



Letters of a Sufi Master (II)

The Shaikh al-‘Arabî ad-Darqâwî

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You cannot conceive that the *faqir* could be completely detached from everything and not be in the presence of God; it is impossible, for him whose spiritual aspiration rises above created things reaches the Creator, and to reach Him is to know Him. Therefore, resolutely leave all the things on which you are relying, whatever they may be, and do not trust in them.

He perishes who is satisfied with anything else in exchange for Thee
 And he who reaches out towards what is far from Thee is lost.
 Anything thou abandonest can be replaced
 But there is nothing to replace God if thou abandonest Him.

Let me tell you about how I was once with my brother in God, the devout and noble Hasani Abul-'Abbas Ahmad at-Tahir (may God's mercy be upon him) in al-Qarawiyyin Mosque. We were both of us deeply wrapped in contemplation when all of a sudden my companion allowed himself to be distracted – or, let us say, to weaken – to the point of falling into chatter like ordinary people. Abruptly and in anger, I said to him: "If you wish to win, strike, and throw (it) out!"

In the same sense I said to another brother: "Strike neither Jew nor Christian nor Moslem, but strike your own soul (*nafs*) and do not cease to strike it until it dies!" You also, my brothers, cast out idle talk completely and without fail, for it is one of the worst temptations and does not become your spiritual station and state. And say only good of people, for as the Prophet says (on who be blessing and peace): "He who is not grateful towards men is not grateful towards God." Besides, as we were saying – and God knows best – he who does not take men into account, that is, who does not know them, does not contemplate God either in a perfect way; for the perfect man is he from whom the creature does not hide the Creator, nor the Creator the creature. Discriminative knowledge does not hide unitive knowledge from such a man; neither does the unitive hide the discriminative. From him, the effect does not hide the cause, nor the cause the effect; from him, religious law (*shari'ah*) does not hide spiritual truth (*haqiqah*) nor spiritual truth religious law; from him, method (*suluk*) does not hide inner attraction (*jadhb*), nor inner attraction method; and so on. He has attained the aim; he is the perfect one, the Gnostic; whereas his opposite is the man who is lost. We are not speaking of God's madman (*majdhub*), transported out of his senses, for he is not lost at all.

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As the Sufis affirm, there is no approach to God save through the door of the death of the soul. Now we see – but God is wiser – that the *faqir* will not kill his soul until he has been able to see its form, and he will see its form only after separating himself from the world, from his companions, his friends and his habits.

One *faqir* said to me: "My wife has got the better of me"; to which I answered: "It is not she but your own soul which has got the better of you; we have no other enemy; if we could kill it, we would kill all our oppressors with one blow. (May the curse of God be upon him who lies)."

The soul is an immense thing; it is the whole cosmos, since it is the copy of it. Everything which is in the cosmos is to be found in the soul; equally everything in the soul is in the cosmos. Because of this fact, he who masters his soul most certainly masters the cosmos, just as he who is dominated by his soul is certainly dominated by the whole cosmos.

Whenever someone shows hostility towards you, whether he be one of you or not, do not be concerned with yourselves, but with what your Lord has commanded; provided you do not defend yourselves, God will defend you and take care of your cause; but if you do defend yourselves and are concerned with your cause, He will leave it to you to manage it and you will be powerless, for it is God *Who has power over all things*.

The Venerable Master Qasim al-Khasasi said (may God be well pleased with him): "Pay no attention to him who slanders you, but pay attention to God; He will remove this slanderer from you, for it is He who incites him against you in order to test your sincerity; but many men are mistaken on this question." If you pay attention to him who slanders you, the slander will continue, together with your sin (of distraction from God).

The *fuqara'* (pl. of *faqir*) of ancient times sought only for what I could kill their souls (*nufus*, plural of *nafs*) and bring life to their hearts, whereas we do just the opposite. We seek after that which kills our hearts and enlivens our soul. They strove only to become free of their passions and dethrone their ego; but as for us, what we long for is the satisfaction of our sensual desires and the glorification of our ego, and thus we have turned our backs to the door and our faces to the wall. I say this to you only because I have seen the favours which God lavishes on him who kills his soul and brings life to his heart. Most certainly we are satisfied with less, but only the ignorant is satisfied with not arriving at the end of his journey. I asked myself whether there could be something else, apart from our passions and our egoism, which cuts us off from the divine gifts, and as a third hindrance I found the lack of spiritual longing. For intuition is generally given only to him whose heart is pierced by an intense longing and a strong desire to contemplate the Essence of his Lord. Intuitions of the divine Essence flow into such a man until he is extinguished in that Essence and thus freed from the illusion of any reality other than It, for this is the direction in which the divine Essence leads those whose gaze is fixed continually upon It. On the contrary, he who aspires exclusively to theoretical knowledge or to action does not receive intuition upon intuition; he would not rejoice in it if he did, since his wish is aimed at something other than the divine Essence, and God (may he be exalted) favours each one according to the measure of his aspiration. Certainly, every man participates in the Spirit, just as the ocean has waves, but sensual experience entirely takes possession of most men; it seizes hold of their hearts and limbs and does not allow them to open to the Spirit, because sensuality is the opposite of spirituality and opposites do not meet.

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We see besides that the spiritual aim is reached neither by many works, nor by few, but by Grace alone. As the Saint Ibn 'Ata-Illah says in his *Hikam*: "If you were destined to reach Him only after the destruction of your faults and the abandonment of all your claims, you would never reach Him. But when He wishes to bring you back towards Him, He absorbs your quality into His and your attributes into His and thus brings you back by means of what comes to you from Him, not by means of what comes to Him from you."

One of the effects of Divine Bounty, Grace and Generosity is that one finds the Master who can grant spiritual education; without Divine Grace no one would find or recognize him, since, according to the saying of the Saint Abu'l-'Abbas al-Mursi, (may God be well pleased with him): "It is more difficult to know a Saint than it is to know God." Again, in the *Hikam* of Ibn 'Ata-Illah, it is said : "Exalted be He Who makes His Saints known only in order to make Himself known and Who leads towards them those whom He wishes to lead towards Himself." There is no doubt that the Lord of the inhabitants of Heaven and Earth, our Master, God's Messenger (may God bless him and give him peace) was openly manifested, like a sun on a standard, and in spite of that was not seen by all, but only by some. God veiled him from others, just as He veiled the Prophets (on them be peace) from certain men, and just as He veils the Saints from the men of their time, so much so that they slander the Saints and do not believe them. God's Books testify to this: *Thou shalt see them looking toward thee and they see not* (VII, 197) and: *They said: what kind of a messenger is this, who eats food and walks in the markets* (XXV, 7) and so on, in all the other analogous passages. Two thirds or more of the divine Book tells how the Prophets (on them be peace) were slandered by the men of their time. Among those who did not see God's Messenger (may God bless him and give him peace) was Abu Jahl (God's curse be upon him); he saw in the Messenger only the orphan who had been adopted by Abu Talib. The same applies to the spiritual Master who is simultaneously ecstatic (*majdhub*) and methodical (*salik*), who is at the same time both drunk and sober; only a few find him. Now if one finds the Master (he sometimes acts in an unexpected way); sometimes he sees that the disciple's Spirit will be freed by fasting and so makes him fast; at another time, on the contrary, he will make him eat to repletion for the same purpose; now he sees that the disciple will benefit spiritually from an increase of outer activity; at another time, from less activity; at one time, from sleeping; at another time, from staying awake; sometimes he wishes the disciple to avoid people, sometimes, on the contrary he advises him to frequent people; for it may be that the inner light of the disciple has suddenly become too strong for him, so that the Master fears he may lose his reason, like many disciples in the past and in our day who have become mad; this is why the Master may bring the disciple out of his retreat and make him mix with people, in order that his spiritual tension may diminish and he be preserved from madness. In the same way, if the inner light becomes too weak, the Master sends him back into solitude in order that it may acquire force, and so forth; the issue is in God's hands. Spiritual mastery could very nearly have ceased to be manifested for lack of those whose heart is quickened by an ardent desire to follow it; but the divine Wisdom never runs dry.

We see that the spiritual way (*tariqah*) is necessarily maintained by Divine Force and Power, since it comes down through our Masters from God's Messenger (may God bless him and give him peace). As the Saint Al-Mursi (may he be pleasing to God) used to say: "No Master makes himself known to disciples unless he has been led to do so by inspirations (*waridat*) and unless he has received the authorization of God and of His

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Messenger." The blessing (*barakah*) of this authorization and the secret it implies is what sustains our cause and safeguards the state of those who adhere to it; but God is wiser.

As to what we were saying about the attachment of the heart to the vision of the Essence of our Lord, no one of us possesses it so long as his soul is not extinguished, wiped out, vanished, gone, annihilated. According to the Saint Abu'l-Mawahib at-Tunisi (may God be satisfied with him): "Extinction is erasure, disappearance, departure from yourself, cessation": and according to the Saint Abu Madyan (may God be well pleased with him): "He who does not die does not see God." All the Masters of the Way have confirmed this. And beware, beware if you believe that our Lord is veiled from us by solid or subtle things: by God, no! illusion (*wahm*) is the only thing which veils Him from us and illusion is empty. As the Saint Ibn 'Ata-Allah says in his *Hikam*: "God is not veiled from you by some reality existing apart from Him, since there is no reality outside of Him: what veils Him from you is but the illusion that there can be a reality apart from Him."

We observe – but God is wiser – that this extinction takes place, God willing, in the least possible time, by means of a certain method of calling upon the Name of Majesty: *Allah*. I came upon this method in the work of the Venerable Master, the Saint Abul-Hasan ash-Shadhili (may God be well pleased with him). It is mentioned in certain books owned by a learned man amongst our brothers of the Bani Zarwal, and I also received it from my noble spiritual Master Abu'l Hasan 'Ali (may God be well pleased with him), in a slightly different, simpler and more direct form. It consists of visualizing the five letters of the Name while saying *Allah, Allah, Allah*. Each time the letters dissolved in imagination, I revisualized them and if they dissolved a thousand times during the day and a thousand times during the night, I continued a thousand times a day and a thousand times a night to revisualize them. This method gave me moments of immense insight when I practiced it for a little more than a month at the beginning of my spiritual path. It brought me great knowledge as well as an intense awe (*haybah*), but I paid no heed to it, occupied as I was in calling upon the Name and visualizing the letters until the month ended. Then a thought forced itself on my attention: "God (be He exalted) says that *He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner*" (LVII, 2). To begin with, I turned away from this thought that crept in, resolved not to listen to it, and I continued to do my exercise; but this voice did not leave me alone; it insisted and did not accept my refusal to listen to it, just as I did not accept its way of acting and did not listen to it. But finally, since it would hardly leave me in peace at all, I answered it: "As for His words saying that He is the First and the Last and that He is the Inner, I understand them quite well; but I do not understand His affirmation that He is the Outer, because all I see on the outside are created things." To this the voice answered: "If by His expression 'the Outer' He meant something other than the outer world which we see, it would not be outside, but inside (that we would have to look for it). But I say to thee: He is the Outer." Then I realized that there is no reality save God and nothing in the Cosmos but Him, praise and thanks be to God.

Extinction in the Essence of our Lord comes about quite quickly, God willing, by the method just described, for by this method meditation bears fruit from the morning to the evening, provided suspension of thought has been practiced long enough. In my case, it bore its fruit after one month and a few days, but God knows best. Certainly if someone were to practice suspension of thought for a year or two or even three, the thought which would result thereafter would attain great good and a dazzling secret.

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From this I understood the prophetic saying: "Better an hour of meditation than seventy years of religious practice," since by this kind of meditation a man is transported from the created world into the world of purity; and one could also say, from the presence of the created into the presence of the Creator. And God is our Warrant for what we say.

We recommend to everyone coming back from the state of forgetting (*ghaflah*) towards the state of remembering (*dhikr*) that he fix his heart continually on the vision of the Essence of his Lord, in order that It may pour out Its truths on him, as It does for him whose heart becomes attached to It; and let him not allow himself to be distracted from his invocation by intuitions, lest this prevent him from reaching the aim.