



The lantern and the whirl

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On Rumi, the selfish self, and what medicine does to the person inside the physician



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I stood next to my friend Dr Manoj Singrakhia observing closely his new creation. When my eyes adjusted to the glare of the focus lights in his studio, I saw again what had drawn me to it in the first place. It was a frame with a lantern in the centre, suspended with its amber light pressing against the pale dissolving figure. On the left side of the frame was a whirling dervish spinning with robes flinging outwards. One of his arms was raised, as if he was attempting to release something into the air. On the right, in careful handwriting, were the words of Rumi: *Once you conquer*

your selfish self, all your Darkness will change to Light.

I stepped a few feet behind. I started appreciating the painting as a whole. The painting gave a vibe of serenity and peace. Images like this, I believe, refuse to leave you and gently haunt you until you explore the meaning within.

I looked at it for a long time. I was not sure what my colleague was trying to tell me, or whether he was trying to tell me anything at all. But the image did not leave me alone,

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and images that refuse to leave us are usually telling us something we are not quite ready to hear.

The whirling dervish - the Sufi mystic engaged in sema, the ritual of turning - is one of the oldest images of spiritual dissolution in the world. I have seen them in many posters hosting the Sufi nights. It always appeared mystical. The dervish spins, with his conical felt hat, not to dazzle but to empty. The rhythmic turning, with hands raised skywards, is a technique for leaving the self behind: for loosening, through motion, exhaustion and surrender, the grip of the ego on the soul. What the Sufis have understood, centuries before psychology gave it a vocabulary, is that the self we cling to most fiercely is often the self that most needs releasing. The selfish self, that Rumi names, is not merely greed or vanity. It is the accumulated crust of habit, defence, and performance that builds up over a life, in an absolutely chaotic manner, accumulating with particular force over a career in medicine.

After years in medicine, I have come to recognize the version of myself that the profession expects. It is calm, careful, and confident. It speaks with restraint, maintains a certain distance and decorum with the chair where I sit, and avoids showing too much uncertainty or emotion. It does not break down in the ward or let a patient see how deeply something has unsettled it. This professional self is not exactly false, but it is shaped over time, with every layer adding a unique set of features, like a mask. We learn it early, practise it constantly, and wear it so long that it can begin to feel inseparable from who we really are.

The lantern in the painting hangs in the space between the figure still turning and the one beginning to fade, and I find myself drawn back to it again and again. According to the Sufi thought, I am told, a lantern often symbolizes the light that helps the seeker find the way. It is quiet and a constant glow.

It does not force itself on anyone; it simply makes the path visible. In that tradition, it is also closely linked to the teacher or guide, someone who has travelled part of the path already and now helps illuminate it for others. Which is, when I allow myself to think about it honestly, what a physician is supposed to be.

A good doctor is not only someone who knows what to do, or someone with authority. A good doctor is also someone who brings reassurance, clarity, and human warmth to a frightened patient.

A physician ought to be one who carries the light into the room where someone is frightened, agitated, confused and in pain, and holds it steadily enough so that the patient can begin to see again. That is a description of medicine that medical school does not quite offer, and that the system we work within does not particularly reward. It requires being present to a person rather than to a problem. It requires, in the language of Rumi, the willingness to loosen the selfish self - the defended, time-pressured, outcome-focused professional self-long enough to actually be in the room with another human being.

As I appreciated the painting, I could observe a dissolving figure. It is not quite there. It occupies the space between the dervish and the lantern as a kind of threshold presence - neither fully formed nor fully gone. I recognise it. Not because I have seen it in a painting before, but because I have felt it in the ward: the sensation, in certain consultations, of the professional self becoming briefly insufficient. There are situations where a patient weeps and is helpless, and there is nothing to prescribe. There are no good answers for the questions which the family asks. An old man sits in silence after a diagnosis, and what he needs is not information but company. In those moments, the constructed self - the one built for competence - is simply not equal to the

room. Something else is required. Something less defended and more present.

The Sufis called the process *fanaa* - the annihilation of the ego in the presence of something larger. I am not claiming that medicine is mysticism. But there are moments in clinical practice that ask that we stop being the physician-in-performance to simply be a person alongside another person who is suffering. Yes, those moments are brief. They cannot be sustained. But they are - I have come to believe among the most genuinely useful things a doctor can offer: a solace.

My colleague, Dr Manoj Singrakhia, who painted the dervish and the lantern, left clinical practice some years ago. I believed he found, in paint, canvas, and silence, a way of paying attention that surgery had eventually stopped providing. I used to think this was a kind of cocoon into which he was retreating. Looking at his watercolour now, I am less certain. Perhaps what he found was not an exit from medicine's essential question but a different way of living inside it: how do we hold the light without losing the person who is holding it?

Rumi's line may sound simple, but it carries a deeper meaning. It does not ask us to erase ourselves. It asks us not to let fear, ego, or the need to always look strong rule us. In medicine, this is important. Patients

do not just need a doctor's skill. They need a doctor's attention, and that is only possible when we lower our guard a little. The lantern gives light. The dervish turns. The waiting figure remains suspended between disappearance and becoming, as though transformation were less a moment of grace than a practice of surrender.

The painting hangs above my desk now, and before each ward round, I find myself looking at it again. It reminds me how easily the professional self hardens into the habit of wearing the mask, and how necessary it is to loosen that grip before entering the suffering of another person. I have not conquered the selfish self. I only know, with increasing age and greying hairs, how often it speaks in the language of efficiency, certainty, and control. Yet the patient rarely needs those alone. More often, they also need a doctor who can remain present without hiding entirely behind the mask of competence.

Perhaps that is what the painting has been trying to tell me all along: that the deepest task in medicine is not only to bring knowledge into the room, but to bring an undiminished self. To hold the lantern, glowing, without becoming hollow. To stand beside suffering without allowing the soul to grow numb. And to remember, again and again, that before we are physicians to others, we must remain answerable to the person within.