

## ***Discovering The Human Soul***

*“Consider the nafs and what perfected it and inspired it with depravity and God consciousness. He has succeeded who purifies it. And he is lost who buries it [in darkness].”*

(Quran:91:7-10)

### **Introduction**

In the Quran the term ‘nafs’ carries many connotations. This complexity of usage is paralleled by an equally complex semantics. The meanings associated with the term ‘nafs’ range from ‘soul’ to spirit’ and from ‘appetite’ and ‘desire’ to ‘passion’ and ‘anger.’ Both Quranic and semantic intricacy of the term ‘nafs’ mirror the intricate nature of the human self or soul. Thus ‘nafs’ may refer to a particular aspect of the self, such as the so-called ‘carnal soul’ that is associated with desires, appetites, and anger. It can also refer to the human being in his full personality, as in “your Sustainer who created you from a single *nafs*” (Q. 4:1). Such usage of *nafs* hints that from the individual’s perspective, he is what/however he identifies with. Hence, for an individual who unquestioningly limits himself with his short-sighted desires and identifies himself with the carnal soul (*al-nafs al-ammara*), that is all there is to his self. For he remains unaware of his other potential selves. Moreover, the wealth of meanings referring to various states of the self encapsulated in the word ‘nafs’ suggest its dynamic nature and its potential for transformation from the carnal soul to the profound spirit. The former meaning of the nafs as referring to the seat of desires, appetite and anger has a negative connotation. However we should not lose sight of the fact that the carnal soul is the very component of the human self that can be transformed through training and discipline so as to disclose the spirit, which constitutes the essence of being human.

More specifically, there are three levels of the nafs described explicitly in the Quran. The *nafs-ul-ammara* *bis-su’* or evil commanding soul is mentioned in the Chapter of Joseph/Yusuf, in aya 12:53, in which Prophet Yusuf says: “And yet, I am not trying to absolve myself: for, verily, the *nafs* incites to evil, and saved are only they upon whom my Sustainer bestows His grace”. This level of *nafs* is where we all start our life journey. At this stage, we identify with our desires, appetites, fears and anger to the point of becoming subjugated to them. Since we believe that this host of wants and impulses constitutes who we are, it seems reasonable to attend to ‘our’ wants and strive to fulfill them at all costs, even if it means committing evil. Hence, this *nafs* rules over us and dominates our sense of self. It *commands* and we execute the commands. We become trapped into mindless identifying with our wants and impulses.

The next level of nafs may be identified as *al-nafs al-lawwāma* or blaming soul mentioned in the Quran. In this Meccan aya, this self-reproaching *nafs* is deemed worthy of being used in an oath, “Nay, I swear by the self-reproaching soul.” (Q. 75:2) Blame

indicates inner struggle of an individual that has become aware of a reality beyond his immediate impulses and short-sighted desires. His higher potentials begin to unfold and strive to subdue the carnal soul. It is that very presence of higher potential that enables self-criticism and attempt for improvement,

Finally, the third level is that of *al-nafs-ul-mutmainna* mentioned in: "O thou *nafs* that hast attained to inner peace! Return thou unto thy Sustainer, well-pleased [and] pleasing [Him] enter, then, together with My [other true] servants –yea, enter thou My paradise!" (Q. 89:27-30), the soul that is content and at peace. This soul subsists in a paradise-state of inner peace as it has discovered its true identity of 'abd (bondsmen) of its *Rabb* (Sustainer). As a result it is *radhiyatan, mardhiya*, well-pleased, well-pleasing (89:28). Clearly each of these descriptions of the *nafs* represent a phase in the individual's inner state of being. Hence, the concept of transformation of the *nafs* that is at the core of various Islamic teachings especially within the Sufi orders, can be traced back to Quranic teachings /verses. In order to facilitate this journey of growth, the journey of the *nafs* has been detailed to include seven stages. Furthermore, six or ten subtleties (*lataif al-sitta or lataif al-ashara*) have been identified to further explain the aspects of human soul that journeys to God. While these nuances are noteworthy, in this paper, I shall focus on some of the implications and consequences of refusing to embark into the existential transformational journey of the soul. I also examine some aspects of the self-discovery of the seeker of truth (*salik*).

### The Self as Narrative

Traditionally the self has been conceived as a soul-substance that constitutes the essence of being human. And this traditional notion of self is directly in connection with the rest of the universe, human being is a "microcosmos." The self is a sign of God as is the rest of the universe. The self is directly related to the Divine, as the crucial classical Islamic saying (related as a saying of the Prophet, peace be upon him,) put it "he who knows his self knows his Sustainer." In modern science and ethics, however, the self is seen as a reflexive project. The subject is what he makes of himself. That is why the aim of modern psychotherapy is not to help people understand the meaning/ reality of their existence but to assist them in "constructing a rewarding sense of identity." "The important thing is to keep going," affirms Philip Rieff. "The modern subject is self-defining" concurs Charles Taylor, "where on previous views, the subject is defined in relation to a cosmic order." J. P. Sartre, who defines himself as an atheist, and atheism as not the negation of but the fight against God's power goes even further. He claims that human being can construct his own 'story' of who he is:

Man is always a storyteller! He lives surrounded by his and others myths. With them he sees everything in his life, no matter what befalls him. And he seeks to live his life as though he were telling it.

In other words, in modern secular or atheistic thought man has been defined as having no actual self as 'it can assume any role or feign any point of view, because it is in and for itself nothing.' A contemporary pragmatist thinker Richard Rorty asserts that the word 'I' is hollow. Accordingly, the self is viewed as a narrative to be routinely 'created' and 'sustained' in the reflexive activities of the individual. As he constructs a comforting "narrative of the self", man feels he has a unified identity from birth to death. The assumption is that this illusion of a coherent biography yields a sense of purpose in life and existential security. When 'I' has thus been emptied of any essence and inherent purpose that connects him to Eternal, it becomes hard to even speak of human growth as well as human solidarity. As even Rorty admits, there is nothing that connects us to each other as human beings, as there is nothing as shared humanity.

Traditional society might have been a source of somehow stable cultural meanings and a focus of identification for its members. It provided them with a sense of security, which is crucial for the development of self. This seeming security however, is difficult to cultivate and sustain in circumstances of constant change and uncertainty. As a result, the evasive and fictive character of the 'project of the self,' has been exposed bringing to the fore unsettling feelings of on pervasive insecurity. Consequently, as Anthony Giddens maintains,

In modern social conditions...crises become more or less endemic, both on an individual and a collective level...The crisis-prone nature of late modernity thus has unsettling consequences in two respects: it fuels a general climate of uncertainty, which an individual finds disturbing no matter how far he put it to the back of his mind; and it inevitably exposes everyone to a diversity of crisis situations of greater or lesser importance, crises situations which may sometimes threaten the very core of self identity.

### **Existential Questions and Ontological Security**

As a matter of fact, in ordinary circumstances, we feel relatively in control of our lives as we think we know what to do and how to react. However, this framework of security is very fragile because it is based on a false feeling that the world around us with all beings and objects including ourselves is permanent. This unfounded perception of the world is prone to crumble when we experience existential crises and routines are disrupted. Such is the case for instance, when we are brought face to face with the reality of death.

The possibility of death is shocking and feels almost 'unintelligible' because it calls into question our taken for granted perception of life and existence. The fearsome reality of death reminds us that we actually have no control over even our breathing let alone over our life. It reminds us that everything including ourselves is ephemeral: nothing is enduring. Life is not intrinsic to us. At such moments, our suppressed existential questions surge back and demand answers. Who am I?, Where did I come

from? What am I doing here? Where am I going? How is life meaningful in the face of inevitable death?

These questions are existential in the sense that they are not abstract mental questions. We ‘live’ and experience these questions even if we don’t always articulate them in words. They are not questions asked out of mere curiosity. We need to answer them in order to reach an ontologically secure understanding of reality and of the self. Furthermore, if and when we have no satisfying answers to these existential questions, the threat of meaninglessness becomes a source of unspecific and pervasive fears and anxieties. This is because our answers to existential questions constitute our framework of reality, without which we cannot ‘explain’ even the simplest daily query. That is why, in order to function in the world, we all have a framework of ‘reality’ although it is often founded on unquestioned beliefs causing it to fall apart at moments of crisis. This state of affairs is known as *ghafla* or mindlessness. Heedlessness (*ghafla*) often hinders us from obtaining satisfying ontological answers to our existential questions. It throws us into a vicious cycle: We constantly need to distract ourselves in order to divert our attention from the feelings of anxiety engendered from the lack of satisfactory answers to our existential questions. Whenever ‘things go wrong’ and we are forced to confront the fictive character of our world, our sense of security is shaken. In this position of heedlessness and identifying with the evil-commanding soul, we are constantly on the brink of crisis. And thus it is not surprising that “we do live in an age in which neurotic anxiety has mounted out of all proportion.”<sup>1</sup> We tend to perceive situations that remind us of our transience as a threat that alienate us from our illusory perception of reality as enduring. As Helen Lynd puts it, we “become strangers in a world where we thought we were at home. We experience anxiety in becoming aware that we cannot trust our answers to the questions, “who am I” “where do I belong?”

### **Pain as Interrupting the Cycle of Heedlessness**

However, the predicament of heedlessness (*ghafla*) is not without a way out. When we come into contact with death or serious illness for instance, the veil of *ghafla* is temporarily ripped up resulting in a forcible and involuntary awakening. This interruption of our habitual heedlessness provides us with the possibility to pause and seek permanent answers to our questions. It is an opportunity for the heart to leave the unquestioned way of being ‘under the spell’ of *al-nafs al-ammara*. It is a sort of invitation to look for satisfactory answers beyond the confines of the domineering *nafs*. In such crisis situations, we are confronted with the reality that nothing, not even our existence is under our control.

At this point, we are faced with two momentous choices. We may wake up to the reality of our vulnerability and choose to accept it and seek to discover its meaning and implications. Or we can fall into a deeper state of heedlessness in a desperate attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> “that even minds inclined to believe that all human problems can be solved by physical techniques begin to label ‘mental health’ as the first of our public problems.” *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), 52.

escape the anxieties and painful existential crises that surge at such junctures. While in this latter state, we remain unaware that we are being given existence here & now. Consequently, we experience life as continuously flowing into non-being. The self finds no point of support within itself and nothing to hold on without. It falsely assumes that it is the owner of its life and therefore it fancies that everything else -like itself- exists in itself and owns itself. But the reality is that everything is contingent and impermanent. Hence, there is nothing to grab onto. The resulting uncertainty and instability, causes the individual to have recourse to routinizing his activities as a defence strategy that serves the purpose of making transient things seem to be stable and substantial entities. This way, he attempts to invent a 'coherent' identity by constructing narratives about his self and the things with which he identifies. Thus he "creates himself," and as Rorty claims, he seeks "consolation, at the moment of death, not in having transcended the animal condition but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself." But what "description' of oneself can alleviate the fear that everything may come to an end anytime? Maintaining habits and routines as a bulwark against threatening fears and anxieties is neither an effective nor a lasting solution, as the meaning of the Quranic aya states,

The parable of those who other than God as their protectors is that of the spider which makes for itself a house: for behold, the frailest of all houses is the spider's house, if they but knew. (*al-'Ankabut*, 29:41)

The journey toward seeking real answers to our perennial questions start when we accept the reality that we have no control over our existence, including our breathing and we embrace moments of crises as possibility for breakthroughs. In other words, on accepting our powerlessness, we consent to welcome the existential questions. This surrender paves the way for receiving the answers. Thus, we become aware that we exist through the creativity of Another and we start to define our existence in relation to our Maker, the source of our existence. Similarly, through our contingency we realize the necessary existence of our creator. This is the first step in the course of 'experiencing' and 'living' the answers. As our awareness and knowledge of the our creator increases, the answers starts to unfold in our inner world in the form of trust (*tawakkul*): the trust born of relying on the creator's power and compassion, to which all beings testify, rather than on our own fictitious power.

### **Embarking on the Journey of Self Discovery**

The *nafs al-ammara*, the self that is trapped in deceptive narratives of self-sufficiency and busy with distracting itself from its crisis starts its journey of transformation and growth when it embraces its vulnerability and dependence on its Sustainer (Rabb). This re-orientation enables man to embark on a journey of self-discovery, which in turn unlocks the reality of the cosmos and connects him to his Sustainer. How does that happen? We will explore this matter by considering more closely human neediness and vulnerability.

Human beings are not mere flesh and blood. They have hopes and desires and more significantly they have extensive needs. Even their physical needs ‘spread through every part of the world.’<sup>2</sup> The whole universe, including the solar system and the seasons are involved in the production of the food we eat for instance. Moreover, human life is so fragile that it cannot withstand few minutes without air. Along with physical needs we also have emotional needs that further connects us to the rest of the world. Indeed, by reason of our humanity, we are attached to other beings, human and other.<sup>3</sup> We love beauty and perfection and we grieve at their destruction and at their separation as expressed in the Quran through the voice of Abraham (pbuh) when he exclaimed, ‘I do not love those that set.’ (Quran, 6:76). Clearly, needs and neediness are at the core of human nature.

This reality however seems very scary to the mindless, who is unaware of the significance of his vulnerability and therefore strives to cover it up by seeking control of his life. As explained previously, this hopeless venture ends when the individual wakes up to the reality of his situation in times of crisis. When he surrenders and embraces the reality of his vulnerability and neediness, he finds tranquility. Subsequently, as he purifies his soul of its illusions, the heart, which is the seat and instrument of the knowledge of God, is prepared to receive the gifts of God (‘ilm al-ladun). This ‘knowing’ is imparted to him according to divine will as it does not depend on human endeavor. Nevertheless, the heart needs to be prepared in order to be ready to receive knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Preparing one’s heart makes the mirror of the heart receptive towards the divine names. In a way, the preparedness of the heart is a sort of ‘re-setting of norms’ that frees the traveler “from all preconceived logic, and makes him receptive to all images.”<sup>5</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi seem to suggest that the intellect transcends its limitations and become identical with the heart<sup>6</sup> or as Nursi puts it, the ‘intellect enters the service of the heart.’<sup>7</sup> At that stage, he is inspired with ‘reasoning with the heart’ as it is alluded to in the Quran.<sup>8</sup> Eventually he realises that it is through his comprehensive neediness that he can connect to the rest of the world and appreciate and love the many things that meet his needs. For instance, he appreciates food and values it because he has the need for it through hunger. In fact, we enjoy food increases in direct proportion to the intensity of our hunger. Similarly, our various needs for health, safety, friendship and love and so on are like ‘stomachs’ that enable us to relish in a wide range of blessings<sup>9</sup> and appreciate

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<sup>2</sup> Description borrowed from Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words: From the Risale-i Nur Collection* (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 1998), 577, 623, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, Vol.2, (Istanbul: Yeni Asya Yayinlari, 1996), p. 1163.

<sup>4</sup> Souad Hakim, *Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi*, 279-280

<sup>5</sup> Souad Hakim, *Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi*, 289

<sup>6</sup> William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, (Albany, SUNY, 19198), 159

<sup>7</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 39

<sup>8</sup> According to a Quranic text, it is the heart that reasons, *qulubun ya ‘qiluna biha* قُلُوبٌ يَعْقِلُونَ بِهَا  
*So have they not traveled through the earth and have hearts by which to reason and ears by which to hear?  
For indeed, it is not eyes that are blinded, but blinded are the hearts which are within the breasts.*  
(al-Hajj, 22:46)

<sup>9</sup> Bediuzzaman Said Nursi likens all human needs to ‘stomachs.’ Thus he talks about the “stomach of life,” whose channel of nourishment is our senses, and the “stomach of humanity,” which enjoys all the feasts prepared for human intellect and imagination etc. See: *Flashes*, 456, *Kulliyat*, 825-826,

them as ayaat (signs or messages) indicating numerous beautiful divine attributes, such as sustainer, provider, generous, healer, protector, loving, compassionate and powerful.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, the more we are conscious of our inherent neediness and vulnerability, the more we can taste and appreciate the divine attributes and enjoy being the honored guests of the divine, finding refuge in his infinite compassion and relying on him and trusting him. Hence, it becomes clear that far from being a liability, human needs are a most precious asset that raises human being to the position of vicegerent (*khalifa*) and addressee of the sustainer of all worlds (*rabbu al-'alameen*). The seeker of truth will then be able to confirm the prophetic saying, '*faqri fakhri*,' i.e., 'my neediness and vulnerability are my asset.'

Acknowledging that human neediness is the key to our connection with other beings and with the rest of the world is a crucial step in the journey of discovering who we truly are. When we realise that our needs are not a liability but an asset, we are ready to admit that neediness is the gist of who we are. This acknowledgement is the forerunner of a great breakthrough. Suddenly, the seeker of truth begins to perceive the question, 'who am I?' from a different perspective. While in a state of heedlessness, he had assumed that he was self-sufficient. When he awakens to the reality that someone else is sustaining his life, and that he is totally dependent on that sustaining, the question, 'Who am I then?' collapses. Instead, new existential questions emerge, 'Who is taking care of my needs so generously and so compassionately? Who brought me here? Who is breathing life into me?' These new questions indicate a breakthrough beyond the limited station of the ego (*maqam al-nafs*) into the station of the heart (*maqam al-qalb*), which extends beyond the confines of the tangible to a boundless realm of eternity. Mevlana Jalaluddin al-Rumi expressed this state (*haal*) in a succinct way as follows<sup>11</sup>,

All day I think about it, then at night I say it.  
Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?  
I have no idea.  
My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,  
and I intend to end up there.  
This drunkenness began in some other tavern.  
When I get back around to that place,  
I'll be completely sober. Meanwhile,  
I'm like a bird from another continent, sitting in this aviary.  
The day is coming when I fly off,  
but who is it now in my ear who hears my voice?  
Who says words with my mouth?  
Who looks out with my eyes? What is the soul?  
I cannot stop asking.

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<sup>10</sup> *Flashes*, 466; *Kulliyat* 586

<sup>11</sup> *Who Says Words With My Mouth?*, From Essential Rumi by Coleman Barks

**Breakthrough: Neediness Gist of ‘Ubudiya and Mirror to Rububiya**

As the seeker pursues the answers to these new heart-inspired questions, ‘who is taking care of my needs? who is my host?’, his heart opens up to receiving divine guidance. What may have previously been mere information becomes ontologically meaningful. As he awakens from the delusion of self-sufficiency, he begins to hear the divine message at a deeper level. Quranic statements such as “O people! It is you, who stand in need of God,” (Q:35:15) makes it clear to him that the object of his longing can only be his sustainer and benefactor. He starts to become acquainted with this most generous host as the bestower of gifts, such as life and hearing and seeing.<sup>12</sup> Upon deeper reflection and contemplation, he realises that while his needs and desires are many, he is powerless to meet even the most basic of such needs, such as breathing. Yet, these needs are being met and his life is sustained in a most compassionate way. It is this overwhelming realisation that makes the seeker receptive to the answers to his existential questions, which unfold unto him. In other words, he begins the journey of ‘living’ the answers to his questions. In the meantime, he gradually becomes more and more acquainted with his host. Thus the seeker’s identifying with his needs is crucial in getting to know his sustainer, who fulfills his needs. In fact, it is our needs and yearnings that connect us to our sustainer and provider. Hence, through hunger, we can savor divine generosity as it is displayed in food and sustenance, through illness we appreciate healing and so on. Our various needs are the means for us to savor the divine gifts, to become aware of them as blessings and appreciate them.

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<sup>12</sup> [O people! Pay heed to God’s *ayaat*,] for it is He who has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and hearts: [yet] how seldom are you grateful! (*al-Mu’minun*, 23:78)



Moreover, our contingent and in a sense fictitious<sup>13</sup> knowledge, power, sense of ownership and faculties life sight and hearing are all sorts of scales and like units of measurement to the divine attributes. Through them, we have been fitted out with the potential to become conscious mirrors to the divine knowledge, power, ownership, sight and hearing of our sustainer.<sup>14</sup> As Imam Bediuzaman Said Nursi explains, human beings have been endowed with sensitive faculties and senses. The aim for their being invested with these qualities is 1-make known to them the endless varieties of divine favors and cause them to offer thanks and worship; 2-to make make known to them by means of those needs and faculties all sorts of manifestations of the divine names manifested in the favors and in themselves. This way they are made to recognize the beautiful divine names through experiencing them and to surrender to the reality of tawhid, “God: there is no deity except Him (because) the attributes of perfection (*al-asma al-husna*) belong to Him only.” (Q:20:8)<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, we understand that our needs as well as our various senses and faculties are the means with which we appreciate the divine favors and read the messages they

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<sup>13</sup> For further explanations see Nursi’s First Aim of the Thirtieth Word, *The Words*

“Just as the ‘I’ is the key to the Divine Names, which are hidden treasures, so is it the key to the locked talisman of creation; it is a problem-solving riddle, a wondrous talisman. When its nature is known, both the ‘I’ itself, that strange riddle, that amazing talisman, is disclosed, and it discloses the talisman of the universe and the treasures of the Necessary World. We have discussed this problem as follows in my Arabic treatise, *Şemme* (Intimations).

The key to the world is in the hand of man and is attached to his self. For while being apparently open, the doors of the universe are in fact closed. God Almighty has given to man by way of a Trust, such a key, called the ‘I’, that it opens all the doors of the world; He has given him an enigmatic ‘I’ with which he may discover the hidden treasures of the Creator of the universe. But the ‘I’ is also an extremely complicated riddle and a talisman that is difficult to solve. When its true nature and the purpose of its creation are known, as it is itself solved, so will be the universe.

The All-Wise Maker gave to man as a Trust an ‘I’ which comprises indications and samples that show and cause to recognize the truths of the attributes and functions of His lordship, so that the ‘I’ might be a unit of measurement and the attributes of lordship and functions of Divinity might be known. However, it is not necessary for a unit of measurement to have actual existence; like hypothetical lines in geometry, a unit of measurement may be formed by hypothesis and supposition. It is not necessary for its actual existence to be established by concrete knowledge and proofs.

**Question:** Why is knowledge of the attributes and Names of God Almighty connected to the ‘I’?

**The Answer:** Since an absolute and all-encompassing thing has no limits or end, neither may a shape be given to it, nor may a form be conferred on it, nor may it be determined; what its quiddity is may not be comprehended. For example, an endless light without darkness may not be known or perceived. But if a line of real or imaginary darkness is drawn, then it becomes known. Thus, since God Almighty’s attributes like knowledge and power, and Names like All-Wise and All-Compassionate are all-encompassing, limitless, and without like, they may not be determined, and what they are may not be known or perceived. Therefore, since they do not have limits or an actual end, it is necessary to draw a hypothetical and imaginary limit. The ‘I’ does this. It imagines in itself a fictitious lordship, ownership, power, and knowledge: it draws a line. By doing this it places an imaginary limit on the all-encompassing attributes, saying, “Up to here, mine, after that, His;” it makes a division. With the tiny units of measurement in itself, it slowly understands the true nature of the attributes.

For example, with its imagined lordship over what it owns, the ‘I’ may understand the dominicality of its Creator over contingent creation....”

<sup>14</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 718-120

<sup>15</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 139

carry from beyond. In fact, through our needs we are made aware that our senses and faculties are themselves great gifts. This realisation reveals our connection to our divine host and yields knowledge of god. Indeed, it is through our powerlessness (*'ajz*) and neediness (*faqr*) that we can perceive the various degrees of our sustainer's power, riches, and compassion. Thus, just as darkness reflects light, the soul becomes like a mirror to numerous divine attributes enabling the *'abd* (servant) to know his *rabb*.<sup>16</sup> This situation is articulated in Uways al-Qarani's supplication,

*O God, You are my Sustainer (rabb) because I am your worshipper ('abd)*  
*And You are the Creator because I am created*  
*And You are the Provider (razzaq) because I am the provided for*

### **We Will Show Them Our Signs in the Horizons and Within Themselves (Q:41:53)**

This new conscious *'abd* identity is based on an ontological reality i.e. human neediness. It is not a fictitious construction of the individual. Moreover, human needs have very important ontological functions; they are like keys to unlocking the meanings and aspects of creation that look to God (*wajh allah*). Take hunger i.e. the need for sustenance for instance. This need connects us to all sorts of food. Actually they are sustenance because we yearn for them. As a result of this yearning and need, we enjoy their tastes and smells. In other words, hunger and need turn food into delicious sustenance. Need is the key that turns food into something noteworthy and meaningful. It is through need that those who embrace their neediness and vulnerability are guided to seek the answers to their intrinsic questions; questions that uplift them beyond the evil-commanding, ego-centered soul; questions like, 'Who is feeding me?', 'Who is taking care of my needs in such a gracious way?' This quest for answers enhances the seeker's awareness that all beings are ayaat (signs/ messages) indicating the realm of the unseen. He observes for instance, that food enters any living body and works there perfectly. However it can't be the food or water or the earth or any other being that is feeding him, since all of them are lacking like himself. What is more, whoever is feeding living beings with this food knows them and their anatomies and their needs and provides for them. This reflection leads the seeker to realise that food is a gift disclosing meaningful messages from its Provider, proclaiming how caring, compassionate and generous a Host He is; how He is the living one who sustains all life and tends to its

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<sup>16</sup> Said Nursi asserts that there are three aspects to human being being like a mirror to the divine names, all of which are contained one within the other. He describes the first aspect as follows,

Like the darkness of the night shows up light, so through his weakness and powerlessness, his poverty and need, his defects and faults, man makes known the power, strength, riches, and mercy of an All-Powerful One of Glory, and so on... he acts as a mirror to numerous Divine attributes in this way. Even, through searching for a point of support in his infinite powerlessness and boundless weakness in the face of his innumerable enemies, his conscience perpetually looks to the Necessarily Existent One..

In the second aspect of being mirror-like, "man acts as a mirror to the knowledge, power, sight, hearing, and sovereignty of sustaining (*rububiya*) of the Master of the Universe; he understands them and makes them known through particulars like his partial knowledge, power, senses of sight and hearing, ownership and sovereignty, which are sorts of samples and unit of measurement given to him." Nursi, The Words, 33rd Word, 31st Window

needs. In other words, this reflection transfers the seeker's focus from the delicious food to the beauty of the divine actions involved in bringing it into existence and offering it to living beings as sustenance. It opens a way from the divine actions to the beauty of the divine names and attributes, and from there to the peerless beauty of the Maker. That is, through his needs and senses and faculties, the seeker becomes cognizant at reading food and everything else as ayaat bearing sacred messages from the unseen; he starts to hear and understand the glorifications that all things and beings offer to their maker and sustainer and their praises to Him.<sup>17</sup>

Hence when the seeker eats a fruit for instance, he reads it with his tongue. He ponders upon the pleasure derived from it. He remembers that the unconscious and powerless fruit can neither meet his needs, nor can it give him pleasure. As a matter of fact, the more one eats from something, the less pleasurable it becomes. Thus indicating that the fruit itself is not the source of pleasure. The hungrier one becomes however, the greater one's appetite is and the more he may enjoy the food. It becomes clear to him then, that someone is feeding him and causing him to derive pleasure from food by means of hunger. This pleasure makes the conscious 'abd realise how a precious gift of power and mercy the fruit is. He will perceive the fruit as a sign of divine favor, a token of love. Indeed, the pleasure turns his attention from the favor to the bestowal of the favor, and from the bestowal to the bestower. And like Ibrahim (pbuh), he exclaims, praise be to God, Who "has created me and is the One who guides me, and is the One who feeds me and waters me, and when I fall ill, He is the One who heals me." (Q:26:78-80)

That is, he realises that pleasure too is an aya, a messenger from beyond singing the praises of his caring and loving sustainer. He also understands that hunger has not been given to us for the sole purpose of filling his stomach and deriving some temporary and very short lived pleasure. Rather, hunger is the means to recognize the the giver of pleasure, the bestower of blessings and to ascend to the heavens of the beautiful divine attributes (*al-asma' al-husna*) indicated therein. Likewise, the aim in the creation of all kinds of sustenance cannot be merely for the gratification of the tongue and filling the stomach. When the surrendered 'abd perceives food as an embodied divine favor, he understands that just as its matter is food for the body, the lasting meanings of the divine attributes manifested therein are food for the soul. For as far as the body is concerned, the beautiful forms and colors of food and their delicious tastes are inconsequential. But as far as the heart and soul are concerned, they are the throne (*'arsh*) to many beautiful divine names. This realisation fills his heart with satisfaction and tranquility (*itmi'nan*) (Q:13:13).<sup>18</sup> The beautiful meanings of the divine favor will give him lasting delight and

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<sup>17</sup> The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, and the earth, and all that they contain; and there is not a single thing but extols His limitless glory and praise: but you [O people] fail to grasp the manner of their glorifying Him! Verily, He is forbearing, much-forgiving! (Q:17:44)

All that is in heavens & all that is on earth extols God's limitless glory: for He alone is almighty, truly wise. (Q:59:1)

He is God, the Creator, the Maker who shapes all forms and appearances! To Him alone belong the attributes of perfection (*al-asma al-husna*). All that is in the heavens and on earth extols His limitless glory. (Q:59:24)

<sup>18</sup> *Only in remembering God, do hearts find peace and satisfaction.* (Q:13:13)

enjoyment; the delight of feeling in the presence of God's everlasting kindness and generosity. This delight is the gist of gratitude and worship (*'ibada*); it is the herald to the delights of paradise. When in this state (*haal*), the *'abd* confirms the truth of the Quranic *aya*, *for them there is glad tiding in the life of this world and in the life to come.* (Q:10:64)

### **A Transformative Journey That Involves All Faculties**

This transformative journey of the soul involves all the faculties that are attached to it, from outer senses like tasting, hearing and seeing to inner powers such the heart and the imagination. As the soul is purified of its illusions of self-sufficiency and independence from its sustainer (*rabb*), the faculties entrusted to it disengage the evil-commanding soul and enter the service of the heart. The traveler enters a new mode of being and knowing under the leadership of the heart. His senses and subtle faculties (*lata'if*), his intellect (*'aql*), spirit (*ruh*) and so on, all start functioning in the name of their sustainer thereby displaying a variety of worship and praise.<sup>19</sup> Nursi asserts that the journey is complete when it incorporates all the faculties,

The excellent man (*al-insan al-kamil*) is he who, driving all those faculties towards the truth on the different ways of worship particular to each of them, marches heroically like the companions in a broad arena and rich manner towards the goal, with the heart as commander and the faculties as soldiers.<sup>20</sup>

In the same way, Hakim asserts that the works of Ibn 'Arabi suggest that human faculties such as memory, imagination and the senses place themselves at the service of the gnostic heart, although Ibn 'Arabi gives them new names. These transformed faculties "have been strengthened by light, by practice (*riyadat*) and effort (*mujahadat*)."<sup>21</sup> Hakim further explains that it is as if each faculty had transformed together with the seeker or as if the fact of having served the heart had made it progress to a higher station.<sup>22</sup>

Nursi, on the other hand, describes clearly in various works of his, how the journey of transformation proceeds for different faculties. When commenting on the *aya*, "Verily God has purchased from the believers their selves and their possessions that Paradise might be theirs." (Q:9:111), Nursi says that all possessions of one's life and what they include such as the body, the spirit and the heart and all outward and inward senses within them such as the tongue, the eye, the intellect and imagination are a trust (*amana*). If they are not sold to God, i.e. if they are not used in His name they will not fulfill the purpose of their creation and will end up being corrupted. Hence, the tongue and sense of taste for instance may "rise to the rank of a skilled and grateful overseer of

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<sup>19</sup> Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, 26; 219

<sup>20</sup> Nursi, *the Words*, 511

<sup>21</sup> Hakim, *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi*, 274

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

the treasures of divine compassion” if it is sold to the generous provider.”<sup>23</sup> Otherwise, it degrades to the level of gatekeeper of the stomach.

### **He Who Knows Himself, Knows His Rabb**

The seeker has reached a station in his journey, wherein he is aware that all beings, things and events are ayaat and he has begun to interact with them in the name of his Sustainer and read them as it is taught in the first revelation 96:1. He further realises that all of creation is a sort of embodiment of the reality of *bismillah* (in the name of God) and proclaims that there is no deity, no sustainer, no provider except God. That is to say, all creation including his own breathing, unfold in God’s name, disclosing the divine command through which everything occurs. With this awareness, the seeker witnesses the reality of tawhid in the creation and within his self<sup>24</sup> and confirms it into his heart. Consequently, his being, his actions become means to connect him back to the divine as mentioned in the *qudsi hadith*, “When I love him I am his hearing by which he hears and his sight by which he sees, his hand through which he holds, and his foot through which he walks.” Let us provide some hints to this profound transformation by means of a simple example.

Let us consider feeding the hungry for instance. Generally, everyone with a compassionate heart will help the needy. However, the seeker performs charity consciously, in the name of his sustainer (*bismi rabih*) as it is enjoined in the Quran, "they spend out of what We have bestowed on them as sustenance" (Q:2:3) This injunction is a reminder that the property (*mulk*) is God’s and so it is to be used in His name. Often, it is understood to mean that the blessings shared are His and so we need to offer it in His name, that is He alone is the Provider. At a deeper level yet, the seeker realises the compassion he feels when he encounters a needy person for instance is also his compassionate sustainer (*rabb*). When he witnesses someone in need, he notices that compassion fills his heart without involuntarily and inadvertently. It is as if he were compelled to help and show compassion. In fact, when we don’t act on this urge, we feel discomfort. In other words, we have the need to help those whom we perceive as in need of help, and for this reason we feel pleased when we fulfill that need and offer help. This state of affairs makes the seeker of truth pause and ponder on the significance of the situation. He thus realises that he is being caused to feel compassion and help. The latter are ayaat indicating a source of compassion and help beyond his self. This way he is made aware that he himself is not the helper; rather it is His compassionate maker who is the true helper. He witnesses that his sustainer, who has endowed him with the need to help, employs him in helping the needy thus making confirm at the reality of certainty (*haqq al-yaqeen*) that His sustainer alone is the

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<sup>23</sup> Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, 9 and *The Words*, 39

<sup>24</sup> *We Will Show Them Our Signs in the Horizons and Within Themselves* (Q:41:53)

compassionate, the helper, the provider, and so on. Hence he testifies that truly there is no helper but God, no compassionate but God, no provider but God.

Earlier, we saw how the seeker read the food as *ayaat* by means of his hunger and consequently he tasted many beautiful divine names such as provider, beautiful and generous, which constitutes the reality of the food. This was an example of the outer or *afaqi* aspect of the journey, which consists of contemplating the manifestations of the divine names as they reflect in the mirrors of beings, e.g. food. The other inner or *anfusi* aspect of the journey refers to the seeker himself being a conscious mirror to the divine attributes<sup>25</sup>, wherein he recognizes the divine acts of sustaining (*rububiya*) and actually ‘tastes’ the divine attributes.<sup>26</sup> This *anfusi* aspect corresponds (in this context) to the act of consciously offering help and feeding the hungry in the name of God for instance. Although now the seeker is not the recipient of the physical gift such as food, as he is apparently himself the one offering help and feeding the hungry, in fact he is now the recipient of an awesome spiritual gift. As he consciously feeds others *bismillah*, he becomes aware of the divine names reflecting within the mirror of his heart. That is he himself has become like a mirror or a vehicle to the divine attributes like helper, and compassionate. This ecstatic awareness awakes in his soul the bliss of feeling close to God, His heart is filled with the love of God. Then, he realises that the rapture contained within the love of God is a sort of innate thanks and as such it is yet another *aya* guiding him to higher levels of awareness of the divine presence. The traveler understands that he is prompted to offer thanks, he is made to thank. In other words, he becomes aware of being the object of the manifestation of the divine name thankful/ appreciative (*al-shaakir*). The journey so continues until the traveler understands the reality of his nature as a conscious mirror to the divine names and therefore that all perfections belong to God and to God only. He then confirms with the reality of certainty (*haqq al-yaqeen*) that, *God, there is no deity but He. To Him alone belong the beautiful attributes of perfections.* (Q:20:8)

## **Conclusion**

Together with his scale-like faculties and his comprehensive needs, human being has been created as a locus to the manifestation of the divine names. When he admits his intrinsic poverty, neediness and weakness, and purifies his soul, he realises that his heart has been created to be like a mirror reflecting the manifestations of the divine attributes. Then he understands that all of the creation acts like mirrors to the manifestation of the divine perfections. It is then that he becomes aware of the divine presence everywhere or, as Ibn ‘Arabic put it, he sees everything as divine self-disclosure. That is he recognizes the aspect that looks to God (*wajha allah*) in all things, all events, all phenomena. His life becomes a realisation of the Quranic *aya*, “Whenever you turn, there is the face of God (*wajhallah*)” (Q:2:115) He finds in every thing a way leading to his *rabb*. Even his habitual actions like eating and drinking become means to know his sustainer and love Him and worship Him. His love for his

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<sup>25</sup> Nursi, *Lemalar*, 347

<sup>26</sup> Nursi, *Sozler*, 117

own self and for the world transforms into love of God. Then, God becomes ‘his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks.’<sup>27</sup>

Divine light establishes itself in the heart of the seeker, wherein the divine immediacy unfolds as expressed in the Quranic aya, “We are closer to him than his jugular vein.” (Q:50:16) It is due to this mystery that the qudsi hadith says, “the heavens and the earth contain me not; yet, how strange! I am contained in the heart of the believer.”<sup>28</sup>

O you soul which is peaceful, return to your Sustainer well pleased and pleasing; enter then amongst My servants and enter My Paradise.  
(Q:89:27-30)

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<sup>27</sup> An-Nawawi’s Forty hadiths

On the authority of Abu Hurayrah (may God be pleased with him), who said that the Messenger of God (PBUH) said: God (mighty and sublime be He) said:

Whosoever shows enmity to someone devoted to Me, I shall be at war with him. My servant draws not near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have enjoined upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask [something] of Me, I would surely give it to him, and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant him it. I do not hesitate about anything as much as I hesitate about [seizing] the soul of My faithful servant: he hates death and I hate hurting him.

Qudsi Hadith related by al-Bukhari

<sup>28</sup> Al-Ghazzali, *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, iii, 14