

Halqa Meeting of October 4, 2015

Abdul Hayy: A dervish friend recently reminded me of a paper I wrote about fifteen years ago. She thought that it was a useful essay on understanding the self. I present it here for whatever it is worth.

Taubah-

Mulla Nasrudeen was walking down a road one day when he saw something shining in the gutter. He picked up a mirror and looked into it. "How ugly!" he quipped as he threw it back, "No wonder it was thrown away."

This story illustrates the beginning of authentic spirituality, seeing what is true, a beginning that is often a denial or rejection. Seeing things as they are can be distasteful and even painful at first glance. It is certainly easier to embrace what passes for spirituality: religious romanticism, mystification, or flattery. People want to delve into their inner natures but don't often want to do the real work that this entails.

It is work, at least in the beginning, to see things as they are. And what an important beginning, to learn to watch and accept what is true about ourselves. To turn from lofty and colorful accounts of meditative visions, paranormal wonders, enigmatic masters, to watch the often disheveled and sometimes banal identities that live inside of our own skins. In truth, there is nowhere else to begin.

Stop with me for a moment to consider the various characters, or personalities if you will, that operate within. Even if you believe them to be "empty" or "unreal," just consider what you know about each of them. Look at them one by one and then as a collection that make up your sense of self, the collective maker of your current life. Let's think about how long each one has been a part of us. I can see some aspects going back into my early childhood and other traits and personalities that I seem to

have acquired along the way. I react to some events just as I always have yet I have watched some parts of myself evolve to cope with and enjoy the present. How does the mirror's image appear to you?

This first exercise of watching, repeated again and again, becomes the basis of deeper spiritual work. That deeper work, the deconstruction of the personalities referred to above, can be destabilizing. It is therefore necessary to understand ourselves well.

Forgetting what I show to others, forgetting what I believe about myself, what do I fear? What attracts me? Precisely what are the patterns of my thinking, feeling, and behavior that have enabled me to cope with life thus far?

Once we have observed ourselves carefully, there is naturally a movement to change. The behaviors that do not harmonize with our inner nature are revealed and there is a desire for greater understanding. Attempts at inner integration, and evolution away from destructive behavior can occur. This is different from the attempts of the superego to force the rest of our person into conformity with a social ideal. Instead, there is the work to observe honestly above all else, and a commitment to accept what is discovered within along with the intention, the prayer, for harmonious change. At this point the spiritual aspirant develops enough insight to choose those actions that deepen the awareness of reality and to turn away from those actions that cloud this perception. This turning is in the Sufi Way called "taubah."

This word taubah is often used in a religious sense that means turning from sin toward God. The Sufi concurs but joins to this concept another one contained in the saying, "Whoever knows himself, knows his Lord." (*man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu*). This statement illustrates the importance of knowing oneself in order to know True Reality. The sentence is also constructed in a manner indicating the precedence of self-knowledge in a progression to knowledge of the Divine. Nor is

the latter knowledge to be found outside of the same person. The Divine is found to be the basis of one's mind and one's very existence.

It is certainly possible, at one level, to make partial comparisons of taubah to what we now call psychotherapy. In psychotherapy we find a reclaiming and acceptance of those aspects of ourselves that had been hidden, feared, and pushed into the background. We may not have noticed the power of deep longings and aversions veiled by symbolic behavior. Successful psychotherapy allows us to move from the symbolic to the actual and to become comfortable with who we really are as we encounter life. This stability is the strength required for deeper spiritual work-to be able to let go of all frames of reference without incapacitating fear and without losing one's relationship to the world at large.

In spiritual work, taubah means turning toward our sacred inner nature to find the strength to turn away from actions that lead to suffering. This turning gives birth to the self of conscience, called in Arabic, *nafs-i lawwama*. Prior to this, the individual is at the level of the *nafs-i ammara*, the self that commands to evil, meaning behaviors that cause harm to oneself and others. This is usually the pursuit of pleasure or dominion and the avoidance of self-examination. In any case, self-examination and the realizations arising out of it should contribute to an openness to explore oneself with less fear, and also to the cultivation of will, the will to pull back from harmful behavior.

So you see, even though Nasrudeen threw away the mirror, it was already too late to reverse its effects. He may initially have wanted to reject the truth, but what he saw would erode his defenses and his limited self-knowledge. He would hopefully have other opportunities to see himself.

There is no mystery to the first step in this process: We watch without judgment and keep watching. When we forget and become absorbed in a situation, we return to watching when this is realized. We watch for the truth in what we are doing based on the evidence in front of us and by noting the fantasies we have. If what we are doing clouds our perception and keeps us from our inner spirit, shall we look more carefully or throw the mirror back into the gutter?