

Stages of Spiritual Journey

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A materialist passes his life in the dark valley of materialism. He is plunged in the sea of evil desires and always is tossed from this side to that side by the waves of material relations of wealth, wife and children. He cries for help, but in vain and in the end gets nothing but disappointment. Sometimes in this sea a breath of enlivening breeze (divine impulse) pats him and kindles in him a hope that he may reach the shore safely. But this breeze does not blow regularly. It is only occasional. "In your life you get some pleasant breaths from your Lord. Make a point of being benefited by them and do not turn away from them."

Under the divine impulse the novice decides to somehow or other pass the world of plurality. This journey is called by the gnostics *sayr wa suluk* (spiritual journey). *Suluk* means to traverse the path and *sayr* means to view the characteristics and prominent features of the stages and stations on the way.

Riyazat and acts of self-mortification are the provisions required for this spiritual journey. As it is not easy to renounce the material relations, the novice slowly breaks the snares of the world of plurality and cautiously begins his journey from the material world. Before long he enters another world called "barzakh". This is the world of his evil desires and inner thoughts. Here he finds that material relations have accumulated a lot of impurities in his heart. These impurities which are an offshoot of his material relations, are a product of his voluptuous thoughts and sensual desires.

These thoughts obstruct the novice in the pursuit of his spiritual journey with a result that he loses peace of mind. He wants to enjoy the recollection of Allah for some time, but these thoughts suddenly interrupt him and foil his efforts. Somebody has well said that man is always engrossed in his petty thoughts and haunted by the ideas of gain and loss. As a result he not only loses his composure and peace of mind, but can also not pay attention to his spiritual journey to a higher world. It is obvious that mental unrest is more harmful than any physical loss or pain. Man can avoid the clash of external relations and interests, but it is difficult for him to get rid of his own ideas and thoughts because they are always with him.

Anyhow, the true seeker of Allah and traveler in his way is not distressed and discouraged by these obstacles and continues to boldly proceed to his destination with the help of his divine impulse, till he safely gets out of the world of petty and conflicting ideas called *barzakh*. He has to be very vigilant and watchful lest any vicious thought may remain lurking in some hidden corner of his mind.

When these vicious thoughts are turned out, they usually hide in some hidden corner of the mind. The poor spiritual traveler wrongly thinks that he has got rid of their mischief, but when he has found the way to the fountain of life and wants to drink from it, they suddenly appear to ruin him.

This spiritual traveler may be compared to a person who has built a water tank in his house but has not used long. In the meantime the impurities and pollution have settled down in the bottom of the tank although water appears to be clear from above. He thinks that water is clean, but when he gets down into the tank or washes something in it, black patches appear on the surface and he finds that water is dirty.

For this reason it is necessary for the sālik (spiritual traveler) to concentrate his thoughts with the help of riyāzat and acts of self-mortification so that his attention may not be diverted from Allah. At last when after passing through the barzakh the spiritual traveler enters the spiritual world, he still has to traverse several more stages the details of which we will describe later.

In short the spiritual traveler watching his own lower self and the Divine Names and Attributes gradually advances till ultimately he reaches the stage of total fanā (self-annihilation) that is passing away from his own perishable will and then the station of baqā (abiding in the everlasting Will of Allah). It is at this stage that the secret of eternal life is revealed to him. . . .

In connection with the spiritual journey another important and essential thing is meditation or contemplation (muraqabah). It is necessary for the spiritual traveler not to ignore meditation at any stage from the beginning to the end. It must be understood that meditation has many grades and is of many types. In the initial stages the spiritual traveler has to do one type of meditation and at later stages of another type. As the spiritual traveler goes forward, his meditation becomes so strong that if ever it was undertaken by a beginner, he would either give it up for good or would be mad. But after successfully completing the preliminary stages, the gnostic becomes able to undertake the higher stages of meditation. At that time many things which were lawful to him in the beginning get forbidden to him.

As a result of careful and diligent meditation a flame of love begins to kindle in the heart of the spiritual traveller, for it is an inborn instinct of man to love the Absolute Beauty and Perfection. But the love of material things overshadows this inherent love and does not allow it to grow and become visible. Meditation weakens this veil till ultimately it is totally lifted. Then that innate love appears in its full splendour and leads man's conscience towards Allah. The mystic poets often figuratively call this divine love "wine".

When the gnostic continues to undertake meditation, for quite a long time, divine lights begin to be visible to him. In the beginning these lights flash like lightning for a moment and then disappear. Gradually the divine lights grow strong and appear like little stars. When they grow further, they appear first like the moon and then like the sun. Sometimes they appear like a burning lamp also. In the gnostic terminology these lights are known as the gnostic sleep and they belong to the world of barzakh.

For the complete text, see: http://www.al-islam.org/lwm/tabatabai_1.htm