

## Tasting God's Essence

Good morning everyone. I request that those who are sitting come sit together as close as possible to each other because we will be doing some meditative exercises and it's much better; the energy is much more effective, sweeter, and stronger when we are close to each other. Since, unfortunately, this is my last day this week I would like to do the meditative exercises first and then we will talk a little about Sufism and we will take your questions on the subject.

As many of you know, Sufism is the spiritual path of the Islamic faith. In every faith tradition there is always a tension, if you will, [between] what people call the exoteric aspect of the faith and esoteric of the faith. Exoteric means the external practices of the religion; the mechanics of the religion as opposed to the inner taste, the experience of the very truth and the meanings of what we are talking about.

Our spiritual teachers tell us that the human being is a mixture of four dimensions of beings and God created us with all four. There is our physical being, which we are most familiar with, there is our intellectual being that is our mind; there is the emotional being, which some Sufis call the heart. There is some ambiguity to what the Sufis call the heart; some refer to it as the core and the deepest part of your being. Others refer to the heart kind of analogous to the psyche, the part of us that feels, the emotional being—the one that feels love and hate and jealousy and greed and those various emotions that you know that you try to identify. Then there's also the spiritual dimension, our soul, and the soul is regarded as the most important part of our being. Part of the purpose, part of the learning of the spiritual path of Sufism, is to awaken the spiritual capacity to perceive just as we can perceive with our physical inputs by which we acquire data or information. We also have the intellect the mind, which we can develop and train.

Many of us can see music literally with their mind. They can see a C flat for example. I don't know how to recognize a C flat from a G minor. But I know physicists who are trained who can actually see the forces. Richard Feynman, the great Nobel physicist, would look at a lecture and say that is wrong, not because he could look at the lecture and do the mathematics but because he could look at the lecture and see the physical realities, and he could see that they didn't make rational sense in his mind's eye. So, he had developed his intellect so much that he could perceive with his intellect what is not normal to see with the eyes. And we can see with our hearts. I remember I had an argument, as many of us guys do with a lady in my younger days and she laughed and said Feisal, 'You are listening to me with your head, you've got to listen to me with your heart.' And all the sudden my draw dropped and I said 'that's right, I got it'. That's the kind of thing we are talking about, you can listen with your head and you can listen with your heart. The ability to listen with your heart gives you a different dimension; it opens up a whole new way of looking at reality. This is especially important as we as men try to listen to women, we tend to be very cerebral and we lack what people call emotional intelligence. In fact, that is a term people use for that. The whole purpose of the spiritual path is to teach us that there is also a spiritual ability to perceive. You can see with your soul, you can perceive with your soul. And that perception is regarded as the truest perception and the most accurate perception. One of the earliest times when you began to differentiate and recognize happens when you experience something that originates from that source.

Many of us have felt physical attraction, purely physical attraction with somebody, now when you are mentally not attracted to the person and physically attracted then you realize that it is purely physical because then nothing else is. Your mind and heart are going to say 'Ew.' Analogously you can fall in love physically, you can fall in love mentally, you can fall in love emotionally, and you can also fall in love spiritually. Spiritual attraction is a dimension that those of us who follow a spiritual path experience. Now what I am saying are things that are just words and sounds, you have to actually experience them to know them. This is why the Sufis use the language of tasting, *dhawq*. We can talk about God, we can discuss these things, but they are relatively meaningless until you taste them. So the whole objective of the spiritual path is to provide you, provide us, with exercises that enable us to taste, to know the taste of God. This is something that may be theoretical but for those of us that are Catholics who have the mass of the sacrament, what does the body of Jesus Christ in the wafer and the blood of Jesus in the wine that you are drinking, that you call the Mass of the Eucharist, what is the flavor, what is the taste of Jesus like? What is the taste of God like? These are the questions that anyone of us who are serious about our spirituality and religion ask ourselves.

But that's what it's about; it's about the journey and the sharing of experiences that enable us to have those experiences because when we have those experiences it is clear the reality of our faith and then when we speak about our faith not from a parochial view that differentiates us from others, but we are really able to speak from the vantage point of the experience itself. When people write and speak from that vantage point, then everyone can understand. So if you read Socrates or Plato, you can see that his truths ring of truth in your heart. It does not matter what language it is spoken in, you will still get that feeling in your heart and it will help you enhance your own intellectual journey and development—same thing with religious truths, those who speak from the space of experience and taste. That's why Rumi is popular: because he wrote in Farsi, in Persian, and I don't know if modern Persian is similar to the Persian of seven centuries ago when Rumi wrote, yet when we hear the translation the meaning cuts through because the reality of the experience cuts through the limitations of language.

So let us begin with this exercise because we can talk about it to death. So open your hearts, shut your minds. Shut your minds because like the Buddhists say, 'Let your monkey mind jump,' because the monkey mind can interfere with the experience of the truth. Still your mind, because for those of us who are highly developed intellectually, the intellect can be an impediment to spiritual development. It's like that student whose trying to be too smart in class, always interrupting by asking questions—interrupting the real process of learning. Intellect can have that capacity, especially those of us who are very gifted, who got into Harvard and Yale and all the Ivy League schools, the mind is often an impediment. Very often when people engage in spiritual exercises they find that they fall asleep. The purpose of that is to still the mind and allow the soul to get the nourishment that comes with the practice of *dhikr*.

### **After *Dhikr***

It is recommended after doing *dhikr* like this, the palpable feeling in your hearts and your being, the stillness of tranquility, is maintained because we can lose it very easily. Arguments, loud television, hard rock music: there are certain things that can shred that feeling that you have in your heart of peace and tranquility; a peace that actually is a taste of God. In Islam, we have many names of God. We call God *Allah*—the God—but we have many descriptive names of him: the king, the sovereign, the creator, the merciful, the compassionate, the loving, the avenger,

the almighty, the all-powerful. One of his names is the peace, Al Salam. It's one of a few names that are pure nouns. The other names are descriptive—the compassionate, the loving, the creator, they are descriptive or adjective ones as you would call them in Arabic. But Al Salam—the peace, not the peaceful—peace itself. So one of the divine names is peace. So we greet one another in Arabic and in Hebrew. Jews do this too. When we say as *salamu ayakum*, we are actually invoking God's presence; we are invoking one of the Divine names. May God's name of peace be upon you. We say this in our tongues. In this little *dhikr* we have spent together we actually get a feeling of God's peace descending upon you, penetrating. To embrace this speech and to hold it within you and to make that the instrument and the platform from which your actions emulate is part of the objective of becoming a more enlightened human being—a more perfected human being, a human being whose actions are directed by the right directives, rather than the directives of what we call the satanic part of us. In our faith, we are taught that just as much as we are given a conscience, an angelic being to watch over us, we also have a satanic being that is appointed to us, which we call the problems of the lower self, the part that urges you to do all the naughty things and mischievous things that wrong our own souls.

### Question and Answer

**Q: In Islam, what is the belief about the relation between God and the individual's soul? Is the soul perceived to be God on the side or is it separate? In Christianity there is a tendency to want to separate the soul and God. Some believe God is part of the soul and that a human is part God, not in the ego sense but in the spiritual sense.**

**A:** Yes. In any faith tradition, including Islam, there is a tension between concepts that seem to be polar opposites of each other and certainly that exists in Islam itself. When God describes in the Quran the creation of humankind, he announces to the angels that I am creating a *khalifa*, a caliph (that's the actual word in Arabic that means successor), and the angels were in shock. They said, 'You are creating a being that is going to cause mischief on earth and will shed blood and weaken your praises.' God says, 'I know what I am doing,' essentially. Then, he describes the creation of Adam from clay and he instructs the angels, 'when I shall have blown into him from my soul from, from my spirit, then fall in prostration to Adam.' So, from this verse we learn that the essence of the human soul is created from a breath, a puff of the divine spirit. This is what defines us as human beings. You might call it from the theomorphic point of view we are puffs of the divine breath. This is the vocabulary that is used in the Quran to flesh out the meaning that we are created in the divine image, which is something common in the Abrahamic faith traditions.

This is also our responsibility, the trust. God also says that we offer the trust to the heavens, to the earth, to the mountains; they fear it, but man assumed it. The trust we have been given as human beings is this trust to know who we are. Rumi often talks, 'If you knew who you were' and he almost gives us analogies. You are like the member of the royal family who doesn't know he is a member of the royal family. So you are worried about your living, but if you acted like a prince or a princess, everybody would bow to you and offer you gifts and they would offer you anything. If we knew who we were and we actually lived according to this knowledge that we are actually puffs of the divine being and essence the heavens, the earth would feed us. As the Quran says, the trees would bend down and offer you food, in other words food would come to you automatically. That is the importance of the trust that we have to maintain within us.

Yet, at the same time, there is the opposite side. We are a different self. To me that is why in the prophetic teaching, in marriage we learn half our religion. When you fall in love with another person, when a man falls in love with a woman and gets married, and you try to create the concept of the 'we' from two I's. Then you have children who are of you but are so different than you and they rebel against you, you almost understand how Adam rebelled against God. Why in Christian vocabulary we call ourselves the children of God. In Sufi writings we speak about the *I and the thou*. The idea of separation, which is true, is true at a level that the Hindus call *samsara*; that everything is actually an illusion. That this life that we live in is God's dream if you will, but if you go beyond this illusion there is a deeper reality that we have to recognize and acknowledge. That reality is really what explains everything including the illusion itself. That's why in true worship of God in the spiritual sense you have to lose the boundaries of ego and the boundaries of yourself. That's why in the famous story of Rumi, a man knocks on a door and voice goes 'Who's there?' and he says 'It's me' and he says 'go away.' Then, after many years of spiritual development, he comes again, knocks on the door and the voice goes, 'Who's there?' and he says, 'It is you.' Then, the door opens and says, 'Welcome, there is no room in this house for two I's,' meaning two egos. There is no room in the kingdom of God for an ego other than that of God.

That is why Sufis speak about the idea of merging or dissolving your ego into the larger ego. It does not mean you lose your ego completely, but it's like a good marriage. You still have your I and your wife still has her I but you have merged yourselves into a larger ego and you serve a larger ego, where there is a sense of team work. Where there is almost a collective consciousness that you have bought into, that you subscribe to, and that you acknowledge and that you serve that greater consciousness. So you serve God's team. Again, that is the tension between these two ideas in our faith religions. Even the concept of God. In our faith we have the concept of God that says God is beyond description. According to the Quran, God is unlike anything and yet God is described by similarities. God is seeing, hearing. God is strong. God is compassionate. God is loving. This is called *tashbih*. We understand God by means of these attributes, *tashbih*, or similar attributes. At the same time, we are supposed to say that God is unlike anything. On the surface of it, it looks like there is a contradiction, but that's the way the cookie crumbles.

**Q: It appears that in Islam and as well as other Abrahamic traditions the focuses of the notions of God are still highly paternalistic. Are there themes in Islam that emphasize the feminine?**

**A:** Yes, to continue our discussion on God being unlike anything, to speak about God as masculine is part of the *tashbih* aspect. The ninety-nine names of God, as we call them, there are names that you might call masculine and feminine names, although we do not use that vocabulary in Islam because we do not have a neutral gender in Islam because everything is male or female. We call them *jalil* and *jamil*. We call them attributes of power or of glory, and the attributes of glory and beauty. In some ways you can make an analogy of the masculine attributes of the powerful, the glorious, the almighty, the creator of life, the cause of death, the avenger, the just, the one who exacts justice, and the attributes of *jamil*, the attributes of beauty, or of femininity, or maternity, of maternal love, the forgiving, the compassionate, the one who turns.

There are many teachings in both the Quran and the hadiths of the Prophet that describe God's mercy and compassion as infinite. One of my favorite hadiths is that all the love that exists on

the earth from the beginning of time to the end of time, from human beings and all of creation, the love of a mother for her child is one percent of God's compassion and the other ninety-nine percent God will display on the day of judgment. Another famous hadith of the Prophet, is the Prophet was traveling and there was this lady who was looking for her child, pulling him out of the campfire lest he get burnt in the fire. She heard the Prophet was there and asked him if it is true that God loves his servants (that is, human beings) more than a mother loves her child. The prophet said yes and the mother responded, 'no mother would send her child into the fire' (and in Arabic, fire is the word for hell). The Prophet just broke down weeping. That's part of the tension again. How do we reconcile God's ability to love and forgive and to exhibit attributes that we associate with the feminine with God's attributes of justice? Those will be the things explained to us on the Day of Judgment. God says he will lift the covers from our vision and we will see with laser like precision.