

# The Essential Rumi

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*Translated by* COLEMAN BARKS

*with* JOHN MOYNE

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CASTLE BOOKS

*for the compassionate heart within the mind, the light  
within the body,*

*for the sun, Shams of Tabriz, and Bawa Muhaiyaddeen*

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address HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

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Published by CASTLE BOOKS  
A Division of Book Sales, Inc.  
114 Northfield Avenue, Edison, New Jersey 08837

ISBN 0-7858-0871-X

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

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## On Rumi

Persians and Afghanis call Rumi “Jelaluddin Balkhi.” He was born September 30, 1207, in Balkh, Afghanistan, which was then part of the Persian empire. The name *Rumi* means “from Roman Anatolia.” He was not known by that name, of course, until after his family, fleeing the threat of the invading Mongol armies, emigrated to Konya, Turkey, sometime between 1215 and 1220. His father, Bahauddin Walad, was a theologian and jurist and a mystic of uncertain lineage. Bahauddin Walad’s *Maarif*, a collection of notes, diarylike remarks, sermons, and strange accounts of visionary experiences, has shocked most of the conventional scholars who have tried to understand them. He shows a startlingly sensual freedom in stating his union with God. Rumi was instructed in his father’s secret inner life by a former student of his father, Burhanuddin Mahaqqiq. Burhan and Rumi also studied Sanai and Attar. At his father’s death Rumi took over the position of sheikh in the dervish learning community in Konya. His life seems to have been a fairly normal one for a religious scholar—teaching, meditating, helping the poor—until in the late fall of 1244 when he met a stranger who put a question to him. That stranger was the wandering dervish, Shams of Tabriz, who had traveled throughout the Middle East searching and praying for someone who could “endure my company.” A voice came, “What will you give in return?” “My head!” “The one you seek is Jelaluddin of Konya.”

The question Shams spoke made the learned professor faint to the ground. We cannot be entirely certain of the question, but according to the most reliable account Shams asked who was greater, Muhammad or Bestami, for Bestami had said, “How great is my glory,” whereas Muhammad had acknowledged in his prayer to God, “We do not know You as we should.”

Rumi heard the depth out of which the question came and fell to the ground. He was finally able to answer that Muhammad was greater, because Bestami had taken one gulp of the divine and stopped there, whereas for Muhammad the way was always unfolding. There are various versions of this encounter, but whatever the facts, Shams and Rumi became inseparable. Their Friendship is one of the mysteries. They spent months together without any human needs, transported into a region of pure conversation. This ecstatic connection caused difficulties in the religious community. Rumi's students felt neglected. Sensing the trouble, Shams disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared. Annemarie Schimmel, a scholar immersed for forty years in the works of Rumi, thinks that it was at this first disappearance that Rumi began the transformation into a mystical artist. "He turned into a poet, began to listen to music, and sang, whirling around, hour after hour."

Word came that Shams was in Damascus. Rumi sent his son, Sultan Velad, to Syria to bring his Friend back to Konya. When Rumi and Shams met for the second time, they fell at each other's feet, so that "no one knew who was lover and who the beloved." Shams stayed in Rumi's home and was married to a young girl who had been brought up in the family. Again the long mystical conversation (*sobhet*) began, and again the jealousies grew.

On the night of December 5, 1248, as Rumi and Shams were talking, Shams was called to the back door. He went out, never to be seen again. Most likely, he was murdered with the connivance of Rumi's son, Allaedin; if so, Shams indeed gave his head for the privilege of mystical Friendship.

The mystery of the Friend's absence covered Rumi's world. He himself went out searching for Shams and journeyed again to Damascus. It was there that he realized,

Why should I seek? I am the same as  
he. His essence speaks through me.  
I have been looking for myself!

The union became complete. There was full *fana*, annihilation in the Friend. Shams was writing the poems. Rumi called the huge collection of his odes and quatrains *The Works of Shams of Tabriz*.

After Shams's death and Rumi's merging with him, another companion was found, Saladin Zarkub, the goldsmith. Saladin became

the Friend to whom Rumi addressed his poems, not so fierily as to Shams, but with quiet tenderness. When Saladin died, Husam Chelebi, Rumi's scribe and favorite student, assumed this role. Rumi claimed that Husam was the source, the one who understood the vast, secret order of the *Mathnawi*, that great work that shifts so fantastically from theory to folklore to jokes to ecstatic poetry. For the last twelve years of his life, Rumi dictated the six volumes of this master-work to Husam. He died on December 17, 1273.

## ❖ A Note on the Organization of This Book

The design of this book is meant to confuse scholars who would divide Rumi's poetry into the accepted categories: the quatrains (*rubaiyat*) and odes (*ghazals*) of the *Divan*, the six books of the *Mathnawi*, the discourses, the letters, and the almost unknown *Six Sermons*. The mind wants categories, but Rumi's creativity was a continuous fountaining from beyond forms and the mind, or as the sufis say, from a mind within the mind, the *qalb*, which is a great compassionate generosity.

The twenty-seven divisions here are faint and playful palimpsests spread over Rumi's imagination. Poems easily splash over, slide from one overlay to another. The unity behind, *La'illaha il'Allahu* ("there's no reality but God; there is only God"), is the one substance the other subheadings float within at various depths. If one actually selected an "essential" Rumi, it would be the *zikr*, the remembering that everything is God. Likewise, the titles of the poems are whimsical. Rumi's individual poems in Persian have no titles. His collection of quatrains and odes is called *The Works of Shams of Tabriz* (*Divani Shamsi Tabriz*). The six books of poetry he dictated to his scribe, Husam Chelebi, are simply titled *Spiritual Couplets* (*Mathnawi*), or sometimes he refers to them as *The Book of Husam*. The wonderfully goofy title of the discourses, *In It What's in It (Fifi Ma Fifi)*, may mean "what's in the *Mathnawi* is in this too," or it may be the kind of hand-thrown-up gesture it sounds like.

All of which makes the point that these poems are not monumental in the Western sense of memorializing moments; they are not discrete entities but a fluid, continuously self-revising, self-interrupting *medium*. They are not so much *about* anything as spoken from *within*

something. Call it enlightenment, ecstatic love, spirit, soul, truth, the ocean of *ilm* (divine luminous wisdom), or the covenant of *alast* (the original agreement with God). Names do not matter. Some resonance of ocean resides in everyone. Rumi's poetry can be felt as a salt breeze from that, traveling inland.

These poems were created, not in packets and batches of art, but as part of a constant, practical, and mysterious discourse Rumi was having with a dervish learning community. The focus changed from stern to ecstatic, from everyday to esoteric, as the needs of the group arose. Poetry and music and movement were parts of that communal and secretly individual work of opening hearts and exploring the mystery of union with the divine. The form of this collection means to honor the variety and simultaneity of that mystical union.

Most of the facts, dates, and chew-toys for the intellect are stashed in the Notes.

Rumi puts a prose prayer at the beginning of each book of the *Mathnawi*. Here's the blessing he gives before Book IV.

### *Praise to Early-Waking Grievers*

In the name of God the Most Merciful, and the Most Compassionate.

This is the fourth journey toward home, toward where the great advantages are waiting for us. Reading it, mystics will feel very happy, as a meadow feels when it hears thunder, the good news of rain coming, as tired eyes look forward to sleeping. Joy for the spirit, health for the body. In here is what genuine devotion wants, refreshment, sweet fruit ripe enough for the pickiest picker, medicine, detailed directions on how to get to the Friend. All praise to God. Here is the way to renew connection with your soul, and rest from difficulties.

The study of this book will be painful to those who feel separate from God. It will make the others grateful. In the hold of this ship is a cargo not found in the attractiveness of young women. Here is a reward for lovers of God. A full moon and an inheritance you thought you had lost are now returned to you. More hope for the hopeful, lucky finds for foragers, wonderful things thought of to do. Anticipation after depression, expanding after contraction. The sun comes out, and that light is what we give, in this book, to our spiritual descendants. Our gratitude to God holds them to us, and brings more besides. As the Andalusian poet, Adi al-Riga, says,

I was sleeping, and being comforted  
by a cool breeze, when suddenly a gray dove  
from a thicket sang and sobbed with longing,  
and reminded me of my own passion.

I had been away from my own soul so long,  
so late-sleeping, but that dove's crying  
woke me and made me cry. *Praise*  
to all early-waking grievers!

Some go first, and others come long afterward. God blesses both and all in the line, and replaces what has been consumed, and provides for those who work the soil of helpfulness, and blesses Muhammad and Jesus and every other messenger and prophet. Amen, and may the Lord of all created beings bless you.

## *I ~ The Tavern:*

### *Whoever Brought Me Here Will Have to Take Me Home*

#### **ON THE TAVERN**

*In the tavern are many wines—the wine of delight in color and form and taste, the wine of the intellect's agility, the fine port of stories, and the cabernet of soul singing. Being human means entering this place where entrancing varieties of desire are served. The grapeskin of ego breaks and a pouring begins. Fermentation is one of the oldest symbols for human transformation. When grapes combine their juice and are closed up together for a time in a dark place, the results are spectacular. This is what lets two drunks meet so that they don't know who is who. Pronouns no longer apply in the tavern's mud-world of excited confusion and half-articulated wantings.*

*But after some time in the tavern, a point comes, a memory of elsewhere, a longing for the source, and the drunks must set off from the tavern and begin the return. The Qur'an says, "We are all returning." The tavern is a kind of glorious hell that human beings enjoy and suffer and then push off from in their search for truth. The tavern is a dangerous region where sometimes disguises are necessary, but never hide your heart, Rumi urges. Keep open there. A breaking apart, a crying out into the street, begins in the tavern, and the human soul turns to find its way home.*

*It's 4 A.M. Nasruddin leaves the tavern and walks the town aimlessly. A policeman stops him. "Why are you out wandering the streets in the middle of the night?" "Sir," replies Nasruddin, "if I knew the answer to that question, I would have been home hours ago!"*

## WHO SAYS WORDS WITH MY MOUTH?

All day I think about it, then at night I say it.  
Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?  
I have no idea.  
My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,  
and I intend to end up there.

This drunkenness began in some other tavern.  
When I get back around to that place,  
I'll be completely sober. Meanwhile,  
I'm like a bird from another continent, sitting in this aviary.  
The day is coming when I fly off,  
but who is it now in my ear who hears my voice?  
Who says words with my mouth?

Who looks out with my eyes? What is the soul?  
I cannot stop asking.  
If I could taste one sip of an answer,  
I could break out of this prison for drunks.  
I didn't come here of my own accord, and I can't leave that way.  
Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.

This poetry. I never know what I'm going to say.  
I don't plan it.  
When I'm outside the saying of it,  
I get very quiet and rarely speak at all.



We have a huge barrel of wine, but no cups.  
That's fine with us. Every morning  
we glow and in the evening we glow again.

They say there's no future for us. They're right.  
Which is fine with us.

