

FOCUS

We're not just wandering through a leafy forest of words here, we are trying to establish constructive pathways through the undergrowth, things which entangle us while all we really want is to see beyond the high canopy above us, find the source of light. We have the longing for truth, we know there is something well beyond the light, beyond the metaphor which offers and denies simultaneously. It offers because it is an implicit understanding of the formlessness which cannot be understood by form, an understanding offered in form, the thing to be discarded or set aside. Part of the undergrowth is learning to straddle the paradox, learning how to distinguish the resonance, the pure sound of wisdom, learning how to separate this from the chitchat of intellectual speculation, learning how to penetrate the metaphor all the way to the reality embedded within its heart.

Mental analysis is especially useful at the lower levels of wisdom or consciousness which depend on seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, and which also depend on the thinking about sensory data, the analysis of sensory data, but it is mind itself which refuses to acknowledge that anything could possibly supersede mind itself. The products of the mind, of its kind of speculation whether scientific, theological, metaphysical or aesthetic, these are forms, the forms of ideas which prevent us from ascending the ladder of wisdom, they keep us from touching what cannot be touched, from seeing what cannot be seen. The mind insists seductively there is no path but its own, but the whisper of truth in wisdom can be heard when we listen with purity, with faith, it is there.

It is there because it is part of the package, the formlessness invested in our form from the beginning, the understanding of who we are and why we are here is already there, lodged within the heart, no need to run around the world searching for something already available if we know where and how to look. Acknowledging the existence of the formless within form is not really so tough, we all admit to the intangible, the qualities, thoughts and desires which motivate us, push us to the worst and the best of who we are. No one denies the good, the just, the compassionate and merciful, just as no one denies the hatred, envy, jealousy and anger, we all recognize these formless entities because of that tiny, that microscopic particle of truth, that breath of divine understanding which has been incorporated within the clay of this form by a Creator who wants us to get it, who wants us to know, has given us the instruments to know.

When I look back at my own experience, the hazardous, even haphazard projection of the routes I accidentally or providentially took, depending on the way you want to see it, I know the light from this inner fire of truth which had a longing to be seen, to be known, this is what brought me to the wisdom of the divine, a wisdom I found brilliantly, luminously manifest in the human form of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. Perhaps I had to see, touch and hear the incarnation of wisdom speak to be persuaded of its reality, not only within him, as he kept explaining, but also within us all. The shrouds of each experience wrapping this truth in garments of ignorance, in the arrogance of ego, the selfishness of genetic confidence, our karma, or the illusions we take for reality, these are merely the mental objects cluttering the undergrowth at the foot of the high canopy hiding the pure light of truth. Here we are, one foot on the earth surrounded by the traps of mind and desire, the other foot taking its own pathway, looking at nothing but the light beyond the trees. That, at least, is the way it sometimes appears to me, and I want to add a subjective, rather personal explanation for these words of mine, why I bother to write down my simplified version of what I have tried to understand when the towering words of the master himself are available in his books, when the

ineluctable sound of the master himself is available on the internet. What I choose to write, what I have written before, is nothing more than the route, the way which opened before me as I learned to walk this pathless path, the arduous, impossible route to wisdom somehow made easier for me, the reformation of wretched, impoverished qualities made feasible.

When I start to think about focus, how to adjust the lens, how to pinpoint an approach to the truth buried beneath the weight, the burden of who we are, who we have become, I turn immediately to another paradigm which can help us understand, help us define this hidden pathway, find it, establish access, purpose and method. If we are not suddenly engulfed in the light of immediate illumination, as I was in the presence of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, how do we proceed, how do we establish access to the inner pathways of faith and wisdom? There is a transforming route for our understanding which can be summarized in his paradigm which tells us only what it tells us if we do not take it to the sanctuary of who we think we are, if it does not change how we pray, how we think or routinely behave.

This paradigm is a map drawn and identified by four words illustrating four continents, four stages of transcendence: surrender, concentration, balance and wisdom. Let us look first at the world of surrender where we find many explanations, many countries within the heart of experience. At this first stage, our surrender does not approach, is not the subtle annihilation of all the worlds invested in selfhood, in ego, our surrender here is the temporary, self-obliterating surrender of devotion when the ego is automatically eclipsed, the sun behind a cloud, a sun effaced in the purity of complete and absolute faith. We are to see this as surrender in the devotion which manifests in love, in the service to God which offers service to others, it is the surrender going beyond mere acceptance that God exists, it is the surrender of knowing, the knowing of knowing, the believing of believing. Here we have the first stage of a developing pattern, the habits of wisdom which clear the earth all around us, which rid us of so many easily uprooted weeds, the degraded actions or ideas based on misleading input from the senses,

from mind and desire. Our clutter of thoughts, words and acts represents just some of the refuse we have to clear away from the foot of a mountain we have determined to climb.

Now we have to concentrate on what has not been burned away in the loving fires of devotion, adjust the microscope to reveal what lies within the cellwork of devotion, study that one point suddenly clarified, focus on that one point which is God. To study, to concentrate on what God is, to know that essence, that purity within the heart, we have to remove everything which is not God from the eye that looks, from the ear that hears, the mouth that tastes, we have to learn how to follow the guidance rising within His truth. This wisdom which knows and understands can be obstructed by qualities which are only half right, occasionally half wrong; the clarity under this microscope, our concentration, must be brought into focus by the clarity of our qualities. What I have found most helpful for myself so far, in the improvements demanded by wisdom, is what I am prepared to relinquish, what I allow with loving tolerance, with unaffected compassion for the people and circumstances I am required to deal with. This does not mean becoming a doormat, it means projecting a flow of love and understanding to wipe away what I think is best, what I like, what I want in whatever equation I find myself part of. Beyond that, what I also have to wipe away is the vestige, the remnant of irritation, ego's final say in the transaction, and it usually does want a last word spoken in the inner silence. A corrected focus, this specific concentration is what must rid us of selfhood's voice, rid us of the criticizing voice which does not know how to accept people as they are.

Now that we are committed to a life of truth and surrender, to learning the silent, inner architecture of absolute faith, and now that we are committed to the purification demanded by a concentrated focus on that one point which is God alone, what happens to our physical life, to our body, the life which goes on in the world? There is an intersection where we have to preserve balance, where we have to be responsible for worldly things, give what Caesar requires to Caesar, as Jesus said. In this Sufi tradition we understand that we do not retreat to

a cave in the jungle, take refuge on a mountain top, in a monastery or a convent, we stay in the world, we provide for ourself and our family, fulfilling whatever worldly obligations fall to us. On the one hand, if we are only at peace in a monastery we have not finished examining ourself, we have not had the occasions, the opportunities to observe or correct our flaws and failures. On the other hand, if we stay in the world with apparently lunatic, self-obsessed behavior, we have not discovered the place of balance there either, the coherence to live in the presence of God while continuing to function in the world, this a more demanding proposition.

As Sufis we stay in the world, we have been sent to learn what must be learned here where we are given the possibility of knowledge, of wisdom which is greater, we are told, than the wisdom granted to other creations, even to heavenly beings. We are composed of outer and inner, the elements our physical composition on the outside, the divine breath that microscopic aspect of God's essence on the inside. Understanding the connection between the two also means learning the place of balance, the place where we learn how to live appropriately in both, so that we don't fall beneath the weight of the world, so that we are not made incomprehensible by our love of God's kingdom.

It's hard enough, an arduous task to learn what we must know about the elemental side of our existence, the complexities of the body and the physical world it inhabits, all the mountains, trees, animals and vegetation, we can spend our life on that alone, but we'll end up with the same questions we began with, the vocabulary of woe which cannot give the right answers. In the same way, we can't spend all our time worshipping and studying at the altars of the inner church or we won't be able to survive in the world outside. The balance, the pivot, is the continuing recitation of *la ilaha ill-Allahu* with every breath, *la ilaha* on the out-breath, breathing out the impurities of the world and the imperfections of the self, *ill-Allahu* on the in-breath, affirming the Oneness, the totality of Allah, denying the reality of anything but Allah. This *dhikr*, the remembrance of God with every breath, keeps us in prostration to Him while fulfilling our obligations in and to the world.