

Mystical Quest in Persian Sufis

Sanā'ī-ʿAṭṭār-Rūmī

Synopsis by Majlona Aliaj

“Sufism is the message of love, harmony, and beauty. It is a divine message. It is the message of the time; and the message of the time is an answer to the call of every soul.”¹

General Points on Sufism

Sufism or Tasawwuf² is the esoteric aspect, the inner dimension of Islamic tradition; it is perceived as the soul of religion by which one attains closeness to God. Upon surpassing the external manifestations of *Sharīʿah*, the foundation of Sufism, one reaches spiritual awareness and begins “worshiping God as if one sees Him.”³ In other words, there is no Sufism without Islam. As William Stoddart, a great scholar of Sufism says, “an attempt to separate the mystical element from the religion which is its outward support is an arbitrary act of violence which cannot but be fatal to mysticism, or spiritual path concerned”.⁴ Thus, Sufism constitutes both the esoterism and initiation, but it is important to denote that Sufis stress inwardness above outwardness, i.e., they do not limit themselves to the elements codified in *Sharīʿah*.

The very first basic station in the mystical path, as Sufi teachers point out, is the necessity of purification of the soul, or *tazkiyah al-nafs*. God is described in the Qur'an as “*the Light of the heavens and the earth*”, [24:35] and can only be seen with the inward sight of the ‘heart’. Therefore, it is through purifying one’s heart that the inner eye opens, followed by liberation and detachment from the carnal desires as the soul becomes ready to cultivate the virtues of a noble character. “The Sufis, says Abu'l-Hasan al-Nuri, one of the disciples of Junayd, are those people whose souls have become cleansed of the impurity of human nature. They are those who have become pure from the wretchedness of the carnal soul and free from desire until they have come to rest in the forefront and in the highest degree with the God”.⁵ The Sufi consistently renounces worldly attachment in order to regain his initial purity, to become a pure creature and to be able to make his soul God-like, so that the Divine can descend there.

In general, Sufis consider themselves as those Muslims who experience the central mystery of Islam, the God’s unique unity, *tawhid- lā ʿilāha ʾillā-llāh*. The *lā* points to the negation of everything besides God. It proclaims that nothing is real, except the Real. One of the most powerful insights Sufis hold is the submission of one’s own self to the will of God. A Sufi becomes dead to his self-will, and God Almighty’s will alone enters in him, and as a consequence of it, he has no wish of his own, no wants or desires nor

¹ Khan Inayat, *The heart of Sufism : essential writings of Hazrat Inayat Khan* (Boston; [New York]: Shambhala ; Random House [distributor], 1999), 5.

² Majority of the modern scholars hold that Tasawwuf comes from the Arabic word *sūf* (wool) and refers to the “one who wears wool”.

³ William C. Chittick, *Sufism : a Short Introduction* (Lahore: Oneworld Publications Limited, 2000), 21.

⁴ William Stoddart, *Sufism : the mystical doctrines and methods of Islam* (New Delhi, India: Rightway Publications, 2001), 19.

⁵ Ḥusain Naṣr, *Sufi essays* (New York, N.Y.: State Univ.of New York Pr., 1972), 70.

does he yearn for anything except the pleasure of God.⁶ Once one is inspired by submission to God, he annihilates himself, so that he can attain to his true self and become immortal in the Divine. The self-negation of this worldliness is called *fanā'*, or annihilation in God and it is a central concept in Sufism. *Fanā'* is the basis for *baqā'*, the subsistence and permanent life in God. In other words, one dies in God and lives by Him; the individual self is lost in the Universal self. He who dies to self, lives in God, and *fanā'*, the consummation of this death marks the attainment of *baqā'*, or union with the divine life.⁷ Thus, the mystic path consists of the willingness to die to carnal nature, so that one transcends all physical laws, to a higher consciousness of realizing God, in which he is reborn into a better state, as the divines. The very purpose of this itinerary is to become united with the Real, which is not a notion, but the Sufi's lived reality; it is the source and object of all being. It is a long process which begins with man in the terrestrial state.

In the Qur'anic verse *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un* [2:156], man returns to his Creator because he has come from his Creator, reminds us that one is destined by his nature to turn toward his God. His return is part of the divine wisdom and plan for creation.⁸ Man is the final cause of the universe and the goal of creation. From the Sufi's point of view, the purpose of creation is the manifestation of Divine's Attributes. It is perhaps important to recall that both the Essence (*dhat*) and the Attributes (*sifat*) refer to the nature of God. The Essence is One in every respect: it is the unexpressed and ineffable mystery. Thus, it is only through the Attributes that one can attempt to describe the Divine nature. In the well-known sacred hadith, often mentioned by Sufis, God revealed to Prophet Muhammad: *I was a Hidden Treasure, and loved to be known intimately, so I created the Heavens and the Earth, so that they may come to intimately know Me.*⁹ Therefore, man is responsible for revealing the Hidden Treasure, i.e., displaying the Attributes and Names of God that are reflected within himself. In this perspective, man is the pinnacle of God's creation and God's image in the universe, but among men, the prophets and saints in general, and the Prophet Muhammad (the Perfect Man) in particular, have achieved creation's utmost purpose of releasing the object of creation. "Muhammad is called the Light of God and he is said to have existed before the creation of the world, he is adored as the source of all life, actual and possible, he is the Perfect Man in whom all the Divine Attributes are manifested".¹⁰

In the realm of mysticism, Persia has always been one of the main sources with the richest poetic creations in Islamic tradition. Persian Sufi saints and sages have always been active, shaping the inward dimensions of that religion. Nasr, a distinguished Muslim scholar, compares Persian Sufism to a vast tree with roots and branches extending all the way from Albania to Malaysia.¹¹ In this article, will discuss three of the greatest Persian Sufis: Sanā'ī, 'Aṭṭār and Rūmī.

⁶ Aftab Shahryar, "Understanding Sufism," (2004): 25, <http://books.google.com/books?id=12DYAAAAMAAJ>.

⁷ Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *The mystics of Islam* (2015), 149.

⁸ Rūmī Jalāl al-Dīn and William C. Chittick, *The Sufi path of love : the spiritual teachings of Rumi*, SUNY series in Islamic spirituality, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 92.

⁹ Safi, Omid. "On the" Path of Love" Towards the Divine: A Journey with Muslim Mystics." p 22-38.

¹⁰ Nicholson, *The mystics of Islam*, 82.

¹¹ Leonard Lewisohn, *The heritage of sufism : Classical Persian Sufism from its origins to Rumi (700-1300)* (Oxford: Oneworld Pub., 1999).

Sanā'ī

Hakim Abul-Majd Majdūd ibn Ādam Sanā'ī Ghaznavi (d. between 525/1131 and 545/1150) is the first of the three great mystical writers of Persia, the second being 'Aṭṭār and the third Rūmī, who, though by far the greatest, had the humility to write, "'Aṭṭār was the Spirit and Sanā'ī its two eyes, we come after Sanā'ī and 'Aṭṭār."¹² Sanā'ī was a court poet who lived during the reign of Bahramshah, Ghazna and spend much of his life composing panegyrics in praise of the Ghaznavid rulers. At some point he abandoned the professional poetry of the court tradition after a spiritual conversion, and committed himself to writing mystical works.¹³ Throughout his career, he has played a significant role in the development of mystical literature while being an exemplary model for later mystics. His major work, *Ḥadīqat al-ḥaqīqat* ("The Garden of Truth"), on which his fame rested, is one of the earliest Persian text-books in Sufi Philosophy¹⁴. Sanā'ī's prominence lies in his competence to adopt and constitute various literature styles never before used to express his philosophical and mystical ideas. He was a prolific poet who wrote in *mathnawī*, *rubā'iyāt* (quatrains), *qaṣīda* (ode) and *ghazal* (lyric). As Arberry denotes, Sanā'ī was the first to compose abundantly in lyrics with religious intention and if he did not actually invent the allegory of the mystical lyric he certainly took it far upon its path of evolution.¹⁵ His epic *Ḥadīqat al-ḥaqīqat* was composed in *mathnawī*, a poem written in rhyming couplets, a pattern which was then emulated by later authors.

Dedicated to Bahramshah, *Ḥadīqat al-ḥaqīqat*, the 11,500 lines mystical poem, divided into ten chapters is a combination of religious beliefs and courtly themes. This book deals with the various aspects of the mystical and practical life¹⁶ where the poet expresses his ideas on God, wisdom, philosophy, love and the world. The poems of Sanā'ī during this period are full of gnostic knowledge and truths and replete with religious thoughts, admonition against worldliness, sermons, and educational examples.¹⁷ It is important to point out that Qur'an and Prophetic Tradition were a great source of inspiration for Sanā'ī at every step of his spiritual quest. He begins his master work on the praise of God as First Cause and Creator and on the praise of the Prophet Muhammad. Furthermore, he advises not to seek the Divine through reason and intellect, for reason serves only as a guide to Him, yet cannot take one far. In the first section of *Ḥadīqa* he says:

¹² Edward Granville Browne, "A literary history of Persia : from Firdawsi to Sa'di," (2013): 317..

¹³ It is said that Sanai one day was passing a garden and heard the 'madman' Lâi Khûr (the ox-eater) singing and stopped to listen. Lâi Khûr admonished Sanai for with all his knowledge, he yet happened to be ignorant of the purposes for which the Almighty had created him; and the only thing he could produce was panegyrics on mortal kings and that would not serve him in the afterlife when he comes before the Creator. Sanai, affected by Lâi Khûr's words was spiritually awakened and transformed into another man and decided to seclude himself from the world and went to Mecca in pilgrimage.

¹⁴ Ḥakīm abū' l-Majd Majdūd Sanā'ī and J. Stephenson, *The first book of the Ḥadīqatu' l-Ḥaqīqat or = The enclosed garden of the truth* (Calcutta, 1910), 25.

¹⁵ Arthur J. Arberry, *Sufism : an account of the mystics of Islam* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), 113.

¹⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, "Mystical dimensions of Islam," (1975): 302,
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uvic/detail.action?docID=3039486>.

¹⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islamic spirituality : foundations," (2008): 336,
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=661086>.

*"By reason and thought and sense no living thing can come to know God. When the glory of His nature manifests itself to reason, it sweeps away both reason and soul."*¹⁸

Another verse in *Dīwān* (75:86) illustrates this point: *Don't seek the path of tawhid with reason!*

As *dhikr* or remembrance of God is the kernel of Sufi doctrine, Sanā'ī stresses the necessity of continual remembrance and commemoration of the Divine. He constantly reminds the reader how insignificant and meaningless is life without His thought and says *life without thought of Him is all wind*.¹⁹ However, it is important to recall that *dhikr* in Sufism is only the inception of the mystical itinerary and the goal is unity with the Divine, for unity, as Sanā'ī says, is the only true contentment. To the Sufis, if one wants to reach the unity with the Divine, it is vital to then renounce and deny this world. Recording his experience in verses, Sanā'ī says, *"not till the renunciation is complete, God is not met"*.²⁰ In the *Ḥadīqat*, On the Desire for God, he asserts, *"so long as he seeks for love with self in view, there waits for him the crucible of renunciation"*.²¹ Asceticism, or, the practice of self-denial, leads to a higher spiritual position with God. Sanā'ī in a beautiful couplet says: "

*To abandon the world is to mount the horse of God's favor; its repudiation is the establishment of pure truth. The death of the soul is the destruction of life; the death of the life is salvation for the soul."*²²

Furthermore, an ascetic does not imagine himself as real and God as illusory, while trying to see things as they clearly are. Rather, he recognizes God as the only real and genuine authority. The very purpose of asceticism, the Sufis remind us, is for becoming detached from all the reality, save God, and devote oneself to the contemplation and meditation on Divine. In a short anecdote, Sanā'ī further illustrates the ideal of Sufism as freedom of any attachment to the world:

*A shaykh had a capricious son;
He said: "My son, turn your head from this blue (dress).
Go away and do stupid things, if it is gold what you want;
Or, if you covet leadership, become a doctor of law.
For that will give you both leadership and honor,
Whereas this Sufi thing only gives you the Lord".* (BV, fol. 133b, 7-9)²³

The impetus behind all the 'suffering' for Sufis is the path that takes one to love, or, more precisely, Divine love. The Divine love is the purest and the most genuine love that transcends all other forms of existing love; it is the unconditional love that is far from any expectation. A Sufi yearns for the Beloved, not to save

¹⁸ Sanā'ī and Stephenson, *The first book of the Ḥadīqatu' l-Haḳīqat or = The enclosed garden of the truth*, 33. 3

¹⁹ Ibid, 61

²⁰ Lala, Chhaganlal. *The Immortal Sufi Triumvirate Sanai- Attar- Rumi*, trans. Bankey Behari, BR Publishing Corporation, 1998, p 21

²¹ Sanai, *The Enclosed Garden of the Truth*, trans. J. Stephenson, (1910; reprint ed., New York, 1971), p 119

²² Sanai, *The Enclosed Garden of the Truth*, trans. J. Stephenson, (1910; reprint ed., New York, 1971), p 91

²³ De Bruijn, Johannes Thomas Pieter. *Of Piety and Poetry: The Interaction of Religion and Literature in the Life and Works of Ḥakīm Sanā'ī of Ghazna*. Vol. 25. Brill, 1983, p 243.

him from the punishment, nor to reward him, but to annihilate in Him. Sanā'ī, as de Bruijn points out, looks at love as the means of escape from bondage to creation:

"To anyone who is supported by the love of His face

Repentance will be the key to the gate. (BV, fol. 134b, 8)²⁴.

Love is the "vehicle par excellence" for Sufis in their mystical journey to the Beloved.

Sanā'ī's mathnawī, *Sayr al-'ibad ila'l-ma'ad* "The Journey of the Servants toward the Place of Return," examines the journey of the human soul towards its destination in the after-life. *Sayr al-'ibad*, as de Bruijn puts it, is a representation of the cycle theory which provides an explanation for man's origin, for the meaning of his earthly life, and for his destination.²⁵ The notion of the cyclical development has been very appealing to mystics, as a means to better describe the mystical quest towards the Divine.²⁶ In the beginning of the book, Sanā'ī explains the stages of human development from the very moment one comes into existence to the awakening of his rational soul. It is precisely after this awakening that one sets out on a spiritual search which brings him eventually to the encounter with God.²⁷ Throughout life, one has to acquire the proper knowledge and wisdom so that one can perfect one's pre-eternal soul. The "Place of Return" (*ma'ad*) has been a controversial issue among philosophers and theologians in medieval Islam. However, Sanā'ī here refers to the philosophical concept, - that after death the human being would return to its original spiritual state, - and not to the notion attached to it in Islamic theology.²⁸ The idea of the spiritual journey, influenced by the Prophet's Ascension to the Heaven, *Mi'rāj*, also expressed in Sanā'ī's mathnawī and many mystics and philosophers, as Reynold A. Nicholson acknowledged has likewise been an inspiration for 'Aṭṭār's *Manṭiq-uṭ-Ṭayr*.

'Aṭṭār

The Persian poet and mystic Abū Ḥamīd bin Abū Bakr Ibrāhīm, commonly known as Farīd ud-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, was a druggist and apothecary by profession, who according to an uncertain and legendary tradition died during the Mongol invasion of Iran, by 617/1220 when his home city Nishapur, an important intellectual Islamic center at that time was conquered by Genghis Khan.²⁹ There is no doubt that 'Aṭṭār always had a

²⁴ De Bruijn, Johannes Thomas Pieter. *Of Piety and Poetry: The Interaction of Religion and Literature in the Life and Works of Ḥakīm Sanā'ī of Ghazna*. Vol. 25. Brill, 1983, p 243.

²⁵ Ibid, 212

²⁶ De Bruijn, Johannes Thomas Pieter. *Persian Sufi poetry: an introduction to the mystical use of classical Persian poems*. Routledge, 2014, p 89.

²⁷ De Bruijn, Johannes Thomas Pieter. *Persian Sufi poetry: an introduction to the mystical use of classical Persian poems*. Routledge, 2014, p 202-203.

²⁸ See De Bruijn, Johannes Thomas Pieter. *Of Piety and Poetry: The Interaction of Religion and Literature in the Life and Works of Ḥakīm Sanā'ī of Ghazna*. Vol. 25. Brill, 1983, p 212; see also De Bruijn, *Persian Sufi poetry: an introduction to the mystical use of classical Persian poems*. Routledge, 2014 for more details related to philosophers and theologians' account on maad, p 89-90.

²⁹ Ritter, Helmut. "The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din 'Attar, trans." *John O'Kane (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2003)*, p 1.

great interest in Sufi teachings and his works are an exemplar of lively and vital mystical notions. However, there is no clear evidence about the precise time he began his mystical quest.³⁰ An outstanding Sufi poet and thinker of medieval Persia, he has been a great source of inspiration for many spiritual souls such as Rūmī, who learned much from him. Leonard Lewisohn and Christopher Shackle write in their introduction to *‘Attār and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*, “‘Attār holds a pivotal place in the Persian poetical renaissance of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, being the central figure in the famous trio of Persian Sufi poets beginning with Sanā’ī and culminating in Jalal al-Din Rūmī.”³¹

‘Attār was a very prolific author and a master storyteller, who has composed many books, yet many literary writings have been attributed to him. His most prominent works comprise six books of poetry and one major prose of biographies of eminent Sufis called *Memoirs of the Saints (Tadhkirat al-awliyā)*. The prevailing genre of his works is mathnawī, a genre initiated by Sanā’ī, but developed and refined by ‘Attār. Whatever importance Sanā’ī may have had for the early development of mystical poetry, as de Bruijn denotes, there can be no doubt that ‘Attār surpassed him as a writer of mathnawīs.³² ‘Attār’s outstanding *Manṭiq-uṭ-Ṭayr*, or Conference of the Birds, his Divine Book (*Ilāhī-nāma*) and Book of Adversity (*Mūṣibat-nāma*) are generally modeled in the following pattern: there is a clear, well constituted main motif or a leading story, which is interspersed with numerous short subsidiary tales that are told with great skill and deal with a great variety of subjects.³³ The main theme ‘Attār - as an adept narrator - develops in the abovementioned works is religious and mystical teachings. Mystical quest, the realization of the oneness of God and immersion in Him, i.e., the unity of the lover with his Beloved, are the motivations for ‘Attār’s poetry. His special emphasis on divine love, the longing and aspirations of the lover to be dissolved in the Divine are better explored on ‘Attār’s masterpiece, The Conference of the Birds.

The Conference of the Birds, one of the most important and celebrated works of Sufi literature is a story of the spiritual quest for the Divine. In this epic, ‘Attār through the language of the birds, - a symbol with a long history in Islamic tradition that represents the spirit -, describes the difficulties the soul encounters on the mystical path. ‘Attār, says Ritter, knows about the active striving of the seeker of God who, impelled by yearning, wanders through the whole world, the whole cosmos, to find the divinity hidden in inaccessible remoteness, the primordial ground of all being.³⁴ According to the tale, the birds led by the knowledgeable Hoopoe (the spiritual master) come together to undertake the long journey in search of their perfect representative or the legendary king, Simurgh. The arduous and perilous journey takes away the enthusiasm and motivation of most of the birds to find the glorious Simurgh, and one after another,

³⁰ Jami in his biographical work, *Nafahat al-uns*, tells the story of a dervish with a beggar appearance who came to Attar’s drugstore and asked him for some money. Attar, busy with other patients, did not pay attention to the beggar until he became angry and said: “You are too attached to this world, how will you pass away?” and Attar on a sarcastic tone replied: “Just as you will!” The beggar after hearing this, lay down and passed away. Attar, shocked by this scene decided to leave his drugstore and to continue his path on mystical quest. Yet Este’lami in the *Narratology and Realities in the Study of Attar* doubts the certainty of this story.

³¹ Lewisohn, Leonard, and Christopher Shackle. *Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*. London and New York: IB Tauris, 2006, editors’ introduction and acknowledgements.

³² Lewisohn, Leonard. “Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi.” (1993), p 372.

³³ Knysh, Alexander. *Islamic mysticism: A short history*. Vol. 1. Brill, 2010, p 152.

³⁴ Ritter, Helmut. *The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din ‘Attar*, trans. John O’Kane (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2003), p 357.

all but a small group of birds excused themselves from the deadly adventure. The journey leads them through a desert with seven valleys: 1- 'search' (*talab*), or the innate tendency for seeking the knowledge one wishes to have; 2- 'love' (*'ishq*), or quality of the heart where one needs to possess that 'pure feeling of love and devotion' in order to reach the goal; 3- 'gnosis' (*ma'rifat*), or understanding of the secrets or that knowledge which illuminates, which comes by the help of the love element and the intellect;³⁵ 4- 'being self-contained' (*istighna'*), or detachment from the physical reality and illusionary self and independence of the soul; 5- 'confession of unity' (*tawhid*), or the rebirth of the soul with the Beloved's image in everything; 6- 'bewilderment' (*hayrat*), or the extreme feeling of pain and sorrow and the awareness about the unseen truths and divine mysteries; and the last one 7- 'poverty' (*faqr*), and eternal subsistence in God (*baqā'*), or the Realization of the Divine Essence. In the end, only thirty birds, purified and detached from everything else, a symbolic representation of the dangers faced by the human soul on its journey towards its creator,³⁶ find their own essence Simurgh (si murgh in Persian thirty birds), revealed in the mirror of their own hearts. As Schimmel puts it, the story of the pilgrimage of the thirty birds who discover eventually, that they, being si murgh, are themselves the Simurgh, is the most subtle and beautiful allegory of the unity of the individual souls with the Divine Essence.³⁷ In other words, this exquisite pun expresses nothing less than *fanā'* and *baqā'*, reaching the original state of God and transforming in Him. In an excellent verse 'Aṭṭār says:

I was a drop, lost in the ocean of mystery,

And now I cannot find that drop again.

Though getting lost is not within everyone's power,

*I was lost in annihilation (fanā'), as were many others.*³⁸

The annihilation of the ego is not a limit to be avoided, but is the real goal: a transitional stage to a new form in which the ego is extinguished and after the command 'Die!' a new existence arises on an entirely different basis.³⁹ 'Aṭṭār uses a very simple language and easily understood, profound analogies in order to teach the stages of spiritual development in the mystical quest toward annihilation, transcendence and subsistence in the Divine. As Schimmel indicates, 'Aṭṭār does not merely tell stories; he often interprets them as well without leaving that to the reader.⁴⁰

Book of Adversity- an explicit allegory- very similar with the Conference of the Birds, represents the journey of the soul seeking his own identity. The leading character or the meditating soul's thought (which

³⁵ Barks, Coleman, and Inayat Khan. *The hand of poetry: five mystic poets of Persia: translations from the poems of Sanai, Attar, Rumi, Saadi and Hafiz*. Omega Pr, 1993, p 37.

³⁶ Knysh, Alexander. *Islamic mysticism: A short history*. Vol. 1. Brill, 2010, p 154.

³⁷ Schimmel, Annemarie. *Triumphal Sun, The: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*. No. 8. Suny Press, 1980, p 113.

³⁸ al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, Farīd, and Afkham Darbandi. *The conference of the birds*. Penguin UK, 1984, 4123-4124.

³⁹ Ritter, Helmut. "The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din 'Attar," trans. John O'Kane (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2003), p 382.

⁴⁰ Schimmel, Annemarie. *Triumphal Sun, The: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*. No. 8. Suny Press, 1980, p 303.

is achieved by means of *dhikr*) is personified as a traveler (*sālik-i fikrat*) who is in the relationship of a novice to a *pir* of this kind.⁴¹ This itinerary leads the wayfarer through forty stages (the number of days and nights of a Sufi vigil) followed by a double track, a descent from the transcendental to the material world and, then an ascent which amounts to a return towards spiritual spheres, the cyclic view that indicates human life.⁴² The bewildered wayfarer accompanied by the *pir* take a tour to several cosmic and terrestrial beings- who speak the “language of states” (*zaban-i hal*) - starting from archangels, heavens, earthly elements, prophets and the human psyche. During the visit, they seek help and guidance from the entities, but receive a negative reply. The prophets refer them to the Prophet Muhammad, the only one able to provide the right answer by showing them that the way towards knowledge of the Divine passes through knowledge of one’s own self.⁴³ Indeed, they reach to the state of understanding the cosmic order, including the fact that they may be higher in rank than angels, depending on the purity of their souls. According to Ritter, the theme and the conclusion in *Muṣībat-nāma* is almost the same as in *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*, but in the frame-story of the *Muṣībat-nāma* the personal conception of God recedes further into the background.⁴⁴

In his other book, *Ilāh-nāma*, ‘Aṭṭār narrates the story of a king (human spirit) and his six sons (dispositions and predilections of the soul) who crave worldly ambitions. When the king asks his sons about their desired wishes and finds out that they all are immersed in ephemeral desires, he persuades his sons that their sensual pleasure, power, riches and other values of this world should be turned into the strive for higher aims, and that they should learn to understand their desires as emblems of the successive stages along the path towards the mystical goal.⁴⁵ A spiritual wayfarer, as ‘Aṭṭār beautifully demonstrates it, from the beginning of the journey experiences the pain of separation from the Beloved, a pain that stems from the heart, but it is sweeter than the very union. Strongly influenced by Mansūr al-Ḥallāj from whom he learned the mysticism of suffering, ‘Aṭṭār more than any other mystical poet of Iran, can be called ‘the voice of pain’, the voice of longing and searching.⁴⁶ In a poignant verse ‘Aṭṭār says:

The pain of love became the medicine for every heart,

*The difficulty could never be solved without love.*⁴⁷

⁴¹ Ritter, Helmut. "The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din ‘Attar, " trans. John O’Kane (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2003), p 18, p 21.

⁴² De Bruijn, Johannes Thomas Pieter. *Persian Sufi poetry: an introduction to the mystical use of classical Persian poems*. Routledge, 2014, p 105.

⁴³ Ibid, 105

⁴⁴ Ritter, Helmut. "The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din ‘Attar, " trans. John O’Kane (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2003), p 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p 18, p 21.

De Bruijn, Johannes Thomas Pieter. *Persian Sufi poetry: an introduction to the mystical use of classical Persian poems*. Routledge, 2014, p 104.

⁴⁶ Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical dimensions of Islam*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 1975, p 305.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 305.

Pain and love turn into the essence of a mystic's existence and are in proportion with one another: the greater is love, the greater becomes the pain of longing. Love gives strength and vigor to endure all the sufferings, grief and pain of the separation from the Beloved.

The remedy for love of the Beloved is also constant pain for him;

Do not seek a remedy for the heart if the heart lives by pain. (T 776)⁴⁸

Love, says Ritter, provides the mystic with assistance to attain his goal, closeness to God, and to achieve union with Him.⁴⁹

'Aṭṭār since his early childhood was very interested and familiar with various aspects of mystical teachings and as he himself acknowledges in the preface of *Tadhkirat al-awliyā*, that Sufi's words were a constant delight for him.⁵⁰ It was precisely the inclination that 'Aṭṭār has always had towards Sufis which inspired him to write his collection of hagiographies of Sufi saints in order to revitalize and reanimate their exceptional religious and mystical teachings. It is important to point out by that time, Sufism had developed a considerable understanding of mystical practices and of struggles and difficulties encountered by those Sufis who demanded achieving closeness and union with the Divine, such as Bāyazīd Bisṭāmī and Mansūr al-Ḥallāj, for whom 'Aṭṭār displays great sympathy. 'Aṭṭār, in his *Tadhkirat al-awliyā*, describes the lives and spiritual experiences of seventy two shaykhs (*awliyā*) who lived in the first three centuries of Hijra⁵¹ and at some degree had reached the station of *fanā*'. However, narration of this station that derives from one's deepest feelings is indescribable and ineffable, since it consists of intimate experience. What is seen and heard by the heart, says Pazouki, cannot be uttered in language, so the *awliyā* are usually silent and if the *awliyā* in *Tadhkirat al-awliyā*, start talking, it is only as a reminder to others.⁵² In this work, 'Aṭṭār's didactic intentions are: to inculcate disdain for this world; humble awareness of one's own faults; earnestness in preparing for death; and the passionate love of God for which all else must be sacrificed.⁵³

'Aṭṭār has had an enormous influence on Islamic mystical poetry and on later Sufi poets. There is a tradition that 'Aṭṭār met the young Rūmī, as his family was passing through Nishapur from Balkh in about 1215 and according to that, 'Aṭṭār gave him a copy of his own work while predicting his future eminence.

⁴⁸ Attar, Farid al-Din. *Fifty Poems of Attar*. re. press, 2007, p 33.

⁴⁹ Ritter, Helmut. "*The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din 'Attar*," trans. John O'Kane (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2003), p 358.

⁵⁰ al-Din 'Attar, Farid. "*Tadhkirat al-awliya*", ed." Muhammad Isti 'lami, Tehran, 1993, p.8.

⁵¹ Pazouki, Shahram. "Sufi saints and sainthood in Attar's 'Tadhkirat al Awliya'." "*Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*. Ed. Leonard Lewisohn and Christopher Shackle. London: LB. Tauris, 2006, 64.

⁵² Ibid, 70.

⁵³ Waley, Muhammad Isa. "Didactic Style and self-criticism in Attar." "*Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*. Ed. Leonard Lewisohn and Christopher Shackle. London: LB. Tauris, 2006, 238.

Rūmī

Mawlānā Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad (30 September 1207 – 17 December 1273), known as Rūmī was born in Balkh, in present-day Afghanistan, to a family of well-educated theologians, in an atmosphere of dynamic mysticism. His father, Bahā ud-Dīn Walad (d.1231), a preacher, jurist, and Sufi, was renowned for his religious knowledge and respected for his spiritual eminence.⁵⁴ However, Sufi scholars believe that it was not until one year after Bahā ud-Dīn's death in 1232, when Rūmī was an accomplished scholar in religious sciences, that he started his Sufi training under Sayyed Burhanuddin Muhaqqiq, a disciple of his father. After becoming his father's successor and his discipleship with Burhanuddin, Rūmī was sent to Aleppo and Damascus, important centers for Islamic discipline, to complement his formal spiritual training by meeting with other Sufi masters.⁵⁵

One of the most significant and decisive experiences in Rūmī's life, while in his mid-thirties was his meeting with the mysterious dervish, Shams-e Tabrīzī. Pir Inayat Khan describes Shams as a man in rags, with no learned qualifications recognizable by the world, and yet in tune with the infinite and, to speak in religious terms, who had gained the kingdom of God.⁵⁶ There are many versions of their first encounter.⁵⁷ However, it is important to point out that before his meeting with Shams, Rūmī was already an accomplished scholar in religious studies; he had always possessed a special gift of speech, yet his understanding of Sufism was more intellectual. And Shams brought a new perspective and awareness in Rūmī's grasp of Sufism, the image of feelings and everlasting love. As Fatemeh Keshavarz so aptly puts it, Shams awakened in Rūmī the wayfarer who had to free himself of rational and speculative knowledge to seek new horizons.⁵⁸ Shams kindled the fire of love in Rūmī's heart, and the ocean of love immersed his entire existence. He was completely absorbed in Shams and had found in him the ideal "beloved," the one in whom the Divine was most perfectly mirrored.⁵⁹ Their relationship transcended the spiritual master-disciple bond and it was transformed into the attachment between lover and beloved. In other words, Rūmī and Shams were no longer two separate entities, but one forever.⁶⁰ It was precisely this affinity between them that made Rūmī's disciples jealous, and provoked to threaten Shams to leave the city. Rūmī begged his son to bring Shams back, but soon he disappeared again and never returned to Konya, the city where now the greatest mystic was left in agony. Deeply saddened and heartbroken by the loss of Shams, Rūmī realized that Shams was still alive in his soul and that he should seek him within his own existence. At this point, Rūmī could not help but began outpouring his passionate yearning into mystical poetry. He says:

⁵⁴ Iqbal, Afzal. *The Life and Work of Jalal-ad-Din Rumi*. The Other Press, 2014, 210.

⁵⁵ Rumi, Jalaluddin. "*Signs of the Unseen*." Putney VT: Threshold Books, 1994, introduction W.M. Thackstone, Jr., Threshold Books, 1994, viii.

⁵⁶ Khan, Hazrat Inayat. "The heart of Sufism." *Boston, MA: Shambhala* (1999), p 6.

⁵⁷ In one of them, Shams asked Rumi who was greater Bayazid or Prophet and Rumi says that the greatest of all human beings is Prophet and this insight impressed Shams. Thus, he was convinced that Rumi possessed a gnostic understanding of Islam combined with the love for the Prophet.

⁵⁸ Keshavarz, Fatemeh. *Reading mystical lyric: The case of Jalal al-Din Rumi*. Wm. S. Hein Publishing, 2005.

⁵⁹ Rumi, Jalaluddin. "*Signs of the Unseen*." Putney VT: Threshold Books, 1994, introduction W.M. Thackstone, Jr., Threshold Books, 1994, x.

⁶⁰ Schimmel, Annemarie. *Triumphal Sun, The: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*. No. 8. Suny Press, 1980, p 24.

Three short phrases tell the story of my life:

*I was raw, I got cooked, I burned.*⁶¹

Rūmī's major work Mathnawī Ma'nawī (Spiritual Couplets), which comprises six volumes with about 25,000 couplets is one of the most significant books not only in the Sufi literature, but in the entire realm of Islam. Known as "The Qur'an in Persian", Mathnawī touches upon every aspect of spiritual learning and thought; the anecdotes that intersperse the discourse are brilliantly told, abounding in wisdom and humor.⁶² *Dīwān-e Shams-e Tabrīzī*, is Rūmī's other important work, an enormous collection of poems that consists of around 40,000 verses. As a way to emphasize the remarkable relationship with his master, Rūmī in the last line of his *ghazals* replaces his pen name with that of Shams-e Tabrīzī.

"Indeed Shams-e Tabrīzī is but a pretext

It is I who display the beauty of God's Gentleness, I." (D 16533)

Rūmī is a great storyteller and an expert in attracting his listener's attention. Interestingly, he is not a systematic thinker and does not employ arguments to support his contentions. Rather, he uses analogies from our sensible world where everything becomes a symbol for him from the rotten onion to the radiant beauty of the full moon.⁶³ In his writings, common experiences in life become passionate; principles of philosophy and metaphysics are brought into a simple and comprehensible language and explained as ordinary phenomena and the mystical experiences also are regarded as a mere aspect of life. Instead of promoting the view that one has to transcend the human level to experience the mystical, Rūmī tended to see the mystical as just an aspect of human experience.⁶⁴ It is precisely this simplification that shows his proficiency and aptness in using the language.

Rūmī's inspiration stems mostly from the Divine, the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition and his works are representation and depiction of the reality of God, man and the universe. Having experienced the highest stages in mysticism, his principle goal is to transform his listener's heart into lovers of God, for He is the center of all existence. It is perhaps important to recall that many verses in the Qur'an emphasize the high position of the soul and specifically the ultimate returning to the God, a doctrine exquisitely employed by Rūmī as a means of reminding his audience of the Divine nature of the soul. In other words, through his teachings, Rūmī attempts to make his audience aware of the transitory nature of the existence, i.e., foregoing the carnal world, and most importantly, ascending and returning the soul back to the main source of all, Creator:

We have been in heaven, we have been the companions of the angels,

⁶¹ Lewis, Franklin D. *Rumi-Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings, and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi*. Oneworld Publications, 2014, p 404.

⁶² Rumi, Jalaluddin. "*Signs of the Unseen*." Putney VT: Threshold Books, 1994, introduction W.M. Thackstone, Jr., Threshold Books, 1994, xii; Arberry, Arthur John. *Sufism: an account of the mystics of Islam*. Vol. 2. Courier Corporation, 1950, p 111.

⁶³ Schimmel, Annemarie. *Triumphal Sun, The: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*. No. 8. Suny Press, 1980, p 57.

⁶⁴ Keshavarz, Fatemeh. *Reading mystical lyric: The case of Jalal al-Din Rumi*. Wm. S. Hein Publishing, 2005, p 146.

*Let us go again there, master, for that is our city.*⁶⁵

The all-consuming problem of human existence for Rūmī, as Franklin Lewis denotes, stems from the painful experience of imperfection and unfulfillment caused by alienation from our potential, or more precisely, from our essential source.⁶⁶

Rūmī holds that soul manifests itself in three levels, where the lowest level would be the animal soul, the highest angelic soul and in the middle the human soul that consists of both levels. The significance of the human soul rests on its manifestations. In other words, human soul can be even higher than angelic soul if one, as Rūmī says, “*returns to the roots of the roots of the self*” – a practice that necessitates undertaking the spiritual quest and purifying the heart. In terms of existence, Rūmī believes that when God created angels with the qualities of light, He gave them reason and knowledge, but He created beasts out of dust and devoid of intellect and reason. While in man (the half angel and half beast entity), the two states are existent and in constant fight. Moreover, Rūmī repeatedly emphasizes the exalted status of man, for it is only he who has the faculty of reason and can attain knowledge, that is, who can behold ‘the light of God’ and in whose form is the house of his inmost consciousness.⁶⁷ The image of light and dust is employed by Rūmī as an illustration of the soul-body relationship. Furthermore, he holds that in order to perceive the true nature of the human spirit, one must liberate himself from form before entering the realm of meaning. Form is the outward appearance of a thing and it is secondary, while meaning is the inward and unseen reality; is that thing as it is known to God himself. As Rūmī suggests, one should always keep in mind that form derives its existence and significance from meaning,⁶⁸ and that underscoring form interrupts the progress of grasping the meaning. The danger of accepting the appearance of a reality without striving to discover the deeper truth is brought out beautifully in the story of Moses and the Shepherd.⁶⁹ What Rūmī wants to make clear to the audience is that one cannot reach the essence of an entity while relying solely on its form (sense perception) or one’s logic. For him, logic and reason are useful when serving religious purposes. As Schimmel puts it, ‘*aql*’ appears to Rūmī as something useful but pedestrian, a necessary guide and yet something that is not aware of the great mystery of Love, for intellect has to stay back, just as Gabriel had to stay back during the Prophet’s night journey, while the Prophet was allowed into the sanctuary of Love.⁷⁰ In other words, it is only inspiration, revelation, an act of grace from God, which illuminates the mind of man who then begins to see the world in an entirely different perspective.⁷¹

See in your own heart the knowledge of the Prophet,

⁶⁵ Schimmel, Annemarie. *Triumphal Sun, The: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*. No. 8. Suny Press, 1980, p 247.

⁶⁶ Lewis, Franklin D. *Rumi-Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings, and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi*. Oneworld Publications, 2014, p 399.

⁶⁷ Shahryar, Aftab. *Understanding Sufism*. Islamic Book Service, 2004, p 111.

⁶⁸ Lewis, Franklin D. *Rumi-Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings, and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi*. Oneworld Publications, 2014. p 19-28.

⁶⁹ Iqbal, Afzal. *The Life and Work of Jalal-ud-din Rumi*. The Other Press, 2014, 210

⁷⁰ Schimmel, Annemarie. *I am wind, you are fire: The life and work of Rumi*. Shambhala, 1992, p 109.

⁷¹ Iqbal, Afzal. *The Life and Work of Jalal-ud-din Rumi*. The Other Press, 2014, 183.

Without book, without tutor, without preceptor."⁷²

Rūmī believes, as Iqbal puts it, those who have reached the highest degree of perfection- Muhammad topping the list- have not reached it through logical calculations or laborious cogitation, but have discovered the truth and reality by means of an inward and Divine illumination.⁷³

In his poetry, Rūmī reveals his profound insight about the Divine love and the oneness of God. He holds that God's essence can never be reached by human imagination and must remain the ineffable mystery.

Whatever you can think is perishable.

*That which enters no thought, that's God! (M II 3107)*⁷⁴

While maintaining that nothing is like God and that He has no equal imaginable, the Sufis also see in the very transcendence of the deity that He is immanent in His creation.⁷⁵ According to the Throne Verse (Sura 2/256), God is described as *al-hayy al-qayyūm*, "The Living through Himself Subsisting," and this indeed is the way Rūmī recognizes Him; not as a *prima causa*, or a first principle which once brought the world into existence and now moves it according to prefixed schedules; rather, as the source of all love.⁷⁶ God is omniscient and omnipotent whose signs and manifestations are everywhere and everything is created for His sake in order to proclaim His glory, yet He is absolutely self-sufficient and far from any needs. The universe, which He created out of nothing – *creation ex nihilo*, a favorite subject of Rūmī - is dependent for its continuance upon Him, but the Creator is not dependent upon any other being, for the whole creation has proceeded from Him and reverts to Him.⁷⁷ The world is nothing but a bridge that leads man again to his essential source. When it comes to the relation between God and man, Rūmī considers this affinity a very subtle one. He views the process of annihilation of man in the Divine essence as a never ending process and compares it with the flame of a candle that continues to exist, despite being astonished by the radiance of the sun just like a mystical man retains his identity despite the overpowering presence of his Lord.⁷⁹ At this point the human essence is intertwined with that of the Divine and that is the reason why mystics like al-Ḥallāj, inspired by submission to God, have been tempted to declare their entire annihilation in Him by saying, "I am the Truth".

⁷² Nicholson, A. Reynold. *The mystics of Islam*. Lulu. com, 2007, p 69.

⁷³ Iqbal, the life and work of Rumi, 279

⁷⁴ Schimmel, Annemarie. *I am wind, you are fire: The life and work of Rumi*. Shambhala, 1992, p 73.

⁷⁵ Rumi, Jalaluddin. "Signs of the Unseen." Putney VT: Threshold Books, 1994, introduction W.M. Thackstone, Jr., xvii.

⁷⁶ Schimmel, Annemarie. *I am wind, you are fire: The life and work of Rumi*. Shambhala, 1992, 73; Schimmel, Annemarie. *I am wind, you are fire: The life and work of Rumi*. Shambhala, 1992, 73; Schimmel Annemarie, The Triumphal Sun, p 225.

⁷⁷ Iqbal, Afzal. *The Life and Work of Jalal-ud-din Rumi*. The Other Press, 2014, p 246-249.

⁷⁸ For more on the idea of relation between God, the first created being and cosmos see Seyed Amirhossein Asghari, "Ontology and Cosmology of the 'aql in Ṣadrā's Commentary on Uṣūl al-Kāfi," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1353/isl.2017.0011>. Also see "Intellect and Revelation: Notes on Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī's Approach in His Commentary on Usul Al-Kafi ", Authorea, 2021.

⁷⁹ Knysh, Alexander. *Islamic mysticism: A short history*. Vol. 1. Brill, 2010, p 160.

“The man who says Ana’l-abd, ‘I am the servant of God’, affirms two existences, his own and God’s, but he that says Ana’l-Haqq, ‘I am God’, has made himself non-existent and has given himself up and says ‘I am God’, i.e. ‘I am naught. He is all: there is no being but God’s.’ This is the extreme of humility and self-abasement.”⁸⁰

Rūmī’s experience of love, separation and spiritual union was dynamic and his words about love, which form the wrap of his poetry from the first to the last page, are colorful and fiery.⁸¹ Rūmī often hesitates to explain love and considers it an ineffable experience that cannot be expressed in words.

Love cannot be described; it is even greater than a hundred resurrections, for the resurrection is a limit, whereas love is limitless. Love has five hundred wings, each of which reaches from the Divine throne to the lowest earth....⁸²

However, there are verses where Rūmī takes completely the opposite side, describing love as an infinite source that one can explain and discuss endlessly. Rūmī holds that God never ceases creating and loving His creatures and His love is a divine power and motivating force that brings universe and life into existence and without love, the world would be lifeless, frozen and mortal. Since God is the source of all kinds of love, even love for other than Him ultimately leads to the knowledge of God. Love and knowledge, the lover and gnostic are inseparable and unified in Rūmī’s work. In a powerful way, he describes love as follows:

*Love makes bitter sweet,
love turns copper to gold,
Love makes dregs into wine,
love turns pain into healing,
Love brings the dead to life,
love makes kings into slaves –
But this love results from knowledge.⁸³*

In Rūmī’s perspective, one can only be a lover of God. Lover and beloved long for each other and make one reality; they are the reflection for one another. If man responds to the call of love, Schimmel says, he can slowly be qualified with Divine qualities, and thus reach proximity to his Beloved, for God’s foremost quality is love.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Rūmī, Jalāl al-Dīn. *Signs of the unseen: the discourses of Jalaluddin Rumi*. Shambhala Publications, 1994, p 97.

⁸¹ Schimmel, Annemarie. *Triumphal Sun, The: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*. No. 8. Suny Press, 1980, p 332.

⁸² Ibid, p 334.

⁸³ Chittick, William C. *Sufism: a beginner's guide*. Oneworld Publications, 2007, p 83.

⁸⁴ Schimmel, Annemarie. *Triumphal Sun, The: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*. No. 8. Suny Press, 1980, p 341.

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