

“International Rumi Year” 2007

An appreciation of Jalaluddin Rumi

By Steven Henson

When declaring 2007 as ‘International Rumi Year’, UNESCO described Rumi as “one of the great humanists, philosophers and poets who belong to humanity in its entirety”. Historically Rumi’s works are known to have inspired Dante, Chaucer and many others, including Mozart. Remarkably, today, 800 years after his birth, he is still one of the best selling poets in the USA.

Rumi (or Mevlana, as he is popularly known) wrote several important mystical works. His major opus is the ‘Mathnawi’, a poem of some 25,000 rhyming couplets in 6 volumes, widely regarded as one of the greatest works of mystical poetry ever written. He is also the founder of the Mevlevi order of dervishes who are sometimes called the ‘Whirling Dervishes’.

Rumi’s all pervading influence springs from the burning passion that lies deep at the core of the Soul. It is this passion which Rumi mirrors back to his readers in all its majestic beauty. With keen insight, generosity of spirit and un-bridled love Rumi’s poetic language becomes a tool that speaks to, and engages, our innermost potential. His aim is to encourage everyone, of no matter what persuasion, to dive in and taste for themselves the spiritual freedom that is possible for Man – and which he has found for himself.

It is for this reason Rumi cannot be defined, only loved and appreciated by those who seek this inspiration for, and in, themselves – and understand its value. In this short article we hope to give readers a taste of the breadth of Rumi’s spiritual message – which is one of Love, Hope and Compassion for all of Humanity. As he himself wrote:-

**Come, Come, Whoever You Are
Wonderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.
It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vow a thousand times
Come, yet again, come, come.**

He was born in 1207 in the province of Khorasan, Persia and died in Konya, Turkey in 1273. In Rumi’s day Konya was an important city on the Silk Road and a meeting place for people from many cultures and beliefs – from Taoism and Buddhism in the East to Christianity, Islam and Judaism in the West. It was in this creative, flourishing environment that Rumi, a lover of music, poetry and dance, entered the spiritual path and re-discovered that which God had established in his soul.

The spiritual path can be likened to the process of becoming a Hero, having never heard of such an idea before. In order to bring this possibility to life one would first have to know what it means to be a hero. Then one would need to see that knowledge in action i.e. witness acts of heroism performed by others, until finally, with sufficient maturity, we are able to take the vital step of becoming a hero ourselves – and reach our goal.

In Rumi's spiritual development the first step, of acquiring knowledge, probably started at around the age of 25 in Konya – which was the perfect place to learn. He was a widely read and knowledgeable man who, within 10 years, became a respected spiritual teacher. Significantly, during this period, he had many meetings with Sadruddin-i-Konevi who introduced Rumi to the mystical writings of his stepfather, Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, and the esoteric concept of Perfect Man.

For the purposes of this discourse we can understand 'Perfect Man' as a person who has abandoned the illusion of there being 'another' existence, separate from (or besides) the Existence of the One (i.e. God). Affirming this they submit themselves, in full conscious awareness, to the Divine Compassion, in complete trust and certainty that the illusion of their individual, partial, separate, existence will, when they have reached sufficient maturity, be removed by God in order that they might fulfil their potential – and become 'the place' where God beholds His creation and the vessel through which the Mercy of God reaches His servants.

Philo of Alexandria, roughly a contemporary of Jesus, stated that "The Perfect Man is God, but not THE God". Ibn Arabi's writings take this truth as their central theme and explore its ramifications from every possible perspective, expounding and examining the universal esoteric principles at the core of every serious belief system – all flowing from the essential Unity of God and Man, which in mystical terms is known as the 'Unity of Being'. The Mathnawi is, in Rumi's own words, "the shop for Unity" and Rumi's writing are a majestic invitation to come to witness this Unity for 'oneself'.

When Rumi was 37 years old an unknown dervish, called Shams-i-Tabriz, arrived in Konya. Almost immediately Rumi recognised the spiritual qualities of Shams and together they entered a period of intense converse in seclusion. There is a tendency to interpret the relationship between Shams and Rumi in today's emotional currency but this is quite wrong. In Shams, Rumi recognised the perfect image of the goal of his seeking, in complete accord with Ibn Arabi's exposition of Perfect Man, and sought spiritual intimacy and enlightenment. For Rumi this initial meeting and subsequent years of retreat were like the second stage of the spiritual path – the witnessing of acts of heroism.

The final stage of Rumi's transformation began immediately after Sham's disappearance some three or four years later. Shams left as mysteriously as he arrived – leaving Rumi to reflect upon the deep love that he felt for his spiritual initiator and companion. In abandonment Rumi discovered that the spiritual yearning he felt went to the core of his own heart, and that the beauty he beheld in Shams could not longer be tied to any one particular form or appearance. Love, so alive in his heart, demanded of Rumi that he renounced egoism in favour of intimacy with the All.

This is the final stage that all spiritual seekers must traverse to reach God – and this part of the path must be walked alone. It concerns 'identity' and it is up to each person to come to this for themselves – no one can do this for them. Beyond this narrow passageway, which we commonly call death (not in the physical sense but rather as a cessation of ignorance and consequent re-birth to the eternal recognition of that which was always present in the first place) lies the domain from which Rumi speaks, constantly urging us to have the courage to dive into the unknown and re-discover, as he himself has done, our home.

After Sham's disappearance Rumi remained alone in retreat with the Beloved. He saw no one, spoke to no one until the 40th day – when he re-emerged into this world as a transformed man. He put on new clothes and started to dance, turning like a planet orbiting the Sun, celebrating his re-union with the cosmic order – a dance which was to become the Sema (a Turkish word that means 'listening to' in the most intimate of ways) performed by his students even to this day. It is also known as the Turning ceremony of the Mevlevi Dervishes.

Rumi wrote of this transformation, which every one of us is capable of working toward, in many ways. Below we offer a small extract from the Mathnawi, entitled 'Soul of the World'ⁱ with a short commentary on some of the significant points that Rumi himself alludes to:-

**“I have circled awhile with the nine Fathers in each Heaven.
For years I have revolved with the stars in their signs.**

(The heart of the Perfect Man contains all the archetypes from the infinite planes of existence and transcends fate. The exterior of the Perfect Man is the Universes.)

**I was invisible awhile, I was dwelling with Him.
I was in the Kingdom of “or nearer,” I saw what I have seen.
I receive my nourishment from God, as a child in the womb;**

(Enlightenment, or Spiritual Union, is a transcendent 'flight to God' which leaves the world of form behind. Here the Soul bears witness to the self-standing Light of Truth alone. The mystic continues in this way until prompted to walk forward. At this time, which is in fact no-time, the Soul takes only from God as the unborn child takes from its mother.)

**Man is born once, I have been born many times.
Clothed in a bodily mantle, I have busied myself with affairs,
And often have I rent the mantle with my own hands.**

(There is no limit to the knowledge of God and hence there can equally be no limit to the mystical process of death and re-birth. For the Perfect Man each death results in deeper intimacy with the Beloved and is a deliberate, conscious act of Love. Rumi is not an advocate of re-incarnation.)

**I have passed nights with ascetics in the monastery,
I have slept with infidels before the idols of the pagoda.
I am the pangs of the jealous, I am the pain of the sick.
I am both cloud and rain: I have rained on the meadows.**

(Man is essentially spirit residing in body. The Perfect Man is not an 'individual' spirit but is the Spirit in all. Hence Perfect Man knows 'others' through 'themselves' and is closer to everything in creation than relationship. This magnitude of this Compassion is one of the great mysteries which only Divine Love can explain.)

**Never did the dust of mortality settle on my skirt, O dervish!
I have gathered a wealth of roses in the garden of Eternity.
I am not of water nor fire, I am not of the froward wind,
I am not of moulded clay: I have mocked at them all.**

(Whilst the exterior of Perfect Man is the Universes, at the same time Perfect Man is the complete image of his Origin and is therefore 'rich beyond need' of the Universes. Here Rumi hints at the ramifications of this supreme spiritual delight.)

O son, I am not Shams-i-Tabriz, I am pure Light.

(The Perfect Man is an unique individuation of the non-qualifiable – Pure Light. Rumi has not 'become' his friend and initiator.)

If thou seest me, beware! Tell not any one what thou hast seen”.

(How can we see such a thing? This we have to answer for ourselves.)

In the former monastery of St. Savior in Chora (Kariye Camii), in Istanbul, there are some rare and beautiful Byzantine icons depicting major scenes from the lives of Jesus and Mary. Therein Mary is described as the 'Dwelling place of the Uncontainable', and Jesus the 'Dwelling place of the Living'.

Jesus is the (active) Word of God which brings to life everything that comes within its regard. Mary is the totally receptive Heart, in complete submission to God, ever ready to receive the all creative Word as pure beneficence from Spirit, and she is the Mother, the source of complete Compassion.

Rumi is the sublime synthesis of these two perfections. His words truly bring to life the heart of his readers in a way that is impossible to define. He gives completely, with immense compassion, knowing well that we are all of the same Spirit, merely different forms, each journeying on the same, but nevertheless unique, path on our way back to our Home. We are like children who have yet to mature – and he is the most generous of parents urging us to bring our true potential to life.

Just as the Heart of the Perfect Man is ‘co-eternal with The Eternal’, Rumi’s influence is as alive today as it was more than 700 years ago, perhaps even more so. Time has certainly not diminished Rumi’s importance to Humanity. It is more than fitting that UNESCO have chosen 2007 as a year in which to celebrate Rumi, the most profound of the Persian mystical poets and a great Saint who has so generously demonstrated to the world what it truly means to be Human, the most important of all lessons, which He is still teaching us today.

ⁱ Extract from the Mathnawi translated by Professor R A Nicholson, Professor of Arabic at the University of Cambridge from his book “Rumi: Poet & Mystic”, published by Oneworld. Professor Nicholson is widely regarded as the greatest Rumi scholar in the English language.

About the Author

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