

Light Upon Light:

Understanding the Principle of *Rahma*
in the Light of Imam ‘Ali’s Discourses to Kumayl

Du‘ā’ Kumayl

According to the scholar Sayyid Ibn Tawus (d. 1266), in his work *Iqbāl al-a‘māl*, Imam ‘Ali gave the following piece of advice in the mosque of Basra, regarding devotions to be performed on the sacred night of the 15th of Sha‘bān: ‘Whoever stays awake all night in prayer on the 15th of Sha‘ban, and recites the *du‘ā’* of the Prophet al-Khiḍr, that person’s supplication will, without doubt, be accepted by God.’ Later that evening, Kumayl went to see the Imam, asking him about this *du‘ā’* of al-Khiḍr. The Imam then told Kumayl to write down the *du‘ā’* and to learn it by heart. He also advised Kumayl to recite it every Thursday evening, or once a month, or, at least, once every year. This was how the *du‘ā’* was transmitted, and how it came to be known as the *Du‘ā’ Kumayl*. We do not know how Imam ‘Alī received this *du‘ā’* from al-Khiḍr, but what is important for us is that the supplication is associated with the esoteric wisdom and the *baraka* of al-Khiḍr—evoked so marvellously in the *Sūrat al-Kahf*; and that it is therefore suffused with subtle mystical truths at the same time as being cast as a supplication addressed to God by someone who is seeking forgiveness from God after having sinned. The loftiest truths of the transcendent Spirit are thus interspersed with the deepest yearnings of the repentant soul: the soul aware of its sinfulness and calling upon the mercy of her Lord.

The Essence of the Supplication: *Rahma* = Reality

First of all, the principle of God’s all-encompassing mercy, with which the supplication begins: [I am reading from William Chittick’s fine translation (with one major modification), published by the Muhammadi Trust]: ‘O God, I ask Thee by Thy Mercy *which embraces all things*’

(citing 7:156). A few verses further into the supplication, we read: ‘by Thy Names, which have filled the foundations of all things’ (*bi-asmā’ika’llatī mala’at arkāna kulli shay’*). If we put together these two verses, we see an *ishāra*, an esoteric allusion. For, if God’s mercy embraces all things, and if God’s Names are the true substance of everything that exists—‘filling the foundations of all things’—then we are being implicitly told that there is in truth nothing but mercy within existence. For everything that is contrary to divine mercy has no foundation in Reality.

The essential, defining quality of the Divine Names is *raḥma*: ‘Call upon Allah or call upon *al-Raḥmān*’, we are told in the Qur’an, ‘whichever Name you call upon, unto Him belong all the most beautiful Names’ (17:110). To say that the most beautiful divine Names fill the foundations of all things is to say that *raḥma* fills the foundation of all things—all qualities that can be called ‘most beautiful’, *husnā*, are contained God, of course, but in God as *al-Raḥmān*, This implies that anything which is contrary to mercy, or opposes it, is only an appearance, not a reality: it has no ‘foundation’ in authentic Being, which is the reality of God’s self-manifestations, His ‘Names’ which alone fill the foundations of all things. So, one might paraphrase the first shahada, and say: no reality except mercy. Or, as the Qur’an tells us: *lā ilāha illa Huwa’r-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm* (2:163): which we can translate as follows: no divinity but Him, who is essentially, the lovingly Compassionate, the lovingly Merciful.

We could also translate *Huwa’r-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm* as this: He who creates all beings through loving compassion and who saves all beings through loving mercy. Let us keep in our minds this image of *raḥma* which embraces all things, as we listen to the discourse between Imam ‘Alī and Kumayl.

The Ḥadīth *al-Ḥaqīqa*

What is reality, *mā’l-ḥaqīqa*? Asks Kumayl.

What have you got to do with Reality?, the Imam replies.

Am I not the companion of your secret (او لست صاحب سرّك)? Asks Kumayl.

Yes, says the Imam, but what drips upon you gushes from me

(قال بلى ولكن يرشح عليك ما يطفح منى)

The Imam then gives a series of statements, after each one Kumayl asks for further clarification:

1. *Al-ḥaqīqa* is the unveiling of the splendours of Majesty, without any allusion.

كشف سبحات الجلال من غير اشارة

2. The effacement of that which is erroneously imagined, together with the clarity of that which is truly known.

محو الموهوم وصحو المعلوم

3. The rending of the veil through the triumph of the mystery.

قال هتك الستر لغلبة السرّ

4. The attraction of absolute unicity to the quality of *tawhid*.

قال جذب الاحدية لصفة التوحيد

5. A light dawning from the morn of eternity, its traces shimmering on the temples of *tawhid*.

نور اشرق من صبح الازل فيلوح على هياكل التوحيد آثاره

After this statement, when Kumayl asks for more clarification, the Imam says:

فاطف السراج فقد طلع الصبح
Extinguish the lamp, morning has broken!

We have here an inebriating set of evocative images, reminding us of the koans of Zen Buddhism. Reams and reams of commentaries have been written on this extraordinary set of sayings. The key principle which the commentators have focused on is that of divine self-disclosure, *tajallī*. Reality is the self-disclosure of divinity, it is God manifesting His unity to what the Imam calls the ‘temples of *tawhīd*’. How are we to understand these temples, *hayākil al-tawhīd*? As the word *haykal*, plural, *hayākil* can be translated as ‘body’, we can interpret these temples as the bodies and souls of all the creatures in the cosmos. God’s self-manifestation or *tajallī* is thus identical not only with the creation of all things, but also with the creation of those things as ‘temples of *tawhīd*’: each created thing can thus be seen as a sacred precinct within which the spiritual activity of *tawhīd* takes place. Let us remember that *tawhīd* is not just ‘oneness’, it essentially means, in accordance with its verbal form in Arabic, ‘declaring/affirming/realising oneness’. *Tawhīd* is a dynamic spiritual process, not a static mental concept; it is the quintessence, or the deepest substance of prayer, in other words.

Now, let us return to the principle expressed through the *Du‘ā’ Kumayl*: no reality but divine mercy. In the light of this revealing principle, we may glimpse one of the many dimensions of the following statement of the Imam’s discourse to Kumayl: ‘The attraction, *jadhba*, of absolute unicity, *al-aḥadiyya*, to the quality, the *ṣifa*, of *tawhid*.’ We see, in the light of the principle highlighted in the *Du‘ā’ Kumayl*, that this attraction, this *jadhba*, is nothing other than pure *rahma*. It is God’s loving mercy, as *al-Raḥīm*, which exerts a merciful, saving attraction upon all beings; upon all those beings who have been created as a result of God’s loving compassion, *al-Raḥmān*. We have a vision here of *rahma* coming full circle: the circle of divine Self-manifestation begins with creative *rahma*, and is completed by saving *rahma*; *al-Raḥmān* projects and creates all beings, *al-Raḥīm* attracts and reintegrates all beings. This re-integration

is, precisely, *tawhīd*, a process of ‘making one’ that which appears to be multiple. It is a process which shows us that what Imam ‘Ali calls ‘the light dawning from the morn of eternity’ is nothing other than the *rahma* that streams forth from the divine Essence; and that this light, whose traces ‘shimmer’, as the Imam says, on the temples of *tawhīd* is reflected back to its source, through what he calls ‘the attraction, the *jadhba*, of absolute unicity to the quality of *tawhīd*’. The attraction of oneness to the realization of oneness is thus a kind of reflection of the One to the One through the mirrors of the many. We are reminded of the Qur’anic principle of *nūrun ‘alā nūr*, ‘light upon light’; which we see is identical to *rahma ‘alā rahma*, ‘loving mercy upon loving mercy’.

Let us now return to the *Du‘ā’ Kumayl*. After being illumined by the lofty and subtle truth of all-embracing mercy, we are brought face to face with the gut-wrenching cry for mercy from a miserable sinner: ‘O God, I find no forgiver of my sins, no concealer of my ugly acts, no transformer of my ugly acts into beautiful ones but Thee (*lā ajidu min ‘amalī al-qabīhi bi’l-ḥasani mubaddilan ghayraka*)’. Here we have another allusion, this time to the promise of God given even to those guilty of idol-worship, murder, and adultery: if they repent, and have faith, and act virtuously, then not only will God forgive them, but, in the words of verse 70 of the Sūrat al-Furqān: ‘God will transform their ugly acts with beautiful ones’ (*yubaddilu’Llāhu sayyi’ātihim ḥasanāt*). God’s mercy may well be all-embracing, including in its embrace even the worst sinners, if they repent sincerely; but the question might be asked by the sinner: if your mercy is all-embracing, and there is nothing in reality but your mercy, how did I end up sinning, where did that possibility come from? He could continue: nothing happens but by your will, with your permission; so are you not the one who is actually responsible for my sin?

The *Du‘ā’ Kumayl* anticipates precisely this kind of reasoning, and this leads us to the second of the two principles we want to focus on, the distinction between the *moral* responsibility of man, and the metaphysical responsibility of God.

This distinction is beautifully brought out in the following passage of the *Du‘ā’*:

‘My God and My Protector! Thou put into effect through me a decree (*ḥukm*) in which I followed the caprice of my own soul, and did not remain wary of the adornment of my enemy.¹ So he deluded me through my soul’s caprice, and therein destiny favoured him (*wa as‘adahu ‘alā dhālika’l-qaḍā’*).’

The sinner then confesses that, as a result of following his own desire, falling prey to the enemy’s temptation, he violates some of God’s commands. But he acknowledges his responsibility totally, and does not in the least blame God for his sins, even though he knows that he could not have sinned without God’s *ḥukm*, His decree or order. How can we understand this *ḥukm*? One way of understanding it is as the divine gift of free will to each human being. We have the freedom either to follow our own desire, our own *hawā*, or to resist it. If we follow it, then we cannot remain wary of the ‘adornment of the enemy’, the *tazyīn ‘aduwwī*. What does the enemy adorn? The Qur’an tells us: ‘Adorned for mankind is love of the passions derived from women and offspring; and stored-up heaps of gold and silver, and horses branded, and cattle and land. That is the pleasure of the life of the world. And God—with Him is a more excellent abode’ (3:14).

The Qur’an also warns us against taking our *hawā* as our god, in two places (45:23 and 25:43). Imam ‘Alī tells us that in the greatest of all spiritual struggles, what the Prophet called *al-jihād al-akbar*, the *hawā* is the commander of the forces of *al-Shayṭān*; and it is opposed by the intellect, *al-‘aql*, which is the commander of the forces of *al-Raḥmān*. What this implies is that the intellect is attuned to the ultimate reality, whose essential, defining reality is *rahma*. It is for this reason that Imam ‘Alī defines the true *faqīh* in terms of his knowledge of divine mercy. Let us remember that the word *faqīh* means ‘one who understands’, (see 9:122) only later did *fiqh* come to be identified almost exclusively with jurisprudence. He says that ‘the true *faqīh—al-faqīh kullu’l-faqīh—*is he

1 I have modified Chittick’s translation here. It is ‘the adornment of the enemy’ (*tazyīn ‘aduwwī*) that the sinner should have been vigilant about, not, as Chittick’s translation would have it, ‘adorning my enemy’.

who does not make people despair of the mercy of God'. One of the most remarkable things about the supplication of the sinner beseeching God with the *Du'ā' Kumayl* is that he refuses to despair of the mercy of God, however great be his sense of having sinned. The sinner is being taught, through Imam 'Ali, and through the particular *baraka* associated with al-Khiḍr, that God's mercy prevails over all things, including His own wrath: the saying 'My Mercy takes precedence over My Wrath' is inscribed on the very Throne of God, according to the Prophet. Let us note that al-Khiḍr is described in the Qur'an, in the Sūrat al-Kahf, as 'a slave from among Our slaves, unto whom We had given mercy from Ourselves, and taught him knowledge from Our presence' (18:65).

Mercy takes precedence over knowledge in this description of al-Khiḍr. It is as if one of the esoteric mysteries imparted by al-Khiḍr, and which is certainly tasted throughout the *Du'ā' Kumayl*, is that authentic human knowledge is not only attuned to the reality of divine mercy, but that human knowledge is a grace granted by divine mercy. As the Qur'an tells us, in the Sūrat al-Raḥmān: 'Al-Raḥmān, taught the Qur'an, created man, taught him discernment' (55: 1-4). Human knowledge emerges as the result of the emanation of the light of al-Raḥmān, as does the whole of creation, as we heard earlier; and our knowledge will deepen in accordance with the attunement of our whole being with the qualities of al-Raḥmān. He who shows no mercy will not have mercy shown to him (*man lam yarḥam lam yurḥam*), said the Prophet, and Imam 'Ali echoes this in several sayings. One meaning here is that if you are not merciful to others, you will not receive from God that form of *rahma* which transforms your mental knowledge into heartfelt knowledge, will not take you from belief to certainty, from certainty to gnosis.

So the true intellectual, *al-'āqil*, is not simply one who knows a lot of things. The true intellectual is one whose knowledge of reality is suffused with divine mercy; from such a person, the light of knowledge will radiate as an almost tangible form of benevolent mercy, loving compassion. Such a person can be called an '*ārif bi'LLāh*, which we can translate not simply as 'knower of God', but one who knows *through* God, *bi'LLāh*: 'Know God, through God', says the Imam: *i'rafu'LLāh*

bi'LLāh. One can know God through God only by making one's knowledge 'lordly', *rabbānī* (cf. 3:79); and this means infusing one's consciousness with those qualities which most essentially define the Lord, *al-Rabb*, and these qualities are all summed up in the essential quality of *rahma*.

'Lordly knowledge' in the Discourse to Kumayl

In another discourse to Kumayl, Imam 'Ali describes three types of people, the highest being the lordly knower, *'ālim rabbānī*. The sages in this category, he says, '*rejoice* in their intimacy with the spirit of certainty; they *make easy* what the extravagant find harsh; they *befriend* that by which the ignorant are estranged. With their bodies they keep company with the world, while their spirits are tied to the transcendent realm.'

These sages rejoice in the spirit of certainty, *rūḥ al-yaqīn*, because the object of their certainty, the divine Reality, the *Ḥaqīqa*, is pure *rahma*; they cannot be increased in certainty, as Imam 'Ali famously said: 'even if the veil were removed, I could not be increased in certainty'. In other words, even if the veil of this world were removed, as it is at the moment of death, Imam 'Ali's certainty of God and Paradise could not be increased. This is because, as he says in another place,³ his heart is already in Paradise, only his body is at work in this world; echoing his statement in this discourse: 'with their bodies they keep company with the world, while their spirits are tied to the transcendent realm.'

This helps us to understand his statement when he was struck by the poisoned sword of Ibn Muljam: 'I have triumphed, by the Lord of the Ka'ba!'

²*Nahj*, pp.433-435; al-Jibouri ed., p.84.

³*Nahj*, p.302; *Peak*, p.394

This undefeated champion of Islam never once made such an utterance after any of his countless ‘triumphs’ on the field of battle. Only now, after being treacherously struck on the head while prostrate in prayer, did he make such a statement, as paradoxical to the worldly minded as it is profound to those with a sense of eternity. He was demonstrating the highest meaning of his words in the discourse to Kumayl just cited: he made easy what the extravagant find harsh; he befriended that by which the ignorant are alienated. What the extravagant and ignorant are most frightened and alienated by is death. But for the Imam death was but the removal of a veil that had already become transparent for him, by virtue of his spiritual knowledge so perfectly attuned to divine mercy. This transformative synthesis of knowledge and mercy had already placed his heart in Paradise.

Imam ‘Ali had ‘triumphed’ because, throughout his life, it was this knowledge of divine mercy that had nourished his soul, as a mother’s milk nourishes her suckling babe: ‘I swear’, he said, ‘that the son of Abu Talib [referring indirectly to himself] is more intimate with death than is the babe with the breast of its mother’. This is far from any morbid fixation on death as negation; rather, it bears eloquent testimony to the fact that Imam ‘Ali was already in a mysterious sense ‘dead to the world’, not out of an indifference to this lower domain, but because his spiritual life—the life of his ‘heart’—was already pulsating inwardly in that radiance of divine *rahma* which Paradise is.

Rumi, the most famous of all Sufi poets, says the following in his *Mathnawi*, a Persian work which is arguably the single most important poem, at once didactic and epic, in the Islamic literary tradition. He is commenting on a prophecy in which the Prophet pointed out to Imam ‘Ali the man who would one day kill him. Imam ‘Ali says, in the poetic vision of Rumi:

Day and night I see the murderer with my eyes, (but) I have
no anger against him, Because death has become sweet as
manna to me: my death has laid fast hold of resurrection.

...

'Tis death outwardly but life inwardly: apparently 'tis a cutting-off (decease), in secret (in reality) 'tis permanence (life without end).

To the embryo in the womb birth is a going (to another state of existence): in the world it (the embryo) blossoms anew.

...

Slay me, my trusty friends [an Arabic citation from a famous poem by Hallaj]: slay me, vile as I am: verily, in my being slain is my life for evermore.

(Rumi, *Mathnawi* 1:3925ff.)