



## NURBAKHS, JAVAD

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**NURBAKHS, JAVAD** (b. Kerman, 10 December 1926; d. Sulgrave, 10 October 2008). Master of the Ne‘mat-Allāhī Sufi Order for fifty-five years, from 1953 until his passing, Sufi poet and author, and professor of psychiatry. Also known by his Sufi sobriquet Nūr ‘Ali Šāh, sometimes extended to Nūr ‘Ali Šāh-e Kermāni or Tāni, to distinguish him from an eighteenth-century predecessor from Esfahan who also had this sobriquet (Nurbakhsh, 1995, 175-6).

### *Life*

Javad Nurbakhsh was born in Kerman, southeastern Iran, on 10 December 1926. His father was a descendant of Kamāl al-Din Nurbakš, a seventeenth century leader of the Nurbakšīyya Sufi Order whose tomb in Kerman is now part of the Ne‘mat-Allāhī Order’s center of worship (*kānaqāh*) in that city. Nurbakhsh was initiated into the Ne‘mat-Allāhī Order in Kerman at the age of sixteen. He recalls in a video interview made shortly before his passing how he actively sought a spiritual guide during his teens (see the “[Library of Discourses](#)” on his website). He was admitted to the School of Medicine at the University of Tehran, from which he graduated in 1952. During his time in Tehran, Nurbakhsh developed a close relationship with Munes ‘Ali Šāh Dhu‘l Riyāsatayn, who was then the Master, or Pole (*quṭb*), of the Nimatullahi Order. Munes ‘Ali Šāh appointed Nurbakhsh his deputy, or *šayk*, at the Tehran *kānaqāh* when he was only twenty years old (Maḏhari, 1994, 95-6). He also authorized him to initiate two individuals into the order in Tehran while he



was present there himself, which in the Ne‘mat-Allāhī Order is usually reserved for those who have the rank of *šayḵ al-mašāyeḵ* (“Foremost Shaikh”), the highest rank short of the *quṭb* (Maḏhari, 1994, 100-101; Rothschild, 1999, 52-60). When in 1952 his medical training required relocation to Bam, Nurbakhsh was put in charge of the Ne‘mat-Allāhī Order in southeastern Iran (Maḏhari, 1994, 105-6; Rothschild, 1999, 73-76). When Munes ‘Ali Šāh passed away in 1953, Nurbakhsh succeeded him as Master of the Ne‘mat-Allāhī Sufi Order. Soon afterwards he obtained the signed agreement of his succession as Master from all the other leading representatives of the order, as well as Munes ‘Ali Šāh’s family’s representatives (Maḏhari, 1994, 110-16, including the text of the signed agreement on pp. 110-11, and a photograph of it on p. 116). This has no doubt contributed to the fact that no competing branch stemming from the spiritual lineage of Munes ‘Ali Šāh has ever emerged, making it one of the smoothest successions to the leadership of a Sufi order in recent centuries, despite Nurbakhsh being only twenty-six years old at the time.

Nurbakhsh who, unlike most of his Sufi peers, had benefited from a modern education, led a revival of the order. A much more prominent place was given to the mystical writings of medieval Persian Sufism in preference to the religious scholarship with which most of the previous generation of Ne‘mat-Allāhī Sufis had been preoccupied. This was evident in the modern editions of medieval works that Nurbakhsh published, and also in his own original writings, mostly in the same long-established genres of Sufi literature and not the Islamic religious sciences (on which see also below). Nurbakhsh led this revival of Sufism not only intellectually, but also socially, through the establishment of more than sixty new *kānaqāhs* of the Ne‘mat-Allāhī Order across Iran, and by fostering good relations with other Iranian mystical brotherhoods, especially the Qāderi Sufis and the [Ahl-e Ḥaqq](#) in Iranian Kurdistan (Maḏhari, 1994, 95-8).

At the time of his succession as Master of the Ne‘mat-Allāhī Order, Nurbakhsh was also already head of the only hospital in Bam. In 1963, he obtained a postdoctoral diploma in psychiatry at the Sorbonne in Paris, and a few years after returning to Iran he was appointed professor of psychiatry at the School of Medicine of Tehran University, a position which he held until his retirement in 1977 (Maḏhari, 1994, 123-5). His professional positions also included the presidency of the Iranian Association of Psychiatrists between 1974 and 1976 (for a comprehensive list of positions, see Zokai, 2003, 323-5). After hosting the World Congress of Psychiatry for the first time in Iran, in which many

American psychiatrists participated, Nurbakhsh was also in 1977 elected an honorary member of the American Psychiatric Association for services to psychiatry (Mazhari, 1994, 122).

Under Nurbakhsh, the Ne'mat-Allāhī Order became international. This process began initially through links with scholars and diplomats residing or travelling through Iran. With his modern educational background and experience of Paris, Nurbakhsh developed longstanding friendships with the scholars Henri Corbin, Toshiko Izutsu, and Annemarie Schimmel, and the diplomats Sir Peter Ramsbotham (Great Britain) and James George (Canada), among others. His friendship with Schimmel culminated in Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications publishing her collection of poetry *Nightingales under the Snow* (Schimmel, 1994). A number of American and European spiritual seekers also came to see him in Iran during the sixties and seventies, which led to the establishment in 1975, in both London and San Francisco, of the first two of eventually more than thirty new *kānaqāhs* outside of Iran during his tenure as Master.

Nurbakhsh moved permanently from Iran after the 1979 revolution, and eventually settled in London. In the early nineties, he moved to a farm and retreat in the village of Sulgrave, near the town of Banbury in Oxfordshire, where he resided for the remainder of his life and is now buried. Outside of Iran, he continued both to direct the Ne'mat-Allāhī Order inside Iran and also to lead its expansion overseas, opening *kānaqāhs* in North America, Western Europe, Russia, West Africa, and Australasia. He continued to write books in Persian during these years overseas, and also, in 1988, established the periodical *Šūfi*, the first periodical of its kind, which continues to be published in Persian and English editions. He convened three international conferences at which leading academic authorities on Sufism spoke, twice at the School of Oriental and African Studies (1990 and 1997) and once at George Washington University (1992).

### *Work*

It is not only through Nurbakhsh's activities as the Master of the Ne'mat-Allāhī Sufi Order, but also as a poet, author and editor of more than eighty books on Sufism, that his contributions to Persianate culture and thought can be measured. Before becoming Master, at Munes Ali Šāh's request he began



writing books on Sufism (Mazhari, 1994, 68-9, 140). The *Diwān-e Nurbakš* (Nurbakhsh, 1380/2001) contains more than 190 ghazals, forty-five quatrains, twenty *matnavis*, and fifty-five poems of five-verse each known collectively as *Haqāyeq al-maḥabba fial-daqāyeq al-waḥda* (also published separately in 1333/1954).

Nurbakhsh's *matnavis* take Mowlānā Jalāl al-Din Rumi's *magnum opus* as a point of departure, with several of them beginning with an address based on the first hemistich of the latter's *Matnavi: beshnow az ney chun shekāyat mikonad*. Nurbakhsh's relatively short *matnavis* poems are in length comparable with the exordiums of the six books of Rumi's *Matnavi*, rather one of its component books, still less the full poem. Furthermore, they focus on teachings rather than narrative illustrations, and lack the innovative lyrical flights that distinguish Rumi's poem.

Unusually for the form, Nurbakhsh's ghazals are also frequently concerned with imparting Sufi teachings directly. They are regularly performed in the Ne'mat-Allāhī Order's *samā'* ceremonies, this being the purpose they were composed for examples can be found at [Sufi Music](#). They share this function with Rumi's ghazals, although the latter's are much more numerous and involve a preoccupation with the poet's own emotions more frequently than the ghazals of Nurbakhsh. Both poets' ghazals also share an emphasis on accessibility and directness, although Nurbakhsh's follow the long-established conventions of Sufi symbolism to a greater degree than Rumi's highly innovative poems. Nurbakhsh's *Dīvān* also includes four mystical poems in the Persian New Verse style (*she'r-e now*), possibly the first of their kind.

Nurbakhsh's other writings mostly belong to traditional genres of Sufi literature. His multi-volume *Farhang-e Nūrbakš: Eṣṭelāḥāt-e Taṣavvof* (Nurbakhsh, 1366-69/1987-90), a lexicon of Sufi terminology that also includes encyclopaedia-like entries on Sufi topics, has been translated into English as a sixteen-volume work entitled *Sufi Symbolism*, as well as a one-volume supplement entitled *Crucible of Light* (Nurbakhsh, 2009). His multi-volume *Ma'āref-e ṣūfiyya* (Nurbakhsh, 1362-6/1983-7), which focuses on definitions of the internal states and stations on the Sufi path, has been published in five volumes in English. Like most of his other Sufi writings, these volumes made available citations from influential Arabic sources, many of which he translated into Persian for the first time. This is also the case for his monograph biographies of the influential Sufis Dhu 'l-Nūn Meṣri (245/859), Bāyazid Baṣṭāmī, [Ḥosayn b. Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj](#), Jonayd (297/910), and Abū Bakr



Shebli (334/946), all of whom wrote or preached exclusively in Arabic.

Nurbakhsh also supervised the edition of influential Sufi writings, including the *Rasā'el* (Nurbakhsh, 1340-51/1961-72) of Šāh Ne‘matullāh Šāh Valī (834/1431), Ruzbehān Baqli’s *‘Abhar al-‘āsheqin* (1349/1970), the *Savāneh* (1352/1973) of Aḥmad Ghazāli, the *Lama‘āt* (1353/1974) of Fakhr al-Din ‘Irāqi, the *Golshan-e rāz* (1355/1976) of Maḥmud Shabestari and the *Dīvān* of several masters of the Ne‘mat-Allāhī, including the founder Šāh Ne‘matullāh himself (1347/1968). Many of these authors and their works, which were edited by Nurbakhsh in the 1960s and 1970s, have become widely recognized as highly influential for the development of Persian-language Sufism.

Most of Nurbakhsh’s books have already been published in English translations, and many have also been published in other European languages (for a list updated as far as 1993, see Maḥhari, 1994, 145-6). The most widely-read book of his in English is a book designed primarily for an English-speaking readership, namely *Jesus in the Eyes of the Sufis* (Nurbakhsh, 1983). In its foreword he states that it was written during a period of residence in the United States during the early eighties. His very popular *Sufi Women* (Nurbakhsh, 1983), a collection of biographies of Sufi women who lived between the eighth and the nineteenth centuries, was for many years the only book available on this topic. His *The Psychology of Sufism* (1992), which analyzes the stages of development of the human psyche on the mystic itinerary, brings together his expertise in both Sufism and psychology, and has consequently become one of the most widely quoted of his analytical books. Another of his works that is noteworthy for its unique theme is *Dogs From a Sufi Point of View* (Nurbakhsh, 1989), a compilation of Sufi references to dogs, with an emphasis on their positive appreciation. One of Nurbakhsh’s most unusual ghazals is the first one he wrote, in praise of a dog and which includes a positive comparison of canine to human loyalty, indicating that he had a particular fondness for these animals from an early age (Nurbakhsh, 1380/2001, 164).

Nurbakhsh’s books aimed primarily at disciples in the Ne‘mat-Allāhī Order are his *Čehel kalām va si payām* (1373/1994), which was published in English as *Discourses on the Sufi Path* (Nurbakhsh, 1996), and *The Path: Sufi Practices* (Nurbakhsh, 2003). The latter is based on two books in the original Persian, namely *Dar Kārābāt* (Nurbakhsh, 1361/1982) and *Dar behešt-e šūfiyān* (Nurbakhsh, 1362/1983), which had also earlier been published as two separate books in English as *In The Tavern of Ruin*, (Nurbakhsh, 1978); and *In*



*the Paradise of the Sufis* (Nurbakhsh, 1979), before the publication of *The Path*. While the *Discourses* consists of translations of recorded speeches that Nurbakhsh had given to gatherings of disciples in London, *The Path* includes chapters detailing the beliefs, practices and customs (*ādāb*) of the Order, as well as details about the process of initiation into it, and answers to common questions about Sufism. Nurbakhsh's writings stand out among mystical writings for being written systematically and in clear and simple language, which helps explain their effectiveness in the spread of interest in Sufi mysticism among new audiences both in Iran and overseas.

### *Teachings*

Nurbakhsh's Sufi teachings were based on the doctrine of the "Oneness of Being" (*waḥdat al-wojūd*) elaborated by Ibn 'Arabi (638/1240) and promoted by the founder of the Ne'mat-Allāhī Order, Šāh Ni'matullah Vali. His teachings combine this theosophical world-view with the practice of selfless service in the tradition of Persian chivalry (*javānmardi*). As he states in his discourse "The Two Principal Messages of Sufism," the first message is to "confirm, seek, and see only the Absolute Being" while the second is "to exemplify the highest humanitarian and ethical values" (Nurbakhsh, 1996, 27). It is clear from the continuation of this discourse, as well as the others printed in the same volume, that his understanding of appropriate ethics was based on the *javānmardi* principles of putting others before oneself, especially through service to them. In his discourse "Chivalry," he states: "The spirit of Sufism consisted of focusing one's gaze in one direction (towards God) through the power of love, and its method was to cultivate a humane code of ethics, which was equated with that of the chevaliers" (Nurbakhsh, 1996, 13). These two principles are viewed as complementary because in Nurbakhsh's teachings they both represent the goal of selflessness: Sufis who are totally selfless see nothing but Absolute Being because they no longer see themselves, let alone others; and service to others, especially the disadvantaged, represents the enactment of genuine selflessness and sincere worship when it is carried out without any personal expectation. The rules and customs of the Ne'mat-Allāhī *kānaqāhs* are designed to nurture these teachings (Nurbakhsh, 2003, 193-213), and their application in society has been encouraged by Nurbakhsh in a concrete way through the establishment of a health center in Porto Novo, Benin, in 1999, and a medical center in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, in 2005, both funded by the Order. The center in Benin has since closed, but the Centre de



Santé Nimatoullah in Abidjan has now expanded, with in-patient beds, outpatient services that include dental and radiological work, and a substantial outreach program. According to an interview with Carol Martinez Weber, MD, New York City-based Liaison for the Centre de Santé Nimatoullah, the center in Abidjan also developed a project dedicated to children with disabilities, another branch of which was subsequently established in Mexico City in partnership with DePaul University, Iberoamericana University, and Pan American University (Carlo Martinez Weber, interview, 4 February 2014). Through such projects, as well as the general cultivation of universal human values, under Nurbakhsh, ever since his 1979 departure from his homeland, the Nimatullahi Order has sought to represent Iranians and Persian mystical culture to the outside world in a positive and respectable light.

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