

Meeting Murshid Samuel Lewis

*by Azimat Sally Schreiber-Cohn, Dance Leader and
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It's the sixties in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I do hatha yoga weekly and practice a book-taught meditation. Zen Buddhist friends have led me to attend the first talk of Ram Dass (Richard Alpert) at Harvard University after his return from India. I feel enthralled to explore spiritual matters after my fairly recent breakthrough from being a "scientifically oriented agnostic."

In the last few months, three poet friends who have read Jelaluddin Rumi ask me if I have heard of the Sufis. I have not. I understand from them that the mystical Sufis appear as ordinary people, as everyday as your neighbors.

Several months later, I am at a seminar. At the end of the evening, someone hands me a paper, "Here is some scratch paper. Please write people's names and addresses." I turn the paper over and see an advertisement for "Sufi Ahmed Murad Chishti," who will give talks in Boston. I am determined to go to these talks.

The night arrives. I expect to hear a spiritual person with the tone of Ram Dass or that of my hatha yoga teacher: gentle, delicate in manner, oh-so-refined and with a subtle luminosity. I walk into the room where eight or ten people are sitting on the floor in front of the older man whose picture I had seen on the poster. The older man has a beard, glasses and is wearing a cloak with a hood over street clothes. He is sitting on a chair in front of the group. After some minutes, he starts to talk.

My ears and mind are confused. "He doesn't have that soft-spoken 'spiritual' voice!" I feel shocked. He says, "Sufism is based on experiences and not on premises." I hear the words, but I don't understand what they mean. My thoughts follow what he is saying; however, my real struggle is: "How can this person with a loud voice be spiritual?"

Then the man says, "It's time to get up and dance." I feel another layer of confusion. "What does getting up from sitting - and even more, dancing - have to do with spirit?"

I get up with the others. He calls out the instructions from his seat in the chair. A young man, his secretary, will lead the movements. Murshid S.A.M. calls, "Hold hands. Now move right. Allah, Allah, Allah, Allah...; Er-Rahman, Er-Rahim...; Turn...; Turn two times...; Turn three times...; Amin." I'm standing in the circle holding hands. I feel like nine universes are spinning around me and through me, yet I'm holding hands and have my feet on the floor. "Come sit down," he calls to the group. Again his uniquely direct voice sounds. He talks. Afterwards, "Are there any questions?"

I expect answers such as, "Over time, as you practice, you'll understand." Murshid S.A.M. answers directly. To a metaphysical question he responds, "Watch your breath. See what you experience."

Then again I hear, "Time to dance."

This time he stands in the circle with us. When he takes hands to form the connection, I feel a current - energy of strength and radiance from his chest center - coming all around the circle.

“Om Sri Ram, Jai Ram, Jai Jai Ram,” he chants and with definite steps moves us right and ends strong, present, “Om Hare Om.”

He continues to stand with us in the circle. “Partners,” he calls. “Women on the outside, men on the inside. Couples face the line of direction.” “Om Sri Ram, Jai Ram, Jai Jai Ram...; Men advance...; Men advance....”

The Dance progresses. Murshid S.A.M. moves to hold my hand as a partner; I feel energy coming directly through my arm into my chest. My chest feels an immediate, personal charge of that strength and radiance.

“Reverse direction. Women advance...; Women advance...;” At the end, “Om Hare Om.” He instructs us to sit down again. He talks and takes more questions. Then, “Enough for tonight.”

It's the next day. The Hog Farm community has come in their busses and has set up for a giant gathering at Harvard University football stadium. I decide to go, even though my main focus for the day will be to attend the next talk of Murshid S.A.M. that evening. At the Hog Farm event, I wander to various stations around the grassy field. I see clown acts, hear rock music groups that have people dancing to their music, and over the loud speaker I hear of the bean-eating contest. I happen to see a few friends whom I know from spiritual connections. “You HAVE to meet this man called ‘Sufi Sam,’” I say. “Meet me at 4:00 near the field entrance, and I’ll show you a dance he taught.” My chest and brain are filled with what I experienced with Murshid S.A.M. I want to share it.

The friends gather at the field entrance. “Hold hands in a circle,” I say. We move: “Om Sri Ram, Jai Ram, Jai Jai Ram...;Om Hare Om.” I feel this Dance to be very different than that with Murshid S.A.M. Still, something happens in our doing the Dance.

“Yes,” the people say. “We will come to hear Murshid S.A.M. this evening.” And so they do. And so they do.....