

## The Origins of Futuwwa

Transcribed from a talk given by Pir Zia Inayat-Khan at the Journey of the Soul Retreat, July 2012

*Tasawwuf*, Sufism is the inner path, and closely related to *Tasawwuf* is *Futuwwat*, which is the expression of the inner path in outer life. The two go hand in hand. *Futuwwat* may be translated as spiritual chivalry, and it is traced to the prophet Abraham, peace be upon him. There are different accounts of how Abraham brought forth *Futuwwat*. According to one telling, many people were drawn to Abraham, because they saw that he was the *Khalil Allah*, the friend of God, and they wanted to develop a similar relationship with God, a relationship of intimacy, of closeness, of friendship. Among those who were drawn to Abraham were two kinds of people: one kind was the renunciates, ascetics who were otherworldly. They were fully prepared to leave the world behind, to go into seclusion, to spend their whole lives in meditation, mystic absorption and prayer. The prophet Abraham welcomed these souls and directed them, and under his direction they thrived and flourished. He offered them the most fitting instruction to suit their needs, the *riyazat* of *Tasawwuf*, the practices of Sufism.

But then there were others who had families, who had professions, and who were pillars of their communities. They had roles of responsibility and were committed to upholding justice. Their lives were in the world; it was not their way or their destiny to withdraw. They had mouths to feed, wrongs to right, and so forth. The first instruction that Abraham gave them was instruction that was suitable for the ascetics. The people of the world expressed their unease, saying, "We simply cannot practice this and at the same time fulfill our duties in the world." After hearing them, Abraham turned within in meditation. A vast ocean appeared before him. He dove into that ocean and swam and swam for many leagues until at last he came to an island. He saw that this was the place for those people of duty, people of the world, who wished to follow him. Then Abraham swam back, and, forging a boat, gathered the sincerest among them and took them on that boat to the island. And that was the island of *Futuwwat*, the island of knightly virtue and chivalry, which may be identified with *Sarras*, the "Siritual Place" which has been the home of the Grail.

Now another story tells that at a certain point in his life Abraham became very wealthy, and the angels began to doubt him. They had doubts about his faith because his wealth appeared to them a evidence that he was concerned only with his own comfort and enrichment. God, of course, knew the truth of the faith of his prophet, but the angels were not so certain. And so God gave permission to Gabriel

to test him. Gabriel flew to earth to the place where Abraham lived, and alighted on a hill near his house in the guise of a Bedouin, a wandering shepherd, a nomad. And then Gabriel began to sing a hymn of praise to God in a beautiful voice. Abraham heard the hymn and was filled with wonder and admiration. When the song was done, Abraham approached the Bedouin and said, "I m so profoundly moved by what you have sung. Will you please sing it again?" The Bedouin answered, "I will for a price, half of what you possess." Abraham agreed, so Gabriel sang the hymn and Abraham fell in a swoon of ecstasy. When it was over Abraham still wanted more. He said, "Please, please sing it again!" The Bedouin said, "Yes, for the other half of what you own." Abraham consented and once again went into ecstasy.

When it was over, Abraham took the Bedouin to his home and presented him with the key to his home and the possession of everything he had. And you can imagine the state of Gabriel's heart when he saw the generosity, the sincerity, the honesty of the prophet. He confessed that it was a ruse, that it was a test, that he was indeed Gabriel, saying, "You must keep what you own; it was only a test." But Abraham said, "No, once I promise to give something I must give it." But Gabriel still refused to have it from him, so Abraham decided to distribute what he owned among his neighbors, the poor and the needy. This meant that his family, and, in particular, his heir, Ishmael, were left without their patrimony, for it wasn't only Abraham's estate, but it was to go to his son after him. And so Abraham, calling his son Ishmael before him, removed the cloth from around his own neck and tied it as a sash around the waist of his son. And he said, "This is my legacy to you. This is the estate of generosity and praise and truth. This is what I pass down to you, and this is what you must pass down to your heirs."

So the tradition of *Futuwwat* was born, and Ismael and Isaac, both having received this legacy, passed it down to their heirs. It was passed down among the line of prophets, down the generations, reaching Moses and Jesus an, through the monk Basira who had the sash of Jesus, it reached the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon them all. This legacy of *Futuwwat*, the outer path, which was defined by the prophet Muhammad as a nobility which ennoble the valorous and the generous, was then passed down through the line of the saints in tandem with the Sufi path of meditation, of inwardness.

The two defining qualities of chivalry are valor and generosity, courage and generosity. Courage of course involves faith. It involves trusting fully in the One, looking ahead with confidence, with hope, however one may be beleaguered; to march onward, to uphold one's principles, even in the worst adversity; not to

succumb to coercion, to compulsion, to intimidation; to be true to one's devotion to the Real in all circumstances, to be true to one's word, to be faithful, to be responsible toward those in one's care. All of these are marks of valor.

Alongside valor is generosity, which again involves trust because it means participating in the flow of the divine largesse. It means acknowledging with gratitude the immensity of the blessings that one has received in so many innumerable forms: how we have been fed and our thirsts slaked; how we have been clothed and brought up from the helplessness of infancy into the full powers of our adulthood; and how the forces of nature all toil industriously to yield the nourishment that sustains us. All of nature conspires to convey to us the endless generosity, the fecund magnanimity of the One Being. And how strange it is, therefore, that we often tend to imagine ourselves as the terminus of this vast and great flow of life; as if we were to be the sole beneficiary of the universe rather than a channel like all channels whereby this goodness, this grace, this bounty may flow.

When we acknowledge with gratitude how blessed we have been, we feel more free to communicate blessings. When, on the contrary, we imagine ourselves unloved, deprived, forsaken, then we have very little wherewithal to extend ourselves bountifully. But when we are conscious of the immensity, the enormity of the blessings, then blessings resound from us as a superfluity, as an overflow of grace. And then wherever we go, whomever we meet, our first impulse will always be to bless, to greet, to extend sympathy, understanding, kindness, and assistance. Such is the path of Chivalry.