Sufi Principles of Meditation

Lecture 7: Contraction and Expansion

“Your hand opens and closes, opens and closes. If it were always a fist or always stretched open, you would be paralyzed. Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expanding, the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated as birds' wings.” —Rumi
Definitions of Contraction and Expansion

Contraction is to the gnostic what fear is to the beginner, and expansion is to the gnostic what hope is to the beginner. The distinction between contraction and fear and expansion and hope, is that fear only relates to something in the future, whether it be the loss of something dear or the onset of something dreaded. Hope likewise only relates to future events—the anticipation of something one likes or the awaited disappearance of something one dreads, the expected end of something one hates. Contraction, however, is a subtle impact produced in the moment itself and the same is the case with expansion. The heart of the one who experiences fear and hope is attached by its two states to the future, while the “now” of the one who experiences contraction and expansion is captured by a feeling that overpowers him in the present.

—Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
As the Sufis’ states differ, the quality of their contraction and expansion also differs. Under one sort of influence, which is not total, contraction is produced but the possibility of outside concerns remains. Other people in a state of contraction may find that the influence affecting them permits no access to outside concerns. Thus one of these said, “I am a barrier”—that is, “There is no means of entry in me.”

—Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
Dynamics of Expansion (Bast)

This is also how it is for people in the state of expansion. There may be an expansion in someone that widens his nature but does not cut him off from the majority of ordinary things. And there may be someone in bast who will not be affected by anything at all.

–Al-Qushayri,

Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
One of the lowest causes of contraction is the arrival in the heart of a feeling brought on by a sign of divine reproof or a hint that one deserves punishment. This inevitably produces a contraction in the heart. Other feelings may be prompted by an indication, through a sort of kindness and welcome, of approach to God or response from Him. This produces an expansion in the heart. –Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
Degrees of Contraction

In general, the degree of contraction of which someone is capable is the same as his potential expansion and his expansion is to the degree of his contraction. There may be a contraction whose cause is unclear to the one who experiences it. He finds in his heart a state of contraction for which he perceives no reason or motive. The proper course of action for such a one is submission until that moment passes from him. If he were to try to refuse it by his efforts or to bring on the moment [of the conclusion of this state] before it comes upon him of itself, his contraction would increase, and [his efforts] might be counted against him as an infringement of the principles of spiritual conduct. But if he surrenders to the rule of the moment, before long the state of contraction will vanish. As by God, may He be exalted, said, "And God brings about contraction and expansion" (2:245).

—Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
And there may be an expansion that comes on suddenly—the one who experiences this encounters it unexpectedly, without knowing any reason for it. It shakes him and makes him giddy. The proper course of action for someone in this circumstance is silence and the observance of correct behavior, for there is at that moment a great danger for him. Such a person must beware of a hidden scheme, a test in the form of a gift. Thus one of the Sufis said, “A door of expansion was opened upon me. I slipped so I was veiled from my station.” And on account of this they say. “Stay on the prayer-rug (bisat), and beware of delight (inbisat)!”

—Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
Junayd said, “Fear of God contracts me while hope of Him expands me. The real nature of things (haqiqah) unifies me [in His Presence], while the Truth of His Being (haqq) separates me [from Him in essence]. When He contracts me through fear, He makes me pass away from myself, and when He expands me through hope, He returns me to myself. When He unifies me through the real nature of things, He raises me to His Presence and when He separates me [from Him] through His Unique Truth, He makes me witness what is other than myself, and so veils me from Him. He, may He be exalted, in all of that moves me [from state to state], not holding me back. He estranges me [from all else] but does not make me familiar with Him. It is in His Presence that I taste the food of my being. Would that He would annihilate me from myself and so gratify me, or take me away from myself and so revive me!”

—Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
God, the Most High and Holy [speaks of one], “whose heart God has opened to Islam so that he has received enlightenment from God” (39:22).

Expansion is the opening that God bestows upon the heart, the spiritual time, and the aspiration of a servant. And that is of three kinds: the expansion of prayers and invocations, the expansion in service, and the expansion during seeking.

—Abdullah Ansari of Herat, *Stations of the Sufi Path*
Prayers, Service, and Seeking

The expansion of prayers has three signs: invocations with reverence, awestruck humble supplications, and beseeching God through Qur’anic divination.

And the expansion of service has three signs: lightly carrying the load of plentiful works, abundant prayers concealed from people, and a heart punctual in prayer.

And expansion during seeking as three signs: minimum audition yet great benefit, minimum service yet great joy, and minimum contemplative reflection yet great contemplative vision.

–Abdullah Ansari of Herat, 
*Stations of the Sufi Path*