

The Subtle Centres of the Heart by Abu Bakr Siraj ad Din Cook

In the Name of Allah, Most Compassionate, Most Merciful

"The origins of the lata'if reflect the origins of the universe as a whole" . First there was the Spiritual World ('alam al-amr), otherwise known as the Universe of Command, then came the Universe of creation ('alam al-khalq). Then Allah created the human being and endowed this creation with ten lata'if capable of apprehending both universes. Five of these lata'if are located below the Divine Throne (al-'arsh) in the Universe of creation ('alam al-khalq) , these being air, fire, water, earth, and the nafs . The other five lata'if belong to Universe of Command ('alam al-amr), located above the Divine Throne (al-'arsh) .

These lata'if (singular: latifa) belonging to the Universe of Command ('alam al-amr) are collectively known as the subtle centres of the heart and are the focus of this work. They are the qalb, ruh, sirr, khafi, and akhfa. Initially "the lata'if were luminous" but when Allah connected them with the body "their light started to be filtered through the influences of the physical world" and as a result work must be done to activate them. Travelling along the Sufi path consists of successive openings of each of the lata'if.

Besides being known as the subtle centres of the heart, the lata'if are also referred to as the senses of spiritual perception. The physical heart is the centre of the physical body; connecting to all areas of the body through the blood. Similarly, the spiritual organ is the centre of the human being. Thus, the heart can be understood as the centre of our spiritual awareness. Just as the human has five physical senses to access and understand the material world, so too does the spiritual centre have five senses. This analogy is attested to in the Holy Qur'an where Allah says, "Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts" (22: 46). These faculties "allow us to know spiritual realities beyond what the senses or intellect can offer" . This is confirmed by Allah saying "We show them Our signs in the (furthest) regions (of the earth), and in their own souls" (41: 53).

The lata'if are also known as subtle substances. That is, they are "qualities that have subtlety, gentleness, and refinement" . Jointly they comprise the subtle body (jism latifa or al-latifah al-insaniyyah). Each latifa activates, or makes conscious, certain spiritual faculties and simultaneously, corresponding sectors of the personality, which "must be confronted and understood objectively" for further travel to occur. Thus, the lata'if have also been referred to as sheaths or fields . The image of the lata'if sheathed in one another is utilised by 'Amr al-Makki, who likened the lata'if to "veils wrapped in one another ... which would be removed successively" as one travelled to Allah .

Each latifa is intimately connected to each successive latifa. Our Shaykh has told us that each latifa is progressively more subtle than the one preceding it, i.e. the ruh is more refined than the qalb, the sirr is more refined than the ruh, and so on. Stated another way each of the lata'if are "refinements of one another: qalb contains ruh, ruh has the inner dimension of sirr ... and so on" . For if this was not so, the cleansing of one latifa would not lead to the opening of another. Furthermore, each subtle centre is aware of the coarser lata'if, but not vice versa . The goal occurs "when enough spiritual refinement is realised" and "is used to transform the self (nafs)" , facilitating the murid's reception of Divine grace.

We are reminded repeatedly of the virtues of dhikr, the remembrance of Allah. It is through this practice that the lata'if are successively opened. Succinctly stated "the aim of every Sufi is to awaken these five lata'if into active remembrance of God, and through them to receive tajalli, the Divine illumination" for "if these subtle centres are developed by way of the accurate method and harmony, awareness and love, they will integrate to the Unity of the One" . We are told in the Qamus al Sufi that dhikr is "the fundamental practice of the Sufi path" and is only perfect when "every atom of the dhakir's being is absorbed and annihilated in the Remembrance of Allah".

Dhikr has successive stages. Starting with dhikr al-lisan, remembrance with the tongue, moving to dhikr al-qalb, remembrance with the heart, to dhikr ar-ruh, remembrance of the spirit, and so on within each successive latifa. However, it should be understood that "dhikr is a medicine for the soul, and the physician must learn his art by practice rather than from books" . Beyond this, there are particular moral injunctions and spiritual practices corresponding to each latifa designed "to 'brighten' it" .

Knowledge of, and working on the lata'if is essential for spiritual development. We are told that "for those who are initiated into the esoteric teaching, the importance of working on the lata'if (subtle centres of the heart) is crucial [for] any spiritual development within the Sufi teaching" . Shah Waliullah (may Allah be pleased with him) informs us that, "the better one is acquainted with such faculties, the better one is able to refine them" . It is for this reason that this article has been written.

The lata'if have been collectively referred to as the lata'ifi sitta, the six subtleties. The inclusion, beyond the above-mentioned five, is the nafs . Etymologically nafs is rooted in "breath" (nafas) as without the breath dhikr would not be possible. However, the nafs is not technically a latifa. The nafs requires no activation; in each and every one of us the nafs is active. While the nafs is transformed through spiritual work, it is not, in the same

sense, opened as the lata'if are. The inclusion of the nafs in the category of lata'if can signify outside influences or cross-cultural confusion, most often with the Indian chakra system .

The gift of the nafs is evidence of Allah's Mercy, given to all indiscriminately. It is the horse upon which one may travel to Allah, journeying through the various stations of Spiritual Unveiling. If the aspirant is willing to apply the necessary spiritual practices to train their vehicle then, by the Grace of Allah, they may attain their goal. It is interesting to note that the colour of the nafs is blue and seen from space this world of ours is a blue dot, indicating the earth as the abode of the nafs. Treated correctly the nafs can aid us in achieving success, but left to its own devices it will guarantee our demise!

Furthermore, blue is symbolic of the indefinite. Hence we have the indefiniteness of the blue sky. The indefinite is an "outward radiation" and thus an expression of "distance" which "takes on the negative aspect of remoteness from God" .

Each latifa is distinguished by certain characteristics. These include location, colour, and function. Some schools connect specific prophets with each of the lata'if, whom they say "specialized in that particular latifa" . It should be borne in mind that "the lata'if cannot be adequately defined in words", as they, and the perceptions they give rise to, are too subtle to be contained within language, "but as a person brings them to light, he or she comes to understand them" . We should be aware that "these delineations were merely matters of intuitive insight" and that "it is not necessary for every seeker to see the same colour; nor is seeing the colour the objective" . Thus, there are differences between the various explanations of the lata'if.

Furthermore, each tariqa utilises particular methods for opening the lata'if. For example the Chishti method emphasise activities that provoke ecstasy such as sama' and dancing while the Qadiri technique utilises rigorous ascetic practices such as fasting and long prayer vigils . While these practices are not exclusive to these particular turuq, the examples are included to highlight variations in the relevant literature. These differences are equally valid, just as divergent legal judgements "of qualified jurists are equally valid" as long as "all of these paths lead to the goal" . What is offered here is in accordance with the Burhaniyya-Shadhiliyya-Dasuqiyya Tariqa as presented by our Murshid.

Qalb

The qalb is the subtle essence or subtle centre of the heart. It is the "supra-rational organ" which utilises spiritual discernment and intuition to perceive the Transcendent Realities. The qalb is an isthmus (al-barzakh) caught between this world and the next, between the influence of the nafs and the ruh. "Normally the heart is 'veiled', blackened by sin, tarnished by sensual impressions and images, pulled to and fro between reason and passion" as a result of the downward pull of the nafs. For, "if victory is not won here, there is no access to the higher dimensions of the subtle self except for brief flashes" as Allah says "every time the light (helps) them, they walk therein, and when darkness grows on them, they stand still, and if Allah willed, He could take away their faculty of hearing and seeing; for Allah hath power over all things" (2: 20). The greater the purification of the heart the more receptive it is to the "irresistible attraction of the celestial spirit" whose powerful attraction on the heart "endeavours to guide it towards the Knowledge of Allah" .

The heart is the sanctified centre of the human. Part of the spiritual struggle is "keeping watch over the heart" with the aim being to arrive at the point where we "never allow any intruders to enter their sanctified hearts" . The goal is to become the Perfect Man where the heart becomes "the Divine Throne (al-'arsh) around which circle the spiritual realities" . Here we see one aspect of the Hadith "My earth and My Heavens contain Me not, but the Heart of My believing slave contains Me" . Before this centre is sanctified, it is the qalb that gains the "first certainty as to the existence of the True Self" for "it is within this organ that the 'child' of the True Self is born" . By examining the word root for qalb we can expand our understanding of this latifa. The root for qalb includes the meanings 'to turn a thing upside-down', 'to be baked on one side', 'to be restless', 'reverse; invert; wrong side', 'placing one in front of the other', whence the expression qiblah, as well as 'mould', which "gives the inversion of 'negative' and 'positive' in the process of moulding" .

The function of the qalb is dhikr. Its strength increases one's capacity for dhikrullah, the remembrance and invocation of Allah. The remembrance with the heart (dhikr al-qalb) occurs when the dhakir contemplates the Beauty and Majesty of Allah and "may be sweet when Beauty reveals itself or awesome when Majesty dominates" .

It can also be said that the qalb knows Allah; it is the site of knowing (ma'rifa). Ibn 'Ata' Allah says that "the hearts and the innermost centres of being are the places where lights arise" for "ma'rifa is a light which Allah casts into the heart of whomsoever He Will" . In order to enact this Ibn 'Ata' Allah says, "empty your heart of otherness and He will fill it up with illuminations and insights" .

The "cleansing of the heart forms the spiritual endeavour of the earlier stages of the Journey" so that "once the heart has been purified the traveller (salik) is in a state of preparedness and receptivity to receive whatever Allah Wills to send" . One aspect of this is purifying our emotional life. As this latifa opens we open ourselves to "an inner spaciousness" which allows us to "come in touch with a sense of essential, objective hope" . The aim of this cleansing is to erase everything that hinders the pure love of Allah.

The colour of the qalb is yellow. Yellow is the most luminous of the primary colours and has been consistently been used to symbolise Divine Consciousness or Intelligence , hence the site of ma'rifa. The qalb is pulled both up by the ruh and down by the nafs, and this is reflected in their respective colours as "yellow remains latent in red and blue" .

The qalb is related to the sense of hearing and corresponds to the little finger. The little finger corresponds to humanity in that humans "are as weak as the little finger, and in constant need of support" . The connection between the little finger and hearing can be found when making wudu, where the seeker cleans their ears out with their little fingers.

Its location is on the left side of the chest, with some being so specific as to locate it two fingers width below the left breast.

Ruh

The ruh is the subtle essence or centre of the spirit. It is in opposition to the nafs in that "the ruh endeavours to pull the heart (qalb) towards Allah, whilst the lower self (nafs) exerts a downward pull on the heart" . As this latifa opens one discovers that "the heart contains a point of contact with the infinite dimension of Spirit, the source of all qualities" . "The human spirit is also Allah's Spirit because Allah breathed His Spirit into man" and for this reason it can be said that the ruh is both "uncreated" and "created" . The created ruh prostrates to the uncreated Universal Spirit (al-ruh al-ilahi) from which it has emerged.

The ruh is most consistently seen as a dormant spiritual faculty. The illumination of the ruh comes about through constant prayer and vigil. This results in purity from mental distractions and projections as we "dissolve self-images, our narcissistic fictions" and "learn to keep our thought processes in alignment with the Divine Reality" . The luminosity of an individual depends upon the degree of activity of their ruh . The illumination of the ruh results in spiritual strength, freedom from fear of people, and concentration towards Allah .

The salik enters the state of unconditional and pure love for Allah (mahabbah). This love transforms the "murid from 'the one who desires Allah' into the murad, 'the one whom Allah desires'" . It is out of this love that 'ishq develops .

The colour of the ruh is red. The symbolism of red "partly coincides with that of fire" , hence the burning of love for Allah. Interestingly, the ternary nafs, qalb, and ruh corresponds to the triad of primary colours, which can be seen to "form together a harmonious totality" in that to "take away red ... the perfect balance would be broken in the direction of too much cold; the absence of blue would make for excessive heat; without yellow, the residue would be too ponderous" .

The ruh is related to the sense of sight and corresponds to the ring finger. It is said that the ring finger corresponds to "the station of the seal of faith (iman) that is engraved on the ring the spiritual seekers symbolically wear", for it is the station of the people of Tariqa, the true spiritual seekers, "who wear the ring of absolute faith in their Guide" . As the ruh opens and our self-images dissolve we begin to see the relationship between Allah's Spirit and the human spirit.

Its location is on the right side of the chest, with some being so specific as to locate it two fingers width below the right breast.

Sirr

The sirr is the subtle secret or mystery hidden in the innermost centre of consciousness or being of the human. We are told that it is the "hidden place where Allah manifests His mystery to Himself" and that it is "the point of secret communication between Lord (rabb) and His slave ('abd)" . It is also known as the qalb ul-qalb, the heart of the heart.

The sirr is the site of witnessing and its cleansing makes Kashf (unveiling) possible. With the opening of the sirr it becomes possible to "begin to discern the Real from the illusory" . Through the opening of the sirr "we begin to see the Divine Reality more clearly in the multiplicity of forms" . This is known as kashf basari where "an incident, a place, a human word or action, a sanctified person may be the place for this visual unveiling" as it "takes place through Allah's creation" .

Ibn 'Ata' Allah says that "lights are the riding-mounts of hearts and of their innermost centres" such that when Allah discloses Himself to his slave, the latter "not only increases his Knowledge of Allah but also increases his yearning and intense love of Allah" . "The raying-out of lights [are] in accordance with the purity of the innermost being" , with the purity of the sirr increasing through contemplating Allah, focusing on His names and attributes in perpetual remembrance. Through this purification one's attention is diverted away from the mundane, becoming firmly fixed on the spiritual realm.

The opening of the sirr marks a distinct change within the consciousness of the individual. It is marked by the development of true will. Equally important, "the activation of this centre is seen often as the initial step or transition from the world of the personality" . This is represented on the Chart of Knowledge where the Self at Peace (nafs al-mutma'inna) begins to break free of the self which commands, or ego self (nafs al-ammara).

The colour of the sirr is green. The meaning of this symbolism can be seen in the statement that "it has been said in Sufism that knowledge of the Truth entails the grasping of 'the union of opposites'" . Green is the result of when yellow is brought to bear on blue, thus the opening of the sirr is connected to the subjugating of the nafs by the qalb. Green is neither hot nor cold and thus does not recede like cold colours nor does it project forward like warm colours. Green is in the middle of the spectrum.

The sirr is related to the sense of touch and corresponds to the middle finger. The middle finger, the highest of all fingers, corresponds to the Holy Prophet Muhammad+ who is the highest spiritual authority . In this sense it can be said that the "highest authority is manifested as the superior height of the middle finger" .

Its location is in the middle of the chest, between the qalb and the ruh. This latifa has also been located at the solar plexus .

Khafi

The khafi is the innermost secret or consciousness. We are told that it is "a Divine subtlety that lies hidden within the spirit ... placed there in trust by Allah to be awakened and actualised only when the lover has been overwhelmed by Divine Love ('ishq) .

'Ishq is intense, overflowing and passionate love of Allah. Just as Allah is infinite, 'ishq is without limit. As rare as red sulphur, "'ishq is the highest stage before absorption in Allah" which "burns away everything of the lover" and only arises as a result of the actual vision of the beloved .

The function of the khafi is to perceive the omnipresence of Allah. With its opening we "recognise that everything we long for is infinitely close" as "infinite possibilities are contained within a dimensionless point accessible to us within our own heart" . It brings about a state of peace and absolute stillness within the consciousness, which

relates to "the activity of intuition and objective understanding" .

All light (nur) enters through the khafi, before spreading to the other senses. It is interesting to note that "in a baby, the ruh (spirit) enters through [the] khafi, and when the ruh departs the body it leaves [the] khafi last of all" .

The colour of the khafi is white. White contains within it the complete colour spectrum in harmony. We are told that the khafi is hidden and that its activation "marks the 'disappearance' or 'hiddenness' from this world" . Allah says in the Qur'an that "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (24: 35). This light is all that we ever see. Thus, we could say that light obscures and hides everything other than itself. For the lover overwhelmed by 'ishq, everything other than Allah is obscured and hidden, making possible the vision of the Beloved.

The khafi is related to the sense of smell and corresponds to the index finger. It has been said that "the index finger corresponds to [the] khafi because it represents the shahadah index" , the finger that we lift during salat when reciting the shahadah. The shahadah, which defines Unity (tawhid) , annihilates all that is 'other' than Allah. Thus, this correspondence between the khafi and the index finger reaffirms the disappearance from this world.

Its location is between the two physical eyes, just above the eyebrows .

Akhfa

The akhfa is the innermost consciousness. We are told that it "is that 'place' where a knower sees Allah through Allah" and that it's opening contains "the knowledge of the Supreme Being" . It is also known as akhfa al-khafi, the most secret of the secret or most hidden of the hidden, and is equivalent to the Ultimate Unseen (ghayb-l ghayb).

The akhfa makes it possible for the ruh to perceive the closeness of Allah. With the opening of the akhfa we begin to "know ourselves as a reflection of the Divine" as our servant hood is subsumed in Allah . The akhfa manifests qualities of compassion and love, for one sees the Real beauty. The Real beauty is "the Reality of Unity", where the Supreme Being manifests itself in every moment without absence. For "when that is before our physical eye and the eye of the heart ... there is Unity of Time, Unity of Place and Unity of Essence" .

It is seen by the Sufis to be the most important and central latifa. It brings about loving kindness and compassion within the consciousness, for "compassion is selflessness and is equated with selfless action" . It is also represents seclusion, that is, seclusion from creation.

The colour of the akhfa is black. The symbolism of this colour has, within modern times, been associated with dark forces that must be overcome by the goodness of light. However, the colour black has other symbolic functions. In Arabic, one root for black can also mean "wise" or "understanding", while "the word sayed (prince) is connected with another root for black" .

Black is the absence of colour. This symbolises the lack of all qualities, where one no longer looks through their own eyes but "sees Allah through Allah" . The akhfa in relation to the nafs is like the vastness of space in relation to the earth.

The akhfa is related to the sense taste and corresponds to the thumb. It has been repeatedly said that the Sufis are the people of tasting.

Its location is on the crown of the head. "This is the 'crowning' latifah and because of its sacred reality it must be protected, covered up and veiled", for "herein lies one of the meanings of the prayer cap and turban and the veil"

Now that each latifa has been detailed, we may ask: if the aim of every Sufi is to activate the lata'if, how does this relate to the Perfect Man (al-insan al-kamil)? In answering this we must look to the Qur'an where Allah says "We have created man of an extraction of clay; then We set him, a drop, in a secure receptacle; then We created the drop into a clot, then We created of the clot a tissue, then We created of the tissue bones, and covered the bones with flesh, then We transformed him into a different being" (23: 12 - 14). From this we can see that the opening of each successive latifa corresponds to the natural development of the human.

However, the Perfect Man (al-insan al-kamil) is an altogether "different being" . It is "through the Perfect Man that Allah enters the world" and this transformation from being human to becoming a human being is one of the supreme gifts of Allah to his creation as He installs his viceregent (khalifah) on earth. Thus, while the aim of every Sufi is to open the lata'if, their joint opening is not the goal of the Sufi path. Despite this, it has been said that "having completed his journey through the lata'if, the disciple is then dominated by the latifa that is strongest in his nature"

We must know that "perfect piety is not possible to attain without developing one's subtle entities (lata'if), which in turn depends upon the acquisition of inner knowledge ('ilm al-batini)" . Furthermore, Shah Waliullah informs us that "if you wish to know the path taken by those who have reached the stage of establishment and have become heirs to the prophetic endowment, it is important that you should realize that this is not possible without knowledge of these faculties" . May this article be of benefit for those struggling on the Path to Allah, and may Allah grant us success in this life and the next. Amin.

About the author:

Abu Bakr Siraj ud Din Cook has a Master's Degree in Philosophy from the University of Tasmania. He is studying Tasawwuf under the guidance of his Murshid, F. A. Ali EISenossi.

Page last updated July 8, 2009

