

# A Sufi Response to the Coronavirus

By Charles Upton

**T**he coronavirus, whether the extreme global response to it is warranted or unwarranted, imposes a major contraction. But *what is it that contracts?* The great Sufi Abu Yazid al-Bistami said: “When the Heart contracts, the *nafs* (the ego) expands; when the *nafs* contracts the Heart expands.” If the Heart contracts we will seek forgetfulness in numbness or dissipation, so the idea is to *use* the virus and the virus-panic to help contract the *ego* instead, the *nafs*; from the Sufi point-of-view, this is why Allah has sent it. The thing in us that is always grasping, fleeing and making demands, the thing that tries to hide from fear either by sinking into oblivion or else by asserting itself and starting conflicts, *this* is the *nafs*. This is what must contract. If, in submission to Allah’s will, we form a clear intent to *use* the coronavirus to contract this *nafs*, then the Heart will expand of its own accord—and along with this expansion will arrive a powerful sense of Allah’s Presence and Mercy; this is what some Sufis have called “expansion in the fist of contraction.” If “there is no might nor power except in Allah,” then we avail ourselves of this power not by seizing it or imitating it but by *submitting* to it. If we can do this with courage, clarity and sincerity, a great power will develop out of that submission, the power to follow Allah’s lead and rise to His commands, in the full knowledge that *there is no refuge from Allah except in Him* [Q. 9:118]. This is the unparalleled opportunity that is being presented to us by the coronavirus; let us not waste it.

But *exactly how is this done?* We are all getting squeezed now, and when you get squeezed it seems like *everything* contracts, both Heart and *nafs*, both empathy and selfishness. You have fewer ways to indulge your passions, even your ‘innocent’ ones, but you also tend to become more irritable, obsessive, paranoid and depressed. How do you separate your Heart from your ego so that the ego can contract and the Heart expand? And is it really you who makes this separation? Do you really have enough power, enough knowledge, to do it?

The time of this pandemic is the ideal time to realize that, in the last analysis, only Allah is the Doer. This is not meant to deny free will and personal responsibility, just to remind us that the primary and ultimate Power in the universe is no-one and nothing but Allah. If we see the painful events as coming from blind unconscious material forces, then we will become depressed, hopeless and fatalistic: “there is nothing you can do, life is random and meaningless.” If we see such events as coming from other people, then we will become angry and combative. “Trump sent the coronavirus—no, the Chinese sent it—no, the Democrats failed to prepare us for it—no, the Republicans blocked the bail-out” etc., etc. Obviously, this kind of mind-set will not help us contract the *nafs* and expand the Heart. Only if we see hard events, like *all* events, as coming from Allah Alone will we be able to accept them and see the lessons hidden within them.

This, of course, brings us to what is called *theodicy*, the perennial question of “If Allah is both all-good and all-powerful, how could He, or why would He, create a universe filled with inevitable suffering?” At this point I don’t intend to go into all the very wise and clear answers to this question provided by saints and sages throughout the centuries; all I want to do is point out that if the idea that Allah sent the coronavirus shakes your faith in Him, this could only be because you had forgotten that *every* human being must die, usually in pain, coronavirus or no. In the memorable words from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*—if you’ll permit me a moment of black humor—“If God really loved us, how come he made us out of *meat*?” No plague or war or other collective disaster can change the basic terms of human existence.

So, Allah sends contraction. How do we respond to it? Our first response, I believe, must be *islam*, submission. But what, exactly, is submission? Is it only hopeless resignation to the inevitable? It must be more than that; even atheists are capable of hopeless resignation. Ultimately, submission is the recognition that only Allah is the Doer, that He is the ultimate Principle behind both outer events and our own response to outer events. In the words of the Quran, *We will show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves, till it is clear to them that it is the truth. Suffice it not as to thy Lord, that He is witness over everything?* [41:53].

But how this is “submission” to be done? Is there a method to it? Is it something that we do, or something that just happens to us? According to the Quran, *You cannot will unless Allah wills* [Q. 76:30]; *Allah created you, and you can do nothing* [37:96]. But we still have to say “yes” to the Will of Allah—and I believe that the only real way to say “yes” to that Will is to find the place in us where we have unconsciously been saying “no” to it all along—the place of *self-will*—and *consciously intend to give up saying that “no”*.

Contraction will inevitably bring up all the vices, passions and obsessions that have been hiding in our soul, all our self-will and concupiscence (which is self-will’s passive partner), all our rebellions against *islam*; in terms of the spiritual life, that is what contraction is for. We sometimes say that Allah sends hard times as a *chastisement*, as if this were simply a form of Divine punishment or revenge. But the real meaning of the word “chastisement” is *purification*. The state of expansion, of spiritual and material ease and exuberance, hides our resistances to Allah; the state of contraction exposes them, reveals them so we can consciously release them. And the precise turning-point between the expansion of the *nafs* that reveals the resistances, and the expansion of the Heart that overcomes them, is submission.

But there is no way the resistances can be released without *love*. If we don’t love Allah, how can we accept His actions, even His most merciful ones? Without *mahabbah*, the Love of Allah, we will hate Him for His chastisements—and when times are easy, we will take His gifts for granted. To forget Him during good times is to despise Him; to react to hard times with hopeless resignation is in effect to hate Him, even if we refuse to let ourselves become aware of that hatred. We may claim to be the abject slaves of Allah who are willing to accept any punishment from Him, even the most apparently meaningless, without hatred, without protest—but the hatred we hide in our contracted Hearts will inevitably manifest itself in a hatred of others and a hatred of ourselves—the perennial occupational hazards of the failed ascetic. If our Heart contracts in hopelessness, our *nafs* will inevitably expand in hatred and slander and judgment against our brothers and sisters.

But if we intend to release to Allah our intent to resist Him, and to open our Hearts to whatever this resistance may have blocked, that intention can only happen in a context of love, and will consequently invoke

the power of love, of Allah in His Names *Al-Rabman* the All-Merciful, *Al-Rabim* the All-Compassionate, *Al-Latif* the Benevolent, *Al-Wadud* the Loving-kind. And love expands the Heart. The true love of Allah, however, is not immediately used up in self-indulgent sentiment and emotion, but expands into *intimacy*—and whatever we are truly intimate with we will come to know extremely well, with a knowing that is beyond feeling, beyond thought, beyond science, beyond conjecture, a knowing that is characterized by *yaqin*, “certainty”. This is the kind of knowing that the Sufis call *Ma’rifa*, “gnosis”, the intimate Knowledge of Allah that grows directly out of love. All that was hidden behind our deep-seated resistance to Allah will be found to be part of that Knowledge; as our resistance to Him is released, step by step, in love, that Knowledge—step by step—will come in its own time.

This is how contraction can open the door to True Love. We always say that war, the most powerful of contractions, brings out both the best and the worst in people; this is another way of saying that contraction inevitably expands either the Heart or the *nafs*—and the one thing that can ensure that it will be the Heart not the *nafs* that expands is true submission, true *islam*. Islam is humility and abasement, the willingness to be as passive and submissive as the earth, which every foot of man or animal can walk upon, every plough or bulldozer cut into, every bomb blast, every vehicle traverse, without resistance or protest. But Islam, since it is submission to Power, can also become the vehicle of Power—a truth that is perfectly expressed in the following verses by the medieval Andalusian poet Ibn al-Qabturnuh:

I remembered Sulayma when the passion  
of battle was as fierce  
as the passion of my body when we parted.

I thought I saw, among the lances, the tall  
perfection of her body,  
and when they bent toward me I embraced them.

*Sulayma* is Allah in the inner world of spiritual states, the world of *in themselves*; *the lances* are Allah in the outer world of conditions, the world of *on the horizons*. Only love can unite *al-Jamal*, the Beauty of Allah, with *al-Jalal*, His Majesty—because in the Heart, by the power of radical submission, love and death are one.

The most direct and obvious form of submission is submission to the inevitability of death. Fear of death is natural, but as the Gospel of John tells us, “perfect love casteth out fear.” In the presence of the Infinite, limitation burns; submission to the pain of that burning, in love, is the very ecstasy and the coolness of Paradise. When we are confronted with fear—the fear of death or any other fear—to move in the direction of paranoia and despondency is to give expansion to the *nafs*, while to recognize this fear as a veil concealing the awesome Majesty of Allah—and all the Beauty of that Majesty—is to give expansion to the Heart. Only love can make this recognition. The Quran says, in the *Sura al-Inshira*, verses 1 and 5: *Have We not expanded thy breast? [...] Surely with hardship goeth ease.* It does not say “*After hardship cometh ease*” but *with hardship goeth ease*. By this it is alluding to *al-Jamal* concealed in *al-Jalal*, to the Beauty hidden in the Majesty—a terrible Beauty that only the eye of the Heart can witness.