Unity of Being: Ibn Arabi's Futuhat

A Doctrine-and-Text Course on Wahdat al-Wujud

Falah Digital

Unity of Being: Ibn Arabi's Futuhat

A Focused Study of Wahdat al-Wujud — the Unity of Being

A Falah Digital Micro-Course · 10 Lessons

Adapted faithfully from the Malay narrative series *Futuhat* by Jauhari Che Wan, which dramatises Ibn Arabi's life and the teaching sessions of his *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* ("The Meccan Openings").

Introduction: Reading the Shaykh al-Akbar Carefully

Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165–1240 CE) — called *al-Shaykh al-Akbar*, "the Greatest Master" — is at once the most influential and the most misread thinker in Islamic mysticism. His master-doctrine, **Wahdat al-Wujud** ("the Unity of Being"), has been condemned as pantheism and praised as the deepest possible *tawhid* (affirmation of God's oneness). Both reactions usually come from people reading a single sentence rather than the whole ocean.

This course is not a biography and not a general introduction to Sufism. It is a **doctrine-and-text course**: ten lessons that track the real chapters of the source, each isolating one load-bearing idea and then stress-testing it against the ideas it is most often confused with — crude monism ("everything is one stuff"), pantheism ("the world *is* God"), and vague spiritual "oneness." If you have met Ibn Arabi only as a name in a survey, this is the deeper study.

A **concept map**, a **terminology guide**, and a set of **discrimination exercises** at the end turn the course into a working reference. Keep them open.

> *A note on method:* Ibn Arabi himself insists that the written word is the least of what he received — "I did not write one letter of what I saw; only its shadow, the shadow of a shadow." Read these lessons the way he asked his own students to read: slowly, and with the heart as well as the head.

Lesson 1 — Cordoba: Intellect Meets Unveiling

In 1194 a twenty-one-year-old Ibn Arabi is stopped in a narrow street of Cordoba by the sixty-year-old Ibn Rushd (Averroes) — the age's supreme philosopher, author of the *Tahafut al-Tahafut*. Ibn Rushd says he sees "a light in your eyes that did not come from any library or any teacher's lesson." He asks what the young man is seeking. Ibn Arabi answers: not the truth that can be proven by logic, but **"the other truth."**

The chapter stages the whole course in miniature: the confrontation and marriage of two ways of knowing — *'aql* (discursive intellect) and *kashf* (direct unveiling of the heart). Crucially, Ibn Arabi does **not** reject the intellect. Asked how he distinguishes genuine experience from illusion, he answers "by the intellect" — "reason is a tool, not the goal. The goal is the heart." The source frames the two as a single whole: reason analyses the apple into cells and seeds; the heart tastes its sweetness and senses the Maker in it. Both grasp the same real thing.

Key idea: Wahdat al-Wujud is born not from abandoning reason but from pressing past its limit. The intellect proves *that* God is; only unveiling knows *how* the heart stands in His presence.

Reflection: Where in your own life do you reach for proof when what is needed is presence — and vice versa?

Lesson 2 — Behind the Veil of the Kaaba: The "Opening"

Mecca, the thirtieth night of Dhul-Hijjah. Ibn Arabi, now thirty-eight, makes a final solitary *tawaf*. At the Black Stone a light "not from any lamp" rises from within; he sees the prophets ranged around the Kaaba and understands himself as an *inheritor* of their light (never a prophet — Muhammad is the last). He falls prostrate, weeps, and at dawn begins to write *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* — "the Meccan Openings."

Futuhat ("openings") is the title and the method. An opening is not like opening a door; it is the unveiling of the spiritual heart, normally shut by ego, doubt and fear. From this the source draws Ibn Arabi's famous **life-as-dream** teaching: what we take as solid — body, name, biography — is like a shadow; only God is finally real, and the opened heart "wakes" to see it. Yet the dream still *matters*: "how you sleep decides how you wake" — a direct refutation of the charge that his mysticism makes action and morality pointless.

He also distinguishes **two kinds of knowledge**: the knowledge that passes through words (teachable, writable) and the knowledge that passes only "from heart to heart," the way an infant knows a mother's love without a word. The 560-chapter *Futuhat* is written to carry the first — and to *crack open* the reader toward the second.

Reflection: Name one truth you know "from the heart" that you have never been able to put fully into words.

Lesson 3 — The Ocean of Wahdat al-Wujud (The Core)

This is the doctrinal heart of the course. In Cairo, past seventy, Ibn Arabi is confronted by his student Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi with the accusation directly: *"They say you teach that everything is God — that you are a pantheist."* His answer is the thesis of the whole tradition:

> "I never said that all existence is one. I said that all existence *depends on* one Existence. Only God has real, eternal, self-subsisting *wujud*. Everything else — including you, including me — has only a *borrowed* existence. We are like waves on the sea. The wave seems separate, has its own shape and motion; but its true being is water. The water is the reality; the shape of the wave is passing."

Three images carry the doctrine and should be memorised:

- **The wave and the sea** — creatures are real *as waves*, but their being is the one sea.
- **The stars and the one light** — "all the stars are light, from one source; but each shines differently. I never said the stars are the same." Difference is real; it is difference in *manifestation*, not in *being*.
- **The mirror** — a mirror shows sky, face, tree, yet does not change and the light does not change. Each creature is a different mirror reflecting different Names of God.

The distinction to hold forever: *difference is real, but it is not a difference in being — it is a difference in manifestation (tajalli).* The bird is not God; the bird is a bird. But the bird has no existence separate from God; its being is God's, its powers are manifestations of God's Names (the Living, the Hearing, the Powerful). This is why Wahdat al-Wujud is **not** "everything is one thing" (monism) and **not** "the world is God" (pantheism).

Discrimination exercise: Rewrite each of these in Ibn Arabi's terms — (a) "The sea and the waves are the same stuff." (b) "God is the universe." (c) "Only God exists; the world is pure illusion." Only one is close; fix the other two.

Lesson 4 — Al-Insan al-Kamil: The Perfect Human

Spring, 599 AH, dawn over al-Aqsa. Ibn Arabi, now forty, tells five students that most people "are asleep, unaware of their own nobility. They live as if they were creation cut off from the Creator — when in truth they are **mirrors of God**." From this comes the doctrine of *al-Insan al-Kamil*, the Perfect (or Complete) Human: the fully polished mirror in which *all* the Divine Names are reflected at once, the being through whom God most completely knows and manifests Himself. Its archetype is the reality of Muhammad (*al-Haqiqa al-Muhammadiyya*); it is approached by the saints (*awliya*).

Note the link to Lesson 3: if every creature is a mirror of some Names, the Perfect Human is the mirror of the *whole*. The doctrine is therefore not self-deification — the mirror never becomes the light — but a theory of human vocation: to be polished enough to reflect clearly.

Reflection: What in you is "unpolished" — what fogs the mirror so that less of the light gets through?

Lesson 5 — Alam al-Khayal: The Imaginal World

In Granada, waking from a vision of a luminous, shifting woman in a golden garden, Ibn Arabi cannot tell the dream from waking sight. The chapter opens his teaching on *Alam al-Khayal* — the **Imaginal World**, an intermediate realm (*barzakh*) that is neither pure spirit nor pure matter, where meanings take form and forms carry meaning. It is the realm of true dreams, visions, and the forms the dead and the angels take.

This is a crucial technical correction: for Ibn Arabi "imagination" is not fantasy or unreality — it is an *ontological level*, as real in its own degree as the physical world, and the very "place" where unveiling is seen. It is also the bridge back to Lesson 2's life-as-dream: our waking world is itself a kind of imaginal display of the Real.

Discrimination exercise: Distinguish "imaginal" (Ibn Arabi's *khayal*) from "imaginary" (made-up). Give one example of each from your own experience.

Lesson 6 — Maqamat: The Stations of the Heart

Damascus, autumn 638 AH. Writing on *maqamat* (stations) and *ahwal* (states), the aged Ibn Arabi warns his student Abdullah against the commonest error: "Many think a station is like the stairs of a house — one, two, three, up to the top. It is not like that." Stations are not a tidy ladder climbed once and left behind; they are dwellings of the heart one may re-enter, lose, and hold simultaneously. A *maqam* is earned and stable (patience, trust, contentment); a *hal* is a passing gift (a moment of nearness). The path is non-linear, and God's gift always exceeds the seeker's effort.

Reflection: Which "station" (patience, gratitude, trust, contentment) do you keep having to re-enter rather than passing permanently?

Lesson 7 — The Seventy-Two Paths: Breadth Within Orthodoxy

Cordoba, Rajab 636 AH. Asked whether his universal language betrays Islam, Ibn Arabi is explicit: "Yes, Abdullah — Muhammad is the final messenger, and the Qur'an is the true word of God. This I do not deny; it is the clear truth. **But that truth does not mean every other path is a lie.**" The chapter unpacks his most

provocative image — that the many ways of seeking point, at their root, toward the one Real — *without* collapsing the finality of prophethood or the authority of the revealed Law (*shari'a*).

This is the most easily abused chapter, and the course handles it carefully: Ibn Arabi's "breadth" is grounded *inside* orthodoxy, not outside it. The Unity of Being widens the horizon of mercy; it never dissolves the Law or makes revelation optional.

Discrimination exercise: State the difference between "all religions are equally valid" (relativism) and Ibn Arabi's claim that all genuine seeking is ultimately a seeking of the one Real. They are not the same sentence.

Lesson 8 — The Controversy: Pantheism on Trial

629 AH, Cairo: a thirty-year-old Ibn Taymiyya writes a fierce refutation, calling Wahdat al-Wujud "veiled unbelief." His sharpest objection is moral and it is a *good* one: **"If only God exists, how can we be responsible for our deeds? This abolishes human accountability."** The chapter then shows the Muslim world splitting into two lasting camps — the rejecters (Ibn Taymiyya and his line) and the defenders (the Sufis; in the Malay world the Acehnese master **Hamzah Fansuri**, who called it "the deepest *tawhid*," against his own critic Nuruddin al-Raniri, whose rival faction later burned the books).

The lesson's work is to answer Ibn Taymiyya with Lesson 3 in hand: Ibn Arabi does *not* say the world is pure illusion or that the self is nothing. He says the self's being is *borrowed*, not *independent* — and a borrowed self still really acts, really obeys or disobeys, really wakes well or badly (Lesson 2). Whether that answer fully satisfies the objection is left, honestly, as the live question it still is.

Discrimination exercise: Steel-man Ibn Taymiyya in two sentences; then answer him in two sentences using only the wave-and-sea image.

Lesson 9 — The Book That Was Never Finished

Damascus, dawn, thirty years of ink. The *Futuhat* runs to 560 chapters and Ibn Arabi never considered it complete. To a student he says the line that governs how this whole course should be read:

> "My son, I did not write a single letter of what I saw. What I wrote is only its shadow — the shadow of a shadow."

The chapter is a meditation on the **inadequacy of language before the Real** and, paradoxically, on why one writes anyway: words are not the experience, but they are a *bridge* and a *key* — crafted to open in the reader the heart-knowledge that no sentence can transmit directly (Lesson 2). A doctrine of Unity that could be fully captured in propositions would, by its own logic, be false.

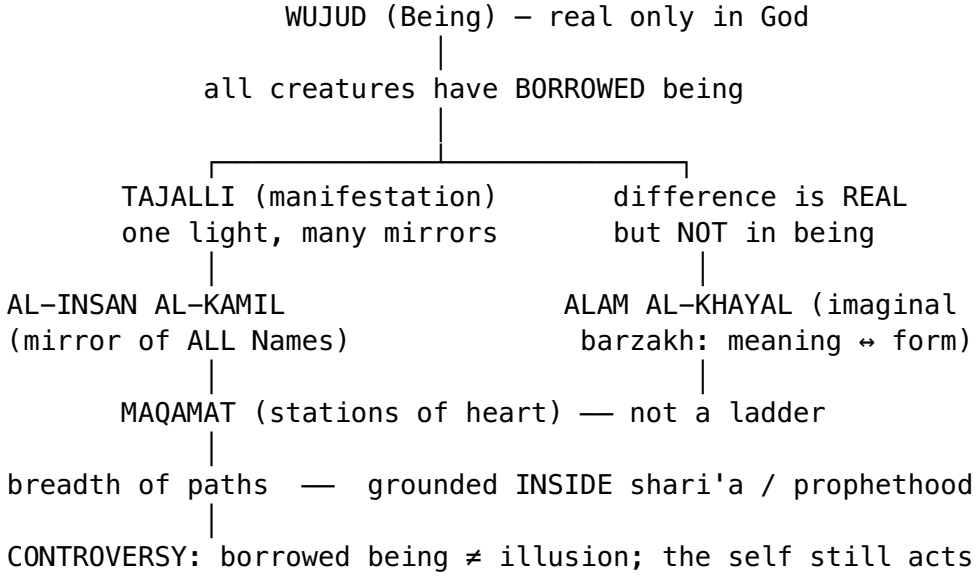
Reflection: If your deepest knowledge is "a shadow of a shadow" on the page, what does that ask of you as a reader of *any* mystical text?

Lesson 10 — The Light That Does Not Fade

Damascus, autumn 1240, below Mount Qasyun. At seventy-five, body frail, "heart still shining like a fire that never goes out," Ibn Arabi dies. The chapter closes the arc: the controversy never ends, the books are burned in some cities and treasured in others, and yet the teaching outlives every fire. His own epitaph on his work — "writing is like a corpse, but a corpse still breathing" — becomes the image of a legacy that is dead letters until a living heart reads them back to life.

Synthesis: Return to Lesson 3. Everything in Ibn Arabi — the Perfect Human, the Imaginal World, the stations, the breadth of paths, even the controversy — is a consequence of one move: *all being is one borrowed from the One, manifest in infinite difference.* Hold that, and the rest coheres.

Concept Map



Terminology Guide

- **Wujud** — Being/existence. Real and self-subsisting only in God; all else has *borrowed* wujud.
- **Wahdat al-Wujud** — "Unity of Being": all existence depends on the one Existence. NOT monism, NOT pantheism.
- **Tajalli** — self-disclosure / manifestation; how the one Being appears as infinite difference.
- **Tanzih / Tashbih** — God's incomparability / God's likeness-to-creation; Ibn Arabi insists on holding *both*.
- **Al-Haqq** — "the Real," Ibn Arabi's favoured name for God as the sole true Being.

- **Al-Insan al-Kamil** — the Perfect/Complete Human; the mirror reflecting all Divine Names.
- **Al-Haqiqa al-Muhammadiyya** — the "Muhammadan Reality," archetype of the Perfect Human.
- **Alam al-Khayal** — the Imaginal World; a real intermediate realm (*barzakh*), not mere fantasy.
- **Barzakh** — isthmus/in-between; the station of imagination and of the dead.
- **Maqam / Hal** — earned, stable station / passing, gifted state of the heart.
- **Kashf** — unveiling; direct heart-knowledge, distinct from *'aql* (discursive reason).
- **Futuhat** — "openings"; divine unveilings, and the title of his great work.
- **Awliya** — the saints/friends of God; inheritors of the prophetic light (not prophets).

Discrimination Exercises (Wahdat al-Wujud vs its look-alikes)

1. **vs crude monism.** Monism: "there is only one kind of stuff." Ibn Arabi: difference is real; only *independent* being is denied. Write the one word that separates them. (Hint: *borrowed*.)
2. **vs pantheism.** Pantheism: "the world = God." Ibn Arabi: the world *manifests* God and has no being apart from Him, yet the mirror is not the light. Draw the mirror diagram and label both.
3. **vs generic "we are all one."** Explain why "all is one" is exactly the sentence Ibn Arabi says he *never* uttered, and what he said instead.
4. **The accountability test.** Using only Lesson 2 and Lesson 8, write three sentences defending moral responsibility within Wahdat al-Wujud.
5. **The reader's humility.** Given "a shadow of a shadow," write your own one-line rule for reading any mystical text.

Closing

Ibn Arabi gives us a vision in which nothing is separate from God and nothing is identical to Him — a single Being shining through infinite, genuinely different mirrors. It was burned in some cities and canonised in others, and it remains the hinge on which Islamic metaphysics still turns. The question he leaves is the one his own student asked at the start: *is this the deepest tawhid, or a step too far?* Read the shadows carefully, and decide with heart and intellect together.

> *The companion course **Roots of Reason** carries a compact profile of Ibn Arabi among the thinkers who built Muslim philosophy. This course is the deeper study — where that profile introduces the man, this one maps the doctrine.*
