



The Guide

INTERVIEW WITH A SUFI SHAYKH

INTERVIEWED

By SAFOURA NOURBAKHS

Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh was the master of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order for 55 years before his passing on October 10, 2008. It is still difficult for most of his disciples to talk about him in the past tense. His photographs continue to grace the walls of the *khaniqahs*, and his teachings via audio recordings still permeate Sufi gatherings across the globe.

The following interview with Hossein Kashani, one of the shaykhs of the Nimatullahi Order, is a tribute to Dr. Nurbakhsh as well as a candid conversation about the trials of a master/disciple relationship, in which a perfected human being commits his or her life to training others on the path towards Truth.

It's often very difficult for people to conceive of the idea of surrendering to another person and to accept that as the only possibility vis-à-vis the spiritual guide. So, the question is why do we need a master, and how should we go about finding an authentic guide? Most of us agree that it is important to have a teacher in all other aspects of serious study. But it is even more important to have one when embarking on a spiritual path. Simply put, the *nafs*, or ego, cannot put pressure on itself and transform itself; only an enlightened teacher can do that for his or her students. Unless one surrenders to the teacher's guidance, that is, unless one trusts the teacher unquestioningly, the teacher-student relationship will be futile, because the master will take us into unfamiliar and unknown territory, confounding us.

Now about the second part of your question, I think what we are really saying is that I'm imperfect but I should be able to evaluate a perfected person, whether this person is perfected or not. And that is kind of absurd.

So you can't even have signs and say ... Only a true seeker's heart may feel the attraction from a real guide. There are no other signs. A charlatan and a real master may act exactly the same way. Actually, a real guide may act worse than a charlatan because a charlatan has a shop and needs to keep the customers happy, but a real one doesn't have such an interest, and may even act contrary to this aspirant's expectation; the aspirant might say, oh this is not a real guide, because I don't see the criteria of a real guide in this person. I think that the more relevant question, or method, is to ask ourselves, am I a real disciple? What are the qualifications of a disciple, and do I have that? I think that should be the starting point, not, what are the qualifications of a master.

Okay. Very interesting. Can I ask you the same question then in that light, what are the qualifications of a real disciple? First, sincerity. Then, that a disciple should be thirsty! [both laugh] To a real disciple the spiritual quest is a matter of life and death. Because the path is so difficult, it is so intense. We wish to accomplish something that is really beyond human endeavor, in one lifetime, in one short lifetime. So, it demands a lot. And until we can accept that the path is of existential importance to us, we won't be able to put into it what is required. When we have all these questions like do I risk this, do I want this, then I am haggling—I am really just a customer in a shop.

So this saying that it's not you who finds the guide, but the guide who finds you: Is that correct? In my experience, I find that to be absolutely true beyond a shadow of a doubt. If you have spiritual yearning (*talab*) and call on the guide, then he or she will find you.

Okay. Let's move on. I want to read a quote by another spiritual guide, Pema Chödrön, from a different tradition. She says, "To obtain enlightenment you need a deep heart connection to someone whose sole motivation is waking you

up. Without this strong connection, when your buttons get pushed, and it's really tough, you're going to automatically feel betrayed and disliked, just when you think the teacher is your best friend, they don't look at you, they don't call on you. Yet, it is a relationship of the deepest intimacy because all of your secrets are exposed to yourself, if not to anybody else."¹ First of all I always find it amazing, and at the same time comforting, to see how similar these spiritual traditions are to each other. Yes, indeed.

But let me ask you about your experience of this complicated relationship and how do you think this relationship evolves, because I think of it in stages; that is, your relationship with your master does not remain the same from the moment you get initiated to different stages of your journey. I also think that masters, of course, do push your buttons for sure, they also help you cope with your own failures, your inadequacies somehow, otherwise, it would be too devastating. Yes, it would. Without that love, without that unconditional acceptance and love from the master to the disciple we would fail miserably and would not be able to recuperate. I have experienced what Pema Chödrön is saying in my first physical encounter with the master. When I met him I felt absolutely and totally naked. I knew that he saw through me like an x-ray, but I didn't feel ashamed then. I felt secure because of that love. Sure, I knew he saw all my dirt, all my filth, but he saw everything else as well. And there was so much compassion in that gaze, and that gave me a sense of security. It was only later that I felt ashamed. [both laugh]

So, my experience with the master is that he was extremely kind. We have to experience kindness in order to learn and to give it to others—then we need to feel at home, feel secure and trusting in the master before we are put to the test. He also challenged his disciples in impossible ways, in ways that one could have never imagined before. I had studied many Sufi texts before initiation, before the three years of longing, so, theoretically, intellectually, I thought I was very prepared for those things; but one has absolutely no clue and can't imagine what these trials and difficulties really are until one is faced with them. Even then it is very difficult for a lot of us to grasp what these are exactly, to the point of denying that what we're experiencing are spiritual trials.

Absolutely right. And without trust, without what we call *eradat*, that devotion, it is impossible. One will run away and lose one's trust.

And so how do you imagine this relationship evolves? It evolves, but it is the master who calls the shots—the master chooses the time and the way it evolves. The disciple is only responsible for his or her own actions in terms of practicing the path. But I don't think that at any point disciples can know for sure what the relationship is; I don't think any disciple can be certain.

No. The disciple can never anticipate what the master will do, what the master's next moves are.





Yes, and this leads to my next question which is about the master as an iconoclast. My experience with my father as my master was that he would not ever let his disciples idolize him. No, he was an idol breaker.

Yes. What was your experience of that and how does that play into the evolvement of that relationship? Oh, for me, I thought it was fantastic. But I could also see how it really confounded people when he was iconoclastic. [laughs]

Yes, we all have memories of him being so unconventional. It was like whatever you thought he's not going to do, he would do. Yes, exactly, and whatever you constructed he would immediately demolish. And he was, I would say, the bravest person I have ever met in my life. He was not afraid of anything. Not only that, he was not ashamed of anything. So therefore, he would employ any method that was at his disposal and would create any situation to teach us a lesson about ourselves. All those trials ... [pause] master knew us inside and out at the first glance; it is we who don't know who we are. We don't know what we have and what we don't have in terms of spiritual capacity and potential, in terms of shortcomings and weaknesses. We have all kinds of imaginations and false notions about ourselves, about who we are and what we know, or about what we want and what our capacities are. So, he would provide the challenges and show us the reality of our situation.

What else can you say about how this relationship evolves? [sigh] This path is so difficult because it lies contrary to how we acquire competencies and know-how in the material realm where we become more than we were before. Spiritual progress, on the other hand, involves a process of reduction and unlearning.

Yes, the path of nothingness. Yes. So, one has to become less,

and less and less, and that is the pain. Because it's not in our nature to want to lose ... to become less, so we say, okay, I have been on this path for ten years, twenty years, what have I gained, what have I achieved? And if I ask that question, then that is its own answer. If you ask, what have I gained, then you haven't understood much. [both laugh]

You're not supposed to gain anything, you're supposed to lose ... We're supposed to ask what have I lost.

What have I lost? Exactly. How beautifully you put it: Instead of what have I gained, what have I lost. Yeah. But most of us ask, what do I know, what have I gained from this thing? So that is why it's so difficult. And that is what spiritual poverty is. It's not to have anything to hang on to other than the Beloved, other than God. And so the master, for the disciple, becomes the only secure place to hang on to because the disciple doesn't have anything else, cannot be sure about anything else, other than the master, other than the teacher by whom the disciple is spiritually nourished.

So, does that lead to total dependency? Not dependency, this is not dependency, it is nourishment. But yes, it becomes very strong to a point where it could become dependency. There is a danger in that, there is absolutely a danger in that, but that is where the master comes in. The master has to see to it that it doesn't become that way. The true master will use every opportunity to turn the disciple's attention towards God and will see to it that the relationship is nourishing us. Eventually the master will detach the disciple from this last attachment. It is difficult to talk about it because at the final stages of this master-disciple relationship we are approaching the realm of unity, where there is no "otherness." There is no master and God. There is only the One. The true guide will help us realize that and get us to that point. That is probably the hardest thing for the disciple to do.



The last attachment being the person of the master? Yes, the person of the master.

There are some anecdotes in Sufi literature talking about that.² Yes. So, anyhow, getting back to this process of reduction. For most of us it's very, very painful and a lot of us don't even recognize it at the beginning.

Exactly. But even recognizing it, somehow it feels that it is never ending. Everything else becomes easier the more you do it. Not so, on the spiritual path, this one becomes more difficult as you go on; it just gets harder and harder, as long as there is anything left other than God.

And there's always something left! Well, as long as there is anything left of the self. The difficulty has got to do with our resistance. And there is resistance as long as there is a self. I would say something else as well about the methods that the masters use: they're tools, and the methods of the teachings are never in the books because if they were they'd lose their teaching value. And also because the same methods cannot be employed for every individual because we're all different; the master diagnoses, so to speak, and applies the appropriate treatment for the individual involved.

That is interesting. So you believe ... [interjecting] There are just allusions to some things in some anecdotes and some poetry, but that's all, because once these methods are revealed then people are anticipating them and they lose their effectiveness. At one point, I was wondering to myself why the master and the shaykhs didn't explain things more fully.

The master was only interested in Truth. He wasn't interested in anything else. And we all experience this Truth differently. The principles of the path have been written in books and books of Sufi poetry which are readily available, but spiritual experiences are not the same for everyone. What I have

experienced, that is very personal. No one else has a share in that. And if I tried now to tell my experiences to somebody else and said, now listen to me, this is how it is, I may be doing harm to that person. And I think that is why one is exhorted not to talk about one's experiences and dreams and all of those things. It's that you are imposing on other people when you tell them about your personal experiences, because then they are stuck on yours and they are cheated out of their own experience. If the listener is not on a spiritual path it is of no benefit anyway. You're only confusing people by telling them. And there is an element of pride in the telling. So, that is why we are encouraged to keep silent.

It is interesting that the path is so individualized in a way that your path is different from all the other paths, but at the same time when you look at all these paths in this particular Sufi realm in this Order with this particular master, all expanding to these other traditions, they all converge. They all converge because Truth is the same.

So, in going back to what you were saying that detailed explanations don't help, it might help in some ways to have that recognition. Explanations might help some people. It may help at the right moment. I am not saying that explanations and all that don't help at all—the moment has to be right. The master did explain things, but only when the moment was right and the explanation was always very short and to the point. This is not a discursive teaching, it is spiritual and therefore internal, and the answers must first be found within. Explanations are helpful if they clarify what we have found within, otherwise they are philosophical mumbo jumbo that are of little value to the wayfarer.

What about this idea of a guide as a mirror to the disciple? What was your experience of that? I found it to be very true. That is one of the manifestations of the master, because the

master doesn't have any self. He's just a clear mirror. And most of the time he would reflect back to us, and we, being such idiots, would say, "Oh, the master was like this and like that" and maybe get anxious and all of those things, or fall into denial. This reminds me of one of master's quatrains:

*We have no thought of good or bad;
Whether someone is a friend or foe makes no difference to us.
We are a mirror for all those who look upon us —
They see in us whatever is in themselves.*

So it is for us to recognize ourselves in that mirror? For a very, very long time on the path, I think, the process is exactly that, in getting to know our shortcomings and the *nafs*. Not to be ashamed of it, which we do many times, which is counterproductive, but in order to acknowledge those traits. Unless we acknowledge them we can never deal with them and it will make the master's work very, very hard. So that is why he would show us, not to make us ashamed, not to make us feel guilty.

But for recognizing the roots of our problems? Yes, and that, I think, starts very quickly. When the master says that you have to show devotion, *eradat*, so that the master may look with grace on you and teach you, we usually think that once the master looks with grace then we are going to see all these lights and other things and all of a sudden we're going to become this wonderful person in everyone's eyes. We don't recognize that when everything becomes difficult [both laugh] the path is a challenging spiritual quest, with love as the only guide.

That is the grace. That is the master's grace.

That's the grace. His teaching is the grace. In other words, when his spiritual attention rests on you, that is when you experience the difficulty, but you ... The difficulties, right. When the master's spiritual attention is on the disciple that is when he or she sees all the things that they never saw in themselves before. And if the disciple has sincerity, they will see it, if the disciple, or wayfarer does not have sincerity they will say, "No, it's not me. It is the master," or may say, "I wanted to become such a wonderful human being, this must be the wrong path. I never knew myself like this before." [both laugh]

Well, yeah. Many people say that. We've heard that again and again. It makes me very happy when people say that they see things in themselves they had never seen before, because I know the path is working for them.

Do you tell them? I tell them, yes. I say, "This is very good, this is great news! The master is looking kindly on you and is showing you your carnal self."

When you start seeing the carnal self, it's pretty ugly. It is! That is exactly it. But that is the hardship of the path: learning to know the base qualities of the *nafs*, the self, and admitting to ourselves that, yes, my ego has all these base qualities.

That is the beginning of blame, the blaming *nafs*, which is the most difficult stage for many of us and which may take a very long time to pass through with the master's help. Were it not for the occasional periods of spiritual expansion and glimpses of spiritual beauty, and but for the master's nourishing, we could lose hope and the energy to go on. I believe that knowing all the different faces of the *nafs* in us, through the master's grace, may eventually bring about true humility, understanding, and compassion towards others.

The master provides the light. We are in darkness, so it is through the master's light that we see these things. We had no knowledge of these traits before. If we read about the various traits of the self, the *nafs*, well, that is merely information which is not the same as experiential knowledge, a distinction which is of utmost importance, at least to my understanding.

Yes. And other people see us too! [both laugh] That's the beauty of it.

Yes. That is the magic. Yes. So, if the disciple is awake and sees what is happening, the disciple's heart becomes very happy, very joyful because *the master's attention is on me. It is working!* And so, we will get energy from that. But if we are not paying attention, if we don't have sincerity and devotion and trust in the master, then it is only negative, we are only seeing this ugliness and saying, "why me?" Why is this happening to me? Where is the teaching?

Yeah, yeah. Okay. My last question. And this is something that was very difficult for us to address, maybe even as recently as a few years ago. But now somehow I think we are in a space where we can talk about it maybe for the first time, and that is this process of transitioning from one master to another master. First of all let me ask you, how long were you on the path with Dr. Nurbakhsh as your teacher? I cannot say, well ... [pause] he's still my teacher.

He's still your teacher? Yes.

Yes. But in terms of when he passed, in terms of physical presence? He's now in the person of his son.

Can you explain that? This transitioning has been, of course, a very difficult process for many of us. Yes, I think, as you said, it's a process. It's not a problem, it's a process.

Yes, it is a process. And the process is, at first there is a sense of loss, even for the new master.

Especially for him. Yes. Especially for him.

I think it was just devastating for him. And I think that he felt he wasn't really ready right off the bat to take on the mantle. He had to take the responsibility. But it was not a very easy thing for him, it was most difficult for him.

Because of the loss. Yes! Because of the loss. He lost his father and he lost his master. And for him it was more so because he had the MOST intimate relationship with him, more than



anyone else. So, this sense of loss for everybody else, it takes some time, it takes some time for them to settle, to come to terms with that. And for those who really were the disciples of Dr. Nurbakhsh, it is no problem because there is only one master. There is only one master, and this transitioning, it is the “breath,” it is a transmission of a breath, from one to the other, it is the same breath, it is the same light, it is the same reality.

Yes, but at the same time ... it is different. Yes, of course. He’s a different person.

And he has different ways of talking, walking, interacting, teaching. For me, of course, I have known the new master for all these years, and I love him. But to answer the question in a general way: if I really had a true devotion to Dr. Nurbakhsh and he was my master and I believed in him, then I would also believe in the one who follows him because he chose him. I can’t have it both ways. [both chuckle]

Yeah. Yeah, exactly. So it’s no problem. Of course, I cannot expect [pause], it would be very naïve and unreasonable to say okay, I want that same personality in the new master. We can’t have it! [both laugh]

Okay. This issue of SUFI is in a way a celebration of spiritual guides. For people who didn’t know Dr. Javad Nur-

bakhsh, how would you talk about him? What differentiated him from other masters in your view? [laughing] I don’t know about other masters, but if I had to describe Dr. Nurbakhsh in one word, it would be “Love.” He was the embodiment of that. And also, maybe you don’t want to write this, but I thought he was the most dangerous being there was. [SN laughs and HK joins in]

I DO want to write this! In what sense? In what sense dangerous? He meant business! That’s what you mean? He was ruthless? Is that what you mean? Yes, the *nafs* was really very much in fear of him, because he had no self-existence, because of that love. There is nothing the *nafs* can do to protect itself from that. We are really face to face with God. Because there is nothing else there. You could never describe him; one would always miss and come up short. He was even different from photo to photo.

He could be anything ... or nothing.

NOTES

- 1 Namgyel, Elizabeth. “Let’s Be Honest.” *Shambala Sun* (Jan. 2008) <http://www.lionsroar.com/pema-chodron-and-dzigar-kongtrul-lets-be-honest/#>
- 2 See following story, *The Last Veil: from Abu Sa’id Abu’l-Khayr’s Hagiography*, 50 translated by Hossein Kashani, and also the original Persian *Cheshidan-i ta’im-i vaqt: az miras-i irfani-i Abu Sa’id-i Abu’l-Khayr* (*Tasting the Moment: From the Spiritual Heritage of Abu Sa’id Abu’l-Khayr*).