

The Concept of Soul in a Sūfi-Yogi Dialogue of 17th Century India

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The present paper focuses on the subject of soul and is based on the text traditionally known as *Su'āl va Javāb* – a transcript of an intellectual discussion between the Mughal crown prince Dārā Shikōh¹ and a Hindu Yogi Lāl Dās² during the 17th C.E. century. Though neither written nor compiled by Dārā himself, *Su'āl va Javāb* stands as a unique work. It is unique in the sense that never before under the Mughals had such an exercise been undertaken purely for the sake of gaining knowledge. This study is based on various manuscripts of the text – specifically, on the manuscript, C identified as *Su'āl va javāb Dārā Shikōh va Bābā Lāl Dās*, in manuscript Or. 1883, India Office Library Collection, British Library, and a few secondary sources available.

The format of Question and Answer in addressing the question of soul is reminiscent of the beginning of the Eighth Chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, where Arjuna asks Krishna: What is Brahman? What is the Self, and what is action? However, here the first question is about the supreme soul (paramātman) becoming an individual soul and then again, the individual soul (ātman) becoming (returning to?) the supreme soul. This shows that Dārā and Lāl Dās both shared the understanding that an individual soul belongs to the Supreme Soul and that they are similar in nature. This becomes evident from manuscript B of the *Su'āl va Javāb* where in answer to Dara's question regarding the difference between the Creator and the creation, Lāl Dās replies that the “The Creator and the creation are like (water of) a river and the water in a jar. Although the essence is one, nevertheless, there is a huge difference in terms of proportion.” He seems to tread a fine line here. He highlights their difference regarding magnitude but emphasizes their similarity by saying that their nature is the same.

In manuscript C Dārā goes into specifics by asking: If ātman (individual soul) and the paramātman (supreme soul) are the same in nature, how then does the “supreme self” become an individual “soul” and again how can the same individual “soul” become the “supreme soul”? The

¹ Perwaiz Hayat “Dārā Shikōh” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol.4, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2005) 2218-2220.

² Dārā introduces Bābā with the following words in his famous work *Hasanāt ul- 'Ārifīn* as: “Bābā Lāl Mundiyya who is amongst the perfect Gnostics – I have seen none among the Hindus, who has reached such *irfān* and spiritual strength as he has.” See Dārā Shikōh, *Hasanāt ul- 'Ārifīn*, ed. Sayyid Makhdoom Rahin (Tehran: Chāpkhāna-i Wāhīd, 1352 H. Solar), 49.

question is principally about the spiritual voyage – individual soul leaving its origin and then again becoming one with its origin. Perhaps the idea of *fanā'* (annihilation) is implied here in which individual soul, after experiencing *fanā'*, loses its identity to become one with the supreme soul. The answer of Lāl Dās responds to this idea. In fact, Lāl Dās elaborates his reply with the example of alcohol: due to impurities, clear water becomes alcohol; only after removing all the impurities does it become clear water again. Thus, a polluted individual soul cannot become one with the supreme soul, which is clear and clean.

Ātman literally means breath; popularly, it is known as the inner self (individual soul). According to the Upanishads, ātman denotes the ultimate essence of the universe as well as the vital breath in human beings. It is not born, nor does it die; in fact, it is imperishable.³ Paramātmān, on the other hand, literally means the supreme self (supreme soul)⁴ or Brahman. The idea of Lāl Dās regarding the similar nature of “individual soul” and “supreme soul” may be compared with Sankara’s theology. The Hindu theologian Sankara (end of 8th C.E.?) developed a doctrine according to which the true nature of ātman is identical with the absolute (brahman). Flood⁵ explains the essentials of his theory in the following words:

He (Sankara) tries to establish that spiritual ignorance (*avidyā*) or illusion (*māyā*) is caused by the superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of what is not the self onto the self. All knowledge is distorted by superimposition or projection, which prevents us from seeing our true nature as the self’s (*ātman*’s) pure subjectivity, ontologically identical with the absolute (*brahman*).

Furthermore, for the school of Sankara, reality is non-dual (*advaita*). There is only one reality – Brahman (*paramātmān*), which is without attributes and un-describable. Brahman and *atman* are identical. Sankara interprets the Upanishadic phrase *tat tvam asi* (that thou art)⁶ in a literal sense: individual soul (you) is supreme soul (that). For him, it is only due to illusion (*māyā*) that one perceives individual soul as different from supreme soul. Once the veil of *māyā* is lifted, the soul (*ātman*) realizes its true nature and achieves liberation (*moksha*). Human beings can attain

³ See John Grimes, *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY, 1996) (hereinafter referred to as *A Concise Dictionary*), 68-69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, .225.

⁵ See Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 241.

⁶ See *Chandyoga Upanishad* of the *Sama Veda*. It retains this saying in the context of the dialogue which happened amongst philosopher Āruni and his son Svetaketu: “That which is the finest essence – this whole world has that as its self. That is Reality. That is *Ātman*. That are Thou (*Tat tvam asi*), Svetaketu.” See Moore, *Indian Philosophy*, 68-69.

this liberation while they are alive (jivan muktī). Sankara's approach was later criticized by Hindu theologians and philosophers such as Rāmānuja (11th century) and Madhva (1197-1276). Rāmānuja challenged the concept of māyā and the belief that the supreme reality (paramātman) is without attributes. Moreover, he rejected the doctrine of the phenomenality of the world, admitted the inalienable individuality of ātman and held that Brahman (paramātman) is personal.⁷ As he saw it, salvation cannot be achieved by the disappearance of the ātman (individual soul) and ātman cannot be dissolved in Brahman (paramātman). For Madhva, ātman and paramātman are ultimately separate and not identical in any way, while the triad of Brahman (paramātman), atman and the world exist permanently, even though the world and ātman are dependent on Brahman. Ātman is blissful by nature though it is subject to pain and suffering on account of its connection with the body and the latter's past karma.⁸

The answer to the question regarding the nature of the individual soul indicates that Lāl Dās followed Sankara's thought, although he seems to emphasize more the personal effort required to cleanse the soul of the impurities caused by the five senses. Lāl Dās in effect blames the individual for accumulating impurities (ālā'ish); therefore, it is the responsibility of the individual to rid his soul of them. Thus, he sees māyā as an impediment to perceiving the reality of the self. Sankara's system of thought, based as it is on non-dual reality (advaita), can be compared to Ibn al-'Arabī's system of thought based on waḥdat al-wujūd (unity of being).⁹ In al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya Ibn al-'Arabī says:

He is their existence and from Him they acquire existence. And existence/Being is nothing other than the Real, nor is it something outside of Him from which He gives to them...¹⁰ For the Verifiers it has been established that there is nothing in Being/existence but God. As for us [creatures], though we exist, our existence is through Him...¹¹ the existent things become distinct and plural through the plurality of the entities and their distinction in themselves. Hence there is nothing in Being/existence except God...¹²

⁷ Moore, *Indian Philosophy*, 508.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Dr. Muhammad Durrany sees the followers of Shankara and Ibn al-'Arabī as sharing the same beliefs. He writes: "The followers of Advaita and 'Waḥdat-ul-Wujūd' believe that whatever there exists on earth is all God in His universal or Virāt form, and whatever is seen other else is nothing but mere illusion or Māyā." See his *The Gītā and the Qur'an* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1982), 229.

¹⁰ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, (I, 406, 14) cf. William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY, 1989) (hereinafter referred to as Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*), 94.

¹¹ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, (I, 279, 5) cf. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 94.

¹² Ibn al-'Arabī, *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, (II, 160,1) cf. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 95.

We know that Dārā was fully informed about the philosophy of Ibn al-‘Arabī¹³ and it is equally possible that he was aware of the criticism being leveled at *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) in the Indian context. For example, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, following, Ala al-Dawlah al-Simnani, criticized Ibn al-‘Arabī and propagated the idea of *waḥdat al-shuhūd*. Friedmann explains:

He [Sirhindi] considers the outward meaning (*zahir*) of the shariah as the touchstone for the correctness of his Sufi experience and finds himself in agreement with Ala al-Dawlah al-Simnani, who was one of the earliest Sufi critics of Ibn al-Arabi’s theory of the Unity of Being.¹⁴

Like Ramanuja, Sirhindi saw creation as different from the Creator and he explained *hamah ust* (All is He) as meaning *hamah az ust* (All is from Him).¹⁵ He elaborates that beings are manifestations of the One Divine Essence. The Essence does not dwell in them, is not united with them and is not influenced, coloured, or augmented by them.¹⁶ By the time Dārā began studying Sufism, both schools had its followers, and much was written about this debate in India. Was Dārā aware of the similar theological debates among Hindu scholars such as Sankara and Rāmānuja? Whether he knew about the debate in Hinduism is not clear from his biography. Nonetheless, Dārā, following Lāl Dās, explains in a later work the nature of individual soul and supreme soul and their relationship with one another in *Majma‘ al-Bahrayn*. According to him, *ātman* is pure self and is akin to *paramātman*, which is the essence of all souls. In addition to this, he describes *paramātman*¹⁷ and names it as *abū al-arvāḥ*¹⁸ (lit., father of the souls). It is interesting that, although Dārā’s explanation in *Majma‘ al-Bahrayn* agrees with Sankara and Ibn al-Arabi in general and with Lāl Dās in particular, he neither refers to any of the thinkers mentioned above nor does he compare their various schools of thought.

¹³ Hayat, “Concept,” 73-74.

¹⁴ Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi* (Montreal: McGill University, 1971) (hereinafter referred to as Friedmann, *Sirhindi*), 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Daryush Shayegan, *Hindouisme et Soufisme* (Paris: La Différence, 1979), 31. In the Persian text Dārā writes “*dhātī ke jami‘ arvāḥ dar ān mundaraj and ān rā paramātman va abū al-arvāḥ gūayand*” Dārā Shukōh, *Majma‘-ul-Bahrain*. Edited and translated into English by M. Mahfuz-ul-Haq. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1929 (hereinafter referred to as Dārā, *Majma‘*) (see Dārā, *Majma‘*, 88).

¹⁸ See Dārā, *Majma‘*, 88.

Dārā's poetry also reflects a similar philosophy. His *Dīwān* contains numerous verses which clearly show that he was a believer in Ibn al-Arabi's philosophy of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. For example, he says:

- We have not seen an atom separate from the Sun;
- Every drop of water is the sea in itself
- With what name should one call the Truth
- Every name that exists is one of the God's names.¹⁹

Poetry was apparently an outlet for Dārā, as it was for others, when it came to experiencing the ideas inherent in *waḥdat al-wujūd*. According to Ali Asani "almost all Sufi poetry in the vernaculars is saturated with the idea of Unity of Being."²⁰ Bulhe Shah – a Qādirī Punjabi Sufi poet of the 17th century confirms Asani's view when he writes:

- He is one, but one among many because
- There are no secrets in a crowded house;
- Every place He is seen, each place His own
- For in the stream of oneness none may drown.²¹

In further exploring the relationship between the individual soul and the supreme soul, Dārā's next two questions in manuscript C revolve around the reward and punishment connected

¹⁹ See Dārā, *Dīwān*, 127. يك نره ند يد يم زخورشيد جدا هر قطره آب هست عين دريا

Meaning: [In] the way we do not see a ray (particle) as separate from the sun,

In fact, every drop is the very ocean itself.

A little difference in rendering is found in the text of the verse in Hasrat's *Dara*, See Hasrat, *Dara*, 145. A similar idea can be found in the long gīnan popular among the Ismailis of the Indo-Pak subcontinent, known as *Bujh Nirānjan*.

Neither does He have any name nor place, nor is He without name and place;

With whatever name He is described, all names are His.

The one invisible One assumed a hundred thousand forms and was contained in the three worlds.

He became evident in everything, [yet] He is not to be seen.

According to Ali Asani, "Ismaili gīnan literature is a genre of Indo-Muslim vernacular literature used to propagate the Ismaili form of Islam in the Punjab, Sind and Gujarat." See Ali Asani, *The Bujh Nirānjan – An Ismaili Mystical Poem* (Harvard: Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1991), 131. Composed sometime during the 17th century, *Bujh Nirānjan*, although a part of Khoja Ismaili tradition, has been lately identified as a composition written by Qadiri sufis adopted by Khoja Ismailis as a part of their literature. The Nizari Ismailis recite this composition in their prayer halls and traditionally maintain that it was composed by one of their dais Pir Sadardin. However, Asani disputes this traditional claim and with the help of a manuscript unearthed at the British Library proving that it was written by Qadiri Shaykh Isa Jundullah (d.1621). See Asani, *Bujh Nirānjan*, 19- 41.

²⁰ Ibid., 131.

²¹ Bulleh Shah, *Bulleh Shah-A Selection*, rendered into English verse by Taufiq Rafat (Karachi: Vanguard Publications, 1988), 137.

to the nature of the soul. Dārā asks Lal Das: “If there is no difference, then, how do reward and punishment come into being?” The reason for this enquiry was to understand the nature of the soul. If it is the same in nature as the supreme soul, then why do reward, punishment, and judgment exist? The reply was that “it is due to the effect of the container.” He illustrates this with the example of the Ganges and the water of the Ganges and explains to Dārā, on his further questioning, that it is due to the nature of the Ganges, which is not akin to its water when held in small containers. To understand this, one has to understand the degree to which the river is held sacred by Hindus.

It is believed by Hindus that the Ganges originates from the head of Shiva and has the power to cleanse the impurities of a believer. To a believer, it is a commendable act to immerse oneself in the Ganges to attain purification. Thus, the Ganges is a purifier and due to its qualities of vastness, purity and connection to Shiva (nature of container reflects nature of Shiva) it swallows up contamination, hence, it remains pure and the question of good and bad does not exist whereas a small quantity of Ganges water held in a container (apparently not connected with Shiva) can easily be contaminated and depending on the container can go bad. Similarly, in a question/answer set in manuscript C, Lāl Dās notes that the supreme soul is pure like the Ganges and without impurities and is a liberator (*mukhallis*), whereas the individual soul is imprisoned in existence. Once the specific nature of existence departs, individual soul becomes supreme soul. Nonetheless, as long as it remains entangled in existence, it remains individual soul. The answer of Lāl Dās offers a certain depth. He treads a path between the thought of Sankara and that of Rāmānuja. On the one hand, he believes, like Sankara, that the nature of the individual soul is akin to the supreme soul, yet on the other hand, the individual soul is imprisoned in existence, which is the real world of Rāmānuja. As such, it will commit acts – good and bad – for which it will be rewarded and punished. To escape the cycle of good and bad, reward and punishment, the individual soul needs to reconnect with the supreme soul, transcending the world of existence, and leaving the prison of time and space.

Dārā moves on to the next set of questions and answers and raises the issue of pain and pleasure. Here the discussion begins with the relationship of soul with body and the connection of individual soul with the supreme soul. Dārā questions why there should be pain and pleasure, seeing as individual soul is, in fact, part of the supreme soul. Lāl Dās’s reply is consistent: the reason for such feeling is due to the fact that soul is imprisoned in the body. Since soul is imprisoned in body, whatever the body may feel, it transmits to the soul. Similarly, as companion to the body, whatever the soul feels, it conveys to the body. However, in the presence of ‘perfect *fuqrā*’, the individual soul remains awake and content. Due to that vigilance, the nature of the individual soul leaves existence behind, and after losing its “illusionary or imaginative aspect,” becomes supreme soul and transcends the feeling of pain and pleasure. A similar idea can be found

in the Ismaili Ginans. Imam Begum (d.1866), a well-known Ginan composer of Indo-Pakistan, sings: “When I found the true master, miseries were gone, and the problems of this servant were resolved; I achieved happiness.”²²

However, Lāl Dās maintains that as long as the individual soul remains attached to existence, both pain and pleasure will continue to affect the individual soul. Moreover, it acquires good or bad character from the actions performed by the body as it is imprisoned in existence. The individual soul, if awake, and for all the time it is imprisoned in the body, feels that pain of imprisonment.²³In manuscript B, Dārā brings up an interesting point -- that body and soul are separate in the way that the body and its shadow are separate. Lāl Dās moves away from this example by giving another, more familiar one: that of a river and a drop of water. If a drop of water goes back into a river, it becomes a river; however, if it remains separate, it realizes its limits. In another Manuscript, Lāl Dās also gives a logical and unique explanation of how the soul becomes separated due to the acts of the body. He says:

Know (also) that water extinguishes fire. However, when it (water) comes (in contact with the fire) through the medium of a container, fire destroys water. Similarly, by developing lust, greed, sorrow and anguish; although the drop (soul) is the essence, one destroys it. Thus essence is free of attributes and, like a river it would not care about a drop (of water). If it enters (the river) then it is the best. Otherwise, it (depends on its) intention (because) wherever it will wish (to go, there) it will spread. Thus, God is God and the devotee is a devotee; however, if he/she avoids spreading out (in all directions rather going back to the Sea), it is better.²⁴

²² “Satgur milya tiyare dukh ja tarriyaji; Sarve sariya dasi ne kaaj; Anand hoon pami.” See G.Allana, *Ginans of Ismaili Pirs*, Vol.1 (Karachi: Ismaili Association for Pakistan, 1984) (hereinafter referred to as Allana, *Ginans*), 326-27.

²³ A similar idea can be found in an Ismaili Ginan sung by Pir Hasan Shah:

Pinjar padiyo parivarno,
Koik bujat jan
Merey tan ki vedna,
Sainya tapat bujhaav

Translation:

Family ties have become a cage;
This is known only to a few;
My being is in pain;
O Lord, come and cool off the heat (of my being)

See Allana, *Ginans*, 232.

²⁴ See Manuscript B, Majlis 2, Question 3:

بدانکه آب آتش را نابود می سازد، چون در پرده ظروف آید آتش آب را نابود کند، همچنان از مبتلای خواهش غیر هوا و حرص غم و غصه درآمده باوجود آنکه قطره ذات است نابود میگردد، پس ذات منزله از صفات است مانند دریا از قطره چه پروای دارد اگر داخل شود سعادت اوست به پیوندد و الا خواهش اوست هر کجا که خواهد برفگند پس خدا خدا است و

The being stops suffering when the individual soul leaves the body and experiences oneness with the supreme soul.²⁵ In other words, individual soul experiences union (*jam'*) and abandons separation (*tafriqa*). Hujwiri explains *jam'* and *tafriqa* in his celebrated work *Kashf al-Mahjūb* in detail.²⁶ He explicates the process of *jam'* that while in separation when one depends entirely on God and commits all his attributes to His charge and refers all his actions to Him; his identity ceases and God manifests in his acts. He quotes one important hadith in which it is mentioned that the servant of God due to the remembrance of God comes so near to God that his every action becomes God's action.²⁷ Thus saints and prophets become united with God while performing duties of servant-hood - externally they experience *tafriqa* whereas internally they experience *jam'*. The experience of *jam'* can be interpreted as the death of a person's identity. Such an experience during a Sufi's lifetime is one of the cornerstones of Sufism. This experience is encapsulated in the popular Prophetic tradition "die before ye die." Schimmel says that this tradition "gave the Sufis the possibility of pondering on the implications of the slaying of the lower qualities and ensuring the spiritual resurrection in this life."²⁸

بنده بنده هر چند که پر اکنده نشود بهتر است

²⁵ One can compare this thought with the idea of the relationship between *nafs* (soul) and *rūh* (spirit). The three levels of *nafs* (soul) --*ammāra*, *lawwāma* and *muṭma'inā*, -- while connected to each other are meant to provide specific functions: *ammāra* is the one with good and bad nature acquired by the influence of place and company; *lawwāma* is the one which is always wake and keeps warning the soul not to listen to *ammāra*; and finally, when the soul rejects *ammāra* it attains the third level where it is more connected to the spirit (*rūh*) which has the nature of supreme soul. See Carl Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: 1997), 45. Also see Carl Ernst's "Mystical Language and the Teaching Context in the Early Sufi Lexicons," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

²⁶ Ali b. Uthman al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, translated by Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Luzac & Co, 1936) (hereinafter referred to as Hujwiri, *Kashf*), 252.

²⁷ Hujwiri quotes the complete hadith:

"My servant continually seeks access to Me by means of works of supererogation until I love him; and when I love him, I am his ear and his eye and his hand and his tongue: through Me he hears and sees and speaks and grasps." (See Hujwiri, *Kashf*, 254)

²⁸ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 235. In this context, a popular short story in Rumi's *Mathnawi* explains this tradition. A merchant leaves for India and before leaving on the voyage asks his (caged) parrot what he would prefer to have as a gift. The parrot requests of him that, on his way, whenever he sees parrots he should let them know about his plight of spending life in a cage. The merchant promises that he will do as asked. On completing his voyage and while returning home he sees a group of parrots and delivers the message but then the leader of the group has a fatal fall from a branch. The merchant sees this, becomes sad and with heavy heart returns home. He informs his parrot about the incident and describes it as heartbreaking for him. On finishing his story, he sees the parrot trembling and falling down inside the cage. After removing her from the cage, to the merchant's surprise the parrot flies to a high branch. Bewildered by this, he asks the bird: "what was the advice from the parrots that allowed you to trick me so successfully?" The parrot replies: "The advice was given by performing an action. The leader of the parrots acted dead to send the message that you must become dead like me in order to find deliverance." The moral of the story is that the body resembles a cage and if one is to attain liberation then one has to die in the cage. See "The Mathnawī-ye Ma'nawī" Rhymed Couplets of Deep Spiritual Meaning of Jalaluddin Rumi. Translated from the Persian by Ibrahim Gamard (with gratitude for R.A. Nicholson's 1926 British Translation) © Ibrahim (translation, footnotes, and transliteration), 1547 – 1854. First published on Sunlight (yahoogroups.com), 11/18/99.

The questions that Dārā raises throughout the dialogue seem ultimately to focus on the concept of soul: its creation, its journey in this world and its return to its origin. Lāl Dās, appears to acknowledge this curiosity. Perhaps this is why he, on the basis of what he said earlier to Dārā regarding the individual soul's awareness and consciousness, raises here the question: Why does a conscious and fully awake individual soul take up earthly existence as its abode? He answers his own query by saying that it is the decision of the individual soul to transfer its existence from *lāmakān* (lit. with no abode) to this earthly abode. He compares the individual soul with a person who comes to dwell in an abode owned by a stranger and, lacking authority, performs only what the stranger tells him to do. In this context, for Lāl Dās, the owner of the place is equivalent to the nature of existence (*nafs-hā-ī wujūd*). Perhaps by *nafs-hā-ī wujūd* he meant *nafs-i ammāra* (lower soul).²⁹ As such, due to this domination, the individual soul becomes helpless and follows the directions of the lower soul. However, individual soul has not forgotten its origin completely and retains it (on the level of sub-conscious). Dārā continues to question the Lāl Dās as to why the individual soul, though awake, is overpowered by the lower soul. The reply of Lāl Dās is not direct; however, instead, he chooses to talk about the voyage of the individual soul. He compares the individual soul with a person who has forgotten his path. Using Sufi terminology, he says that the abode of the soul is *lāmakān*. In other words, the origin of the individual soul (*ātman*) is actually *paramātman*. Thus, *paramātman* is the abode (also known as *lāmakān*) of the individual soul (*ātman*). Lāl Dās then highlights the steps of this voyage: after the soul leaves *lāmakān* and enters into the domain of others, the individual soul forgets its way and like a lost individual becomes perplexed, worried and unable to recognize his true home. After being provided with guidance, the soul recognizes his own abode and returns to his original home and becomes part of the supreme soul (*paramātman*).³⁰

²⁹ One may point out that Baba Lāl later explains three types of *nafs*: 'the soul at peace' (*nafs-i muṭma'ina*), 'the blaming soul' (*nafs-i lawwāma*) and 'the soul that inspires evil' (*nafs-i ammāra*) and seems to suggest an equivalence with the three qualities (*gunas*) of nature: purity (*sattva*), passion (*rajas*) and ignorance (*tamas*).

³⁰ In one of the Ismaili Ginans, the composer Pir Sadardin uses similar language:

O you living creature,
[Remember that time] when you were in your mother's womb,
You were knowledge-able [at that time],
And you were slowly gradually moving upward
Such was the difficult time you endured [in the womb]
O you the living creature,
You made a promise before coming to this Kaljug,

Apart from what Lāl Dās recommends above, he also touches on one additional, important subject, i.e., self-recognition. He cites the example of a king who leaves his throne and sits alone in an isolated place. Nobody recognizes the king and his powers until he comes back and sits on his throne. On his return, of course, everybody recognizes him and gives him due respect. Similarly, if the soul moves from place to place and forgets its location of origin, which is *lāmakān*, it will not achieve its true goal of becoming one with *paramātman*. The voyage of spiritual choice also seems to become a voyage of ‘forgetfulness.’ Similar ideas can be found in popular Sufi literature. For example, Shaykh Fariduddin Attar’s *Mantiq at-Tayr* develops the same idea, where ‘forgetful soul’ returns to its origin after being awakened and guided by its master. Sufi literature emphasizes recollecting that moment (*azal* lit. beginning of the beginning) when God revealed Himself as the Lord of the primordial covenant in the inmost recesses of the human soul (*sirr an-nafs*). The Qur’an, too, reminds humanity of that moment in the following words: “Am I not your Lord?”³¹ As a covenant, the pre-existing souls of all humanity acceded to the lordship of God before the beginning of time.

The prescription offered by Lāl Dās for the return of the soul (*atmān*) to its origin ends with a verse that seems to have been composed by him – very much similar in form and theme with the vernacular poetry of that time. The composition highlights the importance of the ‘Perfect Master’ by stating the difficulty faced by the individual soul in ascending upwards on its voyage. The individual soul implores in this verse that, on its ascent (towards the supreme soul), it needs the helping hand of the ‘Perfect Master’ to climb the “ladder” successfully. In one of the Ismaili Ginans the idea of a helping hand is expressed in this way:

[Leaving the womb] your soul understands that it is now free

Your practice is greed and selfishness.

[In fact] you have broken your promise with your Lord. See Allana, *Ginans*, 226-27.

While in his mother’s womb the individual soul was more knowledgeable and gave his oath of allegiance to the Creator. Similar concept of *alastu* is popular in Sufi writings. However, after coming into this world soul forgot the oath or promise which he made to his Lord. In another passage, Pir Shams offers a recipe for escaping the forgetfulness and ignorance. He says:

Souls have fallen in ignorance;

Due to egoism they have lost their beloved

[Death] will come suddenly and will take [them].

If you accompany your true master,

You will forget about the ignorance and many other things

And you will understand the word of your heart.

The Ismaili Pir is suggesting here that if one wants to forget all other things and follow the right path, one has to seek the company of a true master. (See Ginan Eji Kesri sinha... in *Ginan-e-Sharif* (Karachi: Ismailia Association for Pakistan, 1973) (hereinafter referred to as *Ginan-e-Sharif*), 26.

³¹ *alastu bi-rabbikum*, 7:172.

O Beloved,

The Creator, the Creator of [this] creation

has lead me safe across the sea

Pir Sadardin held my hand so that

I can safely embark upon my destination³².

The last series of three question and answer sets of the manuscript C regarding soul is based on the qualities and the nature of the individual soul, which should be akin to the supreme soul. Dārā asks that if individual soul is a part of the supreme soul (literally a particle from the light of God), then why does the individual soul have to face judgment for good and bad deeds and ascertain its own truthfulness? Moreover, why does it become forgetful after descending to this world? His question implies that, since the individual soul has descended from the supreme soul, it must have the same nature as the supreme soul. As such, the individual soul should always be good, truthful, alert and above judgment. Lāl Dās replies by developing the example he used in the previous set –that of the king who left his throne in ordinary clothes and was arrested by a few policemen outside his palace. The king tries to explain his position, but no one believes him. It is only in the daylight policemen recognized him, and he was able to return to his throne and resume governing. Perhaps Lāl Dās implies here that the individual soul has chosen to leave its abode and, like the king, must not expect to regain its true identity until it returns to its place of origin.

Thus, the individual soul is as essentially pure and blameless as the supreme soul. However, the individual soul has chosen this voyage and, in the process, has imprisoned itself. Only when it remembers the words of the ‘Perfect Master’ will it become conscious of its identity and recognizes that it is a part of the total (supreme soul). At that point, it will no longer have any inclination towards worldly temptations and wishes but will be a purified soul safely returned to its origin. According to Lāl Dās, such a soul will not face judgment because it is pure; nonetheless, the individual soul that is too much occupied in self-serving will be condemned to multiple rebirths – and will remain captive in the cycle of being born 84 times from womb to womb.

One can compare this train of thought with the central idea of Attar’s *Conference of the*

³² Text of the Ginan says:

Sakhi Khalak khalakanhaar tene lai tariya ji,
Pir Sadardin pakdi bannye bhavsāgar ootariya re
See Allana, *Ginans*, 214-15.

Birds. The leading character Hoopoe reaches out to the birds - who are in slumber - and awakens them, sending them back to their king. A similar idea can be traced in other Sufi writings such as Ghazzali's *Risālat at-tayr* (Recital of Birds) and Ibn Sina's *Hayy bin Yaqzān*. These Sufi works contain almost all the ingredients that Lāl Dās is explaining: the Sufi master, consciousness, the pathway to the king's palace and finally, self-realization.³³ However, at this point, Lāl Dās introduces the notion of "84 wombs." This concept, which enjoyed widespread acceptance in the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain belief-systems, represents the punishment for a soul that has failed to attain salvation. An echo of it can also be heard in Ismaili Ginans. Syeda Imam Begum³⁴ says:

Vaar chorasi fariyo;

Tuney saan na avi rey...

Translation: You moved 84 times (from womb to womb),

yet you are shameless (and you are still in slumber).

Dārā continues his questioning and asks: If the individual soul is a drop of the supreme soul, then why does it have to be ascertained? Lāl Dās explains that soul is enveloped in a body and it has to be ascertained to recognize the similar nature shared by the individual soul and the supreme soul. He provides two examples: oil in milk and fire in wooden logs. In his first example, Lāl Dās elaborates on the issue of identity, saying that after the oil is extracted from milk – being originally a part of milk – it never loses its identity even if it is thrown back into the milk. Here, perhaps Lāl Dās is equating milk with the physical world of which soul is a part. Once the soul is extracted from this material world – achieved by following the path set by a Sufi master -- then the soul of a person remains pure even if thrown back into the material world; it will not lose its identity as the drop of the oil does. In the second example, he shows that, potentially, fire is present in a wooden log; as soon as it is activated, the log becomes a torch. Thus, once the flame is ignited, the log becomes a torch, and it loses its identity as a log of wood; rather, it is known as the flame-carrying torch. Hence in both examples (oil and torch), the hidden essence –once identified and ascertained -- never loses its identity. The path that a soul should follow he suggests involves remembrance (*dhikr*) of the word of a Perfect Master. According to Lāl Dās, once the self is recognized through remembrance, all desires, wishes, and temptations of the self (*nafs*) are

³³ See Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*. Translated with an introduction by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (Canada: Penguin Books, 1984).

³⁴ Ginan-e-Sharif, 50.

consumed and the soul, which is a part of God's light, emanates from the body. This is also reflected in the verse in which he says: "As you move away from the *nafs* (*nafs-i ammara*); every hair (of your body) becomes enlightened once it is immersed in the remembrance of the Truth."

The last question of this series is about the forgetfulness of the soul. Dārā asks Lāl Dās how the soul can achieve realization (leaving behind forgetfulness) and return to the Creator. Lāl Dās's answer is very precise and vivid: This is impossible without an intercessor. He compares this with the role of "bureaucracy" in gaining access to a king, which is impossible without the intercession of a courtier. The term used here in the manuscript is "*wasīla*," a Sufi term which can be found in the Qur'an. The Qur'an talks about *wasīla* in the following terms³⁵: "O ye who believe! Be mindful of your duty to Allah and seek the *wasīla* (the intercessor) unto Him and strive in His way in order that ye may succeed." The Master in Sufism³⁶ is seen as the *wasīla*, just as the Imam is seen in Shia Islam.³⁷ Similarly, in Hinduism³⁸ and Sikhism³⁹ the intercessor is the *guru* (Master) who guides a novice towards the right path.

In another example, when explaining the importance of the Perfect Man, Lāl Dās speaks of the "polisher," perhaps alluding to the Perfect Master, who removes the rust from the mirror and makes it bright and useful again. According to him, "once a mirror becomes rusted it does not reflect the brightness. However, if the same mirror is given to a polisher (*ṣaiqalgar*), he will restore its polish (*ṣaiqal*) and bring back its brightness. The mirror, which originally had lost its power of reflection (lit. sight), will automatically start reflecting (lit. showing) the face." The symbol of mirror in this answer alludes to the soul or heart of a wayfarer. Sufi literature has many similar examples of such a symbol used in various stories and parables. One of the more popular stories

أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَابْتَغُوا إِلَيْهِ الْوَسِيلَةَ وَجَاهِدُوا فِي سَبِيلِهِ

³⁵ For the comparison and position of qutb and Imam see Scimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 200.

³⁷ Imam Jafar as-Sadiq said: "We (Imams) are the gates of God. We are the medium for His people. He who approaches Him through us is brought near Him. He who seeks our intercession is interceded for. He who seeks His favours through us is favoured by Him. He who turns away from us goes astray." See Qazi Numan, *Kitabul Himma* translated by Jawad al-Muscatai and A.M. Moulavi, 42. Cf. Kassam Ali M.J. *Ever Living Guide* (Karachi: Ismailia Association Pakistan), 31.

³⁸ Sankara defined a *guru* as one who is firmly convinced that he or she is the supreme consciousness; one whose mind is rooted in the highest reality. (See *A Concise Dictionary*, 133)

³⁹ Pashaura Singh defines *guru* as:

The channel through which the voice of Akal Purakh [the Eternal One] becomes audible..Nanak became the embodiment of the eternal Guru only when he received the divine Word and conveyed it to his disciples. The same spirit manifested itself in his successors. See Willard G. Oxtoby, Roy C. Amore, Amir Hussain. *World Religions Eastern Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2014), 123.

in the *Mathnawi* is about a mirror. Mawlana Rumi relates the tale of a painting competition between Chinese and Greek artists. The former created a marvelous painting on one wall, whereas the Greeks only polished their assigned wall. Both teams were separated by a thick curtain. When the king came to see the results, the curtain was lifted, and he was in awe because both walls had a similar painting except that the one which was reflecting the other was brighter than the original. The Greeks were adjudged the winners for having converted their wall into a mirror. Ismā‘il Rusukhi Anqarawī (d.1041/1631), the great Mevlevi commentator on the *Mathnawi* and contemporary of Dārā Shukôh, explained the same verses as follows:

(The Sufis) have polished their hearts – which are purified of greed, lust, avarice, and hatred – from the rust of ‘others besides’ (God); they have purified and burnished (their hearts) with the remembrance of God (*dhikr Allah*).⁴⁰

Lāl Dās is applying a similar analogy -- the heart as a mirror which has grown rusty--, but he differs in prescribing a method for removing the rust. He emphasizes the need for total and complete submission to the Master. Once the self has submitted, it is the Master who will remove the rust, rather than the wayfarer trying to polish his or her own mirror. For Lāl Dās, it is the Perfect Master who, by removing all the dirt and rust, brings brightness (life) to the soul. Later, in the context of the importance of the Master, he quotes a quatrain from Bābā Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī (Kāshī) which beautifully expresses the qualities of a mirror: it reflects what is in front of the mirror and the mirror’s own identity is forsaken – the object which is in front of the mirror sees its own self in the mirror and nothing else. Thus, the subject becomes object erasing all differences. Moreover, mirror exists for others and does not have any identity. Similarly, the people of purity are so humble that the identities of their own personalities do not exist, such that when other people see the people of purity, they only see their own reflection. Thus, the message of the poetical composition is that people of purity are needed, like mirrors, to reflect other personalities. By showing others their own reality, they guide them.

For Lāl Dās, the connection with the Perfect Master is not only important for salvation; it is also a source of tranquility. He says: “If you need a safe abode (tranquility), then tranquility is in the companionship of the dervishes (*fuqrā*’). Anywhere else, tranquility is not present.” Not only is the Perfect Master needed for tranquility, he is also needed for the sacred word, which

⁴⁰ See Kenan Rifai’s *Listen: Commentary on the Spiritual Couplets of Mevlana Rumi*. Translated by Victoria Holbrook. Louisville, Kentucky, 2013.

should be remembered and guarded in the heart. Lāl Dās ends his answer with the example of an oyster. He perceives a disciple who waits for the Perfect Master as an oyster waiting for the material to create a pearl. Much as an oyster waits for the rain and comes out of the depths to absorb the heavenly drop and after swallowing the drop goes back to the depths to create a precious pearl out of that drop. Similarly, a disciple takes the Word of his master and works on it to connect him/herself with his/her master. In a nutshell, in the above three sets of questions and answers, the discussion continues the theme of ascent to the top, made possible thanks to the power of the Word given by the master. The soul ascends to the *lāhūt* (the ‘non-place’ of divine nature), i.e., its absoluteness.

The study of *Su’āl va Javāb* shows that such discussion on soul acted as a springboard for Dārā’s thought. Subsequent to his discussions with Lāl Dās, Dārā was able to appreciate Hinduism with such deep understanding that he saw almost no difference in the essence of either religion and as a result, wrote the comparative works entitled *Majma’ al-Baḥrayn* and *Samudra Sangam*. It was after these discussions that Dārā, in later years, held Lāl Dās in a similar status as other *awlīya*. He also viewed the Upanishads as the hidden book referred to in the Qur’an and that the Prophet Muhammad was *Siddha* of his time. These discussions also motivated him to research and write extensively on Hinduism, including his translation of various Hindu works such as the Upanishads, *Bhagvad Gītā* and *Jōg Bāshist*.
