

## The Oneness of All Being

~ Camille A. Helminski

Every human being is born with an inner sense of unity. The infant knows itself as one with the mother. It is only after some time elapses that a sense of separation occurs. For a long while, the mother is the mirror of self; it knows no other. Then as we grow we are drawn outward to discover and participate in this miraculous creation of which we are a part. For many the process of that journey becomes filled with struggle, but sometimes a whisper, a glimpse comes to allow us to see into the essential nature of life, into its core and with that glimpse, that whisper, we set out upon the journey to know more. As adolescents, we query our world and the premises upon which it has stood. As we age, we are led to look in so many places for something that will fulfill our need for connection, our need to return to that state of unity from which we were born.

Though in Reality we have never left our Source, we sometimes must journey a long way to remove the veils placed upon us by life in this world so that we may see the Truth. Our journey passes through recognizable stages, referred to in the Sufi tradition as the seven levels of the *nafs* or “self.” When the glimpse of the Essential first catches us, it pulls us from the state of *nafs-i ammara*, the commanding, demanding self. Absorption with our particular, limited self and its grasping needs diminishes as we discover the existence of Eternal Wisdom and begin to be drawn home to our deepest, Essential self. Step by step the process unfolds.

Slowly, we begin the process of discrimination, distinguishing between that which is true and essential and that which is false, which inhibits and veils us from Truth; we witness our own shortcomings and begin to develop a conscience. This is the stage of the *nafs-i lawamma*, the blaming, judging self. We begin to little by little see that we are not separate, but that we are at the end-point of a ray of God’s Presence. We can then turn to gaze upon that Light and make use of that Light to better see our own situation and to gauge how we behave in the world of interactions.

As we gain more experience, new vision opens for us and we come to the stage of *nafs-i mulhaim*, the inspired soul. New ways of being become apparent to us as we see by God’s Light, by the Light of the Oneness with which we are still connected.

Just as a leaf on a tree, looking outward, might imagine that each leaf is a discrete unit of being, separate and individual, making its own movement, yet if it looks back at the tree it will recognize how it is connected and from where it gains its nourishment. Just so, if we really look, we cannot help but see that we are indeed a part of an integral, living, flowing system; not just in the way we move in our lives, but from the very root of our being through which we gain our nourishment; we cannot help but see that we are indeed a part of an integral living and flowing system. In the Qur’an it says, *We shall show them Our signs on the farthest horizons and within themselves.* [Surah 40:53]

All of nature is a reminder of the Unity of all Being. Sometimes it is a prophet or friend of God who reminds us. In the Qur’an, God tells Muhammad,

*Go on reminding: for reminding benefits the faithful.  
And I have created the invisible beings and human beings  
only that they may worship Me.*

*No sustenance do I require of them  
nor do I require that they should feed Me.  
For God is the One Who gives all sustenance,  
the Lord of Power, the Steadfast. [Surah 51:55-58]*

He is the One Who sustains us and Whom we worship, for as is said in *Surah Ikhlas*, the Surah of Purity, *There is no God but God, and He is One. He has not begotten, nor is He begotten*, so everything that exists is still a part of God. We are all still connected even if it be from the farthest reaches of that expansion of His creation. There is only *Ahad*, there is only One Reality and by and through it we are all connected and united in our very substance, in our very Essence.

It is the deepest acknowledgement of this that takes us further. While not attributing wisdom and truth to ourselves but to our Source, we look to see how it is reflected in others—we naturally seek to know all aspects of this diamond of Being of which we are a facet. This is the level of the *tariqa*, the Sufi brother/sisterhoods. There is protection in working together. It is said that the faithful are mirrors for the faithful. Together we enable each other to see more clearly and to reflect more purely praise of our Source rather than the individual, limited self.

As the mirror becomes polished, our contentment with what we see increases; here we come to the stage of *nafs-i mutmainna*, the satisfied soul, for here we find that as it says in the Qur'an *Truly in the remembrance of God, hearts find rest*. What is now more often at the core of our awareness is Our Source, the underlying, Self-Subsisting Sea of Being rather than the foam of partial, particular experience flying through the air.

The will to flow with that Sea increases and we come to *nafs-i radiye*, the pleased soul; the soul that is not just satisfied, but pleased with that which its Source, God bestows. One no longer attributes partners to God, one's own impulses are absorbed into the impulses of One's Maker and one acts in consonance with His/Her will.

Now it is that the soul becomes fully pleasing to God: the *nafs-i mardiye*, the satisfying self. One can more purely serve others, bringing the fragrance of Life, the Light of Life to others, and awakening the awareness of the Life-giving water within them.

Beyond this we are told is the *nafs-i safiye*, or *nafs-i kamile*, the purified or completed self for whom there is no longer any separation, empty of self, open totally to the will of the Source for there is no more distinguishable self; there is only the Beloved. *Wherever you turn there is the Face of God*.

In the *Mathnawi*, Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi tells a story about a man who comes to the door of the friend and knocks. From inside, his friend calls out, "Who's there?" The man replies, "It is I." "Go away!" the friend replies, "This isn't the time--there is no place for the raw at such a table as this. Who but the fire of separation will cook the one who is raw and deliver him from hypocrisy?"

Saddened, the man leaves and begins to wander. Without his friend, he is lonely and distraught. For months he journeys and endures many hardships. Finally, one day he returns. He finds again the door to his friend's house and once more he knocks on the door. The friend calls out, "Who is there?" The man replies, "It is Thou." The friend responds, "Now, come in O myself, since you are I. There isn't room in here for two I's."

Sultan Weled, Mevlana's son tells us:

One day I felt bored and downhearted. My father came into the college and saw that I was sad and said, “Are you angry at someone; you seem so downcast?”

“I don't really know what the matter is,” I replied.

He disappeared into another room and after a few minutes, returned with his face covered with an old wolf-skin.

“Bou! Bou!” he cried, just as if I were a little child again.

I burst out laughing and laughed until I could laugh no more and then kissed my father's blessed feet.

“O Beha-ed-din,” he said. “Are you afraid when someone who loves you dresses up in a wolf skin?”

“No,” I said.

“That same person who can cause you joy, can also cause you sorrow.”

“Why feel sad for no reason and why allow yourself to be the prisoner of negativity? Find a way out of your despondency, and know that all difficulties have a common cause. Treat your joy like a delicate plant and water it; when it bears fruit, share it with your friends.”

As my father spoke (Sultan Weled continued) I experienced a profound feeling of ecstasy and my heart expanded like a flower. For the rest of my life, I never again felt sad; I learned to be detached from the difficulties of the world.

Emboldened by my extreme joy, and the intimacy I felt towards my father, I remarked: “You have told us of the stations, the ranks and the miracles of all the prophets and all the saints, and you have pointed out the greatness in many eminent people, but you have been silent about your own attainments.”

“Dear Beha-ed-din,” my father answered gently, “he who praises the Beloved praises himself, and my sight is clear.”

It was my father who guided me from the world of contraction towards the world of expansion, from duality towards unity. I reflected: “The One alone is beautiful, but when mirrors are used, this One appears many.”

It is in acknowledgement of our unity with our Creator that we find peace. The recognition of this is integral to the litany of prayers recited daily by Mevlevi dervishes. It begins:

In the Name of God, the Infinitely Compassionate and Merciful . . .

O our Lord, You are Peace and from You comes all Peace and our ultimate return is to You, to Peace.

O our Lord, continually You enliven us with Peace.

Allow us to enter Your Garden, the Abode of Peace.

O our Lord, bless us with Peace.

With Your Peace You have exalted everything.

O Lord of Majesty and Infinite Generosity. All praise and glory belongs to You. Limitless are You in Your glory. We could not worship You as You ought to be worshipped, O You who are worshipped.

Subtle are You beyond all knowing. We could not know You as You ought to be known, O You who are the One who knows.

All praise is due to God who guides one to well-being.

I bear witness that there is no God but God and that He is One and has no partner.  
I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and messenger.  
There is no god but God. Everything belongs to Him/Her. All praise is His/Hers. He/She gives life. He/She takes life. He/She is Ever-Living and never dies. All goodness is in His/Her hand. He/She has power over all things.  
There is no god but God. All benefits are His/Hers. All blessings are His/Hers. To Him/Her belongs the most exceptional Beauty.  
There is no god but God, the possessor of the most ancient Oneness that has no beginning and no end.<sup>1</sup>

In his *Maqalat*, or *Conversations*<sup>2</sup>, Shams of Tabriz explains the situation in these words:

I am speaking in the way of symbols and signs. Perhaps what I am doing is not good manners, but as you forgive this due to my impertinence, let me speak of it now. The source of the water is one. It has separated into different ways, different canals. Sometimes all of it flows along this way and sometimes another way. A time comes when the water that flows along this way empties into the other canal and then finds its own channel; sometimes the water coming from that way flows to this side. Well, those who pass through these various waterways and go to the Source of the water, drink from it and get wet, from then on they have been saved from the branches and their roots and sources. Those who grab hold of a branch of a tree break the branch and fall down; but those who catch hold of the trunk of the tree gain all of the branches and are content with the abode of the Darling.

He continues:

May you say *Allahu Akbar*, all power is with God, God is the Greatest. Worshipping consists of this. You must rid yourself of the thoughts and groundless fears that come to your imagination! These are your own thoughts. Turn your eye to higher universes, for God is more exalted than all the things that come to either intellect or imagination. So great is He that He cannot even be contained within the imagination of prophets and of heavenly messengers sent with a revealed book. Sometimes people say, “Everything is Truth, there is no creation”; but if creation did not exist, “the Word” would be something without a letter or voice. There are no letters or voices where the Truth is.”

Truth veils itself with forms, shy before peering eyes. But when the heart is opened, true vision pours in.

If we were to open to the possibility of seeing and being in Unity, how might that affect our relationships and the unfolding of our lives? There are many stories of saints and

---

<sup>1</sup>*Evrad-i Serif*, *The Mevlevi Wird* translated from the Turkish by Cuneyt Eroglu and Camille Helminski; publication pending with The Threshold Society.

<sup>2</sup>*Rumi's Sun, the Teachings of Shams of Tabriz*, translated by Refik Algan and Camille Adams Helminski.

their actions-- holy ones who moved from the sense of Oneness and its elucidation. The following is a story from the *Manaqib al-Arifin*<sup>3</sup>, an account from the life of Mevlana.

Mevlana was always trying to be of service to everybody, good or bad and he used to do every favor in his power for people. In an inn in Konya there was a courtesan, and she was very beautiful. With her there were numerous other young women who had been forced into this way of living. One day, Mevlana was passing in front of this inn and this woman came running out. She approached Mevlana, and falling at his feet, began to entreat him with tears, offering her respects. Mevlana called out to this woman three times: "Rabia! Rabia! Rabia!" Witnessing this, others who were working for this woman came out of the inn and also fell at Mevlana's feet. He said, "Such strong people! Such strong people! If you hadn't born the heavy burden of this difficult life, who would calm the furious men who are taken away by their desires and have lost their way? If it weren't for you how would the dignities of women of dignity be apparent?" Someone from the elite who heard these words of Rumi said, "It is senseless for a great saint like Rumi to show sympathy to street women and compliment them like this." Mevlana replied to this criticism by saying, "This woman is behaving just the way she is without hypocrisy. If you are man enough to be like her, leave two-facedness and two-coloredness so that your inside and your outside might be the same. If your inside and outside are not the same, everything you do will be in vain." Then it happened that the beautiful woman repented and became a woman like Rabia Adawiyye and set free the women who had been working for her. She gave away everything in her house to the poor and joined the ranks of women saints, becoming a disciple of Rumi's.<sup>4</sup>

Another story told is that:

One day while Mevlana was praying in solitude he was so concentrated he didn't notice when a man walked in and said, "I am very poor, I have nothing." When the man saw Mevlana totally absorbed in prayer he took Mevlana's prayer rug and left. When Hoja Majduddin Maraghi learned about this he immediately jumped up and started searching for this man. He caught him while he was trying to sell the rug in Tiz Bazaar and dragged him into the presence of Mevlana. But Mevlana said, "He must have taken the rug out of need. Forgive him. We must purchase the rug back from him."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps it is not yet in our power, our capacity, to see into the very center of things and to act from that vision in this way, calling deeply to the soul of another. But might we not attempt to pause before we interact, looking to see how we might better act in acknowledgement of Unity rather than the perpetuation of the myth of separate identity? Might we question on what basis we relate: the basis of individual separative needs, or

---

<sup>3</sup>Aflaki; excerpts included here translated by Tahsin Yazici from the Turkish version, *Ariflerin Menakibleri*. Now available as *Rumi and His Friends, Stories of the Lovers of God*, translated by Camille Adams Helminski and Susan Blaylock.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, v.1, p.613.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, v.1, p.405.

upon the urgings of our Sustainer, the intimate whisperings in our hearts that guide us when we are most still? To be able to discern clearly, we must incessantly polish this mirror of self, that it may be pure, and not even clouded by the mist of our own breath.

We might take guidance from the Masters of Wisdom of Central Asia who were most careful in their speech, in their steps, in their remembrance. One focus of their practice was to accompany each step with awareness of God's Presence. If I am aware of God's Presence in all that exists, how can I act in separation? How can I judge harshly? I can discriminate, as to what action or state of being may unveil God's Presence more fully, but I can do nothing to alienate myself from anything that is of His creation for ultimately, we are all of the same Being and will inevitably return to the same Source.

To help us remember this, Mevlana tells us to consider everyone to be in their death throes. In his *Mathnawi* he says:

Everyone in the world, whether man or woman,  
is dying and continually passing through the agony of death.  
Regard their words as the final injunctions  
which a father gives his son.  
In this way consideration and compassion may grow in your heart,  
and the root of hatred and jealousy may be cut away.  
Look upon your kinsman with that intention,  
that your heart may burn with pity for his death agony.  
Everything that is coming will come:  
consider it to have already arrived;  
consider your friend to already  
be in the throes of death, losing his life.  
If selfish motives prevent you from this insight,  
cast them from your heart;  
and if you cannot cast them out, don't stand inertly in incapacity:  
know that with every one who feels incapable,  
there is a goodly Incapacitator.  
Incapacity is a chain laid upon you:  
you must open your eye to behold the One who lays the chain.  
[VI, 761-768]<sup>6</sup>

Mevlana calls us to recognize that it is Love that is behind all of this:

Know that the wheeling heavens are turned by waves of Love:  
were it not for Love, the world would be frozen, stiff.  
How would an inorganic thing transform into a plant?  
How would living creatures sacrifice themselves  
to become endowed with spirit?  
How would the spirit sacrifice itself for the sake of that Breath  
by which Mary was made pregnant?  
Each one of them would be unyielding and immovable as ice:  
how could they be flying and searching like locusts?

---

<sup>6</sup>Excerpted from *Jewels of Remembrance, A Daybook of Spiritual Guidance*, selections from the *Mathnawi* of Jelaluddin Rumi translated by Camille and Kabir Helminski. Threshold Books, 1996.

Every one is in love with that Perfection  
and hastening upward like a sapling.  
Their haste implicitly is saying, “Glory to God!”  
They are purifying the body for the sake of the spirit.

[V, 3854-3859]<sup>7</sup>

And yet,

All this dying is not the death of the physical form:  
this body is only an instrument for the spirit.  
There is many a martyred soul that has died to self in this world,  
though it goes about like the living.  
The animal self has died, though the body, which is its tool, survives:  
the sword is still in the hand of that eager warrior.  
The sword is the same sword; the person is not the same person,  
but this appearance of identity bewilders you.

[V, 3821; 3826-3828]<sup>8</sup>

And so as we traverse this Way, this Path of Return, just as the seven sleepers pray in *Surah Kahf*, the Cave Surah, *Do not say, “I will do so and so tomorrow” without adding, “If God pleases.” And call your Lord to mind when you forget and say, “I hope that my Lord will guide me ever closer even than this to the right path.”* [Qur’an 18:23-24]

Continually in the journey, we ask to be brought into the perspective of Unity. As the taste of Unity grows stronger, we are enabled to slough off the scales that separate us, to shed the rough skins that we outgrow in this process of becoming that which we most essentially are. If you and I are truly One and gain our sustenance from the same Source, how can we not act together to enhance that which sustains us all?

The Prophet Muhammad said, “The faithful are as one body. If a member is in pain, the whole body feels it and cannot rest until the pain is alleviated. That pain essentially can ultimately only be healed by Love and all its actions. It is the revelation of Love that is the aim of all existence. Mevlana reminds us:

These creatures of the world exist  
to manifest the Divine Treasure.  
God said, “I was a Hidden Treasure.”  
Listen, don’t let your substance be wasted,  
become manifest!  
Your true sincerity is hidden in falsehood,  
like the taste of butter in buttermilk.  
For years this buttermilk, which is the body,  
is obvious and manifest, while the butter,  
which is spirit, has disappeared within it.

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

Until Truth sends a messenger, a servant,  
a shaker of the buttermilk in the churn,  
who has the skill and the method of churning,  
so that I may discover that my true self was hidden.  
Or until the words of a servant of that messenger  
enter the ear of one who is seeking inspiration.  
The ear of the faithful retains that inspiration,  
because such an ear is close to the caller,  
just as an infant's ear is filled with its mother's words.<sup>9</sup>

As our Celebi, the twenty-first generation grandson of Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi used to say, "Our mother is Love; our father is Love; we are born from Love and it is to Love we are returning. Whatever way you find yourself following, if you are holding the rope of Moses, hold it tightly and follow it home. If you are holding the rope of Jesus, hold it tightly and follow it home. If you are holding the rope of Muhammad, hold it tightly and follow it home," . . . home to the Truth of the essence of the Soul, home to Unity, to the Oneness of all Being.

And here I would like to close with some words of a nineteenth century Melami Sufi, Ahmet Hilmi:

O Oneness! You are the endless, rolling sea!  
Again it is You who is seen among the many waves. Though You have given  
Yourself a thousand names, a hundred thousand forms, whatever is said--the sky,  
the stars, the spirit of the body--is You, only You!  
Even if the eye of man looks with intense attention at the universe--the sky, the  
blue vault, the sun, the world above, or this earth and this lowly soil--even if he  
looks at the face of Adam with the telescope of knowledge, it is You, only You! In  
hyacinth and basil, or in thistle, in the heart-rending roar of the lion, or the sweet  
voice of the nightingale; in the bud that lends joy, or the fragrance of the rose that  
uplifts the spirit; in the most lifeless particle; in the least of the animals; it is You,  
only You!  
In all my senses; in heart, intellect, and conscience; when I am drunk and  
bewildered with the desire of love; and in the pain of the moments when I am  
separated from my beloved; in my uncertain soul that burns with longing--it is  
You, only You! In my embrace, when the moon-faced beauty trembles; when in a  
moment infinity unfolds; when enraptured, I behold the snowy sky; in fear of  
grandeur when my soul is bewildered--it is never anything but You, only You!<sup>10</sup>

*As-salaam alaikum.*

(Talk delivered at the International Association of Sufism Annual Sufism Symposium, San Francisco, CA. 1997)

---

<sup>9</sup>Selection from the *Mathnawi* of Jelaluddin Rumi translated by Kabir and Camille Helminski.

<sup>10</sup>*Awakened Dreams* by Ahmet Hilmi translated by Refik Algan and Camille Helminski. Threshold Books, 1993.