

An Appointment with Destiny: Ivy Duce and Baba's New Sufism, 1946-48

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In the timeline of Meher Baba's work, the year 1948 has special significance to his American Sufis. On January 7th of that year, Meher Baba took the unusual step of suspending his intensive work with *masts* in order to meet for five days with a woman who had come from America to see him. This was Ivy Duce, the newly appointed leader, or murshida, of what was then called the Sufi Order in America. Murshida Duce had journeyed to Meherazad to lay the future of her order at Baba's feet.

At this first meeting in Meherazad, Baba began the work of creating an entirely *new* school of sufism, emanating directly from him, a project he would nurture and expand in succeeding decades. In entrusting this work to Murshida Duce, Baba outlined her responsibilities in his customarily concise way by instructing her to make his new sufism "safe, sane, and stable" to last for 700 years, until his next advent as the Avatar. And Baba surprised Murshida Duce by telling her that his work with sufism, and her role in that work, were ordained by God. "This was your destiny in this incarnation," he told her, "and this is why I have drawn you here."¹

All this was set in motion between 1945 and 1948, the years this conference is focused on. In this presentation, I review how Baba "drew" Murshida Duce to Meherazad for this important meeting and consider his plan for a new sufism in relation to the broader dimensions of his work as the universal Avatar.

Learning of Meher Baba

To set the stage for this 1948 meeting in India, we must go back to 1941, when Meher Baba directed his close Western disciples Norina Matchabelli, Elizabeth Patterson, and Nadine Tolstoy to do special work for him in America. They located and founded Baba's universal center at Myrtle Beach, South

¹ Ivy Duce, *How a Master Works*, p. 2.

Carolina. And, at Baba's direction, Norina, a gifted speaker, gave talks in major American cities in order to spread Baba's name and message. Among those who attended Norina's talk in San Francisco in the summer of 1942 was Murshida Rabia Martin (1871-1947). She was the American-born successor of the spiritual master Hazrat Inayat Khan, who brought Sufism to the West in 1910, much as Vivekananda had brought Vedanta to the West in the 1890s. As the leader of the Sufis in the Western Hemisphere, Rabia Martin wished to align her order with the Perfect Master of the age, whom the Sufis call the Qutub. As she learned more about Meher Baba from Norina and Elizabeth, she intuitively felt that he was indeed the Qutub. But she had to be certain. In 1945, while visiting Elizabeth's Myrtle Beach home, Youpon Dunes, in the company of Norina and several others, Murshida Martin was granted an overwhelming internal experience of Meher Baba's presence and love that confirmed her conviction of his stature. Her contact with Meher Baba, both inwardly and through correspondence, gave her a stunning glimpse of Baba's intention to revitalize sufism for the coming age. She was thrilled by this vision of the future. However, it was not her destiny to carry it forward. She died in August of 1947 at the age of seventy-six, leaving her Sufi Order in the hands of her most gifted student, Ivy Oneita Duce.

Ivy Duce

Born February 25th, 1895, a year to the day after Meher Baba, Ivy Duce was another of the extraordinary Western women in Baba's close circle. Like Norina and Elizabeth, her life experience was vibrant, full and wide-ranging. She was given a rare variety of experiences in living that took her all over the world and included apprenticeships in music, law, banking, publishing, national politics, international diplomacy and more. In later life, she was able to use the fruits of this broad experience of the world in her work for Meher Baba.

Those who met her, as I first did in the mid-1970s, quickly discovered that Murshida Duce had a profound and deeply compassionate understanding of human nature, more encompassing than anyone I had met in my own field of psychology. She had a depth and breadth of appreciation for life that I have rarely seen. She sensed effortlessly and unconsciously the *sacredness* of life in all its diverse forms. She had an automatic reverence for beauty, wherever found, and a refreshing awareness, as pure as a dewdrop, of the divinity of the everyday world. She carried the quiet assurance that the keynote of life is joy. She was one of a very small handful of people I have met in my life whom, in my terminology, I would call "mature". In speaking of her before she was appointed murshida, I will refer to her as "Ivy".

Ivy was married to James Terry Duce, a distinguished geologist, executive, and diplomat associated with international oil companies, especially in the Middle East. His work took them both all over the world and brought Ivy in contact with leading figures in government, business, science, and the arts. As it happened, his work in the world often facilitated Ivy's spiritual goals.² Here is one example: For much of Terry's career, the Duces were based in Washington, DC, or New York. However, in 1940, he was transferred to San Francisco for several years. It was in San Francisco that Ivy was able to meet Murshida Martin and learn of sufism, the timeless path of love for God, which she had never encountered during her long spiritual search. "When I met Murshida Martin," she recalled, "I felt I had come home." Indeed, Murshida Martin later revealed to Ivy that she had known from the moment they met that Ivy was to be her successor. Ivy, however, had no inkling of this.

"A Giant Tooth Extracted"

Murshida Martin first told Ivy Duce about Meher Baba in the summer of 1945. A few months later, Ivy and her daughter, Charmian, then in her mid-teens, met Elizabeth and Norina at their New York apartment. While they were having tea, Ivy suddenly felt as if she "had been struck by a thunderbolt" and burst into tears. She felt as if she were, in her words, "a giant tooth being extracted from somewhere." A golden force of divine energy had penetrated the sheaths of Ivy's lower nature and forcefully seared and ripped them, so that Ivy had the feeling that her lower nature, her "I", had been torn loose and "extracted" just like a big tooth that had outlived its usefulness. Charmian, who was quite psychic as a young girl, reported that she had seen a man in a white robe pass through the room and sit down on the sofa, looking intently at Ivy. When this was later described to Norina, she exclaimed, "That was Baba; he often sits that way!" Murshida Duce considered this experience at Elizabeth and Norina's home in 1945 as her first direct contact with Meher Baba. He was beginning to "draw her to him."

Early in 1946, Ivy wrote directly to Baba to surrender herself formally to him, as her teacher, Rabia Martin, had. She wrote:

. . . We send you our hearts' devotion, and, Holy Master, please have compassion on our "western minds" since we have bodies nourished in western soil where we have not been taught Christianity, mysticism, or any

² Terry Duce's name was included by Baba on the final list of "departed lovers" to be inscribed on the Memorial Tower at Meherabad. *Lord Meher*, 2001 edition, p. 6553.

other approach to God properly. It is difficult for western peoples to aim at experiencing what they have not been taught as an ideal goal.

Baba replied, through his secretary, Adi, K. Irani,

Shri Meher Baba is very much pleased to know about your wholehearted willingness to surrender to him and to serve him and his cause. He also knows how deeply you aspire to see him. He says all your sincere aspirations will be fulfilled at their right and opportune time. He tells you not to worry about anything. Shri Baba sends his love and blessings to you.

“Insh’Allah”

Murshida Martin had planned to travel to India to meet with Meher Baba and begin the process of revitalizing the Sufi Order for the new age. She had invited her Australian student Francis Brabazon to come to America in the fall of 1946 in order to assist her in making the long journey to India. However she soon became gravely ill with cancer of the throat, and in August of 1947, Murshida Martin passed away, a month after naming her successor—Ivy Duce.

Ivy was shocked. This was a role she never sought and never expected, indeed a role she had no wish to fill. She felt she had been “promoted too soon”, that is, she felt she did not yet have the spiritual illumination necessary to serve as a true murshida. She felt keenly the responsibility before God for Murshida Martin’s students, who were now *her* students. All she could think of to do was to go to India and see Meher Baba as soon as possible, to lay the future of Sufism in America at his feet as Murshida Martin had planned, and to ask Baba to appoint a suitably illumined teacher from the East to guide the group.

But how could she possibly get to India? This was 1947. It was a long and arduous journey by sea or by propeller plane. And the subcontinent had now been plunged into violence following the August 1947 partition into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. At that time, it was no place for an American woman to be traveling for any reason.

At just this time, Norina wrote Murshida Duce that one of Baba’s close disciples, Meherjee Karkaria, was coming to New York and Washington on business, and perhaps she would enjoy meeting him. Murshida arranged to host him for luncheon at her home in Washington. They had a delightful visit. As Meherjee was leaving, Murshida walked him to the door. He turned to shake hands with her, saying, “I’ll see you soon in India, Mrs. Duce!”

As they shook hands, Murshida replied as they do in the Middle East, “*Insh’allah*”, meaning “If God wills”. Murshida recalled, “I regarded this as just a

pleasantry, but with the handshake, a searing pain went up my arm and shoulder, and I barely kicked the door shut as I collapsed in the foyer, feeling just as I had at [Norina's] . . .”³ In this interaction, Meherjee had served as a conduit for Baba's force. Murshida Duce was very sensitive to the energy of the Christ. When she was in its presence, it penetrated her to the core.

Although travel to India seemed impossible for her in the fall of 1947, one day, seemingly “out of the blue”, Murshida’s husband, Terry, now an executive with the Arabian-American Oil Company, invited her and Charmian to join him on a field trip to Arabia. Wives and families were rarely invited on such trips, so this in itself was unusual. And once they had arrived in Arabia, Mr. Duce was abruptly called back to New York, leaving Ivy and Charmian to wait in Arabia for the next company plane to take them home, a month later. This gave them a month’s “window” when it was possible for them to make the relatively short trip from Arabia to India and see Baba for five days at Meherazad at the beginning of January, 1948. “*Insh ’allah*”, indeed!

Now, how and why did this come about? At this time, the United Nations was considering the partition of Palestine to create the new state of Israel. The Arab states were adamantly opposed to this and threatened to go to war over it. As a Middle East expert, Terry Duce had been asked by the U.S. State Department to make a discreet emergency trip to the region to assess whether the Arab countries would make good on their threats of war. To disguise the strategic nature of his mission, Terry invited his wife and daughter along to join him “on a sightseeing tour”; in other words, Ivy and Charmian were his “cover.” When Terry quickly flew back to New York to make his report, Murshida Duce and Charmian were free to go on to India and see Meher Baba.

As to *why* it happened, when they arrived at Meherazad, Baba told Murshida Duce that she was there because *he had drawn her to him for his work*. The way had been cleared for her because it was her destiny in this incarnation to serve as a Sufi murshida under his guidance. In later years, she joked about this, saying with a laugh, “I really believed I thought up that trip!”

A New Cycle of Cycles

Murshida’s account of her five-day meeting with Baba in January of 1948 is well-known; it has been published in her book, *How a Master Works*, and much of it has also been reprinted in *Lord Meher*.⁴ She wrote in her journal, “Every day

³ *How a Master Works*, p. 21.

⁴ Murshida Duce’s lengthy account of this 1948 meeting has been published in *Lord Meher* (Vol. 9, p. 3214, *et seq.*) and her own *How a Master Works*; her daughter Charmian Duce Knowles (1929-2003), who accompanied Murshida to India, tells her story in “Growing Up with Meher

was packed with experiences and emotions.” I would like to highlight just a few points relating to Baba’s work with sufism.

Baba emphasized the unusual circumstances of this meeting several times. On the day they arrived, Murshida Duce recalled, “Baba warned me under no circumstances to touch his feet, as he was highly charged for the *mast* work he had interrupted for five days in order to see us.”⁵ Baba explained that his great work with *masts* was now reaching its climax. “He said he must contact them all before his manifestation, and he had contacted ninety percent before I came,” Murshida noted, adding that Baba had resumed this work immediately on the day she left. In their conversations, Baba underlined the fact that “he had seen very, very few new people in the last several years”⁶ and that he had made an exception to see her. And he told her, “the ending of a vast Cycle of cycles is taking place.”⁷

Now, half a century into Baba’s Manifestation, we are more familiar with this phrase, but in the 1940s, Baba rarely used it. It refers to a unique turning point in the entire history of Creation, when the fundamental direction of life currents, which have flowed *outward* toward crystallized material form for trillions of years, now *reverses*, to begin to draw Creation back toward its Source. Meher Baba was charged in this advent with laying the foundations for this immense universal change of direction, which would touch all the realms and graded planes and all the forms, indeed Creation as a whole. As Meher Baba said, there will be a gradual transition from rational processes of thought to intuitive processes of knowing, from the reasoned understanding of the head to the silent, intuitive knowing of the heart. A new humanity will be ushered into a new divine life—a life “reoriented.”

Baba imparted this understanding to Murshida Duce during their very first meeting at Meherazad, and he would amplify and expand on it in later years. It was against this background that Baba outlined his plan for renewing universal sufism for a new age, as a path of inner unfolding for both the East and the West. He wished to bring the central nature of eternal sufism under his wing, while making its practice suitable for the new spiritual age. He signaled the importance of this project by interrupting his seclusion and suspending his work with *masts* for five days to meet with Murshida Duce at his home in Meherazad.

Dr. Ghani’s Role

Baba”, *Glow International*, May 2003, and also in her memoir, *Spread My Love* (Walnut Creek, CA: Sufism Reoriented, 2004).

⁵ *How a Master Works*, p. 24.

⁶ *Lord Meher*, Vol. 9, p. 3219.

⁷ *Lord Meher*, Vol. 9, p. 3230.

At this time, Baba also arranged for Murshida to meet his close disciple Dr. Abdul Ghani,⁸ who was well-versed in traditional sufism and had even known Inayat Khan.⁹ Over the next three years, Baba used Dr. Ghani as an intermediary in answering many of Murshida's questions about sufi principles and practice. Baba often dictated many of his answers directly to Ghani, and through this correspondence between Dr. Ghani and Murshida Duce in 1948 and '49, Baba clarified the purpose of his new sufism in his larger work for the world. For example, in May 1948, Ghani wrote Murshida on Baba's behalf:

Meher Baba is the Sufi of Sufis, but Sufism with him and in him is of a very transcendent, sublime and universal character. He accepts all and denies none. In short, Sufism pure and simple is that which recognizes and acclaims Truth whatever the guise or garb it may assume for the time being. Sufism eschews rigidity and gives no importance to stereotype methods. It believes in individualistic attention towards aspirants. For instance, to some it may enforce exercises in meditation, and to some it may deny all such ordeals as being not conducive to spiritual growth.¹⁰

And in June, Ghani wrote:

Baba is gratified to note the splendid work you are doing. . . . The most prominent characteristic of the Sufi way of spiritual progress is its emphasis on LOVE, which overshadows all spiritual practices known to man. The best manner of developing this Love is to identify oneself with the living Perfect Master and his mission in life. In the affairs of the world today, Baba is assuredly Love-Incarnate for all true and sincere aspirants to live for and die for.¹¹

And in September:

Sufism as a science of life and spirit is suited to the genius of the West. And Baba is seriously thinking of putting the Sufi movement in the West on a much sounder basis and you are the one chosen to accomplish the task out there. Shortly you will be supplied with a concrete plan of work designed by

⁸ Also known as Abdul Ghani Munsiff (a "munsiff" is a magistrate).

⁹ *How a Master Works*, p. 48–9.

¹⁰ Letter of Dr. Ghani, May 7, 1948, *Communications with Meher Baba Relevant to the Formation of Sufism Reoriented, 1945–1951*, Sufism Reoriented archives, Walnut Creek, Calif.

¹¹ Letter of Dr. Ghani, June 7, 1948, *op. cit.*

*Baba, for you to work on. Baba has evolved a method of his own for upholding the Sufi cause and for purging the Sufi movement as it is today in the West of all fetishism and ritualistic tendencies. Under Baba's guidance and spiritual patronage, the tone and fibre of I.K.'s [Inayat Khan's] Sufism would be heightened and strengthened beyond imagination.*¹²

Through Ghani's letters of instruction to Murshida, Baba told her in essence that the re-oriented sufism was to be *entirely new*. All rituals associated with Inayat Khan's Sufi Order were to be abolished, along with graded papers, which the students read and meditated on, these codified outward forms being part of the spirituality of the past. Ghani's letters explained that these patterns followed by Inayat Khan and others belonged to what Baba would later call the "Old Life", the divided world of form and illusion, which was now to be superseded by a new sufism based on illumination at the level of the highest mental plane, the plane of Divine Vision. In traditional sufism, seekers exerted effort to achieve a purpose, performing practices and rituals in order to establish themselves in this or that level or station of consciousness. He clarified that such practices reveal a teacher whose consciousness is limited to the planes of form. That is finished now. Today a real master is to be silent. Formal teachings are not important. It is solely the light, the radiant divine fires the master carries, that is to abet the student's advancement.

Ascendant and Descendent Spirituality

Baba's outline of a revitalized sufism, suitable both in the East and the West, should be considered in the context of the arc of his broader Avataric work culminating in his design for a new Divine Life and a New Humanity. Following the spiritual paths of the past, advanced souls ascended to merge with the higher planes, to escape Illusion, or the Falsehood, and eventually dissolve in the Real, at the source of all. The great pathways of return sought to disentangle conditioned consciousness from the material world by purifying and refining it so that it can merge with transcendent God *beyond* Creation. This pattern might be called "*ascendant* spirituality". On Baba's new path, however, Divinity is invited to descend into duality and infuse our human natures in order to be lived here on Earth. It might be called "*descendant* spirituality". Its approach is to bring high radiant energy from the Beyond *into* Creation *itself*. The result of this work is *embodied* Perfection, living the divine life here on Earth. No longer must seekers ascend to join the Ocean at its source; instead the high radiant energy of the Ocean

¹² Letter of Dr. Ghani, September 10, 1948, *op. cit.*

of divinity will flood the riverbanks where they are, here on this physical plane of life.

Baba established a prototype for the renewal of the various spiritual paths of return in this new age through his direct work with sufism and Murshida Duce, beginning with their Meherazad meeting in 1948. A hallmark of this new, reoriented path is that it can be practiced in everyday life, advancing the seeker on the path while moving Creation on toward its larger cosmic goal. Baba is also thus aided in his Avataric goal of spiritualizing the everyday world for the coming age. Much of the formative work was to be done in America, which provided the energy and conditions necessary for its fulfillment, though Baba anticipated that sufism, and the other “highways to the ultimate universalized”, would eventually be adapted both in the East and the West.

Later in 1948, Baba provided a humorous living illustration of why at that time, his work with a reoriented sufism was to be done in America. In the fall of that year, Baba encouraged Dr. Ghani to start a small sufi group in Pune called “The Sufi Circle”. Baba lent his patronage to the group, a constitution was written, activities were outlined, and so forth. After only a few weeks, however, it was clear that there was not enough interest, time, energy, or enthusiasm among the participants to sustain the group, and with Baba’s permission the experiment was ended. In this way, Meher Baba may have been demonstrating that it is the broad, deep forces of life that determine what is possible at a given time and place.¹³ In this instance, it required the abundant energy and spiritual enthusiasm available in America for Baba’s plan for sufism to be fully realized. By beginning to anchor his new sufism in America as early as 1948, Baba ensured that there would be a firm, though small foundation for the implementation of his plan when the time came in 1952 to create and sign the written charter that brought Sufism Reoriented into being.

For his plan to succeed, Baba also needed the qualities embodied by Murshida Duce. At their first meeting, Baba told Murshida and her daughter, Charmian, “Both of you belong to me. Both of you have been with me since ages.” Baba said they were both members of his circle of 122 close ones who incarnate with him age after age to aid him in his work.¹⁴ Thus, like Norina and Elizabeth, Murshida Duce, too, had many lifetimes of past spiritual preparation for the extraordinary assignment Baba gave her in this life, an assignment that certainly called forth every resource of unconquerable faith, unswerving dedication and unstinting service she had. Among Baba’s Western women, the tasks falling to

¹³ Bal Natu, “The Inception and Termination of the Sufi Circle,” *Glimpses of the God-Man*, Vol. 1 (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Sufism Reoriented, 1977), pp. 375–6.

¹⁴ Ivy O. Duce, *How a Master Works* (Walnut Creek, CA: Sufism Reoriented, 1975), p. 454.

Murshida Duce may have been the most challenging. As the only spiritual teacher appointed by the Avatar, Murshida Duce was charged with laying the foundation for a new spiritual lineage in the Western Hemisphere, to establish an authentic and enduring school of spiritual training for Baba's new age. She was to accomplish this in the spiritual backwater of America, where there was no precedent for such a school and where her work would be least understood. I believe that the magnitude of what Baba asked Ivy Duce to do has never been fully appreciated or understood. And the magnitude of Baba's work through her may only now be coming into view.

Here is how she summarized her task, in her own words:

[Baba said] he had drawn me to him because he wanted me to go ahead and work for him in the world by building up Sufism; that all the forms of religion would be swept away and only the essence remain, and he wanted Sufism spread; that it would converge under my leadership and he would help it to be so.¹⁵

Though I wasn't illumined, he said *he* would do the work *through* me. He said, "I will see to it that you don't make any mistakes with your *mureeds* [students], and I will protect you from taking on any of their karma as long as you remain 100% honest." He said my job would be to make our Sufi Order safe and sane and stable, to last 700 years until he came again.¹⁶

Baba told me that he confirmed my appointment as head of the Sufi Order for the Western world; that he wished me to be the leader and that that was why I had had to come to him—he had drawn me there, so that I could work whole-heartedly for him in the Western world.¹⁷

This was her appointment with Destiny.

¹⁵ *Lord Meher.*, p. 3219.

¹⁶ Transcript of documentary film *Murshida*, 1980, Sufism Reoriented archives, Walnut Creek, Calif.

¹⁷ *Lord Meher*, Vol. 9, p. 3228.