

7. THE TESTIMONY OF THE SAGES

There are pure souls who have attained peace and greatness. Like the coming of spring, they bring good to mankind. They themselves having crossed the dreadful ocean of birth and death, they help others to cross it without any motive whatsoever. (Shankaracharya)

These days it is the average man who is the benchmark of humanity. Psychology focuses on the average man—even on its pathological cases—and from there deduces what it is to be human. However, Abraham Maslow observed that, in order to know our real potential as a human being, we should study extraordinary people who are capable of having experiences at high levels of consciousness. It is the genius who represents the prototype of the human being, not the “man on the street”. Buddha said “all mundane people are disturbed.”

It is true that in the world there are still some saints—more and more hidden, however, and alarmingly fewer than of old—but in any case what is decisive is that today neither the eyes of government nor of the masses are directed towards them. It is “clever” economists, false prophets, and populist politicians (be they “democratic” or “fundamentalist”) who enjoy the limelight, and to use the word “virtue” in their regard is simply a mockery.

Ahmed Al-Alawi:

Thou seest us among men, but we are not as thou seest,
For our Spirits shine clear above the highest heights.
Ours is an intelligence, a flawless jewel,
Exquisite in beauty; it perceiveth naught but God.

Shankaracharya presents the following paradoxical vision of the sage in his work *Vivekachudamani*:

Always delighted in the supreme Bliss, sometimes he appears as a fool, sometimes like a wise man, sometimes as a king; sometimes as an ignorant man, sometimes quiet; sometimes respected, sometimes insulted and sometimes unknown. Without riches, yet always satisfied; helpless, yet full of power; without enjoyment, yet always content; different to others, but seeing equality everywhere. Though acting, he is inactive; reaping the results of actions, yet untouched by them; having a body, yet not identifying with it; though finite, he is all pervading. [...] forgetting “me” and “mine”, he rejoices in the *Atman* forever.

The *Yoga Vasishtha* defines the saint thus:

He whose mind is as calm as moonlight, whether at the approach of a feast or of a battle, or even at the moment of death itself, is verily a saint.

For Ramana Maharshi, in whose presence all who visited were said to feel a profound sense of peace:

One must be a *jnani* [sage] oneself in order to understand another *jnani*. However the peace of mind which permeates the saint’s atmosphere is the only means by which the seeker understands the greatness of the saint.

The sages have understood that their sole being is God, the omnipresent Reality which is, ultimately, the only thing that exists. They live solely to reflect that light, for during their journey on the path they learned to eliminate from their mind anything that could obstruct it or set itself up against it. Two great saints from two very diverse traditions, Ramakrishna and Basil the Great, describe this in nearly identical terms:

The sunlight is one and the same wherever it falls, but only bright surfaces like water, mirrors and polished metals can reflect it fully. So is the divine light. It falls equally and impartially on all hearts, but only the pure and clean hearts of the good and holy can fully reflect it.

Just as when a ray of light falls upon the resplendent and translucent bodies, they themselves become brilliant, and themselves project another ray of light, so do souls who are bearers of the Spirit, illuminated by the latter, become spiritual and emanate grace to others.

Jesus warned against false prophets:

Beware of false prophets, which come to thee in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

False sages try to imitate authentic sages. Jalal-al-Din Rumi wrote:

Fools take false coins because they are like true. If in the world no genuine minted coin were current, how would forgers pass the false? Unless there be truth, how should there be falsehood? Falsehood receives brilliance from truth.

There is a nearly infallible means of distinguishing real sages from charlatans: observe how they act at the moment of their death. The saint who has understood that he is not his body does not fear death and behaves with great serenity however badly deteriorated his physical body may be. All the rest, to one degree or another, fear death.

In his death-bed, the Sufi Al-Ghazali wrote these moving lines:

Say to my brethren when they see me dead,
and weep for me, lamenting me in sadness:
“Think ye I am this corpse ye are to bury?
I swear by God, this dead one is not I.
When I had formal shape, then this, my body,
Served as my garment. I wore it for a while.”

For the Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi:

Faith is necessary for religions, but it ceases to be so for those who go further and who achieve self-realization in God. Then one no longer believes because one sees. There is no longer any need to believe when one *sees* the Truth.

If a trial was set in order to pass judgement on the authenticity and credibility of these beings, could anyone imagine that the tribunal would rule against the sages? Is it conceivable that all these personalities, many of whom were major pillars of culture,

literature, philosophy and theology, were—all of them, from first to last—deluded? That they had lost touch with reality to the point of nearly unanimously believing in the absurd things they spoke about? A tribunal can scarcely ever prove unequivocally that something is true or not; it issues its verdict based on the proofs available to it and based on the trustworthiness of the testimonies given. For Frithjof Schuon,

the unanimous witness of the sages and saints, over the whole surface of the globe and throughout the ages, is a sign or a criterion which no man of good faith can despise, short of asserting that the human species has neither intelligence nor dignity [...]. Before putting aside the mystical or experimental proof as unacceptable from the outset, one should not forget to ask oneself what kind of men have invoked it. There can be no common measure between the intellectual and moral worth of the greatest of the contemplatives and the absurdity that their illusion would imply, were it nothing but that.

Yoga and other spiritual methods are often classified as “scientific” because they are performed using exercises and specific mental experiments that produce expected results. Although one must not overly exaggerate the scope of the qualification “scientific”—for they are, after all, very different domains—it is helpful to show that these are empirical methods based on verifying theory through practice.

Titus Burckhardt writes:

In the Islamic world mysticism is regarded as a science, which is handed down from master to disciple just like jurisprudence, with this difference, that from the disciple a special qualification, or more exactly, an inward vocation, is required. In addition, theoretical learning must go hand in hand with spiritual practice, which alone is capable of disclosing the content of the propositions and the symbols that are taught.

In order to verify an experiment or propose a scientific theory, one must be eminently qualified to do as a result of adequate training, and this is rarely possible for the average person. From among those scientists who do reach this level, only a few will gain renown or receive the Nobel Prize. The same holds true for the spiritual path. But the latter has another problem: while the way of outward or scientific knowledge does not affect the person, who can carry on with his defects and passions, the interior or spiritual path requires a radical transformation of the one who follows it; he must turn the focus of his consciousness from the outward, from the peripheral where his sentiments and mental tendencies draw him, to his inward self or to the beloved divinity. According to Matthiew Ricard:

It also takes contemplatives years to acquire correct knowledge and a lasting control over their minds. So it would be wrong to argue, “You contemplatives, you claim to have a close understanding of consciousness, but how can I know, given that I can’t verify your claims?”

There have been a very great number of mystics on this earth. Some of them were deranged and often preached extravagant ideas. For this reason, a proof of authenticity is to match their words with those of the Scriptures and treatises on contemplation within the same tradition. Many such treatises have proven their usefulness over the course of

countless generations of contemplatives.

In India, the *Mundaka Upanishad* speaks thus of this last state:

As the rivers lose their name and form when they merge with the sea, so the sages are liberated of their name and form when they attain the supreme essence, greater than the most great.

Heinrich Suso expresses this identification in a similar way to what the Buddhists call *shunyata* or “emptiness”:

A man may in this life reach the point at which he understands himself to be one with that which is nothing as compared with all the things that one can imagine or express in words. By common agreement, men call this Nothing “God”, and it is itself a most essential Something.

Ruysbroeck:

Al the pleasures of the earth fused into a single pleasure and poured in their entirety into a single man are nothing compared with the joy of which I speak; for here it is God who flows into our depths in all His purity, and our souls are not only filled but overflowing. Only the light of this experience can show the soul the dreadful misery of those who live without love.

From the *Narada Bhakti Sutra*: “One must not enter into an argument. This is because there is scope of many viewpoints and none of them is conclusive.”

If there is an Absolute, an Infinite, there cannot be anything outside of it that limits it. “We”—but not the appearance of “we”—are that Absolute. To comprehend our unity with Him is the supreme goal of contemplation.

Thus a state is attained that Ibn Arabi describes in the following paradoxical way: “the final end of the gnostics is that the real is identical with them while they do not exist.”

In fact, the ego, the unreal, is what is most opposed to God, or Reality. For this reason Swami Ramdas said: “For the man whose ego is the principal obstacle to the Realization of the unity of God, it is pure ignorance to declare that he is God.” In order to avoid misinterpretations and deviations, this doctrine was traditionally only taught to those with sufficient understanding and faculties. A disciple of the Shaykh al-Alawi observed:

The doctrine of Self-Knowledge is dangerous, the great danger being [...] that the seeker, for want of the necessary sense of the Absolute, should unconsciously “deify a secret fold of the ego”, imagining it to be the Self.

Charles Upton explains:

God is indeed a Person, but if we say He is *only* personal, we are in danger of

implying that He is no more than we conceive Him to be, of imprisoning Him on our human level of understanding, of denying that He opens out “behind”, onto the Infinite.

Rama Coomaraswamy:

It is interesting to note that in almost every field or specialty, common sense tells us that we need guidance and such is sought from experts. But when it comes to spiritual matters the great majority do not hesitate to choose themselves as both expert and advisor. [...] And yet ironically we find many giving their trust to individuals with no traditional affiliations and who proclaim themselves through the media as guides to any and all—usually for a healthy fee.

Man has very limited powers. How could he, solely by his own effort, reach the ultimate goal? How can a finite and limited action have an infinite effect? The saints emphasize that everything happens either through the grace of God or the master (who is a vehicle reflecting God’s grace). One could define grace as the attraction that God or *Atman* exerts: man can only avoid putting obstacles to it.

Richard of Saint Victor:

This gift is from God and not of man’s deserving. But certainly no one ever receives such a great grace without tremendous labour and burning desire.

According to Bayazid alBistami: “This thing we tell of can never be found by seeking, yet only seekers find it.”

Without seeking “experiences”—these will come when they should, if they should—we should be concentrated on spiritual growth, which can only be achieved through constant, patient practice. Real spirituality is that which transforms the person, not that which grants momentary experiences, however sublime they may be.

Spiritual growth is like that of a tree, which needs sunlight and moisture throughout the year, although it may only visibly increase during certain short seasons.