a glimpse inside the tavern of ruin

by padmavajra

Last winter, during a trip to Delhi, I paid my first visit to what is probably the most famous Sufi shrine in India: the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. Ever since reading the life and teachings of this great Sufi master I had desired to see the place where he was buried. Or rather (to put it more accurately) to pay my respects at his *dargah* – his 'royal court' (a Sufi master is regarded as a king of the spiritual world). I have made it a custom to visit the dargahs of Sufi and Muslim saints on my visits to India. The *barakah* (literally the 'power of sanctity' – what we would call the 'atmosphere') of these shrines, even the less well known ones, is often very profound indeed.

It was late afternoon when I paid my visit. The sun was low in the clear, blue winter sky, and a golden light was beginning to glow as I followed the busy main road from the red sandstone grace of Humayun's Tomb. Managing to weave my way through the snarling traffic, I entered a broad lane and joined the jostling crowds. I passed cheap restaurants, bookshops, an Unani doctor's surgery, and the recently restored tomb of the great Urdu poet Ghalib. The lane turned into narrower and narrower alley-ways, crammed with tiny shops: halal butchers with fresh pink carcasses hanging in the open air, travel agents offering cheap bus services to other Sufi shrines, the ubiquitous chai stalls, shops filled with cassettes of Sufi devotional music. And the stalls I love best – those that sell everything required to worship at these shrines: brilliantly coloured *chaddars* (tomb coverings) in deep green, red and purple, embroidered and fringed with gold thread; nets of intensely sweet white jasmine; small red roses, perfumes, skull caps and *tasbihs* (rosaries) of coloured glass, wood and even luminous green plastic. The shopkeepers called out to me to buy from their stall; qawwali music blared from the cassette shops. All around me were people: beggars (men, women and children in dirty, ragged dress); strong-looking men, mostly in Muslim garb of baggy white shirts and pyjamas, white caps on their heads; and mysterious women, hidden from view in their black burkahs.

The alley-way became narrower still, until at last I came to the entrance of the shrine itself. Leaving my shoes outside and tying a red scarf on my head (the head is always covered in Muslim places of worship), I entered the shrine. Immediately to my left was the small structure housing the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin's great disciple, Amir Khusrau. Following tradition, I paid my respects to his shrine first.

I squeezed my way into the tiny room containing the tomb of the great devotee. Crammed inside, men and boys (in common with most other dargahs, no women are allowed inside the rooms housing the tomb) were sitting or standing, silently mouthing prayers. Others were silent, gazing at the tomb, which was swathed in the brilliantly coloured chaddars. The atmosphere was very still, in complete contrast to the hustle and bustle outside. I stood gazing at the tomb and those exquisite cloths – red and green and purple, embroidered with gold, strewn with nets of jasmine and small red roses, and sprinkled with perfume. I felt strangely moved to be taking darshan of the great devotee, Amir Khusrau. It was Khusrau who composed (in Hindi and Farsi) songs of ecstatic love and devotion for his beloved master. These songs are regarded as the origin of qawwali, the most famous form of Indian Sufi music. I was moved to be near this great lover-disciple, who gave the fullest and most beautiful expression to his love, who would lose himself in songs of love. I stood, longing to lose myself – like Amir Khusrau – in such ecstasies of adoration.

From Khusrau's tomb, I crossed the courtyard to the much larger shrine of his beloved master Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, with its elegant white dome. Even more men were pressing themselves into the tiny space around Hazrat's tomb. I noticed that the walls of the shrine were painted with elaborate floral patterns, and there was an overpowering smell of attar of roses, drops of which could be seen on the deep green and purple cloths covering the tomb. Men stood praying, their palms raised in elegant gestures of entreaty. Some men knelt by the side of the tomb, their foreheads resting on the low wooden fence surrounding the tomb. Some men were bent over and gathering up in their hands a corner of the chaddars covering the tomb, which they touched to their foreheads and kissed lovingly. Priests gave blessings by touching the tomb with peacock feather fans, which they would then touch to people's heads.

I left the tomb and sat on a nearby wall. As the twilight gathered, I watched the people: the priests, sleek in their smart white clothing, hustling for donations; wandering fakirs in blue and green check sarongs, white shirts and colourful turbans; ordinary people in traditional Muslim dress or westernised Indian style; women, some completely draped in black, others in brilliantly coloured saris or *salwar kameez*, many of them sitting in silence or prayer on the steps of Hazrat's shrine. And swarms of children. Not all the worshippers were Muslim. There were many Hindus present as well: the blessings of Hazrat Nizamuddin are for all, regardless of their religious persuasion. In fact, the dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin is probably Delhi's most important shrine. As I sat watching, the call to prayer sounded through loud speakers, and almost everybody turned towards the red mosque that stands next to Hazrat's shrine. I love to watch Muslims at prayer. Even the poorest, least cultured person looks so elegant, so graceful in his slow, mindful prostration.

After the prayers had finished I began to hear the strains of a harmonium and the sound of a drum. The *qawwali* singers were beginning their daily evening performance for Hazrat Nizamuddin. For many years now I have had a great love of qawwali. In a mood of intense expectation, I made my way to the space between the shrine of Amir Khusrau and Hazrat Nizamuddin.

Hazrat Nizamuddin was very fond of qawwali. Every evening he would attend *sama* – a formal recital of musical settings of Sufi poems. Sama (the word literally means 'audition') is a central practice for many traditions throughout the Sufi world, although not all Sufis recommend it. Some, in fact, are highly critical of the practice. But for Hazrat Nizamuddin's Chisti lineage, such spiritual concerts are an important practice. Through listening to the words and the music (and the words are as important as the music) the Sufi practitioner aims to attain a state of ecstasy (*wajd*). The sama of the Sufi adept take place in a small private setting, but qawwali is also performed in more public contexts for the humble devotee.

The qawwali singers at Hazrat Nizamuddin continue the tradition of singing for the beloved master. Every evening they sit in front of the shrine of Amir Khusrau, facing the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin and they sing (mainly) songs composed by Amir Khusrau – the songs that the lover composed for his beloved. The singers had already started performing by the time I arrived. Seeing me, they urged me to come and sit near them. There was a lead singer (who also played the harmonium) two backing vocalists (who also kept time by clapping) and a man (who also sang) playing the *dholak*, a long two-headed drum laid across the folded legs of the drummer. The musicians were dressed in a mixture of

modern Western and Indian Muslim dress. The young dholak player looked particularly 'cool' in black jeans, a long, light-blue Indian shirt and a black leather jacket. They sang and played with great force and feeling, and a crowd soon gathered.

At a break in the singing, I leaned over to the drummer and asked him if the group would sing my favourite of all qawwali songs, a song composed by Amir Khusrau himself, the Farsi Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe. It's a very famous 'old' qawwali song, and the qawwals were clearly delighted to be asked to sing it. To my intense pleasure, they were soon entering into the song's long opening lines, and then plunging into its rhythmic verses, with their ecstatic repetitions. The lead singer and backing vocalists would raise their arms to communicate a particular phrase more forcefully. Often the lead singer would direct his singing towards me, beaming with pleasure. I was quietly ecstatic listening to the best of qawwali songs in a traditional setting. I turned my attention away from the crowds towards the heart.

> O wondrous ecstatic eyes, o wondrous long locks,
>
> O wondrous wine worshipper, o wondrous mischievous sweetheart.
>
> As he draws the sword, I bow my head in prostration so as to be killed,
>
> O wondrous is his beneficence, o wondrous my submission.
>
> In the spasm of being killed my eyes beheld your face:
>
> O wondrous benevolence, o wondrous guidance and protection.
>
> O wondrous amorous teasing, o wondrous beguiling,
>
> O wondrous tilted cap, o wondrous tormentor.
>
> Do not reveal the Truth; in this world blasphemy prevails, Khusrau:
>
> O wondrous Source of mystery, o wondrous Knower of secrets.[1]

Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe follows the great tradition of Persian Sufi poetry, with its abundant use of imagery celebrating all that is forbidden by the shariah of orthodox Islam. Although Amir Khusrau does not employ the image, the setting for Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe is the Tavern of Ruin. Much, if not all, Persian Sufi poetry takes place in this strange and wonderful place. The tavern (*kharabat* in Persian) is a seedy cabaret and drinking den, situated in a disreputable part of town. In its dim, candlelit interior, you quaff the musky wine brought by the flirtatious *saki* (cup bearer), gamble your fortune and lie back, while *ghazals* – the songs of love – are sung by minstrels.[2]

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[1] Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, *Sufi music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[2] For an excellent discussion of the Tavern of Ruin see Leonard Lewisohn, *Beyond Faith and Infidelity: The Sufi Poetry and Teachings of Mahmud Shabistari* (Richmond, Surrey: The Curzon Press, 1995).

In Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe, Khusrau sings to the beautiful young saki. The saki– a beardless youth, with 'wondrous ecstatic eyes', beautiful, down-covered face and long, glossy black locks, teasing, mischievous and flirtatious in his tilted cap – is for the Persian Sufi tradition, the very embodiment of perfect human beauty. Such a celebration of all that is forbidden by the shariah – drinking wine, gambling and homo-eroticism – would be profoundly shocking to the orthodox Muslim. (It is probably shocking to followers of other religions as well!) It is even more shocking to discover that in Persian Sufi poetry, within a single poem, sacred language is employed alongside the imagery of the Tavern of Ruin.

Thus, in Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe, we find mention not only of the wonderfully beguiling, wine-worshipping beloved, but also of prostration, submission and sacrifice, of divine benevolence and protection. The boldness of the contrast would be clear to a Farsi speaker, although English translations rarely succeed in conveying it. There is even mention of the Truth (*haq*), which is equivalent to mention of Allah. Sacred and profane language and imagery clash with one another, and through a strange alchemy we are ushered into a new dimension – a strange world that stands above the literalism of both rigid orthodoxy and hedonism. We are in a twilit realm, where nothing is what it seems; a strange light has endowed everything with mystery and significance. It is a realm of symbols, in which sensual images have become spiritualised, and transcendent realities have taken palpable form. The Tavern of Ruin is the realm of archetypal meanings (*'alam-i-ma'na*).

To 'understand' Persian Sufi poetry we need to enter into this symbolic realm. Amir Khusrau himself constantly invokes mystery and wonder in chashm-e-maste through the constant repetition of the word *'ajabe*, which means 'strangely wonderful'. The tune of Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe adds to this sense of strange wonder. Indeed, as I am not a Farsi speaker, it was the tune of Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe that attracted me to the song, even before I knew the meaning of its words.[3] Amir Khusrau sings from the Tavern of Ruin, the realm of archetypal meanings.

This world of mysterious symbols has opened up because the creative power of the heart has been activated by the fire of divine love. It is this fire that illuminates the Tavern of Ruin with a strange light. It is a fire that cannot be contrived: it flares up through a direct vision of the divine beloved. The Sixth Shiite Imam, Ja 'far al-Sadiq, describes such love as 'fire that unexpectedly invades the depths of the heart and consumes all that is not the beloved object'.[4] Such love compels one to leave behind both worldly and religious ambition. Numerous stories in Sufi tradition tell of men who have become highly successful in the religious life, attracting numerous followers (and enjoying all the safety, security and comfort that goes with success) – men who then encounter someone who sparks off in them a raging fire of love. This fire compels them to leave their comfort and security to live a more intense spiritual life. Often this results in criticism, ridicule, scorn (and worse) from conventional society.

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[3] I first heard Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe on the CD that accompanies Qureshi 1995. Ms Qureshi provides two extracts from live performances of the song by two different qawwali performers. The extract from the performance by Aziz Khan Warsi with its ecstatic repetitions (and the sounds of fervent appreciation from the audience) is particularly stirring. A complete performance of the song is to be found on *Qawwali Warsi Brothers Volume Two* issued on cassette by Music Today, New Delhi. The live performances I heard at Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya certainly evoked a sense of wonder and mystery.

[4] Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation* (London: KPI, 1986)

A favourite story of mine is that of Fakruddin Iraqi. As a young man, Iraqi became a famous Muslim preacher. One day a band of *qalandars* (wandering Sufi holy men) passed through his town. Iraqi fell in love with one of their number and joined the band on their journey to India. However, perhaps the most well known example is the story of Jallaludin Rumi and his friendship with the qalandar Shams of Tabriz – a friendship that eventually led to Shams' death, probably at the hands of Rumi's more conventional associates, outraged at their master's seeming infatuation with the disreputable qalandar. Translations of Rumi's poetry have become extremely popular in recent years (apparently he is the most popular poet in the United States). Most contemporary translations of Rumi turn his writings into ineffectual and sentimental love poems. In fact, many of his poems were written for Shams, his wild Master and Friend, and they describe intense spiritual practice and experience in the context of fearless renunciation. Most contemporary translations and presentations of Rumi domesticate him.

The profane language of the tavern in Persian Sufi poetry seeks to describe the effects of being one of 'the people of love'. The poetry – strange as it might seem – is really an attack on worldliness and the desire for the approval of the worldly. In the Islamic world, to actually go to a tavern and mix with the disreputable people who frequent it, would destroy one's reputation in 'good society'. In its employment of the imagery of the tavern, Persian Sufi poetry appears to follow the early Sufi tradition of the *malamatiya* ('the people of blame'). The malamatiya would deliberately and publicly offend against the injunctions of the shariah in order to invoke blame from the society around them. This was undertaken as a practice in order to strengthen the individual's reliance on Allah – the Transcendent. An even more important tradition for Persian Sufi poetry, is that of the qalandar. The qalandar has some similarities to the malamati, but tended to be even more ostentatious in his disavowal of the shariah. A qalandar tended to be a mystic who, filled with the wine of love, would freely wander, singing his songs of unfettered ecstasy.

Obviously, traditions like this can be used as a rationalisation for all kinds of questionable behaviour and weakness. Sufism has known its charlatans, but the best Sufi tradition treats the language of the Tavern of Ruin entirely symbolically. As far as I know, none of the very great Sufi masters have actually spent time hanging around in bars getting drunk! They did not need to do so in order to court the disapproval of society. Just being a Sufi (even if they followed the *shariah*) would bring upon them, at certain times and in certain places, not just blame but persecution and even execution. The list of Sufi martyrs is a long one. The most famous Sufi martyr is Mansur al Hallaj of Baghdad, who proclaimed 'I am the Truth'. The life and martyrdom of Al Hallaj is a very popular subject in Sufi literature. In recent times too, Sufis in orthodox Islamic societies have suffered terrible persecution. Just being a Sufi can mean that one has automatically 'entered the tavern': one's reputation, as far as the wider society is concerned, is finished.

To really enter the Tavern of Ruin then, means renouncing all worldly (and religio-worldly) ambition. In fact, entering the Tavern of Ruin refers to the ultimate renunciation: the complete loss of selfhood. The great Sufi Master (and martyr) 'Ayn al Qudat Hammadani says:

> A sign of love it is to throw away both soul and heart,

to cast behind you all time and place and space;

to be now infidel and now a pious man of faith

and abide in both degrees unto eternity.[5]

We gain admittance to the Tavern of Ruin by throwing away all sense of personal identity, all ideas of being a believer or unbeliever. One is so consumed by the fire of love that all ideas about oneself are obliterated. Thus, the Tavern of Ruin is said to symbolise 'the ruination of the attributes of humanity'[6] and 'pure loss, utter selflessness'.[7] To underline the fact that entering the Tavern of Ruin is not to be taken literally, we are told that entry into the tavern symbolises 'the transformation of one's merely "human" character into a personality of the people of love.... [It] symbolises the ruination of the sensory faculties by means of inhibition, constraint and control of their [i.e. the sensory faculties'] activity'.[8]

It is not easy to enter the Tavern of Ruin. One of the greatest of Persian Sufis, Fakhruddin 'Iraqi (who was also a very fine poet) gives the following description of his own vision of the Tavern:

I went down last night to the tavern of ruin, but no one admitted me. I stood without, clamouring and crying, but no one heard me. Of the wine sellers there, either none were awake, or else being 'no-one', no-one was there to open the door for me. Half the night had passed, when some wild rogue from an archway overhead looked down and made a face. 'Bravo, bravo,' he exclaimed, 'at this hour, you're quite senseless, in fact crazy. Well and fine! Please tell me what's the matter?' 'Open the door!' I demanded. 'Go away!' he replied, 'Don't talk nonsense. Anyway, at this time of night, whoever would open the door for the likes of you? This is no mosque, for us always to open the door for you, for you to dash in and run up to the front aisle. This is the Magian[9] temple of ruin. Inside are living hearts, the place of the "witness" and candle, the wine and ghazal, the lute and the song. Money and wit carry no weight beneath these arches; its tenants' profit is all loss, and their loss, all profit. How long shall you keep pounding on this door day and night, 'Iraqi? For all your fire, nothing is visible but smoke.'[10]

If you want to gain entry to the Tavern of Ruin, the fire of love must be genuine, as must be your desire to renounce everything to that fire. But if you are admitted, as Khusrau says, you are filled with wonder at what you find inside, especially by the wondrous vision of the beardless saki who brings the intoxicating wine and whose ecstatic eyes, long, black tresses and amorous teasing increases the

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[5] Quoted in Lewisohn, 279

[6] Dr Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Symbolism The Nurbakhsh Encyclopedia of Sufi Terminology* (London: Khaniqahi-Nimatullani Publications, 1984), 191

[7] Ibid. 192

[8] Ibid. 194

[9] Magian refers to the pre-Islamic religion of Persia, Zoroastrianism. Another strong feature of Persian Sufi poetry is it's employment of non-Muslim imagery – Zoroastrian, Christian and Buddhist.

[10] Nurbaksh, 192-193.

blazing fire of love. Who is the saki, the beautiful beardless youth? If the Tavern of Ruin itself is not to be taken literally, then what of the saki? Who, in reality, is the saki?

Once again we have to remind ourselves that we are in a twilight realm of symbol and significant image, so no single, definitive interpretation of the saki(or any other image) is possible. Some Persian Sufi masters did in fact contemplate beautiful youths, as a way of contemplating divine beauty. The youth is known as the Witness (*shahid*) because he bears witness to the absolute beauty of Allah. He is a mirror that reflects Absolute Beauty. One of the most famous Sufis who practised contemplation of the Witness was Awhududdin Kirmani:

I want
  to testify about
    the heart's Witness
to be safe
  from worldly grief.
For one
  forbidden glance you need
    your pious ablutions
but I with one look
  at the Witness himself
    wash clean the whole world.[11]

Obviously, this contemplation of the Witness was regarded as a highly controversial practice, even by Sufis. The great Jalaluddin Rumi was critical of Awhududdin Kirmani's practice (although, the equally great Ibn 'Arabi, was supportive of Kirmani). Kirmani himself, when asked why he contemplated beautiful young men replied, 'I am looking at the moon reflected in a bowl of water'. Again, we have to beware of literal interpretations in considering contemplation of the Witness. Such contemplation can only really occur if the contemplator has some vision of the unity of existence – *wahdat al-wujud*. In another quatrain Kirmani says:

Lord you know it was never
  now and again
    I gaped
at the beauty
  of your face.

[11] Bernd Manuel Weischer and Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Heart's Witness: The Sufi Quatrains of Awhaddudin Kirmani* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1978), 113

Each child
of this world
is a mirror
of your beauty
a glass to gaze
forever on the
King's face.[12]

The beautiful youth is a real person, actually contemplated, but he is seen not with the ordinary eye, but with the eye of the Imagination and as a reflection of Absolute Beauty. A story about the great twelfth-century Persian master, Ahmad Ghazzali (the brother of the famous theologian Abu Hamed Ghazzali) illustrates the effects of contemplation of the Witness. Once, Ahmad was found by some friends, meditating in his cell. They were shocked to find him staring at a young boy, a single rose lying on the floor between them. 'Have we disturbed you?' the friends asked. Ahmad, who was absorbed in ecstatic contemplation replied, 'Ay w'Allah!' ('By God!') Ahmad's exclamation, spoken from the profundity of meditation, caused his friends to fall into ecstasy themselves.[13]

In Persian art, the angels are depicted as beautiful youths. To contemplate the Witness means, in fact, to contemplate the angelic realm. Here we are entering into the hierarchy of beauty and the hierarchy of love. In order to ascend from one level of being to the next, we need to contemplate the next level of beauty. However, this we can only achieve through seeing the reflection of that higher level at our own level of being. The higher level manifests in a form that is accessible to us. The great French scholar of Islamic mysticism, Henry Corbin, can help us understand this. In a brilliant passage commenting on Ibn Arabi's Arabic mystical odes, the Tarjuman Al Ashwaq or 'The Interpreter of Desires' (which were inspired by a beautiful young woman) Corbin interprets the Ibn Arabi's experience as a theophany – that is, (roughly speaking) as the 'shining through of a god'. Corbin comments,

In order to understand him [i.e. Ibn Arabi] and to avoid any hypercritical questioning of his good faith, we must bear in mind what may be termed the theophanic mode of apperception, which is so characteristic of the *Fideli d'amore* that without this key we cannot hope to penetrate the secret of their vision. We can only go astray if we ask, as many have done in connection with the figure of Beatrice in Dante: 'is she a concrete, real figure or is she an allegory?' For just as a divine Name can be known only in the concrete form of which it is the theophany, so a divine archetypal Figure can be contemplated only in a concrete Figure – sensible or imagined – which renders it outwardly or mentally visible. When Ibn Arabi explains an allusion to the young girl Nizam as, in his own words, an allusion to 'a sublime and divine, essential and sacrosanct Wisdom [*Sophia*], which manifested itself visibly to the author of these poems with such sweetness as to provoke in him joy and happiness,

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[12] Ibid. 169.

[13] Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Scandal Essays in Islamic Heresy* (New York: Autonomedia, Inc., 1987), 95.

emotion and delight,' we perceive how a being apprehended directly by the Imagination is transfigured into a symbol thanks to a theophanic light, that is, a light which reveals its dimension of transcendence.[14]

It can also happen that ordinary love – what is termed metaphorical or unreal love (*'ishq-i majazi* in Persian) – might, if the practitioner is spiritually strong enough, be a bridge to higher forms of being. A story involving the great Central Asian Sufi, Najmoddin Kobra, illustrates this beautifully:

Lo and behold, while sojourning in Egypt, in a small town on the banks of the Nile, I fell passionately in love with a young girl. For many days, I remained practically without food and without drink, and in this way the flame of love within me became extraordinarily intense. My breath exhaled flames of fire. And each time I breathed out fire, lo and behold, from the height of heaven someone was also breathing out fire which came to meet my own breath. The two shafts of flame blended between the Heavens and me. For a long time I did not know who it was who was there at the place where the two flames came together. But at last I understood that it was my witness in Heaven.[15]

To understand this passage properly, we must bear in mind that Najmoddin Kobra intensified and transformed his 'ordinary' love by intensive spiritual practice, including fasting and recitation of *dhikir*. Dhikir literally means 'recollection (of God)'. It consists mainly of the constant repetition of one of God's names and often involves visualising the face of one's *sheykh* (guru or spiritual teacher) in one's heart. Clearly, dhikir bears some resemblance to Buddhist visualisation and mantra recitation.

I do not know if Amir Khusrau's 'wondrous wine worshipper' was a beautiful youth. Whoever he was, he was apprehended with the eye of the heart, a heart on fire with divine love. Such an eye transfigures everything in the beloved's appearance, seeing the mysteries of reality revealed in the face, the eyes, the beautiful locks, the tilted cap, the amorous teasing. Persian Sufi manuals – the most famous being Mahmud Shabistari's *Gulshan-i raz* or 'The Rose Garden of Mystery'[16] – give clues to these mysteries, but only clues (we must avoid the facile explanations of the literal minded). The clues are attempting to indicate something that can only be 'tasted' directly. We must not forget Khusrau's repeated 'ajabe', through which he communicates his sense of mystery and wonder.

Thus, when the light of imaginal vision shines and the fire of divine love is burning, the ecstatic eyes (more literally, the drunken eyes) are the eyes of one whose identity is lost in divine love. Those eyes, drunk with ecstatic love, hide the sins of the entire world – everyone is absolved, everyone forgiven. The long, glossy black locks are said to be the veils of archetypal forms that cover the Divine Unity. These forms are manifestations of either God's Beauty or his Majesty, and they both reveal and conceal the Divine Unity. The saki is described as 'the wondrous wine worshipper'. Wine (*mai*) – 'that

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[14] Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* (Bollingen Series XCI; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 138–139.

[15] Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (Boulder and London: Shambhala, 1978), 86–87.

[16] For a study of the Gulshan-i raz see Lewisohn.

wine which is not forbidden in our religion',[17] as the great Ahmad Ghazzali describes it – is a recurring image in Persian Sufi poetry. There are a number of terms for 'wine' in Persian: mai is said to symbolise the direct intuitive 'taste' of God within the heart, which induces intoxication and exhilaration. This state has been achieved by the constant practice of dhikir and the boiling up of love. Fakhruddin Iraqi says that mai symbolises the overwhelming sway of love, accompanied by exertion, but which is accompanied by a sound spiritual temper. A wine worshipper is one who is absorbed, overwhelmed and even bewildered by the divine manifestations of Beauty and Majesty.[18]

In fact, throughout Khusrau's poem, there is an interplay between Beauty and Majesty. God's Beauty is embodied in the benevolent, alluring and beautiful beloved, God's Majesty in the beloved's destructive power. We are led on by his alluring, beguiling beauty, his kindness and beneficence. Inspired by this, we offer ourselves as a sacrifice, yet 'in the spasm of being killed', we behold his wondrous benevolence, guidance and protection. We die, but the death induces ecstasy because it is the death of the limiting lower self. Then, we look again and see the beloved continuing to lead us on with his amorous teasing. We never possess him, he always defies us and all we can do, all we want to do, is give ourselves up to his wonder and mystery – the wonder and mystery of the Tavern of Ruin, the realm of archetypal meanings.

I have said that Persian Sufi poetry is a poetry of symbols. These symbols, not being mere allegories, have inexhaustible meanings that only reveal themselves through profound meditation. We have been given some clues as to what the Tavern of Ruin is, what wine is, what the saki is. But there is more to be said, for the Tavern of Ruin is also said to symbolise the *khanaqah* – the Sufi lodge. The saki, is the *pir* or sheykh – the Sufi master. To see the khanaqah in this way, it would not be enough simply to attend the Sufi lodge regularly, and piously perform the practices there, thinking that one was in the Tavern of Ruin. Once again we need to guard against turning the language of the tavern into inoffensive allegory. To see the khanaqah as the Tavern of Ruin means seeing its true significance, and transfiguring one's participation in the khanaqah with the light of the Imagination. Only when we see it with an eye ablaze with the fire of love will the true khanaqah appear. The khanaqah is the place where we will be ruined, utterly ruined, by being divested of all selfhood. All the practices we engage in – dhikir, sama and listening to the master – will ruin us completely. In reality the master is beautiful and beguiling: he draws us on by fanning the fire of love. In the end he brings us to our (spiritual) death and our (spiritual) rebirth. Whether or not Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe is a song about a beautiful youth, it certainly a song about the angel. But it is not only a song about the angel, but also a song about the master: a love song from the lover Amir Khusrau to his beloved master, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya.

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[17] Ahmad Ghazzali Sawanih: *Inspirations from the World of Pure Spirits*, trans. from the Persian with a commentary and notes by Nasrollah Pourjavady (London: KPI, 1986), 17. The oldest Persian Treatise on Love.

[18] See Lewisohn, 288 and Nurbaksh, 75–79. Nasrollah Pourjavady notes that different Sufi masters and traditions read the symbolism differently, e.g. the traditions of Mahmud Shabistari and Fakhruddin Iraqi differ from that of Ahmad Ghazzali and his immediate disciple 'Ayn al Qudat Hammadani. See Ahmad Ghazzali, 105. It is, perhaps, permissible to include references to these differing traditions because the Chisti tradition drew on them both.

The light of the Imagination, the blazing fire of divine love, not only transfigures our perception of others and our environment, it transfigures our sense of ourselves. The lover-disciple also undergoes a transformation. In many of his Hindi devotional songs, Amir Khusrau becomes a young woman in relation to Hazrat Nizamuddin. Here is an extract from the famous *'Tori surat ke balhari*:

> All the other girls saw my soiled *chundar*,[19]
>
> And together they laughed at me.
>
> This springtime, dye my chundar for me
>
> O protect my honour (Nijam, Beloved)! ...
>
> Who can win against mother-in-law or sister-in-law?
>
> I pine for your support.
>
> Everyone knows how you and I are linked:
>
> Is my honour different from yours, (Nijam, Beloved?)[20]

At the conclusion of this song, Amir Khusrau describes himself as being the bride of Hazrat Nizamuddin, with other Chisti saints forming the wedding procession. There is a resonance here with the Buddhist tradition. In many Nyingmapa traditions of Guru Yoga, the disciple is instructed to transfigure him or herself into the dakini Vajrayogini, and form the attitude of Yeshe Tsogyal. The disciple's master is seen as a youthful Padmasambhava who wears both a smile and frown (Beauty and Majesty?). We are also informed that all the details in Padmasambhava's appearance (including his physiognomy) are symbols of reality. No doubt the resonance between Persian Sufism (indeed, Sufism generally) and Buddhism could be explored in much greater detail.

It is difficult for a non-Persian speaker (and a non-Sufi) to even begin to appreciate a poem like Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe. It is hard even for a Persian-speaking Sufi perhaps, because Amir Khusrau – singing out of his overwhelming, ecstatic love – is attempting to convey the secrets of the heart, the secrets of the world seen with the transfiguring light of Imagination – a light cast by the blaze of love. For Amir Khusrau and the Persian Sufi tradition he follows, the poetry and the music are beautiful veils, iridescent and diaphanous, that reveal and yet conceal the ineffable face of Reality. Amir Khusrau sings from the Tavern of Ruin. He is well aware of this, for in the concluding verse of Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe , he says:

> Do not reveal the Truth; in this world blasphemy prevails, Khusrau:
>
> O wondrous Source of mystery, o wondrous Knower of secrets.

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[19] A chundar is a woman's head covering.

[20] Translated in Qureshi, 26.

Blasphemy (*kufr*) can also be translated as 'infidelity'. In orthodox Islam, a blasphemer or infidel is one who does not believe in the tenets of Islam, but within Sufism the infidel is one who has not renounced his self, and who is therefore stuck in the realm of literal interpretations. He is a slave either of rigid orthodoxy or of sensory indulgence. He is caught in these extremes and is barred from the Tavern of Ruin, the realm of symbols and archetypal meanings. How will such people ever understand? So far are they from the 'wondrous Source of mystery' and 'the wondrous Knower of secrets'. Truth (*haq*) can only be revealed to them when the fire of love chooses to invade the depths of their heart.

The following evening I returned to Hazrat Nizamuddin, this time with a close friend. It must have been a special evening because among the crowds were a number of Sufis in long, rich brown wool cloaks, and colourful caps and turbans. They leaned against the pillars of Hazrat's shrine, greeting disciples and listened to the qawwalis sung by the same group I had heard the day before. The musicians beamed at us and, not long after we had taken our seats, they started to perform Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe. I made a small financial offering (as I had done the day before – this is a traditional custom) and they performed with even greater fervour. So absorbed were they in their singing and playing, they failed to notice that the call to prayer was starting. A number of men (presumably the imams - the leaders of the prayers) shouted at them loudly to stop. The musicians immediately stopped playing and became very sheepish, making gestures of repentance and to ward away the evil eye. The worlds of the Tavern and of the mosque sometimes collide.

The following evening (New Year's eve) I returned for a final visit to Hazrat Nizamuddin, hoping for one last hearing of Chashm-e-maste 'ajabe . Not all of the musicians were there this time, and those that were looked forlorn and sang poorly. Whether it was because of the happenings of the night before, or for some other reason, I do not know. The young drummer sat alone at the harmonium singing songs to the Chisti saints, but with little inspiration.

Tonight
no sign
of joy
maybe
in others
not me.
The music
has no taste
tonight
the beloved
is
away.

So we have
no share of joy
this evening
for the loved one
is missing
from the assembly.
The lute the candle
the Witness
are present
but the source
the connection is not here
tonight.[21]

The doors of the Tavern will not always swing open, and the saki will not come at our beck and call with the wine of love. We do not possess the Beloved; the Beloved forever eludes us. Yet the heart knows that union is possible, and our nights are strangely lit with the fire of longing and watered with the tears of Love. Ahmad Ghazzali says it best:

Love is an affliction and I am not about to abstain from affliction,
(In fact) when love falls asleep I turn to it and raise it.
My friends tell me to abstain from affliction.
Affliction is the heart, how can I abstain from the heart?
The tree of love grows amidst my heart.
Since it needs water I shed tears from my eyes.
Although love is pleasant and its sorrow unpleasant,
'Tis pleasant for me, to combine both love and its sorrow.[22]

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[21] Weischer and Wilson, 75.

[22] Ahmad Ghazzali, 36.