

A Thousand Fragments of Dancing Light:
A Meditation on Spirituality and Desire

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Lata Mani

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This is going to be a somewhat unusual lecture for I am going to interweave argument with poetry, sloka and prayer. This choice may seem odd in a secular educational setting. However it is conventional pedagogical practice in spiritual contexts. As such it seemed an appropriate way to invite you to contemplate the relationship of spirituality and desire. I begin with three poems. The first is a free translation or transcreation of a poem by the Sufi mystic, Hafiz, titled, "A Golden Compass."

Forget any idea of right and wrong
any classroom taught you

Because
An empty heart, a tormented mind
Unkindness, jealousy and fear

Are always the testimony
You have been completely fooled!

Turn your back on those
Who would imprison your wondrous spirit
With deceit and lies.

Come, join the honest company
Of the King's beggars-
Those gamblers, scoundrels and Divine clowns
And those astonishing fair courtesans
Who need Divine Love every night.

Come, join the courageous
Who have no choice

But to bet their entire world
That indeed
Indeed, God is Real.

I will lead you into the Circle
Of the Beloved's cunning thieves,
Those playful royal rogues-
The ones you can trust for true guidance-
Who can aid you
In this Blessed calamity of life.

Hafiz,
Look at the Perfect One
At the Circle's Center:

He spins and whirls like a Golden Compass,
Beyond all that is Rational,

To show this dear world

That Everything,
Everything in Existence
Does point to God.¹

II. The second is a sloka from the Chandi Path, a Sanskrit text believed to have been composed between 900-500 BC. It is a verse from the Tantric Praise of the Goddess.

Ya Devi sarva bhuteshu trsna rupena samsthita
Namastasye, namastasye, namastasye namo namaha

To the Divine Goddess who resides in all of existence in the form of desire, we bow, we bow, to her we continually bow.²

III. My third offering is from Lalla or Lal Ded, the 14th century female mystic from Kashmir.

In this state, there is no Shiva,
nor any holy union.
Only a somewhat something moving

dreamlike on a fading road.³

Notions of the sacred are central to societies in South Asia, whether as cultural sub-stratum, source of personal conviction or the bedrock of institutionalised religion. Yet, for the most part, we have preferred to express our vision of equality and justice in predominantly secular terms drawing either on liberal-democratic or Left traditions. On the one hand secular concern or anxiety about the spiritual or the religious is not hard to understand. Religion as philosophy, institution and practice is a minefield. It bequeaths to us a complex, contradictory and conflict-ridden legacy. But it is not unique in this regard. Indeed it is like every other sociocultural inheritance, for the same may be said about Marxism, democracy or liberal humanism. In each case any active engagement calls upon one to address the tensions and contradictions, the delusory and false explanations to be found in these traditions. In the matter of religion we may point to discriminatory notions about gender and in the case of Hinduism about caste. To continue with the example of Hinduism, neither gender nor caste discrimination has a necessary or true (as in authentic) relationship with the core principles of that tradition. Still both have come to characterise aspects of Hindu practice and religious sanction has been sought and supposedly found for such discriminations. One could make a similar argument in relation to the exclusionary aspects of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

It may seem startling to state that caste has no necessary or true relationship to Hinduism since secular social justice discourse has tended to conflate the history of religion and the history of caste, to see it as one and the same. However, consider the fact that so many of Hinduism's most profound philosophers were Dalits, including Chokha Mela, Ravidas, Namdev, Kabir. They eloquently challenged caste consciousness; but they did not identify it with the whole tradition. It is not an exaggeration to say that the songs, poems and teachings of these philosophers, popular in their day as well as ours, have been even more responsible than Hinduism's venerated texts, for making its spiritual wisdom part of the collective consciousness and common sense of South Asia. In this context,

to deem the tradition as only casteist, not only simplifies a complex picture, but ironically re-marginalizes Dalit philosophers and mystics.

To repeat, then, the history of religion or spirituality is not simply one of violence, exclusion and discrimination. Both have also given shape to a rich epistemological and philosophical seam which anchors everyday life, thought and practice in the subcontinent including its literature, its music and its arts. Both have not merely brought deep joy to multitudes but also inspired sociocultural critique. In other words the domain of the religio-spiritual has been characterised by the liberatory as well as the oppressive, the sublime as well as the ridiculous, the radical as well as the conventional. How then are we to make sense of the secular insistence on a unidimensional reading of this legacy? Why the reluctance to acknowledge its enabling aspects?

It will be noticed that I do not propose a firm division between religion and spirituality but place them alongside each other. I do this because, first, I wish to locate both within a social and historical matrix (it is not as though religion is within history and spirituality somehow innocently beyond it, as some uses of the term would imply). Second, I do this to acknowledge the irony that though the practices and outlook claimed as "religious" are frequently more conditioned and conservative than that those claimed as "spiritual," and although religious authorities have at times disowned the mystics who have preached spiritual truths, it is equally a fact that these spiritual teachings have also been preserved by religious institutions and have, in part, survived because of them. Consequently, even while the spiritual core of a religious tradition often works to negate its dogma, it is more appropriate to place them on a continuum. Doing so makes it possible to challenge religious orthodoxy from within a given tradition itself, as many mystics have. More importantly, this position permits one to acknowledge complexity and to refuse distinctions that cannot withstand dispassionate analysis.

To return to the question posed earlier: why is there a reluctance to acknowledge the enabling dimensions of our spiritual and religious inheritances? Might it be understood as a form of prejudice? A prejudice is an a priori conviction, a preconceived, often simplistic, notion that is

seemingly impervious to contrary evidence howsoever rich and multiplicitous. It is as if one already knows what there is to know. Depending on the prejudice the absence of curiosity may be accompanied by suspicion and hostility. Additionally, when we encounter prejudice it becomes clear that for the prejudiced person, their conviction preserves some notion of order. The person fears that setting aside the prejudice would open the gates to disorder and chaos. Confronting the prejudice involves coming face to face with this terror and making one's way through it, to the other side. So far as prejudices against religion are concerned this process is yet to even begin. The belief that religion is inherently and always regressive makes any argument to the contrary seem strange and incomprehensible. Perhaps some of you are feeling this way even now.

Do notice that I have yet to say anything at all about spirituality and desire. I am still sorting my way through the bramble that has overgrown this field of conversation and is choking it. I am doing this to clear a space in which we might meet each other with what in Zen is called "beginner's mind" that is to say, as if for the first time; in the spirit of exploration; as non-antagonists curious to investigate new ways of understanding and of coming together. The history and present of our subcontinent require nothing less from us.

A prayer:

May we come to learn more and more what we've come to learn
May we come to be more and more what we've come to be
May we come to see more and more what we've come to see
May we begin shedding more and more what we've come to shed
We thank you, God, we thank you, Oneness
for dispersing this false sense of "I"
into a thousand fragments of dancing light
into so many roots under the earth.

I offer you this morning the gifts of my doubt and confusion
I am so grateful that nothing is turned away by the Divine
Deepen the silence within so each moment feels like a prayer unfolding
I am but a stone sinking into the well of your heart
May I rest forever at the bottom.⁴

II

Desire is at the heart of spiritual philosophy. It is central to stories of Creation, for the world is understood as a manifestation of God's desire. But in addition spiritual philosophies are essentially pedagogies for living, teachings about what life is and how we might live it. Theistic traditions (traditions which posit the idea of God) would speak of it as learning to live in accordance with God's intention for Creation. In a non-theistic tradition like Buddhism which has no notion of God, it would be phrased as learning skillful means to avoid suffering, not just for the individual self but for all beings, with suffering seen to have its very root in desire. The question of desire is also central to this process since humans have "free will," the freedom to say "yes" or "no" to this inquiry, to accept or decline the invitation to a cooperative dance between the human and the divine.

The question of "God's intent for Creation," of what brings suffering or generates demerit as Buddhism would put it, has been the subject of much dispute and contention. Unsurprisingly, social conditioning has had considerable impact in how this matter has been understood. For our purposes we may broadly distinguish between two tendencies in religion and spirituality. One tendency fundamentally fears humanness (its capacity for free will, its fragility) and in response proposes strictures, brandishing threats of punishment to those who refuse to adhere to them. It is so worried about humans "going astray" that it constructs an entire architecture of do's and don'ts, shoulds and should nots, prescriptions and proscriptions. We may describe this as the authoritarian, disciplinary pole. It is characterized by rigidity. It would seem that this tendency in effect doubts God's wisdom in endowing humans with free will and rushes in to make good the error!

The countervailing tendency embraces free will and humanness and trusts that spiritual teachings will help humans navigate the complex terrain of existence, what Hafiz calls, "this Blessed calamity of Life" in the course of which we may struggle with an "empty heart, a tormented mind, unkindness, jealousy and fear." (I quote here from the poem I read earlier.) This second view is flexible, expansive and generous. Not being fearful, it is more interested in offering a *method and process* than in assuring an outcome. The mystics in all traditions are usually to be found here. Thus it is that the dohas, poems or teachings of Hafiz, Kabir, Rumi, Lalla, Akka Mahadevi etc. beseech us to wake up and see with new eyes.

Unlike the authoritarians whose fearful and controlling impulses lead them to issue threats and diktats, they exhort us towards wisdom for the sake of the peace, joy and ecstasy that it brings. To recall Lal Ded's poem

In this state, there is no Shiva,
nor any holy union.
Only a somewhat something moving
dreamlike on a fading road.

Despite the far greater appeal of the expansive perspective just described, the problem of socially conditioning is shared by both tendencies. For example, both may treat humanness as something to be transcended; the first out of fear, the second from a preference for the transcendent or the non-transient. Both may also work with an opposition (explicit in the authoritarian tendency, implicit in the other) between spiritual desire and sexual desire. Despite this, the expansive tendency is capacious enough to house the tantric philosophical stream which is body-loving, nature-adoring, sentience-honoring and embodiment-celebrating. A clarifying word about tantra is probably in order. It is a term that is much misunderstood, associated with esoteric ritual and sexual practices. But, as we heard in the sloka from the Tantric Praise to the Goddess in the Chandi, it is the principle that the whole universe is divine. This is an idea present in other strands of Hinduism as well, but unlike them tantra is the most unambivalent, that is to say clear, direct and unapologetic, in embracing and celebrating embodiment, nature, indeed all that is alive.

The tantric perspective is to be found to a greater or lesser degree in all religious and spiritual traditions. In Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, it is at once at the core and at the margin and also sought to be sidelined as a distinct tributary. How can all three be possible? Well, for example, ritual and daily life practices may manifest the holism of a tantric view, even as philosophical discourse takes distance from it in reflecting other priorities and commitments, and in this context dubs it a distinct *sub-tradition*, only loosely related to the mainstream. In Christianity and Islam, the tantric aspects are most fully present in their mystical variants.

Let me gather the threads I have laid out in this section with a fragment from a poem by Rumi.

Stay Bewildered in God,

and only that.

Those of you who are scattered,
simplify your worrying lives. There is *one*
righteousness: Water the fruit trees,
and don't water the thorns. Be generous
to what nurtures the spirit and God's luminous
reason-light. Don't honor what causes
dysentery and knotted-up tumors.

Don't feed both sides of yourself equally.

The spirit and the body carry different loads
and require different attentions.

Too often

we put saddlebags on Jesus and let the donkey
run loose in the pasture.

Don't make the body do

what the spirit does best, and don't put a big load
on the spirit that the body could carry easily.⁵

III

Let us now take a step to the side and briefly go over what I have done so far. I have asked why we have been hesitant, even resistant, to the idea that our religio-spiritual legacy may have resources to contribute to our current predicaments. (For a more detailed discussion of these and related issues I would refer you to my books *SacredSecular* and *The Integral Nature of Things*.) Acknowledging the complexity of this inheritance I have indicated how it has been as nourishing as it has been problematic and have pointed to the simultaneous presence within it of tendencies that are expansive and welcoming and those that are constricting and fear-driven. In this final segment I would like to look closely at the spiritual understanding of desire, an idea most unapologetically embodied in tantra though present in some form throughout.

As we have seen, Creation is desire manifest: Ya Devi sarva bhuteshu
trsna rupena samsthita, Namastasye, namastasye, namastasye namo
namaha; To the Divine Goddess who resides in all of existence in the form
of desire, we bow, we bow, to her we continually bow. Here desire is part
of the molecular structure of the universe, an aspect of its very

beingness and isness, of its very DNA if you will. But that is only one facet of desire. For within a spiritual understanding, desire is also the ground of our entanglement in misrecognitions that cause suffering. What does this mean?

It means that if we don't pause to contemplate the nature of our desire and the nature of the thing from which we seek to fulfil our desire, we run the risk of a partial understanding and following from that, disappointment and suffering. To take a very simple example, we may believe we are looking for x when in fact we may be unconsciously looking for y. And not having grasped the reason for our disappointment we may set off in a serial search for other x's imagining that the right x has yet to be found. We may also conclude that our hunger for x is still to be satiated; even that no one's hunger for x can *ever* be satiated because such is the lure of x! In other words we may come up with secondary and tertiary explanations none of which can or will satisfy since the first mistaken premise, that it is x for which we long, has not been called into question. And all this while, the y remains buried beneath a welter of x's; we are none the wiser about ourselves, about why we think we want x or y and whether either can give us that which we seek. We have in short naturalized our desires.

From a spiritual standpoint, to naturalize desire, to accept any phenomenon at the level of appearances, is to mistake what appears to be true for the (whole) truth. This insight is congruent with feminist and queer theorizing. Nonetheless it seems to be an idea that needs to be reprinted. For despite an avowed commitment to a social constructionist understanding of phenomena (namely, that all ideas are socially, historically, culturally conditioned), the idea of the natural continues to circulate forcefully. This is especially so when it comes to desire and even more the case in relation to sexual desire. Post Freud, sexual desire is seen to hold a mirror to self, to express some essential truth about who we are. We have become accustomed to the idea of ourselves as the potent sum of our wants, needs, hopes and longings. In this scenario, social construction often comes into play in critically analyzing the exclusions of heteropatriarchy but the same lens is not always deployed in examining our own assumptions about sex, gender or queerness.

It is as if one declares, "I feel therefore I am" and following from that, "I feel *this* which makes me *that*." In the exuberance of identity politics, such relationships are asserted rather than investigated. One rarely

pauses to ask, "I feel this way. What might I make of this? How might I understand the relationship between this feeling, and the person, gender or sexuality that I think that this feeling makes me? What ideas about self, gender or sexuality are shaping my perspective and leading me to one conclusion rather than another? Am I the sum of my thoughts, feelings, sensations and desires? Am I all that and more? Who am I?" Once desire is naturalized such questions are unlikely to arise in one's consciousness. The result is that one risks settling for conditioned understanding, for knowledge that in its partiality brings with it the residue of dissatisfaction and restlessness.

I trust it is clear that I am not arguing against categories *per se*; we need them to make sense of the world. What I am urging rather is more scrupulous attention to the making of our categories, to the ideas on which they depend, the assumptions that underpin them and the hopes that they express. I am concerned that the dominant feminist and queer conception of desire overlaps with that proposed by the predatory logic of capitalism. This logic treats desire as a naturally occurring and always proliferating dynamic of human nature. It claims that we "naturally" aspire for more and more and that the free-market is the most rational means for its fulfilment. This cynical view hollows out what it means to be human, celebrates a reductive or narrow notion of desire in which it is fused with sex and consumption, and deems as personal freedom the ability to experience both without constraint or limitation. Within its frames, needs, wants and desires are yoked to the objective of an aspirational society, and become drivers for a growth economy.

This is an important aspect of the context for identity politics today. But there is as yet little discussion of how to avoid being entrapped in market-derived conceptions of the human subject. Instead, sensing the opportunity to widen the discursive space (the frame and terms of our understanding) we have argued for a proliferation of genders and sexual identities. Perhaps our optimism needs to be tempered by a dispassionate consideration of whether such multiplication genuinely transforms the categories of sex and gender or whether the diversity actually serves to more effectively obscure the persistence of the gender binary; paralleling the way the celebration of greater choice and individual freedom obscures the dynamic of deadening repetition and conformist homogeneity in contemporary capitalist culture.

We have traveled a long way indeed from the spiritual notion that desire is coextensive with the universe but that its nature must be understood in order that it enliven our existence rather than becoming a web in which we are unwittingly ensnared. This rich and sensuous notion, at once personal and transpersonal, immanent and transcendent, represents a profound challenge to prevailing norms. A body-loving, nature-adoring, sentience-honoring and embodiment-celebrating orientation is intrinsically anti-capitalist. However, its wisdom is not available to us so long as we continue to treat the religio-spiritual as inherently regressive. We must re-examine our a priori suspicion of the religio-spiritual realm. And equally, our a priori faith in all that is considered modern. Perhaps then we may be able rethink desire and freedom in a way that draws dispassionately on the enabling currents in both even while setting aside everything in them that impoverishes our sense of human possibility and of that which animates the universe.

¹ Daniel Ladinsky, "Golden Compass," *I Heard God Laughing: Renderings of Hafiz*, Self-published, 1996, 45-47.

² Swami Satyananda Saraswati, tr., *Tantric Praise of the Goddess, Chandi Path*, Motilal Banarasi Dass, 1985, 351.

³ Untitled, Coleman Barks tr., *Lalla: Naked Song*, Maypop, 1992, 18.

⁴ Lata Mani, "May We Come to Learn More and More What We've Come to Learn," *Interleaves: Ruminations on Illness and Spiritual Life*, Yoda Press, 2011, 40-41.

⁵ "A Basket of Fresh Bread," *The Essential Rumi*, Translations by Coleman Barks with John Moyne, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994, 256