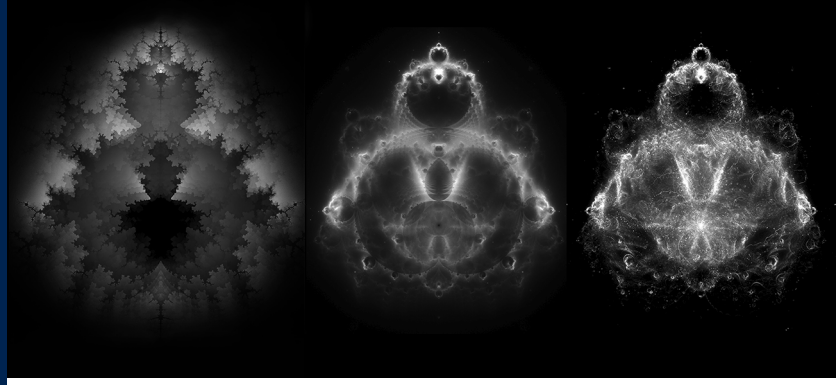

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Melanie Barbato, Mathias Schneider,
Fabian Völker (Eds.)

Beyond Boundaries

Essays on Theology, Dialogue, and Religion in Honor of Perry Schmidt-Leukel

WAXMANN

Reza Shah-Kazemi

Comparative Compassion

Muslim and Buddhist Perspectives on Soteriology as *Upāya*

1. Introduction

In various places in his monumental commentary on Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (2019), Perry Schmidt-Leukel draws attention to a particularly thorny eschatological problem, one which, in modern times, has painfully pricked – if not fatally wounded – the intellectual credibility of conventional Christian doctrines pertaining to the hereafter. The problem is the apparent eternity of hell depicted in various biblical verses routinely cited as irrefutable evidence substantiating this doctrine (such as Matthew 18:6–9; 25:31–46; Mark 9:42–48; Thessalonians 1:5–10; Revelation 14:9–11; 20:10–15).[1] Schmidt-Leukel emphasizes that the Buddhist soteriological schema, by contrast, generates the conviction that all beings will ultimately be saved, and asserts that this conviction is undergirded by compelling philosophical arguments. To the irresistible saving power of the infinite compassion of the bodhisattva is added the principle that all beings are already saved at the deepest level of reality, and that their suffering in *saṃsāra* is but an illusion born of ignorance and desire. The "fire" of *bodhicitta* (Buddha-mind, "awakened mind") is not only more powerful, it is more real "than the fire created by the most vicious sins (vss. 1:13f). *Bodhicitta* originates from the ultimate nature (*paramārtha*) of reality and becomes manifest through the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Its essence is compassion" (Schmidt-Leukel, 2019, p. 345, italics in the original).

This compassion, flowing from the heart of reality, effaces the sins that are born of desire and terminates the hellish suffering to which those sins lead. Through total trust in, and absolute reliance upon, the compassion of the bodhisattvas, "one escapes the infernal outcome of one's negative karma." For its part, hell "is seen as a symbolic *reality* within the dimension of 'relative' or, better, 'veiled' or 'obscured' (*saṃvṛti*) reality" (Schmidt-Leukel, 2019, p. 345, italics in the original). Following on from this, he puts to Christians a "wholesome challenge" – a provocative invitation to engage in a potentially fruitful discourse in comparative soteriology:

> Though most Christians happily share the confidence that the redeeming love of God as it has become manifest in Jesus Christ is of a similarly all-embracing nature, excluding none, the Bodhisattva ideal may still present a wholesome challenge: Has Christian trust in the boundless love of God produced a similarly strong soteriological optimism, or has it found far too often an insurmountable restriction at

1 From the Old Testament, Isaiah 66:22–24 and Daniel 12:1–2 would typically be cited.

> the gloomy and desperate belief in eternal, irredeemable damnation – as expressed in Dante's Divine Comedy where he infamously supplies the gates of hell with the inscription: "All hope abandon, ye who enter here"? Can Buddhism encourage Christianity to increase and widen its hope? (Schmidt-Leukel, 2019, pp. 156–157)

This chapter will outline a brief Muslim response to this "wholesome challenge." It will be based on certain Koranic verses, together with strongly attested sayings of the Prophet (*aḥādīth*, s. *ḥadīth*), pertaining to eschatology and soteriology. Our main question here is whether divine mercy (*raḥma*) performs, within the Muslim cosmos, a soteriological function akin to the saving compassion (*karuṇā*) of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in Buddhism. In essence, the argument we present is as follows: the "metaphysical logic" inherent in the infinitude of *raḥma* strictly precludes the possibility of an eternal hell; on the contrary, the principle of infinite mercy strictly implies the ultimate salvation of all beings. The invincible infinitude of divine mercy is made explicit in the following two Koranic verses and a "holy saying" (*ḥadīth qudsī*), that is, a saying in which God speaks in the first person, on the tongue of the Prophet:

> My mercy embraces all things (*raḥmatī wasiʿat kulla shayʾ*; Koran 7:156).[2]

> Your Lord has inscribed mercy upon Himself (or: "upon His own soul," *nafsihi*; Koran 6:12).[3]

> Truly My mercy vanquishes My wrath (*inna raḥmatī taghlibu ghaḍabī*).[4]

Three points follow logically from the metaphysical premises enshrined in these texts:

1) If hell were eternal, it would be a "thing" subsisting outside the sphere of *raḥma*, escaping forever from its all-encompassing reality, thus contradicting the unequivocal affirmation at Koran 7:156.
2) It is not only illogical but also unimaginable that a Lord whose very essence is defined by *raḥma* could allow sentient beings created by Him to suffer for all eternity.
3) Were hell to be eternal, it would be a partner (*sharīk*) with God, sharing with God the divine attribute of eternity. This is tantamount to violating the foundational "testimony" of Islam: "there is no divinity but the One divinity (*lā ilāha*

2 All translations from the Koran are based on Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (with minor modifications), unless otherwise stated (see Pickthall, 1930).

3 The same idea is repeated, almost verbatim, at Koran 6:54. For a discussion, see Shah-Kazemi, 2007.

4 Found in the collections of Bukhārī, Muslim, Nasāʾī, and Ibn Mājah, cited in Ibrahim & Johnson-Davies, 1980, p. 40 (translation modified).

illa'Llāh)." This theological affirmation can be read metaphysically as: "there is no eternal reality but eternal Reality."

2. *Upāya* and Repentance

We intend to substantiate these points in the light of the Hindu/Buddhist concept of *upāya*. The word *upāya* can be translated as "soteriological strategy" or, in Robert Thurman's more evocative construct, "liberative technique" (Thurman, 2006, p. 129). It is a "skillful way"[5] of imparting, intimating, or initiating: the *upāya* opens up a path leading to a transcendent mystery, one which may be inexpressible in essence, but whose reality can be glimpsed, sensed, or intuited through spiritual modes of cognition catalyzed by the impact, or the "shock," of the *upāya* – an impact reverberating on the ethical, intellectual, aesthetic, and metaphysical planes of consciousness (see Coomaraswamy, 1977a). An *upāya* is an idea, a narrative, a teaching, or a myth that does not necessarily correspond to some empirically verifiable, objectively true "fact," but which can nonetheless be an effective way of triggering a spiritual power capable of unleashing decisive re-orientations or transformations of consciousness in the heart of the seeker.[6] The acts generated by the *upāya* are both cognitive and volitive, resulting in a radical *metanoia*, a "change of mind," a "repentance" in the moral and also the intellectual sense[7]: in the words of Plato (ca. 428/7–348/7 BCE), it is a *periagōgē* or life-changing orientation, an existential and philosophical "turning around." In Plato's *Republic*, the prisoner in the cave must physically "turn around" to see the source of the deceptive shadows dancing on the wall of the cave. This is analogous to what must be done metaphysically: the spirit "must be turned around from the world of becoming" in order to contemplate "the essence and the brightest region of being" (see *Republic* 7:518c, Plato, 1980, pp. 750–751).

This leads us to our main theme, for both of these ideas – ethical repentance and spiritual re-orientation – are discernible in the Arabic word *tawba*, literally "turning," and, by extension, "repentance": the soul "turns" to God in repentance, God "turns" to the soul in acceptance, the same word being used for both sorts of turning: *tāba/yatūbu*. As the English saying has it, "man repents, God relents." The

5 The word derives from *upa-i*, "to approach," so the idea of "way" is heavily implicit (see Bäumer, 1997, p. 9). It should be noted that this concept is rooted in Hindu discourse and then came to play a more decisive role in Buddhism, where the notion of *kauśalya* ("skillful") was added, so that the term *upāya-kauśalya* can be translated as "skillful means."

6 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) tells us that the one who asks what the Buddha teaches (at *Vinaya* 1:40) is not so much concerned about the doctrine *per se*, rather, "what the inquirer really wants to know is 'what he must *do* to be saved'" (Coomaraswamy, 1977b, pp. 314–315, italics in the original).

7 For a discussion of the metaphysical implications of *metanoia*, see Coomaraswamy, 1942.

soul "turns" to God seeking forgiveness, and God "turns" to the soul with mercy, whence the divine Name *al-Tawwāb* ("the Ever-Relenting"), the one who perpetually forgives. The change of mind produced by human *tawba* at once surpasses and presupposes the moral domain; there is here a "turning around," a reorientation of intention, aspiration, and disposition. The result is the "turning" of the soul away from illusion and suffering and towards the path of enlightenment and beatitude.

The descriptions of heaven and hell in the Koran can be read as soteriological narratives, *upāya*s, intended to instill fervent hope (*targhīb*) of divine mercy and provoke fear (*tarhīb*) of divine wrath, the two conspiring to bring about a sincere *tawba*. Looking carefully at the relationship between mercy and wrath elucidates the fundamental distinction between the eternal reality of heaven and the transient reality of hell. Let us begin by considering the logic expressed in the following Koranic verse: "Whoever comes [before God] with a good deed will receive ten like it; but whoever comes [before God] with an evil deed will only be requited with its like; and no injustice will be done to them" (6:160). We observe here that the scales of eschatological justice are calibrated by the superabundant generosity of divine mercy. This is not surprising, given that it is *al-Raḥmān*, the infinitely Compassionate, who, according to the chapter entitled "Al-Raḥmān" (Koran 55:7), has "established the Balance (*al-mīzān*)." The implacability of divine justice is tempered and – in the final analysis – overcome by the infinity of divine mercy.

Furthermore, the divine quality of mercy outweighs the human capacity for sinfulness. It is thus impossible for any sinner to deserve an eternal hell, inasmuch as it is impossible for a sin to be committed *ad infinitum*: the unavoidable relativity of sinful acts strictly implies the equally unavoidable relativity – hence non-eternity – of the punishment provoked thereby. Now, whereas a sinful act which is finite and temporal cannot deserve a punishment which is infinite and eternal, acts of goodness, by contrast, have ramifications, reverberations, and resonances that are infinite, partaking as they do of the one and only quality of goodness, that of God: "Is the reward of goodness anything but goodness?," the Koran asks rhetorically (55:60). The metaphysical implication here is that the human quality of goodness is crowned by, and absorbed within, its angelic and ultimately divine archetype, *al-Raḥmān*, which is the Sovereign Good.

This emerges with clarity from the following verses, often cited by those theologians arguing against the possibility of an eternal or a perpetual hell (espousing a doctrine which came to be known as *fanāʾ al-nār*, "extinguishing of the fire"[8]):

> As for the wretched, they will be in the Fire; sighing and wailing will be their lot, abiding therein for as long as the heavens and the earth endure – unless your Lord

8 In Islamic theology, this doctrine is associated with Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) and his student, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350). For a discussion, see Khalil, 2012, pp. 74–109; Lange, 2016, pp. 170–171.

> wills otherwise. Truly, your Lord is doer of what He will.[9] And as for the joyous, they will be in the Garden [of Paradise], abiding therein for as long as the heavens and the earth endure – unless your Lord wills otherwise: a gift never to be cut off (*ʿaṭāʾ ghayr majdhūdh*). (Koran 11:106–107)

The beatific essence of Paradise is "a gift never to be cut off." Even if the paradisiac "abode" cannot but come to an end – God alone being eternal – the beatitude of the Garden is not so much terminated as sublimated, reabsorbed upwards and inwards, in the final return of all things to the infinite beatitude of God:

> God has promised to the believers, men and women, Gardens underneath which rivers flow, to dwell therein; and beautiful mansions in Gardens of Eden. But the beatitude of God is greater (*wa riḍwān min Allāh akbar*). That is the supreme triumph. (Koran 9:72)

Just as all things begin with creative compassion, all things end with redemptive mercy. The "greatest spiritual master" (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), Muḥyī'd-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (1165–1240), describes this "circle" of all-encompassing *raḥma* as follows:

> The final issue will be at mercy, because the actual situation inscribes a circle. The end of the circle curves back to the beginning and joins it. The end has the property of the beginning, and that is nothing but Being. "Mercy takes precedence over wrath," because the beginning was through mercy. Wrath is an accident, and accidents disappear. (cited in Chittick, 2010, p. 2)

We will return in a moment to the idea of God's wrath being "accidental." At this point, we should note that, in relation to the Koran (11:106–107), both hell and Paradise are subject to a double limitation: they both last only as long as "the heavens and the earth" endure, and the duration "spent" in both posthumous abodes is likewise subject to the condition: "unless your Lord wills otherwise." The "will" of God – also expressed in the phrase, "your Lord is doer of what He will" (*faʿʿālun limā yurīd*) – takes us back to God's mercy, for what God "wills" must be in harmony with the "law" of mercy inscribed by Himself upon Himself, as expressed in the Koran (6:12, 6:54), and in the *ḥadīth qudsī*: "Truly My mercy vanquishes My wrath," as noted above. What God wills is what God is by nature, and He has described His nature as infinitely merciful.[10]

Returning to the immense ontological disproportion between acts of goodness and acts of evil (and, *a fortiori*, between heaven and hell), let us also note the incom-

9 We follow the Arabic in referring to *Allāh* as masculine. By the same token, we follow the Arabic in referring to the Essence of God as feminine (*al-dhāt=hiya*, "she"), likewise, the word for soul (*nafs*) is feminine.

10 See Schuon, 1970 for a persuasive argument against the "eternity" of hell, predicated in part on Koran 11:106–107. See also Schuon, 2008, where the divine will is shown to be dependent on the divine nature, rather than vice versa.

mensurability between divine forgiveness and human sinfulness as revealed in the *ḥadīth qudsī*, where God declares:

> O son of Adam, so long as you call upon Me and ask of Me, I shall forgive you whatever [sins] you have committed … O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky, and were you then to ask forgiveness of Me, I would forgive you. (Ibrahim & Johnson-Davies, 1980, p. 126, translation modified; referring to the collections of Tirmidhī and Ibn Ḥanbal).

Another important corollary of the "metaphysical logic" inherent in the principial triumph of mercy over wrath is revealed in the nexus of subtle relations connecting personal responsibility, spiritual accountability, and what we might call the "mechanics" of judgement, manifesting principles that are at once divine, cosmic and microcosmic. The following verse of the Koran depicts an eschatological scenario which is not far removed from that conjured in the Hindu/Buddhist cosmos by the impersonal *karmic* law of cause and effect:

> And We have tied every man's augury to his own neck, and We shall bring forth for him on the Day of Judgement a book which he will find open wide. [It will be said to him:] Read your book. Your own soul suffices this day as judge (*kafā bi-nafsika'l-yawma ḥasīban*). (Koran 17:13)

From this point of view, it is not some anthropomorphically conceived divinity who judges the soul and condemns the unrepentant sinner to hellfire: the sinful soul is judged and condemned by nobody other than herself. In the clear light of the Day of Judgment, the infallible scales of divine justice will be rendered visible to the "eye" of the heart, allowing the heart to "read the book" of the deeds committed by the psychosomatic substance in which it was temporarily encased on earth. The newly enlightened self will then serve as both judge and jury in its own cause. The scales according to which it judges its "self" are of course those of divine justice. However, this justice is, as we have seen, determined by the superabundance of mercy, which decrees that goodness is rewarded ten-fold, while evil is punished only according to a one-to-one ratio. This does not mean that the suffering experienced by the sinner is unreal, only that it is strictly proportionate to the suffering inflicted by the sinner through his or her sins – no more, no less.

3. Hell and Divine Mercy

The following strongly-attested *ḥadīth* can be read as a direct response to Schmidt-Leukel's challenge via Śāntideva. We observe here another expression of the principle – logical and eschatological – of the all-encompassing nature of divine mercy. It describes the plight of those souls who are suffering in hell, subsequent to the Day of Judgment. The angels, prophets, and the faithful intercede for the sinners,

and when hell contains only those utterly devoid of any iota of goodness or faith, God declares that "the angels have interceded, and the prophets have interceded, and the believers have interceded, and none now remains [to intercede for the most abject sinners] save the Most Merciful of the Merciful (*arḥam al-rāḥimīn*)." God then takes them from the Fire and casts them into a purifying river at the entrance to Paradise.[11]

The conception of hell as a purgative and purifying fire – which cannot last perpetually, let alone eternally – is further reinforced by a *ḥadīth* cited by the Koran commentator, al-Ṭabarī (839–923). It is given by the latter as part of his commentary on the question desperately put to God by hell: "Can there be more?" (50:30), as multitudes of sinners are pouring into her entrails. In the *ḥadīth*, the Prophet cites this verse, and proceeds to describe how God places His foot into hell, causing it to collapse. Then, by contrast, He causes Paradise to continually expand, creating therein sufficient celestial "space" as dwelling places for all those who were previously in hell. The vision here is one of the eventual contraction of hell to the point of non-existence, and the perpetual expansion of the "space" of heaven to the point of accommodating all living beings. The vision evoked here is one of purified sinners being taken out of a hell collapsing into non-existence, and being integrated within a Paradise which is infinitely expandable (see al-Tabarī, 2001, p. 198).

Let us return to Ibn al-ʿArabī's daring definition of divine wrath as being accidental, as opposed to essential, substantial, or "real." This idea is fundamental to the "ontology of mercy" for which the school of *waḥdat al-wujūd* ("oneness of being") of Ibn al-ʿArabī is justifiably renowned. The articulation of this idea by a leading exponent of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, ʿAbd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (ca. 1252/1262–1335), makes it clear that whereas mercy emanates from the inmost reality of God, "wrath" cannot be regarded as an ontologically real (*wujūdī*) quality of God, rather, it is but a name given to the contingent ("accidental", *ʿaraḍī*) consequences flowing from a lack of receptivity to the ontologically real quality of *raḥma*. This quality embraces all things in principle, but in practice, it can be resisted – but not eternally rebuffed – by the sinful state of the unrepentant sinner's soul. This mercy is therefore absolutely real, pertaining to the infinity of the reality whence it springs eternal, whereas wrath, the absence of mercy, is unreal, or has only a fleeting, evanescent reality, insofar as it is destined to disappear into the nothingness from which it mysteriously derives its illusory, momentary existence:

> Mercy pertains essentially to the Absolute, because the latter is by essence "Bounteous" (*jawād*) … Wrath, however, is not of the essence of the Absolute. On the contrary, it is simply a negative property that arises from the absence of receptivity on the part of some of the things for a perfect manifestation of the effects of existence [i.e., pure Being] … The absence of receptivity in some of the things for Mercy entails the non-appearance of Mercy (in those things), whether in this world or the

11 This is found in many traditional compilations, see, for example, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, n. d., p. 94. See the beautiful translation of this *ḥadīth* in Lings, 1991, p. 94.

> Hereafter. And the fact that Divine Mercy is prevented from overflowing into a thing of this kind because of its non-receptivity is called "Wrath" in relation to that particular thing. (cited in Izutsu, 1983, p. 117)

The Koranic portrait of the mercy of God leaves no room, metaphysically speaking, for either the conception or the phenomenon of an eternal hell. God alone is eternal, and whereas the divine promise of granting eternal beatitude to the righteous will be kept – Paradise only coming to an end in the infinite beatitude (*riḍwān*) of the divine Essence – the divine threat of casting sinners into perpetual hell cannot, in good logic, be literally carried out. For it is metaphysically impossible that a just and merciful God decrees an eternal punishment for a temporal act. In terms of the Islamic *upāya*, there is no common measure between a divine promise and a divine threat, and there is still less commensurability between the infinite goodness proper to the Essence of God, on the one hand, and the finite capacity for evil proper to the human being, on the other. These two incommensurabilities are alluded to in the following texts, a *ḥadīth* and a Koranic verse, respectively:

> If God promises to recompense someone's act with a reward (*thawāb*), He will fulfill the promise (*Huwa munjiz lahu*), but when He threatens to punish an act, He is free to do what He wishes (*fa-Huwa fīhi bi'l-khiyār*). (cited in Majlisī, 1984, p. 334)

> Whatever good comes to you is from God, and whatever evil comes to you is from your own soul. (Koran 4:79)

Goodness emanates from the essence of divinity perpetually and perfectly. It is the sinner's refusal of, or lack of receptivity to, the divine goodness which results in what is provisionally designated as divine "wrath." But this wrath and the suffering in hell which manifests it cannot be eternal. It is, as the Sufis maintain, accidental and contingent inasmuch as it is the consequence of an action which is itself accidental and contingent: human sin. The purgation of sin – in Hindu/Buddhist terms, the exhaustion of negative *karma*[12] – is tantamount to the restoration of equilibrium (*al-mīzān*) between the soul and the whole of creation. This equilibrium is determined by the infinite mercy of God, for it is *al-Raḥmān* who sets up the scales of infallible justice, as we have observed.

The divine restoration of an equilibrium ruptured by human sin perforce entails suffering. It may be called, in theological parlance, the "punishment" of God, but it can nonetheless be perceived, in metaphysical perspective, as a function of the mercy which "encompasses all things." For this divine rectification is the means by which the sinful soul is given the grace to return to God, whether willingly in this world through sincere repentance, or unwillingly in the hereafter, albeit according

12 According to the *Madhyamakāvatāra* (3:8), composed by the Indian Buddhist sage, Candrakīrti (ca. 600–650), "forbearance … secures the exhaustion of negative karma" (see Candrakīrti, 2021, p. 141).

to the judgement of her own conscience. However, in both cases, it is a question not so much of us being punished by divine wrath as being purified by divine grace. The impure substance of the soul burns in the purgatorial fire, as Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) says, "not because God wishes to hurt us, but because it [the soul] is what it is – because it is 'of this world' and in proportion to its being so" (Schuon, 2006, p. 128).

This understanding of wrath as the purification of the soul leads into the following stunning esoteric insights of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273), which will serve as our conclusion. We learn from this passage in the *Masnavī* that the end of hell can be conceived as being identical to the vanquishing of egotism. Rūmī discloses the subtle interweaving and dovetailing of the vices of the egotistic soul, on the one hand, and the states of suffering in hell, on the other; these relationships being disclosed as a result of waging the "greatest struggle" (*al-jihād al-akbar*), the war of the divine spirit against the lower soul (*al-nafs al-ammārah*, see Koran 12:53), to which the Prophet referred in a famous saying. Note that Rūmī alludes to two texts which we have cited above: the verse of the Koran (50:30) in which hell asks God whether there can be any more souls to be poured into it, and the *ḥadīth* regarding God's crushing of hell with His foot:

The self [*nafs*] is hell, a dragon wishing harm,
The sea can't cool it down or keep it calm:
I drank the seven seas, was fully drenched,
That human-burner's thirst was still not quenched!
The infidels, whose hearts are hard as stones,
Enter this fire, ashamed, with screams and groans,
But hell's not sated by such food at all,
At least until the Lord should finally call:
"Are you full yet?" The glutton answers, "No!
Can you not see from there my burning glow!"
It makes the world a morsel, swallows it,
Then screams, "*Is there not still another bit?"*
God stamps on it from Placelessness, before
Be! And it was, makes it feel full once more.
Our stubborn selfhood is a part of hell,
Parts show the nature of the whole so well,
It's God who must deal out the fatal blow –
Who else can pull the string to fire this bow?
Straight arrows only will God's bow admit,
Your bow holds arrows crooked, bent, and split:
To leave the bow the arrow must be straight,
It then won't fail to fly and penetrate.
When from the outward fight I turned around
The war inside our soul was what I found:
"The small jihad we have just left behind"

For a jihad of a much greater kind;
The strength from God is what I long to win
Which can uproot Mount Qaf[13] with just a pin,
Don't overrate the lion which can kill!
The one who breaks himself is greater still.
(*Maṯnavī* l375–l389, Rūmī, 2004, p. 87)

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13 The idea here seems to be that the ego is the microcosm corresponding to the macrocosm, symbolized by the mountain of Qāf. It is to be noted that the dialogue between hell and God comes in the chapter called "Qāf" (ch. 50).

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