The Subtleties of Mulla Nasrudin

When you arrive at the sea, you
do not talk of the tributary.

(Hakim Sanai, The Walled Garden of Truth)

Mulla (Master) Nasrudin is the classical figure devised by the dervishes partly for the purpose of halting for a moment situations in which certain states of mind are made clear. The Nasrudin stories, known throughout the Middle East, constitute (in the manuscript The Subtleties of the Incomparable Nasrudin) one of the strangest achievements in the history of metaphysics. Superficially, most of the Nasrudin stories may be used as jokes. They are told and retold endlessly in the teahouses and the caravanserais, in the homes and on the radio waves, of Asia. But it is inherent in the Nasrudin story that it may be understood at any one of many depths. There is the joke, the moral — and the little extra which brings the consciousness of the potential mystic a little further on the way to realisation.

Since Sufism is something which is lived as well as something which is perceived, a Nasrudin tale cannot in itself produce complete enlightenment. On the other hand, it bridges the gap between mundane life and a transmutation of consciousness in a manner which no other literary form yet produced has been able to attain.

The Subtleties has never been presented in full to a Western audience, probably because the stories cannot properly be translated by a non-Sufi, or even be studied out of context, and retain the essential impact. Even in the East the collection is used for study purposes only by initiate Sufis. Individual 'jokes' from the collection have found their way into almost every literature in the world, and a certain amount of scholastic attention has been given them on this account — as an example of culture drift, or to support arguments in favour of the basic identity of humour everywhere. But if because of their perennial humorous appeal the stories have proved their survival power, this is entirely secondary to the intention of the corpus, which is to provide a basis for making available the Sufi attitude toward life, and for making possible the attainment of Sufic realisation and mystical experience.

The Legend of Nasrudin, appended to the Subtleties and dating from at least the thirteenth century, touches on some of the reasons for introducing Nasrudin. Humour cannot be prevented from spreading; it has a way of slipping through the patterns of thought which are imposed upon mankind by habit and design. As a complete system of thought, Nasrudin exists at so many depths that he cannot be killed. Some measure of the truth of this might be seen in the fact that such diverse and alien organisations as the British Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and the Soviet Government have both pressed Nasrudin into service. The SPCK published a few of the stories as Tales of the Khoja; while (perhaps on the principle of 'If you cannot beat them, join them') the Russians made a film of Nasrudin under the name of The Adventures of Nasrudin. Even the Greeks, who accepted few other things from the Turks, consider him a part of their cultural heritage. Secular Turkey, through its information department, has published a selection of the metaphysical jokes attributed to this supposed Muslim preacher who is the archetype of the Sufi mystic. And yet the dervish Orders were suppressed by law in republican Turkey.
Nobody really knows who Nasrudin was, where he lived, or when. This is truly in character, for the whole intention is to provide a figure who cannot really be characterised, and who is timeless. It is the message, not the man, which is important to the Sufis. This has not prevented people from providing him with a spurious history, and even a tomb. Scholars, against whose pedantry in his stories Nasrudin frequently emerges triumphant, have even tried to take his Subtleties to pieces in the hope of finding appropriate biographical material. One of their ‘discoveries’ would have warmed the heart of Nasrudin himself. Nasrudin said that he considered himself upside down in this world, argues one scholar, and from this he infers that the supposed date of Nasrudin’s death, on his ‘tombstone’, should be read not as 386, but 683. Another professor feels that the Arabic numerals used would, if truly reversed, look more like the figures 274. He gravely records that a dervish to whom he appealed for aid in this ‘...merely said, “Why not drop a spider in some ink and see what marks he makes in crawling out of it. This should give the correct date or show something.”’

In fact, 386 means 300 + 80 + 6. Transposed into Arabic letters, this decodes as SH, W, F, which spells the word ShaWaF: ‘to cause someone to see; to show a thing’. The dervish’s spider would ‘show’ something, as he himself said.

If we look at some of the classical Nasrudin stories in as detached a way as possible, we soon find that the wholly scholastic approach is the last one that the Sufi will allow:

Nasrudin, ferrying a pedant across a piece of rough water, said something ungrammatical to him. ‘Have you never studied grammar?’ asked the scholar.

‘No.’

‘Then half of your life has been wasted.’

A few minutes later Nasrudin turned to the passenger. ‘Have you ever learned how to swim?’

‘No. Why?’

‘Then all your life is wasted — we are sinking!’

This is the emphasis upon Sufism as a practical activity, denying that the formal intellect can arrive at truth, and that pattern-thinking derived from the familiar world can be applied to true reality, which moves in another dimension.

This is brought out even more forcefully in a wry tale set in a teahouse; a Sufi term for a meeting place of dervishes. A monk enters and states:

‘My master taught me to spread the word that mankind will never be fulfilled until the man who has not been wronged is as indignant about a wrong as the man who actually has been wronged.’

The assembly is momentarily impressed. Then Nasrudin speaks:

‘My master taught me that nobody at all should become indignant about anything until he is sure that what he thinks is a wrong is in fact a wrong — and not a blessing in disguise!’

Nasrudin, in his capacity as a Sufi teacher, makes frequent use of the dervish technique of himself playing the part of the unenlightened man in the story, in order to highlight a truth. A famous tale denying the superficial belief in cause and effect makes him the victim:

Mulla Nasrudin was walking along an alleyway one day when a man fell from a roof and landed on top of him. The other man was unhurt — but the Mulla was taken to the hospital.

‘What teaching do you infer from this event, Master?’ one of his disciples asked him.

‘Avoid belief in inevitability, even if cause and effect seem inevitable! Shun theoretical questions like: “If a man falls off a roof, will his neck be broken?” He fell — but my neck is broken!’

Because the average person thinks in patterns and cannot accommodate himself to a really different point of view, he loses a great deal of the meaning of life. He may live, even progress,
but he cannot understand all that is going on. The story of the smuggler makes this very clear:

Nasrudin used to take his donkey across a frontier every day, with the panniers loaded with straw. Since he admitted to being a smuggler when he trudged home every night, the frontier guards searched him again and again. They searched his person, sifted the straw, steeped it in water, even burned it from time to time. Meanwhile he was becoming visibly more and more prosperous.

Then he retired and went to live in another country. Here one of the customs officers met him, years later.

‘You can tell me now, Nasrudin,’ he said. ‘Whatever was it that you were smuggling, when we could never catch you out?’

‘Donkeys,’ said Nasrudin.

This story also emphasises one of the major contentions of Sufism — that preternatural experience and the mystical goal is something nearer to mankind than is realised. The assumption that something esoteric or transcendental must be far off or complicated has been assumed by the ignorance of individuals. And that kind of individual is the least qualified to judge the matter. It is ‘far off’ only in a direction which he does not realise.

Nasrudin, like the Sufi himself, does not violate the canons of his time. But he adds a new dimension to his consciousness, refusing to accept for specific, limited purposes that truth, say, is something that can be measured as can anything else. What people call truth is relative to their situation. And he cannot find it until he realises this. One of the Nasrudin tales, a most ingenious one, shows that until one can see through relative truth, no progress can be made:

One day Nasrudin was sitting at court. The King was complaining that his subjects were untruthful. ‘Majesty,’ said Nasrudin, ‘there is truth and truth. People must practise real truth before they can use relative truth. They always try the other way around. The result is that they take liberties with their man-made truth, because they know instinctively that it is only an invention.’

The King thought that this was too complicated. ‘A thing must be true or false. I will make people tell the truth, and by this practice they will establish the habit of being truthful.’

When the city gates were opened the next morning, a gallows had been erected in front of them, presided over by the captain of the royal guard. A herald announced: ‘Whoever would enter the city must first answer the truth to a question which will be put to him by the captain of the guard.’

Nasrudin, who had been waiting outside, stepped forward first.

The captain spoke: ‘Where are you going? Tell the truth — the alternative is death by hanging.’

‘I am going,’ said Nasrudin, ‘to be hanged on those gallows.’

‘I don’t believe you!’

‘Very well, then. If I have told a lie, hang me!’

‘But that would make it the truth!’

‘Exactly,’ said Nasrudin, ‘your truth.’

The would-be Sufi must also understand that standards of good and bad depend upon individual or group criteria, not upon objective fact. Until he experiences this internally as well as accepting it intellectually, he will not be able to qualify for inner understanding. This shifting scale is exemplified by a story of the chase:

A king who enjoyed Nasrudin’s company, and also liked to hunt, commanded him to accompany him on a bear hunt. Nasrudin was terrified.

When Nasrudin returned to his village, someone asked him: ‘How did the hunt go?’

‘Marvellously.’
‘How many bears did you see?’
‘None.’
‘How could it have gone marvellously, then?’
‘When you are hunting bears, and when you are me, seeing no bears at all is a marvellous experience.’

Internal experience cannot be transmitted through repetitiousness, but has to be constantly refreshed from the source. Many schools continue to operate long after their actual dynamic is exhausted, becoming mere centres repeating a progressively weakened doctrine. The name of the teaching may remain the same. The teaching may have no value, may even oppose the original meaning, is almost always a travesty of it. Nasrudin emphasises this as one of the points in his ‘Duck Soup’ story:

A kinsman came to see the Mulla from somewhere deep in the country, bringing a duck as a gift. Delighted, Nasrudin had the bird cooked and shared it with his guest. Presently, however, one countryman after another started to call, each one the friend of the friend of the ‘man who brought you the duck’. No further presents were forthcoming.

At length the Mulla was exasperated. One day yet another stranger appeared. ‘I am the friend of the friend of the friend of the relative who brought you the duck.’

He sat down, like all the rest, expecting a meal. Nasrudin handed him a bowl of hot water.

‘What is this?’
‘That is the soup of the soup of the soup of the duck which was brought by my relative.’

The sharpened perception which the Sufi attains sometimes enables him to experience things which are imperceptible to others. Ignorant of this, members of other schools generally give away their lack of perception by saying or doing something which is so obviously the result of spiritual immaturity that the Sufi can read him like a book. In these circumstances Sufis seldom trouble to say anything. The perception, however, is illustrated by another Nasrudin tale:

Nasrudin called at a large house to collect for charity. The servant said, ‘My master is out.’

‘Very well,’ said the Mulla; ‘even though he has not been able to contribute, please give your master a piece of advice from me. Say: “Next time you go out, don’t leave your face at the window — someone might steal it.”’

People do not know where to look when they are seeking enlightenment. As a result, it is hardly surprising that they may attach themselves to any cult, immerse themselves in all manner of theories, believing that they have the capacity to distinguish the true from the false.

Nasrudin taught this in several ways. On one occasion a neighbour found him down on his knees looking for something.

‘What have you lost, Mulla?’
‘My key,’ said Nasrudin.

After a few minutes of searching, the other man said, ‘Where did you drop it?’

‘At home.’

‘Then why, for heaven’s sake, are you looking here?’

‘There is more light here.’

This is one of the most famous of all Nasrudin tales, used by many Sufis, commenting upon people who seek exotic sources for enlightenment. Acting it on the stage was a part of the repertoire of Karl Vallentin, the late ‘metaphysical clown’ of Munich.

The mechanism of rationalisation is one which effectively bars the deepening of perception. The Sufic impact may often be wasted because the individual will not properly absorb it.
A neighbour came to borrow Nasrudin’s clothesline.
‘I am sorry, but I am drying flour on it.’
‘But how can you dry flour on a line?’
‘It is less difficult than you think, when you don’t want to lend it.’

Nasrudin here presents himself as the evasive part of the mind, which will not accept that there are other ways of approaching truth than the conventional patterns.

In the development of the human mind, there is a constant change and limit to the usefulness of any particular technique. This characteristic of Sufi practice is ignored in repetitious systems, which condition the mind and create an atmosphere of attainment or nearness to attainment, without actually producing it. Nasrudin figures as the character in a story which seeks to make this clear:

The Mulla nearly fell into a pool of water. A passer-by saved him in the nick of time. Every time they met in future, the man reminded Nasrudin about how he had prevented him from getting wet.

Ultimately, unable to stand it any longer, the Mulla took his friend to the pool, jumped in as far as the neck, and shouted: ‘Now I am as wet as I would have been if I had never met you! Will you leave me alone?’

The ordinary joke or fable, containing only one point or emphasis, cannot be compared to the Nasrudin system — ideally a participation recital which exercises an inward as well as an outward or superficial effect. The parable, fable and ordinary joke are considered mystically sterile because they lack penetration or true regenerative force.

While the complex ingenuity and intention of the Nasrudin story is far ahead of, say, the Baldakiev figure of the Russians, the Arab Joha, or Bertoldo of the Italians — all well-known comical figures — something of the difference of depth in stories can be assessed by means of the Mulla’s jokes and their equivalent in their sporadic occurrence elsewhere.

A Zen story provides an interesting example. In this a monk asks a master to give him a version of the reality beyond reality. The master snatches up a rotten apple; and the monk perceives the truth by means of this sign. We are left in the dark as to what lies behind, or leads up to, the illumination.

The Nasrudin story about an apple fills in a great deal of missing detail: Nasrudin is sitting among a circle of disciples, when one of them asks him the relationship between things of this world and things of a different dimension. Nasrudin says, ‘You must understand allegory.’ The disciple says, ‘Show me something practical — for instance an apple from Paradise.’

Nasrudin picks up an apple and hands it to the man. ‘But this apple is bad on one side — surely a heavenly apple would be perfect.’

‘A celestial apple would be perfect,’ says Nasrudin; ‘but as far as you are able to judge it, situated as we are in this abode of corruption, and with your present faculties, this is as near to a heavenly apple as you will ever get.’

The disciple understood that the terms which we use for metaphysical things are based upon physical terms. In order to penetrate into another dimension of cognition, we have to adjust to the way of understanding of that dimension.

The Nasrudin story, which may well be the original of the apple allegory, is designed to add to the mind of the hearer something of the flavour which is needed to build up the consciousness for experiences which cannot be reached until a bridge has been created.

This gradual building up of inner consciousness is characteristic of the Nasrudin Sufic method. The flash of intuitive illumination which comes as a result of the stories is partly a minor enlightenment in itself, not an intellectual experience. It is also a stepping-stone toward the re-establishing of mystical perception in a captive mind, relentlessly conditioned
by the training systems of material life.

A Nasrudin joke, detached (perhaps by translation) from its technical terminology, can still pass current on its humorous value. In such cases much of its impact may be lost. An example is the salt and wool joke:

Nasrudin is taking a load of salt to market. His donkey wades through a stream, and the salt is dissolved. When it reaches the opposite bank, the ass is frisky because his load is lightened. But Nasrudin is angry. On the next market day he packs the panniers with wool. The animal is almost drowned with the increase of weight when it takes up water at the ford. ‘There!’ says Nasrudin triumphantly, ‘that’ll teach you to think that you gain something every time you go through water!’

In the original story, two technical terms are used, salt and wool. ‘Salt’ (milh) is the homonym for ‘being good, wisdom’. The donkey is the symbol for man. By shedding his burden of general goodness, the individual feels better, loses the weight. The result is that he loses his food, because Nasrudin could not sell the salt to buy fodder. The word ‘wool’ is of course another word for ‘Sufi’. On the second trip the donkey had an increase of his burden through the wool, because of the intention of his teacher, Nasrudin. The weight is increased for the duration of the journey to market. But the end result is better, because Nasrudin sells the damp wool, now heavier than before, for a higher price than dry wool.

Another joke, found also in Cervantes (Don Quixote, Ch. 5) remains a joke although the technical term ‘fear’ is merely translated and not explained:

‘I shall have you hanged,’ said a cruel and ignorant king to Nasrudin, ‘if you do not prove that you have deep perceptions such as have been attributed to you.’ Nasrudin at once said that he could see a golden bird in the sky and demons within the earth. ‘But how can you do this?’ the King asked. ‘Fear,’ said the Mulla, ‘is all you need.’

‘Fear’, in the Sufi vocabulary, is the activation of conscience whose exercises can produce extrasensory perception. This is an area in which the formal intellect is not used, and other faculties of the mind are called into play.

Yet Nasrudin, in a manner wholly unique, manages to use the very fabric of intellectuality for his own purposes. An echo of this deliberate intent is found in the Legend of Nasrudin, where it is recounted that Hussein, the founder of the system, snatched his messenger-designate Nasrudin from the very clutches of the ‘Old Villain’ — the crude system of thought in which almost all of us live.

‘Hussein’ is associated in Arabic with the concept of virtue. ‘Hassein’ means ‘strong, difficult of access’.

When Hussein had searched the whole world for the teacher who was to carry his message through the generations, he was almost at the point of despair when he heard a commotion. The Old Villain was upbraiding one of his students for telling jokes. ‘Nasrudin!’ thundered the Villain, ‘for your irreverent attitude I condemn you to universal ridicule. Henceforth, when one of your absurd stories is told, six more will have to be heard in succession, until you are clearly seen to be a figure of fun.’

It is believed that the mystical effect of seven Nasrudin tales, studied in succession, is enough to prepare an individual for enlightenment.

Hussein, eavesdropping, realised that from every situation comes forth its own remedy; and that this was the manner in which the evils of the Old Villain could be brought into their true perspective. He would preserve truth through Nasrudin.

He called Nasrudin to him in a dream and imparted to him a portion of his baraka, the Sufi power which interpenetrates the nominal significance of meaning. Henceforth all the stories about Nasrudin became works of ‘independent’ art. They could be understood as jokes, they
had a metaphysical meaning; they were infinitely complex and partook of the nature of completion and perfection which had been stolen from human consciousness by the vitiating activities of the Old Villain.

*Baraka*, looked at from the ordinary viewpoint, has many ‘magical’ qualities — although it is essentially a unity and the fuel as well as the substance of objective reality. One of these qualities is that anyone who is endowed with it, or any object with which it is associated, retains a quota of it, no matter how much it may be altered by the impact of unregenerate people. Hence the mere repetition of a Nasrudin jest takes with it some *baraka*; pondering over it brings more. ‘So that by this method the teachings of Nasrudin in the line of Hussein were impressed forever within a vehicle which could not be utterly distorted beyond repair.

Just as all water is essentially water, so within the Nasrudin experiences there is an irreducible minimum which answers a call, and which grows when it is invoked.’ This minimum is truth, and through truth, real consciousness.

Nasrudin is the mirror in which one sees oneself. Unlike an ordinary mirror, the more it is gazed into, the more of the original Nasrudin is projected into it. This mirror is likened to the celebrated Cup of Jamshid, the Persian hero; which mirrors the whole world, and into which the Sufis ‘gaze’.

Since Sufism is not built upon artificial conduct or behaviour in the sense of external detail, but upon comprehensive detail, the Nasrudin stories must be experienced as well as thought about. Further, the experiencing of each story will contribute toward the ‘homecoming’ of the mystic. One of the first developments of homecoming is when the Sufi shows signs of superior perception. He will be able to understand a situation, for example, by inspiration, not formal cerebration. His actions, as a result, may sometimes baffle observers working on the ordinary plane of consciousness; but his results will nevertheless be correct.

One Nasrudin story, showing how the right result comes for the Sufi through a special mechanism (‘the wrong method’, to the uninitiated) explains much of the seeming eccentricities of Sufis:

Two men came before Nasrudin when he was acting in his capacity of magistrate. One said, ‘This man has bitten my ear — I demand compensation.’ The other said, ‘He bit it himself.’ Nasrudin adjourned the case and withdrew to his chambers. There he spent half an hour trying to bite his own ear. All that he succeeded in doing was falling over in the attempt, and bruising his forehead. Then he returned to the courtroom.

‘Examine the man whose ear was bitten,’ he ordered. ‘If his forehead is bruised, he did it himself, and the case is dismissed. If not, the other one did it, and the bitten man is compensated with three silver pieces.’ The right verdict had been arrived at by seemingly illogical methods.

Here Nasrudin arrived at the correct answer, irrespective of the apparent logic of the situation. In another story, himself adopting the role of fool (‘the Path of Blame’, to the Sufi), Nasrudin illustrates, in extreme form, ordinary human thinking:

Someone asked Nasrudin to guess what he had in his hand.

‘Give me a clue,’ said the Mulla.

‘I’ll give you several,’ said the wag. ‘It is shaped like an egg, egg-sized, looks, tastes and smells like an egg. Inside it is yellow and white. It is liquid within before you cook it, coalesces with heat. It was, moreover, laid by a hen…’

‘I know!’ interrupted the Mulla. ‘It is some sort of cake.’

I tried a similar experiment in London. At three tobacconists I successively asked for ‘cylinders of paper filled with particles of tobacco, about three inches long, packed in cartons, probably with printing on them’.
None of the people who sold cigarettes all day long could identify what I wanted. Two
directed me elsewhere — one to their wholesalers, another to a shop which specialised in
exotic imports for smokers.

The word 'cigarette' may be a necessary trigger to describe paper cylinders filled with
tobacco. But the trigger habit, depending upon associations, cannot be used in the same way
in perceptive activities. The mistake is in carrying over one form of thinking — however
admirable in its proper place — into another context, and trying to use it there.

Rumi tells a story which resembles Nasrudin's tale of the egg, but emphasises another
significant factor. A king's son had been placed in the hands of mystical teachers who
reported that they now could not teach him any more. In order to test him, the King asked
him what he had in his hand. 'It is round, metallic and yellow — it must be a sieve,' the boy
replied. Sufism insists upon a balanced development of inner perceptions and ordinary
human conduct and usage.

The assumption that just because one is alive, one is perceptive, is denied by Sufism, as we
have already seen. A man may be clinically alive, but perceptively dead. Logic and philosophy
will not help him in attaining perception. One aspect of the following story illustrates this:

The Mulla was thinking aloud.

'How do I know whether I am dead or alive?'

'Don't be such a fool,' his wife said; 'if you were dead your limbs would be cold.'

Shortly afterward Nasrudin was in the forest cutting wood. It was midwinter. Suddenly he
realised that his hands and feet were cold.

'I am undoubtedly dead,' he thought; 'so I must stop working, because corpses do not work.'
And, because corpses do not walk about, he lay down on the grass.

Soon a pack of wolves appeared and started to attack Nasrudin's donkey, which was
tethered to a tree.

'Yes, carry on, take advantage of a dead man,' said Nasrudin from his prone position; 'but
if I had been alive I would not have allowed you to take liberties with my donkey.'

The preparation of the Sufi mind cannot be adequate until the man knows that he has to
make something for himself — and stops thinking that others can make it for him. Nasrudin
brings the ordinary man under his magnifying lens:

One day Nasrudin went into the shop of a man who sold all kinds of miscellaneous things.

'Have you leather?'

'Yes.'

'And nails?'

'Yes.'

'And dye?'

'Yes.'

'Then why don't you make yourself a pair of boots?'

The story emphasises the role of the mystical master, essential in Sufism, who provides the
starting point for the would-be seeker to do something about himself — that something being
the 'self-work' under guidance which is the outstanding characteristic of the Sufi system.

The Sufi quest cannot be carried out in unacceptable company. Nasrudin emphasises this
point in his tale of the ill-timed invitation:

The hour was late, and the Mulla had been talking to his friends in a teahouse. As they left,
they realised that they were hungry. 'Come and eat at my home, all of you,' said Nasrudin,
without thinking of the consequences.

When the party had nearly arrived at his house, he thought he should go on ahead and tell
his wife. 'You stay here while I warn her,' he told them.
When he told her, she said, 'There is nothing in the house! How dare you invite all those people!'

Nasrudin went upstairs and hid himself.
Presently hunger drove his guests to approach the house and knock on the door.
Nasrudin’s wife answered, ‘The Mulla is not at home!’
‘But we saw him going in through the front door,’ they shouted.
She could not think, for the moment, of anything to say.

Overcome by anxiety, Nasrudin, who had been watching the interchange from an upstairs window, leaned out and said, ‘I could have gone out again by the back door, couldn’t I?’

Several of the Nasrudin tales emphasise the falsity of the general human belief that man has a stable consciousness. At the mercy of inner and outer impacts, the behaviour of almost anyone will vary in accordance with his mood and his state of health. While this fact is of course recognised in social life, it is not fully admitted in formal philosophy or metaphysics. At best, the individual is expected to create in himself a framework of devoutness or concentration through which it is hoped that he will attain illumination or fulfilment. In Sufism, it is the entire consciousness which has ultimately to be transmuted, starting from the recognition that the unregenerate man is very little more than raw material. He has no fixed nature, no unity of consciousness. Inside him there is an ‘essence’. This is not yoked to his whole being, or even his personality. Ultimately, nobody automatically knows who he really is. This in spite of the fiction to the contrary. Thus Nasrudin:

The Mulla walked into a shop one day.
The owner came forward to serve him.
‘First things first,’ said Nasrudin; ‘did you see me walk into your shop?’
‘Of course.’
‘Have you ever seen me before?’
‘Never in my life.’
‘Then how do you know it is me?’

Excellent as this may be as a mere joke, those who regard it as the idea of a stupid man, and containing no deeper significance, will not be people who are in a position to benefit from its regenerative power. You extract from a Nasrudin story only a very little more than you put into it; if it appears to be no more than a joke to a person, that person is in the need of further self-work. He is caricatured in the Nasrudin interchange about the moon:

‘What do they do with the moon when it is old?’ a stupid man asked the Mulla.
The answer fitted the question: ‘They cut each old moon up into forty stars.’

Many of the Nasrudin tales highlight the fact that people seeking mystical attainment expect it on their own terms, and hence generally exclude themselves from it before they start. Nobody can hope to arrive at illumination if he thinks that he knows what it is, and believes that he can achieve it through a well-defined path which he can conceive at the moment of starting. Hence the story of the woman and the sugar:

When Nasrudin was a magistrate, a woman came to him with her son. ‘This youth,’ she said, ‘eats too much sugar. I cannot afford to keep him in it. Therefore I ask you formally to forbid him to eat it, as he will not obey me.’

Nasrudin told her to come back in seven days.
When she returned, he postponed his decision for yet another week.
‘Now,’ he said to the youth, ‘I forbid you to eat more than such and such a quantity of sugar every day.’

The woman subsequently asked him why so much time had been necessary before a simple order could be given.
‘Because, madam, I had to see whether I myself could cut down on the use of sugar, before ordering anyone else to do it.’

The woman’s request had been made, in accordance with most automatic human thinking, simply on the basis of certain assumptions. The first was that justice can be done merely by giving injunctions; secondly, that a person could in fact eat as little sugar as she wanted her son to eat; thirdly, that a thing can be communicated to another person by someone who is not himself involved in it.

This tale is not simply a way of paraphrasing the statement: ‘Do as I say, not as I do.’ Far from being an ethical teaching, it is one of grim necessity.

Sufi teaching can only be done by a Sufi, not by a theoretician or intellectual exponent.

Sufism, since it is the attunement with true reality, cannot be made closely to resemble what we take to be reality, but which is a really more primitive short-term rule of thumb. For example, we tend to look at events one-sidedly. We also assume, without any justification, that an event happens as it were in a vacuum. In actual fact, all events are associated with all other events. It is only when we are ready to experience our interrelation with the organism of life that we can appreciate mystical experience. If you look at any action which you do, or which anyone else does, you will find that it was prompted by one of many possible stimuli; and also that it is never an isolated action — it has consequences, many of them ones which you would never expect, certainly which you could not have planned.

Another Nasrudin ‘joke’ underlines this essential circularity of reality, and the generally invisible interactions which occur:

One day Nasrudin was walking along a deserted road. Night was falling as he spied a troop of horsemen coming toward him. His imagination began to work, and he feared that they might rob him, or impress him into the army. So strong did this fear become that he leaped over a wall and found himself in a graveyard. The other travellers, innocent of any such motive as had been assumed by Nasrudin, became curious and pursued him.

When they came upon him lying motionless, one said, ‘Can we help you — why are you here in this position?’

Nasrudin, realising his mistake, said, ‘It is more complicated than you assume. You see, I am here because of you; and you, you are here because of me.’

It is only the mystic who ‘returns’ to the formal world after literal experience of the interdependence of seemingly different or unconnected things, who can truly perceive life in this way. To the Sufi, any metaphysical method which does not embrace this factor is a concocted (external) one, and cannot be the product of what he calls mystical experience. Its very existence is a barrier to the attainment of its purported aim.

This is not to say that the Sufi, as a result of his experiences, becomes divorced from the reality of superficial life. He has an extra dimension of being, which operates parallel to the lesser cognition of the ordinary man. The Mulla sums this up neatly in another saying:

‘I can see in the dark.’

‘That may be so, Mulla. But if it is true, why do you sometimes carry a candle at night?’

‘To prevent other people from bumping into me.’

The light carried by the Sufi may be his conforming with the ways of the people among whom he is cast, after his ‘return’ from being transmuted into a wider perception.

The Sufi is, by virtue of his transmutation, a conscious part of the living reality of all being. This means that he cannot look upon what happens — either to himself or to others — in the limited way in which the philosopher or theologian does. Someone once asked Nasrudin what Fate was. He said, ‘What you call “Fate” is really assumption. You assume that something good
or bad is going to happen. The actual result you call "Fate." The question, 'Are you a fatalist?' cannot be asked of a Sufi, because he does not accept the unsubstantiated concept of Fate which is implied in the question.

Similarly, since he can perceive the ramifications in depth of an event, the Sufi's attitude toward individual happenings is comprehensive, not isolated. He cannot generalise from artificially separated data. "Nobody can ride that horse," the King said to me, said the Mulla; 'but I climbed into the saddle.' 'What happened?' 'I couldn't move it either.' This is intended to show that when an apparently consistent fact is extended along its dimensions, it changes.

The so-called problem of communication, which engages so much attention, hinges on assumptions that are unacceptable to the Sufi. The ordinary man says, 'How can I communicate with another man beyond very ordinary things?' The Sufi attitude is that 'communication of things which have to be communicated cannot be prevented. It is not that a means has to be found.'

Nasrudin and a Yogi, in one of the tales, both play the part of ordinary people who have, in fact, nothing to communicate to one another:

One day Nasrudin saw a strange-looking building at whose door a contemplative Yogi sat. The Mulla decided that he would learn something from this impressive figure, and started a conversation by asking him who and what he was.

'I am a Yogi,' said the other, 'and I spend my time in trying to attain harmony with all living things.'

'That is interesting,' said Nasrudin, 'because a fish once saved my life.'

The Yogi begged him to join him, saying that in a lifetime devoted to trying to harmonise himself with the animal creation, he had never been so close to such communion as the Mulla had been.

When they had been contemplating for some days, the Yogi begged the Mulla to tell him more of his wonderful experience with the fish, 'now that we know one another better'.

'Now that I know you better,' said Nasrudin, 'I doubt whether you would profit by what I have to tell.'

But the Yogi insisted. 'Very well,' said Nasrudin. 'The fish saved my life all right. I was starving at the time, and it sufficed me for three days.'

The meddling with certain capacities of the mind which characterises so-called experimental mysticism is something which no Sufi would dare to do. The product of consistent experimentation countless centuries ago, Sufism actually deals in phenomena which are still elusive to the empiric:

Nasrudin was throwing handfuls of bread all round his house. 'What are you doing?' someone asked.

'Keeping the tigers away.'

'But there are no tigers around here.'

'Exactly. Effective, isn't it?'

One of several Nasrudin tales which are found in Cervantes' Don Quixote (Ch. 14) warns of the dangers of rigid intellectualism:

'There is nothing which cannot be answered by means of my doctrine,' said a monk who had just entered a teahouse where Nasrudin was sitting with his friends.

'And yet just a short time ago,' replied the Mulla, 'I was challenged by a scholar with an unanswerable question.'

'If only I had been there! Tell it to me, and I shall answer it.'

'Very well. He said, "Why are you trying to get into my house by night?"'
The Sufi perception of beauty is associated with a power of penetration which extends beyond the ken of the usual forms of art. One day a disciple had taken Nasrudin to view, for the first time, a beautiful lakeland scene.

‘What a delight!’ he exclaimed. ‘But if only, if only…’
‘If only what, Mulla?’
‘If only they had not put water into it!’

In order to reach the mystic goal, the Sufi must understand that the mind does not work in the manner in which we assume that it does. Furthermore, two people may merely confuse one another:

One day the Mulla asked his wife to make a large quantity of halwa, a heavy sweetmeat, and gave her all the ingredients. He ate nearly all of it.

In the middle of the night, Nasrudin woke her up.

‘I have just had an important thought.’
‘Tell it to me.’
‘Bring me the rest of the halwa, and I will tell you.’

When she had brought it, she asked him again.

The Mulla first finished up the halwa.

‘The thought,’ said Nasrudin, ‘was: “Never go to sleep without finishing up all the halwa that has been made during that day.”’

Nasrudin enables the Sufi Seeker to understand that the formal ideas current about time and space are not necessarily those which obtain in the wider field of true reality. People who believe, for instance, that they are being rewarded for past actions and may be rewarded in future for future doings, cannot be Sufis. The Sufi time conception is an interrelation — a continuum.

The classic story of the Turkish bath caricatures it in a manner which enables something of the idea to be grasped:

Nasrudin visited a Turkish bath. Because he was dressed in rags, he was cavalierly treated by the attendants, who gave him an old towel and a scrap of soap. When he left, he handed the amazed bath men a gold coin. The next day he appeared again, magnificently attired, and was naturally given the best possible attention and deference.

When the bath was over, he presented the bath keepers with the smallest copper coin available.

‘This,’ he said, ‘was for the attendance last time. The gold coin was for your treatment of me this time.’

The residue of pattern-thinking, plus a distinct immaturity of mind, cause people to attempt to enrol themselves in mysticism on their own terms. One of the first things taught to the disciple is that he may have an inkling of what he needs, and he may realise that he can get it from study and work under a master. But beyond that he can make no conditions. This is the Nasrudin tale which is used to inculcate this truth:

A woman brought her small son to the Mulla’s school. ‘Please frighten him a little,’ she said, ‘because he is rather beyond my control.’

Nasrudin turned up his eyeballs, started to puff and pant, danced up and down and beat his fists on the table until the horrified woman fainted. Then he rushed out of the room.

When he returned and the woman had recovered consciousness, she said to him, ‘I asked you to frighten the boy, not me!’

‘Madam,’ said the Mulla, ‘danger has no favourites. I even frightened myself, as you saw. When danger threatens, it threatens all equally.’
Similarly, the Sufi teacher cannot supply his disciple with only a small quantity of Sufism. Sufism is the whole, and carries with it the implications of completeness, not of the fragmentation of consciousness which the unenlightened may use in his own processes, and may call 'concentration'.

Nasrudin pokes a great deal of fun at the dabblers, who hope to learn, to steal, some deep secret of life, without actually paying for it:

A ship seemed about to sink, and the passengers were on their knees praying and repenting, promising to make all kinds of amends if only they could be saved. Only Nasrudin was unmoved.

Suddenly, in the midst of the panic he leaped up and shouted, 'Steady, now, friends! Don't change your ways — don't be too prodigal. I think I see land.'

Nasrudin hammers away at the essential idea — that mystical experience and enlightenment cannot come through a rearrangement of familiar ideas, but through a recognition of the limitations of ordinary thinking, which serves only for mundane purposes. In doing this, he excels beyond any other available form of teaching.

One day he entered a teahouse and declaimed, 'The moon is more useful than the sun.'

Someone asked him why.

'Because at night we need the light more.'

The conquest of the 'Commanding Self' which is an object of the Sufi struggle is not achieved merely by acquiring control over one's passions. It is looked upon as a taming of the wild consciousness which believes that it can take what it needs from everything (including mysticism) and bend it to its own use. The tendency to employ materials from whatever source for personal benefit is understandable in the partially complete world of ordinary life, but cannot be carried over into the greater world of real fulfilment.

In the story of the thieving bird, Nasrudin is carrying home a piece of liver and the recipe for liver pie. Suddenly a bird of prey swoops down and snatches the meat from his hand. As it wings away, Nasrudin calls after it, 'Foolish bird! You may have the liver, but what will you do without the recipe?'

From the kite's point of view, of course, the liver is sufficient for its needs. The result may be a satiated kite, but it gets only what it thinks it wants, not what could have been.

Since the Sufi is not always understood by other people, they will seek to make him conform to their idea of what is right. In another Nasrudin bird story (which also appears in Rumi's poetic masterpiece, the *Mathnawi*), the Mulla finds a king's hawk perched on his windowsill. He has never seen such a strange 'pigeon'. After cutting its aristocratic beak straight and clipping its talons, he sets it free, saying, 'Now you look more like a bird. Someone had neglected you.'

The artificial division of life, thought and action, so necessary in ordinary human undertakings, has no place in Sufism. Nasrudin inculcates this idea as a prerequisite to understanding life as a whole. 'Sugar dissolved in milk permeates all the milk.'

Nasrudin was walking along a dusty road with a friend, when they realised that they were very thirsty. They stopped at a teahouse and found that they had between them only enough money to buy a glass of milk. The friend said: 'Drink your half first; I have a twist of sugar here which I will add to my share.'

'Add it now, brother, and we shall both partake,' said the Mulla.

'No, there is not enough to sweeten a whole glass.'

Nasrudin went to the kitchen, and came back with a saltcellar. 'Good news, friend — I am having my half with salt — and there is enough for the whole glass.'

Although, in the practical but nonetheless artificial world which we have created for
ourselves, we are accustomed to assuming that ‘first things come first’, and that there must
be an A to Z of every thing, this assumption cannot hold good in the differently orientated
metaphysical world. The Sufi Seeker will learn, at one and the same time, several different
things, at their own levels of perception and potentiality. This is another difference between
Sufism and the systems which rest on the assumption that only one thing is being learned at
any one moment.

A dervish teacher comments upon this multi-form relationship of Nasrudin with the
Seeker. The tale, he says, is in a way like a peach. It has beauty, nutrition, and hidden depths —
the kernel.

A person may be emotionally stirred by the exterior; laugh at the joke, or look at the beauty.
But this is only as if the peach were lent to you. All that is really absorbed is the form and
colour, perhaps the aroma, the shape and texture.

‘You can eat the peach, and taste a further delight — understand its depth. The peach
contributes to your nutrition, becomes a part of yourself. You can throw away the stone — or
crack it and find a delicious kernel within. This is the hidden depth. It has its own colour, size,
form, depth, taste, function. You can collect the shells of this nut, and with them fuel a fire.
Even if the charcoal is of no further use, the edible portion has become a part of you.’

As soon as the Seeker gains some degree of insight into the real workings of existence, he
ceases to ask the questions which once seemed such urgently relevant ones to the whole
picture. Further, he sees that a situation can be changed by events which seemingly have no
relevance to it. The tale of the blanket spotlights this:

Nasrudin and his wife woke one night to hear two men fighting below their window. She
sent the Mulla out to find out what the trouble was. He wrapped his blanket over his
shoulders and went downstairs. As soon as he approached the men, one of them snatched his
one and only blanket. Then they both ran off.

‘What was the fight about, dear?’ his wife asked as he entered the bedroom.
‘About my blanket, apparently. As soon as they got that, they went away.’

A neighbour went to Nasrudin, asking to borrow his donkey. ‘It is out on loan,’ said the
Mulla.

‘But I can hear it bray, over there.’
‘Whom do you believe,’ said Nasrudin; ‘me or a donkey?’

Experience of this dimension of reality enables the Sufi to avoid selfishness and the
exercise of the mechanism of rationalisation — the way of thought which imprisons a part of
the mind. Nasrudin, in playing the part of a typical human being for a moment, brings this
point home to us:

A yokel came to the Mulla and said, ‘Your bull gored my cow. Am I entitled to any
compensation?’
‘No,’ said the Mulla at once; ‘the bull is not responsible for its actions.’
‘Sorry,’ said the crafty villager, ‘I put it the wrong way around. I meant that it was your cow
which was gored by my bull. But the situation is the same.’

‘Oh, no,’ said Nasrudin; ‘I think I had better look up my law-books to see whether there is
a precedent for this.’

Because the whole body of intellectual human thought is expressed in terms of external
reasoning, Nasrudin as the Sufi teacher returns again and again to an exposure of the falsity
of ordinary assessment. Attempts at putting into speech or writing the mystical experience
itself have never succeeded, because ‘those who know do not need it; those who do not know
cannot gain it without a bridge’. Two stories of some importance are often used in
conjunction with Sufi teaching to prepare the mind for experiences outside the usual habit-patterns.

In the first tale, Nasrudin is visited by a would-be disciple. The man, after many vicissitudes, arrives at the hut on the mountainside where the Mulla is sitting. Knowing that every single action of the illuminated Sufi is meaningful, the newcomer asks Nasrudin why he is blowing on his hands. ‘To warm myself in the cold, of course.’

Shortly afterward, Nasrudin pours out two bowls of soup, and blows on his own. ‘Why are you doing that, Master?’ asks the disciple. ‘To cool it, of course,’ says the teacher.

At this point the disciple leaves Nasrudin, unable to trust any longer a man who uses the same process to arrive at different results — heat and cold.

Examining a thing by means of itself — the mind by means of the mind, creation as it appears to a created but undeveloped being — cannot be done. Theorising based on such subjective methods may hold good in the short run, or for specific purposes. To the Sufi, however, such theories do not represent truth. While he obviously cannot provide an alternative in mere words, he can — and does — magnify or caricature the process in order to expose it. Once this is done, the door is open for seeking an alternative system of assessment of the correlation of phenomena.

‘Every day,’ says Nasrudin to his wife, ‘I am more and more amazed at the efficient way in which this world is organised — generally for the benefit of mankind.’

‘What exactly do you mean?’

‘Well, take camels for instance. Why do you suppose they have no wings?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Well, then; just imagine, if camels had wings, they might nest on the roofs of houses and destroy our peace by romping about above and spitting their cud down at us.’

The role of the Sufi teacher is stressed in his famous story of the sermon. It shows (among other things, as in all Nasrudin tales) that no start can be made on completely ignorant people. Further, that those who know need not be taught. Finally, that if there are some enlightened people in a community, there is no need for a new teacher.

Nasrudin was invited to give a discourse to the inhabitants of a nearby village. He mounted the rostrum and began.

‘O people, do you know what I am about to tell you?’

Some rowdies, seeking to amuse themselves, shouted, ‘No!’

‘In that case,’ said the Mulla with dignity, ‘I shall abstain from trying to instruct such an ignorant community.’

The following week, having obtained an assurance from the hooligans that they would not repeat their remarks, the elders of the village again prevailed upon Nasrudin to address them.

‘O people!’ he began again; ‘do you know what I am about to say to you?’

Some of the people, uncertain as to how to react, for he was gazing at them fiercely, muttered, ‘Yes.’

‘In that case,’ retorted Nasrudin, ‘there is no need for me to say more.’ He left the hall.

On the third occasion, when a deputation had again visited him and implored him to make one further effort, he presented himself before the assembly.

‘O people! Do you know what I am about to say?’

Since he seemed to demand a reply, the villagers shouted, ‘Some of us do, and some of us do not.’

‘In that case,’ said Nasrudin as he withdrew, ‘let those who know tell those who do not.’

In Sufism one cannot start the ‘work’ at a predetermined point. The teacher must be allowed to guide each would-be illuminate in his own way. Nasrudin was once approached
by a young man who asked him how long it would take before he became a Sufi.

He took the young man to the village. 'Before I answer your question, I want you to come with me, as I am going to see a music-master about learning to play the lute.'

At the musician's house Nasrudin inquired about the fees.

'Three pieces of silver for the first month. After that, one silver piece a month.'

'Splendid!' shouted the Mulla; 'I shall be back in a month's time!'

The sixth sense which the Sufi acquires, which is assumed by theoreticians to be a sense of complete prescience, of almost divine all-knowledge, is nothing of the kind. Like all the other senses it has its limitations. Its function is not to make the Perfected Man all-wise, but to enable him to fulfil a mission of greater perception and fuller life. He no longer suffers from the sense of uncertainty and incompleteness which is familiar to other people. The story of the boys and the tree is taken to convey this meaning:

Some boys wanted to run away with Nasrudin's slippers.

As he came along the road they crowded around him and said, 'Mulla, nobody can climb this tree!'

'Of course they can,' said Nasrudin. 'I shall show you how, then you will be able to do it.'

He was about to leave his slippers on the ground, but something warned him, and he tucked them into his belt before starting his climb.

The boys were discomfited. 'What are you taking your slippers for?' one shouted up to him.

'Since this tree has not been climbed, how do I know that there is not a road up there?' the Mulla answered.

When the Sufi is using his intuition, he cannot explain his actions plausibly.

The sixth sense also gives the possessor of baraka the means apparently to create certain happenings. This capacity comes to the Sufi by a means other than using formal reasoning:

'Allah will provide recompense,' said Nasrudin to a man who had been robbed.

'I don't see how it could work,' said the man.

Nasrudin immediately took him into a nearby mosque, and told him to stand in a corner.

Then the Mulla started to weep and wail, calling upon Allah to restore to the man his twenty silver coins. He made such a disturbance that the congregation made a collection and handed that sum to the man.

'You may not understand the means which operate in this world,' said Nasrudin; 'but perhaps you will understand what has happened in Allah's house.'

Participating in the working of reality is very different from intellectual extensions of observed fact. In order to demonstrate this, Nasrudin once took the slowest of lumbering oxen to a horse race which accepted all entrants.

Everyone laughed, for it is well known that an ox cannot run at any speed.

'Nonsense,' said the Mulla; 'it certainly will run very fast indeed, given a chance. Why, when it was a calf, you should have seen how it ran. Now, though it has had no practice, no occasion to run, it is fully grown. Why should it not run even faster?'

The story also combats the belief that just because a thing — or person — is old, it is necessarily better than something which is young. Sufism as a conscious and living activity is not tied to the past or hidebound tradition. Every Sufi who is living today represents every Sufi who has lived in the past, or who will ever live. The same amount of baraka is there, and immemorial tradition does not increase its romance, which remains constant.

A further depth of this tale points out that the disciple (the calf) may develop into someone with an apparently different function (the ox) from what one might have assumed. The clock cannot be turned back. Those who rely upon speculative theory cannot rely upon Sufism.

The absence of an intuitive faculty in mankind in general produces an almost hopeless
situation; and many Nasrudin tales emphasise this fact.

Nasrudin plays the part of the insensitive, ordinary dervish in the story of the bag of rice. One day he disagreed with the prior of a monastery at which he was staying. Shortly afterward, a bag of rice was missing. The chief ordered everyone to line up in the courtyard. Then he told them that the man who had stolen the rice had some grains of it in his beard.

‘This is an old trick, to make the guilty party touch his beard involuntarily,’ thought the real thief, and stood firm.

Nasrudin, on the other hand, thought, ‘The prior is out to revenge himself upon me. He must have planted rice in my beard!’ He tried to brush it off as inconspicuously as he could.

As his fingers combed his beard, he realised that everyone was looking at him.

‘I knew, somehow, that he would trap me sooner or later,’ said Nasrudin.

What some people take to be ‘hunches’ are often really the products of neurosis and imagination.

The spirit of scepticism about metaphysical matters is by no means confined to the West. In the East it is not uncommon for people to say that they feel that discipleship in a mystical school will deprive them of their autonomy, or otherwise rob them of something. Such people are generally ignored by Sufis, because they have not yet reached the stage where they realise that they are already prisoners of a far worse tyranny (that of the Old Villain) than anything which could be devised for them in a mystical school. There is one succinct Nasrudin joke, however, which points this out:

‘I hear a burglar downstairs,’ the Mulla’s wife whispered to him one night.

‘Not a sound,’ replied Nasrudin. ‘We have nothing for him to steal. With any luck, he might leave something behind.’

Nasrudin, burglar of many empty houses, always leaves something behind — if the inhabitants recognise it.

In Sufism, practical methods of instruction are essential. This is partly because Sufism is an active undertaking; partly because, although people pay lip service to truths when they are told them, the reality of the truth does not usually penetrate beyond their discursive faculty.

Nasrudin was mending the roof one day when a man called him down into the street. When he went down he asked the man what he wanted.

‘Money.’

‘Why did you not say so when you called to me?’

‘I was ashamed to beg.’

‘Come up to the roof.’

When they reached the roof, Nasrudin started to lay the tiles again. The man coughed, and Nasrudin, without looking up, said, ‘I have no money for you.’

‘What! You could have told me that without bringing me up here.’

‘Then how would you have been able to recompense me for bringing me down?’

A great many things are instantly obvious to the Sufi, which cannot be arrived at by the average man. An allegory is used to explain some of the amazing acts of Sufi initiates, based upon supersensory powers. To the Sufi, these are no more miraculous than any of the ordinary senses are to the layman. Just how they work cannot be described; but a rough analogy can be drawn.

‘Mankind is asleep,’ said Nasrudin, when he had been accused of falling asleep at court one day. ‘The sleep of the sage is powerful, and the “wakefulness” of the average man is almost useless to anyone.’

The King was annoyed.
The next day, after a heavy meal, Nasrudin fell asleep, and the King had him carried into an adjoining room. When the court was about to rise, Nasrudin, still slumbering, was brought back to the audience chamber.

‘You have been asleep again,’ said the King.
‘I have been as awake as I needed to be.’
‘Very well, then, tell me what happened while you were out of the room.’

To everyone’s astonishment, the Mulla repeated a long and involved story that the King had been reciting.

‘How did you do it, Nasrudin?’

‘Simple,’ said the Mulla; ‘I could tell by the expression on the face of the King that he was about to tell that old story again. That is why I went to sleep for its duration.’

Nasrudin and his wife are presented in the next story as two ordinary people, who are man and wife, yet separated in understanding of each other by the fact that ordinary human communication is faulty and insincere. The communication between Sufis is of a different order. Further, it is hopeless to try to use the crudity and dishonesty of ordinary communication for mystical purposes. At least, the various methods of communication are combined by Sufis to produce an altogether different signalling system.

The Mulla’s wife was angry with him. She accordingly brought him his soup boiling hot, and did not warn him that it might scald him.

But she was hungry herself, and as soon as the soup was served, she took a gulp of it. Tears of pain came to her eyes. But she still hoped that the Mulla would burn himself.

‘My dear, what is the matter?’ asked Nasrudin.

‘I was only thinking about my poor old mother. She used to like this soup, when she was alive.’

Nasrudin took a scalding mouthful from his own bowl.

Tears coursed down his cheek.

‘Are you crying, Nasrudin?’

‘Yes, I am crying at the thought that your old mother is dead, poor thing; and left someone like you in the land of the living.’

Seen from the standpoint of reality, which is the Sufi one, other metaphysical systems contain several severe drawbacks, some of which are worth considering. What a mystic has to say of his experiences, when reported in words, always constitutes a nearly useless distortion of fact. Furthermore, this distortion can be repeated by others impressively enough to appear profound; but it has in itself no illuminative value. For the Sufi, mysticism is not a matter of going somewhere and gaining enlightenment, and then trying to express something of it. It is an undertaking which correlates with his very being and produces a link between all humanity and the extra dimension of understanding.

All these points — and several more — are made concurrently in one of the Nasrudin tales: The Mulla had returned to his village from the imperial capital, and the villagers gathered around to hear what he had to say of his adventures.

‘At this time,’ said Nasrudin, ‘I only want to say that the King spoke to me.’

There was a gasp of excitement. A citizen of their village had actually been spoken to by the King! The titbit was more than enough for the yokels. They dispersed to pass on the wonderful news.

But the least sophisticated of all hung back, and asked the Mulla exactly what the King had said.

‘What he said — quite distinctly, mind you, for anyone to hear — was “Get out of my way!”’

The simpleton was more than satisfied. His heart expanded with joy. Had he not, after all,
heard words actually used by the King; and seen the man to whom they had been addressed?

The story is popularly current among the folk tales of Nasrudin, and its obvious moral is aimed against name droppers. But the Sufic meaning is important in preparing the dervish mind for the experiences which replace superficial ones like this.

It is more than interesting to observe the effect of Nasrudin tales upon people in general. Those who prefer the more ordinary emotions of life will cling to their obvious meaning, and insist upon treating them as jokes. These include the people who compile or read small booklets of the more obvious jests, and who show visible uneasiness when the metaphysical or ‘upsetting’ stories are told them.

Nasrudin himself answers these people in one of his shortest jokes:
‘They say your jokes are full of hidden meanings, Nasrudin. Are they?’
‘No.’
‘Why not?’
‘Because I have never told the truth in my life, even once; neither will I ever be able to do so.’

The ordinary individual may say, with a sense of profundity, that all humour is really serious; that every joke carries a message on a philosophical level. But this message system is not that of Nasrudin. The cynical humorist, it may be supposed, like the Greek philosopher, may point out absurdities in our thoughts and actions. This is not the role of Nasrudin either — because the overall effect of Nasrudin is something more profound. Since the Mulla stories all have a coherent relationship with one another and with a form of reality which the Sufi is teaching, the cycle is a part of a context of conscious development which cannot be correctly related to the sniping of the ordinary humorist or the sporadic satiricism of the formal thinker.

When a Nasrudin tale is read and digested, something is happening. It is this consciousness of happening and continuity which is central to Sufism.

In reply to the question, ‘What method lacks Sufism?’ Khoja Anis said, ‘Without continuity, there is no Sufism; without being and becoming, there is no Sufism; without interrelation, there is no Sufism.’

This truth is to an extent transmitted by words. Better still, it is partially conveyed by the mutual action of the words and the reaction of the hearer. But the Sufi experience comes by means of a mechanism which takes over at the point where words leave off — the point of action, of ‘working with’ a master.

Nasrudin once illustrated this in his famous ‘Chinese’ story. He had gone to China, where he gathered a circle of disciples, whom he was preparing for enlightenment. Those who became illuminated immediately ceased attending his lectures.

A party of his undeveloped followers, desiring more illumination, travelled from Persia to China to continue their studies with him.

After their first lecture, he received them.
‘Why, Mulla,’ one of them asked, ‘do you lecture on secret words which we (unlike the Chinese) can understand? They are namidanan and hichmaluminist! They mean, in Persian, merely “I don’t know” and “Nobody knows”.’

‘What would you have me do instead — lie my head off?’ asked Nasrudin. PUTOS

Sufis use technical terms to render an approximate equivalent of mysteries which are experiences not to be verbalised. Until the Seeker is ready to ‘catch’ the experience, he is protected from making the mistake of trying to investigate it intellectually by the very use of these technicalities. Itself the result of conscious specialisation, Sufism has discovered that there is no short cut to enlightenment. This does not mean that the enlightenment may take
a long time. It does mean that the Sufi must stick to the Path.

Nasrudin, playing the part of the man who seeks a short cut, figures in a joke which conveys this idea:

It was a wonderful morning, and the Mulla was walking home. Why, he thought to himself, should he not take a short cut through the beautiful woodland beside the dusty road?

‘A day of days, a day for fortunate pursuits!’ he exclaimed to himself, plunging into the greenery.

Almost at once, he found himself lying at the bottom of a concealed pit.

‘It is just as well I took this short cut,’ he reflected, as he lay there; ‘because if things like this can happen in the midst of such beauty — what catastrophe might not have developed on that uncompromisingly tiresome highway?’

Under somewhat similar circumstances, the Mulla was once seen investigating an empty nest:

‘What are you doing, Mulla?’

‘Looking for eggs.’

‘There are no eggs in last year’s nest!’

‘Don’t be too sure,’ said Nasrudin; ‘if you were a bird and wanted to protect your eggs, would you build a new nest, with everyone watching?’

This is another of the Mulla’s tales which appear in *Don Quixote*. The fact that this joke can be read in at least two ways might deter the formalist thinker, but provides the dervish with the opportunity of understanding the duality of real being, which is obscured by conventional human thinking. Hence what is its absurdity to the intellectual becomes its strength to the intuitively perceptive.

Contact between Sufis sometimes takes place by means of signs, and communication can be carried on through methods which are not only unknown, but could appear incomprehensible, to the mind conditioned in the ordinary way. This, of course, does not prevent the pattern-thinker from trying to make sense out of what seems nonsense. In the end he gets the wrong interpretation, though it may satisfy him.

Another mystic stopped Nasrudin in the street, and pointed at the sky. He meant, ‘There is only one truth, which covers all.’

Nasrudin was accompanied at the time by a scholar, who was seeking the rationale of Sufism. He said to himself, ‘This weird apparition is mad. Perhaps Nasrudin will take some precautions against him.’

Sure enough, the Mulla rummaged in his knapsack and brought out a coil of rope. The scholar thought, ‘Excellent, we will be able to seize and bind up the madman if he becomes violent.’

Nasrudin’s action had, in fact, meant, ‘Ordinary humanity tries to reach that “sky” by methods as unsuitable as this rope.’

The ‘madman’ laughed and walked away. ‘Well done,’ said the scholar; ‘you saved us from him.’

This story has given rise to a Persian proverb, ‘A question about the sky — the answer about a rope.’ The proverb, often invoked by non-Sufi clerics or intellectuals, is often used in a contrary sense to its initiatory one.

Knowledge cannot be attained without effort — a fact which is fairly generally accepted. But the ludicrous methods which are used to project effort, and the absurdity of the efforts themselves, effectively close the gateway to knowledge for people who try to transfer the learning systems of one field into that of another.

Yogurt is made by adding a small quantity of old yogurt to a larger measure of milk. The
action of the *bacillus bulgaricus* in the seeding portion of yogurt will in time convert the whole into a mass of new yogurt.

One day some friends saw Nasrudin down on his knees beside a pond. He was adding a little old yogurt to the water. One of the men said, ‘What are you trying to do, Nasrudin?’

‘I am trying to make yogurt.’

‘But you can’t make yogurt in that way!’

‘Yes, I know; but just supposing it takes!’

Almost anyone will smile at the idiocy of the ignorant Mulla. Some people believe that many forms of humour depend for their enjoyment value on the knowledge that one would not be as much of a fool as the person laughed at. Millions of people who would not try to make yogurt with water would attempt to penetrate esoteric thinking by equally futile methods.

One tale attributed to Mulla Nasrudin goes a long way toward distinguishing between the mystical quest in itself and the form which is based upon lesser, ethical or formally religious criteria:

A Chinese sage is represented as having said to Nasrudin, ‘Each person must regard his behaviour as he would regard that of the other. You must have in your heart for the other what you have in your heart for yourself.’

This is not a paraphrase of the Christian Golden Rule, though it contains the same sentiment. It is, in fact, a quotation from Confucius (born 551 B.C.).

‘This would be an astonishing remark,’ replied the Mulla, ‘for anyone who paused to realise that what a man desired for himself is likely to be as undesirable in the end as what he would desire for his enemy, let alone his friend.

‘What he must have in his heart for others is not what he wants for himself, it is what *should* be for him, and what *should* be for all. This is known only when inner truth is known.’

Another version of this reply says tersely, ‘A bird ate poisonous berries, which did it no harm. One day it collected some for its meal, and sacrificed its lunch by feeding the fruit to its friend, a horse.’

Another Sufi master, Amini of Samarkand, comments tersely on this theme, as did Rumi before him: ‘A man wished another man to kill him. Naturally he wished this for everyone else, since he was a “good” man. The “good” man is, of course, the man who wants for others what he wants for himself. The single problem of this is that what he wants is often the last thing which he needs.’

Again there is the insistence in Sufism upon the reality which must precede the ethic — not the ethic merely set up in isolation and assumed to have some sort of universal validity which even general consideration can show to be absent.

The Nasrudin stories cannot, incidentally, be read as a system of philosophy which is intended to persuade people to drop their beliefs and embrace its precepts. By its very construction, Sufism cannot be preached. It does not rely upon undermining other systems and offering a substitute, or a more plausible one. Because Sufi teaching is only partially expressed in words, it can never attempt to combat philosophical systems on their own terms. To attempt to do so would be to try to make Sufism accord with artificialities — an impossibility. By its own contention, metaphysics cannot be approached in this way; so Sufism relies upon the composite impact — the ‘scatter’ dissemination. The would-be Sufi may be prepared or partially enlightened by Nasrudin. But in order to ‘mature’ he will have to engage in the practical work, and benefit from the actual presence of a master and of other Sufis. Anything else is referred to by the pithy term, ‘trying to transmit a kiss by personal messenger’. It is a kiss, sure enough; but it is not what was intended.
If Sufism is accepted to be the methodology whereby the injunctions of religious teachers may be given their real expression, how is the would-be Sufi to find a source of instruction for an instructor he must have?

The true master cannot prevent the growth and development of supposedly mystical schools which accept pupils and perpetuate the counterfeit version of illuminative teaching. Still less, if we are to see the facts objectively, is the tyro able to distinguish between a true and a false school. 'The false coin exists only because there is such a thing as true gold,' runs the Sufi dictum — but how can the true be distinguished from the false by someone who has no training in so doing?

The beginner is saved from complete insensitivity because within him there is a vestigial capacity to react to 'true gold'. And the teacher, recognising the innate capacity, will be able to use it as a receiving apparatus for his signals. True, in the earlier stages, the signals transmitted by the teacher will have to be arranged in such a way as to be perceptible to the inefficient and probably distorting mechanism of the receiver. But the combination of the two elements provides a basis for a working arrangement.

At this stage the teacher marks time to a great extent. Several Nasrudin tales, in addition to their entertainment value, emphasise the initial seemingly incomplete harmony between the teacher and the taught which occupies a preparatory period:

A number of would-be disciples came to the Mulla one day and asked him to give them a lecture. 'Very well,' he said, 'follow me to the lecture hall.'

Obediently they lined up behind Nasrudin, who mounted his donkey back to front, and moved off. At first the youths were confused, later they remembered that they should not question even the slightest action of a teacher. Finally they could not bear the jeers of the ordinary passers-by.

Sensing their unease, the Mulla stopped and stared at them. The boldest of them all approached him.

'Mulla, we do not quite understand why you are riding that donkey face to tail.'

'Quite simple,' said the Mulla. 'You see, if you were to walk in front of me, this would be disrespect to me. On the other hand, if I had my back to you, it would mean disrespect toward you. This is the sole possible compromise.'

To someone whose perception is sharpened, more than one dimension of this and other stories becomes apparent. The net effect of experiencing a tale at several different levels at once is to awaken the innate capacity for understanding in a comprehensive, more objective manner than is possible to the ordinary, painstaking and inefficient way of thinking. The Sufi, for instance, sees in this story, at one and the same time, messages and linkages with the other sphere of being which not only help him on his way but also give him positive information.

To a small extent the ordinary thinker may be able to experience (mutatis mutandis) the different perspectives by considering them separately. For instance, Nasrudin is able to observe the pupils by sitting back to front. He is unconcerned as to what other people will think of him, while the undeveloped students are still sensitive to public (and uninformed) opinion. He may be sitting back to front, but he is still mounted, while they are not. Nasrudin, in violating the ordinary conventions, even making himself appear ridiculous, is stating that he is different from the average person. Since, too, he has been along that path before, he does not need to face forward, to look where he is going. Again, in that position, uncomfortable by average standards, he is able to keep his equilibrium. He is, again, teaching by doing and being, not by words.

Such considerations, transposed into the field of metaphysics and then experienced concurrently, provide the total yet composite impact of the Nasrudin story upon the
progressing mystic.

Nasrudin’s guile, made necessary by the need to slip through the mesh which has been arranged by the Old Villain, appears in one story after another. His seeming madness is characteristic of the Sufi, whose actions may be inexplicable and appear mad to the onlooker. In story after story he stresses the Sufi assertion that nothing can be had without paying for it. This paying may take one of many forms of sacrifice — of cherished ideas, of money, of ways of doing things. This latter point is essential because the Sufi quest is impossible if the areas employed in the journey are already occupied by elements which prevent the journey being pursued.

And yet, in the end, Nasrudin gets away scot-free. This indicates the fact that although deprivation in the early stages of Sufism may appear to be ‘paying’, in the true sense the Seeker does not pay at all. He does not pay, that is to say, anything of ultimate worth.

The Sufi attitude toward money is a special one, far removed from the shallower, philosophical or theological assumption that money is the root of evil, or that faith is in some way opposed to money.

One day Nasrudin asked a wealthy man for some money.

‘What do you want it for?’

‘To buy an elephant.’

‘If you have no money you will not be able to maintain an elephant.’

‘I asked for money, not advice!’

The link here is with the elephant in the dark. Nasrudin needs money for the ‘work’. The rich man, Nasrudin realises, cannot readjust his ideas to see how the money would be spent; he would need a plausible scheme of finance to be put before him. Nasrudin uses the Sufi word ‘elephant’ to stress this. Naturally the rich man does not understand.

Nasrudin is poor; the word being the same one which is used by Sufis to denote one of their number — Fakir. When he does in fact obtain money, he does so by a method, and uses it in a way which is incomprehensible to the formalist thinker:

One day the Mulla’s wife was upbraiding him for being poor.

‘If you are a man of religion,’ she said, ‘you should pray for money. If that is your employment, you should be paid for it, just as anyone else is paid.’

‘Very well, I shall do just that.’

Going into the garden, Nasrudin shouted at the top of his voice, ‘O God! I have served you all these years without financial gain. My wife now says that I should be paid. May I therefore, and at once, have a hundred gold pieces of my outstanding salary?’

A miser who lived in the next house was at that moment on his roof counting his riches. Thinking that he would make a fool of Nasrudin, he threw down in front of him a bag containing exactly a hundred golden dinars.

‘Thank you,’ said Nasrudin, and hurried into the house.

He showed the coins to his wife, who was very impressed.

‘Forgive me,’ she said, ‘I never really believed that you were a saint, but I now see that you are.’

During the next day or two, the neighbour saw all manner of luxuries being delivered at the Mulla’s house. He began to grow restive. He presented himself at Nasrudin’s door.

‘Know, fellow,’ said the Mulla, ‘I am a saint. What do you want?’

‘I want my money back. I threw down that bag of gold, not God.’

‘You may have been the instrument, but the gold did not come as a result of my asking you for it.’
The miser was beside himself. 'I shall take you at once to the magistrate, and we will have justice.'

Nasrudin agreed. As soon as they were outside, Nasrudin said to the miser, 'I am dressed in rags. If I appear beside you before the magistrate, the disparity of our appearances may well prejudice the court in your favour.'

'Very well,' snarled the miser, 'take my robe and I will wear yours.'

They had gone a few yards farther when Nasrudin said, 'You are riding and I am on foot. If we appear like this before the magistrate he may well think that he should give the verdict to you.'

'I know who is going to win this case, no matter what he looks like! You ride on my horse.'

Nasrudin mounted the horse, while his neighbour walked behind.

When their turn came, the miser explained what had happened to the judge.

'And what have you got to say to this charge?' the judge asked of the Mulla.

'Your honour. This man is a miser, and he is also suffering from delusions. He has the illusion that he gave me the money. In true reality, it came from a higher source. It merely appeared to this man to have been given by him.'

'But how can you prove that?'

'There is nothing simpler. His obsessions take the form of thinking that things belong to him when they do not. Just ask him to whom this robe belongs...' Nasrudin paused and fingered the robe which he was wearing.

'That is mine!' shouted the miser.

'Now,' said Nasrudin; 'ask him whose horse I was riding when I came to this court...'

'You were riding my horse!' screamed the plaintiff.

'Case dismissed,' said the judge.

Money is looked upon by the Sufis as an active factor in the relationship between people, and between people and their environment. Since the ordinary perception of reality is shortsighted, it is not surprising that the normal human use of money is equally limited in perspective. The joke about the frogs in the Nasrudin collection explains something of this flavour:

A passer-by saw Nasrudin throwing money into a pool, and asked him why he was doing it.

'I was on my donkey. He had slipped and was slithering down the side of this pool, about to overbalance and fall. There seemed no hope that either of us would survive a serious fall. Suddenly the frogs in the water began to croak. This frightened the donkey. He reared up and by this means he was able to save himself.

'Should the frogs not benefit from having saved our lives?'

Whereas on the ordinary plane this joke is taken to show Nasrudin as a fool, the deeper meanings are direct reflections of Sufi financial attitudes. The frogs represent people, who cannot use money. Nasrudin rewards them because of the general rule that a reward follows a good action. That the croaking of the frogs was accidental, seemingly, is another factor to ponder. In one respect, at least, the frogs were less blameworthy than ordinary people would be. They probably did not think that they were capable of using money, correctly or otherwise. This story is also used in the sense of 'casting pearls before swine', in answer to a questioner who asked a Sufi why he did not make his knowledge and wisdom available to all and sundry, and especially to people who (like the frogs) had showed him kindness and what they thought to be understanding.

In order to understand the wider aspects of Sufi thought, and before progress can be made along lines outside the web cast over humanity by the Old Villain, the dimensions provided by Nasrudin must be visited. If Nasrudin is like a Chinese box, with compartment within
compartment, at least he offers numerous simple points of entry into a new way of thinking. To be familiar with the experience of Nasrudin is to be able to unlock many doors in the more baffling texts and practices of the Sufis.

As one's perceptions increase, so does the power of extracting nutrition from the Nasrudin tales. They provide for the beginner what the Sufis call a 'blow' — calculated impact which operates in a special way, preparing the mind for the Sufi undertaking.

Looked upon as nutrition, the Nasrudin blow is called a coconut. This term is derived from a Sufi statement: ‘A monkey threw a coconut from a treetop at a hungry Sufi, and it hit him on the leg. He picked it up; drank the milk; ate the flesh; made a bowl from the shell.’

In one sense, they fulfil the function of the literal blow which occurs in one of the most terse of the Mulla tales:

Nasrudin handed a boy a pitcher, told him to fetch water from a well, and gave him a clout on the ear. ‘And mind you don’t drop it!’ he shouted.

An onlooker said, 'How can you strike someone who has done nothing wrong?’

‘I suppose,’ said Nasrudin, ‘that you would prefer me to strike him after he has broken the pitcher, when the pitcher and water are both lost? In my way the boy remembers, and the pot and contents are also saved.’

Since Sufism is a comprehensive work, it is not only the Seeker who must learn, like the boy. The work, like the pitcher and the water, has its own rules, outside the mundane methods of arts and sciences.

Nobody can set off on the Sufi path unless he has the potentiality for it. If he tries to do so, the possibilities of error are too great for him to have a chance of bringing back the water without breaking the pot.

Sometimes Nasrudin stories are arranged in the form of aphorisms, of which the following are examples:

It is not in fact so.

Truth is something which I never speak.

I do not answer all the questions; only those which the know-alls secretly ask themselves.

If your donkey allows someone to steal your coat — steal his saddle.

A sample is a sample. Yet nobody would buy my house when I showed them a brick from it.

People clamour to taste my vintage vinegar. But it would not be forty years old if I let them, would it?

To save money, I made my donkey go without food. Unfortunately the experiment was interrupted by its death. It died before it got used to having no food at all.

People sell talking parrots for huge sums. They never pause to compare the possible value of a thinking parrot.