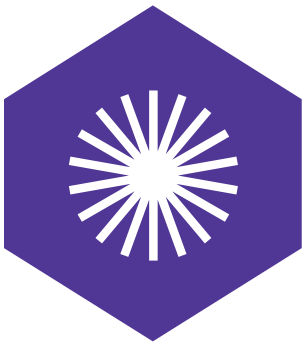


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A Brief Analysis of the Meditation on Death in Sufism

With Reference to Al-Ghazālī and Rūmī

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A Brief Analysis of the Meditation on Death in Sufism: With Reference to Al-Ghazālī and Rūmī

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Abstract: Many world religions use teachings on mortality as an integrated strategy for ethical training and spiritual growth. The theme of death forms one of the most important foundations of Ghazālī and Rūmī's thought. The concept of death is presented and interpreted from interesting angles in relation to Islamic spirituality. In the writings of Rūmī, for instance, the idea of dying before death is a recurring theme. In the works of the two Sufi scholars, death is seen as a way of attaining high spiritual life. The present paper examines the various metaphors, imagery, and allegories related to death in the famous works of the two authors. Their ideas speak volumes of their genius, especially when speaking of a concept without shape and form.

Keywords: Religious Foundations, Spirituality, Islam, Sufism

> *Oh, the life of lovers consists in death: thou wilt not win the (Beloved's) heart except in losing thine own.* (Jalāl al-DīnRūmī, *Mathnawī*. Vol.I, line 1751)

The quotation above embodies the Sufi perspective on death. A cursory examination into the works of Sufi scholars [e.g. Sharaf al-Dīn Maneri (d.1381), Ahmad Zarruq (d. 1493) and 'Ali Muttaqi (d. 1567)] can easily lead one to see that the dictum "die before you die" is not uncommon within the Sufi tradition. The details of this type of 'death', which essentially refers to the death of the 'self', will form the major focus of this paper. The death we talk about here is not the one emphasized by theologians, but that expressed by ascetics. Moreover, death in religious thought and expression is sometimes subsumed by a more attractive reward in paradise. However, though often not talked about and sometimes masked by orthodoxy, death remains a vibrant ingredient of religion, and is most noticeable within mysticism.

Islamic mysticism or Sufism is an essential aspect of Islam that draw our attention to the fleeting nature of human existence and even went a bit further to link it to spiritual growth, not as a way of evading death, but to take the power of its reality into a higher, purer and more virtuous life, thereby rendering life "fearless in the face of finitude" (Perreira 2010, 261). To attain this lofty goal, one is encouraged to practice exercises or deeds aimed at sustaining the remembrance of death. This, as will be seen later in this paper, should not be conceived as a sporadic practice nor is it a superficial kind of practice or thought, but an activity that occupies a central position in an ascetic spiritual outlook to life.

Against this backdrop, this study aims at examining the idea of death within the Sufi tradition. It focuses on two important sages of Sufi thought and their views on death. The paper also reviews death as seen among early Muslims and Sufi scholars as well as their approaches towards it. It examines albeit briefly two popular works of Ghazālī and Rūmī and how they have described the idea of death in their own unique way.

Contemplation of Death

Contemplating death is regarded as an act of *'Ibādah* in Islam; this is why in the Qur'an we find verses such as:

> Did you suppose that We created you for amusement and that you would not return to Us? (*Surat al-Mu'minun*: 115)

And also,

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> Say: 'Death, from which you are fleeing, will certainly catch up with you. Then you will be returned to the Knower of the Unseen and the Visible and He will inform you about what you did.' (*Surat al-Jumu'ah*: 8)

Among Muslims, the Sufis tend to pay special attention to the issue of death. They are extremely and passionately attached to the contemplation on death. From the early period of Islam, among those who had a profound impact on the reflection of death, as quoted by Al-Ghazālī in his *Kitāb dhikr al-mawtwa-māba'dahu* (Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife) which forms Book 40 of *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences), was ʿUmar ibnʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (d. 720). He was quoted to have said:

> For every voyage there must be provisions; therefore adopt the fear of God as provisions for your voyage from this world into the Afterlife. Be as though you had seen the reward and chastisement which God has prepared: harbor longing and fear… for, by God, the man who does not know whether he will awaken at the end of the night, live through the morning to the evening, can have no high hopes, for it may be that between these times lie the hooks of fate. (Al-Ghazālī 1989, 20)

'Umar bnʿAbd al-ʿAzīz is considered to be one of the highly respected rulers of the Islamic empire. Although a political leader, 'Umar bnʿAbd al-ʿAzīz found time to engage in the remembrance of death to the extent that a jurist of his time was uncomfortable with his approach to the issue. This made ʿUmar ibnʿAbd al-ʿAzīz responded thus:

> Could you but see me three days after having been set in my grave, when the pupils of my eyes have come forth and flowed across my cheeks, when my lips have shriveled back over my teeth, when my mouth has opened and the pus run out, when my belly is inflated and rises above my chest, when my spine protrudes from my rear, and when the worms and the pus have emerged from my nostrils; then you would behold something far more remarkable than that which you see now. (Al-Ghazālī 1989, 119)

One of the first things that would come to one's mind looking at the above words is that they are not coming from one whom only imagines death, but contemplates deeply the process of dying. The level of detail given makes this fact obvious. ʿUmar ibnʿAbd al-ʿAzīz was also known for gathering together scholars on a nightly basis to contemplate death, resurrection and hereafter. The example of 'Umar bn 'Abd al-'Aziz illustrates that from the earliest time of Islam, contemplation of death can be seen to go beyond imagining death, but rather deep and critical scrutiny seem to follow it.

Al-Ghazālī and Death

Among the Sufis who have written extensively on death is Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, born in Tus in 1056 CE, a district in northeast Iran and died in 1111CE. Al-Ghazālī was a well-known professor in Baghdad, "the great field of genius and exertion, where talents of every kind had the fullest scope and the highest encouragement" (Nicholson 1994, 46). He wrote on Muslim law, political theory and logic, and later on philosophy, ethics and mysticism. His works contributed significantly to systematizing the evolution of Islamic theology.

An interesting point in his life occurred when; a man of such an influential position had to abandon his professorship for a long pilgrimage through the eastern regions of the Islamic empire. In his *Deliverance from Error*, al-Ghazālī explains that the reason for taking such a decision was that he transformed from a person of fame and riches to a person who embraces a life of asceticism as a Sufi. He explains:

> I considered the circumstances of my life and realized that I was caught in a veritable thicket of attachments. I also considered my teaching and lecturing…(I) examined my motive…and realized that it was not a pure desire for the things of God, that the impulse moving me was the desire for an influential position and public recognition… Worldly desires were striving to keep me by their chains just where I was, while the voice of faith was calling, "To the road! To the road! What is left of life is little and the journey before you is long. All that keeps you busy, both intellectually and practically, is but hypocrisy and delusion as if you do not prepare now for eternal life, when will you sever them? (Watt 2000, 58-59)

From the above quotation, what is of interest to us is his examination of his motives including those for learning and teaching, which he recognised were geared towards worldly benefits. The need to detach himself from such materialistic tendencies preoccupied him to the point that he could not speak when asked to deliver a lecture. The grief of his sudden impotence (of voice), which his physicians could not cure with drugs, was the final straw for al-Ghazālī, and led him to the realisation that he must emigrate. It was during the pilgrimage that the internal struggle with his 'self' intensified and led him to observe Sufism. He vowed to discard the pursuit of knowledge that led merely to worldly connections and became engrossed in more lofty success. Al-Ghazālī spent several years in seclusion (*'uzla*), engaged in meditation (*tafakkur*) and other ascetic exercises in order to purify his soul from all that is other than God.

The most important part of his spiritual journey and cleansing is the exercise of meditation of death. Al-Ghazālī developed ways of meditating on death to the extent of making it a routine in his daily life (Watt 2000, 127-128). It is important to note that reflection of death was not simply a spiritual exercise, but sought to promote one's actions towards perfection in view that this day may be his last. Such reflections included, 1) When you sleep, lay out your bed pointing to Mecca; 2) Sleep on your right side in the manner a Muslim's corpse reclines in the tomb; 3) Remember that in the same manner you will lie in the tomb alone with only your good or bad deeds; and 4) Say the recommended prayer as you go to sleep i.e. "In Your name, O Lord, I live and die and with, You, O God, do I take refuge" (Watt 2000, 127-128).

Al-Ghazālī believes sleep is closely related to death. For this reason, he insisted that upon waking up from sleep, the first words that should come from the mouth are the praise of God, as recommended by the *sunnah* of the Prophet (PBUH). This is to show our absolute dependence upon Him early in the morning. In addition, in order to reflect on the brevity of life, al-Ghazālī encourages us not to cherish long hopes since death often appear suddenly with no specific time, manner, or age. Such reflection on a daily basis can be a motivation to exercise patience and dedication in obeying God for the rest of our life (Watt2000, 129-130).

Al-Ghazālī did not stop at assuming the position of death while lying on the bed every night, he encouraged one to dig up one's grave at home so as to imagine the process of decay the body undergoes while lying in the grave. He cited the example of al-Rabīʿ ibn Khuthaym who was known to sleep in his grave and when asked why, he stated that, "Were the remembrance of death to leave my heart for a single hour, it would become corrupted" (Al-Ghazālī 1989, 12). Although al-Ghazālī urges digging up one's grave, it is not allowed in Shariʿah. It is only strong emotions that motivate some Sufis to do as such, and they might be excused for that.

Al-Ghazālī also gave instructions on contemplating on one's friends and mates who have died by remembering their devotion to life, their negligence, and their joy and pleasures. When these reflections are clear in one's mind, one can then bring to mind how their beautiful forms have been obliterated and scattered in the tomb. He wants us to recall how they were occupied with unsuitable behaviour in the world, and then think of the best way to circumvent it. This is not just to imagine that one would die someday, but an attempt to taste death. This, al-Ghazālī believes would re-orientate one's moral life and change the direction of his life for the better. He pointed out that people who are too engrossed in this world often think they would be following

the funerals of others and do not think of a day when someone else would be following theirs. The reason for this al-Ghazālī explains is not due to lack of familiarity with death but the tendency to see death as a routine and associated exclusively to others, in addition to the misplacement of our confidence by thinking of youth and good health (Al-Ghazālī 1989, 26-27). The inclination towards being overconfident in one's youth and good health al-Ghazālī argues, is not only uncalled for but spiritually dangerous because it makes death seem distant. Reflecting on the proximity and process of death should not be an occasional practice, but as al-Ghazālī recommended, twenty times a day and night. He insisted that one "keep a strict reckoning with himself and regulate his occupations and activities throughout the night and day with matters which will benefit him in the next life" (Watt 2000, 122-124).

A quick glance in the work of Sharaf al-Dīn Maneri (d.1381), another Sufi scholar who wrote on death, is of interest to our discussion. Sharaf al-dīn Maneri met Hazrat Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā, R.A. (d. 1325), but did not become a disciple of a Sufi master until he met the little known Najīb al-Dīn Firdausi, R.A. (of the Firdausi Order in India) as time passed, Maneri became a well-known Sufi Sheikh. He was a Sufi master born in Northeast India where he lived and taught. In his famous book *The Hundred Letters*, which he wrote to the Governor of Chausa in Western Bihar as a basic presentation of his teachings for spiritual advancement, Maneri divided men into three: the covetous and greedy, those about to turn towards God, and those who have reached the height of mystical knowledge (Sharaf al-dīn 1980, 407). Maneri noted that the pleasure loving people do not think of death and if they do it is in pursuit of worldly gains. The remembrance of God does not benefit such people; rather it makes them move further away from God. The second type of man (turning towards God) remembers death and feels fear and dread in his heart and thereby moves closer to Allah. The death he added may come to the second person before he has the time to turn towards Allah. The third type of man (attained height of mystical knowledge) is forever recalling death, for it is an opportunity to see someone he wants to be close with. Maneri describes such a person as one who seeks to be 'swallowed up by death so that after being freed from this dwelling place of sinners, he might rise to the abode near his Friend'. For this reason, he quoted Huzaifah as saying:

> O God, You know that I prefer poverty to riches, sickness to health, and death to life. Make death easy for me, that I might arrive at my reward You! (Sharaf al-dīn 1980, 408).

What Maneri is saying is that while the novice shuns death the advanced Sufi loves and yearns for it. In understanding the advantages of pondering over death, Maneri quoted ʿĀishah, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) as asking the Prophet, 'who are those that would be ranked with the martyrs on the Day of Judgment? And the Prophet replied "Anyone who thinks about death twenty times each day and night." The Prophet is also reported to have said: "Death is a present for the faithful, because the world is their prison, and they are always grief-stricken in it. Death is the release from all that, and release from prison is certainly a much-prized gift!" (Sharaf al-Dīn 1980, 409)

Sharaf al-Dīn Maneri also gave different examples of Muslim sages and their preoccupation with death, such as Ibn Sīrīn, who wherever and whenever he remembers death, his entire body becomes transfixed. Also Ḥasan al-Baṣrī was noted to have said, "Death has dishonoured this world. It has not allowed any sensible man to rejoice." Further references were made by Maneri about Khwaja Rabih Tamimi who believes he has been cut off from the pleasures of this world by death, and Kaʿb Aḥbar who explained that the realization of death makes trials in this life easy to bear. It was statements like those quoted above that made Maneri say:

> O brother, even if there were no sorrow, grief, fear, or torment, still death and its pangs would be quite sufficient, for the whole of life is made miserable because of that moment (Sharaf al-dīn 1980, 409).

Therefore, in examining Maneri's work, it is easily realized that death is a painful and difficult experience which man must be wary of in order to be successful in this life and most particularly the next. It does not matter whether you are a king or beggar. To buttress this further, Maneri wrote the following poem:

> If your possessions were to stretch from earth to the moon,
> Finally, they would all lead to this door!
> When your jaw suddenly turns rigid,
> Then all the World's wealth is no more than a chin!
> If you are a Faridun or an Afrasiyab,
> In this Ocean you are but a drop!
>
> All the creatures of this world are
> submerged in an ocean of blood:
> Who knows what their condition is
> like beneath the dust? (Sharaf al-dīn 1980, 410-411).

Maneri however advised that one should be filled with fear and hope when dying. He supported this by stating that:

> When a slave is strong and completely correct in his belief and practice, fear is what should predominate. On the other hand, when he is sick and weak, especially when he is gripped by the pangs of death, that is when hope should predominate (Sharaf al-dīn 1980, 411).

We now turn to the ways in which Mawlana Rūmī contemplated death. In describing his life, Mawlanā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, states, "my life can be summed up in three statements: I was raw; I was cooked; I was consumed."Mawlanā Rūmī was born on 30 September 1207 in Central Asia when it was still part of the Persian cultural sphere. He later lived most of his life in Konya, Central Anatolia, which was then under the Byzantine cultural sphere, thereby explaining his *Kunya*,al-Rumi (the one from Rome).

One of the most interesting explications on death can be found in Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's *Mathnawī-ye-Manawi,* popularly called *Mathnawī.* The *Mathnawī* is not just a work of art; it can and should be regarded as an Islamic spiritual text that aims at guiding readers to focus on the most important and most profound aspect of their lives. This is why in Rūmī's introduction to the work he stated that:

> This is the Book of the Mathnawī, which is the roots of the roots of the religion in respect of (its) unveiling the mysteries of attainment (to the Truth) and of certainty; and which is the greatest science of God and the clearest (religious) way of God and the most manifest evidence of God…

The work showed quite clearly the breadth and depth of Rūmī's genius as well as his passion for self-effacement. Rūmī, it must be pointed out, lived in a period in Islamic history when the line between self-knowledge and self-delusion was becoming vague; a period when the line between the God-intoxicated and the self-enamoured seem intertwined. We believe that the main notion of Rūmī in the *Mathnawī* is that we should strive for 'annihilation' of the 'self' not assert it. This message was relevant then and is still relevant now.

The six-volume of the *Mathnawī* provide a detailed explication of the longing of man's soul for God and speculates on the conduct and approach for a purposeful and meaningful life. Often, when scholars [e.g. Mohammed Rustom, Erkan Türkmen] examine the *Mathnawī* they focus more on the theme of love and therefore interpret the lines, through what we can call the 'love-

eye goggles'. There is the need to look beyond the theme of love to 'unearth' some of Rūmī's interesting thoughts on death in his work. Death is strongly related to the love that Rūmī talks about in his *Mathnawī*. By death we mean the idea of dying, of sacrificing, of losing the self, of 'becoming earth', losing the fleshy soul, ruining the body, freeing the self, conquering the self, surrendering one's life and so on. All these can be found in the *Mathnawī* because the love he talks about is not a simple love. It is a love that demands sacrifice.

Most times when we talk about this concept of death, we are not referring to mere physical death. The death we talk about here is the one Rūmī says will take you into the "abode of Light". Scholars like Annemarie Schimmel [she wrote a substantial number of works on Rumi and his *Mathnawī*] mentioned this concept of death in her *I am Wind, You are Fire*, when she stated:

> Die before you die, for every act of shedding off a lowly quality is a small death; every sacrifice for the sake of others is another small death whereby the individual gains new spiritual value; thus, in a series of deaths, the soul rises to immortality or to a level of spiritualization that it has never dreamed of. (Schimmel 1992, 157-158)

What Schimmel meant by the "shedding off lowly quality" are the bad characters or attributes that corrupts the heart. These attributes do not take one to the higher spiritual plain; rather, they pull one down to the lowest of the low. Therefore, in shaking off or better still killing such bad attributes or base qualities, one causes death to occur slowly and so invariably moves to spiritualization.

In his *Prolegomenon to the Metaphysics of Islam*, Naquib Al-Attas made reference to this idea of death pointing out that:

> …In this context it is the animal soul that enslaves itself in submission and service and so 'returns' itself to the power and authority of the rational soul. When the Holy Prophet said: "Die before ye die" – it is the same as saying: "Return before ye actually return"; and this refers to the subjugation of one's self by one's real self, one's animal soul by one's rational soul … (Al-Attas 2001, 59).

From the above we can deduce that Al-Attas views death, as the subjugation of the self. This subjugation is a form of killing the self, a kind of death in order to reach lofty spiritual goals. Al-Attas also makes reference to the sacrifice of animals as a means to draw closer to the Lord. If the self is sacrificed or killed, one's chances of reaching a higher spiritual goal will increase.

William Chittick in his article titled 'Rūmī's View of Death' described the idea of death in Rūmī's *Mathnawī* as a voluntary return (*al-mawt al-ikhtiyārī*). He stated that:

> This voluntary return to God is the subject of many works…The whole dimension of Sufi teaching that is connected with the stages and stations of the spiritual journey describes in voluminous detail the spiritual transformation undergone when a human being returns to God before his physical death (Chittick 1987, 36).

From the quotation, we can deduce that it is no ordinary death; it is a death that takes you to a higher spiritual plain and it involves eradicating one's bad qualities. An interesting story found in Rūmī's *Mathnawī* is that of Bilal and how he died rejoicing. Bilal's wife thought the situation to be a moment of grief but Bilal urged "Nay, nay! (say), "oh, joy!' Bilal's attitude to his death was feelings of joy. Bilal noted that "until now, I have been in sorrow from living: how shouldst thou know how delightful death is, and what it is (in reality)?" [M. III, 3517, p. 895]. Rūmī also used the moment of Bilal's death to criticize those who only see his blackness and despise him; Rūmī asked "why is the man (pupil) of the eye black?" [M. III, 3520, p. 895].

When the wife of Bilal perceived the case to be one of "parting and absence from family and kindred", Bilal saw it as a "union with God", when she asked "where shall we behold thy

face?"Bilal replied "In God's chosen circle", when she cried "Alas, this house has been ruined", Bilal retorted "look on the moon, do not look on the cloud". [M. III, 3525-3531, p. 895-896].

This dialogue between Bilal and his wife summarizes the message of death in the *Mathnawī* of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. It shows the attitude people of high spiritual standing have concerning death, and that death can lead to a higher spiritual station. The issue here goes beyond the idea of physical death. Rūmī further asserts:

> The mystery of "Die before death" is this: After dying come the spoils. Other than dying no other skill avails with God, oh worker of deception! (M. VI, 3837-3838).
>
> The ocean's water brings the corpse to the surface, but if a man is alive, how can he escape its depths? When you have died to human attributes, the Ocean of Mysteries will bring you up to a place of elevation. (M. I, 2842-2843).

An interesting point about the *Mathnawī* is the way Rūmī compares things that we can easily relate to with the message he is trying to pass. For instance, the above quote about oceans will be understood when one can imagine how a corpse floats on water or the ocean without 'stresses'. This is how one who is 'dead' to the world will move through life with whatever life throws at him or her. The *Mathnawī* further asserts to a similar affect:

> This "I-and-we-ness" is a ladder that all men climb-in the end, they all must fall. Whoever goes higher is a greater fool, for his bones will break the worse. I speak of the derivative, but this is the principle: To deem oneself exalted is to claim copartnership with God. As long as you have not died and become living through Him, you are a rebel seeking a realm for your copartnership. When you have become living through Him, you are indeed He. That is utter Oneness, how could that be copartnership? (M. IV, 2763-2767).
>
> The saint has died to himself and become living through the Lord; hence God's mysteries are upon his lips. When the body dies in self-discipline, that is life: The suffering of the body is the subsistence of the spirit. (M. III, 3364-3365)

What we have attempted to do in this article is to allude succinctly to the manner in which death was viewed in the works of two great Sufis. Certainly, Al-Ghazālī and Rūmī are not the first to propagate this message, but what is peculiar about them are the approaches employed to express and revivify the traditional position. Their imageries projected their formulations with a freshness and relevance which calls for a deeper understanding, definition and transformation of the idea of death that we can still relate to in our time.

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