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Mulla Sadra and Attaining an Actualized Soul

Mulla Sadra is considered the greatest Persian philosopher of the Islamic World. He lived in Iran from 1571-1640 and was famous for his ability to integrate various Muslim thoughts and sources into his philosophical works, including Quran, Quranic Tafseer, Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, as well as Hadith of the Shia Imams. With this wide array of background sources he was able to bring together different expressions of Islamic thought into his work. The goal of most philosophers and particularly Muslim philosophers was to achieve true wisdom of the world through a systematic and intellectual approach; and this was done through understanding the soul.

According to Mulla Sadra, there is a methodical means by which the human soul, which initially exists in a potential state, can realize its highest level to its actualized state. The relationship between the potency to actuality has been likened to that of the embryo to the animal¹. The potent soul, in its initial stage is like an embryo, which upon proper development and maturation can attain the status of the actual soul, or an animal. However, Mulla Sadra notes that the embryo itself is actually an embryo and potentially an animal. Likewise the potent soul itself is actually a potent soul inasmuch as it is of a regular “mere

¹ Packet, 117

mortal man”, or ‘normal human being’². And in terms of the status the mortal can attain in terms of his soul’s advancement, he can also potentially transform his soul into the intellect, or an actual soul.

Before attempting to actualize the soul, the definition of the soul itself must be clarified, as well as the levels of the soul that leads up from the soul with most potential to the actualized soul. In *The Wisdom of the Throne*, Mulla Sadra states that “the human soul has many levels and stations... at first it is a corporeal substance.”³ This refers to the soul when it first is put inside the body, and its state is defined by it being directly connected to the body. The soul only exists inasmuch as the condition of media below and above it, which are the body and spirit. The body itself is lifeless and nothing but clay without the spirit, thus the source of this soul is in the divine spirit, or *ruh*, which is infused with the body at birth. The spirit is actually the divine breath of God Himself which He instills into each and every human before birth.⁴ Due to the divine source of this spirit, when the soul is actualized, it actually returns to its pristine form that God ensued man with. Due to the source of the divine spirit, which is from God Himself, the soul potentially, if properly cultivated, can attain actualization.

From the initial level of the soul as a corporeal substance, it next attains its normal soulish state in the body. The soul is in the body, and depends on it; the soul cannot exist in the earthly world in humans without a body and conversely, a body without a soul by definition is not living⁵. However, the soul is not affected by the physical state of the body.

² Quran 18:110

³ Packet, 112

⁴ Quran 32:9, 17:85

⁵ Packet, 108

After the soul reaches this state, Mulla Sadra progresses the soul to its next level: the sensible state⁶.

The sensible state refers to the soul as the command center of the lower faculties, or the five senses: vision, touch, hearing, smell, and taste. Each sense is independent from one another and has its own organs that actualize the potency of each sense. For example, the ear is recognized by the potency of hearing, the eyes through seeing, and so on⁷. However, the senses alone do not allow the human to perceive what it is he is sensing. The various senses all give different sensations, and a command center is necessary to unify the sense perceptions to distinguish what in fact is being professed. For example, when a person observes any object, without any prior knowledge of the object, he is unaware of what the object is. The object may give off a multitude of resonant characteristics which may be perceived by the various sense faculties⁸. It is the soul, which accepts all the senses and their perceptions and puts it all together; and from this true knowledge of the object is attained. There is one center which encompasses the multitude characteristics of senses objects, and that is the sensible soul.

The next level of the soul is the cognitive/recollective soul. This is the soul which commands higher faculties of conception, imagination, sense-intuition, and intellect. Again these faculties are independent like the lower faculties of the five senses, and the cognitive/recollective soul commands these faculties.

The next level of the soul is the rational soul, which has its own higher level faculties; it perceives with all the perceptions attributed to the human potencies. Next

⁶ Packet, 112

⁷ Packet, 108

⁸ Packet, 106

comes the practical intellect, and then the theoretical intellect. These two terms, as deemed by Baba Afdal, refer to two ways of reaching the actualized soul. The practical intellect refers to knowing God and praising him through His divine names that man must inculcate and live out practically by living out the essence of the divine names to the best of ones ability as well as following the embodied characteristics of the prophet ﷺ. The theoretical intellect refers to worshipping God through the faith and knowledge of Him.

Finally, the next and final step the soul takes is towards the Active Intellect, or the actualized soul. The actualized soul, in essence is the initial spirit, or *ruh*, that God himself endowed all of his servants with, as mentioned earlier. Only now, this spirit has become actualized to the very divine status of which it was initially given to man.

The levels of the souls are understandable, yet the process of actually progressing ones potential soul to its actualized state is not nearly as simple. While philosophers have argued on how exactly to go about reaching this actualized level, Mulla Sadra proclaims that it occurs in only a minute number of people, and personal struggle and effort alone are not be enough to achieve this goal⁹. Mulla Sadra agrees with the view of most other Muslims, which opposes most philosophers, that prophecy and revelation is certainly required to attain the true knowledge of the soul, or to actualize the soul.

The actualized soul can also be understood in terms of the concept of vicegerency¹⁰. All humankind was created to serve God¹¹, therefore all humans are God's servants. The goal of all humans is to become a true vicegerent of God¹². The potency refers to servitude while the actuality is becoming a true vicegerent. To actualize oneself as

⁹ Packet, 112

¹⁰ Packet, 105

¹¹ Quran 51:56

¹² Quran 2:30

vicegerent from the potential servitude one must learn all the Names¹³. Potentially, we already have the capacity to learn all the names, or gain knowledge of everything, from of the Islamic concept of *fitrah*. Before birth, when our souls were united with God, He taught Adam (man) all the Names. Mulla Sadra identifies ‘learning all the names’ with attaining the key of the ‘Adamic Soul’¹⁴. The Adamic soul in fact is the actualized soul with all knowledge of all the Names. With this key, one can open the treasure of the knowledge of the divine kingdoms and sovereignty (of God). This is analogous to the concept of man being infused with the divine breath before birth. Cultivating the soul yields the soul back in the form of the endowed divine breath. Likewise, the goal of ones life is to re-actualize all the learned Names once again in one’s life to re-learn the true knowledge of ‘all the names’, which we were already taught before birth. Upon learning all the names, the potency of servitude becomes the actuality of true vicegerency; and in attaining true vicegerency, one has actualized the soul.

Only the soul, after having fully attained all of its potential development, reaches the status of the actualized soul. It is the actualized soul that is prepared for the voluntary return to God, the ultimate goal of all those who cultivate their souls.

*O tranquil soul, return to your Lord, pleased and accepted*¹⁵.

¹³ Quran 2:30

¹⁴ Packet, 103

¹⁵ Quran 89:27-28