

Rūmī saw himself as belonging to the line of prophets (*anbiyā'*) and saints (*awliyā'*), the God-given function of whom is to guide the human race. He had a great deal to say about most sorts of Islamic teachings, as can be verified by the traditional commentaries on the *Mathnawī* or modern studies like that of Jalāl al-Dīn Humā'ī. Despite the extent to which he has been singled out in modern times as a unique spokesman for love, much of what he said about the topic was fairly standard in Sufi works; it was prefigured by poets like Sanā'ī and 'Aṭṭār as well as in Persian prose classics like *Kashf al-asrār wa 'uddat al-abrār*, the great Quran commentary by Maybudī (begun in 520/1126), and *Rawḥ al-ar-wāḥ fi sharḥ asmā' al-malik al-fattāḥ*, a long commentary on the divine names by Aḥmad Sam'ānī (d. 534/1140). Perhaps the most systematic exposition of the worldview of love that infuses Rūmī's works is provided by another Persian classic, *Miršād al-'ibād min al-mabda' ila'l-ma'ād*, written by his contemporary Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 654/1256). No one other than Rūmī, however, was so successful in combining magical poetry with explicit and detailed teachings on love as the path to God.

To understand the overall thrust of Rūmī's teachings, we should take him at his word when he says, right at the beginning of the Arabic introduction to the first volume of the *Mathnawī*, that the book deals with "the roots of the roots of the roots of the religion" (*uṣūl uṣūl uṣūl al-dīn*). By "the religion" he means the Islamic tradition, not religion generically. The term *uṣūl al-dīn*, the "roots" or "principles" of the religion, is used in the Islamic sciences to designate Kalām (dialectical theology) and is contrasted with *furū' al-dīn*, "the branches of the religion," which is jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Rūmī is saying that the *Mathnawī* goes to the heart and soul of Islamic teachings. It explains the meaning of the Quran and the Sunnah without getting mired down in the limitations of theological formalism or juridical nit-picking.

One can argue that Rūmī's message is summarized in a Quranic verse that Shams-i Tabrīzī cites as the gist of prophetic guidance: "Know that 'there is no god but He,' and ask forgiveness for your sin" (Muḥammad 47:19). The first clause, says Shams, commands people to seek knowledge of *tawḥīd*, and the second tells them to negate their own existence.¹ People can negate themselves only by living *tawḥīd* to its fullest or, to put it in Rūmī's terms, by love, which is the motive force of *tawḥīd*. Rūmī connects love with *tawḥīd* explicitly in lines that describe love as "the flame which, when it blazes up, burns away everything except the Everlasting Beloved." Then, comparing the Arabic word *lā* ("no" in the formula of *tawḥīd*) to the two-bladed sword of 'Alī, he tells us that love employs this sword "to slay everything other than God," not least the self of the swordsman.² This is why "The religion and creed of the lovers is nonexistence."³

1 Shams-i Tabrīzī, *Maqālāt*, edited by Muḥammad-'Alī Muwaḥḥid, Tehran: Tarḥ-i Naw, 1996, p. 218; William C. Chittick, *Me & Rūmī: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2004, p. 90.

2 *Mathnawī*, edited by R. A. Nicholson, London: Luzac, 1925-40, vol. 5, vs. 588-90.

3 *Mathnawī* 6:233.

THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE

In the just-cited saying as well as in many other passages, Shams-i Tabrīzī—despite the hagiographical depiction of him as an unlearned rascal, intoxicated by love—insists that knowledge is the foundation of the path to God, and Rūmī echoes this position throughout his works. Some modern-day scholars would object to this, not least because Rūmī can be highly critical of *‘aql*, reason or intellect, which is the normal means of acquiring knowledge. But Rūmī also points out that *‘aql* has degrees, analagous to the degrees of light: there is an *‘aql* like a glowing coal, another like a spark, another like a candle, another like the blazing sun.⁴ He commonly differentiates between “partial” (*juzwī*) and “universal” (*kullī*) intellect. The former is ruled by the soul or ego (*nafs*), which was created from the same fire as Iblis, and the latter is none other than the angelic light through which God created the universe, “born of Mustafa.”⁵ Clever merchants and erudite scholars—here Rūmī pokes fun at Avicenna and Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī—partake of the intellect’s husk, but prophets and saints are “mounted on the intellect of intellect.” The husk offers a hundred proofs but can never be sure of itself; the kernel dwells in certainty.⁶

Philosophers and Sufis often distinguish between two basic sorts of knowledge, one deriving from the partial intellect and the other from the universal intellect. They call the two *taqlīd* (imitation) and *taḥqīq* (realization). In the *Mathnawī* Rūmī compares the human self to a house with a courtyard, in the midst of which is a pool-like heart, the center of awareness and consciousness. Imitative knowledge, which is acquired through learning and environment, is like water piped in from the outside; realized knowledge gushes up from a well at the center of the pool. Piped water turns stale and burdens the soul, but the inner water is the fountain of life, forever fresh. The human task is to seek water from within.⁷ Those who find it join the ranks of “the folk of the heart” (*ahl-i dil*), the saints who have achieved realization and who see everything with the light of the universal intellect. It is they who are living witness to the *ḥadīth qudsī*, “Neither My heavens nor My earth embraces Me, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me.”⁸

This is not to deny that imitative knowledge plays an essential role in human affairs, not least in the specifically religious sciences; there is no other way to learn language, grammar, Quran, hadith, jurisprudence, dogmatics, and so on. The second testimony of faith, for example, “Muhammad is the messenger of God,” depends utterly on *taqlīd*. It was Rūmī’s accomplishments in imitative knowledge that prepared him for the coming of Shams and the achievement of realization, which is real understanding of the first testimony of faith, “There is no god but God.” This cannot be gained from catechisms and creeds, only by discovery inside the heart. Thus the Quran speaks of this formula as a universal truth, known to all prophets and pertaining to the original human nature (*fiṭrat*). The partial intellect, however, ignores *tawḥīd*, so it needs the guidance of prophets and saints, “those who have joined the partial intellect to the Universal Intellect.”⁹ It is their task to remind people of what they already know and to show them the path of negating the ego’s darkness and ignorance.

4 *Mathnawī* 5:59-61.

5 *Mathnawī* 1:1966.

6 *Mathnawī* 3:2527-30.

7 *Mathnawī* 4:1960-68.

8 *Mathnawī* 6:3071-73; *Dīwān: Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i Kabīr*, edited by Badī‘ al-Zamān Furūzānfar, Tehran: Dānishgāh, 1957-67, vs. 30224.

9 *Fīhi mā fīh*, edited by Badī‘ al-Zamān Furūzānfar, Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1969, p. 143.

Rūmī contrasts the two basic sorts of knowledge in numerous passages and with a great variety of images, such as hearsay and vision, letter-writing and encounter, debt and ready cash, traveling and arrival.¹⁰ He is especially critical of scholars who study their fields simply to gain students, livelihood, and prestige. As for himself, he says, “My knowledge is substance, not accident... //I am a mine of candy, a plantation of sugar cane—it grows up within me and I eat of it myself. //Only imitative and instructional knowledge laments at the aversion of the audience.”¹¹

THE WORLDVIEW OF TAWHĪD

Rūmī has more in common with the Muslim philosophers than he likes to admit. Specifically, he shares their overall worldview and their stress on transforming the soul in order to achieve real understanding. If he thinks that Avicenna is “an ass on ice,”¹² this is not because he disagrees with the general picture of the universe that Avicenna provides, but because rational understanding alone is not sufficient; it needs the intervention of love to take the seeker forward on the path to God.

Like the philosophers, Rūmī frequently discusses God in terms of *wujūd* (and its Persian synonym, *ḥastī*), reflecting Avicenna’s distinction between the Necessary Being and contingent things. He likes to remind his readers that they typically confuse the two. They think that the world exists, when in fact it does not exist in itself: “We and our beings are nonexistent.” As for God, He is “absolute existence, appearing [to the ignorant] as evanescent.”¹³

Given that God is absolute existence, He has no opposites, for “nonexistence” does not exist. How then can we know Him? As the Arabic proverb that Rūmī likes to cite puts it, “Things are known through their opposites,” so there is nothing through which we can know Him. We can only know and speak about Him in terms of names and attributes, each of which is distinct from the others, and many of which can be understood in terms of opposition or complementarity, even though they pertain to the same Being. Especially important for Rūmī’s depiction of the human situation are gentleness (*lutf*) and severity (*qahr*), or mercy (*raḥmat*) and wrath (*ghaḍab*).

God was a Hidden Treasure and He loved to be recognized, as the famous hadith tells us. In Rūmī’s explanation, God is saying, “I created the whole universe, and the goal of all of it is to make Myself manifest, sometimes through gentleness and sometimes through severity.”¹⁴ This pair of divine attributes reverberates throughout the universe and the human self, and the resulting homologies provide the key to Rūmī’s dialectic.

Gentleness always has the upper hand over severity, because, as the sound hadith has it, “God’s mercy takes precedence over His wrath.” But just as light cannot be perceived without darkness, and just as presence cannot be grasped without absence, so also mercy demands wrath, gentleness uses severity for its own purposes, and roses surround their beauty with thorns. The interplay of gentleness and severity appears in the contrasting qualities of light and fire, angels and devils, intellect and ego, Adam and

10 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rūmī*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983, pp. 125-35.

11 *Mathnawī* 2:2427-29.

12 *Dīwān*, vs. 35277.

13 *Mathnawī* 1:602.

14 *Fīhi mā fīh* 176; cf. *Mathnawī* 4:3028-29.

Iblis, saints and unbelievers, nearness and distance, union and separation, joy and heartache, sugar and vinegar, spring and autumn, day and night, loyalty (*wafā'*) and disloyalty (*jafā'*), wine and dregs, intoxication and sobriety. Only love can harmonize all opposites and complementary qualities and “make them one” (the literal sense of *tawhīd*).

One of *tawhīd*'s basic implications is that everything comes from the One and returns to the One. This “origin and return” (*mabda' wa mā'ād*) is a major theme in both philosophy and Sufism, though many interpreters of Rūmī, especially from the Indian subcontinent, seem to have been unaware of its importance. A number of them have proudly thought that Rūmī anticipated Darwinian evolution. In fact, he is explaining the ascent of the individual soul to God, beginning with the inanimate stage of existence, then the vegetal, animal, human, and beyond. This is a standard discussion among the philosophers and is explained by Sufi teachers contemporary with Rūmī like 'Azīz Nasafī, though no one other than Rūmī explains it with such captivating language.

The very notion of “return” (*mā'ād*)—the third principle of Islamic faith after *tawhīd* and prophecy (*nubuwwa*)—demands that nothing can rise up to God without having come down from Him in the first place. He created human beings in His own form (*ṣūrat*), as the hadith tells us, but the divine attributes can only be actualized and realized in stages. It is because people have descended from God in stages (a descent to which Rūmī also refers¹⁵) that they are able to ascend from the mineral and plant stages (in the womb), to the animal stage (in infancy and childhood), to the human level (as adults observing the necessities of human goodness), and to even higher levels, following Muhammad in his night journey, the *mi' rāj*. Burāq, the steed that takes the seeker on the *mi' rāj*, is nonexistence; at each stage, the limitations of the previous stage disappear. This is not a physical *mi' rāj*, like vapor to the sky, but a spiritual climb, like that of an embryo to intelligence. “The Burāq of nonbeing is a fine steed! When you are *not*, it takes you to Being!”¹⁶ To put this whole discussion in a nutshell, “Form comes out from Formlessness, then it returns, ‘for unto Him we are returning’ [al-Baqara 2:156].”¹⁷

“Form” is one of Rūmī's key notions. His use of the word can only be understood in terms of its opposite, “meaning” (*mā'nā*). Form designates things as they appear, and meaning designates the invisible, spiritual reality that is the source of the appearance. Meaning is thus the reality (*ḥaqīqat*), form is the metaphor (*majāz*); meaning is the inward or nonmanifest (*bāṭin*), form is the outward or manifest (*ẓāhir*); meaning is the spirit (*rūḥ*, *jān*), form is the body. Ultimately, Rūmī says, quoting the shaykh of the religion, that is, Shams-i Tabrīzī, “Meaning is God.”¹⁸ In more poetical terms, “Form is shadow, meaning the Sun.”¹⁹ Or again, “Inwardly Thou art the Spirit of the spirit of the spirit of the spirit, outwardly the Sun of the sun!”²⁰

In short, Rūmī sees that all apparent existence discloses the Real Being as signs, forms, shadows, metaphors, manifestations, apparitions, things, creatures. All activity and rest, strife and war, peace and harmony, are forms displaying the Hidden Treasure. This implies that God is the source of evil as well as good. Given the precedence of mercy over wrath, however, all that appears as evil is in fact serving

15 E.g., *Mathnawī* 3:560 ff.

16 *Mathnawī* 4:552-55.

17 *Mathnawī* 1:1141.

18 *Mathnawī* 1:3338; Chittick, *Me & Rumi*, pp. 73, 187.

19 *Mathnawī* 6:4747.

20 *Dīwān*, vs. 28789.

a greater good that is beyond most people's ken. Evil cannot be eliminated from the universe, because that would be tantamount to destroying the created realm. This is why God appointed two sheriffs to keep the world in order, remembrance of Him (*dhikr*), and heedlessness (*ghaflat*). If either dominated, the world would disappear.²¹

Moreover, to say that evil exists is simply to acknowledge the infinite creativity of Being, which displays every possible form of existence. A painter who cannot paint ugly pictures can hardly be called skillful.²² Indeed, the divine light per se cannot appear to "others"—that is, anything other than God—because it is too intense to be perceived by created things, which are shadows and darkness.²³ "Light is the First Cause, and every secondary cause is its shadow."²⁴ Just as "you come to know light through light's opposite,"²⁵ so also "you will not know evil until you know good."²⁶ There can be no right path without wrong paths, no pleasure without pain, no mercy without wrath.

Rūmī always applies such theoretical discussions to the human situation. In this case he asks his readers why they should be so ignorant as to complain about the existence of evil. Any elementary understanding of *tawhīd* should alert them to the fact that all the forms, pictures, reflections, and shadows that compose the realm of appearances announce that the world has no inherent good, for there is no good but God. Given that it is impossible to find lasting good in anything, why do people stay passionately and shamelessly attached to the world and to their own egos? Ultimately, what they experience as evil is simply God's severity, announcing to them that they must seek His gentleness. "Whenever you turn your heart toward something, His Severity will detach you from it.// O heart, don't fix your heart on any place, don't persist!"²⁷

But why must God make us suffer? When someone beats a rug with a stick, says Rūmī, it is not because he hates the rug, but because he wants to get rid of the dust. Our souls are veiled by the dust of the ego, "and that dust will not leave all at once.// With every cruelty and every blow, it departs little by little from the face of the heart."²⁸ In the end, all the cruelty and suffering of the world is nothing compared to staying distant from God, "For, that cruelty will pass, but distance from Him will not."²⁹

As part of his explication of the wisdom in evil, Rūmī tells a number of tales defending the activity of Satan. The interplay of gentleness and severity demand that the divine attribute of guidance (*hidāyat*), which is made manifest by the prophets, be contested by misguidance (*iqlāl*), which is the activity of Iblis and the satans. Together prophets and satans are the touchstones (*miḥakk*) by which God tests the faith of his creatures.³⁰

LOVE

21 *Fihī mā fih*, pp. 109, 206-7; *Mathnawī* 1:2066ff.

22 *Mathnawī* 2:2544.

23 *Dīwān*, vss. 21967, 30842.

24 *Dīwān*, vs. 525.

25 *Mathnawī* 1:1134.

26 *Mathnawī* 4:1345.

27 *Dīwān*, vss. 11949-50.

28 *Dīwān*, vss. 12074-79.

29 *Mathnawī* 6:1757.

30 *Mathnawī* 2:2672, 2967.

Precisely because Rūmī's works focus on "the roots of the roots of the roots of the religion," its basic theme is love, the fire of *tawhīd* that burns away the illusory existence of seekers and takes them on a *mi'rāj* to the divine presence. If his passionate poetry and marvelous tales have always captured the imagination of listeners and readers, this is because he addresses the concerns of all lovers—and who is not a lover? Nonetheless, to understand what he is trying to convey, we need to have a thorough grasp of what he means by love—even if, as he often reminds us, love cannot be expressed by words and must be tasted. Nonetheless, if anyone has unpacked the significance of love in language, it is certainly Rūmī.

The key proof-text for Sufis who talk of love is the Quranic verse, "*He loves them, and they love Him*" (al-Mā'ida 5:54).³¹ It tells us that God and human beings are both lover and beloved. Thus we have four basic issues: God as lover, man as God's beloved, man as lover, God as man's beloved. Rūmī addresses each of these in terms of *tawhīd*, which is to say that he explains why there is no lover but God and no beloved but God, even though man is lover and beloved by definition. When the Quran says, "He loves them," it does not place any conditions on love, so all human beings are God's beloveds. When it says "They love Him," it is not saying that they should love Him but that they do in fact love Him, whether they know it or not.

1. God as lover

According to the hadith of the Hidden Treasure, God "loved" (*aḥbabtu*) or, in some versions, "desired" (*aradtu*), to be known. Love is the motive force of creation, equivalent to the Quranic term "desire": "*His command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be!,' and it comes to be*" (Yāsīn 36:82). It is love that motivates God to say "Be!", so love is "the formless with a thousand forms, the form-giver to Turk, Greek, and Ethiopian."³² In the last analysis, all love in the universe can be nothing but God's love, just as all being can be nothing but His being. "He alone is the Seeker, and we are like shadows. Oh, our words are all the words of the Beloved!"³³

2. Man as God's beloved

The hadith of the Hidden Treasure tells us that God created the universe to be known and recognized (*an u'raf*)—not by Himself, since He knows Himself eternally, but by "others" (*aghyār*), those who come into existence from nonexistence. All creatures are other than God, but only those who have been taught "*all the names*" (al-Baqara 2:31) have the capacity to recognize God in Himself. These are precisely the children of Adam, who was '*allamahu'l-asmā bag*, "Master 'He-taught-him-the-names."³⁴ God's beloved, then, can only be human beings, specifically those who live up to the task of recognizing Him. Hence God's first beloved is Muḥammad, the greatest of the prophets and the recipient of the message that embraces all knowledge. It is he concerning whom God said, "But for you, I would not have created the spheres." As Rūmī says, Muḥammad is the root, and all things are his shadow.³⁵ "The

31 Cf. *Mathnawī* 2, intro. and 5:2184ff.

32 *Dīwān*, vs. 14023.

33 *Dīwān*, vs. 4657.

34 *Mathnawī* 1:1234.

35 *Fīhi mā fīh*, pp. 105-6.

mystery that began as the seed of the spheres became in the end the lord of ‘But for you.’”³⁶ The gardener planted the seed for the sake of the fruit (the Prophet), so in fact the fruit gave birth to the tree.³⁷ Rūmī’s depiction of the Prophet as God’s original beloved gave his commentators plenty of justification to see references in his works to what the Sufi theoreticians called “the Muhammadan Reality,” i.e., the logos in God, that eternal reality through which all things were created.

Despite Rūmī’s stress on the Prophet as the supreme object of divine love (e.g., in his long description of him as God’s “witness,” *shāhid*, that is, the one in whom God contemplates beauty³⁸), his basic message is that all human beings are loved by God, even if God’s love is focused on the prophets and saints. “Man is the substance, and the heavens are his accident; all things are branches and steps—he is the goal.”³⁹ “In form man is a branch of this world, but in attribute he is its foundation.”⁴⁰ Thus God invites everyone to be His “friend” (*walī*), that is, one of his saints, and Rūmī constantly urges his readers to become lovers.

Given that there is no beloved but God, how can humans be God’s beloved? This is like asking how they can “exist” despite the fact that there is no existence but God. In the last analysis, people’s existence derives from God’s existence, as do all their attributes and qualities. “God created us in His form: Our description takes instruction from His description.”⁴¹ God is the “meaning” of human beings, their true reality, and human beings are the forms of God, His external manifestation, what the Quran calls His “vicegerent” (*khalīfa*). Rūmī tells us that when God desired in eternity to manifest himself, “He made a vicegerent... to be the mirror of His kingship.”⁴² Whatever appears in man is God’s reflection, “like the moon in a stream.”⁴³ Again, as the hadith has it, “God is beautiful and He loves beauty,” and this means, as Rūmī explains, “How could a young man choose an old crone?”⁴⁴ God loves human beings because, as the only creatures that are truly His forms, they alone make manifest—and thereby have the capacity to recognize—the full range of His “most beautiful names.” Everything else is at best a partial reflection of real beauty. “When God causes a man to have knowledge of Him and be familiar with Him, moment by moment he observes the self-disclosures of God and His ineffable beauty from the astrolabe of his own existence—that Beauty will never be absent from his mirror.”⁴⁵ “These beauties painted on canvas veil the beauties of the heart—//lift up the veil and enter: Be with your own Beloved!”⁴⁶ As the *radīf* of one ghazal has it, “return to the root of the root of your own self!,”⁴⁷ that is, the Meaning that gave rise to you as form.

3. Man as lover

36 *Mathnawī* 2:970ff.

37 *Mathnawī* 4:520ff.

38 *Mathnawī* 6:2860ff.

39 *Mathnawī* 5:3575.

40 *Mathnawī* 4:3766.

41 *Mathnawī* 4:1194.

42 *Mathnawī* 6:2151-53.

43 *Mathnawī* 6:3139.

44 *Mathnawī* 2:79.

45 *Fīhi mā fīh*, p. 10.

46 *Dīwān*, vs. 13185.

47 *Dīwān*, vs. 1354ff.

The general principle here is that all things are animated by love (as Avicenna had explained, and Aristotle before him). “Love” is simply a name given to the force that drives things to seek their ultimate good, their final end, their *telos*. A Quranic proof that love animates all things is the fact that God’s wisdom created everything in “pairs” (al-Dhāriyāt 51:49), thus “pairing all parts of the world and setting them in love with their mates.”⁴⁸ Everything is driven by its own desires—“Everyone was made for a task, love for it was placed in his heart.”⁴⁹ “God tells the rose, ‘Celebration is best!’ He says to the cloud, ‘Weeping is best!’”⁵⁰ Rūmī explains that in the human case, the aspirations and desires that grow up in the garden of the soul are God’s attributes, placed there because the Hidden Treasure wanted to be known.⁵¹

The final object of everyone’s love is God, but few people know this. The problem is ignorance, the solution knowledge. Imitative knowledge is not sufficient—catechisms and creeds, philosophies and theologies, rules and regulations, all have their role to play, but none can drive the seeker to the goal. Achieving realization demands harnessing the fire of love to burn away the others. The way to harness love is set down in the Quranic verse, “Say [O Muhammad!]: ‘If you love God, follow me, and God will love you’” (Āl ‘Imrān 3:31). The path of following the Prophet is that of self-negation, surrendering totally to love for God. Rūmī describes this path with a host of images and scriptural supports, such as the purported hadith, “Die before you die!” One of the many well-known symbols that he uses here is the heart as mirror (prefigured in al-Muṭaffifīn 83:14, which speaks of the heart’s *rust*). It is the power of love that “cleans rust from mirrors.”⁵² Once cleaned, “the heart acts as a receptacle for infinite pictures... For the heart is with Him—indeed, the heart is He.”⁵³ In one story, Rūmī tells of the man who heard of the incredible beauty of Joseph and undertook a long journey to see him. Arriving in his presence, he presented him with the gift of a mirror so that Joseph could contemplate his own beauty. The moral is clear: “What is the mirror of Being? Nonbeing. Take nonbeing [as your gift to God] if you are not stupid.”⁵⁴

In classical Sufi terminology, achieving nonbeing is called *fanā’*, “annihilation” of self, which is the complement of *baqā’*, the “subsistence” of the divine form in which man was created. Rūmī contrasts existence and nonexistence with this pair of terms and several others, always with the goal of stirring up love in the soul. Love is “want and need for something.”⁵⁵ Need (*niyāz*) in Persian poetry is the typical attribute of the lover, who longs for his beloved; her quality is “unneediness” (*nāz*), which is haughtiness and disdain along with coquettish glances and subtle come-ons. Rūmī makes clear that need is not only a synonym for love, but also for one of the most typical designations of the Sufi way, *faqr* or *darwīshī*, “poverty.” Moreover, like many other Sufi teachers, he takes poverty as an existential fact that needs to be understood and realized. When God says, “O people, you are the poor toward God, and He is the Rich, the Praiseworthy” (Fāṭir 35:15), He is asserting the actual situation, the nothingness of the human soul in the face of the Real Being. What Sufis are trying to do is to actualize their own

48 *Mathnawī* 3:4402.

49 *Mathnawī* 3:1618.

50 *Dīwān*, vs. 26050.

51 *Majālis-i Sab‘a*, edited by Tawfīq Subhāni, Tehran: Intishārāt-i Kayhān, 2000, pp. 118-19.

52 *Dīwān*, vs. 14084.

53 *Mathnawī* 1:3484 ff.

54 *Mathnawī* 1:3201.

55 *Fīhi mā fīh*, p. 139.

nothingness. “Poverty is not for the sake of hardship; rather, it is because there is nothing but God.”⁵⁶

Need arises when people recognize that they are nothing and desire to be something. But God alone—the Rich, the Praiseworthy—is real. In order to be something, to gain some hold on reality, people must intensify their love, need, hunger, thirst, pain. “What is it to be a lover?,” asks Rūmī. In answering the question, he sets down the program of his teachings: Love is “perfect thirst—so let me explain the water of life.”⁵⁷ Rūmī’s role is to describe the beauty and attractiveness of the true Beloved, who alone can deliver the soul from separation (*firāq, judā’ī*), its basic existential problem. This explains why Rūmī refers to separation in the very first verse of the *Mathnawī*. Nothing else can explain the complaining of the reed. When people become aware of their separation, they experience pain, need, suffering, and hunger: “Pain is an alchemy that renews... Beware, do not sigh coldly in your indifference! Seek pain! Seek pain, pain, pain!”⁵⁸ Acknowledging pain, recognizing thirst, and focusing on the Beloved will call down mercy and gentleness: “Where there is pain, the cure will come, where the land is low, water will run.//If you want the water of mercy, go become low! Then drink mercy’s wine and become drunk.”⁵⁹ “No physician gives pills and remedies without illness—I will become totally pain so that I may reach the Remedy.”⁶⁰ “Every hungry man finds food in the end.”⁶¹ “Whatever your state, seek! ... Seek water, for your lips bear witness that you will find a fountain.”⁶²

Suffering, pain and anguish are signs that people are aware of their separation from the reedbed. It follows that “Whoever is more awake has greater pain, whoever is more aware has a yellower face.”⁶³ Referring to a hadith about the Prophet’s suffering, Rūmī points out that it is precisely wakefulness that explains “why the suffering and tribulation inflicted upon the prophets is greater than that inflicted upon all the world’s creatures.”⁶⁴ And love alone has the power to synthesize the opposites such that pain turns into the most exquisite joy.

4. God as man’s beloved

Rūmī goes to great lengths to show the factuality of the statement, “they love Him.” In brief, human beings love God because there is nothing else to love. The created realm is like pure water, “within which shine the attributes of the Possessor of Majesty.” The water changes, “but the reflection of the moon and stars,” i.e., the divine names, “remains.”⁶⁵ People are in love with reflections, shadows, pictures, and forms, all of which are “gold-plated by God’s attributes.”⁶⁶ Their hopes, desires, and affections for fathers, mothers, lovers, friends, gardens, palaces, sciences, works, food, drink, “are all desires for God, and all these things are veils.”⁶⁷ “In reality God is worshiped by all things, for they all travel

56 *Mathnawī* 2:3497.

57 *Dīwān*, vs. 17361.

58 *Mathnawī* 6:4303-4.

59 *Mathnawī* 2:1939-40.

60 *Dīwān*, vs. 14841.

61 *Mathnawī* 5:1755.

62 *Mathnawī* 3:1439-40.

63 *Mathnawī* 1:629.

64 *Mathnawī* 4:97-100.

65 *Mathnawī* 6:3172ff.

66 *Mathnawī* 3:554.

67 *Fīhi mā fīh*, p. 35.

their paths in search of joy.”⁶⁸ Thus Rūmī distinguishes between “metaphorical love” (*ishq-i majāzī*), which is love for shadows, and “real love” (*ishq-i ḥaqīqī*), which is love for God. “God alone is desired for His own sake,” and everything else is desired for the sake of something else.⁶⁹

Rūmī also insists that, as the Arabic proverb has it, “The metaphor is the bridge to the reality” (*al-majāz qanṭarat al-ḥaqīqa*). God has given us metaphorical love so that we may perceive its limitations and pass beyond it. The warrior gives his child a wooden sword as his first training in the arts of battle.⁷⁰ All love eventually leads to the same place, because there is no other beloved: “Whether love is from this side or that side, it guides us to that side in the end.”⁷¹ This results from *tawḥīd*—all things must return to God. This does not imply, however, that the road will be easy. The fire and burning that fill Rūmī’s poetry reflect the urgency of his message: people have forgotten who they are. They must recover their nature as lovers before passing on to the next world. If the fire of love does not kill the brigand—the ego—before physical death, it will escape to the other side, where its hellish nature will live on.⁷² The suffering of the afterlife is simply the pain whose cure was not found in this world: “The regret of the dead does not stem from death; it arises because they stopped at the pictures.”⁷³

68 *Mathnawī* 6:3755.

69 *Fīhi mā fīh*, p. 101.

70 *Dīwān*, vs. 337.

71 *Mathnawī* 1:111.

72 *Mathnawī* 5:3821ff.; *Fīhi mā fīh*, pp. 166-67.

73 *Mathnawī* 6:1454.