

THE INNER MEANINGS OF
WORSHIP IN ISLAM

A PERSONAL SELECTION
OF GUIDANCE FOR THE WAYFARER



SHAYKH FADHLALLA HAERI



Publisher: Zahra Publications

ISBN-10 (Printed Version): 1-919897-21-6

ISBN-13 (Printed Version): 978-1-919897-21-9

ISBN (E-Book Version): 978-1-919826-52-3

<http://www.zahrapublications.com>

First Published in 2002

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Book Description

IN THIS COLLECTION of teachings on the inner meanings of worship in Islam, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri brings together the most profound guidance for those who journey along this path – from the Qur'an, the Prophet's traditions, narrations from the Ahl al-Bayt, and seminal works from the Ahl al-Tasawwuf of all schools. The essential elements of belief and practice are presented according to three levels of meaning: *shari`ah* (the revealed law), *tariqah* (the path of discipline) and *haqiqah* (the transcendent truth), following the timeless habit of the Prophet (S) of combining the outer practice with the inner meaning.

The Inner Meanings of Worship in Islam will inspire the serious seeker of enlightenment to progress along the path, to purify themselves, their intentions, and their expectations at all stages of the journey. Ultimately all aspects and practices of the *shari`ah* impact upon the process of grooming and refining the character of the practitioner.

By sharing these most transformative teachings from the world of Islam, the author hopes to make available the spiritual nourishment that has sustained and propelled him personally in his own quest for sublime knowledge and true freedom.

About the Author

Acknowledged as a master of self-knowledge and a spiritual philosopher, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri's role as a teacher grew naturally out of his own quest for self-fulfillment.

He travelled extensively on a spiritual quest which led to his eventual rediscovery of the pure and original Islamic heritage of his birth, and the discovery of the truth that reconciles the past with the present, the East with the West, the worldly with the spiritual – a link between the ancient wisdom teachings and our present time.

A descendant of five generations of well-known and revered spiritual leaders, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri has taught students throughout the world for over 30 years.

He is a gifted exponent of how the self relates to the soul, humankind's link with the Divine, and how consciousness can be groomed to reflect our higher nature.

The unifying scope of his perspective emphasizes practical, actionable knowledge that leads to self-transformation, and provides a natural bridge between seemingly different Eastern and Western approaches to spirituality, as well as offering a common ground of higher knowledge for various religions, sects and secular outlooks.

He is a prolific author of more than thirty books relating to the universal principles of Islam, the Qur'an, and its core purpose of enlightenment.

Acknowledgements

Originally written in Arabic some fifteen years ago, this English version of *The Inner Meanings of Worship in Islam* has come about through the hard work and commitment of several people whom I thank most sincerely, especially Muna Bilgrami who has edited and prepared the text for publication, and Abbas Bilgrami for seeing it through to publication.

Editor's Note

Please note that it is customary to invoke blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad, may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, whenever his name is mentioned, even though such invocations have not been inserted consistently into the present text.

The transliteration system used in this book is based on the American Library of Congress, but with some modifications. No diacritic marks have been incorporated for ease of typesetting and the terms *shari`ah*, *tariqah*, and *haqiqah* have not been italicized throughout due to their frequent usage, other than when they first appear. It was decided to retain these terms in transliteration as no single word exists for any of them in English that would convey the fullness of their respective meanings. Not all the transliterated terms within the text appear in the glossary, only those deemed more important. Regarding footnotes, as no page references were supplied in the Arabic, no attempt has been made to include them in the English.

Preface

As a child growing up in the Holy city of Karbala, Iraq, I often used to wonder about the practical and personal implications of our main Islamic practices. It was quite obvious to me that *salat* (prayer), *sawm* (fasting) and other key practices bring about very useful personal discipline. It was not until much later, however, that I began to see the *tawhid* of our *Din* (pronounced *deen*). As I began to be exposed to the rich heritage of *`irfan* (inner knowledge) from the school of the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt and the great Sufi masters of North Africa, India, Turkey and elsewhere, belonging to other schools of theology, the direct and personal benefits of our practices and rituals brought about a noticeable transformation in my conduct and outlook on life.

Our *Din* is indeed the pathway to the realization of Allah's absolute dominance, presence, control and mercy. The interchange between the physical and the spiritual – the Seen/Unseen, *shari`ah/haqiqah*, in time/beyond time, information/transformation, branches/roots, and indeed all such interplays – are connected by our *Din* to the Divine Source and Essence.

The times we are living in are dominated by outer reasoning, intellectuality, and by the general disintegration of society. Because of this I gathered what was of relevance to my own progress in revealing and emphasizing the inner meaning and benefit of the Prophetically prescribed practices. Personal illumination is the first step out of what we experience outwardly as general chaos and confusion.

This book is an attempt to share with the committed Muslim seeker the keys to inner transformation and awareness of the One, All-Encompassing Creator. It is not intended for the general public for it is a specialist's book, the use of which can only be realized in the application of the appropriate teachings. Originally gathered in Arabic, the material was compiled some twenty years ago and was personally selected from the teachings of enlightened beings from across the Muslim world and from different schools of thought and Sufi Tariqas, all of whom have influenced and inspired me. All streams lead to the same ocean and have emanated from the same merciful rain-bearing clouds. Allah's light illumines the known and the

unknown, the inner and the outer, and this life and the next. There is no light except His and He is the All-Encompassing Power and Truth.

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

July 2001, White River

South Africa

CHAPTER ONE: The Stages and Degrees of Knowledge

Without a doubt, the Creator is closer to man than his own jugular vein. He is near and responds to the supplications of those who truly call upon Him. Most people, however, are unaware of this. People experience various stages in the development of knowledge and awareness. One's knowledge directly corresponds to one's sincerity, trust, and certainty, and ultimately to the degree of one's nearness to Allah. These matters cannot be specifically defined except for general descriptive and explanatory purposes.

I have found in my research that various terms and descriptions have been used to indicate the stations and degrees which people have attained in this knowledge. Terms like *shari`ah*, *tariqah* and *haqiqah* will be familiar to readers who have sought higher knowledge through the path of Islam. One important description is given by Sayyid Haydar al-`Amuli¹ (d.719 AH/1319 CE), who states that *shari`ah* is a name applied to a divinely revealed system of laws consisting of basic tenets (*usul*) and their various branches of knowledge (*furu`*); and that *tariqah* consists of adhering to them in a most prudent, careful and consistent manner; and *haqiqah* is the confirmation of the ultimate Truth behind existence by way of illumination and witnessing, or through attaining certain spiritual states.

The People of *shari`ah* (those who abide by the revealed laws) are those who have attained a degree of knowledge in Islamic Jurisprudence (*fiqh*), that is, the *faqih* and others of that caliber. The People of *Tariqah* (those on a strict path) are those who possess knowledge and wisdom, for example, the *`alim* and the *hakim*. The People of *Haqiqah* (those seeking the ultimate truth) are those who possess an inner knowledge based upon their own witnessing, that is, the enlightened master (*`arif*). It is related that Imam `Ali said:

¹*Asrar al-shari`ah wa Atwar al-Tariqah wa Anwar al-Haqiqah* (The Secrets of the *shari`ah*, the Stages of *Tariqah* and the Illuminations of *Haqiqah*).

The shari`ah is a river and haqiqah a sea: thus the *faqih* makes his way through the river and the *hakim* dives into the sea for pearls, but the *`arif* moves along [the sea] aboard the ship of salvation.

In this same vein the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is reported to have said:

The shari`ah is my words, tariqah my actions, and haqiqah is my state. Understanding is my capital, reason (*`aql*) is the basis of my way of life (*din*), and love my foundation; longing my mount, fear my companion, and knowledge my weapon; forbearance my master, trust in Allah my helper, and contentment my treasure; truthfulness my stopping place, certainty my shelter, poverty my pride, and by it I am honored over all Prophets and Messengers.

It is likewise said that prayer (*salat*) as prescribed by the shari`ah consists of service, nearness, and the reunion of lovers. The service is the shari`ah, the nearness is the tariqah, and the reunion is the haqiqah, while the word *salat* is a general term used for all three.

The other descriptive terms often used to describe the levels of people's knowledge of Allah are the following: The Common People (*al-`am*) – this term refers to the general class of believers who adhere to the shari`ah of Islam and whose understanding of the Islamic way of life is centered around it; the Elect (*al-khas*) – these are the learned men (*al-`ulama'*), the men of wisdom (*al-hukama'*) and the ones with the knowledge which enables them to make legal decisions; the Chosen Few of the Elect (*khas al-khawas*) refers to those who possess a deeper knowledge, i.e. the master (*`arif*) or gnostic who has awakened to the all-encompassing Divine Unity and knowledge.

The master Khwaja `Abdullah Ansari² divided the stages of the knowledge of the Unity or Oneness of Allah (*tawhid*) into three divisions: 1) Unity (*tawhid*) of the Common People; 2)

² Khwajah `Abdullah Ansari (d. 481 AH/1089 CE), author of the books: *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Majid* (Commentary of the Qur'an) and *Manazil al-Sa'irin* (Stations of the Wayfarers).

Unity of the Elect; 3) Unity of the Chosen Few among the Elect. Similarly, Al-Naraqī³ divided the act of fasting into three degrees: 1) Fasting of the Common People. 2) Fasting of the Elect. 3) Fasting of the Chosen Few among the Elect.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF REVEALED LAW TO REASONING

It is said that reasoning (*ʿaql*) will never be guided except by way of the shariʿah and that the shariʿah will never be clearly understood except by way of reasoning. The shariʿah and reasoning need each other like the soul needs the body. The shariʿah may be thought of as a building with reasoning as its foundation. Thus the foundation is of no use without the building and, similarly, the building will not stand without a foundation.

It is also said that reasoning is like eyesight and that the shariʿah is like beams of light. Eyesight is useless unless it comes into contact with these beams from the outside. These beams likewise are useless if they cannot be utilized to give sight. One of the interpretations of Allah’s words ‘...light upon light...’⁴ is that they refer to the light of the shariʿah upon the light of reasoning, because reasoning will not be illuminated except by the light of the shariʿah. If a speck of the dust of this world falls upon the pupil of a man’s eye his vision will be marred. What clarity can there be if one is attached to the entire world and thus veiled by it?

The traveler upon this path who possesses reasoning will be rightly guided by it to adhere to shariʿah and thereby progress towards illumination. This cannot be achieved, however, except by way of harnessing the various forces, both physical and spiritual, and directing them in a way which will ultimately be the most beneficial and useful.

Reasoning is what gives us guidance to follow those who possess a higher degree of both knowledge and action. These are the ones whom Allah sends with the shariʿah, that is, the Prophets and Messengers, as well as their heirs, those whom Allah has befriended (the *ʿawliyaʿ*), the Masters and the Mujtahids.

³ Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi al-Naraqī in his book *Jamīʿ al-Saʿadat* (‘The Compendium of Joys’).

⁴ Qur’an 24:35.

RESPONSIBILITY TO THE SHARI`AH

Allah created man in order that he might know Him and worship Him according to His due. The attainment of this goal will be proportionate to the degree attained of the knowledge of Allah, as well as to the level of true worship. The task of the Prophet is to present the perfect shari`ah which deals with all matters concerning the human being throughout his worldly existence and his journey towards his death. Allah has said the following concerning this:

...As We have sent among you a Messenger to recite Our signs to you and to purify you and to instruct you in the Book and in wisdom and to instruct you in what you do not know. (Qur'an 2:151)

Do you not see that everything within the heavens and the earth prostrate before Allah, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees, the beasts as well as many among men. (Qur'an 22:18)

There is nothing that does not glorify His praise but you do not perceive their glorification. (Qur'an 17:44)

All these verses (*ayat*) indicate that everything is commanded and bears a responsibility according to its capacity and ability. The prostration (*sajdah*) and prayer represent, respectively, the slave's state of being and deep spiritual knowledge. Similarly, included within this is the glorification (*tasbih*). The reference here is not to what is commonly thought of as glorification, because Allah said:

...but you do not perceive their glorification (*tasbih*). (Qur'an 17:44)

However, every creature's prayer and prostration before Him is what is most suitable for its station, as He says:

Say: Each acts in the manner of its own kind. (Qur'an 17:84)

Just as there are always two aspects to every created thing, there are two aspects to each of the rules and responsibilities of the shari`ah, that is, an outward act and an inward meaning, one which is perceived through the senses and one which is hidden or unseen.

The responsibilities of the shari`ah outwardly require that one must either arrive at proper legal decisions (*ijtihad*), or, in the absence of this knowledge, that one follows someone who does possess this knowledge. This second process is referred to as *taqlid*. The sources of this knowledge are the Messengers and Imams whom Allah has sent to guide mankind. It is related that Imam Ja`far as-Sadiq said:

Allah does not allow anything to exist without a reason: thus He made a reason for everything and He made an explanation for every reason; He gave knowledge for every explanation and He made a door for every knowledge. Those who know this know it; those who are ignorant of it are ignorant of it. The Messenger of Allah and the Imams are doors that speak and relate these knowledges.

Thus the task of correct guidance and sound leadership lies with the men of knowledge who are the heirs to the Prophets. It is related that Imam Zayn al-`Abidin said:

He who does not have a wise man to guide him correctly will perish.

It is also related that Imam Ja`far al-Sadiq said:

He who acts without insight is like the one who chases after a mirage in the desert: his haste will only increase him in distance.

Imam `Ali is quoted in the book *Nahj al-Balaghah* ('The Peak of Eloquence') as having said:

He who acts without knowledge is like the one who travels off the path. The distance he travels away from the path will only increase his distance from the goal.

In a supplication Imam `Ali says:

O Allah! Illuminate my exterior with my obedience to You, my interior with Your love, my heart with the witnessing of You, my soul with the most profound knowledge of You, and my innermost essence with the contemplation of Your divine presence, O You Who are the Possessor of glory and noble generosity!

Our responsibility with regard to the shari`ah is not merely a restricted observance of the area of the various branches of the faith (*furu`al-din*), but rather it encompasses the pathways of the heart and the internal state of the believer in order that the remedy for the self (*nafs*) be complete and that both the sensory and subtler veils may be removed. It is related that the Prophet said:

And I arrived at the veils of my Lord, the veils of might and power, of splendor and graciousness, of greatness and magnificence, of light and darkness, of reverence and perfection...until I reached the veil of glory.⁵

In respect of this Abu Nasr al-Farabi (d. 338 AH/950 CE) said:

You possess a veil originating from your self which covers you from your self in addition to the clothing which covers your body, so attempt to lift that veil and you will then witness and no longer inquire about what you are. If you witness affliction then misery will be upon you and if you are at peace then blessed are you. You will see that your self and you are located within your body as if you were not actually there within your physical body but, rather, as if you were in the most subtle and divine regions, and you will see what no eye has seen and hear what no ear has heard and witness what has not occurred to the heart of any mortal.⁶

The traveler of this path is responsible, by his very nature, by way of his reasoning and by his actions, to know the various states of his own self as well as the basics (*usul*) and the branches

⁵ Quoted from the book, *Al-Fusus al-Hikam*. ('The Pearls or Bezels of Wisdom') by Shaykh Muhyi al-Din ibn `Abdullah ibn `Arabi al-Hatimi, d. 638 AH/ 1240CE.

⁶ In the book, *al-Mabda' wa al-Mi`ad* (The Beginning and the Return).

(*furu`*) of the acts of devotion (*`ibadah*) in order to attain the results for which man was created, namely, to attain the most profound knowledge (*ma`rifah*) of his Lord. This path relates exclusively to the footsteps of the Prophets and the Messengers and those who follow their guidance.

STAGES AND LEVELS OF DEVOTION

The purpose of verbal confirmation and remembrance (*dhikr*) is to awaken the heart, in that while one repeats with the tongue, the heart will gradually take over and become the one who is in remembrance. Likewise, the remembrance of the heart will in turn spur the tongue on to *dhikr*. Thus the outer will aid the inner and the inner will enhance the outer.

The high degree attained when there is complete Presence of the Heart while one is engaged in acts of meditation occurs when the heart is in a state of complete awareness throughout the act, aware of the attributes of the Truth, of Allah, and of how to call out to Him and by His Grace and Mercy.

The Enlightened ones have categorized four levels or groups of worshippers:

1. *The first group*: They understand the performance of the prayer and the physical or mechanical aspects, and they might even understand the meanings of the words which they utter. The Presence of the Heart, as far as they are concerned, is to pay attention during the actual remembrance or recitations and to conceptualize them in their heart while they are actually in prayer. This group equates the inner truths with the traditional meanings only.

2. *The second group*: They understand the inner truths and meanings of the various forms of acts of devotion and remembrance, both intellectually and conceptually. They know and understand that everything which is praiseworthy is attributable only to Allah. The Presence of the Heart for them is when their heart is focused in the remembrance of these truths.

3. *The third group*: They perceive these truths conceptually and intellectually and inscribe them with the pen of reasoning upon the tablet of their hearts. They have come to have a deep and

profound knowledge of these truths. There is a great difference between the degree of faith one attains in the heart and the mere perception of it by reasoning. Often, man has an intellectual understanding of something, which is confirmed by much evidence, yet his belief in it does not reach the level of faith in his heart.

4. *The fourth group:* They have combined these truths and brought them to the level of the heart and thus have reached the station of serenity and contentment.

The first stage of Presence of the Heart for the traveler along this path is that he knows that this universe is a place where Divine Lordship is supreme. He sees his outward acts of devotion and all his inner and outer movement as emanating from the essence of this Presence of the Heart; and he knows that it is the foundation of Unity (*tawhid*).

The second stage of Presence of the Heart is in actual unveiling. Whoever remembers his Beloved both secretly within himself and openly, and in the secret supplications of his own pure essence that are whispered in solitude, will attain the level of faith (*iman*) and serenity, which will enable him to cross over from the stage of serenity and profound knowledge to the stage of actual witnessing. He will then reach the limits of all possibilities and depart from the world of phenomena.

Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi (known as Mulla Sadra, d. 1050 AH/1640 CE) divides men according to the levels of discipline of the soul (*nafs*)⁷:

1. *The first division:* Those who discipline themselves outwardly by way of the revealed laws, the shari`ah and by performing the night prayers, fasting, giving alms in charity, making sacrifices, observing religious celebrations and various congregational activities, and so forth.

2. *The second division:* Those who discipline the heart and purify it of impurities.

⁷*Al-Hikam al-Muta' aliyah fi Asfar al-`Aqliyah al-Arba`ah*, commonly known as, *Al-Asfar al-Arba`ah* (The Four Journeys).

3. *The third division*: Those who dissolve themselves into the Eternal Attributes.

4. *The fourth division*: Those whose self has vanished and whose very being has been annihilated, whose wandering has finished and whose sights are fixed only upon the Lord and nothing else.

OBEDIENCE AND DISOBEDIENCE

Quieting the limbs, humbling the body and controlling the senses are necessary for the ascent of the heart and soul to the Divine Presence (*hadrah*) and Light (*nur*). There is no doubt that the repetition of the actions and duties of worship and the attainment of the proper state of consciousness require good character and proper behavior. We call this pattern appropriate obedience.

Adhering to obedience and refraining from disobedience are among the most important disciplines which enable the self to be prepared to take on what is suitable for it of knowledge and the states of knowledge of Allah, which is the desired goal.

The greatest of worldly activities is connected with teaching and guidance. After that comes those related to the preservation of the physical body, then those related to the preservation of one's livelihood and wealth. Thus the stages of obedience and disobedience should primarily correspond directly to one's knowledge of Allah, then secondarily to the knowledge of whatever is related to the life of the soul, and finally to whatever is related to one's way of life by which the life of the soul is able to continue.

The first type of disobedience refers to whatever hinders one from attaining the knowledge of Allah and the knowledge of His Messenger. This is unbelief and rejection (*kufr*), and no error is worse than denial and rejection of Reality. The veil, which lies between man and Allah, is illusion and ignorance while the means for drawing one close to Allah is knowledge. The deeper the knowledge and understanding one attains of the Attributes of Allah, His Actions, His Books, His Messenger, and the Last Day, the closer one is to enlightenment.

Ignorance distorts the truths of faith, inducing in one a false sense of security and despair of His Mercy. He who has a deep and profound knowledge of Allah will never assume he is untouched by Allah's ways, nor will he ever despair of Allah's Mercy.

The second type of disobedience relates to destroying the self because its continued existence is what stands in the way of attaining this profound knowledge. This major deviation is referred to as 'the cutting off of the way'. Among other similar actions are adultery and homosexuality because these actions result in confusion concerning lineage and inheritance and natural generations are broken off. It is for these reasons that adultery and homosexuality are not permitted.

The third type of disobedience is with reference to livelihood and behavior. It is not permitted to rule over a people while subjecting them to oppression, tyranny, theft, or other abuses. Protection of the people is actually protection of their souls. Major abuses, which fall into this category, are theft, bearing false testimony, bribery, usury, taking interest, and any act in which there is no mutual agreement.

The purpose of the shari`ah is to make the path to Allah smooth. The acts of devotion represent the journey of the seeker to Allah. The obligatory actions actually draw all who perform them towards Allah, to the expectation of His Generosity, to the all inclusiveness of His Kindness and to the pervasiveness of His Mercy. If He had left the matter up to individuals without them having an understanding of the law they would have fought, argued, and disagreed, which would have distracted them from the Journey to the Creator. Such actions would only bring them to destruction.

The divine shari`ah, then, came with the necessary instructions concerning acts of devotion and all mankind's transactions with his surroundings. It likewise established retribution to prevent the destruction of the soul and body. It provides for the proper punishment of crime to prevent harm to property and person and confusion over the matter of paternity or genealogy, which could affect successful reproduction of the species. The remainder of the shari`ah deals with the struggle (*jihad*) against those who reject the Truth, or the struggle against those who transgress,

or other special situations. Its purpose is to protect the limits which Allah has set and revealed to the Messenger of the Lord of the Worlds.

THE REMEDY FOR THE SELF

In the same way that a doctor or physician treats the body, the Prophets, masters, and gnostic teachers are the physicians of the self. Thus, just as the medical doctor knows the method of removing an illness by way of treatment and medication, the physicians of the self know how to recognize and remove the causes of illnesses related to the self. In the same way that a person who is physically sick should not object to what has been given to him by his physician, it is not correct for the sick self to object to the guidance and instruction received from a spiritual teacher or master. This objection will only delay or prevent the remedy from taking effect and the illness will only worsen. The objections of the person whose self is ill may cause his teacher to become discontented and discontinue his remedy. A knowledgeable jeweler cannot place a precious necklace around the neck of a swine. This is the meaning of Allah's words:

...in their hearts there is an illness and Allah increases them in illness... (Qur'an 2:10)

THE PROPELLING FORCES OF THE SELF

The basis of the power and strength of the self are the forces of attraction (manifesting as desires) and repulsion (often manifesting as anger). These two forces are behind every agitation and attachment and the constant disturbance that results. Once these energy drives are brought under control, however, these natural forces will assist one along the spiritual path to the final goal of awakening to the original source and purpose behind life's forces.

The following characteristics spring from the force of repulsion or anger: cowardliness, pride, fear, lack of determination, weakness of spirit, rage, and other similar traits. Likewise, the following traits originate from attraction or desire: love of the world, greed, avarice, miserliness, treachery, and the like. However, when these two forces of anger and desire are brought under control and the heart is brought in line with its true original nature, then the force of anger will

lead to bravery, spiritual strength, determination, forbearance, steadfastness, and the like. When the force of desire is harnessed it produces kindness, modesty, patience, generosity, contentment, reverence, restraint, and so on.

The main objective, then, is to know the nature of the self, guarding over it with vigilance, holding it to account and treating it with the proper remedies. Progress in directing one's conduct and actions towards noble traits will result in greater awareness of the self and awakening to ever-increasing insights and knowledges.

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND ITS REFINEMENT

Allah says in the Qur'an:

...Then He inspired it to understand what is right and wrong for it.
(Qur'an 91:8)

It is usual that the self will not follow reasoning but will instead follow its own desires and whims opening itself to the disruptive influences of anger, which originally was given to man to protect himself from harm. The lowest level of the self, the commanding self (*al-nafs al-ammarah*) falls prey to these two forces from which it finds no rest.

Once the self is disciplined and subdued it begins to see these two forces as attributes of divine wisdom to be used for progressing through the various stages of refined behavior and conduct. When the self is groomed and purified success on the path of *tawhid* (Divine Unity) is assured as Allah declares:

He will be successful who purifies it, (Qur'an 91:9)

If the self is not watched and disciplined it becomes as dangerous and unpredictable as a wild beast. Otherwise, the self is the means by which one makes the spiritual journey and crosses over the desert of darkness onto the plain of light and tranquility. The self then is the means by which one fails and perishes, or is elevated and liberated from the veils of this transient world.

It is related that the Messenger of Allah said:

The human form is the greatest gift of Allah in His creation. It is the Book which He has inscribed with His own hand, it is the totality of all of the forms of the universe, it is the sum total of the preserved tablets [cf. Qur'an 85:22], it is the testimony to all that is unseen, it is the Straight Path to all spiritual knowledge, it is the bridge which is extended between the Garden and the Fire and the banner of Unity, it is the basis of all knowledges and the foundation of the knowledge of the Hereafter.⁸

As we have explained, the purpose of all divinely revealed laws which follow the intended natural patterns of life are to direct man towards Divine Light, and to enable him to know the joy of contented submission, and to ascend from the degradation of the self to the summit of perfection in abandonment. It saves him from falling into the gross material realms and transports him to the realms of exalted spiritual illumination. All of this leads to the knowledge of Allah through His Attributes, and the belief in His Angels, His Messengers, His Books, and the Last Day. And all this will lead to the primal and natural state of beingness.

When man acts after having attained this profound spiritual knowledge, the Prophet's words take on real significance:

Whoever knows his self knows his Lord.

If one does not know the nature of the lower self and bring it to complete and utter servitude before Allah, then one knows neither one's self nor one's Lord. As long as he does not know his Lord as his Lord and Master, then he will likewise never know the nature of his Lord or the nature of his own self. By witnessing one's meanness, for example, one seeks the cure in Divine Generosity. By witnessing one's weakness one seeks cover under Divine Power. By recognizing one's impatience, one seeks refuge in Allah's infinite patience. By realizing how base the self is,

⁸ Mulla Hadi Sabzivari (1295 AH/1878 CE), in his book *Hidayat al-Talibin* ('Guidance of the Seekers').

one realizes how glorious Allah is. Once the lower nature of the slave is constantly witnessed, then the Lord's High State can be constantly contemplated.

The meaning of the saying of the Prophet: 'This world is the sowing field of the Hereafter', is that the reason behind Creation and the purpose of the shari`ah is to know and be with Allah. The evolution of the self depends upon the realization that its nature is base and humble and that it is completely subjugated to worldly existence, and that it cannot progress from imperfection to full realization without movement, time, and the proper blend of material matter.

It is related that the Prophet said:

The worst of your enemies is your own self within you.⁹

He also said:

The self is the greatest of idols.

Likewise:

I take refuge in Allah from subtle association [*shirk*: seeing other than Allah].

The seeker on this path will come to recognize the deep meanings of these traditions only after self-knowledge and transcendence of his lower nature.

The hidden ailments of the self cannot be treated except by continuous vigil over it and seeking the help of a master who has had experience in these matters and has succeeded. Upon examining the ailments of the self, we find that there are those which are so subtle and hidden that they exert their influence upon the seeker without his knowledge. Among the most important of these are caprice and pride in their various forms. It is related that Imam Ja`far al-Sadiq said:

⁹ From *Risalat al-Sayr wa al-Suluk* ('Treatise on the Journey and the [Appropriate] Conduct'), by Sayyid Mahdi Bahr al-`Ulum.

Whoever allows pride to enter within him shall perish.

The Prophet said:

There are three things that will bring destruction: greed to which one submits, a desire which is followed, and a man's pride in himself.

Imam `Ali said:

Whoever does not take his own self to account daily is not one of us. Thus if he does good then he praises Allah, and if he commits evil he seeks Allah's forgiveness.

The basis of hidden *shirk* is when a man sees his self and says 'I' and thus remains continuously lost in the illusion of his own independent existence. The words of the testimony of faith (*shahadah*), '*La ilaha illa Allah*' (there is no deity but Allah) in this instance will remain unrealized. The Prophet said:

There is nothing between them and their Lord, which prevents them from seeing Him but the veil of pride.

THE REALMS OF THE SELF

There are three realms in which the self interacts: the first is that of the senses, the second is of visions and insights with which one perceives the unseen and the spiritual regions, and the last realm is of reason or intellect (*`aql*), which exists for the purpose of comprehending the realm of Lordship and Power.

Allah created the realm of the senses, physical entities, form and material substance so that it might act as a simile representing the unseen world of the Hereafter (*akhirah*), and to further indicate the spiritual realities within the realm of reasoning. Thus the names are many and varied in their meanings yet one in their true essence, descending from the realm of reasoning and the realm of absolute Power (*Jabarut*), into the realm of spiritual form. From here, there is a movement to the realm of the senses, and the material realm. Just as the descent from the loftiest

beginnings is accomplished in this manner, so too does the return or ascent to the loftiest Truth also follow this pattern.

The senses, therefore, are like a stairway by which the seeker advances to the point of witnessing within the realm of reasoning. By knowing the nature of the senses it becomes easier for the seeker to withdraw and abstain from their influence in order to discover the world of meaning which lies behind them. Whoever does not have knowledge of Allah will not be able to seek Him out, nor will he be inclined to do so. Similarly, whoever does not know the nature of the world and the baseness of its origins will be unable to reject it and go beyond. For this reason the men of knowledge and wisdom have concerned themselves with the study of the material realm and the conditions of the senses in order to proceed from them to what lies further ahead.

The knowledge of the material world and its shortcomings is the beginning of the knowledge of the spiritual realm and its wealth. It is said that as long as the self remains within this world it is like a passenger aboard a ship; that is, the self utilizes the body to make the journey from one world to the next, witnessing and experiencing various conditions over the seas until it reaches the shore of peace and awakening. The ship (the body) has fulfilled its duty when it brings the self to its goal and returns it to its original elements.

The men of knowledge have warned of laxity and frivolity or of giving in to ever-increasing sensual desires and thereby being deceived by one's own emotions and whims. Allah says:

KNOW that the life of this world is but a play and a passing delight,
and a beautiful show, and [the cause of] your boastful vying with one
another, and [of your] greed for more and more riches and children.
Its parable is that of [life-giving] rain: the herbage which it causes
to grow delights the tillers of the soil; but then it withers, and
you can see it turn yellow; and in the end it crumbles into dust....
(Qur'an 57:20)

The material realm has been created so that one may come to know what lies beyond it in the spiritual realm. The former acts as an allegory for one who has not witnessed the latter. For this reason we find that men of knowledge encourage the seeker to hasten in his quest for

annihilation of the self and to make use of this human body before the termination of its allotted time.

It is said that death represents the manifestation of Allah before the Moses of the heart. Thus the 'mountain' of the body disintegrates because it belongs to the material realm, and He becomes manifest before the self within the spiritual realm after the gross material has been stripped from it. This world and the next are opposites which, therefore, cannot manifest together or co-exist. The self is disinclined to physical death due to its fear of annihilation and non-existence because it has a goal and a purpose, which is to seek its state of eternity in the Hereafter and to reach the realm of non-time and non-space. By its very nature the self loves existence and abhors and fears non-existence.

Concerning this al-Razi has said:

Death of the body in this physical existence is life to the soul in the existence of the Hereafter. The soul has a natural inclination toward the transition into the realm of the Hereafter. Its disinclination is because the beginning of the growth of the soul occurs simultaneously with the physical growth of the body and the physical senses predominate over the soul as long as the connection between the body and the soul remains. Because of this connection the soul experiences pain and injury by whatever it is that causes pain and injury to the body. Everything which gives contentment and ease to the body is derived from health and favorable physical circumstances.¹⁰

There is also another reason for the self's disinclination towards death and its desire to preserve the body. It is that the body may serve as a vehicle by which the soul comes to know the Hereafter, and thus realize its own potential perfection. Thus sensory perceptions such as pain and fear are experienced by the animal self to encourage the self to care for the body. The body, in essence, has no feelings and no potential of its own that could prevent or ward off harm. If it were not for the existence of pain and fear within the self, it would have neglected the body and

¹⁰ Abu `Ali Ahmad bin Muhammad bin Ya`qub al-Razi, d.421 AH/1088 CE in *Tahdhib al- Akhlaq wa Ta'thir al-A`raq*.

left it to perish before it had fulfilled its mission, which is to nourish and awaken the self, to rise from the physical to the spiritual.

THE BEGINNING AND THE RETURN

The word ‘beginning’ here is considered to mean the original natural state of the human being in which it was created by Allah. The word ‘return’ here signifies its return to that original state. Allah has said in the Qur’an:

The nature made by Allah in which He has made man; there is no altering of Allah’s creation. (Qur’an 30:30)

I have created from before when you were nothing. (Qur’an 19:9)

The original natural state (*fitrah*) was non-existent before Reality brought it into existence. There was Allah and there was nothing else with Him. That is to say, in the beginning Allah brought creation into existence from complete non-existence and in the end He will take it from the realm of this apparent existence and return it to non-existence (in terms of time and space). Thus, the end is a return to the beginning, and the goal we hope to reach was already present at our starting point, as Allah says:

As We began the creation thus will We cause it to return. (Qur’an 21:104)

The first state of existence for man was the garden in which Adam and Eve resided. The next stage was the fall from the paradise ‘state’ into this world of duality, of opposites, of time and space. The next state after this worldly existence is annihilation in the Oneness, which is the paradise of the people of Unity. Allah has said:

O tranquil Soul... enter My paradise, (Qur’an 89:27-30)

To come from the state of paradise into this world is to experience imperfection and constant change. The departure from this world to paradise is to go from imperfection to perfection and to

return to one's natural, originally desired state of unitive bliss. This represents the Return (*mi`ad*) of creation and its ascent to the Creator. The beginning is from Him and the end is with Him. And He is the First and He is the Last.

The physical world belongs to the material realm of the senses and the Hereafter belongs to the realm of meaning and attributes which is not perceived by the senses, for it lies behind the physical world. The Hereafter is perceived through reasoning, and insight is gained through reflection.

The true nature of man combines these three realms. If worldly attachments and sensual pleasures are predominant then he suffers disappointment and insecurity because worldly pleasures do not last. Sensual pleasures are symbolic and represent a minute example of a lasting attribute in another zone of existence. Thus, whoever is attached to or desires a state that by its very nature is transient and false, he will never be able to maintain the elusive situation and thus will only fail and be disillusioned. When reasoning predominates and one acts according to the spiritual path one refrains from anything that would deflect him from it. In this context Allah has said:

For the likes of this let those who would act, act. (Qur'an 37:61)

Let those who would compete, compete in this. (Qur'an 83:26)

The entanglement of the self with the external senses and powers of arousal prevent it from witnessing the inner realities. Those realities are much brighter and stronger and more durable than the outer ones, which are, perceived by way of the sense organs in the material world. The men of spiritual knowledge are those who have arrived, through the strength of certainty, at the perception of truths by way of reasoning and insights. The lifting of the veil at the time of death will not increase them in certainty and knowledge except in clarity and freedom.

WITHDRAWAL AND DRAWING NEAR

It is related in a divinely revealed tradition (*hadith qudsi*) from the Prophet that Allah said:

My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more beloved than by way of the obligations which I have ordained for him. He may draw near to Me with additional actions (*nawafil*) if I love him. If I love him I become his hearing by which he hears and the sight by which he sees. I become the tongue by which he speaks and his hand with which he grasps. If he asks Me in prayer I will answer him, and if he beseeches Me I will grant it to him.

Drawing near to Allah is always accompanied by withdrawal of oneself from all else. Pre-eminent among the things which one turns to other than Allah is the self itself and its various spheres of influence, which are:

1. The sphere of the senses, that is, the material realm of nature.
2. The sphere of emotions and the realms of allegory and symbolism.
3. The sphere of reason and true essence; this realm is void of matter and form.

The true worshipper bypasses these three spheres in his prostration in imitation of the Prophet, about whom it has been related that once, in the middle of the month of Sha‘ban, during his customary prostration he said: ‘My black, my subtle, and my white are in prostration before you’.

The most important means used to withdraw from the world and to draw near to Allah is through the various forms of worship (*‘ibadah*), as Allah mentions;

And remember the name of your Lord and withdraw yourself and completely devote yourself to Him. (Qur’an 73:8)

When Imam Ja`far al-Sadiq was asked which was the best action that would draw one near to the Lord, he replied:

I know of nothing after knowledge (*ma`rifah*) which is better than *salat*. Have you not seen that the righteous servant (of Allah), `Isa bin Maryam, said (in the Qur’an), “...and He admonished me to perform

salat and (to pay) the zakat as long as I remain alive. [Qur'an 19:31]?"

Thus the utmost in nearness and spiritual knowledge is the condition of the Master which Imam Ja`far al-Sadiq described, as it is related in the book, 'The Lantern of the Path':

His body is within the creation and his heart is with Allah. If his heart should become distracted from Allah for one instant it would perish because of its longing for Him. The Master is the guardian of Allah's Trust, the treasure house of His Secrets, the mine of His Light, the guide to His Mercy over His creation, the storehouse of His Knowledge, and the scales of His Abundance and Justice. He has become annihilated from the creation, desire, and the world and has no companion but Allah, no speech, no signs of indications, no self except in Allah, for Allah, from Allah, with Allah.

THE JOURNEY TO ALLAH

The soul of man is the means by which Allah has selected for him to ascend and return to His Divine Essence. Mulla Sadra described the stages of this journey of ascent, saying:

Know that the seeker among the masters and the 'awliya' has four journeys. The first journey is from Creation to the Truth. The second is the journey by Truth in Truth. The third journey is directly opposite to the first because it is from Truth to Creation by way of Truth. The fourth journey is the opposite of the second in that it is by Truth within Creation.

The First Journey is completed by the lifting of the veils of tranquility, which are connected with the self, as well as the lifting of the veils of illumination, which are connected with the heart and the soul. This is the ascension from the station of the self to the heart and to the soul; then one proceeds onward to the Highest Goal. The realms of the self, the heart, and the soul have within them veils that lie between the seeker and Divine Truth, so one must pass through all of these obstacles. After passing through these realms, the seeker reaches the station of spiritual knowledge and begins the second

journey of annihilation into the Names and Attributes of Allah so that he embodies the words: ...thus through Him (Allah) one hears and by Him one sees and by Him one walks and by His hand one grasps...¹¹

The First Journey, then, consists of traversing the material regions, the spiritual realms, and arriving at the realm of Essence. For this reason we find that the majority of the difficulties and pain which the seeker encounters occur within the first journey.

There are three stations in the Second Journey. The first is the station of the Innermost Secret, which is the Station of Annihilation into the Essence. The second station is referred to as the 'hidden one' and it is the Station of Annihilation into the Attributes and Names of Allah. The third is the Station of Utmost Abundance, which is Annihilation into the Essence and the Attributes. Describing this further Mulla Sadra has written:

If one wished, the secret of the annihilation of one's own essence could be described as being the end of the First Journey and the beginning of the Second Journey. The term 'Hidden' here, refers to annihilation within Divine Power, while the term 'Utmost Abundance' refers to the annihilation of both of these annihilations and completes the cycle of Perfection. The Second Journey is likewise completed, its annihilation perfected, and one begins the Third Journey.

Al-Hakim Mirza Hasan Nuri has further explained Mulla Sadra's meaning, saying that as long as man does not traverse the practical and theoretical Path of the Master, he will continue to see multiplicity and remain unaware of, and unable to see, Oneness. Multiplicity is the veil which conceals Unity. Multiplicity gradually begins to vanish when the seeker begins his search for the cause rather than the effect and to search for the Creator rather than what has been created. The seeker comes to the point where he does not see any duality or multiplicity and witnesses nothing but the One Ultimate Reality, the effulgent Truth. This condition is attained when Oneness cloaks all forms of multiplicity within its own light. At this stage the journey is from the creation to the Truth, from multiplicity to Oneness.

¹¹ In *Al-Hikam al-Muta`aliyah fi Asfar al-'Aqliyah al-Arba`ah*.

After arrival at the realm of Oneness and the vanishing of multiplicity, and after discerning the True Essence within the Names, Attributes and works from one level to the next, one is said to have completed the Second Journey, 'in Truth, by Truth'. Concerning this Mulla Sadra has said:

The words 'in Truth' refer to the journey within the Attributes of Allah, His Names, and His special traits. 'By Truth' refers to when the seeker has realized the true essence of Truth and has removed any sense of 'I-ness' from himself and likewise the illusion of all multiplicity. It is then that he realizes the essence of Allah, His Names, and His Attributes.

The Second Journey is the traversing of the Spiritual realms where one witnesses the Sublime Beauty of Oneness within its manifestations in the universe. Here the heart of the seeker is opened and made aware of Oneness within multiplicity and multiplicity within Oneness. He then stands between the two stations in that he has joined the two opposites. Thus, he is qualified to give guidance to sincere seekers.

The Third Journey is from Truth towards Creation 'by means of the truth'. This is called the Station of Refinement of Behavior (*suluk*). It is the station of witnessing the Realms of Power (*jabarut*), the Spiritual Realms (*malakut*), and the Material Realm (*nasut* or *mulk*), and illumination by way of the knowledges from the Essence, from the Attributes and from Actions.

The Fourth Journey is 'by Truth' within Creation. This is the highest, most subtle, most complete, and most perfect of the stages discussed. The Master is himself veiled by the multiplicity of creation while he is simultaneously immersed within Oneness.

The four stages resemble the ritual of pilgrimage in Islam: the first, going towards the cave – `Arafah; the second, being in `Arafah with Truth, by Truth; the third, returning, testing one's *suluk* by sacrifice; and the fourth, returning to Creation.

The prayer of Shaykh `Abd al-Salam Ibn al-Mashish, the well known North African gnostic, is an example of a prayer made by a master who has reached the highest stage:

O Allah! Let me be immersed within the Sea of Oneness, deliver me from the mires of *tawhid*, and drown me in the sea of Unity until I see nothing, hear nothing, perceive nothing, feel nothing except through it. Make the Greatest Veil of my soul and its spirit the secret of my reality and its reality the sum total of my existence, by way of the confirmation of the Primal Truth.

The Master al-Sabziwari has discussed the journey to Allah and added that the journey consists of focusing and directing the heart to Divine Reality¹². The four journeys he mentions are: The first journey is ‘to Allah’ from the regions of the self until one arrives at the clear horizons, which are the furthest extremity of the station of the Heart and the beginning of the heavenly manifestations. The second is the journey ‘in Allah’ by merging with His Attributes and realizing His Names, then travelling to the ‘loftiest horizons’¹³ and the furthest extreme of Unified Oneness (*Wahdaniyah*). The third journey is the progression onward to pure gatheredness and Absolute Oneness (*al-Hadrah al-Wahdaniyah*). This is the station of ‘two bows’ length’¹⁴ as long as duality continues to exist. When it is lifted it then becomes the station of ‘or closer’¹⁵, which is the furthest extreme of the station of nearness. The fourth is the Journey ‘by Allah’ the station of eternity (*baqa*’) which occurs after annihilation (*fana*’) and is the differentiation after unification.

It is inevitable that at times, the sincere seeker will experience states in which the meanings behind these journeys will be reflected to him and he will perceive them inwardly. However, a state (*hal*) or a momentary spiritual illumination (*ishraq*) is different from a station (*maqam*), the latter being when the seeker is firmly established within this condition and is thus able to remain steadfast on the Path of the Return to the Divine Essence whence he originally came.

¹² In *Risalat al Say`wa at Suluk*.

¹³ Qur’an 15:7.

¹⁴ Qur’an 53:9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

REVELATION AND INSPIRATION

Revelation differs from inspiration. True inspirations are reflections of the prophetic revelations. Those who are following in the footsteps of the prophets and seek insights and inward inspirations must maintain outward precaution and acceptance of the revealed laws of Islam. The world of the unseen opens up to those who live in harmony with the material and seen world. This can happen when the primal and natural codes are adhered to. These are the Prophetic laws and the *Din*.

The word *wahy*, which we translate as ‘revelation’, literally means ‘a writing, a mission, an inspiration, or words which are hidden and which originate from other than man himself’. Used as a verb, *waha* means ‘to reveal to someone’, or ‘to show, indicate or speak to someone by utterances which are hidden from others’. The word *ilham*, which we translate as ‘inspiration,’ has the tri-literal Arabic root of *lahima* and means ‘to swallow or devour something’. The fourth form of the verb, which is the corresponding verbal form of the verbal noun, *ilham*, carries the meaning that something is placed within the heart of man by Allah, as if it were cast into his soul and he was consumed by it.

The means used for conveying an inspiration or *ilham* is an angelic power or force which brings spiritual knowledge and everything praiseworthy for the soul, without the interference of any lowly desires.

‘Whispering’ (*waswas*) refers to thoughts, ideas, or concepts, which confuse the heart causing misfortune, grief, or any condemnable negative effect. Thus whispering is the foundation of false notions and corrupt ideas, including one’s baseless fears of poverty, ill-health, or the fear of some imagined disaster which may befall one, as well as all reprehensible thoughts. Whispering is brought on by a satanic voice, which is able to afflict the self because of one’s inattentiveness or weakness or distraction.

The way these inspirations and the inner illuminations, which spring from them, are made manifest in subtle ways and often not very clear, such as during sleep and after the material and sensual veils have been lifted from the self. Inspirations occur during waking consciousness

when Allah, through His hidden and subtle kindness, removes the veils and wonders from the realm of the unseen and illuminates the heart like a sudden flash of lightning.

Revelation, on the other hand, is similar to inspiration, except that it differs in regard to the strength of its clarity and the fact that the angel who has been sent with it is also witnessed. As Allah says:

It is not for man to be spoken to by Allah except by way of a revelation (*wahy*) or from behind a veil or by way of a messenger whom He sends. (Qur'an 42:51)

The point here is that knowledge and insight comes upon the heart in various ways, by way of revelation and inspiration, by way of messengers and teachers, Revelation, in particular, is transmitted by the angels. It is related from the Imams that revelations were received by messengers (*rusul*) while in a waking state and that the remainder of the prophets (*anbiya'*) received them while asleep.

The direct and inward receiving of knowledge without the existence of any external agent is explained by the fact that man's soul has the capacity to perceive the nature of phenomena as well as its original reality. This reality is veiled, however, because of man's lack of preparation to accept these illuminations and knowledges.

The human soul is like a mirror that is placed in front of the mirror of primal reasoning, or the Preserved Tablet (*al-lawh al-mahfuz*), which contains all that has been decreed by Allah until the Day of Resurrection. Thus, the real essence of knowledge is manifest in this mirror which combines all occurrences. The reflection of this essence is seen in the mirror of the soul which is similar to the image of a form seen in a large mirror that is reflected in a mirror facing it, while between the two mirrors is the veil of the self. This veil may differ in thickness, texture, or delicateness, depending on the state and stations of the person and his closeness to his Lord.

When this veil is lifted the inner vision or insight is opened. In Arabic, this insight is referred to as *basirah*. It is by means of this inner vision that the soul witnesses what is inscribed upon the Preserved Tablet.¹⁶ The ease by which the veil is lifted is in proportion to the degree of readiness of the soul, its total submission and unconditional faith, the purity of the heart, and the receptivity to light by the mirror of the intellect and reasoning.

Some scholars are primarily concerned with acquiring outer knowledge and conduct without regard for the states of the heart or the struggle to eliminate reprehensible qualities or attachments. This is the basic difference between the religious scholar and the spiritual master with regard to Divine Knowledge. Scholars prefer to occupy themselves with learning to bring themselves closer to Allah. The seeker of gnosis, on the other hand, severs his attachments to this creation so that Allah may overwhelm his heart and bring about its unfolding through spiritual openings, by removing the Veil from it through the subtle generosity of His Mercy.

There is no doubt that the seeker who uses his intellect will have a balanced approach to acquiring knowledge through study, and to the struggle against the self, as well as to the perfection of the heart. Thus he will take from the master and follow in the footsteps of the Prophets and those to whom these matters have been unveiled, those who are abstinent and have turned to Allah. For whoever turns to Allah, Allah surely has already turned to him.

The sincere seeker applies himself honestly and wholeheartedly in a balanced way through study, following instruction and struggling against the lower self towards a greater total awareness and a purer state of beingness. Following in the prophetic footsteps and maintaining strong connection with enlightened beings increases one's constant focus on the higher objective by constriction and abstention from distractions and other pitfalls. He who belongs to Allah, Allah will be his.

¹⁶ Qur'an 18:22.

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Son of Karbala

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

The atmosphere of an Iraq in transition is brought to life and used as a backdrop for the Shaykh's own personal quest for self-discovery and spiritual truth.

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Edited By: Munawar A. Anees

Foreword By: Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

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