

# RABIA OF BASRA AND DIVINE LOVE IN SUFI MYSTICISM

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*Depiction of Rabiya grinding grain from a Persian dictionary.*

Little known in the West, Rabiya of Basra remains one of most famous women in mystical Islam, often credited with introducing the concept of pure Divine Love into Sufism and revered, within her own lifetime and today for her absolute asceticism and knowledge of the Divine Mysteries.

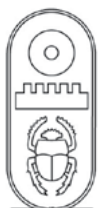
Variouly known as Rabi'a al-Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya and Rabiya al-Basriyya, after her birth place, Rabiya was born into humble circumstances ca. 717 CE in Basra, in present day Iraq and knew great poverty, as well as servitude during her lifetime.

That we know anything at all about Rabiya's extraordinarily inspiring story and teachings is to be credited to Attar of Nishapur (Faridoddin), the renowned Sufi mystic and poet who included her biography in his *Memorial of the Saints*. Writing over three hundred years later, in twelfth-century Iran and anticipating criticism of his having included a woman among revered male saints, Attar addressed

the question of why he had done so by stating "The Divine does not regard your outward forms. The root of the matter is not form, but intention, as the Prophet said: 'Humankind will be raised up according to their intentions'" (Arberry 2000, 29). Perhaps necessarily given the historical distance in time, much of what we do know about Rabiya is considered the stuff of legend. Nevertheless, the many stories of Rabiya and her interactions with her mostly male contemporaries and disciples reveal a great deal about her and her teachings and show a woman renouncing the material world for a life of service to the Divine.

## **Rabiya's Early Life**

The fourth daughter born into a pious but very poor family, Attar tells of the miraculous events reputed to have occurred on the night of Rabiya's birth. There being no oil in the house nor any swaddling in which to wrap the newborn child, her mother had asked her husband to



ask their neighbor for some oil so that she might light a lamp. However unbeknownst to his wife, Rabia's father had made a vow never to ask any living mortal for anything, so after going out and laying his hands on his neighbor's door, he returned saying "they will not open the door." His wife wept and that night, having fallen asleep in distress at his lack of ability to provide for his child, Rabia's father had a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad appeared to him. "Be not sorrowful," the Prophet bade him. "The girl child who has just come to Earth is a queen among women, who shall be the intercessor for seventy thousand of my community tomorrow." The Prophet continued: "go to Isa-e Zadan the governor of Basra. Write on a piece of paper to the following effect: Every night you send upon me a hundred blessings, and on Friday night four hundred. Last night was Friday night, and you forgot me. In expiation for that, give this man four hundred dinars lawfully acquired."

Upon awaking, Rabia's father wrote the letter as directed and the governor, in reply, commanded that two thousand dinars be given to the poor and four hundred dinars to Rabia's father "as a thanksgiving for the Master remembering me."

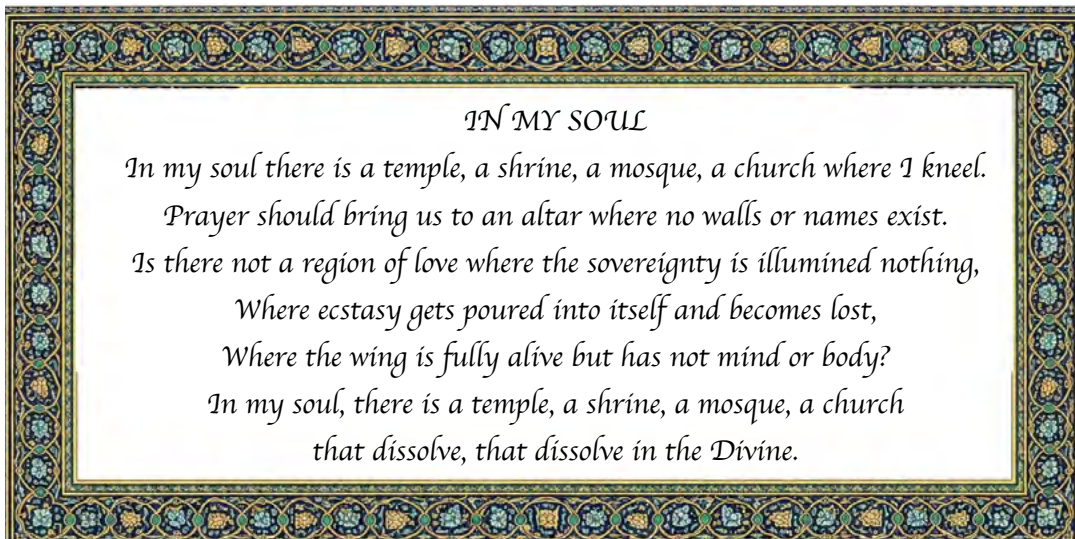
We next learn of Rabia in her youth, when her parents have perished in a famine that swept through Basra, her sisters are "scattered," and she has been sold as a slave for six dirhams. Working in her master's house, Rabia is said to have fasted by day and prayed ceaselessly by night. One night her master awoke from sleep and looking down through a window in the house observed Rabia prostrate and praying: "O my Lord, You know that the desire of my heart is to obey You, and that the light of my eye is in the service of Your court. If the matter rested with me, I should not cease for one hour from Your service, but You have made me subject to

a creature." He also saw what he perceived as a lantern above her head, suspended without a chain. Said to be afraid by what he witnessed, he determined that he would speak to Rabia in the morning whereupon Rabia asked to be set free. The master complied with her request and Rabia left her life of servitude. She journeyed into the desert and in time, built a place of retreat.

This account of Rabia's early life is authoritatively reinforced by her modern biographer, Margaret Smith, and there appears to be little doubt that Rabia had indeed been enslaved. Rabia dedicated the rest of her life to a spiritual asceticism based on celibacy and voluntary deprivation. She rejected many proposals of marriage, including those from companions on the Way. Rabia spent her nights in prayer and her worldly possessions were said to consist of a broken jug from which she drank, an old reed mat to sit upon, and a brick for a pillow. Over time, she attracted to her



The Sufi mystic Rabia Basri Fed by Angels in the Wilderness, *late eighteenth century.*



### IN MY SOUL

*In my soul there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church where I kneel.  
Prayer should bring us to an altar where no walls or names exist.  
Is there not a region of love where the sovereignty is illumined nothing,  
Where ecstasy gets poured into itself and becomes lost,  
Where the wing is fully alive but has not mind or body?  
In my soul, there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church  
that dissolve, that dissolve in the Divine.*

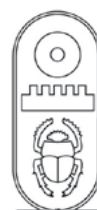
simple home a large number of guests and associates, many of whom became her disciples. Although she counted a small number of women among them, the majority of her disciples were men.

#### **Her Teachings and Prayers**

Leaving no written legacy, it is chiefly through the recounting of her conversations (and more typically), verbal jousts with her guests and disciples, as well as from her prayers, that the depth of Rabia's teachings is revealed. Among the oft quoted stories and anecdotes, two in particular highlight her unique mystical insights. Discoursing on the impropriety of personal desires with a young man named Sofyan and his companion Abd al-Wahed-e Amer, Rabia disclosed her desire for dates. "For twelve years now, I have been desiring fresh dates. You know that in Basra dates are of no consequence. Yet till now I have not eaten any; for I am the Divine's servant, and what business has a servant to desire? If I wish, and my Lord does not wish, this would be infidelity. You must want only what the Divine wishes, to be a true servant of the Divine. If the Divine gives Itself, that is a different matter." When in reply, Sofyan asked Rabia to say something about his situation, she said: "You are a good man, but for

the fact that you love the world. You love reciting the Traditions." In reply, Sofyan cried out, "Lord Divinity, be content with me!" to which Rabia retorted, "Are you not ashamed to seek the contentment of One with whom you yourself are not content?" Sofyan's companion, listening on, then asked, "When is the servant satisfied with the Divinity Most High?" "When his pleasure in misfortune is equal to his pleasure in prosperity," Rabia famously replied.

In this, we see the very early articulation of what was to become a key Sufi doctrine, simply stated. For the Sufi, the goal of the spiritual quest is union with the Divine, absorption into the Divine. Ultimately, this can only be accomplished by Love. While the Sufis delineate various stages on the Way, including purification and purgation of the nafs (desires), asceticism, and complete submission to the will of the Divine, Love is the final and highest stage to be attained by the adept. This takes the form of a passionate longing for the Divine, a direct intimacy between the Lover and the Beloved, and total Satisfaction. For the Sufi, Satisfaction comprised two aspects: human satisfaction with the Divine and Divine satisfaction with a person.





A Sufi in a Landscape, ca. 1550.

As can be found in *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, the oldest Persian treatise on Sufism:

Divine satisfaction really consists in the Divine's willing that people should be recompensed and in Its bestowing grace upon them. Human satisfaction really consists in a person's performing the command of the Divine and submitting to Its decree. . . . In short, human satisfaction is equanimity towards Fate, whether it withholds or bestows . . . so that it is all one to a person whether they are consumed in the fire of wrath or illuminated by the light of mercy, because both wrath and mercy are evidence of the Divine and whatever proceeds from the Divine is good in Its eyes. (Smith 1928, 88–89)

From this stage of Love, the adept passes directly into a mystical union with the Divine who is unveiled in all Its Beauty and attains direct and true Gnosis of the Divine mysteries. Having annihilated self (*fana*), the Sufi attains unity with the Divine and from there on subsists permanently with the Divine, through the Divine, in the Divine, and for the Divine (*baqa*).

Rabia was the first of the early Sufis to stress the importance of loving the Divine for the Divine's sake alone and not out of fear of punishment or anticipation of reward. In an incident recorded by the Persian writer Shamsuddin Aflaki, Rabia sought to make her contemporaries understand this by walking the streets of Basra with a flaming torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When asked by observers what her intention and meaning were she said: "I am going to light a fire in Paradise and pour water on Hell so both veils may completely disappear from the pilgrims and their purpose may be sure, and the servants of the Divine may see It, without any object of hope or motive of fear."

### Rabia's Legacy

Though Rabia was not the first Sufi to realize that Love was the Way to the Divine, she was perhaps the first to lay stress upon the doctrine and combine it with the *Kashf*, the unveiling at the end of the Way of the Beloved to Its lovers, to provide a direct personal experience of Divine revelation. As R. A. Nicholson, the great Sufi scholar, said "with Rabia, Love, the unquenchable flame smoldering in the ashes of ceremonial religion and kindling the torch of mysticism through the darkest ages, began its conquest of Muslim hearts" (Smith 1928: 97).

In her famous verse on the two types of love (shown at the end of this article), Rabia distills the essence of her teachings.

The Love of the Divine to the exclusion of all else, for Its Glory alone, is the Way. In laying stress upon the importance of Sura 5:59 of the Qur'an, "The Divine loves them and they love the Divine" as the cornerstone of all manifestations of love between the Divine and people, Rabia became synonymous with Divine Love, a love which gives up everything and wants nothing but the Divine's eternal Beauty and Grace. This distinguished her from her contemporary ascetics who, for the most part, were pre-occupied with abstention, ritual purity, meticulous observance of religious duties, and a fear of the Divine. Rabia set an example for generations to come and laid the foundations of the multifaceted doctrines of Love of later Sufis.

Rabia lived the life a true ascetic, embracing poverty and surrendering herself utterly to the quest for union with the Divine. She is thought to have lived until she was nearly ninety, retaining clarity of mind and continuing to serve as a spiritual guide and director to the many who sought her counsel, prayers, and teachings until her transition in Basra in 801. Considered the first and greatest female Sufi Saint of Islam, Rabia was the first in a long line of female Sufi mystics to follow.

Today, Rabia is inspiring a new generation of seekers who, though they may shy away personally from her example of extreme asceticism, are nonetheless exalted by her insistence on examining intentions and motives, remaining unattached to promises of reward, nor acting out of fear. Rabia's call to rise above personal notions of pleasure and pain, to realize Divine Love and accomplish that which is worthy of the Beloved, continues to help pave the mystic Way.



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