

# DĀRU 'L-MASNAVĪ OF THE MEVLEVI ORDER

## Thanksgiving from the Islamic Perspective

By Ibrahim Gamard (11/22/84; revised 11/28/02)

As-salāmu `alaykum wa raHmatu 'llāhi wa barakātu-h Peace be upon you all, and the Mercy of God and His blessings!

The word for thanksgiving in Arabic is "shukr." There are two major religious thanksgiving days in Islam: one following the month of fasting [RamaDān], and one following the pilgrimage rites in Mecca. Both involve congregational prayers, sermons, thanksgiving means, and charitable contributions to the poor.

In the holy scripture of Islam, the Qur`ān, God says, "If you are thankful, surely I will increase more (favours) for you."\*

Whenever the Prophet Muhammad-- peace be upon him-- experienced any joy, he used to prostrate before God to express his gratitude.\* When he felt incapable of expressing thankfulness in words, he used to pray, "I cannot count the praises that are due to You!"\*\* Once, someone asked him, "Since you are the chosen Prophet of God, and the religion has successfully spread among the people, why do you still stay up half the night praying? There's no more adversity!" He replied, "How can I not be grateful toward my Lord?"

Islam literally means "submission"-- submission to the Will of God. The majority of "submitters," or Muslims, satisfy the obligation of thanksgiving by being grateful to God for any benefit. But a Muslim who is also a mystic seeks to submit to God's Will on a deeper, more subtle level-- to the point of being thankful to God whether a desired benefit is granted or is withheld and denied. This is because the mystical understanding of gratitude perceives how the blessings of God may be veiled in affliction. Gratitude for the ability to be grateful is another divine gift.\* And entering the spiritual rank, or "station," of frequent feelings of gratitude to God is a further gift of grace given to the mystic.

The famous Muslim mystic and poet, Jalāluddīn Rūmī, described the state of "one who is addicted to (the spiritual state of) thanksgiving" [shukr-bāra]. For such a one, "Thanksgiving for the benefit is sweeter than the benefit" itself.\* "Thanksgiving is the soul of the benefit" and the benefit is superficial and unimportant.\* The "benefit of thanksgiving" is the true benefit, not the material or circumstantial benefit, because thanksgiving brings us to nearness to the Divine Beloved.\*

Rūmī taught that there is a distinction between patience and thanksgiving. The spiritual state of patience still involves duality between man's will and the Divine Will. But the spiritual state of thanksgiving is expressive of the state of union, in which man is filled with immeasurable Divine Kindness.\*

I would like to read you a story from Rūmī's great poem, the Masnavi. this story is based upon a verse from the Qur'an: "When trouble touches mankind, they call to their Lord, turning (in repentance) to Him. But when He lets them taste mercy from Himself, some of them start worshipping other gods besides their Lord-- as if to show their ingratitude for the (favours) We have given them!"\*

[Heading] "The story of the vow made by the dog every winter that, 'When next summer comes I will build a house for the winter.' [In this story, the dog symbolizes ingratitude and greed, and the house that is never built is the abode of gratitude.] "In winter the bones of the dog contract together: the blows of the frost make him so small that he says, 'Having such a small body, I must build a stone house. When summer comes, I will use my claws to build a stone house against the cold.' But when summer comes, his bones expand from the relief which he feels, and his skin grows sleek. And when he sees that he is stout, he says, 'In what house will I be able to find room?' He grows stout and slinks into a shady place-- a lazy, full-fed, cowardly, self-opinionated creature. His conscience says to him, 'Build a house!' He replies, 'How shall I find room in the house? Tell me that!' [Rumi then comments:] In the hour of pain, the bones of your greed contract together and you say penitently, 'I will build a house: it will be a refuge for me in winter.' But when the pain is gone and your greed has grown stout, the desire for the house departs from you, just as (for) the dog."\*

And I would like to recite the last part of this section of verses in Persian, following the translation:

"Thanksgiving for the benefit is sweeter than the benefit (itself)! How should one who is addicted to thanksgiving go toward the benefit?\*

"Thanksgiving is the soul of the benefit and the benefit is like the (outer) skin, because thanksgiving brings you to the abode of the (Divine) Friend!

"The benefit brings forgetfulness, but thanksgiving (brings) alertness; hunt after the benefit with the snare of thanksgiving to the King (of the Universe)!

"The benefit of thanksgiving makes you happy and princely, so that you may bestow a hundred benefits (on) the poor.

"You will eat your fill of God' (heavenly) food and desert, so that hunger and begging will depart from you (forever)!"\*

III: 2895 shukr-é ni`mat khûsh-tar az ni`mat bow-ad

shukr-bâra kay sôy-é ni`mat raw-ad

shukr jân-é ni`mat-o ni`mat chô pôst  
z-ân-ke shukr âr-ad to-râ tâ kôy-é dôst

ni`mat âr-ad ghaflet-o shukr 'intibâh  
Sayd-é ni`mat kon ba-dâm-é shukr-é shâh

ni`mat-é shukr-at kon-ad por chashm-o mîr

tâ kon-i sad ni`mat îSâr-é faqîr

sîr nôsh-î az Ta`âm-o nuql-é Haq

tâ raw-ad az tô shekam-khwârîy-wo daq

Ash-shukru li-llâh, thanks be to God!

## Notes

\*I will increase more (favours) for you: Qur'an 14:7

\*to express his gratitude: Mir Valiuddin, "The Quranic Sufism," 1959, 1977, p. 38.

\*I cannot count the praises that are due to You: a saying [Hadîth] of the Prophet Muhammad [lâ uHS-î thanâ`-an `alay-ka], quoted by Annemarie Schimmel, "Mystical Dimensions of Islam," 1975, p. 126

\*Gratitude for the ability to be grateful is another divine gift: Schimmel, "Mystical Dimensions of Islam," 1975, p. 125-26

\*Thanksgiving for the benefit is sweeter than the benefit: Rumi's Mathnawi III: 2895

\*\*"Thanks giving is the soul of the benefit" and the benefit is superficial and unimportant.: Rumi's Mathnawi III: 2896

\*The "benefit of thanksgiving": Rumi's Mathnawi III: 2898 Nicholson explained: "Since the ni`mat [= benefit, favor] is an act of pure grace on the part of God towards His creature, the latter should feel himself unworthy to receive and unable to requite it, and therefore should regard his shukr [= gratitude] as a second ni`mat [= benefit], for which in turn he can only render thanks by virtue of the Divine tawfîq =grace] bestowed upon him. Hence the saying: 'al-shukru `alâ 'l-shukri atammu min al-shukr' [= gratitude for (the state of) thankfulness is the perfection of gratitude]" (Commentary)

\*thanksgiving brings us to nearness to the Divine Beloved: Rumi's Mathnawi III: 2896

\*filled with immeasurable Divine Kindness: Annemarie Schimmel, "The Triumphal Sun," 1978, p. 305

\*for the (favours) We have given them: Qur'an 30: 33-34, adapted from Yûsuf `Alî's translation, "The Holy Qur'an, 1946 [The use of "We" in the Qur'an is a pronoun expressing the Grandeur of Divine Majesty of the One God.]

\*just as (for) the dog: adapted from Nicholson's translation, "The Mathnawi," Book III, p. 162 (lines 2885-94)

\*How should one who is addicted to thanksgiving go toward the benefit: Nicholson explained, "I.e. he turns toward the Benefactor instead of occupying himself with the benefit." (Footnote)

\*hunger and begging will depart from you (forever): adapted from Nicholson's translation, "The Mathnawi," Book III, p. 162 (lines 2895-999)



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