These last two lines closely resemble the conclusion of ancient Greek poet Cavafy's *"Eternity,"* which is based on a conversation between Arjuna and Krishna in the classic fourth-century Indian poem the *"Mahabharata,"* in which Krishna says, after Arjuna protests that he cannot kill his fellow humans: "Not one life is taken. Know that no one / was ever born, nor does anyone die." Mehrotra wrote, "This is, suddenly, in the midst of the turbulent Greco-Roman world, the calm voice of Krishna. All is illusion for the enlightened. Plainly, Cavafy, himself no Arjuna, did achieve something very like that ultimate state of enlightenment where, not fooled by words, he was able to so order them as to make our common voyage, viewed from his unique angle, seem beautiful, even consoling, in its shining nothingness."

"This "shining nothingness" sums up Kabir's view of human life," wrote Mehrotra. "And it's a view he repeated in poem after poem, almost obsessively."

Kabir's poetic personality has been variously defined by the religious traditions that revere him, and the same can be said for his hagiography. For Sikhs he is a precursor and interlocutor of Nanak, the founding Sikh Guru. Muslims place him in Sufi lineages, and for Hindus he becomes a *Vaishnava* (devotee of the god Vishnu) with universalist leanings. But when one goes back to the poetry that can most reliably be attributed to Kabir, only two aspects of his life emerge as truly certain: he lived most of his life in Banaras (now Varanasi), and he was a weaver, a low-ranked caste that had become largely Muslim in Kabir's time. His humble social status and straightforwardness contributed to his celebrity among various other religious movements and helped shape the *Kabir Panth*, a sect found across north and central India that draws its members especially but not exclusively from the scheduled castes (formerly known as untouchables).

The birth of Kabir (Arabic: "Great") remains to this day shrouded in mystery and legend. Authorities disagree on both when he was born and who his parents were. One legend proclaims a divine virginal birth. His mother was of the Brahman caste and became pregnant after a visit to a Hindu shrine. Because she was unwed, she abandoned Kabir, who was found and adopted by a Muslim weaver.

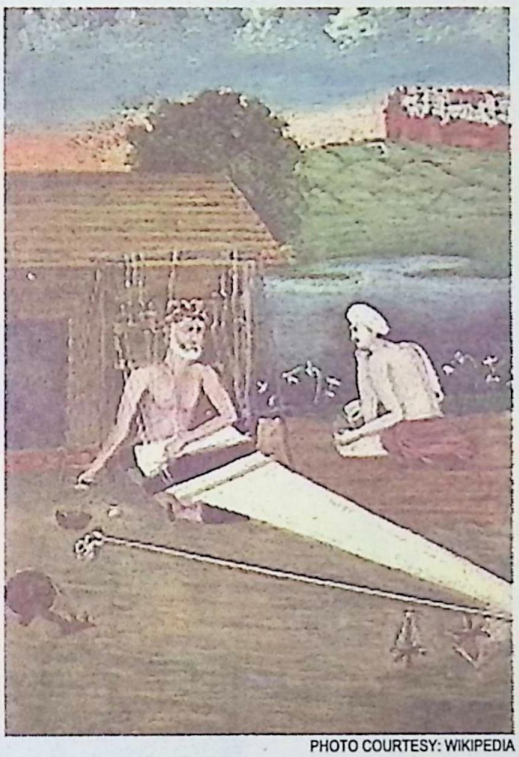


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The Zen Buddhist notion of not mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself is a central theme throughout Kabir's poetry.

The saint-poet is one of the most interesting personalities in the history of Indian mysticism. Legend has it that after his death his Muslim and Hindu disciples quarreled over the disposition of his body (to bury or to cremate?) As they argued together, Kabir appeared before them, and told them to lift the shroud and look at what lay beneath. They did so, and found in the place of the corpse a heap of flowers; half of which were buried by the Muslims at Maghar, and half carried by the Hindus to the holy city of Benares to be burned--fitting conclusion to a life which had made fragrant the most beautiful doctrines of two great creeds.

He may or may not have submitted to the traditional education of the Hindu or the Sufi contemplative and never adopted the life of an ascetic. Side by side with his interior life of adoration, its artistic expression in music and words, he lived the sane and diligent life of a craftsman. Kabir was a weaver, a simple and unlettered man, who earned his living at the loom. Like Paul the tentmaker, and Boehme the cobbler, he knew how to combine vision and industry. And it was out of the heart of a common man that he sang his rapturous lyrics of divine love.

Living at the moment in which the impassioned poetry and deep philosophy of the great Persian mystics, Attar, Sadi, Jalaluddîn Rumi, and Hafiz, were exercising a powerful influence on the religious thought of India, he dreamed of building a bridge between the two most dominant cultures of India.

"The river that flows in you also flows in me," he once sang.