

Sufi Teaching on climate change

with Pir Zia Inayat-Khan,

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So friends, warm welcome to you all. I am so glad that we can be together on this day. Shall we begin with the words of the sufi invocation: Toward the One, the Perfection of Love, Harmony and Beauty, the Only Being, united with all the Illuminated Souls, who form the Embodiment of the Master, the Spirit of Guidance.

Well, it's a special blessing to have with us today a new soul in this world, the sweet child who is with us and who reminds us of the intergenerational continuity of life. The presence of a little child reminds us of our own course of life, our parents, their parents and what the future holds for coming generations. We see ourselves then not in isolation but as part of humanity, as a whole, which itself is part of the living earth as a whole. And in this way our view is enlarged and we are helped to move beyond that often narrow selfishness, which too often motivates us unless the mind is open wide and the heart is open wide. A kind of narrow dogged pursuit of one's personal self interest is the tendency unless we are able to come down to earth, come to our senses, come into contact with a newly arrived soul, walking to a primeval forest, well breathe the zephyr and imbibe the air right down in the cells of one's toes. These are all moments that take us out of the compulsions of a separative egoic identity. And it's precisely this shift that is in our minds today as all over enrichment . Synagogues and mosques and churches are observing a day of reflection on climate change. We are called to reflect on relationship between person and planet, no longer to see ourselves in isolation, but on the contrary to ground ourselves, imbed ourselves in the life of this earth, the life of the cosmos. And this unification of our life with its matrix, this integration of our personal life in the unfolding story of the whole is a task toward which the great sacred traditions of our world urge us, certainly the sufi tradition urges us.

Thus in Sufism the human being is called *khalifat Allah fi al-ard* , which may be translated as „representative of God on earth“. One interpretation of this, a very superficial interpretation of this would imply that we have absolute authority over all species and that all species are there for our exploitation, whereas a deeper, a truer, the real understanding of the expression *khalifat Allah fi al-ard* show something very different: responsibility, stewardship, that we are not only here for ourselves. We are here to be in service. We have been brought here to know God, to serve God. And how do we serve God? By serving the divine creation, by helping it along, helping to flourish what God has made, what has emerged from the divine life, to honor it, to

¹ [The Sufi Teaching](#) was a part of “ [Climate in the Pulpits](#) ” happening across Richmond, Virginia, USA

protect it, to work in accord with it. This is fundamental to our human identity, our *fitra*. We are *khalifat Allah fi al-ard* . If we forget this, then we are bereft of this clear foundation to our lives. And then we're drifting along, taking advantage of opportunities, opportunistically to gain some kind of temporary advantage, to dominate others in some fashion, to indulge appetites, but without any clear mandate. That's what we miss when we live in a desacralized world, a disenchanting world, a world in which we are locked in a ego that absolutely separates us from sky and sea and earth and delimits the vast range of our human experience which in his fullness comprehends the innermost planes and the far reaches of the stars and which is intimately connected to every embodied moment.

So the climate crisis really is a crisis of consciousness and of conscience. It's a crisis of identity, the symptom of estrangement, the estrangement of the human being from the cosmos, the cosmos of which we are the microcosm. We are the whole cosmos in miniature. Everything out there is in here. But this miniature cosmos subsist through the correspondences that exist between what is within and what is without. And all beings subsist in balanced symbioses, in synergies. And this understanding is gaining ground happily in sciences, certainly in biology. The understanding that whereas previously nature was seen primarily as a war zone between competing organisms more and more is evident the extent to which organisms aide each other and live by virtue of the ecologies that they produce together in their mutually enhancing interactions. And since ancient times mystics have intuited this, have intuited the manner in which to walk lightly on the earth, to live in accord with the plants and with the animals.

The great prophets and saints and masters alway remembered this, sitting under trees for instance. Think of Abraham and his oak, think of Buddha under the *bodhi tree*. The tree becomes an access between the invisible and the visible. And the spine of the sage is aligned with that symbol of the world tree. Great inspirations have come under trees. Hazrat Inayat Khan used to sit under an apricot tree. And after his passing that apricot tree withered and perished. Their souls were connected. In sufism some of our practices were taught by birds. Mystics sitting under trees, listen to the sounds of the birds and the birds taught them how to invoke God. One young man, unable to find a Murshid, unable to find a teacher went out into the wilderness and set under a tree and there a bird alighted and kept tweeting: „tuiiii, tuiiii, tuiiii“. Now in Persian, as the young man was a Persian speaker, in Persian „tu i“ means „you are“. „Tuiii, tuiii“ „you are, you are“. That came as litany. „You are“ became his divine remembrance. „Tui tui“ that's one of the „ azkar el toyor “ the zikrs of the birds, which have come down in the sufi lineage. And there ist the story of Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, who was surrounded by birds and all kinds of wild animals, on the edge of town, in the wilderness. And than Sheikh Hassan al-Basri approached. And as soon as he came, all the animas scattered. And he said: Why is that? And she said: What did you have for breakfast?

So, living in harmony with nature is the age-old way and in fact not only the animals and plants, but the elements have long been known to have a livingness in them, that mechanistic science can not fathom: the sense of soul, soul pervading everything, the *anima mundi*, the world's soul in everything. And so coming to a stand of trees you don't just see a timber, although it may be a sort of timber. Of course all of nature yields the requisite for human subsistence. But how do you approach a tree? How do you approach a forest? You see first of all the birds in the trees, the trees with their interlocking roots, the aroma of the growth. You pause, you breathe, you feel the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place. You sense that an atmosphere is noble here, but only through silence, only through attention. If you would just barge in you would miss it. But if you can be attentive, if you can be silent you can start to feel the invisible within the visible. And how there is a sentience, a resonance, a breath that moves through everything. And Mevlana Rumi went further, speaking not only of animals and trees, but saying that earth, water, fire and air are God servants. To us they seem lifeless, but to God they are living. And from this we can understand, the closer we come to the sense of divinity, the more alive everything will become. Stones, rivers, winds, everything pulsing with spiritual life. And that's what helps us to fulfill our mandate as *khalifat Allah fi al-ard*. If we look out on the world and we ourselves are spiritually declined, that is.. the heart is numb and we are motivated by thoughts which are very rudimentary and disconnected from a deeper revery, then we look out on aberrant (abwegig irrig) a world divide of spirit and than the drive is simply to extract, to exploit, extract... (interjection navi: you have arrived).

So we have reached the destination happily (laughter). That's all right. And so, I am glad for that reminder. It reminds us of the place we are 112 E Cary Street, that means to really be in the place

you are. *Nazar bar qadam* as the sufi say. Feel your two feet on the ground. Stand where you stand, sit where you sit, be in this place, in this moment „ibn el waqt” be the son and daughter „bint el waqt“ of this moment, of this place, what’s here. Meet the livingness in everything, it’s right here. The air, the earth, the fire, the plants.

This coming year will be the 700th anniversary of the birth of Lal Ded. I don’t know if that name is familiar to some of you. Lala, Lala Kashmiri. She was a great mystic of the mountains in Kashmir, a Tantra Saiva mystic. And her disciple was Sheikh Nooruddin Rishi. She was of hindu origin, he was of muslim origin, but they found a common ground of living spirit as a place in which to meet. And from that origin the Rishi order was born. The Rishi order was an order of sufism in which the Rishis lived very simply. They were vegetarians and they had the custom of planting trees. Especially fruit trees. They lived simply, they would wander through the mountains, repair erosion, plant trees and Kashmir became more and more a garden, a paradise. You know paradise is a garden. Paradise, *jannat*, is the ancient garden, where rivers and trees and air and sunshine mingle. And so the Rishis planted trees all over Kashmir and over time Kashmir flourished so much that it was said that “Agur frdws br rwa zman ast hman ast w hman ast w hman ast” – „If paradise is anywhere on the earth, it is here, it is here, it is here“. It’s that land that humans have loved, humans have found paradise in, humans have nourished. And in America, too, there have been such souls. Think of John Chapman, Johnny Appleseed, who traveled across the land planting apple trees. Did you know that John Chapman was a swedenborgian, he belonged to the church of Emanuel Swedenborg, the mystical philosopher whose philosophy recognize the *anima mundi*, the spirit of the earth. So these are examples of human beings who have planted trees because paradise is not somewhere else. Paradise is right here. Paradise is revealed in a shift of consciousness. A shift from the profane to the sacred. Seeing the soul in everything and nurturing the soil and serving it, seeing the interrelatedness between things, instead of imposing a will that is unmindful of the balance of all beings. So you could say in sufi terminology the extractive mentality, the exploiting mentality corresponds to what is called the *nafs ul-ammaarah*. And the *nafs ul-ammaarah* is the commanding self, the imperious self. That’s the part of oneself that just wants what it wants and takes what it wants and isn’t interested in anyone else, isn’t concerned about anyone but itself. So, our society has that element. We have to become clean, we have to practice *muhaasibah*, which is self reflection: not only do things, but reflect on what we do and why we do them, what is behind them. There is that element in our modern day society, the drive to dominate, to take what is wanted right away, without mindfulness of the effects of causes or the consequence for future generations, the cycles of nature, the interconnectedness between beings, between living systems. Just take it, because it’s there, because there is a profit, grab the profit now. That’s a symptom of this particular kind of consciousness that we also see in our own interpersonal interactions, in a kind of hectoring, bullying nature’s course or tendency. The attempt to badger and dominate other people and get one’s way. It would be nice if we could say: yes, that’s there in some people I know, but there’s none of that in me. And in fact that’s exactly what the *nafs ul-ammaarah* says, because the *nafs ul-ammaarah* never takes responsibility for oneself. It always locates it’s own destructiveness in other people. But to look at oneself and to say that: yes, I see that I am just grasping, just latching on what I can take. To see that tendency: that’s the first step in gaining self-mastery. And then the second step is the *nafs ul-lawwaamah*, which is the self-critical self, when you start to reflect on your consequences of your actions: I see now that when I did that, when I took that thing or sad that world would it have that effect on that person. And then to repent and to seek to make amends is a significant step to get to that point where instead of just having one’s way one is really paying attention and learning from the affect of what one does. So that’s also there in our society to some extent and it

needs to increase the ability to look at the impact of our way of life and take lessons from it and change course and study the way that nature actually works because...

The other week we were talking about the sufi philosophy and art and when art goes too far from nature art can become degraded, really profane and degraded. Similarly science. When science is uprooted from nature, when science serves mechanistic ends that are devoid of the true understanding of the systemic thinking, the organicity of systems, than a more over devoid of spirit, when science is dispirit, desacralized, science goes in alarming directions. And all of this is the human psyche. Projecting its power without consciousness, without conscience. The sciences themselves, we learn from the tradition, are the legacies of the prophets, the ones who tapped in to the divine consciousness and brought a dispensation of spirit into the world, those are the ones who brought the sciences into the world. Sciences like meteorology or agriculture or masonry. These are all human activities that have their roots in revelation and sacred tradition. But when we try to separate science from the inner encounter with the holy mystery of life and moreover pursue a scientific paradigm that's oblivious to the way the nature itself works on earth, the results are naturally going to be catastrophic. And that's what we witness. And so that reckoning is on the way and that reflects at the social level, at the collective level. The *nafs ul-lawwaamah*, this ability to reflect on the consequences of our actions and way of life and to learn from that and to grow in a new direction. And at last this can lead to the *nafs ul-mutmainnah*, which is the self, which is at peace. And then that peace comes from knowing and living reciprocity, to be fine, ones self in the balance of everything. That means accepting death as well as birth. Accepting inhalation and exhalation. Breathing out everything. Giving as much as one takes. Be in reciprocal accord with the transaction of life throughout the earth, rather than taking and taking and taking. This is what breath teaches us. We practice conscious breathing. Breathe all the way out, empty yourself, become totally void and then another breath comes in, that ebb and flow, that give and take. This is the systole and the asystole of the heart. Going to sleep at night and waking in the morning. These are all cycles of activity and repose, receiving and expressing, but one-sidedness of taking and not giving back, extracting more than can regenerate, these are all signs of the absence of that spiritual balance which ultimately is to be realized in the psyche itself and realized through an accord with the natural rhythms, with the music of the cosmos. Learn that music.

So trees can be our guides. The ancients of many lands saw the tree as a symbol of the world soul, the cosmic tree. Sayyid Muhammad Husayni Gisudaraz saw the tree as a symbol of *wujud*, a pure being. We can see in the tree a clear illustration of our own spiritual anatomy. At the time when forests are being torn down, that enormous raid... to identify with trees, to enter into reciprocity with them through the breath, realizing that the trees breathe out the oxygen that we breathe in and in turn

imbibe carbon dioxide we are made aware of something that we are aware of more intrinsically if in the moment awakens we step out into the forest: that here are our terrestrial companions whose very anatomy illustrates our own spiritual physiology and can help reorient us to the cosmos. The cosmos from which we have become estranged. That reorientation comes from witnessing the roots of the trees sinking down into the earth and the branches of the trees reaching up toward the sky and between the straight line of the trunk. This symbolism is a perfect aide-memoire for activating the *soshuna*, the central channel of the settled body and the *nadis*, that spring from it.

In closing one's eyes, as I invite you to do now, you can feel the earth beneath you as a solid fact, the foundation of your life, always there underfoot, opaque and dense, fertile, deep down within which is that reality that the medes call the central sun, the core of the earth from which earth's magnetism splays out. Root your feet in the ground, root your tailbone in the ground. And in this way entering the forest you are brought into accord with the forest flora. Beneath ground the roots of the trees spread out, overlap and surround themselves with fungi, mycelium. These fungal

strands that weave webs starching out from the roots of the trees through which webs the trees communicates with one another, send food to one another, extract neutrals from the soil and feed the fungi with sugars. This web of interconnectedness beneath the forest floor, in the ancient forest and in all forests. Ancient forests which are falling at a spectacular rate, as these webs, underground webs are ripped up. Their endurance is symbiosis where it is preserved, where it is maintained, there is genetic diversity symbiosis, a community, a community of life. And in one's own tailbone, there is the *latifa qalbiya*, there is the root center which corresponds to one's physical nature, connected with other physical beings, embedded in the earth, made of clay, water, air. Thus, there is a symmetry between the sensation at the root of the spine, this rooted sense and the interconnected roots of the trees in the forest, merge deep in the earth, linked to one another.

If you rise higher you come to the belly, *latifa nafsia*, the belly center, just beneath the navel, which is associated with the nafs, the self, which can be the *nafs ul-ammaarah*, can be the aggressive selfish self or it can be a self that has ripened, that has mellowed, that is opened up. In the forest, from the roots trunks rise up. Here is a self. Each tree linked to the other trees but an entity unto itself, having its own central shaft, it's own particular life, that only it can live, as each of us has. A life only we can live.

Then if you rise higher, you come to the chest. The center of the chest is the *latifa siriya*. One still hasn't ascended all the way, below is the dark chthonic earth, above is the light of the sky. Here in the chest we have reached the understory of the forest, the dappled light in which saplings flourish. Animals leap from branch to branch in

this middling zone between the density of the earth and the transparency of space, between the bright light and the moist dark fertile earth, this dappled world of contrasts. And all the meanings that this contrast reveal an unfolding narrative, the story of the forest.

But rise higher still, and you rise with the tallest trees of the forest. And rise up in to the canopy where the soaring trees reach their crests. These magnificent crescendos of vegetal life, reaching right up into the sky. Every leaf a vessel for sunlight, biding in the sunlight, rising up out of the forest toward the sky. And the branches and the leafs come near each other, but there is what is called crest shyness, they don't quite merge, there is always a little gap. Rather than merging into one another, they all simultaneously turn toward the same descending light, leaving just the necessary space between themselves. Here in the *latifa khafiya*, in the third eye, here is the canopy, that high green zone at the top of the forest, with monkeys and butterflies.

But if you would go even further you would reach the crown of the head, the fontanelle, the top of the body, evoking the emergent layer of the forest, above the canopy. Those are deciduous trees, that reach right up into the sky, as high as possible and hazard the elements. They are immersed into the most intense sunlight and swung this way and that way by the wind. The rain beats on them, but they have reached in to the intensest farthest dimension of life (interjection navi: arrived) They've arrived. It's there that eagles roost. But those high crests remain rooted in the earth below, through the movement of sustenance through xylem and phloem of the trunk nutrients facilitated by the fungi are absorbed into the tree, nutrients from the soil and uplifted into the leafs and the light of the sky, the sunlight is drawn down in sugars that nourish the roots. This entire process illustrates, symbolizes the inner condition of our being. Rooted in the physical manifestation of matter, rooted in this tangible earth and at the same time in the upper most echelons of our being, drawing perpetual sustenance from the celestial light, from the emanation of the divine being.

Those who will repair the forests, those who will protect the lands, those who will green the earth will always be those whose roots go deep into the ground and whose crowns reach high into the sky. Those who know the material to be the manifestation of the spiritual and know our task, our mandate to be in service of God's creation, the furtherance of this creation. And so the infants, the children and their children, so this might be their legacy that this may be what we practice, what we

transmit, earth's own wisdom known to the human being, walking in humility, seeing from the far past into the far future, guided by the revelation that the prophets have brought, faithful always to God. With this intention shall we close now with the prayer *nayaz*: Beloved lord, almighty God, through the rays of the sun, through the waves of the air, through the all-pervading life in space, purify and revivify me and I pray, heal my body heart and soul. Amin.

(transcription by Lejla Tasnim Rechsteiner)