

## The Spiritual Journey

Sometimes in life a breath of enlivening breeze (divine impulse) touches the human being and kindles in him a hope that he may be successful with Allah. But this breeze does not blow regularly. It is only occasional. "Verily, in the days of your life there will come to you wafts of Divine breaths from your Lord. Be aware [when they blow]; turn to them and do not turn [your face] away from them."

During such moments the traveler on the path of God feels new blood in his veins, and under the effect of that very Divine attraction, decides to go beyond the realms of multiplicity, and by all possible means, prepares provisions and starts a journey. In the terminology of the gnostics ('urafa) this journey is called wayfaring and spiritual journeying (sayr wa suluk). Suluk means traveling along the path, while sayr means observing particularities and marvels of stages and phases encountered on the way. The provisions (zaad) required for this spiritual journey consist of spiritual and ascetic practices (riyadat) to discipline the soul. Since relinquishing material attachments is very difficult, the traveler (salik) begins to cut the binding chains of attachments to the realm of multiplicity little by little

As he begins his journey from the material world he enters 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 lustful thoughts and 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. 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.

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. 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 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.

It must be born in mind that wayfaring and spiritual journey is not in contradiction with the traveler's existence in and interaction with the material world. The multiplicity in the external world always remains as it is, and the traveler finds unity within that multiplicity. A [spiritually] strong traveler is the one who is conscious of his own state while at the same time is cognizant of the world of multiplicities and conducts the affairs of both with utmost care.

In the beginning of the spiritual journey, by resorting to asceticism (zuhd), contemplation on and awareness of the heedless and transient nature of the world and the futility of attachment to it, the traveler in the path of God should sever the chain of attachment to the world of multiplicity. Since asceticism results in detesting worldly affairs, the wayfarer would not rejoice in occurrences that result in his outward and material gains; neither would he grieve for those events that bring him material loss.

لَكَيْلًا تَأْسَوْا عَلَىٰ مَا فَاتَكُمْ وَلَا تَفْرَحُوا بِمَا آتَاكُمْ

that you grieve not for the sake of what escapes you, nor rejoice over what you are given.  
(57:23)

After passing through this stage, the traveler will find out that he has a strong interest in and attachment to his own soul and likes himself a lot. He will realize that all his efforts and spiritual combat in effect, emanate from his excessive love for his own soul. Since a human being is selfish and egocentric by nature; he loves himself and sacrifices everything for the love of his own soul and does not avoid destroying anything for his own survival. Struggle against self-centeredness and elimination of this natural instinct is the most difficult of all difficult tasks. Unless this passion is totally eliminated, and this instinct killed, the light of God will not manifest itself in one's heart. By pleading for Divine Grace and continuous help and mercy of the Most Merciful, the traveler must gradually weaken the ties of self-love and self-centeredness, and eventually sever them all. He must recant this inner idol, which is the source of all vices; and consign it to oblivion once and for all so that all his deeds would be definitely for the sake of Sacred Divine Essence only, and his love for himself would be transformed into the love of God. This can only be attained through spiritual combat.

After traversing this phase and having severed all his ties, the traveler no longer has any attachment to his corporeal being and its needs, even to the bondage of his soul. Now, whatever he does is for God's sake.

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Adapted from:

- 1) Stages of the Spiritual Journey by Allama Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai
- 2) Kernel of the Kernel: Concerning the wayfaring and spiritual journey of the people of intellect. From the teachings of Allama Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai