

Another Remembrance of Shah Nematollah Vali

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I am indeed very grateful for another opportunity to speak about Shah Nematollah Vali, and as a result I am thankful to all those who made efforts towards this end and have made this seminar possible. I am sure that none of those in attendance will be disappointed. Of course, with the presence of the many esteemed professors who will be speaking, you will be privy to much interesting information, and therefore I will not take up too much of your time.

The luminosity of this glowing star of Iranian Sufism has shone throughout the world and he is among the important figures who have attracted the attention of poets, philosophers, Sufis and social thinkers. Mention will definitely be made of Shah Nematollah's biography, of which you are aware and have studied, although his early life, and in other words his normal life, is not what we want to focus on because everyday occurrences happen to everyone and influence the lives of all in the same way.

As the place of his birth, Kooh-banân is where this great personality embarked upon his travels in search of the Truth, such as is mentioned in the *Divan-e Shams*: "Those in search of Allah, find yourselves" He found himself and he undertook journeys and travels towards reaching his goal until he eventually reached the presence of Shaykh 'Abdullah Yâfi'i in Mecca and surrendered himself to his guidance and training. After that Hazrat Shah made many journeys to all corners of the Islamic world of that time until he arrived at Kooh-banân and there at the city of Mahan, he built a *zawiyyah*² for his spiritual wayfaring and for the training of his novices, remaining there until the end of his days.

On the path of his spiritual journey, he himself is an example of what he has mentioned in his epistles about the priority of knowledge (*ma'rifat*) over mystical states (*Hâl*). He says that this issue is dependent on the source of the knowledge. Whenever the

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² This is a place for the gathering of Sufis. also serving as a place of retreat.

knowledge is from the source of knowledge, it is more honorable than a mystical state. He adds that acquired knowledge is of a lower rank than mystical states and in this case states are more definite. But if the knowledge, that is, the relation that is called knowledge, becomes manifest in the world of unveiling, this knowledge is more important than mystical states. This is what is meant by knowledge obtained through unveiling.

He himself was in search of Allah, and as was usual, he began his pursuit of it in the exoteric sciences. After this search and realizing that this knowledge alone could not guide man, he turned to spiritual states and armed with the weapon of the acquired sciences, discovered many sciences. He wrote many epistles, some sixty odd of which are available, and it is said that there were about three hundred of them. At any rate of these sixty odd epistles, his acquired and revealed knowledge through mystical states is shown.

In order that we can understand a small example of his knowledge through unveiling, we will refer to an interesting story mentioned by the mystic *Dârâshukêh* in his book *Sakinat al-Awliya'* concerning the biography of his shaykh³. He says every morning he went to be at the service of his guide, and others who were devoted to him would also attend to benefit from what he might happen to say. One morning he noticed that his shaykh was feeling physically unwell, as if he had a fever. He asked the shaykh about his health. He replied that the previous night he had not slept, ran a fever, and had a pimple on his eyelid that bothered him much. In short, there was some such discussion as this. One of those devoted to him became very upset, and because of being so upset he became withdrawn and cut off from this world. After a period when the novice had returned to his normal state, he asked his shaykh to order a cucumber and to put the seeds on his eye. The shaykh accepted his prescription and carried it out. Fortunately, his illness was alleviated. Afterward, someone asked the shaykh. "How is it that you are the shaykh and he is the novice, yet you did not understand the matter, but he did?" The shaykh replied, "I consider illness and good health to be guests from God. So, although I was about to seek a cure in the usual way, I was not upset. But this Sufi became so upset because of my illness that he was taken to a world where he saw the realities of things, the very world where the Prophet asked God, 'O my God! Show me things as they are!'⁴ In that world, where one can see the realities of all creatures of God, he also found that attribute of the cucumber. After he returned from that spiritual journey, he brought back that souvenir."⁵

This is knowledge through unveiling, in which there is no doubt and it is more elevated than the mystical state. Shah Nematollah himself also had passed through all of the stages of which he makes mention.

Aside from this, Hazrat Shah Nematollah also held spiritual influence within the society and he trained and spread his benevolence to people of all social levels, and many of the rulers benefited from him. It is even well known that Tamerlane⁶ held him in great respect. The point must be made here that unfortunately we have the habit of seeing things only in black and white, and since we know Tamerlane to have been a bloodthirsty man, some of us do not consider anything he may have done to be good. This is the fault of past historians, but all of the details about a person or a society need to be explained. The good must be seen as good and the bad seen as bad. The prophet Lot did not curse the people in his society, but says:

³ *Sakinat al-Awliya'*, ed. Tarachand and Jalali Na'ini (Tehran: Elmi, 1965).

⁴ A similar hadith is narrated in "Awali al-Li'ali, ed. Ibn Abu Jumhur al-Ahsa'i. Vol. 4. p. 132.

⁵ This story is a summary - rather than a direct quotation - from the one told in *Sakinat al-Awliya'*, pp. 138-139.

⁶ Tatar conqueror in southern and western Asia: ruler of Samarqand 1369-1405. [Tr.]

(*verily, I am one who abhors your deeds*),⁷ meaning that he was averse to their deeds, not to them as persons. It was not by carnage alone that Tamerlane took over the world. He showed great respect and courtesy toward religious leaders and those in whom the people placed their trust and to whom they were devoted. He was also a friend of the Islamic sciences. It is well known that he donated the proceeds from six hundred villages in trust to Shaykh Safiuddin Ardibili. Likewise, he also held Shah Nematollah Vali in great esteem. Once because of some occasion, Shah Nematollah Vali said to him:

My kingdom is a world without end.

Your kingdom is from khata to shiraz

Also Shahrukh, the son of Tamerlane, who after his father became the ruler of Khorasan, witnessed his father's respect for Hazrat Shah Nematollah and he himself followed this pattern. It is obvious that this respect provided a reason for jealousy and even at one of the gatherings where Hazrat Shah Burhanuddin Khalilullah, the eldest son and successor of Shah Nematollah Vali paid the same Shahrukh a visit, he rode right up to the building door and, as was his custom, sat right next to the Amir.

One of those present at the gathering, out of his own jealousy said: "How much better it would have been if Hazrat Burhanuddin had observed the necessary etiquette toward the ruler and because the king is the leader, he should not have ridden right up to the door of the building, nor sat next to the king, because all pay their respects standing," also adding other things of this sort. In reply, Burhanuddin said: "My father visited the king's father in the very same manner and also it is not proper in my rank that I should stand. I heard my father say, 'If someone expects that I stand in his or her presence that person is illegitimate.'" This in actuality was also a metaphor. The king said to the courtier: "Do not interfere. This does not concern you." This shows what great respect was paid to Hazrat Shah Nematollah Vall.

As a result of the great respect and interest that the Indian Kings had for Shi'ism, Hazrat Shah Nematollah Vali was repeatedly invited to that country. He sent Shah Burhanuddin Khalilullah there, where he stayed for some time, and because his brothers and other members of his family married Indian princesses and formed relationships, they practically became residents of that land. Even after Hazrat Shah, they remained there and for some time the Nematollahi Order spread throughout India.

In many writings and books it has been mentioned that the founder and originator of the Nematollahi Order is Shah Nematollah Vali. This statement might be somewhat dubious to those not acquainted with matters of mysticism. This is because the words 'founder' and 'originator' are usually used for founders or originators of new schools of thought, sects or religions. A principle tenet of Sufism and 'irfan' is that the permission for training must be received from an authorized religious leader and it is not sufficient if attained only from books, otherwise if it was sufficient to attain this from books, the Qur'an which is the most sublime of books, would have been able to guide all people. In that case, all those who read the Qur'an, including the Khawarij, whose foreheads bore the marks of prolonged prostrations in prayer, should have been reformed. Therefore, one must be trained by a guide and a leader. Who is this leader"? According to Mowlana [Rumi]:

Since many a devil has the face of a man,

⁷ Quran (26:168).

*One must not give one's hand to just anyone.*⁸

Towards the end of the Prophet's (ﷺ) era and after him at the time of Abu Bakr, Musailimāh Kadhdhāb had created a religion, and Aswad 'Ansi also did the same, but these soon disappeared because there was no spiritual, social or scientific base behind it. Our Wali 'Ali ('a) is known as the leader of the Sufis and leader of the Shi'ia because he received direct training from the Prophet (ﷺ), and 'Ali ('a) is called Imam because the Prophet (ﷺ) specified this, In the same way, after 'Ali ('a) we know his son Hasan to be Imam, because he was explicitly appointed by Imam 'Ali. From this it can be reasoned that every leader must be chosen by the previous one. In the same way that the Prophet and Imams were not chosen by the people, rather by Allah, the leaders that follow must indirectly be chosen through divine inspiration, meaning that every leader must choose his successor after him, and this is the very situation that occurred in the period of the twelve Shi'ite Imams.

After the occultation of the twelfth Imam, the issues of education and training in Islamic law (*shari'ah*) and the spiritual path (*tariqah*) became separated. The Imam dispatched the work of *shari'ah* to the jurists, such as is narrated from Imam Sādiq ('a): "It is a responsibility of the people to follow any jurist who has self-control, protects his religion, opposes his carnal desires and follows the orders of his Mowla (Master)." Therefore, it is obligatory on every religiously duty-bound person to search for and follow any of the jurists who possess these characteristics. This of course concerns action and not belief. But in the period of occultation of the Imam the permission for spiritual initiation (*bay 'ail*) and guidance was given to Junayd Baghdadi and he was given the permission to choose his successor and that successor to do the same and so on until the day of Resurrection. This connection of the continuous presence of the spiritual leader is called '*silsilah*' (chain or order) in Sufism. Therefore when *silsilah* Nematollahi is mentioned it refers to the chain or permission, which Shah Seyed Nematollah Vali had at the time, him being part of a chain. Other than this, Shah Nematollah Vali was no different as concerns religious leadership to his shaykh, Hazrat Shaykh Abdullah Yāfi'ī or his successor Hazrat Shah Burhānuddīn Khalilullāh, and they were all equal. According to various circumstances and situations, the great mystics and religious leaders, excelled over others, e.g. socially, or when the period called for specific changes in the order or in rulings given. Because of this, the order was thereafter named after that particular leader, e.g. Suhrawardiyyah order, meaning the order after Shaykh Shahabuddīn Suhrawardi or Nematollahi which means the same order where Shah Nematollah was one of the shaykhs and then became the spiritual pillar (*qutb*) and after Hazrat Shah Nematollah Vali became famous under the name of this great personality.

Now the reasons for the uniqueness of Hazrat Shah, which led to the order being named after him, are most present in the outstanding characteristics of the order and for further information we must refer to the relevant detailed books, but here I will mention some of the important issues. One is the matter of being occupied with work, while being idle is unacceptable in this order. Another matter is observing a balance between spiritual states of sobriety (*æahw*) and intoxication (*sukr*), and yet another being the elimination of sama'. Of course there are other issues, but for now they are not part of the present discussion.

The matter which we will discuss here, is that of *sama'* and music.

Music comes from the order and harmony of sounds and voices. e.g. when you sit

⁸ Mathnavi, Bk. I. 316.

down next to a mountain river, the sounds of the small waterfalls, of the river and the leaves of the trees as they make contact with one another, together form a special music which moves the mystic, an inner movement, meaning attention to Allah and His remembrance, Therefore, it can be said that music itself cannot be generally prohibited, In one of his poems, Sa'di tells the following story:

Last night a fowl cried at the morning.

Reason and patience were carried away with tolerance and consciousness.

One of my sincere friends,

When my voice reached his ears,

Said, "I did not believe that you

Could be so confused at the noise of a fowl! "

I said, "This is not a condition for humanity:

That the fowl sings praise, and I be silent. "⁹

This itself is a type of music or in other words samà'. Following this, Sa'di says:

The camel, by the song of its driver; reaches a state and dances.

In this line there is an allusion to *Hudà*. *Hudà* was a specific music song by the camel herdsmen which excited the camels and they in turn would be stirred to movement. It has been narrated that there once was a caravan that was destined to leave Baghdad and travel to Isfahan. The camel herdsmen sang a very attractive song, (*Hudà*). They moved forward all night and he sang all night. The camels ran the whole way such that they arrived in Isfahan in the morning, but all of the camels died from exhaustion and increased heartbeats.

The principle effect of music is undeniable. The obvious effect that music has on man may be used in the path of drawing man near to Allah and to the remembrance of human and spiritual responsibilities; but it may also lead to the path away from God and to surrender to carnal desires.

Thus, music can be considered in two ways: firstly, music which draws man towards God, e.g. the reading of Sufi books in a melodious voice which is now the practice in Sufi gatherings, or what Sa'di expresses about the cock's crow which is at the time of the morning prayer. This is music, which draws man close to God; and, of course, this type of music cannot be prohibited. In contrast to this, there is music which pulls man away from God. Much of the music of today is of this latter type, meaning that a necessary consequence of this music is that it causes the incitement of feelings, instincts and lusts. In such a case it is obvious that music is prohibited and this is the very music which is referred to in Islam as *ghinà*. In actuality, *ghinà* is music which draws man away from God.

With such a distinction, how is it that some would place a universal prohibition on music? This is because there is an ambiguous distinction between divine music and *ghinà*, and it is impossible to formulate a criterion by which to specify the boundary between them. In reality, those who view themselves as responsible for protecting man's morality generally

⁹ Sa'di. Golistan, ed, Gholam Husayn Yusufi (Tehran: 1368/1989), 97.

prohibit music so that these deviations do not occur. However, if the music is of divine type, it is acceptable; but this also depends on the person involved. Because of this, many past Sufis, such as Ghazali, have at times allowed and at other times banned music and the *samâ* '.

What has been left behind for us from those gone by is that today, at the gatherings of the sincere followers of Shah Nematollah Vali, poems of the great Sufi poets are read in melodious voices so that the attention of those listening is drawn both to the music created and to the meaning of the poems, resulting in their spiritual elevation. Thus, the music of *Samâ* ', which in addition to music also involves certain movements, is prohibited by the Nematollahi Order. The good of this prohibition can probably be seen and understood more clearly today. But Shah Nematollah Vali never himself prohibited music.

In the biography of Hazrat Sultan 'Alishah, one of Hazrat Shah Nematollah Vali's successors who was martyred in A.H. 1327, it is written that one of his followers asked of him: "Do you give me permission to play an instrument?" He was answered in the negative. In explanation of his request, the pupil said that the late Hazrat Mushtàq (referring to the famous Sufi master of the Qàjâr period Mushtàq 'Alishah) played the *târ* (an eastern string instrument). He was told: "You become (like) Mushtàq and then do as you like." The famous statement "Do whatever you like," of the Sufi masters is interpreted as "Gain faith, and then you may do as you like." This means that if you gain faith and, for example, become like Mushtàq, then you will not want anything other than Allah, and so, then you can do what you like; not that you can do any improper act that you may like.

In conclusion, I would again like to thank all those involved in this Seminar, and Dr. Seyed Mostafa Azmayesh in particular, who initiated it; and I hope that experts in the field benefit from this seminar and that such seminars are held for other great scholars and mystics of Iran, so that people in general and those of our country can be proud of their society and religion.