

## AL-GHAZĀLI ON THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī was born at Tūs, in the very centre of the region where Islamic mysticism had its rise and early development in 1059 A. D., at a time when some of the greatest of the Ṣūfī writers, such as al-Muhāsibī, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, Qushayrī and Hujwērī, had already set forth the doctrines of Ṣūfism, so far as it had developed at that period. Al-Ghazālī's early education was received at the hands of a Ṣūfī friend of his father. Later he proceeded to school and to college, and received the best education available for young men of his time.

In 1091, al-Ghazālī was appointed professor at the Nizamiyya College in Baghdad, and while there lost his religious faith, and became a thorough-going skeptic and agnostic. He applied himself diligently to a study of the different schools of thought around him, and especially of philosophy, seeking in that way to gain peace of mind and a solution of his own doubts. Finally he turned to Ṣūfism, and this restored his belief in God, but his conversion was accompanied by a physical breakdown. He relinquished his post at Baghdad, and resolved to give himself up to the practice of asceticism and the contemplative life, in order to attain to a real knowledge of the truth. For two years he lived in retreat in different places, studying and writing, the subject of his studies now being the teaching of the great Ṣūfī writers. From time to time he returned to his family, and to the life of the world, and at the end of this period returned to normal life, but after a brief time of teaching at Nishāpūr, his desire for a life of quiet and contemplation led him to return to Tūs, where he spent the last few years

of his life in retirement with his personal disciples, having charge of a Ṣūfī monastery, and there he died in A. D. 1111.

Al-Ghazālī, being a true mystic, and therefore permeated with the consciousness of the divine, was intensely and continuously aware of the all-pervading presence of God, and as a mystic, too, he sought for a conscious relation with that divine Reality, that relation which the Ṣūfis called "union," when the consciousness of the world and of the self was merged in the consciousness of God. What al-Ghazālī sought, as all the mystics have sought, was "the supernatural union of likeness, begotten of love, which is the union of the human will with the divine. They seek to realize the unfeelt natural presence of God in creation, by entering into a personal relationship with the concealed presence which is the source of being."<sup>1</sup>

Mysticism assumes that this relationship is rendered possible by a spiritual faculty of the soul, by which it can see and perceive that which cannot be understood by intelligence, an inner sense by which man can receive a direct knowledge and revelation of God. "Man possesses two eyes," says al-Ghazālī, "the outward and the inward; the outward, which is concerned with the world of sense and its observation, and the inward, which is concerned with the invisible world; and each eye has a sun and light by which it is enabled to see to the perfection of its power." This inner sense the soul possesses because it is itself a partaker of the divine nature. Al-Ghazālī emphasized the teaching, already set forth in orthodox Islam, that man differed from the other creatures because God had breathed into him of His own Spirit. Man, alone of the creation, had been created with a nature corresponding to the divine nature, and therefore he can know God. So, al-Ghazālī tells us, there is within the human soul a power of apprehension, the "inward light," the "light of faith," which seeks the highest kind of knowledge, that of God Himself. In this consists the joy

of the saints, for "they are, even in this life, in a paradise which no eye hath seen, and they listen to that which no ear hath heard."<sup>2</sup> Al-Ghazālī frequently compares the soul to a mirror, which, when it is polished and free from blemishes, and the veil has been drawn aside, can reflect the realities of the spiritual world—and the highest reality, that which alone brings true joy to the soul, is the image of God Himself; by means of the mirror of the soul, man can attain to a direct knowledge of God and the nature of God.

But on account of the rust and the blemishes by which the mirror is marred—"that fair countenance," says al-Ghazālī, "has become disfigured by the darkness of sin"—and the veils which hide from it that glorious reality of the nearness of God, the first step towards the practice of the presence of God, is the polishing of the mirror, and the removal of the veils between the soul and God, and this is by the process of purification, the first stage on the mystic path, which is an inward process. The means of purification is, in the first place, repentance (*tawbat*), which to the Sūfīs was the equivalent of conversion, turning away from the old life and setting the face towards the new life in God. Al-Ghazālī stresses the fact that no one is free from sin. "For though in some cases he is free from the sins of his outward members, he is not free from sins of the heart; though sometimes he may be free from this burden, he is not free from the suggestions of satan, and from forgetfulness of God, nor from neglect and coming short of the knowledge of God and His attributes and His works."

Unrepented sin enters deeper and deeper into the heart, until the image of God on the mirror of the human soul is all but effaced. Therefore the soul that would be purified must repent, and al-Ghazālī writes: "Whenever you purify the place where you are, which is your outermost container, and then your garments, which are your

<sup>2</sup> So Brother Lawrence writes: "If in this life we would enjoy the peace of Paradise we must accustom ourselves to a familiar, humble, affectionate conversation with Him." *Fourteenth Letter.*

nearest covering, and then your skin, which is your closest shell, do not be unmindful of your kernel, which is your real essence, and that is your heart. Therefore strive to cleanse it by repentance and contrition, for that is the spot upon which God looks." A complete purification of the heart from all but God, says al-Ghazālī, is the path which leads the mystic to communion with God. Seeking to submerge the heart entirely in God is its beginning, and its end is complete passing away in God. So he writes: "I pray almighty God to set us among the number of those whom He directs in the way of salvation, whom He purifies from all defilement, so that nothing shall remain in them except Himself, of those in short, of whom He takes complete possession, so that they adore Him alone."

The only way by which the seeker, when purified, can come to knowledge of his Lord, and ultimately to that union with Him, which is the mystic's goal, is by constant intercourse with Him. "When you awake from sleep," says al-Ghazālī, "endeavor to arise before early dawn, and may the first thing that enters your head and tongue be the remembrance of God most high," and this remembrance should be with the lover of God at all times, even as God is with him at all times, if he has eyes to see and a heart to apprehend. Of the constant presence and fellowship (*mu'āsharat*) of God with His creatures, al-Ghazālī writes, "Your Companion, Who does not desert you, whether you are at home or abroad, asleep or awake, in life or in death, is your Lord and Master, your Protector and your Creator, and whensoever you remember Him, He is there beside you. For God Himself hath said: 'I am the Companion of him who remembers Me.' And whenever your heart is grief-stricken for your shortcomings in religion, He is there, continually beside you. For He hath said: 'I am with those who are broken in heart.' If you but knew Him as He really is, you would take Him as your Friend, and forsake all others but Him. And even if you are able to do this at all times, yet I would urge you to set aside time both night and day,

devoted to your Lord, that you may enjoy His presence, in inward converse with Him. You ought to know what are the joys of continuous fellowship with God."

The chief means by which the soul can attain to this companionship with God and the joys to which it leads, are prayer and meditation, for prayer is intimate communion with Him. To attain to the inner reality of prayer, the heart must be "present," that is, closely attentive, to apprehend what God would reveal to it, and the worshipper must come in a state of humble adoration, of reverence and of hope. Just as, in the ritual prayer, the face is turned towards the *qiblat*, and away from all other directions, so also the heart should be turned towards God and nothing else. "Let the face of your heart be turned in the same direction as the face of your body, and know that the heart does not turn towards God except by being free of all else besides."<sup>3</sup> Al-Ghazālī knows much of the distractions and the wandering thoughts which hamper intercourse with God in prayer, but only those who direct their prayer solely to the face of God in humble adoration can receive the light of His presence, and perceive the unseen mysteries revealed to the friends of God. The divine secrets are unveiled only in prayer, and the revelation is in proportion to the seeker's freedom from all distractions. When such a one can say: "My worship and my devotion, my living and my dying belong to God," know that this is the state of one lost to himself and found to his Lord.

Prayer, al-Ghazālī teaches, is of three degrees. The first is that uttered only with the tongue, the second when it is only by resolute effort that the soul can free itself from evil suggestions and concentrate on divine things, and the third when the mind can only with difficulty be turned away from dwelling upon the things of God. But the very essence of prayer is attained when He Who is invoked takes possession of the soul of the suppliant, and

<sup>3</sup> So also Brother Lawrence: "For the right practice of the presence of God, the heart must be empty of all other things; because God will possess the heart alone; and as He cannot possess it alone, without emptying it of all besides, so neither can He act there and do in it what He pleases, unless it be left vacant to Him."

the soul of him who prays is absorbed into God, and his prayer is felt to be a veil between the soul and God. This is the *Ṣūfī* state of absorption or *fanā'*, for the mystic is so absorbed that he takes no thought of his body or what is passing without, or even of the movements of his own soul, but he is journeying first towards his Lord and finally in his Lord.<sup>4</sup>

The soul dwells now in the light, and is in such close relationship to its Lord that He raises the veil between Himself and His creature, and meets him face to face. The beginning of this life of fellowship, says al-Ghazālī, is the going towards God, then follows the finding of Him, when absorption takes place. This direct experience of the presence of God is at first momentary, like the lightning which flashes and is gone, but soon it becomes a constant experience, and the soul, in contact with the divine Reality, continues steadfastly in the contemplation of God, and to such a one is granted the vision of God in His beauty. Of the preparation of the soul to look upon that vision, al-Ghazālī tells us that when the mystic concerns himself entirely with God, God takes possession of His servant's heart, and bestows mercy upon it, and gives His light unto it, and the secret of the invisible world is revealed to that one, and the veil is taken away. The servant can do no more than be prepared for the divine penetration, and his concern is with the sincere will and the ardent thirst and the watching in continuous expectation for what God of His grace shall reveal to him. It is upon the hearts of His saints that the light is shed, those hearts which are free from all preoccupation, and are concerned wholly with God—and when anyone is God's, God is his. So, when the mystic is free from all distractions, the light of God will shine upon his heart and it will be at the first like a blinding flash of lightning, but it will return, for it is the prelude of a constant communion with God. "The delight arising from the beauty

<sup>4</sup> So Brother Lawrence speaks of prayer as "nothing else but a sense of the presence of God, the soul being at that time insensible to everything but divine love." *Fourth Conversation.*

of the Lord," writes al-Ghazālī, "is that of which God spoke when He said, 'I have prepared for My faithful servants what eye hath not seen nor ear heard, and what has not entered into the heart of man,' and some of these delights are given here and now to the one who has wholly purified his heart." "How can he, who understands only the love of sensible things, believe in the joy of looking upon the face of God most high? For such a one there is no vision, and what meaning is there for him in the promise of God all-glorious to His worshippers? But he who knows God, knows that all joys (save only those of the senses) are included in this joy."

And from the vision of God, the lover passes into union with Him; those who gaze upon the divine beauty themselves become godlike.<sup>5</sup> This was the ultimate goal of the quest, for the lover seeks ever the consummation of love in union with the Beloved. So a modern writer has written: "Love brings the very life of the divine into the soul of man and takes it as its own—the divine Spirit becomes the unchanging Friend, the intimate Companion, carrying on close and eternal fellowship with the finite spirit in perpetual reciprocal intercourse of thought and action and desire. The love of truth, which not only enchains, but enchants us; the love of goodness, when it assumes the form of the beauty of holiness; the love of beauty for its own sake, find their consummation in the love of the divine, in which these are harmonized and by which is the source and end of them all."<sup>6</sup> If the divine Spirit does really commune with the finite in the way of love and reveal His life to man in so doing, it seems to follow—that not only can man be in intimate union with God, but that God is in intimate union with him."<sup>7</sup>

This corresponds closely with al-Ghazālī's teaching that the lover of God ceases to be conscious of himself and

<sup>5</sup> Cf. St. Paul: "We all, with unveiled face, reflecting as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Spirit of the Lord." II Cor. 3:18.

<sup>6</sup> So also Ghazālī: "Where Beauty exists, it is natural to love it, and if it is certain that God is beautiful, there can be no doubt that He will be loved by those to whom His beauty and His majesty are revealed. The greater the beauty, the greater the love, and since complete and perfect beauty is found only in God, He alone can be worthy of true love."

<sup>7</sup> Sir J. Bailie, "Spiritual Religion," *Hibbert Journal*, April, 1932, p. 412.

is conscious only of God. Now he knows himself to be in union with Him, as living, moving and having his being in God. Of those who are living the unitive life in God al-Ghazālī writes: "Praise be to God Who hath consumed the hearts of His saints in the fire of His love, and hath taken captive their thoughts and their spirits by the longing to meet with Him and to look upon Him, and hath fixed their sight and their insight upon the vision of the beauty of His presence, until by the inbreathing of the spirit of union, they have become rapt beyond themselves, and they see naught like unto Him among all that is visible or invisible, and they remember none in the two worlds, save Him alone. If any form presents itself to their outward gaze, their inward vision passes beyond it to Him that formed it: if sweet music breaks upon their hearing, their inmost thoughts pass from it to the Beloved. Their longing is only for that which is to be found in His presence, and their going to and fro is round about Him alone. For from Him is all that they hear, and it is to Him that they give heed, since He hath closed their eyes to all but Him and hath made them deaf to all words save His. These are they whom God hath called to be His saints."

They are those who are lost to self, but alive in God, lovers who have entered into abiding union with Him whom they love.

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