

# **The Pleasantries of the Incredible Mullah Nasrudin Study Guide**

**The Pleasantries of the Incredible Mullah Nasrudin by Idries Shah**

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## Plot Summary

In 'The Pleasantries of the Incredible Mulla Nasrudin' by author Idries Shah, we have here repeated a small part of some of the many, many teaching stories that involve themselves with the figure of Mullah Nasrudin.

The Mullah is a mysterious teaching figure claimed by Sufi mystics as their own, teaching a form of Sufi knowledge through the art of the parable, fable, joke and anecdote. Their exact origin in time is unclear, but we can assume that they form part of an oral tradition that has been added to across many centuries and certainly across many countries. Tales of the Mullah Nasrudin can be found in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the border's of India, as well as stretching into Islamic Spain, the Middle East and Egypt. They all feature a rascally, funny, and somewhat disreputable Mullah or wandering wise man known as the Mullah Nasrudin.

The author Idries Shah (himself the man mainly responsible for presenting modern Sufi thought to the Western World since the 1970s) indicates this close connection between Sufism and the Mullah Nasrudin, as the stories so often contain kernels of Sufi teaching. In his introduction he also raises the issue that the Mullah Nasrudin does not really belong to anyone, but is rather an archetypal figure who has bearing for any one attempting to find the truth. He relates how Nasrudin stories are taught in schools and at business conferences, to scientists and researchers as well as, of course, enjoyed throughout the Middle East as a part of their cultural heritage.

The book itself is one in a series of novels that Idries Shah has presented about the mysterious Mullah Nasrudin, and in this collection Shah does not offer any explanations or unpacking of the stories; merely lets them speak for themselves. What follows is a large collection of short paragraph length parables which move through a number of themes such as 'Death' or 'The Role of Man'.



# Quite Simple

## Quite Simple Summary and Analysis

In many of the stories, such as 'Dry in The Rain' we see the idea that the truth is often obvious, staring us in the face. It is often our own habits and preconceptions which stop us from perceiving the truth. In this story, the Mullah is invited to go hunting with the King, who fast out paces him and gets caught in a rainstorm. The Mullah Nasrudin on the other hand, takes off all of his clothes and packs them away as soon as the rain arrives. When the hunt is over, and everyone is soaked through apart from the Mullah, the King is unable to fathom how he can be the only one dry. In another teaching story 'It Is What He Says That Counts' a neighbor of the Mullah's (who is known for his petty cruelty) asks to buy the Mullah Nasrudin's donkey. The Mullah says that he has no objection, but that he must ask the donkey's permission first. When the Mullah returns, he tells his cruel neighbor that no, the man cannot borrow the donkey, as the donkey has the power of prescience, and has foreseen for himself long journeys, short meals and a sore back. This latter story exhibits that the truth of a situation can often be quite simple and direct: that people known for their cruelty will often act to type, and it would be foolish of the Mullah to expect otherwise or a better deal when dealing with this man.

In the teaching story 'The Burden of Guilt' the Mullah Nasrudin and his wife have their house burgled. The Mullah's wife is angry at Nasrudin for not locking the door, claiming that it must be his fault. The Mullah Nasrudin objects, saying that there is surely someone else who is more at fault: the thieves!

These types of teaching stories are usually about prejudices and opinions, and how they color our perception of an event or another person. The Mullah Nasrudin often pokes fun at the accuser or the statement by showing how obviously ridiculous they can be if we examine them from a different perspective.



# Matter of Time And Place

## Matter of Time And Place Summary and Analysis

In the teaching story of almost the same name, 'A Matter of Time, Not Place', the Mullah Nasrudin is asked by a wandering traveler that he wants to borrow the Mullah's rope, which is lying coiled in front of him. The Mullah Nasrudin replies that he cannot, that it is already in use. The wandering traveler is angry, saying that it is not in use, it is just lying there, to which the Mullah Nasrudin replies: It is being used like this; to lie there until he wants to lend it.

Although this story shows the same hallmarks of many Nasrudin stories (with the message that it seems a little unfair), the message behind the teaching story appears to be worthwhile to consider: the wandering traveler was mistaken when he believes that just because the Mullah had a rope lying on the ground that it would automatically be free to use. The traveler was in fact laying a claim on the rope over and above any that the Mullah already had. This story also shows the idea that truth is dependent upon these two things - time and place, and that quite often we get these two mixed up and confused. The traveller believed that his 'Use' of the rope was more important than how the Mullah was feeling at the time. If the traveler had asked at a different time, than he might have found the Mullah more agreeable. This sort of story shows how time, place, and setting are vitally important to the truth of a situation, as the truth can often change (and indeed needs to change) to suit the requisites of the situation.

Similarly, in the teaching story of 'Mistaken Identity' the Mullah Nasrudin is staying at a monastery owned by a Sheikh when a bag of flour rice goes missing. The Sheikh immediately announces that everyone is to have their beard's examined, as the culprit is sure to have grain's of rice in their beard. The real culprit in the crowd says and does nothing, and makes not a move, while the Mullah Nasrudin says to himself that someone may have planted rice in his beard to incriminate him and so furiously begins combing his own beard. Everyone stops and stares at him, thinking that the Mullah is the thief. In this story we are seen that sometimes even notions of guilt and innocence and dependent upon time and place. If the real thief or the Mullah Nasrudin had been seen combing their beard an hour previously then no one would minded or thought anything worse of them. As the Mullah performed that action at that time, it suddenly had the added significance of criminality, wrongdoing and culpability.

# The Roles of Man

## The Roles of Man Summary and Analysis

In the teaching stories related to the Role of Man, they often feature the difference (or the apparent differences) between humanity and animals, or what makes a human a 'real' human. This notion in part refers to a Sufi belief that 'man' (or humans) are comprised of a soul, but that our personalities are still under development; in some senses we are not yet human, as we have not developed our critical thinking, reasoning, and our capacity to perceive the truth in a situation.

In the teaching story 'The King Spoke To Me' the Mullah Nasrudin is surrounded by an appreciative crowd as he relates that the King has been talking to him. The crowd is awed by this, and immediately assume that the Mullah must be very high in the King's esteem for this to happen. When the Mullah is asked just what the King said, he replies: 'Get Out Of My Way'. This story shows that there are many different roles that people play throughout their life, and that during our own we will encounter some of these different roles. This story warns us to take these roles too seriously, or to expect people to act out of type! The appreciative onlooker's 'gave' the Mullah Nasrudin his stage and his role as a 'respected friend of the King's' and, in classic Nasrudin style, the teaching story pokes fun at the idea of social roles or of our faith in them. Seen in the fact that all the King did was to tell one of his subjects (the Mullah) to get out of his way, the teaching story warns us against the perils of trying to put too much faith in those who have 'chosen their roles'.



# Face The Facts

## Face The Facts Summary and Analysis

In the teaching stories that comprise the theme of 'Facing The Facts' we almost have the opposite meaning of 'Behind the Obvious' and 'Quite Simple'. These stories contain the idea that the truth of a situation is often completely obvious and staring us in the face.

In one such teaching story, 'Addicted', we see that the Mullah Nasrudin is standing in as a magistrate at a local court when a woman arrives with a personal matter. She proclaims that her young son is addicted to sugar and that his addiction is now costing her money, so much that they will soon be unable to eat if her son carries on like this. She asks the courts and the Mullah to forbid her son to eat any more sugar, at least for the meantime. The Mullah Nasrudin replies that he must think about this as it is a very complicated case, and asks the woman to come back in a week. At the appointed time the woman comes back and asks the Mullah if he has come to a decision yet, and the Mullah again asks the woman to come back in a week. Finally, the woman comes back and demands that the Mullah Nasrudin answers her plea, at which he tells the son that he must only eat half an ounce and no more a day. On their way out the woman asks the Mullah why he could not come up with a decision any sooner, to which the Mullah replied that he had to give up sugar himself before he asked someone else to! This story has a typical feature of some of the Nasrudin literature; that it flips the situation on its head and suddenly shows another side. In this case we can assume that this is tenderness. The Mullah is being brutally honest when he suggests that he cannot ask another person to do something which he is unprepared to do; a fact which the story is suggesting would make all of life a lot easier.

In another such story, towards the end of the Pleasantries of Nasrudin, it is related that the Mullah wanted to plan and build his own crypt before his death. He bought master craftsmen, stonemasons and artificer's to work on his final tomb until he was satisfied with it. At the end of the last day of work, the workers all ask the Mullah Nasrudin for their pay to which he replies that he cannot because it is unfinished. When asked in what way by the astounded workers, the Mullah replies that it is unfinished because it is empty. This story shows the idea that the facts of a situation sometimes remain incontrovertibly so; they do not change according to whim, opinion or desire, and that it would be foolish to presume that the facts are anything other than what they are.



# Behind The Obvious

## Behind The Obvious Summary and Analysis

The teaching stories that contemplate what is 'behind the obvious' are common throughout any Nasrudin literature and, in many ways characterize a lot of the Mullah Nasrudin's teaching.

In one such story 'The Other Way Around' a disciple approaches the Mullah, asking if he can study under the Master teacher. The Mullah Nasrudin asks the disciple what he has been qualified in and the disciple replies that he has learned from some of the best teachers in the best schools, and the Mullah sadly replies that alas, if only the best teachers in the best teaching schools had been studying him instead, then the disciple might be approaching truth! This story has all the hallmarks of the 'Behind The Obvious' theme. The Mullah Nasrudin is pointing out to the disciple that studying other's (the best teacher's) and their theories is all very well, but will not bring the student closer to understanding himself. Whilst it is obvious that the best school's will provide the best education, the Mullah is suggesting that behind that idea is a whole new fact: that the best education is only worthwhile if the student knows how to use it, and knows who they themselves are.

Another, funny story that shows the idea of the truth hiding 'Behind The Obvious' is the teaching story of 'Never Miss A Bargain'. In this the Mullah Nasrudin looks morosely at his old, familiar donkey. He decides to sell his beast to the town auctioneer, who immediately extols its virtues and sings it praises. Suddenly hearing that the donkey is a fine animal, and having another farmer bid for him, the Mullah Nasrudin also bids on the donkey. This bidding way continues until Nasrudin has spent over twenty gold pieces. It turns out that some of the gold he has to give back to himself, and a large proportion he has to give back to the auctioneer for selling it. The Mullah is out of pocket and walked home with the same donkey... but, he is still happy. The Mullah states that he is happy because he realized what a fine animal his donkey was, and how much he valued it.

This story shows that the truth of a situation is often occluded by our predispositions and expectations. When the Mullah saw his donkey in a new light (beyond the everyday circumstance he was accustomed to), he realized just how much he valued his animal.





# Death

## Death Summary and Analysis

Our common mortality is a common feature of the teaching stories of the Mullah Nasrudin, with its special references and mysteries about what may lay beyond. In 'Why Shouldn't They Mourn' the teaching story relates how the Mullah tied black mourning ribbons to all of his chickens (as they all had reasons to mourn). He does this after he sees a man walking down the street in his mourning garb. The very next day, the man walks up to the funerary poultry and asks the Mullah Nasrudin why the chickens and wearing mourning ribbons, to which he replies 'why not?' This story highlights some of the essential ambiguity about death that we can see in Mullah Nasrudin stories. The Mullah is suggesting that the chickens have just as right to mourn as any man does, as they experience death too - then why does it seem ridiculous that they should in fact mourn? We get the sense that our own sense of this ridiculousness is because we believe that chicken's do not know what is about to happen or when, and this is the exact same point that the Mullah Nasrudin wants to make about humanity.

It is worthwhile to note that 'Death' in Sufi training does not indicate the end of one's psyche, but does represent a complete change for the person. Sufism teaches that we can say nothing about what comes after death, or how it might happen - only that it exists and is vitally important piece of being alive. Occupations such as 'mourning' can be seen to be of lesser significance to the Sufi, who sees that as wondering about something of which we cannot know about.

Another teaching story; 'Bury Me Upside Down' shows a similar message. One day the Mullah is asked how he would like to be buried, and he replies that because this would seem to be so topsy-turvy, he would like to be buried on his head so that in the next one he will emerge the right way up! This rather beguiling story is at once comical and a little ridiculous, but also betrays the clues to the Mullah's reasoning. He is stating that the next world (the afterlife, heaven and hell etc.) can not be anything like this one, and that we have no idea what it will in fact be like.



# Characters

## The Mullah Nasrudin

The central character in all of the tales, unsurprisingly, is that of the mythical teaching figure, Mullah Nasrudin. The Mullah Nasrudin is simultaneously wise, foolish, a figure of fun whose speech also paradoxically seems to contain pearls of wisdom. Pictured as a somewhat wandering itinerant, the Mullah travels all over the Ancient World (notably in Muslim countries), poking fun at peoples stupidity, institutions and customs. His exploits in the form of sayings, parables and judgements are believed to be a key part of the Sufi teaching system; as the Mullah's pronouncements seem to suggest insights taught in that tradition.

As a figure in this book, the Mullah is more often than not one of a slightly disgraceful teacher; the sort who could be found drunk, or found stealing from his enemies. He is depicted here as an 'everyman' as his personal situation always suits the needs of the story (in some stories he has a wife, children, in others he is acting as a judge, or is a landowner whilst still in others' he is presented as a wandering hermit). The Mullah in this sense can be regarded as the personification of Truth itself, in all of its myriad forms (and especially that of the unlooked for, or hidden Truth to be found in any situation).

## The Sheikh

The Sheikh, like many character's in this collection, is an archetype that the teaching stories use to illustrate their points. A Sheikh is a family and cultural leader for the Muslim World; often the head of a large family whose position, age and wisdom confers upon them a great deal of respect and often learning, wisdom and power. Sheikh's can be considered in some ways to be clan leaders, as well as personifications of wisdom.

For the purposes of these teaching stories, the Sheikh's are figures that the Mullah often visits, talks about or is just returning from at the time that the story takes place. They are afforded respect for their position in most of the story, but the figure of the Mullah also slyly pokes fun at greedy or untrustworthy Sheikh's. In this way the Sheikh can be seen to represent power and prestige in this World, and so the Mullah is able to point out where their authority is limited or deviating from mystical Truth.

## The King

The King is a another archetype that is often encountered in the teaching stories of Mullah Nasrudin. The exact identities of the King's are never given (as the Story can be set in almost any time), but traditionally the stories featuring this archetype all have a Classical feel to their depiction of Kingship.



In these stories the King is seen as the absolute Worldly authority and Temporal Power; one in which is far beyond the normal people. This relationship is often brought into examination by the comic figure of the Mullah Nasrudin, as some of the stories relate to the King asking for the Mullah's wisdom and aid, or other times not even regarding the Mullah at all. The message implicit here, is of course that the wisdom that the Mullah represents does not belong to any worldly power, and that all people: whether commoner or nobility, are in need of spiritual wisdom.

## The Householder

The Householder is usually depicted as small minded in Mullah Nasrudin stories, oft-times greedy or ignorant (although sometimes the householder can also be seen to be possessing the kind of 'simple wisdom' that the Mullah Nasrudin expounds). These are the most common other sorts of archetypes that the Mullah Nasrudin encounters on his journeys, and often the recipients for his wisdom. Householder's becomes an analogy for the everyday people of the world, who are mired in all of the human emotions and strife which the Mullah is trying to 'uncover'.

In the Mullah Nasrudin stories, the Householder's can often be taken as an analogy for our own minds or personalities; which believe that they have 'things' (belongings) which we have to hang onto.

## The Merchant

Merchants are a common figure in the teaching stories of Mullah Nasrudin, who often pokes fun at them for being greedy and competitive. Merchant's can be seen to represent those qualities in everybody, and particularly in those who value possessions and money above all things. In many of the teaching stories of Mullah Nasrudin, the Merchant's desire for worldly things is shown to be limited and near-sighted, as their possessions will not be taken with them into the afterlife (or Heaven, as appropriate).

## Nasrudin's Wife

The Mullah Nasrudin is always depicted as being able to teach the truth for any situation; and so in many stories family life, the Mullah Nasrudin is depicted as having a wife and family. It is also important to note that the notion of having a family is important to the tradition in which the Mullah is based, and is seen as one of the mark's of an established, respectable person.

The Mullah Nasrudin's wife however, usually has a double meaning in these teaching stories. On the one hand she is another 'every person' just like every other character - one who can be small minded, habitual and mistaken about events. In these sorts of stories the Mullah Nasrudin seemingly pokes fun at family traditions that limit ones' apprehension of Truth.



In another meaning, and particular to some of the stories; the Mullah Nasrudin's wife comes to represent 'The Beloved'. The Beloved is a concept particular to Sufism, and refers to a mystic's relationship with God, or the Divine. This relationship is often presented as a love affair, with the Beloved occupying the center of the mystic's affection, attention, and mind. If read in this way, then some of the stories that contain the Mullah Nasrudin's wife also reveal a deeper meaning about his relationship to the divine.

## **The Philosopher's**

The Philosopher's are occasional character's that crop up in the Mullah Nasrudin teaching stories as figures that the Mullah tangles with. The Philosopher's are often pictured as dry, a little crazy and very orthodox in their beliefs. The Mullah however, shows that their dry mental investigations can be very far removed from the Truth. The purpose of the appearance of the Philosopher's in the Mullah's teaching stories is to point out that real wisdom and truth does not belong to any particular group.



# Objects/Places

## On The Road

The majority of the teaching stories here feature the Mullah Nasrudin traveling from one location to another. In fact, the most traditional image of the Mullah Nasrudin is one of a traveling wise man. In this way the central figure becomes representative of the truth that could be found anywhere, and does not belong to any particular person or place.

The notion of traveling also has a double meaning in many of these teaching stories; as the travels and journey that we all take in the development of our personalities. In essence, 'on the road' or 'traveling' also refers to the journey that we take from the cradle to the grave, and the appearance of the Mullah is also the appearance of wisdom at various points along that journey.

## Foreign Countries

Foreign Countries occur sporadically throughout these teaching stories of the Mullah Nasrudin, particularly as the figure of the Mullah Nasrudin does not 'belong' to any particular country or nation. The appearance of 'Foreign Countries' indicates that the Mullah Nasrudin is not owned and is a free figure, and symbolically, so is the truth. As the Mullah travels to foreign parts, the teaching stories are often about our preconceptions of other people and customs, and how often our beliefs about strange lands are often wrong.

## At the King's Court

The King's Court features many times in the teaching stories of the Mullah Nasrudin presented here in this collection. It is often alluded to in passing, as a place where the Mullah has just been or is just returning from.

The King's Court is the highest authority in the land, and as such; in the stories where it appears the King's Court is also poked fun of as a purely worldly or temporal power (and thus not intrinsically a place where truth can be found). These teaching stories are often about pride, pomposity or the assumed power that is taken or that we give to others in positions of authority.

## In Your Own House

In a lot of the Mullah's teaching stories the Home features (either the Mullah Nasrudin's own abode, or the house of another). These stories often refer to property and to ones' attachment to our belongings and our life. The Mullah Nasrudin attempts to point out



that all of our belongings are transient, replaceable even and subject to the winds of change.

In another level of meaning, the House also refers to ones own mind and personality, and the deeper meanings of the stories can refer to what happens when a person lets unwanted thoughts, influences or bad habits into the 'House of their Soul' and the havoc that they can then cause there.

## **Food**

Food is also a constant feature of many of the teaching stories. It is often obvious in it's meaning; as the sustenance by which we survive, but Food also can take on other meaning depending upon the needs of the story. Food can represent addiction or greed, and in such teaching stories the Mullah Nasrudin often meditates on why humanity is so concerned with attempting to satisfy their immediate desires. In other stories Food represents the notion of 'sustenance' and especially that of 'spiritual sustenance'.

In the Sufi tradition food simultaneously refers to the worldly things that keep us alive, but, in their essence have no bearing on the spiritual things that keep us human. In regards to this, Food can be seen in the teaching stories as either referring to the addictions which get in the way of our perception of the truth, or of the spiritual nourishment that human's really need.

## **Money and Riches**

Money, riches and wealth in the form of coins, fine clothes and jewels sometimes appear as objects in the teaching stories of the Mullah Nasrudin. They almost always refer to the pride, greed and jealousy most often attached to the pursuit of wealth.

In other stories there is a double meaning to that of the appearance of wealth. They can, occasionally refer to spiritual 'riches'. In these types of teaching stories, wealth is seen as an analogy of the differences between physical wealth and spiritual wealth.

## **In The Tea House**

The Tea House is a common setting for a lot of the teaching stories of the Mullah Nasrudin, as it is a common place in the setting for groups of people to get together and discuss the matter's of the day. During some stories the Tea House is presented as a place that exemplifies laziness or idle conversation. During these stories the Mullah Nasrudin pokes fun at the idle assumptions and chatter that occupy the Tea House.

## The Light

The light, often presented as a Lantern or a torch is another object which can be found throughout the teaching stories of the Mullah Nasrudin. In its common guise of a lantern, it often becomes an allusion to the themes of ignorance and 'illuminaion' - or knowledge. For example, the Mullah Nasrudin may be seen to have a 'secret Lantern' or to 'not need a Lantern' when in the dark - this can be a veiled truth about the fact that most of people (from the perspective of the teaching stories) are 'in the dark' and are ignorant.

The Light (especially the Star and the Lantern are common metaphors found in Sufi thought, for the light of the Divine, and for existence of truth itself. Quite often a wise person, a Sufi or a mystic is portrayed as 'bearing a light' which can be understood as a metaphor for their perceptions in actual fact being 'clear' and not muddled.

# Themes

## Real Wisdom

The central theme running throughout all of the teaching stories is the topic of 'real wisdom' that is, the Truth, or even facts which are 'eternal'. This sort of wisdom seems to come in the form of facts about our human existence, about how we operate as humans, and also spiritual truths about the cosmos, or the nature of knowledge. They are presented to the reader through the words of the Mullah, or suggested through his actions.

As often said before the figure of the Mullah Nasrudin is claimed to be a Sufi teaching figure, and in this light one of his primary goals is to break our established patterns of thinking and accepted beliefs to introduce us to 'real' wisdom. The figure of the Mullah does this by posing questions about our most general and normal of our day to day activities, of answering unanswerable questions, and by actions that appear to be out of context but on a deeper analysis reveal a kernel of wisdom. The Mullah uses humor most of the time to achieve this goal, as he pokes fun at the small minded, the ignorance or any that profess to 'know the truth'.

Through these activities we can see a few common characteristics that 'The Truth' holds for the Mullah. One characteristic is most often that real wisdom is hidden, it lies inside our activities if only we could but see it. Another is that real wisdom is not dependent upon any sort of power, position or prestige (hence the mullah pokes fun at King's and Sheikh's alike). The sort of 'Real Wisdom' that is presented through these teaching stories is often really a case of looking at the situation in a different light, and considering how much we really know, and how much we are merely wishing to be true.

It can be said that, for the Sufis at least, 'Real Wisdom' is something that belongs not of this world, and that this world can be characterized by its ignorance and 'darkness'. This idea is suggested by the teaching stories in the way that the Mullah often does bizarre, surreal or contradictory things that seem to suggest that the laws of the normal world are not worth believing in.

Another aspect of this theme of 'Real Wisdom' is that of its application to psychology. There have been quite a lot of books discussing the idea that the Mullah Nasrudin teaching stories are actually exercises in mapping the personality and are attempts at explaining the inner workings of our psychology. The theme of 'Real Wisdom' in this case becomes the acceptance of the psychological truths about our selves that we may be able to find inside these parables. If the teaching stories are read in this way, then the figures used and encountered by the Mullah can be seen as archetypal forces (similar to Jungian Archetypes), and refer to the interplay of our emotions; our need for authority, our own closed minds or mean spirits, and ways in which we can break out of these habits.





## Worldly Power

Another constant theme for the teaching stories of the Mullah Nasrudin is that of Worldly Power and its limitations. In many of the stories the Mullah confronts merchants, or greedy householders, or even Kings and noblemen, often showing them the errors of their ways.

The Mullah pokes fun at those with Worldly Power often, showing that figures of authority sometimes abuse their power, and that the province of worldly power bears no relation to that of spiritual power. In these teaching stories, quite often we can see that there is a dichotomy between 'Wisdom' and 'Authority', with the figure of the Mullah representing Wisdom while the characters that he encounters often representing the normal world of authority.

The very characterization of the Mullah himself can be seen as an attempt to poke fun at our notions of worldly power. The Mullah emerges in the stories as a shabby, disheveled older man who can be found in almost any circumstance: from digging ditches to herding cattle, begging to selling goods. In his guise as the wandering ascetic, as soon as we encounter the Mullah we can see that he is the antithesis of wealth of prestige, and even appears to be an emissary from another world where power and riches have no relevance.

Worldly Power and authority also comes hand in hand with greed and pride in the stories; and can represent (depending upon the depth of the interpretation), the illusory notions of grandeur that we may hold about ourselves, and our seeming need to feel more important than we really are. One of the most constant themes in relation to Worldly power throughout these teaching stories is that it is essential to question everything, and to never stop that examination of the life around us or the interior life within us. This means that Worldly Power - in the form of prestige, recognition or wealth must also come under question as to its ultimate purpose and validity.

# Style

## Perspective

The Perspective that these teaching stories of the Mullah Nasrudin take are similar to those of parables, jokes, and tales. They are presented as fables and rumors, in the manner that they happened 'long ago, and to somebody else'. This means that most of them all start with the premise that 'The Mullah Nasrudin was once walking....' etc. This style gives the tales a feeling of authenticity and even of authority, as they are all presented as historical fact.

The perspective of the tales themselves is generally hard to capture for all of the tales (as the Mullah Nasrudin stories have been translated and owned by many different cultures and nations throughout time). One enduring feature however, is that the narrator is almost always on the side of the Mullah. These tales are told as if by a friend of the Mullah's who is relating a particularly funny or wise anecdote of his old friend. The fact that the stories are told in this way suggest that the Mullah Nasrudin is in fact a teaching-figure, a 'father of wisdom' to whom anyone can look for humor, advice and learning. The Mullah Nasrudin becomes, literally speaking, an approachable figure as his exploits are often funny and sometimes embarrassing.

## Tone

The Tone used throughout the Mullah Nasrudin varies considerably depending upon who is telling the stories (as they often favorite's for story tellers). On the whole, however, a few commonalities can be discerned: the stories are always parable-like, and always somewhat subversive of the accepted order.

These two features can be explained in this way; they are parable like means that they often appear to be similar to Biblical or religious stories of instruction; the figures used are often archetypal or symbolic figures rather than historic character's (The King, The Merchant, The Sheik, etc). This encourages the feeling of mystical wisdom so often associated with the Mullah Nasrudin.

The stories can also be said to be subversive in the fact that they most often poke fun at those figures who are in power, or who believe that they have power over others, and in general that they attack the social norm. There is a wry comedy and a rascally nature about the Mullah Nasrudin himself, as he often shows up the idiocies or the arrogance of those around him. The Tales can be said to be subversive broadly in the way that they question all of our common mental habits (right and wrong, judgement, truth and ignorance), as well as our institutions (royalty, the law courts, education and economics).

## Structure

The Structure of the book is a simple introduction written by Idries Shah, followed by the stories themselves. The most interesting feature of the book 'The Pleasantries of the Mullah Nasrudin' is that of the stories themselves.

The Stories are almost always usually short in length (only a paragraph or so long, some stretching over a normal book page). They all have a short title that is reflective of the message of the story, and all usually feature a conversation. This conversation is the most common format that the Mullah Nasrudin stories take, as it allows the Mullah to impart wisdom to the other character's in the story, and also allows the Mullah Nasrudin to be asked questions. To be tested, challenged and reacted to. This is an ancient tradition that is common to the Classical and Religious traditions of the Ancient World: we have the examples of the Biblical Parables and the Socratic Dialogues.

Another interesting fact to note about the structure is that the small size of the stories make them easily read and easily digested, but succinct enough to remember and think about for days to come. Some commentators have also suggested that the teaching stories of the Mullah Nasrudin are meant to be imparted by story teller's as a part of an oral tradition; and so in this way we can see that the details are kept simple, action immediate and all with a 'punch-line' or a revelation as the final sentence.

## Quotes

"I know what must be,' said the Mullah Nasrudin, 'but I do not know what may be.'"

"Have you not noticed?' The Mullah Nasrudin said, 'That it is the scarcity of a thing which provides it's value?'"

"Because, you fool - it would be too late to punish him after he broke the pot, wouldn't it?"

"We need the light more during the night than during the day."

"When you are hunting bears, none is more than enough."



## Topics for Discussion

What is your favourite Mullah Nasrudin story from this volume, and why?

Take one parable for the collection 'The Pleasantries of the Incredible Mullah Nasrudin' and analyze its possible meanings.

Consider the main figure of all of the stories presented here. What do you think about the Mullah Nasrudin? Is he a trustworthy figure? Is he wise?

Given that many of these stories could have been written over a thousand years ago, how relevant do you feel are the stories of Mullah Nasrudin to the modern day? Consider their Setting, Style and Message.

Is the author Idries Shah right to link the existence of the Incredible Mullah Nasrudin to the mystical Islamic group known as the Sufis?

Compare the Style, Content and Character's of a Mullah Nasrudin tale to that of a Biblical Parable. How similar are they? What are their differences?