

ISLAM AND GOD-CENTRICITY: DISCOVERING GOD

by

Shaykh Arif Abdul Hussain

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Author: Shaykh Arif Abdul Hussain

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*For Sajjad Ebrahim, my dear brother and friend,
At whose insistence I delivered these series of talks.*

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FOREWORD:

*In the name of God, the Most Compassionate,
the Eternally Merciful.*

All praise belongs to God.

*May benedictions and peace be upon Muhammad,
His apostle and the best of His creation,
And upon the Pure Ones of his family,
And upon his righteous companions.*

THIS BOOK IS THE FIFTH VOLUME in the *Islam and God-Centricity* series. It is comprised of the edited transcripts of the lectures delivered by Shaykh Arif Abdul Hussain in Muharram 1442 (August 2020). The main themes of the book are the natures of God, the soul and the world, and the essences of the devotional practices of Islam. Previous volumes have discussed the purpose of religion, which is to facilitate human growth and evolution to God, in the contexts of theology, ethics, law, sects, and religions.

This volume discusses the purpose of religion in the context of its realisation or actualisation. Accordingly, the lectures are an application of the notions of ‘form’ and ‘essence’ in the domain of the human individual: the soul, its consciousness, mind, and body. The aim of this book is to inculcate in the reader the necessity to embark upon the journey of *knowing one’s soul*. The book aids the reader in this by discussing the root cause of the ignorance of one’s soul, which it designates as the soul’s consciousness “I am the body” (*nafs ammāra*), and its many effects. The book presents the age-old notions of spirituality from an existential perspective, and hence in its own language and terminology.

The lecture titles/themes are as follows:

Lecture 1: the Nature of God

Lecture 2: the Self

Lecture 3: the False Identity

Lecture 4: Beyond Paradise

Lecture 5: Devotion

Lecture 6: the Process of Devotion

Lecture 7: Salat

Lecture 8: Fasting (Ṣawm)

Lecture 9: Hajj

Lecture 10: Zakat and Dhikr

Please note that double quotation marks are used for direct quotations of the Quran, the blessed Prophet, Imams, and sages; single quotation marks are used for paraphrasing.

Lecture One

The Nature of God

We thank Allah for allowing us to congregate in the remembrance of our most beloved Imam Husayn. His noble example inspires and directs us to an understanding that our lives on earth are given to us for the attainment of a lofty spiritual purpose.

This series of lectures is titled, 'Discovering God'. They focus on our yearning to find meaning and purpose. We will see that purpose and meaning for the faithful entails arriving at God, embracing God, and the emergence of God from within the confines of our humanness. In this respect, we will discuss the nature of God, the nature of the self, the meaning and process of devotion, and how devotional practices instituted by Islam, and in essence, every faith, assist in the realisation of the state of godliness.

We find, in ourselves, a deep-seated yearning to know the answer to the question, 'Who am I?' Even after worshipping God for seventy years and serving humankind tirelessly, there remains a question prodding away in the depth of our hearts, bringing us face-to-face with that particular unknown, 'Who am I?' Similarly, we often find ourselves asking, 'What is life all about? What is really going on? Is there more than what I have been taught to believe of religious teachings? Is there substantive meaning beyond religious teachings? Is there depth to my existence?'

These are the fundamental questions reverberating at the core of every human being. At that level, it is as if the spirit of God, which has been blown into the chests of the children of Adam, is yearning for itself restlessly – not allowing itself to rest until it finds itself. If we observe attentively, we find this restlessness in every aspect of existence: every part of existence is dynamic. Every part of it is in motion. It wants to find itself. It wants to know itself. There is no arresting this motion within existence.

It seems everything is fuelled by this question, ‘Who am I?’ Every aspect of existence wants to reveal itself, and in the process of revealing itself, we witness this wonderful evolution. Even without knowing *who I am*, we are growing and evolving as a human species. Intellectually (that is, by use of our rational faculties), we are exploring the lofty heavens and deep oceans. We are looking and searching. Inevitably, we are in search for the answer to that question, and in the very process of searching itself, we are evolving. Yet, that fundamental question still prods away deep within us in our individual capacities, ‘Who am I?’

When we look at observable existence as a whole, we begin to realise that it is conscious of itself. It is a living being. The way it functions, incessantly moving and dynamic, and the way it is meticulously balanced, with precision and perfect arrangement of differing parts and components, bear witness to its life and self-awareness. It is unreasonable to imagine that this observable and contingent existence just happens to be, and that it just happens to be perfectly arranged by coincidences and sheer randomness. Even if we put aside the question of how this observable existence happens to exist as opposed to not, there are infinite possibilities of things not coming together, including their arrangements and configurations, both macro and micro, in a manner that allow all aspects of observable existence to function with such fine-tuning and synchronicity. Such unending probabilities of things going wrong or being out of sync means that the possibility of the formation of the universe as we have at present is next to

impossible mathematically in a domain governed by randomness. Yet at every point of this observable existence, things turn out just right, contrary to how they ought to be in any domain governed by randomness, testifying to the truth of the claim made by religions that existence has a mind of its own. The entirety of observable existence, with all its components, is a living being. Today, the idea that every atom has consciousness and a mind of its own is gaining traction among atheistic thinkers. Everything functions perfectly in a way that bewilders the mind. The Quran states:

The seven heavens and the earth, and whomsoever is in them, glorify Him. There is not a single thing except that it glorifies [Him] with His praise, but you do not understand their glorification. Indeed, He is All-forgiving, All-forgiving (17:44).

In Sūra al-Ḥadīd, God states, “He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward. He is Knower of all things” (57:3). It is as if the verse is saying that existence is not itself, but rather, it is a display of the Divine Itself. It is His living, conscious Being that is being observed. Our eyes are unable to behold this Truth, and yet we are convinced deep within ourselves that we can recognise this Truth somehow. Take the plunge and begin the quest by asking the question and investigating, ‘Who am I?’ For until and unless you ask this question and investigate, the journey does not commence in its realest sense. Inescapably, we are being dragged to our Creator as stated by the Quran. Most certainly we will meet Him (see 84:6). It will be a great loss if we remain veiled from Him at that meeting.

The following question arises: How do we find and meet God, the Ineffable? He is proximate, and yet elusive. He pervades all being, and yet is not to be found in any place. He accompanies every thought, and yet evades imagination. You can go to the furthest part of the galaxy, and you will not find God. You can go to the *Sidrat al-Muntahā* (the Sidr/Cedar tree), and you will not

locate God. The Quran states, “There is nothing like His likeness. He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing” (42:11) and “No one is comparable to Him” (112:4). No matter where you travel in search of Him, and no matter how much you exercise your minds, you will not find Him. Then why is there this yearning? Why is there this burning desire in us to find out *who I am* and *who He is*?

Once again, the Quran provides a phenomenal description:

God is the Light of the heavens and earth. The likeness of His Light is like a niche, in which is a lamp. The lamp is inside a glass. The glass is as it were a glittering star. It (the lamp) is lit from a blessed olive tree [that is] not of [the] East nor [the] West, whose oil can shine [of itself] even if fire never touched it. Light upon light. God guides to his Light whomsoever He wills. God strikes [such] similitudes for people. God is Knower of everything (24:35).

How is it possible to detect light when there is nothing but light? Darkness does not exist, for there is only light, which means there is no way to compare light and hence identify and locate it. Every endeavour to find God as the ‘other’ is doomed to failure. The only path to God is God, and if there is nothing but the Light of God, then the only obstruction to God is the “I” in search of Him. How beautifully the Noble Messenger proclaimed, “He who knows his-self, knows his Lord.” Giving up ourselves to the splendour of light is the only means to embrace the Light.

The Quran says:

God is the walī (ally or friend) of those who believe. He brings them out of [the depths of] darkness into the light. As for those who disbelieve, their awliyā’ (allies or friends) are false gods who bring them out of the light into [the depths of] darkness. Those are the inhabitants of the Fire. They will abide therein (2:257).

Allah is the saintly friend of those who have faith in Him, that is, He is the friend of those who direct themselves towards His Self. He purges them of darkness and brings them into a state

of Enlightenment. These verses inform us that our motion should be directed towards That which is All-light. The inner light needs to yearn and culminate in the Light of all lights. Unfortunately, I have kept myself in a state of darkness, when what I should be doing is giving myself over to this Light in its entirety. The Quran states:

On that Day, you [o Prophet] will see the believing men and women, their light streaming out ahead of them and to their right. [They will be told:] ‘Glad tidings for you today! [There are] Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein [you will] dwell. That is the supreme triumph! (57:12).

And:

O you who believe, turn to God in sincere repentance. Your Lord may well cancel your bad deeds for you and admit you into Gardens underneath which rivers flow. On a Day when God will not abase the Prophet and those who believe with him. Their lights will stream out ahead of them and to their right. They will say, ‘Lord, perfect our lights for us and forgive us. You are Powerful over everything’ (66:8).

From the Qur’anic perspective, it seems that for us to find answers to that primordial question prodding away inside us and stemming from the inner yearning, we need to arrive at the state of light. Not simply a state of enlightenment, but from enlightenment to becoming light itself. To become light itself means to allow God to prevail.

How beautifully it has been explained: O soul! You are the awakening of the divine within the limitations of your humanness. If only you recognised *who you are* and *what you are*. Mawlana Rumi stated it thus: ‘O human! If you understood your worth – if you knew what you are, the brilliance of the sun that you observe so admirably and with such amazement and wonder, would disappear, shying away from your luminosity. If only you could see your own light.’ This is how grand you are.

It seems that finding God is not a question of finding God in a place or finding Him notionally and imaginatively. Rather, it is a question of allowing God, the All-pervading, to prevail. We are to give ourselves over to Him. Let the Author Himself display His own Self unrestrictedly through the human individual. As the Quran states, "There is nothing like His likeness. He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing" (42:11). How phenomenal is God? None is equal to Him. He is the Almighty. He is so majestic, brilliant, and unknowable. The blessed Prophet said, *rabbi ziddni taḥayyuran*, "My Lord, increase me in [my] bewilderment!", for the more I know You, the more baffled I stand before You. The more I know You, the greater is the mystery that enshrouds You. The blessed Imam Ali stated, "No attribute can be assigned to Him, and no description encapsulates Him." How can you ever know Him? When that realisation of God dawns upon the mind and touches the soul, the soul begins to tremble in awe and terror at His majesty. For it sees the nothingness and unworthiness of its own self and feels lost in a state of alienation from God, and yet concurrently it feels the warmth of acceptance from His unending affection and feels secure in the embrace of His tenderness and recognition of His splendour.

The beloved Imam Husayn said, 'No one knows how God is, save God Himself.' In other narrations (*ḥadīths*), the blessed Imams have stated that there are proximate angels who are committed to the devotion of God. They are so absorbed and immersed in the devotion of God that they are unaware of the creation of Adam, or the fact that the earth has been created. The radiance of the Divine overpowers their souls to such a degree that their hearts are content with simply worshiping God. If God were to impart a single ray of His beauty upon the souls of these angels, they would die in regret at not having known or worshipped God at all. Such is the grandeur of God.

Look at the description of God. He is the Transcendent, the Unknowable. The Creator of whatever we see and whatever

our minds cannot fathom. Creation itself is ineffable. You cannot understand creation, that is, humans are incapable of understanding material existence in this five-dimensional scheme, which is the three spatial extensions together with time and space, the clusters of galaxies, and whatever else there is. It is inconceivably massive and expanding at an incomprehensible rate, both of which are unfathomable to human imagination. Then think about the Creator of all this and the countless other universes (or multiverses) and multi-dimensional realms. Think about the One who has created what we cannot know: all that is non-material and those wonders of creation that even the angels cannot decipher. At once, He is both ‘the Majestic, Unknowable One’ and ‘the Beautiful, Present One’. Allah says, *huwa ma‘akum ayna mā kuntum*, “He is with you wherever you are”:

It is He who created the heavens and earth in six Days, and then established Himself upon the throne. He knows what enters the earth, and what comes out of it; and [He knows] what descends from the sky and what ascends to it. He is with you wherever you are. He is Seer of what you do (57:4).

Allah says, “We indeed created man. We know what his soul whispers within him, and We are nearer to him than the jugular vein” (50:16). Allah is present between a human and their soul, or between the heart and their thoughts: “... and know that Allah comes between a human and their heart” (8:24). This is how proximate He is. *Fa-ayna-mā tuwallū fa thamma wajhu-llah*, “Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God.” He is immediately available and yet utterly Transcendent. “To Allah belong the East and West; wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. Indeed, Allah is All-embracing, All-knowing” (2:115).

The blessed Imam Ali explained this notion of God as follows: ‘He is with everything, and yet He touches nothing. He is other than everything, and yet there is neither space nor distance between Him and anything.’ Can you picture such a God? This

explanation forces our minds to break all images, notions, and ideas of God that we have. We are forced to conclude that He in Himself cannot be known. And yet, there is nothing but He, the blessed One, as far as creation and existence are concerned.

The blessed Imam also expressed the following: 'I have never seen a thing, but I have seen Allah above it, below it, before it, and behind it.' How beautifully our beloved Imam Husayn professed, 'O Lord, should I seek proof of Your existence through Your handiwork and creation? Am I not seeing Your divine hand at work now? How can Your handiwork be more brilliant in manifesting You than You Yourself?' What vision did they receive? It is not true to say, 'everything is God', but it is certainly true to say, 'nothing can be other than God'.

You will never declare that the momentous waves are the ocean, but you are correct in asserting that they are nothing but the ocean. The ocean is the unknowable, infinite, and eternal totality, and the waves are its knowable, finite, and temporal expressions – the waves are what the ocean wishes to reveal of itself. Such is the nature of God. But what is our understanding of the nature of God – that is, the God we are drawn to?

God is explaining Himself in accordance with our level of existence, perception, and cognition, when He states, 'He is Allah, *Rabbul-‘ālamīn*', that is, He is Allah, the nurturing-Lord of the entirety of existence (see 40:64 and 45:36). The name *Allah* is the mother of all names in our context. Yet the name Allah does not capture Him as He is. He is the Nameless One. He is He, the One Who cannot be named or described, for He is beyond words, names, forms, and utility. He cannot be contained by any description, but in our context, or from the perspective of our existence, He is Allah and He is *Ar-Rahmān* (the Most Compassionate).

The word *Allah* signifies That which gives rise to every thing, That which is supplying existence to every thing continually, That which is organising every thing in a measured way, and That to which every thing aspires and is returning. Thus, Allah

is a description of ‘He’ in the realm of our existence, and Allah is That to which every thing turns for its own completion. Thus, all beings in our world, insofar as they are in motion and hence seeking completion, are yearning God either advertently or inadvertently.

Yā ayyuha-l-insānu, inna-ka kādihun ilā rabbi-ka kad-ḥan fa-mulāqīhi, “O humankind, verily you are toiling towards your Lord laboriously, and you will encounter Him” (84:6). Whether you agree or disagree with the existence of God, you are being dragged to your God, and hence you will meet Him. No one can resist Allah. How is it possible to resist Him, when every direction you set upon to flee Him leads to Him? If we do not meet Him in this life, then we will meet Him on the Day of Resurrection, and if we do not meet Him on the Day of Resurrection, then we will indeed be united with His Holy Self beyond that Day.

How phenomenal is God in the way He relates to us in our individual capacities, nurtures us, and brings us to His Self? He is the *Rabb*, the Nurturer, Who gives rise to, governs, and manages all at every indivisible moment. He nurtures the bodies, minds, and souls of all beings. He relates to all equally and directs the journeys of all from His Self to His Self. He is at once my individual Lord, our Lord, the Lord of the seven heavens and the earth, and the Lord of all worlds, be they physical or otherwise. He carries us from stage to stage to His Self. The whole journey is from Himself, through Himself, to Himself.

Observe the journey of the great monotheist, Ibrahim. He and his son, the blessed Prophet Ismail, turn to their Lord at that intimate level, the One Who is with them immediately, without name, form, or description, and they call out: “Our Lord, make us two souls submitted to You” (2:128). Then after constructing the Ka’ba, the blessed Ibrahim was addressed by His Lord thus: “Surrender yourself.” Ibrahim replied, “I surrender myself to the Lord of the Worlds” (2:131). Notice how Ibrahim’s tone changed. He did not say, ‘I surrender to *my* Lord’, but rather “I surrender

to the Lord of the worlds.” Undoubtedly, Ibrahim had arrived at That untarnished Beauty. Thus, ‘the Lord of the worlds’ is Allah. From the perspective of every thing in the world, Allah is its personal Lord, and as such, He nurtures and governs it.

God as God is beyond description. He has no names or qualities. The blessed Imam Ali states, ‘To ascribe an attribute to Him is to compare Him.’ No attribute can be assigned to Him. He is lofty, beyond qualities. Consider the nuance within the *Quran*. At times, God is referred to as ‘He’, and at other times as ‘We’, and yet at others, the direct pronoun ‘I’ is employed. At times, He is referred to as the personal Lord, and at others as ‘the Lord of the Easts and Wests’. How bewildering is this? At once, He is Allah and He is *Ar-Rahmān* (the Most Compassionate). Even the name *Allah*, the mother of all names, is a mere description of the ineffable One, for He is the unknowable One: “Say, He is Allah, One” (112:1). At the level of ‘He’, none knows Him except He Himself, but in relation to us and all of creation, He calls Himself *Allah* – the One to Whom all are journeying towards. His relationship to every thing is very personal and private, one that is not shared with anything else. At once, He is my Lord, the Lord of the East and West, the Lord of the seven heavens and earth, and the Lord of all worlds and beings. The journey culminates in reaching and arriving at the Lord Himself whereby there is an intimate belonging with my Lord.

The blessed Imam Sadiq said that the ant assumes its Lord has two antennae. Every instance of creation is vested with the light of the Author, and every individual existence reflects the Author within its own context. How phenomenal is that? The ant can never understand my God, just as I can never understand the God of the ant. I will never understand the God of the blessed Prophet Muhammad, just as Abu Dharr could not understand the God of Salman. The journey to our Lord is very personal and private because it is based on the way we have understood Him and hence relate to Him. And yet at once, He is the Lord

of humankind, the Lord of the animal kingdom, and the Lord of the plant kingdom. Everything displays the Author in the most beautiful way it can, and the Author addresses each one of His handiworks in accordance with its own context.

Here we want to resolve a problem: how can the most beautiful God have an enemy? It does not befit God to have enemies. Has anybody asked this question? It must arise in our minds from time to time. How can God be so vengeful, wrathful, and angry? Has this issue ever entered the mind or not? It has, has it not? But God, You are God. It is the pettiness of my mind that makes me want revenge. It is I who say, 'How dare anyone says that to me? They have offended me!', and it is I who then threatens, 'I will fling you into the pits of Hell'. All of this is me and not You.

Has anybody wondered why God has said such things? It is because He operates with us at our level. He has authored us within the domain of His worldly kingdom, and so He knows the internal struggles that will ensue within us and guides us by formulating His words in accordance with our nature. Is it not amazing? It is amazing the way God is. He has friends, and He has enemies. He is merciful, and He is vengeful. He gives, and He withholds. In our context, God responds to our nature. By communicating with us according to our nature, He is able to regulate and refine us, and hence caringly and mercifully bring us to His-Self fully.

Think about it. When we threaten as human beings, what is it based on and motivated by? The issuance of threats is based on and motivated by the want of greater good. Can you not see? The impelling force is love, the want of goodness, and productivity. The issuance of a threat is an expression of love in a particular context. Such contexts warrant that love takes on the forms of threat. For instance, when parents or instructors penalise and ground their children and students, are they acting out of hatred for the child and student? Or are they acting out of love for the

child and student because they want the best for them? Immature minds understand the language of strictness motivated by love, and ripen thereby.

You will see that qualities which are deemed less than befitting for God, are not God's qualities. They refer to existential responses to *our* qualities. Hence, God conveys Himself in a manner and language that we understand. We desire our spouses, so God says you will get the most beautiful spouses in Paradise. We desire rivers, hence there are rivers in Paradise. We desire honey and wine, and so they are all in Paradise. O human, you are worth more than spouses, wine, rivers of honey, and trees laden with fruits! How cheaply have you sold yourself? You are the reflection of the Author Himself. If the Author can create a lofty Paradise in an instance, imagine how beautiful the Author Himself must be? Imagine how beautiful you must be as the breath of the Merciful? Furthermore, when you can have the Author Himself and hence can author infinitely, what cause do you have with the lofty heavens? All of it comes to naught when you taste the pleasure of His love and are drawn into union with the Blessed One.

Mawlana Rumi explained that we see God's attributes in terms of contraries, that is, they can be categorised in a binary scheme. Hence, they can be divided into the attributes of clemency and harshness, or the attributes of mercy and wrath, or the attributes of love and majesty. Yet we will always find that in dealing with human beings, God's attributes of clemency, mercy, and love prevail over His attributes of harshness, wrath, and majesty – *wa rahmatī wasi'at kulla shay'*, "My mercy encompasses all things":

(Continuing with the blessed Prophet Musa's address to God:) [O Lord,] And decree good for us in this world and in the life to come. We turn to You. He (God) said, "I afflict My punishment on whomsoever I will. However, My mercy encompasses all things. I decree it (My mercy) for those who are conscious of God and pay the [prescribed] alms, and those who believe in Our Revelations (7:156).

He wants justice to be done, and yet He declares, 'I can forgive whomsoever I want' (see also 2:284 and 3:129). He can take revenge, but He says, 'My mercy envelopes everything'. So when we look at the Lord of humankind, we don't see Him as He is in His entirety. We see the Lord of humankind as we are in our human capacity, and in so doing, we are able to relate to and converse with the Lord of humankind. Once we begin to relate to the Lord of humankind, the door of private and personal belonging to God opens – the One Who has always been with us intuitively and to Whom we have always reached out, but have been mindless of.

He says, 'Indeed I am so lofty, and yet I am so near. If you call Me, I will respond to you. If you ask Me, I will give to you. If you trust Me, I will be enough for you. If you forgive My creatures, I shall forgive you. If you feed others, I shall feed you. If you give shade to a homeless person, I shall provide you with shade.' When we open up to Him personally and privately, He opens the door of personal and intimate belonging with Himself. If we can understand this point, that we are to personally and intimately belong to God Who is already with us, then we arrive at that level of belonging where we beseech Him as *Yā Rabbī* – my Lord – with greater depth and mindfulness.

The phenomenal thing here is that if we do not surrender to God at an intimate level, there remains a risk that we reduce God to our likeness, after which He becomes a means of alienation from Himself. Shams Tabrizi went to a gathering of the scholars of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) who were contending that if *wudhu* (the ablution for prayers) is not performed in a very precise manner, both the *wudhu* and the prayer (*salat*) will not be accepted. Furthermore, we will be in debt on the Day of *Qiyāma* due to the faulty *wudhu* and consequently risk falling into Hell. Think about this. If you do not perform *wudhu* properly, then *salat* is not accepted. If your *salat* is not accepted, then you are in debt. If you have a debt, then you will be questioned on the Day of *Qiyāma*.

When you are questioned on the Day of *Qiyāma*, you will not be able to respond. Being in debt, you will go to Hell. This was the reasoning in their jurisprudence. Shams looked at them and said, 'Indeed you worship a vengeful Lord, and as such He really can burn you.' Thus, without wholesome surrender, our Lord is reduced to our likeness and responds accordingly.

Once the great master Ibn 'Arabī was proselytising in front of a crowd of people. He said, 'Your Lord lies beneath my feet'. Enraged by this comment, the people pelted him with stones and chased him away. A wise person within the congregation knew that Ibn 'Arabī did not utter words loosely and carelessly, so he went to the place where Ibn 'Arabī had been standing and began digging under the spot where his feet had been when he said, 'Your Lord is under my feet'. The man found a treasure trove filled with gold and gemstones. He smiled as he realized that Ibn 'Arabī's comment referred to the fact that the crowd of people worshipped worldly wealth. Hence, their Lord was under his feet.

The one who worships the Lord of Paradise will end up in Paradise. He who worships the Hellish notion of God becomes Hellish himself and condemns everyone to Hell. He who worships the God of our beloved Imam Husayn becomes Husayn-like. Our notion of God becomes our direction and objective. Understood accurately, the worship of a personal God and being devoted to Him is a process of yielding to the light of God and being drawn to His beauty gradually. As we progress in our personal journeys to our Lord, we realise that within the threats and warnings is His love, and within the anger is His mercy. It is then that we begin to become like God.

You refer to a scholarly person as a grand thinker, and a good leader as a just and benevolent person, but when you look upon a saint, you immediately say, "This is a godly creature." Godliness is beyond scholarship and leadership. When you look at the blessed Prophets of God, you realise that they were filled with knowledge, they were courageous and charitable, and they were

leaders of humankind, and yet you will not find it appropriate to attribute them with any one of these qualities. If you had to describe them with a single attribute, that is, one qualification explaining who they were, you will say unhesitatingly, “They were godly.” The term ‘godliness’ encapsulates the beauty of their being in its entirety, for they were irradiated with the light of God and hence were radiating it incessantly.

When we find our personal God and begin to give ourselves away to Him through devotion sincerely, then He begins to prevail. So it is not a question of finding or conceptualising God, but allowing Him to emerge from within our beings, and that is only possible when we put God above our own selves. We need to give ourselves over to the Author so that He can reveal Himself. It was never a question of meeting with God in the way we have understood, or uniting with Him even. It is simply a question of arriving at the realisation of an already pre-existing union with the Beloved.

The only way for the wave to meet the ocean is when it relents trying to be itself. Once the wave gives up trying to be itself and effortlessly fades away in the ocean, there is the realisation that there has only ever been the beauty of the unending ocean. This is ‘the meeting with the Beloved’. Once we let ourselves go and take that Abrahamic leap into the inferno, then the Lord of the world asks, *li man-il-mulku-l-yawma*, “To whom belongs the dominion on this Day?”, after which He Himself responds, *l-illahi-l-wāḥid-il-qahhār*, “To Allah, the One, the Overpowering” (40:16).

Lecture Two

The Self

Sufis often cite the following narration (*ḥadīth*) during deliberations on the purpose of creation, in which God says, “I was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be known. Hence, I created creation in order to be known.” The *muḥaddithūn* (scholars of *ḥadīth*) may have difficulties in accepting its authenticity, but it makes perfect sense. If you observe existence at large, it is in search of its own self, and in this process, it is evolving and constantly unveiling its latent beauty.

As human beings on this earth, we want to recognise our own selves internally. Despite our technological growth and moral evolution, there remains the unanswered question of ‘Who am I?’ This primordial question has stirred within the soul since the spirit was blown into the chest of our father, Adam. The beauty wants to rediscover itself at the very core of itself. In this way, our return is to God, our Lord, the Lord of humankind, my personal and private God, and the One and the All. As human beings, we can never know God as He is. For that to happen, we would have to cease being ourselves. However, we can reach out to God, our Author. For in authoring us, He has vested us with His own Self and His blessed nature. His own Self wants

to be found, and hence there is this insatiable desire or yearning within us for inner fulfilment and completeness. It is only by reaching out to His-Self within us that we satiate this desire and yearning, and in the process culminate in the most complete and splendid manner. We cannot help but emulate Him because He has vested us with His own nature. We find no rest because of this insatiable inner yearning to return to the Source. How can peace prevail until we arrive at our destination, which is our origin? In this way, we are returning to Allah, the One we call out to as *Rabbī* (my Lord) initially, and then as *Rabb-ul-‘ālamīn* (the Lord of the entirety of existence), both of which are different stages of arrival. When we arrive fully, then Allah Himself calls out and says, “O contented soul, return to your Lord well pleased and well pleasing! Enter amongst My servants, and enter into My Garden” (89:27-30). Consider these verses carefully. There is something telling in the way these verses have been phrased by God. Observe the personal nature of the phrase, ‘Enter amongst My servants’. God does not say, ‘enter amongst the inhabitants of Paradise’, but rather, ‘Enter amongst *My* creatures, and enter into *My* Paradise’. God is Inescapable. None shall remain. One and all will be reclaimed by the Majestic One, the All-pervading, and the Triumphant. Yet, in our return journey to God, some of us become godly, like the blessed Prophets and our beloved Imam Husayn, and others become tyrannical, monstrous, and demonic.

When one and all are returning to God, then why is there this binary? How can people be poles apart with regard to God? One person embodies godliness (the quality of being godly) in its entirety, and the other personifies what we consider as wholly ungodly! What is happening? All of us want eternal life because God is Eternal Life. All of us have this desire to know and dispel ignorance because God is All-knowledge and All-knowing. We want absolute control and security because God knows no weakness or limitation. We yearn to be the Absolute. This insatiable desire and yearning for the Absolute drives us

into space and the depths of the ocean. We are imitating God. Mawlana Rumi says, 'O human! In your silence, speech, action, inaction, smile, and frown – in fact, in every aspect of you – you are crying out to Him and singing the song of the Author. You are reflecting the Author through yourself, and how can it be otherwise? For you have come from Him, and so you cannot help but display Him.'

If this is the case, then why is one person godly, like the beloved Husayn ibn Ali, and the other their antithesis, a manifestation of ungodliness, like Shimr? Shimr is the one who mounted the chest of Husayn. The blessed Imam asked him, 'Do you know whose chest your knee is upon?'. Shimr replied, 'I know it is upon the chest of a man born to the best of mothers and fathers. Nevertheless, I shall deny you a sip of water, and make you to taste the end of my blade in its stead.' One is godly, and the other is demonic. What has happened here? This brings us to the issue of the self – the I, me, ego, or soul. What is this 'self' that has the capacity to become demonic?

Allah says in the Quran, "When I have fashioned him and breathed My spirit into him, fall down in prostration before him" (15:29). When this spirit of God – the pure consciousness "I am" that is beyond time, space, and causality – is blown into the body, it gives rise to the soul, the limited consciousness "I am" that is associated and identified with a particular body and mind; in other words, it gives rise to the sensation, experience, or awareness, "I am this body". This consciousness "I am" associates with Adam and all of us. In essence, it is the consciousness of the soul that is beyond time, space, and causality, and hence it cannot be created or destroyed. Creation pertains to forms, such as bodies, minds, and souls. It is amazing! Think about it. When we say, 'we created such and such', we mean that we fashioned and brought about the form of something that was not there previously. Allah said to Iblīs, 'Why did you not prostrate to that which I have created with My two hands?' (38:75). When Allah

said, ‘that which I have created with My two hands’, He meant, ‘that which I have sculpted with My two hands’. Similarly, the Quran narrates the blessed Prophet Isa as follows:

... I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you the shape of a bird out of clay. Then I will breathe into it, and it will become a [real] bird with God’s permission. I will heal the blind and the leper, and I will give life to the dead with God’s permission. I will inform you of what you may eat and what you may store up in your houses. Indeed, there is a sign in this for you if you are believers (3:49).

Observe carefully. The Quran says that Prophet Isa said, ‘I will create the form of a bird from clay’, which means, ‘I will sculpt a bird from clay’. So whenever the derivatives and conjugates of the verb, ‘to create’, are used in verses of the Quran, they have the meaning of the derivatives and conjugates of the verb ‘to sculpt’. In any case, the point is that the creation of Adam refers to the creation or sculpting of the physical form of a human. In essence, the consciousness from whence the soul emerges and awakens (as the sense or awareness “I am the body”) is uncreated. It is absolutely amazing!

When we create something, we find that it is subservient to us. I am creating the motion of my hand, and it is totally subservient to me. I create a sketch, or in other words, I give the sketch a form, and thus, I bring it into being. I create my imaginations. I can seize, control, and shape them, and I can keep them animated and cease animating them. But when I examine and investigate the sense of “I am” in my experience as a body (and hold on to it with my attention), I realise that it is consciousness devoid of matter and/or form. In other words, the consciousness of the soul (the pure “I am”) is not a physical or mental form that is created or manifested. It is not an object of experience, but rather it is that in which, and through which, all experience is possible. Also, it is not controlled by anyone, but rather it is that in which, and

through which, control is possible. It is totally uncreated, and in that way, it is free.

My children are not my creation. We were mere passages for their physical forms to enter this world. As conscious human beings, they have not been created by us. We have merely contributed to the make-up of their bodily constitutions. However, their minds and souls are their own. The limited, associated, and identified consciousness of the soul, “I am the body” (or the sense of “I” as the body), is most aptly described as ‘the awakening of the soul in the body’. The consciousness of the soul from which its limited consciousness “I am the body” arises cannot be created or destroyed. We are eternal in that way. Hence, we have awoken, and we are put to sleep. In Sūra Mu’minūn, Allah describes the creation of a human foetus stage by stage:

We created man from an extraction of clay. Then We placed him as a drop of fluid in a safe place. Then We made that drop into a clinging form, and We made that clinging form into a lump of tissue, and We made that lump into bones, and We clothed the bones with flesh. Thereafter, We raised him into another being. Glory be to God, the best of creators! (23:12-15).

In these verses, Allah uses the pronoun ‘We’ in the description of the sequence of the creation of the foetus: ‘We created’, ‘We placed’, ‘We made’, and ‘We fashioned’. When the physical development of the foetus reaches a particular stage, the tone of the Quran changes; it states, ‘then We raised the foetus into another existence altogether.’ This is not a stage of creation. It refers to something arising within the foetus, an emergence of something else: ‘We initiated it into another existence altogether. Glory be to God, the best of Creators.’ God takes pride at this point of the development of the foetus. This point is described in *ḥadīth* as the point at which the spirit enters the foetus fully, that is, it pervades it and associates with it fully, after which the foetus becomes a dormant conscious being. This spirit is the uncreated,

indestructible, and eternal consciousness “I am”. However, it is experienced limitedly as the soul’s limited consciousness, the sense of “I” that pervades and is identified with the body. Thus, in essence, the consciousness of the soul is beyond life and death, and wakefulness and sleep, experienced in this world. It always is. It is eternally alive and always awake. It does not become alive or awake, nor does it die or go to sleep.

Life and death are states of forms (bodies, minds, and souls) that arise and subside in the soul’s consciousness “I am”. Consider this verse. *Kun-tum amwatan fa aḥyā-kum*, “You were in a state of death, and then He brought you to life” (2:28). This means you as a soul existed even though you were in a state of death. ‘You were in a state of death’ means you were inactive and dormant. He brought you into a state of animation in which you think, exercise your minds, see, hear, and work things out through the bodily medium. *Thuma yumitu-kum ...*, “Then He will put you to death [again], and then He will bring you back to life [again], and then you shall be returned to Him” (2:28). In all these states, you exist, and hence in essence, you – as the soul’s consciousness – are beyond bodily life, death, and resurrection. The caption of the verse, “You were in a state of death” cannot be taken to mean ‘you were non-existent’, because in the subsequent caption referring to the second death after which we will be given life on the Day of Qiyāma (“Then He will put you to death [again], and then He will bring you back to life [again]”), we know we continue to exist based on Quran and *ḥadīth*; that is, in the interim between death and resurrection, we continue to exist and experience other intermediary realms. Therefore, the same is the case with the state of death preceding this bodily life. It is not a state of non-existence, but a state of death relative to this world and life; that is, it refers to our non-activity and involvement in this world and life. Accordingly, it would be absolutely correct to say that we are in a state of death now in relation to the Hereafter

and Unseen; that is, we are not active and involved in the life of the Hereafter currently, and hence we are dead in relation to it.

The blessed Prophet said that during the second death, you as a soul do not cease to exist, but rather you will be transferred to another realm of existence. Death is not your end. It merely marks a point of transition and transference. Thus, the verse implies that prior to this life, you existed in a state of death relative to the bodily life of this world, then you were endowed with the bodily life of this world, after which you will be put you back into a state of death relative to the bodily life of this world, and then finally, you will be returned to God. Therefore, the consciousness of the soul, devoid of association with the body and mind, pre-exists our worldly life. It is eternal, and as such, continues beyond bodily death.

The choice of words in the verses of the Quran is phenomenal, and their precision is remarkable. Consider the word *tawaffā* (the cessation of the activity of the faculties of the soul in the body), which has been used in verses of the Quran to depict the end of worldly life and bodily connection. *Yatawaffā-kum malaku-l-mawt* ..., "The angel of death will take you ..." (32:11). In most cases, *malaku-l-mawt* (the angel of death) initiates the process of bodily death, after which it causes the activity of the soul in the body to cease (*yatawaffā*). The Quran states that the process of *tawaffā* is experienced by us for the duration of sleep, for there is a temporary cessation of the activity of the faculties of the soul in the body during sleep. Thus, sleep is a form of partial death. The blessed Prophet has described sleep as 'the sister of death'. Generally, the process of death results in a permanent state of *tawaffā* because the cessation of the activity of the faculties of the soul in the body is permanent and irreversible. The soul is seized fully, and its activity in the body stops.

Allah says to the blessed Prophet Isa, "O Isa, indeed I will do your *tawaffā*, and I will raise you to Me ..." (3:55). Therefore, *tawaffā* does not mean death. It means 'the suspension of the

soul's awareness *I am the body*', and it can occur with or without the death of the body. That is why there is a distinction between *mawt* (death) and *tawaffā*. Thus, when bodily life begins, we merely awaken within a bodily constitution, and when death occurs, our connection to the bodily constitution is switched off permanently. Those resurrected on the Day of *Qiyāma* will ask, 'Who has awoken us from our resting place?' (36:52). This means we are beyond worldly existence and non-existence, both prior to coming to this world and after leaving it. We are eternal, and we never die in that sense. Death refers to the process of the soul's consciousness ceasing to associate with its bodily form in this world, with the result that the bodily constitution stops functioning as expected. But consciousness, soul, and its mind continue to be operational after death.

When we awaken in these bodies, then whose awakening are we? It is a singular truth and reality that is awakening as souls – as us. The human species in its entirety is said to be created from one soul.

O humankind, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it, created its mate, and from the pair of them, spread countless men and women far and wide. Be mindful of God, in whose name you make requests of one another, and [beware of severing the ties of] kinship. God is always watching over you (4:1).

This one soul is ever-living. It gives rise to many forms. The reality of the eight billion people upon this earth is a singular reality, which is the one soul's pure consciousness "I am" (that is not identified with the body, mind, or any individual soul). This means that in essence, the consciousness of the soul who goes to Hell is the same consciousness of the soul who has gone to Paradise, and the consciousness of the soul who inherits Paradise is the same consciousness of the soul who has been thrust into the Fire. Salvation and damnation of humankind in the truest sense

are not determined by our successes and failures as individuals in this world. They depend on something quite beyond and more profound than our individual interactions. Even our individual, post-mortem experiences of Paradise and Hell are not determined by our individual interactions as humans in this world exclusively. This stands in sharp contrast to the theology we subscribe to, namely, that everything is determined and known by God, and as such, His foreknowledge cannot be defied. Undeniably, everything is known by God, but at which level of His Being is everything known? As God, the unknown, the All-encompassing, and All-knowing? Or as God in His creative capacity as the Author of humankind? God as the Author of humankind has left the fate of Paradise and Hell unknown: ‘God has yet to know who amongst you are the believers...’ (see 3:140, 3:142, 3:166-167, 5:94, and 57:25). And how can it be otherwise?

The blessed Prophet has said that each one of us has a place reserved in Paradise and Hell simultaneously, and that each of us determines which we vacate and which we inherit by the life we lead in this world. We are always on the knife’s edge. The beloved Imam Ali did not claim success for himself in terms of salvation until the fateful blow of the blade was delivered upon his blessed head. It is only then that he exclaimed, “*fuztu wa rabbil-ka’ba*”, “By the Lord of the Ka’ba, I have succeeded!” Up until that point, the soul of the beloved Imam knew that anything was possible in terms of salvation. Fate is in an undetermined state. Anything can happen at any moment, but when the blade struck his blessed head, he knew his journey was over and that he had indeed succeeded. How can anybody deny the undetermined state of the soul? How can anybody deny the soul’s ignorance of whether it is going to Paradise or Hell? We will explain this later, but for now, it should be borne in mind that (1) the consciousness of the one soul is eternal, (2) the soul’s consciousness, which is the source of the soul’s seemingly limited consciousness “I am the

body”, is at the heart or centre of every soul, and (3) the fate of individual souls is undetermined.

Allah says in the Quran, “Do you think you will enter Paradise while God has yet to know those of you who struggled [in His path] and were patient” (3:142). Why would the Quran use such ambiguous terms if not to incite curiosity? The soul’s consciousness (the pure “I am”) is neutral insofar as it allows the apparently limited consciousness’ of individual human souls to tend to wheresoever and whatsoever they please in this world. This is why some souls go to Paradise and others to Hell. The soul’s consciousness, which is a point of neutrality in this world, is within one and all. If this can be appreciated, we will know that both the one going to Paradise and the one going to Hell are “me” as the essence of humankind, which is the consciousness of soul. When I see you, it is the soul’s consciousness identified with my body that is looking at the soul’s consciousness identified with your body. The problem is that we don’t know ourselves as the consciousness of the soul; we think of ourselves as the body, which is the soul’s limited consciousness “I am the body” or the egoic soul (*nafs ammāra*), and hence I consider your body to be ‘you’. In reality, it is the same consciousness of the one, indivisible soul that is in every individual soul. The blessed Imam Sadiq said that if human beings understood how they were created, no one would have the heart to hate anyone else. To repeat, our state is undetermined. The consciousness of the one soul is neutral insofar as it allows its reflections to choose Paradise or Hell. Rumi says, ‘O you who salute and weep over Husayn! O you who curse Yazid and Shimr! Look within yourselves! You will find that you are the Husayn who is being slaughtered by your Shimr.’ It is you yourself! If only you could understand that the one beyond the forms of Husayn and Yazid is you – the soul’s consciousness.

So if we as souls existed before this worldly existence (as gestured to in verse 2:28 discussed above: “You were in a state of death, and then He brought you to life. Then He will put you

to death [again], and then He will bring you back to life [again], and then you shall be returned to Him.”), then where and what were we? The Quran says, ‘Why did you forget?’ (see 36:60) and “On that Day, humankind will remember, but how will that remembrance avail them?” (89:23). The Quran states that the deities set up by people will be questioned thus, “Did they worship you?” They will respond, ‘No God, they did not worship us. You gave them such a lengthy existence that they forgot the pledges they had made to You’ (see 25:17-19). The verses of the Quran also mention that we have repeatedly forgotten our meeting with God on the Day of Resurrection, ‘We have forgotten you as you forgot your meeting on this Day’ (see 32:14 and 45:34).

As pre-worldly souls, we have made a certain pact with God and a commitment to Him that we will not allow ourselves to forget, and that we will record it within our history. It is like a group of people who have made a pact to work as a team to complete a task. Hence, they share in the burdens and responsibilities of completing the task. As humankind, we have taken on some responsibility and made certain pacts. This means we are all responsible collectively. We were never meant to have the attitude of ‘them’ and ‘us’ (‘they are bad, and we are good’). No. The ‘bad’ drag everybody down because we are one collective being. Yes, as individuals, we will be judged on what we have done on this earth individually, and it is possible for each of us to attain individual salvation and liberation. However, the collective body has its own destiny as well, beyond the individuals comprising it. Have you considered why the majority of the blessed Prophets of God sought social reform tirelessly? The vast majority of them never confined themselves to caves, did they? All of them endeavoured to awaken humankind as a whole. Why? Because the story of life on earth is the story of humankind. Thus, all of us contribute to the collective damnation or salvation of humankind upon this earth. There were certain pacts and commitments that we were supposed to remember, relay, and record. That history seems to

have been effaced. Hence, we have understood things in a partial and naïve manner. There is more to the story than what we have been taught to believe.

Does it make sense that God decided to create Adam at some point, send him to earth, and instruct him thus, ‘Worship Me. If you are good, I will give you Paradise. Otherwise, I will put you in Hell!’? But O God, I never asked You to create me. God says, ‘It is My favour upon you that I created you.’ What sort of favour is this? It is worse than damnation for me because I know how vulnerable I am. You have given me a bodily constitution that is excessive in its needs. I will be licentious and transgressive. And the world that You have sent me to is a hellish world. Why would anyone in their right mind want to come to this place? Even people living in comfort are always fighting with each other. They do not find a moment’s peace and rest. Then religion tells us that the process of dying is very severe, after which, one and all will be visited and interrogated in the grave by the angels, *Munkar* and *Nakir*. Thereafter, the trumpet will be blown, the entire cosmos and all those living upon this earth will die, and then all humankind will be raised naked. This will be the Day of *Qiyāma* in which we will all be behaving worse than devils, fighting each other. And then, finally, after all of that, there is the possibility of Hell! Is this a bestowal or a curse? Can anybody make sense of this? What is this game that is being played with us? O Lord, are You simply watching Your own Foreknowledge of events come to pass?

Such a narrative is inconsistent with the God Who speaks to us in the Quran and in depths of our consciousness. *We* are responsible for coming to this earth. It has been *our* want and choice. Something has happened in a previous life, before the life of this world, and as a result, we are here. ‘We showed them both the paths’ (see 90:10); ... *immā shākirān wa immā kafūra*, “... either they will be grateful, or they will be ungrateful” (76:3); and We will wait and see. Think about the Quran’s emphasis on

the angels who are “noble scribes”, *kirāman kātibīn* (82:10-11). ‘We shall bring out the books on the Day of *Qiyāma*... Read your book [today], for you are sufficient as a witness against your own self’ (see 17:13-14). Why does the Quran emphasise all this writing, recording, and testimonies? Something transpired prior to us coming here. Consider this phenomenal verse:

And [remember o Prophet] when your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants, and made them testify upon themselves [regarding Himself], ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They replied, ‘Yes, we testify.’ [This was done] lest you say on the day of resurrection, ‘Indeed, we were not aware of this;’ or lest you say, ‘Only our fathers ascribed partners [to God] aforetime, and we were [merely their] descendants after them. Will You destroy us for what the followers of falsehood did [before us]?’ (7:172-173).

God is emphatic that such excuses will not be acceptable on the Day of *Qiyāma*. We will not be able to say, ‘I did not know, and so how can You punish me for something I did not know’, or ‘I was just following my forefathers blindly.’ God states in the verse, ‘I took a pledge from you.’ We do not realise that this life is a very serious venture. We are underestimating our worldly existence. We are on the knife’s edge between salvation and damnation because we have chosen to come to this place, and we are facing a possible perilous end. Each and every one of us needs to ask, ‘What is happening?’. There is something grand taking place. Why do I not know what is happening? On the one hand, humankind was supposed to have recorded these pledges with God, and yet on the other, Allah does not give respite to those who have forgotten. The fact that Allah is not going to give us any respite for having forgotten these pledges means that we do have some impressions of them deep within us. And this is why the questions of ‘Why am I here?’ and ‘Is there something I am supposed to be doing?’ still resonate within our human condition

as individuals. So even though the history of humankind does not bear witness to such pledges being made clearly, and there are insufficient details about them in our religious literature, the fact that God is going to bring us to account for having made them despite our collective forgetfulness indicates that the impressions of the memories of them are very much alive within us as human individuals. Which thinking being does not ask the questions of ‘Why am I here?’, ‘What is it all about?’, and ‘Is there something I am supposed to be doing in this life?’. These questions arise from deep within our souls because residual impressions of the memories of the oaths we have made with our Lord are supplied to every individual soul by the one human soul in which all memories are recorded clearly. Hence, there are individuals, like the blessed Prophets, who can recall the pledges clearly. In *Sūra Yāsīn*, Allah says, “O children of Adam, did I not take a commitment from you that you will not serve *shayṭān* (satan, the devil). Indeed, he is your sworn enemy” (36:60). When did I make this commitment? And yet, Allah is saying that you have made this pledge. “On that Day, humankind will remember ...” and then He says, “... but how will that remembrance avail them?” (89:23).

So, there is this particular reality known as the consciousness associated with the one human soul. This consciousness “I am the one human soul”, and all its myriad of forms including you and I, has had a history prior to manifesting as you, I, and the other eight billion of us today in this world. This world is a test. God states that the basic pass mark is to attest and proclaim, “There is no god other than Allah.”

Have you ever wondered why there is so much emphasis on the phrase *lā ilāha illa-llāh*, “There is no god other than God”? When we read the Quran as a whole, we see that in every part of it, Allah nullifies the worth of every intermediary and every type of intermediation initially and essentially. Subsequently, He allows intermediation for the believers who are upon the path

of God-centricity. And yet, He maintains that the path is one in which ‘there is only I and you,’ and ‘you have to acknowledge that I am the only God.’ Study the verses of the Quran, and you will find the verses that state, “Had there been therein (that is, in the heavens and earth) gods beside Allah, then both would have definitely been ruined” (21:22) and “If there had been gods with Him, as they say, in that case they would definitely have sought a way to the Lord of the Throne” (17:42). Repeatedly, Allah questions the readers of the Quran, ‘Are there any other gods? Call upon your gods’ (see 7:195, 28:64, 35:40, and 41:47). Why is there this emphasis on God’s unity and authority? He is telling us very simply that the pass mark in this world is very minimal: acknowledge that there is no god but Allah, the One Supreme Reality, and you will pass.

As philosophers, mystics, and seekers, we want to delve into the deeper meanings of existence and reality because we find no rest. But as far as humankind is concerned, God states that the minimum pass mark in ‘this life of tests and trials’ is the acknowledgment that there is no god other than God. Why is there this emphasis? Perhaps in a life prior to this one, we faltered to a great extent and went astray. Perhaps we challenged God in some way or another, and as a result, we have chosen to be here to make amends. It seems the only task for us here is to surrender to God and arrive at the fullness of our blessed existence, because in failing to do so, we will bring about our damnation.

Let us examine this further. When the spirit is blown within the body, and the pure consciousness “I am” identifies and associates with the body and mind, there begins a struggle between the spirited soul and the bodily (mind) / the egoic soul (the consciousness “I am this body”). The spirited soul wants eternity with God, and the bodily / egoic soul wants to emulate God within the confines of this world and the restrictions of materiality. An example of a soul that is spirited is our beloved Imam Husayn, the patron saint of all Muslim saints and seekers.

He sees life in death, strength in sacrificing the arms of his beloved Abbas, and the love of God in the plunging of the dagger into the heart of his Akbar. An example of an egoic soul who wants to emulate God within the confines of this world of materiality is Pharoah. He sees life in the killing of his opponents and their children, and wealth in the possession of a mighty kingdom. When the blessed Prophet Musa stood before him in rags with a broken staff, Pharoah smiled and said, ‘O Musa, if you are from God, then where are the angels, the lordly attire, and the treasures of gold and silver?’ (see 43:51-53). The blessed Musa’s richness was in his utmost poverty and need before His God, which enabled him to give himself away to God wholly. In contrast, Pharoah’s richness was in his position and power in this world.

Therefore, when we awaken in the body as a soul, a struggle ensues that either makes or breaks us. The struggle is between the spirited soul (which yearns God and to be itself as the soul’s consciousness “I am”) and the egoic soul (which is the soul’s limited consciousness “I am the body”). If we try to emulate God as egoic souls, our souls become demonic and arrogant. On the flip side, if we emulate God as spirited souls and attend to the spirit within, by repeating *lā ḥawla wa lā qūwata illa bi-llāh*, “There is no power or strength other than God’s”, and reminding ourselves repeatedly that my beauty, life, knowledge, love, wealth, family, and body are not mine but God’s – whatever I have, is given by God, and they are to be returned to Him – then our souls become godly, good, beautiful, and selfless.

Look at the danger in all of this. Allah will question the blessed Prophet Isa on the Day of *Qiyāma* thus, ‘Isa did you say to people that they should take you and your mother as gods beside Me?’ Isa will reply, “O Lord! Why would I say that which I have no right?” (see 5:116). Observe the careful and precise construction of Isa’s statement, ‘Why would I say that which I have no right.’ He did not say, ‘Why would I say that which is untrue?’, but rather, ‘Why would I say that which I have no right.’ The Quran also

says, 'It is not right for anyone to whom We have given the book and authority to say to the people, 'Worship me and become my servants and slaves.' Rather, He will always say, 'Worship Allah' (see 3:79-80). Why does Allah need to say this? Would any of the blessed Prophets of God say, 'Worship me and become my servants and slaves'? So why does Allah say this? It is because there is always a danger of the egoic soul (the consciousness "I am the body") claiming lordship, and it is great indeed. Then Allah says in the Quran that the noble servants (*'ibādun mukramūn*) of Allah do not precede Him in speech, and they do whatever has been commanded to them. But if 'any one of them were to say, *I am God*, We shall make them experience the fire of Hell' (see 21:25-29). Again, what is the need to say this? It is because in the journey to godliness, there is the danger of the egoic soul (*nafs ammāra*) mistaking itself as godly.

If we initiate and cultivate the emergence of godliness by directing the mind's attention away from the operations of the egoic soul (which are the bodily and worldly) and focussing it upon the devotion of God to the extent that we melt away in God, then godliness will be realised in the most glorious way. But if there is waywardness within, then we initiate and cultivate the emergence of a *shayṭān* – a devil – in spite of worshipping Allah. We should know that this demonic emergence occurs whenever the egoic soul believes and feels itself to be godly. In such moments, the innate state of godliness is sealed.

The blessed Prophet Musa was spoken to through the medium of a bush. God does not speak to anyone directly. The Quran says, 'God does not talk to people, save from behind a veil or through inspiration or through a messenger' (see 42:51). However, Iblīs was spoken to directly, 'O Iblīs, why have you not prostrated? Why is there this opposition within you?' (see 7:11-12, 15:28-33, 17:61-62, and 38:75-77). Imagine, there is a direct conversation with God, and yet he, Iblīs, who was so lofty in stature, was not immune from falling from the Grace of God. This is what

happens when the egoic soul mistakes itself to be godly. At that point, we have attributed lordship to ourselves and so we worship ourselves. Do not think that an egoic soul ascribing lordship to itself must be like the Pharaoh's soul that pronounced publicly, "I am your Lord, the most exalted!" (79:24). Rather, it is every soul in which any form of arrogance resides, for arrogance is the state in which the egoic soul claims, "I am independent, knowledgeable, worthy, and noble." Such a state of arrogance is the other god, and it leads to damnation. When there is arrogance, the egoic soul is associating (*mushrik*) with Allah *subhāna-hu wa ta'ālā* (may He be praised and exalted) knowingly or unknowingly. No one misguided Iblīs but he himself. We say that *shayṭān* is in chains during the month of Ramaḍān, and yet many sins occur whilst *shayṭān* is in chains. So who is the real *shayṭān*? It is us ourselves – the egoic soul.

The one human soul, which has manifested as all its myriad of forms (that is, as all the individual human souls), seems to have had a past prior to this worldly existence, and hence we are here for a reason. The reason is for us to acknowledge the authority of God by giving away our own authority. Devotion is a means for the soul to melt away in God, for the humility of devotion enables us to overcome the egoic soul. When arrogance takes root, we ascribe god-head (or god-ness – the quality of being God) to ourselves either by action, speech, or thought. Herein lies the difference between salvation and damnation.

We commit many types of *shirk*. The blessed Prophet said, 'In my community, *shirk* will go unnoticed, just as a black ant crawling upon a black rock goes unnoticed in the darkness of the night.' If we could ask him, "O blessed Prophet of God, what is this *shirk* that goes unnoticed?", the answer would be, "It is the feeling and sense that 'I have discretion and agency' in any action, speech, or thought without the accompanying presential knowledge (awareness) that it is only God Who governs." If you do charitable work and feel you are being charitable, then

that is an instance of ‘hidden’ *shirk*. Does ‘hidden’ *shirk* result in damnation? Based on the words of the blessed Messenger, it does not. As long as we control ourselves, uphold that *there is no god but Allah*, and curb our ego, Allah will give us Paradise despite being infested with *shirk* of the hidden kind. When I give charity, I feel a sense of pleasure that ‘I have performed this praiseworthy act’. This feeling reveals that I am claiming lordship for myself. Observe the attitude of godly souls. When the beloved Imam Husayn gave in charity, he wept, thanked Allah, and apologised to the man (the recipient of charity): ‘Forgive me, for this is all I have.’ Then he turned to Allah, as if to say, ‘O Allah, You have allowed me to part with Your property that I held in trust.’ The act of giving alms made him humble. This is a godly soul, purged of its egoic identity and claims of lordliness.

Lecture Three

The False Identity

We are continuing with the theme of the pre-existence of the human soul prior to its arrival into this worldly existence. The Quran states, “We created you [all], then We fashioned you [all], and then We said to the angels, ‘prostrate before Adam.’ They prostrated except Iblis; he was not of those who prostrated” (7:7). The plural pronoun ‘you’ in Arabic is employed in the captions “We created *you* [all]” and “We fashioned *you* [all]”, which is then followed by the final statement, “and then We said to the angels, ‘prostrate before Adam’”, who is a single human. Hence, all humans were created and fashioned, and then the angels were commanded to prostrate before one of them, Adam. Our creation and fashioning at this stage is not in terms of matter. It is a non-material creation and fashioning (in a non-material realm). Subsequently, Adam was embodied, and the angels were instructed to prostrate before him. This is made clear by another verse, “... He it is Who created you [all] from one soul, and then from it, created its pair, and then from them [both] spread many men and women ...” (4:1). This verse, and other such verses (see 7:189 and 39:6), imply that we were created from one soul initially. Notice that there is no mention of this original soul being created. The sequence of the verse is that we

were all created from a single soul, then this original soul's pair was created, and then from both the original soul and its pair, men and women were created in this world. This verse makes sense if we interpret it thus: Initially, we were all created from a single soul; then – after all souls were created – the material body of the pair of the original soul (that is, the body of the blessed Ḥawā') was created from the body of the original soul (which is the body of the blessed Adam); and then material men and women were created from the embodied, original soul and its pair in this world. To reiterate, the sequence of our creation is as follows: (1) all our non-material souls were initiated from the one, non-material soul; (2) subsequently, a single soul was embodied (Adam), and from it, its material spouse was made (Ḥawā'); and (3) after that, material bodies were multiplied and served as hosts for the remaining souls that were initiated from the original soul. Thus, each one of us has existed prior to this life, that is, prior to being bodily and gender confined, as a unique, non-material soul – a ray or refraction of the same non-material, original soul (*nafs*). Then the souls of Adam and his spouse were given bodily form, and from them, the rest of humankind has been emerging gradually. In summary, the following facts are implied in these verses: first, we existed prior to the embodiment of Adam; second, as unembodied, immaterial souls, we are inextricably connected to the soul of Adam, and hence existed within the folds of the embodied Adam; and third, therefore the angels also prostrated before us when they prostrated before the material form of Adam.

Numerous verses of the Quran cite natural phenomena and then label them as 'signs'. For instance, Allah says:

Among His signs is that He created you from dust; then behold, you are humans scattered [far and wide] (30:20).

And among His signs is that He created spouses for you from yourselves to live with in tranquillity. He put love and kindness

between you. Indeed, there are signs in this for those who reflect (30:21).

And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. Indeed, there are signs in this for those who know (30:22).

Among His signs are your sleep at night, and your seeking His bounty at day. Indeed, there are signs in this for those who listen (30:23).

And among His signs is that He shows you lightning that terrifies and inspires hope, and [among His signs is] that He sends water from the sky, and then revives the earth to life with it after death. Indeed, there are signs in this for those who use their reason (30:24).

What are signs? How are these occurrences signs? Have we ever thought about this? Signs are impactful at a variety of levels, but they are most impactful intuitively and emotionally. Signs are a means for us to awaken within and begin to reflect.

Yesterday we discussed about *tawaffā*, which means cessation of the activity of the faculties of the soul in the body. Allah says,

It is He Who ceases your souls at night, knowing what you have done by day. Then He raises you up [again to life] therein (in the day), until your fixed term is fulfilled. Then, to Him is your return [in the end], and then He will inform you of what you were doing (6:60).

Have we ever wondered how our souls – we – cease to be active in relation to our bodies during sleep? We stop governing our bodies. We are just suspended. We dream but this is not activity in relation to the body. Who is doing this? Who is causing the soul to be active in dreams during sleep? It is as if the Quran is trying to awaken us to this fact: You are from a place that knows no sleep, death, night, day, and gender. All these experiences and

notions have been imposed upon you in your worldly existence, and hence you are supposed to reflect and understand.

We need to understand that when Allah says in the Quran, ‘There is a sign in this for those who ... (are mindful, reflect, listen, and so on)’, it means that we are required to reflect upon these verses. We are supposed to awaken ourselves and arrive at a different state of enlightenment. Individually, we need to realize within that *I am something totally alien to what I am experiencing at present in this world.*

The blessed Prophet was asked, ‘Is there sleep in Paradise?’. The Prophet replied, ‘There is no death in Paradise, and hence there is no sleep there either.’ Think about this. There is no death in Paradise, and hence there is no sleep there either. We cannot comprehend a life – an experience of Reality – in which there is no sleep. The Quran says that humans will not die in Paradise because they are to experience death only once (which is in this worldly life), and thereafter there is no death (see 44:56). If our existence in the Hereafter is deathless and sleepless, then what does that say about our essence? What are we? Think about it carefully.

The fact that people can ‘change’ their genders and yet retain the same sense of ‘I’ affirms that the soul’s consciousness and mind are prior to and beyond gender. Have you ever considered what falls asleep? Does the soul’s pure consciousness (which is at its centre and is free from any form, and hence beyond time and space) fall asleep? Or does its mind? Or its body? Which one of these three falls asleep: the soul’s consciousness, mind, or body? Which one of these three dies? Does the soul’s consciousness, mind, or body die? Death is the cessation of the activity of the body as a functioning biological organism, that is, death is said to have occurred when the biological organism fails to function in an integrated fashion as a person and mind. Thus, it is the body that dies, but we, as the soul’s consciousness and mind do not die. At death, the connection between our individual souls and

our bodies is terminated; hence, it is our bodies that cease to be active at death. Similarly, it is the body that sleeps, just as it is the body that dies. The soul's consciousness (the pure "I am") is beyond sleep, that is, it does not sleep, and consequently our minds emerge during sleep and dream; they remain active in spite of the body sleeping and being partially dead. In this world, we experience sleep and death because we have bodies – bodies need to sleep, and bodies must wear out and die. But in truth, we, as the soul's consciousness and mind, are beyond these bodily properties, that is, of sleep and death. The *Quran* attempts to awaken us to this reality constantly.

To decipher our true nature, consider the following phrase that the *Quran* often cites in its verses. Many verses state that the life of this world is only a short-lived pleasure of deception (see 3:185, and 57:20; there is a similar meaning in 6:32). This world is a deceptive, illusory world. It is not what we think it is, and neither are we who we think we are, for we have allowed ourselves to be deluded into thinking that we are part of this world. We are captured in a prison of illusion created by our own selves, as will be explained shortly. Allah also says, "The life of this world is merely a diversion and an amusement. Indeed, the true life is the Home of Hereafter, if only they knew" (29:64). What if this world is really nothing more than an amusement, diversion, and sport as the *Quran* states it is? What if we are here momentarily in this particular course of life, which we have chosen as individuals, knowing that it will determine where we go next? It seems we have come here of our own accord to try to accomplish a task to the best of our abilities, and then we are to continue onwards. In order for us to avail ourselves of this worldly opportunity, we have been embodied, and the bodily needs have been supplied to us: there are nights for resting and daytimes for earning livelihood; the sun supplies us with heat, and the air and water are given in precise measures so that we continue to live for a period of time that we may have bargained for.

Allah reminds us that we are from a place in which there is no night, sleep, death, or gender. Why can you not remember where you are from? Why can you not recall your origin? Why can you not recollect who you are in essence? Today, we acknowledge in astrophysics and quantum theory that the vast observable cosmos does not account for all of existence. It is a fraction of what exists. Reality cannot be confined to what appears. In this world of God, there may not be any constants anywhere. At the quantum level (which is also a fraction of what exists), nothing is determined. An electron's location is undetermined prior to an observer's observation of it because its existence is like a wave; but when it is observed, its location is fixed as we would expect of a particle. At the quantum level, our standard logical axioms do not work, such as, a thing cannot simultaneously be and not be in one location. When the electron is observed, its location is fixed, but when it is not observed, its precise location as a particle is unknown. This means it is necessary to add provisos to our standard logical axioms, such as 'a thing cannot simultaneously be and not be in one location *at the atomic level and larger*'. Imagine, this cosmos of ours is not what it appears to be. In fact, most of it is unobservable and unknown at present, that is, it is not detectable in either the normal or quantum levels of reality.

In the famous example known as 'the Allegory of the Cave', the philosopher Plato teaches us the difference between the nature of belief and the nature of knowledge. The allegory states that prisoners are chained together in a row, deep in a cave. They are facing the wall in front of them. They are only able to look at it and their fellow prisoners chained immediately beside them. Behind the prisoners is a fire, and between the fire and prisoners, there is a suspended bridge. People are walking across the bridge, carrying all manner of objects. This casts shadows on the wall in front of the prisoners. The prisoners spend all their time watching these shadows, believing them to be real. One of the prisoners is pulling at his chains and becomes free. He turns fearfully and sees

the fire and people walking across the bridge carrying objects. He realises that the shadows on the wall are an illusion. This freed prisoner leaves the cave gradually and discovers the reality outside it. He glimpses the world outside the cave and realises that it is much more real than the reality of the projections on the wall of the cave. Plato states that the prisoners need to be free of the chains and turn around whereby they will see the fire and people walking across the bridge carrying objects. They will realise that the shadows on the wall are not real but false. After that, the freed prisoners will approach the mouth of the cave slowly and in trepidation. The sight of the outside world will mesmerise them initially and cause a great deal of fear and pain. They will need to rub their eyes to become accustomed to receiving the radiance of the sun. Then they will venture out gradually, not looking at the sun directly, for it will blind them. They will have to spend time becoming acclimatised to this new reality outside the cave. They will only be able to look at the sun indirectly, that is, at its reflection, in a stream, river, or lake. Once they acquire the necessary aptitude within themselves, they will be able to behold the brilliance of the sun directly. How wonderful is the allegory of this great sage!

What is reality, and what is delusion? Delusion is to see, hear, smell, taste, and/or touch things that are not there. Delusional experiences are simply states of mind, for they do not correspond with what is in the world. But whatever we are experiencing right now is also a state of mind, is it not? If somebody is colour-blind, they will not see the colour that you and I see. If somebody is deaf, they will not hear what anybody else hears. As a human species, we are fine-tuned to see and hear to the extent and quality that allows us to function adequately. We cannot hear what cats hear. Bats can see in the pitch-black darkness of night by a form of black and white vision they have. In fact, we are unable to move as fast as bats, and we lack their agility to manoeuvre and cut corners. The bat can do all of this because of the form of sight it

has. If a bee comes into this hall, it will see a very different reality to what you and I are seeing. So, delusion is a state of mind that does not correspond to reality, and hence it is false, but we can ask, 'what is reality?'. Is it what we see, hear, and feel sensuously? Or is it what other creatures see, hear, and feel sensuously? Can we claim that the experience of the world in the mind of the bee is false, and ours is true?

We had a little earthquake tremor in Birmingham a few years ago. I was sitting in my living room when the cat meowed suddenly, looked around, and then hid beneath the sofa. I thought this was strange behaviour, and then a few seconds later, I felt the tremor. Whose experience of the world is deficient and altered, my cat's or mine? Its hearing was receptive to frequencies of waves that mine is not, and its mind was able to decipher meanings from the different reverberations of waves that mine is not. So, is our perception of the world correct? Are we seeing the world as it is?

There is a big deception when we label what the majority of us perceive of the world as 'normal'. There is no such thing as 'normality' in the way we understand it. Read the lives of mystics. Ibn Sina states that at some point during spiritual wayfaring, the name 'Allah' will reverberate spontaneously in the depths of your heart, and you will marvel. You will know that it was not heard through the ears, and yet it will be more pronounced than any speech heard through the ears. When mystics see things, it is so vivid that this world appears like a dark photographic negative. Such experiences leave us baffled asking, 'Is *this* real, or is *that* real?' Of course, the answer is: neither is real; but you, as the perceiver of both – the soul's consciousness – are real. Seek that. So, what is happening? What is the nature of this world? Am I seeing things for what they are? Is this worldly experience real? Or is it a delusional and deceptive existence as the Quran says?

In this world, you are within a constitution that is limiting your perception. Even your perception of the observable world is being limited. Sometimes dreams are so vivid that it is as if

the pixels have been increased a million times over. The colours are more sharp and vivid than what is experienced in this world, and the depth and detail is not found in this world. Sometimes mystics hear the name ‘Allah’, and the heart calls out ‘Allah’ spontaneously. They hear the name, and yet there is no audible sound entering the ears. They see dead people standing before them and they know it is not an illusion. They are not delusional nor are they under the influence of drugs. They are fully aware during the experience and certain that it is a real occurrence with significance.

What is the truth? What is reality? The Quran endeavours to awaken us to the truth. It states that the life of this world is not as you have imagined it to be. You are not what you imagine yourself to be. You are being deluded by your own egoic soul. Awaken yourselves and make the most of this opportunity before it slips away. The ‘*urafā*’ (sages) often quote the following narration (despite other scholars questioning its authenticity): *an-nāsu niyāmun fa-idhā mātū intabahū*, “People are asleep. When they die, they awaken.” It is as if we will be hit with the realisation immediately after death that what we considered to be true was an illusion, and what we thought of, and believed in, as an idea is the Truth, the Reality. Another possible interpretation of this narration is that we are asleep now in another world, and our worldly lives here on this earth are an illusory experience; hence, when we fall asleep here permanently, we will awaken in our Homeland. This is depicted beautifully in the Quran thus: “You paid no attention to this [Day]. We have removed your veil, and so today, your sight is sharp [as the edge of a blade]” (50:22). *Subhāna-llah!* May Allah be glorified! Despite having eyesight, there is a veil upon your eyes. You are seeing through a veil. You are not even seeing what is here.

This has been the prelude. Now we will discuss the real issue, which is: our imprisonment in this world by identifying fully with our bodies, genders, statuses, possessions, families,

ethnicities, religions, and so on. All of these constitute our identity. As soon as we identify with any of them, taking any of them to be absolutely real, we become alienated from the truth and God, and therein is the birth of our egoic soul (which is the soul's consciousness "I am the body", or the sense of "I" as the body). The egoic soul is the greatest barrier to the truth. There is arrogance and pride when we say, 'I am a Muslim', 'I am a Khoja', 'I am a Syed', 'I am a man', 'I am a king', or 'I am a scholar'.

The scholar needs to be reminded that when he ages and his memory wanes, he will be wheeled into a *majlis* in a wheelchair. At that point, will the identity, 'I am a scholar', mean much? Was it real in the first place? One who is popular and thinks, 'I am popular', should introspect and tell himself: "Oh fool! This universe of ours is fourteen billion years old. It has trillions of galaxies. Some of its galaxies have hundreds of billions of stars. There are galaxies moving apart from each other at such incomprehensible speeds that they will never be seen by us, for they are moving apart from each other at speeds greater than the speed of light. They are lost to us forever and will never be known. They have become hidden in the vastness of space. The trillions of galaxies, each with countless numbers of stars, are unknown, and yet you are claiming popularity and desire to be known! How deluded are you? Even this immense universe of ours is just a tiny, worthless speck in comparison to the existential ocean in which there are infinite other universes." Think about it.

Our inward identification with religions, ethnicities, genders, nationalities, statuses, riches, and so on, results in a false sense of self both collectively and individually. They confine us and impose a false sense of personality upon us. The consequence of such collective and individual identification is othering, division, separation, disunity, discrimination, conflict, and tyranny. We are deluded. We carry these false identifications and operate within them throughout our lives, and before we know it, the great angel of God stands before us and says, "Come. Your time is up." How

strange is the life of a human being? He has been endowed with a soul which is inquisitive and critical by nature; that is, its purpose has always been to seek answers to the perennial and existential questions of 'What is it all about?' and 'Who am I?' Yet, he ignores and suppresses them. Perhaps it is because we are insecure, for my religion has given me answers, and I am comfortable with them. But our religions are our interpretations of the teachings of the great Prophets and sages. The teachings of the great Prophets and sages may not correspond to our interpretations. For one, the great Prophets and sages were all very inquisitive and critical. Thus, God says something, and we interpret something else.

Allah says to the people of Paradise, ... *wa ladaynā mazīd*, "... and yet we have more [to offer]" (50:35). The people of Paradise are baffled: what more could there be? To be admitted into Paradise is our goal, whereas Allah says that there is more, much more! Believers will be contented with their respective versions of Paradise, but lovers of God do not rest until they meet the Beloved beyond the veil of Paradise, for that is when godliness emerges in its fullest glory. Now think about our state. Poverty, wealth, sickness, and illness – these things occupy us, do they not? Life and death are our constant concerns. If only I knew that I am not life, death, sickness, health, wealth, and poverty. These pertain to the body, bodily, and worldly. It is the worldly body that falls sick, experiences health, has and loses possessions, and lives and dies. It has nothing to do with me. They do not determine *who* and *what* I am. If we fall prey to the bodily and worldly, then the struggle ensues, and we find ourselves alienated from God. If we can arrive beyond that state, then we are on the path of allowing the light to emerge from within.

Allah says in the Quran:

'Death will overtake you no matter where you may be, even inside high towers.' When good fortune comes their way, they say, 'This is from God,' but when harm befalls them, they say, 'This is from you [o Prophet].' Say to them, 'Everything is

from God.’ What is the matter with these people that they can barely understand what they are told? Whatever good befalls you [o Prophet] is from God, and whatever bad befalls you is [ultimately] from yourself. We sent you as a messenger to people. God is sufficient as Witness (4:78-79).

What do these verses mean? One interpretation is that sickness affords me the opportunity to be purged of the false identities and veils of darkness that enshroud me. Allah says that He removes his friends from darkness and brings them into the light. A befitting way to interact with sickness is to say, “O Lord, this body belongs to You, and it pays heed to the laws created by You. Allow me to rely upon You during this sickness and be free of my bodily anguish and pain.” Then the sickness becomes a means for the soul to surrender and be enlightened. However, if I despair during the sickness to the degree that I break and lose hope, then a regressive motion is initiated in which the egoic soul, which is the soul’s identification with the body, is strengthened. This identification, or the egoic soul, is what constitutes the false person. Note, we are also exhorted to consider God as the cause of our good experiences, and ourselves as the cause of bad experiences. Whenever we feel that an experience is good and wholesome, we must remind ourselves that it is from God and remove heedlessness of Him. And whenever we experience the contrary, that is, the bad and evil, we are to remember that we are their cause insofar as our souls were egoic, that is, identified with the body wholly and hence heedless of God.

If I become arrogant upon the acquisition of wealth, which is none other than God’s bestowal upon me, and claim to be its absolute owner, as the Pharaoh did when he exclaimed, ‘Are these rivers and gardens not mine?’ (see 43:51), then I am displaying alienation and distance from God. However, if I acquire wealth but the mind and soul are kept pure – that is, in a state of utter poverty before God – by the presential knowledge (awareness) that it is God’s bestowal and not my possession in reality (for I

do not own anything in reality), then I am heading in the right direction.

People who derive pleasure from owning things should ask themselves why they don't prevent their bodies from succumbing to illness at the point when sickness is imminent? You cannot even prevent your own body from becoming ill. You do not even own or have control over your own body, let alone anything else beyond your body. You do not even possess and have any real control over your own mind, for at any moment your mind may not be able to recall memories of experiences that you want to remember. So you don't even possess your own minds in reality, let alone anything else. In every moment of experience, God is giving us the opportunity to be godly. It is up to us how we interact in every situation: if we interact positively, wholesomely, and in a befitting manner, we become godly and emerge in God's light; and if we interact negatively, noxiously, and in an unbecoming manner, we become more alienated from God.

We must remind ourselves frequently that the blessed Prophet came to monstrous people, and yet he saw beauty, goodness, and intelligence in their souls. When he encountered men who had buried their daughters alive, he did not see ugly souls; rather, he perceived beautiful souls that had been misguided by the delusions of the egoic soul. The Prophet awoke the latent beauty, goodness, and intelligence in the souls of barbaric murderers, and they became angelic souls. How difficult must it have been to bestow kindness, compassion, and love upon a person who had buried his daughter alive? And yet by doing so, the blessed Prophet transformed that individual into a selfless soul, one who was ready to sacrifice his life for the life of another of God's creatures at will. This is the conduct (*sunna*) of the blessed Prophet.

Today, every sect of every religion claims exclusivity of the truth in the name of its founders, the blessed Prophets and sages. Each considers good humans who do not subscribe to its understanding of God as 'other' and hence damned. In reality

however, it is the religious person who condemns another in the name of God that is damned. Can you not see that our religions have degenerated and become the greatest veils? They have become means of disseminating deception en masse, and hence it is they who are deserving of damnation ironically.

Today, Muslims have the audacity to proclaim that all others are wrong and hence Hell-bound. When the blessed Prophets of God were asked, 'What will be the fate of generations before us in the Hereafter?', they replied, 'We do not know. It is in the hands of God' (see 20:51-52). Allah says in the Quran, 'Everything belongs to Me. I can forgive whomsoever I want' (see 5:18, 5:40, and 48:14). By asserting that all others are damned in the name of God, the Muslim forgets that the prerogative of granting salvation to people or damning them is God's exclusively. As long as the soul's mind is not aligned with the Truth, the Good and the Beautiful, its identification with anything bodily and worldly, including religion and devotion to God, will result in damnation. Today, the very Quran that redeemed monstrous people and exhorted unity between people of all faiths is being used to justify intra-Muslim killings. As stated previously, our inward identification with anything bodily and worldly (religions, ethnicities, genders, nationalities, statuses, riches, and so on) results in a false sense of self – the egoic soul – which is the root of all delusion and deception. When the egoic soul interacts with the Quran, it yields the message of *shayṭān* (Iblis). In contrast to this, if the soul and its mind are godly, that is, they are aligned with the Truth, the Good and the Beautiful, then even demons are seen as lights of God performing their function to perfection.

In the realm of morality, there are absolute goods, all things being equal. For instance, speaking the truth is good. Why is speaking the truth good? Because anything that yields growth towards the Truth, Good, Beautiful and Unity, or is productive in relation to Existence, has the property of goodness essentially. Giving, saving, and sparing someone's life are all good because

they are productive existentially. Being able to trust people is good because it is productive in terms of causing unity between people, and hence there is greater societal harmony and growth. Of course, 'speaking the truth' is counterproductive in rare situations in which lying saves lives, and hence it is bad in such situations. For instance, if a madman with an axe asks you for the whereabouts of the person you are hiding in your home, you would not tell him the truth and disclose that 'he is in the loft'; you would lie so that a life can be saved, and murder prevented. In this situation, lying is good. But then why is 'speaking the truth' not good absolutely, that is, in every possible situation? It is because of the limitations of our worldly existence. Our limited existence causes us to be angry, insecure, and anxious at times, and hence we become wayward. In such moments, lying may be necessary and hence good to avert further evil, suffering, and harm. Giving, saving, and sparing someone's life is good, all things being equal, but there are situations in which 'the taking of life' is necessary and hence good, such as taking life in order to defend ourselves or taking the life of an aggressor in the battlefield. If humankind as a whole were to arrive at the pedestal of godliness, there would be no aggressor, greed, cause to lie, or cause to kill. Thus, it is our bodily limitations that are faltering with everything. To live intelligently, morally, and aesthetically, we need to move beyond our bodily identities inwardly.

Another point to consider seriously is the following: we are insecure. We get scared and are filled with anxiety. Then we fall prey to superstitions. This mixture of insecurity, anxiety, and superstition negatively colours all the beautiful things religion has taught us. In moments of anxiety and fear, instead of reaching out to God in confidence, we make bodily bargains with Him: "God, if You do this for me, I will do this for You in return", or "God, if You do this for me, I will give this amount of money in *sadaqa* (charity)." Upon hearing this, I am sure the Heavens smile and say, 'Foolish being! What can you give to God? You yourself

belong to God. And what can your money do anyway? What power does it actually have? Will your money be able to sustain even the bacteria and microbial creatures of the earth? Who is sustaining them?' I am not saying that we should not bargain with God, for it is undeniable that talking to God and begging Him is part of our human condition and humanness. We just need to do it with the right attitude: when we repay our side of the deal to God, we should do so with the mindset, intention, and prayer of becoming more refined and godly.

Remember the story of the blessed Prophet Sulayman. God gave him a kingdom and authority over many kinds of entities. It is said that on one occasion he asked God to allow him to feed the creatures of his kingdom for a day on His behalf. God agreed. A fish came and said, 'O Sulayman, provide my sustenance.' Sulayman commanded his army of men and *jinn* to feed this fish. Night fell, but the fish remained unsatiated. Sulayman prostrated to God with humility and exclaimed, 'You are *Ar-Razzāq* (the Provider of sustenance).' We make bargains with God out of fear; but if we could understand that fear is bodily, and hence it is not me, then our being with God and communing with Him would be substantive. It would transform our attitudes. We would say, "Since the moment of death is destined by God, then none can save me" and "If God has destined loss for me, then none will be able to protect and secure it for me. It will be lost."

The beloved Imam Husayn said, 'O Lord! Allow me not to plead with You for the delay of a destiny You have chosen to hasten. O Lord! Allow me not to ask You for the hastening of a destiny You have chosen to delay.' It is as if he is saying, 'If You choose to take my Akbar at this moment, allow me to accept it and prevent me from pleading with You.' This does not mean that it is wrong to plead with God for a better destiny according to our limited estimation. Of course, it is right to implore Him in such matters too. I am merely asking us to analyse things very carefully. Our souls have become egoic by becoming identified

with the body, and hence our minds are infested with bodily fears, anxieties, aspirations, and hopes, and this is causing us to falter in our relationship with God.

Be like the blessed Prophet of God. When he suffered loss, he said, *innā li-llāhi wa innā ilayhi raji‘ūn*, “Indeed we are Allah’s, and verily to Him, we are returning.” When he faced an enemy, or rather armies of enemies, he would say, *lā ḥawla wa lā qūwata illa bi-llāh*, “There is no power or strength other than God’s”. When he met an insurmountable task, he stated, *tawakkal-tu ‘ala-llāh*, “I rely upon Allah.” He never gave in to the false personality or egoic soul (the soul’s consciousness “I am the body”). He never tried to control or suppress the natural bodily needs, but he was ever vigilant of the egoic soul’s pull towards excess, and hence, it was not a struggle to control it and consequently be free of it. To escape the bondage of the egoic soul, move towards God and become enlightened. First and foremost, we need to realise that we are not what we assume ourselves to be, and this world is not what it appears to be. We are not seeing properly, and hence all of it is a mirage. Our delusional experience of the world and body is generated by the soul itself on account of its being egoic. The cure is to realise that Allah is the sole destination and ultimate goal.

Lecture Four

Beyond Paradise

Inward identification with the body and bodily – that is, with the material body and all the things in the mind that pertain to the body, such as fear, anxiety, and anger – restricts and constricts the soul, resulting in the egoic soul (the soul’s consciousness “I am the body”, or the sense of “I” as the body) being strengthened. In contrast to this, the Light of all lights – the One we yearn for, knowingly or inadvertently because He is constantly inviting us to Himself – expands the soul, dissolving its identification and attachment to the body and bodily:

Whomsoever God wants to guide, He opens their breast to islam (the state of surrender to Him); and whomsoever He wants to lead astray, He makes their breast closed and constricted, as if they were climbing up to the skies (6:125).

Identification with the bodily bewilders the soul. The sense of “I am the body”, which is the egoic soul, enwraps it in a state of confusion and struggle:

Their likeness is as the likeness of people who [laboured to] kindle a fire. When it lit up everything around them, God took away their light, and left them in [utter] darkness, unseeing. [They are] deaf, dumb, and blind, and so they shall not return [to the path] (2:17-18).

The veil of the bodily, or in other words the mind's preoccupation with everything bodily, keeps the soul in a restrictive and darkened place. Such a constricted state of being elicits negativity and pessimism. We are trapped in a downward spiral. We respond to the challenges of life in an unwholesome manner, and at times with uncalled-for aggression and without due consideration.

In the last lecture, we stated that this world is not what it appears to be. Our inner states influence the world for better or worse. We perpetuate negativity when the soul is constricted by the body. The more negative we become, the more the world responds in a like manner. Have you wondered why there is so much strife despite humankind's universal awakening to moral values? We all know what is good, and yet we are unable to stop ourselves marching onwards towards destruction. The growth of negativity throughout the world is fuelled by us. The world absorbs our pessimism and reflects it back to us. How strange is the state of the human being, the author? He can bring about goodness but instead produces evil and then prays to God to dispel it. The solution is simple: stop creating evil in the first instance.

Religious scriptures instruct us to perform good actions, display good feelings, and think good thoughts. When you intend good actions, wish good sentiments, and think good thoughts, goodness culminates and extends beyond yourself, prompting greater goodness. You are the author of your own state and the state of humankind at large. Allah uses analogies to describe the superficial and perplexed state of those who have strayed from Him:

As for those who disbelieve, their deeds are like a mirage in a desert. The thirsty person thinks there will be water, till when he comes to it, he finds it is nothing. At that point, he finds Allah [is with him], and He pays him his account in full. Allah is swift in reckoning (24:39).

Or [they are] like shadows in a deep sea covered by wave upon wave, with clouds above, layer upon layer of darkness. If he

holds out his hand, he is scarcely able to see it. The one to whom God does not give light, has no light at all (24:40).

These analogies express our human psychology. The way we are living our lives gives us a false sense of control and security, and hence below the surface, we are anxious. There is inner anxiety. There is no rest and peace within despite having everything. We march on towards destruction by ignoring, blocking out, or covering up this inner anxiety. We never or seldom direct ourselves towards inner growth and completion, the fruits of which are contentment and satisfaction. We are perpetuating this state ourselves and are fully responsible.

When we are sick, we feel that *we* are sick and not that the *body* is sick. This is because our souls are egoic, that is, they are fully identified with the body. We believe and feel we are the body only. Thus, we succumb to the body and perpetuate the sickness by becoming overly preoccupied with it. Whereas if we had the presential knowledge (awareness), “I am not the body and whatever it is experiencing in essence”, then the ailments of the body would not affect us deeply. The by-product of this is that the body will probably cure itself better and faster if Allah so destines. Increasingly, research shows that there is a correlation between many ailments the body suffers, healing, and our inner states of hopelessness, pessimism, and negativity. Our negative psychological states affect our physical states, which then further perpetuate the negativity within. The more negative we are inwardly, the more bound we are to the body and bodily. We are supposed to make a distinction between ourselves and our experience of the body and bodily (which is the mind’s concerns with the body) frequently. In other words, we are to distinguish between the soul’s consciousness (or awareness) and its experience of the body and bodily repeatedly throughout the day. The properties of the body govern the body. They should not govern the mind. The mind must learn to distinguish between itself as (a) the soul’s consciousness (or awareness), and (b) the experience of the body and bodily, as much as possible.

Consider the phenomenon of miracles. The miracles of the blessed Prophets occurred at particular times and places. They were deemed miraculous because they defied the logic of the people of those respective contexts, which was based on their knowledge of the natural world. Thus, the miracles were natural, but they were regarded as supernatural by the people who witnessed them due to their apparent inexplicability in terms of natural processes. The fact that Prophets performed miracles illustrates that either they could control the processes of nature if God so destined, or that God overruled the normal workings of nature in those instances, including the bodies and minds of those Prophets. Recall the miracle of the blessed Prophet Musa. He cast his staff to the ground, and it became a serpent that devoured the rope-serpents of the magicians. When Prophet Musa picked it up, it resumed its original form. There was no increase in the mass of the staff. This defies our logic today. Why did its mass not increase? It was truly a miracle! Material reality was working at a level that we cannot comprehend currently. In any case, the fact that either Musa was able to perform the miracle with God's permission, or that Allah caused it via Musa, shows that the soul has the potential to govern material reality as much as material reality governs it.

Prior to embarking upon the journey to God, our existence is bodily or egoic, which means the mind has equated the soul's consciousness with the body totally, and hence I feel and believe, "I am the body". There seems to be no distance between the soul's consciousness and the experience of the body. Thus, we are caught up in the bodily wholly, and we understand and interpret the natures of existence, religion, and even God by this bodily mind or egoic soul. We think of Paradise in terms of bodily pleasures, and consequently, all our endeavours become bodily pursuits for bodily pleasures. Think about this carefully. For us, Paradise is bodily comfort and luxury, is it not? We want bodily comfort and pleasure, and nothing but that. How can God give such petty rewards to human beings who are the products of His

own breath? If bodily Paradise is a worthy reward, then why do we seek Allah beyond Paradise? Why doesn't the notion of Paradise satisfy us within the depths of our souls? Even if we find Paradise, we will not be satiated.

The Author has vested us with His nature. Whatever He says about Himself, we inevitably manifest within the limitations of our human existence. Whatever God gives us of worldly delights, we will create the same ourselves undoubtedly. Think about this. The Quran says that Allah sees your deeds, and hence you should not feel that you can hide away from Him and commit whatever actions you want in secrecy (see 2:284, 6:3 and 64:4). Today, we have the capacity to monitor each other all the time, do we not? Our cellular phones supply all our motions to data collection points. Whatever we do, say, and write is being monitored. We are in full view of other human beings. We are fully exposed. Furthermore, the billions of cameras on our phones have the capacity to transmit pictures and videos of every action, spoken word, sound, and written word to these data collection points. We are no longer hidden. We have exposed ourselves to one and all. Whatever Allah has told us of His blessed nature, we display it within the limitations of our existence.

Allah says He knows our intentions. In the not-too-distant future, we may develop technology that maps thoughts and feelings by the waves they emit. We can't help but display whatever God has stated of His nature, for He has vested us with It. In the past, people were afraid that Allah is watching. Today we are careful of our actions because we know that we are watching each other. It is as if Allah is saying, 'I am informing you about your nature in terms of My nature. I am your only calling. You are coming to Me, whether you understand it or not. You are being driven to Me, so get a proper perspective on what is happening.

The Quran says, 'We will give you Paradise in which you will not die. You will have all kinds of luxuries and unimaginable pleasures therein' (see 44:51-56). Look at us today. Consider the

extent to which we have evolved. Are we not attempting to defeat bodily death? In the future, we may be able to overcome it altogether. We may discover the genes and other factors responsible for aging, and then we may be able to arrest it indefinitely. Or we may be able to continue living forever as minds on this earth in sophisticated mechanical bodies, that is, as souls with the conscious “I am a person with a history” in bionic bodies.

Currently, we espouse inalienable human rights. We believe everybody should have a minimum standard of life. As our understanding of nature progresses, humans will be able to create greater comforts for one and all. They will create a world in which there will be no human servants and masters; rather, non-human or artificial beings will be serving them. They will live lavishly and not have to perform menial tasks. Humans will have implants connecting them to the knowledge database of humankind at large; hence, they will have access to everything that is known by humankind collectively. It is in our nature to display and endeavour to attain everything that God has described of His nature or as our rewards in the Hereafter.

Imagine if the phenomenon of virtual reality advances to the extent that we can sleep in pods and experience our virtual realities together. We will create paradises for ourselves. We will have countless lands, horses, camels, and planes. We will traverse whole galaxies in our imaginations. We will have innumerable trees, rivers flowing beneath us, and an endless supply of fruits. We will have whatever we want. It will be an unending kingdom, like the blessed Prophet Sulayman's, or even vaster than that. Does it seem far-fetched? We are in the process of creating such a world. We are creating the very Paradise of God which we yearn for in the Hereafter upon this earth. Do we not have a crude form of Paradise and Hell on earth already? Do we not act in accordance with the ethos of Paradise and Hell? Incentives and threats are pronounced in every collectivity. Is this not evidence of the prevalence of

God's nature in His handiwork and creation of human nature? Humankind is trying to attain everything God has promised.

Despite all this advancement, we will ask inevitably, "Fine, we have created and experienced Paradise, so now what? What happens after this?" Notice, we continue to remain dissatisfied because it is still not enough. There has to be more than just a comfortable life without strife and suffering. Is it not strange that the Muslim lives his whole life in devotion to God to enter Paradise, whilst the non-Muslim endeavours to be good, productive, and innovative here on earth, and creates paradise for everyone inadvertently? The non-Muslim says, 'You need not have worshipped God to attain Paradise. I will give you endless life, gardens, lands, and kingdoms. There is no need to worship your God for such rewards!' We worship Him to attain Paradise, whereas paradise is being created here and now by people who do not acknowledge the God we acknowledge. Unwittingly, a worldly version of Paradise has been created, and it bespeaks of the prevalence of the nature of God in human nature. God is indeed beyond Paradise and Hell. Our calling is not Paradise.

A text message was circulating on WhatsApp about a group of people on a train headed to God. They stopped momentarily at a service station called 'Paradise'. They forgot their destination and missed the train. Consequently, the train continued its journey to God without them. This is our story. We are satisfied with the transitory and illusory. We worship God to attain Paradise. Indeed, Paradise is a veil. We are worthy of far more. Our calling is the Author of the visible and unseen universe, other uncountable universes, and wonders beyond these universes. How can His light within us yearn for more dust as a reward? The light yearns for itself. It yearns for the Absolute, the Ultimate. It cannot be satisfied with anything less.

Have you wondered why there are so many levels of Paradise? If Paradise was enough for us, it would not have levels. The fact that it has levels means that none of them are worthy for the

seeker of God, the seeker of the Absolute. All of them are less than what we deserve. Therefore, we will attain our Paradise, but we will not be satisfied. At this point, the human being begins to explore the more subtle aspects of God which are beyond Paradise. At the outset, we want land, a worldly kingdom, riches, and comfort; however, nothing yields satisfaction. Then we progress and find greater pleasure in sacrificing ourselves for others. Is that not amazing? I acquired all that was possible to be acquired in this world for myself, and yet there was no satisfaction. I found satisfaction in giving to others. I found satisfaction in my experience of hunger when another was fed instead of me. There is more satisfaction in feeding than in being fed. We stand for justice and righteousness for the sake of others so that they can be saved from oppression and tyranny. Such actions are selfless – that is, they are performed with an attitude that is beyond any notion of Paradise – and they are performed upon this earth. So how can Paradise be a worthy reward for those who have already traversed beyond it? There is greater pleasure in sacrificing than in gaining. Think about this carefully.

What deludes us is the bodily and subsequently the worldly (that is, the mind's concern with the body primarily and the world consequently). When we become bodily oriented, the egoic soul (*nafs ammāra*) is active. The egoic soul (the soul's consciousness "I am the body") wants to emulate God instead of submitting to Him. Yet, it cannot, no matter how much it tries, because absoluteness in any regard is impossible for other than God. The more the egoic soul acquires, the more alienated it is from its own self, and hence it becomes more dissatisfied. If the soul's mind rids itself of its egoic aspect and its excessive preoccupations with the bodily and worldly (or in other words, if the mind withdraws its attention and awareness from the bodily and worldly beyond what is necessary) by remembering Allah as much as possible and letting Him prevail, then satisfaction, contentment, rest, and peace will descend upon the soul.

Once Rabia al-Basri, a Muslim mystic, was asked why she was carrying a pail of water. She replied, 'In order to extinguish the Fire of Hell, so that none worships my God out of fear of Hell, for He deserves better.' She exclaimed, 'Oh Lord! If I have worshiped you out of hope for Paradise, deny it to me, and if I have worshipped You out of fear of Hell, cast me therein.' The blessed Imam Ali stated, 'Those who worship God out of fear of the Fire of Hell are slaves, and those who worship Him out of desire for Paradise are transacting with Him. Worship Him as free souls, for God is worthy of being worshiped.' The beloved Imam Husayn said, 'Oh Lord! What has been lost by the one who has found You, and what has been gained by the one who has lost You?' These beautiful sentiments remind us that our true calling is a noble one. We cannot be engulfed by this want of Paradise and fear of Hell.

Our religions become wayward when they are appreciated by the egoic soul (the sense of "I" as the body), for its interpretations and understandings will predominantly be coloured by considerations of the body and bodily and not the selfless soul. All discriminations stem from the discriminatory attitudes of the egoic soul, which are based on its assessment of different bodily properties, such as height, weight, size, clothes, accent, food, and so on. We discriminate on the basis of colour, gender, and religion; and yet our souls and minds are colourless, genderless, and religion-less.

Consider the following: What is greater, the student or the textbook? Textbooks exist to serve the student. Students pass their exams with the aid of textbooks. How can revelation be greater than its addressees? It exists for its addressees, and not the other way round. The purpose of revelation is to awaken us to the light within. If revelation was greater than its human recipient, then the Torah would not have needed updating through Injil, and Injil would not have needed updating through the Quran. Imagine the worth of humankind generally and Muslims in particular! The Quran was revealed to and for

