



*Habs-i-nafas*¹ and *Pas-i anfas*² as Methods of Invocation

Tariq Ashfaq

If you are steadfast in guarding your breaths (anfas) while invoking, you will reach the heavenly kingdom surely.

A Persian Couplet

How is it that you do not smell Me in what you breathe?

Ibn Arabi

In what follows I translate two short Chapters from *Uyun al-Ma'arif* (**Fountains of Wisdom**) by Shah Wahhaj al-Din Qalandar, a Sufi master associated with the Qalandariyya-Qadiriyya Order of India.

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The practice of *habs-i nafas* (breath-control) arrests the intrusion of thoughts (*khatrat*) in so far as the process of respiration remains suspended due to which the cycle of creation (*takhliq*) comes to a standstill, microcosmically speaking³. Consequently, the practising aspirant is as it were reabsorbed into the state of non-manifestation (*ama*)⁴ analogous to the Unconditioned state (*ama*)⁵ of Non-Being. Besides the activation of spiritual influence, the aspirant attains complete union with the Principle by virtue of the said state.

¹ *Habs-i nafas* or breath-control is a method of the regulation of breath similar to the *hathyogic* practice of *pranayama* meant to awaken the higher states. It is done by invoking *la ilaha* silently while breathing in and then keeping the breath confined for a while. After it the breath is thrown out saying *illa' Llah*.

² Unlike *habs-i nafas*, where the retention of breath is of utmost importance, the technique of *pas-i anfas* (*anfas* being the plural of *nafas*) or breaths-vigilance, which is more *rajayogic* than *hathyogic*, is specifically concerned with exercising vigilance over the dual act of breathing by reciting *allah* silently with each ingress and invoking *hu* with every egress.

³ It would be noticed that the breath (*nafas*) produces the microcosmic creation which in turn leads to the emergence of thoughts (*khatrat*).

⁴ Not necessarily in a permanent mode.

⁵ The literal meaning of the term '*ama*' is 'cloud' which implies 'non-manifestation' metaphysically. There is a *hadith* to this effect: "where was our Lord before He created the heavens and the earth?" To this question the Prophet replied: "He was in a Cloud (*ama*), neither was there air above nor below." Commenting on this *hadith* Shyakh Wajih al-Din, an Indian Sufi, says: "It is but natural that the cloud is surrounded by air but the Prophet denied this lest the questioner should take the term '*ama*' literally. Quoted in Shah Abul Hasan Zayd Faruqi's Urdu translation of a Persian treatise, *Wahdat al-Wujud* (**The Unicity of Existence**) by Abd al-Ali Bahr al-Ulum, Delhi, 1970, pp. 48-49.

Habs-i-nafas and Pas-i anfas as Methods of Invocation

The double phases of breathing-in and breathing-out correspond to the two-fold orders of reality, that is, the *lahut* (Universal) and the *nasut* (individual). The breaths in question provide the key to unlocking the mysteries of both the worlds and *a fortiori* they are called the *nafas-i rahman*⁶ (The Breath of the Merciful) of the Prophet Muhammad, which sets in motion the cycle of creation.

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In *pas-i anfas* (breaths-vigilance) the aspirant is to be attentive to the regular alternation of inspiration and expiration of breath. The air⁷ we breathe acts as a vehicle (*markab*) of the animal soul (*ruh-i hayvani*)⁸ which in turn serves as an instrument of the intellectual soul (*ruh-i nafsani*)⁹. Now each of the two parts¹⁰ of soul (animal and intellectual) belongs respectively to the individual (*nasut*) and the Universal (*lahut*) orders. Hence, the respiration comprises all the states of the being thereby encompassing both the extremities of the *nasut* and the *lahut*.¹¹

Of the successive movement of expiration and inspiration the former can be compared to immanence (*tashbih*) while the latter can be likened to transcendence (*tanzih*). The combination of both the rhythms of breath constitutes the phenomenon of life for the inspiration to the exclusion of the expiration is symptomatic of death¹² while the expiration to the exclusion of the inspiration is indicative of apoplexy or coma.¹³ Further, the aspirant, in

⁶ It is to be noted that the terms '*nafas-i rahman*' and '*ama*' are identical in meaning. Moreover, there is an analogical relationship between the *anfas* and the *nafas-i rahman*. Elucidating Ibn Arabi's standpoint in this regard, William C. Chittick says: "Breaths (*anfas*) are the human analogue of the breath of the All-Merciful, since they give life to words and bodily things just as the All-Merciful Breath gives life to the whole cosmos. One might say that human breaths are individual instances of the All-Merciful Breath... When the Shaykh says 'The breaths pertain to the All-Merciful', he seems to include all breathing and even all of manifest Wujud, for he also says that the breaths are 'manifest in the cosmos through mercy' and within them 'all creatures are included.'" William C. Chittick, **The Self-Disclosure of God**, State University of New York Press, 1998, p-149.

⁷ Ibn Arabi wrote: "Since air is one of the strongest of things, and the spirit is a breath, which is similar to air, the spirit has strength." Ibid. p. 320.

⁸ Abd al-Ali in the above-mentioned treatise emphasizes that one must not confuse *ruh-i hayvani* of the Sufis with that of the ancient Greek philosophers and physicians which is none other than the bodily heat (*hararat-i jismi*). The latter can be more properly called the *ruh-i tibbi* ('medicinalist' soul) which in the opinion of a majority of Unani physicians is a vaporous body made up of rarefied humours (*latif akhlat*) particularly blood. On the contrary, Galen and his followers and also Diogenes and Heraclitus, as testified by Aristotle, believed that soul is formed out of air.

⁹ The *ruh-i nafsani* Corresponds to the Koranic *nafs-i wahida* or the *ruh-i kulli* (Universal Spirit). The Koran says: *He created you from one soul*, IV, 1. Additionally, Abd al-Ali observes: "Though the *ruh* (Spirit or Soul) is one yet it is multiple on account of its being conditioned (*mutayyan*)". This can be illustrated by means of an example given by Titus Burckhardt elsewhere: "It is revealed in the form of a tree of which the trunk symbolizes the axis of the Spirit passing through the whole hierarchy of worlds while its branches and leaves correspond to the differentiation of the Spirit."

¹⁰ Keeping in view the indivisibility of the intellectual soul it is therefore illegitimate to use the expression 'two parts', strictly speaking.

¹¹ Instead of employing the five-fold division of the Divine Presences, the two ends of which are the *nasut* and the *lahut*, Shah Wahhaj al-Din makes use of the four-fold division bounded by the *nasut* and the *lahut*.

¹² The English idioms *draw one's last breath* and *breathe one's last* imply that the death of a human being occurs when the respiratory process is disturbed with the in-drawn breath remaining inside the body.

¹³ In all likelihood the death may occur in an apoplectic or a comatose state. Rene Guenon Wrote: "The word 'expire' means both to 'eject the breath' (in respiration) and 'to die' (in respect of the bodily part of the human individuality)." Rene Guenon, **Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta**, New Delhi, 1999, p.60.

Habs-i-nafas and Pas-i anfas as Methods of Invocation

order that his death-in case it occurs at any stage of the breathing-may remain blessed, needs to synchronize the silent invocation of the two parts of the formula *allah-hu* with the drawing in and sending out of breath. Thus, the concurrence of inhalation and 'allah' and that of exhalation and 'hu' are analogous to transcendence and immanence respectively and this cycle of breathing must repeat itself continually from the one end to the other beginning with invoking 'allah'. That is why the cosmos as a whole is contained by both transcendence and immanence, for example, a seed possessing a transcendent nature nonetheless has an immanent nature as it develops into a tree which lies therein potentially (*mundamij*); inversely, although a tree displays immanence it bears transcendence intrinsically (*mundamij*) in the form of a seed.

In the state of immanence agreeing with the tree, to use the above example, or the corporeal order (*nasut*), man, if one might say, hides God in himself; whereas in the state of transcendence coinciding with the seed or the realm of the Unmanifested (*lahut*), God hides man in Himself so to speak. The Koran exhorts the aspirant to reach the station of transcendence in these words: *Be kind as God has been kind to you.*¹⁴ To sum up, the tree is hidden in the seed and the seed is hidden in the tree.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Be kind to God by ascending back towards Him (transcendence) who has been kind to you when He descended (immanence) towards you. Conversely, and in bolder terms of Christianity, God became man that man may become God.*

¹⁵ In another place Shah Wahhaj al-Din remarked that the notion of transcendence (*tanzih*) has two aspects- the absolute and the relative, the latter is a co-relative of immanence (*tashbih*) while the former is inclusive of both, for example, to see both the seed and the tree simultaneously is absolute Transcendence (*tanzih mahad*).