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Spiritual Yearning

By ALIREZA NURBAKHSH

In Sufism the state of spiritual yearning (*talab*) is the force that drives an individual on the path towards perfection. Without yearning for the truth, one simply has no desire to embark on a spiritual journey and cannot comprehend why others feel compelled to do so.

Sufis believe that the state of *talab* is a gift from God and as such cannot be self-induced. God draws whomever he wants. One does not get to choose the beloved; it is the beloved who chooses. As enigmatic as this appears, it alludes to the involuntary nature of this state, that it strikes one, as it were, out of nowhere.

Attar (d. 1220), the great Persian Sufi, speaks in his *Conference of the Birds* of spiritual yearning as the first stage of the path towards the truth. At this stage one yearns for purification of the soul and feels utterly poor in relation to the divine attributes. Attar describes a person who is devoid of *talab* as a lifeless being:

*The one who does not yearn is like a wall,
Dead with no living force inside him.*

The state of *talab* is sometimes triggered by an encounter with an extraordinary individual, sometimes referred to in Sufi literature as a “fool of God,” such as the literary character Bohlul. Such a person ignores accepted social conventions and at the same time reflects divine attributes. He or she appears unexpectedly and, through his outlandish behavior and powerful presence, causes us to realize that the world of external order and material comfort that we have created provides only superficial distraction and, because it is based on our false knowledge of ourselves, does not bring us peace or contentment.

Attar’s entry into the world of Sufism is a good example of such an encounter. A pharmacist by profession, Attar was once working in his shop when a beggar came in and asked him for help. He refused. The beggar again asked for money and Attar again refused. Finally, the beggar asked Attar, “How are you going to leave this world?”

“In the same way that you will leave it,” Attar replied.

“Can you really die like me?” the beggar asked.

“Yes, of course.” Attar replied. Thereupon, the beggar lay down on the floor, placed his wooden bowl underneath his head, uttered “Allah” and died. When Attar saw this he became bewildered, left his shop and began his spiritual quest.

Leaving aside the miraculous aspect of this story, the point here is that when Attar experienced the total detachment of the beggar from the created world he was shocked into realizing his own imprisonment in the circumstances of his life. This in turn kindled the fire of yearning in his heart, the yearning for detachment from concern with worldly matters. Such encounters make us give up our conventional life in pursuit of the unknown.

But it is not necessary to encounter a “fool of God” in an “eye opening” event to experience the state of *talab*. Sufi literature is full of stories in which someone becomes awakened

by an ordinary encounter with an ordinary person.

The following story is told about the ninth century Sufi saint Shaqiq Balkhi (d. 810). Shaqiq was from Balkh (a city in present day Afghanistan) and travelled many times as a merchant to Turkestan. On one of his travels he encountered an idol worshipper who was weeping before his idol. Shaqiq felt that the idol worshipper was misguided and decided to lead him towards the correct path.

“You should worship the living God who has created the world—the all knowing and all powerful God. Be ashamed of your idol worshipping since nothing comes out of it,” Shaqiq told the idol worshipper.

“Well, if your god is so powerful, why can’t he provide for you in your own town so that you wouldn’t have to travel such long distances for a living?” replied the idol worshipper. This response made Shaqiq realize his own ignorance and led him in search of the real God. Similarly, when we encounter someone who demonstrates genuine love and compassion in helping others, we may be led to reflect on our own shortcomings, which in turn may guide us towards the state of *talab*.

But again, the experience of the state of *talab* is not a voluntary choice, nor is what follows. After being struck with *talab*, one’s making sacrifices and enduring hardships on the path of self-discovery is not a matter of choice. One is driven.

Whether we experience the state of *talab* as a result of an encounter with a “fool of God” or as a result of a more ordinary encounter, we must be ready for this experience. Though the experience of *talab* is not self-induced, it usually does not happen to people who are not prepared for it.

We are all born with certain characteristics that are, by and large, determined by our genetic make up. As we go through life, these characteristics change somewhat and we acquire additional traits, which together determine to a great degree our experience of the world and our relationships with other people. At some point we may become increasingly aware of the characteristics—whether so-called positive qualities such as generosity, empathy and kindness, or so-called negative ones such as anger, jealousy and hatred—that play such a strong role in our feelings and behavior toward others.

If we are fortunate, we realize that most of the time we are absorbed with ourselves and indifferent to others. When we see this and our other imperfections, we long to rid ourselves of negative qualities. We may even have momentary experiences in ourselves of such divine attributes as unconditional love and goodness, whereby we come to know that such qualities have been lacking in our lives—an experience that leads us to try to realize these qualities in ourselves.

This sense of one’s imperfection, the feeling of shame at how we behave, together with the wish for perfection, is the prerequisite for being granted the state of *talab*. If we are not aware of our shortcomings and do not feel a genuine desire to change, to attain goodness, love and selflessness, we will not look for any clues in the world about what to do. We will



simply be content and happy with our lives. Even an encounter with a “fool of God” with his or her miraculous powers could not set us off on the path of *talab*. People who are clueless about their shortcomings and have not sensed the presence of divine attributes will usually remain clueless even in extraordinary circumstances.

We live in an era where the dominant view of the purpose of a person’s life is to perfect one’s material shortcomings rather than the spiritual ones. Our culture is bombarding us with the idea that if we own many things and have interesting experiences and adventures we will somehow experience bliss and contentment. But the reality is completely different. We know from repeated experience that even when we get what we want we very soon want something else, in a never ending cycle of discontent. Even if we have all the possessions that we desire and do all the fun things in the world, we will not experience inner peace and contentment and we may still be very far away from caring about and loving others, the

qualities that prepare us for our spiritual yearning.

Rumi writes in one of his poems:

*All your restlessness comes from your seeking the state of rest,
Become a restless seeker until you find rest.*

We are restless because we are pursuing the state of material rest—a state in which we imagine that our possession of material goods can bring us fulfillment in life. This is an illusion. Most of us know this, yet we are still pursuing this dream.

The real fulfillment in life, according to Rumi, lies in *talab* because it is only through the state of yearning that we can find lasting rest and peace. This occurs as the torment and restless longing experienced by the lover in the state of *talab*, as he or she sincerely yearns for union with the beloved, gives way, through the alchemy of love, to the selfless acceptance by the lover of what the beloved wishes, as the lover realizes that all is from God.