

Change and Transformation

Thank you for joining me in this exploration of Sufi stories and poetry, ancient wisdom for modern life. My name is Kamila Shenmen and I am the Co-President of the University of Sufism. I'm looking forward very much to sharing the humor and the beauty of the Sufi Way.

Today's topic is change and transformation. I'd like to begin with one of my favorite stories from the legendary folk hero Nasrudin.

No guts, no glory From Perfume of the Desert by Andrew Harvey & Eryk Hanut. P.105

Mulla Nasrudin or Nasrudin Hoja as he is sometimes known was a legendary folk hero of medieval times, probably from Turkestan in Central Asia, but quite at home in Persian and Afghan cultures. There are thousands of stories told about him, displaying his satire, wit and wisdom.

Nasrudin addressed a large crowd and shouted, "Do you want knowledge without ordeal, truth without lies, attainment without any hard work, and progress without sacrifice?"

Everyone yelled "Yes!"

"Marvelous!" said Nasrudin. "I do also, and if I ever find out how to manage it, I'll be thrilled to let you know."

Life is change. The Sufis know this: that we begin our life as a perfect soul delivered into a human body, which begins to veil and cover over that perfection from the moment of birth.

The soul and the body are very different in nature. The soul is pure light, vital, knowing, invisible, and subtle; while the body is dense, material, attached to the earth & follows its desires.

When the soul enters the body it is exiled from its non-material origins and the self (known as the nafs by Sufis) begins to form and is with us throughout our life

in this world. Its role is to mediate between the non-material soul and the physical, material body.

The nafs or self helps us function in this world, through our physical senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, etc and is concerned with our physical and material survival. It defends us against all threats, either physical or emotional. This self is very concerned that we have everything that we need in this life and that we are safe. The self can easily become fascinated by the material world, and as it helps us navigate this life which alternates between ease and difficulty, it becomes corrupted and impure by what it encounters in life and veils us from the truth of who we really are, where we come from and our connection with the Divine.

So the human journey really becomes one of return to our original state of purity, and reconnection with our soul which is our way back to oneness with God.

One of the characteristics of the self, however, is a great desire to keep things the same, since change is unpredictable and therefore dangerous in the eyes of the self. This is illustrated by the following short Nasrudin story:

Stuck in Patterns
Rahman

Nasrudin Sacred Laughter of the Sufis by Imam Jamal

Nasrudin complained every day at lunch that he was getting sick and tired of cheese sandwiches. His co-workers listened to his complaints for several days, and finally they offered him some advice. "Mulla, tell your wife to make you something different. Be persuasive with her."

"But I'm not married," replied Nasrudin. "Well, then," they asked, "who makes your lunch?"

"I do!" replied the Mulla.

In contrast to this, the Sufis advise us to accept change as inevitable and move forward in trust and gratitude for whatever comes our way, whether it be easy or

difficult. The following tale from Sufi oral tradition is an example of a Sufi teaching story illustrating this advice.

A Wise Donkey Source: Oral Tradition

By the city of Kashan, a hundred miles east of the holy city of Qom, lived a poor peasant named Ahmed. Ahmed's village was at the edge of a desert, facing barren mountains to the north. High on the mountains, snow fell heavily from December until March. As the snow melted, a river flowed into the valley below until May, and then dried up for the rest of the year. Peasants dug wells at the foot of the mountains, connected them together with underground tunnels, and brought water to the valley below. Ahmed, like every other peasant, had a share of this water for the melons in his plot. Every day, he woke up before sunrise, prayed to God, counted his blessings, and then went to work in the fields, under the blazing sun. He worked gladly, as sweat dripped from his face. He collected melons in gunnysacks, put them on his donkey's back, and then took them to the bazaar.

One day, on his way to the bazaar, Ahmed's donkey fell into an abandoned well. Ahmed sat by the edge of the well and listened to his donkey, as it cried piteously. Listening to the sound of the donkey's cry, Ahmed reasoned that the donkey may have broken its legs, and since the donkey was old, he thought he should put the donkey out of its misery. He went back to the village and called a few of the villagers to help him. Ahmed asked every man to grab a shovel and begin to shovel dirt into the well. Not realizing what was happening, the donkey, at first, cried and wailed horribly. Then a few shovelfuls later, the donkey quieted down completely. The peasants peered down into the well and were astounded by what they saw. With every shovelful of dirt that landed on its

back, the donkey was doing something amazing. He was shaking the dirt off and taking a step up on the new layer of dirt. As the peasants continued to shovel dirt on top of the animal, he would shake it off and take a step up. Soon, the donkey stepped up over the edge of the well and trotted off, to the shock and astonishment of all the peasants. Then Ahmed grinned and said, "We all have to learn from my wise donkey. When life throws a shovel of dirt at you, all kinds of dirt, the trick to getting out of such circumstances is to not to let the dirt bury you. Shake it off and take a step up. Each of our troubles is a steppingstone. Like the donkey, we can get out of the deepest wells by not stopping and never giving up! Shake off the dirt, take a step up, and then praise God."

The reason the self, the nafs, is averse to the unpredictability of change is that the nafs is fully convinced that it knows what we need, how the world should function and that the self, in its wisdom, should be in charge of events and actions. The following is a story of a man who knew how to place his fate in the hands of the One Who Knows, the Truly Wise, the All-Powerful and the All-Merciful.

Maybe it's a blessing, maybe it's a curse..... When you Hear Hoofbeats, Think of a Zebra by Shems Friedlander p.7

A farmer in Anatolia had a wife and adolescent son. His wife always complained that they were poor, their house needed a new roof, the barn was broken down, and they had no horse to help with plowing. Early one morning the man and his son looked toward the field, and beside a large oak tree stood the most beautiful thing they had ever seen.

It was a large white horse with perfect proportions. They tied and fed the horse. They were happy. His wife came out and

said, "Look for markings, it is a rich man's horse." There were no markings.

"We can sell the horse," the wife said, "and with the money we can fix the roof, buy a wagon, rebuild the barn, and have something left over for our old age."

"I will not sell the horse," said the man.

"If you don't, I will leave you," said the wife, and went into the house.

Now let me tell you a little about the man. The townspeople and his wife thought he was becoming senile. Whenever something occurred, good or bad, he would say, "Maybe it's a blessing, maybe it's a curse, only Allah knows." Whatever befell him, that's what he would say. That's what he said when the townspeople gathered on his land to see the horse and told him what good fortune he had.

And that's what he said to his wife after she told him that he should sell or she would leave. The next morning, he began building a corral for the horse. His wife became angry. She went to her sister down the road. The man shrugged his shoulders and said, "Maybe it's a blessing, maybe it's a curse, only Allah knows."

The story of the beautiful horse traveled from village to village, town to town, and finally to the capital city where the sultan, a lover of horses, heard it. He called his lieutenant and told him to go to the farmer and offer him a bag of gold for the horse. A vast sum of money.

"What if he won't sell?" asked the lieutenant.

"Then kill him," said the sultan, "and bring me the horse."

The sultan's soldiers arrived at the farmer's house. The horse was as beautiful as they had been told, and the lieutenant offered the farmer the bag of gold for the house.

"Thank you," said the farmer, "but I don't want to sell."

The lieutenant asked the farmer to walk with him. He liked the old man, who reminded him of his father.

"Please take the money," the lieutenant said.

"No," the farmer said.

"My orders are to kill you and take the horse if you won't sell it to me."

"The horse is not for sale."

"Please, this will be your death."

"Maybe it's a blessing, maybe it's a curse, only Allah knows."

The lieutenant said he had an errand in another village, but would return in a few days. He begged the farmer to think about selling horse.

The townspeople gathered and started to argue with the farmer. "You will be rich!"

"Maybe it's a blessing, maybe it's a curse, only Allah knows."

That night the farmer had a dream. Maybe something in the dream woke him. It was around 3 A.M. and he went outside. There was a mist. The horse was beautiful, moving in and out of the mist, disappearing and reappearing. As the farmer moved closer, he felt something special, extraordinary, in every part of his body. He remembered old teachings which said that God took the first breath of His day at this time. He felt touched by God, filled with light, washed clean of imperfection, and that feeling stayed with him.

The horse looked magnificent, his breath steaming from his nostrils into the mist.

Later that morning the farmer's son decided to ride the horse. He rode bareback through the forest and past fields. He felt wonderful, the wind caressing his face and pulling at strands of his hair. He wrapped his arms around the horse's neck. He was at one with the horse until the horse stepped into a hole, throwing the boy high into the air. Falling, the boy broke both his legs.

The townspeople found him and carried him home.

"You didn't listen to us," they said to the farmer. "If you had sold the horse, this wouldn't have happened. Now your son has two broken legs."

"Maybe it's a blessing, maybe it's a curse, only Allah knows," the farmer replied.

The next morning, the farmer looked outside and saw a terrible sight. In fact, he saw nothing. The horse was gone. The townspeople said, "You could have sold him for money, and you didn't. So your son went riding and broke both his legs. Now you don't even have the horse."

"Maybe it's a blessing, maybe it's a curse, only Allah knows," said the farmer.

"The soldiers will come back," said the townspeople, "and they won't believe you when you say the horse disappeared. They will torture you, and then they'll kill you."

"Maybe it's a blessing, maybe it's a curse, only Allah knows," said the farmer.

The soldiers didn't return. War had broken out. All the young men were called into the army, except for the farmer's son with his two broken legs.

"You're lucky," the townspeople said to the farmer. "We will never see our sons again. You will have someone to care for you in old age, but we will be alone."

"I've told you before," said the farmer. "Don't you understand? Maybe it's a blessing, maybe it's a curse, only Allah knows."

The following are a series of Sufi poems, exhorting us to move through life in a state of courage and surrender, being open to what comes our way. Using our experiences as a means to purify ourselves, and to build trust in the Goodness of our Creator; transforming our hearts and souls to their state of original innocence and clarity, knowing that everything that comes to us is from our Loving God in order to help us make our return to Oneness.

True Knowledge by Kabir

Perfume of the Desert p.111

This, I've discovered, is true knowledge -

Those who scramble to get into a boat

Sink like a stone midstream,

While the shelterless and abandoned

Reach the other shore.

Those who dare to take

The hard, winding, thorny road

Get to town in the end;

Those who stroll the easy highway

Get robbed or even killed

Soon after they set out.

*Everyone's wound in illusion's web -
The so-called "holy" as much as the worldly,
And those who run for safety
Under the comforting daïs
Of form and ritual and dogma -
Well, life's hurricane lashes them.
Stay out in the open:
You'll be left safe and dry.
The ones Love never savages
Live in boredom and pain;
Those Love devours like a cannibal
Live in bliss forever:
The ones who lose their own eyes
Come to see the whole Creation
Blazing in their own Light;
Those who hold on to their sight
Remain blind as bats in full noon.
When I began to awake to Truth
I saw how bizarre and crazy the world really is!*

Even if you Lose all you Have Sultan Valad (Rumi's son) From the Perfume of
the Desert p 117

Learn the meaning of that secret

*That God revealed in the Qur'an:
Whether He makes you happy or unhappy,
Whether He makes you sad or gives you hope,
Even if you lose all you have
Or suffer extremely in the spirit,
Be patient: a hundred divine graces
Are coming from His hand to you.
He who endures patiently the pain
That is sent from God
Will, it is certain, obtain
The strength and truth of faith.
Marvellous news is sent to the patient;
They will win a great joy.
You must be able to perceive grace
Even when His divine anger lashes you,
And think of Him always with serenity,
And always, whatever happens, cling to Him
With all your heart and all your soul.*

From Rumi's Masnavi book 3, verses 1436-1441

*Go and seek true love, if you would let your spirit live;
Otherwise, you'll just be a slave to the passage of time.
Don't look at yourself and think you're ugly or beautiful;*

*Only think upon love and what you seek.
Don't look at yourself and think you're rotten or too ill (to make
the journey);
Look upon your hope, O noble one.
It matters not what condition you're in; keep searching.
O you with the parched lip, keep searching for that water,
For that parched lip of yours is the proof
That one day you'll reach the gushing spring.
A dry lip is merely a message sent to you by the water,
Telling you that your discomfort will eventually bring you to it
someday.* (Masnavi III 1436-1441)

Rumi Qatrain 353

*Within every part of me is the sign of my beloved;
Every portion of me is the speech of my beloved.
I am like a harp reclining in his arms;
My crying out is from the fingertips of my beloved.* (Quatrain 353)

And, finally, I'd like to end with a very famous story about the need to surrender and transform:

The River and the Desert by Idris Shah. Taken from The Divine Names: The 99 Names of the One Love by Rosina-Fawzia al-Rawi

One of the greatest Sufi stories talks about the river and the desert. In a poetic, touching manner, it describes the transformation on the path of development.

A stream, from its source in far-off mountains, passing through

every kind and description of countryside, at last reached the sands of the desert. Just as it had crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but it found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared.

It was convinced, however, that its destiny was to cross this desert, and yet there was no way. Now a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered: 'The Wind crosses the desert, and so can the stream.'

The stream objected that it was dashing itself against the sand, and only getting absorbed: that the wind could fly, and this was why it could cross a desert.

'By hurtling in your own accustomed way you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over, to your destination.'

But how could this happen? 'By allowing yourself to be absorbed in the wind.'

This idea was not acceptable to the stream. After all, it had never been absorbed before. It did not want to lose its individuality. And, once having lost it, how was one to know that it could ever be regained?

'The wind', said the sand, 'performs this function. It takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again. Falling as rain, the water becomes a river.'

'How can I know that this is true?'

'It is so, and if you do not believe it, you cannot become more than a quagmire, and even that could take many, many years; and it certainly is not the same as a stream.'

'But can I not remain the same stream I am today?'

'You cannot in either case remain so,' the whisper said. 'Your essential part is carried away and forms a stream again. You

are called what you are even today because you do not know which part of you is the essential one.'

When he heard this, certain echoes began to arise in the thoughts of the stream. Dimly, he remembered a state in which he-or some part of him, was it?-had been held in the arms of a wind. He also remembered-or did he?-that this was the real thing, not necessarily the obvious thing, to do.

And the stream raised his vapour into the welcoming arms of the wind, which gently and easily bore it upwards and along, letting it fall softly as soon as they reached the roof of a mountain, many, many miles away. And because he had his doubts, the stream was able to remember and record more strongly in his mind the details of the experience. He reflected, 'Yes, now I have learned my true identity.'

The stream was learning. But the sands whispered: 'We know, because we see it happen day after day: and because we, the sands, extend from the riverside all the way to the mountain.'

And that is why it is said that the way in which the Stream of Life is to continue on its journey is written in the Sands.

Thank you so much for joining me today. I pray that what I have shared has brought courage and joy to your heart, and deepened your appreciation for the beauty that God has bestowed on us all.