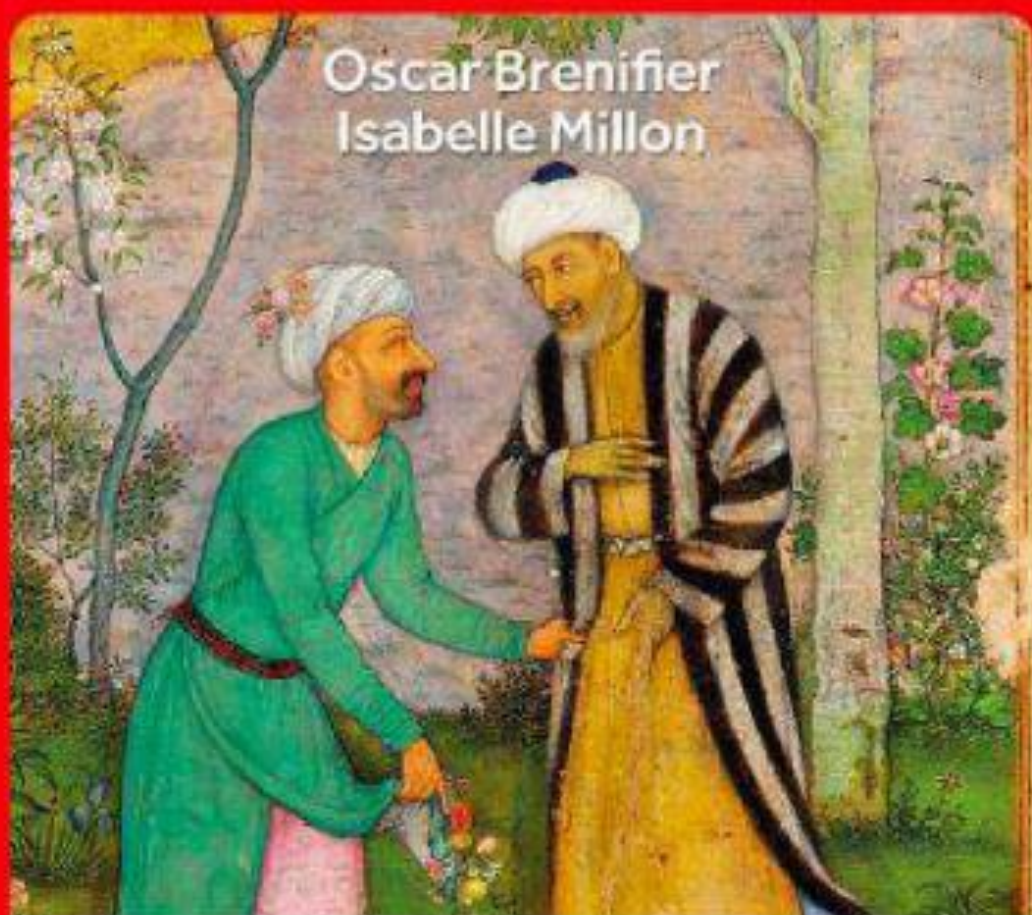


Oscar Brenifier  
Isabelle Millon



**WISDOM OF**  
**SUFI TALES**

**Philosophical exercices**

## THE AUTHORS

### OSCAR BRENIFIER

Doctor of philosophy, trainer and philosophical consultant, he has worked for many years in France and abroad on the concept of "philosophical practice", both in terms of practice and theory. He is one of the main promoters of the « philosophy in the city » movement: cafés-philo, philosophical workshops with children and adults, seminars in business and organizations ... He has published many books in this field, including the collection "PhiloZenfants" (editions Nathan), which were published in more than thirty languages. He co-founded the « Institute of Philosophical Practices » of which he is the chairman. He is also one of the authors of the Unesco report "Philosophy, A school of freedom ". You can find more informations on his website :

[www.pratiques-philosophiques.fr](http://www.pratiques-philosophiques.fr).

### ISABELLE MILLON

Philosophy practitioner, she is specialized in philosophical practice with children and adolescents. She worked in many countries, co-founded the Institute of Practice Philosophical of which she is the director. She trains teachers and lay people to philosophical practice in numerous countries. She is also the author of books for young adults and adults, and collaborates with Oscar Brenifier on much of his work.

You can find more informations on the IPP website :

[www.pratiques-philosophiques.fr](http://www.pratiques-philosophiques.fr).

## THE BOOK

Is life a test? Should we always tell the truth? Is old age a calamity? Is difference a problem? Do we love someone or do we love love? To address these issues, 20 stories from the Sufi tradition are proposed as a basis for reflection. Then come ten questions, in order to deepen the meaning of the various narratives and interpret their content. Ten more questions invite us to meditate on more general issues emanating from these texts. Through this anthology, the reader is invited to discover a spirituality that defines itself as "the heart" of the Muslim tradition, an inner path of Islam, just as a contemplative and poetic art of living.

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# *1/ The long journey of Fatima*

## **Is life a test?**

Once upon a time, there was a young woman named Fatima, the daughter of a prosperous trader who lived in the Maghreb. On a fine day, the father decided to go with her on a business trip, to the other side of the Mediterranean.

- Maybe you'll find a kind husband, he told her.

After a few happy stopovers where the father made some good deals and where Fatima dreamt about her future husband, the ship was shipwrecked on the Egyptian shore. The father drowned and Fatima found herself lost in utter destitution. Fortunately, she was taken in by a family of poor drapers, which put her up and taught her the rudiments of their art. After a while, she ended up reconciling herself with her miserable fate.

One day, when she was having a walk alongside the shore, some slave traders took her with force and brought her to Istanbul. They treated her harshly, and the poor Fatima was bitterly complaining about her fate: she was unhappy. As she was exposed on the market, a mast maker who was looking for workers had pity for her who felt so sad. He bought her in order to give her a sweeter life as his wife's servant. But when he arrived home, the man heard he was ruined because of some pirates who had seized his only boat as well as all his cargo. Since he had no means for employing workers any more, he started building masts by himself with the help of his wife and Fatima, a task that represented a hard work. In order to express her gratitude, Fatima worked laboriously, and after a while, they all achieved prosperity again. Eventually, the boss freed her for working for him, made her becoming his partner, and she could feel certain happiness again.

One day, he decided to send Fatima with a mats cargo to the other side of the seas, in Asia, in order to sell them with a better benefit. But the ship, caught in a hurricane, was shipwrecked. Fatima managed to reach the shore with difficulty. She was moaning, thinking her life was a permanent disaster because every time she had been happy, all her hopes were destroyed. "Why do I always need to confront adversity?" she said, in tears, laying on the ground. But as no one was answering, she stood up and started walking further inland.

Inadvertently she had arrived in China. Now for centuries, a legend had spread there telling that some day a stranger would arrive and would build a tent for the emperor. In this country, nobody knew what a tent was or how to make one. But there was always a hope that the prophecy would come true. Therefore, at the beginning of each year, some heralds were covering the region announcing in all places that all female strangers that would arrive in the country needed to be directly led to the palace. When people saw that Fatima had arrived in their town, they told her that she had to go to the court, and went there with her. When she was in front of the emperor, she was asked if she knew how to make a tent. She answered yes, and asked rope. Unfortunately, there was no rope. But then she remembered that she had worked as a spinner: so she picked up linen and started making rope. Then, she asked sheet and there was no sheet. But she remembered that she had worked as a weaver and started making sheet. Eventually, she asked some posts that didn't exist either. But she remembered that she had worked wood, and made some posts by herself. Later, remembering various tents she had seen and lived in, she made one.

As the emperor saw the result, he was amazed. As a reward, he promised Fatima he would grant all her wishes. She decided to marry a young prince and to remain in China, where she had many children and lived happily ever after.

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- What is Fatima's father looking for?
- What does Fatima expect from life?
- Why is work playing such an important role in the story?
- What does Fatima learn as time goes by?
- What does Fatima's adventurous life come to an end?
- What does China stand for in the story?
- Why does Fatima need a husband?
- Why are far countries more promising?
- How does Fatima reconcile herself with her fate?
- What do all the shipwrecks represent in Fatima's life?

#### **Reflection**

- Is work essential to life?
- Is adversity necessary?
- Are we all toys of chance?
- Is human being fundamentally alone?
- Is life absolutely painful hardship?
- Does life have to mean something?
- Is fortitude an end or a means in life?
- Is man an unsatisfied animal?
- Does providence exist?
- Why does human being want to get richer?

## 2/ The parrot

### Are we prisoners of ourselves?

A merchant had a parrot, which he kept in a large cage. It was dear to him because the animal spoke well. One day, as the merchant had to go to India, country that the bird was from, he asked the animal what would be the gift he would like the most. The parrot replied without hesitation: freedom. As the man refused, the parrot said to him:

- Then go into the forest outside of town, and when you see parrots in the trees, give them news from me: tell them what happened, how I am condemned to live in a cage. Ask them to think a little bit about me when they cheerfully fly from tree to tree.

Once in India, after completing his business, the man went into the forest and fulfilled what his parrot had requested. Hardly had he finished speaking when a parrot, very similar to his, fell to the ground, lifeless, at the foot of the tree where he was perched previously. The man was unhappy to have caused the death of the bird, and told himself that it must have been a close relative of his parrot, shocked by the sad news he had heard.

When he returned home, the parrot asked the merchant if he brought good news from its congeners.

- Alas no! I'm afraid I only have for you painful words. You see, as you had requested, I went into the forest in order to convey your message to the parrots that were there. But when I mentioned your captivity, one of your close relatives immediately collapsed at my feet. He had scarcely uttered these words that the bird collapsed too, thunderstruck, at the bottom of the cage.

- These birds are very sensitive, thought the merchant, surprised. The announcement of the death of his brother killed him on the spot!

Sorry to lose the animal to which he was so attached, the man picked up the bird and for the moment placed it on the edge of the window. But right away, the bird seemed to come to life and flew to the nearest branch.

From there, he called the man to explain what had happened.

- What you took for an unfortunate announcement was actually good news: it was a sound advice. Through you, my jailer, I was suggested a strategy to escape my fate and my liberty. In fact it made me understand the reality of my situation: "You are in prison because you speak. Be dead, and you will be liberated. "

And the parrot fled away, free at last.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Does the merchant love his parrot?
- Why does the merchant obey the parrot?
- Did the parrot expect the consequences of his request?
- What distinguishes the various parrots in the story?
- What does the journey of the merchant symbolize?
- Why does the parrot understand "the story" better than the merchant?
- What did the parrot learn in this story?
- What does the "simulated death" mean in this story?
- Why is a parrot the hero of this story?
- Could the parrot have acted by itself?

### **Reflection**

- Are we prisoners of our own words?
- What are the main reasons we speak?
- Are we aware of the nature and consequences of our words?
- Why is silence painful?
- Can death be a necessity?
- Why do some people understand when others don't?
- Are we born free or do we become free?
- Do others prevent us from being free?
- Should we lie in order to be free?
- How is the human being always in exile?



### *3/ The pomegranates*

#### **Is knowledge a form of power?**

There was once a young man who was studying medicine with a Sufi master, who was also a doctor. After a few years under his tutelage, he asked him: "Master, when the next patient comes, let me, I beg you, take care of him. I want to prove myself! "

- I do not think you are ready yet, replied the master, but let us make an experiment. I shall let you handle the next patient, and see what happens.

Shortly after, they were sitting at home, when a man arrived. The teacher immediately said to the disciple:

- This man is visibly ill.

The student looked at his master in astonishment.

- How do you know?

- Look at his face and the color of his skin, continued the master, he needs a diet of pomegranates.

When the man was near them, the student stood up and approached him with these words: "You're sick! "

- Eh yes! replied the other. I already knew this! Why do you think I came to see the doctor?

- You need to eat pomegranates, ordered the young man.

The man expressed surprise.

- Pomegranates! And why pomegranates? That's all? For weeks, I have not been feeling good!

And he went away disappointed.

The young man turned to the master:

- But what is wrong? What have I done wrong?

The master smiled softly.

- Wait for a similar situation and I will show you.

The next day, they were both sitting on the doorstep when another man came towards them.

- Let me handle it. You will understand the problem, said the master, because this man as well needs pomegranates.

The doctor invited the sick man to enter and sat him down. He ordered him to undress and observed him lengthily. Then he asked him various questions, of rather incidental nature.

- Oh, I see ... Your case is very interesting, and rare indeed! And I see that you suffer. Wait a minute, let me think ... What is recommended in such a case, is of course a natural remedy.

Hold on! A fruit, perhaps ... With many seeds ... Lemon? No, it may be too acidic for you, and bad for your stomach. Let's see ... Ah! I know! Pomegranates. This is exactly what you need!

Pomegranates...

The doctor watched at the same time his client intently, as if he had made a great discovery.

The patient, reassured, expressed his gratitude, paid the doctor, and returned home very happy.

The young man, annoyed, said:

- I don't understand! I see no difference. This is exactly what I said yesterday to another

patient: you need pomegranates!

- That is true. But you see, these two men, even more than pomegranates, needed time.

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- Why does the young man want to prove himself?
- How does the doctor know that his student is not ready?
- What is the main error of the young man?
- Why is the first patient disappointed?
- Why is the second patient satisfied?
- Why is the student annoyed?
- Why does the student have difficulty understanding what happened?
- What does the "need for time" signify?
- Is the doctor a manipulator?
- What does the doctor know that his student does not know?

#### **Reflection**

- Why is patience important?
- Must we lie to pass the truth?
- Why does truth need time?
- Do we all need to believe that we are special?
- Are we all in the quest of an identity?
- Why do we want to show our knowledge?
- Is knowledge a form of power?
- Does the end justify the means?
- Is it moral to lie in order to get what you want?
- Is manipulation a good thing?
- Is it always good to be sincere?

## 4/ The schoolteacher

### Are our convictions our own?

There was once a schoolteacher who was very demanding and quite strict with his students. They never told him anything because he frightened them. Beware to anyone who had not learned his lessons by heart!

But one day, tired of his excessive authority, the pupils decided to find a solution to get rid of him.

- What a pity, said one of them, he never gets sick! That would give us some respite.

- Yes, said another, we would be free, at least occasionally.

Hearing this, a third student proposed an idea:

- We could try to convince him that he is sick. It would suffice to say, "Teacher! Your face is really pale this morning! You must not be well, you definitely have a fever. "

- If you tell him that, he will not believe you, a fourth objected. Your words will not succeed in convincing him. But if all, one after the other, we repeat the same thing, he will eventually believe it. Right after you, I will tell him: "What's happening, Master? What happened to you? "If we are sincere, by dint of repeating it, no doubt he will be convinced.

The next morning, the students launched their plan. Hardly had the master arrived, that instead of the usual salute, a first pupil, looking worried, announced to him the "bad news."

The master, irritated by his remark, sent him away with an abrupt movement of the hand:

- Don't be silly! I am not sick. Go and sit in your place.

As expected, various children, one after the other, shared their "concern", each with his own words. The master gradually began to question himself, and came to believe that he was really sick, so much that he started not feeling well at all. He finally decided to go home, adjacent to the school, to in order to get better.

But he felt resentful about his wife.

- How is it that she did not even notice my condition this morning? Is she not interested in me anymore? Would she leave me to marry another?

When he opened the door of the house, he was very angry. His wife, surprised to see him back so soon, asked him:

- What is going on? Why are you not at school?

- Do you not see the pallor of my face? replied the schoolteacher with a harsh tone.

Everyone is concerned about my health, but you remain completely indifferent. We share the same roof, and you don't even worry about me!

His wife replied: "My dear husband, you're dreaming. You are not sicker than me. Where did you get this odd idea? "

The master became indignant:

- O foolish woman, you're completely blind, and it's not my fault. Can't you see I'm sick, I don't feel good and I ache all over!

But the woman replied firmly:

- As you wish. But let me bring you a mirror. You will check by yourself if you really look sick and you will see if I deserve to be treated in such an aithair manner.

- Leave me peace with your mirror! Go rather prepare my bed. Maybe I'll feel better if I lie down. And then quickly run to the doctor.

While grumbling, the woman walked out of the room.

- All this makes no sense. He pretends to be sick and get me away from home. I don't know what he wants, but I'm sure it's an excuse.

Once in bed, the master began to moan. Some students had followed the teacher to see what would happen, they heard him through the window. The tricky one who had the "good" idea suggested to others:

- Let's read our lessons in the strongest possible voice, all together, and as he is not in a good mood, the noise will certainly annoy him.

Indeed, after a time, the master was tired of the noise, and despite his "sickness" he rose to tell his students:

- You give me a headache. There will be no class today. I authorize you to go home.

Politely, the children wished him a speedy recovery and went off.

When the mothers saw their children playing in the streets instead of being in school, they severely reprimanded them. And the children defended themselves:

- It is the master who told us to leave! It's not our fault if by the will of God, he fell ill.

The mothers warned them:

- We will see if you tell the truth. If it's a lie, then beware! "

The ladies went immediately to the home of schoolmaster, where ascertained indeed that he was seriously ill. They apologized for disturbing:

- Excuse us, we did not know you were sick.

- Neither did I. I had no clue! replied the master. Thanks God Almighty, your children alerted me!

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- What kind of relations maintain the teacher and his pupils?
- What is similar between the teacher and his pupils?
- Why did the teacher end up believing the pupils?
- Why is the teacher angry against his wife?
- Why did the teacher believe his pupils rather than his wife?
- Is the teacher reasonable?
- Why did the teacher want to see the mirror?
- Do the characters of this story trust each other?
- Is the teacher really sick?
- Why do the mothers believe the teacher and not their children?

#### **Reflection**

- Does school embody a form of alienation?
- Is authority necessary for a teacher?
- Why should we believe a group more than one person?
- Is repetition a good way to convey a message?
- Is fear an effective technique to convey a message?
- Should we rather believe others or oneself?
- Why do we sometimes prefer to trust our convictions rather than the obvious?
- Why is authority a guarantee of credibility?
- Why do parents often have difficulty believing their children?
- Are stubborn people strong or weak?

## 5/ *The Unfaithful Wife*

### Should we always tell the truth?

One day a man came home unexpectedly from work. It was not his habit to leave the shop so early, but the idea came to him with a kind of foreboding. So he decided to arrive by surprise at a rather unusual time. But his wife, unfaithful, was receiving another man. When he arrived, he could not open the door. So he knocked loudly, and called his wife. Of course, certain that her husband would not show up at this time, right in the middle of the day, the wife was taken aback. She did not know what to do. Their small family house offered no other exit than the main door and no place to hide. No corner or recess allowed hiding the presence of a man. In desperation, she decided to disguise rapidly her guest into a woman, using her own clothing and veil, and then she opened to her husband.

Dressed in this way, the man was quite visible, and grotesque as a camel in a staircase, but the husband withheld any comment. He simply asked his wife:

- Who is this person with a hidden face?
- This is a woman known in town for her piety, and her wealth, she answered.
- And what can we do for her? Is she asking for a favor?
- She wants to become our parent. She has heard a lot of good things about our daughter and she would like her as a spouse for her son. This woman is with a heart pure and noble. She affirms that beautiful or not, she wants her as a daughter. You must know that her son is incomparable by its nature, its beauty and intelligence.
- We are poor people and this woman is rich. Such a marriage would be like a garment half silk and half linen: it would shame the wearer.
- This is exactly what I told her. But she said that she doesn't care: she is not interested in wealth, or in nobility, and she does not worry about what others think. She only wants to relate to honest people.

The husband still raised various arguments, but his wife claimed to have already raised all of them, stating that the woman was not concerned with all this. She repeated periodically:

- She does not fear poverty, what she strongly appreciates in us is our honesty.
- This woman must well realize that our house is so small that we could not even hide a needle in it! She can therefore guess that our daughter has no dowry. As for our honesty and dignity, it is certain that they are clearly visible. Nevertheless, it will be as you wish, he said to his wife before returning to his shop.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why would the husband return unexpectedly?
- Why would the wife deny evidence so crudely?
- Why does the husband not openly denounce his wife?
- Does the husband trust his wife?
- Is the husband a weak man?
- Is the woman cynical?
- What game is played between husband and wife?
- Is the truth possible between husband and wife?
- Is the husband consistent?
- Why does the husband leave in the end?

### **Reflection**

- Should we trust our intuition?
- Is full trust blind?
- Do others always finally betray us?
- Can we really hide the truth?
- What are the main reasons to lie?
- Is it always appropriate to denounce lie?
- Are we victims of our own lies?
- Can lie have a positive function in human relations?
- Is moral personal or collective?
- Should we avoid shame?

## 6 - *The angel of death*

### Can we escape destiny?

One day, a relative of King Solomon presented himself at the palace and requested an urgent audience. When the man arrived before the king's throne, the monarch noticed his pale face, his blue lips, his shallow breathing, and asked him:

– You don't look well! What happened?

– It's terrible! This morning, I was in the market, when amidst the crowd, I recognized Azraël, the angel of death. When he noticed that I was observing him, he gave me a scary look, full of anger. I don't know why, but he was furious against me.

– I understand, but what do you want me to do? He is the most powerful angel of all.

– I pray thee, O Great King! Thou who are so powerful! Help me!

– But I've told you I cannot do anything against him. How can I help you?

– Thou, who command the elements, ask the greatest wind to carry me away from here, far away, to India. For my salvation and the salvation of my soul!

The king complied and asked the greatest wind to carry the poor man to India, where he arrived the same day.

Sometime later, the angel Azraël, who was still in town, came to visit the Great King. The latter, curious to know more, couldn't help questioning the angel. He told him what had happened and asked:

– Why were you angry against this man? He is rather pious and faithful. But you scared him so much that he left the country hurriedly.

Azraël answered:

– No, not at all! I wasn't angry with him. He misunderstood me. It was rather with a great surprise that I looked at him. In fact, God had commanded me to seek him, because his time had come. But it is tomorrow, in India, that I shall take his life. Therefore, I was very surprised. I thought to myself: «How can he be here today, and in India tomorrow? This man must really have wings to move that quickly!».

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why did the man misunderstand Azraël's expression?
- Why is Azraël the most powerful angel of all?
- Why is death represented by an angel?
- What does Solomon represent in this story?
- Why does Solomon accomplish what the man requested him to?
- Is the man really «pious and faithful»?
- Why does the man claim to fear for the salvation of his soul?
- Should Azraël be surprised by the turn of events?
- What is the man really running away from?
- What does India represent in this story?

### **Reflection**

- Why do we fear death?
- Is death part of life?
- Is it possible to fully accept yourself?
- Are we inhabited by a desire of infinite?
- Why does objectivity pose a problem?
- Should we passively accept the course of things?
- Does fear prevent us from living?
- Are we "condemned to be free", as claimed Sartre?
- Is destiny a reality?
- Can we love fate?



## *7/ The Gnat and the Elephant*

### **Do we need to be recognized by others?**

There was once a gnat, known to all for its high sensitivity, named Namouss the Perceptive. One day, after careful pondering his condition, he decided to move, for good and sufficient reasons. He chose for this purpose a highly suitable venue: the ear of an elephant. So there he carried all his belongings and settled in due form in this vast and attractive home.

Time passed. Namouss rose several generations of little gnats he sent by the immensity of the world. Like all gnats, he knew alternately feelings of euphoria and anxiety, joy and sorrow, dissatisfaction and fulfillment.

The ear of the elephant had become his home, and he became convinced – thus it always happens in such cases - that there was a close relationship between his life, his story, his very being, and this beautiful mansion. The ear was so warm, so deep, so welcoming, it was the scene of so many experiences!

Obviously, when he moved in, he had fulfilled the many obligations and rituals required by the situation. On arriving, he had formally declared his intention with the highest possible volume of his little voice.

- O elephant! Know that no one but I, Namouss the Perceptive, now intends to establish his residence in this place! Since it is your ear, sacrificing to the custom, I inform you of my decision.

Of course, the elephant had not raised any objection since he had heard nothing. Besides, to tell the truth, he never noticed in any way the presence of the imposing gnat family.

Finally came the day when Namouss decided, after much deliberation, to move again, for significant and compelling reasons. According to the sacred custom, he prepared a statutory declaration, and he shouted it in the ear of the elephant. Receiving no response, he repeated his announcement, stronger still, with no more reaction. Stubbornly, he said it a third time, determined to be heard, reiterating his imperative and eloquent words.

- O Elephant! Know that I, Namouss perceptive, intend to leave my home and my house, abandon my residence in this ear that is yours, where I lived so long. This, for significant and sufficient causes, that I am ready to account for."

This time, the words of the gnat finally reached the ear of the elephant, who heard a vague rustling and moved his trunk. Glad to see the elephant was meditating upon his words, Namouss yelled:

- What have you to say in response to this news? How do you feel about my departure?

The big animal then rose his enormous head, and pushed one or two trumpeting that Namouss graciously accepted as a sign of acquiescence.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- How important is the fact that Namouss be "perceptive"?
- Why does Namouss respect rituals?
- What report entertains Namouss with the ear of the elephant?
- Why does the elephant not have a name, unlike the gnat?
- Does the gnat have "good and sufficient" reasons for moving?
- Why does Namouss insist on getting a response from the elephant before leaving?
- Did the elephant answer Namouss?
- Do the gnat and the elephant understand each other?
- Does the gnat need the elephant in order to exist?
- Does the gnat indulge in wishful thinking?

### **Reflection**

- Does life need meaning in order to have value?
- Is there something pathetic in human existence?
- Is the human being susceptible?
- Why do we make projects?
- Why do we pretend to be special or unique?
- What do we expect from others?
- Do human beings tend to practice wishful thinking?
- To love oneself necessarily involves relationship to others?
- Can we laugh at everything?
- Do you rather look like Namouss or the elephant?

## 8/ Old age

### Is old age a calamity?

An elderly man, concerned about his health, went to consult a doctor. He complained at length, feeling the weakening of his intellectual faculties, and asked what he could do to remedy this problem. The doctor listened patiently, then explained that this was certainly due to the phenomenon of aging.

Not satisfied with that response, the patient exclaimed:

- But my sight as well is weakening!
- This is also because of age, answered the man of art.
- And my back hurts, also because of age, perhaps! The old man went on, visibly annoyed.
- Indeed, this is typical of old age.
- And the fact that I have trouble digesting everything I eat, I guess I cannot do anything about it either!
- That's exactly it! With age, the digestive system weakens gradually.
- I was going to explain to you also that sometimes it's hard to breathe, because my chest feels oppressed, but of course, tell you this will not help in anyway, isn't it?
- This is normal indeed! You are now old, and old age brings many evils, our body atrophies, its capacity of resilience diminishes. It's not very pleasant, but you have to accept this sad fact.

The old man was then completely angry.

- You really are incompetent! You tell nonsense! You know nothing at all about medicine! What is your utility if you cannot cure anything? All diseases have a cure, that's medicine! But you have no clue! One really wonders where you learned your craft!

At this, the doctor replied:

- You now are over seventy years of age! This is also what explains your anger and your bitter words!

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Does the man consult the doctor because he is sick?
- Does the man need to go to the doctor?
- Is the doctor empathetic towards his patient?
- Is the doctor a good doctor?
- Is the patient right to be upset at his doctor?
- Is it age that causes the anger of the patient?
- Does the man seek a form of consolation?
- Does the man really know what he wants?
- Is the patient wise?
- Is the doctor wise?

### **Reflection**

- Should we fight or accept old age?
- Is old age a culmination or a decline?
- Are there different forms of wisdom?
- Do we have a moral obligation to be wise?
- Is moderation always advisable?
- Is fatality a reality or a belief?
- Can one love fate, as Nietzsche recommends?
- Is it better to change our desires rather than the order of the world, as proposed by Descartes?
- Does our view on things determine their reality?
- Can we abuse of medicine?

## 9/ Sharing

### Does friendship always lead to conflict?

During a long and arduous journey, three men became friends. They had shared pleasures and pains, they put all their resources in common. However, one evening, after a long walk, they realized provisions were dwindling: there remained all together no more than some water at the bottom of a bottle and a piece of bread. Not knowing how to distribute such a meager amount, they could not agree and ended up lengthily arguing.

As evening fell, one of them suggested going to bed and put the decision to the next morning.

"Let's go to sleep, he suggested, and upon awakening, the one that has made the most significant dream will decide how to proceed. "

The other two accepted the proposal.

The next day they got up at dawn. The first began to tell:

- This is my dream. I was transported into a wonderful place, so nice that no words can describe it. I met an old man who said, "The food is yours by right, for your life, past, present and future, is meritorious and rightly admired by all.

Then it was the turn of the second.

- It's nothing, compared to my own dream. I saw unfolding in a single instant my entire life, past and future. Then appeared to me a strange being, a kind of angel, who told me: "It is you who deserve to drink the water and eat the bread, because you are wiser and more patient than your two companions. You have to be well fed, because your destiny is to guide men."

The third traveler spoke in turn.

- In my dream, I did not see anything, I did not hear anything, I did not say anything either. But I felt an irresistible and mysterious force that pushed me to get up, to take the bread and water, and consume it on the spot. I could not resist, and that's what I did.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Are the three men friends?
- Why do the three men compete for so little?
- Why use a dream as criteria of judgment?
- What are the angels of those dreams?
- What is the main criterion used by the first companion?
- What is the main criterion used by the second companion?
- What differentiates the "argument" of the third companion?
- Are the first two men honest?
- Is the third man wise or cynical?
- Does the story justify the third companion?

### **Reflection**

- Can one legitimately claim to be more moral than another person?
- Can merit be an inappropriate criterion?
- Does friendship lead often to conflict?
- Is action more real than reflection?
- Can our dreams lie to us?
- Why do oracles express themselves enigmatically?
- Is the present more important than the future?
- Is it a good advice to "sleep on it"?
- Is it reasonable to trust our intuitions?
- Is the cynic a realist?

## 10/ *The three advices*

### **Are human beings limited?**

One day, a hunter dragged in his net a little bird. To his surprise, his prey began to talk to him. And the bird tried to convince the man to release him.

- Let me go, he said, what will you do with me? I will be of no use! I am so small and thin that you will not find on me anything to eat. But if instead you return me my freedom, I will grant you three valuable tips that will greatly help you in life.

The animal also proposed to give him the first advice while he was still a prisoner, the second when released and perched in a tree, and the third when he had reached the top of the mountain.

Somewhat perplexed, seeing especially that indeed he had not much to lose, the hunter accepted the proposal. And he hastened to solicit the first advice. So the bird said:

- If you lose something, even if you want it as much as your life, never regret its loss.

The man was slightly surprised by the advice, however, he released the bird, which flew up and landed on a branch. The man then sought the second advice, and the bird said:

- When you hear something that is contrary to common sense, never believe it without receiving evidence.

Then the bird flew to the top of the mountain. The man, intrigued, followed it to the top, but before he could ask the third advice, the bird told him in a provocative tone:

- Oh! Miserable man! My body contains two enormous and precious jewels! If only you had killed me, you would now be the happy possessor of them!

At these words, the hunter had a fit of anger, furious of having been fooled, thinking that a fortune had escaped him. With a sad face, he still asked the bird to give its third advice.

The bird then outright mocked him.

- What a fool you make! You are there waiting for a third advice, while you have neither understood nor listened to the first two I offered you. Remember! I have recommended you to never regret anything, nevertheless you already regret what you did to me. I have recommended you not to believe what is contrary to common sense without receiving evidence, or you manage to believe without doubt that I have in fact two huge jewels in my skinny body. In no time, you believe anything and you lament what you think you have lost! You are so stupid! And you will never change. Like most men, you will remain a prisoner of your prejudices and your narrow-minded attitude.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why did the fighter release the bird?
- Why is the hunter surprised by the first advice?
- What is the difference between the first and the second advice?
- Why did the bird tell the jewel story?
- Why does the hunter not utilize the advices of the bird?
- Did the bird give a third advice?
- Why is the bird sarcastic?
- Why is the hero of the story a hunter, not a farmer?
- Has the hunter learned anything during his adventure?
- What does the bird represent in the story?

### **Reflection**

- Should we never regret anything?
- Are we all hunters?
- Should we believe nothing strange without proof?
- Is the human being in general primitive?
- Are our desires bad advisers?
- What prevents us from changing?
- Is it appropriate to mock in order to educate?
- Is common sense an adequate standard of judgment?
- Is there common sense?
- Is the human being curious by nature?



## *11/ Mahmoud the indecisive*

### **Do we like being victims?**

Mahmoud could not determine himself, he did not know how to lead his life. After a few vague attempts and inconclusive experiences, many doubts invaded his mind. He fancied several projects, but smarting from his past, fearing to be wrong again, he could not decide on the right path to take. Moreover, his personal situation was beginning to cause problems in reality, because he was struggling to meet his own needs.

One day he decided to take advice from a Sufi sage.

- What should I do with my life? he asked. What decisions should I take? I do not know what to do...

Patiently, the man listened for a while to the complaints of Mahmoud, then interrupted

- It's very simple Mahmoud! Go into the forest, observe nature, take example on it, and you certainly will receive a healthy life lesson.

Mahmoud obeyed and went into the forest. He watched carefully, without really concluding anything, when he noticed near a bush a fox quietly lounging, his belly visibly well rounded. Looking more closely, to his surprise, he discovered that for some strange reason, the animal had no legs. Mahmoud was intrigued. He asked himself questions.

- How does this fox manage to feed himself? How can he catch any game?

Determined to get to the bottom of the issue, he settled there and kept watch. Shortly after, close by, a bear fell a gazelle and devoured it loudly, then left, abandoning the carcass.

When the way was free, the fox came out of the bush, crawled to the carrion in order to nibble the remains.

- Well here! exulted Mahmoud, here is a fine lesson, very easy to understand!

Sure to have encountered the answer to his questions, he left the forest, decided to take advantage of this great life lesson.

Two years later, a starving beggar knocked at the door of the Sufi sage. After a moment of uncertainty, the man finally recognized under the rags a filthy and emaciated Mahmoud, who had clearly suffered and physically changed. Exhausted, the man complained bitterly.

- I took your advice, but it did not work. I followed the example of nature, but it gave me a very bad lesson, he moaned. I tried what you said, but it does not work. Look at my condition, and you will understand how much I suffered.

- But what happened? asked the sage.

- I went into the forest to observe nature, as you had recommended me. I saw a fox with no legs that nevertheless lacked nothing. Things seemed to get to him in the most natural way. So I too sat waiting patiently: I trusted nature, I was hoping things would happen by themselves. I stood by exactly like the fox, but nothing good ever happened to me. Now, here I am poor, sick and destitute. The world is really merciless!

The sage nodded knowingly.

- My dear Mahmoud! The lesson was perfect, from what you describe, but I fear the student is slightly simpleminded. You who have legs, why did you choose to imitate the fox? Your model was the bear, rather! Help yourself with attributes that nature gave you! This way you could feed yourself, and you could as well feed the weak.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why does Mahmoud not manage to find his way in life?
- What conception Mahmoud has of himself?
- Is Mahmoud a good observer?
- Why does Mahmoud choose the path of the fox rather than the path of the bear?
- Is Mahmoud of a trusting nature?
- Was the sage right to propose Mahmoud the lessons of nature?
- Does Mahmoud understand the sage's advice?
- Why does the sage call Mahmoud "simpleminded"?
- What is the main problem of Mahmoud?
- Has Mahmoud learned anything throughout the story?

### **Reflection**

- Is nature a reliable master?
- Should we believe in providence?
- Why do we like to complain?
- Why is it often difficult to choose?
- Is the desire for perfection a good guide in life?
- Do we learn only what suits us?
- Is the world ruthless?
- Is passivity necessarily a defect?
- Is it right or wrong to doubt?
- Is it true, as Hegel says, that "the fear of error is the first error"?

## 12/ The droppings

### Does difference represent a problem?

One day, right in the middle of the market place, between the spices and the perfumes, a man suddenly collapsed and fell to the ground, unconscious. He had no more strength in the legs. His head was spinning, he was visibly bothered by the smell of incense burned by the merchants. Those, as well as onlookers, rushed to help him. Some massaged his heart or his arms. A woman poured some rose water on his face, thinking it would strengthen him and put him back on his feet. During that time, others still were trying to remove his clothes to make him breathe. Then a well dressed man, obviously versed in the medical science, bent over to take his pulse, then suggested to just leave him alone and patiently wait.

All around him, discussions were well underway. Some were diagnosing an abuse of drinking or an excess of hashish, others opted instead for a lack of water or food, or simply attributed the discomfort to the ambient heat. Each explained the situation to his neighbor from his own experience: they all told how this had happened to them personally, or what they had observed in their families. But finally, in all this brouhaha, no cure functioned, and the man still remained lying unconscious.

But the brother of the man was a tanner, who kept shop a little further, along with his brother. He quickly learned what had happened, and as soon as he heard the news, he ran to the market, while picking up on his way various dog droppings he could find, that he kept in his hand . Arrived on the scene of the tragedy, he pushed his way through the crowd, yelling:

- Let me get through! I know what to do. I know the cause of his illness!

Hiding well his "medicine", that could provoke aversive reactions, the man came up to his brother, and leaned over as if to whisper a secret in the ear. Meanwhile, quietly, he put his hand under his nose. Breathing in the scent of what was in that hand, the invalid immediately woke up and recovered . The curious who had observed the scene for a while were astonished. They immediately suspected some magical power. One of them even exclaimed:

- This man has a powerful breath. He manages to wake up the dead!

Finally the man got up and left with his brother, as if nothing had happened.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why did people rush when the man fainted?
- Do the people really care about the person that fainted?
- What do smells symbolize in this story?
- Why would it be better to do nothing for the patient?
- Why do all these people want to comment the situation?
- Why does the brother prefer to hide what he does?
- What does the tanner represent in this story?
- Why would the droppings arouse "aversive reactions"?
- Why do observers speak of "magic"?
- What does this story teach us?

### **Reflection**

- Why do we want to help others?
- Why does drama attract attention?
- What engenders disgust?
- Can the "good" hurt us?
- Why is it said "the road to hell is paved with good intentions"?
- Why do we like to comment what happens?
- Why must we hide certain things yet common to all?
- Do we need to explain everything?
- Can differences make us uncomfortable?
- Must we always rely on our experience?

## 13/ *The owner and the beggar*

### Is morality universal?

A beggar passed through a village, going from door to door, begging for some livelihood. Arriving at a stately home, he knocked at the door; the master of the house opened and asked gruffly what he wanted. The beggar exposed his misery and asked if it was possible to give him a piece of bread, even stale, to be fed. The man said unpleasantly:

- Do you want bread? Tell me, does this house look like a bakery?

The beggar insisted.

- Do you have some fruit, even damaged?

- This house is not a grocery store.

- Or a piece of meat?

- We are not a butcher or a slaughterhouse!

- And a glass of water? You have a glass of water, right?

- Do you see here any river?

- Could I then at least rest a while in your garden?

Very angry, the man replied:

- Of course, it is a hostel, where everyone can take shelter at will! Go away! Leave the premises! There is nothing for you here!

Thus, each request from the beggar was rejected in an identical manner. Suddenly, the man took down his pants and defecated on the threshold of the house.

- What are you doing here! angrily exclaimed the owner, frightened and shocked.

- I was looking for a suitable place to defecate, the man replied, still squatting, I finally found it. In this house, there is nothing to eat or drink, and one cannot even rest. It is a complete ruin, totally empty, no one could live there! Such a place can obviously serve only as a cesspool.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why does the owner right away badly receive the beggar?
- Why does the owner concedes nothing to the beggar?
- Why does the owner use questions as a response?
- What is common to the various arguments of the owner?
- Does the beggar change personality in the story?
- Whence does the scandal in this story come from?
- Why does the beggar defecate on the threshold of the house?
- What is the nature of the moral conflict between the two men?
- What is the logic of the beggar?
- How are the beggar and the owner similar?

### **Reflection**

- Why do we love so much to possess?
- What is the use of sarcasm?
- Why are beggars despised?
- Why does dirt scare us?
- What do others represent a threat?
- Should the scandal necessarily cause a drama?
- Should we only respect those who respect us?
- Do we have to be generous?
- Should a moral be universal in order to be a "real" moral?
- Are moral rules a necessity?

## ***14/ The man who was getting angry***

### **Do our defects have a reason to be?**

There was a man who was often getting angry, in a violent way. After several years he finally realized how this inclination was making his life difficult. Not knowing what to do, he started looking for someone who could give him advice. He heard people speaking about a dervish of a great wisdom and decided to go visit him. He took his baggage and gun and set off on the journey.

After several days of traveling, he arrived at the place where this wise man lived. After listening to the visitor for a long time, the dervish said:

- Go to the deserted crossroads that I will indicate to you. There you will see an old dry tree. Install yourself under its branches and offer water to every person who will pass by so they could quench their thirst.

The angry man obeyed and went to the indicated crossroads. He installed himself under the tree and started proposing water to occasional travelers passing by.

Time passed and he acquired certain reputation in the area as an ascetic who was living in severe discipline, practicing charity, being the disciple of a great teacher and a master of himself.

One day, a man who was visibly in a rush, passed by the deserted place and didn't even respond at all when he was offered a glass of water to quench his thirst. When he was called upon, he turned his head and continued walking as if nothing had happened. Provoked, the man who was easily getting angry insisted and repeated his proposal several times.

- Take a bit of the water I offer to all the travelers that pass this crossroads!

Since the passer-by continued to go his way, the ascetic got really angry and shouted in his direction:

- At least you could have thanked me!

But the other one didn't even turn his head.

Completely outraged with such a behavior, he couldn't take it anymore. Forgetting all the work on himself, ascetic discipline and self-control, the man grabbed his gun that was hanging all this time on a branch of the dry tree, pointed it at the inconsiderate traveler and shot. The man fell dead.

Seeing the consequence of his gesture, the angry man despaired. But at that moment, as if by miracle, flowers blossomed on the dead tree.

Later on, he learned that the man he had killed was himself a killer who was rushing to commit another murder after a long series of horrible crimes.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why did the anger of the man make his life difficult?
- Why did the dervish send the man to the deserted crossroads?
- Why does the man have to give water to the passers-by?
- Why does the man obey the dervish?
- Did the man learn something in the deserted place?
- Why does the man get very angry when his offer is ignored?
- Why does anger lead to murder?
- Why does the murder make the flowers blossom?
- What is the lesson of this story?
- Is there some similarity between the two protagonists of the story?

### **Reflection**

- Does anger have a reason to be?
- Does getting angry depend on oneself or on the others?
- Is it better to experience your flaws till the end or correct them?
- Why is it difficult for us to accept who we are?
- Can we really change?
- What are the means for learning to master oneself?
- Is mastering oneself possible and desirable?
- Are the others our own mirror?
- Does immanent justice exist?
- Does everything that exist have meaning?



## 15/ The coffer

### Should we always try to know?

There once was a man respected by all, for he was thoughtful and lead a balanced life. Nevertheless, he got married late, to a much younger woman.

One evening he returned home later than usual and his faithful servant welcomed him in an unusual way.

- Our mistress, your wife, is behaving strangely this evening. She brought the large coffer that belonged to your grandmother to her room, which normally contains some ancient embroidery, but I'm sure that now one can find in it something rather different. She refused to let me look inside, even I, your oldest servant! And now, she forbids that anyone enters her room.

Hearing this, the man went to see his wife, followed by his faithful servant. When he entered, he found her sitting next to a large coffer in solid wood, looking worried. After greeting her, he asked his beloved to lift the cover in order to show what the coffer contained. The woman replied:

- Is it because of the suspicions of your servant that you are asking me this? Do you not trust me?

- Would it not be easier to cut short all the rumors by simply opening the coffer? replied the husband.

But the woman, in a decided tone, retorted:

- I do not think that is possible.

- Why not? Is it locked?

- Yes that's right.

- So where's the key?

The woman showed him the key and said,

- Send the servant away, and I will give you the key.

The man sent him away and the woman timidly handed over the key. Then she left the room, visibly troubled.

Once alone, the man sat down by the coffer and began to think, while gently playing with the key.

He remained there for a long time. Later on that night, he sent for the gardeners working for him. He asked them to lift the coffer and take it to a specific location, away from the property. Following his instructions, they dug a deep hole and buried there the coffer. He watched them, then returned home.

The incident was closed, it was never mentioned thereafter.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Is the husband responsible for the problem that happened to him?
- Is the husband a wise man?
- Which dilemma did the wife create for her husband?
- Why does the wife send the servant away?
- Why does the woman leave the room?
- Does the husband trust his wife?
- Does the woman trust her husband?
- What does this young woman symbolize?
- What does the final choice of the husband reveal?
- Did the husband learn anything through this incident?

### **Reflection**

- Why is it hard to take the right decision?
- Is it desirable to know how to forget?
- What constitutes wisdom?
- Does trust have a cost?
- Why do we fear being duped?
- Are we always alone when comes the time to choose?
- When facing a dilemma, do we always have to choose?
- Is curiosity a quality or a defect?
- What constitutes vain knowledge?
- Why is uncertainty painful for us?

## *16/ The man who walked on water*

### **What is knowledge?**

There was a dervish, well learned, trained in a demanding and austere school, who was walking along the river, meditating on the reality of things. That day, he was absorbed by great theological and moral problems, a science which constituted the essence of the Sufi education provided by the school. Through it all was the issue of finally discovering the ultimate truth of all things.

As he walked, completely absorbed in deep reflections, resounded a shout that interrupted his train of thought. He immediately recognized that it was a traditional dervish incantation, coming from an island in the middle of the river. But as a specialist, he also realized that this man was committing a grave error. He was shocked.

- These words are worthless, he said aloud. How can this man thus massacre the sacred syllables! It is not "Ya Hu" that must be chanted, but "Hu Ya Hu!"

He considered it his most urgent duty - or even sacred - to correct this unfortunate who was so lost. No doubt had he not had like him the chance to be properly educated. Never could this poor man enter in resonance with the truth!

Noticing nearby a moored boat, he borrowed it and rowed towards the island. There he found a man dressed in a dervish robe, sitting on the floor of a miserable hut made of reeds. While chanting the initiatory formulas, he oscillated to the rhythm of his incantation.

- My good friend, he said, this is not the right way to pronounce! Do not be angry with me, I feel compelled to tell you, because knowledge gives us obligations. Moreover, it is meritorious to give beneficial advice to his neighbor, just as it is to receive such advice.

He then explained what had to be done in order to pronounce well, and the man humbly thanked the monk for his generous support. Then the learned dervish went back to his boat, pleased to have done a good deed. He remembered the words of his master who claimed that "the man who manages to correctly repeat the sacred words even has the power to walk on water." He had himself never been able or had never seen anyone hold such power, but did not despair that one day it happened.

Not hearing noise coming from the island anymore, he thought the man was pondering and the lesson had succeeded. Then he heard a weak "Ya Hu", somewhat timid: the man had resumed chanting, hesitant, but still in his usual ignorant way. The learned dervish was somewhat irritated to hear this. But he calmed down by starting a meditation on the tenacious perversity of men, and their insistence to remain in error.

While rowing quietly, he was lost in his deep thoughts, when his eyes uncovered the strangest spectacle in the world: the dervish of the hut had left the island and was moving toward him, walking on the surface of the water. Amazed, he stopped rowing instantly. The man reached him and accosted him with the following request:

- Brother, forgive me for bothering you, but I have come to seek your help. Can you tell me again the conventional method that you taught me? Because I really struggle to remember it.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Why is the learned dervish shocked when hearing the incantations?
- What is the importance of "sacred words"?
- Is the learned dervish animated by a moral sense?
- What does the learned dervish research?
- Is the second dervish naive?
- Why does the second dervish have trouble pronouncing the "sacred words"?
- Why the second dervish ask help from the learned dervish?
- Why cannot the learned dervish walk on water?
- Which of the two dervishes is more conscious?
- What fundamentally distinguishes the two dervishes?

### **Reflection**

- Why do we try to know things?
- Is knowledge a power or a trap?
- Is naiveté a quality?
- Why does ignorance pose a problem?
- Why do we persevere to remain in error?
- Why are we fascinated by the extraordinary?
- Why does disagreement trouble us?
- Can consciousness be a problem?
- Is it possible to know the truth?
- Is wisdom proportional to knowledge?

## 17/ The Lamp Boutique

### Does absurdity make sense?

By a moonless night, in a cold, deserted street, two men meet.

One addresses the other.

- Tell me, do you know the area? I am looking for a store that is called the Lamp Boutique. It is supposed to be near here, but I cannot find anywhere.

- I know the area, answers his interlocutor, I live three blocks away from here. So I can actually guide you to this place.

- I would rather try to find this place alone. They explained to me how to get there, I even noted down all the indications, they are written on this piece of paper.

- So I do not quite see why you came to me, if you wanted to manage by yourself.

- In fact, it was just to talk. The night is dark.

- Really! You are not looking at all for this shop, but rather seeking company.

- I think you're right, that's probably it.

- But if you want to find this shop, it would be more convenient to be guided by someone who knows the area, since you're nearly there. Especially since the last part is a bit complicated.

- I quite trust the people who told me the way, they know what they are talking about.

Moreover, their explanations allowed me to get here and I'm almost there, as you say. This is a proof, right? And I'm not so sure I can rely on other persons.

- Nevertheless, what is weird is that you can trust the people who informed you, when no one has given you the means of distinguishing trustworthy people from those you cannot trust.

- Maybe you are right.

- In the end, what is your goal?

- Just as I said: find this Lamp Boutique.

- Can I ask you why you are so anxious to find this store?

- Because I know for a fact that in this place one can find devices which allow you to read in the dark.

- Indeed. But there is something you've probably forgotten.

- Really! But what? I do not see at all. What have I forgotten?

- In order to read with a lamp, you must already know how to read, right?

- This, you certainly cannot prove!

- Indeed, it would be difficult in a night as dark as this one. And then you are missing an important information.

- What information?

- The Lamp Boutique is still where it always was, but all the lamps were transported elsewhere, in another shop.

- Listen, I don't know at all what a lamp is, evidently! But obviously it is in a Lamp Boutique that you find lamps. That's why they are called like this, right?

- Indeed! Except that "Lamp Boutique" has two possible meanings. It may mean "the place that sells lamps," but also "the place where they sold lamps in the past, but not anymore."

- This as well, I'm sure you cannot prove it!

- Do you realize that if someone listened to you, he would take you for a fool?

- According to me, you would be the one called a fool! But I want to believe that you're not one. For I suspect that in fact you have a well-established plan. You probably want to take me to a lamp shop held by a friend of yours, right? Or, for whatever reason, you do not want me to buy a lamp.

- It's worse than you think! Rather than letting you seek your "Lamp Boutique", allowing you to believe that this will solve your problem, I want to know if you can read or not. I also ask myself if you have ever seen such a shop, if you know what it looks like. Similarly, I would also like you to wonder if there are any other places where to find such a lamp, or other means to read in the dark.

The two men looked at each other sadly. Then each went his way.

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- What does the murky atmosphere of this story symbolize?
- Is the stranger confident or suspicious?
- Why does the stranger contradict himself?
- What does the "Lamp Shop" represent?
- Does the stranger really seek the lamp store?
- What signifies the idea of "reading in the dark"?
- What does the stranger ultimately look for?
- Why do the two men argue?
- What does the final sentence of this story mean?
- Does this story make sense?

#### **Reflection**

- What are we seeking through dialogue?
- Should we understand each other in order to dialogue?
- Why in general do we argue?
- What problem poses rationality?
- Do we always know what we want?
- What is the cause of loneliness?
- Why do we feel the need to insult others?
- Why do we often dodge other people's questions?
- Are we all misunderstood?
- Can absurdity make sense?

## *18/ The king who wanted to be generous*

### **Are we expecting always something?**

A powerful king, who one day was bored, summoned a dervish and asked he tells him a story.

- Majesty, replied the dervish, I would fancy telling you the story of a king who was the most generous of all time, because if you looked like him, you would certainly be the greatest of all living kings.

A sharp tension was suddenly felt among those who listened to this exchange, because nobody spoke in such a way to the king. It was customary to let him know that he was already the greatest living king, because of course he was endowed with the best qualities at an unprecedented level.

- Tell me this story, the king replied, visibly annoyed, but beware, because if your story is not living up to your words, you will get beheaded for slandering your king.

The dervish, remaining unruffled, then told the long story of a king who sacrificed his kingdom and even his own person so that no one would ever suffer because of him. After hearing this story that had captivated him, the king forgot his threats and declared:

- Here is a great story, dervish, and we shall benefit from it. You, of course, you cannot enjoy it, because you possess nothing and have nothing to give. You have given up everything and do not expect anything from this life. But I am a king, rich and powerful, and you will see that I can be the most generous of all, more than you could ever imagine. Follow me and see what I will do.

The king went up on a hill overlooking the town. There he called his best architects and ordered them to build a huge building consisting of a large central room surrounded by a wall of forty windows. Then he ordered to bring a significant part of his treasure inside that building. All means of transport were used to gather and carry in heaps of gold coins, which took a long time. Once everything was ready, the king sent word throughout every corner of the kingdom, that every day he would appear on every window to distribute his wealth to the needy of the country.

Soon, the news spread, and every day the needy crowded around the many windows of the edifice to get some piece of gold from the hands of the sovereign. The king enjoyed every moment of the situation. But after several days, he noticed the acting out of a man, apparently a dervish, who appeared each time, took a gold coin and went away without ever thanking the king, unlike other beggars. The king was surprised to see such a man coming and receiving the gold. At first he told himself the man had a good reason, he thought it was likely in order to distribute this wealth to some poor people, as a form of charity. But curiosity and suspicion slowly accomplished their work. And after forty days, irritated by this continuous maneuver, his patience to the end, the king openly showed his irritation and called the dervish:

- Ungrateful man! Don't you know how to say thank you for what I do? Can you not bow down like the others? You come every day to receive a piece of gold, could you at least smile in return and show some gratitude? How long will this last? And let me know: do you benefit from my generosity in order to get rich, or for usury? Your behavior is not worthy of a dervish! You probably wear this patched outfit in order to deceive us!

As soon as these words were spoken, the dervish took the forty gold coins out of his bag and

threw them to the king's feet.

- Take your gold, generous king! And know that generosity has only meaning at three conditions. To give without experiencing the feeling of being generous. To give without expecting anything. To give without ever doubting about anyone. Will you ever be generous?

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- Why would a powerful king be bored?
- Does the king need a dervish only to tell him a story?
- Why does the king get angry with the narrator?
- Why does the king feel superior to the dervish?
- Why does the king become generous?
- Why does the king get angry with the begging dervish?
- Why should we not seek "the feeling of being generous"?
- Why is the king suspicious of others?
- What is the common feature of the two dervishes in this story?
- Is the king pleased with himself?

#### **Reflection**

- Why do we need to be flattered?
- Is it possible to expect nothing from life?
- Why do we become wary of others?
- Why do we get bored?
- Can glory make us happy?
- Why do we often compare ourselves with others?
- Are human beings tempted by excess?
- Do we always know what motivates us?
- Will man be eternally dissatisfied?
- Is it possible to want to do good only in order to do good?



## 19/ *The beloved*

### **Do we love someone or do we love love?**

There was once a young man very much in love. All admired him for his consistent passion. For several years, he could not reach his beloved; numerous circumstances opposed his plans. Nevertheless, hope nourished his heart.

But one day, he finally got the message he expected from his beloved.

- Come join me tonight, we can finally see each other. And I have prepared a great feast for you.

She gave him an appointment in a given location and added:

- Wait for me until midnight and I will come without you having any need to call me.

The lover was overjoyed on receiving this missive. He let all his relatives, family and friends, know the news. As he wanted to share his happiness with everyone, he gave alms to all the wretched of the city, distributing them bread and meat.

Finally, when the long-awaited moment arrived, he went to the venue indicated by his beloved, and waited. He waited a while, somewhat feverish, although patiently.

As time passed, in the end he nevertheless fell asleep.

At night, the beloved arrived, true to her word. But she found her lover sound asleep! She cut out a piece of her robe, wrapped a few nuts in the square of fabric, and stuffed everything into the pocket of the garment worn by the young man.

At dawn, the lover awoke, looked for his beloved, but did not see her. He felt the small package in his pocket, He plunged his hand and pulled out the present that had been given to him in his sleep. Seeing the nuts and the fabric, he exclaimed:

- My beloved is more faithful and consistent than me! If I am in pain, it is my fault.

## ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

### **Comprehension**

- Who dominates the relationship in this story?
- Is the lover a weak person?
- Why do all admire the constancy of the lover?
- What role plays hope in this relationship?
- Why does the lover want to share his happiness with everyone?
- Why does the missive specify that there is no "need to call"?
- Why is the lover fast asleep?
- What is the meaning of the gift of the "beloved"?
- Why does the lover blame himself for the failure of the encounter?
- Is the beloved a real person?

### **Reflection**

- Do we choose who we love?
- Is constancy always a quality?
- Can circumstances be an alibi?
- Does hope helps us live or does it inhibit life?
- Do we love love or do we love a person?
- In love, must we accept everything from the other?
- Do we always expect something when we love?
- Can love deprive us of our resources?
- Are there different kinds of love?
- Must we love in order to know?

## 20/ Precious and worthless

### Is it difficult to think?

A king called one day his adviser, a Sufi sage, to which he presented this problem:

- The strength of true thought is a clear judgment, especially when is presented to us an alternative. Moreover, here is one that concerns me right now: should we increase the knowledge of my people or give it more food? Knowing that in both cases it will benefit them.

- Sir, why give knowledge to those who are unable to receive it? retorted the sage. Why give food to those who do not understand the reason for it? It is wrong to assume that "in both cases the people will benefit." If people cannot digest this food, if they believe it is given it only in order to corrupt them, or if they figure that in this way they can always get more, you will have failed. Same for knowledge. If they are unable to even realize they are offered knowledge, if they cannot understand this knowledge, or if they cannot understand why it is given to them, they will not benefit from it. To understand it better, such a problem must be addressed by degrees. And here is a meditation that could serve as initiation to a higher degree: "What is most valuable is worthless, and what is worthless is most valuable. "

- You will have to explain this truth and prove it to me, because I don't understand it, said the king.

So the Sufi invited to the court a great dervish and asked him the following question: "If you could ask an inhabitant of this city to accomplish something important, what would you ask him to do? "

This dervish knew the internal correspondence of things. And he said:

- There is a man, a bazaar merchant who could become very rich, and cause at the same time major beneficial changes in the kingdom, and also advance the Way, only by a simple gesture: by giving a pound of cherries to another man in need.

The king was very happy to hear that answer, because usually the Sufi masters are not as explicit or concrete.

- Send for him immediately, and we will order him what to do, he cried.

With a disapproving gesture, the two others hushed him.

- It cannot work in this fashion, the operation can only be successful if the man acts voluntarily, explained the master.

All three then went to the Grand Bazaar, incognito, stripped of their function clothing, so as not to unduly influence the merchant's decision. They approached the stall, examining fruits as ordinary customers. The dervish told the king that he must play the triggering role: he approached the merchant, greeted him and said:

- I know a poor man who lacks everything. Could you offer by charity a pound of cherries?

The merchant laughed heavily.

- Hey, I've dealt with many jokers in my life, I met all sorts of tricks, but this one, it's the first time I hear it. Someone who wants cherries and lowers himself by asking me to give it supposedly for someone else, pretending he does this for charity. That's a good one!

So the three men went away.

- You see what I was talking about? said the sage. A valuable man just made the most valuable suggestion, and events have proved that all of it is worthless to the man for whom it is intended.

The king looked at him thoughtfully, then asked:

- What then of what is worthless, but is precisely precious?

The wise man beckoned the king to follow him to the river. When they reached the bank, the two men suddenly seized the king and threw him into the water. Although they knew very well that the king could not swim. The latter was choking and struggling in the stream, and was about to drown, when a wretched vagabond nicknamed "Crazy Uncle", a well-known simpleton always wandering around the city streets, immediately jumped into the river and brought the king safe and healthy back on the bank. Many passersby, stronger and abler than this poor man, had seen the king floundering around the deep water, but none had made the slightest move to help him.

The drowned king took some time to recover from his emotions. But when he calmed down, the two wise men said to him with one voice:

- See how that which is worthless is precious.

Thus the sovereign returned to his old traditional method, which was to give what he could give, education, assistance or else, in any form whatsoever, case by case, depending on the circumstances, to those which he deemed most worthy of receiving the aid.

### ***Some questions to deepen and prolong***

#### **Comprehension**

- What is the point of asking for a clear alternative?
- What is the difference between "feeding" and "giving knowledge"?
- Why does the Sufi sage disagree with the initial question of the king?
- Why does the sage propose a paradox as an initiation?
- Why is the knowledge of "internal correspondence of things" important?
- Why should the king not reveal the "secret" to the merchant?
- Why does the merchant not seize the opportunity offered to him?
- Why are both wise men violent with the king?
- Why is it a simpleton that saves the king?
- What has the king learned during his adventure?

#### **Reflection**

- Should we understand the nature and intention of a donation in order to accept it?
- Should an educator know well his student in order to educate him?
- Is knowledge more precious than food?
- Do all questions have presuppositions?
- Are appearances always deceiving?
- Is there really some "internal correspondence of things"?
- Can education occur without violence?
- Is truth of a paradoxical nature?
- What is the function of judgment?
- Are we responsible for the order of the world?