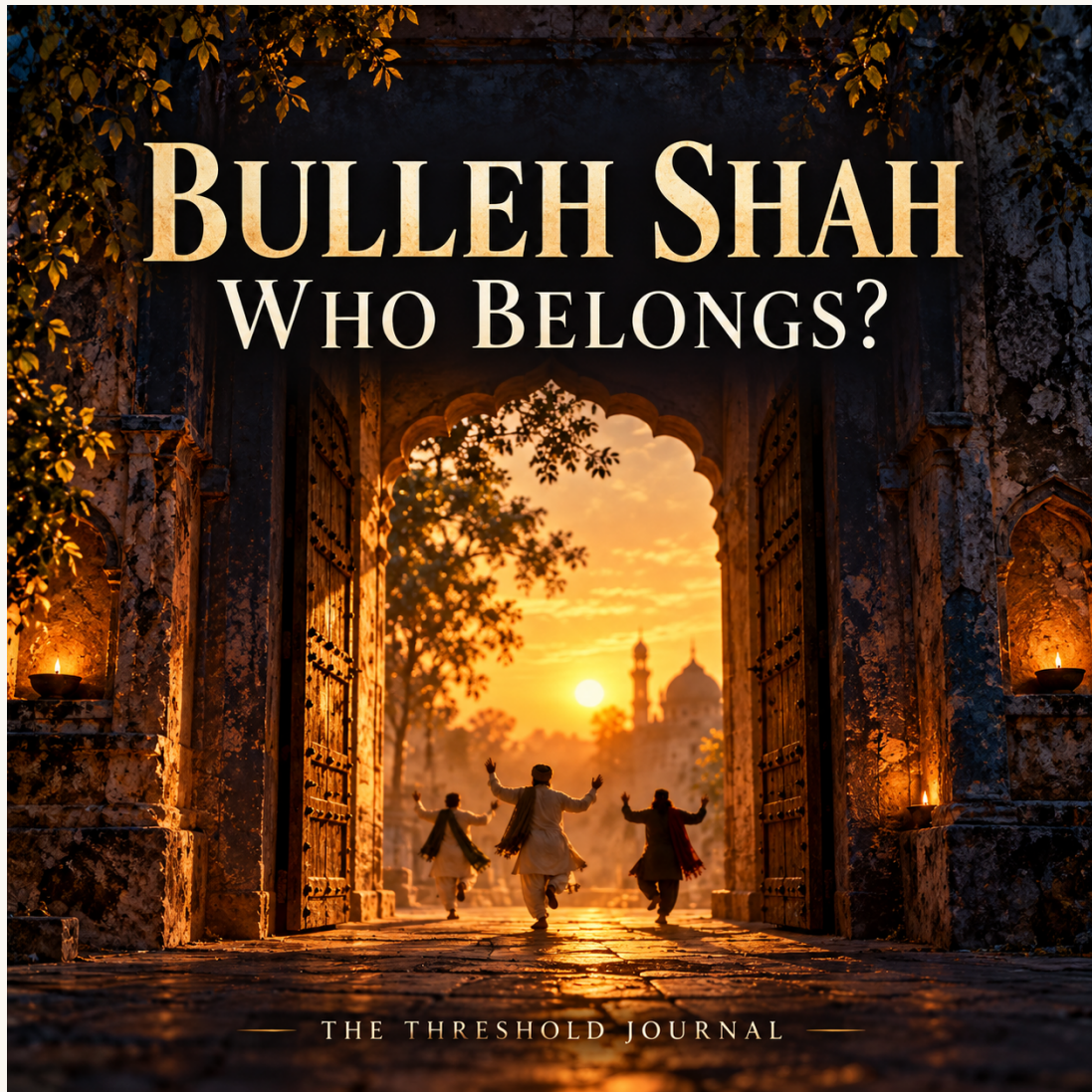




ELEVEN VIDEO ESSAYS / ENGLISH READING EDITION

Bulleh Shah: Who Belongs?

Complete Written Collection

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Produced by The Threshold Journal  
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# The complete series

These eleven reading texts follow the final English narration supplied for the Bulleh Shah: Who Belongs? series. Opening and closing lines have been retained. Speech-only pronunciation spelling has been regularized to “kafi” in the reading edition; poetic lines quoted in their original languages remain alongside English renderings.

The series distinguishes the poet’s Punjabi Sufi setting, traditions about his life, and present-day ethical interpretation. The cover and video images are artistic illustrations, not documentary views of eighteenth-century Punjab or the Kasur shrine.

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The video and podcast narration is in English. This PDF is also in English; the site offers a seven-language introduction to the series.

EPISODE 01

# Kasur and the Threshold of Identity

## Who Am I?

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A name can open a door. It can also close one.

Before you speak, someone may already know your family, your faith, your language, or the place you came from. They may believe they know you.

But what remains when their answer is taken away?

Episode One. Kasur and the Threshold of Identity. Who Am I?

In eighteenth-century Punjab, Bulleh Shah gave that question a voice.

Bullha ki jaana main kaun?

What do I know of who I am?

He lived in Kasur, in the region that is now Pakistan. He was a Muslim Sufi poet who wrote in Punjabi. His words belonged to a living language: a language that could be spoken aloud, remembered, sung, and carried from one gathering to another.

This particular question has travelled far beyond Kasur. It has crossed generations, languages, and borders. But to hear it clearly, we must first resist the temptation to turn it into a slogan.

Bulleh Shah is doing more than saying, “Be yourself.”

In the poem, he moves through familiar ways of naming a person. Religious allegiance. Purity and impurity. Figures from sacred history. Even the difference between waking and sleep. Each seems to offer an answer. Each proves too small.

The refrain returns, as though the poet is asking himself whether a life can ever be settled by a list.

Bullha ki jaana main kaun?

The question is unsettling because names are useful. We need them to call to one another, to tell our histories, to find our way home. A family name may hold years of love and sacrifice. A religious tradition may give shape to prayer, duty, and hope. A place may carry the memory of those who lived there before us.

Bulleh Shah does not have to despise these things in order to ask what happens when we mistake one of them for the whole person.

Imagine a threshold.

Two people arrive at the same door. Before either can speak, one is welcomed because of a name. The other is measured against it. The judgment happens so quickly that it may never be spoken aloud.

The door is no longer just a door. It has become a test of belonging.

That is why the poem can speak to our public lives, as well as our inner ones. The categories we use may help us understand a society. They can also become excuses to decide whose voice counts, whose pain is credible, and who must explain their presence.

The poet's question interrupts that habit.

It also turns toward the speaker. He does not stand above everyone else, announcing that he alone has escaped the limits of identity. He asks what he himself knows. His uncertainty is part of the poem's honesty.

There is courage in saying, "The story I tell about myself may be incomplete."

And there is a kind of justice in admitting, "The story I tell about you may be incomplete too."

This is not an invitation to forget history. Bulleh Shah lived long before the modern border divided Punjab. That border, and the displacements that followed its creation, belong to a later century. His words did not predict those events.

Yet we can still ask why the refrain resonates with people whose sense of home has been shaped by a crossing, a departure, or a question at a checkpoint.

Where are you really from?

For one person, the answer is simple. For another, it may hold several places at once: the city where they were born, the village their parents remember, and the language they speak differently with each generation.

Their experience is not Bulleh Shah's biography. It is one of the places where his question can be heard today.

Perhaps you have been asked to make yourself understandable in a single sentence. Perhaps someone has mistaken your accent for a complete account of your life. Perhaps you have done the same to someone else.

The poem does not offer a new box with a kinder label on it. It makes room for attention.

Before I decide who you are, can I listen?

Before I defend the name I have made for myself, can I ask what it hides?

These questions do not erase real differences between people. Nor do they make discrimination disappear by asking us to feel warmly toward one another. An unjust judgment has consequences. It can affect work, safety, friendship, and the right to be heard.

What the poem offers is a beginning: a way to question the certainty that so often lets those judgments pass unnoticed.

Its spiritual depth matters here. Bulleh Shah was not presenting a modern personality exercise. His inquiry grew within a Sufi search for truth. In that setting, the self is not understood merely by defending its reputation. It must be examined, loosened from pride, and opened to what it cannot possess.

That is a demanding movement. It asks for humility without asking us to abandon responsibility. If I know that my view of a person is limited, I have a reason to look again. If I know that my view of myself is limited, I have a reason to listen when my conduct causes harm.

A question about the self becomes a question about how we live together.

Across this series, we will stay close to Bulleh Shah before placing him beside voices from other traditions. We will meet the teacher Shah Inayat, consider the cost of challenging inherited rank, and hear how poetry can carry a public conscience.

But the first step is here, at the threshold.

Kasur is a real city, and Bulleh Shah's words grew from a real religious and cultural world. We do not need to turn him into a voice without a home in order to let his question travel.

We only need to allow it to reach us before we reach for an answer.

Bullha ki jaana main kaun?

What do I know of who I am?

And what might change if I asked that question before deciding who you are?

Bulleh Shah: Who Belongs?

Next episode: The Master at Shah Inayat's Feet.

Produced by The Threshold Journal.

EPISODE 02

# The Master at Shah Inayat's Feet

## Humility and the Broken Lineage

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A teacher can know everything a student hopes to learn and still be refused one question: Who is he to teach me?

Episode Two. The Master at Shah Inayat's Feet. Humility and the Broken Lineage.

Bulleh Shah belonged to a Sayyid family. In the social world of his time, that lineage could carry religious prestige. Shah Inayat, the man he accepted as his spiritual guide, came from an Arain family associated with cultivation and gardening.

The two men were not meeting on equal ground in the eyes of everyone around them.

To understand the force of Bulleh Shah's decision, we have to hear the question hidden inside the objection. How could someone with a respected lineage place himself under the guidance of a man whom his own circle ranked beneath him?

That objection is about authority. Who may speak? Who must listen? What kind of person is allowed to become a teacher?

Shah Inayat was a Sufi guide in Lahore. Bulleh Shah's bond with him is well attested in the poetry and in accounts of his life. The exact details of their first encounter are less certain.

There are stories of gardens, conversations, and astonishing acts. They belong to a living tradition, but we cannot treat every detail as an eyewitness record. We can tell the story without pretending to know the precise words spoken on that first day.

What remains is powerful enough.

Bulleh Shah accepted a guide whom inherited status had taught others to dismiss.

He had to do more than praise humility. He had to practice it in a relationship that people close to him could see.

In verses associated with Bulleh Shah, family members urge him to reconsider his attachment to the Arain teacher. The poetic voice replies by turning the expected hierarchy upside down. He will not allow the title of Sayyid to settle the question of spiritual worth.

We should listen carefully here. A poem is not a stenographer's record of a family argument. Its force lies in making a conflict audible: the pull of inherited honour against the freedom to learn from someone whom society has placed below you.

And it would be too simple to tell this as a charming story about a noble man who was kind to a gardener.

That version leaves the noble man at the centre of every judgment. It lets him receive credit for recognizing the humanity of someone who needed no permission to have it.

The harder question is whether Shah Inayat could possess wisdom that Bulleh Shah did not.

A teacher changes the direction of attention. The student who has always been listened to must learn to listen. The person accustomed to giving an account of others must allow another person to question him.

That is not a decorative gesture of respect. It can unsettle the habits that have shaped an entire life.

In the language of Sufi practice, a spiritual guide is a murshid. The bond between guide and disciple is not merely a transfer of information. It requires trust, discipline, and the willingness to be corrected.

No ancestry can perform those acts on a person's behalf.

Bulleh Shah's choice did not erase the social standing he had inherited. It did not suddenly end the inequalities around him. We should not ask one relationship to carry more historical weight than the evidence allows.

But the choice made one claim visible: truth does not become false because it comes from a person of lower rank.

That claim has a public edge.

Think of a school where a student's family name changes how quickly the teacher believes them. Think of a workplace where an experienced worker knows the problem, yet a senior title carries the only voice in the room. Think of a religious community that praises service while treating the people who clean, cultivate, or care for others as invisible.

In each place, the question returns. Who is permitted to teach whom?

This does not mean that training and experience are meaningless. Shah Inayat was not valuable because he happened to be overlooked. He was a teacher with a spiritual path of his own. We honour him by taking that path seriously, not by making him a prop in someone else's story of moral improvement.

And Bulleh Shah was not simply collecting an inspiring experience. He committed himself to a guide whose authority came with demands upon his own life.

There is another risk in stories about humility. We may admire the person who bows, then leave untouched the system that required another person to wait for recognition.

A public ethic of humility asks for more. It asks us to notice who is never invited to speak, whose skill is used without being named, and whose counsel becomes acceptable only after someone powerful repeats it.

This is a lesson that reaches into the ordinary structures of our own days: meetings, classrooms, families, institutions, and places of worship. The inherited line may no longer be named in the same way, yet the habit of measuring wisdom by status survives easily.

The question for us is practical.

When someone with less prestige tells us the truth, do we hear it?

When a person we regard as beneath our rank corrects us, can we receive that correction without first defending ourselves?

Shah Inayat did not need a famous disciple to make him worthy of respect. Bulleh Shah needed to become capable of learning.

That is the threshold of this episode.

The question “Who am I?” has led us to another: Who may show me that my answer is incomplete?

Next episode: The False Sanctuary. Beyond Ritual and Legalism.

Produced by The Threshold Journal.

EPISODE 03

# The False Sanctuary

## Beyond Ritual and Legalism

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A man returns from a sacred journey.  
His neighbors greet him with respect.  
He has traveled far, prayed carefully, and learned the right words.

Then someone with less power asks him for fairness.  
What happens next may tell us more than the journey did.

Episode Three.  
The False Sanctuary.  
Beyond Ritual and Legalism.

In eighteenth-century Punjab, Bulleh Shah wrote as a Muslim Sufi in a world where religious practice was woven into daily life. He knew the language of devotion. He knew the importance people placed on pilgrimage, prayer, learning, and sacred places.

And he asked a disturbing question.

What if a person does all these things and still carries the same pride home?

In a poem often known by its refrain, “Makke Gayan Gall Mukdi Nahin,” he turns from the journey to Mecca to the waters of the Ganges, then to Gaya. Different places. Different communities. A shared danger: believing that arrival at a holy site completes the work of transformation.

The poem’s challenge reaches its sharpest point when it turns inward. The journey is unfinished while the self remains enthroned in the heart.

This is not a travel guide to sacred geography. It is a test of what happens after we come back.

Can we still listen to someone who disagrees with us?  
Can we admit when we have harmed another person?  
Can we let the poor stand before us without asking them to prove they are worthy of our attention?

For Bulleh Shah, the outward act cannot be judged only by how precisely it is performed. Its moral weight appears in the life it shapes.

Imagine a threshold. On one side, an orderly room filled with prayer. On the other, a dispute about wages. A person may cross from one side to the other without carrying the spirit of prayer across with them.

That gap is the subject of this episode.

The false sanctuary is the shelter we build from visible devotion when it protects us from examining ourselves. We know the form. We recite the words. We acquire the reputation. Then, when challenged, we point back to the form as though it has answered for us.

But reputation cannot apologize. A pilgrimage cannot pay a debt on behalf of someone who refuses to pay it. Public piety cannot undo private cruelty by itself.

Bulleh Shah's criticism works because it refuses an easy escape. He does not speak as someone standing outside a tradition, pleased to expose its failures. His poetry belongs to a living spiritual world, shaped by the relationship with his guide, Shah Inayat, and by the demanding language of love.

His question is addressed to people who take devotion seriously.

If the sacred matters, why should it leave our habits untouched?

A ritual can train attention. Repeated words can give a day its shape. A community can gather people who would otherwise be alone. Those possibilities are real. But every practice can also be used as proof of superiority. The danger begins when the sign of devotion becomes a substitute for devotion's work.

This is why Bulleh Shah can name more than one sacred destination. He is speaking across the boundaries of his Punjab, where neighbors lived with distinct beliefs and shared streets. His poem does not pretend those traditions are identical. It asks whether any of us can use a journey, a bath, or a lesson to avoid the harder encounter with our own ego.

The question has a public life.

When a respected person is never held accountable, their spiritual standing becomes a shield. When an institution prizes its own image above the people it serves, correct language can conceal an unjust decision. When a believer treats a stranger as a problem before seeing a human being, devotion has failed at the doorstep.

These are not episodes recorded from Bulleh Shah's life. They are situations we can use to hear his challenge now.

The poem gives us no easy way to declare ourselves innocent. Even a person who speaks beautifully about compassion can enjoy being known as compassionate. Even criticism of religious pride can turn into another kind of pride.

That is what makes the inner journey difficult. We can carry ourselves into every sanctuary we enter.

So the question is not whether a mosque, a shrine, or a place of gathering is holy enough. The question is what we bring through its doorway, and what we carry out.

Do we leave with a deeper capacity to tell the truth?

Do we become more willing to repair a wrong?

Does the person with the least power encounter more dignity because we were there?

A place of worship can offer room for such change. It cannot make the choice for us.

Bulleh Shah's poetry puts pressure on the distance between what the public sees and what the heart knows. No audience can measure the heart perfectly. Yet those affected by our choices can often recognize the difference between a performance of goodness and the work of justice.

Perhaps the most difficult moment comes when we stop looking for the hypocrite across the street. We recognize how carefully we arrange our own evidence of being good. We remember the prayer. We forget the person waiting outside.

Then the poem opens again.

Go where you need to go. Pray with the words you have been given. Learn from those who can teach you. But return with the courage to let those actions change the way you meet another human being.

Otherwise, the journey remains unfinished.

And sometimes, refusing the shelter of respectability requires more than a poem. Sometimes it takes a body moving where the public insists it must stand still.

Next episode: The Dancing Saint. Ecstasy, Scandal, and Love as Witness.

Produced by The Threshold Journal.

EPISODE 04

# The Dancing Saint

## Ecstasy, Scandal, and Love as Witness

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A room falls silent when someone begins to move.

No speech. No defense. Just a body doing what the room has decided it must not do.

And suddenly everyone must decide what they are seeing: devotion, disgrace, or a person who can no longer protect his reputation.

Episode Four.

The Dancing Saint.

Ecstasy, Scandal, and Love as Witness.

A famous story about Bulleh Shah says that he lost the favor of his spiritual guide, Shah Inayat. Seeking reconciliation, he learned to dance and performed before him. Different tellings disagree on the details: where this happened, how long he practiced, and what he wore.

We are dealing with a story carried by oral tradition, not a scene we can verify like a dated letter.

But the story matters because generations kept telling it. They recognized something in the image of a respected man willing to be seen without the protections of rank.

Bulleh Shah was remembered as a poet shaped by his bond with Shah Inayat. In the story, the disciple who once had words for everything discovers that words cannot repair a broken relationship. He must cross a threshold in public.

There is a difficulty here. We should not make the artists from whom he is said to have learned into nameless props in a saint's journey. Dance required skill, teaching, and labor. The story's social tension depends in part on a world that admired performance while looking down on some of its performers.

What happens when a man of standing asks to learn from people his society has taught him to overlook?

The gesture overturns more than one hierarchy at once.

A Punjabi song associated with Bulleh Shah begins, "Tere ishq nachaya." Your love has made me dance.

Listen closely to its grammar.

It does not announce, "Look how beautifully I dance." It speaks of a force that has moved the singer beyond the posture he meant to keep.

Love here is not a pleasant feeling added to an otherwise orderly life. It interrupts the careful management of the self.

We know that management well.

We learn how to stand in a room so that no one questions our worth. We speak in ways that preserve authority. We hide the need to be forgiven. We call it dignity when sometimes it is only the fear of being seen as less.

Then love asks for a movement we did not rehearse.

Perhaps it is an apology that costs us standing. Perhaps it is listening to someone we used to dismiss. Perhaps it is refusing to abandon a person because others have decided that person is embarrassing to know.

Bulleh Shah's dance, as the story remembers it, gives those invisible decisions a physical form.

But public embarrassment is not automatically a virtue. A spectacle can flatter the performer. A crowd's shock cannot tell us whether an act is good. And obedience to a spiritual guide does not place any human authority beyond moral judgment.

The test is what the movement makes possible.

Does it loosen pride?

Does it repair a relationship without erasing truth?

Does it let the dignity of another person matter more than our image of ourselves?

For the poet's listeners, the answer might lie less in the steps of a dance than in the willingness to learn them.

There is also a difference between being made to feel shame and freely risking disapproval. One can wound a person. The other can make room for courage. The story does not ask us to celebrate humiliation. It asks why respectability has so much power over our choices.

That question becomes sharper when we imagine the audience.

Someone is watching from the edge of the gathering. They have spent years being told that their work, their body, or their place in society makes them less worthy of respect. What do they see when a celebrated poet stands where they stand?

We cannot know how any historical spectator responded. But we can hear what the story has allowed later audiences to ask: whose movements are treated as devotion, and whose are dismissed before anyone listens?

This is where an intimate story becomes public ethics.

Bulleh Shah's poetry has traveled by voice and song across Punjab and far beyond it. Its life in performance keeps raising questions that a neat biography cannot settle. A line sung in a courtyard can reach people who would never open a scholar's book. A verse can cross the boundary between the one who is honored and the one who is watched with suspicion.

Yet we should resist turning the dancing saint into a simple symbol of unlimited freedom. Love is demanding. It asks whether the person who risks ridicule will also accept responsibility for the people affected by his actions. Ecstasy without care for others can become another performance of the self.

The dance is meaningful when it leads outward.

Toward humility instead of status.

Toward reconciliation instead of possession.

Toward attention to the human being standing at the edge of the crowd.

There may never have been one single performance that unfolded exactly as the story tells it. Its versions change as communities sing, remember, and argue. That uncertainty need not empty it of meaning. It asks us to tell the difference between history we can establish and a tradition through which people think.

And it leaves us with a question that is harder than deciding whether we would dare to dance.

When someone crosses the line that keeps them respectable, will we look closely enough to see why?

Perhaps the body moving in that remembered scene does not prove a doctrine or settle an argument. It shows the cost of no longer allowing reputation to have the final word.

Love has made me dance.

What might it ask us to release?

Next episode: In Conversation with Meister Eckhart. Apophysis, Detachment, and Unknowing.

Produced by The Threshold Journal.

EPISODE 05

# Bulleh Shah in Conversation with Meister Eckhart

Detachment, Unknowing, and the Limits of the Self

---

Imagine two voices that never met.

One speaks in a medieval German sermon. The other sings in eighteenth-century Punjab.

They do not share a language, a century, or a theology. Yet each asks what happens when a seeker becomes so certain of possessing the truth that there is no longer room to receive it.

Episode Five.

Bulleh Shah in Conversation with Meister Eckhart.

Detachment, Unknowing, and the Limits of the Self.

Meister Eckhart was a Dominican theologian. He studied and taught in Paris, preached in German, and worked within Christian teaching about God, creation, and the Word.

Bulleh Shah was a Punjabi Sufi poet. His songs speak from a Muslim spiritual world marked by love, the guidance of Shah Inayat, and the urgent language of the heart.

There is no evidence of an encounter or a line of influence between them. This is a conversation we are making as readers, across a distance that matters.

Let us begin with a page full of words.

In a poem often called “Ilmo Bas Karien O Yaar,” Bulleh Shah addresses the friend who goes on collecting knowledge. Books can pile up while darkness remains within. He turns toward Alif, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, which also begins the name Allah.

A single letter becomes a sign of the One whom accumulated learning cannot contain.

The poem is not a command to abandon thought. It is a warning about what thought becomes when it serves the ego. One may know many words about the sacred and still fail to recognize pride in the person speaking them.

Now listen to Eckhart.

He was a learned teacher who used demanding philosophical language. Yet his sermons repeatedly unsettle the idea that knowledge gives us possession of God. The mind can form an image, defend it, and then mistake its own work for the reality beyond it.

Christian thinkers call one way of approaching this problem apophatic theology: speech that recognizes where its claims fall short. We say something about God, then admit that God exceeds what our words can hold.

This is not a claim that God is absent. It is a discipline of refusing to make the infinite manageable.

Eckhart sometimes speaks of the Godhead to press language toward a depth beyond our customary descriptions. He is not introducing a second god. He is testing the limits of the concepts with which a preacher tries to speak faithfully of God.

Eckhart's language of detachment carries the challenge further. The German terms often translated as detachment and releasement point to a letting go of possessive attachment. Even a worthy act can become a trophy. Even a prayer can become another way of saying, "This goodness is mine."

What would remain if we stopped using devotion to secure a flattering picture of ourselves?

Bulleh Shah's poems ask a related question through a different rhythm. His voice is often the lover's voice: longing, wounded, playful, unwilling to stay safely behind an inherited title. He returns to the beloved and to the guide because love exposes the distance between the self we display and the self that still needs to change.

In Sufi thought, the word *fana* can describe the passing away of the possessive self before God. It can illuminate something in Bulleh Shah's poetry. But it is not a simple translation of Eckhart's detachment, and it cannot replace the imagery of a Punjabi song.

The difference is worth hearing.

Eckhart asks how the soul may receive the divine Word without trying to own it. His thought belongs to a Christian account of God and the life of Christ. Bulleh Shah sings within a Muslim Sufi world in which the name of Allah, the love of the beloved, and a living relationship with Shah Inayat shape the search.

If we erase those commitments, we lose the reason their words have force.

So where can the conversation take place?

Perhaps at the point where each sees the danger of turning spiritual practice into a possession.

A person can become attached to being known as humble. A scholar can enjoy being the one who has learned to say that words are inadequate. Even the claim, "I know nothing," can be spoken as though it were a certificate of superiority.

Neither poet nor preacher lets us rest there.

Bulleh Shah's Alif draws the reader away from the heap of books toward the heart's unfinished work. Eckhart asks the hearer to release the grip of the self that wants God as its achievement.

This kind of unknowing does not end inquiry. It changes the posture of the one who asks.

We can still read carefully, distinguish true from false, and hold one another accountable for what we say. Humility does not excuse careless thinking. It makes careful thinking less eager to crown itself.

And neither tradition ends at the private experience of a seeker.

In a sermon on Mary and Martha, Eckhart gives remarkable attention to Martha, who is busy tending to guests. Her work need not be an obstacle to contemplation. The question is whether she can act without being trapped by her own need to possess the moment.

Bulleh Shah's challenge also reaches the world outside the inward journey. If a person can recite a truth and still refuse another person's dignity, something essential has been missed.

Their languages remain distinct, but each brings us back to an ordinary encounter: someone needs to be welcomed, heard, or treated fairly. Does our spiritual knowledge make that encounter more honest?

Picture the page again.

For Eckhart, there are words about God that must be spoken with care, because no image finally contains the One they seek to name.

For Bulleh Shah, even an alphabet can point beyond a library, while a proud heart can turn that library into a wall.

The point is not to burn the books. It is to ask whether we have mistaken the wall for a window.

When the voice grows quieter, what remains is neither a vacant mind nor an easy agreement between traditions. It is a more demanding attention: to God as neither poet nor theologian can possess, and to the person standing before us.

Next episode: Bulleh Shah in Conversation with Yunus Emre. The Breathing Word and the Human Heart.

Produced by The Threshold Journal.

EPISODE 06

# Bulleh Shah in Conversation with Yunus Emre

## The Breathing Word and the Human Heart

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You cannot pack a homeland into a suitcase.

But a song can travel with you.

It can survive a journey in a voice. It can be heard again in a kitchen, a gathering, or a city far from the place where it was first learned.

This is one reason poetry matters across borders. It gives memory a way to breathe.

In Punjab, the words of Bulleh Shah have passed from singer to listener for generations. Centuries earlier, in Anatolia, the words of Yunus Emre also found lives beyond the page.

They never met. They spoke different languages and belonged to different centuries.

Yet placing their poems beside one another brings a question into focus: what happens when a person hears a sacred truth in the language they use at home?

This is Bulleh Shah: Who Belongs?

Episode six. The Breathing Word and the Human Heart.

Yunus Emre lived in medieval Anatolia, several centuries before Bulleh Shah's eighteenth-century Punjab. Much about his life comes to us through stories, and scholars still have to ask which poems attributed to him are his.

Bulleh Shah's work, too, comes through a long history of voices and performances.

So we should listen with care. A poem carried by many people can endure remarkably well, even as its wording, music, and setting change.

Yunus's poems are often known as *ilahis*: devotional verses in Turkish that could be recited or sung. His tradition also uses the word *nefes*, or "breath," for certain kinds of sacred utterance.

Bulleh Shah's Punjabi verse is associated especially with the *kafi*. Its recurring lines invite another voice to join in, remember, and return.

An ilahi and a kafi are different poetic forms. Their languages carry different histories. But both can make a thought available to someone who has never opened a scholarly book.

Picture a person hearing a familiar language used to ask an unfamiliar question.

Bulleh Shah asks:

Bullha ki jaana main kaun?

What do I know of who I am?

Yunus Emre's much-loved line turns inward as well:

There is a self within me, deeper than the self I know.

The lines are not interchangeable.

Bulleh's question unsettles the confidence of the name, rank, and identity we claim. Yunus's line suggests an inward life that our ordinary account of ourselves cannot contain.

But both give the listener work to do. Neither poet lets us finish with a label.

Who are you when your family name no longer answers for you? When your place in a community no longer tells the whole story? When you have to face the person beneath the role you play?

Bulleh Shah's answer cannot be separated from the world around him. As we have seen in this series, the question of the self reaches outward. If inherited standing cannot tell me my full worth, it cannot tell me the full worth of the person before me.

That is where this conversation with Yunus becomes especially powerful.

It would be easy to admire two beautiful lines about the inner self and stop there. Yet love, in these traditions, asks more of a person than inward reflection. It changes how one meets another human being.

A heart cannot claim to have been transformed by love while taking pleasure in someone else's humiliation.

A voice cannot speak humbly of the mystery within itself and then decide that a stranger has nothing within them worth hearing.

For Bulleh, this tension runs through the challenge to pride and inherited status. For Yunus, it runs through a devotional poetry that returns again and again to love, humility, and the heart.

Their words began within distinct Sufi lives and communities. We do not need to erase those worlds to hear how searching their questions still are.

We can ask something more practical.

Who is allowed to speak about what is sacred?

When a poem is composed in a language people know intimately, its listeners can carry it without waiting for someone else to explain every word. They can sing it, question it, teach it to a child, or return to it after many years.

That does not mean the poet has rejected learning. It means learning has entered a room where more people can hear it.

A familiar word may stay with someone longer than a grand declaration. Repeated aloud, it can become part of how a family remembers. It can also become difficult to ignore.

Imagine Bulleh's question reaching a listener who has spent years being told where they belong.

Imagine Yunus's inward line reaching someone who has begun to believe that their work, their poverty, or their public reputation is all they are.

The poems cannot settle those lives for them. They offer a moment in which another understanding becomes possible.

That moment can be carried across generations. It can also travel with those who leave home.

For someone in the diaspora, a song heard in childhood may return unexpectedly years later. Perhaps they know every word. Perhaps they know only the sound of a parent's voice. Either way, the poem brings a place and a relationship into the present.

This is not a claim that every journey is alike. The listener who has migrated, the child born elsewhere, and the person who has remained at home may hear very different things.

But each can take part in keeping a spoken poem alive.

The deepest connection between Bulleh Shah and Yunus Emre may lie here, in the act of listening.

Yunus asks us to take the life within a person seriously. Bulleh asks how much we truly know, even about ourselves.

Together, those questions can make us slower to judge. They can make us attentive to the person whose history we thought we understood.

A song can travel in a voice. What matters is what happens when it arrives.

Do we hear only something beautiful from long ago?

Or do we let it change the way we greet the next person who comes through the door?

Bulleh Shah: Who Belongs?

Next episode: The Cost of Conscience.

Produced by The Threshold Journal.

EPISODE 07

# The Cost of Conscience

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Who is allowed to stand beside a grave?

Most of us would hope that, when a life ends, the people who knew that person can gather, pray, and grieve.

But a funeral can also reveal a question that a community has avoided for years.

Did this person belong to us?

The question shadows the stories told about Bulleh Shah's death. It also brings us back to the cost of the life he chose to live.

This is Bulleh Shah: Who Belongs?

Episode seven. The Cost of Conscience.

In the last episode, we heard how a poem can travel in a voice. Bulleh Shah's words have travelled far beyond his own time. But being remembered with affection was no guarantee of being welcomed while he lived.

He challenged the pride attached to inherited rank. He followed Shah Inayat across a social boundary that others expected him to respect. In his poetry, he questioned the ease with which a person can display devotion while leaving the heart untouched.

Those choices had consequences.

We should be careful with the stories that describe them. Bulleh Shah's life reaches us through poems, oral memory, and accounts written later. Not every vivid scene can be established as a historical event.

That care matters especially at his death.

Some retellings say that certain religious figures refused to lead his funeral prayer. Scholarly accounts also describe a dispute over whether he could be buried in a Muslim cemetery. We cannot recover the words of everyone involved or assume that every religious scholar took the same position.

What we can say is that the memory of a contested burial became part of Bulleh Shah's story. He was ultimately buried as a Muslim.

Why has this dispute stayed with us?

Perhaps because a burial place is more than a piece of ground. It tells the living who may be mourned among them. It tells a grieving family whether their community will stand with them.

And when belonging is questioned at the grave, the judgment reaches beyond the person who has died.

Exile does not always mean being driven out of a city. A person may remain among familiar streets and still discover that familiar doors have closed.

The cost might be a lost friendship. An invitation that never comes. A room that falls quiet when someone enters. The knowledge that speaking honestly may put one's place in the community at risk.

We cannot assign each of those experiences to Bulleh Shah as a recorded event. They help us understand what social rejection can mean, and why the traditions surrounding his life speak so strongly about it.

His answer was poetry.

A poem cannot force its listeners to agree. It can, however, return a difficult question to them each time it is spoken or sung.

What happens to prayer when it becomes a reason to look down on another person?

What happens to learning when it serves pride?

What happens to a community when its concern for its own boundaries leaves no room to examine how it treats a human being?

These questions arise from within Bulleh Shah's Sufi world. His language of love was grounded in a search for God. That is why its challenge could be so demanding: the person claiming spiritual insight also had to ask what that insight had done to their conduct.

Conscience, in this sense, is more than the courage to disagree.

It includes the willingness to face one's own vanity. It asks whether a judgment is truthful, and what that judgment will cost another person. It can require humility from someone who speaks against a powerful custom. It can also require humility from someone charged with guarding a tradition.

The dispute remembered at Bulleh Shah's death does not give us a simple cast of heroes and villains. It gives us a harder question.

How can people take religious conviction seriously while remembering the dignity of the person before them?

That question does not disappear when a disagreement is genuine. It becomes more urgent.

Consider the distance between saying, “I believe you are mistaken,” and telling someone, “There is no place for you here.”

A community may need to argue about belief and practice. It must still reckon with what exclusion does to a person, to a family, and to everyone watching.

Bulleh Shah’s story makes that cost visible at the most vulnerable threshold of all: the moment when the living gather around the dead.

And yet the story did not end at that threshold.

His words continued to be spoken. Singers carried them. Listeners made room for them. People returned to Kasur.

There is a striking question in that survival. If a community struggles to make room for a voice in its own time, what will later generations hear in that voice?

We do not have to turn Bulleh Shah into a flawless figure to ask it. Nor do we have to know every detail of the funeral to feel its force.

We can begin closer to home.

When someone risks their standing to speak from conscience, do we listen carefully enough to understand what they are saying?

When we disagree, do we remember who will bear the weight of our response?

And when someone stands at the edge of belonging, who will open the door?

Bulleh Shah’s life leaves that question with us. The next episode begins with what we do at the doorway.

Next episode: The Open Hearth. Hospitality, Justice, and the Poor.

Produced by The Threshold Journal.

EPISODE 08

# The Open Hearth

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A fire can warm a house while someone stands outside its door.

Bread may be baking inside. There may even be an empty place on the floor.

But who is invited to sit there?

In the last episode, we considered the cost of being denied a place in a community. Now we turn to the other side of that question.

What does it take to make room for someone?

This is Bulleh Shah: Who Belongs?

Episode eight. The Open Hearth.

Think of a hearth in Punjab. It gives heat. It turns grain into bread. People come near it at the end of a day's work.

We have no account of a particular meal hosted by Bulleh Shah that could serve as the scene of this episode. The hearth is an image through which to test the questions his life and poetry raise.

At a hearth, belonging becomes visible. Someone brings the grain. Someone tends the fire. Someone receives the first piece of bread. Someone may be told to wait.

Bulleh Shah knew a world in which a family's lineage could determine the respect it received. He came from a Sayyid background. His spiritual teacher, Shah Inayat, was associated with the Arain community of cultivators and gardeners.

We met that relationship earlier in this series. Today it asks a different question.

If the hands that grow food are treated as less worthy than the hands that receive it, what has a community learned about love?

This is one reason Bulleh Shah's challenge to pride matters beyond the private spiritual life. A claim about a person's worth changes the way work is valued, whose voice is heard, and who may enter a room without having to prove their standing.

Consider a household that welcomes an honoured guest. The food is generous. The greeting is warm. Yet the person who prepared the meal remains invisible. Another person is admitted only through a side entrance. A third is offered charity, but never a seat.

There may be kindness in that house. There is still a hierarchy to examine.

Hospitality begins with an invitation. It deepens when the host sees the person who has entered, listens to them, and allows their presence to change the life of the room.

That can be uncomfortable. A guest may ask why one person serves while another always sits. A worker may know something the host has never needed to learn.

An open hearth leaves space for those truths.

Bulleh Shah did not write a modern policy for wages, land, or public welfare. His kafis give us poetry shaped by a Sufi search for divine love. Reading them as a detailed political programme would ask them to be something they are not.

Yet poetry can disturb the beliefs that make injustice feel natural.

If inherited rank cannot measure the depth of a soul, it cannot settle who deserves respect.

If devotion leaves us proud of ourselves and indifferent to another person's hardship, we have reason to examine what our devotion has become.

The next step is ours to consider. It is an ethical implication we draw from his questions, rather than a policy we can place in his mouth.

Start with bread.

A hungry person needs food. An invitation to eat matters. So does the manner in which it is offered.

A meal given to display the host's generosity may leave the receiver feeling small. A meal shared with attention can recognise that both people have histories, skills, and something to say.

The difference may be heard in a simple exchange.

Do we speak about a poor person while they are present, as though they cannot answer? Do we assume we understand what they need? Do we welcome their knowledge of their own life?

Dignity is tested in those moments.

Justice asks us to look further. Why is the person hungry? Who was paid for the work that brought food to the table? Who had access to land, safety, and a fair chance to provide for a family?

One generous meal cannot answer every question. It can make those questions harder to avoid.

The hearth, then, has two directions. Its warmth reaches the person beside us. Its light reaches the arrangements beyond the doorway.

This matters wherever people live close to differences in status, wealth, language, or origin. It matters when a family receives a newcomer. It matters when a community organises help for people in need. It matters in the quiet decisions about whose time is valuable and whose work can be taken for granted.

None of those situations is simple. Listening may change what help we offer. Sharing responsibility may require those with more security to give up a comfortable place.

That is a real cost of keeping the hearth open.

Bulleh Shah's poetry has endured because it continues to put confident judgments under pressure. His choice of Shah Inayat as a guide still asks listeners to reconsider the distance they place between a respected lineage and a working life.

We need not pretend that he lived in our century to hear the challenge in his own.

What happens when love reaches the person whose work sustains us?

What happens when welcome includes a voice, a place, and the freedom to be more than the need for which someone came to us?

Imagine the hearth again.

The bread is ready. The door is open. Before anyone speaks of generosity, someone notices the person who has been waiting.

A place is made.

And the question is no longer only who belongs near the fire. It is how the people gathered there will live with one another when the meal is over.

Bulleh Shah's words carried questions like these beyond the rooms in which they were first heard. In the next episode, we listen to the poetic form that helped them travel.

Next episode: The Geometry of the Kafi. Poetry as Sacred Architecture.

Produced by The Threshold Journal.

EPISODE 09

# The Geometry of the Kafi

## Poetry as Sacred Architecture

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A line of poetry returns.

The first time you hear it, it sounds like a question. The next time, you know the words. By the end, you may find that the question has changed.

This is one way to enter the poetry of Bulleh Shah.

In the previous episodes, we followed his challenge to inherited status, religious pride, and the treatment of people left at the margins. But how did those challenges travel? How could a poem remain in someone's memory after the singer had gone?

For part of the answer, we have to listen to its form.

Episode nine: The Geometry of the Kafi. Poetry as Sacred Architecture.

A kafi is a form of lyric poetry closely associated with the musical traditions of Punjab and its neighboring regions. Its verses often move around a returning line: a refrain. A singer gives us new words, then brings us back to words we have heard before.

The pattern sounds simple. Its effect can be profound.

Imagine hearing a refrain for the first time. You are still trying to understand it. A verse follows, offering an image or a challenge. Then the refrain returns. The words are familiar now, but the verse has altered what you hear in them.

Another verse opens a different thought. Again, the refrain returns. You have come back to the same line by a different path.

That is the geometry I mean. The refrain is a doorway. Each verse lets us approach it from another room.

Consider Bulleh Shah's question: "Bullha ki jaana main kaun?"

"What do I know of who I am?"

We encountered it at the beginning of this series. In the poem, the speaker moves through identities that might have settled the matter for someone else. Yet the question persists.

At first, it can sound like uncertainty. Later, as familiar labels fail to contain the speaker, it can sound like a refusal to let those labels have the final word. The repeated question leaves room for the listener to examine the names they have been given, and the names they give to others.

The line is memorable because it returns. It remains difficult because it does not close.

Bulleh Shah worked in Punjabi, drawing on words, images, and voices his audiences could recognize. His poetry can speak through lovers and seekers; it can turn toward the spiritual guide or confront a claim of religious authority. Its language may feel immediate, but the thought within it demands attention.

Take another of his images: cotton.

He names different kinds of cloth. Their finished textures and social uses differ; people may value one above another. But the poem asks us to remember the material from which they come.

We do not need a lecture on rank to understand what is at stake. We have seen how clothing can announce status before a person has spoken. Bulleh Shah takes that ordinary act of looking and makes us look again.

That is part of the kafi's strength. A familiar image gives a listener a way into an unfamiliar judgment. A returning line gives the thought somewhere to live in memory.

These poems were carried in song and performance as well as in writing. A listener might first encounter a line in someone else's voice, remember it, and bring it into another conversation. Later singers could give it different tempos, emphases, and musical settings.

We should take care here. There is no single recording that can tell us exactly how Bulleh Shah himself heard every poem. The words have reached us through transmission, performance, and editions made long after his lifetime. Even the act of printing a poem requires decisions about its text.

Yet that history helps explain its life. A poem carried by voices can remain active. Someone sings it again. Someone hears an old line differently. Someone who has never opened a book of poetry learns the refrain.

A form that invites a return also invites participation. You can recognize the line before you understand every verse. You can hold it while you think about the rest.

There is a public consequence to that design.

Bulleh Shah's criticism of pride and exclusion was expressed in poetry people could repeat. The refrain could travel with them beyond a particular performance. A question about identity, or a challenge to rank, did not have to stay in the place where it was first heard.

That does not mean every listener agreed with him. Nor does repetition turn a difficult poem into a simple slogan. The verse can complicate the line we thought we knew. The next return can make us hear our own answer less comfortably.

This is why the architecture matters.

Imagine a building in which each doorway brings you to a familiar space, but gives you a new view of it. You know your way back. You can still be surprised by what you find there.

The kafi offers that experience in time. Verse, return, verse, return. A structure a listener can follow, with enough space inside it for doubt, devotion, desire, and dissent.

Centuries later, Bulleh Shah's words continue to reach people through different voices, recordings, and communities across South Asia and its diaspora. Each performance belongs to its own moment. The recurring line still asks for a listener.

Perhaps you heard "Bullha ki jaana main kaun?" earlier in this series as a question about one person's identity.

Hear it now after the verses on hierarchy, after the challenge to religious pride, after the lives of people pushed outside the circle.

"What do I know of who I am?"

And what do I assume I know about the person before me?

The words have returned. We have come to them by another path.

Next episode: Living Memory in Kasur. The Tomb That Welcomed the Outcast.

Produced by The Threshold Journal.

EPISODE 10

# Living Memory in Kasur

## The Tomb That Welcomed the Outcast

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A city can remember a poet's name and still overlook the people who keep his words alive.

For nine episodes, we have followed Bulleh Shah through questions of identity, rank, religious authority, love, and public conscience. We have heard how the returning lines of his poetry carry those questions from one listener to another.

Now we come to a place.

Episode ten: Living Memory in Kasur. The Tomb That Welcomed the Outcast.

In Kasur, in present-day Pakistan, stands the shrine associated with Bulleh Shah's burial. It is a place where people have gathered to remember him, pray, and hear his poetry performed.

A tomb may appear to mark the end of a life. At Kasur, it has also become a place where later generations give that life meaning.

We should approach it carefully.

Earlier in this series, we heard accounts of opposition to Bulleh Shah and stories surrounding his burial. Much of what is told about his life comes through poetry and later traditions. Those stories matter to the people who have carried them, even when we cannot establish every detail as historical fact.

What we can examine more closely is the life of the shrine in the centuries after him.

In an account of Kasur based on field research, a scholar describes singers performing poetry attributed to Bulleh Shah near the tomb. He also describes devotional dancers gathering there. The setting includes a courtyard, other graves, an adjoining mosque, and the surrounding life of the city.

It is easy to picture a shrine as a still monument. This account asks us to hear it.

A voice begins a familiar line. Another musician keeps time. Someone listening knows when the refrain will return. The poem we discussed in the last episode becomes an event shared by people standing in the same place.

The people who sustain that event deserve our attention.

In the researcher's account, some of the dancers worked as daily wage laborers. They came to the shrine with lives and obligations beyond the courtyard. Their dancing expressed devotion, and it also gave them a way to take part in a public tradition.

That detail changes how we tell this story.

If we speak only of a great poet and a beautiful tomb, we may miss the workers, singers, and visitors through whom the place remains alive. Their presence cannot be reduced to decoration around a famous name.

Nor should we pretend that a practice observed in recent times has continued unchanged since Bulleh Shah's own century. Musical styles change. Families change. The city changes. The people who come to the shrine bring the needs and arguments of their own day.

Each year, an *urs*, a commemoration of the poet's death, brings people together at Kasur. In Sufi traditions, such an anniversary can be understood through the language of the lover's reunion with the Beloved.

Here, remembrance is something people do. They gather. They listen. They sing. They decide which words to pass on.

Yet a gathering place also has rules, resources, and people with authority. The shrine is maintained within institutions. Musicians need to earn a living. Public celebrations require organization. The ability to enter a space does not tell us everything about whose voice is heard inside it.

That is why this episode's title carries a question.

"The Tomb That Welcomed the Outcast" speaks to the hope many find in Bulleh Shah's poetry: that the person pushed aside by rank, poverty, or inherited identity can stand before others with dignity.

It cannot serve as a claim that every visitor to Kasur has always been welcomed equally. A place is shaped by the choices of those responsible for it and those who gather there.

Bulleh Shah's own verses give us a way to ask more of that place.

If he challenges pride of lineage, what happens when a poor performer enters the courtyard?

If he questions religious self-importance, how is a stranger treated at the gate?

If we admire the music, do we also notice the people whose work makes it possible?

These questions belong to Kasur. They belong wherever a community honors someone who spoke against exclusion.

There is another distance to consider. Many people who love Bulleh Shah's words live far from his tomb. Some know Kasur through family memory. Others first encounter a sung line in India, elsewhere in South Asia, or in the diaspora. They may never visit the shrine.

Their connection is real, too. A place can anchor a memory while its poetry travels beyond it. The voices heard at Kasur are part of that continuing story, alongside the voices that carry his words elsewhere.

Still, the physical place asks something particular of us. It brings the questions of love and belonging back among actual people, sharing a courtyard in the present tense.

A stone threshold cannot welcome anyone by itself. People make that choice.

That may be the most demanding part of Bulleh Shah's living memory. We can preserve his name. We can repeat his most beloved lines. Then we must look at the person standing beside us and decide how those lines will shape what we do.

The tomb marks where a life is remembered.

The living decide what that memory becomes.

Next episode: The Unbound Soul. A Legacy for a Divided World.

Produced by The Threshold Journal.

EPISODE 11

# The Unbound Soul

## A Legacy for a Divided World

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A poet's name can become so familiar that we stop hearing the question he asked.

Bulleh Shah's name has traveled through songs, books, and the voices of people who never stood in the same room. It has crossed the borders that later divided Punjab. It has reached families who left South Asia and made homes elsewhere.

After all that travel, one line still returns.

Bullha ki jaana main kaun?

What do I know of who I am?

Episode eleven: The Unbound Soul. A Legacy for a Divided World.

We began this series with that question. It sounded personal. A person looking inward, uncertain of the answer.

Then we followed it into the world around him.

We heard traditions about Bulleh Shah and his teacher, Shah Inayat. The relationship challenged the pride that can come with inherited rank. We considered the stories of dancing, in which love mattered more than the safety of reputation. We listened to poems that confronted religious self-importance and asked what happens when people protect a rule while failing the person before them.

We heard how a returning line in a kafi can hold a question in memory. And in Kasur, we turned from the name of a celebrated poet toward the singers, workers, and visitors who help keep his memory alive.

Each encounter changed how we heard the first question.

"What do I know of who I am?" can loosen the grip of a title or a lineage. It can also make us less certain of the judgments we pass on someone else.

Bulleh Shah's poetry grew from the language and images of his Punjabi world and from Sufi ways of speaking about the lover, the Beloved, and the spiritual guide. Its challenge has traveled widely because those particulars have continued to speak to people.

When we brought him into conversation with Meister Eckhart and Yunus Emre, we listened across different histories of faith and poetry. Their voices met in our series around questions of self, love, and the limits of pride. Each voice brought something of its own to that conversation.

That matters for a divided world. Listening across a difference takes more care than declaring it gone.

Bulleh Shah died before the partition of Punjab. He could not have addressed the borders and diasporas that would come after him. Yet his words have been sung and read on both sides of a border he never saw, and far beyond it.

People can hear those words with different memories. One listener hears the language of childhood. Another hears a song discovered years after leaving home. Someone else meets the poem in translation and pauses over a question they recognize in their own life.

A poem cannot undo a border. It can travel with the people whose lives have been shaped by one.

It can also be made comfortable. We can praise Bulleh Shah for love and forget how sharply his poetry questions status, exclusion, and claims to authority. We can admire the dancer while ignoring the worker whose labor sustains the performance. We can celebrate a shrine's welcome without asking how a visitor is treated at its gate.

His legacy asks for more attention than admiration alone.

Consider a person asked, yet again, where they are really from. A worker thanked for their service but left out of the conversation. A neighbor whose name is treated as an answer before they have said a word.

These moments may seem small beside the divisions of nations or religious communities. They are also places where belonging is decided in daily life.

We cannot learn everything about a person from the category we place them in. We can listen when they speak. We can notice whose voice is missing. We can question a habit that grants dignity to some people more readily than to others.

None of that requires us to pretend that convictions do not matter, or that disagreements are easy. It asks us to take responsibility for how we hold our convictions in the presence of another human being.

This is where the unbound soul becomes a demanding image.

A soul released from pride is still answerable for its actions. Love must reach beyond a beautiful line of poetry. It appears in the welcome offered at a door, in the fairness of an exchange, and in the courage to object when someone is pushed aside.

No single poem can tell us how to resolve every conflict before us. Bulleh Shah leaves us a question that can interrupt the speed with which we assign a place to someone else.

At the start of this journey, we asked who Bulleh Shah was.

We met a poet whose life comes to us through uncertain histories and enduring stories. We heard words carried by performers, readers, and communities who gave them new life. We found that the question of belonging reaches past any account of one man.

It reaches the moment when another person stands before us.

Bullha ki jaana main kaun?

What do I know of who I am?

If I am more than the name someone gives me, perhaps the person before me is more than the name I give them.

That thought does not finish Bulleh Shah's poem. It gives us a reason to listen again.

This has been Bulleh Shah: Who Belongs?

Produced by The Threshold Journal.

## Sources and editorial note

The scripts use interpretive examples to draw out ethical questions. Traditions about disputed burial, dance, and other events in Bulleh Shah's life are marked as traditions rather than treated as eyewitness records. The dialogue episodes do not claim direct historical influence between Bulleh Shah, Meister Eckhart, and Yunus Emre.

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