

Seclusion and abandoning seclusion

(reflections on October in April)

For Ibn ‘Arabī there are nine ‘mothers of all good’, which are the basis of all spiritual practice and realisation of human potential. Of these the chief one, he says, is seclusion.

But what does he mean by ‘seclusion’? It is a principle that has a long history both in Sufi practice and in all spiritual traditions (e.g. the hermit tradition in Christianity), and immediately summons up images of ascetic contemplatives abandoning the world. But there are different ways to understand seclusion, which Ibn ‘Arabī has clarified in a most profound and crystal clear way.

In his works he delineates two fundamental types of seclusion: seclusion from others, which is at the level of aspiration to Truth, and seclusion from oneself, which is at the level of realisation of Truth. Every seclusion, he points out, demands a simultaneous estrangement from whatever one abandons and an intimacy with what one secludes oneself with.

1. Seclusion from others: this is a physical act that includes withdrawing from other people, frequenting uninhabited places like mountains or being by the sea, or simply going somewhere unfamiliar, as well as withdrawing from all other creatures, animate or inanimate. As such, it may be a physical departure to another place or an abandonment of ‘things’ (as in decluttering one’s house). It should be done with an intention to remember the Divine as much as possible. This exterior type of seclusion is necessary in order to establish a secure sense of identity which is no longer so governed by external circumstance, upbringing, friends, family, possessions and so on. In short, it brings intimacy with the self.

2. Seclusion from oneself: this is a spiritual act, which Dhu’l-Nun al-Misri pointed to when someone asked him when seclusion would be right for him – ‘when you have secluded yourself from your own self’. This interior seclusion has two

aspects: firstly, withdrawing from all the negative characteristics of the self, and secondly, withdrawing from the very sense of having or being a 'self'.

In the first case, what appears negative in a person (the 'vices' or failings and defects) is rejected in favour of positive qualities (the 'virtues' or moral excellences). As Ibn 'Arabī observes, it is better to seclude oneself [physically] due to realising the faults in one's own self and not wishing to inflict them on others than because of seeing faults in others. These good qualities are what is meant by the divine names: thus the mean becomes generous, the ignorant becomes knowledgeable, the dull becomes clear and so on. These names and qualities are the very substance of the divine Form/Image in which the human being is created. In short, this seclusion brings intimacy with the divine names.

The second kind of withdrawal is from attributing these names and qualities to oneself, seeing them as always belonging to the divine, and from attributing existence to oneself. What is left for the human being is the true nature, which is pure servanthood, and is what is indicated by the phrase 'Unity of Being' (*wahdat al-wujūd*). For this reason Ibn 'Arabī states that 'whoever makes seclusion their practice grasps the mystery of the divine unity', since the divine names are the substance of this unity, the way in which it is known, and 'comes to know the uniqueness insofar as it is a quality', since his realisation of his own non-existence is so clear that the truth of the divine Existence shines forth. Only at this point are the veils of darkness of otherness and the veils of light of self annihilated. In short, it brings intimacy with the Truly and Only Real.

What of retreat? Ibn 'Arabī refers to retreat (*khalwa*) as 'seclusion within seclusion', which means the seclusion from oneself taking place within the seclusion from others, or the spiritual seclusion within the physical. This is why he describes retreat as the highest state of seclusion, since it means being entirely empty (*khal'*) of self, a 'place' where the Real can manifest Himself as He is.

As is known and self-evident, God has not secluded Himself within His absolute Uniqueness: only His name interior (*bāṭin*) has withdrawn from being manifest (*ẓāhir*). ‘I was a hidden treasure and loved to be known, so I created the world in order that I might be known’. From the human perspective, this realisation of the Truly Real, which is the essence of what is meant by ‘sainthood’, leads to the person’s return to the created world in a totally transformed way. This return is known as ‘the bridal present’ (*jilwa*) (given by the husband to his beloved wife when she displays herself to him), since there is no confusion of identity left within the consciousness of the human being: he knows that all belongs to God and the whole display of manifestation is seen for what it really is. He knows his own reality in God, and God knows Himself in him. Through this realised human who is the divine Form, all the divine names and qualities find their full expression and repose, and the true purpose of creation is realised.

Stephen Hirtenstein

October Gallery, London, 9 April 2011