

MYSTICAL CLASSICS OF THE WORLD

The Essential Rumi

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QUALITY PAPERBACK BOOK CLUB

NEW YORK

On Rumi

Persians and Afghans 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 (*sobbet*) 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 fiercely 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 masterpiece to Husam. He died on December 17, 1273.

1273
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ALL RIVERS AT ONCE

Don't unstring the bow.
I am your four-feathered arrow
that has not been used yet.

I am a strong knifeblade word,
not some *if* or *maybe*,
dissolving in air.

I am sunlight slicing the dark..
Who made this night?
A forge deep in the earth-mud.

What is the body?
Endurance.

What is love?
Gratitude.

What is hidden
in our chests?
Laughter.

What else?
Compassion.

Let the beloved be a hat pulled down firmly on my head.
Or drawstrings pulled and tied around my chest.

Someone asks, How does love have hands and feet?
Love is the sprouting bed for hands and feet!

Your father and mother were playing love games.
They came together, and you appeared!

Don't ask what love can make or do!
Look at the colors of the world.

The riverwater moving in all rivers at once.
The truth that lives in Shams' face.

Watch the dust grains moving
in the light near the window.

Their dance is our dance.

We rarely hear the inward music,
but we're all dancing to it nevertheless,
directed by the one who teaches us,
the pure joy of the sun,
our music master.

When I am with you, we stay up all night.
When you're not here, I can't go to sleep.

Praise God for these two insomnias!
And the difference between them.

The minute I heard my first love story
I started looking for you, not knowing
how blind that was.

Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.
They're in each other all along.

We are the mirror as well as the face in it.
We are tasting the taste this minute
of eternity. We are pain
and what cures pain, both. We are
the sweet cold water and the jar that pours.

I want to hold you close like a lute,
so we can cry out with loving.

You would rather throw stones at a mirror?
I am your mirror, and here are the stones.

SOMEONE DIGGING IN THE GROUND

An eye is meant to see things.
The soul is here for its own joy.
A head has one use: for loving a true love.
Legs: to run after.

Love is for vanishing into the sky. The mind,
for learning what men have done and tried to do.
Mysteries are not to be solved. The eye goes blind
when it only wants to see *why*.

A lover is always accused of something.
But when he finds his love, whatever was lost
in the looking comes back completely changed.
On the way to Mecca, many dangers: thieves,
the blowing sand, only camel's milk to drink.
Still each pilgrim kisses the black stone there
with pure longing, feeling in the surface
the taste of the lips he wants.

This talk is like stamping new coins. They pile up,
while the real work is done outside
by someone digging in the ground.

smell the incense, the surprise meal fixed
by the lover inside all your other lovers.

This heart-tumult is my signal
to you igniting in the tomb.

So don't fuss with the shroud
and the graveyard road dust.

Those get ripped open and washed away
in the music of our finally meeting.

And don't look for me in a human shape.
I am inside your looking. No room
for form with love this strong.

Beat the drum and let the poets speak.
This is a day of purification for those who
are already mature and initiated into what love is.

No need to wait until we die!
There's more to want here than money
and being famous and bites of roasted meat.

Now, what shall we call this new sort of gazing-house
that has opened in our town where people sit
quietly and pour out their glancing
like light, like answering?

CHILDHOOD FRIENDS

You may have heard, it's the custom for kings
to let warriors stand on the left, the side of the heart,
and courage. On the right they put the chancellor,
and various secretaries, because the practice
of bookkeeping and writing usually belongs
to the right hand. In the center,

the sufis,

because in meditation they become mirrors.

The king can look at their faces
and see his original state.

Give the beautiful ones mirrors,
and let them fall in love with themselves.

That way they polish their souls
and kindle remembering in others.

A close childhood friend once came to visit Joseph.
They had shared the secrets that children tell each other
when they're lying on their pillows at night
before they go to sleep. These two
were completely truthful
with each other.

The friend asked, "What was it like when you realized
your brothers were jealous and what they planned to do?"

"I felt like a lion with a chain around its neck.
Not degraded by the chain, and not complaining,
but just waiting for my power to be recognized."

"How about down in the well, and in prison?
How was it then?"

"Like the moon when it's getting
smaller, yet knowing the fullness to come.
Like a seed pearl ground in the mortar for medicine,
that knows it will now be the light in a human eye.

Like a wheat grain that breaks open in the ground,
then grows, then gets harvested, then crushed in the mill
for flour, then baked, then crushed again between teeth
to become a person's deepest understanding.
Lost in love, like the songs the planters sing
the night after they sow the seed."

There is no end
to any of this.

Back to something else the good man
and Joseph talked about.

"Ah my friend, what have you
brought me? You know a traveler should not arrive
empty-handed at the door of a friend like me.
That's going to the grinding stone without your wheat.

God will ask at the resurrection, 'Did you bring Me
a present? Did you forget? Did you think
you wouldn't see me?'"

Joseph kept teasing,
"Let's have it. I want my gift!"

The guest began, "You can't imagine how I've looked
for something for you. Nothing seemed appropriate.
You don't take gold down into a goldmine,
or a drop of water to the Sea of Oman!
Everything I thought of was like bringing cumin seed
to Kirmanshah where cumin comes from.

You have all seeds in your barn. You even have my love
and my soul, so I can't even bring those.

I've brought you a mirror. Look at yourself,
and remember me."

He took the mirror out from his robe
where he was hiding it.

What is the mirror of being?
Non-being. Always bring a mirror of non-existence
as a gift. Any other present is foolish.

Let the poor man look deep into generosity.
Let bread see a hungry man.
Let kindling behold a spark from the flint.

An empty mirror and your worst destructive habits,
when they are held up to each other,
that's when the real making begins.
That's what art and crafting are.

A tailor needs a torn garment to practice his expertise.
The trunks of trees must be cut and cut again
so they can be used for fine carpentry.

Your doctor must have a broken leg to doctor.
Your defects are the ways that glory gets manifested.
Whoever sees clearly what's diseased in himself
begins to gallop on the way.

There is nothing worse
than thinking you are well enough.
More than anything, self-complacency
blocks the workmanship.

Put your vileness up to a mirror and weep.
Get that self-satisfaction flowing out of you!
Satan thought, "I am better than Adam,"
and that *better than* is still strongly in us.

Your stream water may look clean,
but there's unstirred matter on the bottom.
Your sheikh can dig a side channel
that will drain that waste off.

Trust your wound to a teacher's surgery.
Flies collect on a wound. They cover it,
those flies of your self-protecting feelings,
your love for what you think is yours.

Let a teacher wave away the flies
and put a plaster on the wound.

Don't turn your head. Keep looking
at the bandaged place. That's where
the light enters you.

And don't believe for a moment
that you're healing yourself.

THE MOUSE AND THE CAMEL

A mouse caught hold of a camel's lead rope
in his two forelegs and walked off with it,
imitating the camel drivers.

The camel went along,
letting the mouse feel heroic.

"Enjoy yourself,"
he thought. "I have something to teach you, presently."

They came to the edge of a great river.
The mouse was dumbfounded.

THE MILK OF MILLENNIA

I am part of the load
not rightly balanced.
I drop off in the grass,
like the old cave-sleepers, to browse
wherever I fall.

For hundreds of thousands of years I have been dust grains
floating and flying in the will of the air,
often forgetting ever being
in that state, but in sleep
I migrate back. I spring loose
from the four-branched, time-and-space cross,
this waiting room.

I walk into a huge pasture.
I nurse the milk of millennia.

Everyone does this in different ways.
Knowing that conscious decisions
and personal memory
are much too small a place to live,
every human being streams at night
into the loving nowhere, or during the day,
in some absorbing work.

THE YOU PRONOUN

In the Name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate.

The start of the second book of the *Mathnawi* has been postponed,
and the reason is this: sometimes God reveals all the wisdom of doing
a certain action, and the listener becomes so overwhelmed in contem-
plating that, that he is unable to perform it. Lost in the infinity, with
no ability to understand, or do, anything.

God then reduces the wisdom portion, and makes a small bridle to
fit over the listener's head to lead him by. The size of the bridle is im-
portant when you're dealing with a stubborn camel. Too heavy, and
he'll lie down and refuse to move. Too slight, and he'll ignore it. The
proportion of wisdom to personal advantage is a subtle mixture, like