

## **LAST THREE ASK SYMPOSIA HELD IN UK September 2009 – Feb 2010**

During the past two years the ASK Facilitator team in the UK have held a series of symposia/workshops on the main concepts of ASK Course One lessons. Attendance has fluctuated somewhat, but there has been a core of regular presenters, ASK students and some new 'recruits' interested in the programme. Some people have come because they were interested in particular concepts, but have not taken on the course as a whole. However, we deemed it better not to restrict participation only to ASK students, because we wished to reach out to the Muslim community and others interested in spiritual growth.

There has been a lot of discussion as to how the concepts should be presented. Those attending regularly and studying the ASK lessons soon became familiar with such concepts as the self, consciousness, inner senses, etc., which naturally recurred throughout the presentations. Newcomers have often found this challenging! We tried to overcome this by using a range of presentation styles, short talks with PowerPoint, diagrams, experiential exercises, group and pair discussion and visualisation. We have also found that a half day session is easier for most people to attend, even though some concepts really need a whole day for discussion. For each session we tried to focus on two or three main objectives.

Since Shaykhna's visit in the summer we have finished Lessons 11, 12 and 13/14(which we combined).

### **Lesson 11 – Decree and Destiny (led by Khadija Lafene)**

We started with a brief presentation on the main concepts of the lesson, using PowerPoint showing important quotations. This was followed by an individual and pair exercise in which participants were asked to consider decisions they had made in their lives, how this related to the decree (immutable laws of cause and effect) and how they had chosen their destiny (outcome of their actions). Here we used a quotation from 'Witnessing Perfection' - *"Every being is the author of their own destiny and the experiencer and witnesser. You are both the actor and the audience."* ( p.232)

We then had a discussion in which a facilitator panel answered questions. As often happens, this took participants longer than expected, so they were left with a 'take-home' exercise to consider. This involved a scenario in which a young man discovers that his fiancée has had a dubious past, and he has to consider what action to take. We asked people to consider how this scenario shows -

1. The operation of the decree- Inappropriate actions & behaviour lead to undesired outcomes- the past can come back to 'haunt' you. Appropriate actions and behaviour lead to desired outcomes.
2. How we can change our destiny so that we reached the 'desired' rather than the 'undesired' outcome.
3. How the decree and our actions interact with one another.
4. How by using witnessing and reflection we can make decisions without excess emotionality which clouds our judgment. We cannot change what happened in the past, but we can change outcomes by our actions.
5. How we can never be sure of an outcome, because we cannot be responsible for someone else's actions, but we can be responsible for our own.

## **Lesson 12 – Ageing & Inner Sight (led by Khadija Lafene & Moriam Grillo)**

We began by going through the objectives and participants' expectations. We then asked people to describe their views and experience of 'old age'. We were most fortunate in having with us participants who had considerable experience. We then did some yoga breathing to prepare ourselves for a visualisation led by Khadija in which she was able to see the meaning of a 'bad' experience of her stepmother ageing. Participants were asked to visualise a similar experience of their own. We then did some more exercises helping us to counter our negative perceptions & emotions without denying them, for example:

This simple exercise comes from Naseem Joban.

*Recall a time when you felt angry, sad, irritated, upset (you may even be feeling this way at the moment) shut your eyes and intensify the feeling. Let it grow and grow for a few minutes. Allow it to swamp your whole mind.*

*What happens?*

*Normally the feeling will evaporate. Any appropriate action? Sometimes can't do anything. You may have to do this many times.*

Finally we asked people to choose some quotes from the lesson, discuss them and their meaning.

We came to realise that ageing is a continuous process which starts as soon as we are born and we need to learn to practice awareness at all times.

### **Lessons 13/14 – Life, the Grave and Beyond – Light upon Light or the absence of Light (presented by Sabnum Dharamsi and Naseem Joban)**

After having to cancel twice because of snowy conditions, we at last presented this symposium on 14<sup>th</sup> February. We combined the last two lessons because they do overlap, but in fact we could usefully have spent a whole day diving more deeply into them.

Sabnum began with a presentation of some of the ideas from the lesson, and included participants in the discussion. Here the aim was *'to recognise & not deny natural fear of death and the 'unknown'. To acknowledge our limited knowledge about the difference between this world and the next zone of existence. To examine the idea of a 'good death' or a 'bad death'.*

Naseem then discussed the importance of reaching a higher level of consciousness before we pass on to the next phase of existence. (when we will be in the *barzakh* or interspace and not be able to act) She did this with some extremely useful diagrams and also described one of her own experiences when she was in a state of fear and anger (lower consciousness) and was able to transform it into a higher state through reflection, meditation, prayer and dhikr. This is not an easy process and often needs a lot of work, but it is better to deal with it in this phase of existence. Here we need to get rid of emotionality and see the mercy and learning behind every experience.

Naseem used 4 diagrams to illustrate various concepts from the two lessons.

The first diagram showed the continuum that exists in this realm and the next interspace. The diagram highlighted that the purpose or design of this existence was the development or rise of consciousness. In this realm we engage in free will to allow this progression to take place; in the next realm this is done to us and we do not have free will.

The next diagram illustrated the permanent joining of the soul with the self, which begins at 3 months in the womb and continues in this realm within the body and in the next realm without the body.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> diagram illustrated the development of the consciousness and a discussion took place on what this was at an experiential level and how we can encourage this process.

The final diagram highlighted a case study showing how everyday life and the conscious awareness of life situations provide an opportunity to grow and develop in consciousness. Participants were asked to use the illustration as a template to map on some personal situation. The final diagram illustrated how resolution of life's situations and the development of consciousness allow the higher attributes to show.

Sabnum then shared some of her experiences of dealing with someone going through the final stages of life and how there is great sweetness in this as well as considerable challenge. Many participants shared their experiences too.

Finally Naseem showed how useful understanding our dreams can be in raising our level of consciousness, as in that state we leave the normal confines of time and space in this world. She did this by interviewing Khadija about a recent dream & asking pertinent questions. She showed that people in our dreams represent our Self and its state, and what happens in the dream is meant to teach us something. If we reflect we can deal with the issue.

We are extremely grateful to Sabnum who has been the guiding star behind all the symposia. Khadija has now taken over the main lead, but obviously still needs the support of all active facilitators. We are also very grateful to everyone who has helped.

### **Future plans**

In order to introduce people to the ASK concepts we have decided to hold 'ASKSHOPS', which will deal with specific concepts, rather than lessons as such, for example, the self, consciousness, mind body and spirit, the inner senses etc. Part of these workshops could be used to discuss individual assignments, if students need some help and guidance, as some people have abandoned ASK because they feel they cannot cope with doing assignments. There is a feeling that ASK is too 'academic', but this may be because we haven't always succeeded in conveying the meaning of the lessons.

Insha'Allah the new workshops will overcome this and encourage as well as challenge participants.

### **Julia Khadija Lafene**