

## **THE PATH OF GNOSIS**

### **IN THE SUFI TEACHINGS OF IBN AL- `ARABI**

This essay contemplates upon the theosophy and psychology of Sufism, as expounded by Ibn al-`Arabi, who was one of the great Sufi Masters and one of the most prolific writers in the early history of Sufism.

Ibn al-`Arabi reveals an essential unity between man and God. Man is a theomorphic reflection of God, and the path is a path of self-discovery, as much as it is a path to know God. The Essence of God is only revealed through a knowledge of the Divine Attributes. These attributes, or qualities, are potentially within all human beings, and the purpose of our existence is to know the attributes and bring them into actualization. We do this through the World of Imagination, which is the mediator between the Essential Reality (God) and the World of Form. Through this Imagination we interpret and name the Qualities of Essence or Being. It is also through the Imagination that we come ever closer to the Reality and engender It into our being.

The process of this prayer or path of the mystic is both a disintegration of one's present interpretation of identity and a greater interpretive/imaginative realization of one's being. This alchemical process is continuous for the mystic, and for God as well.

I will sometimes use the term `man' in a non-gender way to refer to both man and woman; though I realize that feminists concerned with gender language might revolt at this use. My apologies, but if one wants to learn of esoteric matters, then one may have to endure greater struggles than this. Because Ibn al-`Arabi and his commentators use the term, it is useful to harmonize this essay with the sound of theirs. Also, esoterically speaking in Sufism, the term `woman' refers to that aspect of the soul which is perfect and God-like. The soul as `she' is the perfection which subsists in potential, as in "the wisdom of the soul."

But the term 'man' refers to that aspect of the soul which is struggling toward perfection or union with the divine perfection [of the soul]. The soul as 'he' is the one ascending the ladder within the [perfect/she] Imagination. The soul is both perfect (in potential) and growing in actuality. Thus, the esoteric sexual union is what all gnostics are involved with, man or woman. And the Perfect Man is both man consciously ascending the path in prayer and woman realizing her eternal perfection. What has been said is a secret to contemplate upon.

Man is continually finding himself and continually transcending beyond that knowing. Thus, the spiritual journey of the mystic is the exploration of God in discovery of Himself. The one who realizes this essential ontological purpose, and comes to realize and actualize the various Attributes of God, is known as the 'Perfect Man'.

The goal of the Sufi is to find God. It is to realize God in oneself and in the world. The finding of God for Ibn al-'Arabi is the realization of the 'Oneness of Being' or the 'Unity of Existence' (wahad al-wujud), which is, "simply stated, there is only one Being, and all existence is nothing but the manifestation or outward radiance of that one Being" (Chittick 79). The realization or the perception of the Oneness of Being is the divine knowledge. Knowledge, in this greater sense, is one of the main purposes of creation in Ibn al-'Arabi's doctrine. And the human being, having the possibility of self-reflection and consciousness of being, is here to know himself and creation.

God has intended man to know himself and creation. For Ibn al-'Arabi the highest form of knowledge is the knowledge of oneself, which is really God knowing Himself through the human consciousness as in the Hadith, "He who knows himself knows his Lord." Knowledge is not just a bunch of information as we tend to think of it, but it is a knowing of oneself and life, which is to know the unity in oneself and with life. In other words, it is a knowing of God, within oneself and within the world. Ibn al-'Arabi says, "All the infinite objects of knowledge that God

knows are within man and within the cosmos through this type of nearness. No one knows what is within himself until it is unveiled to him instant by instant" (Chittick 154).

Our purpose is to know God, but Ibn al-'Arabi reminds us that it is God who wishes to be known. The very longing itself to see the Beloved is the Beloved longing to see us. God reveals Himself through us. Our knowing is God's Knowing through us. The whole purpose of creation and the explanation of who we are is summed up for Ibn al-'Arabi in one of his most often quoted Hadith, "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the world that I might be known."

Ibn al-'Arabi describes Reality as consisting of the Essence, the Attributes and the Acts (Chittick 8). The Essence is God Incomprehensible, Unlimited and without a pluralism of Qualities. It is like the light before any diversification into color and before any reflection. It cannot be known, but is everywhere existent and is the Core Reality of all things. The Attributes, known as the Names of God in Islam, are the various Qualities of the Divine Essence that are given Names from the perspective of creation. The Qualities, or Names, are how we perceive the Essence of Reality, or the Essence of ourselves, and they are also how the Essence reveals Itself in creation. The Acts are how God's Essence manifests Itself through the mediation of the Qualities. The Acts are everything and everyone. It is all action and all form of the creation.

In this basic Cosmology nothing is really separate from God or the Essence. All is derived from the same One Truth, though this Truth manifests Itself in various Qualities. This is the basis for Ibn al-'Arabi's doctrine of Unity, the Unity of Existence, and it is the basis of Sufi theosophy. All Acts are derived from the Divine Qualities, which are derived from the One Essence.

According to Ibn al-'Arabi, God never manifests the same way twice. The whole of creation manifests the Infinite, though partially. Out of the Oneness comes

the multiplicity of creation. Multiplicity is a necessary fact of the Ontological Reality, since the purpose of creation is the revelation of God in His Infinite Fullness. Since everything is derived from the Divine Qualities, which derive from the One Essence, then the differences in things are because of the differences of those Qualities. It is like having a great number of basic ingredients, which can be mixed, or not mixed, in any number of combinations and in any amount of intensities. The possibilities are great, if not infinite. If two things were to have exactly the same Qualities, in exactly the same proportions, then they would be the same. But this cannot happen, because the Divine Qualities do not manifest in the same degrees and in the same proportions with each other. Thus, nothing is ever the same. This is Ibn al-'Arabi's explanation of plurality, due to the Divine Qualities. Thus, everything is in some way a manifestation of Divine Qualities.

There are many Divine Qualities. Some say there are a specific number of these Qualities and others say they cannot be counted. I think it is best left up to the imagination, but to name a few in no particular order: there are the Lover, Merciful, Peaceful, Majestic, Creator, Provider, Forgiver, Knower, Exalter, Abaser, Judging, Grateful, United, Unique, Self-Sufficient, Interdependent, Light, Powerful, Beautiful, Guiding, Dominating, Receptive, Persevering, Patient. To recognize these Divine Qualities is to recognize God. They are found through our relationship with the world and through our deeper understanding of ourselves. God reveals Himself to us in these Ways, and God is revealed through us in these ways.

We come to know these Qualities by recognizing God's affect upon our inner being (our 'heart' or conscience/mind) and God's affect through His worldly Signs and manifestations around us. Ibn al-'Arabi writes, "Once God has created the cosmos, we see that it possesses diverse levels and realities. Each of these demand a specific relationship with the real. When He sent His messengers, one of the things He sent with them because of those relationships were the names by which He is named for the sake of His

creatures... The divine names allow us to understand many realities of obvious diversity... we know the names through the diversity of their effects within us... the effects are multiple within us; hence the names are multiple... but He does not become multiple in Himself through them" (Chittick 35-6).

The Divine Qualities only exist in relationship with creation. They are meaningless terms without creation. This is an ontological reality of all qualities and properties. No qualities exist in a vacuum by themselves; they involve relationship, and for there to be relationship there needs to be a creation making contact with or involving an Essence. The Qualities are the Names of the Essence in creation. Thus, they are how we know God to be. As Ibn al-'Arabi says, "We know the Names through the diversity of their effects within us."

The Names or Qualities are also those of our own. We can understand God as the Compassionate or the Forgiving, because of the feeling of being loved or forgiven by Him. But we can also feel compassionate and forgiving within ourselves as expressed towards others. So, we can relate to the Divine Qualities as being expressed towards us, and/or we can find those same Divine Qualities within ourselves to be expressed in our relationships with others. Ultimately, "we only know them only by our knowledge of ourselves (that is the basic maxim). God describes Himself to us through ourselves. Which means that the divine Names are essentially relative to the beings who name them, since these beings discover and experience them in their own mode of being" (Corbin 115).

So, the Names, or Divine Qualities, or descriptions of Divinity, such as The Powerful, The Compassionate, The Forgiving, The Knowledge, The Guide, etc., only exist in relationship with creation. Here is where Ibn al-'Arabi's brilliant sense of interrelationship and Unity comes through. Because, although Ibn al-'Arabi admits that God in the Absolute, or in Essence, is sufficient unto Himself and independent of existence; God needs the creation in order to have any Names whatsoever. In fact, God needs creation in

order to be known at all with any deliniation, for it is in creation that deliniation exists and in the various Names that the delineation is known. To be known in any way, God needs a creation to reflect back upon, as well as Names to be distinguished by. The many Qualities of God cannot even exist without a creation, and specifically without the human being to reflect upon or realize those Qualities as Names, such as Compassion, existing in the phenomena of life.

The Names of God are how God assumes a relationship in the world, such as Creator, Guide, Forgiver, Compassionate, Exalter, and Slayer. It is through these relationships that God is found and makes Himself known in the world. The Essence of God in Himself is without reference to anything. It is un-named and unknown; though existing everywhere. It is transcendent, meaning it is free and independent of the world or relationships. But the Names and Qualities are how this One Essence reveals Itself in relationship and manifests in the world. The Names can be likened to the different roles a man might have in life. One man might be a father, a husband, a brother, a carpenter, a singer, a student, depending on the time and the person(s) relating to. Yet, that person is one man, not many different people. In this sense, God relates Himself to us in many different ways, but it always one Being who lives through these various modalities.

Whatever we can know about God must come from direct experience, which is the knowledge that Ibn al-`Arabi speaks about. Our knowledge of God is but a small reflection of the Infinite Reality, but none the less, it is an expression of God. God affirms and reveals His Essence through the various qualities and reflections of His expression. Whatever we can know and experience reveals the Presence of God in some way. Ibn al-`Arabi uses the term presence to refer to how God makes Himself known in this world, such as the Presence of Power, the Presence of Knowledge, the Presence of Love and the Presence of Beauty. For we cannot really know God in any other way. It is the One God Who reveals Himself in the world, but this One Being does not manifest in the same way. God

the Abaser (al-Mudhill) is not the same as God the Exalter (al-Mu`izz). What we experience of the One Being, which is Absolutely Real in Itself, are the various modalities of It's expression. In other words, there is only One Presence throughout the Cosmos and that is God, The Absolute, but this Presence makes Itself known to us in different ways, which are called the Names of God.

God is personalized for us through our unique relationship with Him, which is particularized as 'Our Lord,' having certain qualities understood through human experience. Our Lord is known through the active Imagination, and that it is how we give quality to God, The Absolute. Ultimately, we all have an essential relationship with the Absolute, because we are that One Being, but our known or experienced relationship with Divinity qualifies the mystery of Being through one or several attributes. We seek to know God, and this unfolding knowledge requires conceptual or imaginal form. The way in which we know God is not God as He is in Essence, and it is not God fully known in all of His infinite potential; but it is God known in some particular manner or attributes, which has a real, experiential, personal meaning to us, and this is known as 'Our Lord.'

What we know of God are His attributes, and these are truly of the Divine, because God has bestowed upon us revelations of His Being in the form of these attributes. God has revealed Himself in the form of our Lord, and thus this is ontologically divine. It is also true to say that our Lord is partly of our own creation, because the attributes and form of God known through the active Imagination is limited by our phenomenological experience, our cultural language of symbols, and our power to penetrate the depths of subjective experience. In other words, our experiential understanding of God, and even the world, is conditioned and limited by the knowledge of ourselves. So that when we look to our Lord, we can simultaneously see ourselves in this, and thus as we understand our Lord we are furthering a self-understanding. Likewise, when we further an understanding of ourselves, we might then understand

more of the attributes of God, and thus expand the experience of our Lord.

We understand God through the Active Imagination and God has knowledge of Himself through the same vehicle. These are some insights into the meaning of the Hadith, "He who knows himself knows his Lord." At the root there is no real difference between the self and the Lord. God is known through me and I can only know my true self through His Knowing. As Corbin says, "This Lord is not the impersonal self, nor is it the God of dogmatic definitions, self-subsisting without relation to me. He is the one who knows himself through myself, that is, in the knowledge I have of him, because it is the knowledge he has of me" (Corbin 95).

This naming of God by attributes is not a mere anthropomorphic vision of God. Instead, it is the ontological reality of being, and we recognize this ontological reality within our own human being, because we are theomorphic beings. We are not merely projecting human qualities on God, although in a certain sense we are naming God; instead, we are finding God's Qualities within our own theomorphic being. Corbin writes, "The organ of theophanic perception, that is, of the perception through which the encounter between Heaven and Earth in the mid-zone, the `alam al mithal takes place, is the active Imagination... it is essentially a theophanic Imagination and, as such, a creative Imagination, because Creation is itself theophany and theophanic Imagination" (Corbin 98). This creative Imagination is the active Imagination of God, and thus "Creation is Epiphany, that is, a passage from the state of occultation or potency to the luminous, manifest, revealed state; as such, it is an act of the divine, primordial Imagination" (Corbin 186-7).

It is God revealing Himself through Images, Ideas, and Attributes. It is the place of consciousness, the interpreted luminosity of Reality. Here, the Divine Reality is both revealed and veiled. The human consciousness, and all beliefs, images, symbols and ideas within it, exists within this Imagination. Therefore, all that is known in consciousness is a

partial revelation of the Divine. Yet, the revelations and experiences of consciousness are clothed by the phenomenological images and symbolic language found within the world of physical and cultural existence. Just like a dream, the revelation must use the images found within the mind of that dreamer. The Truth is revealed according to the nature of the receptive. Or to put it the other way around, the receptive being discovers Truth by way of its known images and beliefs. Thus, the receptive both clothes and veils the naked Truth. And the Truth takes on a form that can be recognized by the recipient.

Logically, we might question whether God or the human recipient is the true cause of consciousness of attributes, and if we are to choose we must choose God as the first ontological cause, but if we can imagine that God and the recipient are really inseparable poles of One Actualizing Reality, then we can accept the paradoxical truth that God creates the phenomena of consciousness and humans create the phenomena of consciousness. The Sufi Jili says, "Know that when the Active Imagination configures a form in thought, this configuration and this imagination are created. But the Creator exists in every creation. This imagination and this figure exist in you. Thus the imaginative operation concerning God must be yours, but simultaneously God exists in it" (Corbin 214). An easier way to see this is to know that God is the Truth to be known and we are the knowing of this Truth. God knows Himself through us, that is, through the Imagination of which in consciousness we are.

Ibn al-'Arabi describes existence in terms of a relativity between two opposite cosmic poles, which he usually defines as the spiritual and the corporeal, but he also refers to other possible polarities, such as luminous and dark, subtle and dense, unseen and visible, high and low. The spiritual and corporeal poles can be understood in their extreme positions as absolute ontological situations independent of each other. This means that pure light must exist independent of pure darkness, and vice versa, because the two cannot meet without destroying the other.

And yet, all things exist somewhere between and relative to these independent poles, but nothing can purely represent one of the poles.

In other words, nothing is purely light nor purely dark, but there are "innumerable degrees of intermediate creatures between pure light and pure darkness" (Chittick 14). The term 'barzakh' refers to the whole intermediate realm between the spiritual and the corporeal, and is synonymous with the World of Imagination. A barzakh is "something that stands between and separates two other things, yet combines the attributes of both" (Chittick 14). Thus, Ibn al-`Arabi says that "there is nothing in existence but barzakhs," since everything exists somewhere in the ontological hierarchy between the spiritual and the corporeal poles.

What I have mainly described above are the extreme polar ends of the spiritual and corporeal, and the barzakh in between. But the spiritual and corporeal must also be understood as worlds, which relate to each other. The Spiritual World is the luminous realm of the Spirits, Angels, and Archetypal Qualities, and is the most real of all worlds. The Corporeal World is this world of form and events. It is the physical and sensory world. Compared to the Spiritual World it is dark, dense, unconscious, and unreal, but it is not without any light or reality, except in the extreme ontological position. The World of Imagination is more real than the Corporeal, but less real than the Spiritual.

Thus, the Imagination is the intermediary between the Luminous World of Being and the unconscious World of Form. In this sense of the three Worlds as relative to each other, they all interpenetrate existence and make up what we know as the universe. All corporeal things have at least some spiritual light, and all things find their making somewhere in the imagination. Also, the Spiritual World of Luminous Beings need the Corporeal World to manifest and take form, and They need the World of Imagination in order to be known and envisioned.

The World of Imagination has two dimensions, or two complimentary sides to it, which are Creator and creation, Lord and human being, Divine and corporeal, Impersonal and personal, Potential and actual, Named and name, Idea and image, Compassion and response, Cause and effect. Corbin sees this kind of pairing (those above were of my own creation) within the Imagination as typifying "a union for which we have suggested the term `unio sympathetica.' The union of the two terms of each pair constitutes a `coincidentia oppositorum,' a simultaneity not of contradictories but of complimentary opposites" (Corbin 209).

As complimentaries, each of these terms is necessary to its opposite. There can be no Creator if there were no creation, because the meaning of Creator is found in relation to the creation. Likewise, there could be no creation without its cause or reason of being. The Named, that is, God needs to be named. What is God, even to Himself, if He were not known in some way or another? What would be the purpose of existence if it were not experienced or made conscious? God needs to be known and Potentials need some actualization; otherwise there is no real meaning or purpose to God or Potentials. God needs the world. God needs man and woman. God needs images and forms, feelings and experiences; otherwise God is continually hidden, or as Corbin suggests God is pathetically sad and lonely. But without any existence there can be no distinctive knowing, and without this God cannot even experience sadness, because there is just nothing to experience whatsoever.

God as the one and only Being has to become known and actualized for Its own sake and in order to be real. So, the Compassionate Breath of God which created and continually sustains the world is not only compassion for creation, but is God's Compassion for Himself. It is God's urge of Self-expression, and in this way the universe is a [selfish] manifestation of God's concern for His own Becoming. This is who we are, and each of us reflect this divine impulse to some degree or another. The need for becoming known and expressed is shared by all human beings (and maybe

other creatures as well). It is God's longing within us, such that each of us is the divine knowing and expressing Itself through the Imagination.

We use the imagination when inventing new ways of behavior or modes of action. We bring forth new ideas and forms into the world through the imagination. And we also use the imagination in describing, naming, and understanding the world we live in. Esoterically, the active Imagination is the vehicle for understanding and engendering the essence of the spiritual realm, so that one ascends the ladder of Imagination toward greater and greater knowledge. We use the imagination all of the time, and it is helpful to view the esoteric use as not a separate function, but a higher use of the same human vehicle. It is through the imagination that we intuit symbolic meaning. We can see the world literally, or we can see some symbolic meaning behind this world.

Another way to consider this, is that in order for one to see into and describe the spiritual meaning behind the world of form, one has to give some imaginal form to that meaning. This is the nature of symbols, allegories, myths, and even conceptual philosophy. However we describe the spiritual truths we are always using the creative imagination to form those concepts and analogies. It is through the imagination that one can understand spiritual truths that may at first seem contradictory or illogical. Only in the imagination can one hold the possibility of two apparently contradictory logics, such as man is God, but not God. "Understanding imagination is the key to various kinds of knowledge that are normally hidden from our rational minds, since imagination is able to combine opposites and contradictions" (Chittick 121).

The world that we know, or the reality of being that we know, is subjective, in the sense that it is only known through experience. To put it another way, we are always interpreting the world (or it is being interpreted for us by religion or science). We can never purely experience the corporeal world, nor the spiritual world. We cannot know what pure form is, nor can we know what pure spirit is; because,

everything known is known in the mind. It is known through a subjective experience or interpretation, and this can never be the True Essence (God or Reality). This is why Ibn al-`Arabi says this world is imagination.

Thus for Ibn al-`Arabi, everything is interpretation. That is, everything known is by way of the one's unique point of perception. What we experience is not the ultimate reality, whether spiritual or existential. It is a veil, but a meaningful veil. Our experience is in the world of imagination, but this imagination is necessarily meaningful and is the way by which God knows Himself. All things come from the creative imagination. The world unfolds through this and the world returns to Him through this. The Names of God are the fundamental interpretations of Spiritual Reality, which in Essence cannot be fully comprehended nor described (named) in any one manner. If one is to name this Ultimate Reality at all, one must then admit many names, so to not falsely limit Reality by any one quality. Likewise, everything known is some form of interpretation, or naming. This is how we see the world and the subtle truths within the world. This is also the only means by which we can know God.

For Ibn al-`Arabi, the finding of God is a continual deepening of one's perception into the meaning of the world. God is not out there somewhere, but here hidden within the world. God is at the very deep structure of the world, so one must look deeper into the meaning of things. In this way, the truer nature of the world is unveiled more and more, and one finds newer and more profound interpretations of phenomena. But this is not just looking at phenomena as something outside oneself, but seeing reflections of the Self. The creation is seen as "God's unveiling Himself to the creatures".

So for Ibn al-`Arabi, hermeneutics is a Self-disclosure. "The mystical ascent is from external phenomena (or linguistic expression) to interior depth structure," because "whatever exists in this world conceals in its ontological depths an inner reality... so everything is a particular theophany" (Izutsu 6:554).

Finding truth and meaning in the world is to discover something its ontological source, which is God. Or to put it the other way around, to find God we must deepen our interpretation of the world, which is to unveil the [more hidden] meaning.

Ibn al-`Arabi and the Sufis developed a kind of mystical hermeneutics in their interpretations of the Koran and its exegetical tradition. They looked into the depth of its [ambiguous] language to find the metaphorical and symbolic meanings. The Koran reveals explicit and implicit meanings, and "the explicit/implicit question belongs with the discernment necessary in understanding and exegesis ... the two might be broadly characterized as the factual and the figurative" (Cragg 41). So, whether one is interpreting The Book or the world, there may always be metaphorical meanings hidden from the literal mind. This is why the Sufis do not perceive the world literally, but symbolically. Thus, the world is a veil. It is an allusion.

We can not help but conceptualize or interpret the world in some way, whether literally or more symbolically. But this interpreting should be seen as negative, because it is how we know things. It is what knowledge is about. For the Sufis this world is veiled, but the veil is meaningful. The veil reveals something about the Reality. It is not useless or completely devoid of Truth, but it is the way that Truth is revealed, just as God reveals Himself through the world, however veiled it is. Our experience in the world is by interpretation, and this is the way God knows Himself. Sufis say that they are leaving the world of illusion to find the real world, but this is an endless goal, because all experience will be in the world of illusion, or in the world of interpretation. We seek to know the Truth, but we can never go beyond some form of interpretation or imagination of that. Thus, the Sufis say that the Ultimate Truth can never be known, which makes life an unfolding mystery.

Interpretation is necessary for the disclosure of reality and the disclosure of ourselves. For Ibn al-`Arabi, hermeneutics is a never ending process of self-disclosure, and interpretation of anything is an

interpretation of Being Itself. The finding of God requires the lifting of the veils that prevent us from perceiving the Truth. For the Sufi these veils are the veils of ignorance, and only when the veils are lifted can we know the Truth of the ontological center of this world and ourselves. The veils are infinite, so one can never fully experience the completeness of God's Truth, but we can always go further beyond the veils.

We come to an experience of bewilderment (*hayra*), which Ibn al-`Arabi describes as knowing and not-knowing all at once. At every instant the veils are covering the infinitude of God; yet in every instant we can wake up beyond the veils. Life is a continual discovery, and at every moment we can be waking up in the Truth, while having ever more to wake up to. It is like opening the stage curtains to reveal the play, which is about opening the stage curtain. There are always curtains to open, in the sense that we do not know what we do not know, and yet we are experiencing something of the play itself, which is something of the Knowledge of God being revealed. This is the state of bewilderment, of knowing and not-knowing. The understanding of this inevitable situation, of knowing and not-knowing, of unveiling but being none the less veiled, is a great unveiling itself, and it distinguishes a man of wisdom.

To fully appreciate the analogy of the veils one must see it in terms of knowing oneself. We are veiled from knowing ourselves because of our ignorance and because of our self-concepts that we hold on to. The concepts, which we think is the knowledge of ourselves, is that which veils us from knowing our primal, essential nature. So, we must die to our concepts and allow our ego self images to dissolve, in order to discover what is underneath it. This is described in Sufi teachings as a death of self, or a dissolving of illusion (*fana*); and what remains (*baqa*) is the essential truth of our spiritual nature. So, the veil is lifted when we let it go, when we die and re-awaken. Still, there are veils remaining, since the Essence, which is our true nature, cannot be fully revealed. And any revelation or interpretation is itself another veil.

Ibn al-`Arabi sees belief as the significant factor in determining how we view God, ourselves, and the world. Our beliefs color our reality, and in fact, "no one ever sees anything but his own belief" (III 132.29). We all have beliefs, which are at the root of all thoughts and actions. What Ibn al-`Arabi means by belief are the conditioned or acquired set of paradigms, world-views, ideals, images, and symbols that form the basic structure of consciousness. Beliefs are how we know or interpret reality, Truth, God. This world of beliefs is really the world of Imagination. Though some beliefs are closer to Truth than others (ie. more widely relevant), Ibn al-`Arabi would admit that each belief has at least some element of Truth within it, or otherwise it would not be there.

But beliefs can hold us back from the Truth as much as they are capable of revealing some of the Truth, and they especially hold us back when we especially hold onto them and refuse to see the truths of other perspectives. In a similar manner there are many different paths to Gnosis, and each of these are useful to some degree, but some paths bring us closer to the Truth than others, and each path has its own potential pitfalls and limitations. Beliefs and paths have their usefulness but also their limitations. We can affirm the truth and value of every belief on its own [limited] level, but we do not need to be limited by it. The Sufi can comprehend and accept "all knots tied in the fabric of Reality," and "by accepting each knot for what it is, the sage learns what it has to teach, and by not limiting himself to this one knot, he allows for the tying of other knots or the knowledge of other possibilities" (Chittick 191). Each is equal in respect to their being of the One Truth, but not equal in their function or usefulness toward the unfoldment of God's Perfection.

Ibn al-`Arabi says, "The perfect gnostic recognizes God in every form in which He manifests Himself... but the non-gnostic recognizes Him only in the form of his own belief, denying Him when He manifests Himself in another form [other than that believed to be God-like]" (III 161.15). Each being also manifests aspects of the Truth, while at the same time veiling its

revelation. Chittick says, "From one point of view an existent entity manifests the Light of Being by virtue of its very existence; from another point of view it veils or obscures this same Light by means of its own color" (Chittick AT 186).

Ibn al-`Arabi denies that we can know God in His Essence, and many Sufis caution the aspirant to not presume to know God's Essence, which only God can know. The mystic does experience God, but never in His full Omniscience. Any experience, however mystical or spiritually sublime, is an experience of `something' or some presence of the infinite Being of God. At the same time, we are that Essence, for the Essence is in no other place but everywhere, through and through. We are `That I Am"; yet the experience of this Self qualifies it to some degree. To experience the Essence is to limit it in some way, but without this qualifying of the Incomprehensible Reality It cannot be known or comprehended, and we would have no knowledge of the Essence or of ourselves.

Ibn al-`Arabi sometimes uses the analogy of light to describe how God manifests and is known. We do not see light as such, although it certainly is needed for us to see anything at all. What we see is the reflection of light, the reflection off of the trees, the waters, the air, etc. So, light is the necessary substance pervading and illuminating all things, but we see only the reflections of it or how it manifests for us. So, God is only known by reflection, but subsists in everything, and "None knows God but God." We must realize that we cannot know God in His Essence as He knows Himself, just as we cannot see the light in its purity; but we can recognize the various expressions or reflections of this essential Reality.

The statement, "There is no God but God," which is at the heart of Sufi theory and prayer, can be understood in two basic and contradictory ways. On the one hand, it negates everything, all concepts, all the world, and all the self, in favor of affirming God as the incomparable, or that which is beyond anything and everything. Only toward Him do we return. Yet, on the other hand, the statement can be understood to mean that there is nothing true or real but God.

Nothing actually exists but God; therefore, everything is God, since nothing is not God. If something were to not be God, then God would not be alone, and there would be at least two realities in the universe - God and what is not-God. But there is no God but God, so nothing else could exist but God.

Thus, God is known by a paradox of negation and affirmation. It is an ongoing self-annihilation and self-affirmation. The Sufis employ the terms `fana', meaning the ever-fading, and `baqa', the ever-enduring. One first loses oneself in order to find oneself. To know who we really are we have to first give up all the notions of who we are. What remains after this surrender of one's identity is the truth of one's being. The Sufis use the analogy of the mirror to describe how one must first clean it thoroughly before seeing the truth in it. The general idea here is that if one can give up the concepts about the truth, which are most likely conditioned by the society or people of ignorance, then what remains will be the essential truth, or primordial truth before any concepts or descriptions. One surrenders the ego, which is that sense of being a separate "I" from God and all others, and what endures through this ego-death is the Reality behind the illusion, which is God.

For Ibn al-`Arabi, this fana and baqa, this death and resurrection, is endless. It never ends, because the Sufi must give himself up every single moment, which is the true meaning of Islam, surrender to God. It is state of perpetual bewilderment or perplexity, because the Sufi surrenders everything known about himself and the world, so to awaken to the reality as it reveals itself in this unique moment. It is a continual loss and re-discovery of identity. This parallels Ibn al-`Arabi's view that the universe is annihilated and re-created every moment in time. Man does not become God, nor does God come into man, but man realizes God immanent, or God reveals His Immanence through man. There is no coming or going to, because there has never been a separation. This is why Ibn al-`Arabi speaks of the unveiling of God and the awakening of man.

The path is a continual negation and affirmation. One must negate everything, since God cannot be anything we know. This negation opens the veil. But then, at the same time, we must affirm everything, because God cannot not be here. Thus, God is both veiled and revealed, in the world and through us. On the one hand, God is the negation of everything in this world and everything we might experience Him to be; but on the other hand, God can only be known in this world through some kind of experience, whether rational or ecstatic. This is the paradox of God, The Reality. Ibn al-'Arabi likes to use the mirror to describe the subtle reality of being and not-being: "A person perceives his form in a mirror. He knows for certain that he has perceived his form in one respect and he knows for certain that he has not perceived his form in another respect... He cannot deny that he has seen his form, and he knows that his form is not in the mirror, nor is it between himself and the mirror" (Chittick 118).

Ibn al-'Arabi says that all interpretation is formed in the inner world of imagination. This reveals the unique role of human beings in the Cosmos, because the imagination plays a fundamental role in the nature of being human. We are self-reflective creatures, and the world in which we do this is the world of imagination. In Ibn al-'Arabi's terms this is related to the soul of man. The soul is the body of imagination. And through imagination we find new creative possibilities within ourselves. The discovery of our potentials involve both an interpretation of who we are (in essence) and a creative image of ourselves or possible behavior. We are not born complete human beings. In order to grow, or actualize more of our potential, we are continually interpreting that potential and imagining its possible manifestation.

So we come to know existence through the imagination and we come to know ourselves through the same medium. And again, epistemology relates to ontology, because God created the world from His Imagination of Himself, or we could say that this world reflects God's Imagination, and how we interpret this [His] world is really how God interprets

His Essence in various ways. Likewise, we as humans come into being through the imagination (if not ours, then someone else's) and interpretation of our own potential. Creativity comes out of the imagination, and we could say that God reveals His Imagination in this creation, just as we are creating our "own realities" through our imagination.

The place in which we know God and ourselves is the active Imagination, and the knowing itself is the substance of the soul, "which develops gradually as a human being grows and matures, becomes aware of the world with which it is put in touch in a never-ending process of self-discovery and self-finding. The soul -- that is to say our own self-awareness -- represents an unlimited possibility for development... the process whereby it moves from darkness to light is also a growth from death to life, ignorance to knowledge, weakness to power..." (Chittick 17). The growth of the soul is an actualization of the divine attributes inherent in the soul. All attributes are within us, that is in potential. It is important to remember that "these divine attributes are not superhuman qualities or super-added to the human condition. On the contrary, they define the human condition in an ontological sense. Only by actualizing such qualities does one participate in the fullness of existence and show forth the qualities of Being" (Chittick 21).

In essence all people have all of the divine attributes in potential, but in actuality each soul is different in terms of which attributes have actualized and to what degree they have become luminous. Thus, there are a vast hierarchy of souls from the most intense light to the darker unawares. Ibn al-'Arabi sees knowledge as varying in degrees or intensities, "some surpassing others." This is the "ranking in degrees of excellence", called Tafadul (Chittick 8).

Knowledge is a possibility provided to us by God, but not all people have the same degree of knowledge. This idea comes from the Koranic verses, "God has caused some of you to surpass others in provision" (Koran 16:71) and "We raise in degrees whomsoever We will, and above each one who possesses knowledge is someone who knows more" (Koran

12:76), and it asks, "Are they equal - those who know and those who know not?" (Koran 39:9). Thus, there is a hierarchical gradation in the intensity of God's Light and Knowledge, which does not mean that God is less in those lesser places, but existence is less knowing of God.

God's attributes are all through the Cosmos, but they are scattered and dispersed among the various forms and creatures, while in man they are concentrated, though undifferentiated as yet. In essence all people have all of the divine attributes in potential, but in actuality each soul is different in terms of which attributes have actualized and to what degree they have become luminous. Thus, there are a vast hierarchy of souls from the most intense light to the darker unawares. This is why Ibn al-'Arabi employs the concept of "ranking by degrees" or "stations" of being (stations being different than 'states' (hal) - temporary mystical experiences). Some are closer to God's Perfection than others. Or in terms of potential, some actualize more of the inherently divine potential than others. In Sufism the Attributes of God are the potential attributes of man. Thus, "Man is a theomorphic entity in God's Image" (Chittick 24).

Man is the microcosm reflecting the Macrocosm of God. Through man God incarnates His Attributes. Although one can find at least some of God's Attributes reflecting through any man; no man can reflect every Attribute at once. Everything is a derivative of the Essence and the Qualities, but not all is equally true, good, or beautiful. In the Unity of Being we can all recognize our essential Divinity and the various Divine Qualities manifesting through ourselves and our actions; but still, we can all come ever closer to God's purity of Essence and manifest His Qualities more intensely. So, the differences in people's love, consciousness and powers is a matter of degree, instead of the judgement that one either has it or doesn't. The world is not distinctly black and white, or good and evil. It is all of the Light, but there is also shadow and distorted reflections of the Light.

The whole purpose of being is to actualize itself and become known. And this purpose can be understood

from the absolute ontological perspective or from the humanistic perspective. Ibn al-`Arabi loves to quote the Hadith, "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known so I created the world that I might be known." God's purpose is that He ( `He' means God without attributes and beyond male/female divisions) be known, and He can only become known by actualizing Himself in the world. The human being can say the same thing. We become known, to ourselves and others, by actualizing our [hidden] potential in the world. What we can create or manifest of our human potential is who we are in actuality. We come to know ourselves, that is what attributes we have, by manifesting ourselves.

To even know of our potential is to at least imagine that we can manifest this. When I say I have the potential to love somebody, it implies that I can in fact actualize this potential, because if I could not, then the statement would mean nothing. Somehow we are able to see who we can be, then actualize it. To know myself means that I know who I am in potential as well as what I am currently manifesting. The Sufi Way could be seen as process of self-actualization, and proceeds from death and rebirth, called fana and baqa. The death (fana) is the passing away of the conventional self, or the disintegration of one's previous [limited] world-view and self-concepts. The rebirth (baqa) is the real [natural or divine] being coming into fruition, the realization and actualization of the true [more whole] self. The process of fana and baqa is fundamental to the alchemical transformation in Sufism. One is a disintegration or dissolution of self, and the other is the remaining of purified spirit. Fana is the losing of oneself, or the denial of being a self separate from God; while baqa is the remembering of God as one's true Self. God is found after losing oneself, because God is the essence of oneself, so cannot be destroyed.

Many Sufis also practice `wasifas' (translated as obligations to God). This practice is a contemplation and/or a verbal repetition of one of the Names of God. It can be thought of as grounded in the esoteric law of correspondences, because the Name is repeated in

order to invoke that particular divine quality. Sometimes one of the Names is used in a kind of magical or healing way to invoke certain presences or qualities into a place or situation, but that is not the purpose of the wasifa practice (or really it is prayer), which is usually meant to bring forth those qualities into one's being. In other words, through repetition of the Name and contemplation of its Quality, one is engendering more of the Spiritual World into oneself. The highest possibility of man and woman is called, "The Perfect Man" (Insani Kamil). This is the archetype of Self-actualization and the goal of the Sufi path. "The longing for the Perfect Man, theoretically explained in Ibn `Ibn al-`Arabi's work, is much older than these theories - the veneration offered to the Prophet shows this" (Schimmel 282). This actualized Man "realizes in himself and his experience the Oneness of Being that underlies all the apparent multiplicity of existence" (Austin 37). Throughout the cosmos, Being displays the infinite possibilities within Itself, but "It only manifests Itself in Its fullness through perfect man, since he alone actualizes every divine character trait, or every quality of Being. " "Just as Allah is the `all-comprehensive name', so perfect man is the `all-comprehensive engendered thing' in which the divine names receive their full manifestation" (Chittick 30).

At this point it may be useful to quote Ibn al-`Arabi from the first chapter, "The Wisdom of Divinity in the Word of Adam" in *Bezels of Wisdom*, because he describes the theomorphic truth of Man:

"The Reality wanted to see the essences of His Most Beautiful Names or, to put it another way, to see His own Essence, in an all-inclusive object encompassing the whole [divine] Command, which qualified by existence, would reveal to Him His own mystery. For the seeing of a thing, itself by itself, is not the same as its seeing itself in another, as it were in a mirror; for it appears to itself in a form invested by the location of the vision.. the [divine] Command required [by its very nature] the reflective characteristic of the mirror of the Cosmos, and Adam was the very principle of reflection for that mirror and the spirit of that form,

while the angels were only certain faculties [also related to the attributes of God] of that form which was the form of the Cosmos... For the Reality, he [Perfect Man or Adam] is as the pupil is for the eye through which the act of seeing takes place... for it is by him that the Reality looks on His creation and bestows the Mercy [of existence] on them. He is Man, the transient [in his form], the eternal [in his essence]; he is the perpetual, the everlasting, the [at once] discriminating and unifying Word. It is by his existence that the Cosmos exists" (Bezels 50-51).

Human beings are theomorphic reflections of God, and all of God's attributes are within our potential. As it says in the Koran, "He taught Adam the names, all of them" (2:31). These names are within our primordial innocence. They are potentials of the soul, and "growth and development mark a process whereby the divine attributes latent within the soul gradually come into view," and "the goal of human life is seen to be a situation in which every one of the divine attributes come to be manifested within the soul in fullness and appropriate equilibrium" (Chittick AT:183). The full actualization of the theomorphic attributes is the attainment of perfection (kamil). The Perfect Man (insan kamil) is the human being "who participates with total presence and undistracted awareness in God's Self-Revelation" (Chittick AT:184).

But this is not static or even a final attainment, because the revelation is continually changing and the Perfect Man is continually transforming. Ibn al-'Arabi states, "The Perfect Man's unveiling is the most complete form of knowledge. For just as God's Self-Revelation never repeats itself --since the Self-Revealer is Unique (and hence each instance of Self-Revelation reflects that uniqueness) -- so also the Perfect Man consciously and constantly undergoes transformations in his states, thoughts, acts, and innermost secrets" (Chittick II 282.19)

God created human beings in His own image, or better put for this essay, God created human beings in order to have an image. The Perfect Man stands in the very center of Selfhood and is not identified with any

one of the attributes, but is able to manifest which ever one is necessary in the moment. Ibn al-`Arabi once said, "Abandon archetypes and turn to Essence," meaning that most people are identified with certain personality images or archetypes of Self, but the spiritual path demands a negation of all identifications in order to be a pure enough vehicle for any one of the many attributes to manifest. Like God, the Perfect Man feels ultimately unknown, even to himself, for there is no singular identity to hold on to; yet he can manifest in any number of ways and finds himself in all things.

The Perfect Man brings the Divine Qualities together in a more perfect balance and integration. "The goal of Sufism is the integration of man in all the depth and breadth of his existence, in all the amplitude which is included in the nature of universal man [perfect man] ... Man, being the vice-gerent of God on earth and the theatre wherein the Divine Names and Qualities are reflected, can reach felicity only by remaining faithful to this nature or by being truly himself" (Nasr 43). He has a unique moral character in the world; whereas average man or woman has not yet discovered all of their potentials (Qualities), nor have they integrated them together. What we see in the world are varying degrees of imbalanced and balanced Qualities, which define the moral character of human beings.

This world is the unfolding revelation of God in His various Qualities, and man is unfolding his (His) various Qualities. These are all Qualities of God, with no exception, but the manifestation of this can be relatively negative when a balance has yet to be achieved. We cannot become ethical or virtuous through wishy-washy do-goodism. It is important to be loving and caring about others, but this love is not enough. Love needs two other compliments to complete the triad of righteous action, which are knowledge and power. Without knowledge love does not know what to do. One needs to have the knowledge of what is good or what is needed in the circumstance in order to rightly apply the love in ones heart. Love also needs power, because power is what

manifests things. Someone who is loving and even knowing of what to do will not be able to accomplish that action without the power to do so. Power is necessary, just as energy is necessary to run a machine. Then also love is necessary to compliment power and knowledge, because a person with just knowledge and power could do a lot of harm without the loving motive to guide that action. So each of these basic three qualities are needed and must work together to manifest the Good.

There are many Qualities of God, which are potential qualities of the human being, but if one of these is over-manifested to the exclusion of others, then there are problems. For example, one of His Qualities is the Abaser, and if someone were to continuously bring forth this quality without any other, he would eventually cause harm to others. But this is not necessarily a bad quality and in fact, it is useful at times to bring people down off their false peddle stool.

Another Quality of God is the Destroyer, and the consequences of this imbalance is obvious. God is not just the Destroyer, otherwise there would be no room for life, but destruction of the false or of what is no longer needed is a positive quality, and it actually makes room for life. Another example is the Divine Quality of patience. Actualizing patience is needed in this world, and those who have no patience drive themselves and others crazy. I think the consequences of not having patience is obvious to all mature people. Yet, if one were to only exercise patience without other qualities, such as determination (one of the great Qualities of God), one would let the world be destroyed before manifesting some active concern.

There are other kinds of equilibrium necessary to the moral man, and these can be seen as a balance or equality of two polar opposites. Judgement and forgiveness are classic examples of this. If one expresses the quality of judgement without any sense of forgiveness, then one will be punishing wrong doing all the time. Life is imperfect. Human beings are not perfect and we make mistakes. Some of us are a bit sick and do harm to others. We all hurt each

other in ways that we don't often recognize. So we need to forgive each other.

And we need to forgive ourselves. Because if we are constantly making judgement in the world, we are constantly throwing light on sin and requiring penitence of those imperfect souls. Judgement without forgiveness ends up in tyranny. But on the other hand, forgiveness without judgement leads to chaos and the free ranging of crime against the bounty of God. Too much forgiveness allows the Truth and the Good to be stepped upon and disembodied from its rightful home. Of course forgiveness is an essential feature of Christianity and Sufism in particular, but the man who only forgives without enacting judgement is only letting spread the chaos of evil. Judgement requires discipline and order. It means to be within the Order of the Good. But forgiveness is equally important, because it involves a recognition of the essential goodness within the soul and a trust that this will emerge with a little bit of love.

We can now come to understand the relationship between God's Will and man's will. All is of God's Will, because He determined that man would express His Qualities, so these Qualities are at the essence of man. In one sense, we can say that all is God's Will, because it all is derived from God's Will and every action has its root in one of the Divine Qualities. The problems and injustices we see in life do not negate the essential Compassion of God. They merely reveal the incompleteness of expression. Since God's Qualities are dispersed throughout the creation, they do not necessarily concentrate and fully integrate in all actions. Still, they are immanent in creation and inherent in the potential of human beings. They are potentials to be actualized, but are not fully actualized as yet. In order to know His Qualities in and of themselves, God could not determine that they manifest all at once in a perfect integration, which would mean that each of the Qualities would lose their distinct being. Therefore, the Qualities manifest distinctly or in various combinations, but never all together in one action.

The point is that all negative behavior, or all that is interpreted as evil (or sin) is merely imbalance, or certain qualities dominating the person. Every human quality and behavior has at its essential core a divine cause, such as love, goodness, justice, creativity, etc. The action itself may be viewed as negative in relation to its affect on others, but this doesn't mean that its underlying motivation is bad or profane; it merely reveals certain divine qualities manifesting without others to balance it for the greater good. It is not God's Will that this happen, meaning that God does not determine this because He desires it. Instead, we need to realize that the occurrence of imbalance is inherent and inevitable in the unfoldment of God's Purpose, which is to know Himself by revealing Himself in various ways -- and this cannot logically happen all at once (or in one way). The unfoldment requires dispersement, variety and time. God is in the act of discovering Himself in His various Qualities and through His various forms, and how these come together determine the affects.

The Perfect Man is both a slave of God, meaning that he is dependent upon God as a creature is to his Creator, and he is the necessary agent of God, meaning that he is the mind and the body needed to manifest God's Creativity. This is the receptive and the active aspect of the Perfect Man. He is receptive and submissive to God's Command and accepts God's Will on earth. He is also actively enacting God's Will, through his own creativity, which is none other than God's. Both of these aspects become one in the heart of the Perfect Man. He is both being the receiver of Divine Creativity and being the creator of Divine Creativity. In other words, he has taken on the cloak of God, The Creator, The Compassionate, The Guide, The Healer, etc.

Through him the Divine Qualities express themselves. Through him the Divine Qualities are revealed. He has the spiritual power (himma) to manifest what is as yet in latency. He sees into the world of Divine Possibilities, and by his concentration and contemplation these possibilities come into being in this world. Thus, he is the perfect agent of God's

becoming, or the agent of God's Wish. The Perfect Man is "that individual human being who realizes in himself the reality of the saying that man is created in God's image, who combines in his microcosmic selfhood both the macrocosmic object and divine consciousness, being that heart which, microcosmically, contains all things essentially, and in which the Reality eternally rediscovers Its wholeness. He is also, at once, the original and ultimate man whose archetype and potential for realization is innate in every human being" (Austin 35).

This is the great archetypal possibility for all human beings and, according to Ibn al-'Arabi, the primary reason for existence, because the Complete Man knows his unity with God (has returned), and at the same time perceives God in His diversity of Qualities and Acts in the world and also can manifest any of God's Qualities at any one moment. He is therefore the perfect instrument for God to know Himself. The Complete Man is the heart of God in this world and reveals His Qualities to perfection. This does not mean that he is the totality of God, because he is not omnipresent or omniscient. He is not everywhere and does not know everything at once. He is not all things, nor does he know all things, but he has access to all divine potential and to all knowledge. He recognizes the divinity in all people and can express the divinity in whatever way (attribute) is needed in the moment. He is the true theomorphic entity in God's Image.

The Path is to find God, to know God and dwell in His Presence. One who has attained such is the Perfect Man. He is one who knows God in his heart, as in the Koran, "The heart of my faithful servant can contain me", and knows God in the world, as in, "Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God" (2:115). The finding of God "is never just epistemological. It is fundamentally ontological" (Chittick 4). One can only find God, or know God, when one is truly that. It is not just a knowledge looking at the subject from the outside. The true nature of God can only really be known from the inside. So, the finding of God requires the lifting of

the veils that prevent us from perceiving the Truth. It is the lifting of the veils of our own being, not just in order to see, but to truly be who we really are. It is to know our true being.

The prayer of the mystic, or the alchemical transformation of Gnosis, requires both descent and ascent. The descent, which is Epiphany, revelation and dispensation, through the existentiating Imagination, is the divine urge to be known, the creative Prayer of God. The ascent is the struggle to know God or Truth, and engender, become and actualize that knowing. It may appear that the descent is from God toward humanity, and that the ascent is from humanity to God; but look again and see that the descent and ascent are essentially the same, namely to know and become. The prayer of the Gnostic is actually God's Prayer through him or her, and "tends to actualize this divine Being as He aspires to be through and for him who is praying and who in his very prayer is the organ of His passion" (Corbin 119).

In this way, the Prayer of God and the Prayer of man are simultaneous and identical, because God's prayer is to be known and actualized through us, and the Gnostic prays for this engendering.

And so it is God who creates the world so that He can be known, for it is only in the world that God can be known. There is no other place of God's manifestation, and this is why the world, and those capable of knowing it, are necessary for God's Purpose (that He be known) to work out. The Cosmos is the body of God. It reveals the multiplicity of God. In Essence God cannot be other than One in Himself, but since God is also infinite in possibility, the universe represents God's multiplicity. It is man who can recognize the unity within the multiplicity, the Essence within the forms, because it is the Essence Itself which recognizes Itself in the various forms. Man is the pupil by which God sees Himself immanent in the world. This revelation of God's Immanence is the very purpose of life. Ibn al-'Arabi says, "The Universe was made for Man". Here, he refers to man and woman, but not in the ordinary way, for this Man is the Perfect Man, the one who does

realize God in His Immanence. This realization is really the cornerstone of what Perfect Man is. Although an ability to integrate and balance the various qualities is needed to manifest God's Perfection, this Perfection is not static and cannot be specifically defined in any one limited way. So, Perfect Man is the one who knows God's Perfection in all of Its ways and can recognize the Perfection already existing within himself or herself. In his short book, *He Who Knows Himself Knows His Lord*, Ibn al-'Arabi suggests that God is already manifesting Himself through us, so it is a matter of realizing oneself and realizing that God is the One Who lives through me.

All of the Divine Qualities are within my potential, so first I must recognize these, and the more I am conscious of them (ie. knowing myself), the more possibility of their manifestation. He even suggests that the very idea that one must 'travel a Sufi path' to become one with God is an illusion, because we are never separate from Him. No matter what we do we are never separate; and yet, it is the pain of apparent separation that draws the Sufi closer to the Beloved. The separation has a purpose, which is to bring us closer, until we realize that it has always been close, that we are one with God.

Austin interprets Ibn al-'Arabi as saying that "it is not a case of the Sufi striving to reach a goal from which he is, in reality, distant, but only that he is trying to realize and become aware of a oneness and identity that is inexorably and eternally real" (Austin 40).

One may ask here if Ibn al-'Arabi is confusing a necessary distinction between man and God. He is certainly alluding to the necessary relationship between the Macrocosm and the microcosm, and he is implying that God is in fact immanent in man and the world. God exists in man in potential, but not in full actuality. The Perfect Man is one who realizes his unity with God, that God is manifesting through him, but he also recognizes that he is not, and cannot be, the same as God. The Perfect Man has the knowledge of his potential and recognizes it as divine, and from here he works to actualize that potential when the

need arises. Obviously, he cannot be all things at once, nor can he know all things at once. So, the Perfect Man is not God, The Omniscient, but is a perfect servant and lover of God, which he realizes can only be known through his own being and that of others. The goal is not to become God, but is to realize that all of oneself is God and to allow His Potentiality to be manifest. Thus, the microcosm is able to reflect the Names and Qualities of the Macrocosm.

The relationship between man and God is as a drop of ocean is to the ocean itself. The drop IS ocean, but is not THE ocean. Likewise, what we see is a reflection of light, but not THE light; yet it IS light. There is discourse between man and God, but it is not between two independently separate entities, because there IS only God; yet, God exists in this world through the microcosms of man and woman and nature. It is God Who makes discourse with Himself in and through these various modalities. The true discourse between man and God is in man's unveiling of God (or actually God's unveiling of Himself). The purpose of life is in this unveiling, or in the knowledge of His Hidden Treasure, which lies in man and in the world. A real discourse between man and God leaves the man transformed. It's not like you talk to God (or pray) and the relationship remains the same, because any real discourse with God creates transformation and a new awakening. This new awakening is the unveiling of the Truth (al-Haqq).

The goal of finding God is finally realized in the human being. God, The Absolute is beyond any conception, but the different ways that we do conceive of God, through our various kinds of relationships to that Divinity, are how God reveals Himself in the world. God is imminently here, because it is God Who is manifesting as the multiplicity, revealing the many Names or Qualities of His Essence. Our relationship with God and His with us is inseparable, and God needs man as much as man needs God, because we are the perception by which He sees Himself in the multitude and relativity of perspectives. In each perspective and in each

existence is God seeing Himself and being Himself, though not in His Absoluteness. Thus, God is both the cause and the effect of existence. And we know God through being in the world and seeing beyond the veils of perception into the deeper, archetypal, divine structure of things.

We ultimately know God intimately by unveiling the truth of ourself, the Subject of all self-knowledge. It is the Perfect Man who knows and experiences the Unity of all life, who can unveil the underlying structure to its very Core. He knows himself and his necessary relationship with the Divine. He knows God is the hidden treasure who longs to be known, and that this treasure is himself longing to know and express itself to the fullest degree. And, he is able to express that divine potential in any of its various modalities according to the need of the moment.

The divine treasure that longs to be known is both God and man. There is no duality in this essential ontological purpose. I wish to be known. In other words, I wish to know myself, and in knowing myself I know my Lord, God. The longing within me is God's longing. It is God's prayer that it be my prayer. My prayer for gnosis is God's prayer within me. It is God Who is on the path to gnosis. I am He finding Himself through me. And the discovery of my essence, which is God's Essence, is known in a diversity of archetypal qualities. These are how God, or my essence, manifests and is known. The knowledge of myself, as well as the knowledge of others and of God, can only exist by way of manifestation. For without manifestation or the actualization of the qualities, they cannot be known. How can compassion, forgiveness, or creativity be known without some manifestation of it? So, the manifestation of divine qualities is necessary to the knowing of them, and that is why God "created the world that [He] might be known." And that is why the purpose of human existence is to know and manifest the Essence in Its various attributes.

The way of gnosis is through the active Imagination, which is the Imagination of God in knowing Himself. It is through the Imagination that we interpret the

Essence, give It name according to Its functional characteristics, and actualize It in some manner or form. Throughout this alchemical process of gnosis and engendering one must continually negate what is not truly real of the Essence, or transcend what is limiting the fullness of Being, and, at the same time, affirm what is truly Real, to the best of one's abilities. At the core of this alchemy is a fundamental paradox, which is that one is continually ascending or coming into union, while realizing that unity already exists, that one is already the Essence and manifesting the Divine Qualities. Thus, the path is realization and acceptance of one's divine nature, and it is also actualizing that realization of divinity in the world.

The alchemical process of transformation can be divided into two basic parts. One is the dissolution of the form and the other is the reformation of the form. One is disintegration and the other is reintegration. One is negation and the other is affirmation. The process is usually described in six stages, and this then divided into two parts. In actuality there are seven stages, with the one in the middle being invisible and secret. These steps will be described in detail in a later paper (next year or so). The most important idea to consider is the nature of the two basic parts, which actually are not quite so separate, but determining each other all the time. First though, one needs to abandon oneself, let go, and psychologically die. One must be willing to leave everything behind, not because it is so bad, or because one cannot cope with this reality of self and world, but because one wants to find the Truth with all of one's heart, and the only way to discover the Real is to abandon everything that stands in its way. The three steps of negation are 1) discomfort, leading to a committed search for Ultimate Love and Truth; 2) inner struggle, leading to the breakdown of previous mental and physical habits; 3) self-sacrifice, leading to a trusting abandonment of self-interest and self-beliefs to a greater field of reality. And when all has been abandoned, all beliefs, hopes, and even fears, then one has reached the middle step, where there is

no self and yet there is unlimited possibility. Now begins the stages of affirmation, but here is where many flounder, even after much struggle to get here. The latter steps, the magnus opus, cannot proceed without a special ingredient. In terms of producing gold, one has reached the stage where the essence has been distilled and separated from the form. So how can the building of gold proceed? At this stage something has to guide the process to its completion. In order to abandon and dissolve the previous form, all we needed to do was die. But now we must build life, which requires knowledge of what true life is. Since I cannot hold myself back any longer, I have to give one hint and that is pattern. Also, who is going to make the reformation if oneself has been abandoned? At this point we have to allow the primordial essence to rebuild itself into a higher form of life. But it is not easy, especially when the environment of this transformation is continually conditioning the process, so one has to continually work on the first three steps as one ascends the latter steps. Now, back to my previous questions, the essence itself begins to rebuild, and hopefully, if we are conscious and cautious enough in this delicate stage, our own love and commitment will guide the process. God of course is the one Who must ultimately guide and renew our being, but we must engender God into ourselves, becoming the love and guidance of the process (which is one of the purposes of the process anyways). Helpers are needed along the way as well, and there are various beings of the inner spheres who can give guidance, but it is better to have a physical guide (who can kick ass and awaken the sleep with a roar). Now, after this diversion, which was nonetheless useful, the secret to making gold is to start with gold. Start with the right pattern, because pattern influences further pattern, just as things grow with the right correspondence. So, gold is necessary, and what this means is that the spiritual awakening, the essence of love, and the power of creativity is passed on and given to the alchemist by a successful alchemist. In spiritual terms it is undecipherable, but all the great Sufis and other mystics were given a certain catalyzing awakening, sometimes known as a transferrable grace (Baraka).

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