

“The Seven Valleys”

EXCERPTS FROM ATTAR’S

THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

TRANSLATED BY

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VALLEY OF THE QUEST

When you descend into the Valley of the Quest, expect trials and tribulations. They will plague you at every turn.

Here, with each breath you inhale a hundred calamities.

Here, the wandering parrot changes into a common fly.

Here, years of toil and of sweat are needed to stir and transform your senses.

There is no room here for pride, or self-importance, or the things you value and hoard.

Here, one must journey through one’s own blood. Here one must wholly give up all things linked to existence.

Stand empty-handed, and the cleansing of your heart begins.

Purge your heart of its own traits, and the virtues of the Divine will reflect in it.

When light brightens your soul, a single desire of the heart multiplies into a thousand.

If fire flares and blazes the path to the Beloved and a hundred arduous valleys suddenly unfurl, the heart of a true lover flings itself headlong into the flames, like a moth feverish with desire.

That’s when mystery shape-shifts into longing, and the lover begs for a sip of wine from the lip of the Beloved’s cup.

With a single taste of that elixir, the heart forgets everything in this world and the world to come, and drowns—

yet with lips still cracked and parched, the seeker begs the Beloved to unravel the mysteries of itself.

In this valley the lover casts aside all fears, even that of savage dragons, in order to fathom the divine Beloved.

If denial and damnation arrive holding hands, the lover will welcome them both, for they may open a door to the Beloved, and when that door finally opens, there will be neither denial nor damnation on the other side.

VALLEY OF LOVE

Next comes the Valley of Love.

Walk here and drown in fire, for in this valley only fire lives.

If you are not a lover of fire, then leave, because a true lover is one with fire; a true lover ignites, burns, and flares like fire.

There's no providence in the Valley of Love, not a single grain of thought about infidels or the faithful, about doubts or convictions.

Here, a lover joyfully gathers and throws a hundred worlds into the fire.

Here, right and wrong are mates, because in love two becomes one.

You who stand aloof, this valley is not for you.

You deniers, this place will not appeal to you.

Lovers worthy of being in this valley give away everything and boast of their approaching union with the Beloved.

Others may search for their desires in plans and tomorrows, but true lovers know that everything they desire is right here in the Valley of Love.

If you cannot throw your heart into the fire, then how can you be free from your despair?

If silk does not burn to its innermost core, how can it brighten its own heart with joy?

If a fish flops onto shore from the sea, it flaps and struggles until it slips back.

In this valley, love is fire, mind is smoke.

When love arrives, reason flees.

The mind is not a master in the art of love; love cannot labor in the brain.

When sight is gifted to you by the Invisible, you will finally see the heart of love.

Every leaf exists because of love, bent with the drunkenness of love.

Open those eyes given to you and fuse with the universe. If you open only the mind's eyes, you will never see love in full.

Love is the business of the experienced.

Love is the business of the free.

You who are neither experienced nor in love are lifeless and don't deserve love.

On this thousand-branched road, the joyful in heart must offer up a hundred lives with every breath.

VALLEY OF KNOWLEDGE

Next, enter the Valley of Knowledge,
with its boundless myriad roads
unfurling in every direction.
Here, no path resembles the next.
Here, the traveler of the body is
different from the traveler of the soul.

Here, both body and soul progress,
regress, decline and rise, each accord-
ing to its own worth.

In this Abrahamic place, how can a
sickly spider keep up with an ele-
phant's pace? Your journey is greased
by your own measure and maturity.

A fly can flap its wings all it wants,
but how can it keep up with the wind?
We each travel our own path; no two
birds journey the same.

Here, knowledge splits into unnum-
bered insights.
One person finds it in a church or a
mosque, another finds it in a shrine
for idols.

When the sun of knowledge shim-
mers in the Beloved's exalted sky,
each traveler is given sight according
to his own measure and share; each
traveler regains her true rank.

The secret of every atom will be
unveiled, and this ash-pit world will
sprout into a rose garden.
Then you will see past the shell
into the kernel of everything. You
will see yourself as nothing, become

blind to everything except the
Friend.

A hundred thousand mysteries will
be unmasked, and for every hundred
thousand who lose their way, only
one will arrive. It takes a stout soul
of the Way to dive headlong into that
bottomless sea.

If mysteries excite you, then each
moment will bloom a new yearning
in your soul.

Here, unending thirst prevails.
Here, a hundred thousand sacrifices
are necessary.

If you reach that Great Throne,
don't boast, rather ask: Is there more?
Drown yourself in that ocean of
knowledge, or else rub the road's dust
on your head.

If you do not come here a worshipper,
go away and weep, sleepy one.
If you are not joyful in your union
with your Beloved, keep on mourning
your separation.

If you do not see the Beloved's face,
get up! What are you waiting for? Go
look for it! Shame on you, if you don't
know the taste of desire.
Don't drift like an idle, aimless ass.

VALLEY OF DETACHMENT

Next, you come to the Valley of
Detachment. Here, entitlements and
meanings are irrelevant.
From this valley's air of

self-sufficiency surges a storm that ravages whole countries in one blow.

Here, the seven seas are but a puddle, the seven planets are just a spark. The eight pleasures of paradise are as fun as a corpse, and the seven hells are frozen ice.

Here, for no reason an ant has an elephant's superstrength. Here, by the time a greedy crow fills its stomach with seeds, a hundred caravans perish.

Here, a hundred thousand green-clad angels burned in grief until Adam's heart was illuminated. A hundred thousand bodies were emptied of souls until Noah became a sailor.

A hundred thousand gnats formed an army until Abraham found victory. A hundred thousand babes lost their heads until Moses became the Seer of the Lord.

A hundred thousand held fast to old dogmas until Jesus found the divine mysteries.

A hundred thousand endured wretchedness until Mohammad miraculously ascended to Heaven.

Here, neither new nor ancient has any value.

Here it's all the same if you act or if you're idle. If you have suffered a world of hardship, here, it's all a dream.

If a thousand lives perish in the sea, here, a mere dewdrop has slipped into that vastness.

If a hundred thousand heads lie down to sleep, here, it's as if an atom has cast a shadow. If the sky crashes down and the stars fall like rain, here, nothing more than a single leaf has floated from a tree.

If everything is erased, from the moonfish to the moon, here, it's as if an ant has injured its leg in a well. If both worlds perish in a flash, it's as if a grain of sand has gone missing.

If no trace of the devil or humankind remain, give it less thought than you would a drop of rain. If all bodies hit the ground and all animals vanish, so what?

Here, if everything great and small suddenly departs, it's as if a single straw has been drawn and tossed. If all nine spheres of existence vanish in a flash, it's as if a single drop has faded into the seven seas.

VALLEY OF UNITY

Arrive in the Valley of Unity and give up everything except the absolute.

All who traverse this valley will leave sharing a single collar. Here, the many and the few will merge and meld into one.

When many are united in the One forever, then all inside the One is a perfection.

This is not a place for uniformity;
here you find unity in diversity.

Everything here is outside of time,
outside of measurements, so forget
about the Beginning, forget about the
End.

The Beginning is lost; the End
stretches into eternity.
Don't bother with them, they're irrel-
evant. And since all is really nothing,
then nothing is truly everything.

VALLEY OF WONDERMENT

Next comes the Valley of
Wonderment.
Here you will meet pain and unending
remorse.
Here, every sigh is as sharp as a
sword.
Here, every breath brims with sighs.

Though there is no night here, nor
day, you ache night and day, yearn
and burn. Though you suffer no cuts,
blood still drips from the roots of
your hair and writes: Alas.

Here, there is fire, but it is frozen;
there is ice, but it sizzles from pain.
When you arrive here in wonder-
ment, you arrive already lost and
will be yet more lost. And if you
stamp the seal of oneness on your
soul, you'll drift even further in your
lostness.

If they ask you: Are you drunk or no?
Do you exist or no?
Are you within or without?
Are you hidden or manifest?

You will respond: I know nothing,
not even the breadth of my own
ignorance.

I am in love but don't know with
whom.

I am neither devout nor faithless.
I don't know what I am.

Of my own love I am ignorant too.
My heart is both full and empty of
love.

VALLEY OF POVERTY AND ANNIHILATION

The final valley is of Poverty and
Annihilation, the ultimate release.
Words fail to reveal its mystery.

The essence of this valley is obli-
vion— dumb, deaf, unconscious. Here,
in the effulgence of the sun, a hun-
dred thousand shadows vanish.

When the ocean tosses and breaks,
how can patterns that shimmer on
the surface endure? Both worlds are
reflected in those patterns dancing on
the sea.

Deny it and you're a misguided
dreamer.

Lose yourself in this ocean. Find so-
lace in your lost state, and a calming
oblivion will embrace your heart.

When your soul is absorbed into the Ocean, it is saved from its own oblivion. That's when creativity abounds and the mysteries of life begin to unveil.

You, mature Wayfarer, the brave one, if you've taken the first step into this arena of pain, there is no second, for in that first stride you are lost, transformed.

When a lute and common kindling meet in fire, they both burn for they are made of the same wood.
But their attributes are not the same.

When you are a polluted soul, the Ocean will not refuse you; you will merely sink to its floor and remain yourself.

But if you come to it as a pure drop, you will lose yourself in the Ocean, becoming one with its vast water. The Ocean's currents will become yours, too— its shining beauty, yours.
You will be and not be.

How can that be?
It's beyond mind's comprehension.