Lecture 8: Absence and Presence

“For twenty years I have been finding and losing—when I have found my Lord, I have lost my heart, and when I have found my heart, I have lost my Lord.”

—Abu-l Husayn al-Nuri
Absence is the heart’s absence from knowledge of what is going on in ordinary human affairs, due to the absorption of the senses in something else that is influencing them. The heart may be made absent from its sense of itself and others by the influence of remembering eternal reward or of thinking about eternal punishment. For instance, it is said that Rabi bin Khaytham was going to visit Ibn Masud when he passed by the shop of a blacksmith and saw hot iron in the forge. He lost consciousness and did not come to himself until the next day. Having awakened, he was asked about what happened, and said, “Through that fire, the existence of the People of the Fire came to my mind.” This is an absence that exceeded its bounds and became a faint. It is also told that a fire broke out in the house of Ali ibn Husayn while he was in prostration, but he did not turn away from his prayer. When asked about what had happened, he said, “The remembrance of hellfire protected me from that fire.”

–Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
The Causes of Absence

Sometimes absence from one’s senses may be brought on by the Truth’s disclosure of an inner meaning. Those who experience this are differentiated according to their states. It is well known that the state of Abu Hafs al-Nishapuri al-Haddad (the Blacksmith) began with his leaving his trade. He was in his shop when a reciter of the Qur’an chanted a verse, and an influence came over his heart that made Abu Hafs lose awareness of his senses. He put his hand into the fire and drew out the hot iron. One of his students saw this and exclaimed, “Master, what is this?” Abu Hafs looked at what had manifested through him, abandoned his trade, and left his shop.

—Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
Definition of Presence (*Hudur*)

As for presence, it means that one is present with the Real, because if one is absent from creation one is present with the Real. [The term] implies that [the state] resembles being [physically] present: the remembrance of the Real captures one’s heart, and one is present within one’s heart before the Lord Most High.

—Al-Qushayri,

*Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism*
Presence with God, is to the degree of absence from oneself and the world. When it is said that so-and-so is “present,” it means that he is present in his heart with his Lord, not unconscious of Him and not distracted, in continuous recollection of Him. In that state, and according to his degree, the Truth reveals to him the spiritual meanings and secrets for which he has been chosen.

—Al-Qushayri, *Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism*
Absence and Presence

These terms, although apparently opposed to each other, express the same meaning from different points of view. “Presence” is “presence of the heart,” as proof of intuitive faith (yaqin), so that what is hidden from it has the same force as what is visible to it. “Absence” is “absence of the heart from all things except God” to such an extent that it becomes absent from itself and absent even from its absence, so that it no longer regards itself; and the sign of the state is withdrawal from all formal authority, as when a prophet is divinely preserved from what is unlawful. Accordingly, absence from one’s self is presence with God, and vice versa.

—Al-Hujwiri, Revelation of the Mystery (Khashf al-Mahjub)
Degrees of Presence and Absence

“Present,” with the sense of being back from an absence, may also be used for the servant’s return to his perception of his own condition and human situations. This, however, refers to the presence with the creation, while the first use of the term refers to presence with the truth. States of absence vary—for some Sufis, absence is not prolonged, while for others it is continuous.

—Al-Qushayri,

*Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism*
The Subtleties of Absence and Presence

“...inasmuch as all excellencies are bound up with presence, and as absence from one’s self is a way leading to presence with God, the way becomes an imperfection after you have arrived at the goal. Presence is the fruit of absence, but what light is to be found in absence without presence? A man must needs renounce heedlessness in order that, by means of this absence, he may attain to presence; and when he has attained to his object, the means by which he attained it has no longer any worth.

“The ‘absent’ one is not he who is absent from his country,
But he who is absent from all desire.
The ‘present’ one is not he who hath no desire,
But he who hath no heart (no thought of worldly things),
So that his desire is ever fixed on God.”

—Al-Hujwiri, Revelation of the Mystery (Khashf al-Mahjub)
Absence of Personality and Presence with God

It is related that Dhu-l-Nun al-Misri sent one of his companions to Abu Yazid al-Bistami so that the man could bring him word of Abu Yazid’s quality. When he reached Bistam, the messenger inquired after the house of Abu Yazid and went in to see him. Abu Yazid asked, “What do you want?” “I want Abu Yazid,” he said. “Who is Abu Yazid?” was the reply, “and where is Abu Yazid? I myself am in search of Abu Yazid!”

The man went away, saying to himself, “This one is mad!” He returned to Dhu-l-Nun and informed him of what he had seen. Dhu-l-Nun wept. “My brother Abu Yazid has left with those who go to God,” said he.

—Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
A certain man came to Junayd and said, “Be present with me for a moment that I may speak to thee.” Junayd answered: “O young man, you demand of me something that I have long been seeking. For many years I have been wishing to become present with myself a moment, but I cannot; how, then, can I become present with you just now?” Therefore, absence involves the sorrow of being veiled, while “presence” involves the joy of revelation, and the former state can never be equal to the latter. Shaykh Abu Sa’id says on the subject—

“The clouds of separation have been cleared away from the moon of love, And the light of morning has shone forth from the darkness of the Unseen.”

—Al-Hujwiri, Revelation of the Mystery (Khashf al-Mahjub)
Wherever we direct our attention, we spend creative energy.
—Samael Aun Weor, *Fundamentals of Gnostic Education*