

Witnessing God Through *Dhikr*

Bismillah al Rahman al Raheem

It's good to be back here again. Chautauqua is a very special place for me because it really is symbolic of what we might consider the ideal community. Many scholars in all of our faith traditions have thought of what the best community would be—whether it is a Muslim community, a Christian community, a Jewish community—what are the traits that make a community a great community?

I was thinking about this lately and one of the projects that I have started is where I convene a group of Muslim scholars to ask them, from the point of view of our faith tradition, what are the traits that would make the ideal Islamic community is. Based on our jurisprudence, they identified among the things that make a community the greatest community: a community that manifests to the maximum degree what I call the *maqasid* of the Shariah, which are the objectives of the sacred law. The objectives of the law, according to Muslim scholars, are six fundamental objectives, which you might even call values, and many even say that these are actually universal human rights, which are the protection and advancement of life, of religion, of the mind/intellect, of property, of family and of human dignity.

When I think of Chautauqua, it is a place that embodies a value—the greater valuation of life, of religion, family, mind and the development of the mind through education programs, human dignity, and property. So the intensification of these values are in fact the measures by which one measures the development of the society. Here we have, in Chautauqua, a society that reflects these values in a way that is not only true to our individual traditions, but creates a platform where we come together as practitioners of different faith communities and yet we feel a sense of community that goes beyond the parochialism of our own individual religion and establishes a common platform on which we share a deeper sense of our common humanity.

This is really what Sufism is about. Sufism is the human attempt to know the reality of God and the truth of God in a way that goes beyond the parochial language and the limitations of our parochialism. It's kind of like when we think of terms like love and we get stuck on the word love, but if you experience love beyond one particular language tradition, you learn the word *amour* in French or *al hub* in Arabic—if you haven't experienced love you will get caught in the limitation of the word itself, in the language that you are familiar with. But once you experience the reality of love, you go beyond the limitations of the word to the experience of the truth and reality itself—that is what Sufism attempts to take the human being from. From the limitations of your own parochial religious language, an experience of God that takes you to a space where you experience the reality of God because, when you experience the reality of God, it doesn't matter whether you call him Allah, or you call him bach, or you call him dios, or theos, or whatever the word might be, it still is the ultimate, the truth itself. That is what *tassawuf* or Sufism is. Many of us have explored various meditational practices which urge us or move us towards that experience.

In America, Rumi is most well-known for his poems and his writings that have taken us to that kind of experience. In the Islamic tradition there are many other great Sufis who have contributed to the collectivity of the Sufi experience. One of the greatest writers of Islamic poetry and Sufi writing is Ibn Ata Allah, who was a gentleman who was called the Alexandrian because he was born and lived in Alexandria, Egypt. He was the third master of the Shadili order. His masterpiece actually is called *Al*

Hikam, which was translated into English as *The Aphorisms*. They are very short, unlike Rumi's writings, but they are very rich in their signification.

I will read a couple of them to you to get us started and in the mood of remembering God.

'Actions differ because the inspirations of the states of being differ.'

This is in a sense on the Prophet's saying that actions are judged by their intentions—that the value of an action does not lie in the act itself but with the intention with which you perform that act.

'Bury your existence in the earth of obscurity for whatever sprouts forth before having first been buried flowers imperfectly.'

'Actions are lifeless forms, but the presence of an inner reality of sincerity within them is what endows them with life-giving spirit.'

'Nothing benefits the heart more than a spiritual retreat where it enters the domain of meditation.'

'That which shows you the existence of omnipotence is that the creator himself veiled you from himself by that which has no existence alongside of Him.'

'One of the greatest miracles that God has performed is that he has veiled you from himself by something by which in reality is nowhere near his power.'

'Among the signs of success in the end is turning to God at the beginning. He who is illumined at the beginning is illumined at the end.'

Sufism is described, in terms of its procedure, fundamentally by two things: *dhikr*, which is the intonation and recitation of the names of God, and the companionship of those who have connected themselves to God. One of the most important things about the power of *dhikr* is the quality of sound. In all of our traditions we believe that sound has the capacity to revive us. We have known this in our hymns, the songs that we sing, the music that we hear; it has an impact upon us. In all our Abrahamic traditions we also believe that the Day of Judgement will begin when the archangel Michael blows on the trumpet. So Sufism often used this event as an analogy because the sound of Michael's trumpet will awaken all the souls. Can you imagine what that sound will be like—what is that sound that will awaken the soul from a state of death to a state of enlivened presence standing before its lord and creator? In a sense, the objective of *dhikr*—of invocation—is to put together a collection of sounds that have the capacity to awaken a soul that has not yet been awakened to the reality of God and to make that soul stand before its Creator's presence. That is, in a sense, the objective of Sufism.

So what we have placed here is a practice that we have done before where we will practice together the performance of these sounds as done within our Sufi tradition. We will begin by reciting together the Divine names. We begin with the name *ya latif* (Oh you, the Owner of Grace), which has the connotation in Arabic of a protective quality, and one of the reasons we begin with a name like this is because if God were to disclose himself in the fullness of his power we couldn't withstand it. God is so powerful that for us to be able to see God as God knows himself is beyond our capacity to tolerate.

So we will start with *ya latif*, then with *la illaha illallah*, which means no God but God. The word Allah is the Arabic word for the name God and is cognate to the same word in Hebrew or Aramaic. The sound Allah has a real effect to it, or power to it, and whether you are Jewish, or Christian, or Muslim, to

pronounce Allah is actually quite in keeping with your tradition. Then we will say *hu*, or *huwa hu*, which means *he is*. The Quran says, 'Indeed I am I,' and in a sense this is our response, *huwa hu*, or God is what he is and there is no God but God.

Try to flavor and savor the particular energy that comes with a particular sound. Try to do it in one voice like a choir and once the waves of the feeling go over you let it take you wherever it wants, whether it makes you want to be silent or loud, let the *dhikr* operate on you.

Question and Answer

Q: Is Sufism the mystical aspect of Islam?

A: The short answer is yes. We believe that every Prophet came to help people experience the reality of God. Every Prophet came with a message but the fundamental core of every religion is to help take the human being to the reality of God. Wanting to see the lord is something that every human being desires and Sufism is within Islamic practice, the mechanism that helps take the human being to that place where we have no doubt that God exists.

In Islam, the fundamental expression of faith is to bear witness that there is no God but God, so it is an act of witnessing that God exists, and to witness God means that you must see God; that you must experience the reality of God directly. It is not just an act of intellect that deduces and concludes that God must exist; it is an act of directly experiencing the reality of God. That is why Sufis use the language of love; because to know God is to love God. To be aware of God is to be aware of the greatest power, the greatest being, the most powerful, the most attractive, and the most beautiful. And that is why the most fearsome. That is why God is described in those attributes. That is why the experience of God is considered the most powerful experience that any human being can be vouched safe to know. But to know God directly, and God is experiencing this soul.

That is why we call it, in English, the mystical aspect. We don't like to use the word mystical in Arabic because the word mystical in English has an etymology that suggests mysteriousness. Whereas, in *tassawuf*, in Sufism, the idea of Sufism is really one of unveiling. You'll see the vocabulary of unveiling, which means that the Sufi path is giving you increased clarity, rather than increased mysteriousness, or increasing mystery. It is one of decreasing the mystery of God. It is the one, it is more of unveiling and knowing God, and developing a relationship with God. The relationship has its phases. In the beginning, it's like a love relationship, a honeymoon relationship. But it can have its challenging moments because, in Sufism, as you develop, God will test you. God will try you. And the path, the individual journey that you will take on your path, is your journey. And the purpose of the teacher or the guide is just to guide you along your journey, to help precipitate your journey, and then to guide you along your journey. But your journey is yours. You will have your high moments. You will have your low moments. You will have your moments when you say, 'God, what has happened?'

I remember one person coming to my mosque and saying, 'Imam Feisal, you know, I used to do *dhikr* and say *la illaha illallah* up to twenty-five thousand times a day. Now all of a sudden, I don't feel the taste of it anymore. Have I lost my faith?' So those dark nights of the soul, so to speak, as St. Augustine described them, are things that are definitely part of the journey. So when you embark the journey, do not think that it's going to be hunky dory. Just like a marriage relationship, just because you fall in love,

doesn't mean your marriage is going to be all whipped cream and chocolate mousse. There are moments when you go through some rocky moments. But that's just the nature of the relationship between God and man, God and human beings.

End Q&A

One of the themes, when Sufis speak about dissolving yourself in God, is the expression of *fanaa* which means you have reached a state where the boundaries of yourself dissolve and you feel yourself having merged with absolute being. It's not a permanent state; it's a transitional state. And then you transform into a state where your being is no longer anchored in the contingent reality of this life, but is anchored in the absoluteness of absolute being because God is the only absolute.

You have to go through the breakdown first because it's like doing rehab on your home. You have to first do a demolition. Demolish the old stuff and rebuild the new stuff. So you have to do some demolition on your structure and then rebuild and recalibrate yourself into a more permanently anchored state of being, which is where you're now *baqa*, which means you are now residing, anchored on the permanence of God. And the essence of who you are becomes more that God is the absolute being, and you are merely a protuberance of God, which is what we mean by being created in divine image. But to translate that into an experiential modality—and for you to create the world view that wraps itself around that—is what a Sufi path is all about.