

## 'Ashq (Passion or Intense, Ecstatic Love)

Contributed by Fethullah Gulen  
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'Ashq means intense love of and fondness for perfection, beauty, or physical charm. Sufis usually call this sort of love figurative or metaphorical love, such as love for the opposite sex. Real love, the love of the Eternal Monarch, is felt for His Grace and Beauty manifested within His Majesty, and for His Majesty manifested within His Grace and Beauty. The real, intense love felt for God is a wing of light granted to us by Him so that people can use it to reach Him.

Feeling such love can be described as the spirit being like a moth drawn toward the Light, the essence of existence. This intense love is the most basic and mysterious cause of the universe's creation. God has created the universe in order to be known and loved, and so that those souls awakened to truth would feel and manifest a deep interest in His Essence, Attributes, and Names.

'Ashq, which the spirit feels without the intervention of free will, cannot be controlled by the person so affected, for its real source is God, Who loves Himself in a way special to His Sacred Essence and is essentially independent of the created. In addition, it is essentially different from the love felt by the created for the created or the Creator. This sacred, essential love of God for Himself, including His Attributes and Names, is the reason why He created the universe and why He caused humanity to appear in the world. It is also this love that manifests itself in human beings as love of God, as the most essential center of humanity's relationship with God.

'Ashq is the final step leading to God, and a lover who has reached it has no further steps to take. God manifested Himself first as this sacred, essential love required by His being God. This love must not be confused with the love a person feels for either the created or the Creator Himself. As there is no other word more appropriate to express it, I feel obliged to use "love."

Some tend to describe Knowledge as this first manifestation of God, which is regarded as God's condescension to be known. This condescension is called "Knowledge," being God's manifestation of His Knowledge; "Sacred Love," being God's loving to observe and to be "observed;" "the Tablet," comprehending or containing all of existence; and "the Pen," handling all things in existence in all their details. Jabarut (the highest, immaterial empyrean) and the Truth of Ahmad (the Prophet's Name mentioned in the original copy of the Gospels and in the heavens) are other titles of this condescension or God's first manifestation.

Sacred Love is a mystery special to the Divine Essence. Other Attributes of His are appended to or dependent on this love. It is for this reason that those who fly with the wings of 'ashq reach directly to the Divine Essence and attain to amazement, whereas others have to pass through the intermediate realms of the worlds of things and Names.

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The ways leading to God are almost beyond number. Sufism, the science of truth, contains the food, light, and other necessities travelers need for the journey, and the (spiritual) orders (tariqas) are the ports from which they set out, or the schools in which the principles of the journey are taught.

The ways to the Truth can be divided into two main groups. The first is the way in which the wayfarer is offered or taught such principles as eating less, drinking less, sleeping less, increasing contemplation, and refraining from unnecessary social intercourse. Almost all Sufi orders are based on these practices. The main invocations recited by followers of this way are the Seven Names: There is no god but God, God, He, the Truth, the All-Living, the Self-Subsistent, the All-Overwhelming. By reciting these Names, one seeks to pass through the carnal soul's seven steps: the Evil-Commanding Soul, the Self-Condemning Soul, the Soul Having Inspiration, the Soul at Rest, the Soul Well-Pleased (with however God treats it), the Soul Pleasing (to God), and the Purified or Innocent Soul. To these seven Names, some add such Names of Majesty as the All-Powerful, the All-Strong, the All-Compelling, the Master, and the All-Loving; others add such Names of Grace as the Unique, the One, the Peerlessly All-Single, and the Eternally Besought-of-All.

The second way is based on strict adherence to the Qur'an and the Sunna, and the encouragement of certain recitations. Those who follow this way strive to comply with the Sunna in whatever they do. Rather than reciting certain Names, they follow the methods used by God's Messenger to worship, invoke, and pray; meditate on His acts and creatures; and mention Him with all of His Names. Joining these activities with a meticulous following of the commandments of Shari'a, they are firmly attached to their guides or teachers and abandon themselves to the tides of 'ashq and (spiritual) attraction toward God.

Once they have attained 'ashq and attraction, existence with its outer dimension vanishes from their sight. They annihilate their selves and begin to feel and observe the absolute Divine Unity. At this point, they immediately come to their senses without being confused and going to extremes in the relationship between the Creator and the created. In such a manner do they complete their journey.

The basic principles of this second way are regular worship, love, spiritual attraction toward God, regular recitation, and the companionship of one's guide or teacher. In this context recitation, in addition to mentioning God with all of His Names, involves study or attending classes in whatever leads one to God. This is what the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, meant when he described those with whom God is pleased: They study together.

At times, a lover finds himself or herself in the stream of joyful zeal and yearning, which can be regarded as another dimension of 'ashq.