

THE VALUE OF RESPECT

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On the path of spiritual development, respect is highly valued. First of all, respect is essential in cultivating the Inner Life, particularly God-realization. Respect is necessary in order for a person to be open to learning from another person or a Scripture or spiritual practice. Respect and learning are necessary in order to create a personal ideal and a God ideal, which is necessary for God-realization.

Respect is also important in facilitating human relationships in a social-cultural context. Respect is valued in all of the major religious traditions. Children learn to have respect for their elders, and then for familial, social, and religious authority. This forms the basis for one of the five activities of the Sufi Message, the Brotherhood/Sisterhood activity¹, the spreading of the Message of God. For the Sufi path is one of living in the world and doing what one can to help people. Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan said: “The Sufi Message has as its main mission to consider the problems of the day and then to direct our activity to do what is necessary in order to bring about better conditions, in which is the fulfillment of our mission.”²

Arriving in North America and Europe in 1910, Murshid lived through World War I and its aftermath, seeing the West, in which he and his family lived, convulsed by hatred and conflict. It was in September 1922 when he said that the “fulfillment” of the

¹ Murshid refers to this activity as Brotherhood. This masculine term was accepted as generic in the early

² Hazrat Inayat Khan, *Complete Works of Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan: Original Texts: Lectures on Sufism 1922 II: September-December*, (New Lebanon, New York: Omega Publications, 1996), 1.

Message is “to do what is necessary in order to bring about better conditions.” Respect is a psychological attitude that is required for this task, the task of Brotherhood/Sisterhood.

First, I want to discuss some of the cultural attitudes that make us suspicious of respect like skepticism and doubt. We will look at the link between being able to look up to someone and having the ability to learn. This leads us to consider Murshid’s view of the relationship between democracy and aristocracy. Finally, we can then come to the importance in esoteric work of being able to form a personal ideal, and a God ideal. Having a God ideal is necessary, as Murshid says, “in order to bring about better conditions” in the world in which we live.

CULTURAL ATTITUDES.

In contemporary American culture, what do we think of when we think of respect? I asked many people, and the first thing they said was: Aretha Franklin, referring to the Otis Redding song, “Respect,” she so passionately sang:

All I’m askin’

Is for a little respect when you get home...

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Find out what it means to me

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Take care...

Or you might walk in (respect, just a little bit)

And find out I’m gone (just a little bit).

In the cultural context of this song, how is respect understood? This song is about respect in personal relationships, a relationship between a man and a woman. The singer is asking for the listener to “Respect me!” She doesn’t feel respected. And she says, “find out what it means to me.” She thinks that he doesn’t even know what respect means to her personally. The implication is that we have lost our collective sense of what respect means, so it has become a personal issue. Each person, each couple has to determine what respect is. And people worry about being “disrespected,” which often seems to mean that someone feels that they are not being listened to or known.

When Murshid discusses respect, he points out that to have the capacity for respect, a person has to be capable of thinking or feeling that something or someone is superior to themselves. We have to be able to imagine something greater than ourselves. We have to be open to something being revealed to us, something that we didn’t know or realize before. What this means is I have to be able to feel inferior in a particular regard. This does not mean that some people are superior and some are inferior, but that a person may have superior knowledge or wisdom or experience than I have. I use these words specifically. Murshid uses them, but I am using them here because we don’t like to think about inferior and superior. So it’s hard for us to be willing to identify with feeling inferior. Even if we think, “Oh, I’m a Sufi. I’m very respectful.” What does that mean? Do we really imagine that something, some consciousness, is genuinely bigger and greater and superior, that we are inferior in our relationship to it?

In Western civilization, this perspective is not supported. In the 1970s, I had a bumper sticker that said, “Question authority.” The contemporary world values questioning, doubt, and skepticism. This isn’t new. Following the democratic revolutions

in the eighteenth century, the collective consciousness changed. In the French Revolution and the American Revolution, people rejected the monarchical and authoritarian governments of the 1770s. The values of reason, evidence, and skepticism became paramount. People did not want to accept things because of authority or hierarchy or Revelation. Faith, particularly faith in authority, was devalued.

Murshid saw this in the early 1900s when he arrived in Europe. In his autobiography he wrote:

Materialism on one side, commercialism on the other, besides their [Europeans] agitation against their Church, and their interest in the thought of their modern philosophers, turned Europeans, if not from God, at least from the God of Beni Israel. I found that a man today in the West is agitated, not only against the Church, but also against the Autocratic God, Who works without a Parliament, and no one before His government has a vote, Who judges people and punishes them for their sin, and before Whom men are supposed to be presented in the hereafter with their lives' records of deeds. The man in the Western world, who cannot stand even a king over his head, naturally rebels against a God to be considered as an Emperor of emperors. **The modern person does not want anyone to be superior to himself;** a priest, savior, or God, none of them he cares for. If there is anything that appeals to him it is to know of the divine character to be found in the innermost nature of man. The man today is absolutely against a

spiritual hierarchy and therefore naturally against the head of the hierarchy, who is God.³

Modern people are skeptical of authority and reject a God who has no Parliament. People want to have a vote about everything. People want “free speech.” Belief in Scripture then falls to the fundamentalists who interpret Scripture as literal and absolute, and “intelligent people” reject faith and Revelation. These attitudes are seen as democratic, antithetical to aristocratic attitudes. But Murshid did not understand democracy to be the opposite of aristocracy. He said:

Democracy is the result of Aristocracy; when the spirit of aristocracy has evolved enough then it becomes democracy. Then a person thinks, 'I am the equal of any person in the world; there is no person lower than me'; but if a person says, There is no one higher than me,' that is not democracy.⁴

After experiencing Catholicism in Italy, Murshid was even more explicit about the problem with this Western idea of democracy. He said:

The present deplorable condition of religion that is to be found in the Western world is owing to the lack of the . . . principle, which, it seemed to me, the service of the Roman Catholic Church taught: the lack of veneration for one's advanced brother. The spirit of the present generation is: 'I am as good as you.' When a soul has nothing to look up to, it drops its wings, and a soul who was meant to be a bird, remains a beast.⁵

³ *Biography of Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan* (London: East-West Publications, 1979), 133. Dictated by Khan to various Sufi Movement members. Use of the word 'man' as inclusive is consistent with the early twentieth century language usage, so it has not been edited in this quotation.

⁴ Khan, Hazrat Inayat, *The Sufi Message of Hazrat Inayat Khan*, vol. 12, *The Vision of God and Man*, (Katwijk Netherlands: Servire, 1982), 35.

⁵ *Biography of Pir-O-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan* (London: East-West Publications, 1979) 192. Dictated by Khan to various Sufi Movement members.

Respect involves veneration, or feeling there is someone we can look up to in some way. This gives the soul wings to fly.

Murshid says that a respectful attitude is not undemocratic:

The true democratic spirit feels within itself that there is nothing one cannot be, and at the same time appreciates, respects, and understands all that it sees in experience, goodness, righteousness, piety, or virtue. To follow such a spirit means evolution; not to follow it means degeneration.⁶

However, he goes on to say, under the delusion of democracy we see how easy it is “to go against all tradition, education, authority, experience, and age. But if we avoid that delusion then we find the real democracy, that which comes from showing an ideal to others and honoring and respecting that ideal ourselves.”⁷

Murshid had a very hard time expressing the Sufi Message in the West, because the Message is both democratic and aristocratic. He neither could nor wanted to get rid of all the aristocratic assumptions that are in the heart of the Message. He said, “There is no person lower than me.”⁸ But this is not the world we live in now. This is our dilemma, seeing and believing people are only equal to or beneath us. We are living in a political and a social world in which people don’t want to think that anyone is higher than they are. “I am as good as you.” Knowledge and expertise are devalued. Politicians don’t need experience to be appointed to run a government office; anyone can do anything. The aristocrat has been replaced by the billionaire. The soul, which was meant to be a bird, crawls on the ground remaining a beast. And then what has become of our collective

⁶ Khan, Hazrat Inayat, *The Sufi Message of Hazrat Inayat Khan*, vol. 7, *In an Eastern Rose Garden*, (City: Publisher, Year), 224.

⁷ *Ibid*, vol. 7, 223.

⁸ *Ibid*, vol. 12, 35.

values? Greed and self-promotion, competition and creating the right “spin” are predominant and persistent. Truth is irrelevant. As Murshid said, our age is characterized by commercialism and materialism. These characteristics are destructive to the activity of Brotherhood/Sisterhood.

DEVELOPING A PERSONAL IDEAL.

In ancient and traditional civilizations, the attitude of respect was learned in childhood. Children were taught to respect their father, their mother, their elder siblings, their teachers. Showing consideration for elders, simply because the older person had experience, was unquestioned. There was honor given to learning, because the learned person understood more.⁹ Honor was paid to goodness. “In this way a child is brought up with a feeling of respect; the child is given a kind of ideal to look up to and to understand.”¹⁰ But now education is often focused on absorbing information and taking standardized tests, not on emotional and social development. Respect is not taught in school or in the home.

Murshid compares human and animal states of consciousness. He is not devaluing the animal state of consciousness, but he often invites people to develop a consciousness that is fully human, not jinn, not angelic, not animal. He says:

Gentleness, sense of respect, and veneration make humanity different from the animals. If people did not behave like animals, the past war would not have been possible. Dogs bark at each other. Not only one but all of the prophets have brought the message that humanity should show itself higher than the animals in

⁹ Khan, Hazrat Inayat, *The Sufi Message of Hazrat Inayat Khan*, vol. 7, *In an Eastern Rose Garden*, (City: Publisher, Year), 223.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, vol. 12, 68.

this respect, and that they should give way to one another instead of barking at each other.¹¹

It is the human capacity to create an ideal that raises people to the state of true humanity, to the consciousness of the interconnectedness of all life and existence that generates generosity, kindness, and sensitivity to all living beings.

Ask yourself, if I don't learn how to respect a person in my life, if I don't have someone I can look up to and learn from, then how can I form an ideal? Respecting a person is the stepping-stone to developing an ideal. Only when a respected person sees and understands you, can you internalize a feeling of self-respect. For how do you learn self-respect, if you don't have respect for someone else? Respect for someone who can mirror it back to you. Psychologically, if you don't respect anyone, then you're likely to feel that no one respects you. But here is the problem we face in our "democratic" paradigm: if our experience is that when we look up to someone, they are looking down at us, how can we experience respect, let alone a personal ideal?

So I invite you to take a moment to reflect on whom you respected as a child, in your personal life, say before the age of 10. Don't think about it too much. Who did you respect? Who did you admire? Who did you want to be like? Who personally was your ideal? And did you feel that that person, or persons, understood you? Really saw you? Was that person proud of you? What qualities did that person like in you? Did you like these qualities in yourself? Are these qualities you respect in yourself now? If not, what do you respect in yourself now? What don't you respect in yourself? If you don't respect yourself and are experiencing low self-esteem, then how can you respect anyone or anything else?

¹¹ Ibid, vol, 12, 194.

There is another problem we may encounter when we consider respect. What if I don't find anyone worthy of my respect? What if the people or institutions, who say they are superior don't seem very superior to me?

I'll tell you a personal story. In the 1970s, when I was in my 20s, I, along with many others, lost respect for the government during the Vietnam War. Keep in mind, I had grown up in a military family. I thought growing up that my father and the military (and Eisenhower, by the way) were good and right and true. As a child naturally does. It's embarrassing to say, but I thought—I remember feeling—that any man in a military uniform would help me and protect me. But when I joined the March on the Pentagon in 1967, following the rules, being a very good girl by staying in the area where we had permits, I was deeply disillusioned when squadrons of young men in military uniforms wearing gas masks marched into our area and sprayed us with tear gas. We ran terrified, screaming, as far away as we could get. My respect for the military and the government was crushed. I imagine that many of you have had similar experiences.

Another example of my ignorance and naiveté is that when I graduated from college, where I majored in religion and philosophy, I thought I could find out the Truth about God. Since my father and the military had lost their divine status, I thought surely God must have this status. I could respect God—if I only understood Him. So I went to Divinity School at Harvard! I thought, that's where the Truth must be. It was there that I completely *lost* respect—for those academics, for the sense that we were pursuing Truth, and for my concept of God. I was left with disillusionment, disappointment, and cynicism.

Murshid offers us a helpful perspective about this problem. He describes different aspects or forms of respect, and how we can find value in offering respect to a person even if they seem unworthy:

One form of respect is to consider another person better than oneself; even if one did not think them so. Or to regard another person as better than oneself, by reason of humility, or out of graciousness. No person is respected who has no respect for another. There is another form of respect, which is to recognize another person's superiority in age, experience, learning, goodness, birth, rank, position, personality, morality, or spirituality. And if one was mistaken in recognizing another person's superiority it is no loss, for respect given to a person in reality is respect given to God. A person who deserves respect is entitled to it, but when one does not deserve it and yet you respect them it shows your graciousness.”¹²

Since all respect is in reality respect given to God, the value of respect is not determined by the “worthiness” of the object, the person, the organization, or Scripture,. It is found in the attitude of the subject, the one offering respect.

We first learn respect in a personal relationship. This helps us develop a personal Ideal. When I respect someone, I want to be like that person. Or I want to embody some quality that I see in that person. It may be in imitation, or in envy, that I form a personal Ideal. I see the superiority in the person, and I am willing to be inferior and to learn from the other. From this sense of a personal Ideal, I can begin to imagine a picture or concept of the Divine that I truly respect.

¹² Khan, Hazrat Inayat, *The Sufi Message of Hazrat Inayat Khan*, vol. 8, *Sacred Readings: the Gathas*, (City: Publisher, Year), 195.

DEVELOPING A GOD IDEAL

On the mystical path, we need to have some concept of the Divine or of God, whether it is a personal or impersonal concept. Historically, Christian and Jewish concepts of God have tended to describe God as a masculine figure, a king or monarch with power over all elements of creation. Is this a God Ideal that we regard as superior? As having greater vision? As knowing or understanding more than I do? Many contemporary Sufi mystics have turned away from this concept of a masculine personal God, and turned toward an impersonal God concept: Nature, the Universe. This is like the Hindu concept of Brahman; it is universal, cannot be named or thought, it cannot be an object of the knowing mind. Nirguna Brahman. But in Hinduism Nirguna Brahman, God without attributes or characteristics is not in opposition to the concept of Saguna Brahman, God with attributes. So when I seek to understand the nature of God, I can imagine all the attributes that I truly respect. Both are true paths to the God Ideal. It is as the Hindu saint Ramakrishna said, “you can either eat sugar (Saguna Brahman) or become sugar (Nirguna Brahman).” When I bring my personal self into relationship with a personal concept of God, then this is eating sugar. I taste bliss. But I have to exist separately from the sugar that I taste. When I dissolve my personal self in the Absolute Reality, then there is no personal self and no personal concept of God. This is becoming sugar, all is sugar. There is no taster of sugar and no sugar that is tasted. All is One.

But some people are afraid to have a God Ideal, to imagine God or Goddess with attributes, qualities. We may doubt whether anything really exists that is greater than myself, my ego? In rejecting a Father God concept, one that portrays a man with a beard who sits on a throne and judges our sins, have we damaged our ability to imagine God at

all? Psychologically, even when we reject the religious God concept we learned as children, these images still live in our personal unconscious mind. They live in society's Collective Unconscious, leaving God, the judge (whom we don't believe in), to continue criticizing and punishing us internally. We can end up feeling anxious and depressed because of the mistakes we have made, the impossible expectations we failed to live up to, the potentials we have failed to actualize. Or, perhaps we identify with the Self-righteous God concept, and feel justified in judging others who are obviously wrong, and don't agree with us.

To challenge this influence that comes up from the Collective Unconscious, we have to reflect on our inner life. We must ask ourselves: What do I respect about myself? What don't I respect within myself? What do I project onto others? If I only project the positive good qualities of myself, then the other is idealized (in a one-sided manner). Or if I project the negative disrespectful qualities, then the other is demonized and hated. Psychologically, the inability to respect oneself keeps us locked in a black and white, good and evil dualistic world. A world where it only makes sense to fight and hate the evil other, who we fear is determined to destroy us.

How do we create and imagine a Divine God Ideal that we respect? Are we willing to look for the divine Reality that is deeper than our own limited concepts? In the tenth century Hindu scripture, *Devi Mahatmyam*, the Great Goddess is invoked as "you who are worthy of worship."¹³ Murshid asks us to "make God a reality and God will make you the Truth."¹⁴ We can imagine and discover a Divine Ideal that is worthy of

¹³ Swami Jagadiswarananda, trans. *Devi Mahatmyam* (Glory of the Divine Mother), Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1977) 4:3.

¹⁴ Khan, Hazrat Inayat, *Gayan* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1960) 2.

worship; one we truly respect. As we purify the mind of its limited concepts of the Absolute and Unlimited our eyes may open to the God beyond God.

We say in the prayer, *Saum*: “Praise be to Thee, Most Supreme Being, Omnipotent, Omnipresent, All-Pervading, the Only Being...” Is there really an omniscient, omnipresent, all-pervading reality? Who is this, before whom I say, “I surrender to Thee and to Thee alone”? The idea of surrender can frighten us because we think it is submission, a giving up of my individual will. Whom would I submit to, when I have been let down and betrayed so often?

But psychologically, surrender is not submission. It is not a defeat. It is an act of liberation and opening of the ego’s limited consciousness to a greater reality. It is an opening to Divine Presence. It is a realization that transforms the false self, the limited self, the nafs¹⁵, into a vehicle of Divine Will. The nafs must be able to experience respect to perceive and imagine an Ideal that is worthy of worship, an ideal they can surrender to and be transformed by. This experience is what allowed Murshid to say, “I must admit that in spite of all my difficulties I was not disappointed for I never allow myself to be disappointed, fully convinced in my heart that Truth alone is victorious in the end.”¹⁶ During his struggles to bring the Message to the West, Murshid was sustained and supported by his personal experience of the Absolute, the One Being, to whom he had surrendered. Despite the disappointments of people’s misunderstanding of the Message, he persevered knowing that Truth is victorious in the end.

¹⁵ In Sufism the term nafs refers to the physical or carnal self, the lower self, the self that is overrun with passions and anger.

¹⁶ *Biography of Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan* (London: East-West Publication, 1979) 176–177.

BROTHERHOOD/SISTERHOOD ACTIVITY

This mystical transformation is not just for our individual selves. Murshid brought the Sufi Message for self-realization, but also for another purpose. To come back to the unpublished lecture from September 1922 previously mentioned, Murshid wrote: "The Sufi Message has as its main mission to consider the problems of the day and then to direct our activity to do what is necessary in order to bring about better conditions, in which is the fulfillment of our mission."¹⁷

If we are inspired by Murshid's invitation to us to be Brothers and Sisters in our relationships with each other, we will need to consider the problems of our day, as we understand them. We might look at the lack not only of civility but the lack of regard for what is true or factual in today's social and political discourse. This lack of respect leads us to bark at each other, not to listen; barking leads to more violence and hate crimes, toward people with whom we disagree. We might look at the ways in which technology allows people to anonymously insult and attack each other. We might look at the ways in which corporate greed and profits are damaging the earth and our environment. We might look at various conditions, which are lacking balance and harmony.

As Brothers and Sisters, how do we direct our activities to fulfill the Mission? Certainly one of the first steps is cultivating respect within ourselves, toward other people with whom we might agree or disagree, and toward the God Ideal that we find worthy of worship. Having a personal ideal allows us to search for a divine ideal that we truly respect. Respect allows us to be open and curious about the experience of another person, culture, or religion. Openness is necessary to develop understanding of others'

¹⁷ Khan, Hazrat Inayat, *Complete Works of Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan, Original Texts: Lectures on Sufism 1922 II: September – December* (New Lebanon New York: 1979) 1.

perspectives. From openness understanding can emerge, and this is necessary for the development of tolerance of the other. Respect, understanding, and tolerance. These are inner qualities that can allow us to rise above the partisan views that are dominating our modern world. As the prayer, *Khatum*, says, we must “rise above the distinctions and differences that divide.” We must rise above the distinctions within our own minds, the contradictions in our own perception. This includes the distinction between my concept of myself and my concept of God. Murshid reminds us, “The God who is intelligible to you is made by you yourself, but what is beyond your intelligence is the reality.”¹⁸ Through rising above our limited intelligence, we may catch a glimpse of the God Ideal embodied in Murshid’s prayers. It is this experience that may convince us as it convinced him in his heart “that Truth alone is victorious in the end.”

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¹⁸ Khan, Hazrat Inayat, *Gayan* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1960) 0. Edited for inclusive language.