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## SUFISM – ON JOY AND PAIN

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*Life is one in joy and pain.*

*Pir-O-Murshid Inayat Khan, (in Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan 1978, p. 394)*

*How much the Beloved made me suffer before the Work  
Grew entwined inseparably with blood and eyes!*

*A thousand grim fires and heartbreaks~*

*And its name is "Love"~*

*A thousand pains and regrets and attacks*

*And its name is "Beloved"...*

*Heartbreak is a treasure because it contains mercies*

*The kernel is soft when the rind is scraped off;*

*O Brother, the place of darkness and cold*

*Is the fountain of life and the cup of ecstasy.*

Rumi (Harvey & Baring, 1996, p. 124)

How could we know how deeply we have loved or lived if we never have experienced the pain of loss? Joy and pain are inseparable. The above quote from the Sufi poet Rumi reminds me of the preciousness of life, the past, my memories and the mercy of the Universe providing existence, life and people to love and to cherish. The ability to be grateful in the presence of pain is an integral part of the living process. To choose avoiding this pain would be choosing to have not loved or lived at all.

The Sufi mystics see "pain as essential to purification and as essential to the alchemical transformation of the dull human mind and heart into their secret gold" (Harvey & Baring, 1996, p. 124). It is the vulnerability, the open heart, the willingness to love enough, and the risk of experiencing pain and loss that makes us alive. It is not cherishing the wounding, but embracing our ability to feel, to be present, and to know the essence of life. According to Sufi wisdom, suffering is inevitable and necessary in order for our souls to grow. I have experienced loss deeply and often and believe, as the Sufis maintain, we must learn to trust in its ordained necessity. In the dance called life we must meet life as we find it and be present in the face of that which we desire least but cannot avoid. That is the Sufi way. We do not "run to suffering, but neither do we run from it" (Harvey & Baring, 1996, p. 125).

## The Sufi Master Pir-O-Murshid Inayat Khan

Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan (1978), details the life, work, thinking and feelings of his Sufi Master, Pir-O-Murshid Inayat Khan. (References in this article by 'Khan, 1978' refer to Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan.) The] Murshid, according to Khan, "in his last years carried the signature of suffering written on his face, while one would have thought that a liberated master would radiate only joy" (Khan, 1978, pg. 391). The author further explains that while one becomes increasingly sensitive with spiritual development, one is not carried exclusively to the land of joy, while ignoring the cries of pain and despair in the world. Instead, one becomes increasingly aware of all that is, was and will be, "in the Murshid one found joy and pain simultaneously, the way of the broken heart both agonizing and jubilant, never indifferent or low key" (p. 391).

As I reflect upon my life, I can appreciate more fully the Sufi Master's words, "there is an incipient suffering ingrained in the very nature of life - life's inseparable companion" (Khan, 1978, pg. 391). Suffering is found in birth and in death. Suffering is pervasive – even in a joy too intense, or unrequited love, a loss of hope, guilt in not having given enough, or regret in having given too much.. Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan lost his sister in the Concentration Camps at Dauchau, and therefore is deeply aware of and sensitive to global suffering, genocide, sadism, and humiliation. He has compassion for all the victims of cruelty, savagery, and natural disasters in this world. The collective Sufi consciousness is said to be aware that "everywhere and everyday there is endless bitter suffering. No matter how we may wish to protect people from it we cannot, because there must be room for the play of the forces set off by cosmic laws in motion. The only answer is to know how to harness the force that is suffering"(Khan, 1978, p.393).

According to Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan we each have a certain threshold for physical pain in the human mind, with a "cut out mechanism" which is set very high for some people. Naturally, as one attempts to escape physical pain, the urgency of the pain keeps pulling one back to it and efforts to dissociate fail. The Murshid states, "The more one can bear, the more one is given to bear"(Khan, 1978, p. 393).

The discussion of this threshold and its implications, referring to both emotional and psychological suffering, brings to mind a day in 1991. I was in Morristown Memorial Hospital in New Jersey, where I had just undergone orthopedic surgery for a tibia reconstruction. Imagine drills, saws and bolts. I was in the recovery room. My spinal pain medication IV had shifted and no pain medication was entering my system. The nurses couldn't understand why the pain medication was failing. For me the doctors had failed just as the universe had failed me. During the previous twelve months, I had buried my mother and her sister, and my uncle had become ill. I demanded that they remove all IVs from my body and they did as I requested. I felt, we shouldn't pretend that they could help me!

The pain was unbelievable, yet I bit the bullet. After a year of suffering from loss, I was simply determined to tough it out. The nurses on the Orthopedic Unit were aghast when I arrived on their floor, and immediately shoved pain killers into my mouth. How could I endure that pain? Why would I endure that pain? Perhaps I was trying to prove to the Universe I could not be broken.

Pir Vilayat Inayat Kahn states "the more courageously you face physical suffering, the higher the threshold of suffering you can endure, and then at a moral level the more hardship one can endure" (Khan, 1978, p. 393). This follows an odd line of reasoning which has certainly held true for me as I assess my own life and decisions. I experienced this medical emergency following a period of tremendous loss and emotional pain. I believe those losses gave me the tenacity to tolerate tremendous physical pain and to believe that I should and could persevere. For the Sufis, accepting the situation and our suffering as part of the agony of the universe on a cosmic scale

is the only way suffering can be sublimated (Khan, 1978). For me personally, the physical pain was simply pain.

These wisdom teachings resonate deeply as I contemplate my journey to fulfilling my destiny. My path has been an intermeshing of joy and pain, sorrow and despair – which have been a consistent theme. The result has been not only a high tolerance for loss and pain in my life, but in addition a desire and ability to be compassionate in the face of another's pain. My acceptance of these two sides of the coin is the source of my own personal spirituality and how I perceive my relationship to the Universe. Many people believe that as long as extreme tragedy does not happen to them, they are not involved or affected by the outside world. We are all together in this universe, according to Sufi wisdom, and it is from this point that we can "gently creep into the soul of another and forget ourselves. In forgetting oneself we surrender the isolation in our psychological environment and remove the frontier between self and the other" (Khan, 1978, p. 394).

According to the Murshid, it is not detachment that is the solution to our suffering; suffering is overcome by merging with all existence. As for joy, one is never so happy as when one has no reason to be because circumstances can never be so good as to suffice in making one happy. "Happiness cannot be bought or sold, nor can it be given. Happiness is in one's own being, one's own self, that Self that is the most precious thing in life" (Khan, 1978, p.395).

Khan (1978) states that when one finds oneself face to face with the reality of suffering, and holds the belief that there is some intentional planning behind human affairs and destiny, we feel like storming the Universal force we perceive to be responsible. As a Christian, I might hold God responsible for my suffering. If one believes one is a victim, one feels the agony. All one can ask then is why, over and over. The Murshid points out that by blaming the cosmic planner, we become preoccupied with avoiding any suffering or bad karma that might bring more suffering upon us. We act as if happiness alone were our birthright (Vilayat Inayat Khan, 1978). He indicates that suffering is not part of left-over karma from a past life or even from this one, but is simply part of our training for life. Finding in everything its purpose, Murshid sees in pain "the lever devised by nature to make a person sincere and quickens one with life" (Khan, 1978, p. 396).

If it were not for pain, one would not enjoy the experience of joy. It is pain which helps one to experience joy, for everything is distinguished by its opposite. For it is by pain the heart is penetrated, and the sensation of pain is a deeper joy. Without pain the great musicians and poets and dreamers and thinkers would not have reached that stage by which they reached and moved the world. If they always had joy, they would not have touched the depths of life (Khan, 1978, p. 397).

#### *The Wayfarer*

We are all on the journey; life itself is a journey. No one is settled here; we are all passing onward, and therefore it is not true to say, that if we are taking a spiritual journey, we have to break our settled life; there is no one living a settled life here; all are unsettled and all are on their way. The joy of life is the joy of the journey

– Pir-O-Murshid Inayat Khan

(from Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, 1978, p. 127).

"Every experience, good or bad, is a step forward in man's evolution. Failure in life does not matter, the greatest misfortune is standing still" (Vilayat Inayat Khan, 1978, p. 301). For the Murshid, life itself is a paradoxical journey. Spiritual progress is made through changing of our point of view. The Sufis have made a point of revealing the importance of the experience of those states, called *hal*, for the unfoldment of one's being (Khan, 1978, p.129). Pir Vilayat Inayat

Khan refers to this journey as "setting sail" (p. 130) and the traveler is called "the wanderer or the wayfarer" (p. 131). Every soul is said to have a certain debt to pay in life, which appears to be "separate from suffering but reveals itself in debt to mother, father, sister and humanity itself and we repay this debt during our journey" (Khan, 1978, p. 131).

Each Sufi master outlines the stages, the *maqanat*, of the soul's journey according to his own vision, and thereby defines what one will need. For the Murshid, one needs "thoughtful expression in word, action, and deed to overcome the psychological hurdles and approach the horizons of understanding" (Vilayat Inayat Khan, 1978, p. 132). During the first phase, wayfarers are simply enthused by all they encounter. Everything – right or wrong, good or bad – is attractive, like jumping into a pit or falling into a ditch. It is all just fine for the soul at this stage (Khan, 1978).

The second stage is the enchantment stage in life. In this stage, the wayfarer becomes attached to all that "means so much to the self" and the soul becomes more deeply involved with relationship (Vilayat Inayat Khan, 1978, p. 133). The soul has taken heart, and the heart's desires result in much temptation and disappointment, yet the heart is always fixating the mind on the next thing, forever enticed by new temptations. We move along, always building hopes, finding nothing, and then giving in to temptation again (Khan, 1978).

During the third stage, the wanderer seeks an understanding of how things work, how things are related, and how one situation follows another. The wanderer seeks to study and understand. All experiences teach the soul. He moves along the way of unfoldment and he thinks about the nature of life and the contradictions of life such as wise and foolish, or good and bad. What he learns today, he may unlearn tomorrow by a contradictory experience. The ways of right and wrong, the wise and the foolish are constantly studied and wondered upon (Khan, 1978).

Disenchantment is the fourth stage. During this stage, the wayfarer becomes disenchanted with the very things that used to attract him. He can see through the veil of common illusions and begin to see the true human nature. As the gulf between opposing things are removed, he becomes more indifferent and independent, realizing that hope lies in reality. He develops a comprehension of the hair's difference between right and wrong. His development does not cause him to be selfish, but to become more realistic about life (Khan, 1978).

The fifth stage brings the wayfarer back to life where she enjoys even those things that would have made her angry previously. The wanderer plays with children, and enjoys what once made her cringe. The world with its limitations and people with all their faults are all tolerated and forgiven in a continual expansion of sympathy and love. At this point, the Divine Spirit begins to express itself in the wayfarer's heart (Vilayat Inayat Khan, 1978).

The sixth stage is the valley of bewilderment. Here, the wanderer is overwhelmed by the intense meaning of life, and by confronting the power of the truth. This bewilderment becomes a wonderfully amusing way to look at life. The wandering, wayfaring person finally begins to see things as they are, and not as they appear. The two sides of the coin: is a thing bad or good, love or hate? He realizes things are not as they seem or as he thought (Khan, 1978).

In reaching the seventh stage, the Wayfarer realizes the inner eye is a mystery to everyone. "A mystic takes one step forward outwardly and inwardly takes a thousand" (Khan, 1978, pg. 137). For the mystic, feelings come from intuition, a knowledge that comes from a world unseen. According to this knowledge, he acts upon things coming from a far reaching perspective and he sees things from two points of view" (Khan, 1978, pg. 137). "One begins to see the right of the wrong, and the wrong of the right. One begins to see the good of the bad, and the bad of the

good. One begins to see that everything is reflected in its opposite. The dark in the bright, and the bright in the dark, death in birth and birth in death” (Khan, 1978, pg. 137).

For the wayfarer, at this point in his soul’s journey, every good and bad experience is accepted as a lesson. She realizes that all of the paths on the journey move her onward. Through this evolution, the wayfarer in Sufi wisdom develops the ability to accept all things as part of the whole in life, and begins to embrace both the joy and the pain (Khan, 1978, p. 137).

## Conclusion

*Why O my feeling heart  
Do you live and die?  
What makes my feeling heart  
To laugh and to cry?  
Death is my life indeed,  
When I live then I die,  
Pain is a pleasure,  
When I laugh then I cry,*  
Gayan, 247 (Khan, 1978, p. 391).

According to Harvey and Baring (1996, p. 123), “Sufism can be defined in many ways, but it is primarily and marvelously a path of heart.” The entire aim of this mystical discipline is to open the human heart. The birth of this truth entails “nothing less than a surrender to every necessary ordeal, every ordained devastation”, and “never to evade the suffering in the pursuit of truth.” “Such a realistic embrace of the necessity of suffering in the process of birth brings us into the heart of the mystery of the Divine Feminine” (Harvey & Baring, 1996, p. 124). The Murshid, through his perception of the stages of the soul’s unfoldment, helps to provide us with insight into the path of developing the ability to embrace the whole of life (Khan, 1978). It is through opening to the full pain of the facts, and the full pain of real transformation, that the Sufi Mystics show the possibility of accepting heartbreak and becoming midwives to new possibilities. (Harvey & Baring, 1996)

*The heart, everyone’s heart, is longing to give birth; and giving birth, becoming “mother” of our own divine self, is the aim of human life. Accepting the price of this birth of fearlessness is the courage of the Divine feminine, the supreme inner courage of the mystic, and leads to what the Sufis know as the ultimate state of union with reality, of being able to “dance” with adoration and nondual bliss in all dimensions simultaneously.*

Rumi (Harvey & Baring, 1996, p.124)

*Dancing is not raising your feet painlessly like a whirl of dust blown about by the wind. Dancing is when you rise above both worlds, tearing your heart to pieces and giving up your soul.”*

Rumi (Harvey & Baring, 1996, p. 125).

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