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The Traditional Approach to Learning

by William C. Chittick

Despite my title, I will not be talking about tradition in general, but rather two examples, Confucianism and Islam. I choose these two because of my own background. I have been studying the Islamic tradition since my undergraduate days, and for the past ten years I have been investigating the ways in which Chinese-speaking Muslims, beginning in the seventeenth century, expressed their teachings by employing notions and concepts drawn from Confucianism.

In order to focus on what I see as the approach to learning shared by Confucianism, Islam, and various other traditions, I will begin by quoting Mencius, the second great sage after Confucius: “The way of learning is nothing other than to seek for the lost heart” (6A.11).

The word here for “way” is *dao*, which everyone knows is the key concept in Taoism. It also plays an important role in Confucianism, as it does in Chinese Islam. One of its meanings, as here, is the road or the path or the process that people need to follow in order to reach their goal, which in this case is learning (*xue*). For the time being we can take the word “learning” to mean in Chinese what it means in English: to gain understanding. I prefer not to say “to gain knowledge”—though the word also means that—because nowadays people tend to confuse “knowledge” with facts and information. You can know all sorts of things without understanding their immediate significance, not to mention their broad or ultimate significance.

Nowadays we have incredible access to knowledge—that is, to information. Yet, few people seem to have any sense as to what it all means. This is one of the primary areas in which pre-modern scholars would

have critiqued the modern educational enterprise. What we call learning today is focused on information, know-how, and technical expertise. It pushes us out into “the real world” with the idea that our purpose in life is to have successful careers and be well-adjusted to conventional notions of normalcy. But it cannot tell us why we should care about careers and normalcy. It does not have the means to ask the big questions— “Why do we exist?” “What is the ultimate meaning of life?”

Instead of addressing such questions, modern learning directs us to acquire knowledge that has no relevance to our fundamental task in life, which, in Confucian terms, is to become truly human. In the Chinese language, gaining human status used to be called the “great learning” (*daxue*)—a word that, ironically enough, nowadays designates the university.

In the traditional context, to learn something means to come to understand it, and to understand the big issues of life demands engaging in the quest for the Great Learning. The first goal of that learning is to fit all things into the overall picture and thereby make sense of them. But what exactly is the overall picture? What defines its limits? In order to gain real understanding of things, we need to know the big picture, and that in turn is determined by the world view of the tradition in question. For those who are active and engaged members of a tradition, the world view shapes and forms their tacit assumptions about life and living, their attitudes toward people and things, and the goals that they set for ourselves. It is this “traditional context” that puts Confucian learning in a very different category from what we do nowadays at schools and universities.

Let me come back to the saying of Mencius: “The way of learning is nothing other than to seek for the lost heart.” The key to grasping what he means here lies in the word “heart” (*xin*). In books on Chinese thought, this word is usually translated as “mind,” or more recently, “heart-and-mind” or “mind-and-heart.” The Chinese character refers in the first place to the fleshly heart, the physical organ, but generally it designates the seat of our personhood. Classical Chinese thought speaks of the heart in the same way that it is spoken of in most other pre-modern civilizations: to designate the locus of consciousness and awareness, the deepest recesses of selfhood, the point of contact between the divine and the human. Islamic texts like to quote a saying that is attributed to the

Prophet, who tells us that God says, “My heavens and My earth do not embrace Me, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me.”

In this traditional sense of the word, “heart” refers to a power of intuitive intelligence and spiritual awareness that transcends rational processes and unifies the knowing subject with the known object. When the word is translated as “mind,” it is typically done so to follow modern usage, according to which the mind pertains to the rational, discursive, and analytical functions of the human self, and the heart refers to emotions and feelings. In traditional contexts, however, such cognitive functions pertain only to the more external aspects of the heart’s engagement with reality, those that support duality, difference, and otherness. In contrast, understanding that pertains to the core of the heart brings about unity and sameness.

Let me provide a typical example of discussion of the heart from the Confucian tradition. The ancient classic called the Book of Rites tells us that “Man is the heart of Heaven and Earth.” In explaining what this means, the great sixteenth-century Confucian master Wang Yangming says that the heart is “spiritual clarity” (*lingming*), or luminous, unitary intelligence, and it is the reality that lies behind all appearances. Among the myriad things, only human beings have access to it. He writes,

We know, then, that in all that fills heaven and earth there is but this spiritual clarity. It is only because of people’s forms and bodies that they are separate. My spiritual clarity is the lord-ruler of heaven and earth, of spirits and demons. . . . Separated from my spiritual clarity, there will be no heaven and earth, no spirits and demons, no myriad things.¹

But what does Mencius mean by the “lost” heart? If we say in modern English, with no explanation, that someone has lost his heart, we mean he has fallen in love, and if we say that he has lost his mind, we mean he’s gone mad. But Mencius is not talking about love or madness. His point is that learning—which all of us do all the time, whether we want to or not—should be focused on recovering the most precious dimension of our own being, something of utmost importance to us. We had that precious something, but now we have lost it, so our human task is to find it again.

¹ For a slightly different translation, see Wing-Tsit Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living by Wang Yang-Ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 257; also idem, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 690.

In short, Mencius is lamenting the situation of most people, who have lost touch with the innate luminosity and inherent goodness of the human heart that the Chinese call *ren*—humanity, human-heartedness, humaneness, benevolence. *Ren* is in fact the key concept in the whole Confucian tradition, because it designates our true human nature, authentic goodness and virtue, and all efforts should be focused upon achieving it. As Tu Weiming among others reminds us, the Confucian tradition is focused on achieving *ren* or, as he puts it, “on learning how to be human.”² We are not born human, nor do we just grow up to be human—rather, *ren* is a luminous, spiritual clarity, an ultimate goodness that needs to be pursued and actualized. For Mencius, the lost heart is nothing other than this true human nature. This becomes clear when we quote his saying in context:

Ren is man's heart, and righteousness [yi] his road. Sad indeed is it to neglect the road and not to follow it, to lose the heart and not to know enough to go after it. When someone loses his chickens and dogs, he knows enough to go after them, but when he loses his heart, he does not know enough to seek for it. The way of learning is nothing other than to seek for the lost heart.

The Muslim Worldview

Given that our understanding of the significance and role of learning depends on our world view, I need to take a rather lengthy detour to clarify the Confucian and Muslim world views. In doing so, I am trying to look through the eyes of the Chinese Muslims who began writing about their religion in the Chinese language in the seventeenth century. Those scholars were happy to accept the general Confucian view of things and praised its focus on bringing personal and social life into conformity with the Dao of Heaven and Earth, a goal that they understood to be exactly the same as the parallel teachings in Islam. Nonetheless, they thought that Confucian explanations of the human situation in the universe were inadequate, so they supplemented them with teachings drawn from Islam.³

² See Tu Weiming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

³ One of the foremost examples is provided by Liu Zhi, who in 1704 published a book called *Tianfang xingli*, which became the standard exposition of the Muslim world view in Chinese for two hundred years. See Sachiko Murata and W. C. Chittick, *The Heavenly Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms*, forthcoming.

You might think that the Muslim critique of Confucianism was based on the fact that it does not talk about a personal God. In fact, however the Muslim scholars—who were well versed not only in Islamic thought but also in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—had no difficulty accepting basic Confucian notions about the Supreme Principle, the Real Substance, the Ultimate Truth. They had countless parallel discussions to draw from in their own Arabic and Persian texts, so they found nothing strange about this impersonal depiction of the Real.

It may be useful to recall here that the Islamic world view is built on three basic principles. The first is *tawhīd*, the assertion that God is one. The key to the meaning of God's oneness is found in the formula of witnessing, the Shahadah, which is the first pillar of Muslim practice and the foundation of faith. To be a Muslim, one begins by acknowledging that "There is no god but God," a formula called the "words of *tawhīd*." For thoughtful Muslims over the centuries, this has never been a dogma, but rather the underlying truth of things, the fundamental theme of meditation, the guide to orienting oneself toward God, the world, and society. One does not simply recite it; rather, one strives to understand its implications for the big picture and for living out one's daily life with God in mind.

Tawhīd has two basic implications, and these become clear when we insert any of the so-called "ninety-nine most beautiful names of God" into the formula. God is powerful, so "There is none powerful but God." God is merciful, so "There is none merciful but God." God is loving, so "There is none loving but God."

The first implication is that God alone is truly God, truly Real, truly One, truly Alive, truly Knowing, truly Powerful, truly Loving and so on down the list of the divine names. This means that anything other than God does not and cannot possess these qualities on its own. Reality, oneness, life, knowledge, power—all are exclusively divine attributes.

The second implication of the formula is that everything in the universe receives whatever qualities it may have from God. In other words, to say "There is none powerful but God" means that everything we call "power" can only be a sign or a trace of the divine power, bestowed upon created things by the One Reality. Thus the whole universe is, in Koranic terms, a vast collection of "signs" (*āyāt*) pointing to God as the Ultimate Reality and Supreme Principle.

It is perhaps worth stressing that this way of thinking about God does not allow for any real break between God and creation. People often say that Islam talks about God in terms of radical transcendence, which is true enough, but they forget that many of the same authors also talk about God in terms of radical immanence. Yes, God is infinitely transcendent, but He is also omnipresent.

One of the results of this way of looking at things is that Islam has no notion of Deism, which depends upon severing the links between the divine and the human. Many if not most people nowadays, whether they know it or not, think of God in Deist terms. For example, religious people who imagine that the “Big Bang” can mark the moment of creation, or that scientific notions of causality or evolution are sufficient to explain the nature of the world, are taking Deist positions. They think that God, having created the world, lets it run its course, standing off at a distance and rarely if ever interfering (the so-called “clockwork universe”).

Such notions of God’s aloofness are alien to the Islamic tradition. They fly in the face of *tawhīd* by suggesting that the world has some sort of independent reality, such that it could bumble along on its own without God’s constant support and sustenance. On the contrary, all things are utterly dependent on the Supreme Reality at every instant of their existence. There are no gaps in the divine omnipresence.

This brief explanation of *tawhīd* follows in the line of numerous books written in Arabic and Persian over the past one thousand years. For those familiar with Neo-Confucianism—which has been the predominant form of Far Eastern religiosity for roughly the same period—explanations of *tawhīd* in this manner can hardly seem strange. This is because the Neo-Confucian scholars constantly talk about the Supreme Principle as that which underlies “heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things,” at every moment, always and forever. The Muslim Chinese, reading Neo-Confucian texts, saw no contradiction between the basic Confucian views of reality and the standpoints found in their own Islamic sources. It was clear to them that Chinese thought is rooted in *tawhīd*.

The second basic principle of Islam is “prophecy.” Here you might think that the Chinese Muslims would have had trouble expressing their teachings in Chinese terms. On the contrary, they had no difficulty at all, because they followed the basic teaching of the Koran that God sent a prophet to every people (10:47). They recognized that the Chinese

had their own prophets, called “sages” (*sheng*) in the Chinese language. Hence the Muslims simply spoke of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and other Koranic prophets as “sages” and accepted that God sent sages to all peoples, including the Chinese. They found that the description of the characteristics of sages as found in Confucian classics like the *Doctrine of the Mean* were in keeping with their own understanding of prophets, and they often quoted from the Neo-Confucian scholars on the topic. One of their favorite passages belongs to the twelfth-century Neo-Confucian Lu Jiuyuan (d. 1192):

Sages appeared tens of thousands of generations ago. They shared this heart, they shared this principle. Sages will appear tens of thousands of generations to come. They will share this heart, they will share this principle. Over the four seas sages appear. They share this heart, they share this principle.⁴

The third of the three principles of Islamic faith is the return to God, and it is this principle that Muslims found to be insufficiently explained in Chinese texts, so they paid special attention to clarifying what it means. In fact, the single most influential book translated from an Islamic language into Chinese before the twentieth century was not, as you might expect, the Koran, but rather a thirteenth-century Persian classic written by a great spiritual teacher, Najm al-Dīn Rāzī.⁵ This book was extremely popular throughout the Persianate world, that is, from Turkey through Persia and Central Asia to India. It is a long, but poetic and extremely readable account of what it means to be human and how we may go about achieving the fullness of our humanity. The title of the book translates as “The Path of the Servants from the Origin to the Return.” I will not attempt to review the contents—a good English translation is available.⁶ I simply want to point out that this book focuses on the third principle of Islamic faith, the “return” to God, as indicated already by its title. Moreover, it follows the Koran by

⁴ For another translation, see Chan, *Source Book*, p. 580. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite points to the popularity of this passage among Muslim scholars in *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 166-67.

⁵ On the importance of Ra-zī’s book among the Chinese, see Benite, *Dao of Muhammad*, pp. 86-88, 130-33; Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 32.

⁶ Hamid Algar, *The Path of God’s Bondsmen from Origin to Return* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1982).

discussing the Return to God in terms of the Origin, that is, our appearance from God in the first place.

The basic meaning of this third principle of faith is that people go back where they came from, which is the presence of God. If you say, “Doesn’t Islam teach that everyone ends up in either heaven or hell?”, the answer is “Yes,” but we only get there by encountering God. We meet Him in terms of His names and attributes. If we meet Him as merciful and forgiving, then certainly we end up in paradise. But, if we meet Him as just, wrathful, and vengeful, we will not be so fortunate. How we meet Him after death depends on how we live our lives here and now.

One cannot stress too much that the notion of “Origin and Return” is central to Islamic thinking. Without understanding it, people have no orientation. Moreover, we should not forget that it is simply an application of the first principle, *tawhīd*, which tells us that everything comes from God, everything is sustained by God, and everything goes back where it came from.

The Human Situation

For the Chinese Muslims, seeking for the lost heart meant trying to recover one’s original situation with God. According to the Koran, after creating the universe with its myriad kinds, including not only plants and animals but also angels and demons, God created Adam—that is, the original human being, or human beings in general.⁷ Moreover, He created Adam with a purpose, that is, to be His vicegerent (*khalīfa*) or representative in the earth. The issue of human “vicegerency” is central to traditional Islamic thinking. If we can understand what a vicegerent is, then we can understand why God created us. “Vicegerency” is the answer to the big questions: “Why are we here?” “What is the purpose of life?”

So, what exactly is a vicegerent? In the passage of the Koran where God says that He appointed Adam as His vicegerent, it also says that

⁷ I say “human beings in general” not only because of the obvious symbolic significance of Adam as the father of the human race, and the repeated use of the word in Arabic discussions to mean *insa-n* (“Man,” or human beings), but also because of Koranic passages that make the identification. For example, the Koran addresses human beings in general (with “you” in the plural) in these terms: “We established you in the earth and there appointed for you a livelihood; little thanks you show. We created you, then We shaped you, then We said to the angels, ‘Prostrate yourselves to Adam.’ . . .” (7:10ff.)

God taught him “all the names” (2:31). These are the names of all things, including the names of God. We can not live up to the proper human function of representing God if we do not know His creation and if we do not know Him. After all, “name” here does not mean simply “designation.” God did not bestow on Adam encyclopedias of information. He gave him understanding. When Adam came to know all things, he was aware of their realities and the significance of their realities. He understood them in their big context. From the outset he was given the Great Learning, which allowed him to know the exact significance of every form of small learning.

For any of you who are not familiar with Islamic teachings, I should point out that Adam is not only the first vicegerent, but also the first prophet, the first sage, the first complete and perfect human being. He played exactly the role that God created him for, and he did such a good job that he deserves to be imitated by all of us. He was also, of course, the first “sinner.” His sin, however, was that he “disobeyed” (20:121), that is, God’s command not to approach the tree. In the same passage of the Koran, God provides his excuse: “He forgot” (20:115). After all, as the Koran tells us elsewhere, “Man was created weak” (4:28). In the Koranic account, the moment God asked Adam and Eve why they ate the forbidden fruit, they recognized their mistake and asked forgiveness, and God forgave them both. And that was the end of their forgetfulness. This is why a great spiritual teacher like Shams-i Tabrīzī can blame a seeker of God who keeps on slipping on the Path by saying, “His father’s tradition is once.”⁸

To come back to the issue of the names that God taught to Adam, many commentators explain human vicegerency in terms of the Biblical saying, repeated by Muhammad, that God created Adam in His own form. The only way that human beings can “represent” God is by reflecting His total reality within themselves. Adam was taught *all* the names, not just some of them. And when God teaches something, it really sinks in, which is to say that it involves a transformation of the very being of the learner.

According to the Koran, “God’s only command to a thing, when He desires it, is to say to it ‘Be!’, and it comes to be” (36:82). When God

⁸ Quoted in Chittick, *Me & Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2004), p. 191

said “Be” to Adam, He gave him “being,” and that being was a full and plenary manifestation of God’s supreme Reality, which is designated by the ninety-nine most beautiful names. It is within Adam’s being and awareness that God reveals and discloses His own reality, all of His names. Only on this basis can Adam know God and represent God.

So, God created Adam as His vicegerent. In the first place, this is an ontological vicegerency, by which I mean to say the very being of Adam—internally in his consciousness and externally in his body—shows forth and discloses the reality of God. Adam has no choice in the matter. In the language of Islamic theology, Adam is a “compulsory servant” of God, because he must obey the creative command to come into being. All things serve God in this respect.

What makes Adam different from all the other servants of God is precisely that God taught him “all” the names, not just some of them. Bees know the names of flowers, frogs know the names of bugs, but Adam knows the name of everything. That “everything” includes God—God as creator and destroyer, God as merciful and wrathful, God as just and forgiving. And this knowledge is woven into his very being.

It is this existential knowledge of all the names that bestows upon Adam his freedom of choice. In terms of the formula of *tawhīd*, “There is no one free but God.” As the Koran puts it, God “does what He desires” (85:16), but human beings have limitations on doing what they want. Made in the image of that free God, they do have a certain freedom. No one denies this without living in contradiction, since we constantly make choices in our everyday lives. It is only because Adam recognized his own freedom that he felt responsible for disobeying God’s command not to approach the tree, and it was his sense of responsibility that drove him to ask for forgiveness.

Notice that God’s command not to approach the tree is quite different from the other command that Adam had received, that is, the command to come into being, which is called in the language of theology the creative or “engendering” command (*al-amr al-takwīnī*). In contrast, the command not to approach the tree was a “prescriptive command” (*amr taklīfī*). God’s creative command brings us into existence, and His prescriptive command instructs us to observe good words, good deeds, and good thoughts—right speech, right activity, and right understanding. By issuing the latter command, God recognizes our freedom and tells us not to lie, steal, commit murder; to pray, to keep Him in mind

at all times, to perform acts of charity; and to use our intelligence to understand His ways.

Human beings, then, are faced with two commands. They can never disobey the first one, which tells them to come into being, because it makes them what they are wherever they may be—in this world, in the next world, in paradise, in hell. They can only disobey the second command, which comes by way of the prophets and sages. Its pivotal importance for human destiny explains why “prophecy” is the second principle of Islamic thought. The prophets and sages explain the right way of being and doing, and they provide the instructions that people need in order to live up to the vicegerency that God has bestowed upon them.

As for the third principle of Islam, it tells us, on the one hand, that we are compulsory servants of God. We serve His creative command whether we want to or not. He created us without our asking Him to do so, He sustains us as long as He chooses to do so, and He takes us back to Himself whenever He wants to. In none of this do we have any say. Where we do have a say is in dealing with the prescriptive command. Do we follow it, ignore it, reject it, deny that it even exists? All these are options given to us by our freedom.

In any case, according to *tawbīd*, everyone and everything will return to God, so in this respect the return is “compulsory.” Among human beings, however, many will choose to follow the instructions of God in order to live up to the requisites of servanthood and to try to make themselves worthy for vicegerency. They do this by engaging in the return “voluntarily,” that is, by following God’s instructions as issued to the prophets. This voluntary return is precisely the *dao* in the sense that we saw Mencius using the term—it is way of learning how to be human and to act appropriately, and it leads to the recovery of the lost heart.

One very large issue in Islamic thought, much discussed and debated throughout Islamic history, is the degree to which human beings can in fact achieve harmony and conformity with the Ultimate Reality by engaging in the voluntary return. The Koran tells us that God is with us wherever we are (57:4), that He is closer to us than our jugular veins (50:16), and that we see His face wherever we look (2:115). If He is omnipresent and always with us, why can’t we be with Him just as He is with us? Generally, Sufi teachers have answered that we can. We can

overcome the ignorance and forgetfulness that prevent us from seeing God wherever we look. We can achieve the degree of understanding and vision to which the words of God refer in the already quoted saying: “My heavens and My earth do not embrace Me, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me.”

The Path of Love

Most Sufi teachers have held that the path of voluntary return is nothing other than the path of love. Love, as everyone knows, is the motive force that brings about nearness between lovers. Love for God is precisely what drives the worshiper to seek nearness to Him. The Koran recognizes love’s importance in many verses, but it stresses the fact that if you want to love God as He should be loved, there are proper ways to do so.

After all, you can’t say to someone, “I love you,” and then go about business as usual. There are procedures and protocols that need to be observed. You must show dedication and devotion if you want to achieve unity with your beloved. So, what is the proper way to show dedication when dealing with God? The Koran puts it this way: “Say [O Muhammad!]: ‘If you love God, follow me, and God will love you’ (3:31). So, the procedures and protocols in love for God are rooted in following the Prophet—this helps explain the essential role played in Islam by the Sunnah, that is, the exemplary acts and deeds of Muhammad.

This verse tells us that the end result of following in the footsteps of Muhammad is that God will love those who do so. Of course, no one denies that God loves us in any case, or else He would not have created us. However, we need to remember that He even loves those whom He puts in hell, so God’s universal love does not necessarily yield the benefit that we might expect. To say that God loves everyone without exception is like saying, “He is with you wherever you are” (57:4)—this does not mean that we are with Him, nor does it mean that we participate in the blessings and peace of His unity.

Our problem is that forgetfulness and heedlessness prevent us from seeing God wherever we are and from entering into His presence. We have lost our hearts, and until we find them, we will remain far from Him. If we want to find our lost hearts and be with God, then we need to follow what the Chinese Muslims call *li*, “propriety” or “ritual.”

In Confucian terms, *li* is the necessary foundation for a proper and worthy society, and it is determined by the norms set down by the ancient sages. Someone once asked Confucius how to become fully and properly human, that is, how to achieve *ren*. Confucius replied, “Discipline yourself by observing propriety” (Analects 12.1). For the Chinese Muslims, “propriety” is precisely the Sunnah of Muhammad as codified in the Shariah (the revealed law) and the Tariqah (the spiritual path, a word they often translated as *dao*).

The Koran says that when people follow Muhammad, God will love them. When God loves them, what happens next? Here a well-attested hadith provides the answer. This hadith is of the *qudsī* or “holy” type, which is to say that the Prophet is quoting the words of God. In it, God tells us that if His servant follows the path of the voluntary return by observing the obligations and recommendations provided by the prescriptive command, he may then achieve the state of presence with God:

My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through voluntary works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks.

In other words, when the servant follows Muhammad out of love for God, then, in loving him back, God becomes somehow indistinguishable from the servant. What exactly this presence of God in the hearing, sight, hands, and feet of the believer means has been the subject of endless discussion and debate over the centuries. Whatever it does mean, it certainly points to a mysterious conjunction between the divine and the human, a conjunction that is centered in the heart. This conjunction is possible only because people were created in the full and plenary image of God, so they can love him as God, not simply as Provider, or Benefactor, or Forgiver, or some other specific name.

True love—and we all know this on the human level—is unqualified by any sort of desire for benefit or fear of loss. In matters of love, after all, the old dilemma is always there: Does she love me for myself, or for my money? In the case of love for God, He knows the secrets of our hearts, so He becomes the hearing and eyesight only of those who truly love Him for His sake alone. This is a rare situation indeed, so the only sure examples we have of those who have achieved it are the prophets and the sages—such as Muhammad and Confucius.

The Original Heart

Many Muslim thinkers refer to the lost heart by the Koranic term *fitra* or “original creation.” *Fitra* is the divine form that God bestowed upon Adam when He created him; or, it is the divine spirit that, according to the Koran, God blew into the clay of Adam in order to bring him to life.

Any discussion of “origins” in Islam has everything to do with explaining how God created the universe in stages, beginning with the invisible divine spirit, the breath that God blew into Adam. This spirit is called by many names, such as the First Intelligence, the Supreme Pen, and the Muhammadan Spirit. It is a single reality that is aware of all things and gave Adam his knowledge of all the names. Or, we can say that the First Spirit is the creative command of God, his word “Be!” to all things. The Chinese Muslims have this last interpretation in mind when they call this spirit, as they often do, “the Mandate of Heaven” (*tianming*).

What is perfectly obvious to all Muslim thinkers is that human beings, in coming into this world from the divine command “Be!”, begin as invisible spirits. They descend through increasing darkness and density until they become embodied in clay. The movement goes from spirit to body, from life to death, from consciousness to unawareness. It is commonly called the “descending arc” (*al-qaws al-nuzūlī*) of existence. The Chinese Muslims called it “the Former Heaven” (*xiantian*), that is, the heavenly realm where we existed before our entrance into the earth.

Once we exist as embodied human beings, we begin to go back where we came from. The Chinese Muslims called the realm to which we go back “the Latter Heaven” (*houtian*), because we enter it only after embodiment. We can all see the process of ascent taking place in the growth of children toward greater understanding and self-awareness. Infants are not at first able to distinguish themselves from their environment or their bodies. Only gradually do they come to realize that they are aware and that they are distinct individuals. All this is part of the natural flow of existence that follows upon the creative command, “Be!”

Thus we have two movements in human existence. First there is emergence from non-manifestation to manifestation, from invisibility to visibility, from inside to outside, from heaven to earth, from spirit to body. Then there is a reversal of the flow of existence when things start moving from outside to inside, from immersion in the senses and bodily

functions toward awareness and understanding, from constraint toward freedom, from forgetfulness and ignorance toward remembrance and awakening. This latter movement is often called “learning.”

According to Islamic law, observance of the prescriptive command becomes mandatory at puberty. This is the time when we are sufficiently self-aware to understand that we have responsibilities toward our Creator, toward other human beings, and toward our own immortal soul, which wants to live in happiness, not just in this world, but also in the next world. At puberty, then, we can begin to move beyond elementary learning and to strive for the Great Learning. But what exactly does the Great Learning involve? To begin with, we have to understand who we are, where we have come from, and how to go back. But this is not the whole of it, because the Great Learning involves both understanding and practice. It demands not only grasping the big picture, but also putting all of our understanding to work in order to recover the lost heart.

The Prophet said, “Knowledge without practice is a tree without fruit.” Knowledge here is understanding who we are and what we should be doing about it. Practice is actually doing what we should be doing, and that is based on observing propriety and following the Way, that is, the Shariah and the Tariqah. We never reach a point where we can relax and say that we have learned everything that we need to know. “Search for knowledge,” the Prophet said, “from the cradle to the grave.” The Koran commands the Prophet himself to pray with the words, “My Lord, increase me in knowledge” (20:114). If the greatest of the sages had to pray for increase in knowledge, what about the rest of us?

Stages of Learning

If Mencius were asked how to go about recovering the lost heart, he would certainly have pointed to Confucius himself, the model for those Chinese who would like to engage in the quest, just as Muhammad is the model for Muslims. In a famous passage of the Analects, Confucius sets down the stages that need to be traversed in order to achieve the goal. He speaks in the first person, but we do not need to assume that he is providing his own story. Sages and prophets voice their teachings in the language of their listeners. Confucius wants to explain the stages of the Great Learning in personal terms to which all of us can relate:

From fifteen, I set my heart on learning. From thirty I stood firm. From forty I had no doubts. From fifty, I knew the mandate of Heaven. From sixty, my ear was obedient. From seventy, I could follow my heart's desire without overstepping the right. (Analects 2.4)

The first step on the Confucian journey, then, is setting one's heart on learning. This is perhaps the most difficult stage of all. How many of us have really put our whole selves into the task of becoming truly human? Yes, we are all engaged in a quest for more understanding of one thing or another, but what about the one thing needful?

By mentioning the age of fifteen, Confucius does not mean that people should start studying rather late. Far from it. As a round number, fifteen designates the time of puberty, precisely the age at which, in Islamic terms, it becomes incumbent on Muslims to follow the guidance of the Koran and the Prophet. Puberty is the age when we are old enough to understand the difference between right and wrong, true and false, good and evil. It is the age at which the prescriptive command begins to play a role in determining the way we develop, rather than simply the creative command. In a traditional context, it is the ideal age for setting out on the quest for self-realization.

The next stage in the Confucian path is the age of thirty, when the seeker "stands firm" and is completely grounded in the quest for his lost heart. From forty, he has "no doubts" about the rightness of his quest for more understanding. In the Islamic context, forty is the age when Muhammad became a prophet, and some Sufi teachers have said that it is the age of spiritual maturity, when those who travel the path to perfection are opened up to the fullness of their own human nature.

At fifty, the seeker comes to know "the Mandate of Heaven," which is to say, in Islamic terms, that he knows not only God's prescriptive command—what people *should* do—but also His creative command—the destiny that God has doled out to His creatures.

Then at sixty, his "ear is obedient." Perhaps this means that at the previous stage, although he knew exactly what Heaven wanted from him, something of his own self-interest and self-centeredness still stood in the way of his submission to the heavenly command. Now, at sixty, whatever he does is in keeping with the Mandate of Heaven, for he follows the prescriptive command in all its details.

Only at seventy does the lost heart make its explicit appearance.

It is then that the seeker can follow his “heart’s desire without overstepping the right.” There is no trace of self-centeredness left. He is firmly rooted in the prescriptive command: What his heart wants is nothing other than what Heaven wants, which is to say that there is no longer any distinction to be drawn between the prescriptive command and the creative command. Having found his lost heart, the finder “does as he desires” just like God, for in fact his desire and God’s desire are the same thing.

Let me end with one more quotation, this time from the book called by the term I have been using all along, “The Great Learning.” This is one of the four most important classics of Confucianism:

The ancients who wished to clarify their clear virtue under heaven would first govern their countries. Those who wished to govern their countries would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first make their hearts true. Those who wished to make their hearts true would first make their intentions sincere. Those who wished to make their intentions sincere would first extend their knowledge. . . . From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of the personal life as the root or foundation. There is never a case when the root is in disorder and yet the branches are in order.

This “cultivation of the personal life” that is the root of both the person and society is none other than the quest to recover the lost heart. As long as we do not recover it, our lives will remain disordered and incomplete and we will not be able to live in peace and harmony with our own selfhoods, much less with our fellow men. It is this recovery of our hearts and our rightful places in the universe that is the goal of traditional learning.