



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## **Rumi and the Symbols used by him**

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### **Abstract**

Rudolph Otto draws an allusion between God and a mighty mountain, the summit of which is invisible in eternal darkness. According to this great German theologian, a very small part of this mountain is visible, and this appears as a promontory of good hope. We see this minute promontory, through the haze and the smoke of this world and consider it as the final. Whenever we observe a Providential manifestation, we endeavour to commit it to memory by words or allegories. However, every word we find or every symbol we use to commit the manifestation is in one sense untrue. Therefore, and in accordance with all religions, the proper description of the Divine Secret is silence. It is not possible to describe the secret of the Divine Being which is entirely different from all creation. The human being who discovers this secret and the final truth must not reveal it. As Rumi asserted and reasserted, it is impossible to get near the sun. The light and fire of the sun will destroy instantly anyone who attempts to observe it without the veil. For these two reasons, the mystics who experience this observation in ecstasy use symbols for its description. They do this either to show an image of the final truth or to veil the merciless fire of this truth with a coloured curtain. The works of Rumi are, therefore, saturated with such symbols. There is no other mystic poet either in the East or in the West to equal Rumi in the usage of such rich and resplendent symbols.

### **Eternal Sun – Shams Al-Din**

The most important symbol Rumi used was the sun. This is not extraordinary because his first and original beloved teacher was Shams al-Din. He saw the reflections and the rays of the Eternal Sun, the face of the Beloved, everywhere. In the absence of this sun, no roses will grow and no fruits ripen. The sun crowns the thorns of the bush with roses and turns the rough stones

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into red ruby through a process which lasts centuries. In similar manner, the Divine Beloved gives new life and eternal beauty to all lovers who love, suffer and wait longingly. But no one can enter this sun because His glorious magnificence burns all. The sun is a very nice and appropriate symbol to allude to the beauty and the majesty of God. However, one single symbol, no matter how deep and meaningful it may be, cannot be sufficient for the comprehension of the diverse aspects of the Divine Reality. Rumi always searched for and found his symbols in nature. Orchards and gardens, birds and flowers, told the story of the lover and the beloved. The spirit was symbolised by a bird, which symbol was used from the time of the ancient Egyptians to the present day. The allegory of the rose and the nightingale, the duck which escapes into the sea, all allude to the central fact that the spirit desires to return to its original domain. The smallest thing, whether it be a butterfly or a drop of water, in the hands of Rumi gains transparency and reveals the light of the Divine Secret. Man must become lost within the immense ocean of God like a drop of water, because man is like a small wave or fleck of foam created on that ocean. The fortunes afforded by God ebb and flow on that ocean and meet the shores of human life. But according to the wise, the occurrences which take place in our time and space are nothing but the reflections of the tides of fortune and misfortune which occur on that ocean which exists outside the realms of time and space. Whoever meets dissolution on that ocean immediately turns into the mother-of-pearl creating ocean. An absolute abandonment must create an absolute gain.

One of the characteristics of Rumi is that the symbols he used had not only one meaning, but were full of different meanings. These symbols can be taken as having a positive or a negative meaning. The fire, for instance, could be taken to mean the fire of hell, which can be extinguished either by the water of mercy or by the light of magnanimity; or it could also be taken to mean the fire of misfortunes which are made to purify the hearts. Where misfortune is used as a symbol of Divine love, it must mean the Fire of Love.

In all religions, there are certain symbols to allude to the religious truths and to the relationship of God and His creatures. Most of these symbols allude to the ancient rites and primitive customs. One of the most celebrated examples of these symbols is wine. Rumi draws a comparison between the indescribable intoxication caused by ecstasy and the intoxication caused by wine. In eternity, in (*Ruzi-i alast*) God, in the shape of a cup-bearer, will hand the wine of love to the crying man away from home, longing for the scent of this cup, thereby indicating to His creatures his original domain or the way to his Beloved. This world is like an empty cup; when the lover sees the cup he becomes intoxicated. Because if the beauty of the cup-bearer becomes manifest and if there is a chance for the lover to drink the love from the lips of the beloved, the lover will perish by the majesty of the beloved. The cup-bearer is also a music-maker. He plays the flute, the lute and the lyre. The melodies produced on these instruments are always nostalgic. Man is like a lyre in the hands of his beloved, playing the tunes of torment; or man is like a lute in the lips of his beloved, inquiring the everlasting longing.

The flute, used as a symbol in many religions since ancient Babylonia, was a most favourite symbol with Rumi. According to him the roof and the doors of the house of love were made entirely of songs and poetry. The lover who can understand the voice of the flute responds to its tune and joins in the *Sama* and flies resplendent around the perpetual light of the Divine Beloved, like a planet or a star around the sun. In the *Sama* of Rumi and in all symbols relating to the *Sama* there is the deepest meaning. Because the mystic lover eternally flies resplendent

around one centre only; he wants to get near to one goal only and attempts to introduce his secret by using new symbols. The mystic lover finally understands the futility of his poetic endeavours and resumes silence and in silent gratitude flies resplendent around the beauty and majesty of God like an atom around the sun. He listens to His communication, and he gets completely dissolved into a state where there is no *dhikr*, no speaker and hearer. And the mystic lover flows into dissolution in the midst of all the symbols of different shades and colours and in the darkness of light.

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