

## Mysteries—and Presence: Universal Foundations of the Path

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This short, four-session course is intended as a helpful complement to two recurrent shortcomings in currently available popular resources regarding Sufism (and spirituality more generally). The first of these is their typical emphasis, shared by our familiar modern cultural emphasis on “self-help” literatures more generally, on the actions and experiences of the isolated *individual*. The second, multi-faceted problem is the ways that our particular language, our talking *about* spiritual realities, can only too readily come to obscure—rather than to open up and illuminate—the profound universality and omnipresence of the realities in question.

To begin with, each of the most lastingly influential, classical Sufi authors and teachers has pointed out emphatically that our spiritual growth and transformation most memorably takes place in those poignant situations where our (usually unconscious) inner images and mental expectations of reality—what Ibn ‘Arabi aptly termed “the god(s) created in our beliefs”—are profoundly challenged and overturned by life, by the Unknown, by what appears to us at that instant as the kind of “dying” (and eventual rebirth) memorialized in so many famous hadith. The untranslatable Arabic term those great teachers often used for expressing that familiar experience of transformation was *sirr* (pl. *asrar*), combining the English notions of “mystery” and of innermost, essential reality (including, in its Qur’anic usage, the deepest reality of our true Self). Subjectively, they often called that experience of shattering and rebirth “*hayra*”: bewilderment, amazement, confusion, awe, wonder—alternatively joyful or terrifying, depending on what was lost and what was found (*wujud*) in that particular encounter with a deeper, ultimate Reality (*Haqq*).

Whatever language one chooses to communicate about spiritual realities, that language itself can only too easily become an obstacle to real communication. That is equally true, for example, with the scriptural and symbolic repertoire of a particular religious tradition; the accumulated technical vocabulary and practical methods of Sufism or any other schools of spiritual practice; the vast spectrum of related artistic and musical expressions; or the specialized idiom of this or that philosophical or psychological school. As any teacher constantly rediscovers, the particular language we adopt for that purpose is already—for outsiders and the uninitiated—necessarily a “specialist,” in-group medium that must itself be explained and constantly related back to the actual experiential realities in question. So from the very beginning, that choice of language often suggests limitations and particularities, thereby too often obscuring, rather than communicating, the universally accessible realities in question. And finally, as happens again and again among specialists of both religion and philosophy, one’s chosen language *about* spirituality becomes the primary focus of debate and discussion.

In this course, we will turn to a few recent films (and related short readings) that should help to connect us more directly to the universal, shared roots of the spiritual path.

### Course Structure:

Each of the four 2-hour sessions of this class will be divided between an opening lecture orientation (usually 50 minutes or less), followed by a guided discussion of the primary illustrative supporting materials—i.e., the Freer painting (next pages) for Session I, and the films (and related readings) assigned for each of the following three sessions. Beginning with the first class, there will be a short handout of study questions relating specifically to each film and readings for the following session.

### Prior Preparation and Context:

Students who have some time to prepare for this short course beforehand may find it helpful to read the following two short background, contextual studies, focusing on the same issues in the Qur'an and hadith, which will be placed with the other online (Dropbox) reading materials for this class:

-- “The Mysteries of *Ihsān*: Natural Contemplation and The Spiritual Virtues in the Qur'an.” (Item 8 in draft of “*Openings: From the Qur'an to the Islamic Humanities*”). What is important here is the long list of spiritual virtues from the Qur'an in the Appendix to this article, listed in approximate order of their frequency in the Qur'an. <https://dlib.bc.edu/islandora/object/bc-ir:107288/datastream/PDF/download/citation.pdf>

-- “Divine Calling, Human Response: Scripture and Realization in *The Meccan Illuminations*” (*JMIAS*, 2013-14, in two Parts). Helpful in recalling the centrality of discussions and reminders of this core experiential dimension of human spirituality—basically the existential subject of this course—throughout the Qur'an and the hadith. <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/divine-calling-human-response-2.html>

“Reading” the Freer miniature (composite divine “Beloved”):

If you happen to have time and access to the Freer miniature that is our starting point for the first session of this course, it is helpful (especially if you can either expand that image on a screen or use a magnifying glass), to examine its many images in a curious and meditative state. The picture is clearly intended as a kind of “mandala”: an image of the human condition and its stages of love and perfection, in this world and beyond. So each “story” that the viewer is able to perceive (or project) in each “character” has something important to say, and each viewing will reveal previously unsuspected hints and allusions. In particular, it is helpful, just to start, by identifying the different component living domains—beyond the thirteen or more human actors—visible in each of the three “frames” of the image: i.e., the curiously living and colorful “mineral” and geological elements; the unique, often mysterious plants, fruits (repeated pomegranates), leaves and trees; the many different animals and birds, each with their symbolic associations and with their own potential stories and mirroring reactions to the people; and above all, the different emotional connections and “wines/loves” connecting the people both in the outer and inner worlds.

It is also useful to know that the original viewers would naturally “read” this painting from the right edge toward the left; that the descending waters (of life) framing both sides were originally shimmering silver (now tarnished to brown-black); that the gazelles in particular, ordinarily averse to human company, were a familiar and intense poetic symbol of our rare transcendent moments of divine awakening and inspiration; that the different realms of Paradise are repeatedly described in the Qur’an and hadith as “*gardens, beneath which are flowing waters*”; that the “wines,” cups, pitchers, *attendants*, fruits and such are likewise central Qur’anic eschatological images of the beatific dimensions of the soul; and so on.

In particular, the formal “frame” here would normally draw the viewer’s attention toward the central Royal figure—exhibiting all the qualities and symbolism associated with the divine Beloved throughout classical Persian poetry. And within that centrally framed image, according to the perspective representations of this artistic tradition, the highlighted world of Light (white) at the top is meant to lie beyond and outside that inner sanctum, with the divine figure of the “Simurgh” (the dragon of Chinese symbolism and celebration) on the left that holds the Beloved’s attention and action representing all the domains of creation and manifestation. (“*I was a hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known...*” in the words of the famous Divine Saying that encompasses every facet of this painting).

Finally and most importantly, everything in this painting is meant to be *actively* perceived by the viewer as *dynamic and alive* (not static): whoever may be holding or serving the wine-glass of life-giving love, it is the sign and acknowledgement of a particular, intriguing, concrete relationship and experience of love.... Take the woman at the lower right who at first glance seems to be hugging a “normal” tree, like that situated on her right. But when one looks closer, the tree she holds is actually emerging *from her*, with its own distinctive iridescent constellations of mysterious flower-fruits, quite different from the star-leaves of the tree next to her. As in the hadith, where the fruits in the gardens of paradise are the fruits of our beautiful actions (*ihsân*) here-below. Nor is it “silent”: as with a film, each scene has its own music....







## Session I

The Mysteries of Beauty and *Ihsan*:  
Desire (Motivation), and “Openings” to the Beyond

MUSICAL/POETIC VERSION OF THIS PAINTING: 1<sup>st</sup> two verses of a ghazal of Hafiz, sung by Parisa:

*The Musician of Love has a wondrous instrument and song:*

*the impression of each chord (S)he strikes<sup>1</sup> has a **its** way to a place.*

*The world, may it never be without the lament of lovers,*

*such a beautifully-sounding, joy-giving melody it has!*

OTHER KEY REFERENTS/SOURCES OF THIS “MANDALA” OR “ICON,” FROM FAMILIAR HADITH &  
QUR’ANIC VERSES:

**“I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known; so I am creating creation/creatures/human beings (*khalq*), in order that that I might be truly-known.”<sup>2</sup>**  
(Divine saying)

- God is Beautiful, and (S)He loves Beauty. (famous hadith, from Bukhari’s *Sahih*)
- *And among His Signs are the creating of the heavens and the earth, and the differing of your tongues and colors.” (22:33)*
- *We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their souls, so that it becomes clear to them that Hū<sup>3</sup> is the Real.... (41:53) [= the “two Books” of creation/the Spirit]*
- *God’s is the place-of-shining-forth and the place of darkening: so wheresoever you all turn around, there is the Face of God! certainly God is All-encompassing, All-knowing. (2:115)*

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<sup>1</sup>Or: “of each veil (S)He raises.” There is no grammatical gender in Persian language, which incomparably enriches the theophanic world-view permeating most classical Persian Islamic poetry..

<sup>2</sup> The Arabic root here refers pointedly to our “knowing,” recognizing, being fully aware of a *person*. (Not an abstraction, concept, form, and the like.)

<sup>3</sup> The ultimate divine Essence/Reality, and its cosmic manifestation as the universal creative Spirit-Breath.

- *Certainly in the creating of the heavens and the earth...are Signs for the people of Hearts,/ Who remember God while standing, and sitting, and (lying) on their sides, and who reflect deeply on the creating of the heavens and the earth.... (33:190-191).*
- [A modern-day poetic summary]: “We are the bees of the invisible. Lovesick, we forage for the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hive of the Invisible.”<sup>4</sup>

### The “Cosmic Trees” in the Qur’an and Yeats:

Haven’t you seen how God has made a symbol: a good Word is like *a good Tree whose root is solid, its branches in Heaven, giving its fruit at every instant, by God’s permission.... (14:24-25)*

...[the Lamp of God’s Light is] *lit from a blessed Tree, an Olive-tree neither of East nor of West, Whose oil almost shines forth even though no fire touches it: Light upon Light.... (24:35)*

Then We cause to grow for you all from (the water of heaven) Gardens of palm-trees and vines, for you in them many fruits and of them you eat/—and *a Tree coming forth from Mount Sinai that gives anointment and oil for those who eat.... (23:19-20)*

And when he reached (the fire), he was called from the right side of the valley, in the blessed field, *from the Tree: “O Moses, I, verily I am God, Lord of the Worlds!”(28:30)*

Is that (the ‘Supreme Attainment’) better as a resting place—or the *Tree of Zaqqûm*? Surely We have made it as a trial for the wrongdoers! Surely it is *a Tree coming forth at the root of Gehenna*, its crown like the heads of devils—and they are surely eating of it, filling the bellies from it. (37:62-66).

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<sup>4</sup> R.M. Rilke, letter from 1925, shortly before his death (translated here from the French original). The surrounding passage in that late letter beautifully captures the essentials of this painting:

We are continually overflowing toward those who preceded us, toward our origin, and toward those who seemingly come after us. ...It is our task to imprint this temporary, perishable earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its essence can rise again, invisibly, inside us. We are the bees of the invisible. We, lovesick and desperate, forage for the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hive of the Invisible. Transitoriness is everywhere plunging into a profound Being...The earth has no other refuge except to become invisible: **in us, who, through one part of our nature, have a share in the Invisible....** Only in us can this enduring transformation of the visible into an invisible no longer dependent upon visibility and tangibility be accomplished, since our own destiny is continually growing at once *more actual and invisible* within us.

Verily the *Tree of Zaqqûm* is the food of the evildoer: like molten brass it boils in the bellies, like the roiling of muddy springs....! (44:43-49)

...and We only established for you (Muhammad) the Vision that We caused you to see as a trial for the people, and *the cursed Tree* in the Qur'an.... (17:60)

*The Two Trees*<sup>5</sup>

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,  
 The holy tree is growing there;  
 From joy the holy branches start,  
 And all the trembling flowers they bear.  
 The changing colours of its fruit  
 Have dowered the stars with merry light;  
 The surety of its hidden root  
 Has planted quiet in the night;  
 The shaking of its leafy head  
 Has given the waves their melody,  
 And made my lips and music wed,  
 Murmuring a wizard song for thee.  
 There the loves a circle go,  
 The flaming circle of our days,  
 Gyring, spiring to and fro  
 In those great ignorant leafy ways;  
 Remembering all that shaken hair  
 And how the wingèd sandals dart,  
 Thine eyes grow full of tender care:

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart.  
 Gaze no more in the bitter glass  
 The demons, with their subtle guile,  
 Lift up before us when they pass,  
 Or only gaze a little while;  
 For there a fatal image grows  
 That the stormy night receives,  
 Roots half hidden under snows,  
 Broken boughs and blackened leaves.  
 For all things turn to barrenness  
 In the dim glass the demons hold,

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<sup>5</sup> W.B. Yeats, from one of his earliest published collections ('The Rose'). The Canadian singer Loreena McKennitt has an unforgettable sung version of this poem, readily available online.

The glass of outer weariness  
Made when God slept in times of old.  
There, through the broken branches, go  
The ravens of unresting thought;  
Flying, crying, to and fro,  
Cruel claw and hungry throat,  
Or else they stand and sniff the wind,  
And shake their ragged wings; alas!  
Thy tender eyes grow all unkind:  
Gaze no more in the bitter glass.

Primary Supporting Materials:

Persianate miniature painting of the composite divine “Beloved” (from Freer gallery).

Ghazal of Hafiz (1<sup>st</sup> two full lines only), sung by Parisa.



## Session II

The Mysteries of God's "Dyeing":<sup>6</sup>Attachment, Suffering, and the Mysterious Pathways of Providence<sup>7</sup>

The profound Qur'anic image (at 2:136-138) of God as the master-Dyer of the human soul intimately connects with the equally indispensable elements of the material (our soul), water (Life), the "Fire" (suffering), the dyes (i.e., our experience of all of creation and the divine "Names"), and the perpetual mystery of that mordant<sup>8</sup> which occasionally magically transforms the raw elements of experience into enduring wisdom.

Majidi's truly incomparable cinematic masterpiece is a mirror allowing each viewer to revisit indirectly our own unique versions of that verse, while Attar's richly evocative and persistently puzzling conclusion (or postscript) to his "Language of the Birds" suggests some key further dimensions of the mysterious "mordant" of suffering, *walâya* and loving sacrifice.

Supporting Materials:

M. Majidi (director), "*The Color of Paradise*" (Persian and Qur'an: "*The Color of God*")

Concluding Story of 'Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* ("The King Who Killed His Beloved") (to be posted on Dropbox and the course website at Üsküdar University.)

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<sup>6</sup> *Sibghat Allah*: The original Persian title of this film (*rang-i khoda*) is "*The Color of God*" referring to a famous Qur'anic verse (2:138, and note its particular context beginning 2:136): ***The Coloring*** (literally, '***dyeing***') ***of God: and who is more beautiful/better than God in Coloring?!***

<sup>7</sup> I.e., both *makar* and *'inaya*.

<sup>8</sup> I.e., the particular catalyst that permanently attaches the dyestuff to the material being colored.

## Session III

The Mysteries of Service and Devotion (*'ibada*):  
Intention (*himma*), Commitment, and Awakening to Love

Together this long eschatological hadith of the “Bridge” (*sirât*), given in several complementary versions in both Bukhari and Muslim, provides a kind of comprehensive symbolic overview of the human situation and the soul’s journey of perfection—one which is largely assumed as the implicit background for all the more practical forms of subsequent Islamic spirituality and devotional life. However, that metaphysical “big picture” has usually been studied on its own by relatively small numbers of philosophers, mystics and theologians. Instead, the varied practical forms of Islamic spirituality tend to focus on the actual daily, intimate processes of “realization” and practices that are required to “make real” that larger metaphysical vision.

Those two complementary perspectives are inseparably married and memorably dramatized in Majidi’s remarkable story of transforming and redeeming love in *Bârân*.

Supporting Materials:

M. Majidi (director), *Baran*.

The long hadith of the “Bridge” and our vision of God (to be posted on Dropbox and the course website at Üsküdar U.)

## Session IV

The Mystery of Destiny and Responsibility (*sirr al-qadr*)

## Engagement, Perseverance, and Inspiration

The lecture portion of this concluding session will be devoted to the very different “love-stories” that constitute the beginning, middle, and end of Rumi’s *Masnavi*—and to the ways their complementary lessons throw new light on the transformations so memorably dramatized in *Groundhog Day*. Both Rumi and this classic spiritual film draw together the central lessons from each of the preceding three sessions.

Supporting Materials:

H. Ramis (director), *Groundhog Day*.

The beginning, middle and end stories of Rumi’s *Masnavi* (English translations to be posted on course website/Dropbox).

Syllabus for Uskudar University 2018 Summer Arabic Reading Seminar

**Ibn ‘Arabi on Spiritual Inspiration and Discernment**

**Prof. Dr. James Morris**

Boston College, Affiliated Faculty of Institute for Sufi Studies of Üsküdar University

This course is designed as a standard advanced graduate seminar, based on the students’ preparation, in-class reading and discussion of key Arabic passages from chapters 50-58 of Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Futuhāt*, which offer a single coherent and intentionally foundational presentation of his understanding of the universal human process of “realization-and-verification” (*tahqīq*) of spiritual inspiration (*ilham*)—in contrast to many other forms of inspiration—that leads eventually to reliable, verifiable and sound spiritual understanding (*ma‘rifā*). The remaining 500+ lengthy chapters of this great work can then be viewed as detailed applications and illustrations of the basic challenges and processes of inspiration and spiritual discernment first outlined in this section.

Students with some *basic Arabic reading skills* sufficient at least to follow the readings of the more advanced grad students can audit this course *as long as they participate fully and do all of the required preparatory and background readings (all in English)*.

Course Structure:

Each of the four 3-hour sessions of this Arabic reading seminar (with short break in middle) will be devoted to reading and discussion of selected key passages from chapters 50-58 of Ibn ‘Arabi’s “*Meccan Illuminations*.” These chapters in the opening *Faṣl al-Ma‘arīf* of the *Futuhāt* form a single coherent section devoted to the essential practical spiritual question of ***inspiration and discernment***, of how we first recognize the source and nature of “inspirations”, and then how we can understand the relevance, meaning, and intentions underlying those inspirations that are truly spiritual. As such, these chapters are central to Ibn Arabi’s own guiding understanding of the process of spiritual growth as “refined realization” (*tahqīq*).

Prior Preparation and Contextual Background (on seminar Dropbox site):

Students who have some time to prepare for this seminar beforehand may find it helpful to read some very pertinent translations and interpretive studies contained in the forthcoming collected volume *Approaching Ibn ‘Arabi: Foundations, Contexts, Interpretations*, which will be placed with the other online (Dropbox) reading materials for this class. (Required course readings are given in following syllabus section.)

- For a direct experience of Ibn Arabi’s central, guiding conception of “spiritual realization”, see the two translations of very approachable and widely read short works of spiritual



guidance: *From Ethics and Devotion to Spiritual Realization: Ibn 'Arabi's Book of the Quintessence Concerning What Is Indispensable For the Spiritual Seeker*; and Ibn 'Arabi's *Book of Spiritual Advice* (popularly known as "*What Can't Be Relied Upon*"). Simply reading through these two accessible spiritual guidebooks will make it very clear how Ibn Arabi writes in such a way that his reader is obliged to provide his or her own process of experiential and reflective "realization" of the challenges and insights arising from this particular form of "guided attention." These are also excellent illustrations of the specific and often very different rhetorical, teaching methods that Ibn 'Arabi adopts throughout his voluminous literary output.

- Ibn 'Arabi's conception of spiritual "realization" is expressed in very distinctive forms of carefully constructed rhetoric that are examined more closely and carefully outlined in the following two essays from that sourcebook volume: *How to Study the Futūhāt: Ibn 'Arabi's Own Advice*; and *Ibn 'Arabi's Rhetoric of Realization: Keys to Reading and "Translating" The Meccan Illuminations*. In addition, Rumi's *Masnavi* and Hafiz's *Divan* are now familiar to many readers in English, and offer equally effective—and much more accessible and condensed—versions of the same rhetorical intentions marking Ibn 'Arabi's writings. Seminar participants with a knowledge of either of those great spiritual masterworks are encouraged to reflect on and to point out the parallel spiritual teaching methods and intentions that will arise again and again in the course of the seminar discussions....
- Both chapters 50 and 54, with which we will begin this seminar, are marked by particularly vociferous political observations (regarding religious "intellectuals" and self-designated "authorities"/ *'ulama'*) which occasionally recur in other places throughout the *Futuhat*. The following three studies in the sourcebook (*Approaching Ibn 'Arabi* forthcoming volume) are excellent brief introductions and overviews of this historically very influential dimension of Ibn 'Arabi's thought, which is particularly relevant in today's global political setting: *Freedoms and Responsibilities: Ibn 'Arabi and the Political Dimensions of Spiritual Realization*; *Ibn 'Arabi's Messianic Secret: From "the Mahdi" to the Imamate of Every Soul*; and *Spiritual Authority and Universal Revelation: Ibn 'Arabi's Conception of Islamic "Law"*.

Required Course Readings (also on Dropbox site):

The basic study and reading text for this seminar (in .pdf form on the Dropbox course site) is Osman Yahya's Arabic edition, vol. IV, pp. 215-329—i.e., chapters 50-58. We will also post on the seminar site Ibn 'Arabi's Table of Contents (*fihrist*) for *Fasl I*, and the sections of Chapter 559 offering Ibn 'Arabi's very telling account of the "inner secrets" or essential "heart" (*sirr, asrar*) teaching of each chapter of the entire work: here vol. IV, pages 336-337 of the standard "Bulaq" edition. (Students should note that there is NOT any summary section for chapters 52 and 56, and that the numbering of these chapter sections in Chapter 559 proceeds without any

notice of those two silent omissions, so that subsequent printed chapter numbers in ch. 559 are always two “behind” the actual corresponding chapter number.)

We are using Yahya’s edition because its presentation is easier to read for most relative “beginners” in Arabic, and above all because it is the only extant genuinely critical edition that actually gives all the alternative text of Ibn ‘Arabi’s original first “version” of the *Futuhat* (marked as ms. “B” for Bayazit in Yahya’s extensive textual footnotes). In Chapters 50 and 54 in particular, the contrast between Ibn ‘Arabi’s original book and his revised, second recension are particularly striking and revealing. On the other hand, readers of the Yahya edition should always note that the paragraph divisions, apparent section headings, and all the often painfully unhelpful punctuation are added by the late editor or his printers. The punctuation is often particularly misleading and can be a serious obstacle to understanding the Arabic, especially for beginners.

In the seminar, we will also guide advanced students to the [www.onetradition.org](http://www.onetradition.org) website that includes a full searchable text of the *Futuhat* and especially the full autograph Konya manuscript of the final version of the book (in the author’s own hand).

We will also post on the Dropbox seminar site the full (or nearly complete) English translation of Chapter 54 (on “spiritual allusions”/*isharat*), which all students should prepare and bring to the opening seminar session.

### Session I

The actual pace and focus of this seminar will depend greatly on the level of reading skill in classical Arabic (and other prior background) of the participants. In the first session, while we are coming to terms with the Arabic reading level of all the participants, we will start—after a good deal of background explanation and an overview of these key chapters—with the English translation of Chapter 54 (together with the Arabic text of this chapter and the telling account of its “essential meaning” from Chapter 559). If time allows, we will then move back to the beginning two chapters 50-51 on *hayra* (“spiritual bewilderment” and illumination) and the people of “scrupulous inspired awareness” (*wara’*).

Hopefully we will be able at least to “taste” key passages from chapters 50-55 in the very limited time available in the following three seminar sessions. Prof. Morris will prepare and provide—either on the Dropbox site, or as class handouts—the short selected Arabic passages that we will focus on reading in each of the subsequent seminar sessions.