

Commentary by Pir Zia Inayat Khan

Copper Rule 2

“My conscientious self, be polite to all.”

I’m reminded of a saying by a very early Sufi, probably of the 9th century, Abu Hafs al-Haddad of Nishapur, who is quoted by Hujwiri in his *Kashf al-Mahjub*. He says, “*At-tasawwuf kullahu adab.*” Sufism, *at-tasawwuf*, is entirely *adab*, is entirely beautiful manner.

And he goes on and says, “Sufism consists entirely of a beautiful manner. Every time, place, and circumstance have their own propriety. He that observes the proprieties of each occasion attains to the rank of the holy ones.”

This is an extremely interesting statement because it uproots a lot of our notions about what a spiritual path ultimately means. The emphasis here is not on occult attainments or even on piety, precision in ritual, or doctrine. The emphasis is on manner, the manner in relationship, the relationship to others, the ability to harmonize with a situation.

And so, for Abu Hafs Haddad, the way of spiritual attainment is nothing more or less than politeness. And politeness, he says, is situational. It means that one has to be attentive and attuned to the context, to the individuals who are involved, to the propriety of the moment. And, of course, it is not a manner that is formalistic. It is not an etiquette that can be learned in a formal way. It is an etiquette that flows out of a quality of refined attention.

All of us strive, consciously or unconsciously, for this refinement of manner. But we find, that, although we hold for ourself the ideal of politeness, there are times when we are less polite than we would like to be. And on those occasions, it is usually as a result of feeling overextended. Either we are overburdened with responsibility, with work, and some demand is imposed upon us, and we feel that we are beyond our means. And that is the time when we become most irritable. Or when we don’t have time, when we’re in a hurry, we’re in a rush. That is when politeness lapses. And also when one is overtired, when one is exhausted. These are times when it is almost inevitable that one’s quality of etiquette will be compromised.

The saying “be polite to all” is not only an imperative that we should act politely. What is required here is to establish the conditions in our life whereby politeness can manifest naturally. So if we are perpetually rushed, if we perpetually are anxious about time, about feeling inherently tense over a situation, we are going to be predisposed to a lack of etiquette.

It’s not just a matter of, let’s say, having the training, knowing the difference between what is a refined manner and what is not refined. But it’s also being capable of living up to one’s ideal because one has established a rhythm of life that allows for it, which isn’t to say that there will not be surprises and unexpected challenges and emergencies.

But if one has been able to establish a life rhythm that is natural and pervaded by equanimity, then, even in unusual situations, that equanimity carries over. Whereas, if one’s rhythm of life is disturbed, then even in moments of outer repose and release of responsibility, still the inner anxiety persists. So the essence of politeness really comes from a state of equanimity, of peace within oneself.

And so, one can notice when one is out of that balanced, centered state, and then one knows, that at any moment, one is very likely to act without discretion, to act in a way that is not harmonious with the context.