Conversations of Sufi Saints

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The primary medium through which the Sufi masters communicated their teachings in India was oral instruction. Although most Sufis studied Islamic law, theology, and mysticism in Arabic and Persian, the early masters of the most popular Indian Sufi order, the Chishtis, did not themselves write. Several of them were, however, surrounded by disciples of a literary bent, who decided to record their masters' teachings in a diary form. The pioneer of this new literary form was Amr Hasan Dihlawi (“Prince Fine, of Delhi”, d. after 1329), a famous poet at the Delhi court. From 1307 until 1322, he recorded the conversations of his teacher, Nizâm al-Dîn Awlîya’ (“Order of the Faith, the Saint of Saints,” d. 1325), whenever he was able to visit Delhi. His compilation, Morals for the Heart, became extremely popular as a summary of the master's teaching, and subsequent generations of Sufis likewise had disciples record their discourses (malfuzât) in writing.

In this way, one of Nizâm al-Dîn’s chief successors, Shaykh Naṣîr al-Dîn Mahmûd Chirāgh-i Dihlî (“Helper of the Faith, the Praised, the Lamp of Delhi,” d. 1356) is known to us through the vivid diary of his sayings recorded in 1354 by his disciple Hamîd Qalândar (“Praiser,” belonging to the unconventional “qalân-dar” type of Sufi). This text, entitled The Best of Assemblies, was in part personally corrected by the shaykh, who pruned down the verbose style of his disciple, making it into a beautiful example of clear and simple Persian prose. Unlike formal treatises on mysticism, it conveys the dynamic give-and-take of living conversation and personal interaction. This selection is the thirty-sixth assembly, given in full, followed by a brief excerpt from the twelfth assembly. Chirāgh-i Dihlî is shown here as a Sufi who has fully imbibed the canonical tradition of the Qur’ân and the hadîth sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, which he uses as the basis for his homilies. We also see him receiving a “man of the world,” who has sought the saint’s supernatural aid in some unspecified difficulty. As soon as the man comes in, the saint observes, without being told, that the man’s difficulty has been solved. Chirāgh-i Dihlî uses the incident, however, to point out the hidden benefits of afflictions sent by God, who tolerates the ephemeral success of evildoers
like Pharaoh. This leads him, a celibate, to reflect on the distractions inherent in earthly possessions and family life, which disturb the meditations of the mystic. In all cases he recommends "recollection of God" (dhikr), meditation on the names of God, which is one of the principal spiritual methods of classical Sufism. Of particular interest is his skillful adaptation of the story of Moses and the idolater to the Indian environment; a similar story had been told by the Persian poets Rūmī and Sa'di, but without any reference to India. Here, Chirāgh-i Dīhlī has the idolater address the idol in Hindi, and the story of the idolater's renunciation of paganism and his forgiving acceptance by God brings the audience to tears. The master concludes with some words about the divine mercy. This is a typical example of how Sufi tradition forged in Iraq and Iran came to be adapted to the situation of South Asia.

The brief excerpt from the twelfth assembly is a remark about the importance of breath control in meditation. It is significant because of the casual mention of Hindu yogis, whose technique is acknowledged to be fundamentally similar to that of the Sufis, regardless of their doctrinal differences.

The selections are translated from Naṣīr al-Dīn Māhmuḍ Chirāgh-i Dīhlī, Khwāyr al-majalis, compiled by Hamid Qalandar, edited by Khalīq Ahmad Nizami, Publication of the Department of History, Muslim University, no. 5, Studies in Indo-Muslim Mysticism, 1 (Aligarh: Muslim University, Department of History, [1959]), pp. 120–25, 59–60.

Further Reading


The Conversations of Naṣīr al-Dīn Māhmuḍ Chirāgh-i Dīhlī

THE THIRTY-SIXTH ASSEMBLY

Good fortune and happiness! The happiness of speech [with the master] was facilitated. The master (God remember him to the good) had mentioned some useful point, and eminent learned men were seated [in attendance]. He kindly told me to come sit closer. Then he began to speak. I [still] did not hear, so he repeated his remarks, saying, "A man came into the presence of the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace), and said, 'Counsel me, Messenger of God.' The Messenger of God said, 'He who works an atom's weight of good will see its reward. And he who works an atom's weight of evil
will see its reward.' The man said, 'That suffices me, Messenger of God.' He replied, 'The man has understood.' That is, he will do as he has heard.'

Then a man came in to see the master. He was an eminent man of the world, just and renowned, and having sought the master's help, he was released [from his difficulty] by the blessing of the thought of the master. As soon as he entered, the master brightened up and said, 'Welcome! How wonderful! Sit down, for you were released.' He said, 'By the blessing of the thought of the master, last night I was released.' Then the master said, 'When a thorn pricks one's foot, or an ant bites one, one should know that it is the reward of one's action, as God says in the holy Qur'an: And the affliction that befalls you is acquired by your own hands (Qur. 42:30). Then he said, 'What is affliction? An occurrence that is disliked. In general, the word 'affliction' (muṣḥaf) is that which people dislike. But the words 'occurrence' (iṣābat) and 'befell' (asaba) have been mentioned in reports of the Prophet also. God says, 'Whatever of good befalls you is from God' (Qur. 4:79). Then he said, 'A word 'affliction' for a disliked occurrence, is acknowledged as a legitimate category.' Again he said, 'When something disliked occurs, the sins one has committed are forgiven on that account, because one is awakened thereby and turns back toward God, and sorrowing repentance is brought about. One's errors are forgiven on that account.'

Then he said, 'Whatever injury and affliction God sends is one's guide to happiness. But the person who has been granted a long life and has many worldly goods is sent no difficulties, and he falls short in his devotions; this is 'being led on,' and 'being led on' is very near to punishment. God says: 'Step by step we lead them on from whence they know not' (Qur. 7:182). Then he said, 'Pharaoh never had a headache. Throughout the long life he had, he claimed that he was God, but never had a headache.'

Then he said, "The Master of the Law has called possessions and children a trial. 'Your possessions and children are a trial' (Qur. 8:28)." He said, "They are a trial because you want to be occupied in devotions in the corner of the house for a time. The children come and pull on your garment, saying, 'This devotion of yours is no good to us! Go, get something for us to eat!' Because of children you abandon your devotions to God. Then you come out, and become worried and distracted. Thus are children a trial. Wealth is also a trial, because as long as there is no wealth, you are occupied with God. When wealth comes, one gets to thinking of pretty girls and longs for enjoyment and delight. Thus wealth is also a trial.'

"But if one does not spend on oneself that which God has given him, what does one do? One spends it for the sake of God, such as in giving to dervishes, visiting the sick, building mosques, and doing other good deeds. When one turns the corrupt tool of wealth into good deeds, it is not a trial."

Then he said, "Be involved in whatever work you do, speak, and do the world's business. But never let your tongue be empty of the remembrance of God for one minute. Whether standing, sitting, or tumbling in His path, you
should remember God," and he recited this verse: "Those who remember God standing and sitting and on their sides" (Qur. 3.191). When your tongue is busy remembering God, it is to be hoped that it will remove all the sorrows of the world from your heart, and make you sorrowless." Then he said, "What happiness is there beyond this, that in the corner of your house, or in the mosque, or in a shrine, you are occupied with the remembrance of God and are not occupied with human devils? Who are the human devils? They are the ones who hold you back from the remembrance of God when you wish to be occupied in remembrance of God, for God is seated beside you. It is said in the divine sayings, 'I am seated beside him who remembers me.'" and God reminds us in the Qur'an, 'Remember me, and I will remember you' (Qur. 2.152). When you hold back from remembering God, your companions are devils. God says, 'He who turns away from the remembrance of the Merciful, We assign to him a devil' (Qur. 43.36), or 'We entrust [to him a devil].' And when you are occupied in remembrance of God, who will be your companion?" At this point he turned both eyes up toward heaven and said, "God will be. See what God has said: 'I am seated beside him who remembers me.'" Then he said, "This is the saying of Abū Bakr al-Ṭā’īstānī (d. 954) [God have mercy on him]; the Shaykh of Shaykhs [i.e., Abū Ḥafs `Umar Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, d. 1234] (God sanctify his soul) has said in the 'Awārif, that 'Abū Bakr al-Ṭā’īstānī (God have mercy on him) said, 'Keep the company of God, and if you are unable, keep the company of those who keep the company of God, in order that the blessing of their company may unite you with the company of God.'"

After that he told the following story. "In the age of the prophet Moses (God's prayer and peace be upon him), there was an idolater among the Israelites, who had practiced idolatry four hundred years. He had not ceased for a single day in these four hundred years, and he did not raise his head from the foot of the idol, nor did he pray for any necessity during these four hundred years. One day he got a fever, and he placed his head on the idol's foot and said, 'Tū merā gusā'īn, tū merā kartār, muṣīr is tap tāšīn charā.' In Persian, that is, he said to the idol, 'You are my God, you are my Creator, release me from this fever!' He said this in the Indian language, just as it is written. However much he spoke to the idol, what answer comes from stone? No answer came. His fever increased. He got up and kicked it, saying, 'Tū merā kartār nahi! That is, 'You are not my Creator!' He went out and saw a mosque before him. He put his head inside the mosque and said once, 'O God of Moses! From the four directions, the cry came, 'I am here, my servant! I am here, my servant!' This was heard seventy times, without interruption. He was astonished, saying, 'For four hundred years I have not raised my head from the foot of the idol, and I never prayed for any necessity. Today I pray for one, but the idol did not supply my necessity. He gave no reply, no matter how much I implored him. A single time I called out in the name of the God of Moses, and seventy times I heard, 'I am here, my servant!' I am His servant! So much of my life has been wasted, this fever has taken care of everything.'"

"Afterwards, the idolater said to him, 'O raised one, you are the Merciful God, will you tolerate a slave whose wrath (raʾūj) was everlasting? A hundred years' generation of wrath, and Moses, and the mercy of God, occurred, 'O Master, what is the term of years? If you were to punish a man in time of need, you do not punish without intervening to provide.'" Moses accepted, and the idolater remained for four hundred years, and never once did the mercy come to us, he will reply, and answer us.

The master of the mosque and exclamation closed the saying, "God's prayer and peace be upon him, Moses, and the Lord of Creation."
been wasted.' Then he prayed for what he needed: 'O God of Moses, remove this fever from me!' At once the fever left him.

"Afterward he went before Moses, saying, 'O Moses! If one has practiced idolatry for four hundred years, and during these four hundred years not once lifted one's head from the foot of the idol, but afterwards turns back to your God, will your God make peace with him or not?' Moses (on whom be peace) was wrathful. When he heard that someone had practiced idolatry for four hundred years, and never once lifted his head from the idol's foot, the expression of wrath was plain on Moses' face. The idolater grew afraid, and fled from Moses, and every moment he was looking back and thinking, with trust in the mercy of God, that he would call him back. At that moment a revelation occurred: 'O Moses! Receive my servant, and tell him, 'What of four hundred years? If you practice idolatry for four thousand years, and despair of the idol in time of need, then just once cry out in our name; mercy is from us. I reply without interruption seventy times, and every necessity that you pray for I provide.'" Moses ran barefoot, saying, 'Come! For your repentance has been accepted, and your faith has been found acceptable! It is decreed, even so: 'If for four hundred years, nay! If for four thousand years you practice idolatry and never once lift your head from the idol's foot, and then despair of him and come to us, and just once cry out, then seventy times without interruption I will reply, and every necessity that you pray for I will provide to your desire.'"

The master told this story, and those who were present wept with loud cries and exclamations. A clamor arose, and I became upset with weeping. He said something that I did not follow. I composed myself, and listened. He was saying, "God is kind and merciful. He has said, 'My mercy is quicker than my wrath.' Since mercy is quicker, wrath is delayed." After that he said, "He gives life, he bestows the blessing of faith, and he distributes sustenance. God says, 'Though you reckon the blessings of God you will not count them' (Qur. 14:34). Do not forget a God such as this. He did not exclude an infidel who had practiced idolatry for four hundred years; if a Muslim repents, he is merciful and kind, he accepts it." After that he recited this verse, "Truly God does not forgive that one should associate partners with him, and he forgives all else besides that to whomsoever he wishes' (Qur. 4:48)." And praise be to God, Lord of Creation.

FROM THE TWELFTH ASSEMBLY

He said, "The essence of this matter is restraint of breath, that is, the Sufi ought to hold his breath during meditation. As long as he holds his breath, his interior is concentrated, and when he releases his breath, the interior is distracted, and it destroys his momentary state." ... Then he said, "Therefore the Sufi is he whose breath is counted. The adept is the master of breath; this has but a single meaning. The accomplished yogis, who are called siddha in Indian language, breathe counted breaths."