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## **Exercise and Self-Discipline:**

Then what is certainly required is exercise (*riyadah*), and it is directed towards three ends – the first is to clear the path of all but the Real; the second is to subjugate the 'commanding self' (*al-nafs al-'ammarah*) to the 'contented self' (*al-nafs al-mutma'innah*); the third is to render the heart subtle for awareness.

After having commenced the journey at the stage of *iradah*, the next stage is that of exercise and preparedness. This preparedness is termed *riyadah*. Nowadays this term is generally misunderstood and it is taken to mean self–mortification. In some religions the principle of mortifying the self is hallowed. Perhaps the best examples of this are to be seen in the Yogis of India. In the terminology of Ibn Sina, however, the word is not used in this sense.

The original meaning of this Arabic word is 'to exercise', or 'to break in a colt.' Thereafter the word was used for physical exercise, a sense which the word still bears today. The 'urafa' borrowed this word, and in their terminology it is used to mean exercising the soul and preparing it for the illumination of the light of knowledge (ma'rifah). It is in this sense that the word is used in the passage above.

Ibn Sina then declares this exercising and preparing of the soul to be directed towards three aims. The first of these is related to external matters and entails the removal of distractive occupations and the causes of negligence (*ghaflah*). The second is related to the balance of the inner forces and the removal of agitations from the soul, which he has described as the submission of the 'commanding self' to the 'contented self'. The third relates to qualitative changes in the soul, which he calls 'rending subtle of the heart'.

And the first [of the three aims of *riyadah*] is aided by true *zuhd* (i.e. *zuhd* removes the impediments and the hindering preoccupations, which cause neglect, from the path). The second is aided by several things: worship infused with (presence of heart, concentration and) reflection; melody that serves to strengthen the self through which the accompanying words have an effect on the heart (such as melodious reciting of the Quran, supplications and litanies, and the singing of mystic poetry); the instructive speech of a pure, eloquent speaker who speaks gently and effectively in the manner of a guide.

As for the third goal, it is aided by subtle thoughts (contemplating subtle and delicate ideas and meanings which lead to spiritual refinement) and a chaste love (a love that is spiritual and not physical and sensual) which is directed by the virtues of the beloved and not ruled over by sensuality.

Then, when *iradah* and *riyadah* reach a certain degree, flashes (*khalasat*) of the dawning light of the Real will descend upon him, delightful as they are, they are momentary like flashes of lightning appearing and instantly vanishing. These they call 'moments' (*awqat*), and these flashes increase in frequency with greater diligence in *riyadah*.

As he advances deeper into this, they descend upon him even when he is not exercising. Now often he will glance at something and his glance be deflected from it towards the Holy, bringing to his attention some aspect of the Divine, and a state of trance (*ghashyah*) descends upon him, in which, as if, he sees God in everything.

Perhaps it is at this stage that his states overwhelm him, disturbing his equanimity, a change that would be noticed by anyone near him.

Then, he reaches a point in his exercises when his 'moments' change into stable tranquility, the brief snatches become familiar and the flashes become a prolonged blaze. Then he achieves an enduring gnostic state which permanently accompanies him from which he derives an ecstatic delight. And when it departs him he becomes sad and bewildered.

And perhaps it is at this stage the state in which he is in will make itself apparent (to others); but as he progresses deeper into this gnosis, its appearance will be less detectable in him and he will be absent when (appearing to be) present, and travelling when (appearing to be) still.

This passage calls to mind a sentence spoken by 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (A) to his disciple Kumayl ibn Ziyad about the 'friends of God' (*awliya' al-Haqq*), who exist in every age:

Knowledge has led them to the reality of insight, and they are in contact with the spirit of certainty. They find easy what is regarded as rough by those who live in comfort and luxury. They are intimate with what terrifies the ignorant. They are in the company of people with their bodies, yet their souls are lodged in the highest realm. (*Nahj al-balaghah*, Hikam, No. 147).

Until this stage, perhaps, this state of gnosis will occur to him only occasionally. Thereafter it will gradually become such that it is available to him whenever he wants.

Thereafter, he advances further than even this stage until his affair no longer depends on his own wish. Whenever he observes a thing he sees other than it (i.e God), even if his observation is not for the sake of reflection. So, the opportunity presents itself to ascend from the plane of false appearances to the plane of Truth. He becomes stabilized upon it, while (in the world) he is surrounded by the heedless.

Up until this point we have been dealing with the stage of exercise, self-discipline, struggle and the

spiritual itinerary. Now the 'arif has reached his goal.

When he crosses from the stage of *riyadah* to that of attainment, his inward becomes like a clear mirror facing in the direction of the Real. Sublime delights shower upon him, and he rejoices at his self for what is there of the Real. Now (like one viewing an image in a mirror, who looks either at the image or at the mirror reflecting the image) he is perplexed by two views: the view of the Real and the view of his own self.

Then, he becomes oblivious to his own self and views only the Holy. And if he notices his self it is for the reason of its being the viewer, not for the sake of its own beauty (like one who when looking at an image in a mirror, views the image only; although he does not pay attention to the mirror itself, nevertheless the mirror is seen while viewing the image, though the mirror is not viewed for its own beauty). It is at this point that the wayfarer attains union (and his journey from *khalq* to Hagq becomes complete).

Here ends our summary of the ninth section of Ibn Sina's Isharat and his account of the journey from creation (*khalq*) to God (*Haqq*). A point that must be added is that the *'urafa'* believe in four journeys: sayr min al-khalq ila al-Haqq, sayr bi al-Haqq a al-Haqq, sayr min al-Haqq ila al-khalq bi al-Haqq, sayr fi al-khalq bi al-Haqq (the journey from creation to God; the journey with God in God; the journey with God from God to creation; and finally, the journey in creation with God).

The first journey is from creatures to the Creator. The second is in the Creator; it means that in the course of it the 'arif becomes acquainted with His Qualities and Names and himself becomes adorned with the same. In the third journey, he returns towards the creation, without becoming separated from God, in order to guide the people. The fourth journey is amongst the people while still united with God. In this journey the 'arif is with and amongst the people and seeks to guide their affairs so as to lead them towards God.

The summary from Ibn Sina's *al-'Isharat* given above is related to the first of these journeys. He also gives a brief account of the second journey, but it is not necessary for our purposes to include it. Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, in his commentary on *al-'Isharat*, says that Ibn Sina has explained the first journey of the *'arif* in nine stages. Three stages are related to the beginning of the journey, three to the journey from its beginning to its end, and three are related to the arrival or the union. Some reflection on Ibn Sina's account makes the point clear.

By 'riyadah' which is translated as 'exercise', Ibn Sina means the exercises in self-discipline that the 'arif undergoes. There are many of these, and the 'arif must follow a chain of stations in these exercises too. Here Ibn Sina is brief in the extreme, yet the 'urafa' have discussed this matter in detail, and one may seek these details in their works.

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