

Meditations on Scuba Diving and Snorkeling

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*Dark night, fearsome waves, and such a dangerous maelstrom
How can those lightly-burdened ones standing on the shore
understand our condition?*

—Hafez¹

I recently had the pleasure of spending my honeymoon on the small island of Culebra off the coast of Puerto Rico. There my wife, herself an avid snorkeler and scuba diver, introduced me to the wonders of life under the sea, taking me on several dives and snorkeling trips along the island's teeming reefs. We had many discussions on the spiritual significance and symbolism of this contemplation of the world under the water, and I have tried to organize my thoughts on this topic in this short essay. I take a 'kaleidoscopic' approach in this piece, meaning that I consider the same phenomena from several distinct, and often contrasting, symbolic perspectives.

THE OCEAN

The ocean is one of the most powerful and direct symbols of Divine Infinity, and as such is celebrated in the scripture, literature, and rituals of spiritual traditions around the world.² To quote a contemporary Senegalese Sufi shaykh,

1. *Dīwān*, First poem, verse 5. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

2. In virtually all of the spiritual and mythological traditions of the world, water is the origin of life. The Qur'ān says, *We created every living thing from water* (21:30). In the beginning of Genesis, 'the spirit of the Lord hovered over the waters of the deep' (1:2); and in mythologies as disparate as Yoruba, Norse, Greek, and Mayan, creation begins with water (which signifies the transition from the formless Spirit, to the fluid, multi-form world of the spirits and ancestors, and thence to the solid, static world of today). As such, water plays a central symbolic and ritual role in virtually every spiritual tradition as the symbol of pure substance par excellence.

Before, only God existed. When he wanted other beings to come to existence, he manifested himself in himself. From the being that was his manifestation, God created the Muḥammadan Reality. From the Muḥammadan Reality, God created the sea. From the sea, God created foam. The sea cannot be quiet because it was created from a living being and reflects the manifestation of God . . . Of all creatures, the sea is the one that resembles God most in richness, wideness, and generosity. In the sea, we find fish and pearls; boats can circulate without harming the sea in any way. From foam, God created earth. From earth, God created Adam and Eve. That is why Shaykh Ibrahim said that: 'Only God existed before anything else existed, and even now that other beings seem to exist, in fact, only God exists.'³

The most famous orison of Shaykh Abū'l Ḥasan ash-Shādhilī, *ḥizb al-baḥr* (the litany of the sea), likens all of life and existence to the sea, and asks God to subdue it to the supplicant just as he subdued the sea for Moses to pass through in safety—and implicitly, through Qur'ānic allusion (45:12), to subdue all of existence for the supplicant as He subdues the sea for the ships that glide upon it.

In its restlessness, its boundless and mysterious beauty and bounties, the ocean is, as mentioned above, a natural symbol of Divine Infinity, and therefore creativity. For this reason, in many mythologies, the ocean is embodied as a Mother Goddess, giving birth to all life.⁴ Within Sufism, the perpetual ebb and flow, push and pull of waves upon the shore is a direct symbol of the perpetual self-manifestation of the Divine Reality, and the reabsorption of these manifestations back into the Divine. This Divine 'respiration', to use another image, is known in Arabic as *tajdīd al-khalq*, renewal of creation, but unlike the waves of ocean, this renewal takes place not consecutively, but simultaneously, time itself being a part of the self-manifestation or self-disclosure of the Eternal Divine.

However, just as the waves of the ocean shape and are shaped by the ocean floor and the shore, so we too along with everything in creation are both determined by and determine the self-manifestations

3. Shaykh Hadi Niasse, 2002 lecture cited in Ousmane Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 75.

4. For example, in the Yoruba-derived traditions of the New World, *Yemaya/Yemonja*, 'The Mother of Fishes', is the Mother Goddess of the Sea.

of the Divine that constitute our lives, our very beings.⁵ Furthermore, many verses of Sufi poetry describe this life and world as a bubble on the ocean, or liken it to the foam that forms when the waves of Being crash against the shores of Nothingness—ephemeral, fleeting, dynamic, and beautiful, suspended between two aspects of a single, Absolute, and therefore inescapable Reality.

As human beings, we live on the land, suspended between the two blue infinities of sky and sea, whose only boundaries appear to be the horizon and the thin surface layer where we lead our lives. As such, we live in a *barzakh*, a liminal reality, an isthmus, between sky and sea, which symbolize the Objective and Subjective poles of Reality, respectively. We live, often confusingly, as both and neither Pure Subject nor Pure Object—in some ways, we know ourselves (and others) as subject, in others we know ourselves (and others) as object, and in most ways, we do not know ourselves much at all. However, through spiritual practice and grace, we can know ourselves, others, and the Divine Reality itself as both Pure Subject and Pure Object, because the realization of either collapses the one into the other. This union and transcending of binary opposites is figured in the motion of the denizens of sea, land, and sky. While we primarily move in two dimensions, birds and fish move in three. Just as three marks the return to unity ('The Odd' [*al-witr*] of the Qur'ān) after the duality of two ('The Even' [*al-shafi'*] of the same Qur'ānic oath [89:3], which represents The One and the many), the paradoxes and oppositions of two-dimensional geometry and motion can be overcome in three dimensions (i.e. the motion of shadows seems impossible and paradoxical unless one realizes that they are cast by three-dimensional objects).

The pair of sea and sky also symbolize the Inward/Hidden (*al-Bāṭin* in Arabic) and Outward/Apparent (*al-Zāhir*), respectively, both of which are names of God. Due to reflection and refraction, that which is beneath the surface of the sea is hidden from those not in it, while the celestial objects which populate the sky are visible to entire

5. Ibn 'Arabī explains this point in terms of what he terms *'ayn al-thābitah*, immutable entities, which constitute the pre-existence of any and every thing in God's knowledge. These non-existent entities are formed through a 'process' of entification (*ta'ayyun*) also called 'the most holy effusion', and then given existence by a second 'process' known as 'the holy effusion'. This is one of the more difficult points in Islamic metaphysics, but the image of a crashing wave or tsunami which shapes a shoreline, and the subsequent waves which are shaped by this shoreline, is a nice starting point for meditation on this reality.

hemispheres at once. What was said above about the poles of Subject and Object, and about land symbolizing man's liminal reality between the two, equally applies to this binary of Inward and Outward, and to their transcendent unity, symbolized by the horizons where the blue of the sky meets that of the sea. Thus Ibn 'Arabī describes the realized sage as one who 'sees with two eyes'—the Inward and the Outward, simultaneously. And just as ordinary binocular vision results in the perception of the third dimension of depth, this metaphysically binocular vision (Inward and Outward together) opens up a 'third dimension', the beatific vision, in which this, and all other binary oppositions are united and transcended. Again, these three degrees of motion are symbolized in the flight of birds and the dive of dolphins, compared to the largely two-dimensional movement of us land-bound creatures.

Today, however, thanks to certain advances in technology, man can now explore the depths of both sky and sea.⁶ It is two modes of the latter capability to which I wish to direct the focus of the rest of this essay.

SNORKELING

The equipment for snorkeling is simple enough: a clear mask and a snorkel—a tube that connects the mouth below water to the air above water. The mask works by providing a pocket of air, through which the eyes can see clearly, and the snorkel provides air so that the snorkeler can breathe. If we take the ocean as a symbol of the soul or interior aspect of the self, the air provided by the mask and snorkel represents an element of objectivity when exploring the interior world of the self. This element of objectivity is what brings the wonders of the self, of the

6. It is somewhat ironic, but not at all unrelated, that these advances have occurred with the curtailment of the spiritual voyaging which they symbolize—or, more correctly, parody. As spiritual journeying through the levels of Being and those of the Self was reduced, the physical journeying through the sky and sea took off. The easy access to the beauties of these realms, hitherto only vouchsafed to the pearl-diver and unfortunate sailor or fisherman, or to the most intrepid of mountaineers or legendary shamans, can be seen as a compensation for the loss of beauty on the land. This loss of land-bound beauty, incidentally, is directly related to the technologies which have made the sea and sky so accessible; and these technologies, in turn, are directly the result of a science, a worldview, characterized by the loss of spiritual wayfaring. The innate drive to explore the depths of the Self and Existence has been sublimated into the desire to explore the depths of the sea and sky.

soul, into focus. The introduction of this element of objectivity into the subject, the air into the water, is symbolic of spiritual initiation, which gives the initiate a glimpse into the reality of the depths of his or her self.

In keeping with this perspective, when the ocean is turbulent and full of waves, the water becomes turbid and cloudy. Similarly, when the soul's carnal passions or emotions become turbulent, the perspective on one's self also becomes clouded and confused. When the waves calm, and the sediment settles down, the remarkable beauties of the coral, fish, and other creatures reappear.⁷

As for the beautiful scenery under the sea, I have seen no better image of the imaginal world (the level of reality corresponding to the individual world of dreams). In fact the landscapes of many Persian miniatures, which depict this *mundus imaginalis*, bear striking resemblances to the coral reefs that I saw while snorkeling. There are colours, shapes, and beauties underwater unlike anything I have ever seen above, just as the imaginal world contains forms and beauties only glimpsed in dreams, and seldom seen waking. The ocean as a whole is also a natural symbol of the unseen world (*ghayb* in Arabic), with land serving as a symbol of the visible world. Just as the ocean surprisingly accounts for 99 per cent of the area where living things reside, the visible world is but a small portion of reality, although we often act as if it is all that exists. This symbolism is particularly apparent if you are on a boat or small island, and find yourself surrounded by the ocean in the same way that the unseen worlds surround the more limited visible world of sensible things. In fact, in many mythologies, the underwater world of the sea, rivers, lakes, etc. is the realm of spirits.⁸ Just as liquid water stands between the solidity of land and the airy expanse of the sky, so too does the imaginal world stand between the sensible world of form, and the formless world of pure spirit. The imaginal world is another *barzakh*, where spirits take on sensible forms, and sensible forms are animated with spirit/meaning.

7. Relatedly, in the tradition of Islamic philosophy the supra-rational Intellect (*'aql kullī* in Arabic, *nous* in Greek, *intellectus* in Latin) is often likened to the moon, and our rational faculty to its reflection on the surface of the ocean. When the surface is calm, the reflection appears clear and brilliant, but as the water becomes more troubled, the reflection becomes distorted by the waves, and eventually disappears. Similarly, when the soul is troubled and tempestuous, the reflection of the transcendent Intellect, our reason, becomes clouded and can even seem to disappear.

8. For example, among the Songhai, Dogon, and Bozo people who live along the River Niger.

Or from another perspective, taking the shore to symbolize the sensible realm, the zone of the ocean near the shore, which is populated by coral reefs and fish of unimaginable hues, corresponds to the imaginal world, while the more sparsely-populated deep blue sea corresponds to the angelic and arch-angelic realms. (The whales, dolphins, sharks, and other large fish and other creatures that populate the open sea are among the most direct manifestations of Divine Names of Beauty and Majesty in the animal kingdom.)

More generally, however, just as the ocean contains a seemingly boundless bounty of hidden beauties, which it occasionally tosses upon the shores, the unseen world of the spirit is described as a storehouse of beauties, which are occasionally brought forth into sensible form, often in the natural world, and sometimes by gifted artists. In fact one of the most common conceits of Arabic and Persian mystical literature is that of the poet diving into the depths of the unseen to gather pearls of verse and/or wisdom, which are then strung on a necklace to adorn the reader.⁹

Reversing this perspective and taking the sea as the sensible world, snorkeling has a very different symbolism. Snorkeling itself is a very contemplative activity: one mainly floats above the kaleidoscope of colors below, much like the dictate to be 'in the world, but not of it'. This existence 'in but not of' the sea/the world is only possible due to a connection between the self in the sea, representing this world (*dunyā* in Arabic), and the air, representing the world beyond (*al-akhirah* in Arabic). In snorkeling this is achieved through the snorkel, whose earliest form was a hollow reed.¹⁰ In Islamic spirituality, as in many other traditions, this connection is achieved through the heart/Intellect, that divine spark or spirit 'neither created nor uncreated', without which we would all drown in the world of appearances. This is also a kind of *barzakh*, connecting man with his Origin and home, and is what allows man to serve as a bridge connecting Heaven and Earth. As such, it is a kind of inner Logos, the inner Prophet,¹¹ the 'Christ within' or Buddha nature of other traditions.

9. The Arabic word for the stringing of pearls, *nazm*, is also used to refer to the composition of poetry, music, literature, and generally for any form of artistic exposition, organization, or composition.

10. There is a legend that the young Genghis Khan escaped a group of Mongol warriors seeking his life by using one such reed to breathe while he hid under the water in a river.

11. The Qur'ān alludes to this reality in the verse, *The prophet is closer to the believers than their own souls* (33:6).

Interestingly, in the famous opening of his *Mathnawī*, Rūmī likens the human side of this reality to a reed:

Hearken to this Reed forlorn,
Breathing, ever since 'twas torn
From its rushy bed, a strain
Of impassioned love and pain.¹²

Now, the reed or snorkel works because it is hollow, empty of all but air. Similarly, for the heart/Intellect to function properly it must be empty of all but God. As anyone who has snorkeled can tell you, it is necessary to clear your snorkel of water from time to time, especially if you dive beneath the surface, or turn your head the wrong way, or swim in choppy water. If you don't blow the water out every few minutes, you'll soon be choking on it. Similarly, in Islamic spirituality, and virtually every other spiritual tradition, it is necessary to regularly 'polish the heart' through prayer and invocation. If we do not, the cares, troubles, and distractions of this world can drown us. The snorkel, like the heart, serves as a lifeline, a connection, to our home, allowing us to survive, and even enjoy, our sojourn in an otherwise fatal environment.

SCUBA DIVING

Scuba diving takes the principles of snorkeling further, allowing you actually to dive beneath the surface and to spend significant periods of time under the water without coming up for air. The apparatus for scuba diving is also simple enough. You keep the mask and the snorkel, but add a tank holding compressed air on your back. The tank is connected to a hose which supplies air to your mouth, and to an inflatable vest that you can use to adjust your buoyancy.

Taking the sea as a symbol of the world of appearances, our time on a dive is limited and transient: when our air is up, we have to come up and out of the water. Similarly, we come into the world, move around, witness many beautiful and terrible things, and when our time is up, we return from whence we came.

When scuba diving, you become very aware of your breathing, as your air is very precious. Your air is a bit of the world above that you bring down into the water with you, keeping you alive. Similarly,

12. R. A. Nicholson, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1995), p. 31.

the breath which God blew into each of us (Qur'ān 15:29, *We blew into him [Adam] of our Spirit*) is a bit of the Divine world of the spirit, which we carry within us in this lower world, giving us life. In virtually every spiritual tradition, the breath or air symbolizes the spirit, and even in English, words such as 'inspire', 'respire' allude to this fact. When scuba diving, your breath becomes tangible, and you see it rise to the surface in bubbles. Each breath becomes like a prayer rising back up to the Divine, from whence it came. Breath is spirit, it is not of this world. For this reason, many spiritual traditions emphasize meditating upon and controlling the breath, or praying with each breath, as a means of integrating body, soul and spirit, and raising the former to a fuller state of being/consciousness. Scuba divers often speak of the meditative or even spiritual qualities of their dives, and from my own experience, this is due in no small part to the focus on the breath that diving engenders. Our every breath is a prayer, coming from and returning to the Divine; and exercises like meditation, and even scuba diving, can help make us aware of this fact. Our breaths, our lives in this world, are a precious, and finite, gift. Watching the bubbles rise from my mouth and from other divers, I was struck that this must be somewhat how our invocations (*dhikr*) appear in the imaginal world, rising up to rejoin their substance in the Divine empyrean.

When scuba diving, you try to achieve neutral buoyancy by balancing your weight with the air in your vest—that is, you want to be able to float at the same depth without rising or falling. The test for neutral buoyancy is to breathe in and breathe out. When you breathe in, your lungs expand with air, and you rise. When you breathe out, your lungs contract and you sink. You can also sink by contracting your body (curling up in a ball), and rise by expanding it (going spread-eagle). As you swim on a dive, you are constantly breathing in and out, and thus expanding and contracting, and thus rising and falling. This is similar to the phases of contraction and expansion one experiences on the spiritual path. When one considers the role of breathing in this process, a number of symbolic permutations emerge; but for the sake of space, I will only explore two. In exhaling, we contract and empty ourselves by giving of our breath, just as in performing prayer or invocation (*dhikr*) we give of ourselves, emptying (*faqr*) ourselves and our souls of all but God. As a result, we sink deeper into the sea of the Real. One could easily invert the symbolism and take sipping air to be like drinking the wine of remembrance (*dhikr*) of the Divine

Beloved, increasing the empty space (*faqr*) within us, making us rise out of illusion towards the Real.

Not only does breathing affect your buoyancy, but the air that you breathe and that fills your vest is compressed as you go to lower depths due to the increased pressure, and expands as you ascend. When descending, you feel this pressure in your ears, your head, and even sometimes in your lungs. A spiritual descent, or fall, is also often accompanied by a feeling of contraction, as Rūmī notes:

When you have neglected a part of your orisons in the Way,
there comes over you a painful and hot feeling of contraction...
the (spiritual) contractions (which occur) in (the case of) sins affect
(only) the heart;
after death (these) contractions become (actual) chains . . .¹³

Inversely, as you rise, air expands in your vest and lungs, making you rise faster. Any longtime traveler on a spiritual path has experienced a similar sense of acceleration or snowballing of spiritual progress, sometimes accompanied by a feeling of expansion. But just as ascending through the water too quickly can cause your lungs to rupture, attempts to progress too quickly spiritually can cause imbalances and ruptures in the soul. As the Algerian Sufi Shaykh Aḥmad al-^ḥAlawī once told a disciple who complained of a lack of illumination after years of practice, 'If you could make in one moment all the spiritual progress you have gradually made in these ten years, it would cause a mortal rupture in your soul.'¹⁴ Ascending too quickly can also cause the bends: a condition in which gasses in the joints and other regions of the body expand as they are depressurized, causing intense pain.

On the other hand, descending too quickly can cause nitrogen narcosis, or 'the rapture of the deep', in which you can become drunk, disorientated, giddy, or anxious as a result of inhaling air so pressurized that it dissolves into the nerve membranes. Needless to say, this can be very dangerous, as it can make ordinary things appear threatening, and dangerous things seem safe. Similarly, the world of phenomena can easily intoxicate us, making us unstable, anxious, giddy and

13. R. A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawī of Jalāluddīn Rūmī*, 8 vols (London: Luzac & Co., 1925-40), iii.349-53.

14. Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* (repr. Aligarh: Premier Publishing Company, 1993), p. 209.

unable to distinguish right from wrong, the safe from the dangerous. Conversely, taking the sea as a symbol of the heart, the 'rapture of the deep' can be likened to the unbalanced rapture certain aspirants feel when diving into the world of the spirit. This spiritual rapture (*jadhb*) can be dangerous, and can lead to a kind of madness if balance is not restored. Whatever perspective one takes on the symbolism of the 'rapture of the deep', the solution is the same: ascend a little bit and stay there until you sober up and regain your bearings.

We usually think of the spiritually enraptured (*majdhūbin* or 'holy madmen') as being 'somewhat out of it', but rather it is we so-called 'normal' or ordinary people who are 'somewhat out of' the real world, immersed in the phenomena of the world of appearances. In being immersed in appearances, we are absent from our true selves, whereas those in the grips of spiritual ecstasy are absent from appearances and present with their true Self. The Sufi tradition emphasizes that the ideal is to be present with the Real both in Itself/our true Self, as well as in its illusory appearances.

This balance is symbolized in scuba diving by neutral buoyancy, simply swimming in a straight line while breathing. Because of the expansion and contraction of air, this is actually quite a challenge at first, and is one of the marks of an experienced diver. It is easy to drift up or down, and the compression and expansion of air can accelerate this drift or make new divers overcompensate in the one or the other direction. Similarly, staying on 'the straight path' in spiritual wayfaring is not an easy feat, as slight deviations can easily lead to extremes in one direction or overcompensation in the other. Staying on the straight path requires constant small corrections, and is the mark of an experienced spiritual traveler, swimming between 'the bends' and 'the rapture of the deep', between the One and the many, the Inward and the Outward, being enraptured by the Real and being dazzled by its appearances.

When diving, the 'rapture of the deep' can sometimes be hard to notice since communication on a dive is quite challenging: it is usually limited to hand signals and gestures, since our speaking and hearing faculties were designed to work in air. Similarly, our ability to communicate with one another in this world is limited by time, space, and our different languages, but this is not the case in the communion of the spirit. As Rūmī writes,

There are many Hindus and Turks with the same tongue,
 And oh, many a pair of Turks, strangers to each other.
 Hence the tongue of intimacy is something else,
 It is better to be of one heart than of one tongue.
 Without speech, without oath, without register,
 A hundred thousand interpreters from the heart arise.¹⁵

Scuba diving contains most of the same symbolism as snorkeling, but it represents a further degree of involvement in this realm. Most people, especially when wearing a wet suit, are naturally buoyant in seawater, and so it takes some weight to enable them to remain submerged. For some, the tank is enough, but especially for deeper dives, you often have to add weights to your vest in order to explore the depths of the ocean. If you drop your weights on a dive, you will begin to rise faster and faster, as the air in your vest expands as the pressure decreases, until you pop up at the surface. Taking the sea to represent this world, this natural buoyancy and expansion represent the tendency of all things, but especially man, to return to the Divine, the natural perpetual ascent of all existence. This ‘unbearable lightness of being’ is known in Islamic philosophy as transubstantial motion, *ḥarakat al-jawhariyyah*: the tendency of being, especially the human substance, to increase in intensity by actualizing all of its various potentialities.¹⁶ Just as you and your air expand as you rise to the surface, so the soul, the human substance, ‘expands’ by actualizing its latent potentialities along its return to Pure Being.

Seen from another perspective, however, this buoyancy represents the centrifugal tendencies of our soul that we each encounter on a daily basis. When snorkeling, most people have to fight to get to the bottom, and if they relax, they will float to the top. Similarly, it takes great effort for most people to remain centered, to reach to their own

15. Nicholson, *The Mathnawī*, i.1206–8.

16. ‘According to Mullā Ṣadrā, all the various stages of the development of the soul are latent or potential within the original substance of the human sperm. Through the process of transubstantial motion, the soul traverses through the various levels or degrees of being until it finally attains complete independence of all matter and potentiality and is capable of enjoying immortal life. Thus for Mullā Ṣadrā, although the human soul is brought into being with the body, it possesses the spiritual subsistence which through the process of transubstantial motion enables it to attain a level of being which is completely independent of the body.’ (Zailan Morris, ‘Mulla Sadra on the Human Soul and its Becoming’, *Transcendent Philosophy* 11 [December 2010] 21–36 [at p. 23]).

hearts and stay there. There are the fortunate few who naturally 'sink' more than others, and, continuing to take the depths of the sea as a symbol of depths of the soul, the heart, there are those who naturally remain 'in their hearts'. The scuba gear, however, enables virtually anyone to sink to explore the depths, just as the initiation, doctrines, and practices of spiritual traditions allow virtually anyone to overcome the dispersive, centrifugal forces of their souls and discover his or her heart-center.

Taking the ocean to represent the world of the unseen, the scuba apparatus is that which allows one to safely explore this world, namely initiation. The highly pressurized air in the tank is like the initiatic power or *wilāyah* which makes spiritual wayfaring possible. The pressure is so intense in the tank that the mouthpiece from which you breathe has a regulator, which steps down the pressure, allowing you to breathe normally instead of being blown away. Similarly the spiritual power of *wilāyah* is almost always transmitted via the founder of a tradition, and from him, through his representatives to the disciple. These intermediaries channel the Divine Grace that allows their disciples to journey in the world of the spirit; and Sufi lore (and that of many other spiritual traditions) is full of stories of shaykhs (spiritual masters) through whom this power flowed so powerfully at one time or another that it killed their disciples or even those who happened to look at them.

Unsurprisingly, the deeper you go in the ocean, the greater the pressure, and the more difficult and involved the process of diving becomes. Deep dives are akin to mountain climbing: your body requires time to adjust to the different stages and levels of depth, and what is fine 10 meters under, can be fatal at 100 meters. Similarly, each of the different stages and stations of the spiritual path needs to be mastered before progressing to the next, and as the saying goes, 'the good deeds of the novice are the lapses of the advanced'. In diving, as in mountain climbing and spiritual wayfaring, the deeper/higher/farther one goes, the greater the stakes.

Due to these and other dangers, uncertified divers must always dive with a dive master (a degree of certification requiring 100 dives), and can only be certified by a dive instructor, which is an even higher degree of certification requiring more experience. Similarly, most spiritual aspirants can only safely explore the unseen world under the supervision of a spiritual master or one of his or her representatives.

Dive instructors are allowed to train and certify new divers, while dive masters can only lead other certified divers on dives. This hierarchy is quite similar to that of many spiritual orders, as the enterprises in which they are engaged require experience and can be dangerous. This is quite unlike snorkeling, which requires no certification.

Continuing to take the ocean as a symbol of the unseen, snorkeling is akin to reading spiritual books, or practicing the basic rudiments of a tradition, while scuba diving is more like being a serious spiritual traveler. The things you observe from a distance while snorkeling, you encounter, face-to-face, while scuba diving. On my first set of dives, I saw several stingrays at eye-level, as well as turtles, jellyfish, fire coral, and a large nurse shark. I swam with schools of fish that circled above, below, and on all sides of me. This experience of immersion can only be described faintly, and as the epigraph from Hafez indicates, those who remain on the surface can never know what it is like to be in the deep blue.

Who knew that beauty's bounties know no bounds of shape or hue?
 Who knew so many colours lay buried beneath the blue?
 Who knew why the ocean sighs and seethes in its torment?
 I do, I know the reason: It can't get enough of you.¹⁷

17. Verse by the author.

