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The Sword of *Lā* and the Fire of Love

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK



Numerous commentaries have been written on Rūmī's *Mathnawī* over the centuries trying to explain his teachings, but exposition of his thought nonetheless remains a daunting task, to put it mildly.¹ Among twentieth-century authors, few have paid more attention to this topic than the great Iranian scholar Jalāl al-Dīn Humā'ī, who died in the early 1980s. I had the pleasure of studying with him at Tehran University when he was persuaded to take a year off from retirement during the academic year 1968–69. One day in class he was bemoaning the fact that, as he put it, the new generation of scholars knew everything there was to know about a text: the life of its author, historical context, sources, literary techniques, textual variants of the manuscripts. However, they had no idea *what* the texts were saying. A few years later he published a book called 'The Rūmī Book' (*Mawlawī-nāma*) whose subtitle was, 'What is Rūmī Saying?' (*Mawlawī chih mīgūyad*). Clearly, he wanted to remedy what he saw as the gaping holes in contemporary Iranian scholarship on Rūmī. Professor Humā'ī was himself magnificently learned, even if he did not always find it possible to get right to the point – if, indeed, that be possible with Rūmī – and his book eventually came to fill two hefty volumes in 1100 pages. Although my discussion here is comparatively brief, in fact, less than one per cent the length of his grand study, I will endeavour to focus on what appears to me as Rūmī's core message.

Everyone knows that the appearance of Shams-i Tabrīzī acted as a catalyst in Rūmī's life. Before Shams, Rūmī was recognized as a man of learning and respected by other scholars. He was well versed in the

¹ This essay was originally presented as a lecture at 'A Conference in Celebration of Molana Jalal ad-Din Mohammad Molavi Rumi' in November 2007 at the College of the Humanities, Carleton University, Ottawa.

Islamic sciences, including the Qur'ān, the Prophet's traditions (*Ḥadīth*), jurisprudence, scholastic theology (*Kalām*), and philosophy. He was probably trained best in Sufism, which was a standard part of the advanced curriculum. In its various theoretical forms, it provided a science of the human soul in relation both to God and the universe at large. This issue was important to every thoughtful person, but the only other stream of Islamic learning that addressed it was philosophy. Most Muslims, however, found philosophy too abstract and theoretical, and they did not appreciate the fact that the philosophers tended to keep the Qur'ān and the *Ḥadīth* at arm's length.

So, when people wanted to understand the secret of human embodiment and the nature of the human soul, most of them sought answers from the Sufis. Moreover, Sufism had an extremely broad appeal, because its teachers spoke to everyone, not just to scholars, and they offered the means to intensify one's personal engagement with God. In contrast, jurisprudence and *Kalām* were scholarly pursuits. Jurists, to the extent that they did address the common people, instructed them how to act in accordance with God's commandments. Experts in *Kalām* had nothing to do with non-experts other than to tell them in rather dogmatic terms what they should think about God. As for Sufi teachers, they explained to both the elite and the commoners how to find God's presence in everyday life.

According to the usual accounts, Rūmī was an erudite scholar with only a superficial understanding of Sufism, and Shams was an illiterate vagabond, intoxicated by love for God. Shams proceeded to convert Rūmī from the sober religion of scholarship to the drunken religion of love, enamoured of music and dance. This is a good story, and as a rough and ready picture of what happened, it is fine, but it can hardly be considered historically accurate. We know that Shams was far from illiterate, nor was he an easy-going and likeable guy, as we might imagine from all the talk of intoxication and love. In fact, he was a professional Qur'ān teacher and was familiar with Qur'ān commentary, jurisprudence, and philosophy; on a personal level, he was a terror, an extremely exacting taskmaster who held in contempt the meagre attempts at spiritual guidance that he saw in the teachers of Konya. Moreover, Shams recognized that Rūmī was already an accomplished Sufi master. He himself put it this way:

When I came to Mawlānā, the first stipulation was that I was not coming to be a shaykh. God has not yet brought to the face of the earth someone who could be Mawlānā's shaykh. That would not be a mortal. And I am not such that I could be a disciple. Nothing of that remains for me.²

My purpose is not to try to explain the role of Shams in Rūmī's transformation. Rather, I bring him up simply because the standard picture of his role highlights the core emphasis of Rūmī's teachings: Neither Shams nor the mature Rūmī had much patience with the pre-occupations of scholars. Both held that the true purpose of knowledge was to guide people on the path of self-realization, that is, the path of coming to know and love God and to achieve spiritual transformation. Scholarship, even in their time, was too caught up with the outward appearance of knowledge rather than its essence and purpose. More often than not it was considered a means to acquire respect from the community and to earn a nice stipend from a school or a university. As Shams says,

The reason these people study in the madrasahs is, they think, 'We'll become tutors, we'll run madrasahs.' They say, 'Good deeds – one must act beautifully!' They talk of such things in these assemblies so that they can get positions.

Why do you study knowledge for the sake of worldly mouthfuls? This rope is for people to come out of the well, not for them go from this well into that well.

You must bind yourself to knowing this: 'Who am I? What substance am I? Why have I come? Where am I going? From whence is my root? At this time what am I doing? Toward what have I turned my face?'³

It is often difficult for us moderns to understand that for the Sufi tradition, education was a means to prepare oneself for self-awareness, enlightenment and re-unification with the source of all being and all knowledge. Rūmī refers to this point when he says in his *Fīhi mā fīh*,

2 W. C. Chittick (trans.), *Me & Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi* (Louisville: Fons Vitae 2004), p. 212. 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

These people who have studied or are now studying imagine that if they attend faithfully here they will forget and abandon all their knowledge. On the contrary, when they come here their sciences all acquire a spirit. The sciences are all paintings. When they gain spirits, it is as if a lifeless body receives a spirit. The root of all these sciences is up yonder, but they have been transported from the world without sounds and letters into the world of sounds and letters.⁴

In this way of looking at things, all knowledge points toward the Supreme Reality that gave rise to the universe and the human soul. Seekers of knowledge should be striving to travel from the paintings and pictures to the divine spirit that dwells up yonder and animates themselves and the entire universe.

TWO SORTS OF KNOWING

If we take a broad view of the quest for knowledge, it is not too difficult to see that most religious traditions acknowledge two basic sorts of knowing. Muslim sources have often differentiated them by speaking of the knowers or scholars (*'ulamā'*), and the recognizers, realizers or gnostics (*'urafā'*). The *'ulamā'* are those who have learned everything they know from books and teachers. The *'urafā'* are those who have followed the prophets on the path to self-realization and have found the spirit that animates the paintings and pictures. In a typical passage, Rūmī calls the gnostics 'Sufis' and explains the difference like this:

The Sufi's book is not composed of ink and letters:

It is nothing but a heart white as snow.

The scholar's provisions are the marks of the pen.

What are the Sufi's provisions? The footprints of the saints.⁵

Many Sufis and philosophers, including both Shams and Rūmī, distinguished between book learning and real knowledge by employ-

4 *Fīhi mā fīh*, ed. Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr 1348 A.Hsh./1969), p. 156.

5 Rūmī, *Mathnawī-yi ma'nawī*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr 1357 A.Hsh./1978), II: 159–60.

ing the terms *taqlīd* or 'imitation' and *tahqīq* or 'realization'. *Taqlīd* comes from the same root as *qalāda*, necklace or collar, and it means to follow someone else's opinion. *Tahqīq* comes from the same root as *ḥaqq*, a Qur'ānic name of God that means truth, reality, rightness and appropriateness. Literally, realization (*tahqīq*) means to actualize the truth (*ḥaqq*) of something. In the technical language of the Islamic intellectual tradition, it means to recognize God as the Supreme Reality and Absolute Truth and to act accordingly.

Another important term deriving from the same root as *tahqīq* and *ḥaqq* is *ḥaqīqat*, which also means reality and truth. In one of the most common ways of explaining the totality of the Islamic tradition, *ḥaqīqat* is used to designate the ultimate goal of the religion, the Divine Reality that all seekers are striving to reach. In order to do so, people must follow the *Sharī'at*, that is, the revealed law of Islam, and the *Ṭarīqat*, that is, the path of spiritual discipline that is taught by the Sufi shaykhs. In the introduction to Book Five of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī explains how *Sharī'at*, *Ṭarīqat*, and *Ḥaqīqat* are interrelated:

The *Sharī'at* is like a candle that shows the road. Without bringing a candle to hand, you will not be able to go forward on the road. When you walk on the road, your walking is the *Ṭarīqat*. When you reach the goal, that is the *Ḥaqīqat*. . . . The *Sharī'at* is like learning the science of medicine. The *Ṭarīqat* is to avoid certain foods and take certain remedies according to this science. The *Ḥaqīqat* is to find everlasting health and to have no more need for the science and the remedies. . . . The *Sharī'at* is knowledge, the *Ṭarīqat* is works, and the *Ḥaqīqat* is reaching God.

Reaching God then, is the goal of the spiritual quest, and it is commonly called realization, *tahqīq*. No one can achieve realization without passing beyond imitation, *taqlīd*, which is ordinary, everyday knowledge, derived from ink and letters, that is, from hearsay. After all, what we know – or rather, what we think we know – is simply what we have heard and what we have read. We are not sure about any of it, even if it happens to be our deepest assumptions and our most cherished beliefs. We do not know that these are true, we simply trust that they are. In contrast, achieving realization means not simply knowing in a cognitive way, but rather undergoing a profound spiritual transformation by attaining oneness with the *Ḥaqīqat*, the

Source of all being and all knowing. At this stage of human development, there is no distinction to be drawn between knower and known. The knowing self is none other than the reality that is known. Parallels to this way of explaining the goal of knowledge are to be found in most traditions and are especially obvious in the Indian religions (with concepts like *Moksha* and *Nirvana*).

Attaining the *Ḥaqīqat* and realizing the Real is often discussed in terms of degrees of certainty (*yaqīn*), based on expressions employed in the Qur'ān. Then it is said that knowing has three stages. The first is 'the knowledge of certainty' (*ilm al-yaqīn*), which is knowledge received by hearsay and confirmed by logical arguments. The second is 'the eye of certainty' (*ayn al-yaqīn*), which is seeing what one has come to know. The third is 'the truth (or reality) of certainty' (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*), which is to be united with the *Ḥaqīqat* that is known.

The usual analogy for the three stages is knowledge of fire. When the evidence of heat convinces us that there is such a thing as fire, we have the knowledge of certainty. When we see a burning blaze, we have the eye of certainty. When we are consumed by fire, we have reached the truth of certainty. A famous line attributed to Rūmī alludes to the three stages:

The sum of my life is no more than three words—
I was raw, I was cooked, I was burnt.

The point of all such discussions is that our usual, everyday sort of knowledge – which includes our academic learning and professional expertise – is rooted in imitation, not realization. In Rūmī's view, people should never be satisfied with explanations of the universe, the human soul and God that they have read in books or heard from teachers. Rather, they should be striving to reach the *Ḥaqīqat*, where knower and known are one and the individual ego has been burned away by the Everlasting Truth. In order to reach this stage, people must follow the *Sharī'at* and the *Ṭarīqat*, the revealed law and the Sufi Path.

Before going further, it is necessary to forestall a possible misunderstanding. For the past century, there has been a great deal of criticism of blind imitation (*taqlīd*). Orientalists have suggested that blind imitation has stultified the progress and development of Muslim countries, and numerous Muslims have criticized *taqlīd* as the bane

of their societies. When Shams and Rūmī criticize imitation, we should not jump to the conclusion that they were centuries ahead of their times. In modern discussions, the conceptual opposite of *taqlīd* is not *tahqīq* but *ijtihād*, literally, 'striving'. In its technical sense *ijtihād* means sufficient mastery of the juridical teachings of Islam – the *Shari'at* – that one may re-interpret these teachings to fit new situations. Modern-day authors have often claimed that 'the gate of *ijtihād*' was closed in medieval times and that, if Muslims are to enter the modern world, they must re-open the gate.

For Rūmī, Shams, and many other Sufis and philosophers, the discussion of *taqlīd* versus *tahqīq* has nothing to do with that of *taqlīd* versus *ijtihād*.⁶ They accepted that imitation in the realm of *Shari'at* is necessary for the vast majority of Muslims, for the simple reason that only a tiny fraction of the '*ulamā*', and none of the common people, can achieve the level of *ijtihād*. Nor is it desirable for everyone to try to do so, for mastery of this science brings no benefit to the soul. This is why it is classified by the jurists as being merely incumbent upon the community (*farḍ al-kifāya*), rather than incumbent in itself, that is, on the individual (*farḍ al-ʿayn*). It is sufficient for the community that there be scholars who master the science of jurisprudence. As for individuals, they should know enough of the Law to follow it and to ask for advice when they need it, but their goal should be to reach God, not expertise.

In short, in the view of the Sufi teachers, practically all Muslims should be, and will in fact be, imitators in the realm of the *Shari'at*. Moreover, they should also be imitators in the *Ṭarīqat*, which is to say that they should follow the instructions of a qualified shaykh. None the less, imitation itself is simply a means, not an end. The goal is to reach the *Ḥaqīqat*, and reaching this goal is to be undertaken by the method of realization (*tahqīq*). By contrast, the issue in modern discussions of *taqlīd* is to make use of *ijtihād* to modify Islamic law so that it fits nicely into the contemporary world. The notion of *tahqīq* is utterly foreign to the proponents of *ijtihād*, whose goals always remain on the social, legal, and political levels.

6 For example, *tahqīq* lies at the very heart of the teachings of Ibn al-Arabī. This is obvious both from his own writings and from statements of his followers, such as his step-son Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī, who calls the approach of his master *mashrab al-tahqīq*.

Rūmī never refers to *taqlīd* in the juridical sense of the word, and he almost never uses the word *ijtihād* and its cognates in anything other than their literal meaning, that of striving and struggling.⁷ He constantly urges his readers to increase their efforts in following the prophets and saints on the path of the *Sharīʿat* and the *Ṭarīqat*. The aim of their quest should always be to see and know the Truth and Reality for themselves. They must strive to become recognizers and gnostics (*ʿurafāʾ*), not simply learned imitators. This is what he is getting at in these verses:

You have eyes, look with your own eyes.
 Don't look with the eyes of an uninformed fool.
 You have ears, listen with your own ears.
 Why be in pawn to the ears of blockheads?
 Make vision your practice, not imitation –
 think in accordance with your own intellect.⁸

When Rūmī criticizes *taqlīd*, he is not criticizing the observance of the *Sharīʿat* and the *Ṭarīqat*, but rather the claims of jurists, the experts in scholastic theology (*Kalām*) and philosophers to know the final truth of things. In fact, what they know is simply what they have heard from others or, in the case of the more sophisticated, what they have concluded through their own rational processes, but always on the basis of hearsay. They have not reached the ultimate reality or *Ḥaqīqat* themselves, so the best they can do is quote words from those who have. They are, in effect, children trying to talk like adults.

How can children on the path have the thoughts of Men?
 How can their imaginings be compared with true realization?
 Children think of nurses and milk,
 raisins and walnuts, crying and weeping.
 Imitators are like sick children,
 even if they offer subtle arguments and proofs.⁹

7 Rūmī employs the terms *ijtihād* and *mujtahid* about thirty times in the *Mathnawī*, but only once in a technical sense (III: 3581). He typically uses *ijtihād* as a synonym for *jahd*, *mujāhada*, and *kūshish* – effort and struggle on the path to God – and he does not contrast it with *taqlīd*.

8 *Mathnawī*, VI: 3342–44. 9 *Mathnawī*, V: 1287–89.

In short, the knowledge of scholars, theologians, philosophers, scientists, and other learned people is grounded in hearsay, not vision. They do not use their own eyes, they do not see for themselves, and they have not undergone the fiery transformation that is demanded by self-realization.

There are many differences between the realizer and the imitator –
the first is like David, the second an echo.

The source of the realizer's words is burning –
the imitator has learned some old sayings.¹⁰

THE SWORD OF *LĀ*

Realization embraces the realms of both epistemology and ontology. The word *ḥaqq*, from which *taḥqīq* derives, means both truth and reality. God as *ḥaqq* is both the Ultimate Truth and the Supreme Reality. Realization is to recognize the absolutely True and to reach the supremely Real. It demands both discernment and transformation of the soul.

Insofar as the *Sharī'at* and the *Ṭarīqat* require imitation, the model is always the Prophet, and, secondly, 'the prophets and saints', as Rūmī commonly expresses it. The *Ḥaqqat*, however, cannot be known by imitation – one must see with one's own eyes, not with the eyes of others. The theoretical basis for all knowledge of the absolutely True and the truly Real is *tawhīd*, the assertion of divine unity, whose meaning is epitomized by the first testimony of faith, the words 'No god but God' (*Lā ilāha illā Allāh*).

The formula of unity is built of two elements, which are called the negation (*naḥy*) and the affirmation (*ithbāt*). 'No god' negates all illusion and unreality, and 'but God' affirms the unique reality of the Real. Together, negation and affirmation establish a dialectic that reverberates throughout Sufi teachings. The formula denies the independent reality of all 'others' (*ghayr*) and affirms the sole reality of the One. Everything other than God is evanescent, fading, disappearing; God alone is permanent, everlasting, appearing. 'Everything in the earth is undergoing annihilation,' says the Qur'ān, 'and there subsists the face of your Lord, the possessor of majesty and generosity' (55:26). This

¹⁰ *Mathnawī*, II: 493–94.

verse provides one of the more common conceptual pairs used in the dialectic of negation and affirmation, that is, annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsistence (*baqā'*). Another common pair is existence or being (*wujūd, hasī*) and nonexistence or nonbeing (*adam, nīstī*). As Rūmī says,

We and our existences are nonexistent things –
 You are Absolute Existence showing Yourself as evanescent.
 All of us are lions, but lions on a banner –
 we attack moment by moment because of the wind.
 Our wind and our being is Your gift,
 All of our existence is Your bestowal.¹¹

The formula of *tawhīd* provides not only the theory behind realization, but also a good deal of the practice. It is, for example, one of the most common formulae of remembrance, *dhikr*, employed by the Sufi orders, and it provides much of the framework for meditation on God and his bounty. Sufi texts compare the first word of the formula, *Lā* or 'no', to a sword, partly because of the way it is written in Arabic (ل). Seekers must use this sword to cut away all 'others' until only the Real remains. The 'others' to be negated are the world and its creatures, the nonexistent things that appear to us as existent. Rūmī uses the image of the sword in a passage that, to my mind, sums up his teachings as well as anything else in his writings. The verses tell us that the soul must be consumed by the fire of love, which is none other than the sword of negation or *lā* as it slices away all non-existent things.

Love is that flame which, when it blazes up,
 burns away everything except the Subsistent Beloved.
 It drives home the sword of *lā* in order to slay other than God.
 Look closely – after *lā* what remains?
 What remains is 'but God', the rest has gone.
 Bravo, O great, idol-burning Love!¹²

To come back to the role that Shams-i Tabrīzī played in the transformation of Rūmī, the sayings of Shams make clear that his core teaching was precisely the necessity of passing beyond non-existence

11 *Mathnawī*, I: 602–04. 12 *Mathnawī*, V: 588–90.

in order to reach Absolute Being, or, leaving imitation behind and achieving realization. Before the coming of Shams, Rūmī was certainly immersed in the *Sharīʿat* and the *Ṭarīqat*, but he was not yet consumed by the flames of the *Ḥaqīqat*. The *Mathnawī* and the *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī* are both hymns to the burning that he underwent, a process which brought about the dissolution of all phenomenal appearances, all ‘the paintings and pictures’, and the realization of the Real.

THE FIRE OF LOVE

To speak of the path to realization in terms of stages of knowledge is to describe it from the outside. Such an approach runs the risk of turning it into another theoretical discussion, to be bandied about by scholars and dilettantes. This is one reason why Rūmī seldom talks in these terms. He has recourse rather to love, which, as most everyone understands, cannot be explained.

Love cannot be found in erudition, science, books, and pages.
The path that people talk about is not the path of lovers.¹³

There is no way to understand love without being a lover. All those who want to pass beyond imitation and reach the *Ḥaqīqat* must embrace it with their whole being.

Love makes the wine of realization boil –
Love is the hidden cupbearer of the truly sincere.¹⁴

In short, although Rūmī frequently uses the technical language of theoretical Sufism, he focuses rather on the inner transformation that the language is meant to express. One of the many ways he does so is to describe the soul’s burning in the process of eliminating every desire and longing except love for the *Ḥaqīqat* itself. So much does Rūmī stress the importance of love that one can readily agree with those who have said that love, or rather the call to love, is the core of his message. Precisely here, however, many people miss the point,

13 *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā Dīwān-i kabīr*, ed. Badīʿ al-Zamān Furūzānfar (Tehran: Dānish-gāh 1957–67), *ghazal* 395, v. 4182. 14 *Mathnawī*, III: 4742.

because they think of love as they experience it in everyday life and as it has been portrayed in modern culture, which is alienated from every sort of transcendent vision. If we want to recover what Rūmī is talking about, we need to clarify the traditional Islamic understanding of love.

I will try to sum up the background for Rūmī's call to love in terms of the most often cited Qur'ānic verse on the topic: 'He loves them, and they love Him' (5:54). According to this verse, God and human beings share in the attribute of love, so each side is the lover and beloved of the other. Rūmī sometimes makes this point in terms that echo a famous Zen koan, as in this passage from the *Mathnawī*:

Never does a lover seek union
 unless his beloved is seeking him. . . .
 When love for the Real has grown up in your heart,
 without doubt the Real has love for you.
 You will never hear the sound of one hand
 clapping without the other.
 The thirsty man laments, 'O sweet water!'
 The water laments, 'Where is the drinker!'
 Our souls' thirst is the attraction of the Water –
 we belong to It and It belongs to us.¹⁵

We belong to the Water because 'He loves us.' The Water belongs to us because 'We love Him.'

To understand some of the implications of the verse of mutual love, we can look at the notions of lover and beloved employing the sword of *lā*. The formula of *tawhīd* tells us that there is no god but God, there is nothing real but the Real. It negates nonexistent things and affirms True Being; it erases false lovers and beloveds and affirms the true Lover and the true Beloved. It is saying, in other words, 'There is no lover but God' and 'There is no beloved but God.'

To say that God alone is lover has two basic implications. The first is that all love in the universe is a trace of divine love; the second that, in the last analysis, God alone is the one who loves. Thus we see Rūmī echoing the Qur'ānic verse that God created everything in pairs (51:49) and affirming, like Avicenna and many others, that all movement in the

¹⁵ *Mathnawī*, III: 4393–99.

universe is God's love reflected in the seeking and yearning of creation.

The wisdom of the Real in His destiny and decree
made us lovers one of another.
That foreordainment has taken all parts of the world
and made them pairs, each in love with its mate.¹⁶

When Rūmī applies the sword of *lā* with even more rigour, he tells us that in truth there is no lover but God:

Lovers themselves do not seek –
in the whole world, there is no seeker but He.¹⁷

To say that 'There is no beloved but God' also has two basic implications. The first is that everyone loves God and only God. Anything else that people think they love is in fact a sign or a showing of God, a theophany, a display of the divine names and attributes.

Whenever you love something that exists,
it has been gold-plated by the attributes of the Real.
When the gold goes back to its root and the copper remains,
you become disgusted with it and you divorce it.
Pull yourself back from things gold-plated with God's attributes,
stop foolishly calling the counterfeit 'beautiful'.
The counterfeit coin has borrowed its beauty –
beneath its decoration lies nakedness.
The gold goes back from the counterfeit to its source –
you also, go to the source where the gold is going!
The light goes back from the wall to the sun –
you also, go to the sun, which always moves in harmony!
From now on take water from heaven –
you've never seen faithfulness from drainpipes!¹⁸

The second implication of 'There is no beloved but God' is that, when God says in the verse of mutual love, 'He loves them', he is saying that he loves them only inasmuch as they have been transmuted into real gold by his names and attributes, because only he himself can be the true object of love. One of the corollaries of this

16 *Mathnawī*, III: 4400–01. 17 *Kulliyāt, ghazal* 425, v. 4471. 18 *Mathnawī*, III: 554–60.

discussion is that, although 'He loves them' refers to all human beings, he loves some of them more than others. To understand why this should be so, we need to look at the ancient question, 'Why did God create the universe?' For Rūmī and the Sufi tradition generally, the answer is that without the universe, there would be no 'them' to love.

This answer is typically explained in terms of the famous sacred tradition of the Prophet Muḥammad (*ḥadīth qudsī*), 'I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved¹⁹ to be recognized, so I created the creatures that I might be recognized.' To be recognized, God's love demands difference, otherness, multiplicity, and distance, because recognition and knowledge depend upon differentiation and distinction. In other words, God's love is the cause of the separation (*firāq, judā'ī*) from God that defines our existential plight, the separation that is mentioned in the first line of the *Mathnawī* and sets the tone for it and much of the *Dīwān*.

In this view of the human situation, all hunger, thirst, longing, need, pain, and suffering are rooted in our sense of separation, which is the fruit of God's 'love to be recognized'. If 'He loves *them*', that is, human beings and not other creatures, it is precisely because they alone have the capacity to recognize and love *him*, for they alone were created in his form and taught all the divine Names (Qur'ān, 2:30).

Typically, Rūmī discusses the human role as the unique beloved of God in terms of God's love for the most perfect human being, that is, Muḥammad, who was addressed by God in the *ḥadīth qudsī*, 'But for thee, I would not have created the spheres.'²⁰ But Rūmī also generalizes the discussion, making the object of God's love all the prophets and saints.

The heavens are slave to the saint's moon,
The east and the west beg bread from him.

19 See Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī* (Tehran: Danishgāh-i Tehran, 1335 A.Hsh./1956; reprinted Amīr Kabīr, 1361 A.Hsh./1982), p. 29, no. 70. In the several versions of this *ḥadīth*, the verb is either *ahbattu*, 'I loved', or *aradtu*, 'I desired'. In the latter case, the *ḥadīth* ties in with the Qur'ānic discussion of God's desire as the root of creation, as in the verse, 'Our only word to a thing when We desire it is to say to it "Be!", and it comes to be' (16:40). In either case, the basic argument stays the same: God loves or desires specific objects, namely, those who can recognize him for who he is; only those made in his own form – i.e., human beings – can do so.

20 See Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī*, p. 172, no. 546; p. 203, no. 655.

‘But for thee’ is written on his diploma:
 He bestows and distributes all things.
 If he did not exist, the heavens would not revolve,
 nor would they be the place of light and the station of the angels.
 If he did not exist, the seas would not have acquired
 splendour, fish, and royal pearls.
 If he did not exist, the earth would not contain
 treasures inside and jasmine outside.²¹

To appreciate fully what is going on in God’s love for human beings, we need to remember the essential role of beauty. In the Islamic ethos generally, the object of love – true love, at least – is always beauty. The Prophet points to the connection in the famous *Ḥadīth*, ‘God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.’²² Applying the sword of *lā* to this *Ḥadīth*, we see that the first clause: ‘God is beautiful’ means that there is nothing beautiful but God. In other words, all beautiful things other than God are gold-plated by his beauty. The second clause: ‘He loves beauty’ means that God’s only object of love is the beautiful. If he loves human beings, he does so because and inasmuch as they are beautiful. Their beauty stems from the divine form in which he created them. The proper way to speak about God’s ‘form’, that is, the guise in which God appears to us, is in the context of ‘the most beautiful names’ (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*) of God mentioned in the Qur’ān (17: 110). It is these names that help us understand what is meant by the saying, ‘There is none beautiful but God.’ And it is Adam’s gold-plating by these names that bestows upon him any beauty that he may have. The Qur’ān says, ‘He formed you, and He made your forms beautiful’ (40:64). Having created human beings because of love, God then loves each and every one of them to the extent that he or she lives up to the innate beauty of their forms, which is what the tradition calls their primordial nature (*fiṭra*).

But human beings do not typically pay heed to their own beauty. They have forgotten who they are, and they are free to say ‘no’ to beauty, to God, to the prophets, to wisdom, to love. To the extent that they say ‘no’ instead of ‘yes’, they will be ugly. And God does not love the ugly. The Qur’ān makes this point explicitly in a number of verses, saying that God does *not* love the unbelievers, the wrongdoers, the

21 *Mathnawī*, VI: 2102–06. 22 Furūzānfar, *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī*, p. 42, no. 106.

workers of corruption, the transgressors, the immoderate, the proud, and the boastful.

So, although the verse does attest that ‘God loves them’, he does not love everyone with equal love. He only loves people to the extent that they reflect his beauty, for ‘There is none beautiful but God’ and ‘There is none beloved but God.’ Everyone does indeed reflect God’s beauty, because all are created in his form. But to be truly beautiful, people must employ their freedom in striving to conform to the Supremely Beautiful, other than whom there is none beautiful. They can do so only inasmuch as they follow the prophets and the saints, those who have reached the ultimate reality (*Ḥaqīqat*) and achieved realization. The path to the *Ḥaqīqat* is defined by the *Sharī‘at* and the *Ṭarīqat*, which in turn are expressions of the Prophet’s Sunnah, in both the outer realm of activity and the inner realm of transformation. The Qur’ān highlights the Prophet’s role in the path of love in the verse, ‘Say [O Muḥammad!]: “If you love God, follow me, and God will love you”.’ (3:31).

So, in brief, when God loves human beings, this means first that he creates the universe and establishes separation so that people may be aware of themselves as individuals and come to recognize the Hidden Treasure as the source of all; second, it means that he calls people to love him in return by following the prophets. Their created separation is compulsory, and it forces them to recognize their hunger and thirst, their love and need, their nothingness and God’s Being. It turns them into lovers, who suffer the pain of hunger and longing, but it does not force them to recognize that it is God alone who is the object of their love. Only if they recognize this and strive to achieve nearness to him will his love for them be intensified.

In Sufi texts, the most often cited scriptural reference to the fruit of following the Prophet and achieving God’s love is the authentic *ḥadīth qudsī* in which God speaks of the servant who is striving to achieve nearness (*taqarrub*) to him by performing both obligatory religious duties and voluntary good works. When he does this, God says, ‘I love him, and when I love My servant, I am the hearing with which he hears, the seeing with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks.’ This *ḥadīth* is understood as referring to the ultimate goal of creation. By displaying the Hidden Treasure, God brings about separative existence – he cuts the reeds from the reed bed. The reeds complain of their separation, which is to

say that they express their longing to return to him. In response to their longing, God sends the prophets, who provide the path of return, the path that leads to overcoming separation and establishing nearness and union, which is the joy of living forever with the true object of their love.

In short, Rūmī applies the sword of *lā* to everything but the true Beloved. He calls his listeners to experience the burning of love so that they may reach the *Ḥaqīqat* and swim in the ocean of union. He tells them that the goal of their human embodiment is to recover their original identity with their Beloved and to realize in their own souls that ‘There is no lover but God, there is no beloved but God.’

Rūmī tells the story of lover and beloved, loss and gain, separation and union, pain and joy, in many ways and in many contexts, always coming back to the Ocean of Love, the Hidden Treasure that made itself manifest out of love for human beings and that calls them to rejoin the primordial realm. Lest it be imagined, however, that this is a call for ‘the drop to return to the ocean’ and the annihilation of all that bestows identity and reality on the human soul, one should recall this little story from Rūmī’s *Majālis-i sab‘a* (‘Seven Sermons’), which can also serve as fitting summary of his basic teachings:

Like fish we say to the Ocean of Life, ‘Why did You strike us with waves and throw us up on the dry land of water and clay? You have so much mercy – how could You give us such torment? . . .

The Ocean replies, “I was a Hidden Treasure, so I loved to be recognized.” I was a treasure, hidden by the curtain of the Unseen, in the private cell of No-place. From behind the veils of existence I wanted My beauty and majesty to be known. I wanted it to be seen what sort of water of life and alchemy of happiness I am.’

The fish say, ‘We, who are the fish in the ocean, were in this Ocean of Life from the first. We knew its magnificence and gentleness, for we are the copper that receives the elixir of this infinite alchemy. We knew the exaltedness of this elixir of Life. As much as we spoke of it to those who were not at first fish of the ocean, they did not listen, or see, or understand. From the first we were the recognizers of this Treasure, and at the last we will be its recognizers. At whom did You direct this long exile for the sake of “I loved to be recognized.”’

The answer comes, ‘O fish! Although fish know the water’s

worth and are lovers, and although they cling to union with it, their love is not of the same description, with such burning and heat, with such self-abandonment, with such lamentation and weeping of blood, and with such roasting of the liver, as the love of that fish whom the waves throw up on dry land and who tosses for a long time on the hot earth and burning sand. "He neither dies there, nor lives" [Qur'ān 87:13]. Separation from the ocean allows him no taste of life's sweetness – after all, that is separation from the Ocean of Life. How can someone who has seen that Ocean find joy in this life? . . .

God says, 'Just as I wanted to manifest My Treasure, so I wanted to manifest your ability to recognize that Treasure. Just as I wanted to display the purity and gentleness of this Ocean, so I wanted to display the high aspirations and the nurturing gentleness of the fish and creatures of the Ocean. Thus they may see their own faithfulness and show their own aspirations. 'Do people think they will be left to say "We have faith" and that they will not be tried?" [Qur'ān 19:2].²³

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²³ *Majālis-i sab'a*, ed. Tawfīq Subḥānī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Kayhān 1379 A.Hsh./2000), pp. 121–22.