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interview

The Sufi-Rumi Connection

Kabir Helminski, a sheikh of the Mevlevi order, talks about Rumi, Sufism, and their roots in Islam.

By Rhonda Roumani

Kabir Helminski is a sheikh of the Mevlevi Order, which traces its lineage back to Rumi. He is the translator of many books on Rumi, as well as several collections of Sufi writings. Helminski has toured the world, bringing the music of Sufism and the art of the whirling dervishes of Turkey to people everywhere. He is the author of two books on Sufism: "Living Presence" and "The Knowing Heart," and is the translator of Rumi's poetry collections, including "Jewels of Remembrance," "Rumi the Path of Love," and others.

Helminski talked with Beliefnet's Islam producer, Rhonda Roumani, about Rumi, Sufism, and their connection to Islam.

What is it about Rumi's poetry that has made him so popular in the United States?

The United States is an openly religious country, unlike Europe, where there is a lot more cynicism toward not only religion but even toward spiritual matters. Americans are a naturally openhearted and spiritual people. Our spiritual history--the Euro-Christian legacy--has been a legacy in which the direction of our humanness and the direction of religion seem to be pointing in opposite directions.

And Rumi brings it back together by showing us that the way to God is through our humanness, through our brokenness. And only God dissolves our shame and helps us to know that we, God's creation, are profoundly loved.

Islam makes every aspect of human life sacred. Whereas there are other kinds of religious understanding which suggest that the way to God is through the denial of our humanness and the overcoming of our humanness. The Islamic way is much more that we have an inherently good nature. We're not born with original sin. Muhammad (PBUH) showed a way to incorporate the highest spiritual attainment into a very human life. And this is frankly a pretty radical and new concept within the Euro-Christian tradition, where people have denied themselves and gone to monasteries and lived with the burden of sin.

Rumi speaks to this sense that we have of our own human limitations, our own human unworthiness, and he convinces us that we are loved by God. Through the embrace of our pain, a spiritual door opens *if* we embrace that pain in the remembrance of God.

So, Rumi is the voice of this unconditional love. He is willing to talk about his own pain, for instance--the pain of loving God, the pain of being human. He is honest. He touches our wound. He demonstrates how a human being can be the intimate friend of God.

Rumi was a Sufi. What is Sufism, and how is it connected to Islam?

Sufism is made up of several branches. We have no serious doctrinal differences between these branches, nor is one branch in competition with another.

Sufism comes from *tassawuf,* which means purification of the human heart without which we cannot know God. As the Qur'an says, "Indeed in the remembrance of God hearts find peace." The end of the training process of Sufism is the spiritually mature human being.

But we should understand that in every religious tradition, there are different levels. One level is the common practice of religion that they are typically born into. Within a religious tradition, there is also "the path" or "the way." The word for this in Islam is "tariqa." Tariqa is a

conscious choice that a person makes to go beyond belief to "experience." It is different than nominally belonging to a religion. In Islam, there are many tariqas. Someone who walks the path of tariqa is a Sufi.

In Islam, there is the level of Shari'ah, or religious law. The Shari'ah governs our outer actions and behaviors. Sufism has more to do with the inner understanding of those outer practices and the quality of consciousness that we bring to those practices through the development of our inner spiritual capacity, particularly through consciousness and love. This development of one's spiritual capacity is much more possible through a relationship with someone who has made this spiritual journey and can help to guide us and help us avoid the pitfalls of the journey. This person is called a "sheikh," a "guide," a "teacher," or sometimes just a "spiritual friend."

It should involve a kind of apprenticeship. There are rare examples who receive this spiritual enlightenment without a guide, without a teacher. They are called *Uwaysi,* after Uwaysi Qarani, who Muhammad called the best of disciples.

How does traditional Islam look upon Sufism?

Sufis have had a place of respect throughout the history of traditional Islam. It has only been in relatively recent times, and through the confusion of modernity, that people within Islamic cultures have been denying the centrality of the Sufis. There have been a few times that Sufis have been on the outs--because of political reasons. But within the Mongol Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and throughout much of the Islamic world, the role of the tariqas was respected, and people at the highest levels, even the *Ulema,* or the learned scholars, were familiar and at ease with Sufism.

Many of the great Muslims have been Sufis: Abdul Qadir Jilani, Rabia, Al-Ghazali, Rumi, as well as four of the five founders of the recognized *madhabs,* or schools of law.

But when you point this out, the critics might say, "Oh, that's not who we mean by Sufis. We mean those people who are lazy and don't follow the Shar'iah or those sheikhs who create cults around themselves and manipulate people."

For instance, when someone like Muhammad Iqbal, a popular Muslim writer and thinker, suggests that Sufis stand in the way of human progress, he is talking about a degenerated Sufism that may have existed in the India of his time. Iqbal described himself as a devoted student of Rumi and asked that a *makam* (or shrine) be built for him behind Rumi's tomb.

Imam Malik, a preeminent scholar of Islam and the originator of the Maliki school of thought, said, "To follow the shariah without tariqah is to be a *zindiq* (misbeliever)." And vice versa.

Those who are critical of Sufism seem to view Islam as almost a contractual relationship with God. God has spelled out his part of the deal, and human beings had better fulfill it or they will be punished. But I do not believe that this was the mentality of Muhammad (PBUH).

Sufism would be inconceivable without the Qur'an and the example of Muhammad (PBUH). So those who tried to cut themselves off from Islam by ignoring the example of Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur'an have in fact cut themselves off from the source of Sufism.

Also, those who understand Sufism as the blending of all religious traditions into some new eclectic message are approaching Sufism superficially. The source of Sufism must be understood through a deeper understanding of the Qur'an and the character of Muhammad (PBUH). And when one understands the Qur'an and the character of Muhammad (PBUH), one will also have a compassionate and tolerant viewpoint of all faiths because that is the perspective of the Qur'an. But to create a spirituality by mixing a little bit of this and that tradition doesn't do justice to any of those paths. We can respect them--but we cannot walk them all.

How does Rumi's poetry fit into Islam? What order was he a part of?

Rumi's words are inconceivable without the revelation of the Qur'an and the example of Muhammad (PBUH). Rumi received one lineage through his family and another through his teacher, Shams of Tabriz. These two lineages became the inspiration for a new lineage known as the Mevlevis, which for 700 years has attracted people with artistic and idealistic temperaments: musicians, composers, poets, calligraphers, and social reformers.

Rumi is not generally associated with Islam. Do people who read it in the West understand the Islam that underlies his poetry?

Rumi's writings fall into two basic categories. One category is the lyric poems--the *gazals* and *rubayat*. These poems are somewhat ecstatic and intoxicated. They don't often directly refer to Islamic teachings because they work in the language of metaphor and poetry. These poems also work in the conventions of classical Persian poetry, where people use the metaphors of wine and passionate love, knowing very well that they were referring to spiritual experiences and that these experiences are rooted within an Islamic context.

Nowadays, it has been these kind of poems that have been the more popular ones in America. Whereas his "Mathnawi," which has his more mature teachings and which contain references to Qur'anic *ayat* and *hadith* and Islamic practice on every page, are only now becoming popular.

Also, some of the most popular translations have had some of the Islamic references removed because they would not be intelligible to the average American.

However, Rumi's message is always about the love of God and the surrender to God. So, even when he appears to be talking about passionate love or intoxicating wine--all of this is a metaphor for the surrender to God. And that quality of surrender appeals to people in America today, and they don't realize that this surrender is Islam.

Have many people come to Islam through Rumi?

Rumi's poetry is having an enormous effect in terms of softening people's hearts toward Islam. In America today, the reputation of Sufism among Americans is almost impeccable, whereas Islam inspires fear and prejudice. But for those who know about Sufism, and for those spiritual seekers or for those who have a broader consciousness, Sufism is universally appreciated and respected.

But most people don't know how to bring Islam and Sufism together because they find the Islam they are presented with or the stereotype of Islam frightening. Rumi and Sufism seem irreconcilable with Islam, but they are deeply related. In fact, most of the people who come to Islam come to it through Sufism. The only significant exception here is the African American population, which came through another door. The vast majority of people in the West who come to Islam come to it through Sufism.

Are there Rumi sayings that have become popular in the mainstream?

For 20 years, I have watched permissions requests come into our office since we published some of the most popular Rumi translations, including those of Coleman Barks. There is something like a Top 10 Rumi quotes. The following would probably top the list:

Out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing,
There is a field, I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
even the words "you" and "I" do not exist.

How do more traditional Muslims feel about the drinking references and the sexual imagery in Rumi's poems? What do they mean?

The Sufi literary tradition in the Persian language made use of these metaphors at a certain

time to wake people up to the awesome reality of our possible relationship with God, which should be passionate and intoxicating. These great friends of God used these metaphors bravely, one could even say dangerously. It is interesting that even in Iran today, I have been told by very reliable sources, negative criticism of Rumi is unheard of, even though he wrote passages that were sometimes vulgar, though always to make a spiritual point. Today, there is more possibility for confusion in our own culture, where the metaphors are sometimes, relatively rarely, confused with their literal meaning. There is a book out called "The Love Poems of Rumi." Well, Rumi never wrote "love poems" to anyone, except maybe to his wife--I hope he did. But he wrote many poems, one might say all of them, reminding us to love God.

Did Rumi whirl? What is whirling? And why is it done?

Yes. In Islam we're taught that *niyah,* intention, is the foremost criterion of our actions. The intention behind whirling is to come close to God, to remove the veils, to come to our inmost center where we are closest to God. The whirling ceremony is one of the supreme aesthetic expressions, as well as a meditation in movement. But, most importantly, it is an act of worship.

Knowledge has two wings. Conjecture is one wing. Conjecture alone is lacking and cuts short the flight. The one-winged bird continues to struggle, hoping to reach the nest somehow with one wing. And then wisdom shows his shining face. Delivered from conjecture, the bird now spreads both wings (and soars once again).

-Rumi, "The Life and Thought of Rumi"

I implored the sage in earnest last night
to unveil the mysteries of the universe.
He whispered softly in my ear,
"Silence!
It is something to perceive but never to say."

-Rumi, "The Life and Thought of Rumi"

When clutches of the "self" break away,
they clap their hands and break into dance
as their imperfections fade away.
The musicians within strike the tambourine,
and the seas burst into foam at their ecstasy.

-Rumi, "The Life and Thought of Rumi"

Sever the chains of the ego. Set yourself free and witness the bright essence of your inner being. Discover within your heart the wisdom of a prophet without books, without teachers, and without prudence.

-Rumi, "The Life and Thought of Rumi"

Day and night he danced in ecstasy,
revolving on the earth like the heavens.
His ecstatic cries reached the zenith of the skies
and were heard by all and sundry.

-Rumi, "The Life and Thoughts of Rumi"

I am neither Christian, nor Jewish, nor Muslim. Doing away with duality, I saw the two worlds as one. I seek One, I know One, I see One, and I call One.

-Rumi, "The Life and Thought"

Day and night he danced in ecstasy,
revolving on the earth like the heavens.
His ecstatic cries reached the zenith of the skies
and were heard by all and sundry.

-Rumi, "The Life and Thoughts of Rumi"

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He wept when they appointed him judge. The deputy asked, "Why do [you] cry? This is the time to rejoice."

"How can I who does not know decide between two who know?"

"Accept no bribe," the deputy said. "Then you will know. Do not give in to desire; it will make you blind. Since I turned from vain desires, my heart has become like a mirror bright. It recognizes truth from untruth."

-Rumi, "Mathnawi," 2:2744-46, 2753-55

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The bottom of the river is full of jewels.
Take heed! Do not make the water turbid.
The spirit of man is like the air:
when dust surrounds it the sky is veiled.
Notwithstanding such a state of darkness,
God made visions to help you
find the road to redemption.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The spiritual path ruins the body, but subsequently restores it to health. It ruins the house to reveal the treasure, and with that treasure it builds better than before.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Hardship may dishearten at first,
but every hardship passes away.
All despair is followed by hope;
all darkness is followed by sunshine.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The Merciful God promised Mustafa,
"You will die but the Qur'an will prevail.
I shall exalt your Book and its Miracle
and protect its face from being changed.
This Qu'ran to you is Moses' staff;
like that dragon it will devour all deception."

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Seek a true friend,
for a friend seeks the benefit of a friend,
Do good to the people for the sake of God
or for the peace of your own soul,
that you may always see what is pure
and save your heart from the darkness of hate.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Your bounty fulfills every need.
Why should we turn to any other?
The scant knowledge that endures in my soul,
deliver it from the wiles of the body's clay
before this clay consumes it away,
before these winds sweep it away.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The stories of the prophets in the Qur'an sadden the soul within its prison. The captive soul seeks freedom from ignorance. Look to the prophets, those souls freed from bonds. Their voices call from within their religions, "This is the way! Escape! Escape! This is the way we escaped. There is no other way but our way."

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Wisdom is the table, not bread or meat. Wisdom is the light, food for the soul. No nutriment can compare to the nourishment of light. Nothing can nourish the soul but light. Rid yourself of material needs and be set free. Taste the original victual, the dainty morsel of light.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

When temptation claims your reason,
know that misfortune is about to strike.
Fall down prostrate and begin to pray.
With flowing tears implore the Lord
that He may deliver you
from the throes of doubt.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Are you oblivious of the bounty of God who invites you to come yonder? The whole world of six directions is brimming with His bounty. Wherever you turn, His munificence is manifest.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

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The pleas of the devoted ascend to heaven,
the smoke of their sincerity ascends to heaven,
and the angels entreat God in earnest:
"O You who answer every prayer,
Your protection is being beseeched.
Your devotee in utter humility pleads.
Hear him, Lord.
He knows only to depend on You."

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

When your heart becomes a seat of secrets, you will come to your destination. Hide your innermost thoughts, said the Prophet, and you will attain your object of desire. Seeds are buried in the earth, but their innermost secrets bloom as an exquisite garden.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

God scatters His light over all saints. The fortunate hold up their skirts to receive it. Those who receive His light turn from all except God. Without the skirt of love, we cannot receive our share.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The visions now revealed to you,
once they seemed absurd to you.
From ten prisons His bounty released you.
Make not the desert a prison for you.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

As God has made the Qibla manifest, abandon your search. Hark, turn away from all futile search, now that the House has come to view. If you forget this Qibla for one moment, you will be overcome by the qibla of desires.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The spiritual path ruins the body, but subsequently restores it to health. It ruins the house to reveal the treasure, and with that treasure it builds better than before.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Happy the man who freed himself from his "self" and united himself with the Infinite. When you sought refuge in the Qur'an of God, you mingled yourself with the essence of the prophets. The Qur'an is a narrative of the states of the prophets who glory in the blessed ocean of His majesty.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Do not regard yourself as infamous or weak.
Reflect upon your aspirations, O noble one.
No matter what your station be,
keep searching.
For this pursuit is a blessed course.
This quest removes all impediments to God.

-Rumi, "The Life and Thought of Rumi"

Beware! Do not let avarice waylay you!
Do not let greed tear you up by the roots!
For as you sleep,
the stench of your spurious deeds
is thundering on the azure sky.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Practice patience; it is the essence of praise.
Have patience, for that is true worship.
No other worship is worth as much.
Have patience; patience is the key to all relief.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

His burdens have made him double over, his moans before you are loud and clear. "Show me a prayer, a benediction," he cries, "that I may be delivered from these hidden chains."

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

At midnight say, "I am near you: be not afraid of the night, for I am your protecting friend." Last night in your dream you saw One with a prayer-rug. That was I, and what I told you in that dream about the meaning of the prophesy: make those words of Mine your mind's guide.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Every prophet to the world came alone,
within him carrying a hundred unseen worlds.
The cosmos was charmed by his depth
and folded itself into his modest frame.
The foolish thought he was lonely and weak.
With the King as his companion,
how is he weak?

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Do away with superfluous speech, and sacrifice what you hold dear, that His grace may utter praise of you and the heaven be envious of your exalted estate.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The stories of the prophets in the Qur'an sadden the soul within its prison. The captive soul seeks freedom from ignorance. Look to the prophets, those souls freed from bonds. Their voices call from within their religions, "This is the way! Escape! Escape! This is the way we escaped. There is no other way but our way."

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

What did you accomplish in your life? How did you consume your sustenence and strength? Where did you lose the luster of your eyes? Where did you lose all the five senses? I gave you bounty. Where is your gratitude? I gave you the capital. Come show me the interest.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

He complained of his pain a hundredfold. God said, "Grief and pain make you modest and noble. Your real enemy is your own medicine, the elixir that seeks to win your heart. Flee from it to solitude and seek the help of God's grace. Your friends are really your enemies, for they occupy you and make you oblivious of God."

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Wisdom is the table, not bread or meat. Wisdom is the light, food for the soul. No nutriment can compare to the nourishment of light. Nothing can nourish the soul but light. Rid yourself of material needs and be set free. Taste the original victual, the dainty morsel of light.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Hidden creatures good and bad always touch the heart. The touch of the angel is inspiration; Satanic touches temptations untold. Tarry with patience until your confusion is resolved and you know whom you rejected and who became the leader of your heart.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

During prayer I give myself over to the Lord
and delight myself in zealous worship.
The window of my soul opens wide
and the Book of God comes to view
To fill my house with grace and light.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Blessed was the hour that you saw me. I was dead and you gave me a new life. You sought me like a mother; I shunned you like a fool. Happy is he who espies Your face, O you whom pure spirits praise. How I reproached you with many silly words.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

place [of freedom]. The wicked is delivered from his wickedness; the prisoner escapes the sorrow of his confinement. The world appears wide, but in truth is very narrow. Its laughter lamentation, its glory shame.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The best charity is followed by contentment so begin with those related to you.

-The Prophet Muhammed, as reported by Abu Hurairah

Blessed was the hour that You saw me. I was dead and You gave me a new life. You sought me like a mother; I shunned you like a fool. Happy is he who espies Your face, O You whom pure spirits praise. How I reproached You with many silly words.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

With the divine solace "Be not afraid" all fear of oceans or waves or foam should be gone. Rejoice in Him and nothing else. He is the spring; everything else is desolate ice.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Your power comes from the power of God,
not from the veins or the beating heart.
The power of the saints comes from God,
not from feasts and trays of provisions.
They were created from the light
that transcends the angel and the Spirit alike.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

When the ocean of Mercy begins to foam,
even stones drink the water of life.
The face of earth becomes lush green,
the dead wood springs to life,
the lamb and the wolf together play,
the despairing becomes valiant and strong.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Glorified by heaven, O radiant Sun, illumine the earth forever and more that the hearts of its inhabitants unite and ascend and become one with the exalted Divine.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Give your life for that cup of divine wisdom. How can you succeed without endurance and patience? To wait for the sake of that cup is no hardship. Show patience, for patience is the key to joy.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The falcon made the king's hand his joy, and because indifferent to the search for carrion. All animals from the gnat to the elephant are of the family of God and depend on Him for sustenance. What a sustainer is God!

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Sometimes in order to help He makes us cry.
Happy the eye that sheds tears for His sake.
Fortunate the heart that burns for His sake.
Laughter always follows tears.
Blessed are those who understand.
Life blossoms wherever water flows.
Where tears are shed divine mercy is shown.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

God calls himself "Baseer" [Observant], so that the knowledge that He is watching you may keep you from sinning.

-Rumi, "The Life and Thought of Rumi"

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God made the illusion look real and the real an illusion. He concealed the sea and made the foam visible, the wind invisible, and the dust manifest. You see the dust whirling, but how can the dust rise by itself? You see the foam, but not the ocean. Invoke Him with deeds, not words, for deeds are real and will save you in the afterlife.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The servile earth and the lofty sky:
without this opposite
the sky would not be so high.
The low and high of the earth
are winter and spring.
The low and high of time
are night and day.
The low and high of the body
are sickness and health.
By means of these opposites
the world is kept alive;
by means of these doubles
souls feel fear and hope.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

When you resolve to become pious, the devil in your nature cries out at you, "Tread not those paths, O confused one; distress and poverty will overcome you. You will be despised, let down by friends, you will regret it." Dread of the devil has bound their souls; the cries of the devil are the drover of the damned; the call of the Lord is a guardian of the saints.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Had the world been conceived just to praise God, there would be no fervor in glorifying God. Equip man with a sword, remove his infirmities, and see what he will be: a brave knight or a devious thief?

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Seek self-discipline with all your soul. Devote yourself to worship and save your soul. Be grateful that God gave you the gift of self-discipline, for you had no power over it. He inspired it within you with the command, "Be!"

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

During sleep the spirit is set free. Behold how it rejoices in the place [of freedom]. The wicked is delivered from his wickedness; the prisoner escapes the sorrow of his confinement. The world appears wide, but in truth is very narrow. Its laughter lamentation, its glory shame.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Knowledge is light; avarice ice.
Knowledge is water; this world dirt.
A trickle of wisdom appears from beyond
to check the vices of this world.
Should the trickle become abundant,
none would endure, be it virtue or vice.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Hundreds of thousands of inner eyes were opened and through Your breath made ready to reflect upon the unseen.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The saints are My children in exile,
torn away from My dominion and glory.
Despised and alone they endure their trials;
in secret I am their intimate friend.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The wisdom of this world brings doubt. The wisdom of religion soars above the skies. Reflection on Truth opens the way to the kingdom. Treasures and armies do not make a king. A true king is a king within himself.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

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This world is full of remedies. But you have no remedy until God opens a window for you. You may not be aware of that remedy just now. In the hour of need it will be made clear to you. The Prophet said God made a remedy for every pain.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

As God has made the Qibla manifest, abandon your search. Hark, turn away from all futile search, now that the House has come to view. If you forget this Qibla for one moment, you will be overcome by the qibla of desires.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Give your life for that cup of divine wisdom. How can you succeed without endurance and patience? To wait for the sake of that cup is no hardship. Show patience, for patience is the key to joy."

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The falcon made the king's hand his joy, and because indifferent to the search for carrion. All animals from the gnat to the elephant are of the family of God and depend on Him for sustenance. What a sustainer is God!

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Water said to the defiled, "Hurry come to me."

The defiled replied, "But I feel ashamed before the water."

Water said, "But without me how will you wash your shame? How will your filth be removed?"

Shame hinders the faith of the tainted who hide from the water.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

The servile earth and the lofty sky:
without this opposite
the sky would not be so high.
The low and high of the earth
are winter and spring.
The low and high of time
are night and day.
The low and high of the body
are sickness and health.
By means of these opposites
the world is kept alive;
by means of these doubles
souls feel fear and hope.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

Bitter is made sweet through love;
copper becomes gold through love.
Through love dregs become clear;
love heals all pain.
Through love the king becomes slave;
love brings the dead to life.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

You see throngs of afflicted feeble folk seated at the door in ardent hope. O you who are crushed, your pleas have been heard. Hark! Rush toward the mercy of God and be delivered of pain.

-Rumi, "Mathnawi"

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