

Spiritual Maturity Summer School 2015

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“The Sufi has two points of view; his or her own, and that of the other.”

“It is more important to know the truth about yourself than the truth of heaven and earth.”

“The first sign of realization of truth is tolerance.”

“Life is a misery for the person absorbed in himself.”

Hazrat Inayat Khan

I have begun with these four quotations from Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan, and will come back to them during this lecture. I will be looking at the relationship between spiritual development and the development of the personality, specifically the stages in the development of the ego. Often in our reflections on spirituality the ego is described as a single entity, a part of the personality that is one thing; and we think that it is bad and we must get rid of it, in order to experience Divine Presence. However, I will suggest that this is not only not an accurate understanding of the personality, but it is impossible. Today, I will speak on behalf of the ego, that is the mature ego.

First we must speak about Illumination, or Enlightenment.

It is not possible to define or describe Spiritual Illumination, or Enlightenment. Because, as the mystics say, we are always in it. The way things really are *is* Enlightenment and our experience of the way things really are *is also* (the same) Enlightenment. Kabir says,

“I laugh when I hear that the fish in the water is thirsty.

You don't grasp the fact that what is most alive of all is inside your own house.”

So it is really impossible to describe or define something, when there is no vantage point, no place to stand that is outside it. We are always

inside. Given the structure of the knowing mind, which is dualistic, when we use a concept to describe anything, the mind creates a self and an object, a knower and a known. This is described in the Upanisads in this way.

“As long as there is duality, one sees *the other*, one hears *the other*, one smells *the other*, one speaks to *the other*, one thinks of *the other*, one knows *the other*; but when for the illumined soul the all is dissolved in the Self, who is there to be seen by whom, who is there to be smelt by whom, who is there to be heard by whom, who is there to be spoken to by whom, who is there to be thought of by whom, who is there to be known by whom? Ah, Maitreyi, my beloved, the Intelligence which reveals all – by what shall it be revealed? By whom shall the Knower be known?”
(Brihadaranyaka Upanisad)

Isn't this what Murshid means when he speaks of having two points of view: your own and that of the other? There is an esoteric meaning within this saying, in addition to its interpersonal, social meaning.

So when we are describing a concept, an object, we are always standing outside the house, like the fish in the water complaining of our thirst.

And yet we long for this Enlightenment. We long for the mystic's view. That is why we are here today. That is why we speak in paradox. The way things really are is Enlightenment, and our experience of the way things are is Enlightenment.

For, the One is One. Not Two. Therefore there is nothing outside the One. Even though we say, "Toward the One" as though we are someplace else. Anytime we feel we are outside, we *could* laugh, along with Kabir. This is our metaphysical insight.

Rumi says it in this way.

One Song

What is praised is One,
So the praise is One, too,

Many jugs being emptied
Into a huge basin.

All religions,
All this singing,
Is one song.

The differences are just
Illusion and vanity.

The sun's light looks a little different
On this wall than it does on that wall,
And a lot different on this other one,
But it's still one light.

We have borrowed these clothes,
These time and place personalities,
From a light, and when we praise,
We're pouring them back in.

And yet, we do describe things, from the perspective of our "time and place personalities." Sometimes the One is described as Light. Everything is Light. *Ya Nur*, the Sufis say. Everything is lit from within by the same undivided light. There is nothing left out. The Japanese poetess writes:

"Watching the moon
at dawn
solitary, mid-sky
I know myself completely
No part left out." Izumi Shikibu

This is the experience we long for. Light – everything is unified and equal in this radiance, everything is the same, and yet everything is also unique and lit from within. This light symbolizes the way we experience that aspect of reality which is empty, undivided, all-pervasive, eternal, the Supreme God. Yet we are not Enlightened or Illumined, because we experience this light. It would be a mistake to think that I was not Enlightened, but now I have experienced the Light, and now I am

Enlightened. Enlightenment can't be achieved, or attained. That would mean that we are in the realm of *two*. Before Enlightenment and after Enlightenment. The realm of dualist time. Or not Enlightened, and Enlightened. The realm of dualistic space. Our very description traps us in dualism, and limits our consciousness from that which it seeks to describe.

So we have pointed to The Absolute. The Emptiness. The Highest. And now we come down from the Highest, to speak dualistically, turning our attention to the experience of the relative, the world where we live most of the time. To the world we call *reality*. Perhaps we have had an experience of Light, an Enlightening experience. But then we come back to the daylight world. We have to give ourselves to the daylight world in order to turn revelation into matter, in order to consciously embody the Light in matter. We need to see the world as it is, so we can truly give ourselves to be part of it. This is the purpose of life for the Sufi.

So we might say, now that we have realized Enlightenment, and realize it to be non-different from all life, this will be easy. But, as some of us old Sufis know, it is not easy.

What is the process? What stops us? Murshid says, " The process of mystical development is the annihilation of the false ego in the real ego. Sufis call the false ego Nafs and the real ego Allah or God." (Mysticism, Ch. XIV, p. 201.) The false ego? "... It is that the true ego, which is the ego of the Lord, has become a false ego in us."

But what is the false ego? How do we recognize it? Many characterizations have been made of the false ego, but I shall describe it here as a realm of consciousness characterized by a self-centered, oppositional sorting and choosing. By self-centered I mean a belief in the absolute reality of the self and the primacy of its concerns and reactions. The absolute reality of my self, and the primacy of my concerns and reactions. I may even think that my concerns are divinely inspired, and perhaps they are. But when we believe in our ideas in a self-centered way they become delusions, and they bind us to a limited view of reality. Murshid says, "Reality has become confused. The soul, coming from the highest source, but having identified itself with a

smaller domain, the domain of the body and the mind, has conceived in itself a false idea of itself; and it is this false idea which is called Nafs."

So our task here is to allow the experience of Enlightenment/ Light/ the real ego/ God to stain and permeate our everyday ego, so that the everyday ego can grow and develop.

Murshid describes four stages in the development of the ego.

1. *Ammara* is the stage of the mechanical reaction of a mind conditioned to react to any stimulus. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Something happens, I don't get my way, and I react – with frustration, fear, disillusionment, sadness, or some other immediate feeling. So, for example, I say something and a man yells loudly at me, "Stop it!" like he is an angry father. Immediately the *Ammara* ego feels like a child. The psychological experiences of the child are stimulated. The child ego feels frightened, bad, punished, or angry, and may shout back across the room. Or when the *Ammara* ego hears someone yelling like an angry father, it may feel like an angry parent (rather than a child) and feel insulted. Mechanical conditioning. We all have it. It is very important to know and recognize your own conditioning.
2. But, through suffering and emotional learning, the ego becomes *Lauwama*, self-disciplined. At this stage, something happens and while aware of my reaction, I can use my will to modify my response to a situation or condition. So the man (who cannot control his *Ammara* ego reactions) yells, the child ego or the parent ego which has been stimulated, has feelings; but the ego at the stage of *Lauwama* can become aware of these feelings and choose whether and how to respond. So I may feel frustrated, but I can also be aware of patience and try to understand why the other person is so reactive.
3. Then the ego can become *Mutmaina*, being able to maintain a certain rhythm of mind, like a calm sea. The *Mutmaina* ego can feel and recognize agitation but can soothe its agitation, and connect at a deeper level. Murshid says,
"While a person rejoices over his rise and sorrows over his fall, the wise person takes both as the natural consequences of life...(Bowl of Saki, July 9) "It makes no difference to me if I am so praised that I am raised from earth to heaven, nor if

I am so blamed that I am thrown from the greatest heights to the depths of the earth. Life to me is an ever-moving sea in which the waves of favor and disfavor constantly rise and fall.”

4. And finally, the ego can become Salima, peaceful, no longer disturbed by the world's irritations and agitations that would jar it. This deep state of peace is within us all, within all matter, all experience. When the ego has developed to the stage of Salima, then consciousness can sink back into the place from which all thoughts arise. It is a truer place to rest ---and humbler.

But it is easy to think that we have reached this stage of Salima when we have not. We think that we are above emotional reactions, when we are only avoiding them. It is as if we think that we can sort our thoughts and feelings into separate piles of Enlightened thoughts and non-Enlightened thoughts. And that then we can identify only with the Enlightened thoughts; someone else must be having those angry, disagreeable feelings. It is a very seductive delusion. But when we are sick, or become limited by age, chronic pain, or physical deterioration, the self discipline of the *Lauwama* ego cannot control its response to the irritations of life, and the reactivity of the *Ammara* ego reasserts itself. And, as Murshid said, “Life is a misery for the person absorbed in himself.”

It is a puzzlement of the Way that some people seem to have substantial -even operatic – spiritual openings and still behave like jerks, writes Buddhist Rishi Joan Sutherland. We all see this. Otherwise we wouldn't have problems in spiritual organizations. So where do we get stuck?

Since the first and last step of the transformation of the ego is to know oneself, we must begin here. As Murshid said, "It is more important to know the truth about yourself than to know the truth of heaven and earth." To know the truth about myself, I must be able to see my actions, thoughts, and feelings clearly and without judgment. I must be able to tolerate being with my own mind: my wishes, disappointment, fears, angers, idealizations, hopes, desires, frustrations, my pain and my pleasure. This requires a strong inner witness, strong concentration, and a commitment to mindfulness. Because usually when we feel something we don't like, the mind scatters and won't continue to be

aware. Like water skittering on a hot skillet. It must be someone else's fault that I feel bad.

Concentration and mindfulness are mental factors that can be developed in meditation and spiritual exercises. But they must be turned toward our own dualistic experience and fearlessly applied. We have to make ourselves unconditionally available to our own experience. Showing up with an open mind and whole heart. If I can know myself accurately, then I can know when a thought or feeling is really mine and when it is another person's. Then I know when I am projecting my mind onto another. And when the other is projecting his or her mind on me.

This is actually one of the hardest tasks of spiritual development, and one which few people seem to achieve. But without knowing and feeling "my" feelings, I can't really know that another person has different feelings, or even exists separate from me. This is what we all experienced as infants: I'm hungry and cry and Mother comes to feed me; she is my good Mother. I cry and she does not come; she is my bad Mother. She does not exist as a separate person. She only exists to fulfill my needs. This is a state of consciousness which is very hard to outgrow. Because when I realize that my Mother actually has her own needs and feelings, then I am forced to realize she is separate from me, and the world does not revolve around me – no matter how good or obedient, or bad and rebellious, I am. This can be really depressing.

This is also the mind-set of Fundamentalisms of all kinds. There is only one true way. This is the realm in which all thoughts are right or wrong. Usually mine are right and yours are wrong. So I don't need to understand or even listen to any thought/feeling which is wrong. Why would I? Oh, I might listen so that I can argue against you. Or I can just dismiss your view. It doesn't exist. In an adult, this is called malignant narcissism. This is the lack of tolerance.

And Murshid says, "The first sign of the realization of truth is tolerance." When the ego has matured through self-discipline and suffering to develop tolerance, then I can see that I have one point of view and you have another which is different from mine. Then I may try to understand your point of view, from your perspective. I may be curious,

open-minded. This doesn't mean that I have to agree with your point of view; that would be insisting again that there is only one view. Murshid says that we need to see two points of view. So, I have to ask myself: can I tell the story, or make the argument, from your point of view, in a way that you will say that I have understood. For example, when I am seeing a couple for marriage counseling, and they are caught in a particular conflict or argument, I ask each of them to tell the story of the argument from their own point of view, and then to tell the story from the point of view of their spouse. Each must tell the story until their partner agrees, "yes, that is what I am feeling." This can take some time, because like to think that our story is really the "right" story. So, this requires that I have a mature ego which can tolerate discussion, differences, and conflict. I have to be able to accept and live with frustration. I have to really know my strengths and weaknesses and those of the other person. Only then can I know whether I made a mistake, and what I can do to correct it.

Of course this is another significant problem in the development of the ego. Can one recognize and admit one's own mistake? Recently I have been reading an interesting book which has a wonderful title. Mistakes Were Made (but not by me). It is about the practice of self-justification in many areas of life, whether it is politics, business corporations, legal conflicts, divorces, and, I would add, spiritual development. Our Western cultures teach us that there is only one right answer, or there is a hierarchy of answers that are "right" – some are inherently better than others. Therefore, this means that mistakes are bad, a sign of stupidity or weakness, shameful; you can be sued for making a mistake.

A study comparing ten year old students in the US and Japan found that the children in the US were criticized for mistakes in learning math and told that they either had or didn't have mathematical ability which was innate. Children in Japan, however, were encouraged to keep trying. Mistakes, errors, and confusion were seen as part of the learning process; and success in math, as in other things, was not innate, but the result of hard work and perseverance. Not surprisingly, the Japanese children learned math more easily and performed better on standardized tests; while the American children had "math anxiety." (Harold Stevenson and James Stigler, 1970s)

Mistakes help us learn. In fact, without making mistakes we can never learn anything new, or do anything creative. In spiritual practice, we can't grow spiritually unless we can recognize, feel, and think about our own mistakes. And we can't know or understand or have either sympathy or empathy for another person unless we can hear their point of view as distinct from our own, and consider that we might not know everything. We might have made a mistake.

Of course, there are people who criticize themselves often, and easily feel that any mistake must be their own fault. This can come from another imbalance in the personality, another aspect of the false ego. Instead of self-justification, there is self-blame, which is also a delusion; it also prevents us from seeing things as they are.

Murshid, understanding the importance of being able to admit that you have made a mistake, says,

“A person who awakens to the spirit of unity, a person who sees the oneness behind all things – his point of view becomes different and his attitude therefore changes. He no longer says to his friend, ‘I love you because you are my friend. He says, ‘I love you because you are myself.’ He says, as a mystic would say, ‘Whether you have done wrong or whether I have done wrong, it does not matter. What is wanted is to right the wrong.’” (*Smiling Forehead*)

Lao Tsu says,

"A great nation is like a great person:
When one makes a mistake, one realizes it.
Having realized it, one admits it.
Having admitted it, one corrects it.
One considers those who point out one's mistakes as one's most benevolent teachers."

These are fundamental ways in which the "openings," the experiences of Enlightenment, can stain and permeate and transform our Nafs, so that the false ego can mature and outgrow its limited view of reality. To summarize: I have to know and examine myself in a fearless way. I have to recognize that other points of view, other people with different experiences, exist and have valid points of view. I have to learn how to

tolerate them, even when I am frustrated. I have to be able to see my own mistakes and misunderstandings and think about how I can correct them. I have to know when I am not making a mistake.

As if this isn't enough, I have to make myself unconditionally available to my own experience. When my life walks toward me, I have to have the courtesy to walk out to meet it. As one can experience the way in which all things interpenetrate each other and are interdependent, then one's sense of isolation and exile falls away. The self becomes able to participate in the constant flow of circumstances. The mad discipline and insane persistence of our spiritual practice is not in the service of attainment, but of **availability**. We show up. The key to seeing the other world, the spiritual world, seems to be letting something/anything speak to us without interrupting it with our mental habits of exile. Then we can't believe in our delusions as we did before. They can't bind us to their limited view of reality. The ego becomes Salima.

And, so, what is our purpose here? Is it only to develop a peaceful ego? Why do we do all of this, all this hard work? Is it so that I may realize Enlightenment and be free from suffering? Is it so that I may be a person of Light, admired by all? No doubt, these are some of the motivations that bring us to the spiritual path, though there are other desires or longings that may have motivated us. But Murshid points us to the motivation of purpose. He says that while each soul has its own purpose "in the end all purposes resolve into one purpose, and it is that purpose which is sought by the mystic. For all souls, by the right and the wrong path, either sooner or later, will arrive at that purpose, a purpose for which the whole creation has been intended..." (*The Purpose of Life*) In the five activities of the Sufi Message, Murshid highly values the Brotherhood, the Community, the Brotherhood and Sisterhood. This is a vision of the transformation of the group, of the whole life. Not just the individual.

Physics, biology, chemistry, various sciences through the last century have realized that matter is not best described as particles of individual, separate stuff that bumps into or absorbs other pieces of stuff. Rather matter is both particle and wave. All things are interdependent, constantly changing, flowing into and around each other. So our

mystical vision must be of Unity in Diversity, or Diversity in Unity. In order to survive in a world in which technology, economics, and bacteria link us all, we can no longer tolerate a world in which some people are seen as *other*, as alien.

I am reminded of Herodotus, the Greek historian of the sixth century BCE, who wrote about the gold digging ants of India. He says that while he has not seen them for himself he has heard reports that these large ants live in the sandy desert. They are smaller than dogs, but bigger than foxes. They live underground and throw up sand heaps as they burrow, he comments, much like Greek ants. But the sand is full of gold. And the people of India want the gold. So they go into the desert to collect the sand. They take three camels and harness them together. They place a female camel who has just given birth in the middle, and harness one male camel on each side of her. Then, in the heat of the day, while the ants are sleeping, the Indians fill their bags with sand and ride away at top speed, because the ants have smelled them and come rushing after them in pursuit. Though the male camels become tired very easily, the female mother camel misses her baby, and quickly runs home. This was considered factual history for centuries throughout the classical world. People were, no doubt, entertained and amazed at stories like these; and considered the Indians to be very strange people. As long as you never met an Indian, it was alright to think these things. But now, someone would fly to India in search of the gold-digging ants and make a video for U-tube. And we would realize that people are similar all over the world, whether in India, Europe, Asia, the Americas. Realizing this, we see that wild or terrible stories about what other people do in other places can no longer be tolerated in our world today.

Now, our consciousness is changing with every advance in technology; and these changes come very rapidly. Our consciousness is changing into a process that is radically open-ended. The fixed, hierarchical, and polarized categories of thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are less tolerable now than they were then. And we are invited into a more spacious world, which is surpassing previous expectations. This process of developing consciousness seems, from the beginning, to have been a fundamental feature of the universe, existing at a sub-atomic level as a kind of proto-consciousness; and it is eventually

emerging into matter as the universe becomes more and more complex. Matter can become infused with the light of consciousness.

A contemporary Christian theologian, James Carroll, even suggests that the ancient Christian expectation of a future which is fulfilled by being taken up into God (symbolized in the New Testament as “the Son of Man” who comes on the “clouds of heaven”, Mark 14:62) is wholly consonant with the contemporary sense of life as an open-ended evolution, ever surpassing itself. It is the “unbounded scope of consciousness” which is known in Biblical traditions as God. And it is the human person – not just Christ – who is the creature in which the mystery of consciousness is revealed, because the human person participates in the life of Creation and *knows it*. It is the human person who, like Christ, having consciousness of self, can become conscious of his or her Divine Inheritance.. This is the Second Coming. (James Carroll, “Who is Jesus Today?” Harvard Divinity School, Bulletin 2014)

The vision of Brotherhood and Sisterhood in our time must be one of Unity in Diversity. A vision in which each individual’s awakening is in service to our common awakening. A vision in which an individual’s experience of Divine Light, of Enlightenment, is consciously embodied in matter, so that all life is transformed by Light. A vision of becoming more attentive to the complexities of human life, more encouraging of its kindnesses. A vision in which each of us, in our turn, is helping to pass the bright flame from warm hand to warm hand.