

THE PATH OF REMEMBRANCE AND RETURN: THE CIRCLE OF SUFI MASTERS

We only propose to find the truth and turn it loose in the world.

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PART 1: On Listening and Discerning

Professor Amir Sabzevary opens **An Anthology of Sufi Sayings** with a vital cautionary note to the reader. He emphasizes the unique character of Sufi teaching and the singularly unique use and form of the sayings within the Sufi tradition. Multiple meanings and uses are embedded in each saying or story. Each saying exemplifies its content in the way it is spoken and in the context of its appearance. And as Professor Sabzevary intimates, the reader will understand the saying only to the extent they can exemplify it in the act of comprehending it. It is well for the reader who approaches this collection with reverence to keep this self-exemplificatory quality in mind, for there is none other. The sayings can be literal, non-literal, both literal and not literal, and neither literal, nor not literal, and much more. Truth is a happening, an act, not a property of propositions.

The introductory remarks I humbly submit partake of this recursive attribute. In the case of the Sufi Sayings, a proper and intelligible introduction must try to reveal to the reader “echoes” of the powerful harmonics playing through the long history of Sufi Masters and their distinctive forms of communication. So, I begin this prologue with fables, sayings, and intimations of something beyond. I remind the reader: To judge what lies beyond reason by means of reason, does not appear to be reasonable.

It is also good to remember with utmost attention that humanity is at a crossroads. Our survival depends upon our becoming truly conscious. We have reached a turning point in our evolution as conscious human beings on this planet. Our technologies have allowed us to create civilizations unlike any known in recorded history. But civilization has overreached itself. Life on this planet is at risk, threatened by war, environmental disruption, and social and

economic chaos. Technologies of Outwardness—the tools we employ to comprehend and tame nature are not balanced by technologies of Inwardness—the means the great Masters have devised through the millenia to understand, control, and enhance ourselves as conscious and self-conscious human beings. The outer forces by which we command nature are not rooted in the inner capacities we possess to define and express ourselves as free, self-determining, balanced human beings.

The extraordinary language encountered in **An Anthology of Sufi Sayings**, which Professor Sabzevary has so ably rendered into English, is another, and, constant reminder that, as Philosopher Jacob Needleman phrases it in **The Heart of Philosophy**:

Our language is originally built around the realities of self-attention. That is, human language is meant to be an instrument of a conscious being, a being who is fully and precisely aware of all that takes place within their own psyche. Such self-attention has disappeared from our lives, but the corresponding instrument of language remains. We have no real self-attention, yet the shells of human language remain.

A Persian Fable

There is an old fable which tells that Truth and Falsehood went for
A swim together, leaving their clothes on shore. Falsehood
Coming out of the water first, puts on Truth's clothes.
Truth, being what it is, absolutely refused to wear
Falsehood's clothes, thus remained naked.
Ever since then, Falsehood appearing
As Truth, has been accepted as
Truth, while Truth still
Awaits to be seen.

The reader will find glimpses of Naked Truth in the **Anthology** they are about to peruse. But to see even the faintest hint of the

Truth, incisive and penetrating discernment becomes necessary. If Falsehood invites you for a swim, tell me him you have other plans.

British Psychiatrist R. D. Laing once defined "Repression" very simply as "Forgetting something and then forgetting that you forgot." We are all to be found in this state. Remembering that you forgot appears a formidable task, but for those who are disposed to awaken from their dogmatic slumber the light of dawn will bring renewal and return.

'Mulla Nasrudin went to see a Psychiatrist. He said: 'My trouble is that I can't remember anything.' 'When did this start?' asked the doctor. 'When did what start?' said Nasrudin.

'How are you getting on with the memory training course you got by correspondence, Mulla?' 'I'm improving. Now I can sometimes remember that I have forgotten something.'

Abraham Lincoln reminds us most forcefully about the pitfalls of existence as a human being: "Everyone is born an original, but most die copies." In reproducing the sayings of wise Sufi teachers in most elegant and accurate translations, Professor Sabzevary does us a very great service. His poetic revisionings are pathways toward the recovery of our original self.

From within the **Anthology**, Habib Ajami emerges to help light the Way:

It is reported that he wept whenever he heard the recitation of the **Quran**. They asked: 'Why do you cry? Since you do not know Arabic, you cannot possibly know the meaning of what is being read.' 'My tongue,' he replied, 'may not be Arabic, but my heart is'

Try reading each of the Sayings out loud in your mind, but **breathe** as you read, do not speak. You must smuggle yourself past your own intellectual guardians in order to appreciate the insights of the Masters. Speech traps us in the verbal creations of the intellect. Conscious breathing, giving birth to conscious speech, can transport

us across the borders of the mind. Joh or Nasrudin, teaches us the art of smuggling:

Time and again Nasrudin passed from Persia to Greece on donkey-back. Each time he had two panniers of straw, and trudged back without them. Every time the guard searched him for contraband. They never found any. 'What are you carrying, Nasrudin?' 'I am a smuggler,' he replied. Years later, more and more prosperous in appearance, Nasrudin moved to Egypt. One of the customs men met him there. 'Tell me, Mulla, now that you are out of the jurisdiction of Greece and Persia, living here in such luxury—what was it that you were smuggling when we could never catch you.' 'Donkeys,' said Nasrudin.

Two European writers came to a startling realization and in recognizing it we find sound advice for those who would begin to rise from their sleep. Franz Kafka says:

You need not do anything. Remain sitting at your table and listen. You don't even have to listen: just wait! You don't even have to wait: just learn to become quiet and still and solitary and the world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked. It has no choice. It will roll in ecstasy at your feet.

Blaise Pascal, the French thinker who is famous for saying "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know," also said: "All of humanity's misery comes from the inability to sit quietly, close the eyes, and do nothing."

Professor Sabzevary includes the startling and mind-piercing sayings of the great female Saint, Rabe'a Adwiya. She is always full of surprises:

In his sermons, the Sufi, Saleh Morry, constantly uttered, 'whomever knocks, the door shall open.' Hearing this Rabe'a went to him and said, 'How long will you continue saying 'The door shall open?' 'Has the door ever been closed that it must now open?'

So many of us have beaten our heads and hands on the door, and so created our own obstacles. It was once said that academic Philosophy is nothing more than a black cat in a dark room, only there is no cat there. Our incessant search for existence in the non-existent turns us into wandering stray cats. We spend our lives in the service of teachers who do not teach. We never ask of some who seem to lead: which way is the power flowing? A wise business leadership consultant says: "He who thinketh he leadeth and hath no one following is only taking a walk." (Terry Fitzwater, "The Essentials of Leadership," **Comstock's Business**, October, 2001).

The great Fozail Ayoaz finds his way into the **Anthology** in exquisite translation: "The world is like an asylum and the people therein suffer from insanity." Only the one who appears to all as insane will lead us out into the light of wholeness and sound mind. "Folly is not solely the province of fools," a philosophy once reported. The simple-minded are often those for whom barriers do not exist. "Simple things appear otherwise in the absence of knowledge" is the most portentous line in an ancient Sufi story.

Cultivating simplicity is invariably healthy and vivifying. What could be simpler than Yahya ibn Mo'oz's remark: "How strange that people desire the world, a place where the destiny of all things is death." Yahya, like all the masters in this book, teaches by making piercing observations and creating contrasts. There is no learning without contrasts. Where is our life when no background is contrasting the foreground, no foreground the back? Yahya exemplifies this point when he was asked: "Who is a Sufi?" "He who is not," he replied.

There is a telling Proverb which speaks to us:

He who knows not, and knows not that he knows not
Is a fool—shun him.

He who knows not, and knows that he knows not

Is a child—teach him.
He who knows, and knows not that he knows,
Is asleep—wake him.
He who knows, and knows that he knows,
Is a wise man—follow him.

The great scientist, theologian, mystic, and Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin came to recognize the dire straits in which we humans find ourselves. His warnings resonate with the auguries voiced by the great Sufis from the beginning of time: “The day is not far distant when humanity will realize that biologically it is faced with a choice between suicide and adoration.”

Finally, one of the greatest Masters, Abul Ghasem Nasr Abodee, admonishes us with a compelling reminder: “You shall die in the same way that you have lived.” There is hope here, but also a grim remembrance of paths we have not, but should have, taken.

PART 2: Amir Sabzevary, Holding a Mirror Up to Myself

“If I survive this life without dying, I’ll be surprised.”

Nasrudin went into a bank with a check to cash. ‘Can you identify yourself?’ asked the clerk. Nasrudin took out a mirror and peered into it. ‘Yes, that’s me all right,’ he said.

Eleven years ago a young man came to sit quietly in my classrooms. Quiet, yes. But with a compelling presence I couldn’t ignore. As I lectured my eyes kept turning toward him, searching for the image of his noble presence. When he walked out the door, intoxicating fragrances of Attar of Rose trailed behind him. The fire of love began burning in me—not conditional love bound to the person, but the love of “hearts bearing witness to one another,” as Mevlana Jelalu’d-din Rumi oftentimes says in his rapturous prose and poetry. This was Amir Sabzevary, 27 years old, so far from his Tehranian home, yet so much at home wherever he was. Paradoxically, he seemed to exude homeless joy, for wherever he was, he was. So young, yet possessed of the presence of ancients. On the 4x6 biographical card he completed for the class, he wrote: “My goal is to

die before I'm dead." And then, "As Krishna said, 'it is impossible to reach the Truth without a teacher, but those who reach the Truth without a guide are very rare. Therefore, I'll be looking forward to learning from you.'"

So, I was teacher, he student. But really! Our relationship reminded me of some lines Roger Shattuck wrote in his introduction to Rene Daumal's **Mount Analogue**:

To know means to be learning or to be teaching; there is no middle way. The human mind enjoys no state of passive grace. Yet beyond a certain point teaching becomes a subtle and deceptive undertaking, scarcely to be distinguished from learning"

Over the years our relationship flowered. I helped guide him through the halls of academe. He repaid in kind, helping me navigate the ocean of Islamic Mysticism. I was beside myself with joy. The "I" beside the "myself" began to know it did not know and could not know by "myself." Life before was slumber party—now waking dreams filled my vision. The realization dawned on me that "any philosophy," as Mulla Sadia declares, "which is not based upon the mystical vision of reality, is but a vain intellectual pastime." A contemporary thinker, I believe it was John Gardner, reinforced this in saying: "Woe betide the society that builds up philosophers and not plumbers. Neither the philosophers' theories, nor the plumbers' pipes will hold water."

An Anthology of Sufi Sayings is the culmination of years of scholarly research, cultivated linguistic sensitivity, and practice. Everywhere you travel in the world of Sufi literature you encounter an obstacle that is also the door. That paradox isn't easily resolved. Your reason and your intellect will hammer away at the mysterious and seemingly unintelligible sayings within this small book. The door **won't** give. "Knock and it shall open" is a mantra many repeat. But why won't it open? The quotation above from the work of Rabe'a Adwiya bespeaks the way to deal with doors. What you believe to be true is only as true as you believe it to be true. "Neither believe, nor

not believe, and, believe me, you'll begin to believe!" a mad philosopher once said.

Reason and intellect look outward, the Sufi counsels inwardness where there is neither inward nor outward direction in space and time. St Francis of Assisi says: "What you are looking for is what is looking."

An ancient Hindu story reinforces this admonition:

It seems there were ten merchants on their way in order to conduct transactions in another city. They had come to the banks of a broad river. The rains had caused it to rise so much that it swept away the bridge. Nevertheless, their business was urgent. And so the merchants decided to swim across the river. When they reached the other bank, one of them began to count the group. He wanted to make sure that no one had drowned during the crossing. To his horror, however, he always ended up with nine instead of ten, no matter how often he repeated the count. The others too began to count. But no one got a higher figure than nine. A hermit (probably Joh or Nasruddin), coming along, delivered them from distress and doubt. He laughed merrily, counted the merchants and found that all ten were there. Only then did they notice that each of them, when making his count, had forgotten to include himself.

The lesson for all of us: Don't forget to count yourself!! But remember, recalling the lines from R. D. Laing above, first you must remember that you forgot. Only then can you try to remember to count yourself. The self-reflexive remembrance only begins the work. The journey takes a lifetime. In any case, a simple, but painfully difficult, turning around in the seat of your awareness can resolve this and so many other paradoxes.

Professor Amir Sabzevary practices what he preaches and preaches what he practices. It is rare to observe such congruence in anyone. That congruence brings authenticity, integrity, and uncompromising standards to his work. In his introductory note to the

reader, he invites you in but admonishes you to lay aside preconceptions about communication, for the path the **Sayings** chart cannot be trod in the straightline of literal, linear form. The seeker must do, not say. Talking **about** what the philosophers call “knowledge by acquaintance” leads you nowhere. Like the man who was afraid of his shadow and his footprints and so ran to flee both, running so hard he collapsed and died, never knowing that stopping to rest under a leafy tree would end his fear. The Sufi walks the talk, what the more mystically inclined philosophers call “knowledge through Identity.” Davood Ta’l asked Iman Jahan abu Hanifeh: “What must I do now?” “Act upon what you know, otherwise your knowledge will simply be like a lifeless corpse.” Mevlana Jalalu’d-din Rumi points us to a portal:

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don’t go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don’t go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
Where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don’t go back to sleep.

Gazel (quatrain #91)

And he calls you from your slumber:

An eye is meant to see things.
The soul is here for its own joy.
A head has its one use: For loving a true love.
Legs: To run after.
Love is for vanishing into the sky. The mind,
For learning what men have done and tried to do.
Mysteries are not be solved. The eye goes blind
When it only wants to see why.

Gazel (Ode) #617

Professor Amir Sabzevary brings through to us in his magnificent translations the heart of the Sufi Path. Each Master and

each saying is a reed in the reedbed, to use Mevlana Rumi's favorite metaphor in the **Masnavi**:

The Reed is the companion of those who have tasted Separation; For its lamentations unveil our own laments (veils).

Such is the way of the Reed: its laments are poison to those who do not understand it, but an antidote to those who do. The Reed is a true companion for it too yearns for union.

This introduction reaches closure by noting the pervasive and palpable presence of LOVE in the sayings of the great Sufi Masters. Sufis are the true lovers. TRUTH and WISDOM are the objects of their devotion. They know that LOVE is the pathway of unconditional devotion to that which transcends the particularity of the moment. Their lives reveal that the impetus and momentum of LOVE carry us toward the invariant best in the world within and without. Their work shows us that LOVE uncompromisely unifies; that It does not allow us to be less than we might be.

Mevlana Jalalu'ddin Rumi breathes the life of the spirit and love into us when he joyfully says:

You are the unconditioned that is trapped in conditions
Like the Sun in eclipse . . . I died as a mineral to become
A plant, I died as a plant to become an animal. I died as
An animal to become a man. I will die as a man and soar
With the angels. But when I die as angel what I shall
become you cannot imagine. . . . Why then should I fear
to die?

Our wise-guy friend, Mulla Nasrudin, as usual, must have the last word:

'May the will of Allah be done,' a pious man was saying about something or other. 'It always is, in any case,' said Mulla Nasrudin. 'How can you

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prove that, Mulla?' 'Quite simply. If it wasn't always being done, then surely at some time or another **my** will would be done, wouldn't?'

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