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Doors *of* Understanding

Conversations in Global Spirituality
in Honor of Ewert Cousins

Steven Chase, Editor



Franciscan Press

On Self Help:
A Sufi Perspective

William C. Chittick

I first met Ewert Cousins in 1980, and since then he has remained an inspiration to me for many reasons, not least because of the ease with which he is able to discuss the deepest questions of the spiritual quest while employing a variety of traditional idioms. Although I have limited my own writings to the Islamic tradition in general and Sufism in particular, I have always attempted to present Islam's basic themes and teachings in a language that can be carried across traditional boundaries. I take the opportunity of celebrating Ewert's work to reflect upon one of the most basic notions in the Koran and the Islamic tradition in general, a notion that is certainly present in all the great spiritual traditions and one that some within the Islamic tradition would identify with the very impulse that drives what is commonly known as "Sufism." This notion is *tazkiyat al-nafs*, which is usually translated as "purification of the soul."

"Sufism" is a term that I employ with some hesitation, though I much prefer it to the various alternatives that are offered when an attempt is made to explain the specific niche that it fills in the Islamic tradition, terms such as "mysticism" or "esoterism" or "spirituality." All these terms are both too broad and too narrow to designate the diverse teachings and phenomena that have been identified with Sufism throughout Islamic history, and they have the added disadvantage of encouraging people to package Sufism in a convenient Western category, thus preventing them from reflecting on Sufism's specifically Islamic coloring.

I cannot attempt to define Sufism here, but I do want to insist that a correct understanding of Sufism in its historical actuality demands recognizing it as an integral dimension of Islam, a dimension that has sometimes been controversial to be sure, but one that is central, nonetheless, to the tradition as a whole.¹ One of the classic analogies employed by the texts is the relationship between the spirit and the body. The social, legal, and ritual teachings of Islam, codified in the Shariah, are the tradition's body, while the inner life that animates this body is called "Sufism." Sufism in turn has been codified in the specific teachings and practices set down by the Sufi masters. Of course, real

Sufism demands much more than simple codification, just as real Shariah demands much more than knowledge of God's law. The law needs to be put into practice, and the tradition's spirit needs to come fully alive in its body, and this demands various moral qualities such as love, sincerity, purity, and piety all of which are central concerns of the Sufi teachers.

One of the many supports that Sufis cite for their perspective is the one Koranic passage that employs the expression *tazkiyat al-nafs* (though indirectly). I would translate the passage, with some hesitation (and taking help from the best of the many English translations, that by A. J. Arberry), as follows: "By the *soul* and That which shaped it, and inspired it to its depravity and its godwariness. Prosperous is he who *purifies* it, and failed has he who *buries* it" (91:6-10). The larger context makes it clear that the prosperity achieved through purifying the soul pertains to the next world. In relation to that prosperity, the prosperity of this world (at least in the modern, secular understanding of what it means to be prosperous) is irrelevant. Those who fail to purify their souls and instead "bury" their souls as if they were hiding their souls under the ground will not be prosperous. Instead, they will be miserable when they reach the next world, whether or not they are prosperous here.

Like all translations of Koranic passages, this translation is problematic and tentative. To begin with, "purify" is definitely a misleading translation for *tazkiya*. All the dictionaries tell us that *tazkiya* has two senses, though the lexicographers disagree as to which sense is more basic. One sense of the verb is to purify and cleanse, and the other is to augment and increase. Hence *tazkiyat al-nafs*, as the Koran commentators recognize, can be understood to mean both "purification" of the *nafs* and "augmentation" of the *nafs*. Most of the commentators choose the first reading, apparently for theological reasons. After all, the primary task of Muslims is to submit themselves to God, and this cannot happen until they rid themselves of things that God does not approve of. This can be called "purification." However, it is obvious that the soul also needs to grow and to increase in stature before God, and this growth can also be designated as *tazkiya*. Thus, two things need to take place, and both are implied in the word *tazkiya*, purification and growth. Although logically, purification precedes growth, there is no reason that the two cannot occur simultaneously. Hence the two meanings of the verb *tazkiya* are in no way contradictory, and both are certainly meant in

the verse. As Sufis might argue, if God meant only "to purify" and not "to augment," God would have chosen a different word. God certainly knows the Arabic language as well as the lexicographers.

The complementarity of the two meanings of the verb *tazkiya* can be seen in some of the ways it is used. For example, the dictionaries tell us that the word can be employed for planting seeds or raising cattle, in which cases it means neither to purify nor to augment, but something that combines these two senses. When seeds are planted in the ground, they are purified of everything alien to them and exposed to God's blessings, earth, water, and sunlight. This prepares the way for the seeds to increase and grow. Those who plant the seeds neither "purify" them nor "augment" them; rather, they put the seeds into a situation where they can thrive and prosper. As a result, the seeds will bring out their own potentiality. Hence *tazkiyat al-nafs* means not only "purification of the soul," but also making the soul grow and thrive by opening it up to the bounty of God. A better translation might be "cultivation of the soul."

Altogether, the verb *tazkiya* is used twelve times in the Koran, and usually God is the subject and people the object. In most verses, the point is that it is God's grace and guidance that purify and bless people, though, as the cited verse shows, people themselves play an important role in the process. In contrast, the Koran uses the word *nafs* almost three hundred times. A full analysis of how it is used would require a long monograph. I will summarize the basic ways in which it has been understood in order to suggest how we can best interpret it in the present context.

In many Koranic passages, the word *nafs* is used simply as a reflexive pronoun, so it can be applied both to people and to God, and to other things as well. Here "self" is clearly a better translation than "soul." The Koran also uses the term in senses that are not quite reflexive, but the term *self* is still a better translation than *soul*. For example, the Koran quotes Jesus as saying to God, "You," O God, "know what is in my self, but I do not know what is in Your self" (5:116). In addition, the Koran uses the term to refer to the human self in general, and translators typically render it in this context as "soul" instead of "self." In short, "soul" is not an appropriate translation in many contexts, whereas "self" can be used consistently.

One problem with both concepts in English, *soul* and *self*, is that

most people tend to reify them, the first in particular. In other words, they talk as if the soul is a "thing," with a concrete, distinct reality, much as the body is looked upon as a thing. Thus, for example, people sometimes argue about whether or not human beings have souls or whether or not animals have souls. In these debates, the souls being discussed are typically imagined as concrete and distinct realities, especially when people attempt to explain souls in what they call "scientific" terms. Modern scientific thinking, by its nature, is short-sighted. It has no possible way to deal with terms like *nafs* as they have been dealt with in the Islamic texts. In these texts, the whole argument would sound silly, especially if the word *nafs* were employed, since Koranic usage demands that everything have a *nafs*.

In Koranic terms, the issue is not whether or not people have a *nafs*, but rather, what exactly is a human *nafs*, and how does it differ from God's *nafs*, or from an animal's *nafs*? Why is it that God has no need for *tazkiya* of His *nafs*? Why is it that God does not command any angel or animal to perform *tazkiya* on its *nafs*? Here a Persian proverb makes the point nicely. For "beating cold iron," the Persians say, "Recite Yâsîn into the ear of a donkey," Yâsîn being Chapter 36 of the Koran, which has always been recognized as having special power. A donkey's *nafs* is profoundly different from a human being's *nafs*, because, if you recite the Koran into a human ear, it may do some good, but a donkey will never cease being an ass.

What exactly, then, is different about a human *nafs* in general terms? The basic Islamic answer to this question is that it is not within our capacity to have any precise and exact answer to this question, or rather, the specific quality of a human self is that, in its deepest reality, it has *no* specific quality. This needs some explanation.

When we say, "I saw myself in a mirror," we mean we saw the image of our physical form. However, the very act of recognizing oneself shows that there is much more to the self than simply the physical form. The words *nafs* in Arabic and "self" in English refer to everything that we are, but the basic problem is that we do not know everything that we are. If we think we know who we are in any exact sense, we are mistaken.

Few people bother to reflect on their own selves, and this is certainly one of the meanings of the key term *ghafla* or "heedlessness" in the Koran. Those who do reflect upon themselves will either be confused or

lying if they say that they have solved the problem of who they are. Walker Percy, the late novelist, develops this point in his *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*. In many ways, the book is a parody of all the self-help books that are found on the shelves of the local bookstores (I am sure it pleases Percy in his grave that the book is carefully shelved among them). The problem, as Percy illustrates, is that none of the people who write these self-help books and none of their readers have the slightest idea about the real nature of the self that they are trying to help. Percy provides his book with several subtitles. The first two are worth quoting if only to gain an appreciation of the book's tone:

How you can survive in the Cosmos about which you know more and more while knowing less and less about yourself, this despite 10,000 self-help books, 100,000 psychotherapists, and 100 million fundamentalist Christians....?

or:

Why it is possible to learn more in ten minutes about the Crab Nebula in Taurus, which is 6,000 light-years away, than you presently know about yourself, even though you've been stuck with yourself all your life?

If close attention is paid to discussions of the concept of *nafs* in Islamic texts, it will be seen that the unknowability of the human self is a deep underlying theme. Few of the Muslim authorities make the mistake of reifying the self, since they know that the human self is, to use a common expression, "an ocean without shore." However, it may not be obvious, especially to people who have not studied these texts carefully, that the basic Islamic idea of the self is that it is unknown and indefinable. In order to support my contention, let me cite a bit of Koranic evidence, though of course, much more could be said.

First, the very fact that the word *nafs* is used should tell us that there is a problem in knowing what a self is. The word, as I said, can be applied to everything, including God. Therefore, the self in itself is no specific thing, since in each case, the self is simply the very thing that was mentioned or implied. Thus, just as God's self is unique to God, each creature's self is also unique to itself, because each is simply what it is, and no other creature is exactly the same thing, or else the two things would be one thing. God's self is simply God, and a creature's self is

simply the creature. I have a self, and it is nothing but me, and each person in the world has a self, and in each case, the self is nothing but that person.

It follows that the basic question is not so much, "What is the self?" but rather, "What am I?" The Koranic answer here, of course, is indirect, perhaps because God does not want to encourage people to think that they know for sure who they are. However, it is clear from the Koran that each of us, inasmuch as we are human, share certain characteristics as children of Adam. These general characteristics differentiate us from God's self on the one hand and from the self of non-human creatures on the other. But it is also clear that no created self has achieved its final form, if it ever achieves its final form, because each creature dwells in change and fluctuation.

The difference here between the self of human beings and the self of non-human beings is that every human self knows that it has not yet come to an end in its growth and development. Each of us knows, if we are alive, that our self has not taken its last "breath" (*nafas*, a word that is written the same as *nafs* in Arabic). Other things are not given this sort of self-awareness, so they act without thought and reflection. Recite scripture to the barnyard animals and you are wasting your breath. But human beings know that they are faced constantly with unknown dimensions of themselves, because they do not know what they will be and what they will do in the next moment.

In many Islamic theological texts, the problem of self-awareness comes out clearly in the issue of free choice. By performing a volitional act, by making a choice, I specify who I am and what my self is to some degree. Until I make the choice, that moment of my self has not appeared in the world. And of course, here the Koran tells people repeatedly that they will be held responsible for these choices, which is to say that they will have to answer to God when God asks them why they did what they did. They will have to tell God why they chose to make this act a manifestation of their self and not some other act.

The slightest amount of reflection lets us know that each of us stands in the midst of a certain development and unfolding. What is being unfolded is simply our self, but each self is unique, just as each person is unique. We do not know the full answer to what we are because we are not at the moment more than what we are right now, and at every moment of our existence in this world, we are something new.

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So what is our self? It is the I of the moment, and each moment is new. A famous Sufi saying holds that *al-sūfī ibn al-waqt*, "The Sufi is the child of the moment." One of the meanings of this saying is that the true Sufi lives in the constant awareness that his self is nothing but what he is at the present moment. And since each present moment is itself unique, each moment of the self is unique. In some Sufi texts, each moment of the self is called a *naḥās*, a "breath." The Sufis are then called "the folk of the breaths" (*ahl al-anḥās*), because they live in full awareness of the uniqueness of the self at each *naḥās*, each breath, each instant.

What is this new self that we experience at each breath? According to the standard Ash'arite theological view, as refined by numerous disquisitions on the same theme by a variety of Sufi authors, the new self of the moment is God's constant and never-ending renewal of the self's creation. At each moment of our existence, a new self arrives to us from God, just as, in this world, a new *naḥās* arrives.

The Sufis sometimes deal with this sort of thinking about the self with the famous notions of *fanā'* and *baqā'*, "annihilation" and "subsistence." The reference in these expressions is to the Koranic verse, "Everything upon it [i.e., the earth] is undergoing *annihilation*, but there *subsists* the face of your Lord, Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving" (55:27). The self undergoes annihilation at every moment, but the face of God, who creates the self and everything within it at each successive instant, is always present through the creative activity. What subsists in the individual self is God's showing himself to the universe through his constant and continual creation of this specific self. In itself, this self has nothing to call its own, because everything with which it identifies quickly disappears. In truth, individuals have no self other than what they are with God, and all of it belongs to God, not to them. Our proper self is no self at all, that is, no self of our own. Our proper self is the self that God gives to us at each instant, and, if we can live in that process of God's everlasting renewal of the self, we will subsist forever in the divine attributes and acts that come to us.

In fact, the individual self will subsist forever in any case, but there is an enormous difference between (1) those who have no idea what is going on and think that their self is their own, (2) those who think they know what is going on, and (3) those who experience what is actually occurring with full awareness of the ever renewed creation, these last being "the folk of the breaths" or "the children of the moment." Those

who think that their self is something specific, belonging somehow to themselves, need to purify that self of ignorance. Those who think that they know all about it, need to purify and augment their knowledge. And those who experience this as the lived reality of their lives dwell at peace with God in constantly renewed purification and never-ending augmentation. Here we have, of course, the famous Sufi triad *nafs ammâra* (the self that commands [to evil]), *nafs lawwâma* (the self that blames [itself for its own shortcomings]), and *nafs mutma'inna* (the self at peace [with God]).

We can also consider this issue in light of the Koranic account of Adam, who is the father of all human beings and, in Islamic terms, the first prophet and the model that each person needs to imitate in order to be fully human. According to the Koran, "God taught Adam the names, all of them" (2:30). This is a very suggestive passage, and it has elicited an enormous amount of commentary. One of the basic meanings is simply that human beings have within themselves the potential for infinite knowledge. The name of everything that God has created and will create lies within them. By becoming aware of things in the outside and the inside worlds, they gain awareness of the names of things and realize that they have always known them. However, unless they know *all* the names that God taught Adam, they cannot fully know their own self. Knowledge of the names is inherent to the Adamic self and to the self of each human being as a child of Adam; if they do not know what their self knows by virtue of being human, then they have not known themselves.

If people have been taught "*all* the names," as the Koran puts it, how can they ever know these names simultaneously and with full awareness? In effect, it is impossible to actualize the knowledge of all the names at once, because that would mean knowing everything that God will ever create, and God's creation has no end. Hence, human beings will continue to actualize their knowledge of the names forever, and this explains the bliss of paradise, which is God's endless and constantly renewed bestowal of self-awareness on each and every fortunate self. Hell, of course, involves the same bestowal of awareness, but not all self-awareness brings about happiness. One of the most painful things in the world can be awareness of one's own shortcomings and sins. Ibn al-'Arabî tells us that the reason God keeps the people of hell in hell forever is not to punish them, but to show mercy to them. After all, they

will eventually become accustomed to the various torments and even begin to enjoy them, but if God were to take them to paradise, they would be embarrassed before God and the prophets, and that would be a much more painful torment than remaining in hell.²

In all this I have not forgotten the well-known saying that is ascribed to the Prophet, "He who knows his self knows his Lord." Many interpretations of this saying have been offered, but however we interpret it, it cannot be offered as proof that we can know our selves or our Lord completely and totally. Rather, to the extent that we come to know ourselves, to the same extent we will also come to know our Lord. Ibn al-'Arabî reminds us that God in Himself is ultimately unknowable. Jesus did not know what is in God's self, and certainly no one else can claim to know it. Thus Ibn al-'Arabî writes,

I think and God knows best that God commanded us to know Him and turned us over to ourselves in gaining this knowledge only because He knew that we do not perceive and we do not know the reality of ourselves and that we are incapable of knowing ourselves. Hence we come to know that we are even more incapable of knowing Him. This is knowledge of Him/not knowledge. (*Futûbât* III 412.26)

One of the more convincing proofs for Muslims that people do not know themselves is the fact that God sent the prophets. If people did know themselves, they would know what is good for themselves and bad for themselves. But in fact, they do not even know what is good and bad for their bodies. And I mean not only ordinary people, I mean also all the great medical experts, who change their opinions about what is good and bad on a fairly regular basis.

The self is the whole self, not just the body, and the function of the prophets is precisely to tell people what is good and bad for the whole self. The self has no end, even if it does have a beginning. Prophetic instructions deal with the self in terms of its endlessness. From this standpoint, physical death is a rather insignificant event, though it does mark an important boundary, since, after death, people no longer have the freedom to choose or reject God's guidance. Thereafter they will simply serve God in the way God wants them to, because they can no longer hide in their ignorance, which is to say that they can no longer "bury" the self in heedlessness.

The knowledge and guidance brought by the prophets tells people not so much who they are as who they are not. They are *not* beings with limited, finite, finished identities, and they can never, ever be such beings. If they could reach a final limit, they would either be no different from God, which is impossible, or they would come to a grinding halt in their experience of the Real, which is also impossible. In fact, they live today and they will always live in the process of change. They cannot, by themselves, see much beyond today, certainly not beyond death. The prophetic knowledge tells them what is good for the self and what is bad for the self, this self that has no end and no specific identity.

The prophetic knowledge tells them that *tazkiyat al-nafs* is good for them and that they should pursue it. People need to cultivate the self, and that is both purification of the self, or turning it away from everything that is bad for it, and augmentation of the self, or attracting to it everything that is good for it. In other words, cultivating the self is to provide for its well-being, and this needs to be defined in terms of the self's everlasting existence and transformation. Since, on their own, without God's help, people have no possible way of knowing what the afterlife is all about, they have no possible way of knowing what is good for the self's well-being in the afterlife, and it is the role of the prophetic messages to provide this knowledge. The fundamental insight here is that we do not know and cannot possibly know what the self is, and hence only the creator of the self can provide the knowledge that allows for taking care of the self in a way that will guarantee its permanent well-being.

Nothing is more damaging to the well-being of the self than the thought that we know what we are and that we do not need help, or only a little bit of help, to put our affairs in order. This, by the way, is the story of the modern world, modern science, and especially modern politics: ignorance of the self masquerading as knowledge. Attempts to rationalize the world and to use it for our own benefit are doomed to failure, because we cannot possibly know where our own benefit lies. This is the ultimate folly of "self-help." The only way we can pretend to know our selves in order to help ourselves is to bury our selves in false knowledge, pretending to know what we do not and cannot know. People do this by defining the self in limited terms: biological terms, anthropological terms, psychological terms, historical terms, economic terms, social terms, ideological terms, Islamicist terms. These failed

attempts to understand and define the self help to explain the historically unprecedented disasters of the twentieth century.

Finally, let me return once more to the Koranic verse that I cited at the beginning, though I translate it slightly differently here: "By the self and That which proportioned it, and inspired it to its depravity and its godwariness. Prosperous is he who cultivates it, and failed has he who buries it." In short, these verses mean that God has created people and given them their proportions, and these proportions are such that they can never fully be known, because the knowledge that God teaches each self has no end. Part of this knowledge is knowledge of "depravity," which turns people away from God and their own true nature, and another part is knowledge of "godwariness," which brings about their own well-being. However, the Koran also tells us that God needs to remind people before they will remember how to achieve their own well-being, and it is this reminder, this *dhikr* or *tadakkir*, that is the function of the prophets. Those who cultivate their selves by following God's instructions will achieve the everlasting wholeness and well-being of the self, but those who bury their selves in ignorance and forgetfulness will have wronged no one but themselves.

Notes

1. For an overview of Sufism's role in Islam, see Chittick, "Sufism: Sûfî Thought and Practice," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, vol. 4, pp. 102-9; also idem., *Faith and Practice of Islam: Three Thirteenth Century Sufi Texts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), especially Part 4; and S. Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon, 1994), especially Chapters 6-8.
2. See Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabî and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 117.