

# **Death, An Excerpt from Murtadha Mutahhari's Divine Justice**

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**Murtadha Mutahhari**

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This text explains in detail the meaning of death. It also touches subjects like why we are born, why we live, why some fear death and how understanding death is in itself a part of developing your spirit.

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# Death, An Excerpt from Murtadha Mutahhari's Divine Justice

Translated from the Persian by Murtaza Alidina

## [The Phenomenon of Death](#)

One of the concepts which has always tormented man is the thought of death and termination of life. Man asks himself why have we come to the world and why do we die? What is the purpose of this construction and destruction? Is it not a futile and meaningless exercise?

*The Master did himself these vessels frame,*

*Why should he cast them out to scorn and shame?*

*If he has made them well, why should he break them? Yea, though he marred them, they are not to blame. [1](#)*

*Behold these cups! Can He who deigned to make them,*

*In wanton freak let ruin overtake them,*

*So many shapely feet and hands and heads –*

*What love drives Him to make, what wrath to break them? [2](#)*

*There is a chalice made with wit profound,*

*With tokens of the Maker's favor crowned;  
Yet the world's Potter takes his masterpiece,  
And dashes it to pieces on the ground!*<sup>3</sup>

Anxiety about death is one of the causes for philosophical pessimism. The pessimistic philosophers view life and existence as purposeless and meaningless and devoid of any wisdom. This view has embroiled them in confusion and perplexity, and at times even induced them to suicide; they reason that if we are to die and leave, then we should not have come, but now that we have arrived without choice we can exercise at least this much choice that we do not allow this futility to continue; terminating this futility is in itself a wise act.

*I never would have come, had I been asked,  
I would as lief not go, if I were asked,  
And, to be short, I would annihilate  
All coming, being, going, were I asked!*<sup>4</sup>

*Since all man's business in this world of woe  
Is sorrow's pangs to feel, and grief to know,  
Happy are they that never come at all,  
And they that, having come, the soonest go!*<sup>5</sup>

## Anxiety of Death

Before we discuss the issue of death and the objection, based on it and, levelled against the laws and order governing the universe, we ought to note the fact that fear and anxiety of death is a distinctly human characteristic.

Animals do not think about death. What animals have is an instinct of flight from danger and self-preservation. Of course, the inclination for survival as expressed by the preservation of extant life is a necessary concomitant for life in general, but in humans, in addition to this, there is also an attention to the future and survival in the future. In other words, man also harbours a desire for eternity and perpetual life, and this yearning is specifically human. Desire is dependent on conceptualizing the future, and the desire for eternal life is dependent on conceptualizing eternity; the concept of which is uniquely human.

Hence, Man's fear and apprehension of death which has always pre-occupied human thought is distinct from the instinct of flight from danger; the latter being an instantaneous and general reaction to dangers in animals. For, before the desire for eternity develops into a concept, even the human child avoids dangers based on the instinctive flight from danger.

Death anxiety is a product of desire for eternity, and since in the systems governing nature no inherent

desire is created which is futile and purposeless, this desire can be taken as proof for man's survival after death.

The fact that we are tormented by the thought of extinction is itself evidence that we will not become extinct. If like flowers and plants we were to have a limited and temporary life, the desire for eternity would not have emerged as a fundamental desire within us. The existence of thirst is evidence for the existence of water. Similarly, the existence of every fundamental potential and desire within us is evidence of the concrete existence of that perfection. It is as if every potential and capacity is a preconception and memory of the perfection toward which one ought to strive.

The desire and anxiety about eternity and immortality which have always engaged the human mind are manifestations and expressions of the inextinguishable reality and being of man. The appearance of these desires and anxieties for a man are exactly like his dreams, which are the manifestations of human character traits and perceptions in his waking period. What appears in the dream world is the manifestation of things which have entered and sometimes taken root in our soul during our waking period.

That which appears in our souls during the wakeful period in the form of a desire for immortality and eternity—something totally incompatible with the temporary life of this world—is actually the manifestation and appearance of our immortal reality. We will endure. To quote Rāmānand:

*There must needs be the elephant, in order that, when he sleeps supinely,  
he may dream of the land of Hindustan.*

*The ass does not dream of Hindustan at all: The ass has never journeyed from  
Hindustan to a foreign country.*

*Because of desire the elephant remembers Hindustan; then by night that  
remembrance of his takes form.*<sup>6</sup>

These conceptions, ideas and desires are a reflection of that reality which was named by the philosophers and mystics as “alienation” (*ghurbat*) and “incommensurability” (*‘adam e tajānus*) of man in this material world.

## **Death is Relative**

The objection against death stems from the fact that they considered death as extinction whereas death is not the extinction of man; rather, it is a transformation and development, a demise in one realm but rising in another. In other words, death is an extinction, but not an absolute extinction, rather a relative extinction, meaning an extinction from one realm but existence in another realm.

Man does not have an absolute death. It is abandoning one state and acquiring another state, and like all other transformations, the annihilation is relative. When soil changes to plant life, it is a death but not

an absolute death; soil has abandoned its former form and characteristics and no longer has the appearance and manifestation it had as an inanimate entity; but it has died from one state and condition and acquired life in another state and condition.

*I died to the inorganic state and became endowed with growth, and (then) I died to (vegetable) growth and attained to the animal.*

*I died from animality and became Adam (man); why, then, should I fear? When have I become less by dying?*

*At the next remove I shall die to man, that I may soar and lift up my head amongst the angels;*

*And I must escape even from (the state of) the angel; everything is perishing except His Face.*[7](#)

## **The World is a Womb for the Soul**

Transfer from this world to another world, is not dissimilar to the birth of a baby from the mother's womb. This analogy is complete in one sense but incomplete in another sense. It is incomplete in the sense that the difference between this world and the hereafter is much more profound and essential than the distinction between the womb and extra-uterine life. Both uterine and extra-uterine phases are parts of the material world and physical life, whereas the world here and hereafter are two different realms and worlds with fundamental distinctions. But this similitude is complete from another sense; the sense that reflects differences in conditions. The baby is nourished through the placenta and umbilical cord; but after birth, that route gets blocked, and it is instead nourished via the mouth and digestive tract. In the womb, the lungs are already formed but not functional, but after birth the lungs become functional.

It is amazing that so long as the foetus is in the uterus it makes no use of the respiratory tract and lungs whatsoever, and if ever they were to function for even a moment, it would lead to death; this state continues till its last moment in the uterus, but the moment it steps into this world, the respiratory system immediately begins to function, and thereafter if it were to fail to function even for a moment, death would approach.

In this manner the system of life before birth transforms to another system after birth; the baby before birth lives in one life system and after birth in another life system.

Basically, the respiratory system though formed during uterine life, is not designed to function during that period; rather it is a prefigurement and preparation for extra-uterine life. The visual, auditory, olfactory and gustatory systems with all their complexity and expanse are not designed to function in the uterine phase; they are rather for the next phase of life.

This world in relation to the hereafter is like the womb in which all the bodies and mental systems are formed in preparation for life hereafter. The human psychic potential—its non-composite and immaterial nature, the indivisibility and relative constancy of man's "I", his endless desires, his expansive and infinite thoughts, are all constituents of a much wider, expansive and longer, nay, an eternal, and endless life.

These are the very realities which render man “alienated” and “incommensurate” with this temporary and ephemeral life. These are what have led man to be like the “reed” which has been separated from the “reed bed”, from whose “tune both man and woman wail”, and is always seeking a “heart which is torn to pieces from the separation”, so that it may narrate the “details of the pain of love”. These are the very realities which have caused man to view himself from the “lofty perspective of the King seated on the lotus throne”, considering the world in relation to himself as the “kunj mihnāt ābād” or view himself as the “sweet celestial bird” and the world as “a snare of incidents”.

The glorious Qur’ān declares:

***Did you suppose that We created you aimlessly, and that you will not be brought back to Us?  
(23: 115)***

If man furnished with all these systems and capabilities were to have no return back to God, toward a world which is an expansive realm commensurate with this well-equipped entity, it would be exactly like the example of a foetus in the uterine life which had no extra-uterine life ahead, and all foetuses were to become annihilated at the end of their uterine phase of existence; all those elaborate visual, auditory, olfactory, central and peripheral nervous systems, lungs and intestines which are of no function in uterine life, and which are unnecessary for the vegetative life there, would have been created without use and would have been meaningless, futile and destroyed even before any use was ever made of them.

Indeed, death is the termination of one phase of man’s life and a beginning for a new phase in it.

Death, in relation to this world, is death, but in relation to the next world, is a birth, in as much as the birth of a newborn in relation to this world is a birth but in relation to its previous life is a death.

## **World as a School for Man**

This world in relation to the next world is a preparatory, training, and perfecting phase for man. It is very much what a school or university is for youth. In fact we can even say that the entire world is really one big school or training ground.

In the Nahj al-Balāgha, under the section of short sayings, it is narrated that a man came to the Leader of the Faithful ‘Alī (‘a) and started condemning the world, “The world is this and the world is that, the world deceives man, the world corrupts man, the world is criminal and cunning,” and other words of this nature. This man had heard religious leaders condemn the world, and mistook this condemnation as being directed at the reality of this world—meaning that the world is inherently evil. He failed to realize that what was actually evil was “love of the world,” and that what is evil is to hold a narrow view and limited perspective vis-à-vis being—something that is fundamentally incompatible with man and man’s felicity. ‘Alī (‘a) explained to him:

You can be deceived by the world, but the world does not deceive anyone; you have committed a crime on the world, but the world has committed no crime against you ... the world is honest with whosoever deals with her honestly, and is a means of equilibrium for whosoever understands her; the world is a place of worship for the friends of God, a place of prayer for the angels of God, the destination for God's revelation, a trading place for the lovers of God.

Shaikh Farīd ud Dīn al 'Awwālī has composed a poem about this incident. Nāṣir Khusraw addressing the world says:

O World, you may not have lasted more than the usual fourscore and ten for anyone, but still you are necessary. You may be as wretched as a thorn on the eye, but essentially you are as necessary as sight itself. You may have broken, but you have mended as well.

Like a chameleon you take on the colour of corruption from the corrupt, but to the pure you are pure. To those who despise you say: You have not known me.

If you are modest and sedate you'll find me modest and sedate as well. I gave you

righteousness but you sought from me only ill. If you are wise you will be saved from me. Why hate that from which you've been saved? God has given me to you as a thoroughfare—why do you loiter along the way? You are a branch of the tree God planted for your sake – if you grow up crooked, you will end up in the fireplace—grow straight and you will be saved. Yes, crookedness will land you in the flames, and no one will ask if you were almond or pistachio.

You are the arrow of God to His enemies—why have you cut yourself on your own point?[8](#)

The glorious Qur'ān declares:

***He, who created death and life that He may test you [to see] which of you is best in conduct. (67:2)***

Meaning that this world, which is a composite of life and death, is a testing ground for the excellence in human conduct.

It should be noted that the Divine “test” is really to actualize potentials and abilities. The actualization of a potential is to develop and perfect it. This test is not designed to discover the secrets of beings, rather, it is to actualize their hidden potentials. So in this case, “disclosure” is an act of creation and the Divine test “reveals” the human traits from the hidden phase of potential and capability to the external and concrete phase of actualization and perfection. The Divine test is not there to assess the weight, rather it is there to increase the mass.

With this elaboration it becomes clear that the above mentioned verse reflects this truth that the world is a place for training and perfecting human potentials.

## **Basis of the Objection**

With the explanation of death we gave above, the groundless nature of the objections is made apparent. In actual fact, these objections stem from a lack of knowledge about man and the universe, or in other words, they issue from an incomplete and sterile view of the world.

Truly if death is the end of life, then the desire and longing for eternity will be extremely painful, and the face of death will become infinitely frightening to the human consciousness which is awake.

That some humans consider life as meaningless is based on the fact that they harbour a longing for immortality but believe it cannot be achieved. If it were not for this desire and longing, they would not have considered life as futile and meaningless, —even if it all ended in utter non–existence. At least, they would have deemed it as a temporary fortune and an ephemeral kingdom. They never would have reckoned that non–existence is better than such an existence, since the presumption is that the defect of such an existence is its transience—its deficiency is that it is followed by non–existence.

Thus all defects stem from transience and non–existence, so how would it be better if non–existence were to replace even that small and limited amount of existence?

Indeed, we observe in ourselves a longing for immortality, and this yearning is dependent on conceptualizing it; that is, we have a notion of eternity and its beauty and appeal, and this appeal creates in us a tremendous desire for immortality, and for enjoying the bounties of life forever.

If a barrage of materialist notions were to overwhelm our mind, making us think that such ideas and desires are all futile and that there is no reality to eternity, then we would have every right to be worried and apprehensive. In this case, an immense sorrow and fear would develop in us and we would wish we had never come and had never faced such anguish and dread.

Thus the idea of existence being futile and meaningless is the consequence of the incompatibility

between an inborn instinct and an acquired ideology. For, if it were not for that instinct, such an idea would not have developed; and with just as much reason, if the false materialistic ideas had not been propagated to us, we would not have developed such a concept.

Man's innate and inherent constitution is such that it creates the desire for immortality as a means for achieving the perfection whose potential he possesses. And since this constitution and the potentials it implies are beyond the scope of temporal earthly life, the assumption that existence is restricted to this worldly life would mean that all those potentials are futile and meaningless.

The person who has no belief in eternal life finds incongruence between the constitution of his being on the one hand and his thoughts and longings on the other. Audibly and ostensibly he is heard to say, "the end of life is non-existence, all paths terminate in annihilation, thus life and existence is futile and meaningless", but existentially and in his heart of hearts he affirms, "there is no non-existence, there is an endless path ahead, if my life were limited I would not have been created with the potential for eternity and the longing for immortality."

Based on this, as mentioned earlier, the glorious Qur'an equates the denial of resurrection with belief in meaninglessness of creation:

***Did you suppose that We created you aimlessly, and that you will not be brought back to Us?  
(23: 115)***

Indeed, one who considers the world to be a school and place for perfection, and believes in life after death, will not raise such objections. He will not say that they should not have brought us into the world. Nor will he argue that now that they have brought us here we ought not to die. To say this, is in a wise to say that either the child should not be sent to school or that if he has been sent to school, he should never leave school!

Khwaḡja Naṣṡr al-Dīn ṡṡṡ's teacher (or teacher's teacher) was a scholar by the name of Bḡbḡ Afḡal Kḡshḡnḡ. He has expounded the philosophy of death in a profound poem. We can consider his quatrain to be a response to the famous quatrain by Khayyḡm. Perhaps it was composed for this very reason. The quatrain attributed to Khayyḡm is as follows:

*Behold these cups! Can He who deigned to make them,  
In wanton freak let ruin overtake them,  
So many shapely feet and hands and heads –  
What love drives Him to make, what wrath to break them?<sup>9</sup>*

Bḡbḡ Afḡal says:

*As the pearl (essence) of soul joined the shell of body,  
(Nourished by) the Water of Life it took the form of man.  
When the pearl was finished, when the shell was shattered –*

*It came to adorn the ear of the King (God).*

In this quartet, man's body is equated with a shell which cultivates the precious pearl of a human soul in its centre. The breaking open of the shell, when the pearl is perfected, is necessary so that the precious pearl can be elevated from its lowly position to the lofty position of the human ear. Similarly, the philosophy of human death is to facilitate transfer from the prison of the material world to the free ranges of Paradise—which span both the heavens and the earth—and take up position in the vicinity of the Omnipotent King and Majestic Lord, in whose proximity all perfection can be accomplished. This is the meaning of:

***'Indeed we belong to God, and to Him do we indeed return. (2: 156)***

The objection 'why do we die?' and its response has been beautifully encapsulated in an anecdote of the Mathnawī. Rūmī says:

*Moses said, "O Lord of the Reckoning, Thou didst create the form: how didst Thou destroy it again?"*

*Thou hast made the form, male and female, that gives unto the spirit increase (of joy); and then Thou dost ruin it: why?"*

*God said, "I know that this question of thine is not from disbelief and heedlessness and idle fancy; Else I should have corrected and chastised thee: I should have afflicted thee on account of this question. But (I know that) thou wishest to discover in My actions the wisdom and hidden meaning of (phenomenal) duration,*

*That thou mayst acquaint the vulgar therewith and by this means make every raw (ignorant) person to become cooked.*

*Then god spake unto him, saying, "O thou who possesseth the most excellent (understanding), since thou has asked (the question), come, hear the answer.*

*O Moses, sow some seed in the earth, that thou thyself mayst render justice to this (question)."*

*When Moses had sown and the seed—corn was complete (in growth) and its ears had gained beauty and symmetry,*

*He took the sickle and was cutting that (crop); then a voice from the Unseen reached his ear,*

*Crying, "Why dost thou sow and tend some seed—corn and (now) art cutting it when it has attained to perfection?"*

*He replied, "O Lord, I destroy and lay it low because straw is here and (also) grain.*

*The grain is not suitable (to be stored) in the straw—barn; the straw likewise is bad (for putting) in the corn—barn.*

*'Tis not wisdom to mix these twain: it (wisdom) makes necessary the separation (of them) in winnowing."*

*He (God) said, "From whom didst thou gain this knowledge, so that by means of the knowledge thou didst construct a threshing—floor?"*

*He replied, "Thou, O God, gavest me discernment." He (God) said, "Then how should I not have*

*discernment?"*

*Amongst the created beings are pure spirits; there are (also) spirits dark and muddy.*

*These shells are not in one grade: in one (of them) is the pearl and in another the (worthless) bead.*

*It is necessary to make manifest (the difference between) this good and evil, just as (it is necessary) to make manifest (distinguish) the wheat from the straw. [10](#)*

## **Death is an Extension of Life**

In the discussion on death, we ought to pay attention to the fact that the phenomenon of life and death creates a sequence in the realm of creation. The death of some always creates the ground for the life others. The carcass of an animal never remains unconsumed; plants and animals are nourished and invigorated by it. The shell breaks open and releases a shining pearl; then again from the same body and matter a new shell begins forming and another precious pearl develops in its core. The breaking of the shell and release of a pearl is a process that repeats over and over again, thereby extending the presence of grace and life through the span of time.

If people living a thousand years ago were not to die, the opportunity would not have arisen for us living today; just as if humans alive today were not to die, there would be no possibility of life for those to come. If the flowers of the past year were not plucked, the fresh and new flowers of a new year would not have had the opportunity to blossom. The material realm has a limited capacity to accept life as far as space is concerned, but as far as time is concerned, it has unlimited capacity. It is interesting to note that in as much as the matter of the universe is expansive spatially, so too is it temporally—existence having an unparalleled extension in this dimension too.

Khayyām is one of those who have raised objections against death, (albeit they have been attributed to him). It just so happens that he has answered his own objections in one place:

*By suffering tribulations, is man set free;*

*The drop imprisoned in a shell, a pearl shall be.*

*If wealth will not last, in its stead life will withstand.*

*The chalice now emptied, will once again filled be.*

We should not be worried about the emptying of the chalice, the provider will refill it again. Khayyāmvi also says:

*Lament not fortune's want of constancy,*

*But up! and seize her favours ere they fee;*

*If fortune always cleaved to other men,*

*How could a turn of luck have come to thee?[11](#)*

The poet attributes this to the undependability and lack of constancy of the world. Indeed, if only the

person whose turn has come is the measure, then this is betrayal. But if we consider the others who ought to come and also become fortunate then we would call it something else—instead of betrayal we would call it justice, fairness, and equal opportunity.

Here some may possibly interject that God’s power is infinite, so what keeps Him from allowing those who are now living to live forever, and making provisions for those yet to come?

They do not realize that whatever can possibly be created, has been created, and is perpetually being granted Divine grace. Moreover, that which does not exist is what cannot possibly exist. Even supposing that there are other places, and assuming that the circumstances are favourable for the existence of other humans there, the objection would still remain [only having been transposed to a different scene] that their continued existence would preclude the possibility of the arrival and survival of future generations.

This last point is the completion of the response mentioned under the section ‘Death is Relative.’ The net result of both these points is that the matter of the universe, through a natural process and trans-substantial motion (عَرَاكَاتِ الْعَجْوَارِ), produces the shining pearls of human souls. The immaterial soul leaves its matter and material body and continues a more sublime and powerful life. The divorced matter takes on another project and proceeds to produce another pearl in her lap, so to speak. In such an order, there is nothing but perfection and expansion of life, and this expansion occurs through the process of transfer and transubstantiation.

The objection to the phenomena of death by comparing it to the shattering of a cup by its maker—insinuating whimsical desires in the Originator and Sustainer of creation—is so childish as to not merit any serious discussion. These notions are perhaps a poet’s flight of fancy and subtle artistic nuances which may have nothing more to offer than their literary merit. In all probability the composer of these lines, attributed to Khayyām, had such ambitions or was influenced by a constrictive materialistic world-view. But all these objections are answered by the person who holds that, “in the same way as you fall asleep, so you die, and as you awaken from sleep, so also you will be resurrected.” Such a person not only has no fear of death, but like ‘Alī (‘a) longs for it, and considers it as felicity.

Mīr Dāmīd, the eminent philosopher, says:

*Do not fear the pain of death, for its pain is in its fear.*

Suhrawardī, the Islamic Illuminationist philosopher, says:

*We do not hold a philosopher to be a true philosopher until he is able, at will, to disengage his soul from his body—so that such out-of-body experiences become an easy, ordinary, and habitual affair for him.*

A similar quote has been reported from Mīr Dāmīd, the eminent philosopher and founder of the School of Isfahan.

This is the logic of those who have recognized the precious jewel which develops inside the body. But those who are imprisoned in restrictive and inadequate materialistic ideologies, suffer from anxiety of death, since death in their view is extinction. A person of this latter group is anguished that why should this body (which in his view encapsulates his whole identity and personality) be destroyed. Hence, the thought of death leads him to pessimism about the world. Such a person needs to review his vision of the world and must be made to realize that his objections are based on a misunderstanding of the same.

This discussion reminds me about a simple-minded bookseller in the Fayḍiyyah School:

In the years when I was engaged in studies in Qum, there used to be a simple-minded bookseller in the Fayḍiyyah School. This man used to spread out his collection of books and students would buy from him. Sometimes he would perform strange acts and say strange things, which would then be related by word of mouth and spread like a rumour. One of the students narrated an incident that occurred to him when he went to this seller to purchase a book one day: After checking the book, I enquired about its price. The bookseller said, “I won’t sell”. I asked, “Why not?” He said, “If I sell this then I must purchase another copy to replace it.” I laughed at his response thinking, “If a bookseller does not constantly transact, buy and sell, he can’t make profit and is not a bookseller.”

It seems the bookseller was a follower of the school of the poet Khayyām who said:

*While Moon and Venus in the sky shall dwell,  
None shall see aught red grape-juice to excel:  
O foolish publicans, what can you buy  
One half so precious as the goods you sell?*<sup>12</sup>

He finds fault with the wine-seller as to why he sells wine? Of course this objection is a poetic artifice, not a serious argument. In fact, its beauty and grace is based exactly on this aspect. But when we evaluate this logic with some measure of seriousness, we recognize how the wine drinker has mistaken the wine-seller’s work with his own task. For the drinker, wine is the goal, but for the seller it is a means. The wine-seller’s job is to buy and sell, and accrue profit, and repeat this cycle all over again. The person whose job is of this nature, will not be grieved by losing his merchandise, in fact, he will be happy since it is a part of his grand scheme and final goal. *Ḥafīẓ* says:

*Where’s an Aref (mystic) who understandeth the lily’s tongue?  
That he may inquire: Why she went; and why she hath come back.*<sup>13</sup>

Creation is like buying and selling. The world as market is a place to produce, sell, and make profit, and then to repeat this cycle all over again. The phenomenon of life and death is the exchange process—facilitating the market’s advancement and profit. The person who objects to this “exchange” in creation, has failed to recognize the law and goal of the world.

*Whatever form your eye beholds, its essence subsists  
in no-place; If the form goes, no worry, its archetype is eternally there.*

- [1.](#) Whinfield, quatrain 126.
  - [2.](#) Whinfield, quatrain 42.
  - [3.](#) Whinfield, quatrain 290.
  - [4.](#) Whinfield, quatrain 490.
  - [5.](#) Whinfield, quatrain 387.
  - [6.](#) Nicholson, vol. 4, p. 441, vr. 3068–9 and 3071.
  - [7.](#) Nicholson, vol. 4, p. 218, vr. 3901–4.
  - [8.](#) Gholam–Reza Aavani and Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Fourty Poems from the Divan By Nasir–i Khusraw* (London: Institute of Ismaili Studies).
  - [9.](#) Whinfield, quatrain 42.
  - [10.](#) Nicholson, vol. 4, p. 437, vr. 3001–6, 3015–27.
  - [11.](#) Whinfield, quatrain 366.
  - [12.](#) Whinfield, quatrain 208.
  - [13.](#) Clarke, ghazal 174.
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