

Short Islamic Stories

The Woman Who Was The Master Of Bayazid Bestami

It is said that when Bayazid Bestami was asked who his master was, he explained:

She was an old woman. One day, I was possessed by such ecstasy and yearning and sense of unity that not even a hair of anything else could be found in me. In this selfless mood, I went for a stroll in the desert, where I happened to meet an elderly lady burdened with a bag of flour. She asked me to carry the flour for her, but I was incapable of taking it, so I beckoned to a lion to take the load. The lion came up to me and I laid the sack upon its back. I then asked the old lady what she intended to say to the townspeople since I did not want them to apprehend who I was.

"I'll tell them," she replied, "that I met a vain tyrant."

"What are talking about?" I exclaimed. The lady explained thus, first asking: "Has the lion been put to trouble or not?" "No," I answered. "Except for the fact that you burden down those whom God Himself has not burdened!" she objected. "Is that not oppression?" "So it is", I admitted. "And, despite this", she continued, "still you desire the townspeople to know that you have subjected a lion and are a miracle worker. Is that not vanity?" "Yes, it is", I confessed. So I repented, experiencing abasement from my former exaltation. Indeed that old woman's words performed the function of a spiritual guide and master for me.

Source: Attar, Tadhkerat al-auliya

The Shepherd

Once upon a time, there lived in Basra an old man whose only occupation was caring for and loving his only son who was a handsome young man. The old man invested all his money on his son's education. The young man went away for a few years and acquired an education at a well-known university under the great scholars of that age.

The day had arrived for the son to return from his studies and the old man waited at the door for his son. When the son came and met his father, the old man looked into his eyes and felt great disappointment. "What have you learnt my son?" he asked, "I have learnt everything there was to be learnt, father", he said. "But have you learnt what cannot be taught?" asked the father. "Go, my son and learn what cannot be taught", said the old man.

The young man went back to his master and asked him to teach him what cannot be taught. "Go away to the mountains with these four hundred sheep and come back when they are one thousand", said the master. The young man went to the mountains and became a shepherd. There for the first time he encountered a silence. He had no one to talk to. The sheep did not understand his language. In his desperation, he would talk to them but they would look back at him as if to say he was stupid. Slowly but surely he began to forget all his worldly knowledge, his ego, his pride and he became quiet like the sheep and great wisdom and humility came to him. At the end of two years when the number of sheep had grown to one thousand, he returned to his master and fell on his feet. "Now you have learnt what cannot be taught," said the master.

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