



In The Shade of a Good Tree ¹

Tariq Ashfaq

Once you have accepted the master you may believe that God and His prophet are manifested through his person.

Rumi

God appears to His devotee in the form of a Guru.

Ramana Maharshi

In what follows I translate a short chapter, dealing with the question of master-disciple relationship, from *uyun-al maarif* (The Fount of Wisdom) by Shah Wahhaaj al-Din Qalandar, a Sufi master who lived in nineteenth century India.

The *pir* (spiritual master) being a universal man is a deputy of the Prophet Muhammad on the one hand while a manifestation of God on the other. In the absence of the corporeal presence of the master, the disciple may wish to invoke his spiritual presence (*barzakh*), with a view to draw spiritual influences, by meditating on his face. In doing so whatever image comes across the disciple's mind can be legitimately regarded as the *barzakh* of his *pir*, which as it were replaces his physical company. In the same manner, at another level, the theophany (*tajalli*) of the Real (*haq*), to say the least, takes the place of the Real as such.

In order to facilitate the individual efforts of the disciple, the compassionate master by virtue of his divine nature communicates his grace (*faid*) to him. Conversely, the disciple by giving up all vain thoughts may draw immense spiritual benefits the moment he turns his ego (*anaa*) to the celestial substance (*uluhiyya*) of the master. Mere concentration of one's ego (*taayyun or anaa*) on the master's celestial substance (*taayyun or uluhiyya*) will be of no avail unless the unruly temptations are overcome in the first instance.²

¹ Shah Wahhaaj al-Din Qalandar employs the analogy of the good tree for the spiritual master (*pir* or *murshid*) as we shall see later on.

² The celestial substance is what Rene Guenon has so aptly termed the 'inner guru' which is inseparably linked with every individual but which can be activated only, in most of the cases, by taking a human guru as an outer support.

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Besides, a serious seeker (*taalib-i saadiq*) is perfectly qualified to receive an initiatic influence from the master, nay, directly from the Self as such (*anaaniyat-i haqiqi*).

As the reception of celestial transmission is contingent on the exercising of constant vigilance, in the absence of which the grace would remain ineffectual, on the part of the disciple (*saalik*), he would therefore have to learn to tread the path on his own so that he may achieve steadfastness in the way of wisdom. The intense individual efforts of the *saalik* would prepare him for the subtle task of recognizing the initiatic influence. As a result, the disciple would be in a position to appreciate and accept the grace emanating from the master thereby benefiting from it profitably.

It is most desirable that the disciple, like a straw in the sea, should abandon himself to the will of the master wholeheartedly. The currents tend to sweep the straw along, tossing and turning it from side to side but not letting it out of the sea. To use another analogy, the disciple, like a dead man, needs to submit his ego to the spiritual authority of the master without protest. This is unquestionably the safest possible route to Deliverance.

The spirit (*ruh*) has the virtue of communicating life to all that it touches (*mas*). The dead ones regain life and the dry blades of grass grow luxuriant thanks to its vital powers. Likewise, one can attain immortality by seizing of the dust, that is to say the spirit, in the traces of the universal man.

The disciple must concentrate on the presence of the Real in all his activities for it pervades everything. Now any activity where this concentration is lacking is diabolical but not the one where the disciple contemplates the Real as the only Agent (*faail*) and oneself as non-existent (*adam*) purely and simply. It is for this reason that the initiate's very first task, methodically speaking, is to be aware of the presence of his master in all the pursuits.³

It goes without saying that the disciple cannot do without the master who acts as his spiritual support (*pusht panaah*). The disciple must, in whatever way possible, make every endeavour to win the master's favour either by sincerely offering services to him or by cheerfully putting up with his sharp reproofs. The privilege of being a disciple is such that one's success is guaranteed even in worldly enterprises no matter wherever he lives or whatever he does. It also needs to be pointed out that love for the master is superior to all sort of ritual struggles (*mujahadaat*) and individual efforts (*riyadaat*) so much so that the lover because of his special position becomes entitled to enjoy the companionship of his beloved in both the worlds- this world and the beyond.

The aspiration for seeking association (*paivand*=grafting) with the good tree that is to say the master, is enough proof of the archetypal nobility (*ayn-i thaabit*) of the disciple.⁴ To put it simply, love for the master shows the inner beauty of the disciple's essence (*ayn-i thaabit*). Whoever comes under the blessed influence of a perfect master (*sheikh-i*

³ One may note that the presence of the Real and that of the master is one and the same thing for "God appears to his devotee in the form of a Guru." Additionally, God says in the Koran: *He is with you wherever you may be*. LVII, 4, *We are nearer to him than his jugular vein*. L,16

⁴ The simultaneous occurrence of the terms 'good tree' and 'grafting' in the above passage suggests that the disciple as the dry branch of a tree should graft himself on to the good tree in order to regain verdure, that is, spiritual renewal.

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kaamil) is never left by him unenlightened. Even if the disciple turns a heretic temporarily, the spiritual powers of the master will restore his original disposition sooner or later.

In the physical presence of the master it is incumbent upon the disciple to give up his egotistic idiosyncrasies and observe silence in order that he may be able to attract the spiritual influence.⁵ Apart from that, the master's discourses are to be meditated upon and his prescriptions are to be acted upon by the disciple accordingly. It is worth mentioning here that the discourse of a perfect master is pregnant with the spiritual influence and the attentive disciple will get instant benefit from it. Generally speaking, the perfect Saints (*awliya-i kaamilin*) are in the habit of taking care of the spiritual welfare of their devotees both visibly (*zaahiri*) and invisibly (*ruhaani*). What is of overriding importance is that they never deflect from keeping them in their thoughts and their single act of grace (*nazar-i inaayat*) is sure enough to grant them success in both the worlds, nay, better than both the worlds.

⁵ One may recall here the Biblical injunction: *Be still, and know that I am God*. XLVI, 10