

Dayalbagh Educational Institute (Deemed University)

Integrated Masters in Theology Programme 2018-19



The Life and Works of Maulana Jalal-al-Din Rumi
(In partial fulfilment of requirements for THD 403 MA Theology
Semester 2)

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The Life and Works of Jalal-al-Din Rumi

In the last several centuries, the spiritual influence of Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi is being strongly felt by people of diverse beliefs throughout the world. He is recognized as one of the greatest literary and spiritual figures of all time – a great Sufi philosopher, mystic and gifted scribe whose poetry is deeply insightful, meaningful and touching. In this paper, we will recount his life history and explore some of his magnificent works.

Birth and Early Life

Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi was born on September 30, 1207 in Balkh, on the border of what is modern day Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. His family hailed from the Khorasan region, with his grandmother being a princess of Khorasan. At an early age his family left Balkh because of the danger of the invading Mongols and settled in Konya, Turkey, which was then the capital of the Seljuk Empire.

During their travels the family met Farid al-Din Attar, a great mystic who blessed the young Rumi. His father Bah al-Din Walad was a great religious teacher of mystical theology who received a position at the university in Konya. Rumi's early spiritual education was under the tutelage of his father and later under his father's close friend Sayyid Burhan al-Din Muhaqqiq. Sayyid had been in Balkh, Afghanistan when he felt the death of his friend Bah al-Din and realized that he must go to Konya to take over Rumi's spiritual education. He came to Konya when Rumi was about twenty-four years old, and for nine years instructed him in the science of the prophets and mystical states, beginning with a strict forty day retreat and continuing with various disciplines of meditation and fasting.

The Making of a Scholar

During this time Rumi also spent more than four years in Aleppo and Damascus studying with some of the greatest religious minds of the time and also completed the Hajj. As the years passed, Rumi grew both in knowledge and consciousness of God. Eventually Burhan al-Din felt that he had fulfilled his responsibility towards his student, and he wanted to live out the rest of his years in seclusion. Before he left, Burhan al-Din prophesized the arrival of Shams-e-Tabriz in the life of Rumi by saying "A great friend will come to you, and you will be each other's mirror. He will lead you to the innermost parts of the spiritual world, just as you will lead him. Each of you will complete the other, and you will be the greatest friends in the entire world".

Meeting with Shams-e-Tabriz

At Konya, Rumi succeeded his father as teacher in the religious school, madrasa. At the age of thirty-seven, on 15 November 1244, Rumi met the spiritual vagabond and wandering dervish Shams-e-Tabriz. Many differing accounts of this meeting are given of which one famous tale has Shams passing by Rumi who is reading a book. Shams asks Rumi what he is doing, to which Rumi, regarding him as an uneducated stranger, replies, "Something that you do not understand!" At that moment, the books suddenly catch fire and Rumi asks Shams to explain what happened. His reply was,

"Something you do not understand."

Prior to this encounter Rumi had been an eminent professor of religion and a highly attained mystic; after this he became an inspired poet and a great lover of humanity. Rumi's meeting with Shams is aptly described by Murat Yagan in this explanation: "Shams was a messenger from the Source. He did nothing himself but carry enlightenment to someone who can receive - someone who is either too full or too empty. Rumi was one who was too full. After receiving it, he could apply this message for the benefit of humanity. Shams was burning and Rumi caught fire."

Shams became fast friends with Rumi, in whom he recognised a kindred spirit. The two developed a very close friendship and it was at this point that Rumi became more and more secluded, shunning the society of those he previously would discuss and debate matters with. His relationship with Shams caused great jealousy in his family and among other students.

Shams' companionship with Rumi was brief. Despite the fact that each was a perfect mirror for the other, Shams disappeared, not once but twice. The first time, Rumi's son Sultan Walad searched for and discovered him in Damascus. The second disappearance, on 5 December 1248, however, proved to be final, and it is believed that he may have been murdered by people who resented his influence over Rumi, but Rumi himself did not think so. He travelled for years looking for his friend, and it was this loss that led to the outpouring of his soul through his poetry. It was after the alchemy of this relationship that Rumi was able to fulfill Sayyid Burhan al-Din's prediction that he would "drown men's souls in a fresh life and in the immeasurable abundance of God... and bring to life the dead of this false world with... meaning and love."

Writings

Diwan-e-Shams-e-Tabrizi

For more than ten years after meeting Shams, Rumi had been spontaneously composing odes, or ghazals, and these had been collected in a large volume called the *Diwan-i Kabir* or *Diwan-e-Shams-e-Tabrizi*.

The *Diwan-e-Shams-e-Tabrizi*, named in honour of his friend Shams is often abbreviated to *Diwan*. It consists of about 40,000 verses in a vibrant and energetic style. It has been suggested that the *Diwan* represents Rumi's feelings while in a dance-induced spiritual state.

The *Diwan* is filled with ecstatic verses in which Rumi expresses his mystical love for Shams as a symbol of his love for God. It is characteristic of Persian Sufi poetry for it to be ambiguous as to whether the human beloved or the Divine Beloved is being addressed. It is also an essential feature of the particular kind of Sufism that Rumi practiced that mystical "annihilation in the spiritual master" is considered a necessary first stage before mystical "annihilation in God" can be attained. The *Diwan* is filled with poems expressing this first stage in which Rumi sees Shams everywhere and in everything. Rumi's "annihilation" of his separate self was so intense that, instead of following the tradition of including his own name in the last line of odes/ghazals, he often uses the name of his beloved spiritual master and friend instead. Or he appeals to (mystical) Silence which transcends the mind and its concepts.

*That moment (is) joyous and blessed when we are sitting
(together) in the veranda, you and I; with two forms and faces,
(yet) with one soul, you and I.*

*The gifts of the orchard and the speech of the birds will offer (us)
the Water of (Eternal) Life² (at) the moment when we come into
the garden, you and I.*

*The stars of the (night) sky will come as our observers, (and) we
will reveal the moon itself³ to them, you and I.*
- One Soul, You and I, Diwan e Kabir

Although the *Diwan* contains many short didactic passages, on the whole it appears as a collection of individual and separate crystallizations of spiritual states undergone on the path to God. The overall essence of the *Diwan* is one of spiritual intoxication and ecstatic love.

At the end of the *Diwan* is a collection of poems of four lines, called quatrains. It is believed that about 1,600 can be correctly attributed to Rumi.

Masnavi

After the death of Shams, Rumi developed a deep spiritual friendship with Hussain al-Din Chelebi. The two of them were wandering through the Meram vineyards outside of Konya one day when Hussain al-Din described an idea he had to Rumi: "If you were to write a book like the *Ilahiname* of Sanai or the *Mantik'ut-Tayr'l* of Farid al-Din Attar it would become the companion of many troubadours. They would fill their hearts from your work and compose music to accompany it." At this Rumi smiled and took from inside the folds of his turban a piece of paper on which were written the opening eighteen lines of his *Masnavi*, beginning with:

*Listen to the reed and the tale it tells,
how it sings of separation...*

Hussain al-Din wept for joy and implored Rumi to write volumes more. He agreed on the condition that Chelebi would write it. And so it happened that in his early fifties, Rumi began the dictation of this monumental work.

The *Masnavi* consists of 25,000 verses, in six books of poetry and is a commentary upon mystical states and stations. It places them within the overall context of Islamic and Sufi teachings and practice. And it corrects the mistaken impression that one might receive by studying different poems in the *Diwan* in isolation and separating them from the wider context of Sufism and Islam.

The *Masnavi* can justifiably be considered the greatest spiritual masterpiece ever written by a human being. Its content covers the full spectrum of life on earth, every kind of human activity: religious, cultural, political, sexual, domestic; every kind of human character from the vulgar to the refined; as well as copious and specific details of the natural world, history and geography. It is also a book that presents the vertical dimension of life — from this mundane world of desire, work, and things, to the

most sublime levels of metaphysics and cosmic awareness. It is its completeness that enchants and teaches Sufis how to reach their goal of being in true love with God.

"For once Mohammad firmly clarified: "Trust God, but still make sure your camel's tied!" God loves the one who earns, so I urge you: Trust God but don't forget you must act too!"

*If you've an opening in your heart you'll see
The sun's bright rays wherever you may be—
In everything God can be seen through love
Just like the moon among the stars above.*

While many other poets have a mystical vision and then try to express it in a graspable language, Rumi has never attempted to bring his visions to the level of the mundane. He has always demanded the reader to reach higher and higher in his or her own spiritual understanding, and then perhaps be able to appreciate what Rumi was saying. This is why there are many layers to his poetry as much because of his writing, but more because of our understanding. As we transcend in our understanding, we grasp more and more of what he conveyed to us.

Rumi's unique style of poetry became all the rage at the time. He blended romantic imagery of classical Persian poetry that features a beautiful female companion, a cup of wine, a flower garden, moon lit night and candles burning with quotes from the 3 Abrahamic religious books plus mystical references, direct emotional expressions, issues involving maturity and growth of the soul and even anecdotes about daily life.

The mastery of rhyme and rhythm is such that he often creates a new vocabulary, using the same old words, yet creating new feelings that are associated with them. Furthermore, often he has such mastery of play on words and puns, or at other times he uses the same word with a different accent or vowel twice or even thrice in the same verse, with a different meaning each time. One cannot help but marvel at the linguistic mastery he displays. The end result is one of the experience of artistic beauty, musical genius, rhythm and ecstatic energy, all in conjunction with the mental understanding of the wisdom conveyed. This is as close as one can get to the mystical experience itself, without actually being there with Rumi. His presence pervades his poetry, and one cannot help but be touched by such powerful and loving presence.

Through the *Diwan-e-Shams-e-Tabrizi* and *Masnavi*, Rumi greatly influenced Sufi poetry and Middle Eastern culture and his works have become a global cultural touchstone of reckoning.

Besides the above, Rumi's work also includes the *Fih ma fih* – 71 lectures of various religious topics, the *Majales-e Seba*, 7 sermons that he delivered in his lifetime and the *Makatib*, a collection of his letters to students and family.

Mevlevi Order

It is believed that Rumi would turn round and round while reciting his poetry, and it is this dance which formed the basis for the Mevlevi Order, or Whirling Dervishes, after his death. Dervish means doorway, and the dance is believed to be a mystical portal between the earthly and cosmic worlds.

The Mevlevi Order has been presided over by a member of Rumi's family for over 800 years, since the time of his son, Sultan Walad.

Sema is used to refer to ceremonies used by sufi orders and often involves prayer, song, dance and other rituals. The twirling dance represents a mystical journey of spiritual ascent through mind and love to perfection. The turning symbolizes turning towards truth, abandonment of ego and growing love for God.

Every year, on the Urs (death anniversary) of Rumi, the Mevlevi Order will celebrate with an annual festival.

Rumi died in December 17, 1273, halfway through dictating the sixth volume of the *Masnavi*. His mausoleum, the Green Dome, is now a museum in Konya and a famous place of pilgrimage.

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