



\*\*\*EXCERPT\*\*\*

From

## **Practical Sufism**

### *A Field Guide to the Spiritual Path*

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By Phillip Gowins

#### **CHAPTER 11**

##### **A Passion for the Unattainable**

The seeking for God is a natural outcome of the maturity of the soul. There is a time in life when a passion is awakened in the soul which gives the soul a longing for the unattainable, and if the soul does not take that direction, then it certainly misses something in life which is its innate longing and in which lies its ultimate satisfaction.

- Hazrat Inayat Khan

Ever since I can remember, I have felt the dull throb of an emotional need that it seemed could never be satisfied.

Nothing could ease the throb. I tried sex – I suppose everyone does – which only worked for a short time; drugs, which masked the need but did not fill it; coffee and

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cigarettes, cigarettes especially, which dulled the need and covered it over with a smokescreen. I tried science-fiction novels, which enabled me to ignore the throb for the length of time it took to read the novel. Whatever I tried – without any conscious idea, really, of what I was trying to do – failed to fill the aching void that seemed to be in me every waking and possibly every sleeping moment.

It was not until I quit smoking that I began to come to grips with this throb. This was because when I quit smoking, I felt it with renewed vigor and realized that that was what I had been trying to cover up with the smoking. At first, I thought this redoubled throb was due to nicotine deprivation. But when long after the symptoms of nicotine deprivation should have gone away I still felt the throb in all its power, I realized this was something that had to do with the human soul – and I started to wonder how many other people were experiencing this same background emotional noise. I wondered if the whole human race might not be feeling it. And I came to the conclusion that the throb was simply that spiritual yearning of which all the ecstatic poets speak. What is the best way I have personally found for dealing with this primal longing? It is twofold: through meditation; and through the expression of my creativity, which for me involves crafting beautiful objects in my workshop.

Hazrat Inayat Khan writes, “When the light of love has been lit, the heart becomes transparent, so that the intelligence of the soul can see through it; but until the heart is kindled by the flame of love, the intelligence, which is constantly yearning to experience life on the surface, is groping in the dark.”

## **The Limitations of Possessions**

There are many different ways of trying to assuage the passion for the unattainable. Not all are satisfactory. One popular means is by acquiring possessions. But acquiring possessions (and those possessions can be friends as well as things) is only another of those gropings in the dark that Hazrat Inayat Khan mentions in the quotation above. It is a groping that makes us feel alive, but only temporarily. Possessions do satisfy our longings – but only for a moment. Hazrat Inayat Khan does not say anywhere that giving up possessions helps kindle our heart into a flame of love. The path of the renunciation of worldly goods is encouraged by some, but it is not the Sufi way. Sufism holds that we should awaken within life, not outside it. It declares that our hearts can be on fire with love even if we own a nice car, even a Rolls-Royce. The important thing to understand is that the Rolls-Royce, although it is a nice car, is just a car and will not satisfy our yearning to experience our being at its fullest. Having stuff brings only fleeting satisfaction. It also brings permanent problems, because if you have stuff you have to pay attention to that stuff. Every day that I go into my cabinetmaker's shop I look around and take a mental inventory of my tools, right down to the drill bits, and I have hundreds of those. This clutters up my mind. My mind is further cluttered up by the resentment and disapproval that well up within me each time I take this inventory; I think of the tools I do not have, of the perfect stranger who messed up one I do have, and so on and so forth. When you consider that my shop-inventory resentments are then shoved into the usual pile of resentments we all have – he done me wrong, she done me wrong, it done me wrong, and so on, and so on – you can

imagine how totally cluttered up my mind really is.

(Our minds are, in fact, so continually and constantly cluttered up that we have to wonder just how far we can even know what we are thinking or feeling in any one regard. The Sufis have a number of techniques for knowing this. One of them is Muhasaba – the practice of self-criticism and self-interrogation. Muhasaba is fairly easy. Ask yourself, “What am I doing right now?” When the answer comes, whatever it may be, ask the question again, then again. Try to avoid rationalizing. Practice Muhasaba every day. Always question what you are doing. This is not to say that everything you are doing is wrong! No, of course not. But you need to be totally aware of how you are going about your day and totally aware of your thoughts about how you are going about your day. This is Muhasaba. It is akin to the mindfulness of the Buddhists.)

### **The Coffee Shop That Refused to Be Separate**

Sex, smoking, food, drink, having possessions – these are not the only ways we have of temporarily appeasing our yearning for the unattainable. There are a hundred other ways. Let me give you an example. This example is a sequel to the two-week retreat I discussed at great length in the last chapter. You will recall that I spent those two weeks – actually, fifteen days – isolated from the world in a small hut. Because the main constituents of my diet were granola, apple juice, and rice cakes, by the time the retreat was over, I was experiencing a high degree of grease deprivation. I had not had a New York coffee-shop breakfast of meat, eggs, and hash browns for that whole two weeks.

As I was getting into my car, I asked my retreat guide where the nearest restaurant was that I could get a good New York-style breakfast. She was at something of a loss, perhaps reluctant to tell me because she was a vegetarian herself. But she finally came through with a name and a place, and I left at top speed, stopping on the way only to buy a *New York Times* (I was also suffering from a high degree of *New York Times* crossword puzzle deprivation). I arrived at the designated restaurant, plunked myself down at the counter, and in one breath placed my order:

“Two poached on wheat toast, bacon, hash browns, coffee.” The man behind the counter stared at me. I remembered I was not in a New York City coffee shop and repeated my order slowly. Soon my breakfast arrived (a compromise: fried eggs, no hash browns, this not being New York), and I set to.

I was halfway through my breakfast and not quite halfway through my crossword puzzle (this was Friday, and the puzzles are harder on Friday) when a voice came over the public address system: “Ladies and gentlemen, it is now time to say the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America. Will everyone please rise and face the flag?”

My first thought was that my retreat guide had made a mistake and directed me into a parallel universe, one where the U.S. government was a touch more dictatorial. I looked around and saw that if this were a parallel universe, it was an extremely good copy of my own. Furthermore, everybody was standing up. I looked at the guy sitting next to me, who seemed as confused as I was. But we shrugged at one another and did what any sane person would do when confronted with the customs of a foreign

country: we stood up, said the Pledge of Allegiance along with everyone else, and sat down again to finish our breakfasts. (My crossword puzzle had to wait; it was too hard – I finished it at a coffee break further along on my way home.)

The owner of the coffee shop had found a way to assuage his feelings of separation, his desire for the unattainable. It was by making everyone join him for a brief moment of union in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. It was not much of a union, really – just a gesture in that direction. But I could feel the satisfaction that even the regular customers must have felt (for they had fallen into this readily to assuage their own feelings of separation) at performing this well-known and at the same time slightly unusual ritual.

(The regulars may even have felt a bit of smug defiance toward those strangers, like myself, who had essentially been forced to conform to the ritual. That was okay with me. We all have these moments of smug defiance; and I was not offended. If anything, I was charmed. This is not to say that I intend to make the Pledge of Allegiance a part of my daily meditation regime. But I instantly had a sense of the deeper resonances of my encounter with patriotism in that small-town coffee shop.)

No matter how veiled from us the secrets of the greater cosmos seem to be, we all still feel the need to express our commitment to that greater cosmos. We cannot shake the belief that there must be some way of acknowledging our innate belongingness to a whole greater than our world. My friends in the small-town coffee shop had found one way of acknowledging that belongingness.

## **The Unendingness of the Passion for the Unattainable**

Our passion for the unattainable, that aching desire we have to experience ourselves as being a part of something greater than ourselves, finds expression in the world all around us. I have said that meditation and the exercise of meaningful creativity (in my case woodworking) can bring us closer to satisfying this yearning. A number of professional healers, all of them working out there in the real world, come to the Sufi Center that Majida and I direct. There is a chiropractor; there are a couple of physical therapists; there is a polarity therapist; there is a nurse practitioner. There are a number of accomplished healers who, technically speaking, are not professionals. When I hear these people talking about healing, often I hear them expressing the intense creative joy they sometimes experience as they do their healing. They talk about practicing healing just like I talk about making furniture. All of us know we are impacting our environment in a meaningful way. All of us know it, and that knowledge makes us high.

I have already quoted Hazrat Inayat Khan:

The seeking for God is a natural outcome of the maturity of the soul. There is a time in life when a passion is awakened in the soul which gives the soul a longing for the unattainable, and if the soul does not take that direction, then it certainly misses something in life which is its innate longing and in which lies its ultimate satisfaction. . . . We are born with the thinking of the whole universe,

but as our consciousness becomes limited to what we think we are as an individual, we lose the thinking of the universe and base our knowledge upon our experience, or upon our way of interpreting experience. When we rediscover that thinking, we realize how inadequate our personal thinking is.

There is no end to the yearning for the unattainable, not even for the best of us. Once I was driving the Pir to Kennedy Airport when he suddenly said to me, "I'm seventy-five years old and only now am I understanding what it means to be a Sufi." I was not quite sure how to respond to this unexpected announcement, so I said nothing. The Pir's admission told me a lot about spiritual progress. My own breakthroughs come at ten-year intervals—or so it seems, maybe because each one of them is so exhausting that it takes me nine years to work up the courage to try for another breakthrough. Or maybe it just seems that way; maybe the intervals are a whole lot shorter. The fact is that we need only look at how attached we all are to, well, just about everything, to understand why the intervals must indeed be so very long.

### **Exercise 13: Being Greater**

This practice demands that we be continually aware of the limitation of our experience and the probability that there is other, as yet undiscovered, territory waiting to open itself before us. For the next minute or so, try to imagine that what you know is bigger than you know. If you honestly try this, you will experience a sort of psychic

stretching. Do you remember when you were a kid and you tried to blow up a new balloon, and right at the start it seemed like it would be impossible to blow it up? When you feel a psychic stretching and feel like you cannot stretch any more, think of that balloon—and then relax into the exercise and allow the soul's desire to take shape. How do you do this? You can facilitate this allowing by calmly remembering that who the world says you are is only a tiny portion of your being. Remember, too, that “up” and “out” and all those other words are merely words. Everything that is, is there within you.

Sometimes, when I am explaining the above, a student will exclaim, “I never imagined God was unattainable!” I am not saying God is unattainable. The unattainable, when we are talking about the passion for the unattainable, simply refers to that state in which you have an intimation of the actual vastness of creation. This is not an intellectual or a philosophical experience but a direct perception of reality, one known about and sought after by every mystical order. What I have been trying to do is point to the existence of this experience without actually being able to describe it, because, as in so many things in the world of the mystics, words are useless in this respect and all we can really do is talk around the subject.

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