

## **The Feminine vs. the Masculine : A Sufi Perspective of Life**

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### **Abstract:**

*In Sufism, one may find a very interesting feminine approach according to which the feminine is the source of life. Though it is roughly distinguished from modern feminism in principle and aim, it would be very critical to see how this perspective overcomes the masculine dominated world. The overall aim of this paper is to give only a remark and an entry to this perspective without involving in its implications.*

**Keywords:** *Sufism, Quran, Feminine, Masculine, Iblis, Devil, Erotic, Allah, Human nature, Ego, Spiritual path, Buddha*

### **Introduction**

The feminine is a reality with which most of us are entirely unfamiliar. Due to the lack of differentiation between the feminine and our erotic nature, popular custom have learned to associate the feminine with the reality of Iblis, referred to as the Devil in the religious tradition. Our erotic nature, which longs to merge, transcend and become one, will naturally resist bowing down to God's creation, for the longing to merge, transcend and become one is pure in essence. In other words, there is meaning for Iblis to resist bowing down to Adam, who is created in God's image, just as it makes sense that Iblis is ordered to leave paradise as a consequence of rejecting God's command. Iblis' devotion to God is pure love, which does not and cannot bow down to anything other than its beloved, in whose reflection it witnesses the purity of its own creation – Allah! The paradox of this love, this longing to merge, transcend and become one with essence, is that which leads us fall in love with creation, which we come to worship in our longing to merge with God's essence. Love is the experience, through which we awaken to

the consciousness of God, on the one hand, and the recognition of our self, on the other. Love, the longing for oneness, is our connection to God, whereas the longing for self-knowledge is God's relationship to us. We awaken to our innate longing to merge and become one in the experience of love, which is the cause of our conception and the reason for our birth. Love is the life stream of creation and where it ceases to flow, death is the result. Love is the fire of life. Although it can burn us, we depend on fire to exist. The same applies in regard to our erotic nature, which is founded on love. We are born with the task of mastering our passion, to awaken to the truth of our erotic nature; and our taskmaster is Iblis. To remember God in creation and worship no other than Allah is our challenge as God-fearing believers. What is implied by God-fearing? It means to fear to forget Allah and worship something other than Allah's essence, the unity of being. It is this which the prophets of old wanted to make us aware, namely our forgetfulness of Allah's presence and our worship of money, power, beauty, status and security. But instead of listening and making efforts to integrate the wisdom they revealed, we questioned the righteousness of their message and thus subverted the feminine in our worldly culture. Listening is not about doing, but rather the willingness to expand ourselves so that we can hear the other. Listening is like making love, which is not concerned with attaining or becoming, but rather sharing, relating and cooperating. Listening is like praying, feeling and participating. Listening is the sound of creation, which we can hear in our being. Listening is the receptive faculty of God in creation, embodied by the feminine, which is associated with language, religion, mythology and wholeness. We have to become silent to hear God's words as they have been inscribed in our hearts. Silence is the expression of the masculine; silence is the witnessing of God's being in form. We have both to listen and be silent to hear the words of guidance as contained in the Qu'ran, the Bible, Torah and the various other Holy Scriptures, through which God has spoken to us. We have both to listen and be silent to hear the melody of love. We have both to listen and be silent to hear the advice of our heavenly witness, our spiritual twin, who always informs us when we have deviated from the straight path or

when we are about to do something that invalidates our human dignity, freedom and justice. And it is our heavenly twin, our spiritual witness, who contains the purity of our human being. In retrospect, we may conclude that we intentionally associated the feminine with our erotic nature, which has been troubling our sense of self ever since we have become aware of its longing to merge and transcend. In retrospect, we may conclude that we intentionally associated the masculine with God, instead of valuing it as the inspirational dimension, the reality of faith that pertains to our self. In essence, it does not really matter if we intentionally or ignorantly confused the man with God and the woman with the devil, for what matters is that we acknowledge the discriminatory and self righteous interpretations of Holy Scriptures.

As it is impossible to determine the why of Sidi's behavior, what counts then is the acknowledgment of it and its consequences. Regardless of whether he acted from the will of God or Iblis' mastery, many were hurt. The fact is that others entrusted themselves to him due to his ascribed holiness and rank of Sufi mastery, which comes with a great responsibility. The position of spiritual guide, therapist or healthcare giver carries a commitment to ensure that the student, client or patient is not stretched beyond her capacity; that she is not hurt. When the teacher overstretches the student, to the point of breaking, it is his responsibility to claim.

### **I. The Claim for Ego**

Spiritual evolvment is often falsely associated with the conscious and intentional denial of our ego, which explains why many of us allow a spiritual teacher to do with us as she or he pleases. On the contrary, spiritual evolvment is about the conscious and intentional integration of our ego. To do so, we have to make the efforts to become aware of our unconscious drives, thoughts, desires, feelings and wants or, to put it differently, we have to be willing to face our pain, for life is suffering, as Quran reads: "Verily We create man in Suffer"(90:4) But why is life suffering? Because we want things that we cannot have and we have things that we do not want. Example: I did not choose to have a stutter; nonetheless, I have

had this condition since I can remember talking. Do I stutter as a consequence of my past life? Do I stutter because I did something wrong and this is how God punishes me? I stutter. The rest is speculation and belief. The rest is an attempt to not deal with my condition; to rationalize and construct meaning around it. Confronting it means to acknowledge it, which in turn means to deal with all the uncomfortable feelings related to it; feelings of shame, embarrassment and the agony of not being able to speak fluently, to speak like everybody else.

Most of us harbor feelings, drives, dreams and thoughts of which we are entirely unconscious and to confront ourselves is a rather painful process. To confront ourselves brings us face to face with our attachments and the letting go of them is experienced as painful. Example: While we still feel one with our mother at birth, there soon comes a time when not all of our immediate desires and wishes are fulfilled. This is a painful experience, yet it motivates us to evolve. In the process of separating ourselves from our parents we form a myriad impressions of what we consider to be important, would like to avoid, and what we aspire to become, once we have matured into adulthood. In other words, during our childhood and youth we construct our ego, the very thing which we surrender ourselves to deconstruct on the spiritual path. Just as death may be contemplated and theorized about, but only understood in the experience, so too is our ego only fully experienced in its deconstruction. We have to unveil and deconstruct the ego in order to integrate and value it in ourselves. We have to awaken to its essence rather than judging it by its actions. This is not a psychological endeavor, nor has it much to do with thinking or talking, it is rather experienced in discipline of a spiritual practice.

Deconstructing the ego is what the spiritual path is about; the rest is pretty much commentary. As Abu Said Ibn Abi Khayr put it:

Until college and minaret have crumbled

This holy work of ours will not be done

Until faith becomes rejected and rejection becomes belief

There will be no true Muslim. (Abusa'd Abul Kha'ir, 25)

Instead of investing all our energies into questioning whether the male is uniquely culpable by his nature or if he is as prone to err

and act in ignorance and self-righteousness as the female half of our human creation, we may be better off to simply acknowledge mistakes, which have caused much suffering, despair and hurt; as testified by the state of the world today. Only by acknowledging that something went wrong, that we have lost our equilibrium, lost our balance, are we able to learn from our mistakes and discover the meaning for why they happened. Only by assessing where we are currently located, are we then able to change direction. It is not that our world does not work due to our past, but rather because of our lack of being present. Our life as a whole is in such disarray because we are unconscious of the desires, wants, drives and aspiration of the ego, which conflict with our intentions and commitments.

The compound "ego" is not a single thing, but consists of different parts; such as the masculine - feminine and our erotic nature. The compound "ego" is about "I," while the feminine is about relationship and the brotherly/sisterly love we experience and witness in relating to others. The feminine is about morals, ethics and forgiveness, contrasted against the masculine, which is about social order, law and justice. The feminine is about co-existence, whereas the masculine is about the survival of the fittest. Related to this subject:

"Judaism, Christianity and Islam turned myth into dogma on the basis of the biblical and Quranic story of creation and the fall of Adam and Eve. N. Abbot argues that in all three religions essentially the same devices were used to keep women in a position of inferiority: 'the ever-present threat of physical violence too readily executed; energy- and time-consuming excessive child-bearing in the interest of passion, church, or state; denial of free access to the world of books and publications; psychological attitudes that undermine self-esteem and eventually induce in all but the strongest of body and mind a false and vicious inferiority complex.'" ( Sarah Graham-Brown 1984, 5)

Both the woman as well as the man have to work toward the deconstruction of this vicious inferiority complex and take initiative to overcome physical threats and violence by objecting to laws that infringe upon the freedom of the woman's body, be it in regard to child-bearing or abortion, and by transcending the

dynamics that en the separation of the sexes, which result in tremendous suffering for both. We have to inquire into the logic and wisdom of institutions which divide men and women.

## **II. The Masculine Dominated World**

We may do well to acknowledge that we live in a masculine dominated world, a world that is on fire and tormented by war. Our life as a whole is a battlefield, organized around the credo that there is not enough for everybody. This sense of scarcity makes fear an organizing principle in our world. And, in our fear to relate and reveal, in our fear to fall in love and be real, in our fear to cross the boundary, we succumb to it. The fear of confronting our human nature and that which makes us want to merge with it, lies at the root of many of our dysfunctional behaviors:

“Sexual murder, perversion and violence constitute the acts of revenge, real or fantasized, that reassure the desperate man-child that he is powerful in himself and therefore safe from invasion, engulfment and attack: that his ever-fragile masculinity is intact. Yet in the endless and self-renewing parabola of his emotional life, as he swings between the twin poles of his compulsion to be free of woman and to be at one with her, the normal male also stands perpetually condemned to confuse the intense childhood experience of the mother with his desire for other women.... Only this rage, fusing woman with mother, empowers the terrified child against the all-powerful female.... Infant rage comes into play to fuel the break with the mother: but ‘the severity of the ego-splitting can be very acute: the process leaves fissures in the ego structure.’ Rage then becomes, by some manic connection, the answer to its own problem: ‘omnipotent rage is better than to be helpless, terrified and in fear of annihilation.’ (Rosalind Miles, 1986, 45)

Rage is the fire in which our world is burning. Rage is the fuel of terrorism. When we feel oppressed or wronged, or harbor feelings of jealousy or victimization, we tend to justify our actions beyond reason and feel entitled to take the law in our own hands. For terrorism to end at a worldwide level, we must understand our feelings of rage and the feelings of those who terrorize us for a particular cause. We must stand united against

the use of violence and instead look for nonviolent healing and conflict resolution to bring about a change of heart. For, as Martin Luther King stated, "Through violence, you may murder a murderer, but you cannot murder murder. Through violence, you may murder a liar, but you can't establish truth. Through violence, you may murder a hater, but you cannot murder hate. Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do it."

We must listen to our aggressors and understand what they are saying. We need to ask ourselves to honestly consider if there is any truth to what they say. We must look to ourselves and take responsibility for our contributions to these situations. Finally, we must realize that we are one people; humanity is like a body, and each culture is a part of this body, each individual valued for his or her being. And, from this perspective, we must correct the wrongs that have contributed to oppression and injustice, keeping this body sick and dismembered.

### **III. The Subjugation of the Feminine**

We have to recognize the subjugation of the feminine, the oppression of all that which does not fit into the frame of current consciousness, our academia, our politics, our religious leadership. We have to recognize how difficult it has become to address the whole of our human existence and inquire into its meaning, wisdom and beauty.

"Neither conscious gynophobic malice nor unconscious assumption of privilege can completely account for the cohesiveness and resiliency of philosophy against the intervention of women thinkers. Feminist philosophers have documented a masculine identification in philosophy that goes er than discrimination which might be redressed in affirmative action programs, er than biases which might be cured in an effort to consider women as well as men when choosing texts.... If civilization is male in its very constitutive structures, there is no medium for women's thought but men's thoughts; revised, corrected, but still categories, methods, arguments borrowed from men. Feminist theory itself must be expressed in the terms of 'philosophies of man,' as Marxist feminists criticize liberal feminists, radical feminists draw on the existentialism of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty to criticize Marxist feminists, continental

feminists turn to Heidegger to criticize Anglo-American empiricism, poststructuralist feminists turn to Derrida and Lacan to criticize radical feminism.... If it is possible to say that abstract forms of logical argument have provided continuity in philosophy, it may also be possible to say that what holds together a search of wisdom on these questions is the very refusal of abstracted argument and an insistence on constantly returning to painful experiences which provide reference and which provoke and energize passionate thought. At the end of the twentieth century there is a great need for such thinking, which is practical and theoretical, engaged and general.... The tradition of male philosophers has failed to produce an understanding of divinity, self, value, reality, knowledge viable in the late twentieth century. As long as women's thought is defined in opposition or resistance to this failed thought, as what is not logical, not authoritative, not rational, no redress of that failure is possible." (Andrea Nye, 1989, 64)

In the reflection and the awareness of the feminine, we become conscious of our human being. In that consciousness we learn to recognize our longing, our desire to merge and become one with the transcendental. The awakening to the feminine goes hand in hand with the recognition of our erotic nature, for in awakening to the feminine, we become aware of our innate longing. It is this longing, which makes us believe that we are separate from the source of being, exiled from the celestial planes, punished by God. It is this longing upon which the Sufi teaching is based; and this longing to merge and become annihilated; this longing for truth, is based on love. As the Qu'ran puts it, "I was a hidden treasure that longed to be known."

"God reveals Himself most completely and perfect in the human being, made in the image of the name Allah, the name that comprehends every possible name, every reality, every ontological possibility. Hence witnessing Allah in the human being must be the most perfect form of witnessing. However, one can then ask if witnessing Allah is more perfect in the form of men or in the form of women. Ibn al-Arabi answers with the latter, especially since women 'were made lovable' to the Prophet. He could not have been made to love something other than Allah, since nothing other than the Real is truly worthy to



love. 'There is no beloved but God' is the theme found throughout Sufi literature, though rarely expressed in these particular words. Rumi provides the most detailed and accessible explanation of the fact that all love is in fact directed only toward Allah." (Sachiko Murata, 1992, 86)

Regrettably, many authoritative people in the religious and spiritual field have not undertaken the efforts of contemplating the mysteries, as revealed by our prophets and put in perspective by our mystics and saints. Relying on second hand knowledge and borrowed insights, they give themselves all sorts of lofty titles, and we, in our ignorance, tend to follow them. All this happens in the name of faith, the surrender to God and the realization of one's self:

"There has been a reversal of human values, a spiritual breakdown, which has brought into play forces beyond the material and the human. The present crisis has been prepared by the whole system of science, philosophy and religion. The only way of recovery is to rediscover the perennial philosophy, the traditional wisdom, which is found in all ancient religions and especially in the great religions of the world. But those religions have in turn become fossilized and have each to be renewed, not only in themselves but also in relation to one another." (Bede Griffiths, 1988, 13)

Indeed, this is the task of our time, for without a reversal of our contemporary human values, we will be met by a future in which we would rather not live. This reversal will only come about with the integration of the feminine and the acknowledgment of our ego which, in relation to the transcendental, is our humanity. This reversal will include our erotic nature and the passion experienced and associated with it; the passion which we have been investing in consumerism, productivity, competition and pornography in favor of being authentic, transparent, straightforward, honest, sincere, and, alas, compassionate.

In the course of this process, we may recognize the man's tendency to promise too many things too quickly, which he then cannot hold, thus jeopardizing his constitutional self for wanting to be respected. We may recognize the woman's propensity to be carried away by those man made promises, in her need to be

cherished. It is hard to believe that the man would have the power to break a woman's heart, especially if we attribute equal responsibility to both of them. We all want to be respected in our humanity and cherished for who we are. No gender is attached to our aspiration to awaken to our true nature, which infuses our being with meaning, wisdom and love. No gender is attached to the feeling of joy nor the experience of sorrow; no gender is attributed to such concepts as truth, justice, politeness and peace.

“It is my strongest hope that, as the male once rescued consciousness from the chthonic matriarchate, the female might today help rescue consciousness and her brother from patriarchy.... We need today to develop intuition and alert passive awareness.... But until males stop killing themselves (and others) in order to be strong and silent; until females stop encouraging just that behavior as evidence of a ‘true man’; until chauvinists settle their accounts with their own masculinity and stop defensively exploiting their sisters; until angry feminists stop, on the one hand, reactivating chthonic ‘female only’ matriarchal obsessions and, on the other, trying to co-opt patriarchal obnoxiousness; until feminist intellectuals stop asking what it means to be truly female and start asking instead what it means to be neither male nor female but whole and human then the patriarchy, the mental-ego, which has served its necessary, useful, but intermediate function, and which, for that, we have much to be thankful, will nevertheless soon prove quite literally, to be the death of us all.” (Ken Wilber, 1984, 194)

While we can and have to question and redefine the ascribed gender roles, we cannot change our sex - our biological constitution. We can, however, explore and learn from it.

“There are, generally speaking, very strong differences between the male and the female value spheres—that is, both in sex and gender. Men tend toward hyper individuality, stressing autonomy, rights, justice, and agency, and women tend toward a more relational awareness, with emphasis on communion, care, responsibility, and relationship.” (Ken Wilber, 1996, 23)

Gaining some insight about our sex and gender related differences may help us to identify more clearly the aspirations and traits we share with each other, the depth of our human

nature and the reality of our spiritual oneness. On a plane practical level, acknowledging our gender-related differences helps us to relate to each other by valuing them instead of agonizing over them; which generally results in further separation, rather than the transcendence of our gender-related differences.

Learning to embrace the other—our femininity as a male and our masculinity as a female—seldom happens solely through our spiritual practice, but more often in the context of a romantic relationship. It is here that we may witness that, as Tannen writes, “a protective gesture from a man reinforces the traditional alignment by which men protect women. But a protective gesture from a woman suggests a different scenario: one in which women protect children. That’s why many men resist women’s efforts to reciprocate protectiveness—it can make them feel that they are being framed as children.” (Deborah Tannen, 1990, 34)

“Where it gets less simple, is in groups such as Robert Bly’s ‘Wild Man’ workshops and other groups that still urge men to identify with dominator archetypes such as the warrior and the kind, while at the same time often talking about equal partnership between women and men and a more generally just equitable society... But although it is touted as new, the script for men offered by some of these groups is actually not all that different from the old macho script except that it is dressed in New Age clothes. As in the old macho all-male peer groups, once again male identity is defined in negative terms, as not being like a woman. As in the old macho script of contempt for the ‘feminine,’ Bly berates his followers for being ‘too soft’ or ‘too feminine’ and thus, ‘unmanly’ expressing horror at being ‘controlled’ by women, from whom, according to him, men must at all costs be independent. To this end, men must even distance themselves from their own mothers, lest they be contaminated, in Bly’s words, by ‘too much feminine energy.’ (Riane Eisler, 1994, 125)

In a time when female infants were buried alive and the average woman had no social standing on her own, Mohammad was apparently neither intimidated to marry a woman who was fifteen year his senior nor did he resist being comforted by her

when he was in utter distress and felt most vulnerable, as when the angel Gabriel pressed his chest and commanded: "Recite, recite in the name of God." Islam, the religion whose messenger is Mohammad, is the revelation of a joint effort, which is why women are equally included on the Sufi path, albeit still struggling to be equally accepted.

Like Lilith is said to have left paradise long before Eve was to become Adam's mate, so is the feminine a subverted reality in our monotheistic religious culture. Alluded to by Islamic Sufism within the poetry of Rumi, Hafiz, Khayyam, Saadi, Attar and Ibn Arabi, and incorporated in contemplative Christianity, in the form of Mary Magdalene, the feminine does not play a role in most of our lives. Leila Ahmed offers a historical perspective in the following:

"Zoroastrianism ... was principally the religion of the Persians, who predominantly constituted the ruling, warrior, and priestly classes.... The issue of chastity and of resistance to marriage was the central conflict in the battle of wills between prosecuting Zoroastrian priests and each woman. Women as well as men were among the early Iranian Christian martyrs. Although the Christian church endorsed male dominance, the narratives of the female martyrs suggest that it nevertheless introduced ideas which opened new avenues of self-affirmation and independence to women and validated ways to resist the belief that women were defined by their biology and existed essentially to serve the function of reproduction. Thus, Christianity promulgated ideas that were fundamentally subversive of the Zoroastrian social order in two ways: it enabled women to claim spiritual and moral authority and affirm their own understanding of the moral order, in defiance of male priestly authority, and it undercut the notion on which Zoroastrian laws on women were grounded that reproduction was their primary function." (Laila Ahmed, 1994, 34)

Sufism acknowledges the equality of the genders and values their relationship with each other as an essential aspect of the spiritual path. Sufism emphasizes the unity of spirit in a couple who wants to merge with on the physical plane. Because, without this unity in spirit, without valuing each other's principles of faith, physical union will fall short of the sought

after communion, inspired by the dialogue that proceeds our falling in love.

We may fall in love, because of the beauty that our eyes behold in the reflection of another or because we are told something that makes our heart sing and our spirit fly.

Such impressions, as elevating and inspiring they may be, are temporary in nature, for if we really want to know if we are made for each other, then we have to inquire into each other's principles of faith. Faith being the objective contemplation of self, imagination is the subjective, the intentional contemplation of self in relationship. How do we imagine living with one another, as a people, as different nations and as a couple? The feminine is visionary, intuitive and co-creative; in short, religious. The masculine is rational, cognitive, monotheistic. This coming together of wisdom and logic, imagination and reason, spirit and being is the cause of the Native American's vision quest: the experience of unity! Henry Corbin relates to this subject:

“When you create, it is not you who create, and that is why your creation is true. It is true because each creature has a twofold dimension: the Creator-creature typifies the *coincidentia oppositorum*. From the first, this *coincidentia* is present to Creation, because Creation is not *ex nihilo* but a theophany. As such, it is Imagination. The Creative Imagination is the theophanic Imagination, and the Creator is one with the imagining Creature because each Creative Imagination is a theophany, a recurrence of Creation. Psychology is indistinguishable from cosmology; the theophanic Imagination joins them into a psycho-cosmology.” (Henry Corbin, 1994, 34)

Faith, as such, is empty of substance, empty of content. Faith, the masculine, is the matrix; imagination, the feminine, its form, content and story. Faith is that which impregnates, imagination that which gives birth. Love is that which unites them both, for it is both their origin and source of being. Love is without past or future. Love is that which is uncreated, uncompounded and unconditioned, which is why we cannot directly approach it. Love is neither an object nor a feeling. Love is the witnessing of being alone, something which we can only experience, for there

are no words to describe it. As the *Gnostic Gospel of Thomas* puts it:

"When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same...then you will enter the Garden of Eden.

Love takes away our self-articulated limitations and allows us to experience our true nature; it makes us aware of the reality of our own being: communication!

Behold, I do not know any more where to draw a line: who is me and who is I? I have to at least start somewhere. How else can I claim to be, how else can I claim you are? This very You is our I, but you are not us nor are we thou. Essentially, we are the same but different, and without that difference neither you nor I could say: "I am."

You are thou and I am thee, we are not one, not two, not three, but different; is this so hard to understand?

You have no equal, no qualities, no nothing; you are not body, mind nor speech; you are neither this nor everything you are and that is why I am!

We do not contain thee, as we are only your container, nor have you a voice we will ever speak or an ear that will ever hear your silence because you are beyond form and emptiness, beyond the past and future. You are beyond the perception of our creation; you are the very being at the moment of climax: love!

But you have to cease to exist in order to be. Nothing, really nothing can be left of you, and even then "you still must travel a long journey before you reach the place you seek in your madness," to quote my beloved friend and compassionate guide Jalal al Din Rumi:

The day is coming when these words of mine will testify against you:  
I called you I, the water of Life but you turned a deaf ear.

Of course, I know, why tell, just listen: you criticize my creative use of language as irrational and confusing because it does not go along with our linear way of thinking and the style of writing we have been accustomed to reading.

We eat dinner, watch TV and talk to our lover simultaneously, and that is how we have been taught to live fragmentarily!  
Again quoting Rumi:

“Unbelief has come in war, faith in peace,  
 Love strikes fire to both peace and war.  
 In the ocean of the heart Love opens its mouth  
 and like a whale swallows down the two worlds.  
 Love is a lion, without deception and trickery,  
 not a fox one moment and a leopard the next.  
 When Love provides replenishment upon  
 replenishment, the consciousness gains deliverance  
 from this dark and narrow body.” (*Ibid.*45)

We easily adhere to our faith if it is in our favor, but things look differently when, in the process of inquiring into our faith, we discover that the faith of our chosen partner is different from our own. This does not imply that we have to belong to the same faith in order to make a relationship work, but we have to be able to fully value the principles of our partner’s faith; otherwise, we will never fully entrust ourselves to him or her. Faith is the matrix, the source of our life; faith is that which makes you you and me. It remains our responsibility to inquire into our own faith before making a life commitment. This is where the reversal of our contemporary human values begins – the inquiry into our faith and the imagination of how we would like to live our life!

“It is said that in the other world, scrolls will fly, some into the right hands of the dead, some into their left hands. There will be angels, the throne, heaven and hell, the scales, the reckoning, and the book. None of this is clear until an analogy is given. Although these things have no equivalence in this world, they can be determined by analogy. The analogy of that world in this is as follows: At night, everyone goes to sleep shoemaker, king, judge, tailor and all the rest. Their thoughts fly away from them, and no thoughts remain for anyone. But then the morning breaks, like Israfil’s blast on the trumpet, and it gives life to the motes of their bodies. The thought of each one is like a scroll; flying and running it comes back to each. There are never any mistakes. The tailor’s thought returns to the tailor, the lawyer’s thought to the lawyer, the ironmonger’s thought to the ironmonger, the tyrant’s thought to the tyrant, and the just man’s thought to the just man. Does anyone go to bed a tailor and wake up a shoemaker? No, for that activity and occupation

belong to him, and once again he occupies himself with it. So you should know that in the next world it is the same way. This is not impossible, for it happens in this world.

“If a person clings to this analogy and follows it to the end, he will witness all the states of that world in this world. She will catch the scent of them, and they will be revealed to her. He will come to know that everything is contained in God’s Power. You see many bones desiccated in the grave, but they are in comfort. Their owner sleeps happily and drunken, and is fully aware of that joy and intoxication. The analogy of this is to be found in this world of sensory objects: Two people are sleeping in a single bed. One sees himself in the midst of banquets, rose gardens, and paradise, while the other sees herself in the midst of serpents, the guardians of hell, and scorpions. If you investigate their situation, you will see neither the one nor the other. So why should it be strange that in the grave the parts of some people are in joy, happiness, and intoxication, while others are in pain, torment, and suffering, although you see neither the one nor the other? Human being’s existence is a jungle. Beware of their existence if you breathe the breath of the Spirit!” (William C. Chittick, 1983, 57)

The central affirmation of faith in Islamic Sufism is expressed as *La' ila ha illah' la*, there is no God but God. God is love, lover and beloved alike in Sufism. God is that which cannot may not be acknowledged as genuine by our learned scholars, for God is love; and love cannot be quantified or measured and hence is not considered necessary in our educational institutions. This veneration of love and inclusivity is the distinguishing criteria between the Western value of productivity and the Eastern understanding of religion.

“This veneration is accentuated in the overlapping realms of Saktism and Tantra that the devadisis and women of Tantric Buddhism inhabit. Perhaps the scholarly characterizations of Tantric Buddhist yoginis as ‘lewd,’ ‘sluts,’ and ‘depraved and debauched’ betray a vestige of Victorian indignation not only at nonmarital sexual activity of women but also at the religious exaltation and worship of women. Theologian Hans Kung acknowledged that religious awe of women is so antithetical to



Jewish and Christian values that is poses a major barrier to understanding:

‘It is especially hard for the Christian theologian to discuss... Shaktist Tantrism with its orientation toward female power or divinity... No one could fail to see that all the Tantric systems, and the Shaktist practices especially, are extraordinarily alien to Christians, more alien than anything we have met thus far in Buddhism or Hinduism.’” (Miranda Shaw, 1998, 76)

Tantra, alike Islamic Sufism, is inclusive, integrative and transformative, for it is neither in conflict with the feminine nor disvalues our erotic nature.

“The word Tantra, which has become part of the English language, is in Buddhism a term referring to one’s individual spiritual growth, and only secondarily is it made to cover the literate which deals with this developmental process. The words used in the Tantra literature are symbols for the experiences that are being lived through as the process of growth and maturation unfolds. They are not so much labels for things as, for instance, the label ‘dog’ is, rather are they incentives to lead people to, and finally evoke within them, those experiences which those who have had them consider to be of vital importance and which they try to communicate by those peculiar verbal expressions which do not seem to stand literally for anything.” (H.V. Guenther, 1985, 4)

Similar to Sufism, which does not exclude our egoist, erotic nature, our sense of self and humanity, and which even acknowledges Iblis’ role without making him/her wrong, Tantra includes the many conflicting and often times paradoxical dimensions of being. Tantra, like Sufism, crosses the boundaries of reason and logic; which is why as much mischief and confusion are attached to both of these paths as clarity and insight are gained while walking them.

“The Buddhist Tantricism of Padma-Shambhava, like Hindu Tantricism, postulates, in harmony with these more ancient teachings underlying all Tantric Schools, that good and evil are inseparably one; that good cannot be conceived apart from evil; that there is neither good per se nor evil per se.... Tantricism, in its highest esoteric reaches, of which Europeans have but little knowledge, propounds, as do all philosophies, ancient and

modern, based upon the occult sciences, that the ultimate truth (at least from the viewpoint of man) is neither this nor that, neither the Sangsara nor Nirvana, but at-one-ment, wherein there is transcendence over all opposites, over both good and evil.” (W. Y. Evens-Wentz 1982, 34)

The world, as I came to know it in my journey and study, is one of multiplicity, interdependence and imagination. It is a world based on wisdom and faith, aspiration and intention. I had no idea how central faith is to our life when I stumbled into the religious spiritual arena at the age of twenty-one. And I had no idea where my own faith was to take me and how predominant the question of faith would become for me.

Faith is all that has remained with me. I lost friends and community; I lost my religious belonging and spiritual kinship and even my place in the world. Had I known how alone I was to become in this journey, I may have never steered this direction. But, then again, I am very grateful for having been able to pursue this path. I have met with people who were so caught up in their religious studies that they had no time and space available to inquire into their motivation and the living presence by which their faith was sustained. Thankful for not being caught in their place, my heart felt very saddened to see them veiling their own light, their own spirit and own individual essence with all the knowledge, all the books and all the thoughts of other people they studied.

The acquisition of knowledge is valuable, but not for the prize of my wholeness of being. What good have I learned when I can splice a theological argument into innumerable pieces, but lack the ability to turn a person in need of support, comfort and love toward the faith, the living presence, that resides in his or her own heart?

“Al-Ghazzali ranks equally with Rumi, Rabia and Shabastari in his emphasis on the Sufi doctrine that life without true love is a farce, that love is the guiding star on the mystic way, and that love eventually leads one to the ultimate truth.... He contends that the truth of religion depends not on miracles, laws, or rites and rituals, but on the soul’s experience and communion.” (N. S. Fatemi, 1994, 4)

Our world is as troubled by the lack of education as it is by our inability to relate; our inability to communicate; our inability to turn inwards and be still; our inability to go beyond ourselves and render our being to love. As Rumi puts it:

“Look not at Time’s events, which come from the spheres and make life so disagreeable!

Look not at this dearth of daily bread and means of livelihood!

Look not at this famine and fear and trembling!

Look at this: in spite of all the world’s bitterness, you are passionately and shamelessly attached to it.” (Andrew Harvey 36)

It has become increasingly difficult, if not nearly impossible, to contemplate and address this issue called life, in its entirety, in our academic institutions; where we are supposedly prepared for and educated in to understand our role in the world. This understanding, however, is only possible if we are inspired to uncover our mission and genius, as inscribed in our heart; if we are encouraged to unearth our individual calling. For it is this calling that infuses our life with meaning and enables us to realize who we are.

#### **IV. Final Considerations**

Respect for the other arises when we are given the means to articulate our own principles of faith and when we are motivated to contemplate the values that constitute our moral-ethical life. Regrettably, this inquiry no longer bears much weight in education, with the result that many of our leaders, teachers and guides lack the integrity required in leading their fellow companions. Hence, we have come to live in a world where the blind lead the blind, where the greedy become greedier, the poor poorer, the educated ever more sophisticated and the uneducated tend to stay that way. No wonder then, that religious fundamentalism is in the rise, that corporate fraud can be traced into the White House and that science denies everything that may vaguely allude to the transcendental.

“The 1989 booklet *On Becoming a Scientist*, published by the National Academy of Science’s Committee on the Conduct of Science, recognizes that scientific knowledge emerges from an intensely human process. It acknowledges that much of the large

body of knowledge used by scientists in making decisions ‘is not the product of scientific investigation, but instead involves value-laden judgments, personal desires, and even a researcher’s personality and style.’... While I agree that a totally subjective approach to science is not useful because it does not permit knowledge to be shared, I am interested in exploring the ‘excluded middle.’ What if we look at the objective and subjective realms as permeable to each other where they interact and inform each other? What if the objective view of nature is consciously informed by the personal, and the personal is grounded by the objective? What are the benefits of a personal connection to knowledge?” (Linda Jean Sheperd, 1996, 24)

Mythology, the meta-story of language, defies definite and one-dimensional answers, for it evolves in relation to our own insight and realization. Mythology is the stuff theology is made of, while biology is the focus of our natural science. Can we really separate them from one another; separate our body from our mind and our soul from our spirit? Can we talk about the formation of the plasma membrane, which caused the distinction between inner and outer, without simultaneously contemplating its implied meaning? Language always involves the spirit, the theology of our own consciousness, which we therefore cannot separate from that which we observe, describe and formalize into concepts. Language will always inquire into the meaning of life, the mythos, for the purpose of wisdom.

“This directly brings us, of course, to the work of Carl Jung and his conclusion that the essential forms and motives of the world’s great mythologies the ‘archaic forms’ or ‘archetypes’ are collectively inherited in the individual psyche of each of us.... The question then centers and here Freud and Jung bitterly parted ways on the nature and function of these mythic motifs, these archetypes. Are they merely infantile and regressive (Freud), or do they also contain a rich source of spiritual wisdom (Jung)?... For one thing, literal-fundamental mythological motifs are the main social cement in many cultures (including a very large segment of our own), and as divisive and imperialistic as those mythologies are, their particular ethnocentric and social-integrative power has to be reckoned with carefully. One cannot simply challenge or deconstruct the

myths of such societies (or segments of societies) and expect them to survive (or expect them to acquiesce without a fight).” (Ken Wilber *Sex*, 1994, 124)

In the language of the Sufis, Allah created the world in interdependent pairs such as knowledge and wisdom, freedom and responsibility and man and woman. It is this interdependence, which we have to learn to incorporate into our lives, for it is this interdependence from which our creation arises. Thus, we must reflect upon today the peace that we aspire to cultivate tomorrow. And we must allow the generation to come the opportunity, time and space to be with the other, as well as themselves.

“We cannot hope to utter anything worth saying, unless we read and inwardly digest the utterances of our betters. We cannot act rightly and effectively unless we are in the habit of laying ourselves open to leadings of the divine Nature of Things. We must draw in the goods of eternity in order to be able to give out the goods of time. But the goods of eternity cannot be had except by giving up at least a little of our time to silently waiting for them. This means that the life, in which ethical expenditure is balanced by spiritual income, must be a life in which action alternates with repose, speech with alertly passive silence... ‘What a man takes in by contemplation,’ says Eckhart, ‘that he pours out in love.’ The well meaning humanist and the merely muscular Christian, who imagines that he can obey the second of the great commandments without taking time even to think how best he may love God with all his heart, soul and mind, are people engaged in the impossible task of pouring unceasingly from a container that is never replenished.” (Aldous Huxley, 1972, 182)

Does our way of life allow us to listen and hear? Does it invite us to remember our true essence, the reality of love and the source of being – Allah?

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