Zachary Schlosser

RELS1540: Sufi Method in Ibn al'Arabi's *Journey to the Lord of Power*

According to Ibn al'Arabi, the renowned12th-13th c. Sufi master, the Sufi adept, while training along the path of mystical development (*t(arīqa*), encounters four broad phases. The first of these is the "journey to Him," the journey to a direct encounter with the essence of Allah in himself. The second phase is "arriving and standing before Him." The third: "what He says to you as you sit on the carpet of His vision." Although here 'Arabi speaks of visions and the acquisition of divine knowledge occurring at this fairly advanced mystical state, such experiences were common all along the Sufi path. Elsewhere in his text 'Arabi speaks to both the pleasurable and the painful of these. The last major phase of development is "the return from Him to the presence (*hadra*) of His actions: with Him and to Him" ('Arabi, 26). The Sufi adept, having achieved absorption into Allah, eventually leaves this state, for it is blinding, and while "there" he is unaware of anything else. According to 'Arabi "absorption in Him... is a station less than the station of return" ('Arabi, 26).

The above description was a small taste of the detailed exposition of the hierarchical experiences which a Sufi practitioner might encounter, as contained in Ibn al'Arabi's *Journey to the Lord of Power*. 'Arabi wrote this text, a detailed and specific instruction manual for undertaking an extended period of mystical practice, to a "friend and intimate companion" ('Arabi, 25). While this essay intends to investigate the spiritual methodology and experiential results of Sufism broadly, we will use Ibn al'Arabi's text to narrow our research and look into one specific system of thought on the matter of spiritual practice.

After briefly opening with a discussion of what it would mean to be a Sufi, set apart from Muslims more generally, we will look at import of the Prophet Muhammad for Sufi spirituality. Ibn al'Arabi thought of the spirit of Muhammad, or Muhammadan Reality, as the 'Perfect Man' (*al-insān al-kāmil*), "who represents the fullest manifestation of the divine in the cosmos, and is also the origin of all human spirits and a representation of their greatest potential" (Hoffman, 352). The influence of this image on 'Arabi's thoughts on spiritual progression cannot be underestimated. After this introduction we will move into the varieties of Sufi method directly. There are so many elements of Sufi methodology which carry great weight and have been developed to a high degree of sophistication that we could never hope to cover all of them adequately here, thus, instead we will limit ourselves only to a few features which are common and extremely important throughout Sufi tradition. Before exploring the particularities of 'Arabi's spiritual advice in *Journey to the Lord of Power* (which may not apply to all contexts of Sufi practice). These are *khalwa* (spiritual retreat) and various types of meditation, especially *dhikr*, the conscious and active remembrance of God. We will conclude with an examination of the results of spiritual practice according to Sufi thought and practice, including the various systems of the states (*ah)wāl*; temporary, spiritual experiences) and stations (*maqāmāt*; permanent, stages of spiritual development and realization) which the Sufi adept might enter, and the theme hierarchies, which applies both to these states and stages as well as to the spiritually accomplished themselves.

So, first of all, what makes a Muslim a Sufi? Simply, a Muslim is a Sufi if he or she follows one of the many paths of Sufism. Sufism, which is "the generally accepted name for Islamic mysticism" (Schimmel, 3), can be defined as a spiritual science

motivated by a love of the Absolute and the intention to rid oneself of obstacles which hinder one from achieving union with It. (Although this definition is vague at best, I think it sufficient for our purposes as we are not most interested in the definition of mysticism, or its philosophical implications, nor with trying to mark a distinction between specifically "mystical" practices or experiences and "ordinary" ones. Rather, what we are interested in here is simply the *methods* by which self-identified Sufis have utilized to achieve their goals, however they have been defined.) Since "the various Sufi methods of spiritual realization... cannot validly be practiced without the initiation, and the counsel, of a *shaikh*," a rite of initiation establishing a formal and mutually recognized teacher-student is "indispensable" (Stoddart, 54). A Sufi, then, is a Muslim who, motivated by a desire to follow the prophet Muhammad's injunction to "Qualify yourself with God's character," reaches out to an already-accomplished teacher, takes up a formal relationship with them through initiation, and puts their teachings into practice through both mental and physical activity (Ernst, 52).

Sufi spirituality is influenced by both the images of person of the Prophet Muhammad and the Mi'raj, his visionary ascent with the angel Jibrīl/Gabriel through the various levels of heaven to the divine throne itself (Sells, 47). Some Sufis "appropriated the full Mi'raj cosmology as a paradigm of mystical ascent" (Sells, 48). Muhammad comes to receive such exalted respect and admiration because of his unique closeness with God (Ernst, 47). Thus, Sufis, themselves striving to become as near as possible to the divine take Muhammad to be their exemplar and their highest model. 'Arabi's Perfect Man is not only identified with the spirit of Muhammad and his historical person, but with the "perfected saint" as well (Hoffman, 352). Thus, 'Arabi is in some way

fundamentally linking the highest possible goal and achievement of saints to both the finite and eternal aspects of Muhammad.

Despite the implications of Ibn al'Arabi's Perfect Man for the relationship between Muhammad and saints and sainthood, Sufi's still hold there to be major differences between Muhammad and Sufi adepts which are not bridgeable. The most important of these is that while Muhammad was a prophet, Sufi practice is for the "production of *saints*" ('Arabi, 5, emphasis mine). While "the two classes share a common ground – the stations of divine realization–" their realizations are still not equal. Prophets and saints remain distinct in other ways as well. One important distinction given by 'Arabi is that experiential, spiritual "ascension... [is] given without preparation to the prophets, [but must be] earned by the saints" ('Arabi, 3). This is important because it implies that while prophets need not take up self-directed practical training to mature spiritually, saints do. "The capacity of the saints accrues through human effort," thus the importance of method for all Sufi seekers ('Arabi, 97).

Another distinction is directly relevant to the Sufi practitioner's relationship with Muhammad himself. As 'Arabi says: "every saint of God Most High receives what he receives through the spiritual mediation of the prophet whose sacred Way he follows. There are those... who do not know it and say, 'God said to me'; but this is nothing other than the spiritual nature [of their prophet]" ('Arabi, 56). For Sufis then, all divine revelation, mystical experiences, wisdom, and insight are given through the prophet Muhammad. There are no states or stages which are not revealed to the saints without his intercession and his permission, or perhaps, rather, his munificence. Not only is Muhammad the intermediary for what is *received* by the saints, but he is also the

intermediary for anything and everything they *give out*. "The saint speaks from behind the veil of his prophet, while the prophet speaks without a veil – that is, without the mediation of another prophet" ('Arabi, 96). The authority of a saint's teachings, though clearly in part dependent on his own experiences and wisdom (and perhaps scriptural and intellectual knowledge as well) is ultimately grounded in his deference to the prophet Muhammad.

As we move now to Sufis' practical methods for spiritual advancement we will first turn to look at a "regular institution of the Sufi path," the *khalwa*, or spiritual retreat (Schimmel, 103). *Khalwa* offers seclusion to the Sufi practitioner. Though an "advanced and dangerous Sufi practice" ('Arabi, 2), the opportunity it presents to focus ones mind solely and continually on God may lead to enormous spiritual benefits. Such an act of seclusion, however, requires the adept to totally surrender "all worldly and exterior religious affairs, as the first step to surrendering his own existence" ('Arabi, 110). Because the *khalwa* put the Sufi adept at great risk, he may only undertake this practice with the permission of his *sheikh*, or spiritual master. It is the *sheikh*'s responsibility to monitor the progress and mental strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities of his students in order to determine their levels of preparedness for the *khalwa*. If the sheikh feels that his student is liable to fall prey to temptations, for some lesser spiritual station short of full union with God, for example, or that his spiritual progress would be better aided by the support of a community of practitioners, then he might forbid his student from undertaking the retreat, at least for a time. This is one of the reasons why the master-disciple relationship is of great importance to the spiritual progress of the Sufi aspirant. His progress is indebted in large part to the wisdom and experience of his teacher.

Once actively engaged in a *khalwa*, whether forty days or of some other length, the majority of the Sufi's time is spent in one form of meditation or another. These meditations vary widely in style, but all are meant to serve the same purpose: to help the Sufi adept focus his mind more and more fully on some aspect of the divine reality. "Meditation in solitary retreat was the crucible of mystical experience for Sufis. The topics of cosmology and metaphysics, which for philosophers are proved by logic and demonstration, are for Sufis the subject of direct unveiling" (Ernst, 111). Sufi schools developed their own systems of meditation which were meant to be utilized in conjunction with and within the context of their own equally sophisticated psychological theories. Some forms of meditation include methods of breath control and the performance of elaborate sequences of physical movement and gesture. Meditation can also involve active use of the imagination whereby, for instance, the Sufi adept visualized the image of his *sheikh* in front of him (Ernst, 106-110). Such purposeful envisioning should not be confused with the elaborate and sometimes blindingly exuberant visions which might spontaneously fall upon a Sufi engaged in meditation. These visionary experiences are considered transient spiritual boons granted by God (through Muhammad, as mentioned earlier), while the generated images are a type of attention training technology and, in the case of the image of the *sheikh*, devices for establishing the protection and blessing of the master.

By far the most common and most important element and type of meditation, however, is *dhikr*, "the recollection of Allah through the invocation of His Names" ('Arabi, 107). Simply, *dhikr* is the constant repetition of one of the Names of God or some other very meaningful phrase, either silently, or out loud. The two most frequently

used *dhikrs* are 'Allah,' and the *tahlīl*, *lā ilāha illa llāh* ("[there is] no god but God") (Sells, 46). Each name of God is a "remedy and tool" meant to be applied to specific "diseases" of the heart and mind which may be afflicting a Sufi adept, and just as with medicine, to "take" the medicine of *dhikr* without having the sickness for which it is the cure is inappropriate and potentially harmful (Ernst, 94-95). Especially on retreat, when the Sufi adept might chant his *dhikr* for many hours each day (if not the whole day long, without stop!), recognizing which *dhikrs* are appropriate and which are not is of great importance. For example:

> The divine name "the Guide" (*al-Hadi*) is useful in seclusion. It is useful when there is scattering and distraction, which it removes. One who seeks God's help but does not see the external form of the helper should know that his persistence in seeking help is what he asked for.
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> The divine name "the Source" (*al-Ba'ith*) is recited by the heedless, but it is not recited by those who seek annihilation (*fanā'*, [the state of absolute annihilation and absorption in God])...
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> The divine name "the Master" (*al-Mawla*), or the helper and friend, is only recited by the [beginning] devotees, because that is their special concern. If someone on a higher level recites it, it is with a different meaning (Ernst, 94).

Performance of *dhikr* aloud was generally considered somewhat inferior and preparatory to silent *dhikr*. Once the Sufi adept had been accustomed to constant audible recitation he might be instructed to leave the oral recitation behind and to focus on internal recitation "in the heart." A further refining of the process of divine remembrance could occur when the Sufi adept disengaged himself even from internal recitation of the *dhikr* in exchange for the even more subtle practice of continually resting his attention in God himself without the mediation of the recited word or phrase. One master, for

instance, told his disciple, after he had been reciting *dhikr* nonstop through day and night, while awake and asleep for days, "Do not repeat them [the words of the *dhikr*] any more, but let all you faculties be engrossed in remembering God!" (Sells, 169-171). Ibn al'Arabi says that one engaged in retreat should practice *dhikr* until the "Remembered manifests Himself to you and [even the *dhikr* itself is forgotten and] in the actual recollection of Him" ('Arabi, 36). And finally, considering what we discovered of the importance of Muhammad in the lives of Sufis, it is not surprising that we should find this exhortation by a Sufi master: "Remember, remember not to omit the recollection of the Prophet (may God bless him and give him peace), for he is the key to every door, by the permission of the noble, the Giver" (Ernst, 96).

We have given ourselves a general, if rough and incomplete, outline of Sufi retreat practice. To add some character, personality, and detail to this discussion we should now turn to Ibn al'Arabi's *Journey to the Lord of Power*, a practical instruction manual for *khalwa*. The first of 'Arabi's injunctions to the Sufi mystic wishing to perform *khalwa* is the necessity of completing preparatory disciplines. As mentioned before, retreat is considered a dangerous practice; preparations need to be accomplished in order to build the mental strength to guard oneself from the many spiritual pitfalls which arise. 'Arabi: "Spiritual discipline (*riyada*) means training of character, abandonment of heedlessness, and endurance of indignities. For if a person begins before he has acquired discipline, he will never become a man, except in a rare case" ('Arabi, 30).

Once in retreat, the adept should remember that he has entered a time for strict seclusion. The separateness from interactions and dealings with other people is exactly

the vehicle and opportunity for spiritual growth and practice, to forget that would not only be to abuse the value of retreat, but also to hinder one's own progress. The words of Ibn al'Arabi on this matter are so clear and emphatic that they are worth quoting at some length.

> When you withdraw from the world, beware of people coming to see you and approaching you...Indeed... the object of departure from people is not leaving their physical company, but rather that neither your heart nor your ear should be a receptacle for the superfluous words they bring. Your heart will not become clear of the mad ravings of the world except by distance from them. And everyone who "withdraws" in his house and opens the door to people visiting him is a seeker of leadership and esteem, driven from the door of God Most High; and for someone like this, destruction is closer than the shoelace of his shoe (ʻArabi, 31).

So far we have mentioned that retreat practice is dangerous, but have not discussed what those dangers are. ʻArabi, however, goes into great detail about this. All types of visions occur to the Sufi in retreat, but it is difficult to determine what the source of those visions are, whether divine, evil, or simply hallucination originating from one's own mind. ʻArabi says to "protect yourself from the misfortunes of corrupt imaginings that distract you from remembrance," and gives advice on how to distinguish altered states which have been brought on by "angelic and demonic spiritual influences." The clues, in this regard, are the results of the altered states. "If the influence is angelic, it is followed by coolness and bliss," a lack of pain, and will leave "knowledge" in its wake. "But if it is demonic, physical disorientation, pain and distress, bewilderment and vileness ensue; and it leaves mental disorder" (ʻArabi, 32). Even the various blissful, ecstatic, and rapturous states which the adept encounters along the path can become

temptations and obstacles to finally reaching union with God. "If you become enamored of the precious things that He unfolds before you and stop with them, you will be driven from His door and lost." Becoming "enamored," confused, and seduced by particular states is a great danger, and a trap easily fallen into, especially at certain stages of which "Divine bliss" and the absence of "any reality other than their own" is easily mistaken for true union (ʻArabi, 87-88). Other stations bring special, useful knowledges such as the "particular harmful and beneficial qualities" of every mineral, plant, and animal. Though these knowledges appear rather impressive, according to ʻArabi they are actually very modest spiritual attainments which may occur at the outset of retreat practice. So despite the value of these revelations, to be caught by them and remain in their relatively low stations would actually be quite a shame; they must be regarded as spiritual tests of one's commitment, which are obligatory for the Sufi adept (ʻArabi, 36-37).

Preventative medicine for all of these situations is necessary. Since falling prey to all of these obstacles involves distraction from God himself, it is extremely helpful to strengthen one's priorities before entering *khalwa*. ʻArabi: "Let your covenant at your entry into retreat be that there is nothing like unto God... [And do not] seek from Him in retreat anything other than Himself [or]... attach your *himma*, the power of the heart's intention, to anything other Him" (ʻArabi, 32). This done, it will be easier, as powerfully tempting and overwhelmingly blissful states arise, to remember one's intention, and to resist desiring their pleasurable effects and being "bound" by them (ʻArabi, 88). And when they do arise, the foundational and best remedy for them is what we've already discussed, *dhikr*: the continual remembrance of God which is the direct antidote to distraction. When visitors come to call on the Sufi adept while in retreat, and when

beautiful spiritual visions and states are experienced, the Sufi adept uses the recitation of divine names to turn his attention back to God alone. *Dhikr* is the vehicle for the constant reinforcement of one's intention, and the movement from one spiritual station to the next.

Now that we've learned a bit about Sufi methodology, let us turn to the experiential results of such dedicated practice. Throughout this essay we've been using the terms states (*ah)wāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*), and just above we discussed some of the ways in which these aspects of the Sufi path, though normally signs of progress, can become obstacles in their own right, and Ibn al'Arabi advice to adepts on how to avoid such risks. It's appropriate, now, to go into these things in much greater detail. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the states are temporary, spiritual experiences, while the stations are permanent, stages of spiritual development and realization. "States are essentially regarded as divine grace," surprising and unlooked for gifts from God, while "the stations... are accessible to human effort" (Ernst, 103). While states may be *signs* of progress, the stations themselves *are* progress. However, both adepts and we must be cautious here not to mistake even the stations for the goal, and become, fixated and "bound" by them ('Arabi, 88). The goal in Sufi practice is to reach union with God in the total annihilation (*fanā'*) of one's sense of a separate self, as well as knowledge of anything else, and, at least for 'Arabi, beyond this even lies *baqā'*, "'subsistence' in God after annihilation" and one's return to the world of self-other and multiplicity (Schimmel, 143).

The possible states experienced by a Sufi, on or off retreat, are exceedingly numerous, and they may be characterized by both great pleasure and great pain. But let us read a few, directly from the words of a mystic himself, in order to come into some

kind of contact with them. These few accounts are from the Sufi master Ruzbihan Baqli, whose mystical states often took the form of particularly visionary experiences:

> I was wakeful one night at midnight; I was between sleep and waking, but not alert. But in my changeableness I said, "Giver!" And the Truth (great is his majesty) appeared with the quality of majesty and beauty, manifest and adorned with jewels of light. He scattered on me a great abundance, a larges that was scattered from his eternal countenance. He said, "Since you called out, 'Giver,' take this from the Giver, for I am the generous Giver" (Baqli, 17).

> He took me while I was in a state of nearness to him, and he caused me to enter the veils of the hidden, until I was hidden from the hidden. When I departed, a moment passed. I saw myself as though I were in Shiraz, and the doors of heaven opened, until I saw the throne and the footstool. I saw the master Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Dhafif and all the masters separating and gathering, as if the were anticipating that the Truth would summon me there. The Truth (glory be to him) manifested himself to them, and they were sighing, moaning, and crying in that moment, and all of that was from their longing for me (Baqli, 65).

> When I awakened, a fear of separation fell upon my heart, and I remembered days past and bygone sins. My fear increased, and I abased myself, saying, "My God! I fear your wrath on the Day of Resurrection, when my sins will be exposed before the knowers of God!" I saw myself in that hour above the utmost 'Illiyyin in the presence of might, between the prophets and the sincere ones and the nearest angels, in the form of raving and rapture. I heard from beyond a veil something that quiets my heart from that, and all the sorrows fell away from me when I saw myself in the station of expansiveness. I was in the oceans of testing, and the vicissitudes of time befell me... I was in the momentary state with pronged sorrow and painful concern, but I endured a while (Baqli, 109).

Although the stations are usually presented by Sufis with much greater specificity, order, definition and sense of exhaustiveness, the lists of stations themselves can vary *considerably* from between particular Sufi traditions and lineages. For example, Shaqiq al'Balkhi, in *The Manners of Worship* presents four stations. These are "asceticism, fear, longing, and love." Briefly, "asceticism is training the soul by cutting off the desires for food and drink beyond minimum sustenance;" "fear begins with the recollection of death, imposing on the soul the dread that comes from contemplating the warning of God's judgment;" "longing" is "longing for paradise, in which one thinks constantly of the blessings God has reserved for the inhabitants of paradise;" and finally, "love of God, which is ... the highest and noblest [is to become] so filled with love that it overflows so that the angels and the devotees love him [the adept]." Each of these stations were meant to be practiced on their own during *khalwa* of a period of forty days, and each of them could have been permanent and need not necessarily be followed by the achievement of the next station (Ernst, 100-101).

This, then, is one system of stations; others, however, look quite different. The presentation of systems by Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri lists a hierarchy of fifty stations (Ernst, 104, 261) while that of 'Abd Allah Ansari lists one hundred. And while Ansari uses thirty of the terms of Qushayri interspersed, in different orders, with his own, he does not use all of them (Ernst 104-105, 251). Returning to Ibn al'Arabi, recall that at the outset of our discussion we named the four great phases of Sufi training as laid out in *Journey to the Lord of Power*. Again, these are: Ibn al'Arabi's "journey to Him," "arriving and standing before Him," "what He says," "return from Him to… His actions" ('Arabi, 26). I call these 'phases' rather than stations because all of them include the

experience of multiple stations and potential states. A major portion of ‘Arabi’s text contains short descriptions of the stations which he expects an adept to come across in retreat. Each description of the previous station ends, and the next description begins, with “And if you do not stop with this...” signaling both the tendency and risk to become caught by what one has discovered and lose one’s motivation to continue to Goal alone, as well as the fact that each station has the possibility of becoming one’s permanent level of knowledge and way of being.

Each of the stations increases the depth of the Sufi adept’s insight into the nature levels of the activity of God in creating reality. Eventually the adept might reach the highest station, the highest stage of spiritual development possible for saints; this is called the *qut)b*, which means “axis” or “pivot” (‘Arabi, 114). The “perfect saint,” described above, as an appearance of the Perfect Man, the spirit of Muhammad, is in fact this *qut)b* (Hoffman, 352). The *qut)b* is not only thought of as the highest rank of Sufi saint, but also as being “directly responsible for the welfare of the entire world” (‘Arabi, 114). Despite this exalted status, even the station of the *qut)b*, according to ‘Arabi, occurs in degrees (‘Arabi, 43). In order to get a taste of ‘Arabi’s language and accounts of these stations I will quote him here (already relating some of the further degrees of the station of the *qut)b*)

> And if you do not stop with this beckoning, a light is revealed in which you do not see anything other than yourself. In it a great rapture and deep transport of love seizes you, and in it you find bliss with God that you have not known before. All that you saw previously become small in your eyes, and you sway like a lamp. [This station considered *especially* tempting and dangerous (‘Arabi, 88).] And if you do not stop with this, He reveals the “[original]” forms of the

> sons of Adam. And veils are lifted. And veils descend. And they have a special praise which upon hearing you recognize, and you are not overcome. You see your form among them, and from it you recognize the moment which you are in (‘Arabi, 47).
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> And [finally, finally, after everything...] if you do not stop with this, you are eradicated, then withdrawn, then effaced, then crushed, then obliterated.
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> When the effects of eradication and what follows [which I take to be *fanā’*] are terminated, you are affirmed, then made present, then made to remain, then gathered together, then assigned. And the robes of honor which “[your degree]” requires are conferred upon you, and they are many.
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> Then you return to your path and examine all that you saw in different forms until you return to the world of you limited earthly senses [and this I take to be the beginning of *baqā’*]. Or “[you will hold fast]” there where you were absent and the destination of every seeker depends upon the road he traveled (‘Arabi, 48).

Beyond the hierarchies of states and stations, there is another manifestation of the theme of hierarchy in Sufi spirituality, and this is the hierarchy among the saints themselves. The first criterion of this is the rank of station to which the saint has attained. Those saints having attained a higher station are of a higher rank. However, this is not the whole story. As mentioned earlier, for Ibn al’Arabi “absorption in Him... is a station less than the station of return” (‘Arabi, 26). Those who remain absorbed in a particular station are considered of a rank slightly less than those having returned to the relative world of manifest appearances after having attained the same station. However, “if [one seeker] is absorbed in a higher station than that from which [another seeker] returns,” then such a comparison is not possible (‘Arabi, 51).

As we've seen, the masters and adepts of Sufi tradition have developed rigorous and sophisticated systems of methodologies for spiritual development. These include prescriptions of both mental and physical behaviors intended to bring about a vast array of not only temporary states of altered consciousness, but lasting stations of insight into the relationships and gradients between the coarsest material worlds and subtlest divine realms, as well as, ultimately, *haqq*, Truth itself, God himself. We've seen that such systems were greatly informed by the image of the prophet Muhammad in part due to his own spiritual ascension, the Mi'raj. Furthermore, these theoretical and practical systems of thought are filled out by thorough descriptions of the states and stations themselves, as well as obstacles along the path and remedies for them. But lest all this talk of hierarchy and development lead one to believe that a final and complete End to spiritual maturation is possible, I'd like to once again return to Ibn al'Arabi, who effectively refutes any 'myth of finality.' "The essential existence is composed of *haqq*, Truth, and *khalq*, Creation" ('Arabi, 85). To ignore Creation and the relative, manifest world would be to ignore half of reality. Though *fanā'* is high, *baqā'* is higher, and follows it. *Fanā'* is the end of traveling *to* God, but *baqā'* is the beginning of traveling *in* God ('Arabi, 106-107). Even the accomplished adepts "is thirsty continually forever, [yet his] desire and awe cleave to Him continually forever" ('Arabi, 64).

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