



Shams of Tabriz

*Being a Person of Paradise,
Reflections on the Teachings of Shams of Tabriz*

~ Camille Adams Helminski

Bismillah arRahman arRahim

We begin in the name of God, the Infinitely Compassionate and Infinitely Merciful, and we ask His help. As it says in the beginning of the *Maqalat*, this talk was gathered from the words of the beloved Mevlana Shamsuddin Tabrizi, the Sultan of those who have attained. May God not deprive us of his abundant blessings.¹

We are deeply grateful for the opportunity that we have had to spend time in the companionship with Shams during the journey of preparing the book *Rumi's Sun, The Teachings of Shams of Tabriz*, selections from his *Maqalat*, and the generosity of Dr. Refik Algan whose inspiration it was to begin a translation of the *Maqalat* into English. One of the gifts of that journey has been to feel Shams' constant encouragement of those to whom he speaks to become "people of paradise" now, here. So, in this moment, we wish to share with you some of that encouragement.

We are living in the midst of very challenging times. Shams and Mevlana also lived in the midst of very challenging times, yet what a possibility opened with the example of *being* they unveiled. They invite us into the garden of seeing God's beauty and abundance in the midst of everything, seeing the Unity, and encouraging souls to be people of Paradise now, here.

In the *Maqalat*, the "Conversations" of Shams-i Tabriz, Shams tells us,

People say that there is no path, or they say that the path is very long. Yes, the way is long, but once one sets out to walk, with great exuberance and joy, the distance of the way disappears. Just as it was said, "Paradise is surrounded by things we dislike" (*hadith*). All around the garden of Paradise are thorns, but when the fragrance of Paradise reaches our nose, bringing news of the beloved to the lover, then that place of thorns becomes very pleasant. The thorns that surround Hell always seem to be roses and basil, but the unpleasant odor of fire comes to us from them.

¹ *Rumi's Sun, The Teachings of Shams of Tabriz*, Translated by Refik Algan and Camille Adams Helminski, Morning Light Press, 2008, p.1.

If I were to try to explain about the beauty of this path, it wouldn't be appropriate.²

In this world the opposites play out their dance of light and dark, of difficulty and ease, and in the midst of it, we have the work of being rightful caretakers, *khalifas* of the Divine, here, acting as servants (*abd Allah*) to establish the *mizan*, the balance and good measure in this world.

Shams encourages us to open the heart to its true capacity:

The Loving Mind

The heart is greater, more expansive, more pleasant and more illumined than the heavens; why would one narrow it with useless words? How could it be appropriate to constrict a very pleasant universe into a prison for oneself? What is the purpose of turning a universe like a fruitful garden into a tight prison, wasting time with delusions and ugly imaginings and throwing oneself into a dark universe and sleeping in ignorance all the time, wrapped up in a cocoon like a silkworm? We are of the people who turn the prison into a fruitful garden. If our prison turns into a fruitful garden, imagine what our fruitful garden might become? Just watch, and see!

None of the gracious words of the Prophet have surprised me; only one *hadith* has bewildered me: "The world is the prison of the believer." I don't see the world as a prison at all. "Where is the prison?" I'm asking. But that blessed one said, "the prison of the believers," he didn't say, "the prison of the servants." The servants are a different community.

One doesn't have to fit one's own meaning into that narrow thought. Whatever comes from the Friend, quickly say, "It's just like that," and keep going.³

As Shams says, strive to do the good:

Strive to Do the Good

They tell a story about 'Ali (may God be pleased with him). He had said, "We were in the Baqi cemetery and offering the funeral *salaat*. The Prophet came to us and said, "There is no man or woman for whom God has not written whether he or she will go to Paradise or to Hell."

"One of those who were there asked, 'I wonder, can we change this destiny?'

"He said, 'Endeavor—do good deeds. Each [human being] facilitates the work for which he or she is created; people created for Paradise make easier the deeds of the people of Paradise; and those who were created for Hell make easier the work of the people of Hell.'

"After this, the Prophet recited the following verses from *Surah Layl* [92:5-7]: *And so, as for one who gives to others and is conscious of God, and believes in the truth of the ultimate good—for him shall we make easy the path towards ultimate ease.*"⁴

To clarify, Shams says:

² *Ibid*, pp.79-80.

³ *Ibid*, pp.247-248.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp.123-124.

People of Paradise and People of Hell

Let me tell you about the qualities of the people of Paradise. Let me also tell you the sign of the people of Hell. Since the day God created this universe like an arrow shot from a bow, every day, every moment, He has been opening and closing doors. This takes place at such a limitless speed that one's mind stops.

Whoever you see who has a beautiful temperament and a beautiful face, if his/her words are straight forward, if he/she is open-hearted, and if he prays for good things for everyone, a joy of heart comes from the speech of such a person. He/she makes you forget the anxieties and tightness of this universe; your inside opens in such a way that even if he/she swears at you, you laugh. Maybe, when he speaks of unity . . . you weep, but [in that moment] you feel a hundred thousand joys and laughter within yourself. Such a person is a being of Paradise.

There is also a kind of person who drinks blood; there is a coldness on his face and in his words that only bring you anxiety. His words repel you, rather than being warming like the speech of the joyful human being. Well, such a person is a devil, a person of Hell. Now, whoever has realized such a secret behaves accordingly. . . .⁵

In this endeavor, Shams encourages us to bring our helplessness, our incapacity, our need to our Sustainer, for “need is the foremost wing-feather of the way.” . . .

The Palace of the Ancient One

If you pass beyond the body and reach the soul, then you will have reached “createdness.” The Truth is the Ancient, Eternal Being. Where can the one who is created find the One who is Eternal? What connects the earthly creature and the Lord of lords?

In your opinion, that by means of which you move and attain liberation is the soul; then what use is it to put the soul in your hand, ready to give it away?

Even if Your lovers bring You their own heads,
the gift of their life,
they will have only brought cumin seeds to Kerman.⁶

What is it worth to bring cumin to Kerman? What renown will it bring? What price will it fetch? There is a palace where *He is without need*,⁷ so take your need there! Because the One without need loves need, and you, due to that need may suddenly leap out of

⁵ *Ibid*, pp.176-177.

⁶ The region of Kerman is the source of all cumin.

⁷ *Truly, God does not stand in need of anything in all the worlds* [Surah al-Imran 3:97]. See also such verses as *Surah al-Anam* 6:12-14:

Say: “Unto whom belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth?” Say: “Unto God, who has willed upon Himself the law of grace and mercy.” He will assuredly gather you all together on the Day of Resurrection, [the coming of] which is beyond all doubt: yet those who have squandered their own selves—it is they who refuse to believe [in Him], although His is all that dwells in the night and the day, and He alone is all-hearing, all-knowing.

Say: “Am I to take for my master anyone but God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, when it is He who gives nourishment and Himself needs none?” Say: “I am bidden to be foremost among those who surrender themselves unto God, and not to be among those who ascribe divinity to any beside Him.”

these created affairs. Something from the Eternal One, is connected to you; it is love. The ambush of love comes and embraces you, just as it says in the Qur'an: *They love God* is the effect of *God loves them* [5:54]. Then you will see the Ancient Eternal One through the Ancient Eternal One because *He perceives all vision* [6:103].⁸

This is the entirety of the words that do not end and will not end until the day of resurrection.⁹

Shams reminds us of the *hadith qudsi*:

“*La illaha illallah* (there is no god but God) is My fortress. Whoever takes refuge in My fortress becomes secure.”

The Fortress of La illaha il Allah

Shams says,

“Whoever *goes into* this fortress of oneness—He did not say, “whoever only says *the name* of the fortress.” To say the name is easy; you may say, “I have entered the fortress,” or “I went to Damascus.” But if it were just a matter of the tongue, in an instant you could ascend from earth to the heavens or to the Empyrean and the Throne.

The Prophet Muhammad said, “The faithful one who says “*La illaha illallah*” with purity and from the heart, enters Paradise.” Now you sit and say, “He is One.” But who are you? You are more than six thousand! Become One! Otherwise, is His Oneness your concern? You are a hundred thousand particles and each particle of yours is being carried off by some desire; within each particle of yours, you are carrying an illusion. The one who demonstrates purity of intention, and sincerity of action goes to Paradise. There is no need for a promise such as, “If he or she has been able to do this, he or she enters Paradise.” If he or she has been able to do this, he or she is completely Paradise itself.¹⁰

One of the ways in which Shams encourages us to be people of paradise is through being watchful of our speech. He says:

Sugar and Vinegar

If you are in the midst of praising someone, what business do you have with speaking ill of someone? Suppose your mouth is full of sugar—then why would you put vinegar into it? If your mouth is full of vinegar, it's no shame for you not to do the *salaat*—why would it be? Since that is the place of the purified, what business does bad-mouthing have there?¹¹

If you are really occupied with remembering God, with praising God, and absorbed in that sweetness, how could you speak ill of someone else and destroy that sweetness with such vinegar?

He encourages us to be watchful for moments of conflict resolution to encourage friendship even among enemies. He tells a story of the peace that comes with friendship.

⁸ *No vision can grasp Him/Her, but His/Her grasp is over all vision: He/She is subtle beyond comprehension, and All-Aware (Huwal Latiful Khahir)* [Surah al-Anam, 6:103]. This verse from the Qur'an also brings to mind the *hadith* (saying of the Prophet Muhammad): God says, “When my faithful servant draws near to Me through his or her voluntary devotions, then I love him/her and I become the ear with which he hears, the eye with which he sees, the tongue with which he speaks, the hand with which he grasps, the foot with which he walks.

⁹ *Rumi's Sun*, op. cit., pp.1-2.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp.382-382.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.292.

The Peace that Comes with Friendship

A man was thinking bad thoughts about someone. The other one also had the same thoughts about him. There was a third man in between who was a friend of both of them. He said, “Now these two enemies will meet one another; let’s see what will happen.”

From there he went to a place where they would encounter one another, and waited for his friends to pass. When his eyes met with those of the first friend, he prostrated in front of him. When the other friend saw this, he threw his knife on the ground and threw himself at the feet of that friend.

“Alas!” he said, “This means that you are my friend’s friend—how could I kill the friend of my friend?”¹²

We need to remember that words also can destroy. As Iman Ali said, “The tongue is a treasure. The tongue is also an endless disease.”

Shams takes to task shaikhs, jurists, and imams who “*say what they do not do.*” [Surah as-Saff 61:3]¹³ Of them he says,

Remember to Ask

“[They] study in the religious schools . . . for the sake of fame and obtaining teaching positions. They say that one must do beautiful deeds; they declare this in these gatherings to gain status.¹⁴

Why do you seek knowledge for the sake of a worldly morsel?! This rope is for the sake of climbing out of this well, not for the sake of falling from this well into another! Bind yourself to these questions: “Who am I and what is my essence? Why have I come here and where am I going? Where am I rooted? And what am I involved in right now and towards what must I turn my face?”¹⁵

He reminds us of the *hadith*:

The Best of Human Beings Is the One Who Most Benefits Others

“The best of human beings is the one who most benefits others.” But how can one who doesn’t know what good is do something good? How can those who don’t know what a “year” is and who haven’t understood what “life” is wish each other long lives? A single

¹² **IBID, P.293.**

¹³ See [61:1-3]:

*Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, let it declare the praises and glory of God:
for He is the Exalted in Might, the All-Wise.
O you who have faith! Why do you say that which you do not do?
It is most displeasing in God’s sight that you say that which you do not do.*

¹⁴ See also *Mathnawi* II 2429-2435 (*Jewels of Remembrance*, Translated by Camille and Kabir Helminski):

Knowledge is conventional and borrowed
when its owner is annoyed by people who aren’t fascinated by it.
Since it was learned as a bait for popularity,
and not for enlightenment,
the seeker of religious knowledge
is no better than the seeker of worldly knowledge.
He seeks to please the vulgar and noble,
rather than to attain freedom from this world.

¹⁵ *Rumi’s Sun*, op.cit., p.307-308.

small silver coin given into the hand of a man of God is better than a thousand silver coins that come into the hand of a man who is fond of his *nafs*.¹⁶

He reminds us of the passage in the Qur'an:

Becoming Trustworthy

The angels and the spirit rise up to Him in a day whose measure is fifty thousand years [70:4], [He says,]You don't understand the hidden allusions (*ramz*) of the Quran. If you die only with this outer meaning, then it will take fifty thousand years until you smell the fragrance of Paradise. If you keep imagining, "Where is the universe of the prophets, where is the universe of the saints (*awliya*)?" you'll get dizzy, lose your balance, and fall down. Just start walking.

[Remember:] "He who comes to me by an armspan . . ." ¹⁷: but between armspan and armspan, between one knee and another knee there are differences. [It is said of Muhammad:] "Two strides and he arrived," but you don't have the stride of Muhammad. A pharaoh raised his head inside you; Moses came and drove him out. Again pharaoh came; Moses left. These are indications of the shifting of colors. How long is this going to go on? Hold onto Moses himself in such a way that another pharaoh is unable to come. This shifting fickleness of colors is not the Way.¹⁸

Be a Person of Heart

One should not be a person of bodily instincts, but a person of heart. Seek the heart, not instincts! Where is the place of the heart? The heart is hidden.

He is a companion of God, but out of jealousy, they call him "a man of heart." The moment the bright light of the Truth reflects upon the heart, the heart becomes joyful. Then in a moment, that light disappears, but many times it happens like this so that the heart might become a heart. It burns, and many times the heart gets broken, until it melts and only God remains.

[God] indicated this to the Prophet David. David asked God, "Where will I look for you?" [God answered], "My heavens and my earth cannot encompass me, only the heart of My faithful servant can encompass Me." He also said, "I am with those whose hearts have been broken on My way." When you say, "a person of heart," say "those whose hearts have been broken," because brokenness of heart is necessary. When you reach the Truth, you will see the divine light of His Exaltedness from within the divine light of the Truth Itself, because "No one knows them but I."¹⁹

As Mevlana tells us, "Love is the astrolabe of the Divine Mysteries."²⁰ Often it is through difficulty that that love is deepened.

Shams reminds us of Layla and Majnun:

Layla and Majnun

Harun ar-Rashid (the famous Abbasid Emperor) said one day, "Bring Layla to me that I might see her just once. Majnun has fallen into total difficulty because of his love for her; from East to West, lovers have made the story of their love their mirror." After spending

¹⁶ Ibid, p.63.

¹⁷ *Hadith qudsi*: "When someone comes toward Me by a span I come to him by a cubit; . . . when someone comes to Me walking, I come running to him."

¹⁸ *Rumi's Sun*, op.cit., p.65-66.

¹⁹ *Rumi's Sun*, op. cit., p.433. *Hadith qudsi*: My saints are under My dome—no one knows them but I.

²⁰ *Mathnawi* I:110.

lots of money, and with many sly ruses they managed to bring Layla. They placed her into a secluded room in the palace of the Caliph Harun ar-Rashid. In the evening the Caliph came to the secluded room. Candles had been lit; he looked at her carefully for some time, and then for some time he sat with his head bowed. Finally, he said to himself, “Let me make her speak; perhaps the beauty of her face becomes more apparent when she speaks.” Harun turned his face to Layla and asked, “Are you Layla?”

“Yes, I am Layla. But you are not Majnun. The eye that is in Majnun’s head is not in yours.”

How can you see Layla
with an eye with which you look at others?
Unless you wash it clear with your tears!

Look at me with the eye of Majnun! One should look at the beloved with a loving eye because *He loves them* [5:54]. But the problem is that they don’t look at God with the eye of Love. They look at God with the eye of knowledge, or from the viewpoint of gnosis or philosophy, but to look with the eye of love is another work all together.²¹

Love Remembers

The human being remembers often the one whom he/she loves. Especially if that beloved is God! But who is able to remember Him as He deserves to be remembered?

We are remembering you all the time; we are filled with your love.²²

Shams tells us:

Honey Preserves

I wish people knew that happiness is in the gathering of friends—that they might mingle with each other, and show their beautiful faces, so that love might appear among them. When one by one, desires come between them, their brightness vanishes.

If you keep something within honey, it remains fresh and sweet—the air cannot find a way into it to spoil it.²³

When Bitter Words Become Sweet

To some people, [my] words seem bitter, but, if they endure that bitterness, a sweetness comes to them. One who smiles during the time of bitterness smiles because his eyes are seeing the sweetness that will come in the end. And so according to this point of view, patience means to witness the end result of an action and impatience means to be so short-sighted as to not be able to see the outcome.²⁴

With a humorous story, he encourages us to patiently persevere:

Patience and Practice

[There was] a rope dancer [who] would walk on the rope with eyes blindfolded, with wooden clogs on his feet, a water jug on his head and holding four things in his hands. He would walk forward on the rope making creaking sounds with his feet, and return again, then suddenly he would throw himself down, hold the rope with his feet and

²¹ Ibid., p.45-46.

²² Ibid, p.203.

²³ Ibid, p.392.

²⁴ Ibid, p.49.

under his armpits, then hang himself by a single finger, and then jump back onto the rope again.

Meanwhile, his heavy friend kept falling. All the time he was on the rope, his friend would keep shouting at him, “I’ve brought you here in the name of . . . such and such a teacher,” and he would begin to weep. Then quickly people would gather up the sticks and blankets and offer loads of advice.

They practice tightrope walking at the seaside, so that if they fall off the rope they fall into the water. In this way, after long practice, they become master tightrope walkers. And after that, they practice on land. Gradually they raise their rope and learn about the best ways to stand and walk on it. Just as patience is needed for the crescent moon to become full, for the rain on the rocks to turn them into rubies, and for the drops that rain onto the sea to become pearls, these, too, would slowly become expert tightrope walkers through patience and practice.

With time, from unripe grapes you can make halvah.²⁵

Look Deeper

From time to time, ask us, “How are you?”

I am your servant.

If they serve the servants of God with their possessions, then an affection wakes up. Their work opens by means of that affection.

A single coin given by a true friend is more valuable than a hundred thousand given by someone else. Whoever accepts this help of a friend, becomes bound to him; that which is given by the friend opens a closed door.

Never be satisfied with the beautiful outer appearance and words and deeds of a shaikh! Because something is hidden behind them; ask for that.²⁶

He says:

Turning Grace

Day and night I am occupied with praying for you, because there are accidents on the way. One kind of accident is an accident that may occur in the future; the other is the accident that is already occurring. An accident that is already happening can’t be avoided through prayers, but through prayer you can turn around one that may still be distant.

Some say, “Our God is kind, our God is good, but not for others.”

With such a strong partiality, they find a god and make the mistake of thinking that what they imagine to be “God” is God. *God grants abundant grace to his servants* [42:23]. But it says “servants”—where are those servants?²⁷

In the process of learning how to be true servants, Shams encourages us to keep good companionship, to open to the presence of the Prophets, to “zhikr” the Prophets:

He says,

The Gem of Love

Everyone speaks about his own *Pir*.²⁸ In a dream, the blessed Prophet gave a cloak (*khirka*) to me. But this is not one of those cloaks that would become old after only two days and fall to

²⁵ *Rumi’s Sun*, op.cit., p.243.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp.44-45.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.295.

pieces, to be thrown into the furnace or to be used for dishcloths. Rather it is a cloak of companionship and conversation. Not a companionship with any limits, but a companionship that has no yesterday, today, or tomorrow. What does love have to do with “yesterday” and with “today” and with “tomorrow”?²⁹

He says:

Choosing a Far-Sighted Companion

There is no doubt that you take on the nature of the one with whom you are closely in contact, the one with whom you sit.

If you spend time looking at straw, dryness constricts you; if you look at greenery and roses, freshness opens within you. Your companion pulls you to his own universe. This is why reading the Qur’an purifies the heart. You remember the prophets’ words and their states. Their forms unite with your spirit; they become your comrades and sit with you. By means of that great, immortal, and infinite jewel I gained such a warm, high knowledge that I merged with it and became filled with its fire.³⁰

As Shams tells us, “the spirits of the great attained ones are ready. They recognize the living ones and help them.”³¹

He says,

May Revelation Dawn within You

Even if the whole world would hang me by my beard, still if something needs to be said, I will say it. But without a doubt, even after a thousand years, these words will be heard by those whom I want to hear.

A few people became the Prophet’s scribes for the revelation—those who wrote down the divine commands—and a few people became the place where the revelation descends, that is, the place of its effect. Work hard so that you may be both! In other words, be both the object of the revelation and the scribe of the revelation that comes to the heart.³²

Stop, O My Camel, with Joy

All words in the whole world belong to seekers, to those who search. And what is the sign of the one they are seeking? I am listening; you are listening.

When weighing “The Truth Sought” with “God” one has to know the right moment to be able to reach that universe. In the end, where are you going? My graceful friend! What more can one say after this discussion? “May God be with you,” I say. But this is not a wish for separation—it is a prayer that the favor and help of God, and the friendship of the Master and the Truth who knows the secrets, might protect you.

Stop, O my camel! Joy has come to its last degree; the work is finished; the way has come to an end. The earth has turned into a beautiful paradise. The time of celebration has come again, and things have been set right.³³

²⁸ I.e., each person speaks about his own teacher. Shams speaks about Muhammad as his beloved *Pir* (the head of a spiritual lineage).

²⁹ *Rumi’s Sun, op. cit., p.70*

³⁰ *Ibid, p.49.*

³¹ *Ibid, p. 223.*

³² *Ibid, p. 314. See also Mathnawi I:3228-3297.*

³³ *Rumi’s Sun, op.cit., p.221.*

Shams tells us that Mevlana would say to him,

Bright Silence

“If you are silent, your speech becomes brighter, because both the light of silence and the value of speech are hidden within silence.”³⁴

so for a few moments I would like to invite us into silence with Shams, into the heart . . .
and to seal this offering with words of the Qur’an:

[a few moments of silence]

And in the words of *Surah al-Asr*, first in English and then in Arabic, inshallah:

Surah al- ‘Asr, Consider Time [103:1-5]

In the Name of God, the Infinitely Compassionate and Infinitely Merciful
Consider time

Truly, human beings are in loss
except those who have faith and do the deeds of wholeness and reconciliation
and encourage each other in holding to Truth,
and encourage each other in patient perseverance.

Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem

Wal ‘asr

Innal insaana lafi khusr

Illal ladzeena aamanuu

Wa ‘amiluus Saalihaati

Wa tawasaw bil haqqi

Wa tawaasaw bis Sabr

Sadaqa lal ul ‘azeem

May it be love. *Ashq olsun.*

³⁴ Ibid, p.140