

Self and Selflessness

The Position of Human Consciousness

The human consciousness is a presence suspended between the Divine Absolute and a Cosmic-Life-Force that is associated with our intention, thoughts, and feelings.

The realized state of human consciousness is one in which the “I” witnesses *what is* in continual gratitude and awe, and this allows the “I” and its embodied form to be guided directly by the Divine Intelligence.

Human consciousness, however, can be blinded by the nafs, the false self in its many forms, and thus the true “I” is relegated to a latent state.

A False Reality

As the false selves usurp awareness and hijack a certain degree of the life-force, life is governed by false values and a false reality. In the process consciousness is reduced to the dimensions of our compulsions, inner conflicts, negativities, desires, and illusions. The essential self is hypnotized by the thoughts of the nafs, all the shoulds and should-nots, all the stories we tell ourselves about what is happening. The energetic signature of this totality of false and conflicting information is incoherent and chaotic. Furthermore, through the creative relationship between human will (intention) and the life force incoherent and chaotic results are produced. Because the self takes these thoughts to be true, the impersonal aspect of the life force is activated though in an agitated way. The chaotic and incoherent results are the outcome of the false self submitting false information to the life force, which is to some extent subject to human intention. The saying “God works in strange ways” should be modified to say that incoherent human intention works in strange ways.

Hypnotism of the False Self

The work of Sufism is to awaken the essential self from the hypnotic spell of the nafs and begin to observe and understand how that spell was cast. The fundamental spell is the belief that the purpose of life is to avoid disturbance and pain by maximizing non-disturbance and pleasure through secondary and artificial means: Seeking gratification, attention, approval, control.

The Life Force becomes entangled, confused, incoherent by the power of suggestion of the false selves. Instead of simply seeing what is, being appreciative, and expressing gratitude for it, we are, instead, in a state of resentment, or fear, or discontent—in other words, in states of perpetual inner conflict.

Having understood the basic dualistic urges that keep the “I” enslaved, one can begin to live in a state of acceptance, appreciation, gratitude, and trust. If we could simply live with humbleness, gratitude, and love, we would experience a tremendous inflow of life force and divine intelligence.

The Awakened “I”

The Awakened “I” is maintained by these qualities and in its awakened state it can see the true value of the circumstances and conditions of its life. The awakened “I” simply witnesses what is, sees its true value, reports everything to the Divine Intelligence, and in so doing engages the Life Force to meet our needs, solve our problems, and realize our goals.

How might we begin to resolve some of our problems, such as: a bad relationship; an unhealthy habit; an irrational fear; a need for fulfillment; an economic hardship.

Problems of the Self

Many of our problems are the result of thinking too much about ourselves, and I emphasize the word *thinking*, thinking in such a way that we make ourselves the center of an imaginary world in which we expect to be undisturbed, unrestrained, able to always have what we desire. We make a big production of ourselves. If someone says something we don’t like, it’s a big deal.

Reading Your own Letters

Shams of Tabriz says it with remarkable simplicity and clarity: all your problems are the result of your reading “your own letters” all the time, instead of paying attention to your Beloved.

If we analyze this situation we may see that what we take to be “I” is not our witnessing self which is aligned with Spirit, but a “me” constructed on the basis of such pernicious dualities such as: always gaining pleasure and avoiding pain, always receiving attention and never being ignored, always gaining approval and never being criticized.

This “me” arises from a sense deep inside ourselves that somewhere, somehow, we can know a state of ultimate well-being, peace, and security. It is in our very nature to long to be connected to that state of timeless, unconstricted, happiness—happiness without death as Mawlana Asad Ali has named it. But the mistake is in thinking that this ultimate well-being is to be found in circumstances and conditions—in other words in attaining a life without disturbance and difficulty. Seeking satisfaction in worldly conditions alone is a betrayal of the spiritual nature of reality.

In such a state, the consciousness of “I” is entangled and absorbed in various “me’s” and these “me’s” are living our life, speaking in the name of “I” but if one could truly hear them it is clear that when things are not going well they are complaining, judging, blaming, rationalizing, and if things are going well they are claiming credit, seeing “miraculous signs”, and other self-justifying non-sense.

Our involvement with “me” is a betrayal of that Divine Reality, the “me” of the moment replacing the objective witness that serves Central Intelligence, the Command of Love. These “me’s” offer a false, fragile and temporary sense of well-being and security. It is the Real, the Divine Reality (Haqiqah) that can give meaning to all the circumstances and conditions of our lives, and it is this that we can find as the self is purified of these false selves and values. In this process of purification, the self is drawn to higher forms of being and ultimately absorbed in God.

The Essential Self as Objective Witness

There is an entirely different way of being that is not centered in “me” but is centered in the Divine. In this other way of being the “I” is an objective witness in the world, a servant of the Divine, simply reporting *what is* to the One who invited “I” here.

One school of Sufism talks about Fana, effacement or annihilation. The key terms, *fanā*’ and *baqā*’ are found in one Qur’anic passage (55:26-27) in which the roots of both terms appear: “All that dwells upon the earth is perishing [*fānen*], yet still there abides [*yabqā*] the Face of your Sustainer, majestic, splendid.”

There are three levels: the Fana of actions (as just described), the Fana of Attributes, and the Fana of Agency. When we observe and experience how things truly are we see, more and more, how little that is real comes from

“I”, but “I” am more of a relay station for signals and directions coming from Central Intelligence, and Central Intelligence will always do the right and appropriate thing based on the information reported by the “witness on the ground.”

The state of *baqā*’, or abiding in the Divine Reality, is to live in and by means of the Divine Intelligence. It is as if you are an operative of a Central Intelligence Agency, the real one, and that Intelligence is going to look out for you, give you the precise instructions for your mission based on your continuous objective reporting of the conditions you find yourself in. “I” is not in control and does not have to figure everything out. If “I” am honest, I must admit that I do not even know how to cross the street, something else moves my legs, etc. and “I” may not even know the reason for the decision to cross the street. While this is a very simple example, we must admit that there are much more complex process that we accomplish without rally knowing how they are accomplished.

Beginning in the Name of God

We have a practice in Sufism which is beginning any action with “Bismillah,” in the name of God. If we could say Bismillah with absolute sincerity, we would be turning the action and the results over to that Infinite Power and Intelligence in trust. This is a state of Fana, a kind of selflessness. As mystics we are given a front row seat in the cosmic theater. The whole show is a command performance written and produced for your benefit.

But when we are complaining, judging, blaming, rationalizing, doubting, we are acting not “in the name of God” but “in the name of me,” and that “me” is composed of many false selves, each with its own agenda for approval, attention, power, pleasure, is an incoherent and chaotic entity, yet strangely unified by some idea of “me,” an unreal me that compulsively needs approval and is unhappy with criticism, that wants to monopolize others attention and is irritated by being ignored, that is unhappy unless people are doing and saying what we want.

When we are involved with “me” we have made a false god in place of the only God. That is why in Islam this idolatry of the me, or any power figure other than the Divine, is the only unpardonable sin, because it leaves no room for the real God.

Divine Intelligence will not change our conditions unless we first change ourselves by seeing how we have been caught up in the compulsive dualities of gaining attention, lusting for pleasure, seeking approval, avoiding

difficulty, controlling others, resenting *what is*, and increasing self-importance. On the way of inner knowing we have a transforming light that dispels the darkness of negativity. We don't have to figure out why we are thinking certain things, or how certain fears arise; we just bring them into the light and let them be recognized, and they will dissolve.

God is Sufficient

God is sufficient in the sense that when "I" am embracing what is, being grateful by seeing its inherent value, placing complete trust in the Divine Intelligence and the Life Force that serves it, then that Infinite Intelligence will do the appropriate and necessary thing.

At an advanced stage of perfection the mystic who is, in Abu'l-Hosayn Nūrī's words, "fashioned in the attributes of God" (*al-takalloq be-aklāq Allāh*, 'Aṭṭār, II, pp. 54-55) begins to manifest the divine attributes. In Najm-al-Dīn Kobrā's view, he or she becomes the subject of divine attributes and capable of "creating, bringing forth, giving life, causing death, having mercy, punishing and other things that belong to the divine attributes of bounty and justice" (*Fawā'eh*, ed. Meier, p. 29).