

# THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

---

“Martin Lings – An Appreciation of a rare and beautiful life”

Author: Keith Critchlow

Source: *Temenos Academy Review* 8 (2005),  
pp. 143-5

Published by The Temenos Academy

Copyright © Keith Critchlow, 2017

---

The Temenos Academy is a Registered Charity  
in the United Kingdom.

[www.temenosacademy.org](http://www.temenosacademy.org)

# Dr Martin Lings

## *An Appreciation of a rare and beautiful life*

KEITH CRITCHLOW

**T**he fact that apart from his writings he slipped through life so unobtrusively could well be considered as a characteristic feature of his particular greatness—these words of Martin Lings refer to William Shakespeare, but they also aptly describe his own life. A quiet and modest man and a friend of Temenos, Dr Lings lived a remarkably retiring life, even though right up to his ninety-sixth year he travelled world wide to guide, teach and pray with the many students and followers to whom he was devoted.

My own memories of Martin Lings are fond ones. I recall the privilege, at the time of the Temenos Conference in India in 1987, of sharing a circumambulatory prayer with him at the tomb of the great Sufi saint, Shaikh Salim Chisti, at Fatehpur Sikri near Agra. And I remember with gratitude how, much later, he again took up lecturing—from which he had withdrawn—so as to be able to contribute to the V.I.T.A. programme at the Prince's Institute; with the result that he subsequently spoke at the Temenos Academy on several occasions late in life. I also remember an occasion of a different kind, when I had the rare opportunity of taking him to Highgrove for a private meeting with HRH The Prince of Wales.

Dr Lings was a man of extraordinarily varied achievement, and an unusual breadth and depth of knowledge. This ranged from Sufism, of which he had a direct and inward knowledge, and the life of the Prophet Mohammad (SAW), to the folk traditions of Lithuania and the English poetic tradition. A distinguished poet in his own right, he was at the same time a deeply original and perceptive interpreter of the plays of Shakespeare. And as a former Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts in the British Museum and the British Library he was a widely respected authority on Islamic calligraphy.

In addition to all of this Dr Lings was a remarkable exponent of the Perennial Tradition of Wisdom, and a traditionalist in the special sense in which this term is applied to such writers as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, S. H. Nasr and Titus Burckhardt. A footnote in his seminal

small volume, *Symbol and Archetype*, shows his special understanding of the meaning of such terms as 'knowledge', 'symbol' and 'archetype'. Thus he indicates the difference between 'solar' or Divine knowledge and mere scholarship, which is analytical and bound by the limitations of a simply human learning, writing: 'Since light is the symbol of knowledge, reflected light, of which moonlight is the outstanding example, is a symbol of indirect, analytical knowledge.'

Dr Lings, like so many of those of us who have understood what dark times we live in, sought the highest light throughout his life. Having found it, he became a beacon—albeit modestly—to many others through books such as *The Eleventh Hour* and his remarkable writings on Sufism. His book, *The Secret of Shakespeare* (for which HRH The Prince of Wales wrote the Foreword), was commended by Kathleen Raine in words which go straight to the point: 'This short book', she writes, 'says more to reveal or suggest what in Shakespeare is the quintessence of his greatness than the most laborious exposition could ever do.' And herein lay the genius of Dr Lings: an ability to penetrate to the very heart of any subject he turned his attention to. How else could one become the author of *The Book of Certainty*? Speaking of the spiritual Master who may guide others towards the state of human perfection, he says in this book, 'he has no need of any outward Master, for with the Eye of Certainty he sees the path lying open before him along the ray of light which connects the Moon of his Heart with the Sun of the Spirit. This is the normal condition of man.' Thus proceeds the elixir of words of this exceptional small volume. In an age that exalts 'change', 'uncertainty', 'indeterminacy', 'relativity' and so on—all leading inevitably to the nihilism that characterizes a mechanical materialism constructed by the human mind—we must feel deeply grateful to Dr Lings: he reminds us of the permanencies that all impermanence rests upon, of the certainty which gives to uncertainty its significance, of the 'fixed' from which the constantly changing derives its meaning, and of the Sun from which the Moon draws its reflected light. Towards the end of *The Book of Certainty* Dr Lings concludes a chapter by quoting a *hadith* or traditional saying of the Prophet Mohammad, attributed to Ali Ibn Abi Talib:

Who seeketh Me findeth Me.  
 Who findeth Me knoweth Me.  
 Who knoweth Me loveth Me.

Who loveth Me, him I love.  
Whom I love, him I slay.  
Whom I slay, him must I requite.  
Whom I must requite, Myself am his Requitall.

Thus Dr Lings presents us with the 'open secret' if only we are awake enough to receive it. Wise men are rare today, holy men even more rare; and Martin Lings was both.



Dr Martin Lings (with raised hand) reading the Arabic inscription on the Taj Mahal at Agra, while in India during the Temenos Conference in 1987. Others in the group are (from left to right) Kathleen Raine, the American painter Morris Graves, Huston Smith and Philip Sherrard.