

Ihsan – the Gnostic Knowledge of Mankind

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The Arabic word ihsan, which begins the title of this talk, comes from the verb ahsana which means "to act well, to do something expertly, to master something", but although these meanings are indeed included in it, the word as it is used here comes from a well-known saying of the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, in which he was asked to define the deen or life-practice he was sent to convey to mankind.

He divided it into three parts: firstly Islam which he defined in terms of the five pillars, the actions every Muslim must perform; secondly Iman or faith which he defined in terms of the things every Muslim must believe; and thirdly Ihsan which he defined by saying, "It is to worship Allah as if you could see Him, for though you may not see Him, He certainly sees you." In other words Ihsan involves the bringing together of the other two aspects of the deen by a human being who is in a state of intense awareness of the presence of his Lord. Many great Sufis have said that this is sufism. Our master, Shaykh Abdalqadir as-Sufi, says as part of his definition of sufism, and therefore Ihsan, at the beginning of his book The Hundred Steps:

Sufism is the science of the journey to the Kingdom. It is taking the ancient way, the primordial path of direct experience of the Real.

The sufi is universal. He has reduced and then eliminated the marks of selfhood to allow a clear view of the cosmic reality. He has rolled up the cosmos in its turn and obliterated it. He has gone beyond. The sufi has said "Allah" – until he has understood.

Something of the meaning of these words will unfold, Allah willing, during the course of this talk.

Shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Habib, the first shaykh of Shaykh Abdalqadir, says with reference to Ihsan in the long supplication which forms part of his wird, one of the central practices of the path we follow:

We ask for an Ihsan which will drive us into the presence of the unseen worlds and which will purify us from every kind of forgetfulness and defect.

This brings the matter right back to home to us sitting here in this zawiyya which is a place dedicated to making Ihsan a reality in the lives of those who use it.

What is being talked about is not some theoretical construct but rather what is possible for us as human beings; what direction we are going to take in our own lives. The shaykh speaks here about the presence of unseen worlds and he also speaks about forgetfulness and defects, and this brings us immediately face to face with two very different paths we might follow in our lives. The word for human being in Arabic is insan. One meaning of this word is the pupil of the

eye; another possibility is that it comes from the word which means to forget. So the word itself contains the two directions which a human being can take. One possibility is that we become completely engrossed in this world, forgetting that it is merely part of a much longer journey which started before we were

born and will continue beyond our death. The other possibility open to us is that, like the pupil of the eye, we become a lens, except that whereas the pupil stands as the interface between the outer world of forms and the inner world of sense perception, the human being as a whole stands potentially as the conscious interface between this material world and the unseen world of spiritual realities.

So how does it come about that we hold this exalted position in the scheme of things? There are three sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, which together make up a complete description of the true nature of existence and of our place as human beings in it and which take us to the very root of our humanness and put us beyond all the evolutionary or historical definitions with which we have been so profoundly indoctrinated.

The first is: "Allah was and there was nothing with Him - and He is as He was."

The second is Allah's words on the tongue of His Messenger: "I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known. So I created the creation in order to be known."

And the third is Allah's words conveyed by the Prophet: "The whole universe cannot contain Me but the heart of My believing servant contains Me."

"Allah was and there was nothing with Him" The current climate of opinion has turned the existence of God into a matter of philosophical speculation with the result that for most people, including many who consider themselves believers, the existence of God has been turned into a speculative hypothesis. How far we have come from the Truth! The existence of Allah is the most absolute certainty. Not, it is true, the distant, capricious, potentate God of misinterpreted scripture but Reality itself, that Oneness on Whom everything is totally and

continually dependant for its being, but Who is Himself beyond need of anything - Oneness, not in the arithmetical sense of being the first of two or three but rather that absolute singularity the physicists talk of which does not permit the independent existence of anything else along side it. Everything else comes into existence and goes out of it again, begins and ends, is born and dies. Allah is before and after. There is no beginning to His firstness, no end to His lastness. Nothing is like Him or can be compared with Him nor is it possible to have any conception of what He is like.

"And He is as He was." If this is the case how come we are sitting here now

living on this planet which is part of the solar system in one of countless galaxies in a universe which seems to go on for ever? The answer to this question is that the absolute, majestic and overwhelming transcendence of the first tradition is conditioned by the second: "I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known. So I created the creation in order to be known." It was the desire for self-knowledge expressed in the depths of the Essence of the Divine Being that caused the process of creation and led to the unfolding of the many layers of existence and all the forms contained in them including ourselves and the universe we inhabit. And there is another tradition about the actual moment of creation which says that when Allah decreed that the creation should come into existence out of non-existence He grasped a handful of His light and said to it, "Be Muhammad!" And then from that light He created everything else in existence.

Now we have to be careful when we hear this that we do not dismiss it by considering it to be merely a figure of speech or a poetic metaphor. It is literally what happened. Shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Habib says in his Diwan at the beginning of the qasida entitled The Qualities of Muhammad:

Muhammad is the fountain-head of lights and darkness and  
the source of their emergence from the presence of before-time.  
So his light was the first of lights when He determined  
the manifestation of His Names in the first world.

From him all things were clothed in their origination in being,  
and their support comes from him without any interruption.

And this, of course, as it applies to the whole of existence also applies to our own universe and everything in it including our own emergence as human beings on the earth. I must repeat: be careful you do not take this as metaphor; it is a literal description of how things have come into existence.

Taking the present state of the expanding universe and working backwards from it, cosmologists, both astronomers and quantum physicists, have come up with a more or less consistent picture of the first moments of the universe. They say that the universe developed from a singularity, an infinitely small, infinitely dense point emerging out of nothingness. It was a fireball, they say, and by that they mean, of course, not fire as we know it today, but rather a ball of pure energy. Its rate of expansion was incredibly fast as we understand time now but because in those early moments space and time were inextricably bound up together we can have no real idea of what the conditions were like within it. The important point for us in the present context is that the whole event in these very early stages can only be described as being made up of undifferentiated light.

So what has, through the aeons of expansion, turned into innumerable galaxies made up of stars and planets, a few of which are visible to us when we look up

into the breathtaking beauty of the sky at night, was all present in a latent form in this literally fistful sized ball of light. Because of the inconceivable degree of chance necessary to bring about the conditions which made our emergence as sentient human beings on this planet a possibility, the scientists have developed a theory they call the anthropic principle. They say that if we make the simple assumption that human beings exist, all the principle qualities of the universe, all the natural laws, even all the physical constants, can be derived from this assumption. In other words what they are saying is that the whole universe exists only in order to give human beings somewhere to live, so that they, in turn, will be able to describe the universe. How little they understand!

In the 13th Century Shaykh Muhyi'd-din ibn al-'Arabi, whose family came from Murcia and who lived down the road in Seville, enunciated clearly what was in any case common knowledge among the Muslims: "In the universe it was man who was intended." This was, of course, because they knew that the first impulse of creation took the form of the Muhammadan Light: in other words they understood that the whole purpose of existence was the coming into being of the perfect human form which became physically manifest in the succession of incorruptible Messengers and Prophets of Allah, may the peace of Allah be upon all of them, who reached their apogee and fulfillment with the advent of the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. That was the mirror in which the "Hidden Treasure" became known by revealing Himself to Himself in all His Majesty and Beauty.

Now we are approaching the subject matter of this talk: the gnostic knowledge of mankind; what Shaykh Abdalqadir referred to as the journey to the King. Knowledge of our universe forms part of it, but only a very small part. Shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Habib says in his Great Ode about the person making this journey:

He would see the planets and the secrets of their constellations  
and the meaning of their tremendously rapid movement.

But this is entirely insignificant when compared with scale of the journey as a whole. He also says:

The veil of the tablet of forms would be lifted from his secret  
and so the hidden sciences would emerge uncovered.  
- Had the trees been the pens to write it and their ink  
all of the surrounding seas, they would have dried up -

And he would visit the domain which is peopled by  
the limitless array of innumerable angels,

And further:

He would freely roam around the Throne and the Footstool  
which make the heavenly bodies appear like a small ring.

With reference to this last statement the great early gnostic Abu Yazid al-Bistami said when describing his own path to knowledge that as he rose through the seven heavens, the size of each of them in comparison with the succeeding one was like that of a ring thrown into a desert. Then he reached the Throne of Allah, which is the greatest of all created forms and he said of it that it disappeared into a corner of his heart. Are you now beginning to grasp what an extraordinary thing a human being is; what our possibilities really are? And the most extraordinary thing is that all this is just the preliminary stage. Shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Habib now goes on to say:

And, in his quest to purify the secret of his secret from every delay,  
he finally stops at the door to the pure Presence.  
This station of the People in the journey of their spirits  
is the station of concealment and bewilderment.

After it comes knowledge - which may not be disseminated  
except by the one who in vision has received a clear authority.

So the gnostic knowledge we are talking about only begins after this vast inner  
outer journey has been brought to its completion. Finally the Shaykh says,  
echoing the final hadith about the heart of the believer:

So there are signs in the self for any who ponders it  
because all existence is contained in it.  
In purification the self expands to contain the Real.  
Now do not wonder and ask 'How?' or 'Where?' or 'What?'

Now take the words of Shaykh Abdalqadir we quoted at the beginning:

He has reduced and then eliminated the marks of selfhood to allow a clear view  
of the cosmic reality. He has rolled up the cosmos in its turn and obliterated  
it. He has gone beyond.

Now perhaps these words can be seen in their true perspective. And he is one of  
those who not only have clear authority to impart what they know but are  
obliged to convey their knowledge in order to guide to other human beings to  
the path of Allah.

He says in The Hundred Steps about this ultimate human possibility, about  
gnosis itself:

Ma'rifa - gnosis

Gnosis is the knowledge on which all other knowledge rests. All knowledges are  
suppositional yet verifiable in the realm of contingency. This knowledge is

real yet not demonstrable. Other knowledges do not, however, illuminate their knower, nor remove his anguish, nor give him judgment in every case, nor invest his presence with light and radiance.

The man of knowledge remains in needs and creational dependence. The man of gnosis does not remain in any need except dependency on his Lord who gives him what he requires from creation. Other knowledges, being constructs without foundation, are baseless. Gnosis, the central knowledge, for it is knowledge of the self, is a proof to the one who knows it and this is its glory and its supremacy over all others. By it its possessor knows the Universe, how it is set up and its underlying laws in their action, their qualities and their essences. His knowledge of the Universe is his own self-knowledge, while his knowledge of his own self is direct perception of his own original reality, his Adamic identity. Everything he has comes from Allah. He never sees anything but he sees Allah in it, before it, after it. There is only Allah in his eyes as in his heart.

Whoever has gained this has gained the red sulphur. By it he can transform the hearts of those who come to him, for his presence alone is a guidance and a reminder. He guides to Allah by Allah.

And as Shaykh Abdalqadir makes clear in his book, this ultimate knowledge is in fact the beginning of another phase of endless unveilings in which, as he says, the secrets of love flow without end. And, looking at it from a slightly different angle, Shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Habib says about it in the qasida we have been looking at:

A man would not hesitate to spend all he had  
- if he only recognized the secret of his own heart.  
If a man could but grasp the bliss of his secret  
he would shed a tear with every breath he breathed.

This has hopefully been enough to give us at least an idea of what Ihsan, the true birthright of the realized human being, entails. But, of course, for those in whose beings a chord has been struck, for those who feel a stirring in their hearts towards this highest human possibility, an idea is not enough; they will only be satisfied by the experience itself. But such ultimate fulfillment does not come cheap. The price is very high. Shaykh Abdalqadir alludes to it when he says, talking of the man who achieves the goal: "He has reduced and then eliminated the marks of selfhood".

This is referring to path of the purification of the self which forms the necessary preliminary stages of the journey to the King. But for this too there is a necessary precondition and that is the basic act of submission which every human being must make and this brings us back to the hadith of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, about Islam, Iman and Ihsan with which we

started.

Shaykh Abdalqadir says at the very beginning of The Hundred Steps:

'There is no road to the realities except on the tongue of the shari'a,' said Shaykh al-Akbar. The shari'a of Islam is the confirmation that there is no divinity but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. It is to pray five times daily the ritual prostrations. It is to fast the month of Ramadan. It is to pay the zakat tax of wealth. It is to take, if possible, the Hajj to the pure House of Allah and the plain of 'Arafat. It is based on these and confirms that the one following the shari'a has elected to live within the broad moral parameters set down in the Qur'anic commands and according to the guidance within the sunna, the life pattern of Muhammad, blessings of Allah and peace be upon him.

So adopting the divinely ordained framework of Islam, becoming a Muslim, is the necessary first step for someone who wants to set out on this path of self-knowledge; it is the gateway which must be gone through to make the journey we have been talking about possible. But as the shaykh makes clear this does not involve saddling oneself with some arbitrarily imposed set of laws but is in itself just a further recognition of what it is to be a human being. He says that by becoming a Muslim and accepting Allah's limits as conveyed to us by His final Messenger Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, we are simply recognizing that the human creature is limited, is in a body, and thus like all bodies in the physical world is subject to given laws, so the legal framework of Islam is the self-chosen pattern of life one has adopted in order to deepen knowledge until one reaches one's own source, one's spring of life, to drink the water of illumination. It implies the recognition of biological laws that function at every level of existence.

The choice facing each human being is, therefore, very straightforward: either to go in through this door and follow the path of Allah and His Messengers which leads, in any case, to the pleasure of Allah and also opens the way to the glorious possibility of that gnostic knowledge we have been talking about here this afternoon, which is both the ultimate purpose and the complete fulfillment of human existence; or to fail to go through it and go one's own way, following one's own whims and desires, and by doing that to deny oneself the possibility of any permanent satisfaction or peace of mind and condemn oneself to an eternity of burning regret for having missed the chance. We have to go one way or the other. There is no third way. The choice is ours; the choice is yours.