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Addressing Mevlana's Age and Focussing his Relevance to our own, as a light to Illumine our Paths

Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi was born eight hundred years ago, in 1207, in Balkh province of the present day Afghanistan and immigrated to Konya, in Anatolia, at the age of seven with his parents. The family on its way stayed in Persia, for a while and then went on a pilgrimage to the Holy places in Arabia and Palestine, and, from there, to Damascus in Syria; finally they reached Konya, then under the rule of Seljuk Turks, and settled down there for good. But that was a time when all central Asia was suffering from social, political and military problems due to crusades and the Mongol invasions and the consequent unsettled conditions. It was a time of much anxiety, fear and worry. Our Mevlana lived in Konya for about sixty years. This city was already known as a centre for learning with its many philosophical and theological schools to teach Islam.

His own father was a great scholar. From his childhood he imbibed the spirit of learning and piety in his children. He grew up to become a great philosopher, and a Muslim theologian of repute, with many commentaries and talks on Islamic topics; more than a scholar, he was known to be a Sufi whirling saint, ascetical and exemplary in general conduct. He organized the Mevlevi order of Sufi whirling Dervishes who danced and sang in ecstatic prayer. Even the rulers supported them with money and monastery buildings for their common life. The fame of these Sufis spread too many lands. At the time of his death in 1273, Konya was known as holy city, attracting a large number of pilgrims and scholars, all due to the attraction of Rumi by his personal holiness, and by his fidelity to teaching authentic Islam and because of the number of educational institutions that grew up with his efforts and with the help of the rulers. In particular, his order of whirling Dervishes was appreciated by all concerned and a large number came to benefit from their piety. In course of time Konya came to be associated with his work and presently, it is known as "Mevlana City", to all pilgrims and scholars. His power over the city was so great. There are many sacred monuments dedicated to great scholars and Sufi saints, besides universities, gardens and museums. There are specialist schools to teach Rumi's distinctive philosophy of life: the path of illumined love, compassion and service in ascetic simplicity. Love of God should compulsively lead sincere believers to love all men and include, further, all God's creation. Mutual and universal heartfelt love of God and his works, without any distinction of religion, realm or nationality: truth and love have their own nationality to unite all races. His personally lived teaching is: love all men; live in peace and harmony with all; forgive and be compassionate to the weak, because we are all children of a compassionate, loving and forgiving God.

This is, in short the lasting legacy of Rumi as gathered from his personal life, teaching, talks and literary creations, valid for all, valid for ever in pursuing Truth and love of God. It is this teaching that has made him a man destiny, a historic figure, a saint, a beacon light of humanity, to be recognized and honored by the UNESCO, this year, in a special

way. He is a multifaceted character and continues to shed his light on all those who would open their eyes to him, as a beacon light, set on a hill, His example, his charming literacy works, - Mesnavi and Divan-i-Kabir, and his collected letters, in poetry, in parable, or in story form, teach all men love, compassion and forgiveness!

Different people may give different titles: a philosopher, a great Islamic theologian, an artist with words, an effective teacher, an ascetic, a happy Sufi saint, an affectionate friend: but, above all these, he is a loving servant of God and man. Everything, he said or did, has reference to god who is love and who has destined us all for love, to be always happy, twirling dervishes, singing and dancing! no long faced saint; no embittered saint; liberated in mind and heart let us love all men – violence, hatred, sectarian illogical fundamentalism or terrorism should find no place in a true believer in God. Liberality and forgiveness are the highlights of all his poetry and oratory.

What made him to become all that? His times and circumstances. Those days every nation and society was subject to threats of invasions: barbarian tribal incursions – hatred in every form. But his own ambiance was one of love, trust, liberal instruction and high ideals. All the circumstances and influences that surrounded him from childhood until his death were liberative: a learned and affectionate father, who was a spiritual guide, an example of knowledge and virtue, a friend, and a perfect man; then the influence of Sayyid Burhan al-Din, who was his father's deputy earlier, and also peerless in knowledge and a superior and outstanding individual; his professor of Islamic Law in Aleppo, Kamal al-din; Muhy al –Din, the most distinguished Sufi of all time of Damascus; Rumi was raised in the hands of such spiritual guides and teachers: perfect men, knowledge, Gnostic and lovers of God and the beloved of God. Shams al –Din of Tabriz, a well educated man, familiar with all the sciences of his day, “the perfect one of Tabriz”. He lived a hidden life but became an “Alter Ego” – or soul friend of Rumi, a lover of God, till he disappeared one day without a trace. After shams, Rumi's friend of heart and mirror of spirit was Salah – al – Din of Konya, the Zarqubi or goldsmith. He was not educated in our sense; he was however, full of God's grace and light – “there were springs of light in me, and I was not aware of that. You discovered them and brought them flowing fiercely”, he told Rumi.

After the goldsmith, another person, Husam al-Din Chelabi became Rumi's companion and deputy: he is described as “the place where divine light is manifested, teacher of secrets of truth and knowing God, a personality of whom saints of the Muhammadi way are proud” He was a great scholar, hailing from scholarly ancestors. All these influenced Rumi from close quarters, personally and consciously.

These scholars helped Rumi to write or to take down the dictation of his great master piece of Persian literature: Mesnavi. In this work, love is the main them in all its forms, but always reflecting and strengthening love of God, in an allegorical form.

During his life time, in the East, as well as in the west, “Bhakthi literature and movements”, were created and became wide spread”. In Europe, the mendicant orders and societies were started contemporaneous to Rumi: The Franciscans, started by St.

Francis of Assisi (1182 – 1226): the Dominicans started by St. Dominic Guzman (1170-1221); St. Clare started the 2nd order of St. Francis for ladies; St. Peter Celestine started his order of monks who went to lonely places to grow up in holiness (1215 – 1296). These were all itinerant preachers too, depending on alms of the faithful for their life. So many other saints lived as contemporaries of Rumi. St. Bernard (1197 – 1253); St. Anthony of Padua (1195 – 1231); St. Bonaventure (1218 – 1274); St. Louis, the King of France (1214 – 1270); St. Albert the great (1206 – 1280); St. Elizabeth of Hungary, a queen who cared for lepers (1207 – 1231). There were a host of other saints in that century and their fame spread far and wide. It was an age of saints and great scholars like St. Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Albert the great, St. Dominic, Thomas-a-Kempis, the mystic per excellence, who wrote The “Imitation of Christ”, a hand book to grow up in love of God.

St. Thomas Aquinas was a great philosopher and Theologian many volumes of written treatises on Theology and philosophy to his credit. Even today he is being studied in all of the West. In our own land, the ferment of philosophy produced Shankara, Ramanuja and Madwa, to reinterpret Vedic thought. The Bhakthi literature of the Narayanmars, Thiruppavai of Andal, Thiruvacakam of Manickavasagar, Devaram, Thirumurai were more or less of that period. There was, no doubt, ferment of rethinking, of devotion and Service was widespread, love of God and of man were evident in public life everywhere. This general influence could have reached Rumi too through travelers, merchants or even invaders. These could be counted as external influences on his belief, behavior and philosophy of life.

The mendicant saints, the Sufis, saints of India have a lot of commonalities, no doubt. But love of God is the one strong force that moved them all to produce beautiful poetry, sublime thinking and universal outlook on humanity and also the motivation for service. Saints and scholars always have had their source in God, the eternal giver and lover.

Focusing these lights on our times what do we discover in our contemporary society? There is much that is base, evidently. But there is also much that is noble, inspiring and urging us to follow the path of love and righteous conduct in the foot steps of the present day saints and guiding lights. We have our own Rumi’s and St. Francis and St. Elizabeths. Let us not miss the good because of the publicity of the evil by our modern media.

There are terrorists, rapists, naxals, unjust dealers, child molesters and murderers; there are corrupt politicians and administrators, no doubt. But why are we not observing so much that is beautiful, admirable, lovable and worth emulating? Please visit the Homes for lepers, destitute, disabled and Aged; go and see the houses for the street children, street girls, orphans and the abandoned babies.

There we will find the nobler side humanity: caring, sharing and getting concerned about the loveless, powerless the hungry and thirsty: visit the heritage hospitals, charitable clinics, and houses for the released prisoners or their children whose well-being and education is ensured, at a great cost of personal convenience and comfort. Learn of them;

follow them in their loving foot-steps. Then we can discover the way of love that could make us sing and dance with joy like St. Francis, Mother Theresa or Rumi. The joy of living comes from the sacrifice of giving, giving to God in the poor and the weak, in the sick and the lonely.

Rumi ignored those who were jealous of his close and tried to get rid of them. He forgave them, converted them and made them into whirling dervishes, committed to prayer and joyful service. There are many now who pay attention to possibilities of making a happy world where God's presence can be felt and enjoyed; where the Canticle of the Sun and prayer for peace by St. Francis can be sung with a dance. Let us come out of the grave, or at least the cocoon!

Open our eyes to the beauty around us!

See our humanity residing in others!

See God in that image. Then you can happily serve the God, made visible. Whatever you do to the least of my brothers that you do unto me!

Austerity, sacrifice, renunciation make the foundation of love for others. Prayer will reveal if you are able to sacrifice for others, your own well being.

Mother Theresa:

The fruit of Silence is Prayer!
The fruit of Prayer is Faith!
The fruit of Faith is Love!
The fruit of Love is Service!
The fruit of Service is Peace!

That peace is the need of every heart. Let us all try to bring peace to all, each in his own way, in his own measure according to what we are and what we have!