

Kabir: life and work

Kabir's life abounds in legend, and the widely accepted facts about his life can be summarised in a few sentences. He was born in Varanasi (Benares) around the beginning of the 15th century, probably 1398CE, in a household of cotton weavers who had converted to Islam. As a weaver, he was one of the 'untouchables', the lowest caste in Hindu society along with other artisans such as potters, dyers and cobblers (one higher than butchers and those who treated animal hides). He learned the family craft, probably studied meditation and other practices under a Hindu guru, and became a powerful teacher and poet. According to the story, Kabir was the disciple of the celebrated sage, Rāmānanda: the master used to come down to the Ganges in the early morning to take his holy dip. One day, to attract his attention, Kabir lay down on the steps in the pre-dawn darkness, and was stepped on by the Master. Startled, the Master cried out "Rām! Rām!" Kabir took this cry as a holy mantra offered to him by way of initiation, and insisted that he had become his disciple. Through his guru Kabir is said to have achieved enlightenment at the age of twenty. The discipleship of Rāmānanda is central to Kabir biography:

On meeting guru Rāmānanda, O Kabir,
all my ambivalence and suffering are vanished forever!

Whatever formal training he received or didn't receive from Rāmānanda, Kabir learned primarily through 'hearing', and he has been called *bahusruta* ('one who hears much'). He is also said to have been in contact with the many shaykhs and pirs of Jawnpur and Jhusi, as well as the various holy men of his time.

His poetry was composed orally and collected together by his disciples – he is generally thought to have been illiterate. He is thought to have died in 1448. His poems spread rapidly across north India, primarily by word of mouth (in musical form) but also in various written collections. They almost certainly influenced Guru Nanak. According to Dharwadker, we should really think in terms of "collective authorship", as these poems have been appropriated by successive generations, each with their own agenda.

Being a Muslim in north India at this time often meant to adhere to Hindu beliefs as well: large numbers of people, especially the low-caste Hindus, had converted to the religion of the conquerors without forsaking the old ways and practices. Brahminic Hinduism, Buddhist tantrism, individualist yogi teachings and southern devotional practice all mingled with the non-representationalism of Islam. More than any other poet-saint of the period, Kabir reflects the influences of this multifaceted religious life that flourished around him.

This does not mean that he was attempting to synthesize Islam and Hinduism as some have claimed. As we shall see from the poems, Kabir attacked the follies of orthodox religion and

always calls his listeners to direct experience of the divine here and now. In a famous couplet he states:

I've burned my own house down,
the torch is in my hand.

Now I'll burn down the house of anyone
who wants to follow me.

He has a special way of haranguing the reader, forcing one to look at the web of self-deception and lies we all surround ourselves with. If dividing and distinguishing is the great faculty of the mind, Kabir is constantly subverting this with questions:

Kabir says, how to work it out –
I – he – you?

One category of his poetry which many have commented on is called *ulaṭbāmsī*, “upside-down language”. This is a way of describing the fact that our common perception of the world is “upside-down”, and of presenting images that contradict that view. For example, “the fish in the water is racked by thirst”; “a man without feet runs everywhere/ without eyes sees the world”. This was an ancient tradition in Indian religious literature, the use of ambiguous and enigmatic language to express deeper meanings.

The major repository of his poems, like all religious literature in medieval India, has been the oral tradition: singers would take the poems and set them to music, passing them from one group to another, bringing them from one region to another. This oral tradition is still flourishing today amongst monks and ascetics. There are three major written sources of his poetry, all of them compiled over 150 years after his death:

1. the Guru Granth (or Ādī Granth), the sacred book of the Sikhs, which contains utterances of the early Sikh gurus and other saint-poets they admired, including Kabir. It was composed in its current form around 1603CE in the Panjab.
2. the Rajasthani (Midwest) collection, Pancvānī (“Words of the Five”), which includes the sayings of five saints.
3. the Bījak, the scripture of the Kabir Panth, which only contains works attributed to Kabir and was compiled in Uttar Pradesh/Bihar in the East. Both of the latter took shape during the 17th century.

These three collections overlap but emphasize different Kabirs: while the Guru Granth and Pancvānī show a more emotional poet singing of ecstatic insight, separation from the beloved or

offering himself in total surrender (like the devotional *bkahti* movement common in the west), the *Bījak* shows him as an intense ascetic teacher, striving to awaken and shake listeners out of their complacency.

The best-known translations in the West until recently were Tagore's renderings of 100 songs (published 1915) and Bly's versions of Tagore, all based on verses collected by a Bengali who transcribed them from wandering holy men in the early 1900s. Now we also have excellent versions by Linda Hess, Sehdev Kumar and Vinay Dharmawadker as well as Robert Bly, and it is from these that we have selected a range of poems.

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Select Bibliography:

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The Fish in the Sea is not Thirsty, translated by Robert Bly (1971)

The Kabir Book: forty-four of the ecstatic poems of Kabir, translated by Robert Bly (1977)

The Vision of Kabir, translated by Sehdev Kumar (1996)

The Bījak of Kabir, translated by Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh (1983)

Kabir: the weaver's songs, translated by Vinay Dharwadker (2003)