

THE NEED FOR NEED

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Part of the reason for Mawlānā's current popularity in the West is that everyone is in love with love. A number of American poets have been able to convey Mawlānā's delight in love, and this allows those completely unfamiliar with his background to feel that he is speaking to them. Love is wonderful, love is beautiful—we all know this and we all want to experience love's joy.

At the same time, those familiar with Mawlānā's context and teachings have every right to be a bit disappointed that so much of what he is saying gets lost in translation. My purpose today is to try to highlight certain points about love that need to be brought to light if in fact we want to understand Mawlānā's teachings. Let me begin by mentioning four basic notions that underlie all of his poetry and prose.

First, in keeping with Islamic thought in general, Mawlānā maintains that love is a divine attribute. Only by derivation, or metaphorically, can love be considered a human attribute. Before we can understand what love means humanly—and before we can experience love's true power—we need to understand what it means in the divine context.

In a verse to which Mawlānā often makes reference, the Koran says "He loves them, and they love Him" (5:54). In loving human beings—"He loves them"—God is the lover. In being loved by human beings—"they love Him"—God is the beloved. Given that there is no god but God, so also, in the typical conclusion drawn by much of Islamic theology, there is no true lover but God and no true beloved but God. This is Rumi's basic point about love: Love "is an attribute of God in reality, and it belongs to human beings metaphorically."^[1]

The second point is that beauty is by definition lovable. Love cannot be discussed apart from beauty, because beauty is the object of love. So also, beauty cannot be understood apart from love, because love is the human response to beauty. Anyone

who does not feel love toward the beautiful is lacking in human understanding and wholeness.

I am not saying that beauty can be defined. It is no more easily defined than is love. But, we can understand the importance of beauty as soon as we remember that beauty too is essentially a divine attribute and only derivatively a human attribute. Just as there is no true lover and no true beloved but God, so also there is nothing truly beautiful but God. This is one of the meanings of the famous hadith, "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty." Every beautiful thing other than God can be beautiful only because, as Rumi puts it, it takes water from the drainpipe.^[2] If we could understand our real situation, then we would know and sense that every love that falls into our hearts is in fact and in truth love for the Beautiful, for there is nothing beautiful but He.

A third basic point is that we cannot truly love the Beautiful, the only real object of love, without the guidance of the prophets and the saints. Specifically, in Mawlānā's context, this means the guidance of the prophet Muhammad. Here the Koran is totally explicit. The Book addresses Muhammad with these words: "Say: 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you'" (3:31).

There is no doubt that human beings are always the objects of God's love, but this does not become transformative unless people respond to it. God loves us, or else He would not have created us and He would not have revealed the ways of guidance. Nonetheless, to say that God loves everyone is exactly like saying, "He is with you wherever you are" (Koran 57:4). Of course God is with us wherever we are; our problem is that we are not with Him. Of course God loves us; our problem is that we do not love Him in return. In order for us to be with Him and in order for us to love Him as He asks to be loved, we must follow the prophetic guidance that leads to His love for us individually and specifically. This will happen only when we engage sincerely and vigorously in the path that Shams-i Tabrīzī frequently calls the path of "following" *mutāba'at*, a word that is derived precisely from the "following" mentioned in the Koranic verse—"If you love God, follow me." As Shams puts it in one passage of his *Maqālāt*, "Woe on those who let go of following Muhammad!"^[3]

This leads to the fourth basic point: The fruit of following Muhammad is that God will love us, and the fruit of God's loving us is that we will be with God just as He is with us. One of the favorite scriptural references to explain this point is the *ḥadīth qudsī* in which God says, "My servant draws near to Me through nothing I love more than that which I have made obligatory for him, and My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through supererogatory works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears, his eyesight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks."

Now, to review these four points: Love is God's attribute, and human love exists by reflecting God's love. Beauty is God's attribute, and all divine and human love is directed toward God as the beautiful. Once human beings understand that their love is in fact directed at God, they have no choice but to follow prophetic guidance in order to act as a lover should act toward his beloved. Then only can they reap the fruit of being loved by God. That fruit is what Mawlānā often calls "union," for, when God loves His servant, the servant finds that God is present with him, and he is present with God. God is the hearing through which he hears, the eyesight through which he sees.

In short, Mawlānā's teachings are about strengthening the innate human capacity to love God and focusing it upon its true object, which is the divine Beloved, the truly Beautiful. Once people focus their love on their true Beloved, that love necessarily strengthens them in the attribute of "following." Eventually, if they actualize following with sufficient depth and sincerity, they will come to know and actually taste that they see through God and hear through God, and that God is present in all that they see, all that they hear, all that they do, and all that they know—so much so that God himself is the seer, the hearer, the doer, the knower, and the lover, for there is no reality but He.

Among the many words that Mawlānā uses to explain the nature of the love that seekers should be striving to actualize is "need." In talking about need, Mawlānā uses both the Arabic word *ḥājāt* and the Persian *niyāz*. When he uses *ḥājāt*, he usually ties it to our ontological situation in face of God's reality. In other words, we have need for God as a matter of fact, because everything that we are and everything that we can be is entirely contingent upon Him. Here need is a synonym of the poverty *faqr* that is

mentioned in the Koranic verse, "O people, you are the poor toward God, and God is the rich, the praiseworthy" (35:15). Referring to Sufism as "poverty" *faqr*, *darwīshī* derives precisely from this Koranic concept.

When Mawlānā uses the word *niyāz*, the context is often that of the lover's love for the true Beloved. The use of this particular word is not unrelated to the fact that Persian writings on love—which had been appearing for almost two hundred years by the time Mawlānā began composing poetry—often discuss the relationship between lover and beloved in terms of *niyāz* and *nāz*. Need is the attribute of the lover, and *nāz* is the attribute of the beloved. We don't really have an English equivalent for *nāz*, but roughly it means the beloved's pretending not to have any interest in the lover, or the fact that the beloved displays nothing but haughtiness and disdain.^[4]

In Sufism generally and in Persian poetry specifically, the beloved, we should remember, typically plays hard to get. And the most hard-to-get of all objects of love is the True Beloved. This explains why lovers of God can expect pain and suffering in their quest to reach their Beloved. Lovers who are blasé about their love, who are weak and not serious, are in fact exhibiting *nāz*—haughtiness and disdain towards the Beloved. This is utterly inappropriate for human beings, who are poor and needy toward God. If someone claims to love God and then fails to follow the guidance God has offered, this is to claim to have no need. This helps explain why Mawlānā can constantly blame so-called lovers for wanting a comfortable existence. As one of numerous examples, take this verse:

Beware, do not sigh coldly in your indifference!

Seek pain! Seek pain, pain, pain!^[5]

Need as our actual situation, and need as the quality that we must strive to actualize, are tightly bound together. They are really two sides of the same coin—the objective side, or the situation of the universe and everything within it, and the subjective side, or our own perception of the universe and ourselves.

When we look at the universe, we can see that everything is inherently nonexistent, which is to say that nothing other than God has any reality of its own. The reality that it does seem to have is given to it by God. Because we are essentially nonexistent, we

actually and objectively have the state of poverty and need toward God. The task of seeking God depends upon our appreciation and understanding of our own, real situation, the fact that we have no support other than God. In other words, love for God depends upon waking up to the fact that we are utterly in need of God always and forever.

In order to wake up to our actual situation, we need to focus on our need. We need to seek for pain, we need to become aware of the fact that we are indeed suffering, because we are separate from our true reality, our true being. This is why Rūmī's flute keeps on telling us about our original home, the reedbed, and it keeps on insisting that we must strive to return to our homeland.

In one passage, Mawlānā explains that God bestows His bounty only because things need it in order to exist, and it is their need that explains the creation of the world.

Without need, the Exalted God
would not bestow anything on anyone.
If the universe had no need,
the Lord of the worlds would not have created the earth.
If this quaking earth had not needed mountains,
would He have created them in their greatness?
If the spheres had not had need,
He would not have brought the seven heavens from nonexistence.
The sun, the moon, the stars—
how could they have appeared without need?
So, the noose of all existent things is need:
A man's instrument is the extent of his need.
So, O needy one, quickly increase your need!
Then the Sea of Bounty will boil with generosity.^[6]

Shams-i Tabrīzī has many passages in which he explains the necessity for increasing need, and he consistently uses the word *niyāz*. In one, he tells us that God has no needs, so there is nothing that we have that we might bring to God as a gift. The only thing God does *not* have is need, so we should go to Him and present Him with our

need. That presentation of need is called love, and our love for Him can only be a trace of His love for us. If we achieve love, then we will see Him, because He will have become the eyes with which we see.

“Since there is a Court like this, and He has no needs, take need. He who has no needs loves need. By means of this need, all at once you will leap from the midst of these newly arrived things. Something from the Eternal will join with you, and that is love. Love’s snare will come, and you will be caught by it, for ‘they love Him’ is the trace of ‘He loves them’ [5:54]. Through the Eternal you will see the Eternal.”^[7]

When Rumi explains the meaning of his well-known story about the parrot who pretended to die and then was released from his cage, he tells us that the road to our deliverance is that we should die, and that the way to die is to increase our need. We must let go of everything and throw ourselves into the arms of God.

The meaning of the parrot’s dying is need:

Make yourself dead in need and poverty,
So that the breath of Jesus may bring you to life
and make you happy and auspicious like itself.
In the spring, stones don’t become green.
Become dust, and then sprout up as many-colored roses.
For years you have been heart-scratching stone—
try for a time being dust!^[8]

When we read the *Maqālāt* of Shams carefully, it becomes clear that what Shams was trying to do for Mawlānā and his circle was to teach them how to increase their need. Let me quote some passages that bring this home:

“Why don’t you plead to God? Wake up in the middle of the night, get up, and prostrate yourself twice. Need, need, need! Put your face on the ground, and rain down tears.”^[9]

“I want nothing at all—only the need of the needy. . . Only need—not just its form, but its form along with its meaning.”^[10]

“If he’s going to listen to my words like this—with disputation and debate about the sayings of the shaykhs, or the Hadith, or the Koran—he won’t listen to my words, nor

will he reap the fruit. If he wants to come with need and to take benefit—because a person’s capital is need—then he will benefit. Otherwise, one day—ten days—no, a hundred years. He’ll talk, and I’ll put my chin on my hand and listen.”^[11]

If an Anatolian should come through this door, see me, gain faith, and turn to me, he’ll take more benefit from me than these shaykhs. They’re full of themselves. The passing days have blown away their capital, which is need. Time has scattered them.^[12]

They are the great ones, the shaykhs. What can I do for them? I want you because you’re like this. I want someone needy, I want someone hungry, I want someone thirsty! Out of its own gentleness and generosity, sparkling water seeks a thirsty man.^[13]

This last passage is reminiscent of Rūmī’s famous line:

Spend less time seeking water and acquire thirst!

Then water will gush from above and below.^[14]

Let me sum up Mawlānā’s teachings on the necessity of need with a single passage from *Fīhi mā fīhi*:

“When someone hears that in a certain city a generous man is bestowing tremendous gifts and bounties, naturally he will go there in hope of receiving a share. Since God’s Bounty is so famous, and the whole world knows about His Kindness, why don’t you beg from Him? Why don’t you crave for robes of honor and purses of gold?

You sit in indolence and you say, “If He wants, He’ll give me something,” and you don’t make any requests. Look at the dog, which has neither reason nor perception. When hungry and without food, it comes to you and wags its tail. It means, “Give me food, since I have no food, and you have some.” It has this amount of discernment.

Now really, you are not less than a dog, which is not content to sleep in the ashes and say, “If he wants, he’ll give me some food.” It barks and it wags its tail. You also, wag your tail and ask from God! Beg, for in face of such a Benefactor, begging is tremendously desirable.”^[15]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- [1] *Mathnawī* (Nicholson edition), Book II, prose introduction.
- [2] *Mathnawī* III 560.
- [3] William C. Chittick, *Me & Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2004), p. 72.
- [4] For example, Rūmī contrasts the two in the standard fashion in this verse, “She whose disdain fills your heart and soul with blood—what will it be like when she comes to you in need!” (*Mathnawī* I 2423).
- [5] *Mathnawī* VI 4304.
- [6] *Mathnawī* II 3274-80.
- [7] *Me & Rumi*, p. 100.
- [8] *Mathnawī* I 1909-12.
- [9] *Me & Rumi*, p. 22.
- [10] *Me & Rumi*, p. 266.
- [11] *Me & Rumi*, p. 230.
- [12] *Me & Rumi*, p. 231.
- [13] *Me & Rumi*, p. 268.
- [14] *Mathnawī* III 3212.
- [15] *Fīhi mā fīhi* (Furūzānfar edition), pp. 171-72.