



THE WAY OF MUHAMMAD



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Shaykh Abdalqadir As-Sufi

Madinah Press

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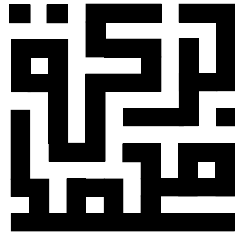
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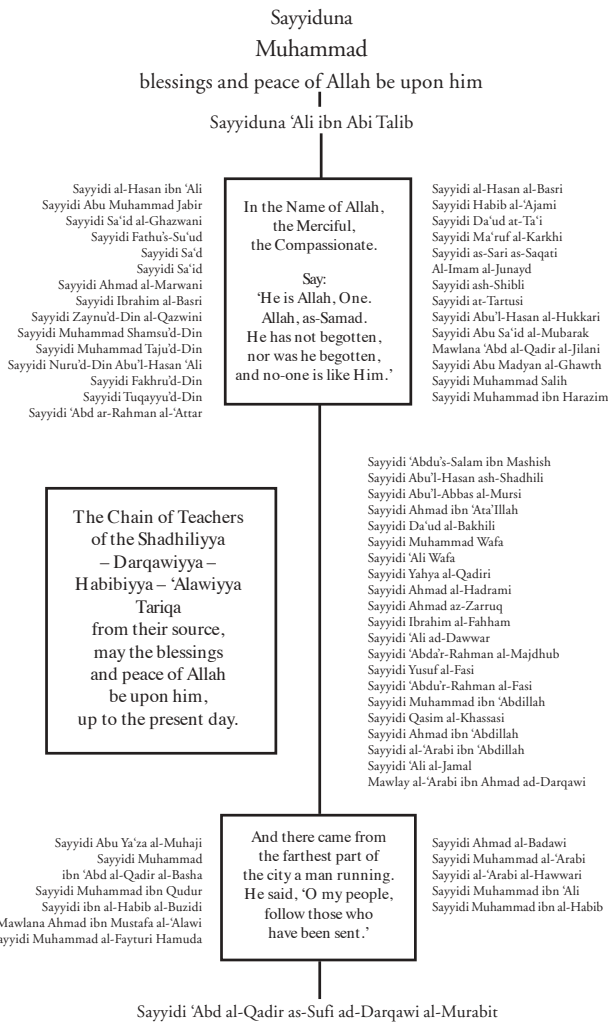
Contents

Preface	xi
Affirmation	15
The Science of the Self	35
The Science of the Sunna	79
The Science of States	111
The Science of Qur'an	143
The Science of Bewilderment	177
The Science of the Moment	203
The Charts: Introduction	227
The Charts	231



ISNAD

In the Name of Allah the Merciful the Compassionate





“If you engage upon travel you will arrive -
and may Allah, praise be to Him, guide you and us!”

(The Makkan Revelations)
– Shaykh al-Akbar

Preface

IT WAS WITH a certain reluctance that I agreed to a new edition of this early work of mine, and this only after some minor editing to remove errors which I can now perceive. The original intention of the work was to show that it was possible to grasp the meaning of Islam in terms of the European existential tradition. Indeed, it is of course the culmination of it. Ironically, the effect of the book was not in the main to open Europeans to Islam, but to restore to those who had gone out of the Deen, especially Arabs, a sense of respect and discovery in relation to Islam. The book is simply a meditation of the five pillars of Islam as viewed by someone who has taken them on and is savouring their meanings. However, now with a lifetime of Islam to contemplate I would want to express the whole matter differently without denying the basic personal truths I tried to indicate in this text. Today the enemies of Islam all explain that the danger of it is that it is not merely a metaphysical construct but is something that affects the whole of life. Yet, after a quarter of millennium of western occupation of Muslim lands, first in colonialism and then by the ethos of technology it can be shown that, tragically, we have abandoned Deen in its totality.

The irresistible magnetic power of Islam which is now about to spread its rays over all the world lies in its Shari'at. Properly speaking the Messenger, blessings and peace of Allah be upon him, abolished the state as the model of societal order. This does not mean he established either anarchy or some kind of mystic individualism, like Buddhism. Where the state was based on canon law and the imposition of order by force, empowered by taxation, the new order established in Madinah was altogether different. The Islamic community is itself a freely chosen social contract of believers who agree to live within its parameters. The proper translation of Shari'at is a road.

The two dimensions of the Shahada confirm worship as belonging to Allah and obedience being due to His Messenger. The next two pillars, Salat and Zakat, in this sense could also be placed beside the double-Shahada. The worship of Allah and the paying of the only permitted tax, Zakat, go together just as the first and second Shahada do. It is in between these two pillars that Islam sheds light on the nature of governance.

Since worship must be according to what we have been ordered, it is not possible to proceed in 'Ibada beyond a certain point without previously having appointed an Amir. It is precisely at the point of Ramadan that governance becomes inescapable to order the sighting of the moon, to start the fast and to order the collecting of Zakat, which is not charity but something, in effect, taken by power. Thus the collection and distribution of Zakat imply the existence of the Amir. It is because Allah in his glory has shown to us the means of transacting socially and avoiding corruption that Islam is called Deen al-Fitr. It is the transaction of original nature, that is, before corrupted by cultural excess. Allah has permitted trade and forbidden usury. Zakat for this reason cannot be paid in paper money for it in itself is forbidden, being a promissory note, and in the majority of cases one against which no material goods can be matched. The

Messenger, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, said: ‘The miser withholds from others the wealth that is due them.’ Therefore banking is revealed as an unthinkable institution both materially by its usurious nature and morally by its perversion of people’s evaluation of life.

This touches the nub of the question of the self and what we now call character. The identity is not formed in a psychological non-spatial zone, but rather it is the pattern and web created by the whole series of transactions which form a social nexus. It is in the exchange of goods, in the holding and the distribution of wealth, in the giving up and the taking on of possessions that the self emerges. Therefore, the path to an integrated human identity can only be established on obedience to the commands of Allah and His Messenger. When he left Makkah, the city of his encounter with Allah, glory be to him, to establish the Islamic community, he renamed the neighbouring city of Yathrib, Madinah. Its meaning quite simply is ‘the place of the Deen’. When he settled there he established two institutions - the mosque and the market. The mosque and market were identical inasmuch as it was not permitted to establish your corner or part of it for your use. With the foundation of Madinah was established the inevitable abolition of capitalist and socialist society. The inability to create monopoly and the impossibility of an elite to separate themselves, in worship from the people had been assured. Not only papal Rome, but later the Holy Roman Empire and later the European Union of the Treaty of Rome, and equally the Soviet Presidium, the English Parliament, and the American Senate, in the light of Islam were revealed to be tyrannies, the basis of which was not its regal army, but its fiscal subjugation of the masses.

The imperial phase of bankism, which sweetly gives itself a political title, ‘constitutional democracy’, while still dominating the world in a manner more ruthless than any ancient warlord

now clearly exposes the truth that systems control does not work, that the abolition of trade and its reduction to mere distribution does not work, that the denial of genuine autonomy of peoples at a local level does not work.

It is for these reasons that the modern man must dig deep into himself to see if, after the almost complete conditioning to which he has been submitted, he is able to act at all. The result of a secular liberal education is something akin, socially, to the general paralysis of the insane. However, there are still those who will not accept the role allotted them by the oligarchy of banking – to be helpless and happy members of the faceless consumer mob. After all the progress, after all the modernity, public arenas of modern life are inescapably identical to that of the Roman Coliseum and Aztec Temple.

The response of the free-acting people of this age will be to obey the order of Allah, glory be to Him, in Qur'an: "Enter Islam in its totality." (2.206). It can also be translated: "Enter Islam all together."

Affirmation

THERE IS ONLY one method by which you can approach the sufic sciences and that is to start, tabula rasa, by putting away the whole world-picture and value structure which has formed you until now and which is completely the result of your social and historical imprinting which you share with millions of others, whatever particular individuality you may imagine you have over and against those millions of others. You have an idea of how things are, and how you are, how things should be and how you should be. Interposed between you and reality is a functioning, fluctuating conceptualisation of existence that, mingled with your personal emotional responses to event and personality, make up what you think is both 'you' and 'your world'.

Any idea of 'god' as an explanation of existence or an arena for your life-experience has to be set aside. 'Religion' (from the Latin – to bind together) as explanation or arena is equally false. Indeed, to mistake the name for the thing named, the category for the indicated, is to make tasawwuf impossible of access. Non-realities that have now crystallised in people's imagination as having some kind of dynamic actuality like history or class or individuality have to be set aside.

The subject of tasawwuf – Sufism – is you.

The subject of tasawwuf is reality.

Let us start from the beginning.

One.

The whole matter begins and ends with an affirmation of One.

But – it will be said – I am another, there is ‘two’, ‘three’, ‘multiplicity’. John is not Arthur, nor Margaret, Anne. Precisely. It is because of the experiential multiplicity that the science of Unity exists. This implies, therefore, that as you are, you are not grasping the true nature of existence. It is like a perpetual fever, a constant hallucination. Things are multiple, alien and solid. There is not even continuity, yet we persist in it. I am the same one who was here yesterday after a night of dreamless sleep – at least everyone in today’s ‘dream’ confirms this. Otherwise I would be mad. *Idiotiki*, in Greek, means private. My reality is affirmed socially, so I exist. Unless they are in my dream. Yet when I dream, the objects seem insubstantial, awake they are solid and therefore ‘real’. Real means solid. Yet I have physicists in my ‘reality’ who now tell me that solidity has no reality for them. The object is slipping away from me yet again, and forms are being proved out of existence and I am left holding onto a ‘mental reality’ in a vanishing world of forms which they tell me is merely dynamic space. The information about my ‘real world’ has become very odd and contradictory – at times even ironic. The person this world has appointed to assuage my inner anxiety, I observe, is in a worse state than I am. It is to this subject that tasawwuf addresses itself.

Thus:

If you desire to know reality you must know yourself.

You are the key, the only key to reality.

You are nothing but a mirror of reality.

It is enough to reflect.

But, your anxiety – about what is on the horizon, and in yourself – stops you from calm and clear reflection. You desire urgent tranquillising information saying ‘it is all proved, everything is really all right, you exist.’ Information has for the moment been set aside.

Let us, however, examine a possibility.

The possibility is that there is someone to trust about the very urgent matter of what life is about. Since we are not to be trusted, it must be some very remarkable sort of person. What would be the qualifications of a man to trust in this matter? There would be only one thing that would make him an ‘expert’ and that is that he knew how to live his life, utterly fulfilled, in radiant and expansive serenity that left space around him for his community and space within him for his own inner peace. Just as in the legend of Kurosawa’s ‘Rashomon’, we are in a dilemma. In that story a woman has been raped and killed. Each witness tells what happened, but each one has given a version of the event from their own subjectivity. Each story is in the end a contradiction of the one before it. The lover, the bandit, the wife – each has been trapped in a private fantasy that insists on interpreting existence in a way that allows for their ‘self-respect’ to continue. Finally, a simple woodcutter who is ‘outside’ the event, with nothing to gain or lose, tells what really happened. But by now the man who sought the truth dares no longer believe anyone, for he has ample evidence that people want their own version of events. When the woodcutter sees the man’s dilemma, and what it has done to him – he no longer believes in existence as a dynamic functioning reality, it has proved to be a fragmented, subjective, ever-changing lie – the woodcutter breaks down and weeps. Humanly it is all he can do. Open himself completely to the man, surrender any idea of separateness, interest, dissembling – just give up, unresistant to that moment and its simple truth: his story. Then the man knows that he too has to give in, he has to shed his doubt and his distrust and even his

own experience. Somehow life cannot have any continuity again unless there is affirmation of this encounter and its reality. And the two men weep. The moment has been tasted.

This is essentially the starting point of the science of *tasawwuf*. It begins with surrendering any vain concept that you can think or detector-feel your way out of the contradictions and pains of lived existence – and the surrender, while actually to the Shaykh, is in truth to the Messenger, the one who is sent just for that, to tell you what reality is like, Muhammad, the Messenger of reality.

The necessary qualifications for this acceptance are these same simple and profound ones of his humanity and his deep sanity and his disinterestedness.

No, I swear by what you see
and by what you do not see,
it is the speech of a noble Messenger,
it is not the speech of a poet
(little do you believe)
nor the speech of an occultist
(little do you remember). (Qur'an 69.38-42)

By the pen and what they inscribe,
thou art not, by the blessing of thy Lord,
a man possessed.
Certainly you will always be repaid.
Certainly you are on a vast self-form.
So you shall see and they shall see
which of you is the demented. (Qur'an 68.1-6)

Mu'adh ibn Jabal said, 'The Messenger of Allah commanded me saying, "Oh, Mu'adh, I command you to fear Allah, to report truthfully, to fulfil the oath, to act loyally, to avoid wrong actions, to care for the neighbour, to have mercy on the orphan, to be soft spoken, to be generous in extending greetings, to do good acts, to limit expectation, to cleave to the Way, to study the Qur'an, to love the life beyond this world, to be anxious in regard

to the Reckoning, to act humbly: I forbid you to abuse the learned, to accuse an honest man of lying, to obey the man of wrong actions, to disobey a just man, to put a land in disorder: and I command you to fear Allah at every stone, tree, or village, and that you show regret for every wrong action, secret or public.”

At this point there are clearly things that do not make sense: fear Allah, to love the life beyond this world, to be anxious in regard to the Reckoning, and to show regret for wrong action.

Surely we desire to be rid of fear – and not simply project it into a god-concept and call it a name?

What lies beyond this world? So far we do not know.

What Reckoning? Surely this regret sounds like guilt?

It is at this point that we must beware of bringing with us the whole value structure that we were prepared to jettison, and applying it just at the point of pretended clarity and lack of pre-conception. If the matter of *tasawwuf* is sin and repentance and the whole guilt-mechanism that modern man has so sensibly been determined to throw off then we are back to square one. We are quite clear at this stage of our enquiry that the guilt/redemption language of Christianity is a hopeless dialectic superimposed on a neurosis and not dismantling it. Let it be, and let us therefore lay aside these disturbing phrases to see what we make of the rest of the injunctions. Apart from these subjective and seemingly ‘religious’ ones, all the others are social and benign. A man of these qualities is certainly someone to be open to, someone to copy. Let us look more closely at the picture of the man, Muhammad.

His name means the Praiseworthy.

Muhammad was forbearing, honest, just and chaste. His hand never touched the hand of a woman over whom he did not have rights, with whom he did not have sexual relations, or who was not lawful for him to marry. He was the most generous of men.

Neither a dinar nor a dirham was left him in the evening. If anything remained and there was no one to give it to, night having fallen suddenly, he would not retire to his apartment until he was able to give this excess to whoever needed it. He was never asked for anything but that he gave it to the asker. He would prefer the seeker to himself and his family, and so often his store of grain for the year was used up before the end of the year. He patched his sandals and clothing, did household chores, and ate with his women-folk. He was shy and would not stare into people's faces. He answered the invitation of the slave and the free-born, and he accepted presents even if they consisted merely of a draught of milk or a rabbit's leg, while because of hunger he would at times tie two stones around his stomach.

He ate what was at hand, and did not refrain from any permitted food. He did not eat reclining. He attended feasts, visited the sick, attended funerals, and walked among his enemies without a guard. He was the humblest of men, the most silent without being insolent, and the most eloquent without being lengthy. He was always joyful and never awed by the affairs of this world. He rode a horse, a male camel, a mule, an ass, he walked barefoot and bareheaded at different times.

He loved perfumes and disliked foul smells.

He sat and ate with the poor.

He tyrannised nobody and accepted the excuse of the one who begged his pardon.

He joked but he only spoke the truth. He laughed but did not burst out laughing. He did not eat better food or wear better clothes than his servants.

The conduct of this perfect ruler was untaught. He could neither read nor write, he grew up with shepherds in an ignorant desert land, and was an orphan without father or mother. He refused to curse his enemy saying, 'I was sent to forgive not to curse.' When asked to wish evil on anyone he blessed them instead.

Anas ibn Malik, his servant, said: ‘He never said to me about anything of which he disapproved, “Why did you do it?” Moreover his wives would not rebuke me without his saying, “Let it be. It was meant to happen.”’

If there was a bed he slept on it, if not he reclined on the earth. He was always the first to extend a greeting. In a handshake he was never the first to release his hand. He preferred his guest over himself and would offer the cushion on which he reclined until it was accepted. He called his companions by their kunya (surnames) so as to show honour to them, and the children so as to soften their hearts. One did not argue in his presence. He only spoke the truth. He was the most smiling and laughing of men in the presence of his companions, admiring what they said and mingling with them. He never found fault with his food. If he was pleased with it he ate it and if he disliked it he left it. If he disliked it he did not make it hateful to someone else. He did not eat very hot food, and he ate what was in front of him on the plate, within his reach, eating with three fingers. He wiped the dish clean with his fingers saying, ‘The last morsel is very blessed’. He did not wash his hands until he had licked them clean of food. He quaffed milk but sipped water.

Sayyedina ‘Ali, his closest Companion, said: ‘Of all men he was the most generous, the most open hearted, the most truthful, the most fulfilling of promise, the gentlest of temper, and the noblest towards his family. Whoever saw him unexpectedly was awed by him, and whoever was his intimate loved him.’

He himself said: ‘I am al-Qautham,’ meaning, ‘I am the complete, perfect man.’

It is to this man that we address ourselves in the acquiring of the knowledge of tasawwuf, the science of the self. In submitting to the Shaykh we submit to the man who has himself mastered these aspects of his behaviour that were not in accord

with his 'vastness of self-form' which is the Messenger's. We are making no mistakes and we are remaining within the zone of existential recognition. The Messenger is not being worshipped, deified, or made into a symbol. He is being accepted as a witness of how-things-are, as being a completely open person in flowing harmonic accord with existence so that he knows it inwardly and outwardly. A man came to him who was over-awed by his presence and became reverential towards him. He said to him, 'Be at rest. I am not a king. I am only the son of a woman of the Quraysh, who eats dried meat.' His answer to his name was 'At your service.' The Shaykh is simply the man who has fully surrendered his self-form and filled himself up with the clear radiance of this perfect behaviour. The Messenger has said, 'I was sent to complete the noble qualities of character.'

It is essential that this starting point is established. We cannot see clearly, we don't know what is happening, we are looking for a witness of the event of existence we may trust. Madmen, poets, occultists we have by our reason rejected: the witness must be disinterested, and he must manifest the highest social and human qualities. It is not enough that he be some kind of a superior being with superior powers, yogic control over the body and the mind, what is essential is that he is completely at peace and that with that peace he can function in the social setting that is man's ordinary quotidian reality. In the Messenger of Reality, Muhammad, peace be upon him, we find a man with all these qualities. He has left behind a book called the Qur'an, and as yet we have not examined or satisfied ourselves as to the meaning and validity of the book – for the moment we are persisting in a more direct existential search for what we seek. We are staying with the man. He has confirmed our own recognition that we are in no way well enough to recognise reality but somehow we must trust the validity of this affirmation of his serenity and human-ness. He has said, 'Man is asleep, and when he dies he wakes up.' This confirms our initial experience of being

somnambulistic, unawake to the true taste of life, but it has in it no consolation, and could be a mere Roman cynicism. However there is another Tradition of his which tells us, 'Die before you die!'

This infers that there is a science of waking up, therefore, while still in the world of bodies.

But the Messenger died fourteen hundred years ago, and the book he left looks at first glance suspiciously like the others, and we had got to a point where only a direct experience was going to convince us. It is here that the essential teaching element of tasawwuf declares itself.

Transmission:

Our concern is the alteration of the self, the conquest of the self, the peace treaty with our rebel forces – and we have understood that our self-form is oddly unresponsive to reason, and worse than that, has a particularly dangerous quality of self-destruction.

Life can, in extremis, be an organised suicide or an endless sleep-in.

Structured information then can only become the foil of this self-destroying, self-deceiving entity – the self. The very knowledge of what is wrong seems to betray our hopes for it, and instead of releasing us it traps us and paralyzes us more, and the very awfulness of our self-hood which we think we see at last, brings us grinding to a disastrous self-aware frozen halt. What then is the method of the Messenger of Peace, or as he prefers to call himself, the Messenger of Submission?

He simply is there and he asks people to follow him, keep him company, and to do as he does. That is all, or seems all – but in fact this is everything.

He has said that, 'If a man lives with a people he becomes one of them,' and also, 'A man follows the life-pattern of his friend, so let each of you look to who he takes as a companion.' We already know in our barbaric state that if a man is locked up with the insane he most probably will himself fragment in his self-

experience, and if he keeps the company of junkies he will sooner or later succumb to their habit; more recognisably, a man becomes a soldier on entering the army. He gets 'beaten into shape', the self-form is restructured and solidified into something considered manly, heroic and brutal. A man who keeps the company of women, and avoids men's company, even if he is sexually expressed as a man, will take on a subtle feminising of self-form and behaviour. Or to narrow the field of this phenomenon even more, if you sit in a room with someone in a rage you will pick up from that person the subtle form of their condition. You will either become 'defensive' or you in turn will attack their anger. If you sit with a depressive you will in turn be depressed or you will feel obliged in some subtle manner to put up a resistance to their swamping all-enveloping low-energy, you will have to become either depressed or by contrast resistantly high. In other words, there is a constant traffic in the energy-forms of the self, and they do battle as much socially as they do inwardly. If the behaviour is controlled from outside, at a certain point there will still come an eruption from within when the outward situation allows it.

Now from the embattled position of the self as it is, we cannot but be well aware that it is of its nature to continue the struggle, to sabotage the end of hostilities, for it thrives on struggle and seems to gain life by its own continued self-destruction. This means that the self is going to be constantly seeking the very company that will keep it constantly trapped in a cycle of pain. If you desire to be punished you will not rest till you find the executioner. You may work your way through a whole series in the desperate desire to prove that you 'want out of it', but see what a cruel fate has always provided you with a destructive partner. In other words for the embattled self, the other is fairly certain to turn out to be the enemy, and hell will, after all, seem to be other people.

Returning now to our point of departure, we have agreed that, knowing as we do that the self is in an endless loop of repeated

battles, we must be done with the game of suffering and rediscover that deep basic sanity which we desire and which we cannot but recognise in this perfectly balanced and radiant figure of Muhammad, peace be upon him.

We wish to recover, if you like, our Muhammad-nature. And the means is transmission.

It is enough to sit with someone for transmission to take place. Instead of seeking again the partner of battle and further pain, we now turn to the Shaykh, who is completely at peace, utterly turned away from all the tremors within us and utterly withholding of either approval or disapproval, the two drugs on which our continued self-survival depends. 'The shaykh is contagious,' said a follower of Shaykh al-Kamil. If you sit in the sun you get sunburned, that is enough. For the moment we do not know why, we have no science yet to indicate why and how this should be so, for it certainly does not accord with the solid mechanistic psychology we are with such difficulty trying to leave behind, because it is a psychology based on the very dialectic that traps us.

The Shaykh is simply the living exemplar – he is not a Messenger, for the Message has been delivered – but you could say that he is the Message. He is a Qur'an and a furq'an. He is a gathering-together of forms, a unifier, and he is a separator, a discriminator, one who makes choices and selects and rejects without struggle.

The mind must be cleared of the whole superstitious, authority-projection idea of the guru that is so prevalent in our society. He is not, and this must be established, a super-guide, a powerful figure, an authority. He is not going to tell you how to live your life, what house to buy and what job to take, although he may well know these things. He in no way takes on the burden of your problems, precisely because from the point of view of his deep sanity these problems do not exist. He is merely a mirror in which you may, if you are patient enough, see yourself at last.

He is an openness, and an emptiness. He is fully surrendered to his creature-state, to advancing age, and to changing seasons, and to the sameness of days. And for this reason he is utterly turned away from us; he greets us and feeds us and counsels us, but he is not caught up, there is no yes to our no, and no refusal of our yes. In some exasperating or frightening way he does not see us. We could kill him. He really does not care! So what then is happening inside this man? From our sick point of view it certainly seems to be a super-defence system that we can envy. He is unassailable, we are vulnerable. He wins, we lose.

We still see things this way. So we decide to imitate him. We go to the master swordsman to learn how to kill, and do not realise that he is teaching us not to need it.

What does he do? What is the means to this omnipotent end? It is, unsurprisingly, disconcerting. Firstly the Shaykh either does not sleep at all or minimally, perhaps two or three hours at most. Putting that aside as the fruit of years of hard work, we cannot avoid recognising that this awakens of which the Messenger of Submission spoke was not some inner consciousness alone, but consciousness itself.

The whole of his existence is spent in one thing – he is in a constant state of awareness, of collectedness, or, if you like recollectedness, for he is there, he does exist before our eyes and he is recollecting back into himself the plenum. His reality is that he is in constant and unceasing communication with reality itself. He has subjugated the self, its struggle is over, and yet there is still a someone there – a man who eats and sleeps a little, talks, sits. Yet if his self-form exists it somehow takes in everything, it excludes nothing, it is all-embracing. We treat him as a Master and show the utmost respect to him, everyone bows before him and he sees all this and he does not care. People denounce him and criticise him and accuse him of fraudulence and he does not care. He is a Master – yet at the same time he is that by the most extreme token of opposites – he is a slave.

He is not our slave, or anyone's slave, or any thing's slave. He is the slave of It, of this very reality we want to know and experience.

He has subjugated his 'I' and he has enthroned the 'He', what the Arabs call the pronoun of absence. Constantly he addresses reality, his reality, as 'He'. He is a presence addressing an absence, and yet we experience him inwardly as an absence expressing a Presence. He is the perfection of slavery. He is bound, utterly constrained, without choice, helpless, obedient. He does what he has been commanded to do.

He bows and he prostrates before this Reality, he calls on its name morning and night, he asks and he asks – but never for this or that, never for forms. He asks for this no-thing, this effulgent nothingness that has produced the myriad forms, he asks It for It and gets whatever 'It' he supplicates for, so we always see him satisfied and content. He may be ill and in pain, he may be penniless, but he is content, he is well-pleased, for it seems that this flow of 'It' never ceases through all these apparently negative events. Stranger still we notice that despite poverty and illness there is in fact a disconcerting and inexplicable flow of goods and money in to this centre of submission, the Shaykh.

We observe also that everything that comes in to him, goes out from him. He is merely a vortex of energy, and the money is distributed and the people are fed and clothed, and he goes on bowing and prostrating and praising this Reality with its endless generosity and compassion and provision, so that we cannot look at him without being reminded of It!

Again it is dangerous to interpose those old preconceptions of an ethic that says we must struggle and work and compete to be a healthy society, and we recall that the working, competing, struggling society has spent itself in a quite terrible frenzy of competition and struggle that has all but destroyed the bio-sphere in which we work to live. For the moment let us enquire openly into what this system of address is that the Shaykh employs and what are its effects.

The Shaykh calls himself Nur-i-Muhammad, the Light of Muhammad, that is, he is a luminous form of that perfection of man, he is the summit of what the human creature is in its potentiality when fully realised.

The thing to be grasped is that the Shaykh is in dialogue with Reality, he speaks to It and It speaks to him. This is again to be accepted either as a fantasy or sanity. We recognise that he functions socially in the world and that he does embody those noble virtues or good qualities that so appealed to us and so intrigued us when we discovered that a man could possess them and live in the world. We also observe that his dialogue rarely involves direct asking for a specific but is mainly about praising the endless energy of the Reality and the generosity and compassion and fullness of its nature – he is busy exalting Reality and honouring it and even glorifying it. Along with this we note that he seems constantly to be involved in a kind of fine tuning, a honing away on this smooth surface of his inner reality of any roughness or blemish. He is with each new day refining and asking to be refined, he is polishing and asking to be polished. So by this token he is utterly open to his own activity, he himself is constantly under review, constantly being renewed, in this dynamic communication he has with his own reality – the static that seems to gather around the wave impulse that is his existence is being cleared and stilled by this rhythmic act of renewal and prostration. This is just like the Messenger of Submission, Muhammad, peace be upon him, who when he undertook any matter, entrusted it to the Reality, and renounced his own strength and power and asked for guidance in these words: ‘Oh Allah, show me the truth as truth, and I will follow it. Show me what is denied as the denied and make me shun it. Protect me in case the truth should become doubtful to me, and I then follow my inclination without guidance from You. Make it be that my inclination is in obedience to You, and may You be pleased with my harmonising with You. Guide me correctly in regard to

whatever I am in doubt about as to its truth, although that doubt is by your permission. Truly You guide whoever You want onto the true Way.'

If this is read carefully, a quite astonishingly fine balance may be observed in the way in which he addresses It as both other-than-he, and at the same time recognises that his whole self-form in its separateness is Its property. His doubt and the adjusting of his doubt are from one source that is not the 'I' that asks.

The 'I' that asks is helpless.

The 'You' that is addressed is total.

With the man of Muhammad, peace be upon him, nothing is outside the process. There is no observer, there is no spectator, there is no alien creature in an alien world in an alien universe. That would be fantasy – to imagine one was outside the process. We are in the process, we are the process – if I was not here, I would have nothing to worry about. It is this persistent lie of self-hood that is the very matter of conflict and suffering. I look out at the forms and get frightened and confused, I become alienated. I try to make the setting of my exile benign. I choose this mountain or the edge of that ocean because I like it and hope that it will harmonise with my inner troubled self. I choose this person and not that person because I feel between us there is some commonality. But soon I become irritated with that person, their sameness seems an empty mockery of my individuality and I long for someone different, the mountain storm echoes my own turbulence and I long for a landscape that is the opposite of my inner imagined self. All this stems from my seeing myself as outside the process and either hopelessly trying to fit myself in and harmonise or trying not to be overwhelmed by the utterly irreconcilable otherness of the creation and the creatures.

The man, Muhammad, affirms unity. He says One not two. So he does not say it, but It says it through him and by him, so that he says, 'I am only a slave of the Reality, yet I am the Messenger

of the Reality.’ In other words I merely tell you what the reality is like. But it is not from me, for there is no me, there is only a locus of communication. There is a radio-station on the waveband but the air itself is nothing but oscillating signals, the waveband and the signal are one reality. So his gathering together of what is, his Qur’an, is not by him but by It and from It – and we are forced to continue – the message is from It to It, for other than It – outside It, in It, there is not anything. This is not complicated.

Two things are being said at once.

If you say One you cannot say the other.

If you say both you approach a new way of understanding existence.

The Message from It is this:

In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

Say: He, Allah, is One,

Allah is endless time,

He did not bring anything into being
and nothing brought Him into being,

and no one form is like Him.

(Qur'an: 112)

This is reality. This is what existence is like.

And it is named. It is named so that we may indicate what cannot be given a name, it is the name of what is not this and not that. Allah.

Allah – it is named with a personal name for a personal name does not define, it merely indicates. John does not define John, it merely indicates that he is there. Allah does not define Allah, it is our indication that He is present although he is no-place.

There is no god. By the same token, there is no me to reject god, for that would make me godlike – that is a power, positing this and that.

Earth is a power but water sweeps over it and destroys it.

Water is a power but air turns it into vapour.

Air is a power but fire consumes it –
and Fire is a power but earth obliterates it.

And so on.

In the world of forms there is no god.

This is not absolutely over that. Allah is not, in this declaration of the Messenger, presented as the ground of being or as the infrastructure, nor is It presented as being identical with the totality of forms.

What we are presented with is an uncompromising affirmation of Unity. One reality, of which the forms are but appearances. The forms are certainly taken seriously and there is a whole science of how to be among forms, how to view them and treat them, including your own. But in affirming the One reality the forms are negated.

No god. Only Allah.

This is how the greatest Master Shaykh ‘Ibn ‘Arabi puts it:

We draw conclusions about Him through ourselves. We do not describe Him with any quality but that we possess that quality, with the exception of a special essential autonomy. Since we know Him by ourselves and from ourselves, we attribute to Him all that we attribute to ourselves. For that reason, Divine communications came down on the tongues of our interpreters, and so He described Himself to us through ourselves. When we witness, He witnesses Himself. We are doubtless numerous as individuals and types, yet we are based on one reality which unites us. So we certainly know that there are distinctions between individuals. If there were not, there would be no multiplicity in the One.

Likewise we are described in all aspects by what He describes Himself. There must be a distinction and it is none other than our need (*iftiqar*) of Him in existence. Our existence depends on Him by our possibility. He

is independent of that which makes us dependent on Him. Because of this one can apply pre-endless-time and no-time to Him which negates the firstness which suggests the opening of existence from non-existence. Although He is the First, firstness is not ascribed to Him, and for this reason He is called the Last. Had His firstness been the firstness of the existence of determination, it would not be valid for Him to be the Last to the determined, because there is no Last to the possible for possibilities are endless. Rather, He is the Last because the whole affair returns to Him after its attribution to us. So He is the Last in the source-form of His firstness and the First in the source-form of His lastness.

He goes on to say:

So the Universe is its own veil over itself and it cannot perceive the Reality since it perceives itself. It is continuously under a veil which is not removed since it knows that it is distinct from its Creator by its need of Him. It has no portion in the essential necessity which belongs to the existence of Allah, so it can never perceive Him. In this respect, Allah is always unknown by the knowledge of direct tasting and witnessing because the time-forms have no hold on that.

Already we seem flung up against an impossibly forbidding barrier. It seems then that the Existent is an unknowable nothing, yet bafflingly a fecund nothing out of which endlessly pour myriad forms. And here is the Shaykh saying that we cannot know Him by direct tasting, by direct seeing. What then is the point of it – we were not seeking a closed system of perfect metaphysical design, we started on the quest because we sought to let our hearts experience the radiant peace of perfection.

The Shaykh al-Akbar also has said:

Some of us implied ignorance of the matter in their knowledge and said – ‘The incapacity to achieve perception is perception.’ Among us are those who know, and who do not utter the like of this: and it is the highest of words. Knowledge does not give him incapacity to know as the first said, but rather, knowledge gives him the silence which incapacity gives. This is the highest mark of the one who has knowledge of Allah.

And so back we have come to our first perception of the Shaykh who in his transmission of the Nur-i-Muhammad, presents us with someone who is utterly helpless.

Sayyedina ‘Umar, the second Khalif of the Messenger, said: ‘Would that I were the dust upon the road.’

The Perfect Woman, the Messenger’s wife, A’isha, said: ‘Would that I were a leaf upon that tree.’

The Messenger called himself the Slave of Allah.

Shaykh ibn al-Habib, who used to sign himself the slave of the slaves, says in his Diwan:

By slavery I mean being stripped of every power and strength and capacity and even the act of getting things for yourself.

Now this is such a completely alien idea that it fulfils our worst suspicions about asceticism and fatalism and all the other labels of our education, it all ends up with disease-ridden squalor and beggars swarming idle in city gutters. The work ethic looms up and struggle takes on its heroic aspect and the militant flags of work and progress and social contract again surge through us with the old adrenaline kick of dialectical rage. We have to be patient and leave this utterly extraordinary point of view aside for the moment, remembering that its confrontation is the whole matter of what has been called the Hikmat, the Wisdom, the Way from the beginning of man’s story.

We have seen that the basis that sustains the whole Wisdom method of the Perfected is the affirmation, the uncompromising affirmation of Oneness. The Unity of existence is the key to the whole set of sufic sciences. Unity of existence is therefore the foundation of the Wisdom of the Wise, and their wisdom is in turn the reality of their slave-hood before the splendour of the Universal Reality.

The Messenger said, indicating the Way –
'The life-transaction is behaviour.'

And it is this science of the self that we must first discover on our journey. We will by the very nature of this unitive approach, come right back to our starting point, Unity, or as it is called in the technical language of Sufism, Tawhid.

In the meantime, as the Shaykh al-Akbar put it:

The Universe continues to be in the present tense.