8 The Gifts of Suffering and the Virtues of the Heart

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Introduction

After a tsunami struck Japan in 2011, I vividly recall an interview of an elderly man as he stood over the ruins of his hometown. Overcome by grief, he informed the reporter that the flood had killed not only his wife but also his children, their spouses, and his grandchildren. The tragedy took from him everything dear to his heart, leaving him shattered and alone to deal with the aftermath of the catastrophe. The story of the man—a modern version of Job—as it was recounted in the short news clip, could not but elicit profound feelings of compassion and sympathy from its global audience. It was also a story that, for those with religious and theological sensibilities, brought home what has often been identified in Western thought as the "problem of suffering."

More than 80 years ago, C. S. Lewis sought to respond to the challenge posed by this problem through a Christian framework for a modern audience in his book *The Problem of Pain*, with arguments that echoed lines of reasoning we would expect to find from representatives of other monotheistic religions as well that believe in an overarching benevolent, omnipotent deity. The heart of the issue, as Lewis laid it out in the opening of the short work, rested on acknowledging that God is both good and all-powerful. Now if He is good, then He would want us to be happy; and if He is omnipotent, He would be able to make it so. But since we are not happy, He must not be good, or He must not be omnipotent (or both). However, if He is lacking in either goodness or power, then He would be deprived of His most essential qualities. We would be better off, on philosophical grounds, in discarding belief in such a self-contradictory being altogether. This, in its most simplified form, was the crux of the argument, at least as far as Lewis spelled it out. He then began his response by attempting to excise both of these terms (*goodness* and *omnipotence*) of their more popular meanings; otherwise the problem, in his own view, remained unanswerable.[1]

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: William Collins, 2015), reprint, 16. The problem was articulated in the early Church by the theologian Lactantius (d. 340 CE), who had himself relied on its formulation by Epicurus (d. 270 BCE). Robin Ryan, *God and the Mystery of Human*

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Lewis may have been correct in assuming that the dilemma was for the most part a Christian one. Certainly, in Islam the theological energy of the tradition went by and large into other areas of inquiry, such as the ontological status of the Quran or the debate around free will and predestination, both of which stemmed from revelation's emphasis on divine unity, in the case of the former, and divine omnipotence, in the case of the latter. The problem of suffering (or for that matter, evil),[2] was never a major one to begin with, largely because the theological axioms of the tradition never brought it to the fore with any force. And the fact that the standard Sunni position, particularly as it was articulated by the Ash`aris or even for that matter the Hanbalis, took pains to preclude human conceptions of goodness and justice from determining how we might understand or think about divine goodness and divine justice (unlike the dominant traditions in the West), served in many ways to prevent the problem from making significant inroads into Muslim tradition.

The existence of suffering, however, was undeniable, and there is no question that there was significant intellectual energy expended into understanding not so much how its presence might be reconciled with the existence of a good God, but rather the wisdom behind its existence, why we experience it, and the gifts it has to offer. And no one addressed these more concrete concerns more thoroughly than the representatives of the Islamic spiritual tradition of *taṣawwuf* or *iḥsān*. The aim of our present inquiry is to turn to this tradition and explore, meditate, and reflect over how its authorities sought to guide the wayfarer through the adversities of life. The practical focus of their texts, concerned as they are first and foremost with *ʿilm al-muʿāmala* ("the science of practical conduct"), led their authors to focus principally on the appropriate responses to hardship and to learn how to recognize its gifts.

The Fall, Paradise Lost, the *Dunyā*, and the Abode of Trial

The philosophically minded contemplatives of Islam often remind us that we suffer here for the simple reason that we are in the *dunyā*, a realm that stands in the lowest rung of the cosmic hierarchy. If, metaphysically speaking, God occupies the summit of the great chain of being, with an essence in which consciousness, being, and bliss (*wijdān, wujūd, wajd*) converge, then the further one moves away from this apex, the more one descends into ignorance, non-being, and the absence of bliss. Thus, while our world carries traces of the Godhead, being at once an outpouring or radiation of It, it is not the center itself, and by virtue of its ontological distance, it must be marked by pain and heartache. This is why Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh (d. 1309) declares in one of his aphorisms, "Do not be surprised by the

Suffering: A Theological Conversation Across the Ages (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 9. Often, the presence of divine omniscience is included in the problem, since God's perfect knowledge, along with His omnipotence, would, or so it is argued, confer upon Him the ability to create a world without suffering.

2 The two problems here being largely intertwined.

appearance of sorrows, so long as you are in this world, for they manifest nothing except what is in keeping with its nature"[3]—the nature here being one of distance and separation from the divine center. Along similar lines, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 765) once remarked, "He who seeks that which was not created, tires his soul to no avail." When pressed to explain to what he was alluding, he replied, "repose in the world (*rāḥa fī'l-dunyā*)."[4] To seek freedom from suffering in this rung of the cosmic hierarchy is therefore to seek the impossible, since suffering is woven, in a sense, into its very fabric. Any freedom must be sought either from above, after death, or from within, in the present moment, since the Heart in its interiority provides access to the highest plenums of existence. Outwardly, however, we can only encounter no more than transient reflections of them, like glimmerings of sunlight on a stream.

The doctrine of the Fall in the Abrahamic religions captures the idea of this separation quite fittingly. When Adam and Eve were exiled from Paradise, the world into which they were sent could not offer them, in their existential excommunication, what they experienced in their homeland, being as they were now in the abode of *ghurba*. Indeed, it is a curious feature of the language of the Quran that when it speaks of the pleasures and pains of the afterlife, of the Garden and the Fire, it uses two words: *saʿāda* and *shaqāwa*. The former is usually translated as "felicity" and the latter as "wretchedness."[5] And yet one of the rare instances where *shaqāwa* is used to describe the suffering of this world occurs when it speaks of the anguish experienced by Adam and Eve in their banishment from God, from their origin, from their homeland, and also (in the Islamic texts at least), from each other.[6] This

3 Ibn ʿAbbād, *Sharḥ al-Ḥikam al-ʿAṭāʾiyya*, ed. Muḥammad Riḍā b. Muḥammad Bashīr al-Qahwajī (Damascus: Dār al-Farfūr, 2003), 119 (aphorism no. 24).

4 Cited in Ibn ʿAbbād, *Sharḥ*, 120 (commentary on aphorism no. 24).

5 "The terms *the wretched* and *the felicitous* refer to the damned and the saved, respectively; these are among the most commonly used terms for these two groups in Islamic texts;" Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (eds.), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 585 (commentary on Q 11:105). The root s-ʿ-d (from which we get *saʿāda*) is used twice in the Quran, in both instances to refer to felicity, happiness, and joy in the afterlife. In Q 11:105 we read, "Among them will be the wretched and the felicitous"; and in Q 11:108 we read, "And those who are felicitous will be in Paradise." As for the root sh-q-w/y, it appears on 12 occasions, in all but two instances to refer (explicitly or implicitly) to the state of the wretched in the afterlife (Q 11:105, 11:106, 20:123, 23:106, 87:11, 92:15) or to *not* being in such a state in this world (Q 19:4, 19:32, 19:48). As for the two instances where it is used to describe a condition in this world, the first of these occurs in Q 91:12, in reference to the unlawful killing of the She-camel by the people of Thāmud. The verse reads, "When the most wretched of them rushed forward [or was deputed]." *Wretched* here, however, may well refer to the individual's future state, in the afterlife. In his commentary on the verse, Rāzī refers to this person, possibly identified as Qudār b. Sālif, as "the most wretched of the ancients by the verdict of the Prophet;" *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990), commentary on Q 91:12. The English translators tend to render *ashqā* here as "the most wicked [of them]." For the other instance, see ensuing note.

6 "Let him [Iblis] not expel the two of you [Adam and Eve] from Paradise, so that you would become wretched" (Q 20:117).

is why Muslim tradition notes that the reason Jabal ʿArafāt east of Mecca is known as the Mount of Recognition is because it is where Adam and Eve finally met, recognizing each other after two centuries of separation.[7] This is not to say that we are not incapable of experiencing great anguish in this world, as the history of our species bears ample witness, or, for that matter, the tumultuousness of our own private lives. Relatively speaking, however, these pains cannot compare to the possibilities of wretchedness after death, nor to that initial experience in the wake of the Fall, of the trauma of Paradise lost so vividly recounted in the literature of the Western religions.

Intertwined into the story of the Fall is the idea, central to the Quran, that the *dunyā* is the abode of Trial (*ibtilāʾ*).[8] As the Quran states, "We created the human being from a drop of thickened fluid, to try to him (*nabtalīhī*). Thus, We have given him hearing and sight" (Q 76:2). And in the chapter of the Cave we read, "We have made that which is on the earth an adornment, to try them, to see which of them is best in conduct" (Q 18:7). To exist in this world is therefore to exist in a realm marked by hardships that accompany divinely ordained tests—tests meant to try, develop, and ripen the soul. In a sense, our mettle is continuously tested here, and this will continue into our final breaths. This is one reason why this world is not the domain of *shaqāwa* proper, since the general usage of the term in the Quran implies a state of a decisive finality and even hopelessness (even though divine mercy, unperceived, may still have the final say).[9] In worldly trials, however, there is always light at the end of the tunnel, and one can reach out to it through whatever it may be that the trial is summoning one to. While this may not entirely alleviate the intensity of its suffering, inwardly one may nevertheless find some measure of comfort knowing that one has done the best they could, without despairing, surrendering to the providence that brought it to one's doorstep. Besides, a conviction that *how* we respond to trials will determine our posthumous states—our stations after death, our ranks in the afterlife—lightens their weight immeasurably, since an interiorized, contemplative religiosity always calls us to keep our eyes set on the larger scheme of things, beyond what we may see through the very narrow gaze of our terrestrial field of vision, concerned only with our fleeting welfare in the here and now.

7 See John Penrice, *Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran* (London: Curzon Press, 1971), reprint, 96 (s.v. ʿ-r-f).

8 For an excellent study of the concept of *balāʾ*/*ibtilāʾ*, see Nasrin Rouzati, *Trial and Tribulation in the Quran: A Mystical Theodicy* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2015). Colin Turner's observation in the foreword is worth repeating: "The concept of the test is fundamental to the very act of creation itself" (ix). For a useful though dated treatment on suffering in Islam, see Montgomery Watt, "Suffering in Sunnite Islam," *Studia Islamica* 50 (1979): 5–19. See also Muhammad Faruque's more focused article, "Does God Create Evil? A Study of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Exegesis of *Sūrat al-Falaq*," *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 28, no. 3 (2017): 271–291.

9 On this theme, see William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); Mohammed Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), chapters 6–7.

The Gifts of Tribulation, Surrender, and the Virtues of the Heart

This brings us to the main theme of our inquiry: without suffering, we would be deprived of the opportunities to cultivate the virtues of the Heart. Indeed, few if any of them could sprout without the waters of pain. One of the most defining of them is *ṣabr* (patience, forbearance, steadfastness),[10] the ideal response to *ibtilāʾ*, and about which a hadith states, "[It] is one of treasuries of paradise."[11] Usually paired in Sufi ethics with gratitude (*shukr*), the classical authorities debated among themselves over which of these qualities was more eminent. One argument ran that since thankfulness was an effortless response to blessings, while patience an effortful response to trials, the latter was superior. After all, it included the virtue of *mujāhada* or "struggle," required a laborious and taxing exercise of self-will, and came far less naturally. Another line of reasoning drew more directly from the Quran: revelation says to the grateful, "We shall surely give you more" (Q 14:7), but it says about the people of *ṣabr*, "Verily God is with the patient" (Q 8:46). Since intimacy with Him (literally "with-ness," *maʿiyya*) is far more valuable than any of His gifts—the grateful receive *from Him* while the patient receive *Him*—it stands to reason that *ṣabr* occupies pride of place.[12] Yet another argument for its superiority rested on the grounds, once again scriptural, that God says, "We shall confer upon the patient their rewards without limit" (Q 39:10). There is no other virtue, the exegetical authorities stressed, about which such a promise is made, the recompense of which is not bound by any constraints whatsoever.[13] This was why Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209) in his famous commentary declared (drawing on a hadith), that when those who lived in relative ease (*ʿāfiya*) will see the rewards laid out on the Scales of Judgement, with no end in sight, for those who endured great trials, they will long to return to the world to undergo even more suffering than those afflicted with tribulations, that they might realize patience in all its modes.[14]

Another virtue that grows out of the soil of suffering is *tawakkul*, literally "reliance" on or "trust" in God.[15] The *mutawakkil* or trustor recognizes, sometimes after a period of defiance or resistance to divine decree, that what God chooses for us

10 Literally, *ḥabs al-nafs*, "holding the soul back," from what it might otherwise have a natural inclination to, whether it be complaint or anxiety. See Atif Khalil, "On Patience (*ṣabr*) in Sufi Virtue Ethics," in *Mysticism and Ethics in Islam*, ed. Bilal Orfali, Atif Khalil, and Mohammed Rustom (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 2022), 71–78.

11 al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Aleppo: Dār al-Waʿī, 1998), 4:96.

12 Qushayri, *Risāla*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. Sharīf (Damascus: Dār al-Farfūr, 2002).

13 The other instances of *bi ghayr ḥisāb* ("without limit," "without reckoning") in the Quran involve God's unconstrained bestowal of provision or sustenance (*rizq*). "He gives to whom He wills, without reckoning" (Q 2:212, 3:37, 24:38; cf. 3:27). The expression is also used in one instance (Q 38:39) in the context of describing the permission Solomon was granted by God to give of the gifts He had given him.

14 See his commentary upon Q 39:10 in *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990).

15 For more on *tawakkul*, see Atif Khalil, "Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Sufis on Trust in God (*tawakkul*)," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society* 71 (2022): 87–105.

is better than what we might choose for ourselves, since, like children, we fail to discern long-term consequences, preferring at all costs the sweet pleasures of the fleeting moment or the immediate future to necessary but painful surgical divine interventions. The compassionate, corrective trial, which forces us to undergo what we find unnecessarily distressing, contains concealed within it a wisdom, the knowledge of which we may only see when the veils are lifted, after death. Trusting in the omniscience behind God's oversight of our affairs, the trustor lets go, allowing the divine Trustee (*al-Wakīl*) to do what faith has always summoned him to. After all, we read in the Quran, "And in God let the faithful put their trust."[16] Outlining the characteristics of this virtue, itself a fruit of faith, one of the early gnostics observed: "From the reality of trust is that the servant of God abandon his own love for what God loves, his own choice for God's choice, his own calculating direction (*tadbīr*) for God's direction, through an independence from himself, while gazing at the flow of divine ordinances."[17]

Tawakkul, in this sense, is often born of a trial from which we cannot find a means of escape. Exasperated by futile attempts to free ourselves of its grip, we may find ourselves forced, in the end, to hand the reins of control over to the One in whose hands, paradoxically, they always were. It is this intentional, conscious, and volitional act that comprises the essence of trust and brings with it freedom from anxiety in the midst of the very trial. This is why the gnostic quoted earlier also said, "Concerns do not find a way into the [hearts of] the people of trust."[18] Once rooted, the virtue may even remain when the trial that bore it comes to pass—this itself being one of the gifts of the trial, with a sign of its internalization being that one not immediately turn in the face of every new hardship to desperate pleas of petition, neither to God, much less His creatures, for deliverance. Sometimes, the trustor may even sense, in her deeper recesses, an internal rebuke in response to a prayer to have it lifted: one movement of the heart, inspired by the *nafs*, may be checked by a higher movement, inspired by the spirit (*rūḥ*). Here, the suppliant may simply call out, tired of resisting destiny, "Do what You know is best." In this respect, *tawakkul* is closely bound to another central virtue of the spiritual life: *riḍā*, namely contentment, satisfaction, or good pleasure. It is to this state we are to aspire in this world, with *saʿāda*, felicity or happiness, understood as the gratification of every desire, reserved for the next world,[19] at least as far as the outward circumstances of our existence are concerned.

The loftiness of this quality of *riḍā* in Sufi ethics is drawn attention to by Makkī (d. 996) in the context of highlighting a debate that took place in early Islam on the status of three people. One of them anticipates and even yearns for death, because death, for him, opens the gate for an encounter with the divine Beloved. The second

16 Q 3:122, 3:160, 5:11, 9:51, 14:11, 39:38, and 64:13.

17 Attributed by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī to one of the *ʿārifīn*. See Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, ed. Maḥmūd al-Riḍwānī (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 2005), 2:910 (chapter on *tawakkul*).

18 Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 2005, 2:910.

19 "They shall have all that they desire, and with Us is more" (Q 50:35).

desires a prolonged life in order to accumulate as many virtuous deeds as possible over his brief journey through the world. And the third man leaves the matter entirely to God, saying to himself, "If He wills, He can give me life for as long as it pleases Him; and if He wills, He can give me death tomorrow." Where do each of these people stand, both in relation to God, and in relation to each other? For Makkī, the lowest rank belongs to the one who wishes for a long life. The nobility of this rank—and it is still a noble one—rests on the man's desire to accumulate as many beautiful deeds as possible, before the final accounting, and not out of a wish to delay the return simply to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of this world. Such a person stands at the station of hope or *rajāʾ*, since he hopes for a grace through which God will enable him to live a life of holiness and piety. The second rank, continues Makkī, belongs to the one who longs for death, not because of the toils and hardships of life, let alone suicidal inclinations, but out of a pining to return to God, to the ultimate object of his love and affection. Such a man stands at the station of *tashawwuq*, of longing, desire, and yearning, consumed as he is by a love for his Maker. The supreme degree, however, belongs to the one who leaves the decision to God, since he occupies, according to Makkī, the *maqām* or station of *riḍā*, being content and pleased with what God decrees for him. His state is like that of the soul before it entered the world: just as one did not choose to come into the *dunyā*, let alone when to enter it, the one marked by *riḍā* foregoes the decision, returning to an almost primordial state of complete and total surrender to God. Makkī goes on to declare that there is no fourth rank, and that the spiritual aspirant should aim to stand on one of the three rungs. That he unhesitatingly accords the supreme state to the station of *riḍā* illustrates the value attached in Sufi ethics to overcoming the desire to control our destiny, sometimes rooted in a subtle and even rebellious self-willing that may, in its origin, be retraced to the first sin of Adam and Eve. This was an act that marked the first rupture between what professor Chittick in his studies of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) has identified as the "prescriptive" and "engendering command," namely what God commands us for our salvation, but which may not necessarily come to pass, and what He commands through His creative fiat, His *kun fa-yakūn*, and which *does* come to pass.[20]

Trials, Divine Decrees, and Human Petitions

Thus far, we have drawn attention to the importance placed on passively acquiescing to fate and divine decree. But the matter, as one might expect, is not so straightforward, and to suggest otherwise would be to distort the complex and variegated teachings found in the tradition, which, taken as a whole, never encourages one to adopt a course of complete stoicism. To be clear, one need not, as a law of the

20 That is to say, the *amr takwīnī* (engendering command) and *amr taklīfī* (prescriptive command). See, for example, William Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 292–293.

path, avoid every supplication or *duʿā* which aims to thwart a trial. The Quran, we know, is not devoid of accounts of men and women of great sanctity—from Job to Mary—who sought divine help to be released from the clutches of a crushing predicament. Indeed, at times it is impossible to resist such a prayer. There are occasions when the soul, unrestrained and unrestrainable, cries out to God with all its might for release. A story from the life of Junayd (d. 910) illustrates this very point. A woman who had lost her son once came to him, imploring him for a prayer. The holy man counseled her to be patient, and so she left, heeding his advice. After some time had elapsed, she came back, with the same plea. He advised her as he had done before, "Be patient," and so she departed once again. Finally, after some period she returned, more desperate than ever, lamenting her inability to exercise patience any longer. "If the matter is as you claim, then go," he said. "Your son has returned." Perplexed, she left, only to find, to her astonishment, that her son had indeed found his way back. When she inquired how he knew, Junayd answered with the verse, "Does He not respond to the desperate one when he calls upon Him, and removes for him his affliction?" (Q 27:62). Her state of *iḍṭirār* (abject need, desperation) had reached a point where, the Sufi master felt, a divine response was inevitable.[21]

It is significant to note from this story, one that carries echoes of the account of Joseph in the Quran, that Junayd did not instruct her to passively accept her fate. He told her to be patient, but with a patience that did not preclude praying for deliverance from her affliction. What parent, after all, would not do all that lay within their power for the safe return of a lost child? It is only natural and human to desire the well-being of our friends and family, especially those whom we love most. It is also natural, for that matter, to desire our own welfare. And this is one reason why Ibn ʿArabī unreservedly declares that patience does not necessarily entail avoiding complaint (*shakwā*) altogether—it only entails not raising our grievances to others. One may, however, do so with God, as Job himself did when he prayed, "Affliction has come over me, and You are the most merciful of the merciful" (Q 21:83). To ask God to remove a trial (*balāʾ*) as the Israelite prophet had done, does not deprive one of the virtue of patience, nor does such a petition reveal a deficiency in one's own state.[22] On this matter Ibn ʿArabī is explicit. In fact, he goes so far as to state that God afflicts us so that we might turn to Him in humble petition, to lift those very trials[23]—trials that bring us to the prayer rug, broken, in a state of abject need, reminding us of our own utter dependence on Him.

One of the spiritual benefits of seeking release from a tribulation is that it forces the suppliant to set his life in order, not only with God but others, at least if he wants his petitions answered. The desperation elicited by the *ibtilāʾ* forces the one tried to make far-reaching changes that he might otherwise not have had the least

21 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 456.

22 Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, ed. Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999), 3:310.

23 Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 3:310.

inclination to. He may be so comfortably ensconced in heedlessness, devoid of any higher concerns, that the trial was the only way for God to awaken him out of his slumber. Our Sufi authors would probably have little reason to contest C. S. Lewis's famous observation that "God whispers to us in our pleasures . . . but shouts in our pain: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. A bad man, happy, is a man without the least inkling that his actions . . . are not in accord with the laws of the universe."[24] The trial may thus rouse the one tried, catalyzing a process of reform that compels him to make concrete changes out of a hope that God pull him out of his misery. Even before he turns his attention to weeding out subtler vices of the soul, there are more rudimentary actions of the limbs, rules of outward behavior, to which the petitioner will feel compelled by a universal power far beyond his reach to conform. Otherwise, his prayers—and he would be the first to recognize this—would amount to no more than empty words. We dislike empty speech, and no sincere person turning to God would expect God to accept it as well. On this point, the Sufis and the *ʿulamāʾ* are unanimous: a genuine effort to bring one's life into agreement with what God wants of us, through His prescriptive command, forms a prerequisite for His response, at least in the way we may want it. It is not enough to simply raise one's hands and petition. As one early authority declared, "How can you expect the answering of [your] prayer, when you have blocked its pathway with sin?"[25] And in ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī's (d. 1166) *Ghunya*, we find an articulation of the same sentiment:

> Petitionary prayer has rules of propriety and conditions. These are the means through which one elicits a response and obtains the object of his desire. He who observes and fulfils them is among those who have been responded to, while he who remains heedless of them or fails to meet their conditions, is among those who transgress with respect to what is required by petitionary prayer.[26]

This does not mean that God never answers the prayers of those who stubbornly refuse to change, since, in the final order, "the wind blows where it pleases," and with God all things are possible. It may be that answering the petition of such person on the part of God amounts, in its own way, to a greater affliction. Or it may simply be an illustration of a divine compassion that, unlike our own, remains unbound by limits. This is one reason why the Sufi authorities remind us that we should never lose hope, since God even answered the prayer of Iblīs when he sought respite (Q 7:14–15). But they also stress that if we genuinely wish to be delivered of an affliction, it lies in our own interests to create the conditions, within the powers vested in us, for its removal.

24 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 91.

25 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 463.

26 The saying is attributed it to an anonymous earlier figure. ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, *Ghunya*, ed. Yūsuf b. Maḥmūd al-Ḥājj Aḥmad (Damascus: Maktabat al-ʿIlm al-Hadīth, 2001), 409.

When Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth (d. 879), the founder of the Saffārid dynasty, succumbed to an illness which none of his physicians could cure, they summoned the saintly Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896) to his court, in the hopes that due to his piety, his prayers for the ruler might be answered. When the request was placed before him, he informed Yaʿqūb that as long there were victims unfairly detained in his prisons, his own prayers would be useless, that God's justice would not permit it. Compelled by need and realizing the extent of a crime to which he had previously given little thought, he had no choice but to free them all. Sahl then prayed, and the man was cured of his malady.[27] The affliction, in the end, was a gift, opening up a pathway for the deepening of his own conscience and a recognition of his misdeeds, not to mention the internalization of a state of *faqr*, of impoverishment before God—yet another virtue of heart. In a sense, one might argue that we are all little Yaʿqūbs governing our tiny fiefdoms, with trials that descend when necessary to set our lives in order. The counsel of Sahl may, in our own cases, either well up from our own hearts, or appear through the mouth of another in a form so compelling that we cannot, in all sincerity and true to our conscience, refuse it.

To Pray, or Not to Pray?

From our preceding treatment of how we should respond to afflictions, there is no doubt something of a tension within the Sufi tradition, at least on the surface, regarding whether or not one should seek release from trials through prayer. Some masters clearly emphasized the need to surrender to God's will, to accept destiny and acquiesce to what has been ordained. Thus, Wāsiṭī (d. 936) declared, "To choose what had been coming to you from pre-eternity (*azal*) is better than to object (through petitions) to the present moment."[28] And Dhū'l-Nūn (d. 859) is said to have informed an old man who requested a prayer from him, "If something has been preordained by God for you, then many unspoken prayers have already been heard: otherwise, what use has the drowning person for shouting? Only that he is sooner drowned, and more water comes to his throat."[29] Such an approach seemed the swiftest and most direct way to develop patience, trust, contentment, and similar qualities. Yet others emphasized the necessity of petitionary prayer in virtually all conditions because it revealed "neediness of servitude,"[30] thereby allowing one to cultivate the virtues of *faqr* and *fāqa*. For this faction, there lay a danger in not regularly turning to God through petitions, since such a state could reflect subtle, deeply seated feelings of self-sufficiency and independence. This was one reason why Ibn ʿArabī (not necessarily an advocate of this second view) argued, somewhat counter-intuitively, that when one supplicates, one should *not* begin with the

27 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 460.

28 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 456.

29 Cited in Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 156.

30 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 456.

needs of others, out of a sense of altruism, but oneself, since to do otherwise suggests that one stands *less* in need of divine aid and guidance than others do. When the Quran chastises those who "withhold their hands" (Q 9:67), a passage often interpreted to refer to those who refuse to *give*,[31] at least some advocates of the second view argued it referred to those who refuse to *ask*, to those who hold their hands back from petitionary prayer, from beseeching divine aid.[32]

The adoption of either one of these approaches too stringently and dogmatically presented obvious problems. With respect to the proponents of the first view, few as they were, their attitude could not, as Schimmel observed, be "regarded as typical for the Sufis in general," because the Quran instructs us to seek divine help on a regular basis.[33] And since the meditations of the Sufis were themselves not only concordant with but drawn from the well-springs of Muslim revelation, such an approach could not gain a strong foothold in the religious consciousness of the community.[34] The danger in the second view, however, of continuously seeking a way out through prayer of every hardship and unease, of every trifling inconvenience, was that it prevented one from benefitting from the gifts brought about through trials, from learning how to surrender to an omniscient power and sacrifice one's own will before the altar of God's will.

One method of reconciling the two perspectives, the merits of each of which were self-evident in their own right, lay in encouraging the afflicted one to combine both approaches, to petition through the tongue while remaining satisfied in the heart.[35] But the problem here was rather simple: since a genuine prayer of petition requires complete presence of heart (*ḥuḍūr al-qalb*), the articulation of a sincere feeling of need, how effective could such a request actually be? Certainly, the feeling of *iḍṭirār*, a powerful and even cosmic effectuating force (as we saw in the story of Junayd) would be altogether absent. The best resolution, the one that appears to have come to dominate the tradition, was the view enunciated by Qushayrī in his *Treatise*. Since, as he writes, "the moments vary," one should observe what is demanded by each of them. In certain circumstances, one cannot, as noted earlier, help but pray for release from the crippling effect of a trial. And yet in others, one may discern the profound benefits of the tribulation, recognize one's capacity through divine grace to endure it, and leave, in the end, the matter to God, trusting in His final judgement. This nevertheless raises the question of how precisely one is to know which course of action to take. Qushayrī (d. 1074) recommends that one observe the heart, paying attention to the direction to which it leads. One way

31 See the commentary upon Q 9:64 in Nasr et al. (eds.), *The Study Quran,* 524. Another interpretation (attributed to al-Qurṭubī) is that it refers to those who refused to go out in battle.

32 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 455.

33 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam,* 156.

34 This view was not entirely without basis in the Hadith literature. As a divine report through the Prophet states, "As for the one who does not petition Me because of his preoccupation with My remembrance, I give him more than I give to the one who petitions;" Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 456.

35 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 457.

is to discern whether the petition elicits a state of contraction (*qabḍ*) or expansion (*basṭ*). If it is the former, then one should hold oneself back from the request; and if it is the latter, one may proceed, with the ease with which the prayer flows out of one's heart a sign that this is in fact what the moment is summoning one to.[36] As Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh declares in one of his aphorisms, "When He lets loose your tongue in prayer, then know He desires to give you."[37] Conversely, the incapacity to petition, either simply due to a hardness of heart which alienates one from God, or the heart's own resistance to asking for ease when the benefit of the trial is recognized in the interior recesses of the self, may be a sign that its removal was never part of the divine design to begin with.

The Gifts of the Pandemic

We began our reflection on the problem of suffering by drawing attention to the tragedy of the Tsunami that hit Japan and many of the surrounding countries of the Far East more than a decade ago. Years later, we would witness, and continue to witness, a different but more far-reaching global crisis.

From its beginning, one of the curious features in our public conversation about the pandemic, particularly in the West, was the virtual absence of any deeper meditation on the meaning of the tribulation. The questions that guided our analyses were almost always invariably framed along purely mechanistic, material, and "worldly" lines: Why, for example, did the Chinese not report COVID-19 to the global community as soon as it appeared? Why did Trump not take the threat seriously, despite the early forecast of a potential health crisis by American medical intelligence reports? Why did things go so bad in Italy? How long would it take before a vaccine would appear? What would be the short- and long-term economic implications of worldwide quarantining? Who was ultimately responsible?

No one asked, behind the endless array of pontifications for which all kinds of experts were drawn from the international community, whether there might be some wisdom behind the crisis at all, whether it might be teaching us something about the direction in which the world was going. Were we really, to use Trump's words, at "war with a foreign virus," or might the virus even have been a friend, to help set the balance of the earth in order, through surgical incisions that no oligarchy or group of nations could successfully bring about on their own? By reframing our angle of inquiry, there were more penetrating questions that could have been, and certainly may still be, explored.

The need to reframe our default modes of inquiry, as we have seen in this short chapter, is a recurring motif in Sufi literature. This is because the human being in a fallen state looks at the world through the eyes of *baṣar*, outward sight, whereas the

36 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 457.

37 Ibn ʿAbbād, *Sharḥ*, 251 (aphorism no. 102). Ibn ʿAbbād corroborates the aphorism through the hadith, "He who is given petitionary prayer is not deprived of a response."

sage looks at it through the eyes of *baṣīra*, insight. And through *baṣīra*, as we have also seen, an outward trial may very well turn out to be an inward blessing, bringing to us a gift that we might be too blind or stubborn to see. External appearances, as we know, are all too deceiving.

What then, if any, might the gifts of the pandemic have been? While it lies beyond the scope of this treatment to explore the question in any depth, there are a few we may draw attention to, in passing.

For one thing, as the onset of the pandemic brought the economic and industrial juggernaut of the modern world to a halt, we saw some of the positive ecological effects of this slowing down on the environment, all the way from Italy to China. News outlets, for example, reported that as the waters of Venice's canals began to clear up and detoxify, dolphins started to appear in unprecedented numbers. In fact, pollution levels in regions under quarantine reached an all-time low. It was as if nature was teaching us that there is perhaps no better remedy for our dismal ecological predicament than to seriously slow down and curtail the technological and industrial pace of our lives; that we should adopt simpler, less ecologically corrosive, more nature-friendly, forms of living; and that there are few things worse for the natural environment than for us to collectively pursue unrestrained material progress. The words of climate scientist Peter Gleick (founder of the Pacific Institute in Berkeley, California) on the effects of COVID-19 are worth sharing in this context:

> As for the environmental benefits we see from the slowdown of day-to-day life and economic activity in terms of improving air quality and other slight benefits, it's a good sign. . . . But it would be nice if we could improve our environment without having to cripple our economy.[38]

Clearly, a global system in which the environment can only be salvaged through a "crippling of the economy" is unsustainable. The issue cannot be reduced to a question of the economy or the environment, since we are, after all, a part of the environment. Only far-reaching changes to our modes of life, our relation to nature, and our preoccupation with industrial and technological growth can save us from what may be our own inevitable end.[39]

Another gift of the pandemic was that it revealed to us how closely we are all interconnected to each other—how the well-being or suffering of one person effects the well-being or suffering of another. Few things demonstrated this as vividly as the contagiousness of COVID-19, especially as new variants emerged. The rich and well-do-to could no longer ignore the fate of the poor and the exposed,

38 "Why We React Fast to Pandemics but Slow to Climate Change," www.theweathernetwork.com/nu/news/article/why-we-react-fast-to-pandemics-coronavirus-but-slow-to-climate-change (last accessed July 27, 2022).

39 This question has already been extensively explored, for those unfamiliar, by S. H. Nasr in his many works on the environment.

since the virus was transmitted through the vast web of relationships that we are all, inescapably, bound to. Such are the conditions, whether we like it or not, of life in the global village of the 21st century. It is worth noting, in this context—to return again to C. S. Lewis—an observation of his in the *Screwtape Letters*, namely, that the philosophy which governs hell stands at the very opposite of such a reality. Here, what is good for you is not necessarily good for me, and what is bad for you is not necessarily bad for me. "The whole philosophy of Hell," asserts the devil in Lewis's work, "rests on the recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specially, that one self is not another self. My good is my good and your good is yours. What one gains another loses."[40] The pandemic, on the other hand, taught us the antithesis of this doctrine. It brought home, very concretely, the need to love one's neighbor as one oneself, a "virtue of the heart" not only in Christianity, but also Islam. Indeed, we find in some Sufi accounts an exhortation to love the other even more than we love ourselves, through the altruistic virtue of *īthār*, of preferring others to ourselves, not only in worldly but even after-worldly matters.[41] If anything, the pandemic forced us (or at least some of us) to more fully acknowledge our interdependence and reconsider the values of self-interest and self-preference that guide the lives of so many of us in the modern world, particularly in the absence of sacred traditions that place self-transcendence squarely at the center of human purpose and teleology.

Yet another gift was that that pandemic reminded us of our own frailty as a species. We pride ourselves in our fallen state—as promethean men and women, to use the expression of S. H. Nasr—in our mastery over the earth. Standing at the summit of the ecosystem, through our technology and instrumental rationality, we easily forget just how feeble we are. That such a materially and physically insignificant phenomenon as a virus (and a relatively mild one at that) could cripple our governments as severely as it did, for at least two years, was a reminder that "the human being was created weak" (Q 4:28); it was a reminder not to "walk proudly on the earth" (Q 17:37). And that it was a virus that brought about such a turn of events, an entity that brings us to about as close as we may get to an unseen reality, at the material level, without entering in the realm of the *ghayb* proper, the actual unseen realm, also appears to have been, in a subtle way, a reminder of the extent to which our lives are effected by truly unseen powers. It was as if we were being taught, through analogy, that the *ʿālam al-ghayb* has the final say over the *ʿālam al-maḥsūsāt*, and that in the final scheme of things, the world of the senses is subordinate to the world above.

40 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), reprint, 71–72.

41 Consider the following saying attributed to Abū Yazīd (d. 874): "[H]e is my disciple who stands on the brink of Hell and takes by the hand everyone being conveyed to Hell and dispatches him to Heaven, and then enters Hell in his place." Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, *Memorial of the Saints*, abridged trans. A. J. Arberry (London: Arkana Penguin, 1990), reprint, 120. On the Bodhisattva-like quality of a certain class of saints, see the chapter by Michel Chodkiewicz entitled, "The Double Ladder," in *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ʿArabī*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 147–173.

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