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DĀRŪ 'L-MASNAVĪ OF THE MELEVİ ORDER

"Rumi and Self-Discovery" in Islamic Magazine

Revised and shorter version of the lecture originally presented to the Sufism Symposium in 1999, published as an article in "Islamic Magazine," Issue 15, Summer, 2005, pp. 67-75 in a magazine section entitled "Rumi and The Path of Love."

by Ibrahim Gamard

Dr. Ibrahim Gamard is a licensed psychologist by profession, has been a student of sufism for over thirty years, converted to Islam in 1984, went on Hajj in 1999, and has been a member of the Mawlawiy (Mevlevi) tradition of Islamic sufism (the tradition which originated with Jalaluddin Rumi himself), since 1976. He has studied classical/medieval Persian for many years and is the author of "Rumi and Islam: Selections from His Stories, Poems, and Discourses" (Skylight Paths Publishing, 2004). This is a book of translations from Persian of some of Rumi's beautiful stories about the virtues of the Prophet, his references to sayings (Ahadith) of the Prophet, and his praises of the greatness of the Prophet (upon whom be peace).

(translations and transliterations from Persian by Ibrahim Gamard)

In order to discover yourself, you have to submit to the Creator of yourself, my Lord and your Lord, the Lord of all the worlds, glorious and exalted is He! --beyond anything that we can conceive!

The Holy Qur'an tells us about how special the creation of humanity was: how God breathed into Adam (meaning mankind) of his spirit (1:29); how God taught Adam all the names, which even the angels did not know (2:31-32); how God drew out from the loins of Adam all the souls of future human beings and asked them, "Am I not your Lord?" And they replied, "Yes, of course! We so testify!" (7:172)

However, since the fall of mankind, we have forgotten all this and we resist submitting our small will to the Almighty Will of our Lord. And so He sent many prophets, known and unknown, to remind us that submission [islām] to the One God leads to peace and safety (sālām). It is the goal of sufism [sawwūf] to return to this primordial homeland of harmonious surrender with our Lord--the only one worthy of worship and the only true Beloved of mankind, the Infinitely Loving One.

The model of submission to the Divine Will for the sufis is the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, who said, "Myself [meaning, 'my ego' (nafs)] has become a muslim" [meaning one who has submitted to God, Most High]. Even though he attained to higher and higher spiritual stations, he never stopped praying. His wife 'aysha reported that she asked him why he continued to do so many extra prayers, standing through much of the night time hours until his feet became swollen, when he was the Prophet of God. He replied: "How can I not be grateful to my Lord?" And the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of God be upon him) has given us so many examples of inspired surrender to the Will of God in a wide variety of situations in the collections of sayings known as the Traditions (Aḥādīth).

In regard to self-discovery and Jalaluddin Muhammad al-Rumi, I looked up some of the terms Rumi uses for self-awareness in a Persian concordance of all the words in Rumi's "Mathnawi." He uses the term "khod-parsast" (self-worshipper) three times to describe someone who is dominated by the base self, or ego [nafs]. He describes the nafs in this way: "The mother of (all) idols is the idol of your (base) self, because that (outward) idol is (only) a snake and this idol is a dragon." (I: 772). A related term is "khod-bint," literally "self-seeking," which is an idiom in Persian, meaning self-conceited, proud, arrogant. This term occurs six times in this negative sense.

Rumi speaks about "khod-shenāhī" (self-knowing) in one instance in the Mathnawi, where he quotes so often quoted by the sufis (that they have attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him): "He who knows himself knows his Lord" [man 'arafa nafsa-hu fa-qad arafa rabba-hu].

However, contrary to what one might expect, Rumi doesn't interpret this in a mystical sense, as in his sublime passages about the "union" of the lover and the beloved, or in a way similar to mysticism in other religions (such as meaning, "He who truly knows himself, knows his Lord as his true Self"; or as meaning, "He who knows the light within his eye becomes the eye of God"). Instead, Rumi interprets this saying in a very religious and Islamic sense, as meaning that the human self is as nothing before the Divine Majesty of God.

He tells the story about Ayaz, the favorite slave of Mahmud, the King of Ghazna. In the story, the King symbolizes God and Ayaz symbolizes the humble saint whose spiritual purity and compassionate wisdom are envied by those of lesser capacity. Ayaz's fellow servants disgraced themselves because they destroyed his locked room, convinced that he had hoarded hidden treasure there. All they found was his original rustic shoes and sheepskin jacket, that he kept there to remind himself of his humble origins as a shepherd before being raised to prominence by the King. (In earlier centuries, kings often elevated their favorite slaves to positions of great power and wealth.) The King said, "Ayaz, pass judgment on the wrongdoers. . . (your knowledge) is a bottomless ocean [and] not (human) knowledge and [your] patient forbearance) is a mountain and a hundred mountains; it is not (human) forbearance." Ayaz replied, "I know that this is Your gift, since otherwise I am (nothing but) these poor shoes and sheepskin jacket."

Rumi then comments: "The Prophet explained this (by saying): 'Whoever has known himself, has known God.' [I]bahr-é an paygāmbar in-rā shāh sākhī har ke khod be-shāhīkāt, yazdān-rā shenāhī--Mathnawi V: 2114). Rumi further comments further on the meaning of the story: "The (foul-smelling) semen (which conceived you) is your rustic shoes and your blood is the sheepskin jacket (this is a reference to the reference in the Qur'an to the human origin of the human being in semen and blood (96:2); anything else, O sir, is His gift. He has given it for this sake: so that you may seek another (gift). Don't say that there is nothing from His besides (only) this amount." (V: 2115-16)

Rumi is saying that the servant of God knows that he is only a container for God's gifts, and not the possessor or source of these gifts. A commentator on this passage by the British Rumi scholar R. A. Nicholson quotes a 17th century Turkish Mevlevi commentator on the Mathnawi (named Anvarigul) as saying that Rumi interprets the saying, "He who knows himself, knows his Lord" as meaning, "He who knows himself to be helpless and contemptible knows his Lord to be Mighty and Glorious."

Now this kind of religious terminology--of feeling helpless and lowly before God--brings up resistance for some people who are attracted to Westernized versions of sufism that view the Divine as an impersonal and essential Beingness within humans. Perhaps due to negative experiences with religion when young, such people are uncomfortable with viewing the Divine as personal and external, since this involves a personal relationship with God that includes issues such as sin, repentance, submission to a Higher Will, and salvation by Divine Mercy and Grace and punishment by Divine Justice.

An example of this is a friend who had been learning this kind of sufism for about a year, but felt disturbed by some traditional Islamic sufī teachings, such as the practice of repeating the Arabic prayer, "I seek the forgiveness of God!" [astaghfirullah]. He had been physically abused during childhood and was taught that God's anger and punishment toward him would be terrible. He was somewhat comforted when I asserted that God's Justice is truly just, and that the Qur'an states that His recompense for a wrong deed is truly equivalent to it and no more, but that His recompense for a virtuous deed is many-fold (6:160). But my friend still found it extremely difficult to trust God as a personal Being separate from him, and preferred the idea that he could meditate and experience a state of pure Consciousness as an undifferentiated cosmic Light. I responded that, as a mystic, I believe that God is both within and nearer to us than our very selves, as well as a Divine Other to whom we must submit harmoniously; that since there is only One Being and One Will, "my identity" is not absolutely separate from the Divine Identity; that whatever happens in this world is not absolutely separate from "my will"; that since God is not absolutely separate from our most essential selves, God is worthy of trust and love. My friend continued to struggle with this important question of trust.

In my own case, I was fortunate to be one of the first Americans to be trained in the "Whirling Prayer" of the Mevlevi dervish tradition, beginning in 1975 in Los Angeles. The next year, Shaykh Sulayman Dede Efendi, the Mevlevi Shaykh of Konya, Turkey (where Jalaluddin Rumi is buried) came to America for the first time and led us in the famous "Whirling Prayer Ceremony." The following year, in 1977, my wife and I traveled to Konya for two weeks, went daily to Rumi's tomb (a place filled with the "perfume" of God's Love), and visited Sulayman Dede Efendi in his home. Dede was a saintly and very pious Muslim, and his American disciples whom we met there were all converts to Islam. They very graciously invited us to stay among them in Konya, but I declined. I felt disappointed that Dede seemed primarily to want them to learn to become Muslims, go to mosques, and learn to read the Qur'an in Arabic. I wanted to learn about Rumi's most mystical teachings and practices instead, and I was not attracted to becoming a Muslim. At the time, I believed that sufism was a universal and esoteric form of mysticism that transcended Islam, which I looked down upon as merely an exoteric shell. We travelled on to Iran, Afghanistan and India, and all the sufi's I met were devout Muslims.

Some years later, however, my attitude toward Islam had changed completely. I became convinced that sufism was Islamic mysticism, that ninety-nine percent of all sufis who had ever lived were devout Muslims, and that if I wanted to go deeper on the path of the sufis (dervishes, fāqirs), I needed to practice Islam, as had so many generations of dervishes in the past. I converted to Islam in 1984, joined an Islamic sufī order, and decided to stop going to non-Islamic sufī gatherings.

By then, I had been teaching myself Persian for several years in order to read Rumi in the original language. I was convinced that Rumi was the greatest religious mystic who ever lived, and one of the greatest Muslim saints. In 1985 I met Professor Ravan Farhadi, an Afghan scholar of classical Persian sufi texts, who suggested that we translate all of Rumi's quatrains [rubā'iyāt]. This is now a large unpublished manuscript. I have been able to study and even translate and version some of Rumi's quatrains published in English to make comparisons with the Persian Poem. I have also compared many translations and versions of Rumi's odes [ghazālāyāt]. As a result, I have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the popular translations and versions made of Rumi's poetry, as well as their anti-Islamic biases.

In conformity with the popular elements of non-Islamic sufism in the West, popular versions of Rumi's poetry have been created which avoid or minimize his religious teachings. Rumi has been wrongly portrayed in a way which is appealing to Americans: as a maverick, an individualist, unafraid to be a "free spirit," a wild mystic who is crazed with passion, an inspired poet who is spontaneous and sensual, and a universal mystic who ignores the Muslim authorities and their "uptight" religious laws.

The idea that Jalaluddin Rumi cared little for religion has been strengthened by translations and versions of poems attributed to Rumi which were actually not composed by him and which express radical out-of-date ideas which are not characteristic of him. These following verses are not in the earliest manuscripts of his poetry and therefore are not from genuine poems of Rumi: "What is to be done, O Moslems? for I do not recognise myself. I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gibr; nor Moslem. I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land or the sea. . . ."

--translated from Persian by R. A. Nicholson ("Selected Poems from the Divani Shamsi Tabriz," 1998, p. 125)

"Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, or Zen. Not any religion or cultural system--" an interpretive version by Coleman Barks (who does not know Persian), based on Nicholson's translation above "If you desire your own divinity, come out of yourself" --a translation from Persian by Shahram Shiva ("Rending the Veil," 1995, p. 10)

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"Come again, please, come again, whoever you are! Religious, infidel, heretic or pagan"

--translated from a Turkish translation by Nevit Ergin ("Crazy As We Are," 1992, p. 1; also rendered by Coleman Barks, "The Illuminated Rumi," p. 3) --this is from a quatrain found among the quatrains of Bâbâ Afzaluddîn Kashâñî (died 1274-- Rumi died 1273) and is related to a similar quatrain attributed to Abu Sa'id ibn Abi 'l-Khayr (died 1048).

Then there are poems attributed to Rumi that do occur in the earliest manuscripts of the quatrains, some of which I have found to be poems composed before his lifetime. Some lines which are uncharacteristic of Rumi are:

"I want to be free from good and bad"

--translated by Nevit Ergin ("Crazy As We Are," 1992, p. 18)

--this quatrain is found in the Divan of Fariduddin 'Attâr, died 1221

Some anti-Islamic writers have even claimed or suggested that Rumi really wasn't a Muslim, because they falsely believed that on the line, "I am not a Christian, a Jew, Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, etc." he was referring to Islam. But as I said, this poem is not in the earliest manuscripts and so is not a genuine Rumi poem. Nicholson first published a translation of this line (in *taṣrîf* *taṣrîf* *ra-yâhî* *ra-yâhî* *ra-nâhî* *ra-nâhî* in 1898), but he admitted that, "The original text does not occur in any of the editions or MSS. used by me" (p. 281).

In his book, "Rumi and the Sufi Tradition: Essays On the Mowlavi Order And Mysticism," John Moyne, who provided the literal translations for Coleman Barks' immensely popular versions of Rumi, stated that "Rumi was a devout Muslim" who "frequently expressed his love for the Qur'an and the Prophets" (p. 160).

He also said, "It is generally understood that Sufism, tasawwuf, grew within the Islamic milieu, and the terms Islamic mysticism and mystics have often been used as synonyms of Sufism and Sufis" (p. 31). However, then Moyne then expressed agreement with earlier generations of Western orientalists by saying, "However, there are compelling arguments that the origins of the theosophy and doctrine of Sufism go back to the pre-Islamic era" (p. 31). He also referred to "the alien origins of Sufism" (p. 53).

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