ISLAM AND GOD-CENTRICITY

DISCOVERING GOD

Shaykh Arif Abdul Hussain

SAJJADIYYA PRESS

Islam and God-Centricity: Discovering God is the fifth volume in a multi-volume series. This volume explores the notions of 'form' and 'essence' with respect to the human individual itself: What is the form of the individual? What is its essence? What is the true identity of the individual? The purpose of Islam is to surrender to God absolutely and thereby realise His Presence. God is All-pervading, and hence He is closer to the individual than they are to their own mind and body. It is because of this Truth that the blessed Prophet stated that to *know one's soul is to know one's Lord*. This book is an examination of the human individual, that is, the soul, its consciousness, mind, and body, and the factors that prevent the realisation of God's Presence. It identifies and designates the cause of the ignorance of one's soul, and hence all its ensuing effects, as the soul's consciousness "I am the body", which in Arabic is *nafs ammāra*. In this context, the devotional practices of Islam are also explored. The book presents the age-old notions of spirituality from an existential perspective, and hence in its own language and terminology.

Shaykh Arif Abdul Hussain (born 29 February 1964) is an Islamic scholar and the founder of the Al-Mahdi Institute. After completing his initial training in the Islamic sciences from the Madrasa Imam al-Khoei in London, Shaykh Arif pursued advanced Islamic studies at the religious seminary in Iran where he attended the classes of leading scholars from Najaf and Qom. Upon returning to the United Kingdom in the mid-1990s, Shaykh Arif continued his study of the Islamic legal and philosophical sciences under the tutelage of His Eminence Ayatollah Ḥusayn al-Amīnī. Shaykh Arif has dedicated his life to preaching the universal teachings of the Prophet and His Household (*ahl al- bayt*) to Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the world.

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ISLAM AND GOD-CENTRICITY: DISCOVERING GOD

by

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-forbearing, 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, *rabbī ziddnī 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 wajhullah*, "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 bemore 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-Raḥmān* (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 kādiḥun 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-Raḥmān* (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 raḥmatī 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-ʿālamīn* (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 yumītu-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-mortmic 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 rabbi-l-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 *Nakīr*. 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 shākiran 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 being 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 worshiping 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 *subḥāna-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 Iblīs; 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 is 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). *Subḥāna-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 supresses 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 unbefitting 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* (Iblīs). 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 Injīl, and Injīl 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 *us*. Its verses

were constructed with the *ummah* (humankind and the Muslim community) in mind. We were sent the light of God to awaken us to the light within. The Quran is a verbal formulation of the Book of the Real, and we are Its material expressions.

At the battle of Siffin, the blessed Imam Ali was forced to concede to soldiers who were demanding arbitration and chanting the slogan, 'in accordance with the Book of God'. He said famously, 'Just as the Quraysh denied the reality of Revelation, these people are denying the meaning of Revelation.' When the opposite camp raised pages of the Book of God on the ends of their spears demanding arbitration, the Imam said, 'I am a living revelation' (literally, 'I am a speaking Quran' – meaning, 'I am an embodiment of the Quran'). We need to awaken to the fact that we are engrossed in a world that is not real. The unreality of the world is intensified by our misinterpretations of religion and misconceptions of God.

Our religion is interpreted on the basis of the bodily. For instance, notice how there is an overemphasis on *how* to pray, and a lack of emphasis on Who we are praying to. The prayer is considered void if the form of *sajda* (prostration) is not performed accurately, but the prayer is not void if you are mindless of the One you are praying to. We are entrapped by the bodily! The *fatwa* (legal opinion) states, 'If the *rukū'* (the act of bowing) is not performed properly, the prayer is void.' However, the *fatwa* will never instruct, 'If other than Allah is entertained in your mind during the *rukū'*, then both the *rukū'* and prayer are void.' Which is the real problem, the inaccurate performance of the *rukū'*, or the mind's lack of focus on Allah? We need to reach the state of inner poverty in which we belong to the Truth absolutely. There will never be any rest within so long as the soul's mind is engulfed in the bodily, irrespective of whether we attain the first Paradise or the subsequent ones. Thus, we must purge the mind of the egoic soul (by creating a distance between the soul's consciousness / awareness and the experience of the body and bodily). Allah says:

> *God has promised the believers, both men and women, Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will dwell; and [He has promised them] blessed dwellings in the Gardens of Eden. And yet the pleasure of God is greater [still]. That is the supreme achievement (9:72).*

The verse states that 'the Pleasure of Allah' is greater than Paradise. Notice how *Janna* (Paradise) is not termed as 'the supreme achievement', but rather the *riḍwān min Allah*, 'the Pleasure of Allah', is designated as 'the supreme achievement'. This is humankind's calling. Allah says:

> *Whomsoever is in awe of the Most Compassionate in the Unseen, and comes with a penitent heart [that is, turned to Him in devotion], [it will be said to them:] 'Enter it in peace. This is the Day of everlasting Life.' Therein they shall have all that they want, and with Us is more yet (50:33-35).*

The verse states that the devotees of God will be given all they desire in Paradise; however, it ends with the phrase, *wa ladaynā mazīd*, 'and we have more to give'. What is this 'more'? That is where we belong – in the realm of the *more*.

Today, humankind is at the cusp of realising that there is *more* beyond all this. There is something far greater than whatever we can imagine. We cannot be satisfied with anything less than that *more*. This is the reason why the blessed Prophets, Imams, and sages have said, 'O Allah! What can I want beyond You?' There is a beautiful prayer of the seventh blessed Imam. After several years of persecution and imprisonment, a woman was sent to his prison cell to beguile him. She saw the Imam in prostration supplicating, 'O Allah! I have asked You for the opportunity to worship You without distraction. O Lord! You have granted me that opportunity. How may I thank you for it?'

We are truly lost. Whatever we find will not satisfy us because we have not reached that point of the *more* beyond Paradise. Put differently, we are not truly existent until and unless we

disassociate ourselves from the bodily and worldly. What good will Paradise be, if that inner disclosure is not achieved and we are still yearning for *more*? The heart will not be at rest even there. The inner disclosure is the understanding of who we are, but we will never know 'Who am I?' until we surrender ourselves to God wholly. Thus, we only begin to find ourselves when we begin surrendering to Him.

The blessed Prophet expressed the state of total surrender thus: 'O Lord! Allow me not to rely upon my own self for even the blinking of an eye.' It is as if he was saying, 'O Lord! I do not want to feel the sense of my agency – the sense "I am doing this" – in any thought, speech, action, moment, or situation, for as soon as I feel the sense of agency, I have become embodied and alienated from You.' The Prophet also said, 'I need to perform seventy *istighfār* (the verbal seeking of repentance) every night to cleanse the rust that has accumulated on my soul due to interaction with the world during the day.' The blessed Imam Ali has articulated the states of the blessed Prophets in *Nahjul Balagha* as follows: 'Observe the state of inner poverty of these Prophets. If I were to talk about the abstemious state of the Prophets, your ears would ring with pain; and if you had witnessed their state of poverty, your eyes would sting with pain.' During the desolate journey to Madyan, the blessed Prophet Musa ate leaves for sustenance. After eating, he would rest beneath the shade of a tree and thank Allah: 'O Lord! How can I thank you for your bestowals?' He was grateful to Allah for the leaves he had eaten. He had become so thin that it was possible to see the skeletons of those leaves in his stomach by merely looking at his abdomen. When he appeared before the Pharaoh, he was in rags carrying a broken staff. Such was the state of his poverty. He had left the world behind.

The blessed Imam Ali described the poverty of other Prophets: 'As for Jesus, his blanket was the darkness of night, his bed the cold earth, and his pillow a hard rock. His two hands were his servants, and his two legs his steed. Jesus did not marry lest he be

distracted from God. As for the blessed Messenger of God, Allah removed other than Himself from his heart totally.' Therefore, it is only when we are detached internally by surrendering ourselves to God wholly that we free ourselves fully.

One of the characters in the story of our beloved Imam Husayn teaches us important points about the bodily. Qadi Shurayḥ was a judge during the caliphate of the blessed Imam Ali and had worked with him. He was a poor man. Ubaydullah bin Ziyad summoned him and said, 'Issue a decree legitimising the suppression of the uprising of Husayn on the pretext of Husayn's opposition to the Caliph.' The Qadi replied, 'How can I do this?' The Qadi had served as a judge under Imam Ali and was known for being a good and righteous person. Ibn Ziyad threw a sack of gold to the Qadi, and then another, and another, until the Qadi began to think to himself, 'I am old, and I have a family to look after. Indeed, it is true that an armed uprising against the Caliph is against our *sharia* and must be quelled.' Think about this. The Qadi had served under Imam Ali. He knew the status of the grandson of the blessed Prophet, and yet notice how the bodily prevailed and influenced his judgements despite his vast knowledge of Islam and his lifelong adherence to the regulations of the *sharia*.

In his *khutba* (sermon) at Mina a year prior to his martyrdom, the beloved Imam Husayn addressed the *'ulamā'* (scholars) as follows: 'It is because of your inertia, silence, and lack of courage to speak out that oppression and social injustice are prevalent today. Your love of this world and prestige has resulted in this state of the Muslim *ummah*.' They were interpreting God and His religion in a bodily fashion, and hence the paradise-like briberies and hell-like threats of this earth were effective (such as, 'You will be given land and money', 'You will be put to death', and 'You will be imprisoned'). Thus, the bodily prevailed. However, free people cannot be lured by such bodily and earthly promises. Even the *real* Paradise of God is no longer significant to them. Their calling is indeed something else. It is a much nobler calling.

Lecture Five
Devotion

Allah says, "[He is] the One Who created death and life to test which of you [o humankind] does best. He is the All-mighty, the All-forgiving" (67:2). The verse indicates that death precedes the life of this world, and that this life is going to be full of struggles. The difficulty of life is affirmed by the fact that we are constantly trying to overcome lack and existential deficiency in the outer and inner aspects of our being. Lack and existential deficiency with respect to the outer (that is, the body) is connotated with death. Hence, we strive to actualise the fullness of our human potential by removing every form of deficiency from ourselves outwardly, including the death of the body, and in the process, we are displaying the nature of God in terms of our outer, bodily aspect. In other words, our endeavours to overcome our outer weaknesses and defeat death are attempts to become deathless, like God, in the domain of the body and bodily. And this is not surprising, for whatever we do existentially is a display of His nature within the limitations of our human existence. He is ever-living, and so we desire to defeat death in our material realm. He is absolute Perfection, Omniscient, and Omnipotent, and so we strive to perfect, know, and have mastery over everything in the outer. Evidently, we are actualising our

innate, existential drive to arrive at the fullness of our existence in the domain of the outer – the body, bodily, and worldly.

Whether we know it or not, we are vested with the spirit of God. The spirit of God knows no rest, death, or lack. When we feel lack or are challenged, we overcome it and become better through it. There is this dynamism within us because our nature has been vested with the nature of God, and hence we display it inevitably. Our return is to God. This return is occurring at every point or moment of life, death, and beyond death. Mawlana Rumi said, 'Oh human! In your denial of God is your acceptance of Him. When you flee from God, you arrive at Him. In your activity, inactivity, speech, and silence, you are doing naught but displaying your Author.'

Since God is the Author of Paradise, we will author it too naturally. Since God cures sickness, we will cure sickness. Since God creates light, we will create light. We are infused with the beautiful creative nature of God, which has no limit and knows no rest. It can neither be stopped, nor hindered. It will move on. Without knowing it or even wanting to know it, we are displaying God in our rational progression and creative abilities. We are not even aware that we are displaying His nature, and yet it flows effortlessly. His nature was hardwired into us when He fashioned us. After creating our own paradise here upon this earth, we advance to the more subtle nature of God inherent within us. We nurture life by eradicating poverty, dispelling oppression, and establishing social justice. We do all this because the nature of God has been breathed into our beings.

All this pertains to the outer motion, which is the innate, existential drive to arrive at the fullness of our existence in the domain of the outer – the body, bodily, and worldly. Such motion is inevitable, for we are supposed to mature as the stewards of God upon this earth. In this outer stewardship, we aspire to transcend every boundary. As God nurtures the material aspect of the world, we too are expected to nurture it. Thus, we dispel sickness, ignorance, and poverty within the human community.

Consider the following verse which pertains to the inner motion: "We will certainly test you with something of fear and hunger, loss of property, lives, and crops. But give glad tidings [o Prophet] to those who are steadfast" (2:155). The subsequent verse states that glad tidings are to be given to those who persevere during tribulations and supplicate thus: "Indeed we belong to Allah, and verily to Him we are returning" (2:156). This is the inward motion. When the outer, bodily aspect of the human being experiences difficulties, the inner aspect is supposed to revert to God and surrender to Him.

To reiterate, there are two types of motion. One is the outer motion of the soul in which reason denies all false gods. As a result, human beings arrive at the fullness of their potential and become manifestations of God's creative aspect, that is, they become the agencies of God. The second type of motion is the inner motion of the soul. When there are difficulties in the outer world – such as when our produce does not yield, when souls are being summoned back to God, when we fall sick, and when fear grips us – the soul is supposed to tend to God earnestly and say, 'Indeed, I belong to Allah, and verily to Him I am returning.' In this way, the body and soul coexist ensuring that the soul attains both its outer and inner purposes. The outer motion of the soul is to defy limits rationally and intellectually, and its inner motion is to endeavour to detach itself from the bodily and worldly. As souls become purified of the bodily and worldly by remembering God within and/or endeavouring to know themselves beyond the egoic soul (the sense of "I" as the body), they become more and more spirited from within. This is the purpose of every human being in this worldly life.

Allah says, "I have created the *jinn* and humankind only to serve Me" (51:56). 'The *raison d'être* of both the *jinn* and humans is to do My *'ibāda* (worship, service, and devotion).' "I want no provision from them, nor do I want them to feed Me. Indeed, Allah is the All-provider, the Lord of Power, the Firm" (51:57–8).

What strange verses! "I have not created the *jinn* and humans save to serve Me. I want no provision from them, nor do I want them to feed Me. Indeed, Allah is the All-provider, the Lord of Power, the Firm." Reflect upon the first of these verses. It explains why human beings cannot help but serve God existentially. In other words, we have been hardwired to serve God, irrespective of whether we know it or not, or even want to or not, and hence we display His nature.

We discussed earlier that we cannot help but display God's nature within the limitations of our human existence. God creates, and so we create. God has made Paradise, and so we are making it too. God dispels sickness, and so we dispel sickness. God feeds the hungry, and so we feed the hungry as well. Are not our actions resembling God's? And how can it be otherwise? He is our Author. Every single aspect of us is from Him – all of it is His. Hence, we cannot help but display Him.

'Ibāda (service) of God is a feature of existence. Hence, we are serving Him in every one of our endeavours. This means every individual is serving Him in all that they do, irrespective of who they believe themselves to be – agnostic, atheist, religious, irreligious, spiritual, unspiritual, saint or sinner. God is inescapable, and His reign is absolute. However, *'ibāda* takes on a different meaning for those who wish to awaken and arrive at their true calling. *'Ibāda* is essential for our inner journey, for it gives us a sense of substantive existence whereby we arrive at the completion of our godly existence wholesomely. Unfortunately, we, the religious people of every sect and religion, consider *'ibāda* as a tick-box exercise of performing certain ceremonial tasks. We don't regard it as referring to an inner state of wilful surrender. The word *'ibāda* means 'service' in addition to 'worship' and 'devotion'. In religion, it is as if the notion of service to God has been equated to the notion of a slave's service to a worldly master; hence, the human being is God's servant or slave (*'abd*) in the bodily and worldly sense. Accordingly, an *'ābid* (a performer

of service) is one who serves God by executing His commands with his body without question, which means that to qualify as an *'ābid*, it is not necessary to have a sense of intimate connection and belonging to the Master. Predominantly, religions have reduced the practice of 'serving God' to the bodily. It is akin to a slave who serves their worldly master physically without any feeling, attachment, or love psychologically. The *'ibāda* of such a slave or servant is simply a question of fulfilling their assigned duties. Only their limbs are in service to the master, but the mind and soul are not. With respect to God, such bodily service is the lowest degree of *'ibāda* – that which is expected of children.

It would be unfortunate if the faithful do not serve God beyond the bodily, that is, with the mind and soul. If praying *salat* (daily prayers), fasting, performance of Hajj, and the payment of *zakat* and *khums*, are understood as merely physical duties, then the purpose of *'ibāda* is lost altogether. In essence, *'ibāda* is the adoration of God at the level of the heart. It is a deep yearning to melt away in God. The bodily aspect of *'ibāda*, that is, the performance of the physical aspect of service and duty, is merely a prelude to the real *'ibāda*. When our worship and devotion to God is understood as mere 'bodily' actions, is it surprising that after seventy years of worshiping God, we are still frightened of death, difficulties, ill health, and poverty? After a lifetime of worship, how can anyone be insecure, worried about tomorrow, afraid of illness and sickness, and frightened of death? If the inner being has connected with God, then of what concern, consequence, and significance is the loss of the body and bodily? We claim that Allah is our origin, destination, and the only One with whom we find any rest, do we not? Then why do we fear, have anxiety, and carry regrets of bridled worldly aspirations?

People who are not acquainted with God and His blessed Messenger can be forgiven for having fears and being frightened, hopeless, and disappointed with life. But is it not inexcusable for the faithful to be frightened and perturbed in their old age? For

they profess conviction in the message of the blessed Prophet and Quran and are acquainted with Allah. How can a follower of the Prophet and his blessed family, who has faith in God's destiny, be fixated on worldly gains after failed attempts? Why should they be preoccupied with such concerns? This love for the bodily distracts us from God and acknowledging His favours upon us. Think about it carefully. Who supplies us with the basic needs of life – the air, water, and light – without being asked? Can all our combined wealth create the oxygen that is needed in the atmosphere? Are we able to create a sun and place it in the centre of the solar system? Is it possible for us to send down rain from the heavens?

Our service (*'ibāda*) to God is bodily for the most part because we have understood and interpreted our relationship with God in an entirely bodily (physical) manner. We worship a bodily God. We yearn for a bodily Paradise. And we fear the bodily chastisement of Hell. Now the real Hell ought to be alienation from God, and the real Paradise union with Him. Bodily worship (*'ibāda*) is insufficient to 'find' or reach our God substantively. Is it surprising that we have become so prejudiced and discriminatory on the basis of religion? To think that people of other persuasions are *lesser* than us and probably destined for Hell betrays our alienation from God. If we were truly connected with the Beloved, then such thoughts would never even occur to us.

Devotional practices are a means to arrive at God. Unfortunately, we have reduced them to the performance of physical movements and observances. They are meant to initiate us on the inner journey of finding union with God and arriving at a state of contentment in His blessed presence. They are meant to free us from worldly concerns and worries. Their physical forms were never meant to be ends in themselves. For instance, Hajj is intended to be an intellectual and a spiritual journey; but for the vast majority of us who have performed it in the past and will perform it in the future, it is just a set of physical rituals that are to be performed with meticulous precision. The *fatwa* (legal

opinion) book states that I must perform *tawaf* (circumambulation) and *sa'ī* (running between the mounts of Safā and Marwa) – which are essential parts of Hajj – in a particular manner; otherwise, my Hajj is not valid. The purpose of the pilgrimage of Hajj is to meet the Lord, but it has become a tick-box exercise of performing physical rituals. 'I have completed the physical Hajj, but did I feel the presence of my God?' The answer is: 'No, I did not. All I did was walk around the Ka'ba and run between the mounts of Safā and Marwa. In the scorching heat, I threw stones at the *shayṭān* and was hit by many stones thrown by others. Frequently, I was angry, irritable, and frustrated at the lack of discipline of the Hujjaj (pilgrims) and wished they would all vanish.' Was this the purpose of performing Hajj? Did you meet Allah? Is your heart content now that you have arrived at your Destiny? Are you ready to die now and meet your Lord? Not at all! I went to Makkah to ask for a long life and increase in my worldly sustenance; and I performed it the following year for the same reason. This is how we have reduced this blessed devotion of God to a mere bodily act. The bodily aspect of *'ibāda* is supposed to discipline and awaken the mind to that point of yearning to be reconnected with the Truth. In other words, its purpose is to train the mind to be attentive to God. It is not an end in itself.

The Arabic word for 'disciplining the egoic soul (*nafs ammāra*)' is *riyāḍa*. The *'urafā'* (sages) and sufi masters explain that originally, the word *riyāḍa* referred to the act of tying the legs of an animal so that it would become obedient and subservient, and hence could learn to obey commands. This is what *riyāḍa* (disciplining the egoic soul) is supposed to do for the wayfarer. It is supposed to discipline the outer motion of the soul connected with the bodily and worldly (that is, the bodily mind and egoic soul) so that the mind becomes purified, and the inner motion of the soul is awakened. The first thing that is necessary at the level of inner devotion, is to awaken to the One we want to be devoted to. Who are we devoting ourselves to? Who are we serving? You will reply, "Allah. He is the One

we want to serve." Then we ask, "Is He a master like any other master?" You will say, "No, He is not." Does He need our physical prostrations, *zakat* and *rukū'*? You will respond, "Absolutely not!" For even if all eight billion people stopped prostrating (performing *sajda*) to Him, it would make no difference to Him, and if they all did infinite *sajdas*, it would not add to His authority. Whether we give in His way or not, He is still going to feed His creatures. Thus, the only objective of devotion is to find Him.

The beloved Imam Husayn supplicated thus: 'Oh Allah! You provide for me before I ask and prior to the need arising. After providing for me, You ask me to loan You a little of what is given by You, and with a hesitant heart I part with it in Your name. You accept it appreciatingly, multiply it many times over, and return it to me.' We need to remember that God does not need these *sajdas*. He does not need our *rukū's*. He says in the Quran, "Neither their meat nor their blood reach God; rather, godliness (*taqwa*) on your part reaches Him" (22:37). Therefore, it is that inner awareness of God that is of value. God does not want me to perform these physical postures without the mind being awakened, alert, and turned to Him.

The blessed Imam Ali stated that many people stand tirelessly at night in devotion to God, but only swollen feet result; many people spend their daytimes fasting, but only empty stomachs are gained; and many people recite Quran excessively, but only the curses of the Quran are procured. These are the outcomes of performing acts of devotion without being aligned with real objective of devotion. In order for the light of God within to re-join God – the Light of all lights – the mind and soul must awaken to God. To repeat, the first thing that is necessary in our devotions to God is to awaken to God and remind ourselves that God does not want our *sajdas* or *rukū's*, but rather He wants my attention to be directed to Him alone during their performance. He wants me to become attentive to Him and make my way back to Him. The blessed Prophet said, 'When you pray, believe

that Allah is watching you so that you become attentive to God and the inner motion of the soul awakens.' The whole point of devotion is to give ourselves away to God and become detached from the body and bodily.

Interestingly, *salat* used to be two *rakats* (units) and not four *rakats* prior to the blessed Prophet's migration to Medina. He added the other two *rakats*. Hence, we pray two *rakats* when we travel, which is the minimum required by God, and the two *rakats* added by the Prophet are dropped. Somebody asked one of the blessed Imams why the two *rakats* were added. They stated, 'If you are inattentive in the first two *rakats* but become attentive in the second two, then the prayer will be acceptable.' Clearly the acceptance of prayer depends on the degree of our attention to God, or in other words, it depends on how awakened we are to God. This attentiveness to God is the main reason today why we have the preludes of doing *wudhu* (ablution), wearing clean clothes, perfuming ourselves, and choosing an appropriate place to perform our prayers. None of these are important in themselves. They are mere preparatory stages to direct the mind to the Beloved. By performing these preludes attentively, the Beloved is brought to the forefront of our minds, and with such a mind, we then devote ourselves with the body to the One Who is the object of our inner yearning.

So the first step in devotion is to get to know the One we are devoting ourselves to. If we were to know Allah, we would become mindful that Allah is the Possessor of one and all. He is the Most-Forgiving. He is concerned about us, and our return is to Him. By reminding ourselves thus repeatedly, our attention to God, which is our inner connection with Him, will be initiated. Subsequently, when the soul awakens to God – that is, when our attention to Him is more focussed – we may supplicate to God for bodily concerns, but in a God-centred manner:

Oh Allah! I do not want to go to Hell; hence I worship You.
I want to enter Your Paradise; hence I worship You.
I want health, which I know is Your bestowal; hence I worship You.

I want Your bounties and abundance; hence I worship You.

After awakening in this fashion, we progress by deepening our relationship with the Beloved:

> *O Allah! But You can forgive me in any case, can You not? Why should I worship You out of fear of Hell? I worship a God that is beyond revenge and wrath. I worship You as You. O Allah! Why have you created Paradise anyway? Would a parent want to withhold whatever they have from their children? Of course not, the parent takes joy in giving whatever they have to their children. You, by priority, are the Parent of all parents. You will give me Paradise even if I am not worthy of it. O Allah! So why should I worship You for the sake of Paradise?*

Such sentiments allow the relationship with our God to intensify and become intimate.

Prior to awakening to God, our worship is powered by our anxieties and fears. But when we awaken and our relationship with God deepens, we realise: "O Allah! Why should I be fearful when You are my God? I used to pray, 'O Lord, dispel the threat of my enemy!' But now that I know You are with me, it makes little difference whether my enemy harms me or not. For indeed the fate You decide for me is better for me!" This is when devotion starts becoming selfless. Thus, there is a gradual progression: from devotions motivated by bodily wants, to psychological devotions based on fears and hopes, and finally to devotion that is selfless. Here, devotion intensifies further as knowledge of the One we have devoted ourselves to begins to dawn:

> *O Lord! I am with You! You are my greatest pride. O Allah! Even if the whole world turns away from me, what difference does it make when You are with me? O Lord! You are the One I yearn for. I no longer wish to be known or acknowledged by Your creatures. The oblivion of not being known is more desirable to me so that only You may be known.*

At this stage, there is a strengthening of the relationship with the One we are devoting ourselves to. Although the relationship is still at the level of the reflective mind, it is becoming more meaningful and will deepen from hereon. The presence of God is with us both in wakefulness and sleep and not just during the formalistic practice of devotion. Every aspect of our lives is accompanied with the presence of God.

The biggest error is to try to find God inside the Ka'ba, or at the mosque, or on the prayer mat. Allah says, "To Allah belongs the East and West; wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. Indeed, Allah is All-embracing, All-knowing" (2:115). God is saying that you only need to turn inwards, 'I am always with you. How can I be confined by walls?' Once we awaken to God, the mind and soul become regulated. We walk with God, breathe with God, talk through God, and see by God. God's presence becomes permanent. My anger, rage, pride, and concern for what others think of me, all vanish. Imagine oneself on a stretcher as a dead corpse? What will 'others' be thinking of then? They will feel sorry that this wretched soul has died and is returning to God with all his sins. This is what 'others' will think. See how significant 'others' are when I am laid to rest. Ask them a day or two after I am buried as to how much they think of me.

One who is in a permanent state of devotion to God inwardly monitors their words and actions. The bodily realm becomes regulated. Where we earn from, how we earn, and what we say, all become mindful and measured actions. Tradesmen often sell their goods and claim, 'By God, I bought this for such-and-such amount, and I am only making a meagre profit.' Of course, this is a lie. In contrast, a businessman whose soul is godly, and hence knows God is with Him, will never lie. He knows that he will receive whatever God has destined for him.

Islamic instructions pertaining to transactions are infused with the higher objective of reaching God. The blessed Prophet taught, 'When you sell a commodity, charge a little less than its asking

price and give a little bit more of it than its asking price.' It is as if the blessed Prophet is reminding us that we are transacting in the presence of God, and that it should be for His sake. Then the transaction becomes an investment with God, and He will give back more than can be imagined. But his real objective in instructing us to charge less and give more is to increase reliance upon God, for it will purge the mind and soul of money insecurity and greed.

The wealthy need to remind themselves that those around them do not actually respect them. They respect their wealth, and often, that respect is motivated by the possible benefits that can be accrued from their wealth. Wealthy individuals will cease to be significant if their wealth changes hands; people will begin to respect the other individual who has become wealthy. This is our reality. Open your eyes and minds to this bitter truth. People respect you because of your position and/or money. You are a president today; tomorrow you will be a nobody. When you become old and start becoming senile, they will laugh at you. Today they are in awe of you because of your arbitrary position. Tomorrow they will laugh at you and mock you. Whatever cannot be said about you today, will not be held back tomorrow. They will direct their scornful words at you without fear. This is our bodily reality.

Devotion takes on a new meaning when one awakens to God. As the love of God penetrates and pervades the soul, it arrests our thoughts. In my devotions to God, God wants *me* – the egoic soul, the consciousness "I am this person". He does not want my bodily postures per se, but He wants *me*. Thus, I cannot have unworthy thoughts. Finally, we begin to sever our ties with the body and bodily and emerge in the light of Allah. Allah describes the blessed Prophets thus, "We made all of them leaders guiding [others] by Our command, and We inspired them to do virtuous works, to keep up the prayer, and to pay the alms. They were Our worshippers" (21:73). They were only able to perform the outward work and actions described in this verse because all their internal workings were directed to God. Their intentions were beautiful and sincere,

not veering from God in the slightest. Thus, immersing oneself in devotion to God, awakens the mind to God. When Allah touches our souls, we begin to yearn for Him helplessly. Before that point, there is no rest or peace because the soul is searching for them (rest and peace) in the body, bodily, and worldly; it has not realised that rest and peace are with God, which is its true belonging.

The following is seldom known: *nobody can punish me more than I can punish myself.* This is because nobody knows what my greatest fears are, or what causes me to suffer the most. Only I know. Hell is the place where my own hellishness will be displayed. Therefore, I – myself – am the punishment both here and within the great inferno of Hell. The experience of the punishment of Hell will be tailored to each of its inhabitants individually. The following is the parallel of the above fact: *nobody can reward me, or make me contented, more than I can reward myself, or make myself contented.* This is because nobody knows what gives me the greatest peace and joy. Only I know. When all of us are in the garden of Paradise together (God-willing), our interactions and experiences will be tailored to each of us individually. Nobody can bestow peace upon me other than me, myself. Hence, we *are* Paradise, and we *are* Hell. It is up to us which we choose to be in this life, and thence in the Hereafter. Nobody can give us anything beyond what we choose to give to ourselves.

In summary, we need to understand the following: It is because we are alienated from ourselves that we cannot find any rest. We – ourselves – are alienated from God who is within, and hence there is no peace and contentment. The blessed Prophet Ibrahim was designated an *Imam* (leader), a *Rasul* (messenger), and a *Nabi* (prophet), and yet he did not find rest because he was searching for, and devoted to, a God Who was 'other'. He found peace only when he realised that the God he thought was outside himself, was actually waiting for him within himself. The final stage is not to deny the body or mind – including thoughts, intentions, feelings, desires, emotions, actions, and speech – by controlling them beyond

the bounds of the *sharia*, ethics, and morality; it is to deny the seeker himself; for so long as the One sought is 'other', alienation remains.

Recall the verse quoted in the previous lecture: "They shall have all that they want therein (that is, in Paradise), and yet we have *more* [to offer]" (50:35). There is a narration (*ḥadīth*), which is also mentioned in the books of our *'urafā'*, stating that the blessed Prophet was asked, 'What is this *more* referring to?'. The Prophet replied, 'From time to time, God will give a glimpse of His divinity to the inhabitants of Paradise, and they will become indifferent to Paradise and its bounties on account of being totally immersed in the radiance of the Divine – the beauty and splendour of God. When God removes His radiance, they will be left with a sense of lack and dissatisfaction. They will live in Paradise yearning for the next glimpse of God's radiance.' Who has said that Paradise is the end? The bodily Paradise is nothing compared to the light within us. Even Paradise will not satisfy eventually.

A *ḥadīth* states that a soul which has an iota of ego will not be admitted into Paradise. If the soul does not yield to God wholly after the removal of arrogance, Paradise will be a place of restlessness ultimately. Undoubtedly, people will be rejoicing in Paradise prior to being given a glimpse of God's beauty. However, its attraction will be lost, and it will cease to be fulfilling after He has bestowed them with a glimpse of His radiance.

Devotion to the One culminates in the absolute level of devotion. Here, the devotee loses themselves in the object of devotion, that is, the egoic soul, the sense of "I" as the body, or 'I-ness', of the devotee fades away totally. From hereon, the worship of God is not for Paradise, health, prestige, wealth, or even His pleasure; instead, it is for Him to remove me from myself: "Oh Allah! End the search. Relieve me of myself, for I am the final veil. Destroy this *I*, this *me*." It is this destruction that causes the untarnished emergence of the Beloved.

Consider the souls that have been effaced due to their proximity to Allah! Recall our beloved Imam Husayn! Upon

seeing the eager swords, he cried out, 'O swords, await not! Devour me.' In his whispered prayer, he proclaimed, 'O God! If these swords shred my body to pieces, every drop of spilt blood will testify that it yearns for You.' This level of love longs for naught but the destruction of the lover, the devotee. The intense and all-consuming love of the lover results in their melting away in the Beloved. The lover becomes like the Object of love. It cannot be otherwise. We begin to emulate the one we love in our speech, thought, and appearance. The lovers of Husayn should be at the peak of humanity, for their Master was the peak of humanity. If a lover of Husayn hates another, they should know that something has gone awry in their love of Husayn.

When the sincerity of the devotee's devotion to the Lord increases, deepens, and reaches its zenith, their devotion enters the realm of love. At this stage, 'the devotee's devotion to the Lord' becomes 'the lover's love for the Beloved'. The lover realises that its own self is the sole obstacle: "O Lord! Remove me from myself and allow Yourself to prevail." The blessed Imam Ali said, 'The love of Allah does not pass over anything but that it is burnt to ashes.' Such are the final levels of love when the lover's own self is consumed by its love for God. The Beloved emerges from the depths of the soul, and the lover fades away. Consider this *ḥadīth qudsī* (speech of God that is not Revelation): 'Draw near to Me by devoting yourself to Me. Do it to the extent that I become the eyes through which you see, the ears through which you hear, and the tongue through which you speak. Come closer still so that you become the eyes through which I see, the ears through which I hear, and the tongue through which I speak.'

The actual goal of devotion is to rid ourselves of ourselves. 'Ridding ourselves of ourselves' means to rid ourselves of the egoic nature of the soul (which is the false consciousness "I am the body", or the sense of "I" as the body, or 'I-ness'). Let it melt away in Allah so that light can prevail to its fullest extent.

Lecture Six
The Process of Devotion

We display the nature of God in our outer, intellectual (or rational) motion. God is All-controlling, and so we yearn to control all things. God is deathless, and hence we strive to defeat death. God possesses all things, and thus we seek to possess kingdoms like the blessed Prophet Sulayman. God is All-knowing, and consequently we are impelled to know every detail of our world and cosmos. This outward motion of the soul is the effect of the outer part of the breath of God within us – *lā ilāha*: there is no boundary or limit to the motion of self-discovery and self-realisation.

Our nature is vested with the nature of God, and so we are hardwired to (a) race ahead, (b) strive to remove all lack from ourselves, and (c) yearn to know and control all else. This outward motion of the soul is inevitable, irrespective of whether we know our nature or not, and it is an unending journey. The more we know, the more humbled we are by how little we know, and the more intrigued we become. This all pertains to the outward motion of the soul, which is the operation of our immaterial minds in the material realm. However, there is also the inward motion of the soul. Its activity is recognisable to most when something of the body and bodily is lost. In such moments, we turn to God acknowledging our belonging to Him: "Those who,

when afflicted with calamity, say, 'Indeed we belong to God, and verily to Him we are returning'" (2:156). Therefore, the outer journey is the mind's efforts to know and gain mastery over the observable, material realm in its entirety; and the inner journey is the mind's efforts to detach from the body and bodily and melt away in the absolute beauty of God. Both journeys coexist; they are occurring concurrently.

Our purpose is to claim the authority that God has vested us with by not ascribing 'god-ness' (the quality of being god) to any god, angel, demon, jinn, person, barrier, limitation, or fear, other than God. For they all limit our rational, moral, and spiritual potential. It is as simple as that. The whole cosmos has been created for God's ambassadors – us – to know, explore, and gain mastery over. Allah says, "O species of *jinn* and humankind! If you can pass through the regions of the heavens and earth, then pass through [them]. You shall not pass through [them] except with [Our] authority" (55:33).

Early humans have prostrated before the sun, moon, stars, and roaring waves. Allah reminds us in the Quran that they are subservient to us (see 14:33, 16:12, 22:37, 22:65, 31:20, 35:13, and 45:13). It is not the other way around. You are not beholden to them. Rather, they are submissive to you. Know your true worth and claim your glory. This is the purpose of the outer motion of the soul via the body.

There is no problem in gaining mastery over the cosmos. The problem is in our psychological dependency and attachment to it. We become psychologically dependent upon the world when the soul mistakes itself to be the body, and then feels and believes it is an inextricable part of it, and hence we become attached to it. The egoic soul (the soul's consciousness "I am the body") is the root cause of our psychological dependence upon the world. Its desires and fears, with respect to securing our bodily needs as individuals and collectivities, is the basis for the soul's outward motion of gaining mastery over our environments, world, and

cosmos. The result is a certain degree of psychological security for the individual and collective egoic souls regarding their respective bodily destinies; however, in the process, we become entrapped within the worldly. Thus, the outer, material realm is ours to have mastery over; however, we are to detach from everything worldly inwardly.

During the time of the blessed Imam Sadiq, some practices of certain sufi groups had become well-known and were talked about publicly, namely, the denunciation of the world and the denial of worldly comforts, luxuries, and pleasures. Imam Sadiq was asked about the meaning of asceticism. He said, 'Being abstemious is not that you never own gold and silver, but that gold and silver never own you.' This is the goal. We are to detach from the body, bodily, and worldly inwardly, whilst acquiring mastery over God's creation outwardly.

Thus, we are to acquire mastery outwardly. God is Omnipotent – that is, He has mastery over everything – and hence our nature is to acquire mastery over everything. We cannot help it. However, this outward motion of the human soul must be in, through, and with God – the utmost point of Compassion (*Ar-Raḥmān*) – inwardly, and not in isolation of Him. This combination of the outward and inward motions of the soul is the meaning of 'disassociating from all gods outwardly and submitting to the One God inwardly' (*lā ilāha illa-llāh*, "There is no god other than God"). A *ḥadīth qudsī* states: 'I have made creation for the son of Adam, but I have made the son of Adam for Myself.' The whole of creation looks up at the children of Adam and venerates them. The children of Adam are not supposed to become worldly. Only their physical constitutions are earthly, but their minds and souls are Otherworldly – that is, beyond the bodily. There is potential peril when our minds fail to disassociate from the body, bodily, and worldly inwardly, for then they try to emulate God as egoic souls through the body and bodily. Recall that the egoic soul is the consequence of the mind's association and identification of the soul's

essential consciousness "I am" with the body and bodily; and it is this egoic soul that the great Prophets and Sages of religion have come to address – *you are not who or what you think you are.*

If humankind did not understand the workings of nature, then how would cures be found, energy created, and poverty dispelled? If we did not acquire mastery over nature, then how would we perform the godly function expected of us as stewards of God upon this earth? Today, we are the hands of God, for *we* cure sickness, and *we* nurture and prolong life. In the future, we may defeat death altogether, and hence create paradise here upon this earth. And then finally, we will say, "O Lord! We have created paradise upon this earth. Now we yearn for You since paradise is not enough for us!" This is the motion that is taking place. We lose out on the Ultimate because we are attached to Paradise and fearful of Hell.

The first blessed Imam described noble, godly souls as those who find 'poverty in needlessness.' The Imam's formulation is the opposite to how it is usually expressed. Normally, it is said that there is 'needlessness in poverty', meaning that when God keeps us in a state of poverty, then God is enough for us. To explain, 'needlessness in poverty' means that the heart is so filled and involved with God that the pangs of hunger do not mean anything. Legions of enemies neither perturb nor deter us from the Truth. This is the meaning of the expression as it is commonly stated – 'needlessness in poverty'. But the blessed Imam Ali has stated it reversely, that there is 'poverty in needlessness'. It refers to the soul that has been bestowed with the kingdom of the blessed Sulayman but knows inwardly that it is naught but a mirage – a mere ray of beauty kept in a state of display by God, and hence He can cease it at will. This is the level to which we need to awaken. Our beloved Imam Husayn said, 'What does he have who does not have You, O Lord? And what does he lack who has found You?' Thus, humankind is to possess the whole kingdom of God outwardly, if God so destines; however, we are to relent and give ourselves over to Him inwardly.

Proper devotion awakens us to our actual, inner state of poverty: the realisation that I don't have any control, agency, life, wealth, power, intelligence, or success; these are all the bestowals of Something Else. Proper devotion enables us to gradually surrender the false god within to the real God. When I feel the sense of "I am in control of my own life", know that the inner light of God is veiled. When I feel and believe that "I am sustaining my own life", know that in those moments I am dead inwardly. When I feel that "I have my own wealth which I have earnt", know that the inner fortune is lost. When I feel the sense of "I am triumphant because of my abilities", know that there is defeat inwardly. The noble, godly soul that possesses everything knows that it is actually in a dire state of need and poverty. It knows it has and owns nothing in reality, not even its own breaths. The more needless a person becomes outwardly, the more potential there is for the soul to awaken to its essential neediness before Allah *subḥāna-hu wa taʿālā*, 'may He be glorified and exalted'.

Reflect upon this *duʿa* (supplication) of our beloved Imam Husayn: 'Oh Allah! How is it possible to thank You adequately, for each act of gratitude makes me indebted to You countless times over? You inspired me to be grateful to You in the first place. The air I breathe is Yours. The vocal cords I use are given by You. The sound I construct with my lips and the words I utter are taught by You.' It is necessary to cultivate this state of indebtedness to God so that we are not beguiled by any moment in which there is a seeming sense of control and agency.

The Quran informs us about the state of Qārūn in Sūra al-Qaṣaṣ:

> *Qārūn was one of Musa's people, but he oppressed them. We had given him treasures such that [even] their [very] keys would have weighed down a company of strong men. ... his people said to him, 'Do not gloat, for God does not like people who gloat' (28:76).*

Here, Qārūn had the opportunity to humble himself and express his indebtedness to God, for it is quite obvious that one's treasures are arbitrary belongings and a mirage; instead, he answered:

> *'It (this wealth) was given to me on account of a knowledge I possess.' Did he not know that God had destroyed generations before him, [those humans] who had greater power than him and were more numerous? Criminals will not be questioned about their sins (28:78).*

The Quran conveys the following instructions in the previous verse:

> *Seek the Next Life by means of what God has granted you, and do not neglect your rightful share in this world. Do good [to others] as God has done good to you. Do not seek to spread corruption in the land. Indeed, God does not love those who spread corruption (28:77).*

Such bestowals are a test and hence potentially problematic. The more God gives, the more indebted to Him we are supposed to be. We are not to claim ownership and glory for ourselves. A side-effect of devotion is its effectiveness in preventing the egoic soul from making such claims, for devotion entails realising and acknowledging one's poverty and neediness before God. The realisation and acknowledgement of this state of utter poverty and neediness is true humility, and it crushes the ego. Think about this carefully. How humiliating is it to serve somebody else? The blessed Sage Luqman said that the worst thing is to work for someone else, be accountable to them, and know that they are monitoring you, giving instructions, and can ask you questions at will, such as, 'Have you done this work?', 'Have you finished that task?', and 'Show me your work schedule?'. It is humiliating for a dignified person to be in that position, and yet it is humbling and the very thing that is needed to awaken to God. This is one of the reasons why sufi masters have insisted that it is necessary for novices to have

a Shaykh. Once the novice makes a formal pledge of allegiance to the Shaykh, he must follow the Shaykh's instructions and serve him without questioning his motives as to whether they are good, bad, or evil. Inevitably, he will experience the humiliation of unquestioned servitude as an initiate, but it will serve as a means of crushing the egoic soul (the sense of "I" as the body) and becoming humbled. If the student feels offended upon being questioned by the Shaykh, it indicates the presence and operation of the egoic soul (for it is the "I" as the body that is offended).

If someone swears at you, and you feel offended, it shows that the egoic soul is present, claiming false nobility, and hence it is hurt. The mind needs to realise and acknowledge that it is really nothing in itself; hence, one and all are free to swear at me as much as they want. Eventually, devotees arrive at the stage in which they are liberated from arrogance and delusions of grandeur. Now, the swearing and scorn of others means nothing to them.

It is good for one and all to serve someone else and experience the host of emotions that surface whilst serving them, for there is a great opportunity to grow and become humble. In such service, there is potential to overpower the egoic soul and claim a loftier rank of existence (which is the selfless soul).

Therefore, devotion is not what we think it is. It is not limited to devotion done by the limbs, which is the devotion most slaves and animals have to their worldly masters. A domesticated animal will sit and stand when it is commanded to do so. Our devotion is like the devotion of such animals if the heart is not involved. Real devotion is sincere, inner devotion to Allah alone, after which He makes us aware of the operations of the egoic soul in our daily lives and provides the alertness to observe and distance ourselves from its reactions, thoughts, and feelings. He also creates certain situations that are tailored to crush the egoic soul. We should be grateful to Allah for granting us such experiences. The real devotee knows that both moments of difficulty and ease are equally favours from God, for He encompasses both in His mercy

and knowledge (see 40:7); consequently, both are recognised as opportunities to be devoted to Him and crush the ego. Thus, experiences of enemies, illness, and losing wealth, property and loved ones, are instances of His mercy.

A righteous soul is able to observe the experience of hurt as it is occurring, create a distance between the experience and themselves, and then forgive the antagonist fairly quickly, perhaps even in an instance. But the mind of a noble, godly soul will not even register any hurt, but will offer back forgiveness, compassion, and the love of God instantaneously. Such souls have no sense of pride when forgiving the antagonist; rather, they think, "O Lord! Thank you for giving me this opportunity to awaken to myself." Our beloved Imam Husayn wept as blades surrounded him. He was weeping for those who had come to kill his near and dear ones. He was asked why he was weeping for them, and he replied, 'They are incurring damnation on account of what they are going to do, and my heart bleeds and pains at their fate. Their actions here will be the cause of their damnation.' We say, "Husayn saved Islam." But our beloved Imam Husayn felt, 'O Lord! How do I thank You for allowing me to meet You?'

The great monotheist Ibrahim was a lover of God undoubtedly. Nothing occupied his soul more than his One God. In his old age, God gave him a son, Ismail. Ibrahim fell deeply in love with Ismail, and soon his mind became attached to his son. The reaction of the egoic soul to the heart's love for kith and kin is attachment. After a period, he began to feel guilty, for he knew that this attachment to his son had distracted him from his One and only Allah, that is, he realised that his mind's attachment to his son was a veil between his soul and his Lord. Thus, Ibrahim saw a dream in which he was instructed to discard this veil and return to his Lord. Imagine an old father having to place a blade upon the neck of his beloved son! This is devotion. The heart cries out in true inner devotion thus, "O Lord! I am directed only to You. There is nothing of me that will remain. There will be no veil between me and You.

It will be You and You alone." Our beloved Imam Husayn saw a dagger embedded in the chest of his young son Akbar and looked skyward, as if summoning his great-grandfather Ibrahim, 'Witness O great-grandfather! There is no blindfold over my eyes and no ropes steadying the hands and feet of Akbar.' This is devotion. Real devotion to God is not an easy task. And how can it be easy, when I have spent a lifetime associating myself with this body and mind? I have become associated and identified with ownership, belonging, power, fame, family, and fortune. Attachment to authority, wealth, children, the body, knowledge, thoughts, and feelings are veils. They need to be discarded one by one. Devotion is to melt away in the One we are devoted to.

The inner light within us will not rest until it finds its Source. It will not rest in this world, purgatory, the last pit of Hell, or the first level of Paradise, until it finds Itself. The seeker will continue to be restless even in Paradise. If I am given all the love in the world and beyond – of brothers, sisters, children, and everything else that can be given – there will still be no rest, for I have not found myself. How can there be contentment for one who does not know himself but knows everything else? How can there be contentment for one who has not found himself but has found everything else? Have you ever wondered why there is no peace and rest in our souls? We don't know our souls. We think and know ourselves as the body. Until and unless I know myself (*who and what I am*), how can I be content? And what will I be content in? Even if I am admitted into the lofty Heavens, will it be possible for me to have peace and contentment if I do not know my own self? Where do our fleeting experiences of peace and contentment come from? What is their source? How can anything quench the yearning of the self for itself but itself? How can the seven earths, seven heavens, Paradise, and whatever other manifestations of God beyond them, satiate us?

Examine our beloved Imam Husayn. Look at the extent to which he was drowned in God. There was nothing left in his being other than his Beloved. He was so devoted to God that he was

content with whatever decree He decided. Everything was torn away from him, and yet he was pleased, content, and at peace. With his final breaths, he uttered these words, 'I am well pleased with Your decree, O Lord! I am surrendered to Your command, O Lord!' He embodied the summit of the devotees of God! No wonder he inspires us. One and all listen to the story of Imam Husayn because he exemplified humankind's innate godliness and nobility in the midst of intense suffering. Hence, we relate to him, and he inspires us. Abbas inspires us and Akbar inspires us. Do you know why? Because the light within us recognises the light in them. The same divinity within us, which is hidden by the veils of the body and bodily, recognises itself in these noble souls.

By the way, Imam Husayn was a wealthy person. He had properties in Medina. He led a full life with his wives, brothers, children, and servants. However, his soul was in a state of poverty and neediness before God inwardly. It was because of his inner poverty and neediness to God that he was able to sacrifice whatever he had on the plains of Karbala, on that fateful day of Ashura. If you had a son like Akbar, you would sacrifice all your billions to secure his life, would you not? He gave his Akbar away readily in the way of God. Think about it. If you had a brother like Abbas, you would work as a slave for the rest of your life to secure his wellbeing. Husayn gave Abbas away to God ungrudgingly. The same godly light of Husayn dwells in the core of our souls; hence, we recognise it in him and helplessly fall in love with him. We see the truth behind his face and beyond his lineage. A person who is a Muslim may see Imam Husayn as a Muslim, but the godly, noble Hindu who venerates Husayn as much as I do, may not see Husayn as a Muslim, but as a great saint and an enlightened manifestation of God. He does not see Husayn as the son of the blessed Imam Ali and heavenly Bibi Fatima, nor as the grandson of our master Prophet Muhammad; he sees Imam Husayn as an awakened manifestation of the light and beauty residing at the core of his own soul. That is the Light beyond light. One who has awoken to It belongs to the Religion

beyond religion. That Religion is beyond denominations and labels. It has nothing to do with Islam as we have understood it (that is, our formal Islam). Nor does it have anything to do with any other religion, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Sikhism. Just as we are attracted to our beloved Imam Husayn, so also are we drawn to the Buddha, Krishna, Guru Nanak, Ibrahim, Musa, and Isa. In fact, we are pulled towards anyone who has awoken to that Light. Our purpose is to awaken to that Light within.

There is a slight mistake in our understanding of humankind's evolution towards God. Our interpretations of the blessed Prophet's religion offer a very negative and gloomy sense of godliness and piety. They tell us we are bad, and we are to remind ourselves that we are guilty. All sects of Islam hold human beings in contempt and inform us of how unworthy we are. This is emphasised to the point of depriving us of any hope of forgiveness and stripping us of any confidence in approaching God. If this is what Islam is supposed to do, that is, to tell us that – and treat us as if – we are perpetually naughty children, then is it any wonder that it plays so minor a role in the lives of many educated minds today? Consider the conduct of the blessed Prophet with the people of Makkah. According to our interpretations of his Islam, he should have condemned the Makkans outright and moved on, for you will not find people who are worse than the Makkans. Many behaved like savages with no value for human life. According to our religion, the blessed Prophet should have told those barbaric people who buried their daughters alive, 'You are destined for hell. There is no hope for you. I have come to reform your children who are untouched by your sins.' But the blessed Prophet was not condemnatory like our religions. Instead, he saw the godly light within them and urged them to seek forgiveness from the Eternally-Merciful Lord for their past deeds. He encouraged them to emerge from the darkness of their egoic souls and have confidence in their humanity. He assured them that Allah would not only forgive all their past sins but would convert them into good deeds (see 25:70). The blessed Prophet empowered

them and instilled confidence in their hearts to reach out to God and share with Him most intimately.

The religion of Muhammad *Rasūlu-llāh* was very different to the religion being preached in his blessed name by all the sects. All our sects preach a sense of gloomy piety, being despondent, being negatively detached from the world, being pessimistic about other people, communities, and societies, and hence we are supposed to be sad all day long, eagerly awaiting the Mahdi or the Day of *Qiyāma*. Where has all this come from? This attitude has no regard for the blessings and bounties of God. It has omitted them altogether. Has Allah not made all this creational beauty and wholesome foods for His creatures (see 2:29, 2:168, and 20:81)? Has He not promised to give better versions and more of it to His devotees in the Hereafter (see 43:71and 56:10-40)?

One night, Salman, Abu Darr, and Mikdad decided that they would not eat meat anymore, partake in earthly bounties, or wear comfortable garments. They also decided to leave the comfort of their beds and sleep on the ground instead. And then the following verse of the Quran was revealed, "O you who believe, do not forbid yourselves from the good things that Allah has made lawful for you" (5:87). You have a bodily constitution, and this is how you are supposed to evolve. Rejoice at the wonder of your bodily constitution, and look after it, but move towards God inwardly. We are not to condemn ourselves constantly and regard ourselves as evil. We are born in the ambit of what *we* consider to be evil – the body. However, it is *not* evil. The problem does not lie with the body or bodily even, but with our attachment to them inwardly. The faithful are taught to condemn and loathe themselves. A person who loathes himself will not evolve to God accurately. How can the inner motion of the soul occur if one despises oneself? God instructed the blessed Prophet to "Say: 'My servants who have harmed yourselves by your own excesses, do not despair of God's mercy. Verily, God forgives all sins. Indeed, He is the All-forgiving, the Eternally Merciful" (39:53).

Why does God say that He forgives all sins except *shirk*? To enable the light within to emerge and transform the person into a godly soul, mind, or consciousness. This is the purpose of forgiveness. Sometimes failing an exam can cause a student to slip into a regressive cycle, lose their confidence, and so they continue to fail. They need to let go of the past failures and move forward with confidence in their abilities.

The inward motion of the soul is to be directed towards God. Its outward motion is the experience of the body, bodily, world and worldly, which includes their exploration and celebration. Consider the following verses of the Quran in which God informs us of the nature of the soul, "The one who purifies his soul succeeds, and the one who corrupts it fails" (91:9–10). What do purification and tarnishing of the soul mean? We awaken in a bodily constitution as do other animals, but we are endowed with supreme imagination and the blessed ability to think intricately. However, the combination of the ability to think and imagination makes us susceptible to committing acts of transgression. For instance, an animal hunts for its immediate needs, but the imagination of human beings prompts them to think about the future, 'I will be hungry tomorrow and the day after and so on,' and hence they hoard.

When the Covid crisis began, many people hurried to the shops and started buying excessively and stocking up. It was a frenzy. They lost all trace of humanity. There was no care for those who could not go to the shops immediately, such as the elderly, frontline workers, and people working at hospitals. Shelves were almost empty by the time others got to the shops. The thought of the future coupled with the concern for 'me', 'mine' and 'myself' was fuelling their imagination, and it triggered insecurity. Consequently, people started to hoard. There was no reliance on God whatsoever.

The mind's imaginative faculty leads to transgressive acts being committed when the egoic soul (the sense of "I" as the body) feels threatened; in other words, the faculty of imagination

is driven by the egoic soul's (a) fear of injury and/or death of itself as the body, and (b) its desire for control and security for itself as the body, resulting in behaviours exhibiting greed, anger, aggression, and anxiety. A dog barks instinctively to dispel a perceived threat; whereas humans will strike their enemies pre-emptively to destroy them, that is, before their enemies have even thought of fighting. Our imaginative faculties play a considerable role in such thinking, planning, and action. But the root of it all is the egoic soul (the consciousness "I am the body"), which is the outcome of the mind's association and identification of the soul's consciousness with the body and bodily. The egoic soul is consolidated and strengthened by the imagination's incessant activity with its memories, desires, fears, and so on.

To reiterate, when we awaken within the body, the soul's consciousness identifies and associates itself with the body fully and hence gets deluded by the bodily properties and its workings. This identification and association give rise to greed, fear, anger, lust, and jealousy. And yet, this uncomfortable state is part of the journey. It is how things are meant to be. We are supposed to experience greed, anger, fear, lust, and jealousy. Such experiences are inevitable because we have awoken within a bodily constitution. One of the purposes of religion is to teach us how to mitigate and grow through these experiences, for they are great opportunities for us to claim our godliness.

The great Prophets, Imams, and sages have taught orally and by their example that curbing the experiences of such emotions, and working through them, increases one's light. Thus, we extrapolate that all emotions and urges are part of the process of unveiling one's true self. Is it not amazing when, instead of taking the opportunity to lie and secure benefit, one says to oneself, "I will not lie; rather I will trust God, the One Who sustains me. I will speak the truth and forego this arbitrary gain." In that moment of deciding to forego the gain, speaking the truth, and relying upon Allah, the light increases and we move further along the way to claiming all

of it. Imagine, if in a moment of rage, we are able to step back, breathe, remember Allah, and say, "O Allah, as you forgive me, I shall overlook this." The light that shines in such moments is so intense; in fact, that intensity of light is only brought about in such moments usually. Such emotions and urges which our sects consider as human weaknesses and hence make people loathe themselves, are actually great opportunities in the scheme of God. We just need to know how to deal with our emotions and urges, and direct them in a way that intensifies the inner light. Every human weakness is an opportunity to claim the light of God. It is not a question of repressing emotions and urges and hiding them away. We must acknowledge our state of vulnerability in those moments and then turn to God: 'O God, I am scared ...'; 'O Lord, I feel hatred towards others and desire their destruction ...'; 'O Allah, I prefer riches rather than Your pleasure ...'; and 'O God, I doubt You. I need You by my side to help me through these trials ...'.

The blessed Imams were genuine and authentic people. They followed the impeccable example of their master and grandfather, the noble Messenger of Allah. The inner and outer motions of their souls were congruent with each other. In one of his *du'as* (supplications), the fourth blessed Imam supplicated thus: "Remove all doubts from my soul." Why would he have said this? From the perspective of their humanness, they acknowledged their feelings and thoughts to God. Who can be greater than God? All are defective and in a state of sin in terms of their relationship to God. Absolute poverty is the essence of the body, mind, and soul, and hence sin is our existential state. There is a *ḥadīth* attributed to the blessed Prophet that sufis often quote: 'If the children of Adam stopped sinning, God would destroy them and create another creation in their stead that would sin, so that He may forgive them.' What a phenomenal *ḥadīth*. It is a question of understanding what it means. When we 'fall' on account of sinning, we have the opportunity to humble ourselves and hence rid ourselves of conceit. The blessed Prophet said, "A sin that is followed by ridding oneself of conceit

is worthier than a good deed that causes pride." Allah has said in a *ḥadīth qudsī*, "I cause my servants to miss the morning prayers at times to prevent them from becoming arrogant."

I will end this lecture with the following observation. Both Iblīs and Adam were given an opportunity to grow and increase their light. Iblīs was asked to prostrate before Adam; and Adam was instructed not to eat from the tree. Both did the contrary. Iblīs did not prostrate, and Adam ate from the tree. Both missed the opportunity of obedience and its fruits by performing their respective acts of disobedience. Allah says, "Thus, Adam disobeyed his Lord" (20:121) and "He [Iblīs] disobeyed the command of his Lord" (18:50). However, immediately after sinning and its being called out, another opportunity presented itself to both, which unbeknownst to them would determine their long-term fate. The flaws within humankind and the *jinn* are constitutional flaws. In any case, what happens at this point is quite telling. Adam awoke immediately after disobeying God. He recognised the greed within that distracted him from God, and hence turned to God in repentance. Recall, Iblīs said to Adam and Ḥawā', 'Your Lord only forbids you from this fruit so that you do not become immortal or two angels' (see 7:20). Upon hearing this, Adam coveted eternity and the rank of the angels, and hence became unmindful of trusting God. As soon as he had disobeyed God, Adam realised that God had made him aware of his inner lack and inadequacy. Adam made no excuses to justify his action, nor did he lay the blame upon anyone else. Instead, he and Ḥawā' humbled themselves and pled, "O Lord! We have wronged our souls. If You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, then indeed we shall be amongst the losers" (7:23). Adam worked on his lack and inadequacies revealed by the sin and became *Ṣafiyu-llāh*, the one specially chosen by God. In contrast to Adam, Iblīs did not see the opportunity in front of him after he had sinned. His ego prevailed and he said, 'My Lord, since You have beguiled and misguided me ... !' (see 7:16 and 15:39). It was as if he was saying to God, 'Lord, You have deliberately done this so

that I fail.' And then he vowed vengefully, 'I will mislead them all, just as You have misled me' (see 7:16-17 and 15:39). Imagine! Both had sinned, but Adam grew and increased his light by becoming humble, admitting his mistake, and seeking forgiveness, whereas Iblīs regressed and diminished his light by becoming arrogant, blaming Another for his mistake, and becoming more defiant. Adam curbed his ego, whereas Iblīs fuelled it.

So our bodily frailties are not to be viewed negatively in the way we are accustomed to as religious people. They are to be seen as potential awakeners or invitations to grow. When I feel the urge to lie, I am supposed to become mindful and say, "God, whatever evil I wish to dispel by telling this lie, You can dispel it anyway, and on the Day of *Qiyāma*, when I stand before You, I will not be able to lie to You." And when we do lie or transgress, then we must not cover it up or justify it, but rather, we must acknowledge it as a sin we have committed before God, attempt to make amends if possible, and grow through it. Is it not better to receive our share of punishment here and be free in the Hereafter?

When souls drown in God, that is, in His devotion, they learn from their sins, inadequacies, and frailties, and thereby submerge in the light and begin to complete their own light. They begin to emerge in the beauty of God – the fullness of His splendour.

Allah says, 'Whatever you manifest or hide, God will bring you to account for it' (see 2:284, 6:3 and 64:4). The *sahaba* cried upon hearing this verse, 'O blessed Messenger of God! What will happen to us, for we have inappropriate intentions and thoughts in our minds?' The Prophet smiled and said, 'God will find excuses to forgive you.' The deeper meaning is that the soul needs to awaken and turn meaningfully to God, "Oh Lord! I am exposed to You. I cannot hide away from You. Let the awareness of Your presence accompany every thought so that I may be directed to You in devotion, service, worship, and love at all times."

Lecture Seven
Salat

The notions of 'humanity' and 'humanness' have a distinct meaning in the existential framework. 'Humanity' is a positive reference. It is employed to refer to the ideal state within each of us (a) in any given situation or context, or (b) in relation to any behaviour, action, thought, intention, feeling, desire, or emotion. In itself, it is the apex of our aspirations, where we belong and need to arrive at, the actualisation of our innate nobility, and the perfection we need to attain. In other words, humanity is a state of the soul in which there is no deficiency or lack inwardly, despite the soul being constrained outwardly by our human condition and experience; and its actualisation results in proper or godly behaviour, action, thought, intention, feeling, desire, and emotion. Hence, we often say, feel, or understand sentiments like, 'Our humanity dictates that we be just, non-prejudicial and caring of others, and rise above every trait that is below our dignity'. Our beloved Imam Husayn exemplified this ideal state of humanity in his actions, speech, and manner. He taught that we must strive to be noble creatures, which means not stooping below the standards expected of us. In contrast, 'humanness' refers to the body-mind constitution as it is *now* with all its strengths, frailties, vulnerabilities, desires, fears, and motivations.

Several verses of the Quran suggest that we, human beings, are far nobler than what we have imagined ourselves to be. We have awoken in this bodily constitution and world, but actually, we are from elsewhere. Allah says, "We can change your forms and make you in a way unknown to you" (56:61), "If We wanted, We could have made angels (*malā'ika*) amongst you to be successors in the earth" (43:60), and "If We had made him (the blessed Prophet) an angel, We would still have made him as a man ..." (6:9), that is, the angel would have a human bodily constitution. Such verses, including verses cited previously relating to the embodiment of Adam, imply that we are noble entities beyond these worldly bodies (see 4:1, 7:189 and 39:6).

In our current experience of Reality, we have awoken in a bodily constitution as part of the animal kingdom, and we are journeying – moving incessantly through the struggles of the body and world – to attain the fullness of our human potential, which is to reclaim either a glorious state that belonged to us, or one that awaits us. The struggles we experience, and the direction we choose to attend to during our bodily confinement, determine whether we grow in the image of the Beloved or the image of the demonic and egoic soul – *immā shākiran wa immā kafūra*, "...either they will be grateful, or they will be ungrateful" (76:3). It is here that religion is vital, for it provides guidance and instructions for our Return.

What is religion? Upon careful analysis of religion, we realise that its instructions are neither simple, nor superficial dos and don'ts. Rather, they are issued to regulate the outward motion of the soul (that is, the body and bodily) so that the inward motion of the soul to God can begin and the mind can awaken to its light. The fundamental and primary objective of religion is to orient our minds and souls towards God. The onus is upon us to make that inner connection with the light within to which we belong. Our humanity dictates that we must aspire to actualise the noble, spiritual virtues of religion; and our humanness (that is, our state *now* as a body-mind with all its frailties, vulnerabilities, desires,

fears, and so on) is the ground for actualising and manifesting those virtues.

Our human frailties and weaknesses are alien states, and we feel and know them as such. Their purpose is to initiate in us the desire for relief from them. There is no rest when we are less than charitable. One feels satisfaction and contentment upon giving rather than hoarding. The state of forgiving is natural for the soul, whereas the state of being vengeful and filled with hatred is alien to it. The state of being calm is more pleasurable for the soul than the state of being agitated. The state of being productive enlivens the mind, whereas the state of being slothful deadens it. The state of being tempered is more conducive for us than the state of being excessive. Observe for yourself. It is only your humanness (the sum total of your frailties, vulnerabilities, desires, fears, motivations, and so on) that prompts you to move in the opposite direction, away from negativity and unproductivity. Thus, religion does not prescribe empty dos and don'ts. The essence of its prescriptions is to awaken and orient us to the Loftier Purpose and remind us to move in Its direction.

The beauty of the Abrahamic faiths and others is that they subscribe to God, the One. In fact, none of the major systems of religious thought subscribe to more than one God or Reality. Even atheistic philosophers would admit that metaphysics (the philosophical analysis of the nature of existence) entails that all existing things have one being in essence. In any case, religions that advocate the Oneness of God or Reality appeal to our humanity, for they are proclaiming a truth and beauty that is existential. Beyond the need to know that there is Oneness, there is the need to be able to relate to It in our humanness (that is, our state *now* as a body-mind) so that we can attain the fullness of our existence, which is the realisation that the motion of the soul is in Oneness.

The Abrahamic faiths and others insist on developing a personal relationship with God, that Oneness, as a personal God. He is All-pervading, and hence all relationships stem from Him

and are pervaded by Him; and since 'relationship' is a means of proximity to and communion with anything generally, it follows that proximity to and communion with God necessitates relationship with Him, the Truth. The personal relationship with God, or the notion of a personal God, enables a conscious connection and surrender to the Truth. The All-pervading God, who is also our personal God, appreciates our humanness and psychological frailties. He understands our weaknesses and strengths. He is the One we can rely upon and forge an intimate and meaningful relationship with. The Abrahamic faiths and others state that the All-pervading God is available to us at a personal level by definition of His All-pervading-ness. This means we are supposed to turn to Him in our humanness with all our flaws, frailties, and weaknesses, and ask Him to regulate our humanness and transform it into humanity.

Parentally, Allah says, "O humankind! What has lured you away from your generous Lord, who created you, shaped you, and proportioned you. He composed you in whatever form He wanted" (82:6-8). Reflect on the tone of this verse and how loving it is! What has made you turn away from *your* generous Lord? He is the One Who created you and is keeping you existent. He has shaped you and continues to shape you. He has proportioned you and continues to proportion you. He is the one Who fashioned you as He wanted. You are His, and He is *your* generous Lord. He is *your* beautiful, personal God. What has made you turn away from Him?

Our beloved Imam Husayn expressed the following in his *dua*: 'O Lord! After this lengthy life, I have begun to understand that the whole endeavour from Your side was to awaken me to Yourself in every situation. In experiencing my mother's compassion, I was introduced to Your undying love for me. In experiencing my father's charitable and sacrificial nature, I witnessed a glimpse of Your benevolent nature. In experiencing my brother's support, I realise that it was none other than another

instance of Your endless assistance. In experiencing my friend's acceptance of me, I know that it was yet another demonstration of Your absolute, non-judgmental acceptance of me.' This encapsulates the essence of religion, which is the soul's inward motion to the Beloved by expressing the frailties of its humanness to its God.

The blessed Prophet was told repeatedly, 'We know it hurts your soul to see them reject the truth. O Muhammad, execute your task. Leave the rest to Us. Indeed you are a Messenger' (see 6:33-34, 36:76, and 10:65). Consider the emphasis and tone, '*Indeed* you *are* one of the Messengers! [Do not let them make you think otherwise]' (see 2:252 and 36:3). This bespeaks of a very personal connection between the humanness of the blessed Prophet and God, and hence God empowered and gave confidence to the blessed Prophet throughout his mission, which was fraught with difficulties outwardly and inwardly within his soul. That wonderful connection to God, which was established by expressing his humanness to Him, enabled him to complete his task. We are to relieve ourselves of the weaknesses of our humanness by tending towards God. The direction that religions emphasise we should choose is the one in which humanness culminates in the brilliance of humanity.

Taoism and Buddhism are noble, spiritual ways of life, but they do not utilise the language of the theology of God. Hence, they cannot be said to be monotheistic or atheistic. In Taoism, the realisation of the Tao is the goal of life. The Tao is described as 'the One, which is natural, spontaneous, eternal, nameless, and indescribable. It is at once the beginning of all things and the way in which all things pursue their course.' In Buddhism, the aim is enlightenment, which is the realisation of the state of nirvana or the ground level of consciousness. This is the deepest level of consciousness, and it is the basis or ground for the arising of all other types of consciousness and experience. It is beginningless, endless, and the source. Both Taoism and Buddhism emphasise

correct, ethical behaviour, a variety spiritual, ritualistic practices, and the study of the works of their respective sages.

Therefore, there is no contention between the Abrahamic faiths and Buddhism or Taoism. The latter two prescribe ways of life with a view to either enlightenment, or the realisation of the nature of life; whereas the Abrahamic faiths prescribe being oriented to the Lofty, All-pervading One Who is personally available to one and all. In essence however, both Taoism and Buddhism are monotheistic; for both deny any reality beyond Reality itself, that is, there is no reality beyond the Tao in Taoism and consciousness (that is empty of all content) in Buddhism. In the monotheistic faiths, this is referred to as the absolute status of God – *huwa* in Islam. *Lā ilāha*, "There is no god" – whatever we imagine in our minds or perceive with our senses as god is not God; *illa-llāh*, "Except Allah" – the One Who is unknowable by perception or the mind. He can only be realised by the negation of one and all – the negation of every perception and mental phenomenon. It should be noted however, that for communities seeking to be liberated through the All-pervading God, individuals must belong to Him personally and intimately in their humanness. This 'personal and intimate belonging to Him in every aspect of our humanness' is what is meant by 'being directed to Him' – the One Who is all the beauty we seek.

Based on all that we have discussed so far, it should be clear that it is the inner world of the soul that really matters. In other words, the mind and soul are of paramount importance and not the body per se. This is because God is to be found within. Therefore, the inner world of the soul, which is the storehouse of our humanness, needs to be worked on enough to allow its inner motion to be directed to God accurately. Thus, the soul needs to relieve itself of the flaws of its humanness.

On that note, I have been asked to address a question on the blessed Prophet Ibrahim's intention to slaughter his son, the blessed Prophet Ismail: How can God imprint Ibrahim's mind with the

idea of slaughtering his son? It is a relevant question, is it not? Surely, we should be asking, 'What sort of a God would test an old man like that?' Obviously, questioning is always good, but the fact that we are asking *this* question demonstrates the full-scale failure of theologians and the community in understanding the Quran – the communication of God. Does it say in the Quran that Allah asked the blessed Ibrahim to slaughter his son? The Quran relates that Ibrahim said, "O child, I see in my dream that I am slaughtering you" (37:102). He did not say, "God has commanded that I slaughter you" (even though it is quite possible that he assumed it). So now the question is: Why did he see the vision of slaughtering his child as opposed to something else, like seeing himself taking his son to school? Well, obviously because schools did not exist! I am making a point here. In all probability, the reason he saw himself slaughtering his son in his dream was because child sacrifice was a common practice in that era, for your imagination populates your dreams with objects and occurrences that are available and experienced in your own context. A caveman will never dream of flying inside a plane because planes did not exist at that time. Today, we will not be able to dream of intergalactic travel except in terms of what we have experienced in science fiction. It is not possible to dream about the far future precisely in any given present, because the objects and occurrences in the far future are not available or experienced in the present context.

The blessed Prophet Ibrahim was traversing to God in and through his humanness. He longed for children and was bestowed with a son in his old age. Until then, he had never experienced the love of having an offspring, and so in his humanness, he became overly attached to his child. Ibrahim began to sense that his relationship with and love for his God was being compromised somewhat by his attachment to his son. He sensed the extent to which his love and attachment to his son had grown, and he began to feel guilty. I do not know if this is relatable, but some parents and spouses will be able to relate to it for sure. When individuals

realise that their love and attachment to their children or spouses has become excessive, they may stop themselves from allowing such love to prevail upon their hearts. They restrain themselves with the sentiment, 'lest a bad omen befalls us, for this degree of happiness is wrong to have.' They prevent themselves from feeling that degree of happiness due to the fear of it being taken away. This is an expression of our humanness.

In his humanness, the blessed Prophet Ibrahim felt intense love for, and attachment to, his son (the blessed Ismail); at some point, he also sensed that it was compromising his relationship with his God. This was prodding away at him. The content of Ibrahim's dream validates that it was a projection of his own humanness – that is, it was the outcome of conflicting emotions in his mind: the attachment to his son, and the guilt of it compromising his relationship with God. He then consulted Ismail, who responded thus, "O father, do as you are commanded!" (37:102). Notice, the Quran does not say that Ismail said, "Do as *God* has commanded", even though he probably meant that. But the fact that the Quran has not designated God as the issuer of the command is very telling. At the very least, it means we have to be very careful in attributing it to Him, especially in light of the ethico-theological issues that ensue if one was to attribute it to Him. In any case, Ibrahim took his child to an appropriate location, and the story culminates with him placing the blade upon his son's neck. At this point, what did Allah do? He, the Most Exalted, saved the blessed Ismail. This is the benevolence of God: He gave life to Ismail; He did not take it. Then why would God command the blessed Ibrahim to kill his son? Why would He put a very old man through all of that? The verse then states, "Indeed you have been true to *your* dream [O Ibrahim]" (37:105). Again notice, the Quran does not state, "Indeed you have been true to the command of God [O Ibrahim]." The Quran ascribes the dream solely to Ibrahim. In summary therefore, the blessed Ibrahim's humanness prompted him to reach out to God to remedy this internal conflict within his soul. The response

was communicated to him in that particular manner by his own humanness on account of his personal relationship with his Lord. Coming back to the main discussion: therefore, our humanness is our means of reaching out to Allah, and devotion is prescribed as a means to relate and converse with Him meaningfully.

The blessed Prophet reformed the pagan communities of Makkah and Medina to which he was sent. He exhorted them to rid themselves of their ills and inhumane practices, and he transformed them into fine human beings by his preaching and being a model of righteous conduct. The statements of the blessed Prophet are steeped in wisdom and have depth. As a community of his followers, we must reflect upon his teachings. For instance, he said, 'When eating, do not blow on your food, chew properly, eat less, and then take a walk.' Today, we are able to verify and explain the benefits of these simple instructions physiologically. Now since the statements of the blessed Prophet pertaining to such mundane aspects of human life are proved true, then it would be wise to take his statements on *salat* (prayer) very seriously, such as '*salat* is the pillar of faith' and the popular report attributed to him, '*salat* is the *mi'rāj* (paradisal ascension) of the *mu'min* (faithful)'. Do not say that *salat* is a form of prayer like any other form. The fact that the blessed Prophet described *salat* in such terms means it must have immense existential value. He is Muhammad *Rasūlu-llāh*! He did not say things in vain or exaggerate. Therefore, if he has been so adamant about a particular practice, then let us try to understand the secret behind it instead of dismissing it. The blessed Prophet said, 'The one who does not find pleasure in *salat* is like an ailing person who finds no pleasure in good food.' How can the heart not feel pleasure in the presence of the Beloved? The one who disdains appearing before their Lord is the one whose heart is sealed to the light within.

There is a distinction between devotional practices (*'ibādāt*) and societal regulations, such as those pertaining to marriage, divorce, and slavery. Societal regulations change with time because they are

bodily regulations, and as such, they are meant to be in line with evolving human capacities; hence, they are mutable. In contrast, the devotional practices instituted by Muhammad *Rasūlu-llāh* are essential, for they pertain to the soul and its need to connect with our godly nature within. Therefore, since he performed *rukū'* (the act of bowing), I know that it must have existential value. I know that *salat* is neither the *rukū'* nor *sajda* in essence, however whilst we are earthbound, we are committed to a *salat* whose constituent actions include the *rukū'* and *sajda*. In the future, when we will be travelling through space, it may not be possible to perform the *rukū'* and *sajda*, but we will still recite *salat* five times without performing those actions or facing the Ka'ba. But whilst we are earthbound, the form of the *salat* of the blessed Prophet is effective. So when Muhammad *Rasūlu-llāh* said, 'Pray as you have seen me pray', the first thing we need to do is trust what this blessed Prophet said. He is no ordinary man. He transformed his community from warring, illiterate people into humanitarians and thinkers. He is followed by nearly two billion people. He created a global nation and spiritual community. This Prophet is not just any man! He is a supreme example of humanity. The Quran says:

> *Recite what has been revealed to you of the Book and perform the prayer. Indeed, prayer prevents indecency and unethical [behaviour]. However, the remembrance of God is greater. God knows whatever you are doing (29:45).*

Unfortunately, we have interpreted the religion of God on the basis of the body and bodily entirely. We think that the whole act of *salat*, from beginning to end, is simply a matter of standing, bowing, prostrating, sitting, and reciting some words in those postures. We think that this is what is owed to Allah. Do the actions of bowing and standing prevent us from stealing, thinking ill of others, or cursing and hating them? Do the actions of bowing and prostrating transform the performer into the likes our beloved Husayn ibn Ali? If the actions of bowing and prostrating

in the *salat* were enough to ward off people from committing *faḥshā'* (indecency) and *munkar* (unethical, reprehensible actions), then the two billion Muslims would be harmless souls. And yet so many of us behave like barbarians and brutes. We claim we are destined for Paradise, but we behave like the inhabitants of Hell. We hesitate to share our wealth with the needy in our human family. We have not discovered the cures for cancer which will benefit all of humankind, and yet we proclaim proudly that we are bestowed with the favours of God at the exclusion of everyone else. We have not won a single Nobel prize for any scientific achievement or humanitarian endeavour, and yet we do not shy away from announcing that we have the Quran and *ḥadīth*. Of course, an Ahmadi Muslim did receive the Nobel prize for physics in 1979, but we have played God and decided to strip his whole community of their Muslim-ness and excommunicated them all. And yes, we have received humanitarian achievements, but are the number of prizes we have received proportional to our numbers – approximately two billion people? So what does the ritual form of *salat* do for us per se? Does it ward us off from committing that which is indecent and/or reprehensible? The answer is, 'No, it does not.' The form of *salat* does not do that for us.

The function of *salat* is to bring the mind and soul to a state of attentiveness. This is the reason why *fiqh* instructs us not to make extra motions during *salat*. Our minds are to become focused and attentive during its performance. When we begin to learn how to drive, we are extremely attentive so that we do not make any mistakes, for it is the first experiences of a new activity. Once we have mastered driving, it becomes an almost automatic activity, and hence our minds roam far and wide, thinking of, and perhaps even doing, other things whilst we drive. At this point, driving has become a mechanical exercise. This is what happens to our devotional practices once we become accustomed to them. Honestly, they are merely habitual activities, that is, they are performed mechanically and automatically for the most part.

The purpose of the *fiqh* of *salat* (that is, its rules) is to regulate the body (the limbs, postures, and tongue) during its performance so that the mind can become attentive and focused. Its purpose is not to master the formal act of *salat* and perform it robotically. What is it in the *salat* that reforms the mind and soul, such that it is prevented from committing *faḥshā'* (indecency) and *munkar* (unethical, reprehensible actions)? It is the connection of mind and soul to the Beloved inwardly. It is the attention of the mind and soul upon Allah at the exclusion of the body, sense perceptions, and mental phenomena. In essence, *salat* is not the outer motions of the body, but it is to focus and concentrate one's attention upon Allah during set times. It has been prescribed for inner growth. To repeat, *salat* is a means for us to make a deep connection with God, which then remains present and resonates in the interim before the next *salat*. The next *salat* revitalises and strengthens the connection with God, which again continues to be present in the interim before the next *salat*. This continues until we come to the point of being able to give ourselves over to God wholly internally, and emerge in His image.

Allah says in Sūra al-Muddaththir that the criminals or immoral people (*mujrimīn*) will be asked, "'What drove you to the scorching fire?' They will answer, 'We did not pray, nor did we feed the poor'" (74:42-45). The first part of the response of these criminals or immoral people ('We did not pray') denotes the inner *salat* (that is, connection with God). This is because the pre-Islamic Arabs of Makkah, to whom the word *mujrimīn* (the criminals or immoral people) referred to, did have a form of *salat* they performed, albeit a very different one to the blessed Prophet's form. Therefore, their response ('We did not pray') refers to the fact that despite praying their particular form of *salat*, there was no connection with God, and hence for all intents and purposes, they did not pray at all. Note that the word *mujrimīn* (the criminals or immoral people) in this verse can also refer to Muslims, for it is possible for Muslims to pray and yet be

immoral and/or criminal. In any case, the meaning of the phrase 'We did not pray' (*lam nakū min-al-muṣallīin*) refers to the inner *salat* of connection with God and not the form per se. Moreover, these verses (74:42-45) imply that both the performance of *salat* and the act of feeding the poor are (a) connected to each other and (b) depend upon the state of the soul and the purity of its mind. How are they connected to each other? Recall that *salat* is supposed to purify the mind and cause the soul to grow morally and spiritually (see verse 29:45 mentioned above); since the act of feeding the poor is a moral action, then a soul that is purified by *salat* and hence moral will always be willing to feed the poor. Such a soul's mind will have been purified of its attachment to wealth greatly if not totally, and so it will feel compassion for all. In conclusion, these verses (74:42-45) imply that there is a relationship between the inner *salat* of connection with God and the act of feeding the poor. Accordingly, the meaning of these verses is that the torment experienced by criminal or immoral souls in the Hereafter will be due to their lack of connection with God and hence their lack of care for the poor.

As the soul grows to the fullness of its potential by directing itself to the Absolute, it will detach increasingly from the body, bodily, and the sense of 'me', 'myself' and 'mine'; consequently, its care for the 'other' will continue increasing until the sense of 'otherness' disappears altogether. It is clear from the tone of other verses of the Quran that the torment in the Hereafter will be self-generated, that is, souls and bodies will be the fuel for Hell themselves: "Beware of the fire prepared for the disbelievers whose fuel is men and stones" (2:24; see also 66:6). Obviously, fire cannot burn without fuel. Such verses could mean that the human body will be burnt physically and as a result, the human soul will be tormented, or they could mean that the soul will ignite the body itself and feel the torment of its burning body. If the second meaning is correct, then the implication is that souls who are unconcerned with the truth at present are in a state of

torment, but they are unable to recognise it as such (see 50:22). As the blessed Prophet said, 'The one who does not find pleasure in *salat* is like an ailing person who finds no pleasure in good food.' It seems we are the creators of our own Hellfire.

Allah mentions three kinds of *deeds* in the Quran: *aḥsan ʿamal* (best in action), *khayrāt* (virtuous deeds), and *ʿamal ṣāliḥ* (righteous deed). Consider this verse: "[He is] the One Who created death and life to test which of you [O humankind] is best in action. He is the All-mighty, the All-forgiving" (67:2). Notice how the notion of death precedes the notion of life in this verse. As discussed previously, *mawt* (death) is the state of the soul relative to this bodily life. In other words, when the Quran says that we were dead, it means we did not have the life of this body. It does not mean that we did not exist, or that we were not experiencing life in another realm. Although this verse states that Allah created death and life, we know that it is speaking generally based on the fact that verse 2:28 asserts that He creates two deaths and two lives: "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." In light of this, the meaning of verse 67:2 is as follows: "He creates two deaths and two lives to test which of you, O humankind, is best in action (*aḥsan ʿamal*) during this life between the two deaths. He is the All-mighty, the All-forgiving." This is important to note for our discussion now.

The notion of *aḥsan ʿamal* (best in action) in this verse refers to intellectual (that is, reason-based) and/or moral actions that stem from the outward motion of the soul. It includes all human endeavours to avert destruction and defy death. Remember that life is a series of moments of action. Therefore, verse 67:2 means that between the two states of *mawt* (death), that is, during this life, we are to struggle to secure the best life (*aḥsan ʿamal*) as individuals and collectivities, which includes our endeavours to cure sicknesses, prolong life, and avert death altogether. To

repeat, such actions are the result of the outward motions of our minds and souls, and they reveal the nature of God vested within us. He is All-knowing, and hence we yearn to know all outwardly. He is Omnipotent, and hence we wish to have mastery over all things outwardly. He is the Dispeller of evil, and hence we strive to dispel all evil outwardly. Thus, between the two states of *mawt* (that is, during this life), we are to strive to achieve the deathlessness of God through constant endeavours to avert death. This want to overcome death is inadvertent on our part as individuals and a species, and it is a fundamental characteristic of the outer motion of the soul in this worldly life. Since our origin is the Ever-Living, Omnipotent, and Omniscient One, we desire to avert death and we seek absolute control and knowledge of our environment. The states of death, lack of control, and ignorance belong to the realm of the body, bodily, and false egoic soul, and hence they are alien to us as unembodied souls and consciousness in reality.

Regarding *khayrāt*, or virtuous deeds, Allah addresses the multi-faith community thus: "Each collectivity (*umma* – according to exegetes) has its own direction to which it turns. So compete with each other in performing virtuous deeds (*khayrāt*). Wheresoever you may be, Allah will bring you all together. Indeed, God is powerful over everything" (2:148). Another example of a verse in which He mentions *khayrāt* is the following: "[They] believe in God and the Last Day, enjoin the ethical and forbid the unethical, and are quick to perform virtuous deeds (*khayrāt*). These [people] are of the righteous" (3:114). According to the Quran, virtuous deeds (*khayrāt*) are actions of service to individuals or collectivities performed with the psychological state of reverence for God. In other words, they are services to human or non-human individuals or collectivities for the sake of God. Consider the following verses:

> *Indeed, those who fear out of awe of their Lord; and those who believe in the signs of their Lord; and those who do not associate*

with their Lord; and those who give whatever they give with trembling hearts [due to the fact] that they are returning to their Lord – [it is] these [souls that] compete with one another in virtuous deeds (khayrāt) and they are the forerunners regarding them (virtuous deeds) (23:57–60).

Virtuous deeds ensue from virtuous souls naturally. This means the outer motion of the mind and soul is not restricted to the natural, existential motion of seeking control and security (*aḥsan 'amal* – which includes rational actions that result from the actualisation of the potential within us); rather, it also includes acts of service to human and non-human individuals and collectivities performed with the intention of 'for the sake of God' and His reverence. Such acts of service are *khayrāt* (virtuous deeds). Although they classify as instances of the outward motion of the soul, they are the result of the soul's inner directedness to God. The word *khayrāt* refers to charity and service to human and non-human others predominantly. It includes all our humanitarian efforts and all forms of care and service to others, such as charity, good words, prayers, and inventions that benefit humankind, provided they are performed with an altruistic (selfless) attitude and/or with the intention of 'for the sake of God'.

The translation of the notion of *'amal ṣāliḥ* is righteous deed. Out of the three kinds of *deeds* cited in the Quran (which are *aḥsan 'amal, khayrāt* and *'amal ṣāliḥ*), the notion of *'amal ṣāliḥ* is mentioned the most in the context of salvation. Allah says:

Indeed, those who believe (that is, the followers of the blessed Prophet), the Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans – whomsoever [of these] believe in God, the Last Day, and perform righteous deeds ('amal ṣāliḥ), they will have their rewards with their Lord. They have nothing to fear, nor should they grieve (2:62).

What are righteous deeds? Are they prayers? Are they charity? The answer is: all the types of actions discussed above have the potential to classify as righteous deeds (that is, acts stemming from

the natural, existential motion of seeking control and security, acts stemming from human reason, services to others, prayers, and religious devotions; all have the potential to classify as righteous deeds). Righteous deeds are acts that assist in the dissolution of an unvirtuous state and the emergence of a virtuous one from whence virtuous deeds (*khayrāt*) flow effortlessly. A deed is comprised of two elements: the outward act and the state of the soul during its performance. A deed qualifies as a righteous deed when the state of the soul is righteous during its performance of the act. Hence, the element that marks the deed as a righteous deed is the state of the soul during its performance and not the outward act per se. The notion of 'righteous deed' is concerned with the inner interactions of the soul during the performance of its outer bodily actions, such as the soul's non-judgmental attention, its accompanying good thoughts, its feelings of respect, care, love, and/or concern, and its reverence for God.

When a person prays *salat* and the attention of the soul is directed to God, it classifies as a righteous deed. This is because the soul was present during the *salat*, and its interaction of *being present* has affected it positively: it will be warded off from committing *faḥshā'* (indecency) and *munkar* (reprehensible and unethical acts). The soul's presence during the performance of acts of devotion becomes a virtue within, and it will eventually become a virtuous state. Therefore, if we interact befittingly during the bodily act of giving charity in the way of God, then the act classifies as a righteous deed (*'amal ṣāliḥ*). Similarly, if our services to others, rational endeavours, scientific enquiries, and technological advancements, are accompanied by a god-centric attitude whereby the soul flourishes inwardly, then all such actions are instances of *'amal ṣāliḥ*.

To be precise, the performance of the ritual of *salat* has the potential to be a righteous deed. Its performance is not a righteous deed in and of itself. If its mere performance was a righteous deed, then we would be angels by now, for we pray several

hundred *rakats* (units) of *salat* during Ramaḍān every year. Often, the opposite is the case: we become monstrous after praying. I must give this example. In the peak of the summer months, there is only a four-hour window to eat and drink before the twenty-hour fast commences. What do we do? We stuff our faces and then stand for the hundred *rakats* of *salat*. It is just an exercise of standing, sitting, bowing, and prostrating. People burp and go back and forth to redo their *wudhu* (ablution for prayers). I have seen this because I used to lead the prayers. During the hundred *rakats* of *salat*, people are frustrated, tired, and sleepy. All they can think of is food and when these hundred *rakats* are going to finish. In *salat*, you are supposed to be with your Beloved. Instead, I stand before my Lord throughout the hundred *rakats* of *salat* and repeat mechanically, 'I adore You', and then I'm done. Go to the Beloved and proclaim with all your heart, "O most Beloved! I am here." Then the soul, you, will connect with God. The bowing and prostrating of our bodily constitution is of no value if the mind and soul do not awaken to the Beloved. On the 11th of Muḥarram, Umar bin Sa'd recited burial prayers (the *salat* of *janaza*) for the dead bodies of the people who fought and contributed to the killing of Imam Husayn. They prostrated before Allah, and yet they killed the grandson of the Prophet! What was the value of their *salat*?

Therefore, the quality of our interactions during the bodily motions of *salat*, and the impact it has on us after its completion, determines whether the performance of any given *salat* classifies as an *'amal ṣāliḥ*. The impact should be a renewed feeling of connectedness with Allah, which prevents us from committing *faḥshā'* (indecency). Animals are not perturbed by indecency and shamelessness to the degree we are. We have a keen sense of what is decent and what is not because of our angelic nobility. Hence, we are not comfortable experiencing all the states and properties of our bodies, let alone displaying them publicly. We know them to be alien, and we want to cleanse ourselves of their hold upon

us beyond what is necessary. The blessed Prophet said, 'He who is chaste most resembles the angels.'

Coming back to the issue of *salat*, the blessed Prophet stated that *salat* is a pillar of faith; if it is accepted, then everything else is accepted, and if it is not accepted, then nothing else is accepted. This makes sense. If you are connected with God, then everything else is accepted, and if you are not connected with God, then one's actions are likely to be egoic and/or robotic and mechanical. They will have no life, for there is no soul in them.

On the Day of *Qiyāma*, people will be questioned about *salat*. Why? Because '*salat* is a pillar of faith; if it is accepted, then everything else is accepted, and if it is not accepted, then nothing else is accepted.' Upon being questioned by the angels, I will refer to the *fatwa* (legal opinion) book and say, "Look, I performed all the postures accurately!" They will reply, "Yes, indeed you did perform the form of *salat* accurately, but you were hardly ever *present*. It would have been better if you had performed its postures faultily but with presence of mind and focus upon Allah." We have understood this lofty devotion in a bodily manner, and hence reduced its performance to the body's movements only and omitted the soul's involvement totally.

The Quran says,

> *These [persons] are they whom God has blessed among the Prophets of the seed of Adam, and [they are] of those whom We carried (in the ship) with Noah, and [they are] of the seed of Abraham and Israel, and of those We guided and chose. Whenever the revelations of the Most Compassionate were recited to them, they fell prostrate, weeping (19:58).*

When God's presence is felt within the soul, that is, when His light intensifies, the only thing lovers can do to find Him is humble themselves totally. It is only when we humble ourselves fully that we are able to adore Him. Do you not see how one's body-mind-soul is made to humble itself in prostration? Fall into *sajda* so that

the inner motion of the soul awakens, and the egoic soul (the sense of "I" as the body), which is the idol and source of arrogance, begins to die. Unfortunately, our bodies bow (*rukū'*) and prostrate, and yet the egoic soul – which is the idol and the other god – still governs the mind. It is this other god – the soul's consciousness "I am the body" – that needs to relent. It is this other god that needs to bow and prostrate, and not the body. This other god – the sense of "I" and "me" – is squatting in the soul's mind and heart. It is the real *sharīk* (partner of God), and it needs to say, "Lord, I surrender. I am nothing and this body is merely dust."

Observe the depth of the connection between the beloved Imam Ali and his Lord. Upon being struck on his blessed head, he exclaimed, "I am successful, by the Lord of the Ka'ba." He applied dust to his wound and recited the following verse, "From it (dust), We created you; to it, We shall return you; and from it, We shall raise you once again" (20:55). He reminded us that our bodies are merely dust. The performance of the postures of *salat* are supposed to cut down the egoic soul and its arrogance. They are not to be performed by the body mechanically such that the egoic soul and its arrogance continues to reign upon the mind.

Prior to the modern era, people did not have taps or running water nearby. They had to travel some distance to get water. The blessed Prophet explained the effect of *salat* thus: 'If a person had a natural spring outside his house and washed himself in it five times a day, how much filth would there be on his body at the end of the day?' The answer is none, for he has washed his body on five separate occasions throughout the day. We usually understand the Prophet's explanation to be referring to the physical, cleansing effects of *wudhu* (ablution) upon the body, whereas he was referring to the cleansing effects of *salat* on the mind and soul. If a person were to remind himself diligently five times a day that 'I am praying *salat* in the presence of my God', he would have no capacity to be wayward after that.

Allah says:

> *When you have finished the prayer (salat), [continue to] remember God whilst standing, sitting, and lying on your sides. And when you are safe, perform the prayer. Indeed, prayer is a timed prescription for the believers (4:103).*

Salat is a timed obligation upon the believers whereby God is remembered frequently. In winter, we pray *fajr* at seven thirty in the morning and *maghrib* at quarter past four in the afternoon. All the five daily prayers (*salats*) are performed between 7:30 am and 4:15 pm. Therefore, we do not pray to God between 4:15 pm and 7:30 am, which means we do not connect with Him during this period of approximately fourteen hours. Do you see the issue here? The five daily prayers are supposed to be timed obligations spread throughout the day evenly, and so they cannot be confined to sunrise and sunset in regions with uneven sunrises and sunsets. In summer, three of the five daily prayers are performed in the space of about four and a half hours, that is, between ten at night and two thirty in the morning, and so only the *salats* of *zuhr* (the midday prayer) and *asr* (the afternoon prayer) remain to be performed in the remaining nineteen and a half hours. Such an interpretation of the timings of the five obligatory, daily *salats* (which is that their timings are to be connected to the sunrises and sunsets in regions in which sunrises and sunsets are uneven) does not fulfil the objective of 'a focussed period of remembrance of God spread evenly throughout the waking hours' in many regions of the world. Today, millions of Muslims in such regions do not pray *salats* to God evenly throughout the waking hours. In winter, it is like washing ourselves five times in a period of just nine hours, and in summer, it is like washing ourselves three times in a period of just four and a half hours during the night and only twice in a period of nineteen and a half hours during the day.

The Quran makes reference to two types of *salat*: the obligatory prayers and the voluntary prayers. Allah says that

the performance of the obligatory prayers is good, for they will ward you off from committing *faḥshā'* (indecency) and *munkar* (reprehensible and unethical acts). However, with regards to the night prayers, Allah says, "Keep vigil during part of the night as an extra offering of your own, so that your Lord may raise you to a [highly] praised status" (17:79). Why doesn't the performance of the five obligatory, daily prayers procure such reward? It is because Allah knows that the five daily prayers will be performed by Muslims in a bodily manner to affirm their personal Muslim identities and display their belonging to the Muslim *ummah*. Only a lover of God – who yearns to meet Him – will stand in the depths of the night remembering his Beloved; hence, that is when He ignites the soul's heart. Here, the heart yields to God; the body is merely peripheral. I pray the five daily prayers because they are prescribed, and if I fail to pray them, I will be punished. But there is no punishment for not reciting the night prayers. Hence, I perform them because I want to be with my God. I cannot sleep because I want to be with my Beloved. Can you see the difference? In essence, prayers can never be obliged. How can spending time in presence of the Beloved be an obligation imposed upon the soul from without? The obligatoriness of obligatory acts is akin to parents obliging little children to study. Once the child matures, they embark upon studies wilfully and enthusiastically after understanding their worth and value. Once the mind awakens to the remembrance of God and the heart falls in love with the beauty of the Beloved, it is no longer a matter of obligation; rather, the soul yearns to frequent the company of its Beloved. The great master Ibn 'Arabī distributed sweets when he reached puberty declaring ecstatically, 'Today, my Lord sees me worthy of standing in His presence.'

Lecture Eight
Fasting (Ṣawm)

We have been discussing the body and bodily, both of which pertain to the outward motion of the mind and soul. The mind associates and identifies the soul's consciousness with them, and hence we experience ourselves as the egoic soul (the consciousness "I am the body") and all its worldly identities. We have also been discussing the inward motion of the soul to God, or the soul's yearning for the Eternal, the Otherworldly. Essentially, it is the light (that is, consciousness or awareness) of the soul, and it yearns to complete its journey by returning to its Source, the Light within: the Absolute Light devoid of all darkness.

We tend to think of the body, mind, and soul as distinct aspects of our human existence. This requires some clarification. The word 'mind' is a collective term that refers to the soul's experiences of all the different types of sense perceptions (that is, sights, sounds, smells, and so on) and mental objects (that is, mental impressions and phenomena), such as thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires, fears, intentions, memories, imagination, and so on. The word 'soul' is a collective term as well, and it refers to the association and identification of its consciousness (the pure "I am") with a particular mind and form. Note, the form of a soul may

be this-worldly (that is, the body we are experiencing currently) or otherwise (that is, some otherworldly body). Crudely put, a soul is a compound of the consciousness "I am", a mind, and an outward form. Thus, the notion of '*my* soul' refers to the state of *my* mind and *my* form (or body) at any given moment, and it also refers to the degree to which the consciousness "I am" is associated and identified with *my* mind and/or *my* form at any given point.

Soon after awakening in this world within a bodily constitution, the soul is deluded into thinking that it is just this material, bodily constitution. It identifies and associates itself with the body and its properties wholly, and hence they become its veils. By identifying and associating itself with the body, the soul naturally identifies and associates itself with all the bodily functions, like eating, drinking, and procreating; and since the body is limited and has limitations, the soul identifies and associates with them too, and hence experiences fear initially, and then other emotions subsequently such as anxiety, due to the operation of its faculty of imagination.

Recall how children are frightened of the dark and unrelatable sounds as they are growing up. We take advantage of their naivety by making reference to and utilising such experiences of fear in order to discipline them. Do you remember telling your young children that if they did not eat their food, the monster or witch would visit and grab them? Have you ever wondered why fantasy stories, horror movies, and thrillers appeal to us? It is because the monster, ghost, witch, and Dracula represent and refer to living realities within our minds. They are merely fictional forms in themselves, created for the purpose of entertainment, but they depict the fears residing within us. Older children overcome their fear of sleeping alone in the dark because they realise that Dracula does not really exist, and hence all such fears are imaginary and unreal.

To explain: initially, the soul is deluded into thinking that it is this finite, small, and weak body, and as such, it experiences fear; then, with the aid of the imaginative faculty, it imagines a host of other insecurities pertaining to itself, its parents, and

environment, and hence its experience of fear is now augmented and compounded; and finally, the older soul rationalises many of these fears with thought, and hence they become consolidated; the result is that the soul believes and experiences itself to be the body only, and so naturally it will have many insecurities. This is the meaning of the notion of 'the soul being fully enwrapped in the veils of the body and bodily', and it is the root of our insecurity.

The function of devotional practices is to discipline the body so that the mind's attention (light) can be freed from the body and bodily, and be directed within. Here, it will work in a reverse fashion, undoing and dissolving the mind's associations and identifications with mental objects, and thereby it will awaken the soul to its true nature. The experience of the body is extremely restrictive: our bodies are *here*, confined to this space and time, and hence we cannot be anywhere else. In contrast, our souls are free and expansive essentially; they know no restriction. The Quran alludes to this thus:

> *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. This is how God lays foulness upon those who do not believe (6:125).*

Devotional practices awaken the soul to its inner dimension by disciplining the body and focussing the mind. Consider the devotional practice of *salat*. We discussed its essence and importance in the previous lecture. The following is an explanation of some of its components: first, we are to make an intention to be mindful of God. This is followed by the pronouncement of *takbīratu-l-iḥrām* – the phrase *Allahu Akbar*, 'Allah is greater'. Have we ever pondered over the significance of this pronouncement? We all know that God is great, and nothing is greater than Him. Then why are we to repeat it so frequently in *salat*? The addressees of the pronouncement are the bodily mind

and egoic soul. They are to be told again and again that God is greater than you and whatever you can imagine. The significance of this world is contingent upon the way you think about it. The world is only as significant as you make it out to be. Its significance is not beyond you. I will explain this with a couple of examples. For the lovers of our beloved Imam Husayn, the dust beneath his feet is more valuable than the whole kingdom of the blessed Prophet Sulayman. It is believed that the handkerchief of the Lady Fatima is tied around the head of the noble martyr, Hurr. Would you rather be in possession of that handkerchief or all the riches of the kingdom of the blessed Sulayman? The lover will say, "I would rather be in possession of that handkerchief." But it is only a little piece of cloth, just like any other little piece of cloth, that is, as a handkerchief, it is no different to any other handkerchief essentially. So where has its value come from? It is given value by the soul that loves the blessed one who owned that handkerchief. Here is another example: Would you rather that your mother lived another year and you spent that time with her? Or would you rather she died a year early and you received a million pounds? Most people will say, "I would sacrifice all my millions of pounds to have my mother live and be with me." We give value to everything in this world. The world and everything in it have no value beyond what we bestow upon them.

Therefore, the pronouncement *Allahu Akbar* (God is greater) is addressing the mind and egoic soul. Upon pronouncing it, the mind or egoic soul is to tell itself that God is greater than it and anything it can perceive or conceive of. When I say, *Allahu Akbar*, I am to understand that God is greater than me and whatever I think about myself and/or this world. To reiterate, the pronouncement *Allahu Akbar* is addressing me – the soul's consciousness "I am the body" – directly; it is emphasising that God is greater than me, and so I must surrender myself (the egoic soul) to Him and prefer Him over myself.

After pronouncing *takbīratu-l-iḥrām* (the phrase *Allahu Akbar*, 'Allah is greater'), we recite Sūra Fātiḥa: *Al-ḥamdu li-llāhi rabb-il-ʿālamīn*, "All praise belongs to God, the Nurturer of *all* things" (1:2). Here, we are to think of the things we do not normally acknowledge in our daily life. We walk past animals, trees, flowers, insects, and human beings without a thought of how beautifully and meticulously they are all balanced, and how wonderfully all of them are displaying themselves as God's creation. Upon reciting the expression *Al-ḥamdu li-llāh* (All praise be to God), we are to acknowledge the meticulous workings of the living system outside our minds to which we need to awaken; in other words, we are to reflect upon the nature of existence and how beautifully it is balanced. The pronouncement *Al-ḥamdu li-llāh* is supposed to ignite the mind to *Rabb-ul-ʿālamīn*, the Nurturer of the entirety of existence. If we are fortunate enough to initiate the spiritual journey, then the whole of the natural world and all of God's creations beyond this earth will take on a new and different meaning. In that awakened state, we will not be concerned about property, money, sustenance, and expanding our business empires, anymore. We will be indifferent to what is being said (or thought of) about us – good or bad – and the people who are saying (or thinking) it. Such a mind and soul will know that spending time thinking about what others are saying (and thinking) is a wasteful preoccupation. In the awakened state, one has a nobler preoccupation: reflecting upon the nature and handiwork of God.

The awakened mind is the tool that awakens the soul to the beauty of God. When the soul awakens, its bodily identity (that is, the egoic soul and all its identities) is known to be a purely functional one and hence not what it actually is, for it is now a godly soul and knows itself as the soul's consciousness essentially (the pure "I am" independent of the body and mind). Consider the effects of the mind's identification of the soul's consciousness with the body. The mind of a soul will inevitably experience and display greediness, insecurity, jealousy, arrogance, and so on. There

is a huge distinction between such a soul and a godly or saintly soul. The godly soul entertains noble thoughts and reflections, whereas the greedy, insecure soul is caught up in thoughts about wealth. The person seeking public approval in the folds of religion is worshipping his own bodily (or egoic) soul only. All souls are bodily in one way or another until they find God. When a soul finds God within, it is no longer in need of legions of armies or wealth to feel secure. God says that death will find you even if you hide in lofty towers (see 4:78). The blessed Prophet Sulayman ruled over men, beasts, and *Jinn*, and yet when death came, he was unable to secure even a moment's respite to sit down. He was taken whilst he was standing and leaning upon his cane. Allah says in the Quran:

> *Then when We decreed Sulayman's death, nothing showed them (the jinn) that he was dead, except a creature of the earth eating at his stick. When he fell down, the jinn realised that, had they known the unseen, they would not have continued the humiliating torment [of their labour] (34:14).*

The likes of the power and authority of Sulayman as an emperor has not been witnessed by the inhabitants of this earth since. When his body fell to the ground, the jinn realised that he had died some time ago, and they cried out, 'Alas, if only we had known that this man had died a long time ago, we would not have endured his slavery' (see 34:14).

If the soul is greedy, the mind will be preoccupied constantly with wealth and how to increase revenues. If the soul is in a state of expanse and contented within, it will be like the beloved Imam Husayn who supplicated in his *Du'a Arafa* thus: 'O Lord, prior to my creation in this world as a new-born, You made sure the heavens rained and the earth yielded plants and vegetation. Prior to being born, You made sure sustenance awaited me in the bosom of my mother. O Lord, prior to my having any teeth, You made sure my daily bread awaited me. O Lord, You are the One who has taken such good care of me in my past when I was

unworthy of any mention! Will You forget me in my tomorrow if my tomorrow comes? How can I not rely upon You?' This is how our beloved Imam Husayn liberated himself. He devoted himself to God wholesomely. He caused his mind to broaden in preparation of his soul's meeting with his Lord. His blessed mind was not consumed with the worry of sustenance, rather its attention was gathered and directed to God. Devotional practices are supposed to discipline the body and arrest the negativity of the mind, thereby freeing its attention so that it can be gathered and directed to God within. This then cleanses the soul of its bodily tendencies, expands it, baptises and colours it in godliness, and initiates its arrival into the folds of humanity.

There is no doubt that those who diligently and frequently recite *Al-ḥamdu li-llāhi rabb-il-ʿālamīn*, (All praise belongs to God, the Nurturer of the entirety of existence) will awaken eventually. It is impossible for one who has been repeating *Al-ḥamdu li-llāhi rabb-il-ʿālamīn* ten times a day for over seventy years to not awaken to its meaning. When we do awaken to it, the mind will reflect thus: "I judge many occurrences (such as evils, flaws, and unjust practices) in the life of this world to be ugly and imperfect, but are not such judgements of mine contrary to my proclamation that *all praise belongs to Allah, the Nurturer of the worlds*? Am I lying when I pronounce it? Or am I not understanding something?" When we stand before God and recite *Al-ḥamdu li-llāhi rabb-il-ʿālamīn* (All praise belongs to God, the Lord of the worlds), we are acknowledging the beauty and meticulousness of *all* His creation and handiwork. At this point, I am forced to reflect: "But actually, I consider the world to be an ugly and imperfect place. I find many flaws and think so many things are wrong. I see so many people dying and am often sick myself. And yet, I state *Al-ḥamdu li-llāh*! Am I lying to my God? Or have I not understood things accurately? Have I appreciated His Being through His creation and handiwork?" This is how devotional practices are supposed to force us to reflect.

Then we recite: *Ar-Raḥmān, Ar-Raḥīm*, "the Most Compassionate, the Eternally Merciful" (1:3). Where is God's *raḥmāniyya* (God's quality of being compassionate)? Where is God's *raḥīmiyya* (God's quality of being merciful)? This world is so full of strife. There is nothing but evil in this world. So why am I saying *Ar-Raḥmān, Ar-Raḥīm*? Is it a lie? Or is it that I have not understood the *raḥmāniyya* and *raḥīmiyya* of Allah? Is there a vision beyond the vision I have at present? It is here that the mind is challenged.

After that, we proclaim: *Māliki yawmi-d-Dīn*, "the Master of the Day of Judgement" (1:4). We say: You are the possessor of the Day of Reckoning, and it is the Day when I will stand and account for everything that I am doing and have done. Everything belongs to Him. Are these hands mine? What about my eyes, ears, children, and mansions? Are they mine? He is the possessor of everything in existence. The clause, *māliki yawmi-d-Dīn*, is supposed to incite the mind into thinking thus.

Thereafter we address God: *Iyyā-ka na'budu wa iyyā-ka nasta'īn*, "Only You, do we serve; and only You, do we seek help from" (1:5). Upon addressing God thus, we are to relieve ourselves of all anxieties and fears. Once the shackles of anxiety and fear are broken, then the soul is free to embrace its Lord.

Then we implore Allah: *Ihdina-ṣ-ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm*, "Guide us to the straight path" (1:6). Here, we are entreating Allah to direct us to His straight path. We recite this clause at least ten times daily, and hence we are invited at least ten times a day to humble ourselves, for its implication is that we may not be directed aright at present. Imagine, this clause has been recited at least ten times daily by all previous Muslims including those present with the blessed Prophet. But look at the complacency and arrogance of our religious sects and communities today. Every sect believes, feels, and claims that it is upon the truth; otherwise, its members would abandon it. And yet, this clause teaches us that no sect or community can ever be upon the truth in and of itself. Rather, 'being upon the truth' and 'being directed to His straight path' is

strictly God's prerogative, and hence it is between God and the individual. It is possible that some individuals of any given sect are upon the truth, whilst others of the same sect are not. In any case, this arrogant state is prevalent in the vast majority of the minds of every sect, and it is totally inconsistent with the absolute state of humility that is required to arrive at the *real* thing. Moreover, this clause makes it clear that no one can claim that they are upon *ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm* (the straight path). The blessed Prophet said, 'You are walking upon the *ṣirāt* (path) as you progress through life. The *ṣirāt* in the Hereafter will be a reflection of what you have done in this life.' Thus, every individual's *ṣirāt* is being constructed as they flow through life.

To reiterate, we are taught from childhood that we are on the right path. However, this clause, *ihdina-ṣ-ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm* (Direct us to the straight path), implies the contrary, which is that we are to implore God several times daily throughout our lives to direct us to the straight path (*ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm*). Hypothetically, if we and all the Muslims of the past, including those that lived during the life of the blessed Prophet himself, were on the right path, then this clause, *ihdina-ṣ-ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm* (Direct us to the straight path), is nonsensical. Why would Allah ask the followers of the blessed Prophet – who are already upon the straight path – to recite *ihdina-ṣ-ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm*? Wouldn't He have told us to recite, "*Al-ḥamdu li-llāh*, thank you, O Lord, for placing us upon *ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm*." Why does the Quran tell us to supplicate, 'Guide us upon *ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm*'? This clause is supposed to awaken us. *Ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm* is not what we think it is. As stated above, it is to be constructed throughout life with all its ups and downs. *Ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm* is to be and become noble and godly throughout our lives. It is a journey of light upon light, that is, it does not end until we breathe our last. Furthermore, this clause reminds us that anything can go wrong at any point during our lives with regards to our relationship with God, and therefore we are to humble ourselves several times daily by pleading, *ihdina-ṣ-ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm* (Direct us to the straight

path). Interestingly, the plural pronouns 'we' and 'us' are used in this clause and the previous one. They may be signifying that our true identity is a universal one, and as such, our endeavour to God ought to be a collective human activity.Therefore, the real efficacy of the *'ibāda* (devotional practice) of *salat* lies beyond disciplining the body. Its intended target is the mind, and its effect is to focus the mind upon God so that the soul can awaken and realise its true identity. We are discussing the devotional practices within the formalistic religion of Islam. However, the notion of devotional practice is not restricted to Islam. Every religion has similar devotional practices, and their intended direction is Allah. The Hindus, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and every other religious grouping, have their own devotional practices and rituals. God awakens souls that tend to Him.

If you realise that the function of *salat* as a devotional practice is to connect with God, then upon examination, you will acknowledge that every religious culture has its own forms of devotion, and their purpose is to facilitate internal growth by means of the body's outer devotion. Examples include chanting the name 'Om', which is the name of God in most of the Indic religions, reciting the Jesus prayer repeatedly in Eastern Christianity, and meditating upon the Self (the soul's consciousness) in yoga.

We will now discuss the devotional practice of *ṣiyām* (fasting). Allah says, "O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful [of God]" (2:183). The first point to note is that the practice of fasting was also prescribed for the adherents of other religions prior to Islam, and the second point pertains to the mind-body relationship. There is a correlation between the states of the body and mind. A healthy body is likely to result in an alert mind, and an unhealthy body is likely to result in a dull and sluggish mind. But it is the mind that needs to be disciplined somewhat for the body to be healthy. This is because a mind that is not disciplined with regards to food, drink, sexual activity, sense perceptions,

and the quality of its thoughts, results in an unhealthy and overindulgent body. One way of disciplining the mind is to restrain the overindulgence of the body by fasting. The result will be a mind that is more alert and freer. If the mind's bodily desires are unfettered, the mind will drive the body to overindulge. Consequently, it will become dull, the soul's consciousness will remain identified with the body and bodily fully, and hence it will experience fears, anxieties, greed, and so on. Thus, the purpose of fasting is to discipline the mind by restraining (a) the body in terms of its intake of food, drink, and experiences of sexual activity, and (b) itself in terms of the type and quantity of its experiences of sense perceptions, thoughts, emotions, intentions, and so on. It is clear therefore that the practice of fasting has existential benefits for all of humankind, and hence the Quran states that it was prescribed for the adherents of other religions: "O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful [of God]" (2:183). Fasting is performed by Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Christians. Each religion has its own forms of fasting. It seems that Muslims practiced the Christian form of fasting initially prior to the revelation of their own unique form. All religious communities have the same devotional practices in essence. The difference is in their respective packaging, that is, there is diversity in terms of their forms. The forms of the devotional practices are important, but they are not essential. They can vary. It is the essence that is important.

The essence of the devotional practice of fasting is to discipline the mind by restraining its normal routines and patterns that prompt the body to consume food and drink, and engage in sexual intimacy and intercourse. As the mind habituates itself to the disruption in its normal routines and patterns of consumption and sexual activity, its attention becomes sharper and freer, and hence its attention can be directed to the remembrance of God within. In another verse Allah says:

O humankind, We created you [all] from a [single] man and a [single] woman and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognise one another [through mutual interaction]. In God's eyes, the most noble of you are those that are most mindful [of Him]. Indeed, God is All-knowing, All-aware (49:13).

In this verse, Allah is addressing all of humankind, and not just the faithful or the people of the Book. The penultimate clause of the verse states, 'In God's eyes, the most noble amongst you [o humankind] are those who are most God-conscious.' Thus, the attainment of a godly consciousness is humankind's real calling. It is in this context that verse 2:183 (a) prescribes fasting for Muslims, (b) asserts that it was prescribed for all of humankind in the past, and (c) declares 'being conscious of God' as fasting's end or goal: "O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful [of God]." To summarise, the devotional practice of fasting seems have been prescribed for the adherents of the Abrahamic and all other faith systems, regardless of whether they subscribe to the notion of a personal God or not; and its function is to assist us – all humankind – in our journeys of transcending our bodily minds or egoic souls and attaining purified minds and selfless souls.

The blessed Prophet said, '*Shayṭān* flows in the bloodstream of the son of Adam. Thus, constrict *shayṭān's* flowing place by fasting.' According to some scholars, the word *shayṭān* is derived from the Arabic verb *sh-ṭa-na*, and hence it means 'the one who is obstinate or perverse' and 'the one who is proficient at binding or tying up'. Notice that the states of 'being arrogant, obstinate, and adversarial', and the state of 'binding or tying oneself to anything (including the body and/or mental objects)', belong to the domain of the body and bodily. *Shayṭān* is the adversary. He is the one who opposes and is obstinate. Interestingly, both the word *shayṭān* and its meaning are not peculiar to Islam. There is a word in Hebrew that is identical to it in meaning and almost identical phonetically, which means the notion was utilised by the

Abrahamic faiths prior to Islam. This is another example of how the same truths are being expressed in different ways and diverse languages in the various religious traditions. If we look beyond the forms, we will see that the essence is the same. Upon careful analysis, the most intimate manifestation of *shayṭān* is the egoic soul, which is the soul's consciousness "I am the body" or the sense of "I" as the body. It is this *shayṭān*, the egoic soul, that refuses to pay heed and surrender. It is forever heedless, and it is nothing but the mind's conviction, feeling, and awareness that 'I am the bodily constitution only and its experiences of mental objects'. This egoic soul is one that feels and says, "I want to control ...", "I want to overpower ...", "I want appreciation ...", "I, I, I, I", "me, me, me, me", and "my, my, my, my". This entity is the inner *shayṭān*, and it is the lifeline for the outer *shayṭān*, such as Iblīs and his followers. The body is inert and lifeless in itself, and hence it is innocent. It is not the enemy. The egoic soul is the enemy.

Iblīs, the accursed, is blamed for all the wrongs we do, and yet in truth he is prostrating (performing *sajda*) to us continually. The angels performed one type of *sajda* before us to acknowledge our superiority, but Iblīs is performing another type of *sajda* to us continually, unbeknownst to him. Has he has not made us his sole and lifelong preoccupation? He cannot see beyond us. He is so obsessed with us that it doesn't even matter to him that his obsession is driving him to his ultimate destruction. Imagine, his refusal to perform one *sajda* before us has enslaved him to us till the Day of Judgement.

On the Day of *Qiyāma*, people will cry and point fingers at Iblīs. He will reply, 'Don't blame me. Blame yourselves. I merely called you, but you decided to come to me out of your own individual volitions' (see 14:22). This means the waywardness is inside *us*. *Shayṭān* does not make us wayward. He merely exposes the waywardness within. For if we were not wayward within, we would not succumb to his temptations. *Shayṭān* will say, 'You wanted to sin. I merely put the idea into your mind. But *you*

decided to do it.' Rumi said, 'Why do you curse Iblīs? His purpose (and function) is to reveal to you who you are within yourselves.' Then he explained this in the following way: 'Imagine that a dog and a sheep have an offspring, and you want to determine which nature predominates in the offspring, the dog's nature or the sheep's. You should make two piles of food next to each other, one of bones and the other herbs, and then place the offspring in front of them but at a distance. If it rushes to the bones, then know that its nature is that of a dog's, but if it rushes to the herbs, then know its nature to be that of a sheep's.'

In essence, *shayṭān* is a state of obstinacy and arrogance that results from the sense of separation from God and hence everything else; and this sense of separation from God and everything else is caused by the mind's identification with a form. The blessed Prophet said, '*Shayṭān* flows in the bloodstream of the son of Adam. Thus, constrict the flow of *shayṭān* within your material constitutions by fasting and abstention.' How does fasting (and abstention) constrict the flow of *shayṭān* in the bloodstream? It does so by loosening one's identification with the body and bodily. Recall that the essence of fasting is to discipline the mind by restraining its normal routines and patterns of consumption and sexual activity. As the mind habituates itself to this disruption, its attention becomes sharper and freer, and hence its attention can be directed to the remembrance of God within. When the mind's attention is directed to God's remembrance within, its attention is no longer upon the body and bodily primarily, and hence the identification with the bodily begins to loosen.

Allah says, "It is only *shayṭān* that causes you to fear his *awliyā* (friends). Do not fear them, but fear Me, if you are true believers" (3:175). We are all frightened and very insecure people. Unwittingly, we become the *awliya* of *shayṭān* by fearing other than God. In any case, the verse of the Quran states that our fear of adversaries, poverty, and the powerful is caused by *shayṭān*. Remember, the Prophet said that one manifestation of *shayṭān*

flows in our bloodstreams, and it is the egoic soul. Thus, it is because of our identification with the body – and hence our love for it and the bodily – that we fear other than God, such as adversaries, poverty, and the powerful. Allah says in another verse, "*Shayṭān* threatens you with the [prospect of] poverty and enjoins you to indecency. In contrast, God promises you forgiveness from His side and abundance. God is All-embracing and All-knowing" (2:268). We do not want to give in the way of God because we are terrified of poverty. But Allah, the Possessor of everything, asks, '... who will give Allah a loan so that He will increase it?' (see 2:245 and 57:11). None of us want to give in the way of God due to fear of poverty and hence desire for wealth. This fear within us is caused by the whispers of *shayṭān* in the mind, and his lifeline is the egoic soul, the sense of "me" as the body. As mentioned above, the egoic soul is a form of *shayṭān*. It is suggestible and indeed welcomes commands contrary to the noble dictates of an accomplished soul. Obviously, the notion of *shayṭān* as the egoic soul includes the inner workings of its (bodily) mind, that is, it includes the mental objects (or mental impressions and phenomena) associated with the sense of "me" as the body. The outer *shayṭān* merely makes suggestions to the mind, but it is the inner *shayṭān* that responds to them.

At one point during the battle of Uhud, there was a cry: 'Muhammad has been killed!' A group of soldiers on the Muslim side ran towards Abu Sufyan and said, 'Spare us! We are ready to worship *Lāt* and *'Uzzā* (two of the pre-Islamic Arabian goddesses) again.' These people were fighting alongside the blessed Prophet, but they ran to Abu Sufyan as soon as they heard he had been killed. Such reactions stem from our humanness. We are all the same in that respect. Allah says in reference to another encounter between the Muslims and their adversaries:

> *[As for] those of you who turned away on the day when the two armies met in battle, it was only shayṭān who caused them to slip because of some of what they had earned (that is, because*

of some of their previous actions). But God has pardoned them now. God is All-forgiving and All-clement (3:155).

They were wayward, and hence *shayṭān* found a way to their souls.

The purpose of the noble practice of *ṣawm* (fasting and abstention) is to assist us in relieving and purifying the mind of the egoic soul, the sense of "I" as the body. It is an aid to break and overcome the continuous experience of (a) just being a body, and (b) the mind's constant preoccupation with the bodily and worldly. The devotional practice of *ṣawm* does this by freeing the mind's attention from the body, bodily, and mental objects somewhat so that it's attention can be directed to the remembrance of God within. The final clause of the fasting verse (2:183) mentioned above imparts God's objective in prescribing the practice of fasting: *la'alla-kum tattaqūn*, "so that perhaps you acquire *taqwa*." The word *taqwa* means God-wariness. Thus, fasting has been prescribed because it has the potential to assist us in becoming God-wary. The root verb of the noun *taqwa* has the connotation of protection. Accordingly, the consequence for a person who acquires *taqwa* is the formation of a fortress of God-wariness around them, for it protects them from evil suggestions.

Most of the time, our minds are totally unguarded. We are completely open and available to every thought and suggestion stirred from within. Every word we hear and almost all external impetuses are absorbed by our minds, and we interact with them immediately and in a reactive manner predominantly. We do not pause to examine them as they occur. The mind rushes headlong in its usual reactive, pattern-based thinking. An unyielding stream of thoughts may be triggered by internal impetuses (such as memories and whims of the imagination) or external events whereby thoughts and their accompanying emotions travel far and wide in all sorts of directions. If we could just take note of the content and workings of our minds for just a couple of hours, we will realise that we are not in control of ourselves at all. Think about it. What happens to the average driver when another driver

overtakes them abruptly? There is an immediate reaction. They feel wronged, or perhaps undermined and offended. Then they become angry and frustrated. And on occasion, they may even swear and curse at the other driver. This all occurs in a matter of seconds. If the driver's experience and reactions are repeated a few times, the emotion of anger and its accompanying outbursts of swearing and cursing will become dispositions of the soul. Now the soul will manifest this disposition in other situations.

One effect of the soul acquiring the quality of *taqwa* (God-wariness, or the quality of being God-wary) is the mind's acquisition of the tendency to be naturally guarded internally. When the mind stays in the present – that is, when its attention is kept in the *now* – it becomes steady and attentive. Incidentally, developing the habit of keeping the mind's attention in the present or *now* – by reminding oneself that God is to be found in the present or *now* – is a great aid for the soul to realise itself as fundamentally different and separate from the body and bodily. In any case, the steady and attentive mind of a God-wary soul is no longer perturbed by bodily and worldly stimuli on account of its attention being stabilised in the *now*. Hence, it is able to examine every thought that is suggested from within or prompted from without. This liberates the mind's attention and spares the soul from being subjected to every form of unworthy and wasteful mental impression (or object). This process gradually purifies the soul of its bodily dispositions.

Ibn Sina stated that there is a hierarchy in terms of the quantity, quality, and duration of contentment that ensues upon experiencing the three different types of human pleasures: bodily, psychological, and intellectual (which includes the spiritual). He said that the contentment resulting from the experience of a psychological pleasure, such as the contentment resulting from the pleasure experienced upon being charitable or courageous, is greater than the contentment resulting from the experience of the bodily pleasures of eating, drinking, and sexual intercourse. Consider the following:

an uncultivated person will overreach to grasp the food that is across the table, unconcerned about the etiquettes of eating; whereas a noble man will never stretch across the table to take the food. Continuing with Ibn Sina: he then stated that the contentment resulting from the experience of intellectual pleasures (which includes spiritual pleasures) surpasses the contentment resulting from the experience of psychological pleasures. He explained that what prevents us from experiencing spiritual pleasures and contentment is the soul's preoccupations with the bodily. Hence, we need to purify the soul of its bodily preoccupations. As discussed above, one of the best aids to purify the soul's mind of its attachment to the bodily and worldly is restraint and abstention. As the soul purges itself of its bodily and worldly preoccupations, it grows in an ascending order, that is, light upon light.

Being unguarded in our minds – with respect to internal and external impetuses that trigger thoughts and emotions – prevents us experiencing spiritual pleasures and contentment. Everything finds its way into our minds, and automatically, that is, seemingly without any control and discretion, we react and interact with it; and before we know it, a lot of precious time has been wasted. Our entire lives pass us by in this way, that is, the mind's incessant reaction to and interaction with internal and external impetuses. The result is that people, situations, memories of past experiences, and the emotions associated with them, determine who we are and what we become. This unguarded state of the mind leaves us exposed to every form of input, and thereby it bars us from growth towards the light inwardly. Our minds are being prompted to think over things that are of no real value constantly. Generally, we talk excessively, and it is wasteful for the most part; and when we do stop talking, our minds continue chattering inwardly non-stop. Is it not strange that we consider the slavery of bodies abhorrent and hence have struggled to outlaw it, but are quite content for our minds and souls to be enslaved totally?

A man went to the blessed Imam Baqir with the intention offending him. He said to the Imam, 'Your mother looks like such and such.' The Imam replied, 'Those are her features.' The man continued, 'She cooks for others as a means of livelihood.' In those days, cooking for a living must have been considered a lowly profession. The Imam answered, 'That is how she earns her money.' Then the man said, 'She is such and such a colour.' The Imam responded, 'Allah gave her that colour.' If someone criticised my mother, I would be very offended and may even react aggressively towards them. Let us learn from this noble Imam. Look at how guarded his mind was! No amount of provocation affected his soul. His mind judged every external impetus as unworthy instantaneously and dispelled it.

This is the effect of *taqwa* (God-wariness), which itself is the intended objective of *ṣawm* (fasting). Initially, fasting seeks to free the mind's attention from the body by disrupting its usual habits of eating, drinking, and sexual activity. Essentially, this is the fast of the mind with respect to the body. After this, the mind is to fast from itself, that is, from its own internal habits of operation with respect to the senses, thoughts, emotions, and intentions. At this stage, the mind is to curtail itself from experiencing ignoble and wasteful sights, sounds, tastes, intentions, thoughts, and so on. As the mind abstains from its usual internal habits of operation, its attention is emancipated further. The soul has a chance to breathe and experience calm from within. Up until now, it had been constantly bombarded with sensory input. Now it experiences calm finally. Its mind is now simply a mirror, that is, the mind merely reflects and records sensuous impressions without becoming involved with them. The *ḥadīth* and spiritual literature instruct us to sleep at night and pray in the morning. Why? Because at night, the soul is seized, the body sleeps, and the soul's perceptual, emotional, imaginative, rational, and intellective faculties cease operating in the body. This lack of involvement of the soul with the body purifies the soul to some

extent, that is, some of the sensory and mental impressions it was involved with during the day lose their force. This is why our souls are able to reflect calmly when we awaken in the morning.

Allah says:

> *Perform the prayer at the sinking of the sun (that is, from when the sun passes its zenith) till the darkness of the night, and [perform] the recital of [the Quran at] dawn. Indeed, the recital of dawn is [always] witnessed (17:78).*

In the morning, the mind is fresh, and hence we are likely to receive deeper understandings when we read the Quran then. In the morning, *salat* is recited calmly because the soul is fresh, and the mind has not begun to involve itself with the ideas of the day or past sensory and/or mental impressions. Usually, we are bombarded with thoughts during our prayers, are we not? But when we offer prayers in the morning as soon as we wake up after a good night's sleep, our minds are fresh and empty. Our souls have been cleansed somewhat. Similarly, when the mind's attention is liberated from the body, bodily, and ignoble and wasteful sensory and mental impressions during fasting, the soul experiences calm and begins to purify itself.

Finally, the *end* of the devotional practice of fasting is to assist the soul to reach the stage when it is no longer attached to the body and bodily. Hence, it no longer yearns for wealth, prestige, pride, or acknowledgement in this world. It is not concerned with the world in itself at all. Our beloved Imam Husayn said, 'It is easier for me to die than to accept a life of humiliation.' And he also stated, 'It is easier for me to face humiliation for the sake of God than to enter the Fire.' When the soul realises its absolute nothingness before God, then the fast and all other devotional practices have done their job of assisting the soul in its reception of God.

Lecture Nine
Hajj

The purpose of devotional practices in Islam and all other religions is to awaken the soul to God by purging the mind of its preoccupations with the body and bodily. Each one of us without exception is yearning to find ourselves ultimately. We all know there is a deeper meaning to our existence. Things are not what they seem or appear to be. Even atheistic thinkers are warming up to the fact that every atom has a mind of its own, that consciousness pervades all things. There is something quite profound about existence, and it yearns to be known. Once humankind as a whole relieves itself of the dictates of the body and bodily, it will be able to direct itself to the search for Itself meaningfully. In the most accurate sense, God and religion are means for liberation and self-discovery if understood properly.

By definition, God cannot be a factor of limitation or restriction. He cannot want divisions in the human community or salvation for some and not others. He says, "O humankind, verily you are toiling towards your Lord laboriously, and you will encounter Him" (84:6). Note, God says, 'O humankind' (*Yā ayyuha-l-insān*), and not, 'O believers' or 'O Muslims' (*Yā ayyuha-ladhīna āmanū* or *Yā ayyuha-l-muslimūn*). Allah says, "[O

humankind], your creation and your raising [from the dead] are only as [the creation and raising of] a *single soul*" (31:28) and,

> *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).*

The same soul encompasses all eight billion of us at present and the entirety of the human race, past and future. It is the same light of God – the One God. The soul is being driven back to God in a variety of different forms.

We need to open our minds and think accurately. In the Quran, the following clause has been repeated a few times, "It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, to cause it to prevail over all religion" (9:33, 48:28, and 61:9). God's vision for the human community is for it to arrive at the pedestal of God-centricity. Humankind in its entirety is destined to arrive at God, our true calling. Upon analysis of the eschatological literature, we conclude that humankind, as a single entity, is converging upon a state of peace and harmonious coexistence. In other words, humankind as a single collectivity is reaching the stage where human goodness flowers and self-centredness withers. This is the vision God has for us, and He has conveyed it in His revelation. Ironically, we have ascribed the exact opposite to God (in terms of His vision for us) on account of not reading His communications accurately. God's vision is for humankind to become God-centred and hence find and complete itself.

Existentially here and now, we are displaying our godly nature in and through all our endeavours: cultural, religious, rational, and humanitarian. Whenever we are faced with a challenge, we overcome it. We do not just pray to God. We become His hand. We generate light in the midst of darkness, provide cures to dispel

sickness, and share wealth in order to alleviate poverty. Today, we consider human rights to be 'inalienable'. We are not content with safeguarding just our own individual rights anymore. The human community is a noble existence. This maturing of the human spirit is not restricted to the religious community. Godliness is flowing within humankind at large. It is not confined to one race, status, gender, religion, and so on. Regardless of whether God is acknowledged or denied, we are displaying His spirit only. All of us are converging towards godliness as one collective being. The wonderful plurality and diversity within humankind is displaying the same Truth. Every segment of the human community is contributing to the completion of the collectivity meaningfully.

Human evolution is a singular movement towards self-realisation. The meanings of the words you are reading in this book are as old as language itself, and hence they are as old as humankind. Previous generations have supplied meanings to the words we use so effortlessly in our speech. Our verbal expressions bespeak the history of humankind insofar as every culture, religion, and civilisation has contributed to the languages we converse in. The fact that we can translate any given sentence into every language (rendering it understandable by everyone) shows that nothing is alien to anybody. You may express something in your language that is different phonetically to all the expressions in the other languages, and yet it will have a parallel expression that carries the same sentiment in every other language. This means we have shared our languages with each other already. We have shared the meanings of their words and expressions, and the history of those meanings, with each other in the distant past. Consider the contributions of previous civilisations. The advancements made by the Romans has contributed to the state of humankind today. Prior to the Romans, the advancements made by people in the Neolithic age contributed to their civilisation. The pre-modern Muslim Arabs refined the scientific method, which is now part and parcel of science today.

Past languages, cultures, religions, philosophies, arts, scientific discoveries, technologies, and so on, have contributed to the beautiful and glorious, unitive outlook prevalent amongst thinking and ethical humans today. The definitive cure for cancer will not appear out of thin air. Current treatments of cancer are beholden to the *totality* of human achievements in the past (including the invention of the microscope, the basic discoveries about the structure of the cell, and the development of modern medicine itself). Generations of minds have worked on the problem of cancers and a separate field of study has emerged – oncology. Oncologists have been analysing and will continue to analyse the data pertaining to cancers until a definitive cure is discovered. However, that cure will itself be beholden to all the endeavours of humankind in the past generally and the scientific community in particular. Consider the field of astronomy. Its history is as ancient as humankind itself. It dates back to the insights of the very first people who observed the stars and wondered what they were, and what their relation to the earth was. Their insights were the basis for subsequent generations to build upon. Today, our knowledge of the cosmos is undoubtedly phenomenal, and yet it is indebted to the endeavours of all our ancestors. It is a delusion to think that we are separate individuals. The contrary is the truth. Each individual human journey is an essential component of the journey of humankind as a whole. Our mere being upon this earth affects human consciousness, that is, both whilst our bodies are alive and after they have died. This is because every trace of our being upon this earth is etched in the aspect of human consciousness that is terrestrially bound.

In 2021, the second most popular takeaway in Britain was Indian food. 'Fish and chips' came in third place. Foods that were once deemed to be foreign are no longer considered to be 'other'. The same is the case with clothes that used to be viewed as non-native. In the near future, gender distinctions will not be defined in the decisive way they are today. As humankind progresses, all

inequality and inequity that is rooted in the differences between human forms (such as colour, size, and gender) will be regarded as obsolete. The employment of house servants or domestic workers will be thought of as slavery. The rate at which every area of human life is evolving (such as technology, language, astronomy, medicine, ethics, and morality) is astonishing. Everyone is contributing to the growth of the whole. The same is true for spirituality. People are approaching God in a variety of ways within religions and outside them, and yet sincere people in every religion and non-religious systems are arriving at the same pedestal of inner godliness. Hence, they are able to recognise and venerate the saints and enlightened beings of other religions. For instance, many Hindus venerate the beloved Imam Husayn as an enlightened manifestation of God. Is it not amazing that 'othering' is disappearing gradually in the domain of religion and spirituality as well?

The vision of God for humankind is a universal one. It is one in which humankind in its entirety completes its journey and reaches the pedestal of glorious splendour. When we observe religious leaders today, like the current Pope and Dalai Lama, we put aside our notional biases of Muslim and non-Muslim and proclaim them to be the fathers of humankind. It befits such humans to be at the helms of their respective religions. I was talking to a Christian friend. At one point, he said, "You know, the Pope should transcend Christianity." I replied, "Not only the Pope, but every religious figure should transcend the limitations of religion, because every religious figure is promoting the same God, the Ultimate Reality. God cannot be bound by a religion." The destiny and essence of humankind, which is humanity, transcends religion altogether. Religions orient us towards God, and as such, they require us to transcend all forms inwardly and arrive at the essence of religion, which is a stabilised orientation to the Absolute. Hence, the head of every religion must transcend the limitations of religion. Our beloved Imam Husayn was not limited by religion at all. The Christian, Abdullah ibn Umayr Abu Wahab al-Kalbi (Wahab), was

welcomed by Imam Husayn into his camp. Wahab may not have known the *kalima* (the Muslim declaration of belief) or the Quran. His mother instructed him to join Imam Husayn. Wahab asked her, 'Who is he?' She replied, 'I do not know. But when I look at him, I recognise the truth inside him.' That is what she understood. Of course, it is claimed that Wahab became a Muslim, but it makes no difference whether he became a Muslim or not. Rest assured, Imam Husayn did not have a problem with his Christianity.

The blessed Prophet transcended the notions of formalistic Islam and formalistic religion altogether. He forged ties with the Abrahamic faiths based on the worship of one God (see 3:64). He was not concerned with the religious distinctions people created. The blessed friends of God (such as the Prophets) transcend the limitations of religion. They are endowed with godliness and godly orientation, whereby they are able to distinguish between the forms and essences of things, people, and religions; for God is the Ultimate Essence of everything. Unfortunately, religious people have forgotten the true essence of religion. They have essentialised the forms of their respective religions due to their insecurities. Our insecurities keep us identified and associated with the body and bodily totally, and this prevents us from seeing that every aspect of human existence is connected to the experience of humankind as a whole, past and future. We do not appreciate the oneness of humankind within the folds of our religions. In fact, they prevent us from appreciating the oneness of humankind. This is because their respective identities have been defined on the basis of the 'other' that is misguided religiously, and hence is to be condemned as irreligious forever. Inevitably, our religions lead to exclusivism because of how we have defined them. Is it not ironic that the operation of the inner *shayṭān*, the mind of the egoic soul, is often heightened when a person embraces one of our religions? "I am better than all others because my religion is the true one. It *is* the straight path (*ṣirāt-al-mustaqīm*). The way I devote myself to God *is* the only true way."

And yet, nobody has a problem with diversity and plurality when it comes to food oddly.

At Al-Mahdi Institute, we have programmes in which people of different faiths gather together for collective devotions. Usually, a person from every faith reads a relevant portion of their respective scriptures. During these gatherings, if you were to be blindfolded and not told who was reading, and which scripture was being read, you would not be able to distinguish between the contents of the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, and Hindu readings. You would admit that the same Reality and same human virtues are being addressed by each, and that all are centred around spiritual belonging to God. We need to initiate and participate in such gatherings. Unfortunately, we have become very conceited as 'people of religion'. To think that *I am the only one who has the truth* is nothing but an expression of the inner *shaytān* – the egoic soul.

Imagine if our religions could come together and share their understandings on the origin, end, purposeful existence, human spirit, human soul, God, and godliness (the quality of being godly) with each other. If religions could gather and present their respective virtue teachings to each other, you would see that they are saying the same thing. Ram said, 'Speak the truth', as did the Buddha, the Blessed Prophets Musa, Isa and Muhammad *Rasūlu-llāh*, and Guru Nanak. All of them said, 'Speak the truth'. Even philosophers and sages in the modern period, who were not associated with any religion, said, 'Speak the truth.' If this could be done globally, humankind will awaken immediately to the realisation that all religions are expressions (forms) of the same, essential Religion. If all our religions could contribute in this way to that singular, essential Religion of God, imagine how effective it would be in awakening our souls to the nature of Ourselves, Existence, and Reality.

You want *all* your children to succeed, do you not? Then how can your God – the Most Compassionate and Eternally Merciful

– want the majority of his eight billion children to fail? Do you not claim that the majority of humans are doomed to fail? Do you not make this claim readily? Are you kinder than the Most Compassionate and Eternally Merciful, who is your God? A parent will not rest until they have secured salvation and success for all their children. Then how can the One who has created this parental love in our hearts for our children be ready to drive six billion people into the pits of Hell and admit only two billion into Paradise? In fact, even this is not accurate according to the average Muslim. Do we not believe that the majority of the two billion Muslims belonging to the seventy-two sects are Hellbound, and that only we, who belong to the one, true sect, are Heavenbound? (In the next point, I'm taking the Shi'a Ithnasheri sect as an example, but the logic applies to every sect.) And within that one true, sect, God alone knows how many people are *Akhbaris* (people subscribing to the school of the traditionalists), and how many are *Usulis* (people subscribing to the school of the jurists)? And within the *Usulis*, God alone knows how many people imitate (do *taqlid* of) the most knowledgeable jurist, and how many do not? After all this exclusivism, the Parent of all parents is left with just a handful of His eight billion children to put into the unending Paradise! The rest of us will be burning in Hell and calling out to Him, "O God, are you not our Lord?" Does any of this make sense?

The problem is in our interpretations of the religion of the blessed Prophet Muhammad. Remember, the audience of the blessed Prophet were barbaric and monstrous people, and yet he saw the potential of goodness and godliness in them. Today, the Christian claims there is no salvation until one professes Jesus to be the son of God; the Jew believes his people are the chosen ones; and the Muslim considers his formalistic sect to be the final religion. How can there be all this division and conflict in the name of God who is colourless and religion-less?

Our religions have such ungodly perspectives because we have suspended the operation of the faculty of reason in the domain

of religion. In every other aspect of life, we know it is our God-given right to think, understand, ponder, and critique, but when it comes to religion, the first thing we do is suspend our rational minds – which is the very faculty God has given us to reach Him. Think about this carefully. When we invest in a business, we make sure we study the whole business plan, but when it comes to investing in the Eternal and Infinite Life, we suspend our faculties of reason altogether. Is this sensible and prudent behaviour?

However, it is not our fault. Our indoctrination began when we were in the cradle, and it is very difficult to escape from. One of the greatest idols we have to break is the one that has been erected within us in the name of religion and God Himself: *my* religious identity and the exclusivist thinking that feeds it (that is, the egoic soul's *Muslim* identity and all its thoughts of religious, sectarian, and cultural superiority). Does anyone worship God really? How can they, for God is not to be found in any of our religions? They are all devoid of God. If our religions were based on God truly, the vast majority of the eight billion of us would be godly. There would be no cursing, swearing, or hate upon this earth. People would be busy contributing positively to the welfare of the world and its inhabitants, and they would be busy refining themselves in terms of their godliness. Unknowingly, our interpretations and understandings of the religion of the blessed Prophet Muhammad – in other words, our sects – are completely ungodly, for they are incompatible with God as the Most Compassionate and Eternally Merciful. Unfortunately, they are all bodily sects, fuelled and justified by the conceited dictates of our egoic souls.

During the Medinan phase of the blessed Prophet's mission, a significant number of his followers became conceited and complacent on account of 'being Muslim'. Their assumption was, 'We are Muslims – we have the truth – and so no harm can befall us.' Thereafter, they were defeated at the battle of Uhud. They had thought that God would aid them because of their 'Muslim'

label (or Muslim-ness) and hence victory was assured. After their defeat, God addressed them thus: 'I have no favourites. I bestowed victory upon you at Badr, and I conferred it upon them at Uhud. This is the way things are. You are neither My favoured ones nor My chosen ones. Those who pave their path to Me in both defeat and victory are My chosen ones' (see 3:140-141).

Look at how amazing the blessed Prophet was. The assassin of the Prophet's blessed uncle, Hamza, approached the Prophet in Makkah and asked, 'I accept Islam, but can you forgive me for killing your uncle?' The Prophet replied, 'Yes, I forgive you; but kindly avoid me, for seeing you will remind me of my dear uncle and his tragic death. That will be unbearable for my soul.' In his humanness, the blessed Prophet admitted that he was unable to face the assassin of his dear uncle, and yet his heart forgave him totally. This is the religion of the blessed Prophet.

The scholars of our religions need to congregate and share the inner meanings of their respective devotional practices with each other, and then convey them to their respective communities. This needs to happen at every level. All of us need to gather and explore the intended, inner values of the outward forms of our devotions. There is a spiritual essence at the core of every devotional practice in every religion. People of different religions can learn from each other and assist each other in enhancing the efficacy of their respective devotional practices.

Whilst we are earthbound, the form of our *salat* (which is the most important of the devotional practices in Islam) will continue to consist of standing, sitting, bowing (*rukū'*), prostrating (*sajda*), the prayers recited alongside these actions, facing the House of God (*qibla*), and performing it at set times during the day. The essence of *salat* is to connect with God, Who is the Higher Purpose. If you asked a Jewish person what the objective of their form of *salat* is, he will give the same response. We ought to be communing with and learning from one another. If there is something in our spirituality that another's lacks, they can benefit;

and if there is something in their spirituality that ours lacks, we can benefit. What is wrong with examining the Hindu forms of fasting in order to understand their essence? In doing so, we will see that the essence is the same, and we may learn techniques and attitudes that can be adopted during the performance of our form of fasting that enhances the experience.

Diversity, difference, and plurality exist at the level of the human form due to the uniqueness of each body and mind. Hence, our features, tastes, and experiences are unique; yet, despite this plurality in our physical and mental forms, we continually explore the commonalities between us that make us one. In the not-too-distant past, *kutchis* and *kathiawaris* hesitated to marry each other. After overcoming that taboo, another one replaced it: Khojas could never marry non-Khojas. This was then superseded by another discrimination: Shi'as could not marry Sunnis. Fortunately, increasing numbers of people are realising the superficiality of these differences, for they are beginning to appreciate or intuit the existential oneness of our humanity. Consequently, our cultures are beginning to change slowly. For instance, it is becoming more acceptable for Shi'as of different cultures to marry one another. Undoubtedly, a regression has occurred early in the history of Islam, for the Quran permitted Muslim men to marry women who classified as 'the people of the Book'. Imagine, the Quran does not even discriminate between people on the basis of religion.

We will now examine the most prominent of the devotional practices in Islam: Hajj, the annual pilgrimage. Consider the verses of the Quran on Hajj. We have not paid attention to them at all. When Allah instructs us in the Quran on the devotional practices of *salat* and fasting, His addressees are the believers: *Yā ayyuha-ladhīna āmanū*, "O you who believe". The first verse revealed on Hajj (note, the order of the verses in the Quran that we are familiar with is not the chronological order of revelation) is a reference to Allah's command to the blessed Prophet Ibrahim:

"Proclaim the pilgrimage to humankind. They will come to you on foot and every kind of swift mount, emerging from every deep mountain pass" (22:27). The blessed Ibrahim was commanded to announce to one and all that they should perform Hajj. But he was one person. So how could he have conveyed the message to all people? This means it was not only an instruction to him, but to his progeny, followers, and their descendants, and hence the proclamation was universal, that is, it was intended for all people of every era until the Day of *Qiyāma*. The fact that God wants all people to congregate together, perform the Hajj, and worship Him, is a declaration that He wants them to remember, know, and be deeply conscious of the fact that they are one in terms of their Source, Essence, and Humanity.

Consider the verses of the Quran that assert the obligatoriness of Hajj. For instance: "Pilgrimage to the House is a duty owed to God by humankind, [that is,] for those who are able to undertake it" (3:97). Notice that Allah does not restrict its obligatoriness to Muslims. According to this verse, all people with ability and means are obliged to perform it. Look at how pluralistic the verse is. We will cite two more examples of other verses that state this: "The first House [of worship] appointed for humankind was the one at Makkah. [It is] a blessed place and a [source of] guidance for all beings" (3:96) and,

> *... [remember] when We made the House a resort for humankind and a sanctuary, [saying], 'Take the spot where Ibrahim stood as a place of prayer for yourselves.' We charged Ibrahim and Ismail thus, 'Purify My House for those who walk round it, those who stay there, and those who bow and prostrate [themselves in worship]' (2:125).*

The following notions are mentioned in these verses: (a) Hajj, (b) its obligation, (c) a House for humankind, and (d) the House of God as a sanctuary for people. All these notions are discussed in the context of humans generally. They are not discussed with

respect to Muslims only. Imagine how restricted our vision is! Prior to 2021, you would have read the following captions on signs directing traffic before entering Makkah and Medina: "Muslims only" and "Obligatory for non-Muslims". But the blessed Prophet Muhammad himself lived with his Christian and Jewish wives in Medina, as did his companions! In Sūra Baqara, God commanded the Jews of Medina to establish *salat* with the Prophet (see 2:43 and 2:83). This is affirmed by early exegetes such as Nasafi, Tabarsi, Tusi, and Zamakhsahri. Imagine, Allah wanted the Jews to pray *salat* with the Muslims in the blessed Prophet's mosque! Often, the Jews of Medina would say to the Prophet tauntingly, 'Your revelation is not stating anything new or original. It is merely repeating what is in our scriptures' (see 5:57, 5:59, and 5:68). The Prophet would respond, 'I am not the first messenger of God' (see 46:9). Obviously, it is the same message.

The devotional practice of Hajj as envisioned by the Quran is (a) a symbolic representation of the existential oneness of humankind, which is its innate humanity, (b) supposed to awaken humankind to this existential state, and (c) a foretelling of humankind's eventual destiny of collectively actualising its innate humanity or existential oneness.

Now we will explore some of the inner meanings, objectives, and effects of the Hajj pilgrimage and its rituals. Once Hajj begins, you cannot distinguish between master and servant, rich and poor, scholar and non-scholar, and professional and non-professional. It dawns upon the mind that we are all one in the sight of God. The genders are not to be segregated during Hajj, for the pilgrims are supposed to be unconcerned with gender differences and the bodily sense of sexuality. In the midst of all the hustle and bustle, the mind's attention is supposed to be centred upon the remembrance of Allah, and hence withdrawn from sense perceptions and mental objects. The focussing of attention upon Allah and withdrawal from sense perceptions and mental objects prevents the notion of looking at the opposite sex

from occurring in the mind. The mind is awakened to Allah, for it is not concerned with the body, bodily, world, and worldly. Your mind has neither sense nor care of the notions of white, black, man, woman, rich, poor, elderly, middle-aged, and young anymore, for it is closer to that innate and underlying oneness within – your innate humanity.

Sadly, we have trivialised the *'ibāda* (devotional practice) of Hajj. It has become so formalistic that its purpose and relevance is forgotten. Would God oblige everyone in the world to converge upon Makkah at the end of every year just to go around a black cube structure mindlessly? Would you not agree that the scale of this obligation signifies that the time, space, and ritual of Hajj has cosmic and existential importance? Obviously, it has cosmic and existential relevance that we have not awoken to yet, but future humans will, God willing. The Quran alludes to the importance of the House of God in Makkah and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem thus:

> *Glory be to Him who made His servant travel by night from the sacred place of worship to the furthest place of worship, the surroundings of which We have blessed, to show him some of Our signs. Indeed, He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing (17:1).*

Thus, these two places of worship have a special significance in terms of our connection with the cosmos, divine agencies, existence, and their Author. The rational and intellective mind is being invited to reflect upon and explore them and their surroundings.

At present, only Muslims are permitted to perform Hajj. This means its inner meanings, objectives, and effects are experienced limitedly, that is, they are experienced by, and with respect to, the Muslim community only. During the Hajj period, many people perform *salat* inside their hotels, and then afterwards, congregate on the upper levels or the roof of the mosque of the Ka'ba to recite *du'as*. Honestly, that is not the place to recite *du'as*. It is the place to observe what is happening. Three million Muslims

are present during Hajj, representing all two billion people of the *ummah*. Realise the nature and reality of this *ummah*. It will dawn upon us that the *ummah* is our greater identity and belonging. Then when you are back from Hajj, your mind will be liberated from sectarianism. You will no longer feel like a Shi'a, Sunni, Wahhabi, or Sufi. You will identify with the greater Islam of Muhammad *Rasūlu-llāh*. This is what Hajj is supposed to awaken us to. Observe the Wahhabi, Shi'a, Sunni, Sufi, Berelvi, Diobandi, Hanafi, and Maliki, performing the same *salat* to the same God alongside each other. Observe them circumambulating the same Ka'ba together. Witness them proclaim together in unison, *Labbayka Allāhumma labbayk*, "Here I am, O Allah, here I am" (meaning, I submit and submit again, O Allah). Awaken to *that* religion of Islam – the Islam of Hajj. I am not insignificant. I am a part of two billion people. I am a great force. As two billion people, we can make a difference to this world and all its inhabitants. I have to contribute positively.

Upon returning from Hajj, if a person carries the same sectarian biases they had prior to embarking upon the noble pilgrimage, then they have not performed it at all in reality. This is because the performance of Hajj has had no impact upon the mind; hence, it has not been purified, and the soul has returned the same – it has not grown. To repeat, if we still harbour prejudices against Muslims of other sects and others more generally after performing Hajj, it means our minds have not paid heed during Hajj at all. The sociological truths we witness during Hajj are phenomenal. Just being on the rooftop of the mosque of the Ka'ba and observing the hundreds of thousands of souls below, all in white clothing, circumambulating the Ka'ba, affects the soul deeply, and hence it may be more impactful spiritually than spending time in solitude reciting *dhikr* and *du'a*. Allow the experience of Hajj to open the mind and liberate it from the pettiness it has clung to on account of the very narrow interpretation of religion it has been fed.

The most symbolic of all the devotional practices in Islam is Hajj. Consider the following aspects. The Quran instructs the pilgrim who is about to begin performing Hajj (that is, just before removing one's clothes and wrapping oneself with the *ihram* – the two pieces of cloth for men and simple clothing for women) thus: 'Those undertaking the Hajj are not to consort sexually, gloat, or take oaths in the name of God' (see 2:197). Three instructions are to be adhered to: (a) lustful thoughts and feelings are not to be entertained, for otherwise one's attention will be directed to the body and bodily, and not God's remembrance here and now; (b) boasting is prohibited, because it is only the egoic soul (the sense of "I" as the body) that boasts; and if that happens, then one's attention is being directed to the body and bodily, and not God's remembrance within; one needs to let go of quarrelling, boasting, and the egoic soul by directing one's awareness to the remembrance of the All-mighty here and now; and (c) uttering God's name in vain is forbidden; only the egoic soul, which is heedless of God, says His name in vain; the enlightened soul reveres God's name; hence, one must venerate God's name (Allah) such that upon hearing It, one's attention is brought to the here and now (or the throne of the heart) either in awe or joy of Him.

Then the pilgrim is to remove their everyday garments. Symbolically, this act refers to the removal of the veils of false personality that one has acquired by associating and identifying with the body, bodily, world, and worldly wholly. This requires some explanation. The veils include all the beliefs and feelings that make up one's identity, such as the beliefs and feelings: "I am a Khoja", "I am male", "I am the son of so-and-so", "I am a billionaire", "I am a scholar", or "I am a *hafiz-e-Quran*." The root of all these beliefs and feelings is the conviction and sense, "I am the body". By questioning "Who am I?", "What is my essence?", "Is Khoja-ness part of my essence?", "Is being a scholar part of my essence?", "Am I the body and mind?", and "Where does the sense of *me* as the body and mind come from?", one realises that one is

not the body, mind, and all the other identities fundamentally. Therefore, when the pilgrim removes their everyday garments upon commencing Hajj, they are also to remove these false identities by recalling that in essence, they are not Khoja, male, the son of so-and-so, a billionaire, a scholar, a *hafiz-e-Quran*, a body, a mind and all its content, a Muslim, or even a Shi'a. All identities are to be discarded until one reaches the real identity – the soul's consciousness (the pure "I am" which is beyond the body). The contemplation upon the question of "Who am I?" is fundamental, for 'to know myself is to know my Lord', which is the purpose of life. Strip away all the false identities you have acquired as a result of identifying and associating with this body and mind, and be free, for they are the biggest damnation and greatest curse upon you. They are your prison.

Why is it *wājib* (obligatory) to perform Hajj only once in one's lifetime? Because a single performance of Hajj is supposed to be enough to tear away everything that is false. It is only when we have the luxury of doing it several times that it loses its meaning. For souls that are innocent, sincere, decent, unsectarian, non-judgemental, and who are seeking their God, one performance of Hajj is sufficient to trigger its transformative magic. Therefore, upon commencing Hajj, remove all layers of false personality, stand unguarded in front of God, and say, "O Allah! *This* is what I am." Our beloved Imam Husayn stated the following in his *Du'a Arafah*: 'All the good claims I attribute to myself are pretentious. The 'I' that attributes good deeds to itself is evil even if the deeds performed are good.' He saw the falsity of his personality with his penetrative insight.

After removing our garments, we are to wash and cleanse ourselves physically. Throughout the washing process, we are to implore Allah to wash and cleanse our minds and souls of everything other than Him. Here, we begin to understand the significance of water and its vitality. Such genuine and heartfelt *du'as* ignite the mind into appreciating the life, power, and purity

of water. It is not a lifeless substance. It is a living entity. As you are washing and cleansing yourself, awaken to and acknowledge its life. It restores the health of your ailing body. It is the outward manifestation of that property of consciousness and existence that restores the health of your ailing soul after bestowing life to it initially. Whilst washing yourself with water, implore Allah thus, "O Lord! Purify me, both outwardly and inwardly", and acknowledge the All-pervasiveness of the Life of God.

After washing and cleansing ourselves, we are to wrap ourselves with two garments. Whilst doing this, we must thank God for enjoining us to conceal ourselves. Acknowledge that these two garments are a blessing from God, and that you do not deserve them in reality. This process – of firstly controlling the mind and focussing its attention upon God, secondly removing one's clothes and false identities, thirdly washing and cleansing the body and soul of all their impurities, and lastly wrapping oneself with two pieces of cloth – awakens the mind to the reality that nothing was, is, or ever will be mine, for everything belongs to God. We realise that everything is His – here, now, and always. It was given to "me" by Him, but I forgot and believed it to be mine. My attachment to it was based on heedlessness and a false belief. It was never mine in the first place, so why have I formed such an unbreakable attachment to it?

After this, we are to cry out and proclaim, *Labbayka Allāhumma labbayk*, "Here I am, O Lord, here I am!" This is the first awakening to God. I was merely a pretentious actor prior to this point in life. I was pretending insofar as I considered myself to be male, female, rich, poor, old, young, black, white, clever, stupid, Shi'a, or Sunni. Tear it all away! This is the first time the individual cries out genuinely, "I am here, O Lord!" Until this point in your life, you were coasting in a sleepful state. This is the point of great awakening from whence the individual begins to live. Prior to this moment, there was no life, for you were simply not there. Up to this point, you have been acting and forgotten who you really are.

The blessed fourth Imam would tremble at this point, that is, when he would exclaim, *Labbayka Allāhumma labbayk*. Even Salafi books cite that Imam Zain-ul-Abidin would tremble at this point in Hajj. Those around him enquired, 'Why do you tremble?' He replied, 'I cry at the prospect of God not responding to my call.' After pronouncing, *Labbayka Allāhumma labbayk*, "Here I am, O Lord, here I am!", the blessed Imam would recite, 'O Lord, I restrain my eyes, ears, and thoughts from being involved with other than You.' O Lord, let the falsity fade away from me.

During Hajj, notice how the circumambulation of the Ka'ba occurs as a continuum, that is, in an undisturbed manner. This continuous motion around the House of God signifies a state of being perpetually detached from everything other than God. Shaykh Fadlallah has stated in one of his books that the word 'heart' in Arabic (*qalb*) is derived from the root *qa-la-ba*, which means to turn. The heart ceases to circumambulate God when the soul's attention is attached or drawn to other than God. Note that the soul becomes the heart when its attention is directed to God, and it becomes the mind when its attention is directed to other than God. Thus, as soon as the soul's attention is directed to other than God, the heart's rotation around its Axis is arrested and the mind begins to operate, identifying itself with sense perceptions and mental objects. Therefore, the continuous motion around the House of God symbolises our existential need to cut away from all inner attachments, like children, brothers, religion, and everything else we are attached to. This includes detachment from the greatest idol, which is the false god that the mind conceives and worships as God. Remember, the notion of 'god' that we worship is obviously not God. It is the mind's conception and projection of God, and hence it is as broad or as narrow as we are. If I am an unforgiving person, it is likely that I conceive my God as unforgiving. Hence, for many of us, He will never forgive anybody ever! If I am desirous of Paradise, I will conceive my God as the Author of the pleasures of Paradise. We need to break the idol of God that we have created

in our own image, and then allow ourselves to be open to God and say to Him: "Suggest *Yourself* to me."

The Heavens must be smiling at us when they observe us during Hajj, standing under the golden pipe, and supplicating thus: "O Allah! Give me wealth and give me health." They must be thinking, "But He has given you all of that already, long ago, when you were at home in your own countries. You have all of that already. Surely, you have come to Hajj with the intention of meeting your God. It is incomprehensible that despite being here finally, at His House, standing before Him, you are asking Him for health and wealth!" Consider this sorrowful state of ours.

Ask the Beloved for His own Self! If you have God, will you miss out on anything? You believe that God watches over you and cares for you, do you not? So do you think you can plan for yourself better than Him? If God is taking care of my affairs, do I need to tell Him what to do for me? Or does He know what is best for me? Do you love yourself more than He loves you? When we stand under the golden pipe and ask God to do *this* and *that* for me, it shows we are still very immature. The only thing He wants us to say is, "O Lord, I have come to You. I am here. I hand myself over to You. To ask You for anything is a sin. For then unwittingly, I have undermined You insofar as I know that You are destining for me as You deem fit, which is always the best for me." Thus, after the circumambulation of the Ka'ba, we are to hand ourselves over to God thus: "O Lord, I wish to free myself by giving my discretion to You. I hand it over to You here and now. Assist me in this." This is what our beloved Imam Husayn said, "O Allah! Allow me not to yearn the hastening of a decree that You have chosen to delay, nor the delay of a decree that You have chosen to hasten." Such are godly souls.

Lecture Ten
Zakat and Dhikr

The teachings of Islam address the two facets of our existence: the outer bodily aspect and the inner psychic aspect (which is comprised of the mental and spiritual). Their objective is the liberation of the soul (or the psyche) by regulating the body and discipling the bodily mind. As stated in the previous lecture, Islam's understanding of the human community is that it is *one being*. Every individual human is the totality in essence, and the totality is every individual human in form. Thus, that which is good must be good for one and all, and not just for some; otherwise, it would not be good. For instance, knowledge, peace, and compassion are good because they are good for one and all, and not just for some – in other words, they are universalisable. The number of good individuals (including the degree of their goodness) is greater in societies that place utmost value on knowledge, peace (inner and outer), and compassion than in societies that place highest value on money, self-interest, and the experience of bodily pleasures. Children born in societies that place greatest value on knowledge, peace, and compassion are extremely likely to be good as adults in comparison to children born in societies that place utmost value on money, self-interest, and the experience of bodily pleasures.

Islam considers the destiny of humankind to be intertwined. We all share and contribute to the evolutionary process of the human collectivity. Each and every one of us benefits from and impacts others. The knowledge and experiences of the individual affect, and are assimilated into, the knowledge and experience of humankind as one soul. According to Islam, the destiny of the evolutionary process of the human collectivity is to meet God. We are flowing back to Allah, both as individual souls and the one human soul. This vision of Islam includes every individual soul without exception, and it is alluded to in the following verses of the Quran: "It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and *dīn al-ḥaqq* (the religion of truth), to cause it to prevail over all religion" (9:33, 48:28, and 61:9). Thus, 'the Religion of Truth' – which refers to God-centricity (and seeking knowledge of who you are) and not to any particular formalistic religion – will cover or envelope every formalistic sect or religion and ethical way of life. The phrase 'the Religion of Truth' does not refer to any particular formalistic sect or religion, for that would rid humankind of its plurality. Rather, the one Religion of Truth, or God-centricity, will prevail in the midst of plurality, that is, in all manner of diverse sects, religions, and ethical ways of life. In other words, the existential message of becoming God-centric and knowing who you are will be manifest in the multiplicity of sects, religions, and ethical ways of life upon this earth. Thus, sects, religions, and ethical ways of life can be whatever and however they want to be as long as (a) the essence is accurate or God-centric, (b) they are in-line with the essence, and (c) their respective adherents are flowing towards that essence.

Regulating the body, and disciplining the mind thereby, is a prime concern in formalistic Islam justifiably, and hence many of its teachings pertain to *sharia* regulations (*aḥkām shar'ī*). Merely adhering to these regulations as a tick-box exercise is not what is intended. Their objective is to discipline the bodily mind by regulating the body so that the soul awakens to the light within.

Disciplining the bodily mind (or egoic soul) by regulating the body is just a prelude to awakening the soul to its light and destiny. We discussed in previous lectures how *salat* prevents us from committing *faḥshā'* (indecency) and *munkar* (reprehensible and unethical acts), and how its form and the forms of its parts, like *rukū'* (bowing) and *sajda* (prostration), do not in themselves. It is the continuation of the soul's connection to God after *salat* has finished, which was caused by the mind's devotion to God during its performance, that prevents the soul from committing *faḥshā'* and *munkar*. Thus, adhering to *sharia* regulations disciplines the bodily mind by regulating the body so that the soul is able to tend towards Allah *subḥāna-hu wa ta'ālā*, 'may He be glorified and exalted'.

The primary concern in formalistic Islam is to ensure that the fundamental needs of bodies are met. People need food, water, clothing, and shelter. Accordingly, the blessed Prophet addressed the bodily needs first. Giving a copy of the Quran to a hungry person is useless, for they are unable to think of other than food whilst they are starving. These basic bodily needs must be satiated in order for the mind to be able to reflect upon loftier ideas effectively, such as the Hereafter, ethics, virtues, and even laws. Think about it carefully. When poverty prevails, societal injustice becomes a norm. It is a sign that the ideals of the collectivity are money, self-interest, and the experience of bodily pleasures, and that its people lack knowledge, wisdom, and compassion. In any case, how can a soul be expected to be godly when it and its family are hungry, thirsty, and homeless? Such a soul is concerned with the survival of its body, and hence it will be immersed within the bodily. The soul of such a body will be desperate, anxious, and fearful, and it will resort to lying, cheating, and stealing in order to survive. These behaviours will become dispositions of the soul, and they will manifest in most of its interactions. Therefore, it is understandable why hungry, thirsty, and homeless souls behave as they often do. It is not their fault. If anything, the fault lies with us as a collectivity, for we

have abandoned the pursuit of knowledge, peace, and being compassionate, and allowed ourselves to be governed by money, self-interest, and bodily pleasures.

The blessed Imam Ali said, 'If *faqr* (poverty) was a human being, I would chastise it until it died.' Bodily poverty – in the sense of hunger, thirst, and lack of clothing and shelter – is the biggest enemy of humankind, and the degree to which it prevails in any given collectivity reveals the extent of that collectivity's godlessness. When we went to Iraq for *ziyarat* (the visitation of the shrines of our blessed Imams and Saints) during Saddam's time, we would see little children begging between the shrine-mosques of Imam Husayn and Hazrat Abbas. It was winter. They did not have footwear. They would walk with bare feet. If they did not receive anything from passers-by, they would swear, shout, and utter all forms of indecencies. They did not go to school, and they had lost all sense of self-respect. Why? It was not because their souls were bad intrinsically. No. The human soul is good in essence. It was because their bodily needs had not been satiated, and hence their minds were constantly preoccupied with the needs of the body.

The blessed Prophet's understanding of human nature was profound. He never considered any soul in his community to be evil inherently. This is because the soul is noble essentially. He regarded their minds to be entrapped and beguiled by their bodies and the bodily. One of the first things he did to tackle this problem was to address societal injustice and bodily poverty. This is because both injustice and poverty perpetuate and strengthen the sense of "I" as the body, or the egoic soul. (It should be noted that the egoic soul is also the root cause of both injustice and poverty.) As alluded to previously, the occurrence of high rates of bodily poverty is inevitable in collectivities that place greatest value on money, self-interest, and the experience of bodily pleasures. The effect of high rates of bodily poverty is increased crime, and the proliferation of individual and societal vices and

immorality. The nobility of the human soul is diminished in such collectivities, for the minds of the majority (poor or otherwise) are preoccupied with the body and bodily.

When Christian missionaries were sent to regions of Africa to spread Christianity, they did not start preaching upon arrival. They addressed the basic needs of the people first, and then built schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure. After that, they began to preach. Once bodily needs are satiated and the mind has security regarding future bodily needs, the ground is set for the mind to be purified and the soul to grow towards godliness. Remember, piety is not outwardly abstinence from the world and worldly. The notion of piety in Islam is to be involved with the world and worldly fully without becoming inwardly worldly in the least; in other words, it is the mind that is to be detached from the world and worldly wholly.

In any case, the priority in Islam regarding the collectivity is to ensure that the basic bodily needs of individuals are catered for. Thus, great emphasis is laid upon charity – that is, donating and giving alms regularly, which is known as *zakat* – and ensuring that all members of the human family are fed. Once minds have security in terms of food, clothing, and shelter, they can be directed to reflect upon the nobler purposes of existence. Bodily poverty, such as hunger, thirst, and homelessness, impedes constructive and productive thought. Minds that are in a state of constant deprivation are consumed by negativity. Such negative energy and thoughts affect human consciousness and hence the entire world. To reiterate, the existence of bodily poverty is not the fault of the poor in any given collectivity. It marks the failure of the rest of the individuals of the collectivity. As alluded to in a previous lecture, the failure of a single human being is the failure of all of humankind, for we are one soul in essence.

Allah states, 'I have created you from a single soul' (see 4:1, 7:189, and 39:6). As an individual soul, if you have achieved enlightenment and other souls are not as enlightened as you,

then they will reduce the overall state of enlightenment of humankind of which you are a part. Once I made an arrogant comment, and my friend's response changed my thinking. During our conversation, he said critically, "Look at the state of the Muslims!" I replied, "No, we should not say that ('Look at the state of Muslims!'), but rather, we should say, 'Look at the state of that group of Muslims!'" He asked, "What do you mean?" I said, "We are Shi'a. We are good and refined people." He responded, "But the onlooker does not distinguish between Shi'a and non-Shi'a, Sunni and non-Sunni, or Barelvi and Deobandi. They see 'us' as Muslims, and they see 'them' as Muslims. They consider us and them to be one community. To the outsider, all Muslims are the same. Now if a member of your family (*ummah*) is immersed in corruption, they drag the whole family (*ummah*) down with them." That is when my journey began. I reflected on what he said and realised that these notions of Shi'a, Sunni, Barelvi, and so on, are false. Muslims are one family – one *ummah*. Then I began to think further. From God's perspective, there is no Muslim, Christian, Jew, believer, or non-believer. They are all humans. They belong to the same human family (*ummah*). God says, 'I have created you from one soul, and as I have created, I will cause everything to return.' (See 4:1, 7:189, 20:55, and 39:6). Therefore, if one segment of the human family (*ummah*) is suffering and failing, then it is tantamount to the suffering and failure of the whole human family (*ummah*).

I often wondered why the great Prophets of God never confined themselves to caves so that they could worship God without distraction. No one appreciated the need and worth of solitude and seclusion with respect to the worship of God more than the blessed Prophets, and yet they spent the majority of their lives amongst their people as preachers and social reformers. They worked tirelessly in their respective communities. They did not discriminate between believer and non-believer. They preached to one and all. By knowing God and themselves, they understood

that humankind is one family. They realised that all our destinies are intertwined, and hence we are all failing in some fundamental sense until everybody evolves, understands God-centricity as the objective, and finds the light within. The blessed Prophet said that all of us are aboard the same boat; if one person – one of us – makes a hole where they are sat, all of us will drown. Humankind is drowning until all of us mature and become enlightened. The eschatological literature seems to presuppose our eventual maturity and enlightenment when it states that during the era of the Mahdi, the Earth shall yield its treasures plentifully, the heavens shall shower its rains unhesitatingly, and the entirety of humankind shall live in bliss (and not just the Muslims).

Therefore, we must guarantee that the basic bodily needs of all human beings are fulfilled, and that their minds have security. A child that experiences hunger frequently and hence is insecure about its food, clothing, and shelter in the future will not be able to learn substantively. Its mind will be worrying constantly about either its current or future bodily needs. Upon beginning his mission, the blessed Prophet set about immediately to emphasise the need to establish social justice and alleviate poverty. He would exhort the people to care for the orphans and destitute, and to give alms (*zakat*) as much as they could. In Medina, he institutionalised almsgiving (*zakat*) as a mandatory tax, and thereby he ensured that taking care of the poor and needy was established as a societal obligation (and henceforth statutory) in Muslim societies. The Quran did not specify the percentage of taxation (*zakat*). The blessed Prophet assessed the needs of his society and stipulated it accordingly. Thereafter, the stipulated percentage of *zakat* became obligatory upon wealth or sources of income, such as crops and livestock.

Why has the Quran not specified the percentage of *zakat* (taxation)? Obviously, the percentage of taxation that is necessary to cater for the societal needs of a particular time and place can never be designated as the percentage of taxation that is necessary

to cater for the societal needs of every other time and place. Societal needs vary in different times and places because of the existential property of growth, that is, due to the continuous growth of the individual and collectivity (see book 4 of the Islam and God-centricity series for information on the existential property of growth). To cater for the changing and growing needs of his society, the blessed Prophet introduced (a) another form of tax, known as *khums* (possibly before the regulation of mandatory *zakat* was established as a norm), and (b) an additional means of generating public wealth, known as *fay'*. *Khums* was a twenty percent tax on war booty, and *fay'* referred to vacated land acquired without war that was to be utilised by the blessed Prophet for the welfare of the needy. Regarding both the tax of *khums* and acquisition of *fay'*, Allah says, "... it is for Allah, His Prophet, the close ones, the orphan (*yatīm*), needy (*miskīn*), and the wayfarer (*ibn sabīl*) ..." (8:41 and 59:7). Interestingly, in the verse of *fay'*, Allah gives a rationale for commanding that all such land be utilised by the Prophet for the welfare of the needy, "... so that it (that is, such land) does not remain [in circulation] amongst the wealthy of you" (59:7).

Therefore, the Quran institutionalised different forms of taxes and means of generating public wealth in accordance with the changing and growing needs of the people and society. The essence of all such regulations is 'to stipulate mandatory almsgiving in accordance with the needs of the people' (see book 4 of the Islam and God-centricity series for information on the notions of the 'essences' and 'forms' of regulations). Hence, it is not possible to stipulate a fixed or universal percentage of taxation (*zakat*) for all times and places, that is, for contexts that are different in terms of societal needs. 'In essence', the forms of taxation in our societies today are no different to the forms institutionalised by the blessed Prophet (that is, *zakat*, *khums*, and *fay'*). The percentages of taxation (*zakat*) were always supposed to fluctuate in order to accommodate the growing needs of society.

The blessed Prophet fixed the percentage of taxation (*zakat*), institutionalised another of its forms (*khums*), and introduced an additional means of generating public wealth (*fay'*) to cater for the needs of his society. There is nothing more than this to the regulations of *zakat*, *khums*, and *fay'*. These forms of taxes and generating public wealth were relevant for his context because they ensured the needs of his society were catered for specifically and not the needs of every other foreseeable society. In view of this, the income tax and other forms of taxes that we pay today correspond to the mandatory *zakat* and *khums* given by people during the life of the Prophet. There is no difference between them because they are the same 'in essence'. This means we are fulfilling our religious obligation by paying them. In issuing the regulations of mandatory taxes (*zakat* and *khums*), Islam is no different to any other the human society both before and after it. All societies had and have taxes. When Islam formulated these regulations, it merely did so within its own context, that is, in light of the needs of the people and society at that time and place. Note, this analysis does not mean that we are not obliged to pay *zakat* and *khums* to cater for the needs of our communities, religions, sects, and their respective institutions today. On the contrary, we are obliged to cater for the needs of all the collectivities we belong to (such as the family, community, society, city, nation, religion, sect, and so on).

So when people say that the regulation of *zakat* is a divine law, or the regulation of *khums* is a sacred law, how are they divine or sacred? A 'form' of *khums* pre-existed Islam. The Quran simply adjusted it. The forms of *nikah* (marriage) and *talaq* (divorce) existed before the blessed Prophet started to propagate his message. He tweaked, humanised, or simply endorsed them. Similarly, social contracts and the norms of trade pre-existed the blessed Prophet. He merely modified them to curtail abuse. The Prophet neither introduced nor created the vast majority of *sharia* regulations. They existed prior to his prophethood. He simply

modified or endorsed them. Thus, the issues that the societal regulations of the *sharia* of Islam addressed have got nothing to do with religion or Islam in essence. They relate to the actions and interactions of humans as humans, and as such, humans have formulated norms and regulations regarding them, both before and after the blessed Prophet's mission. In other words, humans have and always will marry, divorce, trade, tax, penalise, and inherit irrespective of society, religion, and culture. It is just what humans do as humans regardless of religion, culture, and society. Thus, they are not 'religious' essentially. Yes, the blessed Prophet issued the 'optimal' or 'best' forms of those societal regulations in and for the context he was in undoubtedly. And herein is what religion wants: the 'optimal' and 'best' forms of regulations in and for any given context. That is it. Nothing more. If societal regulations are 'optimal' and 'best' in terms of facilitating the rational, moral, and spiritual growth of any given society, then they are 'religious' and 'Islamic'.

To repeat, the regulations of *zakat*, *khums*, and all other societal regulations, such as *talaq* and *nikah*, are 'religious' and 'Islamic' insofar as they are the 'optimal' and 'best' regulative forms in facilitating the rational, moral, and spiritual growth of the individual and collectivity in any given context. Therefore, if the regulations of *zakat* and *khums* do not cater for the needs of the people and society, then they are not 'religious' and 'Islamic'. This is because the essence of the regulations of *zakat* and *khums* is 'to stipulate mandatory almsgiving in accordance with the needs of the people and society'. There is nothing mystical or supernatural about the societal regulations of the *sharia* of Islam. This is all there is to them. We are to ensure that (a) societal regulations are not exploitative, discriminatory, and unjust in and for any given context; (b) societal regulations are 'optimal' and 'best' in facilitating the rational and moral growth in any given context; and (c) the bodily needs of one and all are met and not encroached upon. You will notice that this is exactly what all decent and ethical

humans want and are endeavouring for in their legal systems today in a nutshell, and it is as 'Islamic' as Islam can get.

People talk about an "Islamic" economic system and an ""Islamic" political system. But there is no such thing as an "Islamic" economic system or an "Islamic" political system. Creating economic and political systems is what humans do as humans. They are human endeavours. Islam simply wants us to adopt the 'optimal' and 'best' systems, which are those that are conducive to the rational and moral growth of the individuals and societies in our context. The creation of societal systems and regulations was never Islam's primary concern. Its fundamental concern was and is the actualisation of human godliness – that is, how to become godly and enlightened souls. Islam will intervene in the societal or any other domain (such as the technological and scientific) if its fundamental concern is being impeded, or there is a possibility of it being impeded.

To define how *khums* is to be divided in every time and place until the Day of *Qiyāma*, that is, without assessing the needs of the people and society in any given time and place, is nonsensical. How is it prudent, wise, or rational to state that one of the two equal portions of *khums* will be given to *Sayyids*, and the other to non-*Sayyids*, without assessing who the needy are and what their numbers are? Undeniably, the division of khums into two equal portions was justified when it was formulated, for it was catering for the needs of the people of those contexts. It was a just regulation. But is it justified today? Does the regulation make sense in our contexts? Is it a 'just' regulation today? Think about this carefully. At present, nobody gives *zakat* in the Shi'a community because we do not own livestock and crops anymore generally. This means we have interpreted the mandatory law of *zakat* to be applicable to livestock and crops only and nothing else. In the Quran, where does it say that *zakat* is applicable on livestock and crops only? The blessed Prophet said that the principal source of guidance is the Quran, did he not? And he said that his *sunna*

(praxis) is subordinate to the Quran, did he not? The principal source of guidance – the Quran – instructs us to give *zakat*, and it is silent about what *zakat* is applicable on, that is, it doesn't say anything about livestock and crops. Why? Think about it. It is the Book of Guidance. There must be a reason why It is silent. It is silent because the fundamental point of *zakat* is to cater for the needs of the community. The things that *zakat* is applicable upon are secondary. The reason why *zakat* is emphasised to the degree it is in the Quran (very often, alongside the mention of *salat*) is because if the basic needs of all people are not met, it is impossible to create a godly community. This is all the Quran is concerned about. Remember, Godliness and compassion for all people go hand in hand. It is impossible for a society that is indifferent to the plight of its most vulnerable members to be godly.

Therefore, when the Quran instructs us to give *zakat*, it means we are to give *zakat* on whatever we deem as wealth. This means 'wealth' can be crops, livestock, land, money, stocks, shares, and so on. One effect of rendering *zakat* as being applicable upon livestock and crops exclusively is that we, the Shi'a community, pay *khums* only. Imagine, we have abandoned *zakat* which is mentioned numerous times in the Quran, but we pay *khums* which is mentioned in one verse only.

The verse of *khums* states:

> *Know that whatever war-booty you take, one fifth of it belongs to God and the Messenger, and the close relatives, orphans, needy and travellers, if [or so long as] you believe in God and that which We revealed to Our servant on the day of distinction, [that is, on] the day in which the two forces met [at the battle of Badr]. God has power over all things (8:41).*

In this verse, six recipients of *khums* are mentioned. The blessed Imams said that those who were unable to distribute their *khums* to these recipients should send it to the Imam who would distribute it on their behalf. Notice that the verse of *khums*

does not mention the binary of *Sayyid* and non-*Sayyid*. But it does mention 'the close relatives' of the blessed Prophet as one of the recipients of *khums*. This is because the binary of 'the family of the Prophet' and 'non-family' did exist with respect to the recipients of *zakat* generally. To explain, the community did not deem it proper for the family of the Prophet to be recipients of *zakat*, for it was considered to be siphoned or 'dirty' wealth, and hence unworthy of being given to nobility generally, even if they were needy. This means the distinction between the family of the Prophet and non-family with respect to *zakat* was contextual, for we do not consider siphoned money to be different from any other type of money today. In any case, based on this understanding of the people of that time, poor individuals who were 'non-family' could receive *zakat*, and poor individuals who classified as 'the family of the Prophet' could not. Subsequently, this contextual understanding of *zakat* (as siphoned money) was deemed to have been the underlying rationale for the verse of *khums* permitting the needy among 'the close relatives' of the Prophet to be recipients of alms as *khums*, for the people did not consider *khums* as siphoned wealth.

Accordingly, there is a regulation of *zakat* stating that it is forbidden for a *Sayyid* to accept the *zakat* of a non-Sayyid. Interestingly, another regulation states that it is permissible for a *Sayyid* to accept the *zakat* of another *Sayyid*. This means a *Sayyid* is prohibited from accepting the siphoned, dirty alms (*zakat*) of a non-*Sayyid*, but they can accept it (the siphoned, dirty *zakat*) from a *Sayyid*. These regulations are discriminating between people on the basis of lineage alone, which is characteristic of the *jahiliyya* period prior to Islam. The *Sayyid's zakat* is superior to the non-*Sayyid's* because the *Sayyid* is superior to the non-*Sayyid* by virtue of his *sayyid-ness* (being a member of the family of the Prophet). To reiterate, our books of *fiqh* (or *sharia* laws) state that I am superior to you by virtue of my (*Sayyid*) lineage alone, and hence I cannot accept your filthy alms (*zakat*); however, I can accept the

filthy alms (*zakat*) of somebody else who shares my lineage. Does this make sense? Allah does not discriminate between people except on the basis of reason, morality, and godliness. He says,

> *O humankind, We created you [all] from a [single] man and a [single] woman and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognise one another [through mutual interaction]. In God's eyes, the most noble of you are those that are most mindful [of Him]. Indeed, God is All-knowing, All-aware (49:13).*

The people of Arabia used to have a class system, and so one of the tasks of the blessed Prophet was to emphasise that all humans are equal in the sight of God. Abu Sufyan was enraged that a slave, like Bilal, could be considered equal to him. Again, the blessed Prophet preached that women were the same as men in the eyes of God. The men of Makkah were appalled by this. The Prophet dispensed with all forms of bodily, worldly, and other mental discriminations. So how has this discrimination between *Sayyid* and non-*Sayyid* managed to creep into the Islam of the blessed Prophet? Many members of the *dalit* caste in Hinduism ('the untouchables') were attracted to Islam because it did not distinguish between humans on the basis of bodily, worldly, and other mental discriminations.

Today, we consider the notion of 'the dignity of every human being' as a given and self-evident. The blessed Prophet taught us that we are all from Adam, and that Adam in turn was made from dust. Is it rational, moral, and godly to split *khums* into two equal portions, where one portion will be spent on the needs of two hundred million non-*Sayyids*, and the other portion will be spent on the needs of ten million *Sayyids*? Is this logical, ethical, and godly? Again, this problem is due to the fact that we understand regulations and laws (of *fiqh*) in a form-based manner as opposed to an essence-based manner. *Zakat* and *khums* were supposed to address the needs of people and society, and hence they were never supposed to be fixed by set percentages and portions. As

needs grow, taxation is supposed to change accordingly. However, it must be remembered that the basic purpose of *zakat* and *khums* is to ensure that the bodily needs (food, water, clothing, and shelter) of every person are met, and that every person has security with respect to their future bodily needs. This is because the human mind is only able to pursue the higher purposes of life when it has such security.

Unfortunately, we read religious texts literally and thereby absolutise the relative/ contextual (or essentialise the forms). Consider the issue of financial interest in Muslim scholarly discourse. The Muslim's position is that interest is *haram*. If you ask for the definition of interest, the classical response will be the following: to loan money to someone with the proviso that more money than the original loan be returned, that is, without the lender having done anything to justify the extra return. A person may ask, "Is there a way to get more money from that person legally in the *sharia*? Is there a legal loophole or ruse?" They will be advised thus (please note that it is a very crude example): "If you loan £100 and want £200 in return, then it is not permissible. However, you can add something to £100, like a handkerchief costing 10 pence, and stipulate that the value of both (the £100 and the handkerchief) is £200. If the borrower agrees with that valuation contractually, then the return of £200 is legitimate." This may be shocking, but this particular legal loophole or ruse is considered legitimate in Muslim scholarly discourse, and hence one can employ it. This type of clever and underhand manoeuvring is the natural result of the form-based understanding (or literal appreciation) of the regulations and laws (of *fiqh*), like *zakat, khums*, and interest.

Usury (*ribā*) is prohibited (*ḥarām*) in the Quran. It is unethical and ungodly. The reason it is forbidden by God is because it is exploitation of either the poor or the borrower. In usury, the borrower is either hard-pressed to pay the loan back, or they are paying it back with a very high return, due to the extortionate

rate of interest set by the lender. But what if the rate of interest is not exploitative? Can there be instances of interest that are not exploitative? For instance, I deposit my money in a bank, the bank invests it in several businesses, and then gives me a return. Is that exploitative? Now consider this question. Why is it not legitimate to say to the borrower, "If I continue to keep the money you want me to lend you in the bank, the return would be this much; if you pay me back that return on top of the loan, then I am not losing out and you will have the loan you need"? Is that irrational, unethical, and ungodly? (Obviously, the repayment of the extra money must not be exploitative in the sense of either tying down the borrower to a lifetime of poverty and misery, or paying back the loan with what is considered extortionate interest.)

The Quran forbids interest that is exploitative. The forms of interest offered by mainstream banks around the world today are beneficial and productive for the borrower economically and in other respects too. They are not exploitative, unjust, or irrational. For instance, if a young couple purchased a house with a mortgage, they would have a family home at fairly young age in their lives (and hence they would have security of shelter for themselves and their family). They would have to pay back the mortgage every month over some years at a very reasonable and manageable rate regulated by the state. Obviously, owning a house affords more peace of mind to all family members than renting a property with monthly repayments equal to or greater than the monthly mortgage repayments. Moreover, if they rented, they would never own a house.

The forms of regulations (or regulative forms) of the *sharia* of Islam – which are commonly known as 'Islamic laws' – were ideal for the rational, moral, and spiritual growth of the individual and communities of seventh century Arabia; and by and large, they continued to be effective until the 1800s. What we must understand is that these Islamic laws were formulated in a particular context on the basis of the 'essences' of those laws. In

other words, every law (Islamic or otherwise) is a 'form', and it has an 'essence' or 'spirit'. For instance, the essence of *zakat* is 'to cater for the growing needs of the community' so that the needs of every member of the community are met. It is only then that every soul is able to grow rationally, morally, and spiritually.

To every just societal law, which is secular essentially because it is formulated on basis of reason, morality, and the existential property of growth, Islam adds a spiritual dimension for its adherents. This spiritual dimension is 'essential' for Muslims (as it pertains to the essence), and it is 'to be mindful of God'. For instance, in a business transaction, the secular law – which is formulated on the basis of reason, morality, and the existential property of growth – will state that the seller must not lie; in addition to this law, Islam will instruct its adherents to be mindful of God, and advise them to set the price of the commodity a little lower than the norm, and to give a bit more of it than the price. Remember, Islam wants us to develop the tendency of relying upon Allah and trusting that He will give much more in this life and the Hereafter. Similarly, Islam advises the buyer not to haggle too much. After haggling a bit, the buyer is to pay what the seller is asking for, as long as the price is affordable. The buyer should pay the seller for the sake of God, their own dignity, and the dignity of the seller. And again, the buyer is to rely upon Allah and trust that He will give much more in this life and the Hereafter. Islam introduced such norms within the societal domain to awaken our innate nobility and spirit. Our minds work in the strangest of ways. If someone is begging, stretching out their hand, we give without a moment's hesitation; however, we haggle relentlessly with a poor person who is trying to sell things for a living. That soul is making a pittance. We should give them more than whatever their asking price is. Sadly, our minds work very differently.

In view of this therefore, the law of *zakat* has two dimensions: secular and spiritual. The secular dimension pertains to its

objective of fulfilling the basic needs of the human community so that minds are freed from mundane bodily preoccupations and hence can grow rationally, morally, and spiritually. The spiritual dimension of *zakat* is to awaken the soul, and hence one is to give the mandatory tax and voluntary alms with the intention of 'for the sake of God'. The mindset of a godly soul who gives *zakat* is as follows: "I am giving *zakat* for the sake of God who is All-pervading. I am giving it to none other than His manifestations, and hence there is no 'other'. Therefore, they are my human family. Those are my children. That is my mother and my father. We are one family, one humankind. And in the realest sense, I am giving *zakat* to myself, for their existence and the consciousness of their soul is one and the same as mine. They are me. That person is *me* in a different form." However, for us ordinary souls, the spiritual dimension of *zakat* includes purging the mind of its attachment to wealth and the world completely inwardly. In *Nahjul Balagha*, the blessed Imam Ali has said: "Do not waste your *zakat* by not giving it with the intention of 'for the sake of God.'" If you give *zakat* without intending it 'for the sake of God', it will have outward effects undoubtedly, like feeding, educating, and housing the poor, but its inwards effects will be limited if any.

The verbal root of the word *zakat* means to purify. The Quran uses it and its other derivatives in the context of the soul and its salvation. In a deeper sense, *zakat* is to purify the soul of all inward attachments to wealth and possessions, and as such, it is essential as a means to salvation. Allah says, "The one who purifies his soul succeeds" (91:9). But how does giving wealth as mandatory and/or voluntary alms (*zakat*) lead to salvation? Salvation is to be free of everything other than Allah inwardly, and since inner detachment with respect to ownership results in freedom, it is a means to salvation. The mind must rid itself of the notions, beliefs, and convictions of arbitrary ownership, power, and control. It is simplistic to think that the wealthy are not being

tested by God. In fact, the contrary to true. They are being tested much more than most. A poor person knows they are beholden to the mercy of their Lord. They know they have nobody but God. However, wealth and power are likely to delude the rich into thinking they 'own' and are in control. Such states of mind are the biggest impediments from God. Those who are not wealthy should feel sorry and pray for them. The poor should pray thus upon receiving their charity: "O Allah, thank You. This servant of Yours has fed me, and so give them salvation. They have fed my body for Your sake, and so please do the best for their soul."

In the deepest sense, *zakat* is to offer the sense of "me" to God as alms. Then the mind and soul will be rid of the egoic soul, the consciousness "I am the body". Often, *zakat* is understood to be a means of removing 'the love of this world' from the mind and soul. However, 'the love of this world' is not what we think it is. Usually, we think the notion of 'the love of this world' refers to our love of possessions and wealth, or the love we have for our children. However, in the final analysis, 'the love of this world' is the love of one's own self, the egoic soul. It is this sense of "I" as the body that loves itself, creates the sense of 'me', 'myself', and 'my world', and falls in love with it. The love of the self *is* the love of the world. Even when we give alms (*zakat*) in the way of God, we have the sense of agency ("I am doing charity") and feel good about it (the feeling "I am good and happy about giving this charity"), which means we have done it for ourselves. We have given charity because it makes *me* feel good. At the root of it, there is love for one's own self. This sense of agency, "I", with its love for itself, is the ultimate obstacle. Similarly, when we say, "I am praying because I want to meet God," there is a sense of agency, "I", that is concerned with its self, that is, its own happiness and salvation. Its desire to meet God is filled with love for it its own self. This sense of "I" needs to be offered to Allah as *zakat*.

Allah says:

> *Indeed, [as for] those who sell God's covenant and their own oaths for a small price, there will be no share for them in the life to come. God will neither speak to them nor look at them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He cleanse them. An agonising torment awaits them (3:77).*

But what will Allah not cleanse them of? The answer is: He will not cleanse them of themselves. Allah will not purify them of their own selves, which is the egoic soul. According to a *ḥadīth*, anyone who has an iota of arrogance will not be able to enter Paradise. Thus, the egoic soul (the sense of "I", which will be very refined, moral, and godly at this final stage of the journey) needs to be gotten rid of by offering it to Allah wholesomely.

In another verse, Allah says that prior to being admitted into Paradise, all forms of malice will be removed from the hearts of its prospective inhabitants, that is, souls must be purified before being admitted into Paradise (see 3:195 and 7:41-43). Malice is the inevitable outcome of the egoic soul; for it is only when the mind and soul are identified and attached to the body fully as "I am this person", that the feelings of hate, dislike, resentment, and malice occur. All such emotions are indicative of the existence of the egoic soul. Therefore, until and unless the egoic soul is dissolved by the realisation that the soul's consciousness transcends the body, mind, and person, *zakat* in the deepest sense (which is to give the egoic soul to God as *zakat*) will not have occurred. Our beloved Imam Husayn taught us that everything belongs to God. When all was being taken away from him on the plains of Karbala, he was in a state of absolute surrender. His demeanour on that fateful day was radiating the following existential truth: 'O Allah, it was always Yours! When was it ever mine?' Remember, whatever this sense of "me" does and takes itself to be, is pretentious. He said in his *du'a*, 'I am he whose sense of goodness is evil.'

Therefore, in its deepest sense and in the final stage, *zakat* is to purify the soul of its egoic aspect (the sense of "I") by giving it as alms to God and saying to Him, "It is but You." To repeat, God says, "The one who purifies his soul succeeds" (91:9). Soon after awakening in the bodily constitution, the soul is engulfed by the false notion of "I am the body" due to the mind's identification and association of the soul's consciousness with the body and bodily wholly. Accordingly, salvation is for the one who purifies his soul of its egoic aspect. Consider the following sentiment which we often feel: "I am proud to be a Muslim." Is this not an arrogant statement? Remember how God tested His great servant, Iblīs, the Jinn. He was proud to be 'a devotee of God'. And then when God commanded him to prostrate before Adam, he replied, 'I shall not!' And that was the end of his story.

Similarly, we feel, "I am proud to be a lover of Husayn!". Unfortunately, many of us (Shi'as) think that loving him justifies, if not requires, cursing another (who bears his godly light within by virtue of their innate humanity). But here, we need to ask ourselves: *who* and *what* is making this claim and cursing another? Is it the egoic soul? Do you think a godly soul would make such a claim and curse another? Are you sure this love for Husayn is not simply the love of the egoic soul for itself? Imagine how the pride of the egoic soul has deluded us into thinking that loving Imam Husayn requires cursing another! How can one lover of Imam Husayn curse another? Is this how much you love your Husayn? How can you curse anyone who has the light of your beloved in his heart? Go and kiss their hands, for they are the devotees of the love of your heart. The arrogance of this sense of "I" in any shape or form is a sign of a corrupt soul. Perform inner *zakat* and purify it.

The notion of 'the heart' (*al-qalb*) refers to the most intimate part of human existence. In its deepest sense, it is the centre of our being – the "place" where the soul's pure consciousness "I am" resides and from which the sense of "I" as the body (the egoic soul)

arises. The Quran mentions the notion of the heart in a variety of contexts in several of its verses. Consider the following examples in which Allah is referring to corrupt souls: (a) "God has set a seal on their hearts and their ears, and on their eyes is a covering. They will have a great punishment" (2:7); (b) "In their hearts is a sickness, and God has increased their sickness. They will have a painful punishment on account of their persistent lying" (2:10); and (c) "Then your hearts became hardened thereafter, and they became as stones, or even harder still" (2:74). Now consider the following examples in which Allah is referring to godly souls: (a) "[The penitent are] those who have faith and whose hearts are at rest in God's remembrance. Indeed, [it is] in the remembrance of God [that] hearts are at rest" (13:28); (b) "True believers are those whose hearts tremble [with awe] when God is mentioned. And when His Revelations are recited to them, they increase in faith, and in their Lord they put their trust" (8:2); and (c) "[...] except for the one who comes to Allah with an untarnished heart" (26:89).

When the heart hardens, the egoic soul (the sense of "I" as the body) is extremely crystallised, and it is unable to see the truth regardless of the effort another makes to show it to them. A characteristic common to such souls is that they lack compassion for those they do not consider as 'mine'. In other words, a person with a hardened heart will not be moved by the plight of humans and non-humans deemed to be 'other' and not significant, such as the suffering of orphans seen on the news. Their response upon witnessing such tragedies is likely to be cold and clinical, for instance, "I have already made a donation." The minds of such souls are consumed by the bodily and worldly. They have become accustomed to unwholesome thoughts and behaviours pertaining to the bodily and worldly, and have identified with them wholly. However, according to the Quran, redemption and return to Allah is possible for such souls despite their hearts being sealed (see 39:53).

Allah exhorts us in the Quran to engage in excessive remembrance of Him (*dhikr* – see 8:45, 26:227, 33:21, 33:35, 33:41-42, and 62:10). The mind is to engage itself in as much *dhikr* of Allah as possible in order to awaken the soul and align it to its true calling. The excessive remembrance of God is one of the most potent ways to centre the soul, which means bringing it near to the heart initially, and finally in it. The effect of even coming near to it is peace and inner contentment. No amount of the mind's high-powered reasoning will move us in the direction of God within substantively. After reason has played its role, only the love of God suffices. But how does chanting the names of God with the tongue affect the soul? Consider the following: If you are accustomed to eating hot and spicy food, then the taste of bland food will be unpalatable. Now what is it that likes the taste of spicy food? In other words, which entity enjoys experiencing it? Is it the tongue or the soul? It is the soul that likes it. The tongue is merely the organ of taste that receives and conveys the tastes of substances to the mind, such as sweet, sour, and spicy tastes. However, if the soul forces itself to consume bland foods repeatedly, then the mind will forget the taste of spicy food and the soul will get accustomed to and enjoy bland tasting food. Sensory inputs affect the soul positively and negatively. They can be detrimental or beneficial to the soul physically, rationally, morally, and spiritually. If we have repeated exposure to unbefitting experiences, the soul will be affected negatively; the mind's reaction to the exposures will be revulsion initially, followed by acclimatisation, enjoyment, and addiction finally. If the soul regulates its sensory inputs optimally in terms of physique, reason, and morality, and incorporates the excessive remembrance of God for its spirituality, it will reach God in no time.

Allah's exhortation to remember Him is repeated in the Quran again and again. We are urged to remember Him day and night, mornings and evenings, and plentifully. The soul has come from the placeless place of Divinity, which is its Home or Heart, and it

is imprisoned in and veiled by the body. Hence, when it is made to hear the name 'Allah' repeatedly, it begins to remember Home.

The remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*) with the tongue awakens the soul to the presence of God in the Heart, and hence it experiences rest. Our minds are constantly preoccupied with the world. We need sensory input constantly. This is because we are attached to the body and bodily wholly. We are totally veiled from our own existence, our own self. We are unconscious beings really. We are not alive properly. Our bodies are coasting through life. This is why the blessed Prophet said: *an-nāsu niyāmun fa-idhā mātū intabahū* – "People are asleep. When they die, they awaken." This means that when the sensory input via the body ceases, we will begin to see: 'O my God, this is what I was.' We are constantly preoccupied with money, business, friends, love, hate, criticism, and entertainment, and hence we have no peace. The Prophet said, 'The joy of solitude cannot be expressed.' But we consider solitude to be the biggest calamity. Imagine. What have we become? The first Imam said, 'If you could understand the joy that accompanies the state of being abstemious (to the body, bodily, world and worldly), you would not be concerned about food, water, and shelter.' In other words, if you could understand the joy of knowing yourself beyond the body and mind, you will be indifferent to the body, bodily, world and worldly. We are so enmeshed in the body that it is difficult for us to relate to these ideas.

Allah urges us in the Quran to do *dhikr* excessively (see 8:45, 26:227, 33:21, 33:35, 33:41-42, and 62:10). Keep on chanting His name(s) and remember Him. Even if you feel it has no value, force yourself. For instance, an unhealthy person is told to walk for twenty minutes. They struggle to do it and experience breathing difficulties. The person stops, rings their dietitian, physician, and life coach, and says to each, "This walking is not good for me." Each would respond thus, "Carry on doing it. Do it for a month, and you will see the difference." This is exactly how Allah has prescribed *dhikr* for us in the Quran. The blessed Prophet

emphasised the practice of excessive *dhikr*. Do not abandon it just because there is no effect at the outset. This apparent lack of any effect is due to the soul being enwrapped by the body firmly, and hence it feels as though there is no effect, but actually there is, for no endeavour in the way of God is wasted. So continue chanting the name of Allah, and at some point, your soul will feel the peace that is caused by repeating His blessed name, as the Quran states (see 13:28). The following is an elaboration of its effects: Initially, the unceasing thought processes slow down and stop; then the tumultuous emotions quickly follow suit; and finally, when one is sitting, perhaps in the garden, and chanting, "Allah, Allah, Allah," one sees something that has not been experienced before. One hears the trees singing the praise of God. From hereon, one's daily visits to the mosque for morning prayers are completely different. One has awoken to the 'life' of that mosque. One now feels love for the mosque, and one knows the mosque really loves them. The blessed Prophet said about the mount of Uhud, 'I am in love with it, and it loves me.' The Prophet named his sword and displayed affection to it as though it was alive. Everything is alive. This becomes a fact when the heart melts away in the remembrance of the Beloved.

When we are sat in a calm state chanting the name of Allah, we become silent and still. Then when we observe nature from that state of silence and stillness, it begins to suggest itself. It will be as if we are seeing the redness of a rose for the first time. We will exclaim, "*Subhanallah*!" It will be as if we are smelling its fragrance for the first time, and again we will announce in delight, "*Subhanallah*, what a beautiful fragrance this is!" It will be as if we are tasting the same food we are used to eating for the first time, and we will say, "Thank you for this delicious food." We will begin to see every aspect of life, including the mundane, as it really is, and realise that all of it is 'extraordinary'. When the mind and soul yield, the heart opens, and we begin to live again.

Our spiritual masters have said that when one chants the name *Allah, Allah, Allah, Allah,* very frequently, after a while one will hear the heart call out *Allah, Allah, Allah, Allah.*

The Quran says:

> *Recite what has been revealed to you of the Book and perform the prayer. Indeed, prayer prevents indecency and unethical [behaviour]. However, the remembrance of God is greater. God knows whatever you are doing (29:45).*

Therefore, the remembrance of Allah is greater! The *dhikr* of Allah awakens the soul to the reality of the Heart.

The soul will not find the peace of the Heart by praying our usual *salats*, almsgiving (*zakat*), fasting (*ṣiyām*), or performing Hajj. This is because it hasn't even started going Home yet, and hence it feels estranged in the midst of *salat* and so on. The way Home is the remembrance of Allah. Now, if a soul can reach the stage where it is immersed in the remembrance of God fully, it will begin to forget itself and the Beloved will emerge. It is at this point that it has reached the Heart finally – its Home and Destination. It is now fully at rest: *Ya ayyatu-ha-n-nafsu-l-muṭma'inna* ..., "O contented soul, return to your Lord well pleased and well pleasing! Enter amongst My servants, and enter into My Garden" (89:27-30).