

The Practice and Principle of *Samā'* in Rūzbihān's Thought

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Introduction¹

The very basis of the life of a Sufi is the idea of a Sufi path, which has been elaborated by previous Sufis step by step. To reach their ultimate purpose of uniting with God, Sufi novices need to learn the Sufi path theory from the Sufi master and walk the path, which consists of ascetic practices, in their everyday life. Although the contents of the ascetic practices vary according to the masters, the trend of the times, or orders, the most basic meaning of this theory of the Sufi path and the ascetic practices is to purify the inner soul. Through the process of learning the theory and the ascetic practices, Sufi novices are able to go forward into the depths of the Sufi path. Thus, Sufis appreciate not only the theoretical but also the practical aspects of Sufism. Along with the development of Sufi theory, the manual of ascetic practices of Sufism has also progressed. The manual of ascetic practices is indispensable for the formation of Sufi orders, as the systematic ritual structure assists the disciples of the Sufi path who aspire to a deep understanding of God in this world. This study focuses on the theory and practices of the *samā'* in Rūzbihān's thought. Examining the relationships between theory and practice concerning the Sufi path in his text, I would like to examine the influence of his *samā'* theory in forming his order, which mysteriously became extinct at a very early stage.

I. Sufi Theory and Practices in Rūzbihān's Text

The fame of Rūzbihān Baqlī Shīrāzī (d. 1209)² as one of the “intoxicated” (*sukr*) type of Sufis, such as Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 922), ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadhānī (d. 1132), and Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. 1126) is derived from his representative masterpieces *Sharḥ-i Shaḥīḥyāt* and *Kitāb ‘Abhar al-‘Ashiqīn*. Indeed, he is also known by the name “Master of Ecstatic Utterances (*Shaykh-i Shaḥīḥ*)” for his *Sharḥ-i Shaḥīḥyāt* in which he collected many ecstatic utterances (*shaḥ*) that the Sufi masters unconsciously utter in the ultimate state of union with God. In his *Sharḥ-i Shaḥīḥyāt*, he introduces 192 ecstatic utterances from 45 people including previous Sufi masters, prophets, and saints [*Sharḥ* no. 28].³

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² Concerning his life, see Massignon 1969: 451–455; Sharaf al-Dīn Ibrāhīm 1969: 12–22; Ballanfāt 1998: 55–78, for example.

³ Some of those who were elected in *Sharḥ-i Shaḥīḥyāt* are also enumerated in Rūzbihān's *Kitāb ‘Abhar al-‘Ashiqīn* as people who admit the usage of the word *‘ishq* [*‘Abhar* no. 21]. For Rūzbihān, both *‘ishq* and

However, among Rūzbihān's oeuvre, there are some textbook-like works that were written to preach the Sufi path, and especially to educate the novice about the way. The reason why "Master of Ecstatic Utterances" wrote his Sufi manuals is that he had disciples who sought his guidance. Rūzbihān organized a Sufi's lodge (*ribāṭ*) in his hometown of Shiraz, and had preached sermons in a mosque for 50 years [Ernst 1995: 651].⁴ In short, he was known in the Sufi context as an "intoxicated" type of Sufi but simultaneously he was also a local scholar (*ulamā*). As a religious scholar, Rūzbihān wrote his *Mashrab al-Arwāḥ* and *Risāla al-Quds* to teach the meaning of the Sufi ascetic path and Sufi terminology to his disciples. He states the following in the prologue of each book:

I shall announce the mystical stations (*maqāmāt*) of some sages to disciples for gratitude toward divine benefit, and praise to God's virtue. As God states: "But the bounty of the Lord, [I] rehearse and proclaim!"[Q93:11]. After [explaining] their [Sufi] terminology, I chose one thousand mystical stations according to the level of understanding of the disciples, in order that they who tak[e] a step into the path of saints or the way of a selected one [by God] — as for they who accompany God (saints or selected people), they profit from their great mystical stations and delicacy of unveiling — could notice all of that. In addition, in order that their spirits turn toward the greatest level, and they seek the uppermost stage. [*Mashrab* 43]

Because my brother Abū Faraj⁵ demands me, just a humble priest, to write by my own hand, [I write] a few chapters about the mystical stations of the masters who are on the way of '*ishq* (love) to deliver [my opinion] to the king of Khurāsān and Turkistān. This is also the fruits of travel [to Shiraz of Abū Faraj], and for the sake of the town [of the king of Khurāsān and Turkistān]. He (Abū Faraj) asks me to write [something] suitable for preaching to the disciples and narrating [this] to old masters [*Quds* 10].

Thus Rūzbihān declares that his writing aims to teach the Sufi's path to the novice as he launches into an explanation about the ascetic way.⁶

ecstatic utterance are reserved for selected people by God and his theory of '*ishq* and ecstatic utterance have a certain close relationship. In this paper, I abbreviate *Kitāb 'Abhar al-'Āshiqīn* to '*Abhar*, *Sharḥ-i Shāḥīyāt* to *Sharḥ*, *Kashf al-Asrār* to *Kashf*, *Risāla al-Quds* to *Quds* and *Mashrab al-Arwāḥ* to *Mashrab*. I also designate the number of each story or its page number.

4 Rūzbihān was known also as a preacher of the two Masjid of Shīrāz, which is named Masjid-i 'Atīq and Masjid-i Sunqur, for about 50 years [Shams al-Dīn 1969: 178–179].

5 He is a disciple of Rūzbihān.

6 His representative books such as *Sharḥ-i Shāḥīyāt* or *Kitāb 'Abhar al-'Āshiqīn* were written as an interpretation and defense of ecstatic utterances or the spiritual stations of prophets and saints, including himself [*Sharḥ* no. 71; *Kashf* no. 5–6]. In both books, he regards ecstatic utterances or special spiritual stations as attributable to the "intoxicated" type of Sufi, such as al-Ḥallāj or Abū Yazīd al-Bastāmī, and as a

In *Mashrab al-Arwāḥ*, Rūzbihān divided 1,000 mystical stations into 20 chapters and in *Risāla al-Quds*, he chose 12 topics for the Sufi novice. The topics that he selected for both books are very common. At the beginning of both books, Rūzbihān treats practical and traditional topics in Sufism, such as a “station of asceticism” or “station of silence.” He describes these traditional practices stations rather concretely. For instance, Rūzbihān, in the “station of purification of the limbs,” interprets the nature of the body in this way:

The limbs and senses are the servant of the soul. The source of the actions that arise from the limbs and senses, its nature is blameful. In the world of form, this nature is guarded [by the limbs and senses]. On the way to excite carnal desires, the ego agitates the limbs in vicious movement. The ego attracts the limbs to the carnal material just like a thief. [*Mashrab* 57]

Thus, Rūzbihān warns disciples of the vice of a carnal soul while revealing his scholarly aspects. To disconnect from profane things is the very start of all Sufi disciples and traditional practices that all preceding Sufis had stressed. Despite this, Rūzbihān starts with a very traditional primary issue; the explanations in the latter part of both textbooks gradually become vague because they are based on spiritual visions (*ru'yat*).⁷

II. The Theory of *Samā'* in Rūzbihān's Text

In *Mashrab al-Arwāḥ* and *Risāla al-Quds*, Rūzbihān explains about the ritual of *samā'* in detail. Indeed, compared to other Sufi ascetic practices, he wrote more about *samā'*. Ruspoli concludes that Rūzbihān had practiced the *samā'* ritual by himself, because Rūzbihān starts his *Risāla al-Quds* with the metaphor of the flute of the divine attributes [*Quds* 3; Ruspoli 2001: 58–59]. In *samā'*, Sufis play many instruments, such as the flute, and hearing the beautiful music creates in Sufis the ecstatic feeling that they can remember God's voice. Rūzbihān's precise description of each instrument implies that he was conversant with the instruments as well as such classical Iranian poets as Rūmī and Ḥāfiẓ. Accordingly, in *Risāla al-Quds*, he explains the station of dance and clapping hands. Therefore, we can presume that Rūzbihān imagines in the *samā'* ritual a series of physical practices, such as listening to

sign of the precedence of saints. Concerning Rūzbihān's attachment for the intoxicated type of Sufi, see also Inoue [2014; 2015].

⁷ Rūzbihān had experienced spiritual visions many times in his life and his *Kashf al-Asrār* is a kind of collection of his spiritual visions. Further, in *Mashrab al-Arwāḥ*, there are many spiritual stations based on spiritual visions, such as the “spiritual station of spiritual visions of Jinn” [*Mashrab* 834] or the “spiritual station of spiritual visions of *Iblīs* and spiritual visions of *Iblīs*'s plot” [*Mashrab* 832]. In addition, it appears that these spiritual stations of spiritual visions are gathered in the latter part of *Mashrab al-Arwāḥ*. Considering that the spiritual stations in this book are arranged according to the level of spiritual maturation, it may suggest Rūzbihān's sublime enjoyment of Allāh's grace of spiritual visions.

music, dancing, and clapping.

Rūzbihān starts his explanation of *samā'* with the encouragement of this ritual for the novices. He stressed that the *samā'* is a desirable way to practice the remembrance of God, as our soul could live by the nutriment of *samā'* [*Quds* 50]. In short, the beautiful music that is experienced in the *samā'* ritual is a special food for a creature's soul.

Although Rūzbihān affirms the favorable effect of the *samā'* ritual, he warns the Sufi novice to pay attention when he practices the *samā'* ritual.

Samā' ventilates a series of thought that are a burden of the human being. And [*samā'*] stimulates human nature. And [*samā'*] triggers mysteries of the Lord. *Samā'* makes some people confused, since they are not perfect. However, for some people *samā'* is an admonition, as they are perfect. They should not hear the divine voice because they live instinctively with a dead heart. If not, catastrophes would occur on them. But the people of good heart, in learning this way, inevitably become the hearers of divine voices through their souls. They enjoy the one hundred delight in the *samā'*, and each of those delights could elucidate the divine knowledge (*ma'rifat*) [*Quds* 50].

Rūzbihān explains here that the *samā'* ritual needs to be practiced with sufficient attentiveness. The same warning about *samā'* is also observed in the epistle of al-Qushayrī as an opinion of al-Shiblī [al-Qushayrī 1988: 340–341]. The reason that Sufis have to be careful in practicing *samā'* is because of misunderstandings about this ritual. For Sufis, *samā'* is a sacred gathering in which Sufis listen to the mystical sounds; thus *samā'* is distinct from a profane concert. As a normal concert was very popular not only among Sufis but also the usual followers, the Sufis who recommend the *samā'* ritual had to show the distinction between a profane concert and a sacred one [During 1988: 73].⁸ For this reason, Sufis are very careful about the practice of *samā'*, and many Sufi manuals stress this point. Despite the danger of this ritual, for the novice this practice is an essential condition on the Sufi path to God. Rūzbihān suggests that there is a distinction among people when it comes to hearing the divine voice. According to his explanation, those who can hear the divine voice have a good heart. In addition, Rūzbihān explains that to experience the *samā'*, the seeker of the path to God must maintain the weakness of the carnal pulse and pursue brilliance by ensuring the pureness of his faith [*Quds*, p. 51]. Thus Rūzbihān's writing about *samā'* follows some traditional Sufism manuals such as al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-Luma'* [al-Sarrāj 1914: 267–300] and al-Qushayrī's *al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya* [al-Qushayrī 1988: 335–350].

However, in his opinion, we can see his original way of thinking about *samā'* at the

⁸ The popularity of profane concerts among the people occurs because of the confusion between profane and sacred concerts even among some Sufis [During 1988: 73].

same time. Indeed, Rūzbihān affirms that the experience of *samā'* is limited to the special individual who can enjoy divine experiences, such as God's love. In Rūzbihān's theory, it seems that people who hear God's voice correctly are included in the people who are on the way of God's love.

This [truth] is not clear except for the people who have a power of *'ishq* that the *samā'* is God's *samā'*, *samā'* is from God, *samā'* is about God, *samā'* is in God, *samā'* is with God ... In the feast of *'ishq*, the hearer [of *samā'*] and the speaker [God] are one. The path of true *'ishq* exists with *samā'*. [*Quds* 51]

In the above quotation, Rūzbihān stresses the relation between *'ishq* and *samā'*, and seems to accord priority to the people of *'ishq* concerning the experience of *samā'*.

According to Rūzbihān, to experience the *samā'* it is important whether one was chosen by God or not in the primordial past:

He [God] chose their [special people's] spirits for manifestation of His essence, and [He situated] all of them in the light of [His] attribute and [His] essence, and He made them lovers of His beauty and magnificence ... And then, they heard [His] special voice with affection ascending the mystical stations ... In this world, [this] ancient voice [of God] is remaining in each sweet witnessing. Therefore, they identify when they see a beautiful vision or witnessing, or smell a fragrance as the primordial [divine] attribute and hear the divine voice (*samā'*) from it. [*Mashrab* no. 207]

Those who experienced *samā'* are the chosen people and possess the memory of the beauty of God and the fascinating voice of God in this world. When the chosen ones hear the voice of God, they are prompted to return to God, and annihilation (*fanā'*) occurs. Because of hearing this voice of God, some are too fascinated to utter ecstatic words such as "I am the Truth!!" (*Anā al-Ḥaqq*) or "Glory to me!!" (*Subhānī*) unconsciously. Thus, Rūzbihān concludes his argument of *samā'* with the ecstatic word of Ḥallāj and Baṣṭāmī (d. 874 or 877) [*Quds* 54]. Despite addressing all pupils of Sufism, he thinks that "*samā'* is acceptable (*mubāḥ*) for the people of *'ishq*, but that it is forbidden (*ḥarām*) for the normal people [*Quds* 54].

After the *samā'* and *fanā'*, for the people who are sincere in their love, the next station of survival (*baqā'*) is one that causes melancholy [*Abhar* no. 110]. The people who love God aspire to meet and touch God and to lament the pain of their broken hearts [*Sharḥ* no. 39]. Rūzbihān exists as an interpreter of this sorrow of God's chosen people and as a guide who can show the way to return to God.

This sorrow of longing for God also appears in the famous opening verse of Rūmī's

Mathnawī in which the sorrowful melody of the reed that is cut from the stem is likened to the lament of a human who is separated from God at the very source. Rūmī is also one of the lovers of God who “expresses the plaint of his heart” [*Abhar* no. 122]. In addition, he also suggests the special role of the experience of *samāʿ* in his poem:

We were all part of Adam and heard those
melodies in paradise.
Though water and clay are poured on us
one doubt comes to our memory from something of those sounds.
...
Hence *samāʿ* is the nourishment of the lovers
for within it they find the image of the meeting with the Beloved.
[Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī 2011: 584]

Similar to Rūzbihān's thinking, the *samāʿ* is a memorandum between God and man. However, the description of *samāʿ* in Rūmī's text is more specific in its details. This can be attributed to Rūmī himself, who was fond of *samāʿ*. Even though he is not a founder of the *samāʿ* ritual of his order, in his poetry, Rūmī vividly describes the manner of *samāʿ* with many types of instruments, such as *ney* or *rubāb*.⁹ In this respect, the role of Shams-i Tabrīzī is significant. Shams-i Tabrīzī directly teaches a concrete method of *samāʿ* to Rūmī [Ambrosio 2010: 189], thus Rūmī's description of *samāʿ* becomes very clear and passionate. In addition, Rūmī does not limit the participants of the *samāʿ* to the particular individuals who are selected by God, as he regards the *samāʿ* ritual as a direct expression of the joy at feeling something divine. In other words, Rūmī admits a positive approach to God, while Rūzbihān stresses a passive attitude to God.

For Rūmī, *samāʿ* is a way to express the love for God directly. Thus, he attaches great importance to the wheeling dance¹⁰ as well as music in *samāʿ*, both of which became the representative ritual of his order. Moreover, Rūmī's *samāʿ* theory entails a developed thought that participants can attain the feeling of being in harmony with all creatures in the cosmos.¹¹

9 Schimmel mentions that the number of verses with musical allusions is almost unlimited in Rūmī's poetry [Schimmel 1993: 215].

10 In Rūmī's poetry, the meaning of *samāʿ* includes listening to music and dancing [Chittick 1983: 325].

11 For example, Rūmī sings about *samāʿ* as follows:

Oh come, oh come! You are the soul
of the soul of the soul of *samāʿ*
Oh come! You are the cypress tall
in the blooming garden of *samāʿ*
...
For when you enter in the dance

His theory of *samā'* has a very practical approach as well as a great imaginative aspect.

Conclusion

Through the examination of the Rūzbihān's theory of *samā'*, I could conclude that his theory has two dimensions: traditional Sufi theory, and an original dimension. Although Rūzbihān addresses all the people who are interested in Sufism, in reality, he regards as suitable only the special people who were chosen by God in the primordial past for *samā'*, and he closes the door to normal people as disciples on the path of Sufism. As a result, his theory of Sufi practices also has a practical concreteness and a notional ambiguity that seems to be beyond the understanding of ordinary people. It is possible that his attitude influenced the future of his order. Indeed, even though he organized a Sufi lodge for a long time and his order was founded after his death by his great-grandson, Rūzbihān's order mysteriously disappeared in the generation of his great-great-grandchild. In contrast to Rūzbihān's order, other famous orders such as the Suhrawardī order or Rūmī's Mevlevi order flourished and acquired a widespread reputation even in other regions of that time. As mentioned above, Rūmī's theory has a practical aspect and a fascinating aspect as well as being beautiful poetry. Compared with Rūzbihān's theory, Rūmī's theory could be attractive to everyone. Moreover, the attitude of each descendent is also significant. Despite each descendent writing books with the intention of institutionalizing their own order, the contents differ from each other. While the descendent of Rūzbihān concentrated on gathering miraculous stories about the founder of the order, in the case of the Mevlevi order, Rūmī's son Sulṭān Valad (d. 1312) especially endeavored to interpret his father's thought, life, and teaching faithfully.¹² This difference in the purpose of each order may reflect the future of the order. To institutionalize the group of Sufis and to retain the teaching of the founder, it is also important to recognize the ability of the transmitter, not only the attractiveness and charisma of the founder.

you then leave both these worlds
For outside these two worlds there lies
the universe, endless, of whirling
The roof is high, the lofty roof
that is on the seventh sphere,
But far beyond this roof is raised
the ladder, the ladder of whirling. [Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī n.d.: 504]

As for the translation of Rūmī's *Maṣnavī* and *Dīvān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī*, I refer to Schimmel [1993] and Chittick [1983].

12 In his time, not a few people still cast doubt on the rightness of *samā'* practice. Therefore, in order to convince them that dance and music are not principle objectives, he asserts that *samā'* means a spiritual state that people can reach after the ego vanishes [Sulṭān Valad 1988: 20, 312–313]. This implies that he tried to restore the validity and reputation of the Mevlevi order as a Sufi order, although he is known as a “Second Master” of the Mevlevi order, who established the rules of this order in accordance with his father's teaching.

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