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The Sufi Understanding of Individuality*

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God revealed His love for this world and for humanity when He disclosed to the Prophet Muhammad, 'I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known. I brought forth creation so that I would be known'. We have here a metaphysical statement as well as an expression of feeling. We are informed that the Divine Identity, though essentially unknown and transcendent at one level, loves and is known at another level which is this world. At this level the Divine Self is intimate with His creatures.

A decade or so ago I was asked by some friends to perform their wedding. I invoked the first half of God's statement, just quoted, while addressing the large gathering of family and guests. Speaking about the love and yearning that brings two people together in marriage, I said that their love echoed God's own yearning just as He described it with 'I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known'.

'Isn't it true,' I asked them, 'that what each person most deeply yearns for is the intimacy of being known by another? Isn't this what brings meaning to our human experience? And isn't human love the evidence and symbol of God's love?'

Or, to quote Rūmī who addresses God on this point:

O Soul free of 'I and we',
subtle spirit in man and woman!
When man and wife unite, that One is You!¹

As I spoke, a number of the guests started to weep. Mention of the *ḥadīth* apparently touched what was in their hearts—and we human beings do occasionally weep upon hearing whatever evokes our own

* This is the text of a lecture which was presented to the Temenos Academy on 29 November 2010. All translations are my own.

1. *Clarifications: Selections from the Sublime Verses of Jalāl ud-dīn Rūmī*, translated by Robert Abdul Hayy Darr (forthcoming from Archetype), p. 64.

yearning for intimacy. We are, after all, creatures of intimacy; and without it we feel lonely and isolated.

The human being is called in Arabic *insān*, a word related to *uns* which means 'intimacy'. Another word associated with the *insān*, the human being, is *nasiān* which means 'forgetfulness'. In the Qur'ān, God uses the verbal form of this word when He says: '*And do not be like those who forget God, for He made them forget themselves*' (59:19).

At the very beginning of Rūmī's masterpiece, the *Masnawī*, he reminds us that our feelings of alienation are the evidence of our forgotten union with God. Here is the famous opening:

Hear this reed as it complains,
and tells the story of separations.

Ever since I was cut from the reed bed,
my tune made men and women to lament.²

Rūmī mentions the separations as plural because most people feel deprived of God's Presence while they live in this world; and the loss of God-consciousness results in alienation from ourselves as well as from our fellow beings.

Intimacy is the harmonious state of our primordial nature, and discord arises when we lose touch with our nature soon after being born into this world. Our true individuality is the consciousness of our relationship with God. Yet most of us pass our lives only hazily aware of this relationship, and find ourselves cut off from our primordial intimacy with the Divine.

Sufis usually introduce their teachings on the 'primordial intimacy' by quoting a passage in the Qur'ān which also informs us about the nature and condition of individuals before they arrive in this world. In this famous verse, God addresses the gathered souls of all of Adam's progeny: '*I made them to bear witness about themselves by asking them, "Am I not your Lord?" They answered, "Yes, truly, we witness that this is so."*' (7:172). God speaks to all the souls and they all immediately recognize Him as their Lord. This frequently quoted verse is known in

2. Jalāl ud-dīn Rūmī, *Masnawī*, from the Konya manuscript. Book I, lines 1–2.

Sufi literature as the 'covenant of *alast'*, the latter word in Arabic being shorthand for '*Am I not your Lord?*'

Things are far more ambiguous in this world of form where most of us can no longer hear the eternal call of '*Am I not your Lord?*' Our true awareness, our spirituality, has been compromised by our earthly journey across the landscapes experienced through our sense perceptions. Our senses and instincts give rise to self-objectification and to the objectification of the world around us. We have acquired the illusion of having an independent existence, and this has left us isolated from the Whole. The Sufis claim that, at a deeper level, each person's individuality remains a unique and sacred relationship with God. The truth is that we have neither existence nor individuality except in relationship to the Divine and the rest of creation. We are individually irrelevant except in relationship to the Divine Individual, of Whom we are each partial reflections. Immersed in the world of perishable forms, most people have forgotten who they are.

Rūmī writes:

A man who's lived many years in a city
shuts his eyes and drifts off to sleep for a while;
He now sees a different city, one full of good and evil
but he doesn't remember his own town or think,
'I was there; now I'm in some other place.
This isn't my town, this is an illusion.'
No, he thinks that it is his own town.
It seems original to him and feels natural.
What wonder if spirit, passing through places,
does not remember its birthplace nor its home;
For this world resembles sleeping and dreaming
which conceal reality like clouds hiding the stars.³

To better grasp the Sufis' understanding of individuality, let us consider some of their teachings. Sufis speak of a timeless and eternal Reality, an Absolute Unity. They attribute real individuality to that one Existence alone. Mahmud Shabistarī writes:

3. *Clarifications*, p. 6.

Read the sentence, 'I was a Hidden Treasure',
and become aware of the elusive secret.

Know that the world from end to end is a mirror.
In each atom blaze one hundred shining suns.⁴

In his famous commentary on Shabistari's *Garden of Mystery*, Muḥammad Lāhijī writes:

Know that the universe, with respect to its totality, is like a great mirror in which the Real One is showing all of existence as it appears through His Divine Names [which describe the knowable Divine Attributes inherent in the unknowable Divine Essence]; and each and every atom in the world is also a mirror in which some particular aspect of His is reflected, out of all the aspects of His Divine Names. It is established that every one of the Divine Names, whether partial or universal, partakes of the totality of the Divine Names because all the Names are united in the Essence of Unity though they are distinguished from one another by the quality and relationship particular to each one. At the level of the Absolute, however, these Qualities and Relations are mere potentials inherent in the Divine Essence, and are never actually separate from the Essence. Thus in each thing there is everything! All of existence is to be found in a mustard seed. But its particular, limited individualization (*ta'ayyūn*) is what prevents the fullness of the Divine Reality that is within it from manifesting.

This matter is called the 'Mystery of the Divine Self-manifestations' which is the spiritual mystery by which the gnostic witnesses all things in each thing. So the gist of the couplet's meaning is this:

The world from end to end is the mirror of the Being of the Real One because the Real One is, through His articulations, diversified and particularized in this great mirror of the world; and within each atom there are hidden one hundred thousand shining suns, because the Being of the Real One is Single and there is no possibility of

4. *The Garden of Mystery: The Gulshan-i rāz of Mahmūd Shabistari*, trans. Robert Abdul Hayy Darr (Cambridge: Archetype Press, 2007), p. 48.

dividing that fundamental unity. All of the perfections [of existence] are dependent upon Unitary Being.⁵

Shabistārī writes:

The Exalted Presence of the Real One has no duality.
In that Presence there is no me, you, or we.⁶

It is this Divine Individual Who manifests through the innumerable forms of the universe. The Divine Self is truly undivided, which is what the word 'individuality' means: that which cannot be divided. The Sufis hold that, despite Its unalterable unity, the one Real Individual manifests in countless forms, and at different levels of existence.

Let us consider these two aspects of Infinite Being. The first is Absolute Being, free from all but Itself, free of any existent thing whatsoever, and therefore called the Absolute and the Unseen. The other aspect of Infinite Being is comprehensive of all things, potential and actual, in all of their infinite variety. This is the immanent God Who says: 'I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be Known. I brought forth creation so that I would be known.' These two aspects of infinite Being are also referred to by the great Sufi Ibn al-ʿArabī as the two sides of Divine Unity: the Essential Oneness and the Oneness of the Divine Names. The latter is also called the Oneness of All, *wāhediyyat*. The Oneness of All is the unseen source of our world. It is also known as 'nonbeing' or 'nonexistence' because it does not come into this existence that we know at the concrete, physical level. Lāhijī explains that the Oneness of All is, in fact, only 'relatively nonexistent'. Even though it lacks the actual existence of our world, he writes, it does have an 'ideal existence' within God's Knowledge. The reason that 'relative nonexistence' should be of interest to us is that it is the source of all of the things in our world, including each person's individuality. Words like 'nonexistence' and 'nonbeing' might sound unpleasant, but let us remember that Sufis like Rūmī regarded non-being as the realm of spiritual liberation. He writes:

5. Muḥammad Lāhijī, *The Maḥāṭih al-ijāz fi Sharhe Gulshane Rāz*, with an introduction by Kaywan Samīʿi (Tehran: Mahmudi Books, 1989), p. 115.

6. *The Garden of Mystery*, p. 93.

Show us, O God, that spiritual station
 where the divine Word sprouts with no letters,
 and the purified soul runs with its head
 into the boundless expanse of nonbeing.
 It's such a vast open space, such a limitless expanse
 that nurtures [these realms of] imagination and existence.
 The imagined realities are narrower than nonbeing,
 which is why they are the instruments of sorrow.
 Individual existence is narrower than imagination;
 it's where the moon becomes a slender crescent.
 The existence of the world of sense and color
 is narrower yet, it's narrow as a prison.
 Complexity and multiplicity cause narrowing
 and the senses are drawn to this complexity.
 The world of unification is away from the senses;
 if you want Unity, travel in that direction.⁷

Not only are there great differences between individuals, but each individual essence manifests differently in accordance with the level at which he or she appears. Our usual sense of ourselves is based on our sensual and mental experience in the physical world. Our worldly experience acts as a veil upon our true individuality. This ego-self is a straitjacket that keeps us from experiencing our fundamental God-awareness. Another poem by Rūmī helps us to understand the manifestation of our essences at different levels, and the veiling of the soul in this world of the senses. He writes:

How can a world be contained in clay?
 How can the heavens fit under the earth?
 Never, by God! You're beyond this world
 even during this life, in this moment of time.
 A bird is flying above in unknown skies,
 with its shadow cast upon the earth.
 The shadow of the shadow of the shadow
 of the heart . . . is what the body is.

7. *Clarifications*, p. 43.

How can the body reach the heart's level?
 A man sleeps, his spirit is like the sun
 shining in the sky while he's in pajamas.
 Spirit lies concealed in a shrouded void
 while the body tosses and turns under a blanket.⁸

We will now take a closer look at Sufi teaching on the immutable essences which abide in the realm of the Oneness of All. For the Sufis, each person's true identity abides beyond the world of time and space as an unmanifested essence. Sufi thinking on the essences developed out of both Platonic and Islamic metaphysics on the subject. In the famous Qur'ānic verse that I quoted earlier, God addresses Adam's progeny in their essential individuality: *'I made them to bear witness about themselves by asking them, "Am I not your Lord?" They answered, "Yes, truly, we witness that this is so."*' This reciprocal 'Lord/servant' relationship between God and human beings is what fundamentally defines our individuality. Each person's individuality is one out of countless individual relationships to the One True Individual.

Shabistarī devotes most of the Sixth Inquiry of his masterpiece, *The Garden of Mystery*, to understanding this Qur'ānic verse about the 'covenant of *alast'*. He writes:

Why did God say, 'Am I not your Lord?'
 Who answered in that moment, 'Yes!?'⁹

His commentator Lāhijī writes:

Was it not the human reality and actually all of Adam's progeny who were being addressed by the question, *'Am I not your Lord?'* and who was it that confessed, *'Yes!'*? If they had no essential knowledge of the Divine, how could they have acknowledged their Lord's Presence? So the love for God, and the searching for Him, and the knowing of Him, were all present in human beings *before* they came into existence.¹⁰

8. *Ibid.*, p. 7. 9. *The Garden of Mystery*, p. 88.

10. Muḥammad Lāhijī, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

From all of this, we learn that what the Sufis refer to as nonbeing, *‘adam*, is actually quite alive. As I mentioned, Lāhijī calls this realm of the archetypes ‘relative nonbeing’ to distinguish it from sheer nonbeing. If sheer nonbeing is imagined as the darkest of nights, the Sufi’s nonbeing would be more like a beautiful, star-illuminated night, full of the energies of the Divine Names and their corresponding potentials in the immutable essences of all things. Beyond this living night of the Oneness of All is not sheer nonbeing, but pure Absolute Existence, which Shabistarī compares to a ‘shining day’. He writes:

On that *day* when Man’s clay was mixed,
the lesson of faith was written in his heart.¹¹

Lāhijī comments:

This is a reference to the Sacred Tradition that records God’s statement, ‘I mixed Adam’s clay with My own Hands’. In other words, on that day of the Primordial Becoming, the *fiṭrat*, when I mixed and fermented the human clay with My two hands, which are My Beautiful and Majestic Qualities, they, the human beings, then appeared within My Knowledge of things, ornamented with the awareness of Me, and the realization of faith in their hearts.¹²

Shabistarī then explains how the shining day of Absolute Oneness becomes the night of the Oneness of All in which all individuals abide with God in intimate oneness. He writes:

Just last night you bound yourself to service,
a promise you’ve forgotten into unknowing.¹³

Lāhijī explains:

In the previous line, Shabistarī had invoked the idea of ‘The Most Sacred Emanation’ in which the formation of the essences and their predispositions occurs, which he called the *day*. It’s called the day

11. *The Garden of Mystery*, p. 87. 12. Muḥammad Lāhijī, *op. cit.*, pp. 357–8.
13. *The Garden of Mystery*, p. 88, here with an alternative translation.

because it is the Essential Theophany, occurring *without* the Divine Names, and is called the Most Sacred Emanation because it has not yet become clothed in the vestments of the Divine Names and Qualities, and because it is without the stains of multiplicity that arise from the Divine Names. The 'Oneness of All' is called the *night* because it is the level of the Divine Knowledge in which there is distinction among the various Names and essences of things. Shabistarī writes, 'Just last night you bound yourself to service', because at this level of the Oneness of All, the Real One has descended from the Essential Absoluteness which is like the day, and becomes veiled in the coverings of the Names and Qualities. You, who are the human being, made the pledge to serve your Lord last night at the 'covenant of *alast*' when you said, 'Yes!', and accepted God's Lordship. This can only mean that you had an inherent knowledge of your Lord. But the covenant that you made at the level of *ideal* existence was forgotten at the level of *actual*, worldly existence because of the effects of multiplicity and by becoming veiled in the realm of the senses. You are now heedless of your primordial state, and you no longer even know that you know it.¹⁴

Describing the sad state of the self-alienated person, Shabistarī writes:

There is nothing in the way except yourself,
But beware of the tenacious existence of the self.

If you become trapped in yourself,
the world will at once become your veil.¹⁵

Lāhijī comments:

Since the human being is the exemplar and model of all the worlds, whenever the human is trapped in the veils of egotism, he or she is trapped in the veils of the whole world. Whoever is freed from the veil of self-fantasy will find no other veil remaining. The source of all transgression is self-regard, and by imagining that one has a

14. Muḥammad Lāhijī, *op. cit.*, p. 358. 15. *The Garden of Mystery*, p. 106.

separate existence from God, one also imagines that the world has a separate existence.¹⁶

Rūmī often uses fables in the *Masnawī* to illustrate the condition of egotism and self-deception. Early in the *Masnawī*, Rūmī tells the story of a fierce and dangerous lion who is outwitted by a hare that was intended as his next meal. The hare outwits and overcomes the lion by playing upon his psychological projections. The hare invents a story about a rival lion to make him furious. Then he guides the lion to a nearby well which he claims is the lair of his rival. The lion becomes so absorbed in the emotions generated by his ego-self that he fails to recognize his own reflected image in the well. The lion leaps in to attack what he takes to be his 'enemy' and plunges to his death. Here is a portion of Rūmī's poem:

When the lion saw his enemy in the water
 he went after him and dove into the well.
 He plunged into a well dug by himself,
 and so his cruelty came right back to him.
 The cruelty of the vile is a dark well
 as all of the sages have rightly described it.
 Whoever's more cruel has a more frightful well;
 justice decreed that the worst shall have the worst.
 O you who dig your own well of injustice,
 know that you set a trap only for yourself.
 Don't wind a cocoon around yourself;
 You dig your own well, so dig sparingly!
 The lion saw himself in the well; in his rage,
 he didn't recognize himself from his enemy.
 He saw his own image as his enemy,
 So, of course, he pulled a sword on it.
 Overwhelmingly, what you see as vile in others
 is the appearance of your own nature in them.
 It's what you are that's reflected in them:
 It's your deceit, your spite, and ill-temper.
 It is actually you, and you injure only yourself.

16. Muḥammad Lāhijī, *op. cit.*, p. 421.

You shout foul curses at yourself.
 You don't see your wickedness clearly,
 or you'd fight yourself to the end.
 You're attacking yourself, you fool,
 like the lion who leapt upon himself.
 When you go deeply into your own nature,
 then you'll know that the spite was yours.
 Who was the lion that was seen in the well?
 It was himself, but another seemed to show itself.
 'The believers are mirrors for each other',
 as the Prophet said in a wise transmission.
 You're holding blue glass up to your eyes,
 which is why the world seems blue to you.
 If you're not blind, see the blueness in you.
 Speak ill of yourself then, not of another.
 If the believer were not 'seeing by God's light',
 how could he nakedly see the Unseen world?
 'Seeing by God's fire' is how you see ill;
 unaware of good, you're stuck with the bad.
 Little by little, do pour water over the fire
 so that your fire becomes light, O sad one.
 O Lord, pour the water of purity on the fire
 so that the world's fire becomes entirely light.
 The oceans are wholly under Your command;
 the water and the fire, O Lord, are both Yours!
 If You will it, the fire becomes sweet water;
 otherwise, even the water becomes fire.
 Even our seeking is of Your creation;
 Your justice, Lord, is salvation from injustice.
 Without seeking, You've given us our seeking,
 You've opened the treasury of virtue to all!¹⁷

Shabistārī explains that we must make our way back to our essential individuality to become liberated from egotism. Not everyone desires such spiritual freedom, and only those who inherently yearn for

17. *Masnawī*, Book I, from verse 1307.

spiritual understanding can make their way back to their original home. He writes:

If you've seen the Real One in your original state,
you should be able to see Him in 'That Place'.¹⁸

Lāhijī elucidates:

In the primordial state, each human individual (*fard*) was receptive and suited to his or her own special knowledge and wisdom. Some had complete receptivity and witnessed True Reality through the totality of the Divine Names and Qualities, and were later never veiled from their knowledge or from witnessing that Presence. And others were able to realize various Names and Qualities in their own way; and yet others were more at the level of the animals in how they witnessed the Names in a partial way, and they continue as you see them, seeking sleep, food, collecting the things of the world, and striving for status among people. They are deprived of the perfection that is possible for the human being. Each one, in the primordial state, accepted the pledge which they still honor.¹⁹

So we learn here that some individuals come into this world with an awareness of their Lord, while others arrive here heedless of the Divine Presence, yet have the capacity to regain that awareness; while others arrive heedless and never recover the awareness of their Lord in this life. Shabistārī:

If you would read that script just once
you'd know everything that you desire.²⁰

Lāhijī comments:

If you would read the script and text of your inherent predisposition which is recorded in the book of each person's immutable essence, you would know without a doubt that whatever a person manifests, whether it be wisdom or ignorance, whether of perfection or of

18. *The Garden of Mystery*, p. 88 19. Muḥammad Lāhijī, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

20. *The Garden of Mystery*, *loc. cit.*

deficiency, all of it truly comes from the person's essence. Experience of Divinity will be in accordance with that person's predisposition, and people will not gain anything that is not already within their primordial, inherent capacity for it.²¹

This quite remarkable statement about reading one's script should be given some consideration. Shabistarī's mention of 'reading that script' actually refers to the human capacity to experience one's essential individuality directly, after emptying oneself of the usual experiences of the mind and the senses.²² He continues:

Beyond the intellect humankind has another faculty
by which to know the hidden secrets of spiritual meaning.²³

Lāhijī comments:

Beyond speculative reason, which discovers the unknown through the arrangement of premises and proofs, the human being has another faculty by which to grasp mysteries which are concealed and veiled from the intellect, and by which to see through the eye of 'inner vision' (*basīrat*). This is the path of purification which [at different times] consists of spiritual journeying, ascetic practice, struggling with oneself to free the heart of all but God, solitude for the sake of sustained attention to spiritual practice, all of which make up the path of the prophets and the friends of God (upon them peace), and this is the path of passion and love for God which is not found anywhere but in the clay of humanity.²⁴

Shabistarī:

21. Muḥammad Lāhijī, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

22. *Tā'ayyūn* is the word used by Shabistarī, and other Sufis who followed after Shaykh Ibn al-Arabī. They used the word in this context to mean the fundamentally unreal, seemingly separate individualization of the human being which leads to a sense of 'otherness' in which each person thinks and behaves as though they possess their own separate will power and existence, and fails to perceive the ever-present truth that God is the single Person in all of existence, manifesting in the limitless, diverse forms of the creatures and things.

23. *The Garden of Mystery*, p. 89, with an alternative translation.

24. Muḥammad Lāhijī, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

Your real 'you' is a copy of the divine design.
 Seek from this self anything you may desire.²⁵

Lāhijī comments:

Since it is only in the theater of manifestation of the 'human reality' that God appears through the totality of His Names and Qualities, and it is only the human being who has the receptivity and comprehensiveness for this; and since the human being is a copy of the comprehensiveness of the Divine Form; and because God, though perfect in His manifestation, has become concealed and hidden in the veils of the human being's individual restricted form and has become clothed in that human form; for all of these reasons Shabistārī writes, 'Seek from yourself whatever you desire', meaning that if you want to see God, then according to the *ḥadīth* 'Whoever knows himself knows his Lord', you must come to know your own self so as to witness the Divine Beauty, and attaining to this greatest wealth cannot be had through the intellect, through reasoning, or through logical proofs. It can only happen if you annihilate your individual self and your imaginary existence in the Divine Presence, so that the veil of your 'you' is cast aside and God shows His Face to you from behind the veil of your 'you', and you witness God directly in yourself. This spiritual reality cannot take place except by way of obedience to the divine commands, worship, spiritual journeying, struggling with one's lower self, proper guidance from a completed guide, purification and polishing of the heart, and continual practice of *zīkr*, the invocation of God's name, which is like a polish for the mirror of the heart that clears the clouds and rust of 'what is other than God' until the Divine Light shines brightly in it.²⁶

In the Qur'ān it is written that, '*There is rust upon their hearts from what they have acquired*' (83:14). Expanding on this and other similar scriptural statements, the Sufis never tire of urging people to polish the mirror of their hearts. Rūmī, in countless places, writes that people should polish the mirror of the heart until it reflects the Divine Presence, and liberates people from their own projections cast in the mirror of the world.

25. *The Garden of Mystery*, p. 89. 26. Muḥammad Lāhijī, *op. cit.*, p. 366.

Rūmī returns to the fable of the lion and the well repeatedly throughout the *Masnawī*. Perhaps the story's most interesting retelling occurs in Book VI, near the end of his masterpiece. Here Rūmī begins by comparing Adam, the human prototype, to the astrolabe of the Divine Attributes. The astrolabe was one of the most wonderful inventions of medieval Islamic science. By its use, one could predict cosmic events such as the appearance and location of planets and stars, the latter symbolizing the Divine Attributes. Here is the poem:

Adam is the astrolabe of the Sublime Attributes;
 the Human Being is the theater of God's signs.
 What appears in the human is a reflection of God
 like the moon's reflection in stream water.
 On this astrolabe are engraved complex designs²⁷
 which represent the eternal Attributes.
 It is from the Unseen Sphere and Spirit's sun that
 the designs teach their lessons from the beginning.
 The engraved designs and the guiding astrolabe
 are without the astronomer in the hands of the vulgar.
 God gave the knowledge of astronomy to the prophets
 because the mystery needs special, mystery-seeing eyes.
 Later generations fell into the well of the world;
 Each person saw his own reflection within the well.²⁸

Let us consider for a moment what Rūmī is saying. He proposes that the human being either fulfils his or her Adamic potential to reflect the vast, beautiful Qualities of the Divine Self, or is doomed to an existence in the 'well of the world', as he calls it, where human experience is reduced to the reflections of the ego-self in the well. He goes on:

Know that what's seen in the well comes from outside;
 Otherwise you will be the lion who fell into the well.
 A hare led him astray saying, 'Such and such
 a fierce lion is at the bottom of the well.

27. Rūmī uses the word 'spider', the technical term for these engraved designs indicating latitude and longitude.

28. *Masnawī*, Book VI, with stanza beginning at verse 3138.

Leap into the well and avenge yourself!
 You are stronger, so go tear off his head!
 Swayed by the hare's words, the lion obeyed;
 He became enraged by his own imaginings.
 He didn't say, 'This image is not really from the water;
 It's merely a change coming from the Transmuter.'²⁹

Rūmī occasionally describes the moment-to-moment articulations of the Divine Names in the world of form as the 'Changer' or the 'Transmuter'. He has a number of poems about the world as a place of constant transmutation, in accordance with the Qur'ānic verse, '*Every day God is upon another articulation*' (55:29). Rūmī continues:

When you feel vengeful toward an enemy,
 You too err in the six directions, O prisoner of the six.
 The enmity you find in him is a reflection of God
 in accordance with the Divine Qualities of wrath.³⁰

The six directions are the directions of space and they refer to the sub-lunar realm in which we live, also known as the well. It is at this level that spiritual light is reduced and the darkness of shadows prevails. It is at this level that the Wrathful Names of God are to be found manifesting.

The sin you find in him is related to your own sin.
 You must therefore wash the ill-temper from yourself.
 What's showing in him is your own bad temper;
 he is the mirror's face that reflects your image.
 Since you're viewing your own villainy there
 don't strike at the mirror, O Hasan.
 The stars above cast their images on the water,
 and you're throwing dirt upon their reflections.
 [You say,]
 'These unlucky stars have landed on the water,
 and they seek to overturn my good fortune.'
 You imagine they resemble the ill-starred ones

29. *Clarifications*, p. 31. 30. *Ibid.*

so you spill the dirt of conquest on their heads.
 Their image seems to vanish, it's no longer seen,
 so you imagine that the stars are gone.³¹

Let us recall that Rūmī begins the stanza with a reference to the astrolabe which reflects the stars and planets. There the stars and planets are the Divine Qualities in their comprehensive reflection of Divinity, a reflection that is overwhelmingly Merciful, Beautiful, Knowing and Loving. In the well of the world, the stars reflected are deemed to be unlucky stars. Rūmī continues:

But the stars of ill-fortune remain in the sky;
 you must apply the remedy in that direction.
 In truth, the heart must be directed 'beyond direction'
 since bad luck on this side comes from 'beyond direction'.
 Know that whatever's given issues from the Divine;
 what's given is seen reflected in the five and the six.
 How long, after all, will the reflection be visible?
 Make a habit of seeing the source, O seer of faults.
 What's granted by God is mixed in you like spirit,
 in such a way that it is you and you are it.³²

What is 'beyond direction' is beyond our existence in the realm of time and space. It is the relative non-existence of the Oneness of All. In another poem, Rūmī equates nonbeing to the Prophet Muhammad's ascension into the heavens:

heech kas raa taa nagardad uu fanaa
neest rah dar baargaaha kebreeaa

cheest mi'raaje falaq, een neestee
aashiqaan raa, mazhab o deen neestee.

Whoever has not been annihilated of self
 cannot find the way to the Court of Majesty.

31. *Ibid.* 32. *Ibid.*

What is the Ascension? This nonbeing.
The faith and religion of Lovers is nonbeing.³³

Rūmī here identifies nonbeing with *fanā*, the mystic's annihilation of the false self which had previously concealed the Presence of God. Here is yet another of Rūmī's poems about nonbeing:

When you stand in the ranks of the spirit-flyers
nonbeing will raise you up like a winged *buraq*.
This isn't like flying from Earth to the moon
but like a field of cane becoming sugar.
It's not like a vapor rising into the sky,
but like an embryo growing to intelligence.
The steed of nonbeing becomes a fine *buraq*
to carry you to True Being if you're effaced.
Its hooves caress the mountains and rivers
as it lifts you from the world of the senses.
Step into the boat and go moving along
like the soul that flows to its beloved Soul.
With no hand or foot, go to the Eternal
like when the spirits galloped out of nonbeing.³⁴

Lāhijī writes, in a number of places, that *fanā*, the annihilation of personal illusion, is actually a reversion to one's fundamental state of nonbeing, to the primordial awareness of one's essential individuality. The recovery of one's primordial state comes through the lifting away of one's egocentric existence. He writes:

The High Presence manifests to the seeker in an epiphany beyond quality and direction, and the seeker's self is completely annihilated and scattered in the lights of the Essential Theophany of Unity, and he rejoins his *fundamental nonbeing* (*ʿadam asli*) as he is annihilated in God, which is the state of all of the Friends of God.³⁵

The individual as a mirror's reflection is a comparison that we encounter again and again in Sufi literature. Another image is that of the individual as an aperture in a lamp. Shabistārī writes:

33. *Ibid.*, p. 66. 34. *Ibid.* 35. Muḥammad Lāhijī, *op. cit.*, p.12.

You and I are 'accidents' of the Essence of Being,
like openings in the covering of the lamp of Being.³⁶

Lāhijī comments:

You and I, who are like the particular individuations of the Essence of Being, can be compared to the openings, or holes, in the lamp's covering where the light shines variously through them.³⁷

Shabistārī means that we are each a particular constriction and limitation of the same light that shines from the divine Lamp of Being.

Another version of the self as an aperture is offered by Rūmī in these lines:

Maa chuu naayeem wa nawaa dar maa zi tuust
Maa chuu kuuheem wa sadaa dar maa zi tuust

We are like the reed pipe and our melody is from You.
We are like the mountain face and our echo is from You.³⁸

The individual flute's music cannot be heard without the blowing of the Divine Breath; nor can the Divine Breath manifest without the flute. The Divine Breath, also known as the Breath of the Merciful, is said to manifest in the realm of the Oneness of All, bestowing itself on all of the essences destined to come into appearance. *Nafas*, the word for breath, is written the same as *nafs*, the word for 'self'. So it is the Divine Individual who blows existence into countless flutes of all sizes and descriptions, to release the music of cosmic becoming. God plays His music through the flutes of our essences. Comparing nonbeing to the richness of organ music that musically captures the sense of fullness discovered in the Oneness of All, Rūmī writes:

To rise beyond the angels, I'll be sacrificed.
I'll become what cannot even be imagined:
I'll become nonbeing, nonbeing like a pipe organ
that calls me with fullness, 'Surely our return is to God!'³⁹

36. *The Garden of Mystery*, p. 66. 37. Muḥammad Lāhijī, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

38. *Masnawī*, Book I, verse 599. 39. *Ibid.*, Book III, verses 3905–6.

In another famous line, Rūmī says:

man kasee dar naakasee dar yaaftam
pas kasee dar naakasee dar baaftam

I found true selfhood within selflessness.
 and wove together selfhood with selflessness.⁴⁰

This couplet, like all of Rūmī's statements about individuality and personal experience, is informed by another well-known *ḥadīth* which allows us to understand the sacred function of personhood, once the self is purified of egotism and the faculties of the senses transcend their limited habitual perceptions. God says:

My servant does not cease approaching Me through excessive devotion until I love him. And when I love him, I am his hearing, I am his seeing, I am his tongue, and his hand and his foot. It is through Me that he hears, and he sees through Me, and speaks through Me, and he grasps through Me, and it is through Me that he walks.⁴¹

This lovely *ḥadīth* describes how the purified senses and faculties of the human being become the sensory faculties for the expression of Divine Awareness. It is often quoted by the Sufis to explain how people can regain their 'sacred individuality'.

I have described a few of the metaphors used by the Sufis to represent the reciprocal, relational nature of individuality. The most commonly used image is that of a mirror. Rūmī's reference to the astrolabe is an elaboration on that idea. We have also seen that individuals are sometimes compared to apertures, like the openings in a lamp or the holes in a flute. The lamp's apertures give rise to individual beams of light; and the holes in the flute allow for the countless melodies of the divine music. These various images help us to understand how individual existence is the means by which the 'Hidden Treasure' becomes known.

40. *Ibid.*, Book I, line 1735.

41. Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il Bukhārī, *Al-Jāmi al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Ludolf Krehl and Theodor Willem Juynboll, 4 vols (Leyden: Brill, 1862–1908), LXXXI:38.

One of the most beautiful metaphors for individuality is offered by the 'Greatest Shaykh', Ibn al-ʿArabī, in his masterpiece *The Bezels of Wisdom*. In the Chapter on Ismāʿīl, the Shaykh identifies the self with paradise. He draws upon a Qurʾānic passage which reads, '*O tranquil soul, return to your Lord, truly pleased and truly pleasing. Enter among My favorite servants. Enter My Paradise*' (89:27–30). Here God is addressing the 'tranquil self', called in Arabic the *nafs al-mutmaʿina*. The soul has, at this level, evolved beyond the constricted, heedless state of the ego-self known as the *nafs al-amara bi su*, the 'self that incites to evil.' Turning away from the ego-self toward God, the Sufi strives to follow his or her conscience. The conscientious self is the *nafs-i lawwama*.

Ibn al-ʿArabī paraphrases the Qurʾānic verse thus: "*Enter My paradise*", which is what veils Me. My paradise is not other than you, and you veil Me with yourself'.⁴² The Shaykh is playing on the root meaning of the Arabic word *janna* which means 'paradise', and also 'what covers and conceals'. He goes on to say that 'When you enter His Paradise, you enter into yourself'.⁴³

Kwārazmī, the great Central Asian Sufi, gives the following commentary on the words of the Shaykh:⁴⁴

Every soul that has found tranquility and security, and has abandoned fleeting desires and pleasures, becomes well-pleased with its Lord, and is pleasing to Him, just as in the Qurʾānic verse. He commands the soul to return to the particular Lord who called it out of the whole of the Divine Presence so that the soul would be the bearer of that Lord's luminosities and become the theater of His Perfections, and the touchstone for the appearance of the Lord's dominion and His Actions. This tranquil soul recognizes its Lord from among the other Lords, and becomes well-pleased with the Lord and His divine Actions. The beauty of the soul's acceptance of its Lord's dominion and Actions is what makes the Lord pleased with it.

The Lord says to the soul, '*Enter among my favorite servants*', those who have recognized their own Lords and are well-pleased with

42. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, Chapter on Ismāʿīl. 43. *Ibid*.

44. Quotations for the remainder of this paper are taken from Tājuddīn Husseīn Kwārazmī, *Sharh-i Fuṣūṣ* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Mawlā, 1978), pp. 295–7.

them and are pleasing to them. These are souls who have reserved themselves to their own particular Lords and who do not seek out Lords other than their own, and who thus bring pleasure to their own Lords.

"*Enter My Paradise*", which is My covering and the place of My favorite servants'. Paradise, *jannat*, is an Arabic word that means a ground that has been planted with so many trees that their shade hides the ground beneath them.

Paradise, as described by the externalists, refers to the pleasurable stations and realms of desire to be found in the afterlife. This is the Paradise of God's Actions and Works. The lover of God, however, does not settle on these, but says to the angels of Paradise:

O Angels! Stop luring me with the castles of Paradise.
God's yearning lover does not rejoice in seeing turrets.

For the gnostics, there are other paradises beyond the usual paradises. These are the paradises of the Attributes, where the gnostics take on the Qualities of the Lords of Perfection and the Attributes of the Most Glorious One. These latter paradises have many levels and degrees. Then there are the paradises of the Essence which refer to each Lord's appearance to each gnostic, through which the gnostic is effaced in his or her particular Lord.

Thus when the gnostic is commanded to '*Enter My Paradise*', he understands this to mean, 'Enter yourself, your essence and true reality, so that you may find Me there and fully witness Me.' This is because the gnostic seeks nothing but God, which is different from what the ignorant person seeks. That person seeks what is literally understood: pleasures mentioned in the scripture which appeal to the ego-self. These pleasures include drinking (from fountains of wine and milk) and eating (delicious fruit from the paradisaal trees) and lovemaking (with the damsels of paradise).

But God says, 'My Paradise is not other than you, for it is you who cover me with yourself. You veil me with your essence and thus become a protection for my Essence, My Qualities and Actions, protecting Me with your essence, your qualities and actions. Emerge from the veil of your imaginary independent existence, and come into My Paradise which is your true individuality so that you may fully witness Me.'

These very beautiful words by Kwārazmī elucidate one of the most lovely passages in Ibn ʿArabī's masterpiece. The Greatest Shaykh's own words are themselves a commentary on one of the most beautiful passages in the Qur'ān, quoted above, concerning the reciprocal nature of individuality.

The Sufis' understanding of individuality could hardly be more positive and sublime. According to their view, the Divine Individual forever explores His own eternal Being within the temporal and finite expressions of His own Self-limitation, which are our own limited individualities. Although we essentially have no existence, we are nevertheless treasured in God's knowledge through all eternity. He draws us, the 'hidden treasure', into His various realms of manifested existence in order to fulfil His own urge to love and to become known.

