

Unveiling Dreams: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Imagination and the Sufi Path

Dévoilement des rêves : L’imagination d’Ibn al-‘Arabī et la voie soufie

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Abstract

In the Islamic tradition, the concept of dream and the imagination have acted as a vital component in theological, philosophical, and spiritual discourse. This is due to the close relationship between the prophetic revelation, the imagination, and ‘truthful’ dreams. In this study, we will be examining the conjunction between the notions of dream, imagination, and revelation as seen in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s corpus, specifically *The Meccan Revelations* (al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah). In observing this text, we will aim to analyze and answer the question of the importance of ‘dreams’ in the Islamic mystical tradition and the role it plays upon a seeker’s spiritual quest. How does Ibn Arabi define the role of ‘dreams’ for one on the spiritual path and how can it lead to one’s ascension? Can a seeker attain the station of revelation (*wahy*)? What are the distinguishing marks between imaginative visions and truthful dreams? These are some of the primary questions which will be studied throughout this work.

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.”¹ This famous Shakespearean line, can adequately serve as a gateway to our discussion of what is called ‘dream’ and the ‘realm of imagination’ in the mystical tradition of Islam, or Sufism. In Sufi belief, particularly in the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), the universe is perceived as an infinite and eternal abode of divine manifestations and self-disclosures. Thus, everything in creation and the cosmos is none other but a manifestation of the Divine. In each stage of being, and moment of creation, the Divine makes Himself manifest in a uniquely different form and image. These divine forms, which are manifested in both corporeal and spiritual

¹ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2006, p. 227.

realms, are seen to be signs that require unveiling and interpretation. Similar to Shakespeare, the Sufis believe that this world is a divine theatre for the self-disclosures of God. It is man's primary role to encrypt the symbols and signs of worldly life and understand its embedded mysteries. In fact, these symbols are implemented to guide man to the truth, and ultimately to the eternal abode. Therefore, it is only the Divine Essence that is Real, whilst all else is a lucid dream, or imagination. It is due to this vital ontological and epistemological importance that oneirology has had a tremendous role throughout the Islamic tradition. At an inferior degree, the dream-state is a tool for understanding one's psychological state. This has served as a helping hand to many spiritual seekers who have aimed at correcting certain behaviors and traits of their carnal soul. Yet, the most important aspect of the dream-state is its divinatory role, which is a precursor for unveiling the secrets of the universe during one's 'wakeful' state.

To illustrate the importance of this subject, the Qu'rān exemplifies the story of Joseph and Abraham¹. Moreover, there are numerous prophetic sayings and narrations in regards to this subject. To further prove the vitality of oneirology in the Islamic tradition, one must not forget its extensive role in kingship, as each court had a dream interpreter to foresee future events and provide visionary guidance.² Furthermore, one can witness an immense literary tradition as early as the 3rd/9th century in relation to visionary autobiographies.³ The dreams of Sufis can also be seen in hagiographical texts such as such as 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī's (d. 871/1492) *Nafaḥāt al-uns* and Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's (d. 618/1221) *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā'*, and even in Sufi manuals⁴. As the significance of this tradition increased, an entire literary genre was dedicated to the science with texts in dream interpretation, such as the renowned *Tafsir al-Aḥlām* of Ibn Sirin (d. 110 /729).

In this study, we aim to assess the importance of the dream in relation to the imagination and its vital role in ascension in the spiritual path. The focus of this study is primarily on the 188th

¹ The story of Joseph can be found in the 12th chapter of the Qu'rān and the sacrifice of Ishmail by Abraham is recounted in Chapter 37, as-Şaffāt. It must be noted however, that in Ibn al-'Arabī's *Bezels of Wisdom*, the sacrifice of Ishmail is explained in the bezel regarding Isaac.

² Not only is this evident in the Qu'rānic story of Joseph, but it is a tradition that reached its peak during the Timurid dynasty.

³ Amongst the various texts one can reference Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's (d. 279/892) *bad' Sha'n* which reflects his spiritual development.

⁴ Al-Qushayrī's *Epistle of Sufism* has a section dedicated to truthful dreams.

Chapter on Truthful Dream (*ruyah*) in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *The Meccan Revelations* in addition to the Chapter on Joseph in his *Bezels of Wisdom*. A brief overview will initially be provided on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontology in order to provide a clear premise for the understanding of that which he calls the ‘presence of imagination’. We shall then examine the two orientations of the imagination, the absolute and relative and shed light on its respective divinatory nature.

1. The Absolute and Relative Imagination

In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontology¹, imagination is considered as the most extensive and encompassing realm of being. This realm is even called the ‘heart’² and one who does not have knowledge of it is considered as devoid of knowledge. It is an intermediary between the formless, or the intelligible, and that which has form, or the corporeal. As the universe is composed of both spirit (meaning) and form, this realm is the most comprehensive as it is a ground for the union of all paradoxes and contradictories.³ The Imaginal Realm is considered to be, “neither a compound material body, nor a separate intelligible substance, because it is a *barzakh*, that is, an interworld, a limit, which separates the one from the other.”⁴ On the one hand, the imagination is similar to the archetypal forms of Plato, in which it contains the archetypes of reality. Yet, the platonic forms are disengaged forms which serve as ‘light’ in maintaining and guiding all that is in the created world, it being the forms’ ‘shadow’. Thus, the objects in the created world do not bear an independent existence and are in essence non-existent. The true entity is the form. In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontology, this is a superior mode of being to the imagination, and is considered as the intelligible realm, which is a fixed and disengaged entity. This is noteworthy to be mentioned because in the mentioned sufi ontology, we refer to an absolute imagination that receives its forms from the intelligible, yet we are not describing the Platonic forms, but an imagination that is an isthmus. It is not a fixed entity nor is it completely disengaged and purely absolute. It is a gradation

¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī classifies being into five ‘presences’: First and Second Entification, Intelligible, Imagination, Corporeal, Perfect Man. There has been immense work on this subject and due to the limitation of this study, we are unable to address this matter in extensive detail. For further study, please refer to the works of William C. Chittick, in particular, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

² Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, Volume II, p 313.

³ It is only in the realm of the imagination where one can perceive allegories or images such as a three-headed man, or a man that is half-beast and half-human.

⁴ Henry Corbin, *Spiritual body and Celestial Earth*, p 144.

of contingent being (*mumkin al-wujūd*) as opposed to necessary being (*wajib al-wujūd*), which is reserved for the Divine. Ibn al-‘Arabī states that the world is a play of the Divine Names of *al-Zāhir* (the Manifest) and *al-Bātin* (The Hidden). In this regard, the ‘presences’ and that which it manifests are in constant play between making an appearance and remaining in concealment. Identically, the imagination is at once both an outward manifestation of the intelligible and an inward manifestation of the corporeal realm, serving as an intermediary between the spiritual and physical. However, it must be noted that although this isthmus orients towards two domains, it is not composed of two separate realms, nor is the place of its occurrence distinct. In *The Meccan Revelations*, Ibn al-‘Arabī describes the unity of the two worlds, the spirits (divine realm), and the bodies (corporeal realm) as such:

“That which is born from the coming together of the two is a Presence and a world. The Presence is the Presence of the imagination. It is the manifestation of meanings in sensory molds like knowledge in the form of milk, perseverance in religion in the form of a fetter, Islam in the form of a pillar, faith in the form of a handle, and Gabriel in the form of Dihya al-Kalbi and in the form of the Bedouin; and he became imaginalized to Mary in the form of a well-proportioned mortal... That is why the Presence of imagination is the most all-embracing of Presences, because it brings together the two worlds—the world of the absent and the world of the witnessed.¹

The imagination that faces the intelligible is the absolute or dissociable imagination (*khayāl munfaṣil*), which, “contains the Forms of everything existing in the world, and because it is the archetype of all the Forms of the individuals and essences existing in the plane of divine knowledge.”² The absolute imagination is considered as a creative and active plane. It is self-subsisting and objective. The imagination that is on the lower end of the spectrum, orienting towards the corporeal realm, is the relative or conjoined imagination (*khayāl mutaṣil*). This layer of the imagination is subjective and designates the human imagination. It is psychological in nature. In *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, Ibn al-‘Arabī designates Isaac as the manifestation of the conjoined imagination and Joseph as the dissociable imagination. In Isaac’s case, the dream of sacrifice should have been interpreted instead of acknowledging its entire state as veritable truth. Ibn al-‘Arabī states, “The self-disclosure of forms in the presence of the imagination requires another science by which one grasps what God intended by these forms.”³ The need for interpretation is due to the fact that the dream was not purely from a divine source and contained

¹ William C. Chittick, *The Self-disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Cosmology*, p 258-9.

² Henry Corbin, *Spiritual body and Celestial Earth*, p 145.

³ Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p 68.

adulterated images stemming from the relative imagination. In regards to Joseph, he understood that his dream had a higher reality, and was aware of its interpretation; yet even at his spiritual station, Joseph lacked complete understanding of the absolute imagination. Ibn al-‘Arabī professes that the entire universe is in a fact, a mere dream and it is only Muhammad who has truly understood and actualized this message.

The absolute imagination is often called the ‘storehouse’ as it is responsible for preserving all received inputs of the sensory faculties. That which is envisioned in the dream-state in the relative imagination is none other than the perceptions acquired by the sensory faculty, or as Ibn al-‘Arabī says, “the soul’s internal conversation with itself”¹. Such dreams and depicted images are transient in nature as they are the result of everyday occurrences that lack meaning, and is completely cerebral.² However, the absolute imagination is responsible for extracting the natural and physical forms of that which is conceived by the senses—which are in essence cosmic and spiritual forms—in order to utilize them as symbols for the transmission of a higher ontological reality. This explains the reason as to which Muhammad interpreted milk as knowledge in the dream-state.³ The images in this state are permanent due to the fact that they are in essence primordial and archetypal forms.⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī explains that the more complete and active the sensory faculties are, the more adept the imagination is in creating images and forms. For instance, he mentions that one who is born deaf is unable to perceive sound in the dream-state, and thus is excluded from witnessing dreams through the means of sound and melody. Whereas the dreamer who has all five senses, equally receives a more lucid and thorough vision.⁵

In order to better understand the manner in which the imagination perceives, Ibn al-‘Arabī divides the comic reality into three gradations. On the higher end of the plane, it consists of the intelligible, which is devoid of matter, and is only perceived by the intellect or reason. The lower

¹ Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī and Muhammad Khwajavī, *Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah*, Volume 8, p 427.

² Ibid 425.

³ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p 96.

⁴ In order to explain this topic, Ibn Sina provides an example of a body of water and the reflection which gets cast upon it. He says that the image is reflected on the water as long as the holder of the image is present, yet, as soon as the holder of the image disappears so too does the image. The casted reflection is an example of the relative imagination which disappears with the subject, but the body of water is acknowledged as the absolute imagination, which is the bearer of all forms.

⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabī and Muhammad Khwajavī, *Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah*, Volume 8, p 426.

plane consists of the sensible and is perceived through the senses. The isthmus is perceived by both the intellect and the senses, in which image is perceived by the intellect in way of analogy.¹ Consequently, this vast realm of the imagination is where one can witness the self-disclosures of God in its most direct form, and it is not something that requires proof as each human being has the capacity and capability to 'imagine' in both the dream and wakeful state.²

2. Dream and Prophecy

There is a narration by Muhammad where he says, "The (true) dream of a faithful believer is a part of the forty-six parts of prophethood."³ The 'true dream', or one that occurs in relation to the absolute imagination, has a divine origin and is recognized as the source of revelation. The value of such dreams held such a lofty status in the Islamic tradition that Muhammad would ask his disciples each morning to recount their dream.⁴ In *The Meccan Revelations*, Ibn al-'Arabī narrates three types of dreams: Dreams of Guidance or the truthful dream, the created dream which arises from one's soul⁵, and the dream inspired by Satan.⁶ He states that when the sensory faculties are at rest, the body enters a state of 'rest'. In this stage, which can be named as sleep, the imagination paints a picture with the objects that the body's senses conceived during the wakeful state. There are numerous narrations from Muhammad where he states that those who are the most truthful in speech are also the ones most truthful in dreams.⁷ Thus, there is a clear emphasis on self-purification and righteousness of an individual who seeks to acquire the station of truthful dreams. Often times the intelligible realm is compared to as 'prey', in which one is advised to diligently aim for its pursuit. If the dreamer acquires the intelligible, the dream is considered as a truthful or

¹ Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī, *Durar Rasā'il Ibn 'Arabī*, p 76.

² Ibn al-'Arabī, *Durar Rasā'il Ibn 'Arabī* ibn arabi 77.

³ Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl Al- Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al- Bukhārī*, Book 91, Hadith 6.

⁴ "When the Messenger of Allah finished the dawn prayer, he would ask: Did any of you have a dream last night? And he said: All that is left of Prophecy after me is a good vision." Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, Book 42, Hadith 4999.

⁵ We are referring to the blaming soul (*nafs al-lawāmah*). In sufi psychology (*ilm al-nafs*), the soul is categorized in different degrees. The utilized terms are Qu'rānic in origin. In this instance, the intelligible dresses in a form, unique to the capabilities and capacity of the dreamer. In this dream-state there are layers of meaning but requires interpretation in order to unshroud it from adulteration.

⁶ Ibn al-'Arabī and Muhammad Khwajavī, *Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah*, Volume 8, p 426-7.

⁷ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book 42, Hadith 9.

guiding dream. The most inept are the dreams that stem purely out of carnal desires¹.

As established, the truthful dream is one that concerns the intelligible realm and the Divine reality. Evidently, one who has accessed this type of dream is one who has also experienced a state of ascension², similar to the one experienced by Muhammad during his revelations. Such experiences can be viewed as identical in the sense that it originates from a single spiritual source, but it varies in regards to the experience's spiritual strength and weakness.³ Although Muhammad is considered as the Seal of the Prophets, the gateway to revelation (*wahy*) is accessible to every believer.⁴ Thus, on the one hand the truthful dream can be considered as an epistemological tool in understanding and deciphering God⁵, and on the other hand it is a vehicle for divine guidance and spiritual awareness. It is no wonder that it is recounted that to know God, one must acknowledge him in the dream state.⁶

Let us further expand on the role of revelation and its relationship to the absolute imagination. Ibn al-‘Arabī states that prophecy is none other than the speech of God, which can be classified into three categories: revelation without an intermediary, Revelation through a messenger, Revelation through veils.⁷ Additionally he mentions that although no individual can reveal a novel divine law, each individual is capable of receiving a revelation, or guidance, from the divine depending on his physical constitution and spiritual rank.⁸ Whereas one might receive news of what he will witness the following day, another might receive the hidden meaning of the reality of the cosmos. Corbin explains, "Everything received by men in this manner is of the same nature as

¹ In this instance we are referring to the commanding soul (*nafs al-amārah*) It is at this stage where there is a dominance of sensual desires and evil conduct. Dreams in this stage are a result of carnal projections, or meaningless visions of what the dreamer witnessed throughout his or her day.

² What is meant by ascension is the *Mi'rāj* of Muhammad into the heavenly abodes.

³ Let us consider a wellspring as an example to this statement. A wellspring can serve as the originator and source of numerous ponds and lakes. Although the formed bodies of water differ in gradation of quality and attribute, they are not only united with the wellspring, but essentially one in nature.

⁴ I heard Allah's Messenger saying, "Nothing is left of the prophetism except Al-Mubashshirat." They asked, "What are Al-Mubashshirat?" He replied, "The true good dreams (that conveys glad tidings). Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Book 91, Hadith 9.

⁵ What is meant by God in this context is God as seen through his self-disclosures, as no one is adept of truly acquiring knowledge of God through the Absolute Himself, and ultimately, do not have access to the innercore of His Essence.

⁶ Ibn al-‘Arabī and Muhammad Khwajavī, *Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah*, Volume 8, p 450.

⁷ Ibid, p 420-1.

⁸ Ibid, p 422-4.

what the Prophet saw during the six months of his true dreams; it was through the Imaginative Presence that he not only beheld these visions but also that he saw the Angel.”¹ Similarly, Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (d. 652/1273), the great sufi poet and follower of the Akbarian tradition, explains this issue in his *Maṣnavī Ma‘navī* where he states that one witnesses realities in the truthful dream that one might not be able to perceive in the corporeal world. He further expands that such visions can have such transcendental meaning that one might need to spend years in order to find a competent individual even for its mere interpretation.² Dawūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350), a commentator of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Bezels of Wisdoms*, explains, “the seeker understand, on the one hand, the difference there is between what he sees in his dream and the ability of those moderately advanced in the mystical path to realize imaginatively an ascent to Heaven, and on the other hand, the difference from what is really contemplated in the spiritual world.”³

In order for a spiritual seeker to assess his or her progress in the path, dreams were recorded and often recounted to their spiritual masters. One such occasion can be seen in Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī’s (d. 279/892) autobiography in which, “...dreams were messages concerning reality which proclaimed to him his gradual ascent within his inner self and, correspondingly, within the macrocosm.”⁴ Sufis were also advised to seek reality, and the answers to their questions, in their dreams. For instance, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, 9th/15th century poet and follower of the Akbarian tradition, recounts in his hagiography that one of Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī’s students saw God in a dream in which he asked for the way that leads to Him. God responded, “It is self-sacrifice, and then you’re there.”⁵ In another occasion it was revealed in a dream to a Sufi that patience is greater than fasting and prayer.⁶

The following accounts were an example of the ‘guidance’ provided in one’s dream-state in which the body is at a physiological state of rest. However, one who has been granted a strong will (*ḥimmah*) and the creative power embedded in the realm of imagination is able to perceive such

¹ Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī*, p 241.

² Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, *Maṣnavī Ma‘navī*, Book 6.

³ Henry Corbin, *Spiritual body and Celestial Earth*, p 145.

⁴ John O’Kane and Bernd Radtke, *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism*, p 9.

⁵ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī’s, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*, p 57.

⁶ *Ibid*, p 164.

‘dreams’ in the wakeful state as well. Ibn al-‘Arabī explains in his *Bezels of Wisdom*, “ When the Prophet received revelation, may God bless him and grant him peace, he would be taken from the visible, sensorial world, and would be shrouded, becoming hidden from those present around him. When this withdrew he was returned. He perceived it in none other than the presence of the imagination, although he could not be called sleeper.”¹ Similarly, Muhammad received a revelation in the form of a young man called Dihya al-Kalbī. This revelation was in a wakeful state and in fact it was the creative power of the Prophet which allowed him to imagine and actualize Gabriel in his form. Corbin describes that this practice is on the one hand parapsychological and on the other hand an intimate taste and perception of the divine.² Such mystical perceptions are common amongst mystics, and is a reflection of the absolute imagination. Corbin explains,

“the Active Imagination serves the *himma* which by its concentration, is capable of creating objects, of producing changes in the outside world. In other words: thanks to the Active Imagination, the gnostic’s heart projects what is reflected in it: and the object on which he thus concentrates his creative power, his imaginative meditation, becomes the *apparition* of an outward, extra-psychic reality.”³

It should be noted that such imaginal projections were actualized purely for the comprehension of Divine Realities, and it is strictly disapproved for one’s personal or material use. For instance, Ibn al-‘Arabī recounts that he would often evoke the spirit of his master, Yusuf al-Kūmī, in order to receive guidance on certain spiritual questions.⁴ In another light, it is narrated in the Bezel on Jesus⁵, that Mary’s Active Imagination created an apparitional body of Gabriel, which fathered Jesus. Thus, the truthful dream can be both in the wakeful and slumber state, but that which remains consistent is its origin, which is divine.⁶ A seeker who has not yet attained the willpower of creation, is considered inferior in rank as to that who has achieved such act of mediation and of witnessing of the ‘truth’ with his sensory faculties during the wakeful state.

3. The World as a Dream

The Qu’rān mentions numerous times that the creation of the heavens and the earth are all

¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p 96.

² Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī*, p 222.

³ Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī*, p 223.

⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Durar Rasā’il Ibn ‘Arabī*.

⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*.

⁶ For a detailed account of the creative aspect of imagination, see Henry Corbin’s *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī*.

signs.¹ Moreover, there is an emphasis for believers to ponder upon these signs and understand their truth. In essence, the interpretation of dreams in the human imagination is a precursor to the superior interpretation of the ‘dream world’. What is meant as the ‘dream world’ in the Islamic sense is similar to the Vedantic concept of *māya*. There is only one Reality or true Self, *Brahman*, whereas all other is a form of illusion, or a veil that covers the true nature of reality. *Māya* is also described as a cloud which veils the human eye from witnessing the sun. In *Light in the Word of Joseph*, Ibn al-‘Arabī recounts a prophetic narration, “Indeed mankind is asleep, and when they die, they awaken.”² One should be careful not to confuse the two aspects of the imagination in this instance. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, the absolute imagination—which is the subject of our current discussion—encompasses all that is not God, or in other words, everything that lies in between God and nothingness. The relative imagination is what was previously discussed and is one ontological mode, or ‘presence’, in comparison to other. Thus, in order to provide a clearer standpoint, the *māya* is the absolute imagination and the *Brahman* is the Divine Essence. When one dies, one is disengaged from the sensory faculties, which allows a clear vision of the meaning behind the signs and forms. Yet, Muhammad also states that one should “die before you die”.³ This is not a physiological death but a death to all that one has falsely recognized as Real, whereas it has only been a shadow. Ibn al-‘Arabī describes,

“Know that what one calls ‘other than the Real’ and which is rereferred to as ‘the world’ is, in relation to the Real, as a shadow is to an object. It is the shadow of God. It is in just this way that existence is attributed to the world, for without doubt that shadow is existent in the sensory domain, albeit only when there is something wherein the shadow is manifest.”⁴

In this passage, the emphasis on the shadow on the one hand, proves the illusion-like existence of that which is not Real, and on the other hand, attests to its very existence. It is important to note that Ibn al-‘Arabī does not negate the external and physical manifestation of these shadows. They are real to the extent in which they are perceived by the senses. However, in relation to the Supreme Real, they are merely shadows and non-existent. In fact, just as it is reiterated in the Islamic corpus, these ‘shadows’ or signs, are provided for our interpretation and contemplation. As man is inept

¹ Qu’rān: 26:139, 26:154, 36:33,42:29,45:6.

² Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p 95.

³ Although there is no recorded transmission of this *hadith* in the four major Sunni *Hadith* corpus, it is a prophetic saying widely used and favored amongst the Sufis.

⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p 98.

of having a direct contemplation of the Divine Essence, he is obliged to recognize the Divine through His signs. Ibn al-‘Arabī says, “The world is only known to the extent that the shadows are known, and the Real is unknown to the extent that the object that casts the shadow is unknown.”¹ This traces back to sufi ontology and cosmology in which it is said that the entire universe, in all its form, are the manifestations of the Divine Names of God.² Thus, the one who has internalized all the Names of Reality, is in fact the one who has acquired a comprehensive understanding and ‘tasting’ of the Divine. With that said, a seeker should not avoid the ‘shadows’ but should unveil it in order to attain the light, and its respectful meaning. The error that Ibn al-‘Arabī attributes to Joseph is that when his dream was manifested in the sensorial realm, he acknowledged it as absolute truth. Whereas that who has a complete grasp of Divine Truth, understands that even the sensorial expression of the imagination is but a dream.³

The world is a slumber and all its signs are revelation.⁴ It was discussed earlier that one who receives a truthful dream benefits from a manner of prophecy due to its revelatory nature. Revelation was said to also include receiving Divine Speech from behind a veil or that which is made manifest to the heart. The seasoned sufi is one who can unveil the signs of the universe and recognize it as it truly is. At this station, the sufi is able to understand and unite the existence of both the divine and lofty nature of the object of perception and its corporeal and inferior domain. Thus, whereas the origin of revelation occurs in the dream, it is only the accomplished seeker who can awaken from the slumber of existence, albeit being in a wakeful state.

The value of the imagination due to its encompassing and comprehensive nature is of utmost importance in the Islamic tradition, and particularly in the sufi path. Those who deny dreams and acknowledge it as haphazard and useless are labeled as ‘ignorant’ by Ibn al-‘Arabī. It is by means of the imagination and its dream state where a spiritual seeker can understand where his soul truly stands. If he has veraciously participated in self-purification, an equal result will be visible in the form of truthful dreams, in which the origin is divine and serves as revelation. If the seeker is

¹ Ibid, p 99.

² For further study on this topic refer to William C. Chittick’s *Self-Disclosure of God* and *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

³ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, p 97.

⁴ Tāj al-Dīn Ḥusayn bin Ḥasan Khwārizmī, *Sharḥ-i fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam-i Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī*, p 334.

occupied by his carnal desires and lower self, his imagination will only produce meaningless images that have been collected throughout the day by the senses. In this regard, the dream can be a clear assessment of a seeker's psychological state and spiritual progress.

Yet, the dreams that occur in the state of sleep, or the physiological state in which the senses disengage, is an imitator for man to unveil the greater dream in which he is residing in. It is a form of preparation in comprehending the formless through the form. Thus, one can say that the physiological sleep is a precursor to the science of the heart, of deciphering the enigma of cosmic existence. The accomplished seeker is one who has achieved that isthmus-like vision in which he comprehends the non-existence of the cosmos, but equally recognizes its existence and contingency in relationship to its Source. Thus, the realm of imagination is the quintessential tool to transcend from the form to the formless, and descend the formless to the form.

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