

# Rumi's Religion of Love<sup>1</sup>

1. *Mathnavi*, Rumi's master piece, begins by telling the story of a flute. At some level, this flute is a symbol of human being's soul, and its sad melody echoes a hidden sadness at the heart of every human being's soul who is separated from the source.

For Rumi, the tragedy of human's existence in this world is "separation". We were once united with the Unseen Ocean of Divine. But now the tiny drop of my existence is fallen in the desert of this illusionary world, apart from the Ocean. For Rumi, the authentic life is the one which is united with the Divine. Therefore, my life, as long as it is separated from the source, is not authentic.

2. That is why the flute's melody is passionately sad. It is sad, because of the pain of nostalgia, being apart from the home. And it is passionate, because of the desperate longing for returning to the home, and rejoining the Beloved. Therefore, for Rumi, at the heart of human's soul there is a persistent sense of uneasiness: my soul never feels comfortable in this world, it always feels something is missing, it always experiences a sense of "separation anxiety". Therefore, the flute's moaning is a sad song that your soul sings when she remembers the home, the good old times.

3. For Rumi, an unauthentic life, i.e., a life of separation is dominated by two strong feelings: anxiety, and boredom. The reason is simple: When the drop of my existence is not a part of the Ocean anymore, its existence can easily be wiped out. An isolated drop can be easily evaporated by the heat of the sun, or be dried out by a wind. A separated life is at the edge of annihilation. And the constant threat of annihilation is the main source of human's anxiety. On the other hand, the situation of human's soul at the stage of separation, according to Rumi, is similar to a princess who used to live in an extremely large palace, but now she is condemned to live in a very dark small prison with no windows on the walls. When she lived in the palace, there was always something new to explore: the vastness of the sky, the colorful scene of the sunset, the endless horizon of the ocean. There was no room for boredom. But now she is restricted to close walls with no perspective. Nothing new and refreshing comes to the view. She is bored to the bones. When the drop was united with the Ocean, it was limitless, but now as a separated drop, it is trapped into its limited individuality. Here, the source of boredom is the finite, being restricted to inescapable limits.

Therefore, for Rumi, there is only one way to truly overcome the pain of anxiety and boredom in our lives: to attain the authentic life, to find the way back to the home, to be reunited with the Ocean. This journey brings to our souls permanent peace and true happiness.

4. But what is the path to the Ocean? How can human's soul find her way back to the source? Rumi believes that this question cannot be answered unless we know what the main obstacle on our way back to the Ocean is. So what is the barrier that prevents us from rejoining the Ocean, and overcoming the stage of separation? Rumi's answer is simple and straightforward: the obstacle is you, your own "self". Rumi tells us the story

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of a lover who went to his beloved, and knocked the door. The beloved from behind the door asked: "Who is that at the door?" The lover answered: "I". The beloved disappointedly said: "Go away! It is not the proper time! Here is not place for such a raw fellow!", and she did not open the door. After several years reflection, the lover returned and fearfully knocked the door again. The beloved asked: "Who is that at the door?" This time the lover responded: "You! The one on this side of the door is also you!" And it was then that the beloved opened the door, and said: "Now it is the time! There is no room in the house for two 'I's. Now since you have been transformed to me, and nothing left of that 'I', you may come in." Rumi's message is clear: if you want to rejoin the beloved, you should abandon your "self".

This "self", for Rumi, is the situation of human's existence when s/he has become separated from the Divine, and it has two major characteristics: First, from moral point of view, this "self" is the source of "selfishness" and "egoism". The person whose existence evolves around him wants everything for his own benefit, and cares less for the others. But secondly and more importantly, this "self" defines itself in contrast to "others". Therefore, the essence of "self" is boundary; some limits that distinguish it from other beings. Boundary and limit create distance and separation. They descend "self" from the state of union to the state of separation. That is why Rumi calls "self" "the mother of all vices", and considers it as the main source of anxiety and boredom.

5. Then how can one cure the sickness of this selfish limiting "self"? How can one escape from the prison of this restricting selfishness? How can our souls flourish like a flower, or transform like a butterfly? Or more accurately, how can one alternate the individual self's boundaries and contours? It is worth noting that alternations in individual self's boundaries and contours are a goal of religious quest in general: For example, in Indian Vedanta the goal of religious quest is to expand the self to include all of being, and in Buddhism, it is to eliminate the self, and in theism merging with the divine.

For Rumi, the one and only way of this alternation or transformation is the path of love. Rumi calls "love" "the Physician for all our sicknesses", and more importantly, he considers "love" as the remedy for pride and conceit, which are, in his view, the main sources of all other human's vices. He strongly encourages us to fall in love:

آب حیات است عشق در دل و جانش پریر  
مرده و پژمرده است گرچه بود او وزیر

عمر که بی عشق رفت هیچ حسابش مگیر  
هر که جز عاشقان ماهی بی آب دان

*A lifetime without Love is of no account. Love is the Water of Life- drink it down with heart and soul!*

*Know that all but the lovers are fish without water, dead and desiccated, though they be viziers. (D 11909-10)*

بترین مرگ ها بی عشقی است  
بر چه می لرزد صدف؟ بر گوهرش

*The worst of all deaths is to be without Love. Why does the oyster tremble? For its own pearl. (D 13297)*

هر که را نبض عشق می نجهد  
گر فلاطون بود تو اش خر گیر

*If Love's pulse does not beat within a man, let him be Plato, he is but an ass. (D 12330)*

عمر بود بار همچنانکه تو دیدی

عشق گزین، عشق، بی حیات خوش عشق

*Choose love, love! Without the sweet life of love, living is a burden- as you have seen. (D 32210)*

But why is “love” the “Physician of all our sicknesses”? For Rumi the magic of love lies in its ability to alternate the individual self’s boundaries and contours. The essence of “love” for Rumi is “sacrifice”. A true lover is the one who is eager to make great sacrifice for the sake of her/his beloved. As soon as you experience love, your way of being transforms drastically. Before love, you knowingly or unknowingly consider yourself as the measure of everything, the center of the universe. However, as soon as you fall in love, the configuration of your “self” will be changed. To form a love-bond requires you to become open toward the other, and if necessary, to sacrifice your own well-being for the sake of the beloved. And this openness alternates the boundaries of your “self”. The center of your existence moves from “I” to “beloved”. Rumi sometimes calls this transformation, “death prior to death” or “death in the light”. Through love, one finds the opportunity to detach oneself from one’s own self, and attach it to the beloved.

6. Most Muslim mystics, including Rumi, portrayed the human love as a “bridge” toward divine love. To experience a true romantic love, for them, prepares human soul to fly higher, and find the capacity to love God directly. However, Rumi sometimes employs a different metaphor that represents his different understanding of the relation between human and divine love. Rumi claims that to perceive the soul of the universe, that is God, one needs two mirrors: one is your own heart, and the other one is your beloved’s heart. The lover places his own mirror in front of the beloved’s mirror. As soon as love’s bond forms, these two mirrors reflect each other endlessly. The infinite reveals himself in the space between the two mirrors. The difference between the mirror- metaphor and the bridge- metaphor is important: when you cross the bridge, and reach the other side, you do not need the bridge any more. However, the perception of the infinite is entirely dependent on the presence of both mirrors. In other words, in bridge -metaphor, human love has only instrumental value, when you reach God, your earthly beloved does not matter anymore, but in mirror-analogy, human love has intrinsic value, and you can perceive the holy only through your beloved. God reveals Himself in the space between two human beings. As many Muslim Sufis claimed: The path toward God passes through the care for fellow human beings.

Therefore, love is not only the great teacher of altruism, but also it shakes the boundaries of “self”, and creates a unique opportunity to perceive the holy through your beloved.

That is why Rumi invites us to go beyond the limits of this or that religion, and devote ourselves to what he calls “the religion of love”. The religion of love for Rumi is not the negation of this or that religion, but it is the higher level of spirituality. This idea is deeply rooted in Rumi’s personal experience of love. Before he met Shams, Rumi was to a large extent, a man of traditional religion. For a man of religion, religion is the center of the world of spirituality. Salvation cannot be attained but through a particular religion. But after meeting Shams, Rumi became a man of God. For a man of God, there is no fundamental difference between this or that particular religion, as long as they lead you to God. Rumi’s personal experience of love was a turning point in his theology, a kind of “Copernican Revolution”. For a man of God, it is God and not any particular religion that is the center of the spiritual world. The goal is to encounter God beyond any

veil, including the veil of religion. That is why Rumi considered himself as a follower of the “religion of love”:

دین من از عشق زنده بودن است      زندگی زین جان و تن ننگ من است  
(مثنوی، دفتر ششم، 4059)

*My religion is to live through love- life through this spirit and body is my shame.*

And he claims that the religion of love is different and beyond all other religions, it is all about God and nothing else:

ملت عشق از همه دین ها جداست      عاشقان را ملت و مذهب خداست (مثنوی، دفتر دوم، 1760)

*Love's creed is separate from all religions: The creed and denomination of lovers is God.*

7. Finally, for Rumi, same as Plato, love is a response to beauty. The lover must be sensitive to all kinds of beauty in the world. Rumi says in his religion if you want to know God, do not look at this or that book, look at the beauty of the beloved:

عاشقان را شد مدرس حسن دوست      دفتر و درس و سبق شان روی اوست  
(مثنوی، دفتر سوم، 3847)

*The lovers' teacher is the Beloved's beauty: Their book and lesson are His face.*

The beauty that inspires love, the openness that comes with love, and also the perspective of reunion with the beloved are elements in Rumi's religion of love that relieve the burden of “separation”, and help human soul to overcome the persistent sense of anxiety and boredom. Rumi's response to the tragedy of human's predicament in this world is nothing but the same universal message of love: to love and to be loved.

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