Sufi Principles of Meditation

Lecture 10: Striving

“The time for the Greater Holy War has come! Arise, oh Sufi! Enter the battle! Cut the throat of sensuality with hunger! Fret not over stew! The dervish gives away his body and spirit: This is the principle of every generous act. Place them in the fire, for fire is an alchemy that transforms the unripe.” —Rumi
I heard Abu Ali al-Daqqaq say, “If someone beautifies his outer being by struggling against the passions of his ego, God will beautify his inner being with the vision of Him. God Most High said, “Those who struggle for Us we will certainly guide in Our ways” (29:69). —Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
The Greater and Lesser Holy Wars

The Prophet said: “The mujáhid is he who struggles with all his might against himself (jáhada nafsahu) for God’s sake.” And he also said: “We have returned from the lesser war (al-jihád al-asghar) to the greater holy war (al-jihad al-akbar). On being asked, “What is the greater holy war?” he replied, “It is the struggle against one’s self” (mujáhadat al-nafs). Thus the Apostle adjuged the mortification of the lower soul to be superior to the Holy War against unbelievers, because the former is more painful. You must know, then, that the way of mortification is plain and manifest, for it is approved by men of all religions and sects, and is observed and practiced by the Sufis in particular; and the term mortification (mujáhadat) is current among Sufis of every class, and the Shaykhs have uttered many sayings on this topic.

—Al-Hujwiri, Revelation of the Mystery
The Foundation of Striving

Know that the foundation and rationale of struggle or striving (mujahadah) is to wean the ego from what is familiar to it and to induce it to oppose its desires (passions) at all times. The ego (animal soul) has two traits that prevent it from good: total preoccupation with cravings (attraction to pleasure) and refusal of obedience (avoidance of pain/harm). When the ego is defiant in the pursuit of desire, it must be curbed with the reins of the awe of God. When it stubbornly refuses to conform to God’s will, it must be steered toward opposing its desires. When it rages in anger [at being opposed], its state should be controlled—no process has a better outcome than the breaking of the power of anger by developing good character traits and by extinguishing its fires by gentleness. And if the soul finds sweetness in the wine of arrogance, it will have become incapable of anything but showing off its great deeds and preening itself before anyone who will look at it and notice it. It is necessary to break it of this habit, dissolving it with the punishment of humiliation by means of whatever will make the soul remember its paltry worth, its lowly origin, and its despicable acts.

—Al-Qushayri, Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism
And thus did We show Abraham the realm of the heavens and the earth that he would be among the certain [in faith].

So when the night covered him [with darkness], he saw a star. He said, "This is my lord." But when it set, he said, "I like not those that disappear."

And when he saw the moon rising, he said, "This is my lord." But when it set, he said, "Unless my Lord guides me, I will surely be among the people gone astray."

And when he saw the sun rising, he said, "This is my lord; this is greater." But when it set, he said, "O my people, indeed I am free from what you associate with Allah.

Indeed, I have turned my face toward He who created the heavens and the earth, inclining toward truth, and I am not of those who associate others with Allah.

And his people argued with him. He said, "Do you argue with me concerning Allah while He has guided me? And I fear not what you associate with Him [and will not be harmed] unless my Lord should will something. My Lord encompasses all things in knowledge; then will you not remember?"

—Qur’an 6:75-80
The struggle of the majority of people is to bring their works to full development. The struggle of the elite is to purify their states because the endurance of hunger and wakefulness is simple and easy. The cure of character and the cleansing of its impurities is extremely difficult.

—Al-Qushayri, *Al-Risalah: Principles of Sufism*
Striving: The Basis of Union

While all mystics have affirmed the need of mortification, and have declared it to be an indirect means (asbáb) of attaining contemplation (musháhadat), Sahl asserted that mortification is the direct cause (‘illat) of the latter, and he attributed the search (talab) a powerful effect on attainment (yáft), so that he even regarded the present life, spent in search, as superior to the future life of fruition. “If,” he said, “you serve God in this world, you will attain proximity to Him in the next world: without that service there would not be this proximity: it follows that self-mortification, practiced with the aid of God, is the direct cause of union with God.”

—Al-Hujwiri, Revelation of the Mystery
The Causes of Contemplation

“Those who strive to the utmost for Our sake, We will guide them into Our ways” (Qur’an 29:69). i.e. whoever mortifies himself will attain to contemplation. Furthermore, [Sahl] contends that inasmuch as the books revealed to the Prophets, and the Sacred Law (Shari‘ah), and all the religious ordinances imposed on mankind involve mortification, they must all be false and vain if mortification were not the cause of contemplation. Again, both in this world and the next, everything is connected with principles and causes. If it is maintained that principles have no causes, there is an end to all law and order: neither can religious obligations be justified nor will food be the cause of repletion and clothes the cause of warmth.

—Al-Hujwiri, Revelation of the Mystery
Training the Lower Soul

Does not training (riyadat) alter the animal qualities of a wild horse and substitute human qualities in their stead, so that he will pick up a whip from the ground and give it to his master, or will roll a ball with his foot? In the same way, a boy without sense and of foreign race is taught by training to speak Arabic, and take a new language in exchange for his mother tongue; and a savage beast is trained to go away when leave is given to it, and to come back when it is called, preferring captivity to freedom. Therefore, Sahl and his followers argue, mortification [striving, mujahadah] is just as necessary for the attainment of Union with God as diction and composition are necessary for the elucidation of ideas; and as one is led to knowledge of the Creator by assurance that the universe was created by him, so one is led to union with God by knowledge and mortification of the lower soul.

—Al-Hujwiri, Revelation of the Mystery
Three Ways to Strive

Striving is to fight against one’s ego (nafs), against evil (div), and against the enemy. God, the Most High, says, “Strive in God’s cause, as you ought to strive…” (22:78).

Striving may occur in three ways: one way is to confront the enemy with the sword, the second is to confront one’s ego by means of wrath, and the third way is to confront the evil (or devil) by means of patience.

—Abdullah Ansari of Herat, Stations of the Sufi Path
Three Categories of Strivers

Those who strive (*mujāhidān*) with the sword are of three groups of people: one group are those who strive and are rewarded for their striving, the second group are those who are exhausted but are forgiven for their exhaustion, and the final group are those who die (are killed) and are considered martyrs.

Those who strive against the ego are of three groups: those who strive and are servants among the righteous servants (*abrār*) of God, then there are those who discover and are supporters (*awtād*), and finally, those who are free and liberated and are among the spiritually transformed apostles (*abdāl*) of God.

Those who fight against the devil are of three groups of people: one group are those who continuously seek knowledge and are among those near to God (*murqaribān*), then those who are obedient and thus are considered sincere ones (*sidiqun*), and then there are those who are pious and thus considered the friends of God (*awliyā*).

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