

# Seeking God's face: Discovering the dance of walāya and wilāya

Author: James Winston Morris

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## “Seeking God’s Face”: Discovering the Dance of *Walāya* and *Wilāya*<sup>1</sup>

James Winston Morris

(An abridged version of this paper was the keynote address for the conference on "Mevlana Rumi and the Love of the Prophet and the Friends of God", at Konya Turkey, Dec. 15, 2016.)

And God's is the place-of-shining-forth and the place-of-darkening: so wherever you-all turn around, then there is the Face of God. (Qur'an 2:115)

... For God will bring a people whom He loves and they love Him.... [of the “Friends of God,” *awliyā Allāh*] (5:54)

God is the *Walī* of those who have faith: He brings them forth from the shadows to the Light.... (2:257)<sup>2</sup>

In the Islamic humanities, too, pictures may be worth thousands of words. Certainly this is true of the monumental calligraphic composition that immediately greets each pilgrim on as they first enter the shrine of Mevlana Rumi:<sup>3</sup> for that apparently simple image provides nothing less than a sort of mandala, a comprehensive, multi-dimensional reminder of the essentials of the human condition in this world and beyond—and, once we begin to actively contemplate its lessons and meanings, a powerfully dynamic instrument for spiritual reflection and recollection (*dhikr Allāh*).

To begin with the bold, black, most immediately visible foreground of this image, what must immediately strike every visitor is the stylized image of an obviously symbolic face, an image that for most visitors would immediately evoke the repeated Qur’anic image of the “Face of God” (*wajh Allāh*), as the manifest, knowable dimensions of the divine throughout all creation, and the Qur’anic emphasis on our responsibility for “seeking” that Face.<sup>4</sup> Indeed that profound inner seeking and longing could well be taken

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<sup>1</sup> The complete original essay in English, with full footnotes is available for free download at [http://dcollections.bc.edu/james\\_morris](http://dcollections.bc.edu/james_morris).

<sup>2</sup> The three key Qur’anic verses here highlight three equally essential aspects of the expressions of the *w-l-y* Arabic root and the divine Name of *al-Walī* discussed throughout this essay: the human action or response (“turning around”); the active human embodiments (in this world and beyond) of that divine quality; and the divine Name itself.

<sup>3</sup> The divine Names here are given without the Arabic definite article, as they would be recited in Persian. This particular style of “mirrored” (*ma’kūsa*) calligraphy—so memorably illustrated throughout the great mosque of Bursa—suggests a likely date from the later 18<sup>th</sup> century. By that time, the artist(s) could presuppose a widespread popular familiarity with the usage of this universal imagery of divine “Names” within the context of the later theological and philosophical schools of Akbari thought that by then were widely associated with institutional Sufism and with the learned interpreters of the poetry of Rumi.

<sup>4</sup> See the passages at 2:272; 30:38; 92:20; 6:52; 18:28 and the full explanation of the interrelated meanings of this Arabic root in the Qur’an in Chapter 2 (“Listening: Contemplation and the Purified Heart”)

for granted on the part of each new visitor who had already journeyed so long and far for this closer visit with the spirit of Rumi and his close family and Mevlevi successors, whose memorials are aligned just below and beyond this calligraphy.

At the next level, for those visitors with even a little Arabic, Persian or Ottoman Turkish, this mysteriously open Face dissolves into a mirrored set of two intertwined prayers to God, in the familiar form of litanies of *dhikr* and supplication, calling upon Him through two divine Names included in all the traditional hadith enumerations of the “Most Beautiful Names”: “*O Wālī*” (God as the One Who intimately governs, manages, and directs every aspect of creation) and “*O Walī*”—that is, God as the intimate divine Friend, Guide, Helper, Support. In the Persian mystical poetry of Rumi and the litanies and songs of the Sufi tariqas, in Turkish and many other Islamic languages, this second divine Name is translated above all as *Dūst* or *Yār*, the divine Beloved in all of His/Her infinite (and infinitely precious) particular manifestations.

In the Persian calligraphy here, these two complementary—yet often apparently opposed—divine Names are distinguished only by the central vertical letter *alif* (ا) of *Wālī*, which is here dramatically intertwined with the letter *lam* (ل) shared by both Names. The *alif* traditionally reflects the creative Act and intrinsic connection with all levels of creation; while in contrast to that verticality, the form of the letter *lam*, by itself, clearly suggests the beginning of the cosmic process of “Return” to God that is the inherent purpose of the human condition. Indeed from the earliest Islamic times the distinctive calligraphic “embrace” of those two letters (the *lam-alif*) has symbolized the all-encompassing Love-relationship linking the divine and each human soul. Finally, the ligature of the *lam* and concluding letter *yā*’ of both these Names here reads literally “for Me” (*lī*)—a powerful reminder of the ultimate Source and aim of that Love.

Visibly “behind” and above these two highlighted Names in the foreground, in reddish-brown pigment, is a supplication (likewise mirrored on right and left) to another, even more familiar divine Name: *yā Ākhir* (O the Ultimate, Omega, the Aim and Goal of all),<sup>5</sup> the Name that here appears “above and beyond” all else. Yet it is still partially intertwined with the two black Names in the foreground. In that open background plane, as it were in the cosmic distance, *yā Ākhir* is surmounted by an immense Crown and surrounded by interlaced images of the leaves, flowers and fruits traditionally associated in the Qur’an and hadith with Paradise, closeness to God, and the divine Reality as the creative “Source-of-all-Life” (*al-Hayy*).

Thus the overlaying of these two planes of differing colors, imagery and calligraphy immediately places each viewer within a liminal boundary of mystery suggesting the repeated Qur’anic insistence on the ways that every divine “Sign” (*āya*) in this world and in our souls points back to its Source and meaning in the infinite, “invisible” Beyond—and on the ways that the “Friends of God” (*awliyā’ Allāh*, a Qur’anic term that includes all the divine prophets and messengers) stand present on just the “other side” of that

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of *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘Meccan Illuminations’* (Louisville, Fons Vitae, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> See the famous evocation of this divine Name at Qur’an 57:3.

plane of the visible: immediately witnessing us in this world, while remaining mysterious and hidden to our everyday, mundane self.

So now we are ready to explore the central mystery of this painting: the transforming ways that the *Alif* of the divine Presence and unconditional creative Love forms the Axis and essential Connection—a sort of spiritual “revolving doorway”—around which these two ever-present Names and realities (*Wālī* and *Walī*) are always pivoting, in every stage of each soul’s “turning return” (*tawba*) to God.

#### I. THE DIVINE NAME/REALITY *AL-WALĪ*, THE *AWLIYĀ’ ALLĀH*, AND THE LOVE-RELATIONSHIP OF *WALĀYA*

Constantly referring back to this emblematic calligraphy from Rumi’s shrine, the following brief exploration of the divine-human relationship traditionally termed “*Walāya*” is divided into the following six sections. (I) First, this preliminary introduction to the key terms *walāya* and the corresponding divine Name *al-Walī*. (II) A short list of a few of the most obvious gateways or divine Signs through which we begin to become more aware of the actual reality of this relationship. (III) A short indication of the lifelong processes of “realization” (*tahqīq*) by which each person gradually begins to follow up on those initial discoveries. (IV) A simple “spiritual phenomenology” evoking some of the recurrent ways that this relationship—which ultimately encompasses every dimension of our experience—gradually becomes deepened and more consciously interactive in our spiritual life. (V) A few indications of the far-reaching practical and political implications and primordial human responsibilities inherent in this unfolding process of discovery.

Finally (VI), we conclude with the ultimate inseparability of these two Names in the actual dynamic processes through which our awakening to God’s Friendship and *walāya*, together with His mediating “Friends” (the *awliyā’*), is ultimately driven and conditioned by the divine power and influence of His providential activity of Governance (*wilāya*). For the divine Name *al-Walī* (with its substantive *masdar* form *wilāya* or *wilāyat*) means to govern, rule, manage, administer, and so on: that meaning is reflected in its familiar everyday use, in a number of Islamic languages, to refer to the public forms of governance, as well as in various elaborate religious accounts of the “celestial hierarchies” of the angels and certain *awliyā’*.<sup>6</sup> Hence also the widespread traditional belief in the hidden spiritual governance of the “patron saints” of particular cities and regions, as well as the centuries-old respectful practice across the Islamic world of appending an epithet of divine “rulership” to the names of so many of these venerated figures among the Friends: e.g., Eyup “Sultan”, Nur ‘Ali “Shah”, Shah Ni‘matullah “Vali,” and so on.

However, the divine Name and field of discovery that we begin with here is that of *al-Walī*, together with its substantive *masdar* form *walāya/valāyat*. This divine Name—and its essentially “verbal” reality as an action or ongoing process and relationship—reflects an immense complex of closely associated meanings: including, *to be close or next to*; *to be friends with*; and by extension, *to aid, assist, help, protect, support*. So when this meaning of the divine Name *al-Walī* is related back simply to the vast range of Qur’anic verses and hadith dealing with this *proximity* of the divine Reality and its relation to all of creation and to human beings more particularly, and when we add to this all those further verses and hadith relating to the practical realization and actualization of that divine-human relationship of *Walāya*: then it is no

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<sup>6</sup> See especially the detailed discussion of both of these terms and their meanings, drawn from throughout Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Futūhāt*, in Michel Chodkiewicz’ classic *The Seal of the Saints*.

exaggeration to say that *all* of the Qur’anic and Prophetic teaching can be understood as centering around this Reality of divine “Friendship”/*Walāya* in its endless ramifications.

## II. DISCOVERING THE GATEWAYS OF *WALĀYA*: PERSPECTIVES AND PROSPECTS

We can begin to fill out the bare symbols of this calligraphy by pointing to eight universal doorways or omnipresent aspects of *walāya* that are particularly present and effective in almost everyone’s experience. Here and in each of the following sections, I must ask our readers, as I briefly mention each of these different dimensions of *walāya*, first of all to actively bring to mind at least a few concrete illustrations of situations in which they themselves have recently encountered these dimensions of *walāya*. And then, with regard to those examples, to think of what they have discovered as effective means, tools or useful instruments in revealing and opening up the deeper relational connection—what the Qur’an calls the individualized divine Calling and Response<sup>7</sup>—that is the inherently dynamic heart of *walāya*. Although we cannot dwell on such individual “case studies” or learning situations in this short essay, it should quickly become clear that these relationships are extremely concrete and particular, and that they constitute the very tissue of our everyday inter- (and *intra*-) personal relations: for example, our relations to our memorable dreams; to our prayers and mysterious experiences of inspiration/*ilhām* (in all their unforgettable and indispensable forms); to our spouses or partners; in reading to or discussing events with our children or grandchildren; in dealing with the pressing needs and solicitations of family, colleagues, or co-workers; and so on. The inherent creative challenges and demands of this relationship of *walāya*—and the absolute practical necessity of intimately knowing the specific preparedness, resources and limitations of our “audience” and interlocutors or spiritual companions—are even clearer when we move from those everyday personal domains of *walāya* to the particular specialized fields of our professional responsibilities as parents, artists, students, teachers, performers, writers, caretakers, healers, and so on.

And for readers familiar with Rumi’s poetry, it will quickly become obvious that this brief evocation of these familiar gateways to discovering *walāya* happen to correspond to any listing of his favorite poetic subjects.

— The first of these gateways to the relationship of *walāya* is the ever-present theophanies of the world of **Nature**: the entrancing call of sacred places; the inner correspondences (and ongoing lessons) between the human soul and so many other creatures; the natural symbolism of the elements, winds, fragrances, trees, heavens, colors, seasons, and animals; or the unavoidable ethical challenges of our profound inner and outward dependence upon those creatures, elements, and the wider natural environment; and so on.

— The second of those windows onto *walāya* is the transforming, humbling, awe-inspiring spiritual power of **Beauty** in all of its infinite forms and expressions. (“He is Beautiful, and He loves Beauty,” in the words

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<sup>7</sup> *And whenever My servants ask you about Me, surely I am Near: I respond to the call of the one who is calling, whenever he calls upon Me. So may they respond to Me and may they have faith in Me, so that they might be guided rightly!* (2:186). See the discussion of this central theme in the Qur’an and hadith in our recent study *Divine Calling and Human Response: Scripture and Realization in **The Meccan Illuminations***, in *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society [JMIAS]*, vol. 53 (2013), pp. 1-24; and vol. 54, pp. 1-12.

of the famous hadith.)

— The third of these omnipresent portals is the poignant grace of our individualized “**Tests**” and **Crises** (*ibtilā’* or *imtihān*)—whether that spiritually educational face of *walāya* appears initially in the forms of unwanted suffering and difficulty, or of potentially dangerous and revelatory apparent “good fortune” (*balā’ hasan*, in the words of the Qur’an, 8:17). As life constantly reminds us, suffering, failure, mortality, and all the other unforgettable reminders of our intrinsic human limitations are indispensable preconditions for our discovering and actualizing the central divine quality of Compassion or absolute Lovingmercy (*rahma*) and for actively bringing into existence all that is beautiful and good (*ihsān*)—as indeed for realizing each of the other “Most Beautiful” divine Names and Attributes.<sup>8</sup>

— A fourth portal into *walāya* is faithful **Devotion** and selfless **Service** (*‘ibāda, khidma*), in all their forms and expressions, beginning with their foundational practical, disciplining role as the essential basis for contemplation, illumination, and eventual creative actualization. Here it is interesting to note that if people are not given these fundamental forms of ritual and devotion by their culture and religious tradition, they of necessity create and re-discover novel expressions of those realities. We have only to think of the rigorous devotion and submission needed for the mastery of any sport, art, science, profession, or any other discipline in every area of life: disciplines that always seem so unimaginably daunting to anyone not called to that particular expression of *walāya*.

— A fifth and historically central gateway to *walāya* is each soul’s discovery or awakening to the active presence (whether in this world, or more often beyond) of the **Friends of God**,<sup>9</sup> the ever-living instruments of God’s Lovingmercy, and of their guiding influences of Grace (*karāmāt*). In the end, the spiritual autobiography of each human soul is woven through with the threads of their visible and invisible influences (*āthār*). And this is also a domain in which the coloring of languages, expectations, and other conditioning cultural and historical factors is initially so obvious, requiring much further individual reflection (*tafakkur*), inspired insight (*basīra*), and active interaction (*murāqaba*) that are needed to develop that spiritual discernment and attentive focus (*tawajjuh*) which are essential to a deepening awareness of the divine Friendship in all its forms.

— A sixth, and perhaps the most obvious and unavoidable of the theophanies of *walāya* lies in all the individual **Ethical Challenges** of everyday life—in the revelatory *tension* (sometimes subtle, sometimes blatantly unavoidable) between momentary, apparent benefits and habitual or socially reinforced patterns, on the one hand, and the mysteriously illuminated, necessarily inner awareness of what is *actually* right and appropriate in a given situation. No one can avoid this gateway to contemplative awareness and wisdom, and these recurrent dramatic situations are what keep each person spiritually awake and growing.

— A seventh domain where we are obliged to discover and turn to *walāya* is the intrinsic spiritual necessity of **Active Creativity and Renewal**. Just as happens outwardly with physical buildings, homes,

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<sup>8</sup> See the discussion of related Qur’anic and hadith passages in *Opening the Heart: Ibn ‘Arabi on Suffering, Compassion and Atonement*, JMIAS vol. 51 (2012), pp. 27-56.

<sup>9</sup> I.e., the *awliyā’ Allāh, qawm, rāhimūn*, and *‘ibād al-Rahmān*—always including *all* the prophets and Messengers—as they are described in key passages of the Qur’an and hadith.

monuments, and human bodies: entropy, neglect, and ruin (the poets' *kharābāt*) are also the natural course of this inner world unless they are countered by all the onerous adult demands and focused human responsibilities of "spiritual maintenance." No one is allowed for very long the self-deceptive delusions of *taqlīd*, of being only a passive spiritual consumer. In this vivifying relationship of *walāya*, each soul knows what is alive and real and authentic, and what is not—or else we are painfully and memorably taught to discern and rediscover that essential difference.

— Finally, nothing more powerfully and comprehensively reveals the full dimensions of *walāya* than the discovery and unfolding of each person's particular **mystery of Destiny** (*sirr al-qadar*), which is of course the central framework of the Qur'anic account of our spiritual origin and return (*ma'ād*). This is the uniquely individualized drama of the revelatory interplay between the elements of our own existential choices (decisions, motivations, missions, etc.) and the wider context of divinely bestowed "givens" and "accidents." Only through that serendipitous drama can we gradually discover over time all the underlying meanings and unsuspected blessings of each of those apparently random situations and events.<sup>10</sup> And that uniquely individual "Rising"<sup>11</sup> leads providentially to an ever-deepening awareness of the particular divine role, purpose, meanings and implications of what at first so often appear as arbitrary choices and chance accidents. This final, most inclusive and inescapable dimension of *walāya* is also a powerful reminder of the key spiritual function of literature, poetry, theater, and cinema as essential spiritual tools for awakening and communicating our deeper understanding of these wider, slowly unfolding aspects of *walāya* (the cosmic "shadow-theater" and love story) that only reveal themselves over the longer course of a lifetime, or beyond.

Again, the next practical step in evoking these facets of divine Friendship/*walāya* is to explore how uniquely and differently they arise in the context of each person's life, and the ways that each individual's unique spiritual preparedness and receptivity interact with those experiences to determine whether those theophanies will lead to deepening growth and transformation, or may remain for the moment only a fallow potential.

### III: EXPLORING *WALĀYA*: MAKING SENSE OF THE INVISIBLE

Before turning to those means through which we can start to deepen and fully recognize the soul's relationship of *walāya*, we should at least mention the four successive dimensions--or rather intertwined stages (*mi'rāj*)--of the ascending process of exploration and realization that are normally engendered by our initial moments of awakening to that divine presence and nascent relationship. In other words, these

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<sup>10</sup> I.e., of this particular personality, character, and spiritual potential (*isti'dād*); this culture and history; this particular set of gifts and obstacles and handicaps; this particular family and friends and colleagues; this particular historical moment, and so on.

<sup>11</sup> That is, the "lesser Resurrection (*al-qiyāmat al-sughrā*), in the language of the later Sufis and Islamic philosophers.

are four basic tools of discovery and discernment that are elicited by the initial encounters and discoveries of *walāya* briefly suggested in the preceding section.<sup>12</sup>

(1) Each of the potential discoveries suggested here depends above all on active inner **ATTENTION** (*tawajjuh*), as we gradually develop an appreciation of the slowly and intermittently awakening spiritual senses. Indeed when that inner attention develops to a certain degree of awareness, it becomes unclear whether or not there is anything in life that is *not* in reality a “spiritual experience.”

(2) **REFLECTION** (the Qur’anic *fikr, tafakkur*) and **DISCERNMENT**: Building on the accumulation of comparable experiences, certain external criteria, and above all the crucial guidance of experienced spiritual teachers, these are of course the next tools of exploration needed to distinguish the supportive and illuminating realities of *walāya* from the painfully familiar “educational” forms of misunderstanding, self-delusion, and misconstrual built into each person’s path of spiritual maturation.

(3) **ILLUMINATION** (*ilhām*), or the eventual **ASSIMILATED UNDERSTANDING** (*‘aql, ta’aqul*) of the intended meanings and directions flowing from each recognized encounter with *walāya*, is a gift and grace that can sometimes arrive inseparably from the actual concrete experiences of divine Friendship evoked in the following section. But more often that understanding can take years to discover, unfold, and work out in light of the slow accumulation of practice and experience.

(4) With time, every initial intimation of *walāya*--like those briefly suggested here in sections II and IV--eventually takes its place in the wider context of appropriate, individually responsive **ACTION** and **VERIFICATION** (*tahqīq*), as our attentive practice, reflection, understanding and illumination lead on to the challenge of new Signs and indications “*on the horizons and within their souls*” (41:53).

#### IV. INTIMATIONS OF *WALĀYA*: RECOGNIZING AND DEEPENING THE “GIFTS OF GRACE” (*karāmāt*)

To put it most simply, discovering *walāya* means a transformative recognition of the “Invisible” (to others) divine Presence of *al-Walī*, of the divine “Friend,” in any of Its concretely experienced qualities, effects and activities, through the distinctive qualities and particulars of each of those manifestations. In this section, we have tried to suggest some of those particular instants of discovery (*tajalliyyāt*, the momentary theophanic “unveilings” of the divine Beloved) that tend to have an inherently *inter-personal* form, and which can therefore readily provide the initial promptings or occasions for discovering and connecting with one of the instruments of that Love, the *awliyā’ Allāh*. Even within this small subset of theophanic events, it is already notable that the locale and circumstances of such discoveries are in no way limited to any particular sort of outward venue. For the moment of discovery in question is equally real and potentially transformative, whether that encounter first happens through a particular personality, pilgrimage, holy places, devotions, dreams, visions, inspirations, readings--or in the even subtler echoes, intuitions, premonitions, or “sympathetic vibrations” (*wāridāt*) that we may unexpectedly encounter at any time.

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<sup>12</sup> For a fuller treatment of the practical dimensions of spiritual intelligence highlighted here, see *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabi’s ‘Meccan Illuminations’* (Fons Vitae, 2005); or more succinctly, *Ostad Elahi On Spirituality in Everyday Life* (Kuala Lumpur, 2011).

The following list of relevant qualities or particular results of our encounters with the divine Beloved/Friend is meant simply to suggest the particular illustrative experiences that readers necessarily have to recall for themselves. Of course certain items in this list may well suggest a particular memorable event, or even a longer-term, more consciously interactive and ongoing relationship with one or more of the divine “Friends” (*awliyā*). For such personal stories—whether we happen to frame them as love-stories or as mysteries—are in fact all that can ever really be shared and potentially communicated,<sup>13</sup> since nothing at all about *walāya* can somehow be proven or demonstrated to those who have not yet discovered and awakened to the first signs of that Relationship, who have not already encountered the deepening process of spiritual realization (*tahqīq*).

— The relationship of *walāya* that is discovered is always **personal and individual**, though it and its initial occasions may well be shared in various ways. (We will return in the following section to some of the recurrent difficulties of communication that this sharing normally entails.)

— What is discovered through each encounter with *walāya* is an **ongoing inner process**. That complex reality is beautifully conveyed in the Arabic language of the Qur’an, and yet very difficult to conceive or convey in the subject/object, linear temporal frameworks of Indo-European languages. For the reality of this relationship one encounters with the divine Friend has no “end” (or temporal “beginning”), and it cannot be controlled or defined (at least from the earthly human side).

— What one encounters of *walāya* is characterized by its **openness and availability**—not by any sort of “jealousy” or “spiritual territoriality.” What pilgrims everywhere discover and encounter, for example (in the many forms of *ziyāra* or visiting holy places and persons of all kinds), is rarely delimited or restricted by their particular religion, upbringing, culture, or momentary system of conscious beliefs.

— **Mystery** and **wonder** are always inherent in the reality and experience of *walāya*, since clarification or illumination in one area most often only opens up new mysteries and deeper unknowns: i.e., what has been called the distinctive subjective element of *hayra*, “spiritual bewilderment” or awe and amazement).

— **Engagement** (that is both **mutual** and enduring): we already know from the beginning, long before we can verify this knowing over long periods of time, that the aim and fulfillment of *walāya* lies beyond our earthly time, however we may seek to imagine or situate that inchoate “beyond.”

— **Commitment**: once this relation of Friendship is discovered, one is never truly alone, never abandoned—nor able to abandon.

— **Intention**: one might say that the unfolding power (and concomitant challenges) of focused spiritual intention (*himma*) flow inevitably from our initial attitude and ongoing efforts of spiritual “attentiveness” (*tawajjuh*) already highlighted in the preceding section.

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<sup>13</sup> “*Life is But a Dream*”: *Creation as Divine Cinema and the Shadow-Theater of Existence...*, pp. 10-48 in *El Azufre Rojo: Revista de Estudios sobre Ibn ‘Arabi*, vol. 2 (2015).

— **Direction** and resulting **clarity of purpose**. What one often immediately discovers together with *walāya* is a memorable recognition of the Qur’anic “Face/direction of God,”<sup>14</sup> immediately distinguishing the inner “lights” of true illumination (the Qur’anic *mashriq*) from those dimensions of our life that were previously unrecognized as expressions of “darkening,” “shadows” (*zulumāt*), and “veils.”

— **Co-operation**: that is, an interactive harmony beyond either personal control or external compulsion (*jabr* or *ikrāh*). As Ibn ‘Arabi has memorably expressed this experience and insight, the seeker transitions through the ongoing realization of our soul’s *walāya* from “journeying” (with difficult effort and struggle) to “being carried” along the unfolding flow of one’s uniquely individual spiritual path.<sup>15</sup>

— An outwardly inexplicable, inner awareness of **protection** and **safety**: i.e., of re-assurance, inherent trust, confidence, and mysterious sustaining (*īmān*, *sabr*, *tawakkul*, *itmi’nān*, and so on.).

— **Motivation** and **spiritual energy**: one of the most familiar mysteries of this discovery of the connection and relationship of *walāya* (since it is often so literally invisible to others) is this miraculously increased inner energy and clarity of perspective, making possible the overcoming or endurance of previously daunting obstacles.

— **Devotion** and **longing**: distinctively, in the case of a genuinely transforming encounter with *walāya*, that devotion and longing only *increases* or mysteriously persists despite long periods of apparent “absence” or “separation.” Nor is it ever fully satiated by any kind of fulfillment.<sup>16</sup>

— **Gratitude**: distinctively never-ending and not decreasing; instead only growing and deepening with each encounter with the *Walī*/Friend.

— **Profound Respect** (*ihtirām*): discovering an inherent (“cause-less”) valuing of the other and simultaneous *being-valued*, without any specific outward or visible “cause” or occasion. (There seems to be no adequate word for this simple spiritual reality in English)

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<sup>14</sup> *Wajh al-Haqq*: see our opening Qur’anic epigraph 2:115. “Direction” is another closely related meaning of the Qur’anic *w-j-h* root: i.e., to “face” or direct oneself toward the theophanic Source or Friend. (See the more complete discussion in Chapter 3 of *The Reflective Heart...*, “The Face of God and Human Faces: the Qur’anic Sources.”)

<sup>15</sup> See the translated passages in Chapter 1 (“Journeying: From Wandering to Repose”) in *The Reflective Heart...* (full reference in n. 11 above).

<sup>16</sup> See the beautiful evocation of these distinctive qualities of true *walāya* in the famous epigrammatic “litmus-tests” of spiritual realization constituting Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Kitāb al-Nasīha*, partially translated in *Introducing Ibn ‘Arabi’s “Book of Spiritual Advice,”* pp. 1-18 in JMIAS, vol. XXVIII (2000); a complete translation is included in our forthcoming volume, *Approaching Ibn ‘Arabi: Foundations, Contexts, Interpretations*.

— Awakened ***absolute, conditionless love*** (*rahma*: not the same as the more particular devotion and longing just cited): not tied exclusively to any particular object or circumstances, with the distinctive quality of being a true and sufficient *end-in-itself*.

— ***Perseverance*** (*sabr*) and ***insistence***: the unexpected and inexplicable, mysteriously “gifted” power to continue searching, discovering, and questioning the deeper meanings of this Relationship, under even the most discouraging challenges and circumstances.

#### V. SOME PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: COMMUNICATING AND SHARING THE RELATIONSHIP OF *WALĀYA*

Each of the following practical consequences would normally require at least a few pages of basic elaboration, and could be readily expanded into its own essay. But these implications are really only significant when backed up by the kinds of concrete experiences and deepening personal discoveries of *walāya* alluded to in the preceding sections. Once a person’s realization of this Relationship reaches a certain critical mass, the practical consequences of each of these points necessarily begin to shape how we learn to communicate appropriately in this domain, always depending on our particular audiences and interlocutors:

- This relationship (of *walāya*) is ultimately far “bigger” and *more inclusive* than whatever we may think of as its “partners” or participants, including all historical traditions and cultures.
- *Walāya* is a *process*, not an “object.” What is “known” through *walāya* and a genuine *walī* is embedded in a specific, uniquely *personal existential context*—a Relationship that is always unfolding and deepening—and which therefore is not fully perceptible or adequately describable as any sort of outward, externally shared object or “thing.”
- *Ma‘rifa*, spiritual “knowing awareness” or immediate recognition of the divine *Walī* in any of His infinite manifestations, or the peculiar kind of immediately inspired, necessarily personal awakening that underlies our focused awareness of *walāya*, is always *particular* (i.e., not an abstraction or concept, and not successfully communicable as such).
- The realities of *walāya*, from the simplest momentary perceptions on to ever deeper realms, are *universally present and potentially accessible*. The problems involved in discovering and recognizing those Presences have to do with ensuring one’s attention, discernment, and the removal of inner obstacles (“veils” of all kinds), not with anything that can be otherwise taught or inculcated in any other, more convenient way.
- The distinctive nature of this relationship and encounter (of *walāya*) means that *genuine communication about each instant or case of realization can only take the form of a personal “story”*—albeit in any of the many spiritually suitable “languages” mentioned in the next paragraph. It is surely no accident that the most effectively accessible and enduring forms of communication about the “Friends of God” (*awliyā’*) in each major religious tradition—and certainly in the foundational scriptures of each of the Abrahamic traditions—are so often in the form of such personal stories.

- Adequately describing or sharing our discoveries of *walāya* (and encounters with each *walī*) also requires a form of appropriate language capable of conveying *the plenitude of the experienced Instant or Moment* (a non-linear, mysteriously expanded “vertical time”) and a momentary *higher communion of shared being and understanding* (i.e., something far beyond the implicit subject/object, temporally restricted expectations built into Indo-European languages and grammars). Here we have only to recall the multiple, inexhaustible meanings that Rumi’s relationship with “Shams” continually takes on throughout each genre and stage of his immense work. This means that the appropriate creative language for conveying the familiar epiphanies and theophanies of *walāya* suggested in the preceding sections normally include one or more of the following: music, poetry, rituals, dance, visual arts, cinema, and other appropriate forms of witnessing.
- From this perspective, the classical masterpieces of the poetry of *walāya* in Islam (Hafiz, Rumi, Yunus Emre, and their peers in each Islamicate language and culture) are only “didactic” for readers and critics who have no clear conception of what those masters are actually attempting to communicate and awaken. In terms of this subject of *walāya* and the *awliyā’*, what those incomparable works provide for each attentive reader/listener, over the necessary period of time and experience, is an appropriate “*observational tool*” for discovering, evaluating and sharing all the indicative practical dimensions of the unfolding relationship of *walāya* and its “mystery love-story” of realization (*tahqīq*) that were briefly outlined in the preceding sections.

At the same time, we must observe that there are also certain important social (and ultimately, political) conditions for discovering and then effectively communicating these facets of *walāya*, which reflect the essential inseparability of our most basic spiritual responsibilities and their corresponding, pre-requisite freedoms. We may conclude this section with those essential, primordially human freedoms because their compelling existential and spiritual necessity in each case comes ultimately not from any outward (historical, cultural or political) sources, but *from the intrinsic spiritual demands of our actual human reality as the locus of these theophanies*, as the personal manifestation of each of these integral dimensions of our unique active relationship of intimate friendship with the Beloved.

— The first of these preconditions is **the freedom and responsibility to learn**, which in the spiritual domain is inseparably connected to the profoundly individualized, and absolutely unavoidable, educational role of our illusions, mistakes, negligence and their painfully memorable, ultimately transforming consequences. Consequently, this fundamental freedom also implies the constant **responsibility of forgiveness**, both of one’s self and of others.

— Next is **the freedom and responsibility to respond appropriately to each divine “Calling.”** This is the freedom and responsibility for those acts of spiritual creativity and innovation (*bid‘a hasana*) which are indispensable for all the manifestations of *ihsān*<sup>17</sup>—and which together entail the inevitable

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<sup>17</sup> I.e., for recognizing and actualizing all that is beautiful and good, or “worshipping and serving God as though you see Him,” as the culminating aim of all Religion (*dīn*) is described in the famous words of the canonical “hadith of Gabriel.” (The injunction to undertake “beautiful/good innovation” is from a famous hadith.)

growing diversity and particularization of outcomes and methods arising from each particular situation and experience of *walāya*.<sup>18</sup> (It would revealing to contrast this indispensable spiritual freedom with the Qur'an's repeated denunciations of all forms of querulous "disputation," *mujādala* or *jidāl*.)

— Finally, as already noted, there is our **freedom and responsibility to share and communicate the unveiled divine "Treasure,"**<sup>19</sup> of what each person may discover of this relationship of *walāya*: *And as for your Lord's blessings, recount them!* (93:11). The practical implications of this simple, unrestricted commandment are far-reaching.

#### VI: FROM LEARNING TO TRUE SERVICE (*'IBĀDA*): DISCOVERING THE DANCE OF *WALĀYA* AND *WILĀYA*

The preceding sections have mainly focused on the distinctive features and qualities of the relationship of *walāya* (i.e., our gradual discovery of God as *Walī*, the intimate Friend and Beloved)—and not so directly on the correspondingly indispensable role of *wilāya*, of God as *Wālī*, as Ruler and Governor—because those clearly beneficent aspects of God as Friend, Guardian, Guide, Beloved and so on are normally perceived more positively. And also because at the early conscious stages of that Relationship we inevitably experience the first memorable occasions of that love-story as near-miraculous events and happenings. But that is certainly *not* how these two complementary divine Qualities are presented in this extraordinary calligraphic monument that greets each visitor to Rumi's shrine. For there the vertical letter *alif* (ا or Alpha), universally symbolizing the divine Creative Act and inner link of Creator and all creation, is inextricably intertwined in an embrace with the letter *lam* (ل)<sup>20</sup> shared by both of these divine Names—suggesting and even highlighting the ultimate inseparability of these paired divine Names in each person's ongoing process of spiritual discovery, growth and maturation.

So if we return to examine more closely the different phenomenological manifestations of *walāya* introduced in the preceding sections, it quickly becomes apparent—at least as an abstract, logical observation and conclusion—that none of these individual facets of divine Friendship/*walāya* becomes visible to us without a complex, far-reaching and all-encompassing framework of divine activity, governance, direction, determination (*taqdīr*) and all the other manifestations of God as *al-Wālī*, as the "Manager" present and operative in every dimension of being from the most metaphysical to the most intimately personal. Indeed it is fair to say, in line with our opening epigraph from the Qur'an (2:115), that for the most part we normally seek and discover some longed-for manifestation of the "Face" of God precisely as the eventual result of our "turning around,"<sup>21</sup> away from any of the multitudinous "dark,"

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<sup>18</sup> Alluding to the famous Qur'anic verse 30:22. "*And among His Signs is the creating of the heavens and the earth and the difference of your languages and your colors: surely in that are Signs for those who truly know.*"

<sup>19</sup> Alluding to the famous Divine Saying (*hadith qudsī*): "I was a hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known: hence I created the world/people (*al-khalq*) so that I might be known."

<sup>20</sup> Visibly symbolizing the (still incomplete) prolongation of that creative Act in the partial "return" of the earthly human being to the divine Source.

<sup>21</sup> *Wallā*, from same Arabic root as both these divine Names. That meaning immediately suggests the related root and concept of *tawba*, of our "repentance" ("turning" toward God, away from sin) and the divine response of God as "the ever-Turning" (*al-Tawwāb*) in forgiveness and right guidance.

troubling, or disagreeable aspects of life. So from that perspective, the *alif* of our calligraphy is like the spiritual pivot of a kind of constantly revolving door, where our initial encounters with the dark, fearful and uncontrollable aspects of life keep us constantly in prayerful search and longing for the illuminating solace of the divine Friend/*walāya*. In short, our motivations, our capacities, our perceptions and interpretations, even the deeper determination of when and how our prayers and pleading are outwardly “answered”: all of these inwardly visible aspects of *walāya* are also ultimately expressions of and responses to the preceding forces and surrounding, preparatory context of divine *wilāya*.

Indeed this frequent unconscious opposition, in our naïve initial approach to life, between our perception of divine Friendship/*walāya* (as something intrinsically “positive” and longed for) and our suspicion of *wilāya* (as an often apparently impersonal or even negative ruling power) is quite typical of the sort of deep-rooted, instinctive human dualism which we normally apply, quite unreflectively, in the course of life to so many of the necessary polarities and contrasts between the contrasting divine Names and qualities: for example, to God as *Muhyī* (“Giver of Life”) and *Mumīt* (“Giver of Death”); as *Hādī* (“Guide”) and *Mudill* (“Who leads astray”); as *Zāhir* (“Outward”) and *Bātin* (“Inner”); and so on. Of course none of these divine attributes can exist and become humanly known and fully appreciated without the lastingly experienced contrast with each other. Yet taken by themselves, we know that such abstract philosophical reflections and familiar theological cautions have little deeper effect in actually transforming and overcoming that underlying, natural human dualism.

Instead, this powerful calligraphic greeting forcefully reminds us that in practice it is only through our close attention to life’s actual realities and contexts—i.e., to all the unfolding personalized lessons and tests bestowed by that divine Beloved (to borrow Rumi’s favorite image for that “Face” in this painting)—that we can gradually learn something of the deeper Reality and Source underlying our unforgettable moments of awakening to the divine Friend. Or in other words, only through those providential dramas can we eventually discover that the divine “Governor” (*al-Wālī*) really *is* the All-Compassionate Beloved (*al-Walī*, *Yār* and *Dūst*). Secondly, this painting boldly emphasizes (like so many of Rumi’s poems, long and short) that it is only in a state of profound humility, vulnerability, and often desperate longing and entreaty (*niyāz*)—symbolized in this calligraphy by the poignant, prayerful “O...” (*yā*) always addressing this intertwined pair of divine Names—that we can even notice and truly appreciate the Beloved’s eventual response. Finally, the fact that this initial passionate supplication extends all the way up to the “Ultimate Reality” (*yā Ākhir*)—woven in tiny, less visible red tendrils at the top of the painting, at once above, behind, and through the monumental black Names in the foreground, and thus equally present in the foreground plane of this lower world, as in its infinitely expanding background: this placement powerfully highlights the necessary vastness of the divine perspectives of time and possibility that are slowly revealed through our transforming encounters with both of these Names.

One of the defining qualities of any great work of spiritual art (as of *walāya* more generally!) is that its meanings and immediate import shift with each renewed encounter, with each transforming “*visit to the graves*” (Sura 102). Thus this mandala, at each encounter, actively mirrors back each viewer’s deepening and necessarily unique personal experiences of the divine “Governor” (*Wālī*) and the loving divine Beloved (*Walī*). So with time, we pilgrim-visitors gradually find ourselves more and more often passing beyond the bold surface plane to the expansive space of those boundless spiritual realms (the *barzakh*) “behind” the visible plane of the Face and Names. And through our repeated visits to that

rediscovered presence of the divine Beloved/Friend, we may discover some of the following transforming Signs:

- Painful difficulty (*'usr*) becomes ease (*yusr*). “Surely **with** the hardship”—not after it—“is ease; surely with the hardship is ease.” (94:5-6)
- Our childish impression of divine “necessity” and determination as being opposed to our limited individual “freedom” (*jabr* and *qadr*) gradually becomes transformed into an actively partnered, spontaneous “dance” of *taslīm* and *rizā*, of inner surrender and contented peace.
- Our initial dualistic juxtaposition of rare moments of miraculous “grace” to a supposed “ordinary,” vacant world of routine (or even darker “evil,” oppression, tragedy, and the like) is transmuted into our transforming “finding-awareness” of the *whole* of Being (*wujūd*) as blessing (*baraka*).
- The initial stages of calling upon God or others, and then waiting for some eventual wished-for response,<sup>22</sup> begin to give way to the deeper practice of listening, witnessing, and responding selflessly in that “spontaneously beautiful creative service” (*ihsān*) which is the true act of worship (*'ibāda*) and culmination of faith, as described by the Prophet in the famous hadith of Gabriel.<sup>23</sup>
- Our naïve contrast of singularly memorable, intermittent spiritually “meaningful” moments to the futilely repetitive, horizontal landscape of linear and impersonal time (*zamān*) gradually dissolves into the experienced timeless “Instant” (*waqt*, in the language of the Sufis) of the personal Love-relationship of *walāya*.
- The familiar painful juxtaposition of unexpected moments of grace experienced as effortless, unexpected “music,” interrupting a backdrop of more persistent situations of cacophony or random “noise,” is gradually effaced—someplace behind and beyond the Face of this painting—in our dawning awareness of the invisible rhythm, the intertwined co-operation, of this deeper cosmic Dance of *wilāya* and *walāya*. As in the famous concluding lines of Yeats’ late poem, *Among School Children*, that so closely echo the familiar Qur’anic likeness (14:24) of “...a good Tree whose roots are firm and its branches in heaven”:

...O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

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<sup>22</sup> See the detailed scriptural references in the study cited at n. 6 above.

<sup>23</sup> There the Prophet, in response to Gabriel’s question about this culminating aim of all Religion (*dīn*), explains *ihsān* as “... to worship/serve God as though you see Him; and even if you don’t see Him, He surely sees you.” Or in another, more revealing translation of the same Arabic concluding words: “... and if you are **not**, then you **do** see him...”

And here Rumi's visitor moves on....

