



DEKR

DEKR (lit., “remembrance”), the act of reminding oneself of God.

i. In Sufism.

ii. In the Babi and Bahai religions.

i. IN SUFISM

Among Sufis *dekr* is the most common prayer practice. The term and its derivatives occur in about 250 koranic verses. The Qur’ān itself (e.g., 7:63, 38:1) and other scriptures (e.g., 21:7) are referred to as *dekr* or as *dekrā* and *taḍkera* (reminder; e.g., 6:90, 74:49), and the Prophet Moḥammad is called *moḍakker* (admonisher; 88:21). In most instances *dekr* has the basic meaning of “mentioning” God’s name or “remembering” God, as in “Remember Me and I will remember you” (2:152); “O believers, remember God incessantly” (33:41); and the frequently cited verses 5:91, 7:205, 13:28, 18:24, and 33:35. This meaning recurs in numerous canonical Hadith (Wensinck, II, pp. 178-82) and often also in the noncanonical Hadith frequently cited by Sufis. One example of the latter is the *ḥadīṭ qodsī*, “I am the Companion of one who remembers Me” (*anā jalīso man ḍakaranī*; Tostarī, p. 26; Šebli in Qošayrī, p. 467; ‘Ayn-al-Qożāt, p. 24; Meybodī, V, p. 393, VII, p. 541, VIII, pp. 218-19, 388 [uttered by Bāyazīd], X, p. 260; for Daylamī’s attribution to ‘Ā’eša, see Saḳāwī [d. 902/1467], pp. 95-96), another the *ḥadīṭ nabawī*, “The best *dekr* is the secret one” (Aḥmad



b. Ḥanbal, nos. 1477, 1559, 1623; Sarrāj, ed. Nicholson, p. 42). The Prophet is also reported to have compared *dekr* assemblies (*majāles al-dekr*) to the meadows of paradise (Moḥāsebī, 1940, p. 331; Qoṣayrī, p. 466) and to have likened *dekr* to the angels' glorification of God: "No company sits remembering God, without the angels surrounding them and divine Presence (*sakīna*) covering them" (Wensinck, II, p. 494; Moḥāsebī, apud van Ess, p. 201). *Dekr* formulas were also adopted in Muslim everyday life, for example, *al-ḥamdo le'llāh* (Praise belongs to God) and *sobḥān Allāh* (Glory be to God). The most beautiful names of God (*al-asmā' al-ḥosnā*) were recited to the rhythm of prayer beads (*tasbīḥ*) or as litanies (*awrād, aḥzāb*).

While theologians (*motakallemūn*) explored the variety of meanings in the word *dekr* (Tahānawī, pp. 512-13), scholars of religious law (*foqahā*) concentrated upon minute regulation of ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*). Nevertheless, the term *majāles al-dekr* was used by such scholars of law as Anas b. Mālek (d. 91-93/709-11) for prayer and other religious assemblies said to have existed since the time of the Prophet (Makkī, II, p. 23; cf. Meier, 1976, p. 236).

From the basic meaning of *dekr* in the Qur'ān and Hadith Sufis derived the notion of "recollection" of God (*dekr*) as a principal prayer practice and central doctrinal concept. Although patterns of historical influence have not been conclusively demonstrated, the Sufi *dekr* includes aspects resembling the repetition of the name of God and hesychastic prayer of eastern Christianity, as well as features similar to the meditation techniques of Yoga (Anawati and Gardet, pp. 235-58). Possible affinities between Sufi forms of *dekr* and the shamanistic practices of Central Asia have been doubted (Meier, 1954, p. 131). As a devotional practice *dekr* is clearly distinct from Muslim ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) and personal supplication (*do'ā*). It is, however, closely associated with intimate colloquy with God (*monājāt*) and with ecstatic prayer accompanied by music and dance (*samā*).

In practice the Sufi *dekr* reflects the mystic's concentration upon God's presence within the human soul, to the exclusion of all else. The Sufi repeats a short *dekr* formula either aloud or "in the heart," seeking to turn away from all distractions and to erase all barriers to awareness of God's presence. The struggle against forgetting God (*ḡafla, nesyān*), the antithesis of *dekr*, reaches a point at which the Sufi is so much with God that he is unaware of even the act of *dekr* itself. *Dekr* is understood to be both an act of speaking and an act of hearing: The uninterrupted repetition of God's name is experienced as hearing God speak. For Sufis it thus fends off the insinuations of Satan, counteracts the



egocentric drives of the lower soul, and cleanses the mirror of the heart from the tarnish of worldly concerns. They can then be free for God alone. Unlike the ritually obligatory *ṣalāt*, *ḍekr* is voluntary, and performance is not bound to any particular time (Qoṣayrī, p. 467), though eventually Sufis came to prefer Thursday nights for their collective *ḍekr*. They do not understand *ḍekr* as an exercise in self-mortification (despite the term *sayf al-morīdīn* “novices’ sword”; Qoṣayrī, p. 465); rather, it is a mystical way of reaching ecstasy (*wajd*), union with and immersion (*esteḡrāq*) in God.

The Sufi *ḍekr* developed from an individual method of prayer among the classical Sufis of the 9th century into a prayer ceremony of the Sufi confraternities (*ṭarīqas*) beginning in the 12th century. Sahl b. ‘Abd-Allāh Tostarī (d. 283/896) was one of the earliest Sufis who adhered to a regular *ḍekr* practice and offered a rudimentary yet coherent *ḍekr* theory. Throughout his life Tostarī observed the method of recollecting God by repeating the mental prayer “God is my witness” (*Allāh šāhedī*; Qoṣayrī, pp. 83-84; Böwering, pp. 45-49, or in the words of Ebn al-‘Arabī [d. 638/1240], p. 174: “God is with me, God looks at me, God sees me”), in order to actualize God’s presence in the silence of his heart. In the conviction that God takes care of the mystic at every moment of his existence, he understood the practice of *ḍekr* as man’s daily spiritual sustenance (*qūt*) and interpreted it experientially as the breakthrough to God, Who Himself effects His own recollection within the mystic’s heart (*al-ḍekr be’l maḍkūr*, *ḍekr Allāh be’llāh*; Böwering, pp. 201-07). According to Tostarī, God reveals Himself in the inmost recesses of the human soul (*serr al-naḥs*) as the Lord of the primordial covenant alluded to in the koranic phrase *alasto be rabbekom* (Am I not your Lord? 7:172). In this covenant the preexisting souls of all humanity had acceded to the lordship of God before the beginning of time. Through anamnesis the mystic rediscovers this moment in preexistence in pharaoh’s blasphemous proclamation of his own lordship, *anā rabbokom al-a’lā* (I am your Lord Most High; 79:24). By listening to God, the true speaker of the koranic word, the mystic ironically perceives the actual essence of belief flowing from pharaoh’s tongue of unbelief and remembers in his experience the moment when God, in preexistence, affirmed His oneness and lordship for human consciousness. That there is only One Who can truly say “I” is the ultimate truth of Islamic mysticism captured in the act of *ḍekr* (Böwering, pp. 185-201). Rowaym b. Aḥmad (d. 303/915-16) corroborated Tostarī’s theory of *ḍekr*: “The people heard their first *ḍekr* when God addressed them saying, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ This *ḍekr* was secreted in their hearts even as its occurrence was secreted in



their intellects. So when they heard the *dekr*, the secret things of their heart appeared, and they were ravished, even as the secret things of their intellects appeared when God informed them of this, and they believed” (Kalābādī, pp. 126-27; tr. pp. 166-67).

The ecstatic quality of this “I” was first given consistent expression in the paradoxical utterances (*ṣaṭḥ*) of Bāyazīd Beṣṭāmī. His statements “Glory be to Me!” (*sobḥānī*), “I am He” (*anā Howa*), “I am I and thus am ‘I,’” and “I am I; there is no God but me” gave vivid expression to a human consciousness merging with the divine. In these expressions there was room neither for the human self nor for God but only for the ultimate and absolute “I,” called “God” as the object of faith but “I” as the subject of mystical experience. Whereas it was Bāyazīd who laid the ecstatic foundations for Sufi prayer, Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) became famous for bringing the *dekr* experience into the open with his public proclamation *ana’l-Ḥaqq* (“I am the Real,” i.e., God). There were, however, Sufis, who favored a more sober approach to *dekr*. Abū Bakr Wāseṭī (d. after 320/932), for example, held that the first Sufi word was “Allāh” uttered by the first caliph, Abū Bakr (d. 13/634) and that it was the task of the believer to find peace in the *dekr* (Sarrāj, ed. Nicholson, pp. 91, 122-23). He voiced reservations about the unmitigated practice of *dekr* (*man dakara eftarā* “One who performs recollection fabricates lies”; Sarrāj, ed. Arberry, p. 12) and saw its legitimate goal as mystical vision (*mošāhada*): “*Dekr* is leaving the field of forgetfulness as one enters the space of vision dominated by fear and intense love” (Qoṣayrī, p. 467). Many other classical Sufis contributed aphorisms to the chapters on *dekr* included in the widely disseminated Sufi manuals of the 10th and 11th centuries.

There is sufficient evidence that the classical Sufis performed *dekr*, originally a predominantly solitary exercise, also in groups and employed shouting and dancing as the body language of ecstasy. At Qayrawān in the 9th century these collective performances were known as *mašhad al-dekr* (Meier, 1976, p. 243); they came to be associated with *samā’*, the practice of listening to music and poetry recitation, especially in the Sufi circles of Baghdad. Jonayd (d. 298/910), one of the leading shaikhs of Baghdad and a sober mystic disinclined to show signs of rapture (Qoṣayrī, p. 202), defined the basic prerequisites of *samā’* as a fixed time and place and the presence of brethren (Sarrāj, ed. Nicholson, pp. 186, 272). Abū Naṣr Sarrāj (ed. Nicholson, pp. 285-88) recorded some of the features of those sessions, like emotional gesticulation and shouted ejaculations, and compared the dancing Sufis to a flock of sheep stirred by the



wolf. In sessions of *samāʿ* preference was given to the spontaneous show of emotion resulting from overwhelming experience. Although Ḥakīm Termedī (d. between 295/907 and 310/922) and others criticized dancing, clapping hands, jerking the head, and swaying during *dekr* (Radtke, p. 129), still others approved throwing off the turban and tearing the clothes. Dancing, whirling, and leaping up were understood as the expression and result of trance, rather than as means for achieving ecstasy. There were provisions, however, that made it permissible to provoke the emotion artificially (*tawājod*) or to conform to the movement of another dancer (*mowāfaqa*), especially that of a respected person (Qoşayrī, pp. 201-06).

With time, *dekr* and *samāʿ*, which had originally been independent forms of religious expression, became intermingled. Although it appears impossible to define with precision the various stages of transition, the process had been completed by the time of Aḥmad Ġazālī (d. 520/1126), thus well before the emergence of Sufi confraternities. Aḥmad Ġazālī understood *dekr* as the merging of the practitioner with the cosmic consciousness of creation, which spontaneously proclaims God the one and only Lord (Gramlich, 1983, pp. 18-19). As an exercise, it served Aḥmad Ġazālī as the prelude to *samāʿ*. The group assembled after either the morning or evening prayer and, following litanies and the recital of *dekr* formulas, listened to koranic verses recited by a beautiful voice and interpreted by the shaikh. Then the singer (*qawwāl*) stepped forward to chant songs apt to induce dance and ecstasy (Robson, text p. 167; tr., p. 105).

In their attempt to explain Sufi teachings to a larger public the authors of the Sufi handbooks, from Sarrāj's *Lomaʿ* (ed. Nicholson, p. 219) through Qoşayrī's *Resāla* (p. 465) to Moḥammad Ġazālī's *Eḥyāʿ* (Anawati and Gardet, pp. 214-234), established a ranking of three degrees of *dekr*, an ordering already formulated in substance by Tostarī's disciple Ebn Sālem (Sarrāj, ed. Nicholson, p. 219). The *dekr* of the tongue (*dekr al-lesān*) is the mere recital of the *dekr* formula; that of the heart (*dekr al-qalb*) is total inner concentration on God's name without moving the tongue; and that of the innermost being (*dekr al-serr*) is the experience of total absorption by the reality of the One Who is recollected (*al-madkūr*). In each of these modes recollection has initially to be established with effort, but then it begins to flow spontaneously. As the mystic advances through these three ranks of *dekr*, a process of interiorization takes place. In the *dekr al-lesān* the Sufi is aware of three entities: the subject, the object, and the act of recollection. In the *dekr al-qalb* he is conscious only of the division



between the subject and the object of recollection. Finally, in the *dekr al-serr* no duality remains, and total *fanā'* (passing from existence) is achieved (see [BAQĀ' WA FANĀ'](#)). In later Sufi theory the latter two stages were collapsed into a single second stage, and recollection of the organs and limbs (*dekr al-jawāreḥ*) was added as the third, in an attempt to describe the permeation of and sovereignty over the whole body by *dekr* (*solṭān al-dekr*; see e.g., Ma'šūm-ʿAlīšāh, I, p. 236).

The Sufi confraternities further transformed the *dekr*, which had begun as a free method of prayer, into an elaborate liturgical ceremony. They developed a dual tradition, including the solitary *dekr*, whether uttered aloud (*jālī*) or imperceptibly (*kaftī*), and the collective *dekr*, performed by the group aloud in unison. They also distinguished between *dekr moqayyad*, performed at a fixed time and place, and *dekr moṭlaq*, which was free of such constraints (Ebn ʿAṭāʾ-Allāh, p. 5). This same distinction determines whether or not a *dekr* is bound to a fixed ritual (Qoššāšī, pp. 146-47; Meier, 1957, p. 202). Ideally *dekr*, as an act of reminding oneself of God, should become the mystic's permanent state and an activity performed uninterruptedly. It is of prime importance that the *dekr* formula be implanted in the practitioner's heart by the Sufi shaikh through *talqīn* (infusion), an act derived from Muslim funeral custom (Qošayrī, p. 737; Gramlich, p. 389). The most common *dekr* formula in the *ṭarīqa* tradition is the Muslim declaration in which the negation *lā elāha* (there is no god) is combined with the affirmation *ellā Allāh* (but God). Other preferred forms are "Allāh" and the pronoun *howa* "He." The principal requirements for the solitary *dekr* are a state of ritual purity while reciting the formula; solitude in a small, dark, and empty room; a position facing the *qebla* with eyes closed, legs crossed, and hands on the knees; elimination of all distracting thoughts (*nafy al-kawāṭer*) and breathing controlled with minute regularity (*ḥabs al-nafas*); the presence of the *pīr* before one's heart (a practice of visual representation, sometimes aided by contemplation of the ephebe, or *šāhed*; Gramlich, p. 393; cf. Ritter, 1978, pp. 434-503); and the presence of God before one's eyes (*morāqaba*) through and beyond the image of the *pīr*.

Three basic forms of the Sufi *dekr* can be distinguished, according to the beats (*ẓarb*) of the rhythmic movements and regular breathing performed by the seated individual practitioner. The common historical roots of the three basic forms can be traced in the Kobrawī *dekr*, for the essential elements were already set forth in the *Merṣād al-ʿebād* (pp. 271-88; tr. pp. 271-85) of [Najm-al-Dīn Dāya](#) (d. 654/1256), who followed the practice of Najm-al-Dīn Kobrā (d.



618/1221). The Ne‘mat-Allāhīs practice a two-beat *dekr*, called *dekr-e haykalī* or *hamāyeli*, accompanied by bodily movements when the practitioner is alone or performed mentally when others are present. As *lā elāha* is pronounced the head is drawn up in a half-circle from the navel to the throat around the right side of the chest, the seat of the carnal soul (*nafs*); while *ellā Allāh* is pronounced it is returned in another half-circle to the navel around the left side of the chest, the seat of the higher soul or spirit (*rūh*; Gramlich, pp. 396-98).

The Naqšbandīs perform a three-beat *dekr* without visible motion or perceptible sound. Sitting quite still, the practitioner presses the tongue to the palate and holds his breath beneath the navel. Without moving, he draws the *lā* from beneath the navel to the top of the head (first beat), then directs the *elāha* from the vertex to the right shoulder (second beat), and finally drives the *ellā Allāh* from the shoulder into the heart (third beat). The breath should be held as long as possible and released only after an uneven number of completed repetitions, ideally twenty-one; then the exercise is repeated on a new breath (Gramlich, pp. 398-401). The principles regulating the Naqšbandī *dekr*, as ascribed to ‘Abd-al-Kāleq Ğojdovānī (d. after 617/1220) and developed by Bahā’-al-Dīn Naqšband (d. 791/1389), have become standard in the confraternity (summarized in Trimingham, pp. 202-04).

The Kobrawī Sufi ‘Alā’-al-Dawla Semnānī (d. 736/1336), following Nūr-al-Dīn Esfarāyeni (d. 717/1317), developed a four-beat *dekr* (Qoššāšī, pp. 155-58) that was adopted by the Hamadāniya (see [‘ALĪ HAMADĀNĪ](#)). Holding his breath, the Sufi inclines his head to the level of the navel and inaudibly pronounces the formula in four beats: *lā*, while jerking the head back into the upright position, *elāha* while tracing a half-circle with the head around the right side of the chest and returning it to the position of the navel, *ellā* while jerking the head back up again, and *Allāh* while describing a half-circle with the head around the left side back to the navel. The principal shaikhs of the Ne‘mat-Allāhīya, [Dahabiya](#), and [Kāksārīya](#) developed further variations of these basic forms of *dekr*, which are generally kept secret from the uninitiated (Gramlich, p. 404-07). These variations, often employed as means of shaping a practitioner’s character, rest on the assumption that through recollection one assumes the traits of the divine names (*taḳalloq be asmā’ Allāh*, a phrase of Abu’l-Ḥosayn Nūrī, d. 295/907-08) and actualizes the perfections latent within man as created in God’s image (‘Aṭṭār, II, pp. 54-55).

The collective *dekr* ceremonies of the *ṭarīqa* tradition, based on a number of



dekr formulas, most commonly *lā elāha ellā Allāh*, included minute regulation of respiratory rhythm and precisely prescribed postures, according to the traditional practice within a particular confraternity. Such traditions frequently included the use of musical instruments like drums and pipes and the recital of poetry and eulogies to saints. The shaikh, or *pīr*, occupied the most important place in a Sufi session (*ḥaḏra*) or circle (*ḥalqa*). He also directed the exercise of a person practicing *dekr* in seclusion (*kalwa*), especially the forty-day retreat (*arbaʿūn*; see ČELLA ii).

An especially well-known form of communal *dekr* is that of the Mawlawī *ṭarīqa*. Although it is also performed individually, the Mawlawī *dekr*, usually called *samāʿ*, is best known in its collective form. A group of adepts assembles in a circular room (*samāʿ-kāna*) around the shaikh, who sits on his sheepskin facing the *qebla*. Participation presupposes initiation; musicians must be present, and a particular style of dress (conical cap and sleeveless gown) is imposed. The group first sits in a circle, then stands together and dances in an ordered circle, each person turning on his own axis, with head and arms in precisely prescribed positions. All begin and end with the music as they perform their studied ritual of whirling. Unlike earlier forms of *samāʿ*, in the Mawlawī *dekr* ecstasy has become the goal of the dance, rather than its result (Ritter, 1933).

For a music sample, see [Baluchistan Dekr](#).

For a music sample, see [Fadāye Rokṣār – Dekr Qāderieh](#).

For a music sample, see [Korasan – Dekr Hāji Majnun Šāh](#).

For a music sample, see [Sanandaj – Dekr Qāderieh](#).

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ii. IN THE BABI AND BAHAI RELIGIONS

In Babi and Bahai usage *dekr* refers to both a person (see Lawson) and an activity (see Scholl). In such phrases as *dekr Allāh al-a‘zam* (the mightiest remembrance of God or the remembrance of God the Mightiest) it refers to the manifestation, or prophet, of God (*mazhar-e elāhī*). In the writings of the *Bāb* it is a reference to himself (Lawson). In the writings of *Bahā’-Allāh* it may refer either to himself or to the *Bāb* (1984, pp. 190, 194; 1967, p. 7). This usage reflects the Shi‘ite interpretation of certain koranic passages (e.g., 3:58 and 20:124) as references to the imams. *Dekr*, the “mention” or “remembrance” of God, also denotes prayer and the recital and reading of the scripture, as well as sharing the Sufi meaning of repetitive, ritual chanting (see i, above).

In the histories of the Babi period several practices resembling the Sufi *dekr* are recorded. For example, in the *Tārīk-e jadīd* of Mīrzā Ḥosayn (p. 157; cf. Mīrzā Jānī, p. 231) it is recorded on the authority of Ḥaydar Beg that the Babīs of Zanjān used to chant “Allāh abhā” (God is Most Glorious) ninety-two times (equal to the numerical value of the name Moḥammad) from their barricades during the upheaval in 1266-67/1850-51 (see [BABISM ii](#)

Bahā’-Allāh provided formulas to be chanted and also set aside a special day for this activity (‘Abd-al-Bahā’, tr., p. 38), but, apart from the ritual invocation of the words “Allāh abhā” as part of personal daily devotions, there is not at present much in Bahai practice that corresponds to the Sufi practice of *dekr*. The phrase *mašreq al-adkār* refers both to the practice of reciting prayers and scripture at dawn and to the place in which such recitations are carried out (see [BAHAI FAITH ix](#)).

‘Abd-al-Bahā’, *Tadkerat al-wafā’*, Haifa, 1924; tr. M. Gail as *Memorials of the Faithful*, Wilmette, Ill., 1971.



Bahā'-Allāh, *Alwāḥ-e nāzela keṭāb be molūk wa ro'asā-ye arz*, Tehran, 1347 Š./1968; partial tr. Shoghi Effendi as *Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh to the Kings and Leaders of the World*, Haifa, 1967.

Idem, *Montakabātī az āṭār-e Ḥazrat Bahā'-Allāh*, ed. Shoghi Effendi, Hofheim-Langenhain, Germany, 1984.

B. T. Lawson, "The Terms 'Remembrance' (*dhikr*) and 'Gate' (*báb*) in the Báb's Commentary on the Súra of Joseph," in M. Momen, ed., *Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi*, Los Angeles, 1988.

Mírzá Ḥosayn Hamadānī, *Tārīk-e jadīd*, tr. E. G. Browne as *Tárīkh-i-Jadīd, or New History of Mírzá 'Alí Muḥammad the Báb*, Cambridge, 1893.

Ḥājī Mírzá Jānī Kāšānī, *Ketāb al-noḡṭat al-kāf*, ed. E. G. Browne, Leiden and London, 1910.

Moḥammad-Nabīl Zarandī, tr. Shoghi Effendi as *The Dawn-Breakers. Nabīl's Narrative*, Wilmette, Ill., 1962.

S. Scholl, "The Remembrance of God. An Invocation Technique in Sufism and the Writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh," *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 2/3, 1983, pp. 73-98.