

Ibn 'Arabi and the Spirituality of Everyday Life

Presented at the Eleventh Annual Gathering of the Threshold Society

By Dr. **James Morris**

Preface

by Kabir Helminski:

Years ago Threshold Books published *What the Seeker Needs*, translated by Shaikh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi. At the time it was not clear to us that that text was as much interpretation and commentary as translation. It incorporated an Ottoman commentary on the text as if it were part of Ibn Arabi's own words, thereby setting Shaykh Al Akbar's surprisingly universal text into a more parochial perspective. Here and now James Morris presents us with a translation of the original text without added commentary. We hope that it will be useful for sincere spiritual seekers.

Ibn 'Arabi on *Our Discovery of 'Revelation' (shar')*

Ibn 'Arabi's 'Book of the Quintessence' is so condensed that almost each line deserves further commentary. However, since he so often refers here-with intentional and very pointed ambiguity-to what is given or even 'said' to the seeker by 'revealed prescription' (shar'), it is very important to understand how broadly, but also very individually, he understands the actual reality/process to which that central term corresponds. The following famous passage is a particularly detailed and important expression of this understanding which is at the very foundation of all his writing:

Now you must know that if a human being (al-insan) renounces their (own personal) aims, takes a loathing to their animal self (nafs) and instead prefers their Sustainer/Teacher (rabb), then the Real will give (that human being) a form of divine guidance in exchange for the form of their carnal self... so that they walk in garments of Light. And (this form) is the Sharia of their prophet and the Message of their messenger. Thus that (human being) receives from their Lord what contains their happiness-and some people see (this divine guidance) in the form of their prophet, while some see it in the form of their (spiritual) state.

In the former case, he continues, 'that (form) is the inner reality of that prophet and his spirit, or the form of an angel like him, (who) knows

his sharia from God.... And we ourselves have often received in this way the form of many things among the divinely revealed judgments (ahkam shar'iyah) which we had not learned about from the learned or from books. For if the form is not that of (that person's) prophet, then it still necessarily refers to their spiritual state or to the stage of the shar' with regard to that moment and that (particular) situation in which (that person) saw that vision....'

And even in that instance, 'apart from what is forbidden or enjoined (by the Sharia), there is no restriction on what (that person) accepts from (that vision), whether with regard to beliefs or other things-for God's Presence includes the totality of beliefs (jami' al-'aqa'id).'

Subject Outline of Ibn 'Arabi's *Book of the Quintessence: Concerning What Is Indispensable For the Spiritual Seeker*

God's All-Unity and Transcendence

Faith in the messengers, companions, 'people of this Path' (Friends of God), and serving the poor

Silence, focus on remembrance of God, and good deeds

Right companion on the spiritual Path.

Sincere intention (sidq) in seeking the right guide

Right livelihood

Eating little

Filling the day with prayer

Sleep, eat, and dress only as really needed

How to read the Qur'an

Keeping track of one's animal self (muhasaba) and shame before God

Staying Conscious: being aware of demands of the 'Instant' and eliminating inner distractions

Purity (tahard)

Striving for good moral character traits

Right attitude toward spiritual 'opponents'

Right Behavior (adab) toward animals, dependents and children

Avoiding the powerful and worldly, while practicing ihsan and sabr

Being present with God at every instant

Generosity (and avoiding stinginess) [Incomplete]

Controlling anger and learning how to (not) react to 'negative' encounters

Practicing Ihsan

Constantly practicing Dhikr/remembrance of God and asking His forgiveness

Repentance and untying the 'knots' of persistence (in opposition to God)

[Incomplete]

Taqwa: Awareness of God and its practical consequences

Avoiding self-deception/Iblis [Incomplete]

Practicing spiritual conscientiousness (ward)

Practicing 'non-attachment' to this lower world (zuhd)

Ibn 'Arabi

***The Book of What is Essential, Concerning What Is
Indispensable For the Spiritual Seeker***

Translated by James Morris

You asked, O seeker, about the essential core of what the seeker must do, so I have answered you in these pages. And it is God Who brings to fulfillment-there is no Rabb but Him!

Know, O seeker-may God bring you and us to the fulfillment of willingly obeying Him, and may He cause us and you to know what pleases Him!-that (our) closeness to God is only known through His informing us of that. Now He has already done that-all thanks and praise be to God!-through His sending the Messengers and sending down the Scriptures and making clear the Paths leading to the eternal bliss. So once we have faith and hold (this) to be true, there only remains putting into practice (a) those actions regarding which one has faith, and (b) through applying the revelation (shar') in its appropriate place, with regard to what has become established in the souls of those who have faith.

[2.] Then after that, o seeker, you should have faith in the Messengers-may God's blessings be upon them-and in what they have brought (from God) and what they have informed us about Him...

Next, you should accept and acknowledge the people of this Path, with regard to all the stories that are recounted about them (i.e., their qualities and accomplishments) and with regard to everything you see from them which the (ordinary) mind and (worldly) knowledge cannot encompass. In general, you should hold a good opinion of everyone, and your heart should be at peace with them. You should pray specially, in secret, for the people of faith. And you should serve the poor, recognizing their excellence and nobility in that they are content with your helping them, and in their bearing patiently with their discomforts and troubles and difficulties.

[3.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is keeping silent (samt),

except for remembering/mentioning God (dhikr Allah), reciting the Noble Qur'an, guiding in the right way someone who's gone astray, exhorting to do what is right and forbidding what is wrong, reconciling those who are disputing, and encouraging acts of charity-indeed every form of good.

[4.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is searching for someone who is right for you, who will help you to (attain) what you are pursuing and to (pursue) the way leading there. For the person of faith means a great deal to his brother, [alluding to such hadith as "the person of faith is the mirror of the person of faith," etc.] And take care to avoid the company of the person who is fundamentally opposed (to your quest).

[5.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is a master and spiritual guide (shaykh, murshid). Now (with regard to finding such a guide), inner sincerity of intention (sidq) is the very watchword of the spiritual seeker, because if the seeker is truly sincere with God, He will turn every (outward) "satan" for that person into an angel guiding them directly to the good; and He will inspire in that person (the awareness of) what is good. For inner sincerity is the ultimate Elixir (the "perfect cure"), one that can only be applied to the heart of our essential being.

[6.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is seeking out this (licit) source of support (luqma: literally, sustaining "morsel" of food), since the very foundation of this Path is a licit livelihood. The pillar of this Path rests on that foundation (of right livelihood): do not burden anyone, and do not accept (inappropriately) from anyone, but earn your own living. And always be attentively conscientious about what you acquire, and about what you say, see, hear and all your other actions.

[7.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is eating little. For hunger brings about an increase in spiritual energy for following God, while it takes away spiritual laziness.

[8.] You should properly cultivate and fill the moments of the night and the day:

[10.] And if you are among those who know how to read, then make it your duty to pray (in addition) a full section of the Qur'an from the written text. In each chapter, ask and inquire (of God) what you ought to ask about, and try to figure out the special relevance (for your immediate case: the i'tibar) of each verse. Continually reflect and meditate on each verse, (to come to understand) what is its relevance and applicability, what those (divine?) Attributes are indicating (to you): reflect on those (Attributes) you have and those which you are missing. Then-give Him thanks for those which you have and those which you haven't (yet) realized! And when you read about the attributes of the hypocrites and those who reject (God), then reflect as to whether or not some of those attributes are also in you.

[11.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is that you should

observe and take account of your carnal soul (muhasabat al-nafs) and pay close attention to your inner thoughts and impulses (khawatir) at every moment of time. After doing so, you should feel shame in your heart before God. For if you are ashamed before God, then He will prevent your heart from experiencing a thought or impulse that is contrary to the revelation (shar') or from carrying out any action displeasing to Him/Right (al-Haqq).

Indeed we once had a master who would record his actions (during the day) in a notebook, and then when night came he would set them out before him and take an account of his carnal soul according to what was noted there. And I added to my master's practice by recording my inner thoughts and impulses as well.

[12.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is continually being aware of (the correspondence between) one's inner thoughts and impulses and the (spiritual demands of) every moment of time....

And if you start to do a religiously prescribed act that brings you closeness (to God), don't tell yourself that you will be alive after that to do something else. Instead, make that your last action in this world, the one in which you will encounter your Lord! For if you do that, you will be released (or completed: khalas)-and with that release comes (God's) acceptance.

[13.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is that you should always sit down in a state of Purity. So when you become impure, purify yourself....

[14.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is to seek to realize the noble virtues of character (makarim al-akhlaq).

[15.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is to keep away from those who are open enemies [literally "opposites," addad: the stress of this term is on the opposition of ends, not on outward relations, beliefs or emotional states of mind.] and those who are not of your (spiritual) like-but without your holding them to be evil, or even ever having such a thought occur to you! Instead, (what is essential is) having your intention (niyct) on keeping company with the Truly Real and His people, and having your preference be for them.

[16.] Likewise, you should treat these animals with loving sympathy and compassion (rahma) for them, because they are among those whom God has caused to be of service (or "subjugated": taskhir) to you. So don't impose on them (work) that is beyond their capacity, and do not mount (or "load") those of them you mount heedlessly.

Likewise with regard to whatever slaves your right hand possesses, because they are your brothers and God has only let you control them so that He can see how you treat them. For you are His slave! So whatever way you would like Him to treat you, then do precisely that with your own male and

female servants. Indeed God will surely requite you (accordingly), so whatever evil and ugly deeds you would love to have Him pass over in your account, act precisely that same way with regard to them. For all (creatures) are God's family, and you are a member of that whole Family. If you have a child... oblige them to observe the appropriate behavior of the revealed Path (adab al-shari'd) and the character traits of true Religion. Induce them to kindness and non-attachment (to this world, zuhd) from infancy onward, so that they become habituated to those qualities. And don't encourage desires and cravings in their heart, but rather diminish the attractions of the life of this world..... But don't do any of that out of stinginess with your money or property!

[17.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is that you shouldn't even come near the gates of the powers-that-be (al-sultan), nor should you keep company with those who are competing and striving for (the things of) this world, since they will distract your heart from God. But if something should force you to keep their company, then behave toward them with frank good counsel (nasihd), and don't try to fool them (by pretending to agree with them). For (in reality) you are (always) doing business with the Truly Real, and whatever you do (i.e., as long as it is for God's sake), they will be made to be of service to you through (their impact on) your wider spiritual situation. Therefore always keep your intention directed toward God, (knowing that) He will deliver you from the situation you are in through the means that are best for you with regard to your true Religion.

[18.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is to always be present with God-may He be exalted!-in all of your actions and all your states of rest. [NB: note that this saying is approximately halfway through the whole treatise.]

[19.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is to always be giving, whether you have much or little, whether you are in straightened circumstances or at ease.

[20.] You must restrain your anger. For that is a sign of the breadth of capacity of your heart.

Now when you restrain your anger, you please the All-Compassionate (al-Rahman).... You have also brought delight to the heart of the person from whom you withheld your anger, by not requiting them in kind for their (originally offending) action. And that can be a cause of their returning to what is right and just and recognizing their own unjust and offensive treatment of you; indeed they may even repent for what happened as a result of their behavior.

So you must know the right ways to receive and welcome (offense and hostility),and strive to take on that character trait.... So struggle (to realize) the qualities (of Mercifulness and Compassion), since they give

rise to love and affection in people's hearts. Thus the Prophet already ordered us to practice mutual affection and to love one another. And this (i.e., restraining one's anger) is one of the highest of the causes helping to realize Love.

[21.] You must practice ihsan (doing/creating what is good and beautiful), for that is a sign of your shame (or "conscience": haya') before God, and of the glorification of God in the heart of the person who is muhsin. For Gabriel said [in the famous hadith on the 3 aspects of true ReligionA/w]: "What is ihsan? And the Prophet-may God's blessings and peace be upon him!-replied: "It is that you should worship/serve God as though you see Him. For even if you don't see Him, He sees you!"....

[22.] You must practice dhikr (remembering God) and asking His Forgiveness. For (asking His forgiveness) after you've sinned effaces and removes it, while doing so after you've been willingly obedient and done good (ihsan) brings "light upon light" and joy upon joy. As for dhikr, that unifies the (scattered) heart and purifies your inner thoughts and intentions...

[23.] You must strive to loosen the knot of persistence and stubborn insistence (on opposing God: israr) in your heart.

[24.] You must remain cautiously conscious of God (taqwa), both with regard to your inner life and outwardly....

[25.] You must avoid spiritual self-deception (ightirar), which is when your carnal soul deludes you concerning God's graciousness and forbearance, while you are still persisting in your sinful-disobedience.

....

[26.] You must practice spiritual conscientiousness (wara'), which is an intuitive avoiding (of something wrong, illicit, etc.) that you feel in your heart (sadr). The Prophet-may God bless him and give him peace!-said: "Abandon what disturbs you for what does not disturb you." So even if you are in need of that (which disturbs you) and you can't find anything to replace it, then leave that (need) to God: He will provide you in exchange with what is better than that.... For this conscientiousness (wara') is the very foundation of true Religion. So as you begin to apply it in practice, your actions will become purified, your conditions (inner and outer) will become successful, your words will become perfected, blessings of divine grace (karamat) will hasten toward you, and you will be protected and preserved by a divine protection in everything you do, without any doubt. By God, by God, my brother! (Practice) conscientiousness, conscientiousness!

[27.] And you must practice non-attachment (zuhd) regarding this world, reducing your desire for it.... And Praise be to God, the Lord of the Worlds! And God's blessings and peace be upon our master Muhammad and His Family and Companions!

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