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Part 2.3: Rules of Attaining Spiritual Perfection

To be able to advance on this spiritual path it is necessary for a spiritual traveler to appoint some righteous man his preceptor (spiritual guide). The preceptor must have passed away from self and reached the station of ever lasting abode in Allah.

He should be fully aware of all the points which are to the advantage or disadvantage of a spiritual traveler and should be capable of undertaking the training and guidance of other spiritual travelers. Moreover, remembrance and recollection of Allah and prayer to Him with humility are also necessary for a spiritual traveler.

Besides, to be able to pass all the stages of spiritual path successfully it is necessary for him to observe certain rules:

1) Renunciation of customs, usages and social formalities

It means to refrain from all those formalities which are related to mere customs or stylish living and which are a hindrance in the way of the spiritual traveler, who is required to live among the people but to lead a simple and balanced life.

Some people are so absorbed in social formalities that they always observe them too minutely in order to maintain their position in society and often indulge in useless and even harmful practices, which cause nothing but inconvenience and worry. They give preference to unnecessary usages over the real and important necessities.

Their criterion for judging what is proper and what is improper is the appreciation and disapproval of the common people. They do not have any opinion of their own, and simply follow the common trend. At the other end there are some other people who lead an isolated life and ignore all rules of society and thus deprive themselves from all social benefits. They do not mix with other people and come to be known as cynics.

To be successful in his objective the spiritual traveler should follow the middle way. He should mix up with the people neither too much nor too little. It does not matter if he looked different from other people because of his distinct social behavior. He should not follow others and should not care for any criticism in this connection. Allah says:

They do not fear the criticism of any critic in the way of Allah. (***Surah al-Ma'ida, 5:54***).

That means that the true believer sticks to what he thinks to be right. As a principle it may be said that the spiritual traveler should weigh every matter seriously and should not follow the wishes of other people or their opinion blindly.

2) Determination

As soon as the spiritual traveler begins his spiritual exercises, he is bound to face many unpleasant events. He is criticized by his friends and acquaintances who are interested only in their selfish desires and current social customs. They taunt and unbraid the spiritual traveler in order to bring a change in his behavior and to turn him away from his objective.

When these worldly people find that the spiritual traveler has a new style of life and his ways and manners have become different from their own, they feel upset and try their best to remove him by means of mockery and taunt from the line recently chosen by him. Thus at every stage of his spiritual journey the devotee has to face fresh difficulties which he can resolve only by means of his determination, perseverance, will power and trust in Allah.

Let the believers place their trust in Allah. (***Surah Ali Imran, 3:122***)

3) Moderation

It is one of those important principles which the spiritual traveler must follow, for a little negligence in this respect not only hampers his progress, but often as a consequence of a lack of attention to this principle he may get tired of the spiritual journey itself.

In the beginning the spiritual traveler may show much zeal and fervor. In the middle he may see wonderful manifestations of Divine light, and consequently may decide to spend most of his time in acts of worship and make himself busy with prayer, bewailing and weeping.

Thus he may try to undertake everything good and pick up a morsel of every spiritual dish. But this practice is not only not beneficial but is also in many cases definitely harmful. Under too much pressure he may get fed up, leave the work incomplete and cease to take interest in commendable acts. Too much enthusiasm in the beginning leads to too little interest in the end.

Therefore the spiritual traveler should not be misled by momentary zeal, and keeping in view his

personal circumstances should shoulder only as much burden, or even less, as he is sure to be able to carry permanently maintaining due interest in it. He should perform acts of worship when he is really inclined to them and should withdraw from them when his desire to perform them has not still completely faded away.

He may be compared to a man who wants to eat something. Such a man first of all should choose a dish that agrees to his temperament, and then should stop eating it before his belly is full. This principle of moderation is derived from that tradition also according to which Imam Ja'far Sadiq said to Abdul Aziz Qaratisi: "Abdul Aziz, faith has ten degrees like the steps of a ladder which are climbed one by one. If you find anyone below you by one step, pull him up to you gently and do not burden him with what he cannot bear, or else you will break him."

This tradition shows that in principle only those acts of worship are beneficial which are performed with zeal and eagerness. The following saying of Imam Sadiq also means the same thing: "Do not force yourselves to worship."

4) Steadiness

It means that after feeling penitence about a sin and asking Allah's forgiveness for it, it must not be committed again. Every vow must be fulfilled and every promise made to the pious preceptor must be kept.

5) Continuance

Before explaining this point it is necessary to make some preliminary remarks. The Qur'anic verses and religious reports show that everything we perceive by our senses, everything we do and everything that exists or occurs has a corresponding truth transcending this material and physical world and not subject to any limitations of time and space. When these truths descend to this material world, they assume a tangible and palpable form. The Qur'an expressly says:

There is not a thing the treasures of which we do not have with Us. But we send down everything in an appointed measure. (***Surah al-Hijr, 15:21***)

This verse essentially means that everything in this world has had an existence free from estimation and measurement prior to its material existence. When Allah intends to send a thing to this world, He appoints its measure and so it becomes limited:

No disaster befalls in the earth or in yourselves, but it is in a Book before We bring it into being. Surely this is easy for Allah. (***Surah al-Hadid, 57:22***)

As the external shape of everything is fixed and limited and everything is subject to all the changes that are the characteristics of matter such as coming into a shape and being disfigured, everything in this

world is temporary, transient and subject to decay. Allah says:

Whatever is with you is to be exhausted and whatever is with Allah is to stay. (***Surah an-Nahl, 16:96***)

In other words, those abstract truths which are not subject to material characteristics and the treasures of which are with Allah, are not to come to an end. The following tradition, which is accepted by the Shi'ah and the Sunnis both, is also relevant in this connection: "We, the Prophets have been ordered to speak to the people according to their intellectual capacity."

This tradition relates to the description of the truths, not to their quantity. It says that the Prophets simplify the higher truths and describe them in a way comprehensible to their addresses. Human mind having been dazzled by the glamour of the world and being preoccupied with the futile desires, has become dull and rusty and is not capable of comprehending the reality of the truths.

The Prophets may be compared to a man who wants to explain some truth to the children. Naturally he will have to explain it in a way corresponding to the power of understanding and observation of the children.

The same rule applies to the Prophets who are the custodians of the Divine teachings. Sometimes they describe the living truths in such a way that they appear to be lifeless, while as a matter of fact even the external rites such as prayers, fast, pilgrimage, zakat, khums, urging that what is right and restraining from that what is evil are all living and conscious truths.

The spiritual traveler is he who by means of a spiritual journey and spiritual exercises seeks to purify his soul and intellect from all impurities to be able to view the higher truths by the grace of Allah in this very life and this very world. It often happens that a devotee views the ablution and prayers in their real form and feels that from the viewpoint of perception and consciousness, their real form is a thousand times better than their physical form.

The reports which have come down to us from the Imams show that the acts of worship will appear on the Day of Resurrection in their appropriate forms and will talk to the human beings. Even in the Qur'an it has been mentioned that the ears, the eyes and other organs will be speaking on that day. Similarly the mosques which appear to be composed of bricks and mortar, have a living and conscious reality.

That is why some reports say that on the Day of Judgment the mosques and the Holy Qur'an will make complaints to their Lord. One day a gnostic was lying on his bed. When he turned from one side to the other he heard a shriek coming out of the ground. He could not immediately know the reason. Subsequently either he himself realized or somebody else pointed out to him that the ground, having been separated from him, was shrieking.

After these preliminary remarks now we come to our main point. By means of continuous practice the

spiritual traveler should imprint on his mind an abstract figure of each act of worship he performs, so that his practice of it may turn into a permanent habit. He should perform each deed again and again and should not give it up till he begins to take delight in its performance.

He cannot capture the permanent angelic aspect of a deed unless he continues to perform for quite a long time so that its impression on his mind may become indelible. For this purpose he should choose a deed consistent with his inclination and aptitude and then continue to perform it, for if a deed was abandoned prematurely, not only its good effects would be obliterated, but a reaction also would begin to appear.

As a good deed is luminous, the reaction of its abandonment involves darkness and evil. The fact is that "there is nothing but good with Allah and all the evils, mischief and wrongs are attributable to us." Therefore man is responsible for all faults and defects. "My Lord, evil cannot be attributed to You."

This shows that Allah's favor is common to all. It is not a prerogative of any particular class. Allah's infinite mercy is for all human beings, whether Muslims, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians or idol-worshippers. But some men because of their wrong doing develop certain characteristics which make them unhappy, and so Allah's mercy makes some people happy and some others distressed.

6) Meditation

This means that the spiritual traveler must at no time be forgetful of his duty and must always abide by the decision which he has taken.

Meditation or contemplation is very vast in its meaning and its sense differs according to the degrees and stages of the spiritual journey. In the beginning it means refraining from all acts not useful in this world or the hereafter and abstaining from saying or doing anything disliked by Allah.

Gradually this meditation becomes stiffer and higher, and may sometimes mean concentration on one's silence, or on one's self or on a higher truth, that is the names and the attributes of Allah. The degrees and grades of this kind of meditation will be mentioned later.

Here it may be mentioned that meditation is an important factor in spiritual journey. The leading gnostics have laid great stress on it, and have described it as the foundation stone of spiritual journey on which the edifice of remembrance and recollection of Allah rests.

Without meditation remembrance and recollection of Allah are not likely to produce any positive results.

For a spiritual traveler meditation is as important as for a patient the prescribed course of diet, without which the medicines may be ineffective or may even produce counter-effects. That is why the most outstanding spiritual guides do not allow any liturgies and recollection of Allah without meditation.

7) Checking

It means that the spiritual traveler should every day have a fixed time for checking and assessing what he had done during the past 24 hours. The idea of this checking has been derived from what Imam Musa ibn Ja'far has said: "He who does not take account of himself once every day is not one of us."

If on checking the spiritual traveler finds that he has not done his duty, he should seek forgiveness from Allah and if he finds that he has performed his duty in every respect, he should be thankful to Him.

8) Censuring

If the spiritual traveler finds that he is guilty of some lapse or error, he should take some suitable action to reprimand or punish himself.

9) Hastening

This means that the spiritual traveler should be quick in implementing the decision he has taken. As he is likely to face many obstacles on his way, he should be vigilant and careful and should try to achieve his objective without wasting a moment.

10) Faith and Reliance

The spiritual traveler must have love for and implicit faith in the Holy Prophet and his rightful successors.[1] Complete reliance and trust are especially necessary at this stage. The more the reliance, the more lasting the effect of good deeds.

As all the existing things are the creation of Allah, the spiritual traveler must love all of them and should have regard for them according to the grade of their dignity. A lover of Allah shows kindness to all men and animals. According to a tradition, affection for the creation is a part of faith in Allah.

Another tradition says: "Allah, I seek of You Your love and the love of him who loves You."

11) Observance of the Rules of Veneration

The observance of these rules of correct behavior towards all and His vicegerents is different from the faith and reliance mentioned above. Here veneration means to be careful not to exceed one's limits and do anything inconsistent with the requirements of man's servitude to Allah.

It is essential for man to observe his limits vis-a-vis his Creator, the essentially existing Being. This veneration is a requirement of this world of plurality, whereas faith and love naturally require attention to monotheism - the unity of Allah.

Faith and veneration stand in the same relationship to each other as an act obligatory and an act prohibited. While performing an obligatory act the devotee looks towards Allah and while abstaining from a prohibited act he looks towards his own limitations lest he should exceed them. Veneration means following a middle way between fear and hope. Not to observe the rules of veneration indicates too much familiarity which is extremely undesirable.

The distinctive characteristic of the late Haji Mirza Ali Agha Qazi was his cheerfulness and faith rather than fear. The same was true of the late Haji Shaykh Muhammad Bahar. On the contrary, the predominant feature of Haji Mirza Jawid Agha Maliki was fear rather than hope and cheerfulness. That is what is indicated by their sayings.

According to the gnostic parlance he who is dominated by cheerfulness is called a "drunkard" and he who is dominated by fear is called a "hymist". The best thing is to adopt a middle way in between these two extremes. In other words the devotee should have the highest degree of both the qualities at one and the same time. This degree of excellence is found in the case of the Imams only.

In short, man who is a possibly existing being, should not forget his limits. That is why Imam Ja'far Sadiq used to prostrate himself on the ground whenever anything smacking extremism was uttered by anybody about him.

An absolutely dutiful devotee is he who always considers himself to be present before Allah and observes all the rules of property and deference while doing anything such as talking, keeping quiet, eating, drinking, sleeping etc. If the devotee kept the names and attributes of Allah in his mind, he would automatically observe all the rules of veneration and would always be conscious of his humility.

12) Intention

It means that the spiritual traveler should be single minded and well-intentioned. The objective of his spiritual journey should be nothing but to pass away in Allah. The Qur'an says: "Worship Allah keeping worship purely for Him."

A number of reports say that there are three grades of intention. Imam Sadiq is reported to have said: "There are three kinds of worshippers: There are some who worship Allah because they are afraid of Him. Their worship is that of the slaves. There are some others who worship Allah for the sake of recompense. Their worship is that of the wage-earners. There are till others who worship Allah because they love Him. Their worship is that of freemen."

On deep thinking it appears that there are two kinds of worship. One of them is not worship at all in the right sense, because those who perform this kind of worship are actually self-worshippers. They are motivated by self-interest. As self-worshippers cannot be the worshippers of Allah, they may even be regarded as a sort of unbelievers.

The Qur'an has described the worship of Allah as man's nature. At the same time it has denied the possibility of any change in man's in-born qualities.

Set your purpose for religion as a man by nature upright - the nature in which Allah has created man. There is no altering in the nature framed by Allah. That is the right religion, but most men do not know

'even this fact' (***Surah ar-Rum, 30:30***)

Therefore an act of worship actuated by self-interest is not only a deviation from the path of devotion to Allah, but is also a deviation from the path of monotheism, for these self-seekers appear not to believe in the unity of Allah in His actions and attributes because they associate someone else with Him.

The Qur'an has everywhere proclaimed the unity of Allah and has denied the existence of any associate or partner with Him. The first two groups of worshippers mentioned above consider Allah to be their partner in their objectives and do not refrain from the idea of self-aggrandizement even in worshipping Him. They have double objective and that is what is called polytheism which according to the Qur'an is an unforgivable offence.

Allah does not forgive that partners should be ascribed to Him. He pardons all save that to whom He will (***Surah an-Nisa', 4:48, 116***)

It is clear from the above that the worship performed by the first two groups is not fruitful and will not bring the worshipper closer to Allah.

As for the third group who worships Allah for the sake of love, their worship is that of freemen, and according to a report the most noble worship. "It is a hidden position to which only the pure attain." Love means attraction, or in other words to be drawn by some person or some truth.

The third group is of those who love Allah and are inclined towards Him. They have no objective other than being drawn to Him and gain His good pleasure. Their motive is their Real Beloved and they try to move towards Him.

Some reports say that Allah should be worshipped because He deserves being worshipped. He is fit and worthy of being worshipped because of His attributes. In other words He is to be worshipped because He is Allah.

Imam Ali says: "My Lord, I do not worship You because I am afraid of Your hell, nor because I want Your paradise. I worship You because I have found You fit for being worshipped. You Yourself have guided me to You and have called me to You. Had You not been I would not have known what You are."

In the beginning the spiritual traveler goes forward with the help of love, but after traversing a few stages he realizes that love is different from the beloved. Therefore he tries to give up love which was his means of progress so far, but which might prove a hindrance in his further advancement. Now he

concentrates all his attention on the Beloved Whom he worships as his Beloved only.

When he goes a few steps further he realizes that yet his worship is not free from duality for he still considers himself to be the lover and Allah the beloved, while it is inconsistent with absolute unity of Allah to think of a lover of Him. Therefore the spiritual traveler tries to forget about love so that he may step into the world of unity from the world of plurality. At this stage he ceases to have will and intention for his distinctive personality has already passed away.

Prior to this stage the spiritual traveler was seeking vision, viewing and sight. Now he forgets all these things, for when he has no intention, he can have no desire. In this state it cannot be said whether the eyes and the heart of the spiritual traveler are functioning or not. To see and not to see, to know and not to know all become irrelevant.

Bayazid Bistami is reported to have said: "First I renounced the world. Next day I renounced the hereafter. The third day I renounced everything other than Allah. The fourth day I was asked what I wanted. I said: I want that I do not want." Perhaps taking a clue from this saying some people have fixed the following four stages:

(i) Renunciation of this world;

(ii) Renunciation of the hereafter;

(iii) Renunciation of the Lord;

(iv) Renunciation of renunciation.

This is a point which requires deep consideration for being understood properly. This is the stage at which the spiritual traveler gives up all desires. This is, a great achievement, but difficult to realize, for even at this stage the spiritual traveler finds that his heart is not free from all desires and intentions. At least he aspires to gain perfection. It is of no use to make any conscious effort to get rid of the desires for such an effort itself involves a desire and an objective.

One day I spoke to my teacher, Mirza Ali Agha Qazi about this question and asked him what the solution of this problem was. He said that it could be resolved by adopting the method of "burning". The spiritual traveler should realize that Allah has created him in such a way that he must always have some desires and ambitions. That is a part of his inborn nature.

Howsoever he may try, he cannot eliminate all desires. Therefore he should realize his powerlessness and give up all efforts to that effect. In that case he will entrust his case to Allah. The feeling of powerlessness will not only purify him, but will also burn the roots of all desire. Anyhow, it must be kept in mind that only theoretical knowledge of this point is not enough. The spiritual traveler must develop a real taste for it. If such a taste is developed, it can be more pleasure-giving than anything else in the world.

This method is called 'burning' for it burns out the very existence of will and intention and uproots them completely.

The Qur'an has used this method on a number of occasions. One instance is the use of the Divine expression: "We belong to Allah and to Him we shall return." Anybody who uses this method will find that it produces very quick results.

At the time of calamities, disasters and mishaps man consoles himself in different ways. For example, he reminds himself that death and misfortunes are the destiny of all human beings. But Allah has suggested the burning method as a short cut by prescribing the above formula to be uttered on such occasions.

If man realizes that he himself and all that he possesses and all that belongs to him in any way, are all owned by Allah who has full power and authority to dispose of them as He wills and pleases, he will not grieve for any loss and will feel relieved. Man should know that factually he is not the owner of anything. His ownership is only phenomenal. In reality everything belongs to Allah who gives whatever He will and takes away whatever He will.

Nobody has a right to interfere in what He does. Man should know that he has been created wishful, ambitious and needy. All that is a part of his inborn nature. Therefore, when the spiritual traveler is filled with any sort of yearning during his spiritual journey, he suspects that it is not possible for him to be totally free from desires, and that passing away in Allah, which is the basis of the worship of freemen, is inconsistent with his inmate propensities to will and desire. In these circumstances he is perplexed and feels helpless.

But it is this feeling of helplessness that effaces his egoism, which is the basis of will and desire. Therefore, after passing this stage no trace of will and desire is left. This point is worth understanding well.

13) Silence

There are two kinds of silence:

(i) general and relative;

(ii) particular and absolute.

Relative silence means to refrain from talking to people in excess to what is absolutely required. This kind of silence is necessary for the spiritual traveler at every stage. It is commendable for others also. Imam Ja'far Sadiq referred to this kind of silence when he said: "Our partisans (Shi'ah) are dumb." A report is mentioned in the Misbahush Shari'ah according to which Imam Ja'far Sadiq has said: "Silence is the way of the lovers of Allah because Allah likes it. It is the style of the Prophets and the habit of the chosen people."

According to another report Imam Ja'far Sadiq said:

"Silence is a part of wisdom. It is a sign of every virtue."

Particular and absolute silence means to refrain from talking during verbal recollection of Allah.

14) Abstaining from Food or at least Observing Frugality

It is recommended on the condition that it should not disturb mental peace and composure. Imam Ja'far Sadiq has said: "The believer enjoys hunger. For him hunger is the food of the heart and the soul."

Hunger illuminates the soul and makes it lighter whereas overeating makes it dull and tired and hampers its soaring to the heaven of gnosis. Out of the acts of worship fasting has been lauded a great deal. A number of reports concerning the Holy Prophet's Ascension to the Heavens have been mentioned in Daylami's Irshad and the Biharul Anwar, vol. II. In these reports the Holy Prophet has been addressed as Ahmad.

These reports underline the beneficial points of starvation, especially its wonderful effect in connection with spiritual journey. My teacher, the late Ali Agha Qazi once related a wonderful story about starvation. In short he said: "Once during the days of the former Prophets three persons were travelling together. At nightfall they set out in three different directions with a view to get food, but agreed to assemble next morning at a particular place at an appointed time. One of them was already invited by some person.

The second man also by chance became the guest of someone. The third man had no place to go to. He said to himself that he should go to the mosque to be the guest of Allah. He passed the night in the mosque, but could get no food. Next morning they assembled at the appointed place and each one of them related his story. At that time the Prophet of the time received a revelation to the following effect: "Tell Our guest that We were his host last night and wanted to provide him with sumptuous food, but found that there was no food better than hunger."

15) Solitude

There are two kinds of solitude also: general and particular. General solitude means not to mix with other people especially the ignorant masses and to meet them only as and when absolutely necessary. The Qur'an says:

And forsake those who rake their religion for a pastime and a jest, and whom the life of the world beguiles. (***Surah al-An'am, 6:70***)

Particular solitude means to keep away from all men. Such kind of seclusion is commendable at the time of performing all acts of worship, but is considered essential by the gnostics at the time of pronouncing certain liturgies. In this connection the following points must be observed:

For the spiritual traveler it is necessary to keep himself away from crowds and disturbing noises. The place where he performs acts of worship must be clean and lawful. Even the walls and the ceilings of his room must be tidy. His room should be a small one preferably accommodating only one person. A small room having no furniture and no decorating material is helpful in keeping the thoughts concentrated.

A man sought Salman Farsi's permission to build a house for him. Till then Salman had not built a house for himself. Still he refused to give the permission. That man said: "I know why you do not give permission." "Say why", said Salman. He said: "You want me to build you a house only so long and so wide that it may accommodate you only." "Yes, that's the thing. You are right", said Salman. Subsequently that man built for Salman, with his permission, a house of that small size.

16) Vigil

It means that the spiritual traveler must make it a habit to wake up before dawn as early as he tolerably can. Denouncing the sleeping at dawn and praising the keeping awake at that time Allah says:

They used to sleep only a little while at night and at dawn used to seek forgiveness. (***Surah al-Dhariyat, 51:18***)

17) Continued Cleanliness

It means to be always ritually pure and to adhere to the performance of major ablution on Fridays and on all other occasions on which it has been recommended.

18) Practicing modesty and humility to the utmost degree

It includes weeping and wailing also.

19) Abstaining from Tasty Food

The spiritual traveler should abstain from tasty dishes and should be content with a little food as is absolutely necessary to sustain his life and energy.

20) Secrecy

It is one of the most important points to be observed by a spiritual traveler. The great gnostics have been very particular about it and have laid great stress on it. They advised their pupils to keep their spiritual exercises as well as their visions etc. secret.

If simulation (taqiyya) is not possible, equivocation (tawriyah) must be resorted to. If necessary spiritual exercises may he abandoned for some time to maintain secrecy. "Try to fulfill your needs by maintaining

secrecy."

At the time of sufferings and calamities simulation and secrecy make the things easier. If the spiritual traveler faces any hardships, he should go forward patiently.

Seek help in patience and prayers; truly it is hard except for the humble-minded. (***Surah al-Baqarah, 2:45***)

In this verse the word salat (prayers) has been used in its literal sense, that is attention to Allah. On this basis it may be inferred from this verse that patience in the remembrance of Allah makes the hardships less burdensome and paves the way to success.

That is why it is often observed that the people who become extremely restless when their small finger is cut, do not worry in the least about losing their limbs and organs in the battlefield. According to this general rule the Imams have laid great stress on secrecy, and even have considered abandoning simulation a grave sin.

Shaykh Saduq in his book, at-Tawhid has quoted a report saying that one day Abu Basir asked Imam Ja'far Sadiq if it was possible to see Allah on the Day of Resurrection. He asked so because the Asha'irah, the followers of the Sunni Imam Abul Hasan Ash'ari believe that all people will see Allah on the Day of Resurrection and in the hereafter, which is obviously not possible without incarnation. Allah is far above what these wrong-doers say.

The Imam said: "It is possible to see Allah even in this world as you saw Him here just now." Abu Basir said: "Son of the Prophet, allow me to relate this event to others." The Imam did not allow him to do so and said: "Don't relate it to others; otherwise they will not be able to comprehend the truth and will go astray for no reason."

21) Preceptor and Spiritual Guide

The preceptors are also of two types: General and special. The general preceptor is he who is not responsible for guiding any particular individual. People seek his guidance considering him to be a learned and experienced man. The Qur'an says: Ask those who know if you do not know. Such preceptors can be helpful only in the beginning of spiritual journey.

When the spiritual traveler begins to view the manifestations of the glory of essence and attributes of Allah, he no longer needs to have a general preceptor. The special preceptor is he about whom a divine ordinance exists to the effect that he has been assigned the job of guidance. This position is held only by the Holy Prophet and his rightful successors.

Their guidance and company are essential and indispensable not only at every stage of spiritual journey, but even after the spiritual traveler has reached his destination. The nature of this company is esoteric

not physical for the real nature of the Imam is that station of his luminosity, the authority of which extends to everyone and everything in the world. Although Imams body is also superior to the body of everyone else, yet the source of his authority over the universe is not his body.

To explain this point it may be mentioned that whatever happens in this world, its source is the names and attributes of Allah, and the same Divine names and attributes are the essence of the Imam also. That is why the Imams have said: "Allah is known through us and he is worshipped through us."

Therefore, it may rightly be said that whatever stages the spiritual traveler traverses, he covers them in the light of the Imam, and every position to which he advances, that position is controlled by the Imam. Throughout his journey the spiritual traveler enjoys the company of the Imam and remains associated with him. Even after reaching his destination, he needs the company of the Imam, for it is the Imam who teaches him the rules that are to be observed in the World of Divinity.

Therefore, Imam's company is essential at every stage of spiritual journey. In this connection there are many subtle points which are not easy to be explained. They may be discovered by the spiritual traveler through his own taste.

Once Muhyuddin Ibn 'Arabi went to a spiritual guide and complained to him that injustice was growing and the sins were rampant. The spiritual guide advised him to pay attention to Allah. A few days later he went to another spiritual guide and made the same complaint. That spiritual guide told him to pay attention to himself. Ibn 'Arabi was very much upset and began to weep. He asked the spiritual guide why the two answers were so different from each other. The spiritual guide said: "Oh dear! the answer is one and the same. He drew your attention to the companion and I to the path."

I have related this story to show that there is no difference between making a journey to Allah on the one hand and arriving at the station of the Imam while passing through the stages of the Divine names and attributes on the other. These two things are not only closer to each other but are almost identical. At this stage there is no conception of duality. There is nothing but the light of the glory of one Single Being, which is described in different words. Sometimes it is expressed as the Divine names and attributes and sometimes as the essence of the Imam or his luminosity.

To know whether a general preceptor is fit to be so, it is necessary to watch him closely and have contact with him for a considerable time. Such super-natural things as to know what others think, to walk on fire or water, to narrate the past events or to foretell the future, are not a sign of anybody's being a favorite of Allah.

The performance of such things becomes possible at the beginning of spiritual vision, but the stage of proximity to Allah is far away from this stage. No one can be a preceptor in the true sense unless and until he receives the light of the glory of Divine essence. To receive the light of the manifestations of Divine names and attributes is not enough.

The spiritual traveler is said to be receiving the light of the manifestations of the Divine attributes when he feels that his knowledge, power and life are really the knowledge, power and life of Allah. At this stage when the spiritual traveler hears something, he feels that Allah has heard it and when he sees something, he feels that Allah has seen it. He may feel that Allah alone is the Knower, and the knowledge of every existing being is the knowledge of Allah Himself.

The spiritual traveler is said to be receiving the light of the glory of the Divine names when he views the Divine attributes in himself. For example he feels that Allah is the only Knower and his knowledge is also that of Allah. Or he feels that the only living Being is Allah and that he himself is not living, but his life is actually that of Allah.

In other words he intuitively feels that "there is no knowing, living or powerful being except Allah." If a spiritual traveler receives the light of the manifestations of one or two Divine names, it is not necessary that he should receive the light of the manifestations of other Divine names also.

The spiritual traveler receives the light of the glory of Divine essence only when he forgets himself totally and can find no trace of himself or his ego. "There is none but Allah." Such a person can never go astray, nor can be seduced by Satan. Satan does not lose hope of alluring a spiritual traveler until he obliterates his very existence.

But when he enters the sanctuary of the world of divinity after annihilating his personality and ego, Satan loses all hope of seducing him. A general preceptor must be such as to have reached this stage. Otherwise it is not safe for a devotee to submit himself to any Tom, Dick or Harry.

It is not advisable for a spiritual traveler to go at random to any shop for getting what he requires or to submit himself to any pretender. He should make complete investigations about the proposed preceptor and when it is not possible to do so, he should put trust in Allah, compare the proposed preceptor's teachings with those of the Holy Prophet and the Imams, and act only according to what conforms to the latter, If he does so, he will be safe from the wiles of Satan. The Qur'an says:

Satan has no power over those who believe and put trust in their Lord. His power is only over those who make a friend of him and those who ascribe partners to Allah. (***Surah an-Nahl, 16:99***)

22) Daily Verbal Recitation of Liturgies

The amount and the method of the recitation of the verbal liturgies depend on what the preceptor advises. The liturgies are just like a medicine which may suit some and may not suit others. Sometimes it so happens that a spiritual traveler begins more than one liturgies of his own opinion, while one liturgy pulls him towards plurality and another towards unity.

Their mutual clash nullifies the effect of both and they become totally ineffective. It may be mentioned that the permission of the preceptor is necessary only for those liturgies which everybody is not allowed

to recite. There is no objection to the reciting of those liturgies for which general permission already exists.

The gnostics do not attach any importance to the mere repetition of liturgies without paying attention to their meaning which is far more important. Mere verbal repetition is of no use.

23, 24 & 25) Remembrance, Recollection, Evil thoughts

These three stages are of great importance for the purpose of achieving the objective. Many people who fail to reach their destination either stop at one of these stages or go astray while on their way to them. The dangers which these stages imply are idol-worship, star-worship, fire-worship and occasionally heresy, Pharaonism, claim of incarnation and identification with God, denial of being obligated to abide by religious injunctions and regarding everything lawful. We will discuss briefly all these dangers. Let us first talk about incarnation and identification with God, which is the greatest danger and is caused by devilish insinuation when the mind is not free from evil thoughts.

As the spiritual traveler is not out of the valley of ostentation, he may be led in the wake of the manifestation of Divine names or attributes to believe (God forbid) that Allah has dwelt in him. That is what is meant by incarnation, which amounts to infidelity and polytheism, while the belief in the unity of Allah nullifies every concept of pluralism, and considers every existence in comparison to the existence of Allah a mere fantasy and everything existing a mere shadow. When the spiritual traveler attains to this stage, he annihilates his existence and does not perceive anything existing except Allah.

Eradication of Devilish Insinuations

The spiritual traveler must have full control over himself so that no thought might enter his mind inadvertently and no action might be taken by him unintentionally. It is not very easy to secure the required degree of self control and that is why it is said that the eradication of insinuations is the best means of purifying the soul.

When the spiritual traveler attains to this stage he in the beginning finds himself overwhelmed by evil thoughts and devilish insinuations. Strange ideas come to his mind. He often thinks of old events which have already been forgotten and visualizes imaginary events which are not possible ever to materialize.

On this occasion the spiritual traveler must remain steadfast and firm, and should eradicate every noxious thought by means of remembering Allah.

Whenever any evil thought may come to his mind, he should concentrate his attention on one of the names of Allah and should continue to do so till that thought has vanished. The best method of eradicating the evil thoughts is to concentrate on the Divine names. The Qur'an says:

Whenever those who practice piety are troubled by an evil thought from Satan, they remember

Allah and then they forthwith see the light (***Surah al-A'raf, 7:201***)

However, the treatise ascribed to the late Bahrul 'Ulum, does not allow this method to be adopted. This treatise lays stress on the necessity of banishing evil thoughts before beginning the acts of remembering Allah and declares it to be extremely dangerous to use these acts for the eradication of evil thoughts and insinuations. We give below a summary of the arguments advanced by the treatise and propose to contradict them subsequently.

This treatise says that: Many preceptors ask the devotees to do away with insinuations by means of remembering Allah. Obviously here remembering means mental concentration, not verbal recitation of any liturgy.

But this method is very dangerous, for remembering Allah, in fact, amounts to beholding the 'Real Beloved' and to fix eyes on His beauty, which is not permissible unless eyes are shut to all others, for the sense of the dignity of the Beloved does not allow the eye that sees him to see anyone or anything else. It will be a mockery to remove eye from the Beloved again and again to see something, and a person who does that, is likely to receive a shocking blow. The Qur'an says:

He who ignores the remembrances of the Beneficent, We assign to him a devil who becomes his comrade. (***Surah az-Zukhruf, 43:36***)

Anyhow, there is one form of remembering Allah that is allowed for the purpose of getting rid of evil thoughts. According to this form the devotee should not have the beauty of the Beloved in mind. His purpose should be only to get rid of Satan, just like the man who calls his beloved only to dismay his rival and drive him away.

Thus if the devotee comes across any evil thought from which he finds it difficult to escape, he should engage himself in remembering Allah in order to get rid of that evil thought. Anyhow, the experienced gnostics ask the beginners to clear away the evil thoughts first and then to undertake the remembrance of Allah.

For this purpose they ask him to fix his eyes without blinking for some time on something like a piece of stone or wood and concentrate his attention on it. It would be better if this process was continued for 40 days. Meanwhile 'A'uzu billah'; 'Astaghfirullah' and 'Ya Fa'al' should continually be chanted, especially after morning and evening prayers. After the completion of 40 days' period the devotee for some time should concentrate on his heart and should not allow any other thought to enter his mind.

If any evil thought came to his mind, he should chant the words, 'Allah' and 'La mawjuda illallah; and continue to chant them till he feels somewhat enraptured. While pursuing this course he should chant a great deal 'Astaghfirullah,, 'Ya Fa'alu' and 'Ya Basitu' also. When he has attained to this stage, the devotee is allowed to resort to mental remembrance, if he wants so, in order to eradicate all evil thoughts once for all, for once the devotee has reached the stage of remembrance, recollection and

contemplation, the evil thoughts and the devilish insinuations disappear automatically. This was the summary of the discourse, ascribed to Bahrul ‘Ulum in the above-mentioned treatise.

Anyhow, it must be understood that this method of the eradication of evil thoughts has been derived from the method followed by the Naqshbandi, a sufi order found at some places in Turkey etc. This order has come to be known so after the name of its grand preceptor, Khwaja Bahauddin Naqshbandi.

But this is not a method approved by Akhund Mulla Husayn Quli Hamadani. Remembrance and recollection of Allah are an integral part of the method followed by him and his pupils also, but they lay greater emphasis on meditation and contemplation. We have already described meditation briefly and now propose to mention some details of its various stages.

First stage: The first stage of meditation is to abstain from everything unlawful and to perform everything obligatory. Any negligence or lethargy in this respect is not permissible.

Second stage: The devotee should intensify his meditation and try to do all that he does purely for the sake of gaining good pleasure of Allah. He should carefully refrain from all that is called pastime and fun. Once this habit has become firmly established, it will no longer be necessary for him to exert himself in this regard.

Third stage: He should believe and acknowledge that Allah is Omniscient and Omnipresent and that Allah who supervises all His creation is looking at him. This meditation should be observed at all times and in all circumstances.

Fourth stage: It is a higher degree of the third stage. At this point the devotee himself perceives that Allah is Omniscient and Omnipresent. He sees the manifestation of the Divine beauty. The Holy Prophet hinted at the third and the fourth stages of meditation when he said to his great companion Abu Dharr Ghifari: "Worship Allah as if you were looking at Him, for if you do not see Him, He sees you."

This tradition indicates that the degree that Allah sees the worshipper is inferior to that of the worshipper's seeing Allah. When the devotee attains to this stage, he should get rid of the evil thoughts by means of some acts of worship. The Islamic law does not allow concentration of thought on any piece of wood or stone.

Suppose the devotee died while concentrating on a piece of wood or stone, what would be his answer to Allah? It is commendable from religious point of view to get rid of evil thoughts by the weapon of remembering and recollecting Allah, which is itself is an act of worship. The best and the shortest way of getting rid of evil thoughts is to concentrate on one's self. This method is allowed and approved by Islam. The Qur'an says:

Believers, you have to take care of your own self. He who errs can do you no harm if you are rightly guided. (***Surah al-Ma'idah, 5:105***)

Concentration of thoughts on self is the method that was prescribed by Akhund Mulla Husayn Quli and has always been adopted by his pupils, who maintain that knowledge of self invariably leads to knowledge of Allah.

The chain of the teachers of gnosis goes back to Imam Ali. The number of the sufi orders which have taken part in imparting the mystic knowledge is more than 100, but the main orders are not more than 25. All these orders go back to Imam Ali. Almost all of them belong to the Sunni denomination.

Only two or three of them are Shi'ite. Some of these orders are traced back through Ma'ruf Karkhi to Imam Ali Reza. But we belong to none of these orders and follow the directions of the late Akhund, who had nothing to do with these orders.

More than a hundred years ago there lived in Shustar a leading scholar and Qazi (judge) named Agha Sayyid Ali Shushtari. Like other eminent scholars his occupation was teaching and administration of justice. Many people called on him to take counsel. One day all of a sudden somebody knocked at his door.

When Agha Sayyid Ali opened it he saw a weaver standing there. On inquiry as to what he wanted, he said: "The judgment given by you regarding the ownership of that particular property on the basis of the evidence produced before you was not correct. Actually that property belongs to an orphan little child and its deed is buried at such and such place. The course that is being followed by you is also wrong."

Ayatulllah Shushtari said: "Do you mean to say that my judgment was wrong?" The weaver said: "What I have told you is the fact." After saying that the weaver went away. The Ayatullah began to think over who that man was and what he said. On further inquiry it was found that the said deed was actually buried at the place mentioned by the weaver, and that the witnesses produced were liars.

The Ayatullah was alarmed, and said to himself: "My other judgments also might have been wrong." He was frightened. Next night the weaver again knocked at the door and said: 'The course being followed by you is not proper.' The same thing happened the third night. The weaver said: 'Do not waste time. Collect all your domestic effects and sell them out, and then set out for Najaf. Do as I have told you, and after six months wait for me in the Wadi'us Salam of Najaf. The late Shushtari left for Najaf. As soon as he arrived there he saw that the weaver in the Wadi’us Salam at sunrise, as if he had emerged suddenly from the ground.

He gave some instructions and then disappeared once again. The late Shushtari entered Najaf and began to act according to the weavers instructions. At last he reached a position too high to be described.

The late Sayyid Ali Shushtari held Shaykh Murtaza Ansari in great respect and attended his lectures on theology and jurisprudence. Shaykh Murtaza Ansari also attended Sayyid Ali's lectures on moral law once a week. Following Shaykh Murtaza Ansari's death, the late Sayyid Ali assumed his teaching

functions and began to give lectures from where Shaykh Murtaza Ansari had suspended them. But he did not live long and died after six months only.

Anyhow, during this short period Sayyid Ali trained and guided Mulla Husayn Quli, one of Shaykh Murtaza Ansari's distinguished pupils. Mulla Husayn Quli already had some contact with Agha Sayyid Ali and from time to time used to ask him questions regarding moral and spiritual matters. When Sayyid Ali succeeded Shaykh Murtaza Ansari, he sent a message to Mulla Husayn Quli, on which he wrote:

'The course that you are following presently is faulty. Try to attain to higher positions.' At last Agha Sayyid Ali succeeded in persuading Mulla Husayn Quli to follow his method. Consequently before long Mulla Husayn Quli became a wonder of his time in morals, spiritual knowledge and self-mortification. Mulla Husayn Quli also trained some very distinguished and competent pupils, each of whom became a shining star on the sky of gnosis. His most prominent pupils included Haji Mirza Jawad Agha Malaki, Agha Sayyid Ahmad Karbalai Tehrani, Agha Sayyid Muhammad Sa'id Habbubi and Haji Shaykh Muhammad Bahari.

My preceptor was the late Haji Mirza Ali Agha Qazi who was a pupil of Agha Sayyid Ahmad Karbalai. This is the chain of my preceptors which goes back to the above mentioned weaver through the late Shushtari. Anyhow, it is not known who that weaver was and from where he acquired his gnostic knowledge.

My preceptor Agha Qazi followed the method of knowing self like Akhund Mulla Husayn Quli and for the eradication of evil thoughts and devilish insinuations he called for paying attention to self first. He suggested that for this purpose the spiritual traveler should fix a time of day or night and should concentrate his attention on self for half an hour or a little more.

This daily practice will gradually invigorate his heart and eradicate the evil thoughts. At the same time he will gradually acquire the knowledge of his soul and, Allah willing, will achieve his objective. Most of those who succeed in clearing their mind from evil thoughts and ultimately receive the light of gnostic knowledge, achieve this objective in either of the following two ways: either while reading the Qur'an, their mind is suddenly diverted to the reader and it is revealed to them that the reader was really Allah; or the veils are lifted through the intercession of Imam Abu Abdillah (Imam Husayn – the grand son of the Holy Prophet of Islam), who is especially concerned with the lifting of veils and removing the barriers obstructing the way of the devotees.

There are two things which are especially helpful in receiving the light of gnostic knowledge: (i) Covering all the stages of meditation; and (ii) Concentrating attention on self. If the devotee paid full attention to secure these two things, he would gradually perceive that despite its variety the whole universe was being nurtured from one source, that is the source of all that happens in the world. Whatever perfection, excellence or beauty anything in the world possesses, it is a gift from that source. Everything has received a share of existence, beauty and grandeur according to its capacity. The generosity of the

Absolute Munificent is for all, but everything existing gets its share according to its capacity and nature.

Anyway, if the spiritual traveler adheres to complete meditation and attention to self, four worlds will gradually be revealed to him:

First World – Unity of Actions: In the beginning the spiritual traveler will feel that he himself is the source of all that his tongue says, his ears hear and his hands, feet and other limbs do. He will think that he does whatever he likes.

Later he will feel that he himself is the source of all that happens in the world. At the next stage he will feel that his existence is closely connected with Allah and through this relationship the favors and bounties of Allah, reach the creation. Ultimately he will perceive that Allah alone is the source of all actions and occurrences.

Second World – Unity of Attributes: This world emerges after the first world. At this stage when the spiritual traveler hears or sees anything, he feels that Allah is the source of his hearing and seeing. Later he perceives that Allah is the source of all knowledge, power, life, hearing and sight found anywhere and in any form.

Third World – Unity of Names: This world emerges after the second world. At this stage the devotee feels that the Divine attributes are not in any way separate from the Divine essence. When he sees that Allah is the Knower, he feels that his being knower is also Allah's being Knower. Similarly he thinks that his having power, his sight and his hearing are Allah's having power, His sight and His hearing, for he is sure that on principle there is only One Being in the whole universe who is having power and who sees and hears. It is His power and His sight and His hearing that are reflected and indicated by everything existing according to its capacity.

Fourth World – Unity of Being: This world is higher than the third world. It is revealed to the spiritual traveler in consequence to the revelation of the glory of Divine Essence. He at this stage perceives that there is only One Being who is the source of all actions and attributes. At this stage his attention remains concentrated on the One Being and is not drawn to His names and attributes.

He attains to this stage only when he has annihilated his transient existence completely and has passed away in Allah. It would be difficult and far from truth even to call this stage the station of Divine Essence or Divine Unity, for the Reality is far above any name that is uttered or written.

No name can be given to the Divine Essence and no station of it can be imagined. Allah is even above the question of not being imagined for even negative expressions would mean that He has some limits whereas He is above all limitations. When the spiritual traveler attains to this stage, he will have annihilated his self and ego completely. He will recognize neither himself nor anyone else, He will recognize Allah alone.

While passing through each of these worlds the spiritual traveler annihilates a part of his self and ultimately annihilates himself completely.

In the first world he attains to the stage of passing away, for he realizes that he is not the source of any of his doings and that everything is from Allah. Thus he annihilates the traces of his actions.

In the second world he as the result of attributive manifestation perceives that knowledge, power and all such qualities exclusively belong to Allah. Thus he effaces the signs of his own attributes.

In the third world the spiritual traveler receives the manifestation of Divine names and perceives that Allah alone is the knower, the doer etc. Thus he effaces the signs of his names and designations also.

In the fourth world he views the manifestation of the glory of Divine Essence. As a result he entirely loses his entity and feels that there exists nothing but Allah.

The gnostics call the revelation of the glory of Divine Essence at this stage the 'griffin', which cannot be hunted. They use this word for that Absolute Being and Mere Existence which is also described as the 'Hidden Treasure' and the Being having no name nor any description.

In his poems Hafiz Shirazi has described this point in an attractive style using beautiful metaphors. At one place he says:

'An old seer and sage told me the following story, which I shall never forget: One day a pious man was going somewhere. On his way he saw a drunkard[2] sitting, who said: 'Devotee, if you have some bait to offer, lay down your trap here. The devotee said:

'I have a trap but I want to catch a 'griffin'. The drunkard said:

'You can catch it only if you know where it is to be found. But its nest is not known.' 'That's right', said the devotee, 'but to be disappointed is a worse calamity.' Just see how this man did not lose heart. It is possible that the lonely man is led to the Peerless Being by a Divinely appointed guide.

Obviously it is not possible to catch the griffin when its nest is not known. But Allah can bestow His favor on the lovers of His everlasting beauty and can lead them to the world of Divine unity and passing away from self.

1. The rightful successors of the Holy Prophet are those who have complete knowledge of Islam and who have been designated to execute his mission after him. According to a tradition accepted both by the Shi'ah and the Sunnis the Holy Prophet said: "There will be 12 Caliphs/amirs after me." (al-Bukhari, al-Sahih, al-Tirmizi, Vol. II; Abu Dawud, al-Sunan, Vol. II, Ahmad ibn Hambal, al-Musnad, vol. V, al-Hakim, al-Mubtadrak, vol II)
2. We have already explained this term.

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