

SoulWork in the Sahara

Having just returned from the Gift in the Desert Sufi retreat in the Sahara, I wish to share some of my experiences and reflections. My thanks to the 26 brave souls who entered into the Tunisian desert, and especially Murshida Mariam Baker and Naquib Achmed Heeks (and Hedy) for directing and organizing our trip!

In one model of the normal formation and development of the ego there are four dualisms that form and move us out of unity with the Only Being. In the first the infant recognizes the difference between self and other and is said to give up infinity. In the second the infant begins to structure time into the past, present and future and is said to give up eternity. In the third the infant separates mind from body and gives up bliss and an embodied existence, becoming a talking head. In the fourth the child separates persona from shadow by learning and repressing what is unacceptable to her caregivers and society and becomes fragmented, cut off from her vitality and aliveness.

These are normal and necessary occurrences in the healthy formation of the personality that is necessary to function in the material world. In spiritual development these gains are consciously reversed, allowing one to rest in the Only Being while also functioning in the world. I will examine our Saharan odyssey in terms of its impact on these four dualisms and our movement toward unity.

Persona and Shadow

Each of us has not only a God Ideal but also a personal ideal. This directs the way we are supposed to be and act to be good boys and girls. Any other feelings, thought or behaviors are pushed away and relegated to a hidden basement inside. In the Sahara the overpowering intensity of the physical demands and the simplicity of our lifestyle began to make it difficult to maintain these images. Our

desert journey began to reveal more natural and animal aspects of my being. Ya Haqq! Under the purifying exposure to the elements of sun, sand, wind, and lack of water, it became increasingly impossible to maintain the usual way I could be in my comfortable home.

With no water I could not maintain my personal looks and hygiene. Rumpled clothes and hair and increasing body odor challenged my polished and civilized Western veneer. The natural functions of defecation and urination were difficult to hide even though one had gone over the next dune.

On a group level, issues around being seen were brought to the surface by the taking of pictures and videos.

The maturity of our group allowed us to discuss and share these issues and our concerns -- to hold, not hide how we were doing, our blessings and difficulties. Each day the vast openness of the sand and sky of the Sahara allowed us to open and be real on a personal level. When the men walked the half hour to the well through the ruins of a deserted Bedouin village to wash we became literally naked. I again could feel my issues with my body how it was acceptable or not. The friendship and caring of us men hand-pulling the water, bucket by bucket, and lovingly pouring it on each other allowed me to relax and accept my body as it is.

I increasingly experienced and accepted the naturalness of my child and body selves.

Mind and Body

One of our core spiritual practices was walking practice. During our many long walks on caravan in the shelter of each other, the Bedouin, and their camels, Murshida Mariam would suggest a pair of wazifas to work with silently on the breath. The wazifa began to calm the normal chatty nature of my mind, helping me to focus on deeper aspects of my being and reality. The rhythm of our long walks and focus on

breath brought me more and more into the temple of my body. The Saharan sand was incredibly soft, almost like dry clay, and we went barefoot most of the time. With each step I would feel the sensual softness and coolness of the sand, often sinking up to my calves in loose drifts. For the most part our group held silence on our walks. A deep felt sense of my body began to develop - bliss along with aches and pains, stinging sand and flies, the warm sun, the cool moon.

Our food was simple and fresh: fire baked bread, dates, and cheese for breakfast; soups and bread for lunch; couscous for supper, with pomegranate seeds for desert; and tea and coffee all around! Each day we had an afternoon tea where we would all share foods we had brought, feeding and caring for each other through our generosity. The delicious simplicity and regularity of our meals also brought me deeper into contact with my core physical body self.

My masculine and body selves were also activated and strengthened by meeting the ferocity of the wind and sand combined with the challenge of our long hikes. Wrapping myself in colorful desert garb, the necessity of keeping warm and the purity of sun, stars and moon also allowed me to deepen into contact with my body. At times the ordeal of my physical exertion and the strength of the desert conditions caused me to simply let go of my mind and focus on the task at hand or just let go and surrender under my burnoose (the same garb Obi Wan Kenobi wore in the first *Star Wars* film).

Timelessness and the Present

In the desert I had no watch and there are no clocks! I began to experience my normal mental activity of organizing my day into past, present and future dissolve. A flow or unfolding of the present began to open and a sense of eternity. I had no idea of what day of the week it was most of the time. The call to practice and meals provided a framework for measuring the day.

This whole process opens even more during our solo day of retreat in the desert. We each find a place in the desert and go out with some water, dates and bread provided by our Bedouin brothers. The wind and sand begin to pick up. The desert becomes fluid. I simply collapse and let go into the moment. A day and night of being arise. The sun moves, the wind blows and calms, the night falls, the moon rises, the stars shine, the dawn comes. I do nothing but observe the vast empty and full spaciousness. I drop into the Only Being. My female self holds me in the eternal present. The morning deepens. I pack up and hike back slowly rejoining our group in silence and then in sharing. Time begins again but is staying more fluid.

Self and Other

The movement to unity, to the dissolution of self and other comes at different times. Often I walk and breathe first myself, then the group and landscape into my heart in a modified Tonglen practice. At times I soften into the elements and landscape.

One deep experience of communion comes when we return to the town of Douz and have supper at the home of our lead Bedouin guide. As we come in we are warmly greeted by all his extended family. We are held in an incredible warmth and love. There are perhaps 50 of us in a medium-sized room, much closer quarters than I am familiar with, and the body boundaries soften. Our supper arrives in the form of several large bowls of couscous. As we eat with spoons out of the same bowl I feel my Western fear of germs dissolve and experience ourselves as one being in different bodies eating together!

On our return journey Azima shares with me an initial version of the Sufi invocation was Merging in the One!

Ya Sahkur, I am so thankful for my time of merging in the

desert, our precious earth, the elements, the guidance of our leaders, the love of my Sufi family and the protection of the Bedouin.