

The Veil of Beauty

By Rani Kathleen McLaughlin

God is beautiful and He loves beauty.

—Koran

The experience of beauty is at the center of the mystical teaching of Hazrat Inayat Khan. He says that God has veiled the created world in beauty as the artist veils his or her meaning in word and thought, in melody or visual image. Beauty is the veil which covers the highest consciousness, protecting it from the gaze of the lower mind. It is said that no one may see the face of God directly — not because God refuses to be seen; but because the mind would be shattered by that vision. When Moses saw the burning bush and heard the Lord call out to him, it is said that he “hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” (Exodus 3:6) In Greek mythology the hunter Actaeon was torn to pieces by his own dogs when he gazed without permission on the Goddess Artemis bathing in the river. A story is told of a smart young adept in the Egyptian temple of Sais who unveiled the veiled image of the Goddess and whose tongue was paralyzed by what he saw. The unprepared mind may be driven mad by an unmediated vision of the Divine. Beauty veils our eyes until we may rightly understand, at the proper time.

Truth without a veil is always uninteresting to the human mind.

—Bowl of Saki, Jan 3

While disintegration or madness may be one result of having a direct insight into the depth of life, devaluation is another way that the psychological ego protects its sense of its own importance. One person might sit in meditation for a while and say, “This is boring. This method doesn’t work. I haven’t experienced anything.” Or a person might look at an impressionist painting and say, “This doesn’t look like a house.” The conditioned psychological ego sees and evaluates its

experience through its own limited concepts. It is the limited and judging human mind which rejects the essence of things. So God has veiled truth with beauty. Beauty is the veil which renders truth interesting to the human mind. When we look at something which we see as beautiful, we are interested; the mind opens up to see or hear or understand more. We are intrigued. A feeling of appreciation may develop as we come alive in this moment of perception. When we look at beauty, and reflect deeply on what we perceive, the mind is drawn downward to the depth of life, which is truth. As Murshid describes it, looking for what is beautiful is a method of spiritual practice that awakens the soul and quickens the heart into life. One comes alive in the presence of beauty. One is attracted to beauty. One surrenders to beauty.

The purpose of creation is beauty. Nature in all its various aspects develops towards beauty, and therefore it is plain that the purpose of life is to evolve towards beauty.”

—Sufi Message, Vol. III, 90

Beauty is not simply an accidental characteristic of existence. It is one of the motivating forces of creation, one of the principles that moves matter into existence. It is of the essence of existence. Of course, Murshid agrees with the Vedantic, Buddhist, and Christian traditions which say that essence is without form, and beauty is a characteristic of form. In the Hindu Vedanta a distinction is made between Saguna Brahman which has form and Nirguna Brahman which is formless. Nirguna Brahman (formless) could not be said to be beautiful, while Saguna Brahman (with form) might be beautiful or ugly. In Buddhism, the word ‘Nirvana’ means “that which is without ‘vana’ or color;”

that is, without form. And the experience of ultimate experience is not described by the Buddha (in the earliest Theravadin scriptures) except to say that it is Nirvana. Nirvana could not be said to be beautiful or ugly. Nothing can be said about it at all. In Christian mysticism, it is said that God the Father is the formless and transcendent God who comes into form through the experience of incarnation. Then He is not known as Father, but is known as God the Son, the Christ.

Murshid agrees with the mystical teachings of all these traditions, saying that God is formless and therefore beauty does not refer to the form of God. The formless God (nirguna) cannot be described as 'He' or 'She' or 'It,' or as beautiful or ugly, since all of these words imply form. The formless God cannot be described. But when God manifests in form, He/She/It is beauty. Of course, with the creation of beauty, ugliness also appears, but God's purpose in creating is to create beauty. God's form is beauty. Beauty is nondifferent from God. As in Tantric Hinduism, Shakti is nondifferent from Shiva, existence is nondifferent from essence. In the Tantra there is an image of Shiva and Shakti closely intertwined in an intimate embrace. This is an image of essential existence. But then Shakti sits up and leans back, moving in a beautiful dance; and in this dance is all that we know and call existence. Shiva watches, admires, loves, and delights in the beauty of her dance. Essence and existence. Nature evolving through and toward beauty. Shiva witnessing and Shakti dancing. This is the dance of the One Being whom Murshid describes as the Perfection of Love, Harmony, and Beauty.

In this kind of nondualistic philosophy, mystical experience is not different from the experience of the senses, but many religious traditions emphasize a dualistic view of existence, even as they affirm a monotheistic theology. God the Creator is said to be utterly different from the created world. Mind is different from body, and spirit is separate from matter. In this kind of dualistic world, the path to mystical realization is found in restricting and denying the senses, so that the

nonsensual spiritual reality may be experienced. The sensory world is seen as infinitely alluring and seductive. It is a delusion and an illusion. It must be rejected by the spiritual person, otherwise it will be a trap. This is described in some of the Upanishads in the teaching of "neti, neti." The spiritual attitude is to look at the world of experience and say "not this, not this," that is, this is not absolute reality. Anything that can be experienced through the mind and senses is not the Absolute Brahman and must be rejected.

In early Christianity, the Church Fathers make this rejection of the material world quite explicit in their identification of women with matter, the body, and sexuality. This "feminine" realm is in opposition to the spiritual realm which is identified with men, mind, spirit, and virginity. The opposition can be found in the admonition of St. Jerome, which is amusing to our ears. Jerome says, "a clean body signifies a dirty mind," and admonishes "good women" not to bathe, wash their hair, or dress in anything but squalid clothes. (Rosemary Reuther, *Virginal Feminism and the Fathers of the Early Church*) Ascetic mystical paths tend to ignore and devalue sensory experience and the material world in order to attain detachment and freedom from bondage to the senses. In their devaluation, beauty is just a sign of bondage, a temptation that must be resisted. This is clearly expressed in a Theravadin Buddhist Sutta for "Offering Flowers." It states:

*Lo! These flowers are now of colour,
beautiful;
of scent; sweet; of shape, lovely.
But soon they will become discoloured,
malodorous and unlovely.
So, too, are all component things —
They pass away, are painladen, and all
things (conditioned and non-conditioned)
are soulless.*

—H. Saddhatissa, *A Buddhist's Manual*, p. 15

continued on next page

That which is beautiful, appeals to the senses, and interests the mind must be resisted by clearly remembering how transient all sense experience is. Otherwise the sensory world will entrap and bind the spiritual aspirant, blinding one to clear insight into the truth of life.

There are also many schools of Sufism that are ascetic, rejecting sense experience. The first Sufis in the Islamic tradition were living in a time of tremendous political expansion and economic success. Within less than a century, Islam grew from being a small tribal religion to being a world empire. With this rapid development in the seventh century came a great increase in wealth. The Sufis rejected the material wealth and luxury and the political power of the Umayyad empire. They saw that sudden wealth had intoxicated people, leading them to forget their values. They espoused a simple and ascetic life, like the life of Mohammed. The Sufi Message of that time was a message of austerity and renunciation. A poem of the eighth century Sufi saint Rabi' al-Adawiyya expresses this in this way:

Serving-girl:

It's Spring, Rabi'a —

Why not come outside,

And look at all the beauty God has made!

Rabi'a:

Why not come inside, serving-girl,

And see the One who made it all —

Naked, without veil.'

—Charles Upton, trans, *Doorkeeper of the Heart: Versions of Rabi'a*, p. 21

All beauty is veiled by nature, and the higher the beauty, the more it is concealed.

—*Sufi Message*, Vol. IX, 129

Some describe the Universal Sufism of Hazrat Inayat Khan as an aesthetic, not ascetic, Sufism, which focuses on the appreciation and recognition of beauty. While the Message of unity, tolerance of others, and realization of the Divine Reality, is found in all schools of Sufism; the Sufi Message brought to the West in 1910 by Hazrat Inayat

Khan is not an ascetic message. It is an aesthetic message; a message that invites us to appreciate the material world and see it, as an artist would, as the manifestation of Divine Reality. This is certainly not surprising since Inayat Khan cultivated his considerable artistic talents in his first career as a musician. He earned a place in the history of music as a reviver of the classical raga form in India, and brought Indian music to America and Europe in the beginning of the twentieth century. In his prologue to *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*, he says,

I gave up my music because I had received from it all I had to receive. To serve God one must sacrifice the dearest thing, and I sacrificed my music, the dearest thing to me. I had composed songs, I sang, and played the vina. Practising this music I arrived at a stage where I touched the music of the spheres. Then every soul became for me a musical note, and all life became music... Now, if I do anything, it is to tune souls instead of instruments, to harmonize people instead of notes.

—*Sufi Message*, Vol. II, xi

In his own spiritual life, it is clear that music was a central method in his awakening. His contemplation of the beauty of sound did not distract him from the Divine Reality. His contemplation of beauty was a means that tuned his spirit to the realization of the Divine Presence within all phenomena. Beauty may veil and conceal, but it does not necessarily delude the spiritual seeker.

There is one object of praise, the beauty which uplifts the heart of its worshippers through all aspects, from the seen to the unseen.

—*Sufi Message*, Vol. I, 20

Following the vision of beauty is a method for awakening the heart. When we perceive something as beautiful, we value it. Valuing something leads us to appreciate it, and appreciation leads us to gratitude. The qualities of being awake, appreciative, and grateful are very important in our spiritual

development. Murshid says that there are two types or temperaments of people.

One is living because he (or she) is responsive to all aspects of beauty, whether the beauty appeals to his (her) eyes or ears, or to his (her) sense of taste or touch. The other one is incapable of enjoying it.

—*Sufi Message*, Vol. I, 222

To be spiritual in Murshid's teaching is to be alive. This is a teaching about entering into our life and experience with passion and with joy. The Sufi Message of Inayat Khan comes, at this time, to bring harmony to a world that is seriously out of balance, by affirming the ways that physical sensory experience can be a doorway into spiritual reality.

In other historical eras, people undoubtedly needed to be reminded to break the bondage of impulse and instinct that entraps the spirit. People needed to learn self-discipline and restraint of the senses. But as the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung has found in his analysis of the collective consciousness of the twentieth century, people are deeply alienated from their connection with the earth, with other forms of life, and with their own unconscious psyches. With the rapid development of modern technology a one-sided value system has gripped western culture. Though it calls itself 'science,' it lacks the qualities of genuine investigation, curiosity, and openness to evidence that true science has. It might be more accurately called 'pseudo-science.' In a pseudo-scientific worldview, materialism, technology, efficiency, individualism, rationality, objectivity, and science are held as absolute values, in a one-sided way. And (though it is irrational and unscientific) this view takes a rejecting stance toward spirituality, community, interconnectedness, subjectivity, intuition, and exploration of the collective unconscious, the depth of life. We might see the pseudo-scientific attitude as the direct descendent of the ascetic, dualistic Christian Church Fathers, and the Puritan Christians that taught the opposition of spirit and matter, and preached a one-sided rejection of the sensory world. Pseudo-science now exalts the

physical world and rejects spiritual experience. Popular western culture promotes sensual experience as if it is all that exists. But Inayat Khan teaches us to pay attention to both spirit and matter, to realize the depth of spirit within matter by attending to the quality of beauty.

"What self-denial is it to deny the divine beauty which is before us? If we deny ourselves the divine beauty which surrounds us, then the beauty which is within will not unfold itself." —*Sufi Message* Vol. I, 222

A one-sided, ascetic rejection of the beauty, which is outside of us, limits our recognition of the Divine Presence within. Attending to the beautiful sights and sounds and touches and tastes and smells around us will enliven our hearts so that we can become aware of the subtle thoughts and feelings that move within us. Our minds and hearts have the capacity to be responsive to our experience. This responsive quality is designated as Jemal by the Sufis, and is identified with the receptive quality of the moon. This responsive quality develops and matures through perceiving beauty—a beauty which is without and within. And beauty must be experienced in the world if it is to be awakened in the inner depth of our being. Murshid states this in an emphatic way:

The only way of wakening to the life within, which is most beautiful, is first to respond to the beauty outside. —*Sufi Message* Vol. I, 222

The goal of spiritual life can be reached by cultivating the responsive nature of the mind and heart so that we finally wake up to the life within.

That which is not veiled is not beauty; in the veiling and unveiling of beauty lies the purpose of life. Beauty is that which is always out of reach. We see it and we do not see it. We touch it and we cannot touch it. It is seen and yet veiled; it is known and yet unknown. That is why words are often inadequate to express the beauty of truth, and why symbolism was adopted by the wise.

—*Sufi Message* Vol. IX, 213

continued on next page

Beauty is that which is veiled and unveiled, which lies at the depth of life and touches the human heart bringing exaltation and anguish. Of course this is a paradox to the human mind. How can beauty be both the veil, and that which is veiled? How can something be both the concealer and that which is concealed? Inayat Khan often quotes the Prophet Mohammed as saying, "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty." Beauty is of the essence of God, and is the object which God loves. Beauty is the motive, the reason why God creates. This same paradox is expressed in the words "Ishq Allah mabud'Allah." God is the Lover, Beloved, and the Love which flows between them. God is realized in the experience of loving, as the one who loves, as the one who is loved, and as love itself. God is the Knower, the object which is known and the experience of knowing itself. This dynamic paradox can be expressed in terms of the experience of love, the experience of knowing, or the experience of perceiving and appreciating beauty. Participating in this paradox, engaging in life fully, gives us awareness of the purpose of life. For Inayat Khan, beauty is not simply a characteristic of manifest existence. Following the path of beauty, re-

sponding to all the things and experiences that we find in our life which are beautiful to us, wakens the heart to a living condition. Responding to beauty makes us appreciative and grateful. It helps us to discover the inner life. Beauty is a characteristic of existence, it is the path to realization, and it is the essential divine nature, the One Being, the One who is invoked as the "Perfection of Love, Harmony, and Beauty."

Bibliography

Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Sufi Message of Hazrat Inayat Khan*, International Headquarters of the Sufi Movement, Geneva. Various dates. All quotations of Hazrat Inayat Khan are from these editions.

Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Religion and Sexism*, Simon & Schuster: New York, NY, 1974.

H. Saddhatissa, *A Buddhist's Manual*, British Mahabodhi Society: London, England, 1976.

Charles Upton, *Doorkeeper of the Heart: Versions of Rab'ia*, Threshold Books: Putney, VT, 1988. ❧



Himayat, Arjuna, and Saul