



RUMI, JALĀL-AL-DIN VIII. RUMI'S TEACHINGS

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Jalāl-al-Din Moḥammad Balkī Rumi's (q.v.; d. 672/1273) *magnum opus* is his didactic poem, the *Maṭnawī* (q.v.), and his main prose work is the *Fihe mā fihe*, which was compiled from the notes of students at his teaching circle. These works, which represent the last two decades of his life, constitute the most substantial sources for his teachings without need for recourse to his many biographies. We do not have sources dating from his young adulthood, before he met his mystic mentor Šams-al-Din Tabrizi, though his later writings arguably provide insight into the world of scholarship he had been raised in. Accordingly the focus of this entry is Rumi's mystical teachings.

The *Fihe mā fihe* is the most important source for the actual situation of Rumi's teaching, since it is a collection of the notes of students attending his circle. This work represents sessions at Rumi's teaching circle that date from the mid-to late 1250s in all likelihood, when one takes into account the references to other living individuals (Mojaddedi, 2012, pp. 12-14). The full text, which forms the basis of Badi'-al-Zamān Foruzānfar's edition, is found in a manuscript dating from 751/1350 and a manuscript containing approximately the first two-thirds of the other, dating from 716/1317. The component



chapters are usually translated as “Discourses,” and though they mostly seem to be composite units themselves, they are nonetheless very consistent and even include some repetition. The first general observation that can be made is that the amount of material compiled after an extended effort is quite modest (71 discourses), and the comments that it includes about the difficulty of gaining access to Rumi’s oral teachings except when distinguished guests were present, further indicate that he was not a hands-on teacher of his disciples (Mojaddedi, 2012, pp. 1-18). The biographical tradition in this instance supports the textual evidence with its general portrayal of Rumi as a teacher withdrawing from his students after meeting Šams, and appointing deputies (e.g., [Ḥosām-al-Din Čalabi](#)) to represent him in that capacity instead.

Rūmī’s primary mode of teaching in both of his didactic works is the teaching-story. In the *Fihe mā fihe*, his teaching typically consists of a story followed by a homily that draws out its teaching points. The *Maṭnawī*, which contains some of the same stories found in the *Fihe mā fihe*, is, in contrast, a highly interactive poem, in which Rumi alternates voice at a rapid frequency, for instance, breaking off midstream from a narrative to address the audience directly, or even to a new embedded narrative. This makes the *Maṭnawī* especially well-suited for the function of substituting for Rumi’s presence, which may explain the relatively small amount of teaching notes from students studying with him directly.

The *Maṭnawī* is also informative about Rumi’s private sessions with his deputy Ḥosām-al-Din Čalabi, which are elaborated upon in the biographical tradition (e.g., Aflāki, pp. 496-97, 741-42). Moreover, the contents of the *Maṭnawī*, a work of some 26,000 verses, match the original reason given in Rumi’s biographical tradition (e.g., Aflāki, pp. 739-40) for its composition, namely, to satisfy his disciples, who already enjoyed the *maṭnawī* poems of [Shaikh Farid-al-Din ‘Aṭṭār](#) (d. ca. 1221). This is because it is composed in the same mystical *maṭnawī* genre that his predecessor excelled in, and it contains a much higher theological content, which identifies his immediate audience as being in all likelihood the members of the *madrassa* that Rumi had inherited from his father. It is important to note that, while Rumi’s *Maṭnawī* cites the Qur’an and Hadiths at a much higher frequency than any other work of its genre, and also contains more technical jurisprudential and theological passages, such material is used as a means for imparting mystical teachings (Mojaddedi, 2006, pp. 364-68). Far from promoting a scholastic religiosity with such material, Rumi instead subverts basic religious tenets, including the sealing of



prophethood with Moḥammad (*Maṭnawī* VI, vv. 171-74), the rituals such as communal prayer (*Maṭnawī* II, vv. 2780-90), and pilgrimage to Mecca (*Maṭnawī* II, vv. 2224-57). Rumi's reference in the *Fīhe mā fīhe* to the common perception of his teaching circle being dangerously likely to make one abandon conventional scholarship (p. 156), as well as his emphatic dismissal of a more religious rival's circle, which had managed to draw one of his disciples away (p. 136), further underline the point that his own teaching program at what was previously his father Bahā'-al-Din Moḥammad Walad's *madrasa* in Konya, was uncompromisingly mystical.

When one takes into account Rumi's immediate audience, it should not be surprising to find that his teachings include, in addition to the Sufi preoccupation with the annihilation of the self, the subversion of orthodox religious teachings and practices and the limitations of rationalist scholasticism. His best-known teaching story is "Moses and the Shepherd" (*Maṭnawī* II, vv. 1720-800), which can serve as a good example of his teaching style as well as his actual teachings. This story begins with an orthodox critique of anthropomorphism from Moses after he overhears a shepherd praying in such a fashion. However, the twist in the plot comes when God rebukes Moses and points out that it is the inner intention and state of the worshipper that counts rather than what they profess or how they practice. Moses rushes in pursuit of the shepherd to clarify this to him, but meets a seemingly transformed man who has reached lofty mystical heights. The story ends with six couplets of commentary about the error of judging others as inferior based on your perception of their way of worship. At the center of the narrative, immediately following the major twist in the plot of God's intervention, Rumi includes one of his idiosyncratic lyrical flights. Such passages are unprecedented in the *maṭnawī* form of poetry and make Rumi's work so distinctively multi-vocal and intense. It is in the lyrical climax at the center of the Moses and the Shepherd story where one finds its most famous couplet: *Mellat-e 'ešq az hama dīnhā jodā'st; / 'Āšeqān-rā mellat-o maḍhab Ḳodā'st* (Beyond all the religions stands love's nation; / God is their sole dogma and denomination" *Maṭnawī* II, v. 1774). This accurately represents the mystical teaching of the story about the legislative prophet Moses and the shepherd who becomes identified as a lover of God and, on that basis, transcends Moses' knowledge. The widespread popularity of this story is, however, more likely due to the religious tolerance broadly expressed here rather than these more demanding mystical teachings.



The teaching points in the story of Moses and the Shepherd are consistent with Rumi's teachings elsewhere in the *Maṭnawī*. The best-known examples are in the story about the four Indians who spoiled their own prayers by finding fault in one another's performance of that ritual (Rumi, *Maṭnawī* II, vv. 3027-45), and the story about the deaf man who visited a sick neighbor and felt very smug about doing what he thought was a good deed (*Maṭnawī* I, vv. 3360-409). In the *Fihe mā fihe* also, Rumi repeatedly stresses the importance of the inner state of the worshipper rather than the outward performance, even going so far as to argue in favor of ignoring the call to prayer in order to stay in meditation with one's Sufi master (*Fihe mā fihe*, p. 12). He also berates a religious rival who has lured away one of his own disciples, saying: "He has trapped him with rosaries, litanies, and prayer-rugs" (p. 136), and criticizes the ulama for knowing all about the outward minutiae of religion while remaining clueless about the inner dimension, which in his view is what actually counts (p. 17). The frequency with which Rumi repeats such teachings is most probably due to his immediate audience of seminary students.

Rumi's teachings manifest his own extensive education, both in the religious and in the physical sciences. Yet he frequently critiques scholars, whether religious or non-religious, and stresses the superiority of mystical knowledge. His most famous teaching story about this point is probably The Grammarian and the Boatman (*Maṭnawī* I, vv. 2835-65). In this story, the grammarian's smugness is mocked, because, in spite of his knowledge of grammar and condescension towards the boatman who is ignorant of it, he does not know how to swim, and the boat is sinking. Rumi also uses this story as an occasion to comment on the superiority of selflessness, using the analogy of a corpse floating on the sea, but there is no discussion of mystical knowledge here. Later in that same first book of the *Maṭnawī*, mystical knowledge is exemplified in the final pair of interweaving stories about Imam 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb (d. 661; *Maṭnawī* I, vv. 3721-4004). 'Ali is depicted as being in total surrender to God, which means that his every action is Divinely directed and in harmony with God. He neither takes revenge against an enemy soldier when sorely tempted to, nor tries to avert his own death when forewarned about it.

Book Three of the *Maṭnawī* focuses specifically on epistemology, an open agenda that is discussed at length in its prose introduction and exordium (*Maṭnawī* III, vv. 1-68). Rumi's approach is to discuss in ascending order different forms of knowledge, from the immediate, face-value interpretation



of things to reasoned scheming, and ultimately divinely communicated knowledge. It is the last of these that represents his own understanding of certain knowledge, and he explains in various stories how selflessness is a prerequisite. For instance, in one story Moses is pestered by someone who wants to know the language of all the animals. After trying to dissuade him and consulting God, Moses reluctantly teaches him a limited amount, but this is enough for the man to discover that he cannot cope, and he ends up learning about his own imminent death from a clairvoyant rooster (*Maṭnawī* III, vv. 3266-400). In contrast, a dervish accepts the amputation of his hand for a crime he has not committed, because through divine communication he felt that he had earned this for another reason, and a court official feels compelled to return to his ruler, from whom he had previously fled, even though the latter wishes to execute him (*Maṭnawī* III, vv. 3686-4751).

For Rumi, divine communication of the highest kind is not restricted to prophets. In the *Fihe mā fihe*, he teaches this explicitly, while at the same time acknowledging that it is in contravention of Muslim theological dogma: “When it is stated that after Moḥammad and the other prophets, *waḥy* (divine revelation) is not sent down to other people, that is not the case. It is simply not called *waḥy*; but this is what was meant when the Prophet said, “The believer sees by the light of God” (*Fihe mā fihe*, p. 121). In the fourth book of the *Maṭnawī*, he also states that the [Sufi Bāyazīd Beṣṭāmi](#) (d. 261/874) received the same kind of divine communications as prophets, and that the Preserved Tablet (*lawḥ-e maḥfuz*) in heaven was the source of his knowledge. He explains in this context that Sufis may use different terms (e.g., *waḥy-e del*) for their divine communication in order to imply that theirs is inferior to that of the prophets, but this is just for the sake of hiding the truth from the non-mystic (*az pay-e rupuš-e āmma*; *Maṭnawī* IV, v. 1854). What is most original about Rumi’s teachings on this subject as compared with those of other Sufis, however, is his encouragement of seekers on the mystic path to strive to follow such inspiration above other kinds of knowledge as much as possible (*Maṭnawī* II, vv. 160-66).

Rumi associates “scent” (*bu*) with divine communication and frequently illustrates this point with the story about Jacob and Joseph’s shirt. His above-mentioned reference to the divine communication received by Bāyazīd Beṣṭāmi is also found in a story about his perceiving through “a scent” the future birth at a specific location of a major Sufi, Abu’l-Ḥasan Karaqāni (d. 424/1033; *Mathnawī* IV, vv. 1802-55). The significance of this point is that the



teachings that Rumi wishes to impart to his disciples are not intellectual, but rather the development of their receptivity to and perception of divine communication for themselves.

Those who succeed in this endeavor become fully surrendered to the divine will, such that they would not even retaliate against someone spitting in their face while lying at their mercy (*Maṭnawī* I, vv. 3735-4004). Since they are no longer directed by the self and its preoccupations, but simply carry out actions for God's sake in the manner of the Qur'anic *Ḳeẓr*, they also cannot be judged morally. In fact, Rumi begins the entire *Maṭnawī* with a story (I, vv. 35-247) that is difficult to bear because of the ethical questions it raises, in spite of the fact that his poem contains many other more appealing stories. The story has a murder at the center of its plot, followed by an extended justification of the murder in the closing comments (vv. 229-46). The decision to start his poem with something that he acknowledges will be difficult for the general public to embrace is a clear indication that Rumi's aim is not to give ethical teachings for a wider audience outside of Sufism. However, this does not preclude the opportunity for overlaps. Errors in judgment due to self-conceit, the paradoxical contradictions of self-motivated human behavior, falls through pride, judging on the basis of inner purity rather than outward appearance or status, and selfless abandon for the sake of love, which are frequently presented in all his didactic writings, have a universal appeal that has made the *Maṭnawī* popular for centuries.

In common with other Sufi authors, for Rumi the aim of the mystical path is to overcome the self (*nafs*). Rumi explains at length that the way to achieve this is under the guidance of a Sufi master (*pir*; *Maṭnawī* I, vv. 2934-58) who has already completed the path, because no one can overcome the self on their own. He specifically points out the superiority of this kind of discipleship to the fulfillment of ordinary religious requirements, because of its efficacy for this purpose (*Maṭnawī* I, vv. 2972-93). The master is needed at various stages in the path for advice about how to navigate the path, both to inspire the beginner (*Maṭnawī* I, vv. 1399-556), and also to assist at the later stages, when there is the hazard of a fall through pride after mystical accomplishments, as illustrated in the story about the Prophet Moḥammad and Zayd (*Maṭnawī* I, vv. 3514-720). There are many false masters, and the way to distinguish between them is through their inner purity, not their outward appearance, actions, and claims, though even disciples of a false master may succeed on the Path, if they are sincere, through God's mercy (*Maṭnawī* I, vv. 2275-98). What is forbidden



for a disciple may be correct for a master, so extra caution is required in discerning the genuine one and also in remaining loyal to him (*Maṭnawī* II, vv. 3311-439).

Although Rumi frequently draws on material from his seminary educational background, the vision of Sufism which he conveys using that material is not one that is easily harmonized with scholastic Islam. His priority is overcoming the self in order to experience God directly, and he sees this as an endeavor that all his readers should aspire to according to their capacity. Scholars who join him are reassured that they will gain a “soul” for the corpse-like knowledge that they already possess, rather than have to abandon that knowledge altogether, but no suggestion is made that their education is beneficial for the Sufi path (*Fihe mā fihe*, p. 156). Rumi also draws on other fields of knowledge, such as medicine and astronomy, without any implication that they are inferior to scholastic religious knowledge. Rather, he uses such knowledge as a means to express his mystical vision of creation as being enchanted in its entirety, with even inanimate objects being in communication with the Divine (e.g., *Maṭnawī* I, vv. 2124-71).

For a music sample, see [Divāna šo](#).

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