

Like Attracts Like: principles of Kubravi esotericism in Mevlevi esotericism

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Abstract

*Samâ' – musical listening accompanied by whirling – is one of many practices used in Sufism with the aim of opening the individual's mind and heart to their greatest potential. Just as with zikr (repeating the Names of God), samâ' is considered a means of releasing spiritual energy, that is, of allowing the portion of divine light which lies dormant in the mystic to awaken, uniting with its counterpart in the Cosmos. The spiritual hermeneutics which governs the principle of 'like attracts like', widely discussed by philosopher Henry Corbin in his *L'Homme de Lumière dans le Soufisme Iranien*, was established between the 12th and 13th centuries by the Persian mystic Najmuddin Kubra and continued by his direct disciple 'Alâ'-al-Dawla Semnânî. Considering the parts which make up the human being as fragments of their cosmic counterparts, Kubra developed an esoteric physiology of subtle organs of perception (lataif) in which each subtle organ or center is associated with a metaphysics of reflected light in Infinity. This law of mutual attraction and recognition of like for like, illustrated by Kubra in the most diverse ways, is based on the communication between the human and The Divine, the seeker and The Sought, the contemplator and The Contemplated, the lover and The Beloved. Kubravi esotericism connects – this has been my insistent hypothesis – Mevlevi esotericism to its deepest roots. And it is precisely these roots that provide the necessary elements for understanding the principles which govern the practice of samâ'. Some of these principles can be expressed in the following terms: samâ' is 'the art of spreading the inner wings'; 'an intensive transformative process between the two poles: Heaven and Earth'; its objective is, through the 'balancing of the interior with the exterior', to lead the individual to the experience of the divine energy.*

Keywords

Samâ', Kubra, Rumi, Kubravi esotericism, Mevlevi esotericism.

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Turning in *samâ*’ is not simply spinning around oneself in circles. It means developing the sensation of internal and external balance, of Heaven and Earth. This is the balance of life itself, in perfect communion with the creation and in deep respect for the ‘Truth behind the truth’ and the ‘Light behind the Sun’ What’s the use of making precise turns around your own axis if your life sinks into chaos? Before considering the practice of *samâ*’, we should critically re-examine our own life. We must know what can happen to us if we are to grow beyond the training of *samâ*. Like everything else in life, *samâ*’ has its price. This is a path that confronts us with our own imbalance. The sufi Way leads, through accepting the work and the constant practice of the exercises, to an openness to realization. The work has to do with renunciation. Thousands of individual tasks make up this Way and all of them together lead to the domestication of egos – *nafs*² (Bauer and Bauer 43-44).

Ingrid and Kurt Bauer synthesizes the authors' personal experience of the initiatory process of *samâ*’ in their inspiring book *Sema: der Wirbeltanz der Derwische; die kunst der lebensbalance*. The couple, who traveled by motorhome to Turkey in search of the Whirling Dervishes or *Mevlevi*, ended up having much more than a cursory contact with Sufism. The vivid way their experience is

²*Nafs* (plural: *enfus*): literally, ‘soul’. According to the spiritual hermeneutics of Najmuddin Kubra (1145–1220) and his disciple Alâoddawleh Semnânî (1261–1336) – first Sufi masters to fix their attention on the physiology of the seven subtle organs of perception or supersensible centers (singular: *latifa*; plural: *lataif*) – the *enfus* correspond to the seven levels or degrees of consciousness that the sufi can experience in his process of spiritual evolution. They are: *nafs ammâra* (the inferior self), *nafs lawwâma* (the judgmental mind or soul-consciousness), *nafs mulhama* (the inspired soul), *nafs mutmayanna* (the pacified soul), *nafs radyya* (the realized soul), *nafs mardiyya* (the soul which realizes) and *nafs kamila* (the purified or complete soul). (See Henry Corbin, 1971; Idries Shah, 1977; Yashar Öztürk, 1988)

narrated – of a practical teaching method being revealed to them – ranks the text amongst the most authentic and instructive contemporary sufi accounts.

The great contribution of the book lies, however, in the field of ‘pre-expressivity’³. We find in it the extra-quotidian principles and techniques that guide the praxis – the turn – of the *Mevlevi* dervishes. *Samâ’*, like any traditional art or practice, is taught progressively, in successive degrees, through steps that can be followed. This is why it is said that this is a path which can be followed by beginners.

We must remember, however, that dervishes – *Mevlevi*, or of any other sufi school – are not, by definition, actors (although some actors may be dervishes!) They are, rather, ordinary people who have the most diverse roles and professions in the world and who have chosen Sufism, the mystical Way of Islam, as the path for their spiritual development. Likewise, the practice of *samâ’* is not primarily aimed at scenic representation – although some practitioners of *samâ’* have become professional ‘Whirling Dervishes’, performing the dance ritual artistically in theaters and concert halls.

Samâ’ is one of the many meditative techniques used in Sufism with the aim of opening the individual's mind and heart to their greatest potential. As much as *zikr* (repeating the Names of God), *samâ’* is considered ‘a means of releasing spiritual energy’, that is,

³ Pre-expression is the level that deals with making the actor's or dancer's energy scenically alive, that is, with how an actor can become a presence that immediately attracts the viewer's attention. This pre-expressive substrate becomes implicit at the level of expression and can be perceived by the viewer. During the training process, the actor can work at the pre-expressive level, as if at this stage the main objective was energy, presence, the *bios* of their actions and not their meaning: “The pre-expressive level, thought of this way is, therefore, an operative level, not a level that can be separated from expression, but a pragmatic category, a praxis, whose objective, during the process, is to strengthen the scenic *bios* of the dancer or actor” (Barba and Savarese 188).

of ‘allowing the portion of divine light that lies dormant in the mystic to awaken, uniting with its counterpart in the Cosmos:

Every time the heart strives for the Throne, the Throne reaches to the heart, so they meet. Each precious stone (that is, each of the elements of the being of light) which is in you, brings about a mystical state or a visualization in Heaven that corresponds to it, be it the fire of a burning desire, of a special preference or of a love [...]. Each time a light ascends from you, a light descends towards you, and each time your rays of light ascend, rays of light corresponding to them also descend towards you [...] If these energies both have the same quality, they will meet half-way, between Heaven and Earth. But when the substance of light that dwells in you grows, it will be the Whole, in relation to that which is of the same kind in Heaven. Then it will be the substance of light in Heaven that will sigh for you, for it will be your substance that will attract it and it will descend towards you. This is the secret of the mystical path (Corbin 84).

The spiritual hermeneutics which governs the principle of ‘like attracts like’, widely discussed by philosopher Henry Corbin in his *L'Homme de Lumière dans le Soufisme Iranien*, was established between the 12th and 13th centuries by the Persian mystic Najmuddin Kubra⁴ and continued by his direct disciple ‘Alā’-al-Dawla Semnānī. Considering the parts which make up the human being as fragments of their cosmic counterparts, Kubra developed an esoteric physiology of subtle organs of perception (*lataif*) in

⁴Born in 1145 in Khwarizm and killed in 1221 in Samarkand, during the invasion of Genghis Khan, Najmuddin Kubra was one of the great initiates of his time, with disciples from all over Central Asia. Many became famous, including: Bahauddin Walad, father of Rum; Baba Kamal, who is cited as one of the masters of Shams of Tabriz (the most important Sheikh of Rumi); Najm Rāzi, author of a mystical treatise in Persian; and Fariduddin Attar.

which each subtle organ or center is associated with a metaphysics of reflected light in Infinity:

In every purified part of human being, the counterpart which corresponds to it is reflected, for things can only be seen and recognized by things that are similar to them. When the esoteric nature that designates geniuses and faculties becomes pure, what is its homologous in the Macrocosm is contemplated in it. The same is true for the soul (*nafs*), the intellect (*'aql*), the heart (*qalb*), the spirit (*ruh*), the trans-consciousness (*sirr*), the arcane or intuitional center (*khafi*) – the inner place where the divine attributes that intoxicate are revealed [...] – even deep consciousness (*haqq*) (Corbin 80).

The hypothesis of an influence of the *Kubravi* or *Kubrawiyya* Order on the *Mevlevi* or *Mawlawiyya* Order – either through Rumi's contact with Shams (who was a disciple of Baba Kamal, a pupil of Kubra) or through the teachings of his own father, Bahauddin Walad (who also received teachings from the Persian master) – is supported by Michel Random, in his book *Rumi, la Connaissance et le Secret*. According to Random (60), it is in *Adâb Al-Tarîqa*, a short treatise on initiation that Kubra sets out the rules of the *Kubravi* Order. These rules resemble the essential prescriptions of the Whirling Dervishes: members must wear the robe corresponding to the *tariqat* (school), sit on prayer mats, and so much repetition of Divine Names (*zîkr*) that they become cosmic dancing (*samâ*).

Kubra's influence on the *Mevlevi*, I hypothesize, goes far beyond the rules of behaviour (*adab*) and meditation techniques (*zîkr* and *samâ*) prescribed by the Sheikhs of the *silsila* (the 'current of transmission' among the sufis). Kubra dedicated himself to studying and describing the phenomenon of 'luminosity', making visionary perceptions an experimental method. And, from the colour of the lights seen by the disciples in a meditative state (or perceived by the master as emanating from them), it was possible to know their

degree of spiritual elevation. Although this metaphysics of light is not directly addressed by most Rumi scholars, the *Mevlevi*s' emphasis on activating the subtle heart (*qalb*) – the fundamental organ of supersensible perception – demonstrates that this initiatory knowledge not only continued to be transmitted through of centuries, but continues to be, even today, one of the central points of *Mevlevi* esotericism.

The heart (*qalb*) is the axis around which the dervishes turn. Its purification is part of the sufi Way and leads – when the spirit triumphs over the negative tendencies of the soul (*nafs*) – to the unveiling of the 'eye of the heart' ('*ayn al-qalb*). In it an embryo of mystical origin develops, like a pearl in its shell, which will give rise to the 'true self' of the individual (*latifa anâiya*).

According to Kubra, the Divine Being has different loci and abodes. The heart (*qalb*) – as well as the spirit (*ruh*), the trans-consciousness (*sirr*), the arcane (*khafi*) and the deep awareness (*haqq*) – is one of the inner places where the Divine Attributes manifests:

The heart participates in every Divine Attribute, and even in the Divine Essence. This participation does not cease to expand, and the mystics differ from one another in the degree of their participation. As each Attribute has its seat in one of the loci or abodes, and the heart participates in each of the Divine Attributes, these are epiphanies in the heart because of the heart's participation in these Attributes. This is how the Attributes show themselves to the attributes, the Essence to the essence (or the Self to the self). On the one hand, these are the Attributes (or places) that contemplate the heart (which make it present). On the other hand, it is the heart that contemplates the places of the Attributes (becomes present to them) (Corbin 83).

If 'in every purified part of being the counterpart which corresponds to it is reflected', the purified heart (*qalb*) also seeks its cosmic counterpart. 'Every time the heart aspires to the Throne, the Throne will aspire to the heart', says the Iranian master. When this attraction occurs, from the 'celestial heaven' towards the 'heaven of the heart' (or 'heaven of the soul'), the heart (*qalb*) is called the 'Holy Spirit':

The Holy Spirit in human being is a subtle heavenly organ. When given the concentrated strength of spiritual energy, he attains Heaven and Heaven merges into him. Or rather, Heaven and Spirit are one and the same. And this spirit does not cease [...] to rise, until it acquires a nobility above the nobility of Heaven, and everything aspires to meet its original source and kind (Corbin 81).

Here is the essence of Kubra's intuition: if the parts that constitute the human being are fragments of their cosmic counterparts, if a substance only sees and knows the substance that is similar to it (just as it can only be seen and known by its own kind), if each kind seeks to unite itself with its own kind, then the 'precious stone' (a metaphor of the cosmic fragment in the human being) will seek, itself, to unite itself with its 'original source', being, therefore, able to see and only recognize the source that was its origin and towards which all its desire and longing are directed.

This law of mutual attraction and recognition of like for like, illustrated by Kubra in the most diverse ways, is based on the communication between the human and The Divine, the seeker and The Sought, the contemplator and The Contemplated, the lover and The Beloved:

There are lights which ascend and lights that descend. The lights which ascend are those of the heart; those that descend are those of the Throne. The creaturely being is the veil between the Throne and the heart. When the veil is broken and a door to the Throne is opened in the heart, like rushes

towards like. The light rises towards the Light, and Light descends towards light, and it is 'Light upon Light' (Corbin 83).

This brief introduction to Kubra's esotericism – almost archaeological work – connects, I suggest, *Mevlevi* esotericism to its deepest roots. And it is precisely these roots which provide the necessary elements for understanding the principles that govern the practice of *samâ'*. Some of these principles were fixed by Ingrid and Kurt Bauer in the book *Samâ': the Whirling Dance of the Dervishes or the Art of Life Balance* and can be expressed in the following terms: *samâ'* is 'the art of spreading the inner wings' (27); 'an intensive transformative process between the two poles: Heaven and Earth' (35) its objective is, 'through the balancing of the interior with the exterior' (45-46) to lead the individual to the experience of the divine energy.

But what exactly does it mean to 'spread the inner wings', 'alchemize the twin poles of Heaven and Earth', 'balance the interior with the exterior'? (Do you realize how much Kubravi hermeneutics is able to decipher these metaphors?) If we connect Kubra's esotericism to Rumi's esotericism, we can easily deduce that 'opening the inner wings' means 'release the spiritual energy', i.e. 'to allow the portion of divine light that lies dormant in the mystic to awaken, uniting itself with its counterpart in the Cosmos'.

Spiritual energy is not, however, released quickly. There are well-defined steps that must be followed. The different stages in the process of learning *samâ'* are, in a way, wrapped up, like a box within a box: you open one of them and discover that there is something else inside, noticing that it is the next box. The complete process of *samâ'*, the totality of the steps, 'leads to a progressive opening of the heart and a breathing in God' (Bauer and Bauer 66).

Ingrid and Kurt Bauer's book provides a clear indication that, in order to learn *samâ'* – meaning learning the bodily technique of

turning – it is not enough to master, in isolation, the choreographic sequences of the preparatory exercises. Rather it is necessary to develop an internal attitude of trust, which also extends to the external context of life:

Before the first step and the first turn, a process of becoming rooted in God begins. The condition for this is the decision to trust. The relationship with God unfolds from there, as in every process of trust and love, and develops more and more. Once rooted in God's trust, the path to freedom is open to human beings. All this precedes *samâ'*. Indeed even before the *semazen* (whirling dervish) turns for the first time, the process of inner growth and life change is well under way. An intense learning process has already taken place. He was rooted in trust (Bauer and Bauer 67).

Trust, therefore, is not automatically gained through the practice of *samâ'*. It is, rather, a prerequisite. Sometimes, as Kurt Bauer explains, the *semazen* can confuse the feeling of comfort that comes with practice with a feeling of confidence. True confidence, however, does not depend on the immediate results – pleasant or unpleasant – of *samâ'*. 'Trust in Life', or 'trust rooted in God', depends, rather, on the individual's capacity for surrender. This is a never-ending process as one can always trust a little more. Thus, the more palpable the experience of trusting, the warmer the inner energy current will become and the stronger will be the recognition of Truth (*al-Haqq*).

Once 'rooted in trust', the individual is able to put into action the principles and techniques concerning the practice of *samâ'*. Each posture, step or attitude has an intention, a goal and a meaning, which must be fixed in the memory of the *semazen* so that, moments before starting *samâ'*, they can connect, through their creative imagination, to that symbolic frame of reference and its implicit meaning.

The awareness of the meaning of each position, gesture, step or turn – either by the adepts involved in the practice or by those who participate in *sama*’ as observers – provides the movement’s ‘universal structures’ (turning, walking, crossing arms, raising hands to the sky), identifiable in other traditional arts, in an absolutely particular sense. Without these references or ‘semantic particularities’, it would not be possible, for example, to distinguish the *Mevlevi samâ*’ from an Afro-Brazilian Candomblé turn or even from the turn of a shaman in a trance in an Amerindian healing rite.

Samâ’ is the art of balance – the balance of life. The turn around the axis of the body is performed with the left leg firmly fixed to the ground, while the right leg performs the movement. In the turn, the white robe of the *semazen* opens like a rose that, greedy for water, stretches towards the sky. Beauty and charm find their most perfect expression in this movement. The right hand is turned up and the left is down. With the right hand raised, the *semazen* grasps the *baraka* (grace) of Heaven, which is carried to the heart and, through the left hand, passed on to the world. *Samâ*’ means to be rooted in the Earth and reach up to Heaven. It means belonging, at the same time, to this world and the other world.

The aim of *samâ*’ is to induce in the practitioner a conscious state of union with the Cosmos. This experience reaches both the deepest levels of existence and into the individual’s daily life. It is for this reason that *samâ*’ can be conceived – individually and collectively – as a kind of ‘training for the perfect balance of life’:

Samâ’ is the ritual of cosmic balance. Every *semazen*, dervish or sufi occupies a specific space in *Samâ*’. The positions of the participants represent, respectively, the Sun, Moon and Planets. In this way, the great turn [the collective ritual] becomes a cosmic anthem. As the stars revolve in harmony around the Sun, the sufis revolve around God [*maallah*] and ‘in God’ [*fillah*]. In Tradition it is said that through *Samâ*’ the energy of God is made available to the

world. When we come into contact with this energy unprepared, it can produce a shock (Bauer and Bauer 54).

Based on my own experience of learning *samâ'* – through my direct contact, between 1990 and 2005, with Seyyed Omar Ali-Shah (1918–2005), sufi Master of the Naqshbandi Order; between 1996 and 2009, with Sheikh Mevlevi Yakup (Baba) Koyuncu ⁵, master of *samâ'* in the Jerrahi Order of Istanbul, Turkey; and in 2009, with the German Master of Circle Dances of the People, Gabriele Wosien, with whom I was able to effectively train and improve my practical knowledge of *samâ'* – I have tried, in this paper, to emphasize the esoteric aspects of *samâ'*, also present in other sufi meditation techniques.

⁵ It was Yakup who pointed me to the book by the Germans Ingrid and Kurt Bauer, who were instructed in Konya to study.

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