

Maqām and Ḥāl : The Mysticism of Ordinary and Extraordinary Life in Sufism

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Abstract:

This paper proposes a comparison between classical Sufi descriptions of a mystical state (*ḥāl*) and mystical station (*maqām*) with modern and post-modern concerns about a “mysticism of everyday life.” The experience of a *ḥāl* denotes a state of grace that descends upon a Sufi practitioner, but which is only temporary and facilitates a new “station” in life that represents the ability to bring a visionary state into everyday life (Schimmel 1975, Nasr 1991, Ernst 1997). This functional dialectic can be usefully compared to various concepts of in the writings of humanistic psychology (Maslow 1968, 1993; Reich 1948, 1949). In both the classical Sufi terminology and practice, as well as that in the evolving theories of humanistic psychology, one finds the attempt to contextualize “everyday life” itself within a mystical framework, that is, not only is there a mysticism of everyday life, but everyday life is a type of mysticism in itself.

This paper presents a conversation between ancient and modern voices about a “mysticism of everyday life.” It compares classical Sufi descriptions of mystical states and stations with concepts developed by the humanistic psychologists Wilhelm Reich and Abraham Maslow (Reich 1948, 1949; Maslow 1968, 1993).

First, a word about the topic itself, and our discussion of it here in the Mysticism Group, which takes place against a contemporary Western cultural backdrop. There is enormous popular interest in a “mysticism of daily life,” as witnessed by the titles currently populating the self-help and spirituality sections of most bookstores. The best of these books essentially tell us that whenever one is able to bring a certain quality of attention, concentration or love to a particular

task, something like a mystical insight can occur. Many others, however, concern attempts by various authors to tell us that everyday life is really all the mysticism or spirituality or wisdom that there is. In other words, there is no purpose to undergoing any sort of rigorous spiritual study or dedication to a practice, because the secrets of life are already here in plain view. They essentially tells us not to worry about looking beneath the surface of things and to simply float downstream with the tide of popular culture. I would call this the “Everything I Need to Know I Learned from Trying to Figure Out How to Tune My VCR” thread in popular culture.

The earliest Sufi mystics did not attempt to justify reducing the rigour of either prayer or spiritual practice. Instead, they take their lead from a famous extra-canonical saying of Allah conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad (one of the so-called *hadith qudsi*):

My servant draws near to me through nothing I love more than the religious duty I require of him. And my servant continues to draw near to me by superogatory worship until I love him. When I love him, I become the ear by which he hears, the eye by which he sees, the hand by which he grasps, and the foot by which he walks. If he asks me for something, I give it to him; if he seeks protection, I provide it to him (translated in Ernst 1997, p. 51).

This saying, along with various Quranic passages such as the verse of Light from Sura 24 (v.35), provide what Carl Ernst has called a “divine charter for mystical experience” for the early Islamic and Sufi mystics. Two examples of

mystics who seem to have taken refuge in the above hadith include Abū Yazīd Bisṭamī (d. 875, C.E.), who is quoted to have said in a state of mystical ecstasy “Glory be to me!” (*subḥānī*), and Ḥusayn ibn Maṣṣūr al Ḥallāj (d.922, C.E.), who in similar state said “I am the Truth” (*anā’l Ḥaqq*),.

Similarly, many early Sufis express a radical and uncompromising interpretation of what is called in Islam the doctrine of Unity (*tawḥīd*). In this view, the expression of witnessing of faith, “There is no god except God” (*lā ilāha illa llāh*) really means that there is no other reality except God. Hence any expression of “I-ness” or individuality must be contained within this all-embracing Unity. A modern Sufi author, Seyyed Hossain Nasr, expresses this idea in more nuanced language when he comments:

Sufi doctrine does not assert that God is the world but that the world to the degree that it is real cannot be completely other than God; were it to be so it would become a totally independent reality, a deity on its own, and would destroy the absoluteness and the Oneness that belong to God alone (Nasr 1991, p. 45).

Early Sufi notions about mysticism and everyday life proceed from these metaphysical ideas about the complex interrelationships between and identities among human beings, the world and the divine, ideas that are quite different from classical Western notions, which usually dictate a division between the “sacred” and the “profane.” If a mystic accepts that it is already the divine ground of Reality that has a mystical experience through her or him, then certain questions naturally arise: Why do these experiences pass away? How do they

relate to the states of consciousness that remain? And what is the overall purpose of such experiences?

To try to answer these questions, some of the earliest Sufi authors begin to distinguish between *ḥāl* (a mystical state) and *maqām* (a mystical station). The experience of a *ḥāl* denotes a state of grace that descends upon a Sufi practitioner, but which is only temporary, facilitating (under ideal circumstances) a new “station” in life, which represents the ability to bring a visionary state into everyday life (Schimmel 1975, p. 99; Nasr 1991, p. 72-73). For instance, ‘Abd al Karīm ibn Hawāzin al Qushayrī (d. 1074) comments:

Among the folk, the state is a mode of consciousness that comes upon the heart without a person’s intending it, attracting it, or trying to gain it—a feeling of delight or sorrow, constriction, longing, anxiety, terror, or want. States are bestowed; stations are attained. States come freely given while stations are gained with *majhūd* (the expending of effort). The possessor of a station is secure in his station, while the possessor of a state can be taken up out of his state (translated in Sells 1996, p. 103).

Any tendency, however, to consider a *ḥāl* or state as a mere phenomenon and therefore inferior to a station is countered almost immediately in Qushayrī’s discussion:

If it did not change
It would not be named a state
Everything that changes, passes.

Look at the shadow
as it comes to its end,
It moves toward its decline when it grows long.

[S]ome of the folk have maintained the stability and perdurance of the states....[T]hey are correct who claim that the state is continuous. The particular mode of consciousness (*ma'na*) is a taste or portion (*shirb*) in a person that can later grow into something more. But the possessor of such a continuous state has other states beyond those that have become a taste for him. These other states are ephemeral. When these ephemeral happenings become continuous for him like those previous states, then he rises up to another, higher and subtler state (translated in Sells 1996,p. 104).

In attempting to explain this qualitative difference in spiritual experiences or states, and the belief of early Sufis that not all states are equal, a well-known story is told about the first meeting of Shamsuddīn Tabrizī and Jalāluddīn Rūmī (in approximately 1244 C.E., according to traditions related by Bayat and Jamnia, 1994). The story was written down about a century later by Shamsuddīn Ahmed al Aflākī. In the story, Shamsuddin asked Rumi, “Who was greater, Abu Yazid Bistami or Prophet Muhammad?” Rumi replies:

“Muhammad, God’s envoy, is the greatest of mortals. What of Abu Yazid?”

“Then,” said Shems-ed-din, “what does it mean that Muhammad said: ‘We have not known Thee as Thou shouldst be known,’ while Abu Yazid said; ‘I am exalted, my dignity is upraised, I am the sultan of sultans?’”

Our Master replied: “Abu Yazid’s thirst had been quenched at one gulp; the jar of his understanding was filled with this little quantity; light was limited to the size of his window. But God’s Elect sought each day further, and from hour to hour and day to day saw light and power and divine wisdom increase. This is why he said; ‘We have not known Thee as Thou shouldst be known’” (translated, with different endings in Eflaki, 1976, p. 21; Bayat and Jamnia, 1994, p. 127).

Likewise, in attempting to differentiate the various stations, classical Sufi authors developed extensive lists of the various *maqāmāt* that aspirants would progressively experience as their everyday consciousness. One of the best known lists was formulated by the 12th century Persian Sufi Farīdu d-Dīn ‘Attar in his *Mantiq ut ṭayr*, “The Conference of the Birds.” In this story of a flock of birds who travel to meet their king (known as the “Simorgh,”), led by Solomon’s sacred avian companion the hoopoe, the travellers must encounter seven valleys: the valley of the quest, the valley of love, the valley of understanding, the valley of independence and detachment, the valley of unity, the valley of astonishment and bewilderment, and the valley of deprivation and death. At the end of the journey, only thirty birds remain, and when they finally confront their “king,” they find their own image (“si-morgh” in Persian being a pun that also means “thirty birds.”). The Simorgh tells them:

“I am a mirror set before your eyes,
And all who come before my splendour see
Themselves, their own unique reality:
You came as thirty birds, not less nor more;
If you had come as forty, fifty—here

An answering forty, fifty would appear;
Though you have struggled, wandered, travelled far,
It is yourselves you see and what you are”

(translated by Darbandi and Davis in Attar, 1984, p. 219; see also the earlier translation of C.S. Nott, 1954 from a French version).

Other Sufi formulations add more complexity to the stations on the path, by again considering the question: who is doing the acting and experiencing? They do this by using the concepts of *fanā*, an effacement or annihilation that involves giving up self-will, and *baqa*, the experience of realization-subsistence that involves finding the divine will in one’s own.

For instance, the 11th century CE Sufi master Abū Sa‘īd abn Abīl Khayr developed a list of progression of forty stations that a student must possess if “his march upon the path of Sufism is to be acceptable.” This list begins with intention, conversion and repentance, includes effacement and subsistence as stations 21 and 22, then concludes with ascertaining of the Truth (38) , seeing God with the eye of the heart (39) and finally Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) itself (as translated by Nasr 1991, pp. 78-82). Abi’l Khayr also relates each of the spiritual stations to a particular prophet, beginning with Adam and ending with Muhammad.

Viewed simplistically, this notion of a hierarchy of mystical stations accords with similar metaphysical notions previous and subsequent to the classical Sufis. To make matters more complex, however, as Nasr comments, Abi’l Khayr includes as stations what other Sufis called states, and he also includes additional stations after subsistence (*baqa*², the state of the 30 birds seeing themselves in the Simorgh). Nasr concludes his discussion on Abi’l

Khayr's list on this point of seeming confusion, weaving the context of the state-station dialectic even more finely:

[T]he stations that follow [*baqa'*, subsistence] may be said to be so many stations in the journey *in* God (*fi 'llāh*) after the traveler has ended the journey *to* God (*ila 'llāh*). Even the station of service (*khidmat*) that comes after *baqa'* must not be considered as action or religious service in the usual sense of the word but as service rendered by a being who has already tasted of union with God (*wiṣāl*). In its own order it is something analagous to the vow of Avalokitesvara in Buddhism to save all creatures after having already set one foot in *nirvana* (Nasr 1991, p. 82).

Similarly, other classical Sufis tune the discussion about state and station to an equally fine pitch and deconstruct any simple or categorical notion of the ideas in question. For instance, the 10th century mystic Abū Naṣr aṣ Ṣarrāj notes that within a particular station, the beginner, the more accomplished student and the adept may act completely differently. For instance, as “repentance,” a beginner turns away from faults and forbidden acts; the accomplished student may turn away from even small slips and oversights, while the “people of knowing” (*wājidiin*) turn their attention away even from their own good or pious acts. In this regard, Sarraj quotes one of his predecessors, the Nubian Sufi Dhū n Nūn (d. 859): “The faults of those near to God are the virtues of the pious....What is sincerity for the seeker or novice is self-display for the knowers (*'arifiin*) (translated in Sells 1996, pp. 199-200).

The classical Sufis also began to develop the idea of the *waqt* or mystical moment, which Sells calls “a time out-of-time within time, bringing the eschatological afterworld into the present” (p. 100). Qushayri comments in his treatise on mystical expressions:

They call the Sufi “a son of his moment” (*ibn waqtihi*), meaning that he is completely occupied with the religious obligations of his present state.... He is concerned only with the present moment in which he finds himself. They also say: “to be preoccupied with a past moment is to lose a second moment.” (translated in Sells, p. 100).

Based on this idea, Qushayri develops his ideas of deeper states. For instance, he sees what one might call the psychological or somatic experiences of constriction (*qabd*) and expansion (*bast*) as more developed than the beginner’s concentration on an emotionalized hope of reward and fear of punishment, which are oriented to the future not the present:

The heart of the possessor of fear or hope is related to these two conditions through a deferring (*bi ājilihi*) of the expected. But the possessor of constriction and expansion is a captive of his moment in the “oncomings” that prevail upon him in the immediate now (*fi ‘ājilihi*) (translated in Sells, p. 106).

It is as if the idea of the mystical moment as experienced by the experiencer creates a sense of time as pulse, including all times, rather than as objectified points on a line or circle. At this point in the conversation, the classical Western notions of the strict separation of past, present and future do not adhere. We can see some of this as deriving from the predominately synchronic character of Semitic languages themselves and the difficulties even today of specifying past, present and future in them using only verbal forms (for more on the psychological dimension of the synchronic nature of Semitic languages, see Boman 1960 and a modern application to biblical studies in Douglas-Klotz 2000).

The doctrine of unity (*tawḥīd*) is also carried a step further by al-Hallaj in a text in which he includes within the ground of the divine Reality even what we might call negative states and stations, such as pride and disobedience. In retelling the story of Iblis' refusal to bow to the first human Adam (as told in Sura 2:30-33), Hallaj takes the side of the underdog and shows Iblis as the ultimate monotheist who will not bow to anything except the ultimate Reality, even when it is the ultimate Reality that orders him to do so. Iblis makes the argument in Hallaj's story that in order for the doctrine of *tawḥīd* to be true, Allah must have eternally foreknown and forewilled Iblis' disobedience and so he was, in a paradoxical sense, to use a colloquial expression, "just following orders." In a more profound sense, Iblis is also seen as the perfect Lover who will not settle for anything except the divine Beloved, a theme explored by many later Sufis.

Through all of these formulations and paradoxes about *ḥāl* and *maqām*, it is precisely a sense of divine Love that overshadows the need for any exact understanding, even while the attempt is being made. The Lover knows what

s/he has experienced and does not need to articulate it in the words of the metaphysician. As Rumi says, commenting upon Quran Sura 62:5, intellect is like a donkey that carries books but does not understand them, whereas love is like the winged horse Buraq that carried Muhammad into the divine presence (quoted in Schimmel, 1975, p. 140).

When we turn to the writings of psychologists Reich and Maslow, one must acknowledge that there is both nuance and evolution in the thought of both on the issues explored by the Sufis. To fully describe the thought of either writer would require separate studies devoted to each. At this point, I will content myself with some preliminary points of comparison, if only to show that deep thought on and experience of these issues sometimes produces similar results.

Maslow (1968) proposes both the concept of peak experiences (corresponding to the Sufi states) as well as what he called a “hierarchy of needs” leading to full “self-actualization” (the latter corresponding to the Sufi stations). For the early Maslow, an ecstatic type of unitive peak experience was essential for a fully self-actualized person, whom he defined as “the fully growing and self-fulfilling human, the one in whom his potentialities are coming to full development, the one whose inner nature expresses itself freely, rather than being warped, repressed, or denied” (1968, p. 5). Maslow called such an experience an example of “B [for Being]-cognition”: a way of knowing that was whole, complete, self-sufficient or unitary; that tends to de-differentiate figure and ground; that is open to a richness of detail as seen from many sides; that does not engage in comparison or competition; that seems outside of time and space, and in which the self is forgotten and the ego transcended (1993, p. 89).

Later in life, Maslow re-evaluated his thought and began to consider the value of states that did not fit this early profile. In reconsidering his book Religions, Values and Peak-Experiences (1964), he wrote:

[I] would now also add to the peak-experience material a greater consideration, not only of nadir experiences...but also of the plateau experience. This is the serene and calm, rather than the poignantly emotional, climactic, autonomic response to the miraculous, the awesome, the sacralized, the Unitive, the B-Values. So far as I can now tell, the high-plateau experience always has a poetic and cognitive element, which is not always true for peak experiences, which can be purely and exclusively emotional. It is far more voluntary than peak experiences are. One can learn to see in this Unitive way almost at will (1993, p. 335-6).

At this point, he begins to approach the Sufi notions of an advanced station, that is, of a way of living ordinary life in an extraordinary way dependent upon regular practice and connection to a spiritual community:

Very important today in a topical sense is the realization that plateau experiencing can be achieved, learned, earned by long, hard work. It can be meaningfully aspired to. But I don't know of any way of bypassing the necessary maturing, experiencing, living, learning. All of this takes time.... The "spiritual disciplines," both the classical ones and the new ones that keep on being discovered these days, all take time, work, discipline, study, commitment (p. 336-7).

In the same re-evaluation, he also points out the dangers of polarizing the notion of "mystic" versus "normal," which some had done with his ideas. The danger of the "polarizing mystic," he writes, is that such a person needs stronger and stronger stimuli ("triggers") in order to produce the same mystical state, which can lead to an addictive pattern.

The great lesson from the true mystics, from the Zen monks, and now also from the Humanistic and Transpersonal psychologists—that the sacred is *in* the ordinary, that it is to be found in one’s daily life, in one’s neighbors, friends, and family, in one’s back yard, and that travel may be a *flight* from confronting the sacred—this lesson can easily be lost. To be looking elsewhere for miracles is to me a sure sign of ignorance that *everything* is miraculous (1993, p. 333).

In this regard, Maslow’s definition of “transcendence” at the end of his life, itself transcended the traditional dichotomy of “transcendent” and “immanent” as usually discussed in the study of mysticism:

Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos. (Holism in the sense of hierarchical integration is assumed; so is cognitive and value isomorphism) (p. 269).

Wilhelm Reich’s way into the topic arises from his experiences treating both sexual dysfunction as well as schizophrenia using a type of breathing therapy. In his somatic theories, Reich describes a functional opposition of tension and charge leading to orgasmic release. In many ways, this release corresponds to the states of the Sufis and Maslow’s peak experiences. When the orgasm reflex was successfully reintegrated with the breath, Reich felt that there would be a reformulation (and/or release of) muscular holding, which he called “character armor.” This latter concept can be seen as the somatic equivalent of the Sufi station. For Reich, the analytic therapy of his mentor Freud was not fully effective, because it did not deal with this layer of holding:

All of our patients report that they went through periods in childhood in which, by means of certain practices in vegetative behavior (holding the breath, tensing the abdominal muscular pressure, etc.), they learned to suppress their impulses of hate, anxiety, and love. Until now, analytic psychology has merely concerned itself with *what* the child suppresses and what the motives are which cause him to control his emotions. It did not inquire into the *way* in which children habitually fight against impulses.... It can be said *that every muscular rigidity contains the history and the meaning of its origin* (1948, p. 300, emphasis in the original).

For Reich, such rigidity not only led to what he called “character disorder,” but also to a host of modern diseases such as cardiovascular hypertension, muscular rheumatism, pulmonary emphysema, bronchial asthma, peptic ulcer and various blood diseases. The restoration of a healthy orgasmic response was itself a type of expanded state of awareness (a somatic *hal* in Sufi terms), which when consciously experienced led to a permanent change in the way a patient experienced the world (a somatic *maqam*):

The sensation of integrity is connected with the sensation of having an immediate contact with the world. The unification of the orgasm reflex also restores the sensations of depth and seriousness. The patients remember the time in their early childhood when the unity of their body sensation was not disturbed. Seized with emotion, they tell of the time as children when they felt at one with nature, with everything that surrounded them, of the time they felt “alive,” and how finally all this had been shattered and crushed by their education (1948, p. 357-358, 1942).

While considering in depth a case of the treatment of a schizophrenic patient, Reich makes a comparison between mystical states and schizophrenia, as viewed through the lens of his theory. This led him to propose that there was, in healthy individuals, the somatic equivalent of an organizing self, what he called an “orgonotic sixth sense”:

Besides the abilities to see, hear, smell, taste, touch, there existed unmistakably in healthy individuals a sense of organ functions, an orgonotic sense, as it were, which was completely lacking or was disturbed in biopathies. The compulsion neurotic has lost this sixth sense completely. The schizophrenic has displaced this sense and has transformed it into certain patterns of his delusional system, such as "forces," "the devil," "voices," "electrical currents," "worms in the brain or in the intestines," etc. (1949, p. 454, 1949).

In this regard, the difference between a mystical state and a pathological one, from Reich’s viewpoint, depended upon a person’s ability to integrate extraordinary states within her or his everyday life, to some degree or other:

The functions which appear in the schizophrenic, if only one learns to read them accurately, are COSMIC FUNCTIONS, that is, functions of the cosmic orgone energy in undisguised form. Not a single symptom in schizophrenia makes sense if one does not realize that the sharp borderlines that separate *homo normalis* from the cosmic orgone ocean have broken down in the schizophrenic....

I am referring here to functions which bind man and his cosmic origin into *one*. In schizophrenia, as well as in true religion and in true art and science, the awareness of these deep functions is great and overwhelming. The schizophrenic is distinguished from the great artist, scientist or founder of religions in that his organism is not equipped or is too split up to accept and to carry the experience of this identity of functions inside and outside the organism (1949, p. 448).

Here Reich approaches the Sufi notion of *tawḥīd*, the doctrine of Unity, the experience of the knower becoming the known. When the repression of sexual energy was magnified on the level of society, Reich saw what he called an “emotional plague” that created war, dictatorship and all sorts of violence worldwide (1949, p. 504ff). Later in life, Reich believed that the ingrained repression of natural sexual energy was too deep to be changed in most people. The best that one could do was prevent the development of character armor in young children:

If no severe damage has already been inflicted on it in the womb, the newborn infant brings with it all the richness of natural plasticity and development. This infant is not, as so many erroneously believe, an empty sack or a chemical machine into which everybody and anybody can pour his or her special ideas of what a human being ought to be. It brings with it an enormously productive and adaptive energy system which, out of its own resources, will make contact with its environment and *begin to shape that environment according to its needs....* LET THE CHILDREN THEMSELVES DECIDE THEIR OWN FUTURE. Our task is to protect their natural right to do so (1983, p. 20).

For Reich like the Sufis, the natural expression of love held the key for healing both on an individual and societal level.

Breaking off this conversation for the moment, one finds, in both the classical Sufis as well as the theories of Maslow and Reich, an attempt to contextualize “everyday life” itself within a mystical framework, that is, not only is there a mysticism of everyday life, but everyday life is a type of mysticism in

itself. Both endeavors, ancient and modern, attempt to bridge the inherent gap that ensues when a mystical or visionary state proves temporary, which could be expressed by the questions: If this is divine grace, or the essential nature of Reality, why does it go away? Or does it?

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