Divine Love

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Istanbul is one of the cities that I wanted to visit all my life. Rich in history, this old city straddles Asia and Europe. You can literally walk from Asia to Europe in 10 minutes! This was also the seat of a mighty empire which ruled over a big chunk of Europe, Asia and North Africa. The opportunity came when I was going to Canada to attend my youngest daughter's graduation. I spent four days in Istanbul visiting the Blue mosque, the Topkapi palace museum, the Grand Bazaar and taking the boat cruise in the Bosporus.

A lot has been written on Turkey. So I will write about something that is unique to Turkey and is oftentimes missed out by tourists. Yes, I am talking about the "whirling dervishes" and their famous dance. This is also described as the dance for divine love. I had read about it but had no idea about what it stood for or what this dance really meant. I made sure that an evening was set aside for the whirling dervish dance. Many restaurants and cafes have some kind of fake dervish dances for their clients but it is a far cry from the real thing. One evening, I went to the Hodjapasha Dance Theater where this art form is taught and performed. The Hodjapasha Dance Theater was originally a 550-year-old *hammam* which has been turned into the stage for the dance of the whirling dervish.

The origin of the whirling dervishes may be traced back to Mevlana (Maulana) Jalaluddin Rumi. Rumi was born in Balkh of Khorasan province which is now in Afghanistan around the beginning of the 13th century. Later his family migrated to Turkey. Rumi was a scholar who studied medicine, history and other subjects besides Islam and other religions. He was fluent in Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and Greek. In those days Persian was the language of literature and Arabic was the language of science. Hence his literary works like 'The Masnavi' is in Persian. He was a poet, philosopher and a religious leader. He had a big following and his madrasas were always full of scholars and students.

> The first whirling symbolises the creation of the world, its animals and plants. It continues for four salutes which are the means for the humans to reach divine reality intoxicating the soul.

Rumi died in 1273. After his death, one of his four sons, Sultan Veled started an order which came to be known as the Mevlevi order. Rumi's death is celebrated by the order as the "Sab i Arus" or "the wedding night" when he joined the Divine forever. The Mevlevi order is one of the most known around the world. The order is based on the mystical dimensions of Islam. Sufism may be roughly defined as a means by which a person frees himself from bad habits, cleanses his soul and attains maturity with love for God. In a way, it is a lifestyle.

This order continued its existence until 1923 when Ataturk banned all orders and closed all hermitages. The Mevlana Sema ceremony or the whirling dervish dance survived in the activities of various associations, foundations and educational institutions and the order continued to survive as a cultural heritage even though it was officially banned. In 2005, the UNESCO declared the Mevlana Sema ceremony as one of the "masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity".

The Sema ceremony or the whirling dervish dance is one of the richest Turkish cultural heritages. This is a ritual, a spiritual journey in which the soul meets God and becomes mature and attains unity with Him before its journey back to life to serve humanity. The dance is accompanied by a band of flutists, drummers and chanters. The whole episode is formally choreographed and is led by a sheikh or leader. The dancers wear special costumes. Their coats symbolise the tomb.

They begin with "Naat i Sharif" in praise of the prophet (Peace be Upon Him). The dancers numbering five, stand with their clenched hands folded cross ways, that is, the right hand touches the left shoulder