

Maqam, Murshid and Murid: Sufi Way Stations and Master-Disciple Relationships
in Farid ud-Din ‘Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*

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Farid ud-Din ‘Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* is an allegorical poem elaborating on the nature of mystical experience and the stages on a wayfarer’s path to the Divine. Using an overarching story of the hoopoe bird of Solomon who convinces a host of other birds to undertake a spiritual journey, ‘Attar maps out the human weaknesses that must be overcome before such a quest, as well as the arduous obstacles one will need to overcome to reach the goal. At each step of the journey, ‘Attar uses countless smaller tales within the frame story to underscore the point being made; cautionary tales warn of the dangers of worldly attachment, while stories of lovers and their beloveds illustrate the relationship that should exist between seeker and God. The poem gives a detailed presentation of a number of elements of the Sufi experience. The seven valleys of spiritual stages, or *maqamat*, in ‘Attar’s poem, skillfully describe the stages in Sufi doctrine of the *tariqa*, or pathway to God, while the hoopoe’s role as guide for the birds and the relationship between Shaykh Sam’an and his disciples elaborate on the nature of master-disciple relationships.

‘Attar’s description of the seven valleys can best be described as stages or *maqamat* on the path to the Divine. As Ernst notes, different Sufis gave a different number of *maqamat* on the path, ranging from four to over a hundred. The number usually depended on the number of the stages that the author himself passed through, and each had to be overcome before advancing to the next stage (Ernst, 1997, p.102-3). ‘Attar’s poem describes seven *maqamat*: Quest, Love, Insight into Mystery, Detachment, Unity, Bewilderment and Poverty and Nothingness, which

correspond to some of the *maqamat* mentioned in other Sufi texts. For example, ‘Attar’s valley of Love corresponds to al-Kalabadhi’s descriptions of the Sufi doctrine of love. Both ‘Attar and al-Kalabadhi describe the station of love as one in which the seeker is consumed wholly by love. al-Kalabadhi notes that the feature of this state is that one will not have any attention to give to any other creature, rather, one’s focus will be wholly absorbed by God (trans. Arberry, 1935, p.103). Similarly, ‘Attar claims the lover “...knows of neither faith nor blasphemy...who has no time for doubt or certainty” (trans. Darbandi & Davis, 1984 p. 172). Thus both authors suggest that reaching the *maqam* of love involves attaining a level of oblivion to all besides God. This is further exemplified in the stories associated with the Valley of Love in ‘Attar’s poem. The man in love with a beer seller defines lover as one who will sell all he owns and do anything at all for the sake of being near the beloved (‘Attar, p. 173). Majnoun expresses a similar sentiment when he risks his life for the merest glimpse of Leili; this supports al-Kalabadhi’s description of the lover being someone who prefers the beloved to all else in existence (al-Kalabadhi, trans.Arberry, 1935, p.102). Another aspect of the Valley of Love is that it includes achieving a state of intoxication with God. al-Kalabadhi describes the Sufi doctrine of intoxication as that state in which the lover finds both wealth and poverty, good and bad, are equal in worthlessness in the face of overwhelming awareness of the beloved. In other words, all consciousness of the material world falls away and is solely focused on the object of love (al-Kalabadhi, trans Arberry, p.110-1). Thus, Majnoun’s consideration of the ragged sheepskin as being worth the same as a lavish cloak, and the both insignificant compared with love for Leili, exemplifies this. The idea that both pain and pleasure are of equal worth to the intoxicated is expressed in ‘Attar’s lines, “...poverty in love is like salt...It gives love taste; you can’t call that a fault” (trans. Darbandi &

Davis, p. 175). This matches al-Kalabadhi's description of the state of intoxication as being one in which pain brings pleasure and is chosen over pleasure (al-Kalabadhi, trans. Arberry, p 110-1).

Love is also an integral part of the next valley in 'Attar's seven, that of *ma'rifa*, or gnosis. Here 'Attar continues the theme of the lover by recounting the stories of the sleeping lover and the wakeful lover. Sincere love is described as having the ability to unveil hidden secrets about God, should the lover remain steadfast in his love. However, 'Attar differs in his order here from other Sufi orderings of the way stations on the path. For example, al-Qushayri puts Love *after* Gnosis, instead of before as 'Attar does (Ernst p.104). For Ansari, the *maqam* of Love comes many stations before the attainment of Gnosis, which occurs just a few stations from the end of his long list (Ernst p. 105-6). Again, this illustrates the different nuances of mystical experience, underscoring that each person will take a different route to the Divine. 'Attar himself states this in the Valley of Insight, saying that it is a place where "every pilgrim takes a different way...and different spirits different rules obey" ('Attar, trns. Darbandi & Davis, p. 179). 'Attar also suggests that some element of intoxication is present at this stage of the path, as intoxication will lead to a love that will open the doors of *ma'rifa* for the seeker (ibid. p. 183). This is also supported by Ibn Tufayl's assertions about the nature of mystical experience, as put for in his introduction to *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, that it is a highly individual and idiosyncratic experience that defies description in human words (Ibn Tufayl, trans Goodman, 2009, p.95-7) .

'Attar's Valley of Detachment corresponds in some ways with the Sufi doctrine of detachment elaborated on by al-Kalabadhi. al-Kalabadhi describes this stage as one in which all care of this world falls away, and one should act without any anticipation of reward or otherwise, but solely act for God. This detachment should even be carried to the point of becoming oblivious to one's states as well. Thus everything in existence becomes worthless to oneself,

even oneself, in the face of devotion to the Divine (al-Kalabadhi, trans. Arberry, p. 104-5).

Similarly, ‘Attar describes it as a *maqam* in which all of existence is viewed as insignificant and transient, worthless and fleeting. It is a place where one is released of all attachment to creation in any way, shape or form, as exemplified in the story of Yusef of Hamadan who realizes that this diverse world is really from one source, and the world itself will pass away. In the story of the horoscope, one comes to the conclusion that whatever one is attached to in this world, he will see it pass away into nothingness. Attaining this station will free him for gaining greater closeness to the Divine (‘Attar, trns. Darbandi & Davis, p. 184-9).

‘Attar’s Valley of Unity corresponds closely with al-Kalabadhi’s descriptions of the stage of Unification in the spiritual path. The doctrine of unification holds that a *murid* should be so wholly engrossed in God and preoccupied with Him that his actions are all for His sake and his attentions and desires are exactly in line with the Divine Will. In other words, one’s *nafs* has departed and been replaced with the will of the Divine, and so one will do no action that deviates from God’s wishes (al-Kalabadhi, trans. Arberry, p. 135-7). Similarly, ‘Attar describes this as a stage in which one “surpasses good and bad and knows the One...This good and bad are here while you are here; surpass yourself and they will disappear” (‘Attar trns. Darbandi & Davis, p.192). Thus in this phase, which directly follows the valley of detachment, one has overcome all cares of the world and be overcome by the will of the Divine. This person, ‘Attar describes, is so wholly engrossed in the One that he “has no being, yet will be...A part of Being for eternity” (ibid. p. 193), which indicates that the *nafs* has been overcome and replaced with the will of the Eternal Being that is God.

While the valley of Bewilderment is supposedly part of the progression of spiritual *maqamat*, its nature resembles more that of a *hal* or spiritual state, not station. This is because the

circumstances that throw one into bewilderment come upon one unannounced and unsought-for. The *hal* is considered a gift- a grace from God that descends upon an individual unexpectedly, and is beyond one's control, unlike a *maqam*, which one can strive to attain (Ernst, 1997, p.102). The stories recounted in this valley seem to support such a conclusion as well. The slave who is seduced by a princess finds himself in an unexpected state of ecstasy from which he awakens confused and lost. He is unable to achieve such an experience on his own, rather, the experience happens to him. He has a flash of mystical experience that changes his spiritual state upon awakening.

The last valley, that of Poverty and Nothingness, or *faqr* and *fanaa'*, describe the end of the spiritual journey that culminates in the beatific vision. This is the stage in which the birds experience death of the self, or *fana'*, which is described by al-Kharraz, Junayd and others as the stage at which the self passes away into oblivion. This stage is where the wayfarer is able to escape the lower self entirely, leaving only the *ruh*, or spirit, to commune with the Divine (Green, 2012, p.32, 37). This appears in the poem where 'Attar says, "With God both Self and evil disappear..." ('Attar, trns. Darbandi & Davis, p.205). Here 'Attar is describing the process by which the seeker escapes to a higher realm of being, one in which he is in close proximity to the Divine.

Throughout the spiritual journey of the birds, there is an overarching *murshid-murid* relationship that binds them all together. In the very beginning of the tale, it is the hoopoe who suggests the journey to Simorgh. Even before the hoopoe is appointed the official leader of the group, he begins taking on the role of guiding master as he responds to and refute the excuse each bird gives to not go on the quest. After gradually helping overcome their individual worldly attachments, he is chosen as their leader (ibid. p. 76). The first thing they do to establish the

murshid status of the hoopoe is the birds pledge their loyalty, or *bay'a*, to the hoopoe. The pledging of *bay'a* has historically been a part of initiation into Sufi brotherhoods, and marks the beginning of a *murid's* discipleship to the *murshid* (Green 2012, p. 9). As Ernst describes, the master-disciple relationship was paramount to the spiritual path. The disciples were to be “like a corpse in the hands of a corpse-washer” (Ernst 1997, p. 124) in relationship to their *murshid*. As part of the etiquette of the *murid* and the condition of the pledge, they agree to follow him to the ends of the earth and obey his every command.

This is in contrast with the cautionary side-story of Shaykh Sam'an, which, while a tale manifesting themes of love, self-denial, and death of the *nafs* (exemplified by the death of the girl who is the object of Shaykh Sam'an's desire), also elaborates on the proper etiquette of the disciple. In the story, Shaykh Sam'an's faithful disciples follow him all the way to Rome, but quickly abandon him when he falls in love with the Christian girl and renounces faith. Instead of remaining with him as they pledged, they return home. Upon their return, a junior shaykh berates them for violating the most basic concept of discipleship, which is following the shaykh in whatever he does, even if it be into disbelief. Of course, this is meant figuratively, to emphasize the importance of loyalty in the master-disciple relationship.

Other elements of *murshid-murid* relationships surface in the frame story when the hoopoe relates a short story of how he came to gain his knowledge from King Solomon. This can be seen as his establishing of a sort of legitimacy for himself. It is almost as if he is recounting his lineage, or *silsila* of knowledge. He emphasizes how he learned from his teacher King Solomon knowledge could not be attained by any amount of worship. Instead, it was knowledge Solomon transmitted to the hoopoe directly, and that the hoopoe encourages them to seek this knowledge out (‘Attar, trans. Darbandi & Davis, p.79). Now, instead of excuses, the hoopoe's

role becomes that of encourager to the birds. He addresses their complaints and fears by telling stories of those who have experienced the same issues. In the beginning his role was to convince them of the worthlessness of the world, so he focused on showing how superficial their worldly desires were. After assuming the mantle of *murshid*, however, the hoopoe advises the birds on how to overcome the weaknesses of the *nafs*. After addressing all of their needs, then the hoopoe describes the seven valleys through which the birds will pass on their spiritual journey, as well as the types of mystical experience (elaborated on above) they should anticipate experiencing. Green notes that in Sufi tradition the *murshid* was not only seen to be the inheritor of a tradition, but to be someone who had at least somewhat already traveled the path of mystical experience (Green 2012, p. 8). Thus the hoopoe, in recounting the stages of the path, shows an intimate degree of familiarity with the spiritual journey, leading one to believe he has traveled it before. It is at the end of his imparting of this knowledge, or *'ilm* and *ma'rifa*, to his students that they are ready to depart on the journey. Some birds remain true to their oath and follow him to the end, while others die along the way or turn away from the path. The reward, however, for those who kept faithful to their *murshid* was the attainment of *fana'* and the ultimate reunion with the Simorgh.

[Citations on next page]

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