



# Rumi Teaches Blog Posts: 2016

by nashid fareed-ma'at

Rumi Teaches Blog Posts: 2016  
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Nashid Fareed-Ma'at

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## INTRODUCTION

(from *Rumi Teaches Blog Posts: 2013 - 2014*)

In 2013, I started the *Rumi Teaches* blog. As much as there is some mainstream interest in Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi, much of it tends to reduce him to just a mystic poet. The majority of mainstream portrayals of him take him out of the context of Islam, and even less acknowledge the deeper purpose of his work to arrive at the station of realizing the Beloved, the Absolute. To address this poignant gap in how Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi is presented, I was moved to utilize this blog. Sharing guidance and lessons I received, the blog posts seek to inspire a more wholistic approach to reading and applying what Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi taught through his poetry, stories, and words. As the blog continued for over a year, a question arose of what to do with the growing collection of posts, especially since at times the blog focused on specific themes that might be useful in a collected format.

To this end, I present the original posts as they were posted in a book form. I chose not to re-edit any of the posts, partly because of time constraints as well as to retain the original “flavor” of the posts. Reflecting on the first two years of the blog, I can certainly notice a growth in my ability to utilize the blog format to reflect on Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi’s words.

Although the posts have gone through an extensive edit and rewrite process prior to being posted, I am sure my imperfect eyes have missed some errors. For that I apologize. But I pray the intention of capturing

a more wholistic presentation of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's work is served despite any shortcomings on my part.

At the time of posting this collection, the *Rumi Teaches* blog continues on. To read the present posts, you can go to the blog webpage at:

< [http://www.blueantelopeproductions.com/rumi\\_teaches\\_blog.html](http://www.blueantelopeproductions.com/rumi_teaches_blog.html) >

In Surrender and Peace,

nashid

November 2016

## **I am joyous**

*January 14, 2016*

I am joyous, because I am free from worldly joy.  
I am drunk, because although I don't drink wine, I am elated.  
I don't have a need to be concerned about anyone else's state.  
May this secret glory be a blessing for me.

\* \* \*

I am happy by myself; my happiness is not from the reed flute.  
I am warm by myself, I am not warm from any water or fire.  
I am so light from Love, that in the scales  
I will become two ounces less than nothing if you weigh me!

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,  
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 266)

\* \* \*

Many spiritual traditions warn against seeking joy from the world, the sense-based pleasures. The pull of the senses can be so powerful that even the wise who know of these dangers can fall into bondage to these through engaging them. One of the main thrusts of many monastic approaches is to drastically reduce exposure to these pulls. But Islam, which is explicitly communal, discourages life-long asceticism: the challenge being to navigate the pull of the senses without falling into bondage. One might be surprised to realize how much the pull of the senses is a factor in the overwhelming majority of our interactions with phenomena.

The opening line of the first quatrain identifies one of the main barriers to true happiness: not being *free from worldly joy*. True happiness (joy, bliss, or whatever one may call it) comes only from the Beloved; in fact, some say direct, unveiled realization of the Beloved is happiness. The Beloved is within, even as some of its glory manifests beyond. But everything of the world is without (outside). Since most of us identify with the mind which is outward-oriented: when we engage the things of the world (through the mind), we turn our orientation outward -- away from what is within. Freedom from sense-based (worldly) bondage doesn't lay in not experiencing things of the world; instead freedom lays in not attaching. This is the state of being *joyous*: a conditioned station that approaches a joy which is not bound by any conditions.

Can we experience phenomena as they occur and then let them go as they go, without attaching? Can we experience what is pleasant as it is and then let it go without having even the slightest inclination toward what is pleasant? (Be honest.) A key to doing so is turning within wherein is a greater "pleasure:" happiness. Even a desperate beggar will let go of a copper coin to receive pure gold. This turning becomes easier when we have a regular practice of turning within, such as a grounded meditation practice. When we diminish and, eventually, stop attaching to phenomena, we will find that even the slightest desire for worldly pleasures ceases. This includes the tendencies and mental impressions that form in relation to pursuit of and desire for pleasure. Then we are truly free to experience phenomena as they come and go without such distracting us from the unending, indescribable happiness that is the Beloved. This can even mature into experiencing the smaller and fleeting pleasures of the world within the steady, unending happiness that is the Beloved.

It should be noted that in ancient times worldly joy was not seen as separate from its opposite: which some refer to as pain or suffering. In this context, freedom from worldly joy also includes freedom from pain: the bondage of seeking aversion from what is unpleasant. When one ceases with avoiding what is unpleasant, experiencing such when it comes and letting it go when it goes to return to an inward focus; when one lives this, one is free from pain and suffering.

The reference of being *drunk* speaks to intense pleasure; some use the word "ecstasy." Alcohol is strictly forbidden in Islam, so the reference to drunkenness and wine are clearly metaphors since any abiding Muslim already abstains from these. In ancient days, wine (and the other liquors this term referred to) was one of the most potent worldly intoxicants that caused temporary, intense pleasure. Yet for the mystic, this is a poor substitute to the bliss of living a life turned inward toward the Beloved. We should also remember that in ancient days, most drinking was done in the company of others; in part, because the collective experience of this intense pleasure usually superseded the experience of getting drunk alone. Yet, to be *drunk* without dependence on wine -- alcohol, the communal experience of drinking, or any intense worldly pleasure -- points to a person resting in true elation: an inward turning toward and resting within the Beloved.

How often is the *need to be concerned about anyone else's state* a continuing cause of pain and suffering? Concern with others -- which is usually driven by attachments -- turns us outward, away from the happiness within. This doesn't mean we should become self-centered narcissistic beings who blatantly ignore others. Instead, we allow happiness to be the means by which we are drawn (by wisdom) toward

or away from others. Within such happiness, we completely realize that sometimes there are causes for others' unhappiness that don't call for our involvement. One example that comes to mind is Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's mourning for the disappearance of his master Shams at-Tabriz: as much as others sought to console him, it was not for them to intervene with his suicidal melancholy. It was through this melancholy that he was purified of all attachments and eventually arrived at the freedom which revealed he and Shams are one. And through this revelation came outpourings of teachings, poetry, expressions of love -- outflows of Jalaal ud-Diin's arrival at happiness.

This doesn't mean that in a different situation we should not become involved in another's state: the key factor is not having a self-based (often self-centered) *need to be concerned about anyone else's state*. This "need" can also play out as avoiding concern about others. The call to be or not be concerned about others can come through resting in happiness or even responding selflessly and spontaneously to what circumstances present. There can be a subtle distinction between these approaches and a self-based "need" to respond. Honesty and being in the moment (which always reveals what is appropriate) are helpful since there is no predetermined, fixed way to respond to all situations...

The *secret glory* of being *joyous*, being *drunk*, and not having a *need to be concerned about anyone else's state*; these are a *blessing for me*. Referring to these as *secret* means these can be realized even if, at first, they are not obvious. Consistent application of these ways reveals this secret and brings one to the station of being *happy by myself*: a happiness that is truly free, not depending on anything. This goes beyond even the happiness of *the reed flute*: the beauty of having

emptied one's self to be a vessel through which the Beloved blows -- one of the main aims of the Sufi path. Some will also view the reed flute reference in light of the opening words of the *Masnavi*, in which Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi writes:

Hearken to the reed flute, how it complains,  
Lamenting its banishment from its home:

“Ever since they tore me from my osier bed,  
My plaintive notes have moved men and women to  
tears.

I burst my breast, striving to give vent to sighs,  
And to express the pangs of my yearning for my  
home....”

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma'navi*, trans. by E.H.  
Whinfield, p. 3)

We can even be free from this “yearning for my home:” a lost child remembering that it has a home can curtail the despair of being lost, offering direction of what to seek through remembrance. But even such remembrance in the midst of lamentation remains within duality: the one separated and the home sought. This can be deluding because we are only “separate” from our home when we look outward to the world. When we look within, we realize home is “therein:” all separation and duality cease in the depth of such realization. And when we cease with such separation and duality, Home (Oneness) is.

When we genuinely realize Home is within, we stop seeking the warmth of Home and poor imitations of such in *any water or fire* -- any worldly phenomena. We stop pursuing and avoiding things and, in

this way, arrive at the station of true emptiness. In this station, not only is life no longer oriented around things (phenomena), but there is no longer anything left in the remnants of the “self” to grasp at or avoid anything. Thus, we become *so light from Love*: “immersed” in a freedom from any orientation toward any phenomena, including the most subtle. Language starts to get in the way when trying to describe this station. But within true emptiness, when we are placed on the scales -- anything in life that calls for any sense of accounting -- we become *two ounces less than nothing*. Literally, our life cannot be measured in worldly terms any longer. Though we may move through the world and all its phenomena and experiences, and the attachments most people make in regard to these, we are always Home: experiencing the fleeting as unending Oneness, and the affected and unchanged simultaneously and not at all. We experience the “self” within complete emptiness of “self” and the world as not even a speck of dust within Home. Ahh, words fail, words fail, words fail! But the Reality of this is here now; the invitation to It laying within when we stop seeking Home, and Its portents, in the world of phenomena...

May we all be joyous to eventually realize the true happiness within that already is...



## **An elephant in a dark room**

*January 28, 2016*

Some Hindus were exhibiting a huge elephant in a large dark room. And many people, not knowing what an elephant was, gathered to see it. But as the place was too dark to permit them to see the elephant, they all felt it with their hands, to gain an idea of what it was like. One felt its trunk, and declared that the beast resembled a water-pipe. Another felt its ear, and said it must be a large fan. Another its leg, and thought it must be a pillar. Another felt its back, and declared the beast must be like a great throne. According to the part which each felt, each person gave a different description of the animal...

The eye of outward sense is as the palm of a hand,  
The whole of the object is not grasped in the palm.  
The sea itself is one thing, the foam another;  
Neglect the foam, and regard the sea with your [other] eyes.  
Waves of foam rise from the sea night and day,  
You look at the foam ripples and not the mighty sea.  
We, like boats, are tossed hither and thither,  
We are blind though we are on the bright ocean.  
Ah! you who are asleep in the boat of the body,  
You see the water; behold the Water of waters!  
Under the water you see there is another Water moving it,  
Within the spirit is a Spirit that calls it.

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma'navi*,  
translated by E.H. Whinfield, p. 181 - 182)

\* \* \*

What is the elephant to you? Take a moment to reflect on this before continuing -- there's no wrong answer. One of the explicit intents behind using metaphors in many ancient societies is to allow teachings to speak to a person where that person is. In this way, it is not wrong to see the elephant as the Beloved, Ultimate Reality, Absolute Truth, the spiritual path, the spiritual master, true life -- or even your spouse! But whatever one may see the elephant as, the metaphor is speaking to a greater whole that expands beyond our perception, a greater whole we often ignore being fixated with a part or parts of this whole.

When we are dealing with perception we are dealing with the mind. And the perception of even the most expansive mind is no more than the limited reach of a feeling hand *in a large dark room*. Most humans live through the unenlightened mind: therefore, the metaphor of a large dark room. Yet this does not stop us (in delusion) from making expansive declarations based on the limitations of our perception. It may seem ridiculous from a reader's perspective that the people in the story enter the large dark room and then, based on what they feel with their hands, make declarations of what the whole elephant is like. Thus, the different persons declare the elephant to be like *a water-pipe, a large fan, a pillar, a great throne* -- each believing their declaration to be complete and true.

It may seem ridiculous to us who have at least an idea of what an elephant is to describe the whole of the elephant in relation to a part. But when we are immersed in seeking to experience and realize "something" with the mind, more often than not we formulate declarations spanning toward defining the whole based on the limited reach of our mental perceptions. As foolish as it may seem, most

humans often do the same thing as the people in the story: ascribing the whole or predominant qualities of an “entity” based on the limits of what “I” perceive. How often do we describe someone as being “a nice person” based on one or a few pleasant experiences we’ve had with that person? A declaration we make often without having a clue of the countless other interactions this person had with others.

For the exceeding majority of people, once the perception occurs our minds automatically (via conditioning) start formulating ideas and opinions. We effortlessly associate what is before us with what we have experienced and been taught, allowing stuff of the past to fill in the gaps of what our present perception may lack -- and often do so unconsciously. For most, we view this as a necessary starting point of engaging phenomena -- one of the consequences of identifying (who “I” am) with the mind. But even when our ideas and opinions are correct, in alignment with what is true, this approach is ripe with danger. It may serve us well with things in which their full scope falls within the reach of our perception. But with most phenomena, and life itself, the fullness of such expands beyond our perceptions. And the more we engage in the business of perception and idea / opinion-making, the more we condition the mind to make this the orientation through which we engage everything.

Let me demonstrate the danger of this approach in regards to the Absolute. Most spiritual traditions explicitly state that the (fullness of the) Absolute is beyond perception -- some state only some of the qualities and manifestations of the Absolute can be perceived. Yet if I am in the habit of mental perception and formulation of ideas and opinions, I will find myself looking to formulate expansive declarations about what the Absolute is based on what I perceive -- or

imagine to perceive. And where there are gaps, I will utilize stuff of the past (including what I've been told about the Absolute) to fill in my contrived ideas and opinions about the Absolute. In fact, it's unlikely I will have a sustained interest in the Absolute if I don't have an idea (and usually opinions) of It.

The power of mental conditioning will draw me to this approach even as I conceptually know that no set of perceptions and ideas can encompass the fullness of the Absolute. Thus, mental perception, ideas, and opinions become part of my spiritual journey in quest of the Absolute: obstacles that are contrary to the "goal" of realizing (the fullness of) the Absolute. Every perception and idea of the Absolute is partial, none is complete. It is no different than a man in the large dark room thinking that the whole elephant is like a whip because his hand is upon its tail. So how can we move from this partial orientation to one that is open to realizing the whole?

Often we seek the whole by embracing additional things to do to expand this partial orientation: usually other forms of mental activity with its perceptions, ideas, and opinions. But the problem is not caused by a lack of activity, and expansion of the partial usually remains incomplete. Any genuine solution must address our fixation - often addiction -- with mental perception and the partial perceived, and how these fuel the creation of the bondage of ideas and opinions. We should also be careful that any additional activity we engage is not a veiled means of more mental perception and idea / opinion-making. No activity is "small" or "insignificant" in relation to the dynamics of this fixation: sometimes a single act is enough to lead a person to addiction.

Note that Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's advice does not advocate activity, rather a restraint of activity that allows another "activity" to happen:

*The eye of outward sense is as the palm of a hand,  
The whole of the object is not grasped in the palm.  
The sea itself is one thing, the foam another;  
Neglect the foam, and regard the sea with your [other]  
eyes.*

Even when we know the outward senses cannot grasp the whole, the foam (the partial) can play a useful role in arriving at a realization of the whole. To *neglect the foam* doesn't mean a negation of mental perception -- and in explaining this the language can get tricky. You can only neglect (disregard) something you are aware of. The components of the mind will perceive, that is part of their function; the (spiritual) art of *neglect* calls for us to be aware of what the mind perceives without fixating on it. But since most of us engage (even if subtly) and, thus, fixate on what we perceive, it becomes almost impossible for most of us to not formulate ideas and opinions which become the fodder of our declarations. *Neglect* is not something that is taught as much as it is realized: which is why most traditional Sufi paths include a regular practice of meditation so the student may arrive at this realization through a practice of single-pointed concentration.

For example, in meditating (concentrating) on a name / quality of the Beloved, the mind becomes trained at acknowledging sense perceptions (i.e. a sound in the other room) and the collage of mental motion (i.e. memories, thoughts about what I "need" or want to do later) while maintaining focus on the name. Note that memories are based on past

perceptions; and thoughts about what I “need” or want to do (the future) are projections based on past perceptions. By maintaining focus on -- constantly, in every moment, turning attention to -- the name through continuously repeating the name aloud or silently, we eventually realize our innate ability to acknowledge yet neglect the stuff of mental activity. In doing so, we diminish our identification with the mind and its activity; and the mind eventually becomes still and quiet, like a background canvas. In this mental stillness and quietude, we realize a deeper awareness already present within that is able to *regard the sea*, the whole. Most people arrive at this realization through a consistent, uninterrupted, disciplined, and wholistic spiritual practice that progresses through many challenges and struggles.

If we remain fixated on mental perceptions, what is partially perceived, ideas and opinions, and our contrived declarations, it becomes almost impossible to realize the whole: *You look at the foam ripples and not the mighty sea*. Focus on just one tree in a field and see how difficult it is to see the whole field. And this mental foam, the partial and what we construct from it, is arising all the time: *Waves of foam rise from the sea night and day*. Through our fixation with the foam, literally *We, like boats, are tossed hither and thither, / We are blind [to the ocean] though we are on the bright ocean*. Instead of trying to see with this blindness, if we accept it as blindness, we can open to a different, more expansive awareness. Similarly, when a blind person stops trying to see with the eyes, that person can “see” with one’s ears and *behold the Water of waters!* -- understand the metaphor. *Under the water you see there is another Water moving it* -- acknowledge the surface water and then neglect it so that deeper awareness may reveal the Water moving

the foam. Eventually, we will come to realize for ourselves that *Within the spirit is a Spirit that calls it*. The cultivation of neglect allows us to hear the call of Spirit, and then be drawn to Spirit to...



## The comfort you find in this world

February 11, 2016

Why, night and day, do you search for quiet and rest? They cannot be found in this world. But not for one instant do you give up seeking these things. The comfort you find in this world is like a lightning flash that passes but never endures. And what kind of lightning is it? Lightning full of hail, full of rain and snow, full of suffering. For instance, someone sets out for Antalya. They go toward Caesarea -- the opposite direction of Antalya -- hoping to reach Antalya, and never turn back even though it is impossible to reach Antalya by this route. But another who goes by the Antalyan road, though lame and feeble, still they will reach their goal, since that is where the Antalyan road ends.

No task in this world or the next is without suffering. Therefore, devote your suffering to the next world so it will not be wasted. You say, "O Muhammad take away this religion from me, for I can find no rest." How can our religion let anyone go before it brings them to the goal?

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,  
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 208 - 209)

\* \* \*

I remember the words of a teacher who said that, for most humans, it is suffering that brings us to the spiritual path. He said even for those of us who have received a spiritual upbringing, it is often only when we encounter some significant suffering that the spiritual path becomes intimate and "real." Yet despite this dynamic, there is often

an unspoken and unrealized intent to use the spiritual path to escape suffering.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's response to this intent is clear and direct: *Why, night and day, do you search for quiet and rest?* -- i.e. an escape from suffering. *They cannot be found in this world.* This declaration is also stated in many other spiritual traditions. Iisa (a.s.), also known as Jesus, said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24, Luke 9:23) In his lifetime, the cross -- upon which people were crucified -- served as an undeniable symbol of suffering. The Buddha (Shakyamuni), prior to his enlightenment, engaged six years of extreme austerities searching for an escape from suffering. Yet the first lesson he teaches after becoming enlightened is that 'There is suffering.' Within the acceptance of this inescapable aspect of this world, he taught people how to be free from suffering while in the midst of it. I can pull examples from other spiritual traditions stating this same point: that there is no escape from suffering in this world. Yet how many of us continue to seek such, even unconsciously through our embrace spirituality? For how many of us can it be said that *not for one instant do you give up seeking these things* -- an escape from suffering?

The most common way we seek an escape from suffering is through the comforts of this world. And the human mind can become so deluded that it even finds comfort in teachings and practices that explicitly discourage the pursuit of worldly comfort. A comfort that is *like a lightning flash that passes but never endures*. A comfort that is *full of suffering*. Seeking an escape from suffering fuels our continued suffering. Therefore, the metaphor Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi offers is so appropriate: *They go toward Caesarea -- the opposite direction of*

*Antalya -- hoping to reach Antalya, and never turn back even though it is impossible to reach Antalya by this route.*

It is virtually impossible to arrive at the destination of “no suffering” by seeking an escape from suffering; and pursuit of such only keeps us away from the destination of the spiritual path. But if we tread the spiritual path -- which encourages us to accept that there is suffering in this world; even if we persevere upon this path afflicted by suffering, *though lame and feeble*, we will eventually arrive at the destination of the spiritual path. *How can our religion let anyone go before it brings them to the goal?*

So if suffering is part of the spiritual path -- of life in this world -- what are we to do with it? Firstly, let's not confuse the acceptance of suffering as a call to glorify suffering or seek unnecessary suffering. Even when Iisa tells his disciples to take up their cross, he doesn't tell them to crucify themselves or carry their cross to the chief priests of the Temple who will surely kill them. But in taking up the cross, there is an acknowledging that *No task in this world or the next is without suffering. Therefore, devote your suffering to the next world so it will not be wasted.* One aspect of the next world, for those who are spiritual, is that it brings us closer to the destination of the spiritual path: Oneness with the Beloved, wherein there is Peace and Bliss which are not disturbed by anything -- unaffected by suffering.

If we seek to not waste the opportunities within suffering, we would be wise to reflect on what is its purpose. There are many components to such, but I'll focus on two in this blog post. First, within suffering there is a reminder to be mindful and careful regarding our deeds. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi shares:

These troubles and depressions that come to you are the effect of some injury and wrong you have committed. Even if you cannot remember in detail what you have done, still from the results you can know the deed. You may not remember whether it came from your own negligence or ignorance, or because others swayed you into wrongful action. But look at the results: how much did you fall from grace, or how much has your heart expanded? Certainly a fall from grace is the response of disobedience to Allaah, and expansion of the heart is the reward of obedience. (*Fihi* p. 123)

I remember the words of another teacher who said the Beloved has not afflicted or punished a single person yet; when we encounter such, the Beloved has only withheld Its Mercy to allow the fruits of our actions to fall upon us. Every spiritual tradition I have studied has explicit moral abstentions and observances that dictate undeniable terms of spiritual obedience. These are offered with the intention of guiding the whole of our lives in ways that are practical and sound. But in the modern age, many take a reductionist approach to ethics and codes of behavior, only regarding “major” acts of disobedience as wrong (sin). Thereby, a “little white lie” is not regarded as a lie -- especially if we seem to benefit from it. But we will reap what we sow from every deed, even if the fruit of suffering is not always immediate and direct. That “little white lie” will manifest some form of suffering unless the Beloved intercedes with Mercy. And remember, every fruit is larger than its seed...

One of the aims of suffering is to turn us back to obedience to the Beloved, wherein we may experience “expansion of the heart.” If I can remember with every instance of suffering that there is something -- often many things -- I did at some point that planted the seeds of what I am facing now, this can foster a strong determination to keep all of my actions in the space of spiritual obedience. That from this point forward, I will not commit another act of disobedience to refrain from placing my life any further in the reach of suffering. In this regard, no act is small or insignificant. It is important to remember that for the Sufi path, ethics and good behavior (which fosters moral character, *adab*) are essential.

Another purpose of suffering, which has a strong connection to the Sufi path, is remembrance (*dhikr*) of the Beloved. Note these words by Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi:

In prison, suffering, and toothache, when pain comes it tears away the veil of forgetfulness. The sufferers turn to Allaah and pray, “Oh Lord, Oh Compassionate One, Oh Allaah!” They are healed. Then the veils of forgetfulness descend again and they say, “Where is Allaah? I cannot find It. I cannot see It. Why should I even look?”

How is it that when you were suffering you saw and found, but now you cannot see? Therefore, suffering is made to prevail over you to the end, so that you will remember Allaah. The sinner is forgetful in times of ease and does not recollect Allaah. (*Fihi* p. 390)

We should not hold ourselves to be so clever that we neglect that many of us are these very same sinners who forget the Beloved in times of ease. And traditional Islam does not view sin through a judgmental lense. For many, our spiritual lives mirror that of a yo-yo: we suffer, we remember the Beloved and get temporarily serious about the spiritual path; then we experience some relief, even if through our own spiritual growth, and return to forgetfulness which eventually sows seeds for more suffering.

Suffering is screaming at us to remember the Beloved. As we spiritually mature, we transform from a person who constantly needs to experience suffering to remember to become someone who realizes that suffering is always present. And traditional Islam doesn't limit suffering to extreme forms: any lingering disturbance of the mind and body beyond an incident of hardship and its natural outflow is suffering. To use a metaphor, when a rock is thrown in a pond: that is the incident. And the outflows are the ripples from the rock's entry into the water. But after the ripples have faded away, if we are still disturbed by this incident, the ancients would consider that suffering. Mental attachments and grasping play a major role in this.

If we are aware, we will see that our every breath in this world occurs within the presence of suffering -- there is only a rare few in all of humanity for whom this is not the case. Even if I have matured to settle into an unwavering righteousness (spiritual obedience), this station rests upon a bed of past wrong deeds. Once the seeds of these deeds have been planted, they are destined to manifest and afflict us as suffering unless the Mercy of the Beloved intercedes. Realization of this fosters an effortless, deepening remembrance and appreciation of the Beloved. To this point, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states:

The faithful, however, do not forget that suffering -- they see suffering as always present. In the same way, once an intelligent child has had its feet put in stocks as punishment, that child never forgets the stocks. The stupid child, however, forgets and must be put in the stocks every day. So, too, the clever horse, once it has felt the spur, does not require the spur again. It carries the rider for leagues without forgetting the sting of the spur. (*Fihi* p. 391)

For the horse, as long as the rider is there, the spur is present -- it is only a leg movement away. Even if we have learned from our past wrong deeds, a return to experiencing suffering is only a small act of disobedience away. Realizing this reveals the jewel of awareness that suffering points us to. And in such awareness, we transform suffering from something we constantly experience to an unafflicting presence fostering a remembrance of the Beloved and abidance in spiritual obedience.



## The gaze of Majnun... the gaze of Love - Part 1 of 2

February 25, 2016

The caliph looked at Layla and said, "Are you Layla?"

She said, "Yes, I'm Layla, but you're not Majnun. The eye in Majnun's head is not in your head.

*How will you see Layla with an eye that sees others  
and has never been purified by tears?*

"Look upon me with the gaze of Majnun."

You should look at the Beloved with the eyes of the lover, for "It [Allaah] loves them" [Qur'aan 5:54]. The flaw is that people don't look at Allaah with the gaze of Love. They look at It with the gaze of knowledge, the gaze of gnosis, and the gaze of philosophy. The gaze of Love is something else.

*(adapted from Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of  
Shams-i Tabrizi, translated by William C. Chittick, p. 228)*

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We'll use as the centerpiece of this two-part blog post words from Shams al-Tabriz, the master who opened Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi to his own heart. And the centerpiece of what I chose of his words is the story of Layla (sometimes written as Laila) and Majnun.

The story of Layla and Majnun remains one of the most cherished stories in the Arabic and Muslim worlds. The story holds special affection among many Sufis who see powerful metaphors within it

regarding the mystic path. There are various versions of the story, which flourished for centuries through the oral tradition, but there is a common core that remains consistent despite the variations. We'll use this post to share an overview of this story since it informs the context of Shams' words.

As a boy, Qays (who becomes Majnun) falls in love with Layla: Layla literally means "night" and Qays became lost in the night of this girl. His love was so deep that his youthfulness could not prevent him from drowning into complete absorption with her. And she fell deeply in love with him, but her expression of such was more restrained due to the norms of society.

It is sometimes difficult for those of Western culture to understand the fullness of this Love absorption since we tend to approach what we call "love" through the mind and personality (the individual "I"), even if we label such otherwise (i.e. "the heart"). But in many other parts of the world, the traditional approach to Love is duty. For example, in traditional Arab culture where arranged marriages are common, people usually don't fall in love and then marry. Instead, they are married first; and through serving each other as husband and wife (duty) they learn and open to love each other. A Love realized through a genuine coming together through service. Many couples come to realize, often through challenges, that living through the mind and personality is often a barrier to service, duty, and true union. If we transcend these barriers, this learning and opening -- dare I say, surrender -- to Love points us to the heart.

Young Qays arrives at such transcendence, this arrival at the heart, without treading the path of service and duty: arriving at the

destination without the journey that prepares us for such arrival. Thus, he becomes completely immersed in and overwhelmed by the absorption of this Love. They say he was drowning in the ocean of Love before he realized the water could take his breath, and eventually his life, away. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi describes this absorption as follows:

If the heart is totally absorbed, then all the other senses are obliterated in it, and there is no need for the tongue [language]. Take the case of Layla: She was not a spiritual being, but of flesh, fashioned of water and clay. Yet passion for her produced such absorption, and so utterly seized and overwhelmed [Qays, who becomes] Majnun, that he had no need to see Layla with his eyes, no need to hear her voice. He could not separate himself from the thought of her, causing him to cry...

*(Fihi Ma Fihi, trans. by A.J. Arberry, p. 81 - 82)*

And cry he did, but the words were not his own. Through him came some of the most beautiful ghazals (poetic verses) which, in his overwhelmed state, he proclaimed aloud for the world to hear. These spontaneous outpourings were of such beauty that people became enamored of his verses. In fact, some of these same verses are still repeated today, centuries later. Qays' public demonstrations of affection went blatantly against social norms and the etiquette of courtship. His declarations were also seen as soiling Layla's reputation since such wooing was not socially acceptable. To protect Layla from this, her people decided to keep her in seclusion -- denying

the young lovers any chance of meeting, let alone the opportunity to flourish their love.

Instead of deterring Qays, the seclusion stirred his outpourings: his ghazals increasing in intensity and beauty, his proclamations becoming more bold. His absorption into Love became such that he lost all interest in the world, everything else became irrelevant besides Layla. He found himself wandering in the remote deserts and mountains, reciting his verses aloud. Oblivious to all human interaction, the people called him Majnun -- which means "madman." Yet the beauty of his ghazals were so entrancing that people would venture out into the desert and mountains to hear his words, even if he was "insane." So enraptured in beauty were his verses, that they impressed themselves into the people's memory. And they shared these ghazals with others, leading to their spread throughout all of Arabia and beyond.

Majnun's words even found a way into Layla's seclusion: upon hearing them, she would swoon. Eventually she began to send verses of her own into the world, writing lines on pieces of paper and tossing them into the desert wind. And fate found a way of having these move through the ocean of humanity to her lover's ear. People would find these scraps and know they were intended for Majnun, carrying the papers to him in hope of witnessing an outpouring response of more beautiful verses.

As most versions go, Layla's people eventually married her off to another man. Yet she remained chaste in her love to Majnun, refusing to allow her husband to touch her. And Majnun's verses continued to flow, even as he descended further into madness. But one of the

boons of this madness was the gift of *Salaam*: a Peace that cannot be disturbed. Despite the mental agony of his separation from Layla, there was a Peace within his heart that prevented him from completely breaking and sustained the flow of verses. This Peace became such a force in his presence that even wild beasts became peaceful when near him. Cherishing the refuge of his presence in a world immersed in conflict and suffering, lions would lay with gazelles, wolves with sheep, jackals with hares -- all at the feet of Majnun. They served as a wall of protection around him as they communed in the absorption of Love that outpoured through him. I remember a teacher who said the reason most humans didn't realize this Peace within Majnun was because they were always coming to him in want: of ghazals, revenge, an end to this embarrassment...

Even as Majnun became skin and bones from neglect of food, his love for Layla sustained him. And her love for him continued to bloom, even if covered in discreet veils. One version has it that a midnight meeting is arranged for the two: yet when they met, the love for each was so intense that they couldn't even speak a word, hardly glance at each other. Majnun, unable to contain the force of his love, runs away into the distance.

There are variations of the tragic earthly ending for these lovers. In some accounts, Majnun is found dead in the desert stoned to death; circumstances suggesting he was killed in revenge for the many years of soiling Layla's reputation. In other accounts, Layla is overtaken by an illness which slowly brings her to death. Upon hearing the news, Majnun, escorted by the wild beasts, comes to lay upon the grave of his beloved, which too becomes his grave. The animals keep vigil, not allowing any humans to approach: their corpses sharing a semblance

of the union that was denied them while alive. A powerful metaphor reflecting this world's hostility toward (true) Love: that the cost of living Love in this world is often death.

To this, many Sufi versions add the epilogue of Layla and Majnun's reunion in Heaven. Beyond the reach of human interference and binding social norms, nothing impedes the freedom of their love. A reminder that when Love endures in purity, the union of lovers will come to be -- if not in this world, then in another. But this is for those who keep Love pure; the same can't be said for sullied, often selfish, approaches to "love."

It is within the context of this epic tale that we come to Shams' words. The text preceding the opening selection states there was a caliph (a leader) who heard the verses and gossips of Majnun's adoration of Layla. Wanting to see her beauty for himself, he summoned her. Looking upon her, you get the sense that he did not regard her physical beauty to match Majnun's proclamations. Many versions of the story affirm that Layla was not a person of overwhelming physical beauty. As Arab culture doesn't limit human beauty to the physical, the caliph wonders if her immense beauty lays in her character, which conversation would reveal. So he asks, "*Are you Layla?*" Sensing the intention behind the question, Layla responds: to see my beauty you must *Look upon me with the gaze of Majnun* -- to see the beauty of the Beloved, one must see with the gaze of one who loves the Beloved. The Beloved may reveal Its fullness right before our eyes but without *the gaze of Love*, we will remain blind to such.

We'll explore more in depth what *the gaze of Majnun, the gaze of Love*, is pointing to in the next blog post.



## The gaze of Majnun... the gaze of Love - Part 2 of 2

March 10, 2016

The caliph looked at Layla and said, “Are you Layla?”

She said, “Yes, I’m Layla, but you’re not Majnun. The eye in Majnun’s head is not in your head.

*How will you see Layla with an eye that sees others  
and has never been purified by tears?*

“Look upon me with the gaze of Majnun.”

You should look at the Beloved with the eyes of the lover, for “It [Allaah] loves them” [Qur’aan 5:54]. The flaw is that people don’t look at Allaah with the gaze of Love. They look at It with the gaze of knowledge, the gaze of gnosis, and the gaze of philosophy. The gaze of Love is something else.

*(adapted from Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of  
Shams-i Tabrizi, translated by William C. Chittick, p. 228)*

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As Shams begins to explain what it means to look with *the gaze of Majnun, the gaze of Love*, he references a verse from the Qur’aan. “*It [Allaah] loves them*” is key phrase from a larger verse, something students of the Qur’aan would recognize. Similarly, if I say “Thou shalt not kill,” people familiar with the Ten Commandments will automatically reference this statement as part of the larger set of decrees. So let’s look at the full verse as it certainly informs the tone of Shams’ explanation:

Oh you who are faithful, if any of you turn back from one's Faith (Way), Allaah will bring forth a people for whom It loves them as they love It: humble with the faithful, mighty against the unfaithful, striving hard in the way of Allaah; not fearing the censure of any censurers. Such is the Grace of Allaah, which It bestows on whom It pleases. Allaah is the All-Encompassing, the All-Knowing. (Surah 5, Verse 54)

Particularly for Sufis, this verse speaks major qualities of the endless qualities of Love. And these qualities are embodied by Majnun. The first being that Love is for the faithful; it is virtually impossible to love without faith. I remember one teacher who said that if you have doubts within your pursuit of Love, you are pursuing an imitation of Love. Majnun, even in his madness, was immersed in faith. Sometimes this point gets lost because Majnun lives his love for Layla without any expectations regarding outcomes -- whereas most people approach faith in terms of outcomes. Yet in faith, Majnun never doubts his love for her even when its expression takes on the form of madness. In his faith, he trusts with a conviction words struggle to convey that Layla loves him -- despite having very little interaction with her.

Another quality of Love is being humble with the faithful -- all that is in harmony with faith, with Love. This is accompanied by a mightiness against the unfaithful -- all that opposes faith, Love. Majnun's madness was fierce: his loud outbursts of verses were an extreme rebellion against a society that impeded his union with Layla. In the context of his society, Majnun's proclamations were regarded as equivalent to acts of extreme physical violence, even if people were

enamored with the beauty of his verses. He shunned all society, including his family, for discouraging his love for Layla. This led to him living alone in the desert, in homeless solitude -- a statement of mighty resistance in a society that was very communal. Yet if a person brought word of Layla or a message from her, he became complete humility. And even with the wild beasts he walked with: he didn't lord over them; instead he was their fellow companion although they came to him to bask in the peaceful bliss that emanated through him.

And surely Majnun strove "hard in the way of Allaah" -- in the way of Love and faith. His life became one of extreme hardship and austerities. He left wealth and comfort to become a homeless ascetic of Love: the verses that poured forth through him becoming his prayers, meditations, and service of devotion. He continually rejected every single encouragement to abandon this way, suggestions most would regard as practical and sound. Instead he never wavered from the path of Love, even when this path transgressed extreme hardships.

Majnun's commitment to this way went beyond personal choice; it was a surrender to fate. Within such surrender he did not fear any censure -- not even the possibility of being killed by Layla's people and government officials for his "abominable" behavior. The challenges he endured did not diminish in the least the Grace of the Beloved bestowed upon Majnun. It may not have been evident to the eyes of others, which tended to focus more on his madness; but Grace is real. One of the undeniable proofs of this Grace was the overflow of these immensely beautiful verses for Layla. Grace, and the overflows it yields, is not something earned or developed; rather it is a blessing bestowed by the Beloved on whomever It wishes.

Most humans don't arrive at this state of Grace as Majnun did; in a sense, his youthfulness prevented him from acquiring the "adult" tendencies that impede openness to Grace. Once we become closed or hold barriers to such, *the gaze of knowledge, the gaze of gnosis, and the gaze of philosophy* can become means to arrive at *the gaze of Love* which is open to Grace.

Knowledge is stuff of the world: from the gross forms of physical objects to more subtle, mental impressions. Our fixation with these endlessly turns us outward toward the world; the opposite direction of the inward turning toward the heart, wherein the Beloved (Love) dwells. The path of spiritual knowledge looks to reveal the outward, limiting tendencies of the mind -- tendencies we place ourselves in bondage to by continuous misuse of the mind. When we become aware of our limiting tendencies and activities -- many which we aren't cognizant of -- we can cease engaging these to arrive at a quietude of mind. In such quietude, we can realize the always-present *gaze of Love* that emanates from beyond the mind.

Gnosis, in traditional Sufism, goes beyond the mental realm; it is a direct knowing (not knowledge) of the Beloved. Many traditional Sufi orders approach this knowing through the Names (attributes) of Allaah. Let's use *Al-Hakim*, The Wise, as an example. Most people have concepts of what they regard as wisdom; and we consider things wise when they fit within such contrived conceptual boxes. What often informs these discerning qualities is pursuit of what is pleasurable and aversion of what is unpleasant (to our minds). But a direct "experience" (knowing) of *Al-Hakim* reveals there is a purpose to everything that occurs, pleasant and unpleasant, that relates to the totality of existence. Such knowing not only informs how we think,

but our every action, thought, and approach to life is transformed -- the caterpillar becomes a butterfly.

Coming to a knowing of *Al-Hakiim*, we no longer deal with phenomena through the lenses of our pleasure-influenced concepts of wisdom and the formulations we contrive from these. Instead, we deal with phenomena in the context of their purpose in the infinite totality of existence, a purpose revealed through the heart. Thus, a person with such knowing will sometimes willingly endure what is unpleasant because it fulfills a beneficial purpose in the scheme of the totality of existence -- such as Majnun enduring the hardships of his love for Layla. Yet as wonderful and life-transforming as *the gaze of gnosis* is, it is not as open to Grace as is *the gaze of Love*. Love goes deeper.

*The gaze of philosophy* can be read a few ways. There is worldly philosophy, which Shams readily dismisses. But philosophy was also used in a Sufi context: intellectual systems of concepts and observations intended to expand the scope of the mind to be more open to spiritual truths. In some respects, spiritual philosophy moves in the direction of gnosis but doesn't seek direct knowing, although some philosophers go further to "experience" such. Thus, philosophy is still limited to the framework of the mind; although it expands beyond knowledge, it is still closed to Grace.

Knowledge, gnosis, and spiritual philosophy can be used to remove barriers and limitations to Grace. And in turning in the direction of openness, one can realize magnificent qualities of Love. As wonderful as such may be, one should not mistake *the gaze of knowledge*, *the gaze of gnosis*, and *the gaze of philosophy* with *the gaze of Love*. In

particular, there is one thing *the gaze of Love* arrives at that the other approaches don't; the selected Qur'aanic verse speaks to it.

The verse says: "Oh you who are faithful, if any of you turn back from one's Faith (Way), Allaah will bring forth a people for whom It loves them as they love It" (Surah 5, Verse 54) This indicates, although not explicitly, that faith leads to Love. And once we are clearly on our way to or have arrived at Love, the Beloved warns us to not turn back. (Remember: the Qur'aan is the words of the Absolute revealed through the Prophet Muhammad, p.b.u.h.) If we turn back, this Love that the Beloved loves us with will be bestowed upon another people. A Love that if we continue to be drawn to and arrive at will "manifest" (our) Love for the Beloved: the Beloved loving the lover and the lover loving the Beloved such that, with *the gaze of Love*, there is only Love. Only Love.

Words cannot begin to fully describe what this Only Love is. But it is because of this that those absorbed in Love continue to love even in the face of extreme hardships. This is why Majnun embraces the homeless life in a brutal desert of solitude, continuing to yell forth verses of Love to Layla. To the world this seems excessive, and perhaps stupid, but the circumstances matter not because in *the gaze of Love*, there is Only Love. And this is something the caliph cannot comprehend as he looks upon Layla. Even if she was the most beautiful woman in all of creation, if he is not seeing with the gaze of Only Love, he cannot even approach an understanding of Majnun's love for Layla. In the same way, if we wish to realize what it is to love

the Beloved, we must arrive at *the gaze of Love* wherein there is Only Love. And by grace, we have means to be drawn to this gaze...



P.S.: Only the Beloved loves; the lovers are but vessels. But that's a topic for another time...

## Allaah sent a gnat

March 24, 2016

These words are Allaah's army. By Allaah's authority they open and seize fortresses. If Allaah commands thousands of horsemen to go and show their faces at such and such a fortress but not to capture it, so it will be. If It commands a single horseman to seize that fortress, that same single horseman will open the fortress gates and capture it.

Allaah sent a gnat against Nimrod and it destroyed him. "Equal in the eyes of the Gnostic [Sufi] are a penny and a dollar, a lion and a cat." If Allaah bestows Its blessing, one penny does the work of a thousand dollars and more. If Allaah withholds Its blessing from a thousand dollars, they cannot do the work of one penny. So too, if Allaah commissions the cat it destroys the lion, as the gnat destroyed Nimrod. In short, when we realize that all things are of Allaah, all things become one and the same in our eyes.

I hope, too, that you will hear these words within your hearts, for that would be profitable.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,  
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 104 - 105)

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Many in spiritual circles would agree with Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's statement *that all things are of Allaah*, the Absolute. That everything that is and happens comes from the Absolute; and how things play out in the interactions of phenomena is ultimately a matter of the Will of the Beloved. If the Beloved so wills, a clawless kitten can defeat a full-

grown, powerful lion in its fighting prime. For many in spiritual circles, this is not new knowledge. Yet Jalaal ud-Diin highlights a key element that moves us beyond possessing this knowledge and yet still living predominantly through self-effort -- including using or allowing the dynamics of phenomena to impose our intentions and desires. This element is to genuinely *realize that all things are of Allaah*. When we genuinely realize this in a way that goes beyond the mental realm of concepts, we effortlessly cease with the delusion of self-effort and pursuit of worldly powers. To this end, Sufi masters continually use stories to remind students of this reality, that through remembrance we may come to truly be open to such realization.

Nimrod (An-Namruud in Arabic) is lauded in ancient lore, even if he is an example of one who turned to evil. Even the righteous acknowledge his great characteristics which he used to accomplish some of the greatest feats in human history. In the Bible, he is described as “a mighty hunter before the Lord” (Genesis 10:9). Some interpret this as acknowledging that he started off as righteous because it is unlikely that an evil person would be described as being “before the Lord.” He used his skills of being a mighty hunter to become a mighty and powerful king, praised for not only his strength and fortitude but also his great intelligence. He established an expansive kingdom that encompassed Babylon and Assyria -- some regard these as two of the greatest civilizations in human history. But Nimrod’s ambitions went beyond merely human leadership: in his glory and fame he regarded himself as a god and turned his subjects to worship him and other idols. He kept some people in such dependence on his governance that worship of him became a means of survival.

This set the stage for one of his most noted deeds: the building of the Tower of Babel. This was only three or four generations after the Great Flood, which the Prophet Nuuḥ (a.s.), also known as Noah, and his family survived. In fact, some traditions hold that Nimrod was a grandson of Nuuḥ. Yet Nimrod ignored one of the greatest lessons of the Flood: the call to live in humble obedience to the Beloved or face dire consequences. In his arrogance, he inspired the people to build a tower so tall that if Allaah flooded the world again they would be able to survive in the tower. In essence, this would allow people to do whatever they want. So they began to build this wide, strong, and elevating tower: one that would be capable of surviving another Flood. To avert such, the Beloved imposed upon the people, who previously spoke the same language, different languages; thus, they were not able to understand each other and work together to complete the tower. This confusion also eventually led to people scattering across the earth as different nations. Yet Nimrod remained strong with a powerful kingdom, still lording over much of the earth. That is until Allaah sent a gnat.

There are different versions of this tale I am about to share. The Prophet Ibraahiim (a.s.), also known as Abraham, was sentenced to be burned to death for destroying idols. A large bonfire covering a wide distance was lit and Ibraahiim was thrown into the fire. Yet Allaah made the touch of the flames cool to his skin and he suffered not a single burn. He was then brought before Nimrod. Ibraahiim chastised the king for making himself a god and allowing the worship of idols. He and Nimrod then argued over the Beloved's sovereignty, with Nimrod giving forth a long list of powers he actively displayed on earth as a king and "god." When Ibraahiim says the Beloved has power over life and death, Nimrod retorts that he also has such power: he can

provide people sustenance to live or banish and execute them. Ibraahiim then challenges Nimrod to display a power greater than the Beloved, as the Qur'aan relates:

Have you reflected on him [Nimrod] who had an argument with Ibraahiim about his Lord, because Allaah had given him [Nimrod] the kingdom? How when Ibraahiim said: My Lord is It who giveth life and causeth death. He [Nimrod] answered: I give life and cause death. Ibraahiim said: Lo! Allaah causeth the sun to rise in the East, so do thou cause it to come up from the West. Thus was the disbeliever abashed. And Allah guideth not wrongdoing folk. (Surah 2, Verse 258)

Thus, the argument ended. But not the conflict, for Nimrod challenged the Absolute to a battle. He assembled a large army on the battlefield, summoning his best soldiers -- some of the best fighters in the world. On the other side, Ibraahiim stood alone as the Beloved's proxy. The war cries began, Nimrod's soldiers yelling in a fury to scare the sole soldier on the other side fleeing, thus attaining victory through intimidation. But instead, Ibraahiim stood unnerved. Suddenly, the skies mysteriously darkened as a horde of gnats (some traditions say mosquitos) descended upon Nimrod and his army. These little creatures flew into the noses of these large, muscular masters of combat, flew underneath their armor and began to bite their flesh. The soldiers were overcome by these tiny bugs and fled. The True Cause of this victory is reflected in Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's words when he says:

*If Allaah commands thousands of horsemen to go and show their faces at such and such a fortress but not to capture it, so it will be. If It commands a single horseman to seize that fortress, that same single horseman will open the fortress gates and capture it.*

The determining factor of the outcome is not the characteristics of phenomena and the conditions they exist within. Yet this is often what we look at -- even spiritual people -- ignoring the True Cause. What determines the outcome is the Beloved, even if It uses phenomena and conditions to effect Its Will. And It will sometimes even use means "illogical" to our minds, such as little gnats defeating an army. Thus, the Sufi is not concerned with the particulars of phenomena. Instead, the question becomes: am I looking to the True Cause and living in harmony with That?

But the story doesn't end there. From that battlefield, a single gnat continued to follow Nimrod and pester him day and night -- some say for forty years. Some traditions say the gnat flew up Nimrod's nose and began to, little by little, gnaw on his brain. This continued for years until one of the greatest human minds in all of history was reduced to an imbecile madness. Other traditions say the gnat continued to fly about Nimrod's face. Despite all efforts to kill and repel the gnat, it continued to buzz by his face in unending disturbance -- again, some traditions say for forty years. Even when Nimrod had servants beat on his head with maces, the pain of such compared not to the torture of this unceasing disturbance by this single little gnat. Yet in his insisting arrogance, Nimrod refused to surrender to the Beloved: maintaining his claim as a god and refusing to forbid his people from worshiping idols until his death.

Understanding this dynamic, we may better understand why Jalaal ud-Diim Rumi says: *“Equal in the eyes of the Gnostic [Sufi] are a penny and a dollar, a lion and a cat,”* -- or even a gnat and a large, powerful army. What large and competent armies could not do through self-effort, the Beloved did with a single gnat: defeat Nimrod, one of the greatest kings in human history, with an intentional slow pace that proved more painful than sudden death. Yet there was a mercy in this slow deliberation: it offered Nimrod countless opportunities to repent and return to righteousness -- opportunities he rejected. And just like Nimrod, we may be afforded the opportunity to perform a range of actions; but what determines the outcomes of such are not our actions, only the True Cause, the Beloved.

To one with knowing, the scale of phenomena and actions are irrelevant. Within such knowing, one realizes (in a way that goes beyond the mind) the determining factor of what manifests and how lays only with the Will of the Beloved. Any actions one with such knowing performs is done within the realization of this dynamic. Thus, *“If Allaah bestows Its blessing, one penny does the work of a thousand dollars and more.* To the knowing mystic, a penny is just as valuable as all the riches in world. In the same way, all the riches in the world mean nothing without the Beloved’s blessing, because *“If Allaah withholds Its blessing from a thousand dollars, they cannot do the work of one penny.*

This is not a call for those who have not yet arrived at such knowing to blindly imitate this realization. Instead sit with these stories if they resonate with you and allow them -- hopefully within the context of a disciplined and pure spiritual practice -- to start to slowly open you toward such realization. Beyond the appearance of phenomena’s

workings is the realization of this undeniable truth. Constant remembrance and immersion into affirmations of this truth will unflinchingly begin to remove the veils and obstacles to the openness that receives such realization. In the same way, *These words [of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumij] are Allaah's army. By Allaah's authority they open and seize fortresses* that impede this realization. May you truly *hear these words within your hearts*. May you open to *realize that all things are of Allaah*, and embrace the “sight” of equanimity (a penny and a thousand dollars being viewed the same) that is in harmony with this realization, further opening to the transformation of your whole being...



## **But it's my partner - Part 1 of 3**

*April 7, 2016*

I said, "My heart is an instrument and implement.  
Like a viol (rubaab), the heart is in unison with my voice."  
When I found that my heart was the friend of another,  
I kept saying [foolishly], "But it's my partner!"

\* \* \*

The heart that I thought belonged to me --  
By Allaah, I never left it with any friend --  
Has left me, O idol, and has come to you.  
Take good care of it, for I took good care of it!

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,  
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 211 and 213)

\* \* \*

Some describe the Sufi way as "the path of the heart." The heart remains a focal point of those who embrace and deepen into what this path calls for. Yet as magnificent as it is to realize what the heart beholds, it is not the final destination; there is something beyond the heart that calls for even letting go of the heart.

The term "heart" is used in various ways in Islamic lore. This diversity of use can become further clouded through translation and the differing ways the term is used in other languages. Some of the confusion is understandable, particularly with translating Sufi poetry

in which metaphors with strong worldly inclinations are sometimes used to refer to non-worldly (spiritual) realities. Examples include how “wine” and “idol,” which are forbidden in Islam, are used to refer to spiritually cherished entities. So I’ll use this post to offer some background on how “heart” is used in Sufi poetry as such may inform how the above quatrains speak to you.

One way heart is used is in a romantic / worldly passion sense. Although such is discouraged in Sufism because it forms and sustains ego-based attachments, it is sometimes used as a metaphor for the selfless love that arises when one truly surrenders to the Beloved. The Sufi lexicon frames this connotation of heart in the lover - Beloved relationship. Just as a lover’s heart is driven by worldly passion for a (human) beloved, the Sufi lover looks to cultivate a similar “passion” (intensity) for the Beloved through spiritual practice and service. The “heart” (in this sense, the innermost place of the mind) is turned to become consumed in attachment to only the Beloved -- actually our idea(s) of the Beloved. Deepening into a “passionate obsession” of this attachment, all other worldly attachments dissipate and eventually fade away so that there is only the (mind-based) desire for the Beloved. Without other worldly attachments and distractions the mind settles into a quietude which then reveals, in typical mystic irony, that the Beloved cannot be attached to. If one then releases this only remaining attachment one arrives at the threshold of the heart: which goes beyond the mind to a “place” beyond all duality and separation, only Oneness; beyond all striving and desire to the endless contentment of Bliss.

In some Sufi traditions, this selective attachment to the Beloved is replaced by attachment to the spiritual master -- commonly called

*Mawlana* (or *Mevlana*) or *Shaykh*. The master, as a human being, occupies a form more tangible than ideas of the Beloved. In traditional Sufi orders, the master stands as the present link in a chain of (spiritual) transmission that goes directly back to the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) This chain usually passes through a lineage of masters who served as heads or notable saints of Sufi orders, even as some orders sometimes branched off to form new orders. But sometimes masters receive this transmission through mystical occurrences. For example, some receive this transmission through dreams: literally Muhammad or a saint initiates a person in a dream.

All transmission happens from heart to heart, it does not involve the mind. In fact, one of the main aims of spiritual practice is to cultivate a quietude of mind so that it doesn't interfere with or veil the heart. One of the proofs of such transmission is complete openness of heart: that one lives life through the boundless essence, not the limitations of the mind. That one effortlessly abides in abounding strength that draws, not compels, the dynamics of life. That one sits on a throne of wisdom, whereby all that one needs to know is revealed when it needs to be known. That one remains in the flow of beneficence; even challenges that come and go flow beneficently through one's life. And that what we call life is lived in pure Oneness, the form (mind-body entity) emanating and serving in complete harmony with the Beloved.

In this sense, the heart is the inner essence of not only our (human) being, but all of reality. The Absolute says in the Qur'aan:

We [The Absolute] verily created human and We know what its soul whispereth to it, and *We are nearer to it than its jugular vein.* (Surah 50, Verse 16, italics mine)

In the context of classical Arabic (the language in which the Qur'aan was revealed), there is a strong metaphoric relevance to the jugular vein, particularly in its relation to the heart. The jugular veins are major blood vessels in the neck that drain blood from the head to the heart. If the jugular veins are punctured that usually means death since such results in rapid, major blood loss. In ancient days, such an injury often resulted in someone drowning in their own blood. In ancient Arabia, the jugular vein was regarded as the most vital vein -- in some respects the "life vein." So to be nearer to this most vital vein is to be the life-force itself. This is an intimacy that goes beyond all ideas yet already is within everyone of us -- even if most of us ignore it.

It is not coincidental that the above verse refers to the vein that drains from the head, which contains all five of the mind's senses, to the heart. This reflects a direct relationship between the mind and the heart, wherein the Beloved dwells. (A famous hadith says: "Neither My heavens nor My earth contain me, but the heart of My faithful servant contains and embraces Me.") Considering this relationship in light of our tendency to identify with the mind and body, we may see how what "drains" from the mind can veil the heart. The term heart is sometimes used in reference to this dynamic: particularly, the innermost part of the mind that meets and can literally rest upon the heart like a veil. Just as a sheet draped over a person may seem to take on some of the qualities of the person (i.e., the shape of the

person, as the person moves the sheet appears to move), the innermost part of the mind can appear to take on some of the qualities of the heart. Without discernment, it may seem that the mind lays at the essence of who we are, a delusion that fuels and is fueled by our identification with the mind and body.

Two things in particular can be used to discern the inner-mind from the heart. The mind operates in the orientation of separateness, which is part of its function as a tool to navigate this world. The mind's nature to separate the wall from the doorway enables my body to exit the room through the doorway without walking into the wall. The mind does this effortlessly and automatically, literally without having to consciously think "this doorway is separate from the wall, I should walk through the doorway, not the wall." When we identify with the mind -- think this is who I am -- we literally engage most, if not all, phenomena in terms of "I" and the "other." This type of engagement indicates we are operating from the mind, not the heart.

When the first quatrain opens with *I said, "My heart..."*: the "I" and "My heart" are referring to the mind resting upon (veiling) the heart. When we are truly in the heart, which expands beyond the mind and its duality and separation, there is no "I" and "my." And we should not deceive ourselves into thinking (key word!) that we have transcended the mind simply because we omit "I" and "my" from our vocabulary but still operate in an orientation that emanates from these unspoken dynamics. But here's the challenge: since Oneness, the orientation of the heart, cannot be expressed in language (which designates phenomena into separate objects and concepts), mystics use language -- with its limitations -- to metaphorically point to that which language cannot fully encompass. It is for this reason that the true

“language” of the heart is silence, which goes beyond the mere absence of sounds. Silence is transmitted from heart to heart (which are actually not separate); it is not communicated from one person to another. But some mystics will use language to guide others to a mental quietude that is open to silence.

Another means of discernment lays with our occupation with (often addiction to) knowledge. The orientation of the mind is outward and all knowledge is tied to at least one object of worldly (external) phenomena. This applies to even subtle objects like the quality of being intelligent: intelligence being based on the accumulation of facts about worldly phenomena and the ability to apply these facts to varying situations. Knowledge, being of the mind, involves phenomena being perceived as separate entities, even if we acknowledge relationships among these. But the heart is oriented toward awareness, which encompasses the limited realm of knowledge but is not bound to it. And awareness is most easily and clearly realized within, where there are no (outward) distractions and veils, which is why the orientation of the heart is first within.

To use a metaphor, awareness encompasses the knowledge of the various waves of the ocean, which the mind perceives as separate parts of the ocean. But awareness literally realizes the waves as the ocean -- no wave being separate even as it is a distinct aspect of the ocean. And, sticking with this metaphor, the whole of knowledge doesn't amount to a single drop in the endless ocean of awareness. The mind and knowledge cannot encompass awareness; yet the deluded mind may think (key word again!) it's looking at separate things as a whole when it really isn't. Duality has not the “sight” of Oneness. Also, awareness is not fixed like knowledge, and even embraces the stuff of

knowledge in a fluid manner. Remember, no object is permanent, all objects decay and eventually disappear. When we are viewing life through the limited lense of knowledge, we are in the mind even if we reference such as the heart. Awareness doesn't have a lense, but the language of mystics may point to such through a lense.

Again, confusion may arise since sometimes the same word is used for knowledge and awareness in original Sufi writings (Arabic and, in the case of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi, Persian). So knowing the context of what is being communicated is extremely important to deciphering the intent of the author. But, particularly with poets, the context may be intentionally vague to allow for open interpretation: an invitation for the hearer to receive what is shared as it speaks to one's present understanding. Thus, it becomes a challenge of translation to decipher or choose a "proper" context; a challenge further complicated by the lack of uniform approaches to and terms of translation. For example, I use the word 'awareness' but I've seen others translate this as: reason, universal reason, consciousness, gnosis, (spiritual) mysteries, truth, intellect, etc.

I hope the above is helpful in better understanding the context of the above quatrains. We'll explore their content in the next post.



## But it's my partner - Part 2 of 3

April 21, 2016

I said, "My heart is an instrument and implement.  
Like a viol (rubaab), the heart is in unison with my voice."  
When I found that my heart was the friend of another,  
I kept saying [foolishly], "But it's my partner!"

\* \* \*

The heart that I thought belonged to me --  
By Allaah, I never left it with any friend --  
Has left me, O idol, and has come to you.  
Take good care of it, for I took good care of it!

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,  
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 211 and 213)

\* \* \*

In the last blog post, we explored how the term "heart" is used in Islamic lore; now we'll turn our attention to the two selected quatrains. The opening lines of the quatrains are informative and indicate two distinctions in spiritual maturity. The first quatrain opens with *I said*, "*My heart is an instrument and implement*. As stated in the last post, the "*I*" and "*My*" indicate this quatrain is happening within the space of the innermost mind which rests upon and veils the heart. "*I*" and "*My*" are indications of duality and separation, and this mind-oriented perspective informs the tone of the entire quatrain. Yet within this view there are things that point beyond the mind to Oneness. This

realization is reflected in the opening line of the second quatrain: *The heart that I thought belonged to me*. Notice, the heart is no longer being referenced in terms of “I” and “My” even if in the past *I thought [the heart] belonged to me*.

The heart, with its ever-deepening intimacy, lays at the essence of our being. This factors into why, in ignorance, we selfishly identify the heart and what it beholds as mine -- often in subtle ways we don't realize. Yet the spiritual maturity of realizing the heart and what it beholds is not “mine” is a precious jewel of the Sufi way. Such realization goes beyond the mind and concepts, although masters and teachers may use these to point in the direction of this realization. And genuinely using the heart as *an instrument and implement* can go a long way toward arriving at, being drawn to, this realization.

How many of us truly regard the heart as *an instrument and implement*? A tool to be used toward a specific purpose? Often we view the heart as something we feel or receive something desired from. This is reflected in statements like “I feel such joy in my heart” or “My heart is filled with such joy” -- with “me” feeling this joy emanating from the heart. In ancient times, these views were accompanied by the notion among some in Sufi circles that the heart is the final destination of the Sufi path. And one can sympathize with this mistaken notion when one has “experienced” the immaculate, expansive, and blissful beauty of the truly open heart. But I remember the words a Sufi teacher who said: “If I don't see the heart in how you live, something is lacking.” This is a call to be committed and determined to use the heart as a tool in our actions and approach to life, a use that should be evident in itself. This counsel is just as relevant if we are referring to the heart as the innermost mind or the

essence of (our) being. We'll address what purpose the tool of the heart is intended for shortly.

The second line of the first quatrain gives a powerful metaphor of how to use the heart as *an instrument and implement*. The choice of the viol, or rubaab as is the Persian name of the specific instrument referenced, is intentional. The rubaab is a lute-like string instrument: it has a few melodic strings, a few effect strings, and a range of resonance (sympathetic) strings. An interesting quality of the resonance strings is that the player rarely plays these; instead they resonate sound from the other strings being played. In this manner, the what the musician plays (on the melodic and effect strings) is magnified by the instrument itself. The relevance of this quality is immense as a metaphor for the instrument of the heart, such that the rubaab is one of the cherished instruments of traditional Sufi music (*samaa*) in the Persian world.

Now to bring this back to the first quatrain, the second line states: *Like a viol (rubaab), the heart is in unison with my voice.*" What we do with the instrument of the heart is magnified by the heart (the instrument) itself. This is one of the reasons traditional Sufism emphasizes restraint, especially for beginning students. Since most people come to spirituality from a place of ignorance, delusion, and selfishness, we need to restrain these so that we don't magnify living such with the heart -- especially our actions. And yes, the heart can be used as a tool of these although the intent of its creation lays with another purpose. Such is why spiritual ego / selfishness is often more dangerous and binding than worldly ego / selfishness.

The purpose of the tool of the heart is also reflected in the second line of the first quatrain, yet may not be evident to those who aren't familiar with *samaa*. The phrase *in unison with my voice* has a specific context to *samaa* gatherings. *Samaa* can be translated as 'listening.' Although participants engage in music and singing, sometimes accompanied by sacred dancing and poetry, such is geared toward listening for and then dissolving into the "Voice" of Oneness, the "Voice" of the Beloved. But this *unison* (which leads to annihilation) is something to be experienced rather than conceived, so let me share some other words from Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi that speak more explicitly to the purpose of the heart:

The human has the power to engage in any actions  
soever,  
But worship of Allaah is the main object of one's  
existence.  
Read the text "I have not created Jinns and humanity  
but to worship me."\*

The only object of the world is to worship Allaah.  
Though the object of a book is to teach an art,  
If you make a pillow of it, it serves that purpose too.  
Yet its main object is not to serve as a pillow,  
But to impart knowledge and useful instruction.  
(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma'navi*, trans. by E.H.  
Whinfield, p. 216)

[\* a verse from the Qur'aan, Surah 51, Verse 56]

To deal briefly with worship in the traditional sense: what you worship dictates how you live. In ancient times, one would consult what one worships in regards to every action before committing it. And if one

didn't have direct audience with one's deity, one sought guidance from scriptures, prophets, spiritual guides, and teachers that relay the will of that deity.

For most people, our main deity is our mind: we use it in a way that it literally dictates how we live, often played out through attachments to (worldly) objects of the mind. For example, those who have cell phones: when it rings, is not your normal response to answer it or at least turn your attention to it -- without any discretion or forethought? Some people will get up in the middle of the night to answer their cell phone, but ignore or get upset with, sometimes even chastise, their spouse and children if they wake them up in the middle of the night. For some people, the first thing they do after waking up is check their cell phone. Some people won't leave home without their cell phone and seek to take it everywhere! In the eyes of ancient societies, they would say your cell phone is one of your gods -- a relationship established through the conditioning of the mind. And it doesn't just stop with cell phones: for most people, literally every aspect of how we live is dictated by the conditioning and attachments of the mind -- often in ways we don't realize.

Traditional Sufism is explicit in citing the dangers of mind worship, instead turning toward the heart. It's not that the heart should replace the mind as the object of worship: no, Islam firmly holds that only the Absolute should be worshiped, only the Absolute should dictate how we live. The heart can serve as a powerful tool by which to be led by the Beloved, our every action being dictated by that Voice within. Within the heart is the Intimacy of the Beloved, wherein we have undistracted and direct audience with the Beloved -- an audience that doesn't necessarily play out through thoughts and concepts. But how

we use the heart is of importance, just as a book can serve as a pillow although that isn't its best or intended use. Just as the heart can be used to abide in Intimacy with the Beloved, it can also be (mis)used to veil, obscure, and confuse such Intimacy.

This shift of orientation from mind worship to heart-based guidance is mirrored in many ways by the ancient approach of learning (how to use) an instrument. First, the student must show due and continuing respect and reverence to the teacher -- this is the foundation of being a student. Then one learns to respect, hold, and care for the instrument -- this opens one to the sacredness of music. Then the instruction proceeds to playing the basic notes and chords on the instrument -- this opens one to the language and philosophy of music. The notes and chords of Islam include studying the Qur'aan, other holy scriptures, as well as the teachings and lives of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), other prophets, and masters and saints. Then after continuous, consistent repetition of practice and application, one matures to putting notes and chords together to play compositions. As wonderful as this may be, this is not the final stage. For the true musician, even if playing a prescribed composition, music becomes what it truly is when the musician and the song (and sometimes the audience) "arrive" at an *unison* of being: where neither party is separate from the other, dwelling within or dissolving into One Voice.

This is a good place to stop since the exploration of the text has become longer than I anticipated. We'll conclude in Part 3 by continuing to explore the first quatrain and see how this leads into the second one.



### **But it's my partner - Part 3 of 3**

*May 5, 2016*

I said, "My heart is an instrument and implement.  
Like a viol (rubaab), the heart is in unison with my voice."  
When I found that my heart was the friend of another,  
I kept saying [foolishly], "But it's my partner!"

\* \* \*

The heart that I thought belonged to me --  
By Allaah, I never left it with any friend --  
Has left me, O idol, and has come to you.  
Take good care of it, for I took good care of it!

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,  
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 211 and 213)

\* \* \*

(This post is a continuation of Parts 1 and 2 and builds upon what was stated in those posts. Please read the previous parts before reading this blog post.)

The previous post ended reflecting on how the traditional approach to music informs the selected quatrains. That for the true musician, music becomes what it truly is when the musician and the song (and sometimes the audience) "arrive" at an *unison* of being. In such being, neither party is separate from the other; all dwell within or dissolve into One Voice.

So, as the second line of the first quatrain states, when *Like a viol (rubaab), the heart is in unison*, the heart is being used as an *instrument and implement* in harmony with our true purpose. But note the line concludes stating *with my voice*; this indicates we are still within the realm of the mind and its duality and separation. The mind can be brought to a quietude that is open to realization of that One Voice and still impose its limitations (my-ness, duality, separation, etc.) on such openness. It is not uncommon for the mind to react selfishly as it realizes that what it holds as *my heart was [is] the friend of another*. The mind will often reject that the heart does not belong exclusively to “me” even if it conceptually acknowledges that the heart belongs to the Friend (the Beloved) and, thus, is the Friend of all. This is such a slipping point for so many on the mystic paths: that we progress to finally open to the *unison* of all yet reduce realization of such to a selfishness of “I” and “my.” What often follows then is a distorted view of this all-inclusive unity colored by the veils of our imposed duality and separation. And we can do so in such sophisticated and seemingly spiritual ways as we literally impede our own progression to full realization of Oneness by a self-imposed bondage, and often in ways we are unaware of.

The wonder of *unison* is happening to all, all the time; most of us ignore such with our fixations on the mind and its perceptions and attachments. But even when we have an openness of mind that is inclined to an all-inclusive embracing of the heart and *unison*, most of the time -- even for the wise -- there are mental impressions that selfishly react, foolishly declaring: *“But it’s my partner!”* “Just mine! The heart is mine!” To move beyond this impedance, we must be brutally honest in admitting to ourselves if we are truly open to sharing the wonder of the heart and *unison* with everything else? Any

inclination of excluding any being from such is an obstacle because the heart belongs to all. And it is to our benefit to work toward the removal of all obstacles.

We usually don't have resistance to sharing the wonder of the heart and *unison* with those who benefit and support us. But are we truly open to sharing this wonder with those who have harmed us? And may still be harming us? With those who commit evil while we struggle to maintain righteousness and wisdom? With those who continue in the indulgence of ignorance and delusion while we continue to exert great efforts and discipline in spiritual practice? With those who oppose us? Be honest! This is not to say that we should allow or support others in harming us, committing evil, living in ignorance, etc. There are ways to protect and disassociate ourselves from persons engaged in such without excluding them from the heart and *unison*. We may remove ourselves from their presence but we should not remove them from Oneness -- understand the metaphor. Remember, one note played on the instrument of the heart resonates on other strings. And even one note of separation can become a resonating song that impedes our opening to, dwelling within, and then dissolving into Oneness.

If we have any inclinations of excluding anything from the wonder of the heart and *unison*, we should not beat ourselves up with judgment. Instead, we can restrain from acting out and engaging these tendencies while reflecting upon why they are present. Yes, this is a delicate balance of not engaging yet analyzing these tendencies. This informs why traditionally the Sufi path is approached under the guidance of a teacher who can objectively help us navigate this balance. By bearing but not engaging the tendencies, especially refraining from acting them

out, the tendencies burn themselves away like a fire that is not fed anything to fuel it. By analysis I mean detailed observation of the dynamics of the tendencies and the course of their emanation -- not interpreting them. This allows us to see where and how we, through our own physical and mental actions, are lighting the fires of the tendencies. Realizing such, when these burn away through not engaging them, we can refrain from relighting the same or similar fires. For many, such an approach is the ground we toil as we move from *My heart* to *The heart that I thought belonged to me*, as the second quatrain opens.

As we transition to *The heart that I thought belonged to me*, there is an onus upon us to take great care of the heart. This is reflected in the line: *By Allaah, I never left it with any friend*. I remember a teacher who used the metaphor of the heart in this state being like a sick baby. And as a caring parent, we should not leave the babe with anyone -- not even our best friend -- for even a moment while the baby is sick. In a similar manner, we should not neglect or leave the heart in the care of another for even a second while these tendencies are burning themselves away. Even for persons under the guidance of a teacher, this traditionally would be a time when the teacher gives the student space to work through the toiling of this ground. In fact, in some Sufi orders this may be a time when a teacher places a disciple in seclusion -- complete solitude from others. It is not a time for instruction and engagement of others; instead it is a time for release, transition, and healing.

When *The heart that I thought belonged to me* reaches the state where it *Has left me*, inclination toward exclusion no longer impedes the inclusive nature of the heart and *unison*. This happens when enough

of the excluding tendencies of the mind have burned away. There may still be some lingering tendencies to be released, but enough of the deeper and more subtle layers of selfishness have been shed. This allows one's orientation to mature beyond separation and duality as well as strengthen to embrace complete openness to Oneness.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi reflects the release of this mind-based selfishness in traditional Sufi terms when he states that the "selfish heart" *Has left me, O idol, and has come to you*. In Islam, idols are explicitly forbidden. Yet, particularly in Sufi poetry, *idol* is sometimes used as a reference for the spiritual teacher /master. The master, as the present link in the chain of spiritual transmission, "opens" the heart of the disciple from the openness of the master's own heart. In truth, the heart is Oneness, there is only One (or some say Oneness of) Heart laying at the essence of all beings. Within a traditional disciple - master relationship, the disciple's heart leaves its former selfishness to place itself in the care of the selfless master who already lives *unison* with all. Words cannot suffice to explain this wonder. But this usually happens after the disciple has sufficiently cleansed its heart of excluding tendencies; it is extremely rare that a master will clean the disciple's heart even as the master guides and supports the disciple through such purification.

But let me stress, the opening of the heart does not entail the disciple giving its heart to the master. The heart belongs to the Beloved and is not the disciple's to give. Instead, the disciple gives the master the depth of its trust, obedience, service, dedication, etc. -- such facilitates this process of opening. And when the disciple is truly ready, the heart of the disciple places itself within the care of the master -- not the disciple placing the heart there.

The last line of the second quatrain really isn't necessary for how can the master not *take good care of* the heart. But the line reveals the disciple has not yet arrived at complete selflessness: the "I" that acknowledges what "I" did in the past, that *I took good care of it [the heart]*. The task now is to continue toward dissolution through deeper trust, obedience, service, dedication, etc.; to be drawn into complete selflessness, which the master already abides within even if the master's demeanor seems otherwise (such as with Shams at-Tabriz). In this way, *unison* with the master becomes a bridge that unfolds to full realization of *unison* with all, a realization that is beyond the reach of words and concepts yet is the very music of the heart...



## Subject to My Will

May 19, 2016

Therefore hath Allaah commanded, “Make an exception,  
Couple the words ‘If Allaah wills’ with your vows.  
Because the governance of actions is in My hands,  
The wills of all are subject to My Will.  
Every moment I impart a fresh bias [inclination] to the heart,  
Every instant I set a fresh mark on the heart;  
Each day I am engaged in a fresh work,  
There is naught that swerves from My purpose.”

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma’navi*,  
translated by E.H. Whinfield, p. 193)

\* \* \*

The above poem deals squarely with the Islamic approach to vows and offers poignant guidance. But at first view such may not be obvious, which is why Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi precedes these words with a story of a dervish who makes a vow. The story was the focus of a previous post: *True to his vow* posted on June 4, 2015. Whereas that post focused more on the dynamics within the story, this post will focus more on how to approach vows. Here is the story:

There was once a dervish who took up his abode in the mountains, in order to enjoy perfect solitude. In that place were many fruit-trees, and the dervish made a vow that he would never pluck any of the fruit, but eat only what was shaken down by the

wind. For a long time he kept his vow; but a time came when there was no wind, and consequently no fruit was shaken down.

The dervish was true to his vow for five days, but he could then endure the pangs of hunger no longer, and he stretched out his hand and plucked some of the fruit from the branches. The reason of this lapse on his part was that he had omitted to say “Allaah willing” when making his vow; and as nothing can be accomplished without Allaah’s aid, he could not possibly keep his vow.

Shortly afterwards the chief of the police visited the mountains in pursuit of a band of robbers, and arrested the dervish along with them, and cut off his hand. When the chief discovered his mistake he apologized very earnestly; but the dervish reassured him, saying that men were not to blame, as Allaah had evidently designed to punish him for breaking his vow ‘by depriving him of the hand which had sinned in plucking the fruit.’

(adapted from *Masnavi*, p. 192 - 193)

A major element of the story, which relates directly to the Islamic approach to vows, is who or what is the source of the vow? We should remember Islam means ‘surrender to Allaah (the Absolute).’ As people spiritually grow and mature to realize what this truly means the path of such will sometimes encounter the space of vows. One of the warnings the story illustrates is the danger of “I” -- myself -- being the source of vows, even if with beneficent intentions. For this reason, most traditional Sufi orders forbid students from making vows on their

own; they are required to get permission from teachers or masters before taking on any vows. But as many drawn to the mystic paths live with a zeal that sometimes disregards wisdom and guidance, the Beloved offers this merciful command: *Therefore hath Allaah commanded, "Make an exception, / Couple the words 'If Allaah wills' with your vows.*

Some context may be helpful to better understand the mercy of this command from the Beloved. In ancient days, when a person took on a vow one would usually only mention one's own name in regards to the vow. In many ancient societies, especially ancient Arabia in which the religion we call Islam comes into being, people gave much more weight to words: they were not as casual with language as we are in many modern societies. So if I vowed to stop eating (non-vegan) gummi bears -- which is a real vow for me -- I would only state my name. To state the name of another in regards to my vow would require that I get that person's permission and blessing before doing so because any breaking of the vow would reflect on that person. Also, any violation of the vow may subject that person to making amends for such. For example, if I vowed to death upon my mother's name to not eat gummi bears again, if I ate gummi bears that may subject my mother to death -- if those enforcing the vow sought to do so. This may seem a little extreme to modern societies where we are much more causal with language and vows, but this is the context in which the poem is shared.

Understanding this point, when the Beloved says *Make an exception* when making your vows, we are being given permission to place the Absolute's Name in our vows. This doesn't negate the wisdom of seeking guidance from teachers prior to making vows, but it places the

Absolute and Its values squarely in the making of our vows. To return to the example of my vow, it would be ludicrous for me to state my mother's name in my vow to not eat gummi bears if she is a gummi bear connoisseur. Instead, it is suitable for me to obtain permission to use her name in the vow if she is not eating gummi bears, and even more so if she is a paragon of healthy eating -- we'll give her credit for that (smile). In the same way, when one mentions '*If Allaah wills*' in our vows it is intended to serve as a safety check for the piety of our vows: traditionally, one would not invoke Allaah's name in vows that are counter to what is righteous and beneficent.

The inclusion of '*If Allaah wills*' takes on an even deeper meaning in the context of Islam: surrender to the Absolute. If I am in the state of complete surrender, I should make no vows: instead, I leave it to Allaah to reveal what vows I should embrace if It wills for me to take any. But most people progress to the depth of surrender through self-effort restrained by the parameters of ethics, spiritual guidance, and spiritual study. Like the dervish in the story, many will make their own vows and sometimes suffer losses because of them until we realize: *the governance of actions is in My hands, / The wills of all are subject to My Will.*

The truth is when the Beloved wills for something to be done, there is nothing that can prevent such from happening. In the same vein, if the Beloved wills for something to not be done: do what we will, it will not happen. We tend to focus on how things happen: individual and collective will are among the factors of this how -- collective will being a collection or cooperation of individual wills. But human will, with its very limited influence, happens within the "space" of Divine Will. Human will offers us the opportunity to exert our self-effort in

harmony with Divine Will as we deepen into surrender. Yet in the fullness of surrender, we surrender even self-effort and human will so that only the Will of the Beloved moves us. When we truly realize this, all inclination toward self-effort and human will ceases. Instead we truly become a complete servant of the Beloved, attentive to Its Will, however It wishes to reveal it, and obedient to whatever it commands. This sets the course of our lives, including if we take on any vows.

This attentiveness calls for a moment to moment awareness. Why? Because *Every moment I impart a fresh bias [inclination] to the heart, / Every instant I set a fresh mark on the heart.* Often, the self-effort approach to surrender is looking to impose a set, linear paradigm to be the means by which we progress. For the dervish, not picking fruit from the trees is part of the means by which he's "supposed to" arrive at "perfect solitude" through his restrained self-effort. But in the depth of surrender, the granting -- not earning -- of such solitude may sometimes involve picking fruit, and at other times not picking fruit. The Will of the Beloved is fluid even as it may include some set parameters.

For Muslims, the set parameters include the Five Pillars of Islam: all which are explicitly stated in the Qur'aan and define a clear, pious space in which the fluidness of deepening occurs. Let's use the Pillar of Prayer (*Salaat*) as an example. Islam has five prescribed prayers a day which occur within defined periods of time, all which are set to positions of the sun and its light. For example, the *Maghrib* prayer is to be performed in the period of time after the sun sets and before the dark of night (usually around an hour and a half after the sun sets). But, in keeping with the Will of the Beloved, this defined period shifts every day, usually moving a minute or two earlier or later (in North

America) depending on the season. So one cannot say I will do the *Maghrib* prayer at 7:00pm everyday -- such mirrors the orientation of most vows approached through self-effort. To fulfill the vow of the *Maghrib* prayer as the Beloved wills requires one to be attentive to the daily, fluid shifting of when the sun sets and to make this prayer after such occurs before the dark of night settles.

This fluidness extends beyond just the repetition of prescribed tasks. Particularly as we move through the self-effort approach to surrender, the Beloved will utilize differing “tasks” to diminish and remove the self-based (ego-based) veils and obstacles that impede complete surrender. So instead of projecting long-term (sometimes life-long) edicts to live, the deepening of surrender embraces a day-to-day approach -- this doesn’t negate the select set of duties the Beloved commands us to perform every day (such as prayer). This day-to-day approach is acknowledged when the Beloved states: *Each day I am engaged in a fresh work, / There is naught that swerves from My purpose.*

What are the present veils and obstacles the Beloved wishes for me to address and how? Adhering to this approach, we become more attentive to the Will of the Beloved and how It reveals such moment by moment. But the foundation of this approach lays in doing what we already know the Beloved wishes for us to do. In Islam, this begins with upholding the Five Pillars -- and every traditionally-based spiritual path has “pillars” that serve a similar purpose.

By perfecting our continuous upholding of the Pillars, we become so familiar with the “Voice” of the Beloved that Its “Voice” becomes recognizable even when It speaks through other phenomena. Let me

stress, this is not “me” recognizing (often interpreting) the “Voice” through my interaction with phenomena; instead the “Voice” becomes obvious in ways that are beyond doubt when It speaks -- in whatever way It speaks, through whatever form It may choose. No words can fully describe this deeper “knowing.” But in this way, the *Each day I am engaged in a fresh work* deepens to become a moment-to-moment engagement and service of the Beloved. Then we come to truly live in the moment, serving in each moment as the Beloved Wills. This is truly life. Within the living of true life we come to realize, in ways words cannot explain, what is truly meant when the Beloved says: *There is naught that swerves from My purpose.*



## Without mouths or lips

June 2, 2016

Come so we may speak to each other from spirit to spirit,  
talk to each other in a way hidden from eyes and ears.  
Let us laugh without lips and teeth just as the rose garden.  
Let us discourse without lips and mouth just as the thought.  
Let us tell the secret of the world completely with our mouth closed...  
and in the awareness of Allaah's existence.  
Nobody talks to one's self in a loud voice.  
Since we are all one let us call out to each other  
from our hearts without mouths or lips.

...

Hands and feet are aware of the state of the heart.  
Let us give up conversation made with our tongues  
and vibrate our hearts.

(adapted from *Fundamentals of Rumi's Thought*,  
translated by Sefik Can, p. 148 - 149)

\* \* \*

The above poem, in many respects, is an invitation to a deeper level of communication (and communion) -- or, as some would say: genuine communication. It's interesting to note that Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi is glorified for his words (poetry, stories, and teachings); yet so many of his words are a call to intimate communication *without mouths and lips*. But such communication *from our hearts* calls for a shift in orientation: from "me" to "we" to "oneness," from "my" to "ours" to "all."

The opening word, *Come*, is an invitation; a number of poems and writings of invitation within the Sufi lore begin with such a calling. This indicates that we are being invited from where we presently are to another “place,” perhaps another way of being. In this instance, it is an invitation to move from a way of life immersed in the senses (and ego) to the reality of *spirit*.

The word “spirit,” for which I’ll also include “soul,” is used in varying ways in translations of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi’s work; but for the sake of this blog post let’s approach “spirit” as that part of our being which is beyond the senses. In the poem, Rumi uses specific references that relate to the senses: *eyes, ears, lips, teeth, mouth, voice, hands, feet*. All these relate to the senses and the body, which is the house of the senses. These play a major role in facilitating our (mis)identification with the body and the mind: for most of us, the mind directs the body. These are oriented outwardly (toward phenomena) and toward separation. For example, when I see a flower, “I” (the perceiver) perceive the flower (the object) which is outside of “myself.” Although it is light reflecting off the flower to my eye which manifests this sight -- energy moving from the object perceived to the perceiving object -- the “I” experiences this exchange of phenomena as “I” (me) seeing the flower. In this simple example, there are just two entities; but usually we are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching a multitude of phenomena simultaneously, immensely reinforcing this sense of individual (“I”) identity among an array of outside phenomena that seem separate (distinct) from “me.”

When using the senses in this manner, the magnitude of individual identity with the body and mind is strengthened by every single perception: as this is what “I” am seeing and experiencing, fueling a

sense of this “I” being who “I” am. Consider how many perceptions are made in just a minute, and how many waking minutes you spend in a day. These countless reinforcements, which can go on for years upon years, are counter to the way of spirit. The orientation of spirit is inward and realizes that all are one(ness), that all share an inseparable unity. To this point, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states:

We, all humans, are in reality all one essence.  
Our minds are one, and our heads are one.

...

Every human carries the same soul [spirit],  
but the bodies are in hundreds of thousands.  
Similarly, there are countless almonds in the world,  
but there is the same oil in each of them.  
(*Fundamentals*, p. 149)

To be clear, the way of spirit does not negate multiplicity; instead it realizes all distinct entities as one. It is the difference between realizing the palm and each finger of a hand as separate entities or realizing that they are (part of) one hand. Thus, the way of *spirit to spirit* (unity, oneness) is *a way hidden from eyes and ears* (separation, multiplicity), just as if one looks westwardly, the eastern horizon is hidden from your view.

So to genuinely *speak to each other from spirit to spirit* calls for a shift from individual outward-oriented identification with the mind and body to the inward realization of inseparable unity. It is a release of the ego and mental attachments to abide in the heart that is already present within. To exclude anything veils and hides this “language” of spirit; although this doesn’t mean that we embrace everything the

same way. In Islam, this invitation occurs within the context of *adab*, moral character and behavior. This is the defined (and protected) space in which mystical deepening and spiritual maturity take root. In this regard, one may not *laugh* with a person engaged in evil deeds; instead this shared expression of joy may be better reserved for those engaged in pious actions. Perhaps a *discourse* is better suited to one engaged in evil: but not a *discourse* with *lips and mouth*, especially since such rarely results in persons ceasing with evil deeds and may even make you a target for their wrongs. But a *discourse* that is like *the thought*: thoughts come and go if we don't hold to them; and perhaps we should let those engaged in evil go from our lives (or we go) to not remain in the presence of evil. Islam holds that the Beloved is the Creator and Sustainer of good and evil, and only in limited circumstances are the righteous instructed to address wrongs committed. The Qur'aan (the words of the Beloved) more often instructs that we not remain in the company of those committing wrongs, and encouraging tolerance when that is not possible, but leaving the Beloved to deal with them.

But even to *laugh without lips and mouth* with the pious doesn't mean that we don't laugh simply because it is not audible. What is quietude and silence to the senses is a diverse symphony of spirit. Such that the *laugh* of the *rose garden* may be a beautiful fragrance that effortlessly perfumes all that sit among the roses. One of my favorite Sufi sayings is: "If you want to smell like roses, go sit in a rose garden." Simply by sitting there, it is only a matter of time before you effortlessly start smelling like roses, their fragrance resting upon you. A metaphor for receiving the transmission of beautiful qualities by resting in the presence of those who possess such beauty. Or the *laugh* may be the beauty of the rose that closes at night: there are

times to close to the world and abide within inner solitude -- a solitude that reveals we are never alone, that the Beloved is always with us. Or at other times, the *laugh* may be the rose open fully and completely uninhibited to the sun shining its glory: a season to give and serve others without reserve.

The rose garden is a cherished metaphor for Sufis, a mystical place where lovers come together to share and be dressed in the beauty of Love. Metaphors of this blessing are painted in terms of the roses' fragrance, sight, touch, taste (rose tea), etc. And those who become quiet enough can even hear the roses sing, celestial songs from the heavens that the most beautiful earthly music can only aspire to resemble. Again, all metaphors for something that comes from beyond the world of the senses, and yet still paints beauty within the world the senses perceive. In many respects, the beauty we perceive with the senses and adore is an invitation to a beauty that expands beyond the reach of the senses: the beauty adored by "I" is an invitation to realize *awareness of Allaah's existence*.

In adoring this beauty, how we *laugh, discourse, tell the secret of the world completely* will vary; these are not fixed, and may have a specific meaning in one moment that is different than what it means in the next. Words and their meanings are often fixed; the language of spirit is vast and fluid but always points to *awareness of Allaah's existence*, which is only Oneness. Oneness cannot be perceived or expressed by the body and mind (although these are expressions of Oneness); and we more often (mis)use these to reinforce and highlight our conceptions of "I" and separateness. But even *Hands and feet are aware of the state of the heart*, which speaks the language of spirit. So *Let us give up conversation made with our tongues*, derived and

conveyed by the mind, body, and (ego-based) identification we have with these. When we yield fixation with these we may realize that just by quieting the mind and body, the vibrations of the heart become evident (*vibrate our hearts*). Then we may better understand the depth and purpose of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's invitation: *Since we are all one let us call out to each other from our hearts -- a calling that is to be done without mouths or lips.*



## By his guidance and guarding

*Ramadan Mubarak!!!*

*June 16, 2016*

... After all, this spiritual state you have discovered is due to [the Prophet Muhammad's, s.a.w.s.] blessing and influence. For, first, all gifts are showered on him, then they are distributed from him to others. Such is the rule. Allaah said, "O Prophet, We have scattered all gifts upon thee." Said Muhammad, "And upon Allaah's righteous servants!"

The way to Allaah is exceedingly fearful and blocked deep by snow. Muhammad risked his life, driving his horse through and opening up the road. Whoever goes on this road, does so by his guidance and guarding. He discovered the road in the first place, and set up waymarks everywhere, posting signs that say, "Do not go in this direction, and do not go that way. If you go that way you will perish, even as the people of 'Ad and Thamud, but if you go in this direction you will be saved, like the faithful. All of the Qur'aan expounds this, for "therein are clear signs" -- in other words, upon this road We have given waymarks. If anyone tries to destroy any of these signs, everyone will attack them, saying, "Why do you destroy the road for us? Why do you work toward our destruction? Are you a highway robber?"

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,  
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 408 - 409)

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As we are in the midst of Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, it is befitting to turn our attention to the Prophet Muhammad, s.a.w.s. It was within the month of Ramadan that he received the first revelation of the Qur'aan. What emanates from this series of continuing revelations over the next 23 years is a way of life Muslims follow. The Qur'aan contains the words of the Absolute. But Muslims also look to and follow the *sunnah* of the Prophet: his teachings, actions, customs, and practices. Thus, the metaphor Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi employs of Muhammad *opening up the road* has a strong connotation within Islam: in essence, a road paved by the living example of Muhammad that leads to the Absolute.

Before preceding, let me be clear that Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi is not saying the road paved by Muhammad is the only road for all of humanity. In traditional Islam, it is an explicit duty of all Muslims to respect other spiritual traditions. Traditional Islam also forbids seeking to convert others: Muslims can share about Islam but never seek to compel others to embrace it. The Qur'aan acknowledges:

For We [the Absolute] assuredly sent among every *ummah* a messenger, (with the command): “serve Allaah and shun evil.” (Surah 16, Verse 36)

*Ummah* is an Arabic term that can be translated as nation, community, or any grouping of people with a shared connection, i.e. such as being Muslim. It can be used in a wider sense than we tend to use these words in modern language: for example, the term “Muslim *ummah*” can refer to all people who have, are, and will ever be Muslims. So when the verse says the Absolute sends messengers to every *ummah* to “serve Allaah [the Absolute] and shun evil,” it

indicates these decrees are common to all humans. But messengers are suited to the specific *ummahs* they are sent to. Just as Muhammad was sent to ancient Arabia to speak in their language and customs, the Beloved sends messengers to other *ummahs* to communicate in ways that resonate with them. Yet the message delivered through Muhammad doesn't just resonate with ancient Arabs; people of others cultures and times have, still, and will continue to embrace Islam to become part of the Muslim *ummah*. Maybe you can see the more expansive nature of the term "*ummah*."

The decree "serve Allaah and shun evil" is delivered and fulfilled in diverse ways among differing spiritual traditions. To this point, I share the following verse from the Qur'aan:

Unto each *ummah* have We [the Absolute] given  
sacred rites which they are to perform; so let them not  
dispute with you of the matter, but you call to your  
Lord. Lo! You indeed follow straight (right) guidance.  
(Surah 22, Verse 67)

For Muslims, this straight (as in a direct path of) guidance includes following the living example of Muhammad. Although Islam is sometimes described as "the Way" -- or even sometimes (particularly with some translations) as "the only Way" -- we should not misinterpret how language is sometimes (poetically) used as negating what the Qur'aan acknowledges: other spiritual traditions have their own "messengers" to follow. There are differences among the roads, but there are also commonalities; and all roads, if followed to completion, lead to a common destination. For those who are not Muslim, it may be helpful in the context of this blog post to relate what

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi says about Muhammad to the “messengers” of their spiritual traditions: messengers who deliver the essence of “serve Allaah and shun evil” in differing ways that resonate with those they are sent to serve.

Traditional Islam, and Sufism in particular, emphasizes spiritual transmission. Much of the spiritual work of the Muslim involves living in a way where one can receive the *gifts* the Beloved bestows on the prophets to disperse; portions of which the prophets may then bestow upon saints and masters to distribute. This calls for obedience to the guidance the Beloved reveals through prophets, which forms the substance of what saints and masters teach.

In Islam, Muhammad is regarded as the Last Prophet: he carries not only his own prophetic gifts but also the gifts of all the prophets that precede him in the Abrahamic lineage. Another factor of being the Last Prophet is that within Muhammad’s prophecy, the scope of divine revelation is brought to completion: there is nothing else new to be revealed within this prophetic lineage. (This doesn’t negate the endless depth of such revelation.) Thus, *Allaah said, “O Prophet, We have scattered all gifts upon thee.”* This is not a personal bounty just for Muhammad, to do with it whatever he likes. Instead, in receiving these gifts he becomes a servant with a sacred responsibility of acting as a manager of these: giving such to whoever lives in a way to receive them. And Muhammad continues to serve this duty, even “from the grave,” which is why he adds: *“And upon Allaah’s righteous servants!”*

Note that the opening sentence states: *this spiritual state you have discovered is due to [the Prophet Muhammad’s, s.a.w.s.] blessing and influence.* This starts to speak to the prophetic duty Muhammad has to

those who follow his *sunnah*. Incumbent in the responsibility of properly dispersing the gifts is the duty of demonstrating a way to receive them. But *The way to Allaah is exceedingly fearful and blocked deep by snow*.

Most of the obstacles and challenges blocking *The way to Allaah* are within the mind -- particularly the ego. And since most of us identify with the mind and body, especially the ego, the curbing and removal of such obstacles is often scary. Few are courageous enough to release and extinguish who “I” am to realize the Absolute, because if I am not “I” (who I hold myself to be) who am I? To most, this is a very scary question with no definitive answer, an answer that wades into the “unknown” -- beyond what can be known by the mind. Yet roads to move beyond the obstacles and challenges, and through the unknown have been laid: for Muslims, such a road lays within the *sunnah* of Muhammad.

The *sunnah* encompasses Muhammad’s *guidance and guarding*: the *guidance* navigates followers on a clearly established road, and one aspect of the *guarding* is staying on the road. Let me use the metaphor of an expressway. We usually need to travel local streets to get to the expressway: all the individual circumstances and conditions that bring us to the spiritual path -- which usually includes suffering. But once we get on the expressway, which has already been laid and paved, we should stay on this “straight path” until we reach the city of destination.

The paver of the road has already *set up waymarks everywhere* to assure us that we are heading in the right direction. For example, if we’re headed to New York City, we’ll see signs that say: “New York -

90 miles;" then "New York - 75 miles;" then "New York - 60 miles," etc. There will also be signs that indicate *"Do not go in this direction, and do not go that way."* At certain points the expressway may split: the road bearing right going to New York, the road bearing left going to Boston. If we're going to New York, don't go to Boston! In fact, even if we need gas, we should be mindful of when the signs indicate a rest stop on the expressway. Sometimes when we exit the expressway -- even for a good reason -- the way to get back on might not be as easy as returning the way we got off. And *If you go that way you will perish*: we might get lost, end up going further away from the destination, or sometimes not ever return to the expressway which, if followed, unfailingly leads to the city of destination.

These are metaphors for the spiritual journey. And the Muslim *ummah* has retained an enduring appreciation for the safety of the road laid by the *sunnah* of Muhammad, such that:

*If anyone tries to destroy any of these signs, everyone will attack them, saying, "Why do you destroy the road for us? Why do you work toward our destruction? Are you a highway robber?"*

Although some Muslims have been overzealous at times in seeking to protect the *sunnah*, the much larger expanse of Muslims have upheld and protected the *sunnah* appropriately. Honoring the decree that "there is no compulsion in the Way" (Qur'aan Surah 2, Verse 256), Muhammad constantly taught and demonstrated that the best way to protect the *sunnah* is to live it sincerely and completely as surrender to the Absolute. Such protection of the *sunnah* has contributed to minimizing the corruption of its teachings and the decay of its

transmission. As a result, centuries later devoted Muslims are still able to follow Muhammad's example (road) to realize spiritual states that open them to receive the bounty of endless gifts from the Beloved.



**Even though the way is without end...**

*June 30, 2016*

Even though the way is without end, place your feet upon it,  
Because watching at a distance is the occupation of cowards.  
Gain this way through the life of the heart,  
Because the life of the body is the attribute of an animal.

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,  
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 525)

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We are in the last days of the month of Ramadan. One of the understated purposes of this month of fasting is contemplation. Some Muslims will literally spend the last ten days and nights of Ramadan in a mosque: immersed in prayer, remembrance of the Beloved, and introspective reflection. One of the aims of this is to ponder what lessons one should look to deepen as one departs the period of fasting to return to a more “normal” way of living. In this way, the jewels realized in Ramadan are kept close to one’s heart so one may be beneficently transformed in a lasting manner. It is within this spirit, I was drawn to the above quatrain which speaks to how to approach the spiritual journey.

*Even though the way is without end:* the wise constantly remind themselves of this. Some on the spiritual journey are naive enough to think there is a fixed endpoint or destination to arrive at. Or some begin the journey knowing it is endless but shift to a mental orientation that operates as if there is an endpoint, usually measuring

points of attainment in relation to such. This is the nature of the mind which, being limited, looks to set limits on everything -- even that which is endless. But in *the way* of the mystic, there is always more to be done: the fullness of *the way* ever expanding, the beauty of perfection ever increasing as we mature, grow, and deepen in surrender. Even if we “reach the Beloved” -- whatever that means -- we will see that the Beloved is endless. Therefore, the more we come to “know” the Beloved, we realize there is more to “know.”

I remember a teacher who warned that one of the common signs of stagnancy with spiritual growth is one’s resignation to contrived accomplishments: that one proceeds as if one knows enough or emphasizes what one knows instead of focusing on what more there is to learn and realize. The completely humble confess: “I know nothing” -- that even if I “know” anything, it is insignificant in the scope of the endless all there is to learn and realize. In fact, one of the phrases stated repeatedly in the Qur’aan is: “Allaah knows, you know not.”

The endlessness of *the way* can be daunting; and for some, fearful. But *the way* is not a path of passivity or spectatorship: it requires that you *place your feet upon it* and walk. We walk this path not so much to reach a destination: for you are the destination (within), but most of us won’t realize this unless we journey outwardly. So the intention of the journey becomes to be transformed as we travel, allowing the guiding journey of *the way* to transform us as it sees fit. Thus, *the way* cultivates a readiness for realization.

Such readiness for realization calls for courage: a willingness to relinquish the person “I” hold myself to be and entrust it to a path that will change who I am in ways I may not be able to forecast or

understand. That I am willing to surrender what I identify as being to an unknown, and eventually completely surrender all sense of “I” to dissolution and annihilation. This is a shift from how “I” live “my” own life to becoming a selfless instrument of life that is moved by the Beloved: surrender. The instrument we are to become may be unknown, how it is to be played may be unknown, and certainly the fullness of the Beloved and Its Will is beyond what the mind can fully know. Such surrender means being here in the midst of it, not *watching at a distance*. Such surrender calls for an ever increasing and deepening of courage, trust, and faith: it is not *the occupation of cowards*.

These requirements of *the way* exceed ideas but most of us will first approach *the way* within the mental space of ideas. We often come to the spiritual path with concepts of what spirituality is supposed to be and how we hope it will provide clarity, happiness, peace, fulfillment, etc. -- which, at first, are just more ideas. Thus, our initial approach to spirituality is often within the mental realm, with all its limitations and misconceptions. Although this brings us to *the way*, often as a result of encountering suffering, the mental realm will not suffice to progress on the spiritual journey.

To progress, we must look to the heart: *Gain this way through the life of the heart*. In this context, the heart is the placeless place where we “meet” the Beloved, for It dwells within the heart, the innermost essence, of every being. And this *gain* is not achieved through self-effort of the body and mind, although such effort may bring us to a place where this *gain* can happen. Instead this *gain* calls for surrender that *the life of the heart* may unfold within and upon us. This life, emanating from the heart, will transform us. It is an art of allowance

not effort although, paradoxically, we often must exert some effort to arrive at the station of allowance. But once there, which is really here, the qualities of the Beloved unfold to transform us to the extent of our willingness to allow such.

One of the proofs of such willingness is restraint and quietude of the mind. So much of our mental activity and the accompanying (mental) noise are inclined toward exerting individual will toward self-oriented (and often selfish) efforts. These are exertions of “my” life, not *the life of the heart* which emanates from the Beloved. From *the life of the heart* comes true guidance, providence, manifestation, and realization - the mind and body can only fabricate limited imitations of these. When the mind and body are continuously restrained, the blessings of *the life of the heart* happen. It is similar to sitting in an immaculate rose garden, just sitting there and remaining close to the roses. Through such continuous intimacy, which is within the heart, the fragrance of the roses falls upon us. Thus, we effortlessly start to smell like roses and, with continued sitting, will even start to embody the qualities of roses through no effort of our own. These qualities will simply become us and the “I” dissipate. Now, when we are in the habit of self-effort and (mental and physical) activity, we must restrain such tendencies to act; but such restraint should be the limit of our efforts to allow greater blessings to unfold.

When we abide within allowance, we will realize *the life of the body* and the mind -- they are inseparable -- *is the attribute of an animal*. In the context of Sufi poetry and stories, animals are often used as a metaphors for the instinct-dominated life, controlled by the senses. This is viewed as lesser than the opportunity within the human life: to

transcend the bondage of the instincts and senses to realize the Beloved.

It should be noted that although humans have within our being the means to transcend the dominance of the instincts and senses, we often don't. Instead we misuse these in pursuit of pleasures -- often living in ways that are less than animals. But the same holds true when we drape misuse of the instincts and senses in spiritual facades, still living in ways that are less than animals. For animals, the instinct-dominated life is the means by which they live out their service of the Beloved. Whereas for most humans, our bondage to instincts and senses is lived in service of our egos -- even "spiritual" egos. This points out the importance of transcending the dominance (bondage) of the instincts and senses to avoid living less than or equivalent to the animals. But even more, if we wish to fulfill *the way* we must move beyond a body and mind-oriented life, surrendering and allowing *the life of the heart* reign over our being.

May we take these lessons and realizations with us beyond the month of Ramadan...



## Smile like the rose at loss and gain

July 14, 2016

In this tale there is a warning for thee, O Soul,  
That thou mayest acquiesce in Allaah's ordinances,  
And be wary and not doubt Allaah's benevolence,  
When sudden misfortunes befall thee.  
Let others grow pale from fear of ill fortune,  
Do thou smile like the rose at loss and gain;  
For the rose, though its petals be torn asunder,  
Still smiles on, and it is never cast down.  
It says, "Why should I fall into grief in disgrace?  
I gather beauty even from the thorn of disgrace."  
Whatsoever is lost to thee through Allaah's decree  
Know of a surety is so much gained from misfortune.  
What is Sufiism? 'Tis to find joy in the heart  
Whensoever distress and care assail it.

(adapted from *Masnawi i Ma'navi*,  
translated by E.H. Whinfield, p. 221 - 222)

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The above poem is preceded by a story. The Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) heard the call to prayer and went to perform ablution. Since this cleansing in preparation for prayer includes washing the feet, he removed his boots. After completing ablution, he grabbed one of his boots to put it back on, but an eagle swooped in from on high, snatched the boot from his hand, and flew away. In that moment,

Muhammad was disturbed by the rudeness of the eagle, for even animals knew he was a prophet and should be treated with due honor.

As Muhammad watched the eagle fly, the boot was overturned and, to his surprise, a serpent fell from the boot. Thus, the eagle, who in the moment of anger Muhammad regarded as an enemy, was proven to be a true friend. The eagle then landed before him with the boot, saying: "Come, take your boot and go to your prayers." Muhammad confessed the anger he felt prior to seeing the serpent drop and thanked the eagle for its kindness. He also stated that although the Beloved reveals unseen things to him, in that moment of anger he was blinded by his own preoccupation with losing "my" (ego) boot. The eagle replied that it was not like Muhammad to slip into such forgetfulness. It also said that it was not by its sight that it saw the serpent; instead by Muhammad's illuminance was the hidden serpent revealed to the eagle. An illuminance that emanates from the depth of Muhammad's surrender to the Beloved.

There is much in this story to encourage us to *acquiesce in Allaah's ordinances*, but certainly one of the major themes is how forgetfulness of the Beloved's grace can lead us to *doubt Allaah's benevolence*. Surely *When sudden misfortunes befall thee* such doubt is a common response of the mind, even for one who has reached the spiritual station of prophethood. Although we may initially *grow pale from fear of ill fortune*, if we to turn toward remembrance we can accept the working of the Beloved's beneficence even if such manifests in challenging and sometimes "confusing" ways. Then, we can *smile like the rose at loss and gain*. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi is so emphatic in acknowledging the importance of this that he put it in terms of what it means to be a Sufi: *What is Sufiism? 'Tis to find joy in the heart /*

*Whensoever distress and care assail it.* But what does this mean in terms of practical, everyday living?

One answer to this question lays in the metaphor of the rose. The rose is one of the most cherished metaphors for Sufis throughout the ages. Yet many tend to only glorify the rose in its blooming, fragrant state -- ignoring what led to and follows this state. I remember a teacher who said the rose is a flower of wisdom. Thus, its fullness (its bloom, fragrance, silkiness, alluring visage, etc.) is always present even if its form (or formlessness) doesn't reflect such. In its developing state, the rose's immense beauty is squished into a seed and then a tiny bud -- imagine trying to fit your whole body into one of your fingers, or even your hand. Once becoming a bud, the (form of the) rose tears itself forth over and over again so that its form may be expansive enough to reflect the fullness of its beauty. Then, this expansive form lasts only for a short season before beginning to wither and decay: the rose's beauty still full as the form realized to express it fades away.

If we see the essence of the rose (through which its beauty emanates), not merely what we perceive of its beauty (i.e., its form), we may be able to understand why Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states: *For the rose, though its petals be torn asunder, / Still smiles on, and it is never cast down.* The rose, in its wisdom, never forgets its beauty: a beauty it doesn't manifest itself but is a treasured gift from the Beloved. Even when the rose has no form, the beauty of the rose is. Even as the reflection of this beauty is constricted to a small seed, the beauty of the rose is. Even as the seed breaks open, growing in stages to become a bud, the beauty of the rose is. Even as the bud is torn open little by little, immersed in growing pains, the beauty of the rose is. Even as the flower is in full bloom, its alluring fragrance emanating through

the silk of its petals, the beauty of the rose is. Even when this form can contain such beauty no more, and begins to wither and decay, the beauty of the rose is. Even after the last petal has dropped and the stem falls to the ground, the beauty of the rose is. And even when the form of the rose returns to being dust, the beauty of the rose is.

In remembering its everlasting beauty, the rose is not disturbed by any hardship or misfortune. In remembrance, it doesn't lose sight of what is most important: *It says, "Why should I fall into grief in disgrace? / I gather beauty even from the thorn of disgrace."* The rose remembers that facing hardships is part of upholding its beauty: the growing pains of its form bursting forth, the suffering of its form withering to decay. This truth that the Beloved's beneficence includes seasons of hardships and challenges is more easily accepted when resting within remembrance. Thus, the rose remains committed to serving its purpose as a beacon of beauty -- a purpose instilled by the Beloved.

If we are serious about the spiritual path, we must come to a place where our divinely-given purpose can be revealed to us. Traditionally, living the guidance of and serving a spiritual master serves this end. But often to be drawn to a spiritual master calls for an unyielding sincerity and living commitment of piety that precedes such a meeting - in truth, such meeting is a reunion. For the rose, its purpose is its beauty. But what is the purpose the Beloved bestows upon you?

When we move beyond selfishness, which a grounded spiritual practice facilitates, we will be quiet, open, and strong enough to receive revelation of our divinely-given purpose. And strength, a fruit of humility and surrender, is necessary to be ready to receive revelations our ego-based weaknesses will reject and resist. But then we must

embrace and commit to a continuous remembrance of this purpose or of the Beloved which instills this purpose: for it is extremely rare that such a purpose will not involve some hardship and struggle. But the hardships and struggles we encounter in service of our divinely-given purpose and the Beloved always prove to be benefits, even if we don't always see everything in play. The same is not necessarily true for those of us who don't live in service of our divinely-given purpose or the Beloved: often the hardships and struggles encountered in such approaches to life is merely due consequences.

Consider this: if Muhammad never saw the serpent fall from the boot, would that have changed that the serpent was within in it and most likely would have bitten his foot if he put the boot on? Yet, like Muhammad in the moment that the eagle "stole" the boot, when things play out in such a manner most of us tend to focus on the apparent loss (the lost boot) instead of remembering our the Beloved and the purpose it bestows us. In such remembrance, we will more likely remember that unseen forces may be at play serving our benefit: remembrance begets (more) remembrance. If at any moment we fall into forgetfulness, we must strive hard to find a way to return to remembrance -- this speaks to the greater (inner) *jihad*. This is made easier when we make remembrance our everyday (every-moment), normal way of living: a cultivated "habit" we are more likely to return to even when incidents occur that temporarily pull us into forgetfulness.

With the deepening of remembrance comes the illumination of grace. Remember, the eagle said that it was Muhammad's light which revealed the serpent to it. In the same way, as our remembrance deepens, the Beloved will dress us in an illumination of grace that will

literally move phenomena to serve our benefit and protection. Often, we will not see such illumination or how it operates; but we don't need to, it is enough for us to remain immersed in living remembrance. Although we may not see these dynamics at play within our own lives, we have countless stories like the one of Muhammad and the eagle which testify: *Whatsoever is lost to thee through Allaah's decree / Know of a surety is so much gained from misfortune.* The more this has a continuing presence in our lives, the more we move beyond the sways of the mind's fixation with pleasures and aversions: into the abode of the heart. Therein, is a *joy in the heart*: a contentedness unmoved by any conditions, good or bad, which allows the mind to deepen into a faith (confidence and trust) of the Beloved. Within such faith, the mind comes to rest in its own steadiness of equanimity. And in such steadiness, abiding in remembrance becomes easy and effortless.

So if an eagle comes and “steals” a boot from your hand... Need I say more?



## The affairs of the world

July 28, 2016

Every night Thou dost free our spirits from the body's snare  
and erase all impressions on the tablets [of the mind].  
Our spirits are set free every night from this cage,  
they are done with audience and talk and tale.  
At night prisoners forget their prison,  
at night governors [rulers] forget their power.  
There is no sorrow, no thought of gain or loss,  
no idea of this person or that person.  
Such is the state of the mystic, even when [that one] is not asleep:  
Allaah saith, "Thou wouldst deem them awake, whilst they  
sleep"  
[The Sufi] is asleep, day and night, to the affairs of the world,  
like a pen in the hand of the Lord.

(adapted from *Selected Poems of Rumi*,  
translated by Reynold A. Nicholson, p. 12)

\* \* \*

When you think about the world, what do you think of? Particularly in this day and age, most people talk about the world in terms of conflict, war, immense and unending suffering, problems and hardships, pain -- usually negative terms. But what is the root of this negativity? Are the trees and flowers shooting and bombing each other to death? Are the animals, birds, and sea creatures stealing from the rest of creation? Are the waters (oceans, rivers, lakes, etc.) and the

lands polluting themselves? Or is such negativity manifesting through human action -- often actions emanating from ego-based pursuits?

I appreciate one Sufi teacher who constantly made it a point to distinguish human action upon the world -- which we often to refer to as "the world" -- from the world itself. This world is a virtual paradise: the Qur'aan repeatedly cites the sun, the moon, the stars, what grows from the earth, the fruits of the trees, the rivers, and more as testaments of the glory and wonder of the Beloved. In fact, a constant metaphor for Paradise is the earthly garden: full of flowers, trees, grass, and bushes. And in ancient Arabia, reference of a garden also included the birds, insects, and animals that were frequent visitors to these beautiful abodes of nature. So what turns this world, and its abounding beauty, into a place of negativity: human actions -- which include not only physical deeds, but also verbal and mental engagement. Most often these are ego-based actions imbrued with harm, anger, lust and desire, greed, carelessness, inconsideration and lack of mindfulness, ignorance, pride, etc. To be clear: the world unsullied by human action is not something the mystic needs to be *asleep* to. Rather, it is misguided human action and what emanates from such which we call *the affairs of the world* that the mystic is *asleep* to. But what are the dynamics of such affairs: the selected poem shares some insight regarding this.

*Every night Thou dost free our spirits from the body's snare / and erase all impressions on the tablets [of the mind]. The bondage of the affairs of the world are created in the realm of the body and mind. It is for this reason that adab, moral behavior / character, is fundamental to traditional Islam. This first means restraining the (mis)use of the body and mind which foster snares (trap) of bondage. Then one proceeds to*

heed divine and spiritual guidance for how to properly use the body and mind in this world.

The metaphor of a *snares* is not coincidental. Many ancient snares utilized a cord or string which, when touched, would unleash a trap upon the unsuspecting prey -- or sometimes a prey which thought it was clever enough to outsmart the trap. In this realm of snares, when we engage an unethical act or thought, we often expose (unleash upon) ourselves to greater cycles of bondage than what springs from the very act or thought we engaged.

Let me be clear about what is meant by engaging thoughts. We can't always prevent an unethical thought from arising: sometimes the "stuff" in our minds will instantly react to phenomena, formulating a thought before we can do anything to prevent its arising. But we always have a choice regarding engagement. If an unethical thought arises, we can turn our attention to a point of focus. For traditional Sufism, practices of *dhikr* (remembrance of the Beloved) establish a presence of remembrance in one's life: something one can always turn one's attention to, a point of focus that is always available.

Since bondage is created in the realm of the body and mind, ethics -- especially moral behavior -- play a very practical and vital role in not ensnaring ourselves in cycles of (worldly) bondage. Traditional approaches to ethics are clear: if we wish to live free from such bondage it is incumbent upon us to not commit a single violation of ethics. We often work toward this station through imperfections; but certainly all unethical acts and thoughts we can presently refrain from we must if we are serious about freedom. With a consistent commitment to such, our minds will be purified from the mental

impressions that fuel unintentional violations of ethics. But we should not minimize any act or thought, because even a seemingly small act or thought is enough to place us in massive and unending cycles of bondage.

Yet notice the grace of the Beloved: although we, individually and collectively, trip countless snares of bodily and mental bondage, *Our spirits are set free every night from this cage, / they are done with audience and talk and tale.* More often than not, the first moments of awakening from sleep are immersed in freedom from *the affairs of the world.* Unless we are awakening from an intense dream, in those first moments we are not engaged in worldly affairs -- whether as an actor, spectator, or one spinning and continuing the narratives of such affairs. Thus, we are constantly placed in freedom from the bondage of worldly affairs until we engage an act or thought that trips a snare (yet again), placing ourselves in the trap of *the affairs of the world.*

It is we who place ourselves in bondage: it is only "I" who place myself in bondage -- not the Beloved, not the world, not anyone or anything else! This is not to say we won't find ourselves in situations of bondage, but we can navigate such with a freedom the Beloved bestows upon us *every night*, and which is present in our first waking moments. It is for this reason, many spiritual traditions encourage maintaining quietude in the time of waking. Many traditions will go further and encourage refraining from any worldly action -- sometimes not even talking -- in the waking hours. Most traditional Sufi orders instruct seekers to occupy the waking period with ablution, prayer, meditation, *dhikr*, and selfless service of others -- beginning the day with such activities before engaging in any worldly affairs. Within such there is an explicit intention to cultivate and deepen a presence of

this freedom the Beloved grants us with all, if not most, waking moments. The freedom the Sufi abides in by remaining *asleep to the affairs of the world* is constantly given to us -- it is not something we need to attain. If we sincerely wish to live this freedom, we don't need to find it: we need to stop losing it by tripping the snares of our engagement of *the affairs of the world*. Thus, you find throughout history Sufis, as well as mystics of other spiritual traditions, who lived in complete freedom even while enduring situations of intense bondage, oppression, and persecution.

In the midst of the waking moments, the plight of our individual and collective conditions are insignificant -- this is carried over from the freedom given to us *every night* by the Beloved. *At night prisoners forget their prison*, even if their bodies and minds are asleep within a jail cell. And so too *at night governors [rulers] forget their power*, even if their bodies and minds rest upon the finest sheets and pillows of a royal bed. There is *no idea of this person or that person*. And when personhood -- particularly the ego -- is not predominant, *There is no sorrow, no thought of gain or loss*. This is significant, because even the gain of pleasures in *the affairs of the world* is a tripping line of the snares of worldly bondage. So in most periods of sleep (including daytime naps) we are placed within this freedom and awaken within it. From this state of freedom, we ego-oriented humans are the ones who place ourselves in bondage over and over and over again. Realization, not just the concept, of this dynamic offers us opportunities to realize this freedom: a freedom we yield when we, through self-effort, engage *the affairs of the world*. Yet even fleeting experiences of this freedom can cultivate a willingness to allow the our personhood (ego) to be dissolved: so we may abide in lasting freedom which we don't abandon by regressing to personhood and bondage.

To be *asleep* to the world is not to be immersed in dreams about the world: it is to remain in this freedom, within this absence of personhood, even as we navigate the world. Most humans have become addicts of thinking -- yes, thinking! -- that the only way to navigate the world is through the person or persons "I" hold myself to be (i.e. "my" different roles as employee, lover, friend, parent, etc.) Such personhood is often based in (mis)use of the body and mind. These are intended to serve as vehicles to navigate the world: they were not created to be the determining factors of how and why we engage the world. There is sometimes a subtle yet profound difference between these two approaches. The later approach is guaranteed to end up in bondage, since when we are led by the body and mind we are constantly led to snares. Not every touch of a snare's wire will activate the trap, but the majority of the time a gentle touch is enough to become entrapped. Imagine letting a car drive itself: it is not a matter of if but instead when you will end up in an accident. And if you continue to end up in accidents, how long will it be before you seriously harm yourself and others? This speaks to the approach of allowing the body and mind determine how and why we engage the world.

There is another approach: truly using the body and mind as vehicles. With this approach, the spiritual teacher becomes the driver, or a sound spiritual practice. Or if a person presently has neither, a genuine commitment to *adab* will suffice to drive us through life until we are driven to a more knowing driver -- and we all have an innate sense of ethics, we just need to listen to it. Such a driver will navigate us around the snares of life, and when we are not in bondage we will come to notice the freedom given to us within our waking moments. Such realization is essential to not discarding this freedom through

self-oriented engagement of worldly affairs. As we abide more consistently in this freedom, the realization expands to show (beyond mere thoughts) that the body and mind can be used to navigate the world without manifesting personal attachments and the bondage that follows. Realizing this, we naturally cease with placing ourselves in bondage. But even more, the realization can expand to reveal that we can be *like a pen in the hand of the Lord* -- the Beloved being our driver. The pen does not move by its own accord: it is moved by the Beloved who grants us this freedom and will move us in ways that expand such to be our waking state even as we remain *asleep to the affairs of the world*. Then we will come to fully realize why *Allaah saith*, "*Thou wouldst deem them awake, whilst they sleep.*"

May we realize the freedom constantly bestowed upon us and stop sacrificing it for our constant entrapment in unending bondage...



## **You will become... by means of Divinity - Part 1 of 2**

*August 11, 2016*

If you revolve around Saturn, you will become Saturn.  
You will become a true human if you revolve around true humans.  
You will become a ruby if you revolve around this ruby mine.  
You will become a ruby mine if you revolve around the Beloved.

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,  
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 573)

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While exploring some quatrains for the present blog, I came across three that spoke to the moment. The more I looked to settle upon just one, the more the beautiful connections between these three cried aloud. So I will spend the next few blogs exploring these quatrains, particularly in regards to how we deal with this “self” in the context of a genuine embrace of spirituality.

Traditional Islam is clear about the purpose of why this “self” is created. In the Qur’aan, the Beloved explicitly states:

{56} I [Allaah] created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me. {57} I seek no livelihood from them, nor do I ask that they should feed [or provide for] Me. {58} Lo! Allaah! The

Beloved it is Who giveth livelihood, the Lord of  
Unbreakable Might.  
Surah 51 Al-Thaariyaat (The Winnowing Winds),  
Verses 56 - 58

Contemporary meanings of worship include performing ceremonies, rites (including ritual prayer), and displays of praise. But in a traditional sense, worship is more expansive. Whereas it includes ceremonies, rites, and praise, the fullness of worship goes further to explore what it is for me -- it is that personal and unique -- to honor and revere the Beloved. The above verse notes that this goes beyond cherished ways of honor and reverence: in ancient Arabia one of the most esteemed ways of honoring and revering a being was to provide livelihood for that being. But in the case of the Beloved, It provides livelihood for us; which challenges us to explore more deeply and intimately what it means to truly honor and revere the Beloved.

Although the full answer to this question is personal and something to be lived, certain parameters can be applied on a general level to facilitate individuals realizing what it is to truly honor and revere the Beloved. In Traditional Islam these parameters include *adab*: moral character and behavior. Can we sincerely profess to honor and revere the Beloved if we harming others, lying, stealing, committing sexual immorality, being greedy, and other acts that disturb and destroy harmonious relations among creation? These parameters also include faith: living with an openness and trust that allows the realization of honor and reverence into our lives. They also include surrender and obedience to the Beloved, and those who live and convey guidance from the Beloved. Some of this guidance is obvious and has been confirmed as valid: such as the Qur'aan and other holy scriptures, as

well as the teachings and living examples of prophets, saints, and masters (the lives they live). These are just a few of the parameters that can facilitate realization of what it is to truly honor and revere the Beloved.

One of the most profound yet overlooked factors in living these parameters is, to state it in layman's terms: the company you keep. In Islam, this doesn't include just humans and other animate creatures, but even inanimate objects. I'm reminded of a Sufi teacher who would not allow people to bring cell phones into their gatherings, even if they were completely off and out of view. He didn't want the presence of such objects to influence the presence of the gathering -- he wouldn't even allow them into the room. This speaks to an important point: we are more often colored by (take on the qualities of) that which we remain in the presence of more so than we color such phenomena. Even among spiritual people, we more often use cell phones for worldly purposes; rarely, if ever, do we use such in the vein of honoring and revering the Beloved. So to have such in the presence of a gathering intended to facilitate remembrance of the Beloved can undercut and create (often unseen) tension with remembrance and its fruits. Even more, the effect of such coloring extends beyond being in the presence of and using such objects: this coloring literally shapes our mentality in ways we often don't realize. For example, there has been a noted increase in the lack of consideration and mindfulness toward others in relation to increased cell phone use, which has a narrow, fixated, and (dare I say) selfish nature.

But even more than staying in the company of phenomena (beings and objects), there are certain things we *revolve* around. These phenomena literally dictate our behavior and how we approach life -- even if we

think we can engage such in restrained manners that we control. To stay with the cell phone example: for the exceeding majority of people who have one, when it rings or vibrates they instantly turn their attention to it regardless of what they are doing. And if it doesn't ring for some time, how often will people check their cell phones to see if they missed a call or a text? For some, this dominant presence of the cell phone has evolved to a point that people make it a contrived necessity: some people won't go anywhere without their cell phone. For these people, their behavior and approach to life is literally revolving around their cell phone. In Islamic terms, this is viewed as having an idol or partner to the Absolute. Islam is firm that only the Absolute should dictate our actions and approach to life -- not anything else or in addition (as a partner) to the Absolute.

The premise that our acts and approach to life should revolve around the Absolute is reflected in many Sufi practices that cut across different Sufi orders. For example, the common seating arrangement in Sufi gatherings is a circle: that we place ourselves in a formation that revolves around the Beloved. But also one of the common forms of ceremonial Sufi dance is to whirl or twirl -- many have heard the term "whirling dervish." The Persian word translated as *revolve* in the above quatrain is the same word used for whirling. There are numerous explanations of what informs this practice, among them being that when a Sufi whirls one's body in remembrance of the Beloved that person is whirling (revolving) around the (spiritual) heart. And the Beloved dwells within the heart. While whirling, we relinquish our revolving around other things, to revolve around the heart and be colored by the Beloved that dwells therein. Many have not only experienced deep ecstasy from whirling, but have also been

transformed to cultivate and deepen lasting ways of living that truly honor and revere the Beloved.

Now for most us, the path to revolving around the Beloved will proceed through revolving around phenomena. The idea of revolving around the Beloved is more easily embraced than actually living such; and our continuing identification with the mind and body sustains our tendencies to attach to phenomena. Acknowledging this dynamic, the quatrain offers guidance on how to use these tendencies in ways that lead to freedom from such attachments, to arrive at a freedom that revolves around only the Beloved.

*If you revolve around Saturn, you will become Saturn.* This metaphor acknowledges the openness Traditional Islam has to science. One of the ancient systems of Islamic astronomy acknowledged Saturn as the seventh and highest celestial body, beyond which there is only the Field of Stars, the Field of the Heaven of Heavens, and The Beyond. The reference of a celestial body also included the realm of its orbit, which was called a heaven. The Seventh Heaven is significant because no creation can go beyond it, and only a rare pious few can even reach that far. To go beyond the Seventh Heaven, one must be drawn beyond the farthest point by the Beloved. One of the celebrated occurrences of this in Islam is the Night of the Mi'raaj, when the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) was drawn beyond the Seventh Heaven to be within "two bow lengths" of the Beloved (Qur'aan Surah 53, Verses 8 - 10).

If you are revolving around the highest and farthest point you can go in living spirituality, *you will become Saturn*: that celestial body that orbits in the heaven closest to the Beloved. In our embrace of

spirituality, are we revolving around doing the best (highest) and the most (going the farthest) that we can presently do? There should be an element of moderation in doing the most, that we don't harm and burn ourselves out in seeking the most of the most. But even if there is plenty of room to grow in what we're doing, doing the best and most we can presently do becomes a means to maturing to more evolved levels. By doing our present best our best increases to become better, to become that celestial body that is drawn closer to the Beloved. (Note I'm using these descriptive words as metaphors.) Far too often we are settling for less, even if it is substantive, convincing ourselves that such suffices as honor and reverence of the Beloved. But this compromising impedes us being drawn to *revolve around the Beloved*.

One aspect of revolving around Saturn is doing the best and most of what we already know to do: heeding guidance already received. But another aspect is to revolve around those who are "Saturns" in their own right. This informs why traditional Sufism is approached in the context of the disciple - master relationship. The master is living what it means to be truly human, and: *You will become a true human if you revolve around true humans*. I've said this Sufi saying before and I'll keep saying it: if you want to smell like a rose, go sit in a rose garden. When we abide in the presence of those who are fulfilling the great human potential and purpose of truly honoring and revering the Beloved, their qualities will start to become a fragrance that settles upon us. This becomes so even more when we *revolve around* masters.

The standard of being a human is excellence! But too often we view "being human" as a justification for being less: how often when we make a mistake or give forth an insufficient or flawed effort we say, "I'm only human." Such deluded thinking will diminish and

completely dissipate if we *revolve around true humans* who are living examples of excellence. They will instruct and show that this excellence is easy to realize when we allow the Beloved and that which directs us to the Beloved to dictate our lives -- it is a matter of surrender. But such excellence is often very difficult, if not impossible, to reach through individual self-effort alone.

In the next post we'll finish exploring this quatrain, which will lead into the second quatrain I will share.



## **You will become... by means of Divinity - Part 2 of 2**

*August 25, 2016*

If you revolve around Saturn, you will become Saturn.  
You will become a true human if you revolve around true humans.  
You will become a ruby if you revolve around this ruby mine.  
You will become a ruby mine if you revolve around the Beloved.

\* \* \*

Know that every form is accepted by “primordial matter,”  
And know that its Fashioner is the “First Cause.”  
Divinity never descends into human nature, but  
Know that human nature is manifest by means of Divinity.

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,  
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 573)

\* \* \*

Continuing where we left off in the previous post, *You will become a ruby if you revolve around this ruby mine*. Note, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi refers to *this ruby mine* after mentioning *true humans*. This is not an overstatement: one who fulfills the purpose of being a *true human* is such.

Rubies are rare treasures. In ancient times, there were only a few areas in the world where ruby mines were found. And in the past, their beauty was more cherished; in the modern age, appreciation of the rarity of the ruby has been diminished by the manufacturing of

synthetic rubies. (There are metaphors in this last point regarding real and “synthetic” *true humans*, but that’s a topic for another blog post.) Yet despite their rarity, the beauty of rubies is well-known.

Rubies are among the hardest of minerals. Not only are they hard to break, but they can cut through many substances. As a metaphor, this relates to the spiritual master and teacher who has cut through (penetrated) the many layers (of ego and ignorance) that veil the heart. Thus, the *true human* is a living example of one who lives this penetration; but such an one also has powers (i.e. insight, keen observation, etc.) that allow that one to penetrate the veils of others.

There is also mystery surrounding rubies. Even today, when modern and spiritual sciences have been able to determine how many minerals are formed, there is no clear consensus about how rubies are formed. Even in places where the components and conditions needed for their formation are present, ruby mines are found in sporadic and limited locations. Such reflects on the *true human*: there is a mystery about such an one who “alchemizes” components available to others to become rare rubies. Also, the mines are not widespread, but rather in limited -- dare I say, intimate -- locations. The connection a student / seeker forms with a genuine spiritual teacher / master is always intimate. And this intimacy, while always remaining within the space of ethics, may vary drastically from prevailing norms of relationships.

Many of the ancient ruby mines were not underground; rather they were pits or locations where sediments gathered: such as deposits washed to a place through the immense rains of a rainy season or a stream such sediments fed into. Miners would carefully sift through the sediments, in search of gems; this tedious search fueled a greater

appreciation for the discovery of a gemstone, especially a rare ruby. In a similar way, the seeker must sift through the sediments of one's life to uncover these rare finds. If one has sifted through mounds and mounds of sediment without finding a ruby, that one is more likely to genuinely cherish and respect a ruby when found. This is often a different (deeper) appreciation than most who purchase rubies or receive them as gifts.

This gives a sense of the value of rubies. And you can become one: *You will become a ruby if you revolve around this ruby mine.* This often entails searching where the sediments deposit and to sift, little by little, through such in search of these rare gems. Note, most ruby mines are not lined or filled with immense amounts of rubies. They are more often large piles of soil or pits sifted through, or streams that don't appear to be anything extraordinary which may contain only a few rubies. And most rubies are very small, a fragment that broke off a larger deposit over time. This speaks to where we will find *true humans*: that even in places where such deposits (seekers) gather, such as a spiritual "place," we will often have to sift little by little through those who gather there to find a rare gem. And this sifting is not only through the other people we find there, it is also a sifting within one's self: particularly to remove the barriers that impede our ability to realize what a gem is. This often includes relinquishing our fixed ideas of what a *true human* is, ideas often contrived in ignorance and selfishness.

But the opportunity of becoming a ruby doesn't end there. It is a means to a greater end: *You will become a ruby mine if you revolve around the Beloved.* Once we discover a ruby in the piles of stuff we hold our lives (including who we hold ourselves, our "I") to be, will we

search for other rubies? If so, this can transform the heap of stuff we hold our lives to be into a ruby mine. Over time -- dare I say, eternity -- other tiny fragments of a larger ruby deposit most likely broke off to be mixed into the sediments. The fact that you found one ruby fragment supports this premise.

Let us not limit our understanding of rubies to just the person (personality) of a *true human*; rather, it is the qualities of the Beloved that shine through that person (and ourselves) which are the gems. It is the searching for, not always the continuous discovery of, rubies that makes the stuff (heaps) of our lives a mine. Yes, in some mines more rubies may be found than in others, but that's secondary to the primary purpose of searching for rubies -- within ourselves and our lives. In this searching, we will come to realize that the precious gems are "fragments" from the larger (endless) source of the Beloved. As our searching intensifies and deepens, we will find ourselves revolving *around the Beloved* through the search for and appreciation of Its qualities. And when we *revolve around the Beloved*, we will realize this greater treasure of such revolving is worth of the toil of searching huge masses of sediments even if we find only one small ruby.

Thus, realize -- and this is where the first quatrain leads into the second -- *Know that every form is accepted by "primordial matter."* The translators acknowledge the challenge of translating this quatrain into English since it includes varying cultural and philosophical components that don't directly correlate into modern English (words and concepts). But the first line mentions factors that point to a relationship that is helpful to contextualizing what has been shared. So let's approach it more in this vein, and not be so attached to a literal translation.

*"Primordial matter"* refers to a Greek philosophical term mentioned in the original quatrain. Here we see the openness of Traditional Islam in embracing other spiritual and philosophical systems in the exploration of Truth. The term speaks to that Undefinable Source from which all emanates. In Islam, this is encompassed by the name "Allaah" -- the highest name of the Absolute in Arabic. But the reference of *"primordial matter"* emphasizes that quality of the Absolute which exists before the beginning of everything; and, thus, can be said to have no beginning. Islam explicitly states the Absolute has no beginning. And by having no beginning, it has no ending since beginnings and endings are bound to each other in duality. The Absolute is sometimes described as "The Eternal," but even this is insufficient because eternity refers to unending time which, having a beginning, continues unendingly until the Last Day. But the Absolute is even before the beginning of and beyond the unendingness of time, even as it is within time. So approaching *"primordial matter"* as a metaphor, it points to "something" beyond definition -- and, thus, comprehension.

So when the quatrain states *Know that every form is accepted by "primordial matter,"* it is acknowledging *that every form* -- every phenomenon whether as an object or experience, subtle or explicit -- has a relationship with *"primordial matter."* The term *"accepted"* has an added context in Islam which goes beyond mere receiving or approval. To use prayers as an example: in Islam it is a custom that before and after Muslims make their prayers they often say, "May Allaah accept (or receive) our prayers." And this is said even for the truest prayer: one made without any trace of ego, where the prayer -- which comes from the Absolute -- prays itself through the instrument of the one praying. This points to the essence of acceptance: that

although the prayer, manifesting as a phenomenon, emanates from the Absolute and will return to the Absolute, its manifestation as a distinct phenomenon occurs as a flow of Oneness (the Absolute). In form it is distinct yet inseparable from the *"primordial matter."*

One of the most celebrated and beautiful metaphors of this among Sufis is the reed flute. When played by a skilled musician, the flute is not separate from the musician, the air that is blown through it, or even the beautiful music that results from the convergence of these distinct components. In such playing, although the player, the breath, and the flute are distinct forms, in the music that moves through and encompasses these they are oneness. It is not coincidental that Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi opens the *Masnawi* with "Hearken to the reed flute..."

*So Know that every form -- every single phenomenon -- is accepted by -- has this inseparable relationship with -- "primordial matter" -- the Absolute. This includes even that which we don't like, which we may deem to not be spiritual, even that which is wicked and evil. Will we remember this? Will we remember, know that its Fashioner is the "First Cause" -- that the Beloved creates and fashions (shapes) every single phenomenon we encounter! Remembering this, we may need to address some phenomena directly on the relative plane, but beyond the surface we should address all concerns -- complaints or appreciations -- we have regarding any phenomena to the Beloved. Why? Because Divinity never descends into human nature -- or we can say, "into the human realm of activity." Why? Because its fullness is too expansive to fit into this realm even as it permeates this realm. For example, try fitting an entire room into a bowl within your hands; yet the expanse of the room includes even the bowl -- the room is not outside the bowl. And even more than just being too expansive to be reduced to the*

realm of human activity, *Know that human nature is manifest by means of Divinity*. We already know this deep within, that everything emanates from and is manifest (sustained) by the Beloved. But the call to *Know* this is a call to remember and actually live this remembrance.

As much as some things must be addressed on the realm of human activity, with everything we should always be looking to the Beloved. It is the Creator and Fashioner of all, that unto which all will return. It is before the phenomenon manifested, It is as the phenomenon exists, and It is after the phenomenon has passed. Will we remember that, at the essence, this whole entire existence -- including the whole of our (individual and collective) lives -- revolves *around the Beloved*? And since this is the case, will we embrace a path to realize and honor such? This differs profoundly from how most of us live, approaching life as if everything revolves our ego and its associations -- "I" and "mine." But with realization and remembrance, we can deepen into the fullness and beautiful harmony of what it is to *revolve around the Beloved*...

In the next post, we'll explore the third quatrain that cried aloud with the two above.



## Be shown yourself -- without yourself

September 8, 2016

If you walk on the Way, the Way will open to you.  
And if you become non-existent, non-existence will lead to existence.  
If you become humble, you will not be contained in the universe.  
And then you will be shown to yourself -- without yourself.

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,  
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 574)

\* \* \*

(This blog post builds upon the last two posts: *You will become... by means of Divinity - Part 1 and Part 2*. You may wish to read those before reading this one.)

We concluded the last blog post exploring how everything revolves around the Beloved. But do we truly approach life in this way, living the realization and remembrance of this? If we are honest, most of us will admit that we don't -- this includes even "spiritual people" who are seriously committed to living a spiritual life. It is for this reason, most spiritual traditions offer paths to arrive at the "destination" of this approach. Traditional Islam holds that every single prophet, saint, and spiritual master embarked upon a path to arrive at living the awareness that everything revolves around the Beloved.

Thus, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi opens the quatrain stating *If you walk on the Way...* Note that *the Way* can have varying meanings in different contexts. Sometimes it refers to the whole way of life (surrender) that

we call Islam. Sometimes it refers to traditional Sufism, the mystical path of the heart which unfolds within the larger way of Islam. Or even sometimes it refers specifically to the master / teacher - disciple / student relationship which is the traditional way of teaching, cultivating, and transmitting unailing means to be drawn to the “destination.”

Regardless of the specific context, mention of *the Way* usually involves a path -- and paths are defined routes that are to be followed. *Al-Faatihah*, the opening surah (chapter) of the Qur’aan, illustrates this point. After stating that we only worship the Beloved, only ask It for help, the surah continues: *Ihdinaas siraatal mustaqiim* (Surah 1, Verse 6). This can be translated as: “Show us the straight path” or “Keep us on the straight path.” Yet straight is not always linear.

I remember how one elder explained this using the desert as a metaphor. Travel in ancient Arabia could be deadly: the desert terrain was brutal and certain regions might be hosts to robbers or immersed in war. When one sought to travel, one usually hired a guide to navigate these dangers and lead one to the destination, especially since there were no paved roads. (As most desert guides were males, I’ll use the “he” pronoun in referring to such; but a guide in the larger sense can be male or female.) Although the destination might be directly northeast, the guide might not head in that direction in the beginning leg of the journey. He might veer north toward a water hole where the travelers could replenish their water supplies along the way. Then he might veer a little more east to avoid hilled regions known to be occupied by robbers. Then he might even veer west to avoid an area immersed in open warfare and toward another water hole. The total

distance of this “straight path” might be longer than a direct linear northeast route, but it is certainly safer.

As much as a guide may veer directions to avoid dangers, he doesn't veer randomly or whimsically in pursuit of pleasures. A good guide chooses a path as direct as possible in light of the prevalent conditions and dangers to arrive unfailingly at the destination. The value of a good guide is obvious when compared to journeys led by incompetent guides or taken without guides which result in harm, even sometimes death, of the travelers. Journeys without a good guide can also result in delayed arrival to the destination, or sometimes not reaching the destination at all. In light of this, we may appreciate why “Show us the straight path” is followed by: “The path of those upon whom You [the Beloved] bestow grace, not those who earn wrath or go astray” (Surah 1, Verse 7). This phrase speaks to the importance of grace in reaching the destination, the absence of which usually leads to the wrath of hardship, suffering, destruction, etc., as well as a journey gone astray.

This starts to inform the dynamics of *If you walk on the Way*. It is a *Way* we must walk, follow step by step. Even if in the ancient days one rode a camel or horse on the journey, still these animals moved step by step following the very footsteps of the guide. As we proceed in this manner, *the Way will open to you*. It is not so much something we conquer, discover, or attain; rather by treading a defined path, usually following the footsteps of a guide, *the Way* reveals and manifests itself to us. This may be a subtle difference in approach, yet its impact is often profound. It is not an approach that emphasizes exertion, effort, and ingenuity; rather an approach of surrender, obedience, and allowing *the Way* to reveal itself to us and draw us to

the destination. Yet neither it is a path of passivity and being carried to the destination, but instead a “middle way” of restrained activity as we adhere to guidance and the defined space of the path to *walk on the Way*.

Adhering to guidance *on the Way*, leads to a deepening of restraint -- particularly from doing what “I” want or think “I” should do. Maturing into restraint within the defined space of the path will eventually reveal the gross and subtle tendencies we have accumulated to act of our own (ego-based) volition: where the “I” is the determining factor of what “I” do, even for “good” acts. Some of these tendencies will be cleverly disguised as “intelligent determinations” we make based on what we perceive. But in the ancient context, when one follows a guide one does so without question or commentary -- “We hear, we listen, and we obey” (Surah 2, Verse 285). In fact, in some situations, those who follow the guide will literally step into the guide’s every footprint to emphasize avoiding any deviance from following the guide.

When we get serious about following guidance, we often avoid “big” and blatant disobedience. But it’s amazing how much we impose seemingly small and little changes upon how we “follow” guidance. As stated above, a subtle difference in approach can have a profound impact. And even more, these little changes are ways of the “I” (ego) maintaining its existence: even a grain of sand of the “I” impedes *non-existence*. But *If you walk on the Way* -- follow guidance as given within the parameters of the path -- the opening of *the Way* unfailingly leads to *non-existence*.

For example, a guide may say when you come to sit in a circle of gathering, step into the circle with your right foot first before sitting. On one level, what difference does it make if you step into the circle with your left foot when it comes to seating the body in the circle? But on a deeper level, this non-complying assertion is, at minimum, sustaining the existence of "I:" me exerting myself counter to the instruction given. The same dynamic can play out with "I" obeying the instruction given -- an obvious example of this is may be when a person makes a big show of stepping into the circle with their right foot. As long as the "I" exists to do what "I" want or think is appropriate the "I" cannot *become non-existent*. The spirit of guidance calls for obeying the instruction as given -- simply as it is: without deviance, addition (i.e. pomp), or any other coloring of the "I." We should also remember a little deviance, addition, and coloring of the "I" usually leads to more of these.

Following guidance as given, even if such seems trivial, allows obedience to dwindle away all inclinations of "I" existence (self-existence). I stress allowing obedience to do this because often when the "I" seeks to dwindle away itself it only strengthens its existence. But for most, it is not until we get a taste of *non-existence* that we realize there is an existence beyond this limited "I" we try to experience all reality through.

Don't confuse the idea of *non-existence* with the genuine realization and being of this -- such goes beyond the mind. I use the metaphor of trying to realize the entire ocean through a small drop of the ocean's water. And in reality, the "I" is less than a fragment of that drop. We cannot even conceive what the ocean really is, let alone truly open to the realization of such, if we're looking to see the vastness it is

through a drop of water. But relinquishment of the drop, our fixation with it, allows the ocean to reveal the vastness of its reality to us.

So whereas some aspects of the spiritual practice may seem unnecessarily particular on the surface, understand the workings of the depths seeking to extinguish the “I.” Again, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi points to an unfailing way to arrive at this destination: *If you become humble, you will not be contained in the universe.* It’s somewhat ironic that by seeking to experience the endless universe through our limited “I,” we become contained (limited) in the universe. This self-based approach to life only stinks of self-importance (“I”-importance) and bondage; whereas the depth of humility, the relinquishment of all self-importance and ego glorification, unfailingly arrives as freedom.

Within freedom, nothing can contain us: the All-Pervading and Only Reality that is realized. For Only the Beloved is: everything revolves around the Beloved. And you are that Beloved -- but not how the “I” and limited mind contrive false understandings of such. As long as there is even a smidgen of “I” existing and exerting itself, we will fall into and remain immersed in ignorance, confusion, and delusion regarding this essential truth. But by continuing to restrain the “I” and making it a non-determining factor in our actions, thoughts, and eventually our whole approach to life, we will become so humble that the “I” no longer exists. The mind and body we project the “I” upon will just be instruments of the Beloved, not misused to contrive a fabricated “I” seeking to create, impose, and sustain its own (unreal) “existence.” *And then you will be shown to yourself -- without yourself:* what we truly are, the Only Reality that is.

As we progress *on the Way*, we can have a taste of this truth which often fades away. But if we stay *on the Way* and continue to deepen our humility, we can have more than just as a flash of this realization: we can abide in this non-existing existence within and beyond all time. The invitation is extended, it is ours to accept and honor, or... (you fill in the blank).



## The fountain the shaykh's

September 22, 2016

Wherefore the blind imitator is like a deaf person,  
In regard to the joy that one feigns to feel.  
The light is the shaykh's, the fountain the shaykh's,  
And the outpouring of joy is also the shaykh's, not the imitator's.  
'Tis like water in a vessel, or light through a glass;  
If they think they come from themselves, they are wrong.  
When the vessel leaves the fountain, it sees its error;  
It sees the water in it comes from the fountain.  
The glass also learns, when the moon sets,  
That its light proceeded from the shining of the moon.

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma'navi*,  
translated by E.H. Whinfield, M.A., p. 349 - 350)

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We are approaching the anniversary of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's birth on the solar calendar (September 30, 1207). Inspired by that, let's explore what some consider his mystic birth: his first encounter with Shams at-Tabriz. There are numerous accounts of this meeting but I'll focus on two main ones in this and the subsequent post. We'll begin with the version that resonates most with me: the encounter at the fountain. I'll share a brief version of this account and then use the above poem to emphasize points of significance.

Most traditions hold that Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi was around 40 years old when Shams first approached him. Shams saw Jalaal ud-Diin about

15 years earlier yet he wasn't ready to receive what Shams would later impart to him. Shams had been longing to "mix with and become the companion of Your [the Beloved's] saints." (*Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi* p. 179, trans. by William C. Chittick) Some say Shams literally pledged to pay with 'his head' (life) just to be in such company. A dream came to Shams in which he was told, "I will make you the companion of one saint.... He's in Anatolia." (*Me and Rumi* p. 179) Konya, where Jalaal ud-Diin's family had moved to, is in the region of Anatolia (within modern-day Turkey).

So Shams lived with this burning for saintly companionship for many years. It is perhaps inconceivable to imagine his turmoil: beholding this magnificent "secret" of the bliss of Oneness with the Beloved, yet having no one to share or even understand this great wonder -- this treasure becoming a burden bore alone. There is a hadith in which the Absolute states: "I was a hidden treasure wishing to be known." If we can "feel" the depth of what this conveys, perhaps we can start to approach an understanding of Shams' burden. So imagine, if you can, the yearning for relief and fulfillment he must have felt when now he saw an older Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi who was ready to receive the invitation to embrace the path of sainthood.

I stress it was an invitation to embrace the path of sainthood which lay within Shams' first approach of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi. It was not sealed with absolute certainty that Jalaal ud-Diin would accept the invitation. A line in the Qur'aan states: "There is no compulsion in the Way" (Surah 2, Verse 256) -- Jalaal ud-Diin had the choice to embrace or reject this invitation and all such entailed.

Also, having realized the potential and readiness to embrace this path of sainthood is not a guarantee to become a saint -- one who realizes Oneness with the Beloved. Who knows how many other such persons Shams approached within the region of Anatolia who rejected or did not fully manifest what this invitation offered. Shams doesn't give a lot of detail about his life but I would caution against assuming that he knew for sure that his approach of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi would result in the later becoming a jewel of sainthood renowned throughout the ages. I say this in light of so many stories of others on the saintly path and how rare it is for anyone to first accept such an invitation. And even more rare to tread the path to mature into a saint. And even more rare for one to reach the depth of sainthood Jalaal ud-Diin surrendered to realize.

But there Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi was: walking through the streets of Konya followed by some of his disciples. He was already recognized as a great Sufi and scholar, acquiring the position his father previously held as a shaykh over many Sufi disciples. Shaykh literally means "elder" and is a title used for Sufi teachers; but there is a deeper meaning for those embrace the path of sainthood, a meaning Jalaal ud-Diin had not yet realized. He also had a growing reputation as a judge of Islamic law, with a remarkable ability to render fair and precise judgments even in complicated cases. So when this man of great renown was approached by an unknown wandering bum from out of town, it is no surprise that Jalaal ud-Diin rebuffed him.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi was carrying books in his hands accompanied by some of his disciples. The bum, who was sitting by a fountain, approached Jalaal ud-Diin and asked what was in the books. Already this bum had crossed the lines of proper etiquette: he did not offer a

greeting or give a display of respect and reverence; instead he bluntly inquired of something that was, for all practical purposes, none of his business. So for Jalaal ud-Diin to offer any reply was kind, he would have been in his right to completely ignore this bum and perhaps walk blindly by an invitation which transformed his life. He responded to the bum, stating the books contained things he could not understand. The bum immediately grabbed the books and flung them into a nearby fountain.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi and his disciples were appalled. These were Islamic books of great value: copied by hand on papyrus with ink that was subject to smear. If wet, the writing would be rendered indecipherable. And to replace the books could take months or even years, since other copies would have to be relocated and then recopied by hand -- unlike the swiftness of modern printing. So care was taken to prevent any liquids from being used in the presence of such books. For the books to be submersed in the water of the fountain likely meant their ruin.

Yet note Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's course of actions. He didn't immediately seize the bum with his disciples and give that bum a brutal beating -- an acceptable, some say encouraged, course of action in that age. The bum would have deserved such for not just ruining the books but also for his rude and disrespectful behavior toward a shaykh. Instead, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi rushed to grab the books as his disciples grabbed the bum. When he opened the books, he was dumbfounded: they were dripping wet with water yet not a single mark was smeared. He then looked into the eyes of the bum and: the encounter! He knew he was in the presence of a great spiritual master -- a true shaykh, not one merely given the title. He then invited Shams

to stay with him and went into seclusion with just Shams for an extended period time, some say months.

The above poem isn't explicitly about this first encounter but it speaks to dynamics in play within this meeting. Although Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi was already a great person by religious and worldly standards, by the "measures" of the path of sainthood he was a *blind imitator [who] is like a deaf person*. He was immersed in pursuits centered in the mind, as are many who call themselves Sufis. And yes, he was a great individual providing valuable service to others. His endeavors should not be diminished but this is not the same as the path of the heart which guides to surrender and realization of Oneness with the Beloved.

The greatness of the mind can only blindly imitate the greatness of Oneness because the scope of Oneness exceeds the limitations of what the mind can perceive. Even when mind-centered people are told this, and may even repeat such words and concepts, they are deaf to it. As long as they try to understand this through the mind, they will not be able to understand what is being conveyed because such exceeds the limits of the mind. This was the state of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi. From a young age he was exposed to teachings that spoke of Oneness: his father was a shaykh who taught and wrote about such. Yet, as most of us do, Jalaal ud-Diin approached this on the level of the mind; even more, he arrived at an amazing cultivation of his mind. And as is the nature of the cultivated mind, he felt a sense of joy and pride for his mind: parading through the streets as a renowned shaykh followed by disciples reflects this. Note that years later, after deepening into surrender of Oneness, he officially retired from having disciples, turning over his position to Salaah al-Diin Zarkubi. (Although this

didn't stop others from still regarding themselves as his disciples.) And he embraced a demeanor of such humility, so humble most would not think he was this rare treasure of humanity. But for mind-centered people, *the joy that one feigns to feel* through the mind is only a blind imitation of the *joy* of Oneness.

For Sufis, a traditional way of realizing the *joy* of Oneness is through receiving transmission from a true shaykh:

*The light is the shaykh's, the fountain the shaykh's,  
And the outpouring of joy is also the shaykh's, not the  
imitator's.*

*'Tis like water in a vessel, or light through a glass;  
If they think they come from themselves, they are wrong.*

When we are mind-centered, it is common to think that *joy* comes from ourselves, even if we -- especially in "spiritual" circles -- say otherwise. And particularly for those who cultivate our minds into amazing states, we think *joy* is a product of (attained by) cultivation. Thus, a scholar will continue to immerse more into scholarship, more into the cultivation of the mind neglecting and usually moving further away from the heart. We will literally live as if the water comes from the vessel, not the fountain the vessel should immerse within to receive water. It is no secret that for the vessel *the water in it comes from the fountain*: that this *joy* comes from another source. Although this is obvious, in our blind imitation and deafness, we ignore what is obvious. But will we have at least a space of openness within our blindness and deafness to experience an encounter with a shaykh because *the outpouring of joy is also the shaykh's, not the imitator's*.

To be clear, the shaykh bestows *the outpouring of joy* to the disciple who is willing and ready to receive it; but the *joy* belongs to the Beloved. Yet in our blindness and deafness we totally ignore the Beloved, even if we think and say otherwise; at least the shaykh who possesses this *joy* has a form we can perceive within our blindness and deafness. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi had at least a space within his blindness and deafness to engage the bum: he responded to that rude bum from out of town when he didn't have to. Thus, he was able to have an encounter whereby the bum was realized as a great spiritual master, a true shaykh. And there was a message within the encounter for what accepting the invitation would include: a willingness to throw all his books (mind-centered cultivation) into the water to be smeared to indecipherable markings. Yet not a mark of his was smeared as these would be used later in service of guiding others to the *joy* of Oneness. (But for others, immersion into the fountain may mean complete effacement if such is not useful to the service of *joy*.) Thus, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi immersed into the fountain, releasing attachment to all he cultivated: he immersed completely into Shaykh Shams.



## Wholly indifferent to yourself - Part 1 of 2

October 6, 2016

Another person came to the Prophet and said, "I don't want this religion. By Allaah, take it back. Ever since I entered your religion I've had no peace for a single day. My wealth is gone, my spouse has left, my child cannot be found, my respect is destroyed, my strength is sapped, even my lust has disappeared." Muhammad answered, "What did you expect? Wherever our religion goes it does not return without uprooting that person and sweeping clean their house."

"None but the purified shall touch Allaah."

So long as there remains in you a single trace of self-love, Allaah will not show Its face to you. You will not be worthy of Its presence. You must become wholly indifferent to yourself and the world, so that Friend can show Its face. So, whenever our religion lodges in a heart, it will not withdraw its hand until it brings that heart to Allaah and severs from it all that is untrue.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,  
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 207 - 208)

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In the previous post, we explored the version of Shams and Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's first meeting which involved books being thrown into a fountain. In this post, we'll explore the version that revolves around the question: "Who is greater: Bayazid Bistami or Muhammad the Messenger (s.a.w.s.)?"

Bayazid (transliterated as Baayaziid), also known as Abu Yaziid al-Bistami, was a famous Persian Sufi who lived in the 800s A.D. He is renowned for increasing awareness about *fana*, which can be described as the annihilation (or dissolution) of the ego / individual self -- when this occurs Reality (the Beloved) is realized. There is a story that when Bayazid was an elderly man someone asked him how old he was. He replied, 'I am four years old.' He went on to say that for seventy years he lived with the veils of the ego, only becoming free from them four years ago. His stated age reflects when he arrived at the station of complete renunciation of anything other than Allaah. Bayazid's influence as a Sufi master continues even today, and he was a major figure in the Persian Sufi world Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi grew up in.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi studied Bayazid's life and teachings, and he makes numerous mentions of Bayazid in the *Masnawi*. Bayazid was known for going into deep ecstatic states. In these states, he would make statements that most Muslims regard as heresy: such as "I myself am Allaah," "There is no deity but me, worship me." People have been killed for making utterances like these; yet there was a depth of grace protecting Bayazid. There is an account in the fourth book of the *Masnawi* in which Bayazid instructs his disciples to kill him if he makes such blasphemous statements within his ecstatic intoxication again. When he does so, numerous disciples attack him but the consequences of their acts fall upon themselves: those who go to slit his throat or stab his chest find these wounds miraculously manifest upon themselves and die. Only those who inflicted non-deadly wounds survived while Bayazid remained unscathed.

One of the crown statements of Bayazid is "I have achieved [the station of] knowing Allaah." In the Sufi context, this goes beyond

mere knowledge and logic to a deep, intimate, and expansive realization of the Beloved. To know a person in such a way is to know, without doubt, what a person will do in any given situation -- and be correct in such knowing. To make such a profession regarding the Beloved would be considered as heresy by many Muslims, including some Sufis, since Islam is clear that the Beloved cannot be known. Its "fullness" cannot be contained in the mind and is beyond conception although some of Its qualities may manifest in ways that can be known.

Bayazid's proclamation differs drastically from Muhammad's position which is reflected in a famous hadith: "I am incapable of knowing You (Allaah) the way You deserve." Some also translate this hadith as "I have not honored You in a way that You deserve." In ancient Arabia, it was held that one needs to know a being in order to truly honor it: the depth (or fullness) of honoring being dependent upon the depth of knowing.

In the time of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi, there was much debate within Sufi circles regarding who is greater: Bayazid or Muhammad. In one respect, Muhammad is the Prophet and Messenger of Allaah: Muslims regard his life as an unfailing source of guidance and support. And specifically for Sufis, he is the "Master of (spiritual) Masters:" the lineages of all traditional Sufi orders converge within his heart. So although Bayazid is a disciple of Muhammad through Sufi lineage, he realizes states Muhammad never professed to reach: of knowing the Beloved, claiming to be the Beloved through ecstatic absorption. It was (and still is) an accepted premise among Sufi orders that the best disciples build upon the stations of their masters and go further to realize and attain stations that supersede their masters. Was this the

case with Bayazid? Did he surpass the Prophet Muhammad? Such was heavily debated among Sufis in Jalaal ud-Diin's time. One thing which fueled the debate was that many scholars and intellectual (mind-oriented) Sufis leaned toward Bayazid being greater, even if they never publicly declared such. But most Muslims held to the long established premise that Muhammad remains the greatest Muslim, some say the greatest human being, who will ever walk the earth.

The above informs the context as Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi is riding upon a donkey followed by some of his disciples when an unknown man approaches. The man grabs the reigns of the donkey, which is a bold gesture since he is a stranger. And after greeting Jalaal ud-Diin with titles of respect, he asks: "Oh Shaykh, who is greater: Bayazid or Muhammad?" As stated earlier, for most Muslims this is an asinine question since for most there is no question that Muhammad is greater. But addressing the question to a Sufi shaykh indicates that this stranger is likely a Sufi, since among Sufis the question was open to debate.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi quickly responds that Muhammad is greater because he is the chief of all prophets and saints; therefore, by the grace of the Beloved, all greatness belongs to him. But Shams challenges this reply, asking why Muhammad said, "Glory be to You (Allaah), we have not known You as You deserve" whereas as Bayazid said, "Glory be to me," "How great is my station that I achieved knowing Allaah," and "I am the King of kings." Within Shams' words was an inference that Bayazid claims the greater state -- accepting that both Muhammad and Bayazid, as pious men, would not lie or exaggerate. But there was also an unspoken force challenging any

sense of conventionality Jalaal ud-Diin might be displaying, a call to complete and intimate honesty -- even with a stranger.

While many Sufis engaged this question of greatness on philosophical and conceptual levels, Shams posed the question in a way that cuts to the core of what it truly means to be a Sufi. The force of which overwhelmed Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi: how often does someone or something call into question the core of who we are? The force of Shams' question left Jalaal ud-Diin exposed. He yelled out in awe, fainted, and remained unconscious for about an hour. His disciples and the other Sufis who came to this scene were astonished; they knew or sensed that this wasn't a physical swoon, but a spiritual rendering to unconsciousness. Some say it was within this swoon that the answer Shams had to the question was revealed to Jalaal ud-Diin, something he humbled himself to. For when he awoke, he immediately grabbed the hand of the stranger, Shams -- a sign of respect and deference, just as a child grabs the hand of its beloved and protective parent. He then led Shams to a private room in the Sufi school he taught at and spent the next forty days in seclusion with just Shams.

What was the answer Shams gave? And how does this relate with the selected text? Part 2 of this blog post will explore such.



## Wholly indifferent to yourself - Part 2 of 2

October 20, 2016

Another person came to the Prophet and said, "I don't want this religion. By Allaah, take it back. Ever since I entered your religion I've had no peace for a single day. My wealth is gone, my spouse has left, my child cannot be found, my respect is destroyed, my strength is sapped, even my lust has disappeared." Muhammad answered, "What did you expect? Wherever our religion goes it does not return without uprooting that person and sweeping clean their house."

"None but the purified shall touch Allaah."

So long as there remains in you a single trace of self-love, Allaah will not show Its face to you. You will not be worthy of Its presence. You must become wholly indifferent to yourself and the world, so that Friend can show Its face. So, whenever our religion lodges in a heart, it will not withdraw its hand until it brings that heart to Allaah and severs from it all that is untrue.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,  
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 207 - 208)

\* \* \*

"Oh Shaykh, who is greater: Bayazid or Muhammad?" Shams' answer to this question penetrates to the core of what it truly means to be a Sufi.

On one level, Shams' reasoning may seem simple. But genuinely living what it means encompasses a profundity that only a rare group

of humans realize before death. It involves transcending the limitations of: the mind, the self we identify with due to delusion, and the world we “live” this self within. Thus, we may arrive at the complete openness of the heart: an openness that respects yet is *wholly indifferent to yourself and the world*.

The greatness of Bayazid and his “knowing Allaah” is honest and genuine to the station he attained; but such is still limited to the mind, even if in this case it is an expansive, illuminated, and humble mind. Although the mind can play a role in surrender, if we remain within the space of the mind our surrender cannot be complete. And remember, Islam is surrender to the Beloved. Through Bayazid’s devotion and expansive yet partial surrender, his limited mind became full with only Allaah. This is no small feat in a world where the exceeding majority of people don’t even reach the state where ten percent of their minds are full with (focused only on) the Beloved. But the mind is not even a teardrop in the ocean of Reality. Although there is an ecstasy that overwhelms us when the teardrop is consumed with the Beloved, it is still only a teardrop of an endless ocean. So even if the teardrop is full in “knowingness,” it is not the endless ocean. The essence of the teardrop and the ocean are the same, but the fullness of the endless ocean cannot be realized by the full knowing of a teardrop.

What fuels this fixation with the teardrop? Our fixation with the self, which should not be viewed separate from the world the self operates within. Careful observation reveals that the exceeding majority, if not the whole, of the self is composed in relation to stuff of the world. This dynamic is even a danger for saints, including the shaykh Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi riding upon his donkey. Whereas pious people limit and exclude “worldly” / sense-oriented stuff from composing the identity of

the self, they often include qualities of the Beloved that manifest in the world in ways we can relate to. If we can relate to it via the mind, we can formulate components of self-identity from it -- which becomes a basis for ego-based attachments. A pious self may be glorious: discerning amazing realizations, opening to wonderful “superhuman” powers, basking in states of ecstasy and love that marvel even the angels. But it is finite, limited, and doesn’t even begin to reveal the inexplicable, incomprehensible fullness of the endless Reality that is the Beloved.

The endless Reality cannot be realized through a finite vessel. For once the glass is full it cannot contain any more without breaking or overflowing. The glass does not expand to encompass what is beyond its capacity. In fact, if we are brutally honest we will admit that once our glass is (or seems) full we have the tendency to think that is all: that there is nothing more to realize or we become content with the all we have realized. This speaks to the state of Bayazid: “How great is my station that I achieved knowing Allaah.” What more is there to know when we know the Ultimate? When we think we have realized all there is to know, our surrender not only remains incomplete, it often recedes; just as a person at the destination is often not as engaged as the one traveling.

This is where we get to a fundamental difference between Bayazid and the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) For Muhammad, surrender is never-ending: there is never a final state or destination, every moment calls for a new (present) surrender to the uniqueness of the present the Beloved creates. While one occupies a human form, the teardrop is there; but for Muhammad (and those who fully follow his example), there is no fixation to the form of the drop. Whereby, as the “space” of

the teardrop is moved through the endless ocean, what is experienced of the ocean still happens within the space of a teardrop but is not finite and fixed, rather endless and open to infinite experiences of Reality.

Being immersed in this unendingness, the more the self comes to “know” (experience) the Beloved, the more we come to realize there is so much more to know that the self will never fully know It. Although Its essence is the same and unchanging, Its “beingness” (manifestations and more) may change drastically from moment to moment -- or even within moments -- in ways that confound all logic. It is truly without any limitations, without any definitions that can be fixed beyond how It is experienced in the present moment -- even these words cannot fully convey this. The fullness of the Beloved (the ocean) cannot be known within the space of a teardrop; yet there is a yearning within to know the fullness of the Beloved with this teardrop.

To be explicit, we cannot “know” the fullness of the Beloved with the self; yet we have a yearning within to “know” this fullness with the self: “Glory be to You (Allaah), we have not known You as You deserve.” Some say the greatest tension between this apparent paradox is: the self itself. It will not hesitate to claim knowing the fullness of the Beloved if its teardrop becomes even partially full with Its manifesting qualities -- which is not the fullness of the Beloved Itself. How much more will one claim such knowing if, like Bayazid, the whole teardrop becomes full with the qualities of the Beloved? And in claiming such, live this finite knowing as if it is the endless fullness of knowing the Beloved. We can only come to realize the fullness of the Beloved when It shows Itself to us. Even if this occurs little by little over the eternity of all time, the Beloved -- not we --

determines how such happens. But in order to allow this to happen, we must deal with this self:

*So long as there remains in you a single trace of self-love, Allaah will not show Its face to you. You will not be worthy of Its presence. You must become wholly indifferent to yourself and the world, so that Friend can show Its face.*

These terms are not negotiable. And they apply even to the greatest of saints, even to Shaykh Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi who cultivated an amazing finite mind but had not yet opened to the endlessness of the heart. Within Shams' question to him was a deeper question: are you willing to let go every *single trace of self-love*, even to a speck of dust? The force of this deeper question so overwhelmed Jalaal ud-Diin that he fainted. We cannot get of a sense of this force by the mere concept of it. But when we are challenged by an egoless purity (which Shams abides within) to let go of just a portion of who we hold ourselves to be, we may be able to get a sense of why Jalaal ud-Diin fainted when Shams' question challenged him to relinquish all of who he held himself to be.

This speaks to one of the main intentions of traditional Islam: *Wherever our religion goes it does not return without uprooting that person and sweeping clean their house.* Like other spiritual traditions, some of the original intentions of Islam have been abandoned or reduced. This has resulted in focusing on lesser practices, many which emphasize dogma and rites over the emptying of the self which allows a space within for the Beloved to reveal Itself. The Qur'aan says "There is no compulsion in the Way" (Surah 2, Verse 256) -- this

“Way” (*ad-Diin*) is sometimes translated as “religion.” The Beloved will not force Its revelation upon us, the duty is upon us to make a space for such if we wish for such to occur.

For most people, the process of emptying the self means not having *peace for a single day* as *our religion* seeks to sever all our worldly attachments: such as attachments to family (*my spouse, my child*), reputation (*my respect*), desires (*my lust*), among other worldly stuff. And let me stress, the process targets our attachments to these phenomena, not necessarily the phenomena themselves -- they may remain in our lives as we discover new ways to engage them. For the pious, this process may also include relinquishment of spiritual studies and one’s knowledge, which was a major factor for Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi. We may never know all that this entailed for Jalaal ud-Diin but clearly one of the intents of the forty days of seclusion with Shams was to begin this process of relinquishment. And for most traditional Sufis, what occurs in seclusion is only to be confidentially discussed with one’s shaykh and maybe with one’s closest disciples.

The selected text from Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi clearly states one of the main purposes of Islam: *So, whenever our religion lodges in a heart, it will not withdraw its hand until it brings that heart to Allaah and severs from it all that is untrue.* Anything that is finite and limited is not true when it comes to the Beloved. Shams’ question of who is greater points to these deeper implications: Will Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi remain on the path of being a full teardrop and vessel like Bayazid? Or will he *become wholly indifferent to yourself and the world*, to embrace the path of unending surrender to the Beloved like Muhammad? Great benefit to humanity and the universe would be proffered whether Jalaal ud-Diin became a full teardrop or a teardrop

emptied into the endless ocean. But if he's going to the core of what it means to be a Sufi, irrespective of worldly perceptions and reputation, then the choice becomes clear. And it is a choice each one must make on their own, without compulsion.

I am forever grateful for the choice Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi made...



## **And only submersion remains**

*November 3, 2016*

Love resides

not in learning

not in knowledge

not in pages and pamphlets

Wherever the debates of humans may lead

that is not the lovers' path

Love's branches arch over pre-eternity

its roots, you see, delve in Forever

a tree resting not on soil

not trunk

not even Heaven's throne

We deposed reason

punished passion with the lash:

For such reason and such morals

were degrading to such glory

You see,

So long as you long

you idolize longing;

but become the Beloved

and then no being longs...

and only submersion [dissolution] remains

(adapted from *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*,  
translated by Franklin D. Lewis, p. 24)

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Love, as a word and concept, is one of the most misused and abused terms by humans throughout history. I am reminded of one of my favorite sayings of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi: "Whatsoever I say in exposition and explanation of Love, / when I come to Love (Itself) I am ashamed of that (explanation)." (*The Mathnawi of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi*, trans. by R.A. Nicholson, Book 1, Line 112) Yet, within the limitations of the vastness of language, there are few words that better serve to convey what Sufism encompasses.

For many, Sufism becomes a mystic path that calls for embrace and focus which, as one spiritually matures, dissolves all that has brought one to this sacred embrace and focus. One of the paradoxes of this path is that most seekers engage a spiritual practice to cultivate attachment to the very things that facilitate this dissolution. When we attach to worldly things through sense-based pursuit and aversion, the dynamics of such attachment turn us away from and become barriers to dissolution. Instead many traditional Sufi approaches utilize cultivation of select attachments to be the means by which one arrives at a station where one becomes ready to relinquish all attachments. This is often done under the care and guidance of a teacher who has progressed along this path and, thus, is in a position to lead others through this process.

Among these select attachments, students may be guided toward *learning, knowledge, pages and pamphlets*: which include logic /

philosophy, teaching stories, the accounts of prophets, saints, and masters. Partial understanding may confuse the emphasis on these in certain stages of the Sufi path as indicating these lead to Love. But they do not. They can be embraced as means which lead to stations where we relinquish attachments that turn us away from and serve as barriers to Love. Remember, “there is no compulsion in the Way” (*Qur’aan* Surah 2, Verse 256): so if we hold to things that turn us away from or serve as barriers to Love, It will not compel Its presence upon us. *Love resides not* in these means; but our embrace and focus on these can support a “journey” that allows us to arrive (be drawn to) where Love “resides.”

Correct intention in using these means is very important. As much as these can serve the journey toward dissolution, many have embraced and focused on these in ways that sustain and create attachments. Many, even in Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi’s day, have embraced these without relinquishing attachments; and, thus, made this their path in the name of Sufism although such is counter to the original purposes and spirit of Sufism. Even today, some Sufi groups are rooted in *learning, knowledge, pages and pamphlets*. Some have even glorified their use of such in (mind-based) positions and philosophies they hold to distinguish their approach from others -- distinguishments that often ignore the greater “goal” of dissolution. This has led to open and subtle *debates* in efforts to increase their numbers and influence. But Jalaal ud-Diin cautions sincere seekers against such: *Wherever the debates of humans may lead / that is not the lovers’ path*.

Another common barrier to arriving at a station of dissolution is our fixation with (attachments to) time. We should not limit time to just the passing of seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, etc.: these are

measurements of time we impose upon the phenomenon we call time, not time itself. Without going too much in depth, many traditional Sufis look at time as ‘the movement of being:’ particularly how the constant movement of the duality of creation contrasts against the changeless stillness of the Divine Essence.

Within this paradigm, we can experience this movement of being as the constant changing of duality. Many look to experience the bliss of Love (often pursued as seeking pleasure) within this endless series of temporary moments being colored by the continuous shifting within opposites. Thus, we the experience the great joy of Love and the great sadness of Love as we are moved between the extremes of Love’s manifestations within duality. So many renowned “love stories” illustrate this: *Layla and Majnuun*, *Romeo and Juliet*, etc. Although the points of experience within this range are vast, they are limited. They are only a partial expanse of the endlessness of Love; not the fullness of Love which Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi’s words point to.

*Love’s branches arch over pre-eternity:* the branches (growth, fruition) of Love extend into (instead of from) the beginning of pre-eternity. In Islam, pre-eternity refers to the unmanifested original state from which the beginning (manifestation) of creation emanates. So one can read this line as saying: Love has no beginning. And, *its roots, you see, delve in Forever:* roots, referring to the beginning point of the tree, immerse into the endless end of Forever. In Islam, the infinity of time has end in the Last Day. So one can read this line as saying: Love has no end. These two lines also twist the order of time within duality: linking the fruits of the beginning (*branches*) with the seed of the beginning (*pre-eternity*) and the beginning (*the roots*) with the end (*Forever*). And even more, having a *tree resting not on soil / not trunk /*

*not even Heaven's throne*: a tree that rests upon nothing. One can read this as pointing not to the manifestation of the tree, which must have something to rest upon within the changing of duality; but rather its beingness. This shifts one's attention to the changeless essence upon which the constant shifting of duality's manifestation moves. Herein lays an indication that we can experience time as this changeless essence.

*Reason* and *passion* are ways we relate to the manifestations of duality. Think about it: are you ever passionate or more tempered in reason about the essence of the phenomena you pursue or seek to avoid? Or is such *passion* and *reason* directed toward the phenomena's forms, even if the manifested forms are subtle? These ways of relation indicate the presence of attachments, even if they are subconscious or ones we are not aware of. Whereas *reason* and *passion* may serve beneficent purposes as we mature toward the stations of dissolution, when we approach such stations *reason* and *passion* become barriers: *We deposed reason / punished passion with the lash*. These are *degrading to such glory*: as much as these may serve a recognition that Love is, they impede realization of the fullness of Love.

This leads us to one of the greatest dangers of the "journey" toward dissolution: *So long as you long / you idolize longing*. The desire for Love leads not to Love, but only the unending desire for It. The more you want, the more you want; often becoming more and more consumed with the delusion of desire. And deepening into such delusion impedes realizing and honoring that which you want. Such is the typical cycle of desire. But for most of humans, if there is no desire for Love, It does not even register as anything significant in our

minds -- most of us live "life" through the mind. So the challenge is to walk a very delicate balance: to have a desire for Love which allows a place within our lives for Love to be; yet to temper (restrain) the desire because the desire is not Love and leads only to the desire for It, not Love Itself. Traditionally, this is done under the watchful guidance of a teacher because it is easy, within delusion, to confuse the desire for Love as Love.

When we sincerely and consistently allow a place for Love within our lives, eventually Its wonder will reveal Itself enough to invite us to an openness that allows Love more space to be -- an invitation we can answer or ignore. Like light shining upon a shadow, the presence of light is sufficient to dissolve the shadows so that where light and shadow meet, there is only light. Thus, we may come to see, in ways that go beyond concepts, that the way to realize Love is to *become the Beloved*: to become Love by allowing Its light to be more and more of life until the whole of life (not just "my" life) is light. Then, we will no longer be a being (which is composed of shadows). There will only be light; and when there is no being, *then no being longs*. Then, we realize in ways that go beyond words, that *only submersion remains*.

Whether you call it submersion, dissolution, annihilation, complete surrender, enlightenment, etc.: when we arrive at this station by allowing the whole of life to be enlightened by light, all is Love and only Love. It is there, in the fullness of Love, that Love resides. And we can reside therein by submersion into It. Very few people are ready in the early stages to just submerge into Love. So we can use means,

preferably under the guidance of a teacher, to cultivate such readiness;  
yet being very clear that Love resides not in these means...



**My illumination of the world... in our every breath - Part 1 of 2**  
*November 17, 2016*

My illumination of the world is from that Eternal Candle.  
And my triumph is from that supreme Beloved.  
How can I be with that Beloved and that Eternal Candle?  
Indeed, what can I do if this is my allotment?

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,  
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 257)

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We'll use this blog post and the next to explore two quatrains,  
beginning with the first one which leads nicely into the second.

One of the paradoxes of creation for the Sufi (and other mystics) is navigating the dynamics of the created world within our innate yearning to realize *that supreme Beloved* Itself: beyond merely Its glorious manifestations which fill the world to that indescribable Essence which permeates all. Yet the components of human creation are better suited to perceiving the manifestations of the Beloved and are incapable of perceiving that Essence. So how can one navigate the manifestations of the Beloved, and the captivating beauty which emanates from these, to arrive at (be drawn to) a realization of the Essence? The above quatrain speaks to this.

*My illumination of the world is from that Eternal Candle.* This is not a new proclamation to many spiritual seekers. Although the idea of this may be known, it is a more expansive awareness and living of this

which leads to a transformation that opens us to realization of the Essence. In seeking this expansive awareness, it is helpful to realize the dynamics of *my illumination*. In many respects, until we are drawn toward this expansive awareness, most of us live within the “my-ness” of this illumination and, in delusion, project it to be the world we engage.

Mystics of various spiritual traditions, including some schools of traditional Sufism, have boldly declared: there is no such thing as the world. Everything we perceive is but a reflection of the activity of our senses. To use eyesight as an example: when we see an object, we don't actually see that object. We are actually seeing light reflect off that object and make contact with the eye -- not the object itself. Immersed in our sight, we don't see how our eye -- specifically how it functions -- colors our perception of what we see, which we then deem as qualities of the objects we perceive. Then this perception is colored by the memories of sense-based activities we hold in our mind: whether past similar activities were pleasant or unpleasant, as well as names and ideas (often opinions) we associate with past activities that we project upon our present activities. To use the sun as an overreaching example: some people see the sun as white, others as orange, others as yellow, others as red, others as a mix of these colors. These different colors are more informed by our eyes and the cultural designations we hold (i.e., what color the sun is “supposed” to be) more than the actual color of the sun -- if the sun even has a color.

Most of us live within *my illumination* blind to the fact that we are living within *my illumination* -- literally a world created of the dynamics of our perceptions and thoughts. We project qualities of how phenomena are based on how we perceive and think of them, rarely

realizing such phenomena as they truly are. This is self-oriented; or dare I say: selfish. It so shapes how our mind operates that it permeates the whole of our lives -- how we live. And the more self-oriented / selfish we become the less likely we are to realize our self-oriented / selfish condition. Thus, we often live out this dynamic with little to no awareness of it. Even when many of us talk about this as an idea, we don't truly realize it and remain entrapped in living it. Such unawareness is at the core of our delusion, ignorance, and confusion; and is an undeniable factor in why we don't realize the Essence.

Although this dynamic is self-oriented / selfish, it is not self-created. *My illumination of the world is from that Eternal Candle*: from the Beloved Itself, the Light of all light. Our perception is but an aspect of Divine Awareness. It is All-Knowingness manifesting through the mind; the mind including the senses and the thinking part of the mind which formulates and retains associations from what we perceive. Our senses are but a light from that endless and only Source of Light. Light allows things to be seen: in fact, all that we see is but the movement of light. The other senses operate through other forms of energy: the movement of energy forming the basis of all types of perception and thinking. To better realize (beyond concepts) this dynamic, some Sufi orders incorporate "energy exercises" into their spiritual practice.

Moving beyond ideas, can we genuinely realize that it is not we (the self-oriented "I") who are seeing what we see? That instead "our" sight is but the movement of light in operation emanating from that Eternal Candle, not the self we identify with such movement? If we can truly realize this dynamic in play, we move from the bondage and

delusion of *my illumination of the world* to the world being an emanation of the Beloved. And when the world is just the world, not the world “I” create, we can move through it with complete freedom -- a freedom that matured Sufis surrender to loving service of the Beloved. Then we may come to realize why Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi says: *my triumph is from that supreme Beloved*. It is through restraint, if not dissolution, of this “I” that we come to realize this state of *triumph* from the Beloved. Although I used sight in this metaphor, the points apply to all of the senses and thinking / association activity of the mind.

All that is created is but a manifestation of the Beloved. These manifestations can be so captivating and we can feel so “alive” when we perceive and think about these through *my illumination of the world*. For most of us, when we are caught up in our attachments to “my perceptions and thoughts” and “my world” (the world “I” perceive), we ignore the *Eternal Candle* which allows such to be. Our attachments to the mental activity of perception and thinking are central to this self-oriented “I” we fabricate from such activity. In fact, most of us don’t relinquish our hold to “my perceptions and thoughts” and “my world” even when we know (as an idea) such relinquishment leads to the greater awareness of realizing the *Eternal Candle* we yearn for. Even Sufi masters like Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi acknowledge the challenge of this: *How can I be with that Beloved and that Eternal Candle?* -- the “I” being a mental fabrication we identify with which literally impedes us from realizing *that Eternal Candle*.

Even many sincere seekers pursue and feel the yearning for that *Eternal Candle* through *my illumination*. Although it veils realization of the *Eternal Candle*, the *Eternal Candle* creates and sustains *my*

*illumination*, so there is a purpose for its creation. How are we to move beyond these apparently opposing factors that seem to only keep us stuck in a situation we cannot get out of? *Indeed, what can I do if this is my allotment?* -- not an allotment we necessarily placed ourselves within, but find ourselves within. (And yes, many of us make the situation worse by immersing further into our self-oriented / selfish approach to life and actions.)

The ideas that 'All is the Beloved' and that 'the world I perceive is a mental fabrication' doesn't stop us from perceiving the world and its phenomena through *my illumination*. Even for most of us, our consideration of these dynamics happens within *my illumination*, not in surrender to the greater awareness of the *Eternal Candle* -- the supreme Light which expands beyond the smaller lights of perceptions and thinking. And so often seeking the *Eternal Candle* through *my illumination* leads to tension, conflict, and suffering -- internally and with others. So what to do? The question warrants contemplation and reflection if we are truly sincere, especially since a honest sitting with the question will reveal barriers we are holding to the realization of the *Eternal Candle*. Yet, the mercy of teachers such as Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi doesn't leave us without guidance. In the next post, we'll explore a quatrain that offers some counsel.



## My illumination of the world... in our every breath - Part 2 of 2

December 1, 2016

My illumination of the world is from that Eternal Candle.  
And my triumph is from that supreme Beloved.  
How can I be with that Beloved and that Eternal Candle?  
Indeed, what can I do if this is my allotment?

\* \* \*

We are those who have found our healing ointment from Love,  
And who have offered our breaths to Love in every moment.  
So that every breath of ours may go toward Love,  
Love finds Its own breath in our every breath.

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,  
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 257 and 452)

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We ended the last blog post stating that seeking the *Eternal Candle* through *my illumination* often leads to tension, conflict, and suffering. Yet many of us feel that yearning for the *Eternal Candle* through *my illumination* and seek It through such. The *Eternal Candle* creates and sustains *my illumination*, but It does not leave us entrapped to its dynamics. Freedom from it calls for experiencing *my illumination* without being so drawn into its captivation that we seek to live with it -- to use a metaphor: to touch but not grasp. And we should not fall for the deception that seeking to live *my illumination* to be free is a lesser form of bondage than living it for more blatant self-oriented /

selfish aims -- this includes those of us who seek to live *my illumination* for a spiritual life.

To this end of freedom, the footsteps of saints, masters, and prophets point toward *Love*. They too have experienced the suffering of seeking this yearning for the Beloved through *my illumination*. In fact, sometimes the intensity of their yearning is so intense they take what some consider as extreme actions: renouncing all fame and wealth to live in spiritual poverty; going into periods of extended seclusion; embarking upon arduous fasts and other spiritual austerities; or even taking repeated meditation retreats alone in caves like the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) Few people take on such “extreme” challenges to fulfill this yearning. Yet, by grace, the struggles of past seekers reveal an easier path to fulfillment: *We are those who have found our healing ointment from Love*.

Just as *Eternal Candle* is a descriptive metaphor for the Beloved, so too is *Love*. We are not talking about mental concepts of romance or self-oriented / selfish pleasure: in *Love*, there is only *Love* -- only the Beloved. This is why those *who have found our healing ointment from Love* also *have offered our breaths to Love in every moment*. This is not offering an occasional breath here and there, or when we feel inspired or despaired. This offering is such *that every breath of ours may go toward Love*. But let's examine what this is really saying.

For most people, the idea of “love” is more appealing than the reality of *Love*. The idea of “love” is centered in how “I” feel, rooted in *my illumination*. The selfishness of this can play out in many ways: sometimes in wanting to feel the pleasure of “love” myself; other times in how “I” can make others feel the pleasure of “love;” and other times

it can be a mix of these. Such an approach looks to sustain and utilize the “I:” literally “I” directing my breaths to serve “I.” Even if the “I” is being used to perform actions for others, such actions are really being done for “I” -- to validate the “I” in some way. Whereas this may sometimes lead to pleasure, it sustains the dynamics of tension, conflict, and suffering; and these will eventually undercut the pleasures of “love.” Such is the fate for all loving relationships that are “I” / self-centered.

And even more, the pleasures of “love” are temporary: even when attained, they decay -- and usually quickly. Thus, contributing to the dynamic of always seeking new pleasures to counteract such relationships becoming old, tired, and dead. And even more, the dynamics of *my illumination* constantly seek to fit all phenomena within the range of what “I” perceive and think -- and usually perceptions and thoughts that are pleasurable. The “I” becomes so consumed with this, it literally (often unconsciously) reduces and ignores components of phenomena to fit within the framework of *my illumination*. Thus, “I” can be with a person for many years and never truly realize who that person is. And even more so with the Beloved, who cannot be perceived or conceived of, only Its manifestations.

The approach of *those who have found our healing ointment from Love* is completely different: they offer *every breath* -- every single one -- to *Love*. In the ancient sense, a genuine offering is not partial or with calculation. It is the fulfillment of a duty for grace received and forthcoming. If I offer you a pie, it is yours to do whatever you wish: whether you eat it or throw it away should not matter to me. Once I give it, it is no longer mine and, therefore, no longer my concern. Such an approach to offering embodies surrender and dissolves the “I” and

*my illumination* instead of sustaining it. In the ancient way, any presence of “I” taints the offering: making it impure. And having any reaction indicates such a presence: whether I smile because it is received, or become sad if it's rejected. A genuine offering is only about the one the offering is made to, and even the oblation (what is offered) is a means to honor that one. It is not hyperbole that saints, masters, and prophets have repeatedly said we (the “I”) must become nothing when it comes to *Love*.

Let me be clear: we who seek to make an offering to the Beloved, we come empty-handed. There is nothing the Beloved needs nor is there anything we can create to give to the Beloved. In fact, everything we “create” is only a reconstituting and compiling of phenomena already created by the Beloved. If the Beloved doesn't give us something to make the offering with, there is nothing we can attain or create on our own to do so. In ancient times, having something to offer is essential to making the offering. And would it not be wise to use what the Beloved gives to us to offer as the oblation?

So that *Eternal Candle* emits the light of *my illumination* so we may bring this as a gift to the altar of sacrifice. We who make the offering should not seek to sustain it, especially since when we do so we usually forget the Beloved and become entrapped in the selfish, delusional captivation of *my illumination*. We should give the whole thing unconditionally to the Beloved: experiencing the perceptions and thoughts of *my illumination* without adding to it, as we place it upon the altar of sacrifice. The Beloved guides us as to how to use or not use what we offer to It. Scriptures offer guidance, teachers provide guidance, the example of those who live such sacrifice (the righteous) are also guidance. These literally provide guidance for every action

and non-action, *every breath of ours... in every moment*. If we continually abide by such without hypocrisy, heeding these forms of guidance will cultivate an “inner-hearing” to that direct guidance the Beloved grants us through the heart.

Abiding by divine guidance calls for an approach of restraint and quietude toward life, since excessive activity (including mental / thinking engagement) only leads to entrapment within the captivation of *my illumination*. We should also relinquish our attachment to past perceptions and thoughts, which we often use to guide us through our present circumstances. Instead, we can always look to sources of divine guidance to direct what we do and don't do -- even with the “small” things in life. We are called to completely entrust the existence of “my” life (and “my” world) to the Beloved -- again, *every breath of ours*.

It is for the Beloved to sustain *my illumination* so we may have an oblation to offer. As long as the Beloved sustains it, we offer it: with every single breath, to be used and guided by the Beloved. We shouldn't misinterpret this as a call to complete passivity, but instead a willingness to act or not as guided by the Beloved. Most of us are too selfish to live such surrender in the beginning. We might give three breaths to the Beloved, and then take the fourth for ourselves. And usually taking that one breath leads to us taking more breaths for ourselves, “I” sustaining *my illumination*. To address this selfishness, the ancients often sought spiritual teachers and lived the whole of their lives within a grounded spiritual practice. As they matured to the station of offering *every breath of ours to Love*, they discovered that *Love finds Its own breath in our every breath*.

When we completely surrender *my illumination* to *that Eternal Candle*, Its Light shines through the light of what *my illumination* perceives and thinks. Remember, *My illumination of the world is from that Eternal Candle*. And so too it is with the metaphor of breaths: when we completely surrender *our every breath* -- which comes from the Beloved -- to the Beloved, the Beloved *finds Its own breath in our every breath*. For the Beloved is *Love*.

The reality of this is beyond words and ideas, so there's no point in trying to explain it. Instead, in the next post, I'll offer a story from the Sufi lore which may give a fragrance of how this dynamic plays out. We'll break from protocol and explore a work that is not from Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi or Shams at-Tabriz. Instead we'll take a selection from *The Conference of the Birds* by Fariid ud-Diin Attar, a Sufi saint who preceded and was an influence on Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi.



## It is your not-being

December 15, 2016

As long as the servant does not become absolutely extinguished of self,  
The Unity does not become verified by him.

Unity is not the descent of Allaah into you; it is your not-being,  
For something false does not become true merely by idle boasting.

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,  
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 575)

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This blog post is a follow-up to the previous two. The last post concluded stating that when we completely surrender, “Love finds Its own breath in our every breath.” (*The Quatrains*, p. 452) And Love is the Beloved. The reality of this is beyond explanation, but Sufis (as well as mystics of other spiritual traditions) have a long history of using stories to give a fragrance of this reality.

As promised, we will share a story from *The Conference of the Birds* by Fariid ud-Diin Attar, also known as Attar of Nishapur. He is a Persian Sufi who preceded Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi, passing away when Jalaal ud-Diin was a youth. Attar remains a major influence among Sufis, especially among Sufi lineages that cross through the Persian region. Many regard him as one of the greatest Persian poets of all time.

*The Conference of the Birds* is a Sufi classic told in poetic form. It presents the journey of a gathering of birds to the Simurgh, the Great Bird. This quest serves as a metaphor for the soul’s “journey” to

Union -- or as the above quatrain states, *Unity* -- with the Beloved. Within the tale, Attar utilizes a stories-within-the-story approach to address the many doubts and excuses the birds hold to which are barriers to the realization of *Unity*, Oneness with Beloved.

And I stress realization of *Unity*: it is not a matter of attaining or cultivating *Unity*, or acquiring a state by which the Beloved descends upon us. It is a matter of verifying, I use the term 'realizing,' an *Unity* that already is. Traditional Sufis, along with other mystics, encourage seekers of such realization to extinguish the self, the ego; and for many, restraint of the self is a means toward such extinguishment. As long as the self exists, our identification with it ignores, deludes, and confuses our awareness of this *Unity* that already is.

But to the story. My adaptation is from a prose English translation by C. S. Nott, which is rendered from a French translation of the Persian text by Garcin de Tassy. At the point the selected story is from, one by one birds are confessing character flaws which they feel will impede them from making or completing the journey. The fourth bird admits its imperfect piety: how, at times, it acts virtuously, but at other times succumbs to evil impulses. For example, although it prays, it also goes to the tavern in pursuit of sensual desires. The hoopoe, who is the leader of the journey, states that none is expected to be guiltless but that obedience to spiritual teachings is a path to true happiness. The hoopoe then offers a few short stories to elaborate on this point, one of which is the following:

In ancient Egypt, there was a beggar who fell incessantly in love with the king, such that he seemed on the border of madness. When the king heard of

this smitten man, he had the beggar brought before him. The king said, "Since you are in love with me, you must choose between two options: to be beheaded and die; or to go into exile, barred from seeing me."

The beggar, completely distraught, chose exile. As he prepared to depart, the king had the beggar beheaded. A chamberlain, surprised by the king's action, said, "The beggar was innocent. Why did he have to die?"

The king replied, "Because he is not a true lover. Had he truly loved me with all his heart, he would have rather lost his head than leave that which he loved. Love is all or nothing." The king continued, "If the beggar would have chosen death over exile, I would have exchanged my royal life for the hardships of spiritual poverty to become his dervish -- to serve him in love. One who loves me, but loves one's own life more, does not truly love."

(adapted from C. S. Nott's translation of *The Conference of the Birds*, p. 56, Section 20, sub-section titled "The King and The Beggar.")

The telling of this story after the hoopoe advises obedience to spiritual teachings is not coincidental. *The Conference of the Birds* is clearly written for a Sufi audience, although others are not barred from reading it. One of the main tenets of traditional Sufism, across different lineages, is that the seeker must 'die to self' (the ego) to

realize the Beloved. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi phrases this tenet in the selected quatrain as the call to *become absolutely extinguished of self*. Despite this clear, explicit, and oft-repeated guidance, few go beyond the teachings and elements of spiritual practice intended to prepare for such annihilation to actually ‘die to self.’ Many seek the preservation of the self -- albeit a “spiritual” self -- which equates to exile from the king.

As long as the self (the “I”) exists -- our identification with the mind-body entity -- we separate our self from the Beloved and literally drive our self into exile from the Absolute. The “I” can only exist as (apparent) separation from the Absolute, just as a shadow can only exist as long as there is an object between it and the light. Remove the object, the shadow effortlessly dissolves into the light so that there is only light. Then we realize that even the shadow is light, despite its apparent “different” form which seems separate from light when an object is present. So too, remove our identification with the mind-body entity, and our imagined self dissolves to be Oneness with the Absolute Awareness that is the Beloved. And the self is predominantly sustained by attachments to physical and mental objects.

We are that beggar in the story. In comparison to the All-Powerful Creator and Owner of All, we have nothing we can give the Sovereign that It doesn’t already have. Nor is there anything we can do for the Absolute that It can’t do for Itself simply by saying, “*Kun! Fayakuun*” - - “Be! And it is.” (Qur’aan Surah 36, Verse 82) Yet, when we value the “life” of our self (ego) more than death for love, our separation will only be torment and suffering. Living the idea of “love,” we come to eventually lament our separation from the Beloved although we are the ones who choose and create such separation by refusing to die to

self. Oh, but when we die to self, this is when life and love truly begins...

Traditional Sufism is explicit in saying, as was stated in the story: "One who loves me, but loves one's own life more, does not truly love." When we truly love, our loving is all about that which we love, and only that. If this is not our approach, *The Unity does not become verified* in us. And the power of delusion is such that we can literally spend the whole of our lives never realizing this *Unity* that already is.

Traditional Sufism also cautions against masqueraded attachment to self. For example, some seekers think that if they purify the self enough -- even in suffering and struggling for our 'love' of the Beloved -- the Beloved will come to us. But Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi, along with others, refutes this: *Unity is not the descent of Allaah into you*. Or some think we can make this self worthy enough to earn audience with the Beloved -- still holding to the existence of this self. No: this is not what Jalaal ud-Diin and others teach! Instead they constantly repeat that for the realization of *Unity*, of Love, *it is your not-being* that is called for. The intent of purification and self-improvement is to remove the stuff we hold to in the mind that veils or resists a willingness to embrace *not-being*. When we have removed all impurities and abide in the peace and strength of such, we will realize an innate willingness to dissolve the self.

To be clear: this *not-being* is not a call for physical death or suicide. It is the death of our identifying with the self -- specifically the mind-body entity which becomes the basis of our ego-identification. This identification is more subtle and pervasive than flesh and bones, the air we breathe, and our mental perceptions and thoughts. Yet, in the

eyes of traditional Sufism, this self is completely fabricated and false; and so too anything that emanates from or is an exertion of the ego. This is why, in the lexicon of traditional Sufism, the statement “I love” is false: as long as it is the “I” that is loving that love cannot be real, even if it is imagined with the best of intentions. As Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states: *something false does not become true merely by idle boasting*. And, as one teacher ingrained in me: we need not be judgmental if we find ourselves immersed in “false love.” Instead, it is a precious opportunity to move from what is false to true...

Within the story, Attar has infused a beautiful encouragement to help us realize *Unity* and Love. Let us be sincere and devoted in our spiritual practice and service, not slacking or abandoning it, using it to restrain the ego, not sustain it. If this is our approach, like that beggar, we will eventually be brought before the Sovereign. And we will be presented with the same proposition: to have the self executed or choose its continued survival in exile. If we choose the former, obeying this precious tenet of traditional Sufism, the Beloved will leave the Throne of Thrones to be our loving servant, serving Us with the wonder of Its Omnipotence and Endless Love. And I stress the Beloved will serve Us, not “I” -- when the shadow of “I” dissolves into the Light of Us, it is Us serving Us even through apparent separate forms. The death of “I” can happen even if the mind and body live on: these become vessels serving the realization of *Unity* that already is. For the Beloved is already closer to us than our own jugular vein (Qur’aan Surah 50, Verse 16), already dwelling within. The question is: will we surrender our “I” to dissolution within the Beloved that we may realize this most beautiful *Unity*?



## What you longed for at first

December 29, 2016

“Whoever desires to sit next to Allaah, let them sit with lovers of Allaah.” These intellectual sciences are a game and a waste of life, compared to the spiritual experiences of the dervishes....

However, once you enter the world of spiritual poverty and practice it, Allaah bestows on you kingdoms and worlds you never imagined, and you feel quite ashamed of what you longed for at first. “Ah!” you cry. “With such reality in existence, how could I have sought after such foolishness?” But Allaah says, “If only you had risen above such desires, becoming detached from them and seeing them for what they were, all would have been well. Yet now, when they enter your thoughts and you avoid them for My sake, My grace is infinite, so of course I make them attainable to you.”

(adapted from *Fithi ma Fithi*,  
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 262)

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One of the main, yet understated, themes of traditional Sufism is the call to transcend the bondage of desires. Although this was explicitly repeated in ancient times, it didn't stop many who embraced Sufism from using this path as a means to pursue desires -- even if it such was done with a “spiritual” facade. Whereas the beauty of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's words and teachings can speak poignantly to those immersed in desires, his teachings take on a more profound meaning and transforming depth when we transcend desires. And ironically, what we ultimately seek (pursue), and often struggle for, through

pursuit of desires comes to us when we abide in the state of desirelessness.

In the words that precede the selected text, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi briefly mentions Husam ad-Diin Arzanjani. (It is not clear from the text whether this was Jalaal ud-Diin's beloved disciple Husam Chelebi, for whom the *Masnawi* was primarily written.) Jalaal ud-Diin describes Husam as "a great debater" who was immersed in the intellectual and scholarly approach before "entering the service and society of dervishes." (*Fihi* p. 261) Although it is not explicitly stated, one can infer that Husam treaded the intellectual path in quest of (desiring) knowledge of the Beloved. Yet when he started to commune with dervishes he abandoned debate, to which Jalaal ud-Diin shares: "*Whoever desires to sit next to Allaah, let them sit with lovers of Allaah.*"

The *sit next to Allaah* is a metaphor which includes seeking to know and understand the Absolute. In ancient times, to continually *sit* with a phenomenon (person, being, place, etc.) -- especially in close proximity -- was a means by which to get to (truly) "know" that phenomenon: beyond merely thoughts and observations, but to experience the presence and fullness of that. Thus, Sufis seek *to sit next to Allaah*, but the Beloved is beyond form. So such sitting is sought indirectly by sitting with those who abide in the fragrance of experiencing the Beloved. As I've mentioned before: if you want to smell like roses, go sit in a rose garden...

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi then makes a poignant distinction between the mind-based approach of intellectuals and scholars and the heart-based approach of Sufis (dervishes). He is explicit: *These intellectual sciences*

*are a game and a waste of life, compared to the spiritual experiences of the dervishes.* The Beloved cannot be perceived or conceived of with the mind. And since *intellectual sciences* are derived from what the mind can perceive and conceive, he dismisses them. Remember, Jalaal ud-Diin was an intellectual and scholar before his encounter with his master Shams at-Tabriz. He abandons the intellectual and scholarly paths after experiencing the reality of the Absolute through sitting with Shams.

To use a metaphor: we may become entranced by the most eloquent and beautiful description of what it is to be in love. The language may be piercing and precise, elucidating captivating imagery and sensations that color the mind with enlivening thoughts of what it is like to be in love. But when we fall in love, we realize its reality is more expansive than beautiful descriptions; more encompassing of our whole being than just a mind immersed in thoughts of love. When we truly fall in love, mental (intellectual) conceptions of it do not compare with the living experience of love. And this holds true for not only what is pleasurable within the experience of love, but also what is painful within it.

So the mental only encompasses an aspect of our whole being, of what we can experience. And the intellectual and scholarly paths emanate from and hold the mental realm as dominant: everything is primarily sought through and, if necessary, reduced to what the mind can perceive and conceive. This limitation is then further reduced by the fixations of desires: where we hold to more limited preferences, derived by our likes and dislikes, within this mind-based limitation.

The fixations of desires are more powerful than most realize: often once we hold to a desire, it literally defines the scope of how we live -- and sometimes in ways we are unconscious of. We literally seek to have the entire universe suit our desires: welcoming that which is harmony with them and rejecting that which is not. So often our disposition toward phenomena is based on how such fit within the framework of our desires, regardless if such is truly beneficial or harmful to us. Many of us would rather engage that which we like, even if such is unhealthy and harmful -- and even when we know how detrimental such is. As desires become the predominant ways of our lives, we find ourselves in bondage to them.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi doesn't completely dismiss desires, but he points out the dangers and limitations of such. He admits it is possible to reach the goal of one's desires but:

only one out of a hundred thousand reach their goal,  
and even they do not always find happiness and  
peace. For every desire has many branching paths to  
reach that goal. It is long and arduous, full of pitfalls  
and obstacles, and in the end it is possible those  
twisting paths will fall short of your desire. (*Fihi* p.  
261 - 262)

As an alternative, Jalaal ud-Diin encourages an easier, unending path that is immersed happiness and peace: *spiritual poverty*.

The modern age tends to portray *spiritual poverty* as abstention from or drastic reduction of material possessions. But to not have something yet crave for it in the mind is still a form of attachment:

such will create and sustain the same dynamics of struggle, hardship, and conflict one faces when having possessions one is attached to. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi -- along with other mystics -- identifies the root of *spiritual poverty* as being without desires: transcending the mental fixation which facilitates attachment to phenomena, whether we physically possess such or not.

Ironically, living without desires is a way to attain what we seek through desires. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states:

This way of desirelessness is the way to attain your desires. Whatever you have longed for will come to you on this path... When you have chosen the way of spiritual poverty, these things come to you. No one has ever traveled this road and had cause to complain... (*Fihi* p. 261)

Some context may be helpful since, in the modern age, our orientation toward desires differs from the ancient days. Today, we tend to emphasize the form of desires, and look to such to determine how our desires are fulfilled. So if I think a romantic relationship will make me happy, my modern thinking will be preoccupied with finding 'that special person,' and how I will be in a specific type of relationship with her (i.e. marriage), and how that relationship should play out: she does everything I want so I can be happy. Nice fairy tale! In the ancient days there was less preoccupation with the form: in the ancient mindset, my desire for happiness would be preoccupied with the "goal" of being happy. Whether such came from having a puppy or a wife was less important than this "goal;" and there would be more of an openness to however happiness may come without me putting

conditions on (limiting) how such must happen in my life. But even within this openness, when we're moved by desires, we are constantly seeking their goals, pursuing (chasing) something to make us happy -- even if our seeking is restrained.

When we have *risen above such desires, becoming detached from them and seeing them for what they were*, and remember the Beloved's promise to *make them attainable to you*, our emphasis rests not on the form of the desire. The happiness I desire may not come via the limited concept of my ideal wife. Although the ancient orientation of desires is more open, it is still limiting; the puppy, wife, or other (created) phenomena that I seek as a means to being happy is still limited to what the mind can perceive and conceive. When we become *detached*, happiness may come through phenomena or through no phenomena at all. There are no limitations to how the Beloved makes its blessings *attainable to you*. And I stress, in detachment from all desires we no longer need seek anything; instead, the Beloved bestows and delivers to us that which fulfills the "goal" of what we sought. This is not a call to be passively inactive: what the Beloved brings to us (or brings us to) may call for action to serve, engage, and honor what the Beloved bestows. But it does mean a cessation of our self-based pursuit of desires.

When we abide in *spiritual poverty*, desirelessness: *Allaah bestows on you kingdoms and worlds you never imagined, and you feel quite ashamed of what you longed for at first*. Not only a shame at how I limited happiness to the means of a wife or puppy, but a shame that even my conception of what I thought happiness could be doesn't compare to the more expansive *reality* of what happiness is. "*Ah!*" you cry. "*With such reality in existence, how could I have sought after such*

*foolishness?”* But *such reality* is rarely realized until when we drop all desires.

*Such reality* expands beyond the mind, into the endless depths of the heart, which is why Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi references *the spiritual experiences of the dervishes*. But once we (mentally) know the limitations of desires, it is something we must practice: *once you enter the world of spiritual poverty and practice it*. Desirelessness means no desires, and we must be diligent in working toward such: *when they [desires] enter your thoughts and you avoid them for My sake*. Among many Sufi lineages, seekers establish a spiritual practice as a means to first reduce the scope of desires: eliminating worldly, carnal desires for just pious ones. Then one aims to reduce even the number of pious desires we hold: for example, to have only the desire *to sit next to Allaah*. But even this desire must be relinquished to be fully immersed in the wonder of *spiritual poverty*: when we want nothing, every single thing that has a place in our lives will come to us or we will be brought to it by the hand of the Beloved. Although such may seem impossible, it is not -- as Jalaal ud-Diin testifies. When we continually restrain and reduce our desires, the grace of the Beloved will bring us to desirelessness -- *My grace is infinite*.



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Ma'at