

Words to the Wise:

Quatrains of a Sufi Philosopher

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The spiritual teachings of Islamic civilization have become manifest in a great variety of forms over history. Many of the foremost scholars in the technical fields of Islamic learning, especially in later times, were also practitioners of the Sufi path, and philosophy in particular tended to be closely connected to Sufism. Historians have debated to what extent Avicenna (d. 428/1037), the greatest of the Peripatetic philosophers, may have been influenced by Sufi teachings, but few have doubted that some of the later philosophers, such as Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), the founder of the Illuminationist School, and Mullā Sadrā (d. 1050/1640), the most famous master of the School of Iṣfahān, incorporated Sufism into their philosophical teachings.

Among philosophers who have a recognizably Sufi dimension to their teachings, Afḍal al-Din Kāshānī (d. ca. 610/1213), better known as 'Bābā Afḍal', has remained practically unstudied.¹ Little is known of his life, other than that he wrote and taught in a village near Kashan known as Marāq, where his tomb is still a site of pilgrimage. He has left us with about fifty prose works, most of them quite short, and several hundred quatrains. What sets him apart from most other philosophers is that he wrote almost entirely in Persian. Moreover, he explicitly aims his works at seekers on the path to God. By writing in Persian, he shows that he was not aiming his works at specialists, since philosophers typically made their important statements in Arabic. Indeed, when Mullā Sadrā wanted to make some of Bābā Afḍal's teachings better known, he translated one of his books into Arabic (even though the vast majority of

Mullā Sadrā's students would have been native speakers of Persian).

Since Bābā Afḍal did not consider his audience to be professional philosophers, he exerts great effort to explain the theory and practice of the philosophical quest in simple and clear terms. The eminently practical side to his teachings come out most plainly in seven long letters that he wrote to disciples and friends, in which he explains how to follow the path of self-realization by utilizing one's God-given intelligence. The fact that he had an even wider audience in view is shown among other things by the large number of quatrains ascribed to him. Poetry, after all, was by far the most popular form of literature among Persian speakers, enjoyed by the literate and illiterate alike. The quatrain was an especially powerful means for making points in an easy to remember format, and it offered a Persian technique for expressing philosophical maxims, which were a common genre in Arabic.

The essence of Bābā Afḍal's philosophy can be expressed in the prophetic saying, "He who knows himself knows his Lord." All of Bābā Afḍal's writings tells his readers that their first task as human beings is to come to know themselves. The self that must be known is nothing other than the self that knows, and this is the divine spirit that God breathed into Adam. Sufis often refer to this spirit as the 'First Intellect' and they like to quote the prophetic saying, "The first thing God created was the intellect." According to Bābā Afḍal, the goal of the philosophical quest is for knowers to know themselves, and this can only happen when the distinction between knower and known disappears. This is the well-known philosophical teaching that

the intellect (*'aql*), the intelligible (*ma'qûl*), and the intellect (*'aql*) must all be experienced as one. Only then can the seeker truly know and experience *tawhid*, the assertion of God's unity that underlies all of Islamic doctrine.

The quatrains that follow are representative of Bâbâ Afđal's poetical style and philosophical teachings. Many of them would be unremarkable among the quatrains of any Sufi poet.

* * *

*Wherever I look is turmoil,
the pain of torture, the blow of a stick.
To purify the world from each other,
people have made their beards into brooms. (39)²*

*I was born of nine fathers and four mothers,
I'm sad and happy from the seven, the two,
and the three.*



*I've five roots and live in a house with six foundations.
How did I fall to the hands of this bunch?³ (95)*

*What do you get from learning [fađl]
but eating out heart?
A shame, Afđal, that you can't eat your learning.
These days, the crumbs are in the hands of the dogs—
you can't eat bread from the hands of dogs. (56)*

*Suppose you run the world as you like, then what?
Suppose you read life's book to the end, then what?
Suppose you have your way for a hundred years—
then a hundred more. Then what? (183)*

*This world's an inn and we're the guests—
don't think we'll be staying for long.
In both worlds, God will remain, none else—
Everyone-upon it will be annihilated. [Koran 55: 26]
(128)*

*Do you know why they beat the falcon's drum?
So the lost falcon will come back to the way.
Do you know why they sew shut the falcon's eyes?
So it will open its eyes to its own worth. (162)*

*Sew up your eyes so your heart may become eye,
then see with that eye a different world.
If you rise beyond pleasure with self,
your states will be pleasing from head to foot. (2)*

*His worship thinks the heart's in the breast
and that, not taken two steps, he has arrived.
Knowledge, abstinence, renunciation, hope, search—
these are the road, and he thinks they're the goal.
(152)*

*Those who dwell in the Beloved's presence
don't mention His name and rarely speak.
But those who are windy like bagpipes
are far from Him, so they call Him aloud. (108)*

*O heart, seek help from none of the creatures,
seek shade from no naked branch.
Height's in contentment, lowness in greed—
take height from the self and seek for no lowness.
(110)*

*Seek not the top, be no more than any.
The bandage is soft, don't be a lancet.
If you want nothing bad to reach anyone,
be not bad-wanting, bad-teaching and bad-thinking.
(171)*

*If the seed does not grow—you sowed it.
If the cloth does not please—you wove it.
If your foot sinks in mud don't complain—
you're the one that mixed up the mud. (174)*

O pure Sufi seeking God,
He has no place, from whence do you seek Him?
If you know Him, why do you seek Him?
If you don't know Him, whom are you seeking? (161)

My Idol has not shown her face—
all their talk is futile and vain
When someone praises her as she should be praised,
he's heard the account from somebody else. (157)

The Men of Your road all know Your secrets,
the beads of the rest spin round Your compass,
The seventy-two sects all do Your work—
You are with all, and all search for You. (115)

The Men of Your road are the men knowing meanings,
but hidden they stay from near-sighted eyes.
More wondrous still is that knowing the Real
they come to believe and are called unbelievers. (79)

Not for a moment have you done the commandments,
but you want to be just like the Men of the past.
You've not walked the road,
so you haven't been shown—whenever you knock,
the door will be opened. (150)

With You I gaze not on being,
I think not of ups nor of downs.
I see and I worship in certitude,
neither seeing nor worshipping self. (146)

The world of the soul is not what you think,
the road of union is not what you've followed.
The spring at which Khidr drank the water of life
is in your house, but you've blocked it up. (151)

I wandered the world seeking Jamsid's cup,
I sat for no day, I slept for no night.
When my master described the cup to me,
jamsid's world-showing cup was myself. (94)

You are the copy of God's own book,
you are the mirror of the King's own beauty!
Nothing of the world is outside of you.
Seek what you want from yourself—it is you. (160)

Every painting that appears on the tablet of being
is the form of the one who painted the picture.
When the old ocean sends up new waves,
they call them the 'waves' but in fact they're
the ocean. (103)

Whether you see all as kernel, all as shell,
don't look crooked, all is He.
You've no eye with which you can see Him—
from your head to your feet, all is He. (181)

Grief for You makes every soul happy,

unbelief for You gives freshness to faith.
May the heart not find comfort from You for a breath
should it seek the cure for Your pain. (5)

Not all the unknowing are free of Your love,
not all without insight are rid of Your pain—
As much as I look on this world's creatures,
I see no head empty of madness for You. (47)

If you do well on the path of the search,
you will command the nine-layered house.
The first step is searching for Him
the last is to be yourself He. (165)

O Lord, how pleasant to laugh without mouth,
to see the creatures without owning eye.
Sit and journey—how good it is
to travel—the world without painful feet! (179)

I am not I—who would you say is the one that is I?
I am silent, but you ask me who's in my mouth.
From head to foot there's nothing but shirt.
Ask who it is from the one who wears me as shirt.
(107)

The wheel of the spheres is my nine-layered cloak,
the angel's essence the fruit of my nature.
The beginning-and-endless secret
of which you have heard
only alludes to my old and new speech. (114)

Every work in the world is our craft,
every lion with heart bides in our thicket.
Don't pass us by lest you not see with certitude
the more blooming and beautiful in our thought.
(105)

Notes

1. On his life and works, see S.H. Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia* (1996), pp. 189-206; Chittick, "Bābā Afzal," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* III (1988), pp. 285-291. I am in the process of finalizing a book on him, including the translation of most of his major works. The quatrains here are excerpted from that work.
2. The number at the end of each quatrain refers to the numeration provided in Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī, *Musannaḡat* (1952-58) pp. 737-72.
3. The numbers refer to the nine heavens, the four elements, the seven planets, the two worlds, the three kingdoms, the five senses, and the six directions.

References

- Chittick, W. C. 1988. "Bābā Afzal," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.
- Kāshānī, Afḍal al-Dīn. 1952-58. *Musannaḡat*. Edited by M. Minūwī and Y. Mahdawī. Tehran: Tehran University.
- Nasr, S.H. 1996. *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*. Richmond: Curzon.