

Memories of Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan

by Gawery Voûte ¹

When Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan left India in 1910 he settled his life in the West to bring a World Message of Spiritual Liberty, based on a God ideal. In his 'Review of Religions' we find the following passage: *There are many in The West who believe that there is some God and perhaps a hereafter and there is a soul somewhere within or without, but they do not follow a particular religion, though some of them may belong to a certain church for the sake of conventionality. They are more open to go into the truth, for no church in particular binds them. Among them there are some who are contented with their belief in God and trouble no more about it, and there are others who are open to listen to any point of view on the subject, other than their own. It is in that category of people that there are some who go in search of the God ideal, the soul and the hereafter and religious truth.*

With this quotation I would like to take you back to 1923, when Murshid gave a talk in Amsterdam in a small hall of the 'Muziek Lyceum'. It was my friend Sakina Furnee, one of his secretaries living in Suresnes, who wrote to me about this lecture. She emphasized that I should not miss this opportunity, knowing me to be a seeking soul. And so it was, for though I had been searching in the Christian religion, neither Protestantism nor Roman Catholicism answered the cry of my soul for clarity about the true existence of the Christ and of His Heavenly Father.

When I think of that moment so long ago, when Murshid Inayat Khan entered the hall, it seems as if it were yesterday, so profound and forever this first impression was. His walk was as majestic as natural, showing a complete composure, such as I had never seen before. His feet seemed to balance life on earth whereas his face emanated a life unseen. Of course, at that young age I was only dimly aware of it. But in my search for spiritual clarity his being made me feel in the presence of a Christ like being come to reveal the true personality of Jesus Christ whose message had been covered by dogmatic interpretation. Inayat began with the simple word, "Silence", so unusual at the beginning of an address in public, that I wondered why. But then he addressed us saying "Beloved Ones of God" for during the silence he had united all of us in the love of the Creator. Then during his address he turned our minds and hearts towards an awareness of the privilege of man as a human being to reflect the Creator on earth, and thus to become a beloved-one of God. At that moment my mind was not yet ready to realize the deep sense of what he said. It took me more preparation to recognize that in this first encounter Murshid had created an atmosphere of silence as well as of being in the loving presence of our Creator whose essence was to be found in the depth of each human heart. As Murshid explains in the saying in the Gayan, "*When man closes his lips God begins to speak.*" And it is

¹ These memories were expressed during the Summer School of 1992 in Katwijk aan Zee, the Netherlands.

through the prophetic soul that God gives His message. This I discovered when Murshid visited Holland again.

After having introduced the Universal Worship in several countries for those religiously inclined who look for the ideal of a worship beyond all differences of beliefs, Murshid now spoke to a larger audience about the Unity of the World Religions. His intention had been to speak about 'The coming World religion', but owing to the presence of some clergymen he wisely changed his subject at the last moment. During this second visit to Amsterdam Murshid gave a private address at the home of one of his mureeds. It was a closed evening only for initiates but my sister and I had the privilege to be invited as inquirers. When we entered the room we found those present talking together in a loud and excited way about Murshid, which made us, outsiders, feel rather uncomfortable. We did not know that it was on account of the deafness of one of them. And another reason was that Murshid had been called away to visit a very sick baby, whose life was in danger, and so he arrived late. From the moment he entered the room the atmosphere, so highly strung, calmed down. And after a short silence his address touched me so deeply that it swept away any objection of my critical mind. On the contrary, for the first time of my life I felt a longing to become one of his mureeds and my sister was as much impressed as I was. But in our young and inexperienced condition and still living with our parents, we needed more time to take such an important decision. So we left without having had any personal contact with Murshid. We did not yet feel ready to take up his precious time. Still whatever is meant for you will come at the right moment.

Six months later our personal situation was much changed because of the passing away of our mother. It was not only the circumstances but mainly this experience itself, that made such a deep impression on us. By that time we had read 'The Soul, Whence and Whither', and this was our support in those sad days. Nothing could withhold us any longer treading the Sufi-path under the guidance of Murshid. So in the summer of 1925 we traveled to Suresnes where Sakina Furnee introduced us to Murshid in Fazal Manzil for a personal interview. At last in his presence: There he stood, shaking hands with me. So overwhelmed I was that I could not utter a word. Then Murshid broke the silence and said: "I know you, you have passed through a time of sorrow, sit down." At that moment I felt as his own child, who came in complete surrender. Silently he read the story of my life as an open book. Then he asked me to come back the next morning to be initiated by him. So at last the sacred moment arrived: Murshid took my hands in his hands and linked me in the chain of Chishti Masters as his mureed. Though not yet quite aware of my bliss, I sat down in such a blessed silence as words cannot describe. Then Murshid broke the silence and gave me my first esoteric practices on a scrap of paper which would be explained to me by Miss Angela Alt, a fine lady with a Dantesk profile. She made me rehearse the twenty breaths of Purification in such a distinguished way that her manner itself seemed to me a purification. Then she gave me the programme of the Summer

School to which my sister and I were now introduced. But the rest of that morning we went together to a quiet place for we were not yet ready to meet other mureeds after the deep impression of our initiation.

For a week we attended the Summer School of 1925. It was an overwhelming experience to be in the presence of Murshid day after day. The subject of regular afternoon talks was the education of children. My sister as a violin teacher was immediately impressed by the way in which Murshid treated this important subject with such wisdom and loving care. As for me, a garden architect, I had not paid much attention to the upbringing of children. What struck me all the more was the way in which Murshid opened our minds and hearts to discover the unspoilt beauty of youth, when cared for by the education of parents and teachers. So it occurred to me that these Summer Schools under Murshid's guidance were in the largest sense an education of his mureeds. Not only because of the instructions he gave, but more so through the atmosphere of love, harmony and beauty that emanated from our Master. His ever-present radiance lifted us above our small ego's to forget all trouble and disharmony, and so aspire towards becoming a truly human being. At the same time the mureeds, the workers for the Cause, were trained by Murshid during these Summer Schools. In the first place to deepen their sense of responsibility for their presentation of the Message. For Murshid wanted them to give an example of balance and harmony in their dealings with mureeds as well as with inquirers. And in order to prepare their minds for their task he made them aware that the Message of Love, Harmony and Beauty should be delivered by a spirit of true understanding and Love, and not by a critical mind.

The next Summer School, in 1926, my sister and I had the privilege of being present for a whole month. After having attended the Gatha classes the Healing Service and the Universal Worship during that year, we aspired still more to Murshid's guidance. Each Tuesday night Murshid talked about the Message. Once he spoke about the prophets of the world religions, and it seemed as if he merged into the sacred being of each one of them. Each Sunday afternoon he gave a public lecture, where inquirers joined us to attend the Universal Worship afterwards. This open day followed after a Saturday evening silence, when the mureeds gathered to prepare themselves and purify their minds for a new week of spiritual experience. This Khilwat Silence in Murshid's presence revealed the sacredness of collective purification. However, several times Murshid changed these Knilwat Silences, when he allowed his mureeds to be present at a Samadhi Evening. Early in the evening Murshid sat behind a screen in a dimly-lighted hall, and stayed alone to go into Samadhi. The mureeds were asked to enter the hall in complete silence. Each mureed was shown his place. When all were present the ceremony began in deep silence. One by one we were invited to Murshid's presence, where we were allowed to stay some minutes, as long as Murshid's eyes were opened. The closing of his eyes was the sign to leave by a back-door. In silence my sister and I went home to our

hotel in the starry summer night. It was an hour's walk, silently to undergo the sacred impression of this Samadhi Evening.

For every mureed an interview with Murshid was another culminating point. We all looked forward to these precious moments of personal contact, in which Murshid used to help us with our personal life's problems and instruct us about our esoteric practices. One morning, before I went to my personal interview, a sudden feeling overcame me that Murshid was going to give me a Sufi-name. Words cannot convey how I looked forward to my interview. For to receive a Sufi name from Murshid surpassed any expectation. I only sensed that it would deepen the link with my Master. When I entered Murshid's room and sat down in silence Murshid began the interview and asked me about the book 'Mysticism of Sound', whether I had read the chapter 'Name'. Then he explained the importance of a name and asked me my name. When I pronounced my name Clare Cornelia, Murshid smiled and said: "What a long name", Then he went into a deep silence. And it seemed to me that he looked into my past, far beyond my present life. These moments seemed to last an eternity. It opened my mind to the sense Murshid reveals in Gayan: *"It is our perception of time which passes, not time itself: for time is God, and God is eternal"*. Then Murshid broke the silence, and said, "Your name is Gawery. It is a Sanskrit name". He took a scrap of paper, on which he wrote my name, and he explained the significance, saying that I had to keep it secret. This moment was so sacred, that all my life I have kept it secret. In later years, through life's ups and downs, it has been the secrecy of my name, which accompanied me and helped me to stand firm the sake of Truth.

When the end of my visit to the Summer School came near I had another interview. This time it was not in Fazal Manzil, but in the Garden of Allah, as we used to call the Sufi-Garden. Murshid's seat was under tree of apricots, full of fruit. It seemed symbolic of the prosperity of his Message. But at that moment my whole attention was focused on that last and unique event of being personally in his presence. Murshid asked me to stay on a little longer until the last day of the Summer School. This time it seemed to me as if Murshid was somehow worried. As it had not yet dawned on me, that a Messenger, more than anyone else, had to deal with far-reaching responsibilities, all sorts of problems, risks and even opposition, I could not fathom the cause of his worries. But I simply felt that Murshid was in pain. My answer to his question was, that I regretted not to be able to stay to the end of the Summer School. And all of a sudden I exclaimed from out my young perception, "O Murshid, can I help you?" Then he smiled and said, "Simply help your leader in Amsterdam". It took me years, before I became aware of the full significance of this last interview. In a personal sense it meant that Murshid would never accept help from a young mureed who was not ready for such a task. Both for the sake the mureed and for the sake of the task itself. But a more far-reaching meaning could be Murshid's own personal awareness, that this Summer School of 1926 could be the last of his life. Just as his answer to a devoted mureed, who asked him if he would ever go back to his home-country, had

been that he would when his task in the West was accomplished. So in the week before the closing of the Summer School Murshid must have been involved as Bearer of the Message, and personally as a human being in a last fare well to his Western mureeds. Then on 13 September 1926 the ceremony of laying the foundation-stone of the Universel in Suresnes took place, and as a last farewell Murshid initiated his Mureeds as members of his newly inaugurated Confraternity of the Message, with his eldest son at the head. In the autumn of 1926 he took leave for a period of rest in his beloved home-country India. There he hoped to be restored to health. But invitations to speak at different universities about the Message made this impossible. And when his New Year's wishes reached his Western mureeds they were deeply concerned about his health. For whoever read these New Year's wishes, later published in Nirtan as 'Before you judge', could not but feel them as a last farewell.

When Murshid passed away on the 5th of February 1927, it seemed at first unreal. My sister and I, who were used to seeing Murshid only at the Summer School, had developed during his absence a feeling of his continual presence. Every evening before going to sleep our union our Master brought us spiritually in his presence. This sacred link helped us when we came to realize that his presence would never more be here on earth. So even when from now on being under the guidance of his successors, we continued to be his initiates. And when we heard afterwards that we were the last people that had been initiated by Murshid himself, this was an indescribable consolation. For, as the years passed on, our human development began to support our growing spiritual responsibility to 'spread the Message far and wide', not only in our home-country, but in different parts of the world. Especially after World War II there was a great need for workers, visiting foreign Sufi centres and starting new centres elsewhere. In view of this important work for the Cause our enterprise needed not only a firm and solid background but a sense of loving understanding, which asked for enough balance amidst the difficulties to be overcome. It is obvious that, as every worker for the Cause, we had to develop our personalities through the experience of our own lives ups and downs, in order to overcome our shortcomings.

And we should never forget, that the spreading of a World Message asks for an organization, which - as Murshid said - can never fulfill its spiritual Ideal. Therefore, Murshid advised his workers not to take all questions concerning organization too seriously. As Murshid said it may happen to anyone to step in the mud once. But after this experience one should guard oneself not to take a second step in the mud. It has not always been easy to practice this simple lesson for it needs a great amount of wisdom and tolerance. But then we must realize that all of us as mureeds have Murshid's example to follow. It is therefore that I have tried to share my memories of Murshid with you. Of course they give a glimpse of Murshid's being the Rasoul. In that respect, we have his own words, when he describes the stages of annihilation, called in Sufi-terminology: Fana-fi-Sheikh and Fana-fi-Rasoul. In his address to some newly-initiated mureeds he mentions that their attitude towards him must be

natural. Let them approach him in the way their hearts feel: as a father, as a friend, as a teacher, and even as a servant. Then in the end he speaks about a final stage – Fana-fi-Allah – when Murshid and Mureeds disappear in the realization of God This ultimate purpose of the soul can be discovered in the Sufi-emblem. As Murshid has said: *“The heart that receives the Divine Light, is liberated.”*