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Dark Nights and Nonlinear Paths in Western Abrahamic Contemplative Traditions

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by

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ABSTRACT

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by

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Recent research has documented meditation-related experiences in contemporary Buddhist traditions and the appraisal processes involved with either normalizing or pathologizing such experiences. These studies have complicated the frameworks that even clinicians and psychologists use to make such differential diagnoses but to date there has been almost no comparable work examining how such appraisal processes are navigated in other religious and spiritual communities. This thesis makes a contribution in this area by investigating some of the textual sources and themes that contemporary teachers and students in Western Abrahamic contemplative traditions draw upon to interpret distressing and challenging meditation-related experiences. When appraising difficult experiences as 'part of the path' in contemporary Christian traditions, teachers and practitioners invoked both Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, particularly the latter's discussion of the "dark nights," and the contemplative path structure utilized by both of purgation-illumination-union. Purgation or purification was often translated into a psychological key and Thomas Keating's conception of "divine therapy" and "the unloading of the unconscious" in the Centering

prayer tradition was found to be influential in this formulation. In Western Sufi traditions, challenging or distressing experiences were understood as normative in relation to Classical Sufi psychological literature describing different states (*hal*) and stations (*maqamat*) of the Sufi path (*tariqa*), particularly those related to a process of purification or "polishing the mirror of the heart." Other key ideas referenced in normalizing interpretations were the valley of bewilderment (*hayrat)* in Farid ad-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, descriptions of painful experiences in the poetry of Jallal al-din Rumi, and the dual concept of annihilation (*fana*) and subsistence (*baqa*) that is ubiquitous in classical Sufi literature. Jewish teachers and practitioners referenced a constellation of several key texts, figures, and ideas in appraising challenging experiences as 'part of the path' as well: mystical interpretations of the Song of Songs, "descent for the sake of ascent" (*yeridah tzorech aliyah)* and purification, the doctrine of "expanded and constricted consciousness" (*mochin d'gadlut, mochin d'katnut),* the Hasidic practice and doctrine of elevating sparks and "foreign thoughts" (*machshavot zerot)*, and finally, liminality and "the breaking of the vessels" (*shevirat ha-keilim).* In introducing the conception of 'non-linear paths' to describe these trajectories of contemplative practice invoked by contemporary teachers and practitioners, this thesis seeks to highlight the ways in which certain negatively valenced meditation-related experiences are normalized even as individual variability and unpredictability has been acknowledged for centuries in these traditions.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This MA thesis is part of a larger study of distressing experiences in Western Abrahamic contemplative traditions designed to complement 'The Varieties of Contemplative Experience' (VCE) project conducted by Dr. Willoughby Britton and collaborators in order to investigate challenging meditation experiences in western Buddhist traditions.[1] Although less well known to many both outside and even within the Abrahamic traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have all given rise to incredibly rich and sophisticated contemplative traditions.[2] Manuals with explicit meditation instructions are

[1] Jared R. Lindahl et al., "The varieties of contemplative experience: A mixed-methods study of meditation-related challenges in Western Buddhists," *PLoS ONE* 12(5): e0176239 (May 2017): 2-3, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176239

[2] For a discussion of the category and emerging field of the 'Abrahamic' religions, see Adam J. Silverstein, Guy G. Stroumsa, and Moshe Blidstein, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Abrahamic Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). For a critique and argument against the utility of this category, see Aaron W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions on the Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). While a fuller exploration of the term and the debate surrounding it is beyond the scope of this paper, ultimately I believe in the utility of the term enough to make use of it due to the reciprocal relations that have occurred historically between the mystical traditions within each of the three religions. For example, McGinn argues that Philo was a key influence on the early church fathers and scholars in Jewish studies have argued that medieval and modern Christian mystical traditions have significantly impacted Jewish mystical traditions as well. (McGinn, *Foundations*, chapter 1; Idel, "Mysticism in the Abrahamic Religions," 388-9) Similarly, Islamic studies scholars have acknowledged the impact and influence of Jewish traditions upon early Islamic mystical traditions and Jewish studies scholars have established beyond a shadow of a doubt the impact of medieval Sufi and Islamic philosophical traditions on Jewish mystical traditions as well. (Sviri, "Between Hope and Fear, 336; Ernst, *Sufism, 48;* Idel, "Mysticism," 388-9) Furthermore, given the deep and pervasive influence of Arabic Neoplatonism on all three mystical streams, I believe the term "Abrahamic" is warranted to gesture towards the reciprocal (nonlinear) relations amongst the specifically contemplative

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often rarer than in some Eastern traditions, but this is often due to such instruction being intentionally relegated to the realm of oral transmission between teacher and students.[3] Interviews, thus, are essential not only to learn more about distressing experiences, but also to understand the resources that the traditions rely on the interpret them.

The Varieties of Contemplative Experience Abrahamic (VCE-A) study is an ongoing replication of the VCE project conducted among Jewish, Christian, and Islamic meditators from English speaking Western countries such as the US, Canada, UK and Australia.[4] Through qualitative interviews this study attempts to investigate the broader range of experiences associated with meditation practices in the West. In order to better understand the types of experiences that tend to be under-reported in scientific research, scholarship, and the media, the VCE-A study intentionally queried experiences that practitioners found unexpected, difficult, distressing, or functionally impairing. Interviews also asked about the range of interpretations given to experiences, as well as the putative causes of and remedies for difficult experiences. Meditation experts were also queried for how they interpret and manage challenging experiences that are reported by their students or patients.[5]

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currents within each religion and the familial resemblances that have 'emerged' from such relations. (Chittick, *Divine Love,* xxv)

[3] William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983), 150; Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah, 11b.

[4] See Lindahl et al.,"Varieties," 6-13 for an extensive description of the project's methodology, which was followed closely in order to enable robust future comparisons between the two data sets. The major methodological differences are that this was a purely qualitative study, and so did not employ the use of scales or questionnaires beyond the interview protocol, clinicians were not interviewed, and practitioners with a mixed practice history that included a significant influence from non-Abrahamic traditions were not excluded from this study.

[5] More specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore the following questions: What is the range of meditation-related effects described by Abrahamic practitioners in the West? What types of experiences do they report as unexpected, challenging, difficult, distressing, or functionally impairing? What are the hypothesized causes of those experiences? What interpretations are they given by others and which do they find compelling themselves? How do practitioners prevent, manage, navigate, or integrate such experiences? How do teachers guide their students through such experiences?

The VCE-A study recruited 30 Abrahamic meditation practitioners from Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Islamicate traditions—10 from each religion.[6] While this study sought to interview both Islamic and perennialist Sufi teachers and practitioners, thus far due to accessibility and the snowball sampling method the majority of interviews have been conducted amongst 'perennial' groups. For the Jewish and Christian subjects, there was more of an even split between orthodox and heterodox traditions, though Sefardi Jewish and Eastern Orthodox traditions are underrepresented.[7]

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[6] This study follows Zia Inayat-Khan in his chapter "Islamic and Islamicate Contemplative Practice in the United States" in exploring the scope of contemplative practice in both Islamic and 'Islamicate' contexts. The latter term was coined by Marshall Hodgson to refer "not directly to the religion, Islam, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims." (*Venture,* 59) The Islamicate context is particularly important in light of contemporary debates about how to define "Sufism" and, following Suha Taji-Farouki's book *Beshara and Ibn Arabi: A Movement of Sufi Spirituality in the Modern World* and others, the terms 'Sufi' and 'Sufism' are used in this study "to designate all figures and trends that self-describe thus, be these universal, Islamic, contemporary, or historical." (10) In her chapter, "In the Garden of American Sufi movements: Hybrids and Perennials," Marcia Hermansen describes two main categories of Sufi movements or groups in the US today, "hybrids" by which she means "those movements which identify with an Islamic source and content" and "perennials" meaning "those movements in which the specifically Islamic identification and content of the movement have been de-emphasized in favor of a" more universalist outlook. (155)

[7] Inclusion criteria for practitioners required a minimum age of 18 years, a contemplative practice in an Abrahamic tradition, and the ability to report on meditation-related experience that was challenging, difficult, or was associated with significant physiological or psychological changes, including distress or impairment. The VCE-A study also recruited 30 meditation experts who had taught extensively in an Abrahamic tradition. Inclusion criteria for experts was an occupational identity as a teacher in an Abrahamic mystical or contemplative tradition. The overall sampling strategy was purposive and recruitment employed both special case sampling and snowball or chain sampling to meet the aims of investigating this phenomena as well as sampling from both "continuous and discontinuous" traditions which together constitute the contemporary landscape of contemplative practice. Once interviews are transcribed and verified, they are coded for both phenomenology and influencing factors using the VCE codebook.

Experiences were coded according to six categories (affective, cognitive, perceptual, sense of self, somatic, and social) and while beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on the full spectrum of difficulties some of the most commonly reported as distressing or impairing were: Fear, Re-experiencing of Traumatic memories, Affective Lability, Changes in Executive Functioning, Hallucinations, Derealization, Perceptual Hypersensitivity, Change in Self-Other or Self-World boundaries, Change in Narrative Self, Loss of Sense of Basic Self, Social Impairment, Cardiac Changes, Involuntary Movements, and Somatic Energy. See Lindahl et al., "Varieties" s4, for descriptions of each category. See Appendix for some preliminary data based on an initial round of coding by the author on the first round of interviews conducted between 2012-2016.

In the course of the interviews, interviewees frequently referred to spiritual texts that they drew upon in the context of practice. This thesis analyzes the most frequently referenced texts in order to determine how they portray the spiritual path, what difficulties if any they anticipate, and how they advise practitioners to deal with them. Based on an analysis of these texts, it is clear that central mystical texts in all three are in fact quite explicit and forthcoming about many pitfalls or wrong turns that it is possible to make, as well as challenging stages which indicate progress despite the appearance to the contrary. In keeping with the conclusions of the VCE study, this suggests that here too appraisal processes play a crucial role in normalizing experiences

The normalizing role of spiritual appraisals has received limited attention, however the first major treatment of such processes in this arena was in the early 1990's when Stanislav and Christina Grof introduced the term "spiritual emergency" to begin to address challenging effects of meditation and other spiritual practices and prevent normal and expected effects of these practices from being unnecessarily "pathologized" which, in their view, caused unnecessary suffering and impeded spiritual transformation.[8] More recently, psychiatrist Emmanuelle Peters and her colleagues have picked up this line of research, exploring different interpretations of unusual and anomalous experiences and the effect that "spiritual appraisals" has on impairment, "need for care," and clinical outcomes.[9]

[8] Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof, *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis* (New York: Putnam, 1989).

[9] See for example, C.M.C. Brett et al., "Appraisals of Anomalous Experiences Interview (AANEX): A Multidimensional Measure of Psychological Responses to Anomalies Associated with Psychosis," *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 23-30, 191, no. S51 (2007). doi:10.1192/bjp.191.51.s23; R. Underwood, V. Kumari, and E. Peters., "Appraisals of Psychotic Experiences: An Experimental Investigation of Symptomatic, Remitted and Non-need-for-care Individuals." *Psychological Medicine* 46, no. 06 (January 2016): 1249-263. doi:10.1017/s0033291715002780; Emmanuelle Peters et al., "Clinical, Socio-demographic and Psychological Characteristics in Individuals with Persistent Psychotic Experiences with and without a "need for Care"," *World Psychiatry* 15, no. 1 (February 2016): 41-52. doi:10.1002/wps.2030.

Since there is still much debate as to what exactly constitutes "adverse" effects of meditation, this paper will explore emic understandings of 'necessary difficulties' in Abrahamic contemplative traditions to begin to disambiguate the latter from the former (based on interviews with contemporary teachers and practitioners). Preliminary findings from this qualitative study have found that these subjects appraised or interpreted such distressing experiences in general as either "adverse effects" or "part of the path."[10] In the context of this study, "adverse" refers to difficult or distressing experiences which were appraised as preventative of, or antithetical to, growth and development, and as such entail unnecessary suffering. This is in contrast to distressing experiences that are "part of the path" meaning they are actually indicative of growth and development (despite appearing otherwise) and as such involve necessary suffering. We will first examine some of the traditional terms, texts, and figures referenced by those who appraised certain experiences as "part of the path" to begin to explore what such paths look like.

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[10] Fisher et al, in prep. Given the emic centrality of paths related to this topic, this study follows Taves in *Religious Experience Reconsidered* in highlighting the centrality of the path metaphor to Abrahamic mystical traditions and organizing this comparative project around the "composite ascriptions of experiences within the broader context of a path deemed religious." (4, 7, 176) While Taves recommends organizing comparison around either the goal or the practices deemed efficacious towards its attainment, this comparison uses difficult stages of the path as the pivot of comparison and then contextualizes such stages in relation to that goal. (*Religious,* 164, 185-6) See Lindahl's doctoral dissertation (2010), "Paths to Luminosity: A Comparative Study of Ascetic and Contemplative Practices in Select Tibetan Buddhist and Greek Christian Traditions" where he organizes his comparative project similarly according Taves' formulation (37); and Blaschke's doctoral dissertation (2017) drawing upon both Taves and Lindahl while also expanding their framework (21-22); See also Idel's chapter, "Mysticism in the Abrahamic Religions" where he writes, "The Abrahamic mysticisms refer to special paths, designated as *via, tariqa,* or *derekh*, that are imagined to be conducive to extraordinary experiences." (380, emphasis original) He later describes how,

> what is crucial for understanding the differences or the similarities between different forms of mysticism is not the very existence of mystical union experiences or their technical expressions, but the more comprehensive structures within which they eventually function…Therefore, in lieu of resorting to detailed study of the theologies that were influential in a certain type of mysticism in order to discover whether these theologies allow extreme experiences and expressions, or would permit only moderate ones, it is also plausible to turn to an inspection of the mystical paths as a major avenue of describing the mystical nature of a certain religion. (Idel, "Mysticism," 384)

Chapter Two: Christian Traditions

When appraising difficult experiences as "part of the path" both teachers and practitioners often invoked both Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, particularly the latter's discussion of the "dark nights." They also invoked the traditional Christian contemplative path structure, purgation-illumination-union, acknowledging that purgation was often a distressing but necessary stage of practice. Referencing contemporary traditions, practitioners and teachers also referred to Father Thomas Keating's conception of "divine therapy" and "the unloading of the unconscious" in the Centering prayer tradition.

Teresa of Avila

As mentioned above, teachers and practitioners referenced Teresa of Avila (1515-1555) when appraising their distressing experiences as necessary suffering on the contemplative path, specifically her descriptions of her own experiences in what would become her autobiography, *Life of Mother Teresa de Jesus*. One of the most famous of these—due to the sculpture made by Bernini documenting this event—is a vision she reports

of an angel piercing her heart, which caused both "severe pain and supreme delight."[11]Another was an experience of "extreme desolation like being placed in a desert" where "the soul seems like it is crucified" which Bernard McGinn notes "sounds very much like what her friend John of the Cross would later analyze as the passive night of the spirit."[12] One final distressing experience understood by Teresa in a framework of purgation (and thus sent by God, not the devil) was a brief vision of hell involving feelings of constriction and suffocation that "made it feel like the soul was tearing itself to pieces."[13] Despite the sheer terror and affliction of the experience, Teresa later understood it as "one of the greatest favors the Lord granted me" since it vanquished her fear of other kinds of suffering and gave her the strength to endure such events.[14]

Teresa also described another category of difficulty in her writings related to both "intoxication" and madness. Indeed these two themes feature prominently in her "quasi-commentary" on the Song of Songs, the first of its kind for a woman in the history of Christianity (or Judaism). She understands the two breasts of "Your breasts are lovelier than wine" (Song 1:2) to be referring to two advanced states of contemplation—the prayer of quiet and the prayer of union—and that particularly after the latter, when the contemplative returns to her faculties after a state of full absorption, she will experience a "holy madness" or confusion in its wake.[15] While the "intoxicating" effects of the two states of prayer may be

[11] Bernard McGinn, *Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2017), 140.

[12] McGinn, *Mysticism*, 144.

[13] McGinn, *Mysticism*, 145.

[14] McGinn, *Mysticism*, 145.

[15] McGinn, *Mysticism*, 169.

impairing and confusing, she ultimately understands the verse to be indicative of a more matured state after being "weaned" from those "breasts" and one can reflect back on those experiences.[16]

John of the Cross

While earlier Christian mystics certainly discussed necessary difficulties one will encounter on the path to union with God, John of the Cross' (1542-1591) writings on the dark nights are "the best known treatment of mystical dereliction in Christian history."[17] One of the central analogies he uses to describe such necessary difficult experiences is a log of wood being burned so thoroughly that it eventually becomes one with the flame. [18] The other analogy he introduces in the very beginning of *The Dark Night* is of a mother weaning her child:

> It should be known, then, that God nurtures and caresses the soul, after it has been resolutely converted to his service, like a loving mother who warms her child with the heat of her bosom, nurses it with good milk and tender food, and carries and caresses it in her arms. But as the child grows older, the mother withholds her caresses and hides her tender love; she rubs bitter allows on her sweet breast and sets the child down from her arms, letting it walk on its own feet so that it may put aside the habits of childhood and grows accustomed to greater and more important things.[19]

Particularly relevant for our study is what he goes on to describe as the two 'passive nights'—the night of the senses and the night of the spirit. The passive night of the senses involves a purification of the sensory faculties and is understood as the beginning of the

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[16] McGinn, *Mysticism,* 172.

[17] McGinn, *Mysticism,* 280.

[18] McGinn, *Mysticism,* 284.

[19] John of the Cross, "The Dark Night," in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 361.

contemplative or "illuminative" stage of the threefold path of purgation, illumination, and union.[20] The passive night of the spirit is a more dramatic and painful purification of one's "spirit" which consists of the faculties of intellect, memory and will.[21] This dark night signals the beginning of the unitive stage of the path which culminates in a mystical "marriage" to God, also conceived of as the realization of the "center of the soul" (*centro de alma*).[22]

Sister Constance Fitzgerald, a contemporary Carmelite author and contemplative, has written several influential pieces on how the dark nights manifest for people today and how to work skillfully with them when such challenging stages arise. She uses the language of "impasse" to describe the dark nights by which she means "there is no way out of, no way around, no rational escape from, what imprisons one" and that it entails "unavoidable suffering."[23] She adds that "intrinsic to the experience of impasse is the impression and feeling of rejection and lack of assurance from those on whom one counts" and that "the more action one applies to escape it, the worse it gets."[24] Fitzgerald counsels that in order to be "educated for darkness" and see the dark night as a "sign of life" and "the condition for creative growth and transformation" (instead of a sign of death) one must first acknowledge and accept the experience of powerlessness.[25] That acceptance of powerlessness dovetails

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[20] Mcginn, *Mysticism*, 282. The first Christian mystic to make use of a three-fold path was Origen however the first to use this particular formulation was Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. (McGinn, *Essential*, 150-1; Louth, *Origins,* 57-8)

[21] McGinn, Mysticism, 273.

[22] McGinn, *Mysticism*, 260.

[23] Constance Fitzgerald, "Impasse and Dark Night" in *Living With Apocalypse: Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion*, ed. Tilden Edwards (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers 1984), 94.

[24] Fitzgerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," 94, 96.

[25] Fitzgerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," 97, 96.

with an acceptance of the fact that such growth can only "be the fruit of unconscious processes" occurring mysteriously "beyond conscious, rational control."[26]

She understands the dark night of the senses as a kind of withdrawal from a reliance on the "left-brain" conscious processes which activates the "right-brain" processes in the sense that it "puts a reverse pressure on imagination…that throws the intuitive, unconscious self into gear."[27] In reference to the dark night of the spirit, Fitzgerald describes it as a "deeper dark night" where the intellect, will, and memory are purified: "This darker Night removes the very support systems that have structured our lives, given them meaning and value, and provided a source of affirmation and final assurances."[28] The purification of intellect manifests "when our philosophy of life, our theology and our carefully constructed meanings fall apart before our eyes…Nothing makes any sense. The mind, while on one level *full* of a lifetime of knowledge, is in total darkness on another, the level of meaning."[29] The emptying of memory is not experienced as a loss of a lifetime of memories, but rather that "all that the memory holds which once provided motivation and security, which engendered trust and promise for the future, seems now an illusion and a mockery."[30]She continues to describe how the "memory is indeed empty, …possessing nothing but the scattered remains

[26] Fitzgerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," 96.

[27] Fitzgerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," 115 note 3, 95.

[28] Constance Fitzgerald, "Desolation as Dark Night: The Transformative Influence of Wisdom in John of the Cross," *The Way Supplement 82* (1995): 103.

[29] Fitzgerald, "Desolation as Dark Night," 104.

[30] Fitzgerald, "Desolation as Dark Night," 104.

of cherished experiences and the crushing remembrance of personal failure and defeat."[31]

And finally, the darkness of 'will' is a profound emotional experience of the

> overwhelming feeling of being rejected and abandoned not only by one's friends but particularly by God… However it happens, what or whom one cherishes most in life is cut off, taken away. The worst thing about this 'purification of the will' is that the loved one, the very focus of one's love and desire, becomes the cause of one's agony. There is nothing so destructive of affirmation and worth as rejection by one who has loved you and on whom you have counted with complete assurance. It leaves one unable to grasp anything affectively.[32]

Centering Prayer & Divine Therapy

One of the most influential contemporary conceptual translations of the contemplative paths of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross is the movement known as Centering Prayer, spearheaded by the Trappist monk Thomas Keating. Over the last four decades Keating has developed a conception of the contemplative path which, drawing on classical Christian mystical sources, acknowledges that some challenging or distressing experiences are necessary and unavoidable. He describes how "through the regular practice of centering prayer the dynamism of interior purification is set in motion" which he calls "a kind of divine psychotherapy, organically designed for each of us, to purify our unconscious and free us from the obstacles to the free flow of grace in our minds, emotions, and bodies."[33] He explains further:

> Empirical evidence seems to be growing that the consequences of traumatic emotional experiences from earliest childhood are stored in our bodies and nervous systems in the form of tension, anxiety, and various defense mechanisms. Ordinary rest and sleep do not get rid of them. But with interior silence and the profound rest

[31] Fitzgerald, "Desolation as Dark Night," 104.

[32] Fitzgerald, "Desolation as Dark Night," 104.

[33] Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 95.

> that this brings to the whole organism, these emotional blocks begin to soften up, and the natural capacity of the human organism to throw off things that are harmful starts to evacuate them. The emotional residue in our unconscious emerges during prayer in the form of thoughts that have a certain urgency, energy, and emotional charge to them. You don't usually know from what particular source or sources they are coming. There is ordinarily just a jumble of thoughts and vague or acute sense of uneasiness. Simply putting up with them and not fighting them is the best way to release them.[34]

Keating elaborates that these 'emotionally charged thoughts' may sometimes also have a somatic dimension to them and may manifest as "emotional knots" that can cause physical pain as they are "unwinding."[35] He also notes the conative dimension of this process in that the quieting or withdrawal from one's normal thought patterns exposes our unconscious motivations and value systems which "have their roots in prerational attitudes" and the "emotional programs of early childhood."[36] Collectively these hidden motivations and unconscious drives comprise the "monumental illusion" of what he terms the "false self" and the unloading of the unconscious is its slow deconstruction.[37] His advice for working with such emotional garbage or "psychic nausea" is to simply "wait it out" rather than try to push it away, to "allow your attention to gently move toward the emotion by sinking into it, as though you were getting into a nice Jacuzzi…Don't think; just feel the emotion."[38] Furthermore he advises practitioners not to sift through the material that is arising or being unloaded during the prayer period since the "psychological refuse comes up as a kind of compost. It's like throwing out the garbage. You don't separate the egg shells from the

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[34] Keating, *Open Mind*, 95.

[35] Keating, *Open Mind,* 105.

[36] Keating, *Open Mind,* 96-97.

[37] Keating, *Open Mind,* 15.

[38] Keating, *Open Mind,* 102.

orange peels. You just throw the whole thing out."[39] He notes that distressing thoughts, moods or feelings of depression "might last for several days" as part of this process or even longer if it is particularly "heavy weather."[40] In the latter case, he notes that as one goes deeper into the unconscious, "you may hit something like an oil well and up will come a whole stream of stuff" which may result in "a period of several months or years when it is rough going."[41] "These", Keating describes, "are the periods John of the Cross calls 'dark nights.'"[42]

Keating's student, Cynthia Bourgeault, writes how much of Keating's "psycho-spiritual paradigm" was inspired by the first Centering prayer intensive in 1983 at the Lama Foundation which was modeled on a Zen Buddhist *sesshin* retreat.[43] She discusses how

> no one was prepared for the volume and vibrancy of emotional outpouring that flooded forth from five hours a day of Centering prayer practice. From his years as abbot, Keating was used to the gradual sensitizing and participation of the unconscious during the course of contemplative life—but not with such speed and intensity. He recalls seeing 'people going through in ten days what it would have taken them twenty years to go through at a monastery.'[44]

Bourgeault further adds that the work of Michael Washburn influenced Keating's paradigm, specifically his notion of "regression in the service of ego-transcendence" which is resonant with, and corresponds closely to, "what Keating sees as the heart of the divine

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[39] Keating, *Open Mind,* 100.

[40] Keating, *Open Mind*, 103, 95.

[41] Keating, *Open Mind,* 93.

[42] Keating, *Open,* 93.

[43] Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Plymouth: Cowley Publications, 2004), 91.

[44] Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 92.

therapy."[45] This model suggests that, contrary to traditional understandings of spiritual transformation as a linear ascent,

> the ascent is inextricably bound to a descent into the ground of our own psyche… Thus, periods of psychological ferment and destabilization are signs that the journey is progressing, not that it is a failure. As a practice of meditational prayer loosens repressed material in the unconscious, the initial fruits of spiritual practice may not be the expected peace and enlightenment, but destabilization and the emergence into consciousness of considerable pain.[46]

She later adds that as practice deepens and progresses, "we penetrate deeper and deeper down to the bedrock of pain" but that the "fruits of this unloading are more than worth it" since after "each significant descent into the ground of our woundedness, there is a parallel ascent in the form of inner freedom, the experience of the fruits of the spirit, and beatitude."[47] Keating himself uses a rich variety of metaphors and imagery to describe this oscillatory trajectory and the necessary difficulties and suffering that this path of purification or unloading entails. For example, he compares the contemplative to a basketball in the sense that the harder it is thrown down, the higher it will bounce back up, and likens the contemplative path to the growth of a tree in that it's fruit (the goal) will only emerge and become ripe in the fall after its flowers bloom in spring and then die in the summer.[48] He also compares the contemplative path to a spiral staircase as well as "an eagle rising to the sun"

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[45] Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 108.

[46] Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 97.

[47] Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer*, 97-98.

[48] Keating, *Open Mind,* 114. Cynthia Bourgeault also uses the metaphor of vegetative ripeness for spiritual attainment: "Our real goal in the spiritual work, then, is not to dismantle the ego—which will fall away in its own time when the fruit is ripe —but simply, quietly, patiently, to nurture the heart." (Bourgeault, "The Egoic System," 5) Cf. Idel's translation of a passage from the 13th century Kabbalist Menachem Recanati, in which he describes the attainment of the "the final union" in similar terms: "Know that, just as the ripe fruit falls from the tree, it no longer needing its connection [to the tree], so is the link between the soul and the body." (Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives,* 43- 44)

which "keeps returning to the same place on the horizontal plane, but to a higher place on the vertical plane." [49]

Dark Nights in Centering Prayer

As we saw above, Keating equates particularly acute or challenging periods of "unloading" with John of the Cross's (passive) dark nights. Elsewhere in his writings he follows John more closely, for example, in describing this stage as one of being "weaned" off sensory rewards and identifying the three signs of the dark night of senses as "aridity in prayer and daily life", "the fear that we are going backwards and that…we have offended God", and finally, "the inability or disinclination to practice discursive meditation."[50] While the night of the senses "immobilizes the false self", the night of the spirit purifies and liberates one from the "residue" of the false self in the unconscious.[51] He mentions that the "total self-surrender" that emerges in this stage may manifest as "a moment of existential

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[49] Keating, *Open Mind*, 114; In another work, Keating elaborates on this image:

> whenever a certain amount of emotional pain is evacuated, interior space opens up within us. We are closer to the spiritual level of our being, closer to our true self, and closer to the Source of our being, which lies in our inmost center but is buried under the emotional debris of a lifetime. We are closer to God because through the process of unloading we have evacuated some of the material that was hiding the divine presence. Thus, when in prayer we start the circular motion again, we are closer to our center. As a consequence, there is deeper rest. This inevitably causes more unloading of emotional junk…This circular movement of rest, unloading in the form of emotionally charged thoughts and primitive emotions, and returning to the sacred word is constantly bringing us closer to our center. So the circular motion in fact turns out to be a dynamic process resembling a spiral staircase. (Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 49-50)

The spiral staircase or ladder is also an image that arises in some Jewish mystical traditions, as Wolfson notes, a "spherical ladder" (*ha-sullam ha-kadduri)* was the object of a spiritual vision of Abraham Abulafia. (*Abraham Abulafia,*135) Similarly, in *Keter Shem Tov*, a teaching in the name of the Besht also describes a "circular ladder" (*sulam ha-agulah*). (312-313) My thanks to Elliot Wolfson and Ariel Evans-Mayse for bringing my attention to both these references. See below for the "spiral path" in one contemporary Sufi tradition.

[50] Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 79-81.

[51] Keating, *Invitation to Love*, 110.

doubt and dread in the extreme."[52] Keating does appear to diverge from the description of these stages by St John when he argues that they do not always occur consecutively: "sometimes the night of the sense begins at once, sometimes the night of the sense and the spirit are reversed, and sometimes they take place at the same time."[53]

Once the false self is completely "dismantled", the state of "transforming union" is automatically entered.[54] This consists of a "restructuring of consciousness, not an experience or set of experiences" in which "the presence of God becomes a kind of fourth dimension to the three-dimensional world in which we have been living."[55] In this abiding stage of the path "emotional swings disappear," though the emotions themselves do not, and "there is no longer a self-centered 'I'."[56] He concludes that transforming union "is the goal of the first part of the spiritual journey," intriguingly implying there is a second part to the journey.[57] In the forward to a reprinting of another of his books, he describes this more advanced terrain as "the experience of non-duality" and "an abiding sense of the unity with Ultimate Reality" which entails the "diminishment or loss of the sense of separateness."[58] In an even more recent book, he describes this ultimate goal as "non-dual consciousness," "unity consciousness," and the "death of the separate-self sense" and adds that the "sense of a

[52] Keating, *Invitation to Love,* 115.

[53] Keating, *Invitation to Love,* 116.

[54] Keating, *Invitation to Love*, 110.

[55] Keating, *Invitation to Love*, 109.

[56] Keating, *Invitation to Love*, 119.

[57] Keating, *Invitation to Love*, 120. He summarizes this first part of the path or spiritual journey as follows: "Thus the movement from the takeoff point of sacred symbol to spiritual attentiveness, to ever deepening absorption of the faculties in God, and to the purification of the unconscious terminates in the transforming union." (*Invitation to Love,* 118)

[58] Keating, *Invitation to Love*, 120; Keating, *Intimacy with God*, vii.

separate self is the ultimate cause of all our problems in the first place, even more fundamental than the false self."[59] Later in the book he makes very brief mention of a "night of the self," which precedes this attainment without any elaboration.[60] Fortunately Keating's student David Frenette offers a bit more on the topic:

> Some modern contemplative writers also speak of a third dark night: *the dark night of self*. In the dark night of spirit, God disappears. In the dark night of self, 'self disappears—or gradually diminishes until it is finally gone' as you are subsumed in the embrace of the inner life of the Trinity itself, when you lose any fixed point of self-subjectivity in the subjectivity of what is called the Godhead."[61] (emphasis original)

Frenette quotes the contemporary Christian mystic Bernadette Roberts, who has written several books on this "night of the self,"[62] and describes the goal of "unity" as an embodiment of the life of the Trinity.[63] In conclusion, then, we can see that in Centering Prayer, necessary difficulties may be encountered in the process of the unloading of the unconscious, which overlaps with what they interpret to be John of the Cross' dark nights, or

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[59] Keating, *Reflections on the Unknowable,* 50.

[60] Keating, *Reflections on the Unknowable,* 144. It is likely that Keating himself coined the phrase "night of the self" though he never takes credit for it nor do any of his students attribute it to him explicitly. In a footnote in her book *What is Self? A Study of the Spiritual Journey in Terms of Consciousness,* Bernadette Roberts writes that "recently an experienced contemplative suggested we call this (unitive) marketplace stage 'The Night of the Self' to follow the 'The Night of the Spirit." (177)

[61] David Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God,* 2nd ed. (Boulder: Sounds True, 2017)

[62] Roberts, *What is Self?*, 177. See also Roberts, *The Experience of No-Self* (1982) and *The Path to No Self* (1991)

[63] Frenette discusses the difference between the two goals of (transforming) union and unity (consciousness) as follows:

> The final movement of the divine dance of contemplation is that of living union, oneness, in the ordinary events of human life. The fullness of Jesus's teaching on the prayer in secret and union is about unity. Unity is different, greater than union. Union is oneness. Unity is oneness expressed in diversity. Unity is when the divine and human are not separate. (*The Path of Centering Prayer,* 111)

in the much more advanced (and theologically novel) night of the self culminating in a much more radical unity with the divine.

Chapter Three: Sufi Traditions

When understanding challenging or distressing experiences as normative, practitioners and teachers referred to Sufi psychological literature describing different states (*hal*) and stations (*maqamat*) of the Sufi path (*tariqa*), the idea of purification as "polishing the mirror of the heart", the valley of bewilderment (*hayrat)* in Attar's Conference of the Birds, descriptions of painful experiences in the poetry of Rumi, and the dual concept of annihilation (*fana*) and subsistence (*baqa*).

Sufi Psychology & The Yo-Yo Syndrome

Dr. Sara Sviri, one of the leading academic experts on the subject of Sufi psychology, describes the trajectory of the classical Sufi path as an "ascending road or ladder along which several stations or stages (*maqamat)* are situated," each one designating "a psychological obstacle, related basically to physical and egotistic needs."[64] While different Sufi manuals enumerate different names for, and quantities of, these stations, most do include another "category of psychological events…which is much more ephemeral, intensified and spontaneous, and is regarded as an utterly divine grace" which are called "states" (*hal).*[65] She

[64] Sara Sviri, "Between Fear and Hope: On the Coincidence of Opposites in Islamic Mysticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, vol. 9 (1987), 338.

[65] Sviri, "Between Fear and Hope," 338.

continues that "the neat portrayal of consecutive *maqamat* does not, in fact, presuppose a straightforward line of ascent" since different emotional states are correlated with different revelations of God, and "God reveals Himself at times as benevolent, compassionate and loving…and at times as wrathful, vengeful, judging and oppressive…the worshipper accordingly is constantly thrown between extreme emotional poles."[66]

The negative revelations of God that manifest as afflictive emotions are actually divinely "designed to destroy the earthly propensities in man, whereas, the gifts and favors of what appear as positive relations [or] emotions nourish the seed of spirituality in him."[67] The Sufi path, therefore, involves a "dialectical line of ascent" and "this dynamism or fluctuation is very often referred in Sufi literature as "variegation" (*talwin*) in mutual opposition with "consolidation" (*tamkin*)" which "denotes the reconciliation of the opposites, or the merging of the polar emotions into one another to form a 'whole', a unity of opposites, a *coincidentia oppositorum.*"[68] However, so far as "consolidation" is merely another "stage on the ladder of ascent" then "it is no more than a transitory phase of rest and stabilization before another, more violent wave of emotions or revelations attacks the wayfarer and throws him again from one extreme to another."[69] As one makes one's way up the ladder, the wayfarer continues to ascend from one polar set of divine qualities/emotions to a higher set in the

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[66] Sviri, "Between Fear and Hope," 338.

[67] Sviri, "Between Fear and Hope," 339.

[68] Sviri, "Between Fear and Hope," 339-340.

[69] Sviri, "Between Fear and Hope," 340.

sense of being more refined, beginning with fear (*khauf*) and hope (*raja*) and progressing to expansion (*bast*) and contraction (*qabd*) afterwards.[70] Expansion consists of feeling

> intoxicated and elated, life feels vibrant and full of possibilities, there is a sense of purpose and direction, hardships seem manageable, obstacles are easily overcome, synchronicities come in abundance, and one gets insights and revelations—sheer ecstasy….Then one's inner state changes, sometimes with no apparent reason: a deep depression sets in, apathy and inertia, there is no light, no hope, no comfort, no security, no guidance, no God; an unexplained anxiety blocks the chest and the throat, and everything is dark and gloomy.[71]

Both Sviri and the pioneering scholar of Sufism before her, Anne Maire Schimmel, identify the state of contraction with the "dark night of the soul."[72]

While there is often a great range and variety of differences in the maps of the "stations" of the Sufi path, the oscillation between expansion and contraction is ubiquitous throughout Sufi literature and is reported by Sufi communities until the present day.[73] In fact, one contemporary Sufi group has nicknamed this phenomenon, as they have witnessed occur amongst members of their community, the "Yo-Yo" syndrome.[74] The founder of this community, Irina Tweedie, published her diary from the period of her Sufi training which is uniquely explicit about the many terribly painful experiences she encountered during the 7 years she spent with her Sufi Sheikh in India.[75] Upon returning, she was also unusually

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[70] Sviri, "Between Fear and Hope," 341.

[71] Sviri, "Between Fear and Hope," 341.

[72] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam,* 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 129; Sara Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things: Images on the Sufi Path*, 2nd ed. (Inverness: The Golden Sufi Center, 2002), 30.

[73] Sara Sviri, "The Mysterium Coniunctionis and the 'Yo-Yo Syndrome': From Polarity to Oneness in Sufi Psychology," in *Jung and the Monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,* ed. Joel Rhyce Menuhin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 206.

[74] Sviri, "The Mysterium Coniunctionis," 206.

[75] In fact, Sviri notes how her teacher, Bhai Sahib, asked her to keep a journal of her experiences because "The experience you have, and will have in the future, you can find only in the Persian language,

forthcoming about the difficult experiences of the Sufi path and apparently became known as an expert in assisting others in navigating such difficulties effectively.[76] Tweedie herself describes how

> on the mystical path -- the meditation is easy; all is wonderful. We call God or That, the Beloved. The Beloved is near; meditation is easy. It's all wonderful. The next day I am alone. I can't find the Beloved. God doesn't exist. It is awful. We call it the yo-yo syndrome -- up and down, and up and down, and up and down, endlessly. And that provokes a kind of loneliness, and a kind of frustration, which St. John of the Cross calls the dark night of the soul. And as you can compare spiritual life to a spiral, the experiences repeat themselves in a higher and higher spiral, or rather higher and higher frequencies. The dark night of the soul gets deeper and deeper and deeper.[77]

In another Interview, Tweedie clarifies that

> To be on the path, using the conventional words is really, how shall I put it? –it is a great friction. It is a law of nature, like the tide, like day and night, like a pendulum swinging back and forth…this very friction causes the purifying of the mind. You see, friction creates fire; fire is pain, suffering, and great loneliness. Nearness and separation keep altering, keep going backwards and forwards, move from pain to joy. That is how the mind will be purified.[78]

Purification and Polishing the Heart

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mostly in the form of poetry, and very little of it has been translated until now ... But you will write from your own proper experiences, living experiences." (Sviri, "*Daughter of Fire*," 83)

[76] For example, George Feurstein, the prolific scholar of Yogic traditions, notes in a preface to one of his books that Tweedie's published diary was "invaluable" for him and that, "During my spiritual crisis…she helped me immensely in those days of reorientation. Thanks to her I experienced my first real spiritual breakthroughs." (Feurstein, *The Yoga Tradition,* xvi)

[77] Irina Tweedie, interview by Dr. Jeffrey Mishlove, *Thinking Allowed: Conversations* on *the Leading Edge of Knowledge and Discovery*, Thinking Allowed Productions, 1998.

[78] Theresa King, *The Spiral Path: Explorations into Women's Spirituality* (Saint Paul: Yes International Publishers, 1992) 295-6.

One of the earliest images that gets used to describe the Sufi path is "polishing the mirror of the heart" based on a Hadith describing "invocation" (*dhikr*) as cleansing the rust of the heart.[79] In early Sufi literature, the heart is understood as both the organ of flesh as well as the organ of personal and transpersonal consciousness, and the process of polishing it is used to describe the painstaking work of ethical practices, the practice of the recitation of a sacred word or phrase (*dhikr)*, as well as the effects of such practices, conceived of as some kind of acute experience of love. This love is not experienced as, or compared to, a gentle embrace or sentiment but rather the agent of purification and as such must get flamed to a dramatic heat and intensity. Sviri writes that "all great Sufi poets and teachers have implied time and again that '*ishq*, love-desire, passionate love, is not a mild pietistic affection or ideal, nor a dreamy, sentimental, poetic metaphor, nor a refined, philosophic concept. It is a crude, ruthless, and glorious reality which pervades all levels of being, body and soul."[80] As such this quality of love is intense enough to purify the heart, to 'burn away' its impurities in the metallurgic and alchemical imagery that is employed. The famous Sufi poet Jallal al-din Rumi (1207-1273) adopts the metaphor of the alchemical properties of love when he writes,

> Through Love all that is bitter will be sweet. Through Love all that is copper will be gold. Through Love all dregs will turn to purest wine.[81]

Here we also find another widely used metaphor for the purgative effects of contemplative practice, the fermentation process of turning grapes to wine, which is used often in the poetry of Rumi and later Sufi poets after him. In the metaphor, the "dregs" (*durd)* of the wine can be

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[79] Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things,* 16.

[80] Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things* 111. For an historical treatment of the term *ishq* in early Sufism, see Joseph E Lumbard, "From *Hubb* to *Ishq:* The Development of Love in Early Sufism," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, no. 3 (2007): 345-385.

[81] Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things,* 206.

identified with necessary suffering, for example, the despair and/or longing that is left over after the "intoxicating" effects of the practice subside.[82] Summarizing such purification imagery used in early Sufi poetry, Schimmel explains that "just as grape juice is purified by constant "tribulation" of fermenting until it becomes pure wine, and just as wheat is ground and kneaded and apparently mistreated until it becomes bread, thus the human soul can mature only through suffering."[83]

Contemporary Sufi traditions have continued to make use of such purificatory imagery. Tweedie's successor Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee describes the love cultivated in contemplative practice in their tradition as follows:

> It is a love that burns and purifies, cleansing the heart of many impurities that belong to the ego and *nafs*, the desires and distortions in which the pure soul of the newborn child becomes trapped as it grows into the density of this world. The fire of the heart begins to burn away this dross, often confronting us with our own darkness, our shadow qualities.[84]

As is common in many contemporary spiritual traditions, the framework of purification is related to an embodied psychological model, here using the Jungian framework of the "shadow" as the personal unconscious. Since the psyche is understood to be rooted in the heart in these models, this effect of contemplative practice in the context of an intimate relationship with a teacher has both somatic and psychological repercussions, the latter of which will make conscious "patterns of resistance or repressed inner pain."[85] This teacher argues that "these feelings need to come to the surface and be accepted and understood", in

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[82] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love,* 317.

[83] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam,* 137.

[84] Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, *Fragments of a Love Story: Reflection on the Life of a Mystic* (Point Reyes: The Golden Sufi Center, 2011), 25.

[85] Vaughan-Lee, *Fragments of a Love Story,* 102.

other words, it is not simply enough that such psychological material is evoked, but that is must be consciously related to and addressed.[86] At the same time, he also warns that it is "easy to get caught in unnecessary inner dramas, and the distractions of the mind and psyche can be endless."[87] Therefore, "the teacher can help the disciple to differentiate what belongs to the work of inner transformation and what is a distraction that can be avoided" since not all of the psychological material uncovered during contemplative practice needs to be addressed.[88] This question, of how much psychological work is necessary to accomplish contemplative goals, is one that all modern contemplative systems must navigate in some way or another, and today there are no shortage of varying opinions within and across traditions, some of which we will discuss below.

Bewilderment and Union

In one influential and poetic/allegorical map of the Sufi path, Farid ad-Din Attar's (1145-1221) *The Conference of the Birds*, the wayfaring birds must travel across seven valleys symbolizing stations (*maqamat*) of the path before reaching their goal, a mythical bird known as a 'Simurgh'. The sixth valley is called "the valley of bewilderment" (*wadi-i hayrat*) and in this station one doesn't know "whether he exists or not, whether he's in the middle or on the edge, whether he's visible or hidden, whether he's extinct (f*ani*) or

[86] Vaughan-Lee, *Fragments of a Love Story,* 102.

[87] Vaughan-Lee, *Fragments of a Love Story,* 102.

[88] Vaughan-Lee, *Fragments of a Love Story,* 102.

permanent (*baqi*), or both of these at the same time."[89] Attar then offers a parable to elucidate this particular predicament:

> The daughter of a king falls in love with the handsome slave of her father. She has ten serving maidens to whom she complains about her suffering in love. The latter promise to bring the slave to her in secret. They give him a sleeping potion and manage to bring him to the princess' room. When he wakes up, he sees himself surrounded by royal splendor and festive arrangements. The young women are playing music, incense is burning, and opposite him sits the most beautiful of all princesses who immediately overwhelms him with caresses. Drunk from abundant enjoyment of wine, in the morning he is taken back to where he has been. He wakes up in a confused state and doesn't know what to answer those who question him about his nocturnal experience, whether he experienced something real or a dream, whether he was drunk or sober…And between this and that he's now bewildered and helpless, and he feels he's at his wits end.[90]

This valley, interesting enough, comes right after the valley of union *(wadi ittihad),* which is not actually the goal of the path in this allegory. Nevertheless, the effect of such an experience was potent enough to have dramatically destabilizing effects, and it brings one to a state of helplessness—a prerequisite for the attainment of the final goal of "poverty and annihilation (*faqr u fana*).[91] One contemporary scholar characterizes this stage of the path as one in which the mystic is "thrust" back into the phenomenal world of multiplicity and egoic consciousness after a particularly potent experience beyond both.[92] This can be a very disorienting and destabilizing situation to be in, leading Attar to describe one in this state as

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[89] Hellmut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Man, the World and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din 'Attar,* trans. John O'Kane (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 149.

[90] Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul,* 149.

[91] Lucian Stone, "Blessed Perplexity: The Topos of *Hayrat in 'Attar's Mantiq al-tayr" in Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight* eds. Leonard Lewisohn and Christopher Shackle (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2006), 101. The final valley is also associated with "subsistence" (*baqa)* in the book. (Stone, 103-4)

[92] Stone, "Blessed Perplexity," 98.

"like a madman."[93] Vaughan-Lee offers a contemporary interpretation of this stage of contemplative development:

> After certain inner experiences you know that your ego is an illusion. It is not real. You have tasted of the truth of who you really are, the center of being that really belongs to you. And yet you have to wear its clothes like everyone else…Initially this can be very confusing for the ego. Before, it was the main actor in your life; now it is just a bit player, mostly repeating old lines.[94]

It must be noted, however, that this is not yet the goal, which in this parable (and traditions of "bridal mysticism" more generally) might be comparable to being engaged and married to the princess, rather than unexpectedly being deposited in her chambers from time to time but then returning to one's life (or trying to) as it was previously. This can be a particularly precarious and disorienting time for the contemplative, and it is here that some teachers have noted that a strong relationship between a teacher and student is helpful or even necessary, since "without this complete commitment the disciple can easily be left stranded between the worlds, unable to return to a former ego-identity, yet lacking the energy or guidance needed to cross into the deeper reality of the Self."[95]

Annihilation and Subsistence

As stated above, the pair of terms *fana* and *baqa* ("annihilation" and "subsistence") are acknowledged as the "highest stage" on the Sufi contemplative path and are rooted in a verse from the Qur'an: "All that dwells upon the earth is perishing (*fanin)* yet still abides (*fa-yaqba)* the Face of the Lord, majestic, splendid." (Sura 55:26) While *fana "*indicates the annihilation of the psychological identification with the lower self, the ego (nafs)," *baqa*

[93] Stone, "Blessed Perplexity," 101.

[94] Vaughan-Lee, *Fragments of a Love Story,* 152.

[95] Vaughan-Lee, *Fragments of a Love Story,* 97.

refers to "the permanence of the higher Self, the soul, man's everlasting core of being."[96] This dual stage refers to a structural change in one's consciousness and identity, beginning with an ecstatic (literally outside one's self) experience of undifferentiated unity which ultimately stabilizes as a sense of self comes back 'on-line', though in a transformed capacity.[97] In one contemporary Turkish Sufi tradition,[98] the first stage of this attainment is discussed as a kind of psychological death where "the servant temporarily ceases to be, often falling into a state of total intoxication in which the apparent world disappears."[99] This can also be a challenging stage as one confronts the terror and dread associated with the prospect of one's death, and here again a teacher can be helpful or even necessary to help one "die" to his or her old identity and then "act as a midwife" for the birth of a new one.[100] The classic and authoritative formulation of *baqa* after *fana* is attributed to the 9th century Baghdadi Sufi master al-Junayd (835-910), who made this stage the defining characteristic of his "sober" system of Sufism:

> He is himself, after he has not been truly himself. He is present in himself and in God after having been present in God and absent in himself. This is because he has left the intoxication of God's overwhelming *ghalaba* (victory), and comes to the clarity of sobriety…Once more he assumes his individual attributes, after *fana.*[101]

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[96] Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things*, 86.

[97] Stone, "Blessed Perplexity," 104.

[98] The "Nuriyya-Malamiyya," the tradition of the Turkish Sufi reformer Pir Nur al-Arabi (d.1888) represented today by Mehmet Selim Ozic (b.1930). (Dickson, *Living Sufism in North America* 111, 112)

[99] Yannis Toussulis, *Sufism and the Way of Blame: Hidden Sources of a Sacred Psychology* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2010), 177.

[100] Toussulis, *Sufism and the Way of Blame*, 177.

[101] Ali Hassan Abdel-Kader, *The Life, Personality and Writings of Al-Junayd* (London: Luzac & Company, 1962), 90.

Baqa is also sometimes referred to as the *fana* of *fana* or "annihilation of annihilation," in that the state of disappearance of one's individuality then itself concludes whereupon a transformed sense of individuality returns.[102] One contemporary Turkish Sufi teacher describes this culminating stage as follows:

> For me, a fully matured human being has access to the experience of unification and separation in a fluctuating manner in the station we refer to as *jam al-jam*. At the station of *jam,* an individual experiences that nothing exists but God, but this is normally an intoxicating experience of short duration. An individual cannot live in that state for very long as mentally balanced; and as soon as he returns to soberness, he perceives other individual presences as real, though in a manner that is "qualified" by the experience of unity or oneness."[103]

In this system, the experience of annihilation is also termed "gathering" (*jam)* and is considered so impairing that "one cannot remain in this state for too long, for to do so would be to risk becoming "mad in Allah" (*mualla).* Because of this, the *malamati* guide immediately coaxes his student into the next stage of *baqa."*[104] The next stage is the "second separation" from God (the first separation being when a soul is born and their connection to God is concealed from them) where a transformed sense of self re-emerges and then "dries out" after the "ravishment of union."[105] Finally, the previous two stages reach a kind of synthesis or fruition in the "gathering of gathering" (*jam al-jam)*, an inherently dynamic

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[102] Cf. Wilcox, "The Dual Mystical Concepts of Fana' and Baqa' in Early Sūfism," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 38:1, 95-118, who argues that for early Sufism, specifically Junayd, *fana* and *baqa* are two dimensions of the same state in which one's sense of self is absent. For a more philosophically robust perspective on the concurrence of the two stages, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being,* 224-233.

[103] Toussulis, *Sufism and the Way of Blame*, 152.

[104] Toussulis, *Sufism and the Way of Blame*, 178. See also, William Donkin, *The Wayfarers: Meher Baba with the God-Intoxicated*, for a fascinating description of Meher Baba's journeys in India to visit various "god-intoxicated" individuals and his analysis of their different types. For a historical description of such 'god-intoxicated' individuals, sometimes called "the fools of God" in Persia and the India, see Nasr, "Sufism and Spirituality in Persia, 213-216; and Rizvi, "Sufism in the Indian Subcontinent," 252-3. See also Ernst, *Sufism*, 115-119.

[105] Toussulis, *Sufism and the Way of Blame*, 185

stage where the experiences of union and separation oscillate, perhaps even harmonizing with each inhale and exhale.[106]

While some contemporary Sufi traditions discuss *fana* as a death or annihilation of the identification with one's ego or sense of self, and *baqa* as the rebirth and identification with the divine "Self" as mentioned above, some traditions discuss even more fundamental changes that can occur. Vaughan-Lee explains the difference as follows,

> Earlier in the journey we experienced the painful process of *fana,* the dying of the ego that is the doorway into the secret of the heart, this death in love through which we awaken into the wonder and light of our divine being, the Self. What is less understood is the deeper extinction that happens to one's very being that takes place in this next chamber of the heart. This is an extinction so total that nothing remains, no sense of Self, no awareness of oneness, nothing. It is like being absorbed into a black hole that takes everything… this is not for the fainthearted.[107]

In other words, there are at least two different kinds or orders of *fana* that may be possible: the annihilation of one's *identification* with the ego or self and the annihilation of the sense of self (itself). Thus while the first leads to an "awakening" to one's divine self, the latter is an awakening from the illusion of any kind of separate self at all such that it is actually "God's awakening as God sees the oneness and multiplicity of the divine creation through the eye of our heart."[108]

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[106] Toussulis, *Sufism and the Way of Blame*, 152, 180; See also Sells, "Bewildered Tongue," 120.

[107] Vaughan-Lee, *Fragments of a Love Story,* 34.

[108] Vaughan-Lee, *Fragments of a Love Story,* 122.

Chapter Four: Jewish Traditions

For those subjects who reported difficult experiences as 'part of the path,' a constellation of several key texts, figures, and ideas were often referenced: the Song of Songs, 'descent for the sake of ascent' (*yeridah tzorech aliyah)* and purification, the doctrine of 'expanded and constricted consciousness' (*mochin d'gadlut, mochin d'katnut)* the Hasidic practice and doctrine of elevating sparks and "foreign thoughts" (*machshavot zerot)*, and finally, liminality and 'the breaking of the vessels' (*shevirat ha-keilim).*

Song of Songs

The Song of Songs is one of the last books accepted into the canon of the Hebrew Bible and also one of the most important inspirations for Jewish mystical traditions. Indeed this biblical book is "of unparalleled scriptural significance" for the Zohar (considered the 'bible' of Jewish mysticism) given how often it is quoted and expounded upon.[109] While predominantly read in the Rabbinic tradition as an allegory for God's love of the Jewish people, the book is literally a very erotic poem and dialogue between two lovers which, beginning in the twelfth century (due to the influence of Arabic Neoplatonism and probably

[109] Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Song of Songs* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 298.

Islamic mysticism as well) began to be read as a dialogue between God and an individual soul.[110] The Song is particularly relevant for our purposes due to several of its lines which were understood by some Jewish philosophers and mystics to refer to difficult stages of the contemplative path.

Maimonides was the first to interpret the song using this more individualized lens and pertinent for our purposes was his understanding that the line "I am sick with love" (Song 2:5) refers to such an intense love (*ishq)* for the divine that one was "crazed" and so love-sick that one could think of nothing else.[111] This line of interpretation was continued by his son—a leader of a unique Jewish-Sufi pietistic movement in Egypt which emphasized contemplative practice and retreat—as well as several generations of his descendants. Heavily influenced by medieval Sufism and making use of some of the technical Sufi terminology discussed above, they read the Song as a description of the stations (*maqamat*) on the path (*derekh*) towards union with God.[112] This movement sought to restore the biblical model of discipleship in which the "master determined the particular course of spiritual training appropriate for each disciple in accordance with his temperament and capacity."[113]

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[110] Paul Fenton, "A Mystical Commentary on the Song of Songs in the Hand of David Maimonies II" in *Esoteric and Exoteric Aspects in Judeo-Arabic Culture* Eds. Benjamin Hary and Haggai Ben-Shammai (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 21.

[111] Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, 277-278. The idea of divine madness goes back to Platonic sources where the madness of eros was one of four kinds of divine madness. (Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 64) For some potential influences on Maimonides' usage of the term, see Steven, Harvey. "The Meaning of Terms Designating Love in Judaeo-Arabic Thought and Some Remarks on the Judaeo-Arabic Interpretation of Maimonides." *Judaeo-Arabic Studies.* ed. Norman Golb. Amsterdam (1997): 175-196.

[112] Fenton, "A Mystical Commentary," 32. Fenton remarks that the term for path (*derekh)* "parallels the Sufi term *tariqa*" and "is used continuously in this sense by members of the pietist circle." ("A Mystical Commentary," 48)

[113] Elisha Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt: A Study of Abraham Maimonides and His Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 226.

Most relevant for our purposes is the description of difficult experiences that can be encountered at different stages or "stations" along the path that these authors read as alluded to in the Song. For example, in Song 5:6-8:

> I opened the door for my beloved, But my beloved had turned and gone. I was faint because of what he said. I sought, but found him not; I called, but he did not answer. I met the watchmen Who patrol the town; They struck me, they bruised me. The guards of the walls Stripped me of my mantle. I adjure you, O maiden of Jerusalem! If you meet my beloved, tell him this: That I am faint [love-sick] with love.[114]

In one commentary from this circle, the "watchmen" are understood to be the sensory faculties and the injury they inflict is the "great torment" of one's awareness returning to the body after a period of the senses being withdrawn and feeling 'bonded' (*wusla*) with the divine.[115] The "love-sickness" here is "not the wound of nearness" that occurs earlier in the poem (2:5) but "a love-sickness due to absence."[116] Here is an example of one of the necessary difficulties of this particular path, that as we saw in classical Sufi sources as well, love-sickness can feel quite painful and distressing but is an unavoidable byproduct of experiences of momentary union. Furthermore, the experience of being "bound" (*wusla*) to the divine in a state of sensory absorption that precedes such distress is not understood as the ultimate goal of the path (*wusul*) but rather a stage en route to that goal.[117] This distinction, that there are different kinds of experiences of union with the divine and not all are understood in a soteriological sense, we have already seen in both Sufi and Christian sources.

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[114] Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary,* 8.

[115] Paul Fenton, "Some Judaeo-Arabic Fragments by Rabbi Abraham He-Hasid, The Jewish Sufi." *Journal of Semitic Studies* 26, no. 1. (1981): 52.

[116] Fishbane, *The JPS Commentary,* 144.

[117] For a description of momentary bonding or union (*wusla*) vs. the culminating union of arrival or attainment (*wusu*l), see Georges Vajda, "The Mystical Doctrine of Rabbi Obadya, Grandson of Moses Maimonides," *The Journal of Jewish Studies* 65, no.4 (1955): 213-225.

Descent for the sake of ascent and Purification

Several teachers and practitioners interpreted some challenging experiences according to the doctrine of "descent for the sake of ascent" (*yeridah tachlit aliyah*). Elliot Wolfson describes how this idea first occurs in the Zohar and then was incorporated into later Jewish mystical systems.[118] In one passage of the Zohar, the biblical verse "And Abraham *went down* to Egypt" (Gen 12:10) is explained as follows:

> R. Simeon said, Come and see: Everything has secret wisdom. This verse hints at wisdom and the levels down below, to the depths of which Abraham descended. He knew them but did not become attached.... Come and see the secret of the word: If Abram had not gone into Egypt and been refined there first, he could not have partaken of the Blessed Holy One. Similarly with his children, when the Blessed Holy One wanted to make them unique, a perfect people, and to draw them near to Him: If they had not gone down to Egypt and been refined there first, they would not have become His special ones.[119]

In this passage, the word "went down" (*yored*) is interpreted by the author(s) of the Zohar to refer to a spiritual descent to the realm of the demonic before a corresponding ascent ("And Abraham *went up* to Canaan" in Gen 13:1) to the higher spiritual level of "partaking of" the divine. Abraham is "refined" (*tzeruf*) while in Egypt and so too were the Israelites after him while they were enslaved in Egypt during the time of Moses.[120] The idea that Egypt is the

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[118] Elliot Wolfson, "Light Through Darkness: The Ideal of Human Perfection in the Zohar," *The Harvard Theological Review* 81, no.1 (1988): 76.

[119] Wolfson, "Light Through Darkness, 85.

[120] Wolfson, "Light Through Darkness, 85. Wolfson argues that there are two basic approaches to the problem of evil in the Zohar, the "cathartic and the emanative" which give rise to two different ideals of human perfection. ("Light Through Darkness, 81) According to the former, "just as God had to discharge the impure forces in divine Thought before God could emanate the holy forces, so too the human soul must refine itself and remove all dross before it can attain the level of holiness." ("Light Through Darkness," 84) The latter, however, suggests that

> even in the darkness there is a spark of light. This notion, which became a central motif in the kabbalah

place of refinement and purification has very early roots in the Jewish tradition, going all the way back to the Hebrew Bible where Egypt is compared to an "iron crucible" or "furnace" (*kur habarzel)* in Deuteronomy (4:20) and then in Proverbs (17:3) it is written that a "crucible" (*kur)* is "for Gold" (*li-zahav)*.[121] Egypt also represents a place of constriction due to the etymological connection between Egypt (*mitzrayim*) and "narrowness" (*tzar*). This metallurgic refinement and purification imagery was present in medieval mystical literature due to the influence of Arabic alchemical sources and then later incorporated by some Hasidic Rabbis who identified contemplative prayer as such a crucible which is needed to burn the "dross" from one's animal soul to reveal the precious metal of one's divine soul. This imagery was particularly prominent in the Habad Hasidic tradition:

> The divine soul is only able to function through the processes of the animal soul…The relationship between the two souls can be compared to that of silver and the soil in which it is found. It is quite impossible to extract pure silver directly from the earth. At first, silver and soil are so intermingled that they can only be separated by a repeated series of refinements in a crucible. The divine soul's silver is similarly intermingled with the animal soul's dross…Prayer is the crucible in which the silver of the divine soul is refined.[122]

> of Isaac Luria and subsequently in the writings of the Hasidim, is not stated explicitly in the Zohar, although it is implicit in various contexts…the task of *homo religiosus* in the Zohar is not the separation of the holy spark from the demonic shell but rather inclusion of the latter in the former. Evil has no absolute existence in itself; it is ontologically posterior to the divine, for the life-force of evil derives from the divine attribute of judgment. The realm of evil is constituted by the unbalanced force of judgment that has, as it were, assumed an unwarranted autonomy. Hence the religious and moral task of the human being is to restore that energy to its divine source, to balance judgment with mercy, to temper the untempered force of severity with the effluence of love-to contain the left in the right. ("Light Through Darkness," 94)

[121] On the connection of Biblical metallurgy and alchemy, see Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists: A History and Source Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 41-43.

[122] Louis Jacobs, *Seeker of Unity: The Life and Works of Aaron of Starosselje,* 2nd ed. (Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006), 114-115.

Other Hasidic rabbis similarly compared the contemplative path to boiling a pot of water where all the impurities first rise to the surface as well as to "cooking" one's heart with the fire of ecstatic experiences cultivated in contemplative prayer.[123]

For some Jewish contemplatives today, the "animal soul" or "heart" is identified with one's unconscious mind and therefore these teachings are understood to mean that a descent into the places of constriction in one's psyche is necessary to ascend spiritually and that distressing effects and experiences associated with contemplative practices are actually signs of progress indicative of the purification and refinement of one's psyche.[124] In the words of one contemporary scholar and teacher, Moshe Krassen, contemplative prayer can "open up regions of the unconscious where negative material is stored and concealed" which can manifest as "intrusions" of "various types of thoughts and impulses that are repressed."[125] For Krassen, once these thoughts and impulses arise in the context of contemplative practice, they need to be intentionally "refined" by recognizing them as manifestations of "divine energy" in order that such energy can be integrated into one's consciousness to ultimately realize one's "true nature."[126] Here Krassen connects these metallurgic/alchemical

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[123] Edward Hoffman, *The Way of Splendor: Jewish Mysticism and Modern Psychology* (Boulder and London: Shambhala, 1981), 114; and in the writings of the second Habad Rabbi, Dov Ber of Lubavitch, prayer is "compared to the cooking of meat which becomes tender and fit to eat at the end of its cooking. This is known as a 'heart of flesh'. It is otherwise when it has not been properly cooked, then it is tough etc." (Jacobs, *Tract on Ecstasy*, 157) See also a similar description in the writings of Kalonymous Kalman Epstein of "burning his gristle and blood" during fiery prayer. (Garb, *Shamanic Trance*, 43) It is also interesting to note that in many alchemical sources where the base elements are said to "ripen" into gold in the earth through the power of the sun and one intentionally "ripens" the elements with fire in the alchemical procedures, the word used for "ripen" in Hebrew is the same word for "cooking" (*m'vashel)*. (Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists,* 152, 574). Patai also notes that this alchemical idea is also found in the Zohar. (*Jewish Alchemists,* 161)

[124] Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburgh, *Transforming Darkness into Light* (Kfar Chabad: Gal Einai, 2002), 25.

[125] Mosheh Aaron Krassen, introduction to *Pillar of Prayer: Guidance in Contemplative Prayer, Sacred Study, and the Spiritual Life, from the Baal Shem Tov and his Circle,* trans. Menachem Kallus (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), xxiii.

[126] Krassen, intro to *Pillar*, xxiii.

conceptions of the unconscious from depth psychology with Lurianic and Hasidic teachings which we will explore further below.

Expanded and Constricted Consciousness

A second (though related) way in which Jewish subjects interpreted necessary difficulties was in reference to the Lurianic Kabbalistic doctrine of "constricted consciousness" (*mochin d'katnut*) and "expansive consciousness" (*mochin d'gadlut),* which some scholars have even gone so far as to identify with, or connect to, the idea of the "dark night of the soul" in Christian mystical traditions.[127] In ethical literature gadlut refers to arrogance and "katnut" refers to humility, but the terms are used differently beginning in Lurianic Kabbalah.[128] While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the mechanics and complexities of Lurianic Kabbalah, what is germane for our purposes is to note that these two terms refer to the radical theological conception of God's own conception, pregnancy, birth and development within this system.[129] Furthermore, this system describes the growth and development of human beings as mirroring this divine developmental process

[127] Louis Jacobs, *The Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies,* 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 2.

[128] (Faierstein 332-334, n 29).

[129] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 4th ed.* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 271. For a fuller discussion of how these two terms fit into the Lurianic system, see Mordechai Pachter, *Roots of Faith and Devequt: Studies in the History of Kabbalistic Ideas* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2004), 185-234; and Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 236-238.

(theomorphism) in terms of both their physical and spiritual growth.[130] As Mordechai Pachter explains in a seminal essay on the subject, *mochin de'katnut* in the Lurianic system can sometimes refer to a state of gestation (*ibbur*) or nursing (*yenikah*) for an individual, the collective Jewish people, or a dimension of the divine itself and it is possible for and individual and the collective to mirror each other or to be relatively independent.[131] A righteous person (*tsadik*) can intentionally alter this rhythm in their own life though at the same time, high levels of spiritual development makes a person a reflection of the divine and general cosmic rhythm "like a sensitive seismograph."[132] Given that such a spiritually perfected individual experiences an "inextricable interdependence on his surroundings," the activities (specifically sins) of those around him can also cause an involuntary descent into states of constricted consciousness.[133] Hasidic teachers built on and adapted these doctrines and their relevance to contemplative practice, particularly emphasizing *gadlut* and *katnut* as "degrees of contemplative concentration" which have a bearing on which contemplative techniques one should practice, since not all are possible from *katnut*.[134]

This insight, and particularly the contemplative dimensions of this system, were extended and developed in Hasidic literature, and it is particularly in this context that Jewish

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[130] Pachter, *Roots of Faith and Devequt,* 205.

[131] Pachter, *Roots of Faith and Devequt,* 190, 223.

[132] Pachter, *Roots of Faith and Devequt,* 230.

[133] Pachter, *Roots of Faith and Devequt,* 232.

[134] Miles Krassen, *Uniter of Heaven and Earth: Rabbi Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh and the Rise of Hasidism in Eastern Galicia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 71-72. While Persico notes that early Hasidism (first two generations) "offers no detailed meditative method," some scholars have noted that certain early sources suggest a technique of contemplative prayer described as "the atomization of words of prayer," or "cleaving to the letters" involving a focus on visual and aural dimensions of each letter one is praying, a technique which is particularly relevant when one is dominated by discursive and "intrusive" thoughts during prayer. (Persico, "Judaism and Meditation," 7; Krassen, *Uniter of Heaven and Earth,* 72; Krassen, intro to *Pillar,* xxiii; Idel, *Hasidism,* 160-170.)

practitioners and teachers today identify necessary meditation related difficulties with *mochin d'katnut.* In his monograph on the founder of the Hasidic movement, Israel ben Eliezer (also known as the Baal Shem Tov) (1700-1760), Emmanuel Etkes defines "constricted consciousness" as a feeling of despair and "the sense of disappointment and helplessness of one who has failed in his efforts to free himself from the shackles of material existence" while "expansive consciousness" refers to the "sense that the gates of heaven are opening before him and he is succeeding in rising and realizing his yearnings for unmediated contact with the divinity."[135] This pair of terms or experiences played a prominent role in the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov and the following parable elucidates how they are widely understood:

> A disciple asked the Baal Shem: "Why is it that one who clings to God and knows he is close to him, sometimes experiences a sense of interruption and remoteness?" The Baal Shem explained: "When a father sets out to teach his little son to walk, he stands in front of him and holds his two hands on either side of the child, so that he cannot fall, and the boy goes toward his father between his father's hands. But the moment he is close to his father, he moves away a little, and holds his hands further apart, and he does this over and over, so that the child may learn to walk.[136]

In the parable, the moments of "expanded consciousness" correspond to the times of being close to and held by the (divine) father where all of a sudden the child has a new and elevated perspective on the world and enjoys the thrill of this newfound power. The moments of "constricted consciousness" are the times when the parent retreats and the child falls and feels abandoned and helpless and yet this dialectical movement is in service of the greater developmental goal of the child learning to walk and achieve some level of autonomy. Similarly, the goal of contemplative practice is not to remain in expansive states of

[135] Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader,* trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2005), 128.

[136] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidism* 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 65.

consciousness but to reach more lasting developmental goals, and for this, periods where such states are inaccessible is understood to be instrumental. In other teachings attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, this dynamic is connected to the line from Song of Songs (2:6), "His left hand is beneath my head and his right hand embraces me" where, following Talmudic precedent, the left hand is associated with being pushed away and the right hand with being drawn near to the divine.[137] Once again, the point is that the periods of constricted consciousness (left hand) belie the deeper intentionality of "pushing the person away so as to bring him or her closer" and, furthermore, that the oscillation between the two states is actually in service of facilitating a deeper relationship symbolized by the embrace with both hands.[138]

This kind of oscillatory trajectory later became an important point of emphasis in the life and teachings of the Baal Shem Tov's great grandson, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, who likewise emphasized the larger developmental context in which such rhythms of contemplative practice occur. Tzvi Mark argues that Nachman's depiction of *katnut* and *gadlut* are more aligned with the Lurianic use of these terms than other earlier Hasidic thinkers,[139] particularly with respect to the "regressive quality" of such states where "a person reverts to previous stages of his development" given how central the association with biological development is for Luria.[140] He adds that "katnut is not negative regression, but a functional and desireable stage of [the] dynamic expressed by the Hasidic axiom 'descent for

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[137] Menachem Kallus, *Pillar of Prayer: Guidance in Contemplative Prayer, Sacred Study, and the Spiritual Life, from the Baal Shem Tov and his Circle* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 160, 159.

[138] Kallus, *Pillar of Prayer,* 160.

[139] Tzvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness: The Religious thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 189.

[140] Mark, *Mysticism and Madness,* 193-4.

sake of ascent'."[141] Mark also mentions that there is some risk of getting stuck in states of katnut and compares this dynamic as represented by Nachman to a process of death and re-birth in which one must "pass anew through a second Ibur (gestation), birth, and katnut (childhood)."[142]

Today some Jewish contemplatives continue to echo this connection between descent, regression, and constricted consciousness by making the additional connection between *katnut* (smallness) and one's childhood, since a child is also called a "katan" in Rabbinic and later texts.[143] Invoking that same vein in the tradition, some contemporary contemplatives draw inspiration from the Kalonymous Kalman-Shapira (1889-1943), the Piasetzner Rebbe who writes how negative or distressing emotions conceal divine intent and light, and, playing on two words with a shared root—garment (*beged*) and 'traitor' (*bogged*) argues that the distress of distressing emotions is the garment that betrays the divine life concealed within it.[144] Dr. Maisels argues that to access the divine light within such challenging emotions, there must be "a kind of searching out of the core nature of the emotion, the divine light, and

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[141] Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*, 206.

[142] Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*, 209, 206. For a more detailed discussion of first vs. second *katnut*, see Pachter, *Faith and Devequt,* 198-205; Kallus, *Pillar of Prayer,* 84, n447.

[143] Ginsburgh, *Transforming Darkness into Light,* 25; Rabbi Yehoshua Starrett, *Keser Shem Tov: Mystical Teachings on the Torah, Volume 1* (Cleveland: BST Publishing, 2008), 19, where he writes:

> The workings of a person's soul are very deep and convoluted, and most people are not aware at all of what motivates them and why they act in certain ways. There motivations are usually based on deep seated emotional needs that were formed in one's early years, in one's "katnut," one's childhood adolescence. Because one's consciousness if [sic: is] constricted and limited during these years, these dynamics develop without one's awareness, and sink deeply into the unconscious. It may only be many years later that one begins to become aware of these deep seated motivations, and of how so much of his behavior arises from this immature consciousness.

[144] James Maisels, "The Self and Self-Transformation in the Thought and Practice of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira," (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 2014), 471, Proquest (3627853).

a discarding or letting go of the damaging aspect of the experience, the wicked garment which covers the divine light."[145] Creatively weaving this etymological connection between a child (*katan*) and constricted or immature consciousness (*mohin d'katnut*) into practice instructions, one way that the Piasetzner recommends this can be accomplished is by relating and even speaking to such challenging emotions as if they are crying children.[146] This practice of accessing the divine energy in distressing or afflictive emotions is also relevant to the Hasidic practice of the "uplifting of thoughts" to be discussed below.

Uplifting Sparks and 'Foreign Thoughts'

The Lurianic myth of the creation of the world discusses an event known as the "breaking of the vessels" (*shevirat ha-keilim)* in which the initial light emanated from the light of the Godhead was too unstable and thus "shattered" the first divine vessels meant to contain it, causing the shards of the vessels with sparks of divine light trapped inside to descend and ultimately give rise to the sensible world of physical reality. The job of humanity, then, is to liberate these sparks from the shells of the broken vessels, which is also seen as a process of purification or sifting (*birrur*). The Hasidic movement developed and expanded this doctrine in ways that has implications for our discussion of necessary difficulties, particularly related to the intra-psychic dimension of uplifting these sparks.

Louis Jacobs notes that "Hasidism utilizes the concept of the holy sparks" to a far greater extent than Lurianic Kabbalists and that the Hasidic emphasis that each individual has his own unique sparks to reclaim is not found in the Lurianic corpus."[147] For our purposes,

[145] Maisels, "The Self and Self-Transformation," 475.

[146] Maisels, "The Self and Self-Transformation," 456.

the doctrine of sparks is most relevant in its application to the related practice initiated in early Hasidism of the 'uplifting of foreign thoughts' (*machshavot zerot*) some of which were understood to be one's personal sparks.[148] The process or practice(s) of elevating foreign thoughts consists of a different approach to a problem common to all contemplative practices: navigating distractions. [149] While earlier approaches to contemplative prayer and meditation advocated suppression of such distracting thoughts, early Hasidism was novel (and controversial) for introducing the idea that distractions could be part of the practice as well.[150] This doctrine is particularly relevant for us since some of these foreign thoughts can be uncomfortable or distressing but the crux of the idea is that such thoughts are arising for the purpose of 'elevation' or, in other words, as a kind of psychic reflex allowing for the (divine) energy animating them to be re-incorporated into the soul or psyche.[151] As one contemporary Kabbalist and meditation teacher explains it:

> On a deeper level, these very thoughts represent parts of our self that need to be redeemed. In a hidden way, they are saying, "Please take us with you too! We also need to be fixed! Don't leave us behind." Thus when we are attacked by such thoughts (especially when we are trying to learn Torah or pray to Hashem), this is a sure sign that we are contacting a deeper strata of our psyche, and are thus on the

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[147] Louis Jacobs, "The Uplifting of Sparks in Later Jewish Mysticism" in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present* ed. Arthur Green (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 115, 117.

[148] Both Jacobs and Krassen note that not all foreign thoughts are meant to be elevated and that the decision is predicated on if the means of elevating the thought arises at the same moment the thought does, which may be a function of how engrossing or overwhelming such a thought is. (Jacobs, "The Uplifting of Sparks," 120; Krassen, *Uniter of Heaven*, 76) Sutton also remarks on the Besht's advice on discernment and argues it can be understood on a "sliding scale": "for a novice, most thoughts should be pushed aside. At more advanced stages, most thoughts should be raised up." (Sutton, *Purim Light,* 30)

[149] There were in fact two different approaches to uplifting such thoughts, a 'particular' and a 'general' approach, in the teachings attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, which Maisels argues reflects a more acosmic and a more panentheistic metaphysics. (Maisels, "The Self and Self-Transformation, 149-150; Kallus, *Pillar of Prayer*, 119)

[150] Krassen, *Uniter of Heaven and Earth,* 48-49.

[151] Krassen, intro to *Pillar,* xxiv.

> verge of a major breakthrough in our lives. Moreover, this is a sure sign that the spark of holiness and goodness that was trapped in our own negativity is finally being freed. Deprived of its life-force, these negative blocks automatically dissolve before our very eyes. They never had any real existence to begin with.[152]

This is related to a larger debate and argument about whether the goal of these meditative systems are acosmism or panentheism—in other words, whether the "shells" or garments of appearance are meant to be disposed with or seen as divine as well.[153] This question also has more immediate application for our purposes in terms of how to understand and relate to negative experiences that arise in meditative practice—should they be ignored or engaged with, and if the latter, in what way? Maisels, rooted in the Piasetzner, argues for the appropriateness of both approaches, what he calls a "dispositional unity" and elaborates on the Piasetzner's approach to working with challenging emotions and thoughts as we saw briefly above.[154]

Shevirah and Liminality

Gershom Scholem remarks that for later Kabbalists the breaking of the vessels "is connected, like so many other things, with the law of organic life in the theosophical universe. Just as the seed must burst in order to sprout and blossom, so too the first bowls had to be shattered in order that the divine light, the cosmic seed so to speak, might fulfill its function."[155] Once again, what occurs in the sphere of the divine is mirrored in the natural

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[152] Sutton, *Purim Light,* 30-31.

[153] Maisels, "Self and Self-Transformation," 149.

[154] Maisels, "Self and Self-Transformation," 152, 471-474.

[155] Scholem, *Major Trends,* 268. The comparison of contemplative development to organic or vegetative processes is found within both medieval and contemporary traditions. See for example St. Theresa's comparison of the four stages of prayer to four different ways to water a garden (McGinn, *Mysticism*, 146-150);

and human realms and this idea was translated into Hasidic garb by the successor to the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid of Mezeritch (1704-1772), in his explanation of this dynamic of spiritual growth:

> Nothing in the world can change from one reality into another, unless it first turns into nothing (*ayin*), that is, into the reality of the between-stage. In that stage it is nothing and no one can grasp it, for it has reached the rung of nothingness, just as before creation. And then it is made into a new creature, from the egg to the chick. The moment when the egg is no more and the chick is not yet, is nothingness…it is called chaos (*tohu).* It is the same with the sprouting seed. It does not begin to sprout until the seed disintegrates in the earth and the quality of seed-dom is destroyed in order that it may attain to nothingness which is the rung before creation.[156]

This understanding of chaos as a liminal or transitional state has deeper roots in the Kabbalistic tradition but also has a technical sense in the Lurianic system as referring to the pre-creation world of the shattered vessels, also known as the world of chaos (*olam ha-tohu)*.[157] On the other hand, one contemporary teacher of Jewish meditation, Dr. Zvi Ish-

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Cf. Hellner-Eshed's description of the imagery of watering a garden in the Zohar (*A River Flows From Eden,* 235-237); See also the passage from Italian Kabbalist Menachem Recanati that compares union with the divine to a fruit ripening and falling off a tree (Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives,* 43-4). Cf. Cynthia Bourgeault's analogy of contemplative attainment to a ripe fruit falling off a tree. (Bourgeault, "The Egoic System," 5) One contemporary western Sufi teacher, Dr. Neil Douglas-Klotz, invokes Gregory Bateson's idea of the "ecology of mind" to describe how "consciousness operates much more like an eco-system than anything else…embedded in an ecological reality, within and without" and then argues that some "Sufi stories and poetry represent an early eco-psychology." ("The Key in the Dark,"152-3) Ellen Haskell describes how in Hebrew, "suckling (*yeniqah*) can refer both to human breastfeeding and to plants drawing nourishment from the earth" and that "many kabbalistic texts that use the suckling metaphor move freely between the term's anthropomorphic and vegetative usages." (*Suckling at my Mother's Breasts,* 44, 133 n17) Curiously she neglects to mention that the term for weaning in Hebrew (*l'gamel*) also means 'ripening' in vegetative contexts, such that one could say that weaning is how humans are 'ripened,' and the decrease in sunlight that catalyzes the ripening of fruit is a vegetative weaning. While certainly not all Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mystical traditions display such organic imagery or analogies for contemplative development, I would suggest that certain sub-traditions within each may describe a kind of indigenous eco-psychology or even be justifiably called an 'ecology of heart,' though I will have to wait for further studies to explore this further.

[156] Buber, *Tales of the Hasidism,* 104.

[157] Hannu Toyryla, "Slimy Stones and Philosophy: Some Interpretations of Tohu wa-Bohu," *Nordisk Judaistik/Scandinavian Jewish Studies* 21, no.1-2 (2000): 18, https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.69569. For a related teaching that one must first fall from one's spiritual stage or "rung" in order to ascend to the next stage, see Arthur Green, *Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl: Upright Practices, The Light of the Eyes* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1982), 224-225. Some contemporary Kabbalists have even made the (anachronistic) connection between chaos in this sense and the findings of modern Chaos theory, arguing that spiritual growth requires liminal periods where one's cognitive system may best be described by nonlinear dynamical paradigms. (Ginsburgh,

Shalom, references this imagery of the seed decomposing before new life sprouts and speaks about it as a kind of "psychic death"

> where I experienced everything I had known to be who I am and what reality was, went through a process of erasure in a way and dissolution, dissolving. And…on the other side of that experience I found myself in a state in which perception was radically altered and that marked a turning point in my life really because there was a radical shift in terms of literal perception, actual visuals, the way the world looks. And the lens through which experience was happening was altered, shifted, and in a way has never gone back to…it was like there was a life before that event and then life after. And then life afterward became for me a process of integrating this newfound mode of experiencing and perceiving reality that was not marked by the usual filters of the personal history. So it had felt in a way that my personal history until that point had been erased and I was reborn (laughs) in a sense into this new life that had no psychic investment in the history that I had lived until that point. So it was like a kind of new life that was born and then there was a process of how to integrate that and figure out how to actually live in the world from that state."[158]

Ish-Shalom speaks about this process as a kind of a death of one's self-identity or personality which can be quite a distressing or challenging experience, as "you can feel like your guts have been ripped out, like there is nothing to substantiate you. You can feel like completely nothing—empty, parched, dry, lack, void."[159] Drawing on the Lurianic and Hasidic descriptions of *katnut* and *gadlut* we discussed above, he describes how this challenging stage of the path is where experiences of "contraction and expansion interpenetrate and cross fertilize, creating the necessary friction to metabolize our unconscious material" in the same way that salt and sea water cause the friction to refine a pearl—but that the fruition of this

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"Olam Ha'Nekudim"; Crispe, "The Power of Networks"). For a chaos theory/systems perspective of navigating the liminal space between the disruption of one's normative cognitive processes and its subsequent self-organization or re-constellation, see Studstill, *The Unity of Mystical Traditions,* 238-9.

[158] Zvi Ish-Shalom, interview by Trace Rawl*, Stories of Silence,* mind guides, May 2018 https://soundcloud.com/storiesofsilence/tracks (5:10-7:30)

[159] Zvi Ish-Shalom, *The Kedumah Experience: The Primordial Torah* (Boulder: Albion-Andalus, 2017), 257.

process is this experience of a kind of death and rebirth.[160] He identifies this with the Hasidic principle of *bittul ha-yesh* or as he translates it, "the nullification of one's somethingness," which then gives rise to one's "true self" or "essential self."[161] However, later in his book he remarks that there can be experiences on the path in which even this "essential self, our soul-spark, is erased, then we are left with absolutely nothing. This can be terrifying. All that is left is nothingness; black, still, empty, silent. It feels like a black hole."[162] This experience is also not the ultimate goal in his system however, which he identifies according to Lurianic and Hasidic conceptions as the highest level of the soul known as "singularity" (*yechidah)* which is described particularly in the Habad Hasidic tradition (upon which Shalom draws) as "the dissolution of egocentric consciousness" and the "nondual" awareness of being co-essential with the essence of the divine.[163] While he doesn't identify it as such, it seems warranted (following the work of Elliot Wolfson) to posit that this erasure of one's "essential self" would, within the Habad tradition, correspond to "nullification of existence" (*bittul bi-mesi'ut*) in contrast to the earlier stage of nullification of somethingness (*bittul ha-yesh*) where he does draw on Habad sources.[164] While Shalom presents his map of the path

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[160] Ish-Shalom, *The Kedumah Experience,* 259.

[161] Ish-Shalom, *The Kedumah Experience,* 259, 266.

[162] Ish-Shalom, *The Kedumah Experience,* 266.

[163] Ish-Shalom, *The Kedumah Experience, 272*; Elliot Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2009), 76.

[164] Shalom, *The Kedumah Experience,* 348 n8. For a description of the difference between the "nullification of something" (bittul ha-yesh) and the "nullification of existence" (bittul bi-mesi'ut) in Habad sources, see Wolfson, *Open Secret,* 68-81. Describing the latter, Wolfson writes:

> The nullification of existence, which is also marked semantically as the "essential nullification" (*bittul asmi*), that is, the nullification of essence, completely obliterates all differentiation in the divine nothing (*bittual ha-yesh le-ayin ha-elohi be-takhlit).* The semblance of individuality is undone, as the one assimilated into the essential nothing, the true worshipper of God (*oved yhwh be-emet*), has no sense of self at all (*eino margish et asmo kelal*). (*Open Secret,* 76)

according to the traditional Lurianic scheme of 5 dimensions of the soul,[165] he also remarks that the trajectory of the path as he conceives it "is not linear" in that "we are always moving in, out, and through" the different stages or levels of the soul and that it is possible to experience them in a different order, as he notes was true for his own experience.[166]

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[165] Ish-Shalom, *The Kedumah Experience,* 293.

[166] Ish-Shalom, *The Kedumah Experience,* 229.

Chapter Five: "Nonlinear" Paths

Recently a growing cadre of scholars of mysticism have proposed the framework of 'paths' (as opposed to just experiences) to discuss and compare religious traditions, and indeed it is a particularly well suited construct for all three Abrahamic traditions given how central it is within each.[167] We have thus far seen how, in trying to understand challenging experiences associated with meditation, practitioners and teachers from all three religions (in the West) rely upon conceptions of "the path" that involve oscillations between experiences of ecstasy and euphoria alternating with periods despair and dysphoria.[168] In all three

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[167] Robert Buswell and Robert Gimello, eds., *Paths to Liberation: The Marga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), xii; William Parsons, *The Enigma of Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning The Psychoanalytic theory of Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7; Taves*, Religious Experience Reconsidered*; Jared Lindahl, "Self-Transformation According to Buddhist Stages of the Path Literature," *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies* 3, no. 14 (Fall 2012); Blaschke, "Consciousness of God"; Elliot Wolfson, *Along The Path,* 89-110 and in the introduction where he notes that the

> religious texture of Hasidism, I submit, is enframed by the image of walking and the basic elements that it entails, to wit, the foot, the shoe, and the path. From a phenomenological vantage point walking may thus be considered a ground concept, for it allows one to grasp the foundation of Hasidism in an originary way. (*Along the Path,* xii)

See also Garb, *Shamanic Trance* who interestingly contrasts an emphasis on the context of a mystical path with the approach of "Idel's customary description of mystical experience as being the more or less direct consequence of the employment of techniques." (139)

[168] Louth interestingly writes:

> It is, however, the case that many Eastern Orthodox writers find in St. John of the Cross something

traditions they are conceived as reflecting various degrees of proximity to, and distance from, some dimension of the divine. In Sufi traditions the dialectic is between states of expansion (*qabd*) and constriction (*bast*), in Jewish traditions between literally big consciousness (*mochin d'gadlut*) and small consciousness (*mochin d'katnut*) and in Catholic traditions typically between states of consolation (*contentos)* and desolation. In these conceptions of the contemplative path, "nonlinearity" refers to the fact that progress of growth entails challenging, uncomfortable, distressing, or impairing experiences before new baselines of awareness and or senses of self can be reached. The path is "nonlinear" with regard to the *valence* of experiences encountered along the contemplative developmental trajectory.

However scholars (etic) and teachers and practitioners (emic) also refer to paths as nonlinear in the sense of *unpredictable* and *non-sequential*. For example, while Theresa of Avila depicts the stages of the contemplative path as seven concentric castles, she admits that one does not always enter each castle in order.[169] Frohlich refers to this latter conception of the path by Theresa as "non-linear" in that it is not a "step-by-step journey from one place to another" noting that Teresa herself indicates that only the beginner images the seven castles

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> quite foreign to their own tradition — which for them is a tradition stretching back to that of the Fathers. It may be, then, that we are touching here on an area where there is a fundamental contrast between the ways of East and West." (*Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition,* 182)

He then cites Vladimir Lossky who writes that "both the heroic attitude of the great saints of Western Christendom, a prey to the sorrow of a tragic separation from God, and the dark night of the soul considered as a way, as a spiritual necessity, are unknown in the spirituality of the Eastern Church." (*The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 226 in Louth, *Origins,* 182)

[169] Mary Frohlich, *The Intersubjectivity of the Mystic: A Study of Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 179. Frohlich elaborates that

> Teresa's descriptions of the various stages often overlap. Those who believe that there should be clear boundaries between stages frequently accuse her of being poor at making these distinctions. The problem, most likely, is simply her descriptive honesty. From a descriptive or "common sense" perspective, different states very often do overlap, blur into one another, success one another in irregular and confusing ways, etc. (179-180)

linearly one after the other.[170] In a similar vein, John of the Cross writes that despite his portrayal of the stages of the contemplative path, "God leads each one along different paths" (*diferentos caminos)* and Thomas Keating argues that despite being presented sequentially by John, individuals may experience the dark nights in reverse order.[171]

In Sufi traditions, despite many sequential depictions of the stages (*maqamat*) that comprise the path, many have also argued that 'there are as many ways to God as there are human beings' and thus that the stages may be experienced in different orders as well. For example, at the end of a short treatise describing the Sufi path to God as he formulated it, al-Ghazali writes that while the order of the stages he elucidated earlier is true for some people, for others they experience the advanced stages at the beginning of their path.[172] About a hundred years later, the 'Sheikh of Sheikhs' Ibn Arabi writes in his meditative retreat manual that the "seekers of the Way of Truth are individuals. So although the Way of Truth is one, the aspects it presents vary with the varying conditions of its seekers."[173] Furthermore, while the 'stations' are often presented as a ladder or in a sequential order, the states (*hal*) are

[170] Frohlich, *The Intersubjectivity of the Mystic,* 191. Gerald May makes a similar point about the stages of contemplative prayer not occurring in a "stepwise progression." (May, *The Dark Night,* 127) Already in the 7th century, John of Climacus similarly posits that while "placed in ordered sequence, the different steps are not to be regarded as strictly consecutive stages, the one terminating before the next commences. For even though by God's grace we gradually progress to the higher steps, we still continue to live and develop simultaneously on the lower levels as well." (Ware, intro to *The Ladder,* 16)

[171] McGinn, *Mysticism*, 264; Keating, *Invitation to Love,* 116.

[172] Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights,* trans. David Buchman (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1988), 52.

[173] Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat,* trans. Rabia Terri Harris (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1989), 26.

completely unpredictable and since the stages are sometimes understood as stabilized states, this leaves a lot of room for individual differences in experiences.[174]

Both senses of nonlinearity that we have seen so far are certainly not limited to Abrahamic traditions and indeed this is why this particular path construct may prove to be more generally useful.[175] Many textual sources in Buddhist traditions discuss similarly structured "paths" of contemplative practice involving challenging or distressing stages, for example, the 5th century *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhagosa or the 20th century *Visuddhiñana-katha* by Mahasi Sayadaw,[176] and as Lindahl shows, some Buddhist maps of the path are similarly "not linear" in the sense of non-sequential.[177] Furthermore, some contemporary

[174] In fact, some Sufis like Ibn Arabi don't always clearly differentiate between states and stations. (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge,* 279)

[175] It is possible that nonlinear dynamic systems (NDS) theory may shed light on both senses of nonlinearity—valence and non-sequentiality/unpredictability. As alluded to above, both emic (teachers/practitioners) and etic (scholars) perspectives have begun to incorporate and draw upon NDS approaches and terminology (see below, n.193 for emic examples). For example, Frohlich calls attention to, and builds upon, the theologian Bernard Lonergan's engagement with systems frameworks, specifically the concept of "emergence" which Frohlich relates to his conception of "below upward" and "above downward" processes and micro-deterministic explanatory theories vs. macro-deterministic explanatory theories (*Intersubjectivity,* 100-109). See Thompson, *Mind in Life,* Appendix B for a more updated discussion of the debate in some branches of cognitive science over the possibility of "downward causation." (417) Another scholar, Randall Studstill, employs dynamical systems theory (specifically cybernetics, chaos theory, and Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures) in his comparative study of the medieval German Christian mystical tradition of Eckhart, Suso and Tauler and the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism traditions. (Studstill, *The Unity of Mystical Traditions,* 10-19) The applicability of nonlinear systems approaches to both of the senses of nonlinearity identified above may be buoyed if it can be demonstrated that some Abrahamic contemplative practices involve positive feedback mechanisms, since "Nonlinearity results from positive and negative feedback relations." (Thompson, *Mind in Life,* 419) Future studies may investigate Neoplatonic influences on Abrahamic contemplative traditions, specifically the role of the doctrine of "procession and return" and its potential relationship to such 'reciprocal causal' relations resulting in positive feedback mechanisms. See David Fideler, "Neoplatonism and the Cosmological Revolution," 114 for a rough sketch of this direction. For an example of this Neoplatonic influence on Jewish contemplative practice, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum,* 288, 301. For the connection between this doctrine in Moshe Cordovero and what Wolfson has termed "linear circularity," see Wolfson, *Aleph Mem Tau,* 82. For Buddhist meditation teachers who incorporate the language of positive feedback into their instructions in the practice of *samatha* culminating in the states of meditative absorption (*jhana),* see Brasington, *Right Concentration,* 27 and Young, *The Science of Enlightenment,* 69. I look forward to exploring these connections in a future study.

[176] Lindahl et al., "Varieties," 3.

[177] Lindahl, "Self Transformation," 260.

Buddhist teachers discuss the effects of concentration practices using similar terminology to the Centering Prayer teachers surveyed in this paper, specifically in terms of both practices relaxing the mechanisms of repression in the psyche. For example, Leigh Brasington, author of the book, *Right Concentration: Practicing the Jhanas*, reports in a recent interview:

> At the start of every retreat I teach, I warn students that if you have unresolved psychological issues, they quite likely will show up…It's a common thing… whatever unresolved psychological issues that you have, they're unresolved because you are using your energy and your distractions to keep them at bay. They will probably show up at some point when you get really quiet because there's no more distractions to keep them at bay and all your energy is going into your focus rather than keeping them at bay. And it can be quite unexpected, it can be stuff that you knew was there…or it can be stuff that you have no idea was there. And it is so common that I have to give this warning at the beginning of every retreat.[178]

And in his dissertation almost 40 years ago studying the effects of a three month Vipassana retreat, contemporary Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield writes,

> It is essential to recognize the non-linear process of growth in meditation in order to construct proper research models. Unfortunately much previous research has viewed meditation as if it would produce simple growth curves based on measuring one or more psychological or psycho-physiological variables over time. Upon recognizing the meditative pattern of periodic regression, re- structuring and reintegration, it becomes clear that to take an average measure of a population of meditators over time will not account for those sample members who are experiencing the extremes of regression or of advanced concentration, and would result in a meaningless average. Care must be taken in research design to acknowledge the complexity of this growth process, and to design sufficiently sensitive or long-term studies to measure changes while allowing for this non-linear development to take place.[179]

[178] Leigh Brasington, interview by Dr. Willoughby Britton, *Cheetah House on-the-Road,* Winter 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBzA4jeee3g

[179] Jack Kornfield, "Intensive Insight Meditation: A Phenomenological Study," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 11, no. 1 (1979): 53-54.

Chapter Six: Conclusion & Future Directions

Our brief survey of the traditional literature describing "necessary suffering" within Abrahamic contemplative paths uncovered remarkable structural similarities in the classical "non-linear" paths of all three mystical traditions. The rather striking correspondence between Jewish oscillations between "expanded consciousness" and "constricted consciousness" and Sufi oscillations between "expansion" and "constriction" are perhaps understandable given their respective roots in Rabbinic and Islamic Hadith literature discussing the dual revelations of God's mercy and judgment/anger. Furthermore the prevalence of the idea that passionate love of God is identical to, or associated with, "divine madness" can be traced to Plato's Phaedrus and Neoplatonic sources that influenced and shaped all three mystical traditions.[180] Moreover, the Song of Songs was a direct inspiration for much of both Jewish and Christian mysticism, and the poem shares themes with the pre-Islamic *Qasida* poetry of the Arabian peninsula, such as painful longing for the beloved, gardens, wine, intoxication, and madness.[181] Hebrew biblical imagery of metallurgic refinement also inspired both Jewish and Christian traditions and hermetic and alchemical

[180] William C. Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), xxv.

[181] Jinbachian notes that while there is "no evidence for a generic link" between the Song of Songs and Qasida poetry, he believes that "both are the fruits of the same desert soil and fertile nomadic culture." ("The Genre of Love Poetry," 128, 125)

traditions surely influenced the use of this imagery in all three traditions as well. This is not to collapse the differences between (or within) the three mystical streams and paths nor is it a claim that the paths lead to identical goals—even if some contemporary teachers within these traditions suggest as much—since, for example, for Teresa and John the goal is inherently Christological and Trinitarian, some Jewish mystical traditions argue that only Jews can reach the most fundamental union with God (given that only Jews have divine souls) and Sufis following Ibn Arabi often conceptualize the Sufi goal as the realization of "the light of Mohammad."[182]

The second sense of nonlinear (unpredictable/non-sequential) highlights the fact that many Abrahamic contemplative traditions have historically acknowledged the individual variability of contemplative paths. While stages of the path literature seeks to map out the territory that may be encountered through contemplative practice, many traditions were also aware that people will only experience some states or stages and that they may do so in very different orders. I suggest that this fact is one reason for the stress laid on working closely with a teacher—and relatedly, the relegation of many practical instructions to oral traditions—in the contemplative traditions of all three religions, since, if maps corresponded exactly to practitioner's experiences universally, a teacher would be obsolete. Instead, due to the individual variability and unpredictability of the paths, working closely with a teacher with personal familiarity with some swath of the contemplative territory has become an inalterable requirement for many.[183] I would also suggest that this historical data suggests

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[182] Keating, *Intimacy*, vii; McGinn, *Mysticism,* 205, 251; Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 45; Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge,* 323, 240. See Gregory A Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn Arabi*, for a critique of the portrayal of Ibn Arabi as a universalist and his argument that actually Ibn Arabi's thought entails an exclusive supercessionism.

[183] For the teacher-student relationship in Sufi traditions, see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions,* 100-1, 104; Silvers-Alario, "The Teaching Relationship in Early Sufism*."* In Jewish traditions, see Hellner-Eshed, *A*

that in the contemporary dissemination of meditative practices, teachers, clinicians, and meditation researchers ought to heed calls for more "person-centered" approaches to these practices.[184]

One future direction of research might investigate how consistent such nonlinear trajectories (in terms of valence) are across contemplative traditions and, if they are consistent, what they may reveal about basic underlying processes of psychological growth and development. In their paper, "Change is Not Always Linear: The Study of Nonlinear and Discontinuous Patterns of Change in Psychotherapy," Hayes, et al write,

> When challenges to the current steady state of a system are too great to assimilate, change often is not gradual and linear but rather is characterized by disturbance and increased variability in system behavior before reorganization. During this period of fluctuation, the system is destabilized but also open to new information and to the exploration of potentially more adaptive associations and configurations. There is then an oscillation between old patterns that are less viable and new patterns that are emerging, until the system settles into a new dynamically stable state (attractor) and variability decreases.[185]

River Flows from Eden, 51-53; For a description of how oral traditions in Eastern Orthodox traditions cater to the individual dispositions of each practitioner, see Lindahl, "Paths to Luminosity," 57.

[184] Lindahl et al., "Challenging and Adverse Meditation Experiences," in *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation* eds. Mansur Lalljee, David Brazier and Miguel Farias. Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press.

[185] Hayes et al., "Change is Not Always Linear: The Study of Nonlinear and Discontinuous Patterns of Change in Psychotherapy," *Clinical Psychological Review* 27, no. 6 (2007): 2. See also Studstill's description of challenging or distressing stages of the path in Dzogchen and German mysticism that arise due to the perspectives and practices within both that (he argues) disrupt the cognitive processes that normatively constrain awareness into the "dualistic frame of reference of ordinary experience":

> The disruption of these cognitive processes, however, leaves an important question unanswered. Why does this disruption prompt cognitive evolution? Chaos does not necessarily guarantee evolution in a positive direction. Psychic disorganization can just as easily precipitate devolution into psychopathological states. What determines which direction the system will take? The systems metaphor suggests at least one possible response to this problem.
>
> The chaos of cognitive disruption constitutes a radial and novel form of unknowing that is naturally experiences as uncomfortable…The break-down of the cognitive structures that maintain the hermeneutical circle of ordinary experience is simultaneously an encounter with the unknown. This is in turn tends to generate fear and a strong tendency to retreat back into the known—from a systems perspective, to close down system boundaries. If this closure is extreme enough, the disassociation that results may result in mild to extreme forms of psychopathology. Another option for the cognitive system is to allow the discomfort, resist the impulse to return to the familiar, and settle more deeply into the uknown, i.e., open system boundaries even more. This may explain the importance of a religious belief system in supporting cognitive evolution. Depending on the tradition, religious belief

Given the consistent descriptions of oscillations and "regression for the sake of ascent" in both the traditional literature and contemporary reports from Abrahamic (and some Buddhist) traditions, and the suggestion by teachers in this study that this trajectory is mirrored in psychotherapy, future research might employ dynamical systems frameworks to further investigate experiences and growth along contemplative path models across multiple traditions.[186] Such interdisciplinary and comparative contemplative research may prove of interest to scholars, clinicians, and contemplative practitioners alike.

> systems potentially encourage a sense of fundamental, existential trust, of believing that when you 'jump off the cliff' so to speak, someone or something is going to catch you.[note: nurtured in childhood]…the systems metaphor suggests that this is a crucial variable that connects chaos to growth. From a systems perspective, openness allows the system to evolve, to self-organize into a new pattern of psychic organization characterized by freedom from dualitistic conditions—what Dzogchen calls enlightenment and what the German mystics describe as union. (*The Unity of Mystical Traditions,* 238-239)

[186] Contemporary teachers within all three religions are beginning to incorporate or utilize dynamic systems language and approaches within their teaching. For example, Rabbi Moshe Schatz, subject of recent research by Jonathan Garb, argues that the principle of 'nondecomposability' is inherent to Kabbalistic traditions when he writes that "a partzuf is a whole that unifies its parts into one essence, thereby making the whole greater than the sum of its parts" and that the "fundamental principle of partzuf is a bottom line code of the Zohar and the Ari" though he claims it was anticipated by Rabbi Isaac the Blind and Rabbi Azriel of Gerona and later expressed by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto. (Garb, *Yearnings of the Soul,* 122-3; Schatz, *Sparks of a Hidden Light,* 37, 50; on nondecomposability, see Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 420) Cynthia Bourgeault also has recently begun incorporating the terminology of dynamic systems theory such as "dissipative" structures and "feedback loops." (Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer,* 178, 121) In Sufi traditions, see Ozelsel, *Forty Days*, 156-161, for a discussion of how she uses systems theory and the work of Ilya Prigogine to account for the "extremely difficult transition phases on the 'way'" and the "radical mental re-organization" which she experienced on her retreat and finds in traditional Sufi literature.

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