BRILL

JOURNAL OF SUFI STUDIES (2026) 1–29

JOURNAL OF SUFI STUDIES

brill.com/jss

Toward Asphyxiation: an Exploration of the Early Sufi Breathscape

Riccardo Paredi | ORCID: 0000-0001-9425-5474
MSCA Global Post-Doc Fellow, Faculty of Linguistic Sciences and Foreign Literatures, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart Milan, Milan, Italy
New York University Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, UAE
riccardo.paredi@unicatt.it

Received 12 August 2025 | Accepted 25 August 2026 |
Published online 15 October 2026

Abstract

Respiration holds a central place in Sufism as both a locus of metaphysical reflection and a medium of spiritual practice. This study offers a source-based examination of breath (*nafas*) in Islamic mysticism, focusing on early Sufi texts up to the fifth/eleventh century. Often overshadowed by later systematic theories, these early teachings reveal a varied yet coherent "breathscape" rooted in Qur'anic imagery, ascetic discipline, and the lived experience of remembrance, while laying the foundations for subsequent Sufi elaborations. Recovering these strands – from vigilant breath-keeping to the breathlessness of union – allows for a revised genealogy of Sufi breath and highlights the importance of engaging the broadest range of early sources to trace the continuity and gradual evolution of these reflections within the tradition.

Keywords

breath – early sufism – *Dhikr* – *Samāʿ* – Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī – Sufi poetry

* This research was carried out within the project SEMENSUF – *Seminal Sufism in Motion: The Oldest Extant Arabic Encyclopedia of Islamic Mysticism and its Dissemination*, funded by the European Union under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (Grant Agreement No. 101150744). Open-access publication has been made possible through the financial support of this project.

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/22105956-BJA10053
© RICCARDO PAREDI, 2026 | ISSN: 2210-5948 (print) 2210-5956 (online)

1 Introduction: a Vibrant Breathscape

Breathing is paradoxical: it is at once "one of the last bastions of the universal" – shared by all living beings yet physiologically diverse – and "perhaps the most subtly contingent of all human activities," shaped with exceptional precision by ritual, therapeutic, and meditative disciplines.[1] Sufism, from its inception, cultivated this dual breathscape, making respiration a privileged site for spiritual practice and metaphysical reflection.[2]

Although no comprehensive study has yet explored the Islamic breathscape in its own right, its significance nonetheless emerges across a wide range of Islamic disciplines and practices – from the regulated breath of Qur'anic recitation and the healing potential of whispered prayers and invocations, to its metaphorical resonance in poetry, its deliberate modulation in calligraphy and music, its theorized roles in medicine, and even its prescribed etiquette in everyday acts such as eating and drinking.[3]

Within Sufi studies, scholarly attention has understandably focused on what is perhaps the most breath-centered practice in Islam – and arguably the most frequently performed form of prayer in Sufism: *dhikr*, the remembrance of God.[4] In its simplest and most widespread form, *dhikr* involves the repetition of God's names, often seamlessly woven into the rhythms of daily life: artisans murmur it as they work, artists breathe it through their creative process, and everyday gestures fall into its cadence – transfiguring life into a continuous, embodied act of devotion. Respiration lies at the heart of this practice:

1 See Nile Green, "Breathing in India, c. 1890," *Modern Asian Studies* 42.2–3 (2008): 283–315, in which the author illustrates how Sufi breathwork was historically shaped by its colonial and religious context.

2 With breathscape, I refer to the experiential and conceptual field formed by the rhythms, sensations, and symbolic meanings of breathing, encompassing both its physical processes and its cultural, spiritual, or metaphysical interpretations.

3 For models of interdisciplinary research that could inform future work on breath in Islamic contexts, one might consider "The Life of Breath" project (2014–20), culminating in David Fuller, Corinne Saunders, and Jane Macnaughton, *The Life of Breath in Literature, Culture and Medicine: Classical to Contemporary* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Andrew Russell and Rebecca Oxley, eds., *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath, Body and World*. Special issue of *Body & Society* 26.2 (2020); Maja Bjelica and Lenart Škof, eds., *Air and Breath in Religions and Philosophies*. Special issue of *Poligrafi* 28.111–2 (2023), only the latter of which, as I shall reference, gives attention to Islamic perspectives on breath with a contribution by Zahra Rashid.

4 For concise yet thorough introductions, see Gerhard Böwering and Moojan Momen, "Ḏekr," in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/dekr/) (accessed 08 August 2025) and Jamal Elias, "Sufi Dhikr between Meditation and Prayer," in *Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Technical Aspects of Devotional Practices*, ed. Halvor Eifring (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 195–6.

when *dhikr* is performed with sincere intention rather than as mere technique, it becomes a profoundly embodied discipline in which breath enables full absorption in the act. It regulates the self, silences intrusive thoughts, awakens spiritual consciousness, and inscribes the presence of the Divine into the body through mastery of the breath.[5]

Much of this literature has examined the diverse respiratory techniques and invocatory formulae of both solitary and collective *dhikr* across the various Sufi paths (*ṭuruq*). In these practices, breath is inseparable from invocation – *dhikr* is quite literally breathed into the heart, or, in technical terms, inculcated (*talqīn*) into the invoker.[6] Studies have highlighted recurring formulations such as the *dhikr* of negation and affirmation (*lā ilāha* / *illā Allāh*), the elision of divine names into pure breath sounds (e.g. voiceless *ḥāʾ* of *al-Ḥayy*, *hāʾ* of *Huwa*, or the "*ah*" framing *Allāh*, etc.), and the distinct breath patterns, movements, and choreographies that characterize major Sufi orders: breath retention (*ḥabs-i dam*) in the Qādiriyya and Chishtiyya; silent *dhikr* centered on *hūsh dar dam* ("awareness in the breath") in the Naqshbandiyya and Bayrāmiyya;[7] rhythmic and vocal breathwork in the Yasawiyya and ʿĪsāwiyya (e.g., the famed "*dhikr* of the saw"); and rotating *dhikr* in Khalwati offshoots like the Shamsiyya and Sünbüliyye, among many others.[8]

Beyond formulaic remembrance (*dhikr*), previous scholarship has also explored breathwork in spiritual audition (*samāʿ*) – though in a less systematic manner. This uneven attention partly reflects the nature of the practices themselves: while breath in *dhikr* is active, structured, and repeatable, respiration in *samāʿ* is more fluid and resists formalization. As a receptive practice of

5 For a dated but still valuable study in this regard, see Louis Gardet, "Un problème de mystique comparée : la mention du Nom divin (*dhikr*) dans la mystique musulmane," *Revue Thomiste* 52.3 (1952): 642–79. For Sufi breathwork in dialogue with contemporary somatic psychology and modern physiological understandings of breath and body awareness, see Neil Douglas-Klotz, "Body of Bliss, Body of Blessing: The Elemental Purification Breaths of Hazrat Inayat Khan and Their Relation to the New Physiology," *Toward the One: The Journal of the Federation of the Sufi Message* 8 (2007): 29–35.

6 On "inculcation" see e.g. al-Suhrawardī's explanation in Erik S. Ohlander, *Sufism in an Age of Transition: ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 222–5.

7 Silent, breath-centered *dhikr* is attested early: already al-Khargūshī reports that a servant's unspoken remembrance is perceived by the angels through the breeze of the gentle wind, al-Khargūshī (d. 406/1015), *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, ed. Bassām Muḥammad Bārūd (Abu Dhabi: al-Majmaʿ al-Thaqāfī, 1999), 319.

8 For a brief overview of *dhikr* practices, see Éric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The inner Path of Islam*, trans. Roger Gaetani (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), 162–70. For *dhikr* practices of each order mentioned above, see the corresponding entries in *Encyclopedia of Islam, New Edition Online* and *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three Online* (hereafter *EI2* and *EI3*).

listening to poetry, chanting, and music to induce or intensify mystical states, *samāʿ* engages the breath in spontaneous rhythms shaped by inner emotion.[9] Breathing may be thus steady or erratic, slow and measured or disrupted by sighs, gasps, or sudden suspensions – mirroring the heart's agitation in states of ecstasy (*wajd*) and unfolding under divine will.[10]

A common feature of the source material on breathwork in both *dhikr* and *samāʿ* is its relatively late emergence. Although respiration was integral to these practices from their earliest expressions, detailed aspects and techniques were seldom recorded in writing. This was largely due to their oral and aural transmission within master–disciple relationships, as well as their esoteric and initiatory character, often intentionally confined to the boundaries of the *ṭarīqa*. Documentation expanded alongside the institutionalization of Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*) and the gradual codification of their doctrines and practices. The paucity of early documentation also prompted, especially in earlier Orientalist scholarship, various attempts to locate the origins of Sufi breath practices in other religious or meditative traditions – efforts that produced a significant literature on parallels, cross-cultural contacts, and the wider spiritual landscape that shaped early Sufism.[11]

---

9 My characterization here is necessarily broad – structured and codified forms of *samāʿ* certainly exist. For broad overviews on *samāʿ* with reference to breathwork, see Kenneth S. Avery, *A Psychology of Early Sufi* samāʿ*: Listening and Altered State* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Leonard Lewisohn, "The Sacred Music of Islam: *Samāʿ* in the Persian Sufi Tradition," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 6 (1997): 1–33; Nelly Amri, "Le *samâʿ* dans le milieu ifriqiyen (VIIe–X^{e}/XIIIe–XVIe siècle): pratiques, tensions, codification," in *Des voies et des voix. Actes de la deuxième édition du colloque international, Tlemcen du 12 au 16 novembre 2005*, ed. Zaïm Khenchelaoui (Algiers: Centre National de Recherches Préhistoriques, Anthropologiques et Historiques, 2006), 180–222.

10 For an exploration of the Islamic soundscape in Central Asia shaped – among other sounds – by Sufi breathwork, see Aḥmad Kāsānī's typology of *dhikr* in Alexandre Papas, "Creating a Sufi soundscape: Recitation (*dhikr*) and audition (*samāʿ*) according to Aḥmad Kāsānī Dahbīdī (d. 1542)," *Performing Islam* 3.1–2 (2014): 25–43.

11 Practices of harmonic breath calibration and attunement to the divine are widespread across religious traditions and likely arose independently, though Sufi parallels with Yoga, Kabbala, and hesychasm practices are notable. On Sufi engagement with Yoga from at least the eighth/fourteenth century, highlighting shared techniques such as *prāṇāyāma* and early textual exchanges like the thirteenth-century Persian and then Arabic translation of the *Amṛtakuṇḍa*, see e.g. Carl W. Ernst, *Refractions of Islam in India: Situating Sufism and Yoga* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016) and Carl W. Ernst and Patric D'Silva, *Breathtaking Revelations: The Science of Breath from the "Fifty Kamarupa Verses" to Hazrat Inayat Khan* (Richmond: Suluk Press, 2024). For Sufi-like practices such as breath control during the meditation of divine names in Jewish mysticism, see Paul B. Fenton, "Judaism and Sufism," in *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2002), 755–68 and, for two specific cases: idem., "Solitary Meditation in

2 Under the Shadow of the Masters: Recovering Early Sufi Voices on Breath

A different picture emerges when it comes to theoretical reflections on respiration in Sufism. In a concise entry on "Breath and Breathing" in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three*, Thomas Dähnhardt highlights the centrality of breath (*nafas*) in Sufi thought. He notes Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī's (d. 234/848) teachings on breath awareness, before turning to the speculative metaphysics of Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and later Akbarian thinkers.[12]

This focus – understandably shaped by the limited scope of the encyclopedic format – nonetheless reflects a broader trend in the scholarship on breath in Sufism. In contrast to the case of ritual breathwork instructions in *dhikr* or *samāʿ*, which become more explicit only in later texts, early ascetic and mystical figures did articulate foundational ideas on breath and respiration. Yet despite the availability of this material, their contributions are frequently overlooked in favor of a substantial scholarly focus on Ibn al-ʿArabī, his intellectual heirs, and other later systematic thinkers.[13]

Jewish and Islamic Mysticism in the Light of a Recent Archeological Discovery," *Medieval Encounters* 1.2 (1995): 271–96; Bülent Şenay, "Hasidism under the Influence of Hesychasm and Sufism: Baal Shem Tov – A Jewish Sufi and Hesychast?," *Uludağ Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 30.1 (2021): 57–77. For Christian mysticism, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The prayer of the heart in Hesychasm and Sufism," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 31 (1986): 195–203; İsa Babur, "Heart-Centered Paths: A Comparative Study of Hesychasm and Sufism," *Entelekya Logico-Metaphysical Review* 7.2 (2023): 35–61; Eiji Hisamatsu, "Hesychasm and Sufism – A Comparison Between Jesus Prayer and Dhikr," *Religions* 15 (2024): 1556; Marco Toti, *La preghiera e l'immagine: L'esicasmo tardobizantino (XIII–XIV secolo): temi antropologici, storico-comparativi e simbolici* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2012).

12 Thomas Dähnhardt, "Breath and breathing," in *EI3*. Al-Bisṭāmī's teaching on *pās-i anfās*, often cited from the sixth/twelfth century work, i.e. Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyāʾ*, ed. Muḥammad Istiʿlāmī, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Zawwār, 1355 sh./1976), 191, has a similar earlier counterpart in Abū l-Faḍl al-Sahlajī/al-Sahlakī (d. 475–6/1082–3), "Kitāb al-Nūr min kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr," in ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī, ed., *Shaṭaḥāt al-ṣūfiyya* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1949), 100: "The mystics worship and keep their breaths (*ḥifẓ anfāsihim*) with the One they know because they have abandoned everything besides Him."

13 One notable exception is Nasrollah Pourjavady, "The Notion of the Breath (*nafas*) in Ḥallāǧ," *Persica* 17 (2001): 85–90, who analyzes the theme of breath in al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), highlighting its prominence among early mystics. However, he does not address transmission issues, as many sayings attributed to al-Bisṭāmī and al-Ḥallāj himself survive only in later sources. Another partial exception is Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Chanter la douceur de la prière. De quelques aspects méconnus du vocabulaire technique de la poésie mystique persane," *Journal des savants* 1 (2014): 121–41, who explores breath and its metaphors in Persian mystical poetry, including some early Sufi teachings by al-Ḥallāj,

Indeed, Ibn al-ʿArabī offered one of the most influential and sophisticated interpretations of breathing in the Sufi tradition.[14] For him, the breath of the Merciful (*nafas al-Raḥmān*) is the very process through which God brings the cosmos into existence as an act of merciful self-disclosure. This breath simultaneously manifests and sustains all things in a state of continuous re-creation, encompassing and embracing them in divine mercy (cf. Q 7:156), relieving the anguish of their prior non-existence, and forming the very substance of creation. Breath and speech are inseparable: existents emerge as articulated forms – letters, words, sentences, books – within this infinite, undifferentiated exhalation. Human respiration mirrors this divine creative act and becomes vehicles for returning to the source. At the end of time, the All-Merciful will "inhale" the objects of His self-knowledge, drawing all quiddities back from their fleeting manifestation to their original state of hidden nonexistence.[15]

Another major focus of scholarly work on breath in Sufism is Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), the subject of several dedicated studies exploring his reflections on respiration.[16] The great mystic developed a rich theopoetics of breath, portraying God as the *damsāz* ("breath-maker" or "breath-player") and *ham-nafas* ("co-breather"), whose animating breath fills all beings with life and longing. In the famous proem of the *Mathnawī*, the breath of the Real (*nafkh-i ḥaqq*) enters the reed flute – symbol of the soul exiled from its

al-Bisṭāmī, Abū Saʿīd b. Abī l-Khayr (d. 440/1049), Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) and ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1089).

14 See William Chittick's scholarship, esp. on chaps. 198 and 558 of Ibn al-ʿArabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, e.g. William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY, 1989), esp. 97, 127–32, 205–6, 377; and idem., *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-ʿArabī's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY, 1998), esp. 69–72, 329–31. For the so-called "dynamic of the Hidden Treasure," see also Stephen Hirtenstein, "Cosmogonic Myths in Sufism," in *Sufi Cosmology*, ed. Christian Lange and Alexander Knysh (Leiden: Brill, 2023), esp. 61–4. For the imaginal dimensions underpinning Ibn al-ʿArabī's notion of the divine breath, and an inspiring exploration of "Divine Passion and Compassion" see Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 105–75.

15 Later authors elaborated and expanded Ibn al-ʿArabī's interpretation of the *nafas al-Raḥmān*, e.g. among many, Jāmī (d. 898/1492), for which see Sajjad Rizvi, "The Existential Breath of al-Raḥmān and the Munificent Grace of al-Raḥīm: The Tafsīr Sūrat al-Fātiḥa of Jāmī and the School of Ibn ʿArabī," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8 (2006): 58–87.

16 For an introduction to Rūmī's "pneumatology," see Kazuyo Murata, "The Life of the Breath of Life in Rūmī," in *Islamic Thought and the Art of Translation: Texts and Studies in Honor of William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata*, ed. Mohammed Rustom (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 18–29 and Zahra Rashid: "*Nafas*: Breath Ontology in Rumi's Poetry," *Poligrafi* 28.111–2 (2023): 121–6.

origin – producing the plaintive song of separation and yearning for union.[17] Breathing thus becomes both a metaphysical condition and a sacred performance: the mystic, emptied of ego, becomes the perfect vessel – the *ney* played by the divine musician, drawing forth the hidden melody of existence.[18] Through intimacy with the *hamdamān* ("breath-companions") – saints, prophets, or God Himself – the seeker partakes in this divine respiration, which bridges the gap between self and Other, finite and infinite.[19]

Yet while the contributions of these towering figures have profoundly shaped our understanding of breath in Sufi metaphysics and poetics, they have also cast a long shadow over earlier, less systematized articulations. This study shifts the focus to the formative period of Islamic mysticism – up to the fifth/eleventh century – to offer a source-based exploration of the early Sufi breathscape. These teachings are not only deeply grounded in Qur'anic imagery but also lay the conceptual and experiential foundations on which later thinkers built. By returning to this neglected terrain, the study aims to illuminate a more layered genealogy of Sufi thought on breath – one that values the subtle insights of early ascetics and mystics alongside the grand syntheses of their successors. Accordingly, this article does not address later, modern, or contemporary Sufi developments, which constitute a distinct and already well-documented field of scholarship.[20]

17 Saʿdī's (691/1292) "Rose Garden" (*Gulistān*) too opens with a meditation on breath: "Every breath which is inhaled bestows new life, and every breath exhaled gives pleasure. For this reason, every act of breathing contains two benefits," see the introduction of Saʿdī Shīrāzī, *Gulistān-i Saʿdī*, ed. Ghulām-Ḥusayn Yūsufī (Tehran: Khwārazmī, 1368 sh./1989).

18 Although Rūmī greatly popularized the theme, the idea of a cosmological concert can be traced back at least to the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ (Baghdad, fourth/tenth century) and, within Sufi thought, at least to Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. 520/1126). See Jean-Louis Michon, "Sacred Music and Dance in Islam," in *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*, ed. Jean-Louis Michon and Roger Gaetani (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006), 167. On the "natural symbol" of the *nay* in Sufism, see Banu Şenay, *Musical Ethics and Islam: The Art of Playing the Ney* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press Urbana, 2020), esp. chapter 5 and 6. One may be tempted to find a distant echo of this image in an early saying attributed to Abū l-ʿAbbās b. ʿAṭāʾ (d. 309/922): "Longing breathed (*tanaffasa al-shawq*) in my heart and made it rise / Just as the flow of water breathes through the reed (*ʿūd*)." Al-Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 503.

19 Before Ibn al-ʿArabī and Rūmī, Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. ca. 618/1221) portrayed the human as both "soul" (*jān*) and "universe" (*jihān-i muṭlaq*) chiefly through the image of the drop's return to the ocean; yet for his "Breathing Practices and the Awakening of Selflessness" see Cyrus Ali Zargar, "The Cruelty of the Way and the Afflictions of Dīn: A Study of ʿAttar's The Speech of the Birds' Climactic Moment," in *Mystical Landscapes in Medieval Persian Literature*, eds. Fatemeh Keshavarz and Ahmet T. Karamustafa (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), 217–42.

20 A non-exhaustive selection of studies on breath in later Sufi contexts includes: Stefano Pellò, "The Breath of the Imam: On the Safavid Christ of Mullā Muḥsin Fayż-i Kāshānī

3 The Scriptural: Breath of Life, Wind of Mercy

Sufi reflections on respiration rest on a deep lexicographical and scriptural foundation. Qur'anic cosmology portrays breath as intimately tied to the divine act of creation and the mystery of life itself, primarily through the pneumatic concepts of *rūḥ* ("spirit") and *nafs* ("self"). The exact nature of *rūḥ* – etymologically related to wind (*rīḥ*) – remains elusive: the Qur'an itself affirms that it is a matter of God's command, and humans "have but little knowledge of it" (Q 17:85). Commonly understood as the life-giving Spirit that God breathes (*nafakha*)[21] into creation, this divine inbreathing animates the first human being, i.e. Adam (Q 15:29; Q 32:9; Q 38:72), initiates the miraculous conception of Maryam/Mary (Q 21:91; Q 66:12), and is reenacted by ʿĪsā/Jesus (himself defined as "God's Spirit," *rūḥ Allāh*) when he breathes life into a clay bird (Q 3:49; Q 5:110).[22] These acts form a chain of vivifying exhalations, linking divine agency to human and prophetic action, the eternal to the temporal, and even the masculine to the feminine – as reflected in the dual grammatical gender sometimes assigned to *rūḥ* in Arabic.[23] This shared current of life

(1599–1679)," *REArm* 41 (2022): 491–504; Zahra Rashid, "*Haqāʾiq-i Hindī*: A Sufi Poetics of Air and Breath Through Bhakti Songs," *Sophia* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-025-01085-7; Arthur Saniotis, "Attaining the Mystical Body: Indian Sufi Ascetic Practices," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 23 (2012): 65–83; Sepideh Afrashteh, "*Dhikr* in Islamic Sufism: A Case Study of the Order of Kubrawiyya," *Journal of the Institute for Sufi Studies* 3.1 (2024): 20–35; Oleg Yarosh, "Contestualizzazione del respiro yogico nelle comunità sufi occidentali," *Mefisto* 5.2 (2021): 87–104; Nasima Selim, *Breathing Hearts: Sufism, Healing, and Anti-Muslim Racism in Germany* (New York: Berghahn, 2024).

21 The root *n–f–kh* appears about twenty times in the Qur'an, referring both to God's creative inbreathing and to the blowing of the horn (*ṣūr*) that signals the end of the world and resurrection (e.g., Q 6:73; 18:99; 20:102), thus placing breath at both the origin and reawakening of life.

22 For further Sufi elaborations of Jesus as the "spirit of God," see Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 2010), esp. "Jesus in Ṣūfism," 83–106; Milad Milani, "Representations of Jesus in Islamic Mysticism: Defining the 'Sufi Jesus'," *Literature & Aesthetics* 21.2 (2011): 45–64.

23 See Sarra Tlili, "From Breath to Soul: The Quranic Word *Rūḥ* and Its (Mis)interpretations," in *Arabic Humanities, Islamic Thought: Essays in Honor of Everett K. Rowson*, eds. Joseph Lowry and Shawkat Toorawa (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1–21. On competing Sufi interpretations of the eternal or non-eternal nature of *rūḥ*, see also Atif Khalil, "Sufism and Qurʾānic Ethics," in *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London: Routledge, 2020), 159–71. For one of the earliest discussions on Sufi understanding of *rūḥ* (as uncreated, divine, life-bestowing), see Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī, *al-Taʿarruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf*, ed. Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1413/1993), 73–4. While *rūḥ* is uncreated, al-Kalābādhī holds that each human breath is created by God as it occurs, denying human autonomy and affirming total divine control, ibid.,

would become, in later mystical (*sensu lato*) poetry, the basis for a resonant metaphor: God as the Cup-Bearer, His breath as wine, and the human body as the goblet.[24]

Nafs too, is a polyvalent and thus elusive term. The root *n-f-s*, which occurs two hundred and ninety-eight times in the Qur'an, is etymologically linked to respiration, as the noun *nafas* and the verb *tanaffasa* are the most common Arabic terms for "breath" and "breathing" – though neither occurs in the Qur'an itself. In Qur'anic usage, *nafs* most often denotes the individual person (e.g. Q 5:32), the reflexive "self" (e.g. Q 3:30), or the inward self (e.g. Q 33:37), and only rarely refers to a detachable, subtle, vital principle or lower "soul" (e.g. Q 31:28) – in alignment with its Biblical cognate *nefesh*, the life force that circulates in blood.[25] The root also carries connotations of relief, expansion, and unfolding – meanings that converge powerfully in the Qur'anic oath: "By the dawn as it breathes (*tanaffasa*)!" (Q 81:18), where night's constriction yields to the expansive exhalation of dawn, yoking the macrocosmic rhythm of creation to the microcosm of the human lungs.[26]

For its part, canonical and non-canonical early prophetic and pious literature foregrounds both the association of breath with divine mercy and its breezes, and the practical, bodily dimensions of respiration. On a symbolic level, this literature reinforces the deep connection between breath and the natural element of wind – portrayed in the Qur'an as a "bearer of good tidings" (e.g. Q 7:57; 25:48; 27:63; 30:46) – and anticipates the later crystallization of the expression *nafas al-Raḥmān* ("the breath of the Merciful") in Sufi metaphysics. One of the earliest occurrences of this theme appears in Ibn Abī Shayba's (d. 235/849) *Muṣannaf*, which records a report attributed to Abū al-Dardāʾ

50–2. Similarly, Ibn ʿAṭāʾ affirms that not a single breath can be attributed to humans, see al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*: *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿazīz*, ed. Sayyid ʿImrān, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1421/2001), *sub* Q 61:2–3.

24 See, e.g. Ḥāfiẓ Shīrāzī, *Dīwān-i Khwāja Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ*, ed. Parvīz Nātil Khānlarī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Khawārazmī 1359 sh./1980), 534 [*ghazal* #259], 868 [*ghazal* #426].

25 For the root "n–f–s" see its entry in Elsaid M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, eds., *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008), 954–5; for a lexicographical reflection, see Regis Blachère, "Note sur le substantif *nafs* « souffle vital », « âme », dans le Coran," in *Analecta*, ed. Regis Blachère (Damascus: Presses de l'Ifpo, 1975), 51–60.

26 Early pietistic literature also seized upon this imaginal parallel between breath and light: "O servants of God, truly this Qur'an dispels the plots of Satan and his hidden schemes, just as the light of dawn, when it breathes, drives away the darkness of night as it recedes," Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-Zuhd al-kabīr*, ed. ʿĀmir Aḥmad Ḥaydar (Beirut: Dār al-Jinān wa-Muʾassasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, 1408/1987), 215 [#546].

(d. 32/652–3?) urging believers to seek out goodness throughout their lives and to expose themselves to the "breezes of God's mercy" (*nafaḥāt raḥmat Allāh*) by which He touches whomever He wills among His servants.[27]

The precise expression *nafas al-Raḥmān* appears around the same time in reports attributed to the Prophet Muhammad himself, preserved in both Sunnī and Shīʿī sources dating back to the second/eighth century. In one widely transmitted hadith, the Prophet, turning toward Yemen, says: "Truly, I sense the breath of the Merciful coming from this direction," a metaphor for divine relief arriving from Yemen, often associated with the Prophet's helpers (*anṣār*) or the ascetic Uways al-Qaranī.[28] In another report, the Prophet says: "Do not curse the wind, for it is from the breath of the Merciful," further underscoring the convergence of natural and spiritual signs – wind and breath – as parallel vehicles of God's mercy in times of hardship.[29]

These symbolic associations help illuminate the meaning of early embodied practices involving breath. In numerous reports, often attributed to ʿĀʾisha, the Prophet is described as breathing (*nafatha*) into his hands while reciting prayers, then wiping his body to seek healing – an embodied ritual in which divine words are transformed into a kind of spiritual balm and distributed across the body through breath.[30] This link between respiration and

27 For this widely circulating saying within and beyond Sufi circles, see Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf*, eds. Ḥamad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Jumʿa and Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Luḥaydān, 16 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1425/2004), 7:111 [#34594].

28 Among the first occurrences, see al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), *Kitāb al-Tārīkh al-kabīr*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir Aḥmad ʿAṭā', 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1422/2001), 4:74–5; or else al-Faḍl b. Shādhān al-Azdī (d. 260/874), *al-Īḍāḥ*, ed. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī al-Urmawī (Tehran: Muʾassasa-yi Intishārāt va Chāp-i Dānishgāh-i Tihrān, 1363 sh./1984), 14. It appears also, with variations, in Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), *Musnad al-imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾūṭ, ʿĀdil Murshid, et al., 50 vols. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1413–21/1993–2001), 16:576, – with the wording *nafas rabbikum* – or else in Ibn Abī ʿĀṣim (d. 287/900), *al-Āḥād wa-l-mathānī*, ed. Bāsim Fayṣal Aḥmad al-Jawābira, 6 vols. (Riyadh: Dār al-Rāya, 1411/1991), 4:411, with the wording *nafas rabbī*.

29 See, e.g. Ibn Qutayba, *Gharīb al-ḥadīth*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh al-Jabbūrī (Baghdad: Maṭbaʿat al-ʿĀnī, 1397/1997), 149, 291.

30 See, e.g. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* #6139 and compare with #4439. Louis Massignon also attributes to ʿĀʾisha a report describing the Prophet Muhammad's early experiences of revelation as gradual, beginning with isolated letters before coalescing into full phrases. He interprets these as "*commotions internes*" marking the inception of breathwork in Islam. Massignon further suggests that the earliest companions of the Prophet trained themselves to recite the Qur'an by synchronizing *nafas* (breath) and *rūḥ* (spirit), "polarizing through intention the ambivalent triliteral roots, in the hope of reconnecting with the primordial divine breath." While evocative, I have been unable to locate the precise reports to which Massignon refers. See Louis Massignon, "L'idée de l'esprit dans l'Islam," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 8 (1945): 277–82.

somatic discipline also appears in the Prophet's well-known advice to fill the stomach one-third with food, one-third with drink, and to leave one-third for breath – a principle later echoed by numerous ascetics such as Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. ca. 194/810), who viewed bodily restraint as key to cultivating inner awareness.[31]

4 Conscious and Unconscious: Breathing in Early Mystical Literature

As Louis Massignon aptly synthesizes, early mystical literature drew on scriptural terminology to develop a metaphysical conception of "inner time" – oscillating and alive – distinct from "astral, cyclical time" (measured by the sundial) and "degrading time" (measured by the exhaustion of the hourglass).[32]

This tendency to ground the conceptual architecture of Sufism in Qur'an-inflected vocabulary is already evident in the definition of *nafas* ("breath") as a technical term in early Sufi "manuals," notably in the earliest surviving exposition of Sufi doctrine, Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's (d. 378/988) *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* ("The Book of Flashes"). There, *nafas* is defined as a *rūḥ min rīḥ Allāh* – "a breath from God's breeze, cast upon the fire of hearts to extinguish its sparks."[33] As is often the case in Sufi definitions, the formulation fuses Qur'anic imagery with experiential insight, linking breath to divine relief and interior transformation. This

31 E.g. Ibn al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Zuhd wa yalīhi Kitāb al-Raqāʾiq*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-Aʿẓamī (Malegaon: Majlis Iḥyāʾ al-Maʿārif, 1386, reprinted with different pagination but the same item numbers, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1419/1998), #533. For Shaqīq al-Balkhī, see Paul Nwyia, *Trois œuvres inédites de mystique musulmane* (Beirut : Dār al-Mashriq, 1973), 17–8. Breath is also linked to drinking etiquette, e.g. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* #5631, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* 2028b, Ibn Mājah, *Sunan* #3427.

32 Massignon, "L'idée de l'esprit dans l'Islam," 277.

33 The term "Sufi manuals" or "handbooks," for lack of a more precise designation, refers to a diverse body of self-conscious efforts to present and systematize Sufi thought as an Islamic "science." See e.g. al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ fī l-taṣawwuf*, ed. Reynold A. Nicholson (Leiden: E.J. Brill and London: Luzac & Co, 1914), 347–8; ʿAbd al-Malik al-Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 436; for synthetic variations, see Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, "Tafsīr alfāẓ al-ṣūfiyya," in *Sufi Treatises of Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021)*, eds. Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 2009), 33 [#121]. This canonical definition can be also found in al-Qushayrī's "Kitāb ʿIbārāt al-ṣūfiyya wa-maʿānīhā," edited together with other three treatises in Qāsim al-Samarrāʾī, "Arbaʿ rasāʾil fī al-taṣawwuf," *Majallat al-majmaʿ al-ʿilmī l-ʿirāqī* 18 (1389/1969): 49 [#18]; however, in his *Epistle*, al-Qusharyī opts for a slightly different definition: "Breath is the soothing of hearts through the subtle graces of the Unseen (*tarwīḥ al-qulūb bi-laṭāʾif al-ghuyūb*)," al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, eds. ʿAbd al-Ḥālim Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. al-Sharīf (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1994), 196.

compact formulation reflects a broader pattern of transmission in early Sufi literature. Shaped by orality, early mystical texts often consist of short sentences, aphorisms, terse sayings, and scattered maxims – fragmentary in structure but dense in meaning – that together form a constellation of insights into how early renunciants and mystics understood the role of breath in spiritual life.

Yet, alongside these dispersed teachings, we also find the emergence of more sustained and elaborated reflections. A case in point is one of the earliest and most developed theories of breath, articulated by the third/ninth-century mystic al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 295–300/907–12), whose keen interest in the physiology of *nafs* left a lasting impact on Sufi thought.[34] In his view, although Adam came to life through the *rūḥ* of God, his body was vitalized by the *nafs*, a life force rooted in clay, residing in the lungs, and sustaining the body through respiration and blood circulation. From this distinction emerge two modes of breath: *rūḥ* generates a cool, luminous exhalation (*nafth*), described by al-Tirmidhī as a "wind of compassion" (*rīḥ al-raʾfa*) and a "light of life" (*nūr al-ḥayāt*) infused into Adam; *nafs*, by contrast, produces a warm, denser breath (*nafkha*), tied to the lower self and bodily appetites.[35]

This dual structure would later resonate strongly with Sufi thinkers, who distinguish between two kinds of breath a human being can take: a conscious, fragrant breath – "a breeze of the east wind that passes through a rose garden," ego-free, from the Real, with the Real, in the Real – and the natural, unconscious breath – "smoke from a baker's oven," unaware of the Real and immersed in associative thoughts (*khawāṭir*) and base impulses (*shubuhāt*).[36]

34 Though only fragmentarily preserved, another coherent theory can be discerned in the surviving writings of the early Sufi Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), who identified vital breath (*nafas*) with the human soul (*nafs*) and regarded the latter as the arena of a struggle between the God-oriented heart and the self-centered carnal soul (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi-l-sūʾ*), i.e. the spiritual self (*nafs al-rūḥ*) vs the natural self (*nafs al-ṭabʿ*), see Gerhard Böwering, "Sahl al-Tustarī," in *EI2*. See also al-Tustarī's commentary of Q 39:42 in al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 39:42.

35 For al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's "pneumatology," see for instance his *Nawādir al-uṣūl fī aḥādīth al-rasūl*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAmīra, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1412/1992), *aṣl* 246; see also Geneviève Gobillot's discussion of "breath" in her translation of al-Tirmidhī's *Ghawr al-umūr*, Geneviève Gobillot, *Le livre de la profondeur des choses. Étude historique et thématique de l'œuvre d'al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2015), 159–63; and Sara Sviri's synthesis of "Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's Physiology and Cosmology of the *Nafs*" in Sara Sviri, "Zuhd in Islamic Mysticism," in *Sufi Cosmology*, 179–82.

36 For the vivid metaphors quoted, see the Abū Saʿīd b. Abī l-Khayr's *dictum* in Muḥammad b. Munawwar, *Asrār al-tawḥīd*, in the masterful English translation by John O'Kane, *The Secrets of God's Mystical Oneness* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1992), 448. Likewise, Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038) reports: "I heard Yaḥyā say: 'Glory be to the One

5 The Living, in Every Breath

The core teaching in early Sufi writings on respiration is that God – the Living (*al-Ḥayy*) – is present in every breath, and that this presence must be continuously remembered.[37] To live and to breathe in truth is to let each breath pass through remembrance of its Giver, free from hypocrisy or idolatry – a rarity that may occur only once in a lifetime.[38] Drawing on the phonetic, orthographic, and semantic proximity between *nafs* ("self") and *nafas* ("breath"), Sufis often read the Qur'anic exhortation to "remember your Lord within yourself" (*fī nafsika*, Q 7:205) as a call to remember God through awareness of one's very breath (*fī nafasika*).[39]

Such awareness is cultivated through spiritual vigilance (*murāqaba*), attentiveness (*murāʿāt*), and disciplined breath-guarding (Pers. *pās-i anfās*) so that none are lost to heedlessness. Through this practice, the Sufi learns to master the breath – the core of life – gradually quieting all that is spiritually lifeless: worldly distractions and the illusions of the ego (*nafs*). In this effacement of the self, what remains is sustained awareness of the only true Living and Real (*al-Ḥayy, al-Ḥaqq*).[40] The religious scholar, "Sufi" and "psychologist" *avant-la-lettre* Abū Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) emphasized this idea throughout his works, concisely teaching that "one must be mindful of God in every single

---

who made breaths-spirits luminous and spiritual (*al-arwāḥ rūḥāniyya nūrāniyya*), and breaths-souls restless and airy (*al-anfās jawlāniyya hawāʾiyya*). For the breaths-spirits (*arwāḥ*) yearn for ʿIlliyyīn [Q 83:18, their place of origin], while the breaths-souls (*anfās*) long for Sijjīn [Q 83:7, their prison]'." Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyāʾ*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ Saʿd ʿAṭiyya et al., 10 vols. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Saʿāda and Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1351–7/1932–8), 10:60–1. Abū Saʿīd al-Qurashī (d. 382/992–3) proposed a different dichotomy: he distinguished between the spirit of death (*rūḥ al-mamāt*), whose removal causes death, and the spirit of life (*rūḥ al-ḥayāt*), which animates physiological functions, both breathing among them, see al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 17:85.

37 This idea is concisely expressed by al-Tirmidhī: every living being breathes God's Spirit – the first living thing and the beginning of creation – "and whoever breathes, breathes by means of that Spirit, for it is the origin of creation." Al-Tirmidhī, *al-Masāʾil al-maknūna*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Juyūshī (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1400/1980), 89–90.

38 "If a servant were to succeed in taking even one breath in his entire life without hypocrisy or idolatry, the blessings of that breath would remain with him until the end of his life," Ibn Munāzil (d. 333/943) as quoted in al-Sulamī, "Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya," in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya wa-yalīhi Dhikr al-niswat al-mutaʿabbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿĀṭā, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1424/2003), 279.

39 E.g. al-Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 106.

40 This idea opens Louis Gardet's reflection on the Sufi practice of *dhikr*, see Louis Gardet, "Un problème de mystique comparée," 642ff.

breath."[41] Later Sufi masters elevated this principle to a definition of Sufism itself: for the Baghdadī master Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (d. 334/946), "Sufism is watchfulness over one's breath," while Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) likewise stated in his influential *Epistle* that "Sufism is to keep every breath with God."[42]

Such attentiveness to breath is reciprocal: just as the true servant remembers God in every breath, so too does God – the "guardian of breaths" (*ḥāfiẓ al-anfās*) – watch over each one the servant takes, to the point of being jealous of His servants' breaths, "lest they be wasted on anything other than Him."[43] The underlying idea is that God "counted for them [only a limited] number" (Q 19:84), and not a single breath escapes His care – especially that of the elect, for "He is accompanying you in each breath."[44]

At least two early Sufis expand this awareness further: a conscious breath, they suggest, holds the potential for intimate, focused connection with the Real. The mystic Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) defines breaths released with the remembrance of God as alive and "connected" (*mawṣūl*) to

41 E.g. al-Muḥāsibī, *Risālat al-mustarshidīn*, ed. ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Bashāʾir al-Islāmiyya, 1391/1971), 46–7.

42 Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, 196, but also 34, 329, 331. For al-Shiblī's words, see e.g. al-Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 29; al-Sulamī, "Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya," 258. Such breath-awareness was also held as the mark of true spiritual nobility in al-Sulamī, "Kitāb al-Futuwwa," in *Majmūʿa-yi āthār-i Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Sulamī*, ed. Nasrollah Pourjavady (vol. 1–3) and Mohammed Soori (vol. 3), 3 vols. (Tehran: Markaz-i Nashr-i Dānishgāhī; vol. 3: Markaz-i Nashr-i Dānishgāhī and Muʾassasa-yi Pazūhish-i Ḥikmat va Falsafa-yi Īrān; Berlin: Muʾassasa-yi Muṭālaʿāt-i Islāmī and Dānishgāh-i Āzād-i Berlin, 1369–88 sh./1990–2009), 2:266.

43 For the epithet, see Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī's (d. after 320/932) comment on "Indeed, God is ever Watchful (*raqīb*) over you" in al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 4:1. For the quote, see e.g. al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, 412; al-Ṭabarī (d. 470/1077), *Salwat al-ʿārifīn fī uns al-musthāqīn*, eds. Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 155 [#251]; on reciprocity, see al-Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 188: "If you seek Him with sincerity you will find Him in the very first breath, for He watches over your every breath" (*qāma ʿalā anfāsik*)." On divine jealousy, see the anonymous comment in al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 15:88: "The Real was jealous (*ghāra*) over His Beloved (the Prophet) and […] willed for him that his Moments be spent with Him, his days be devoted to Him, and his breaths be held in His presence." al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*, ed. Ibrāhīm Basyūnī, 3 vols. (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1981), *sub* Q 2:202 and Q 3:5.

44 See the anonymous comments in al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 13:8 and Q 54:49. The idea recurs in later works, e.g. Maybudī's (fl. early sixth/twelfth century) compilation and expansion of ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī's (d. 481/1089) teachings, see Abū al-Faḍl Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, *Tafsīr kashf al-asrār wa-ʿuddat al-abrār*, ed. ʿAlī Aṣghar Ḥikmat, 10 vols. (Tehran: Intishārat-i Dānishgāh-i Tihrān, 1331–9 sh./1952–6), 7:268.

God.[45] This idea is further developed by the eloquent preacher and accomplished Sufi author Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), who, in his encyclopedic *Qūt al-qulūb* ("Nourishment of the Hearts") affirms that true certainty (*yaqīn*) means collapsing one's life into the present Moment – making each breath, each state, and each deed a conscious offering to God. In this state, the servant:

> becomes watchful of his Moment, protective of his state, vigilant over himself, gathered in his focus, counting his breaths, observing his Watcher, sitting with his Beloved. Not a single breath leaves him – no matter how short the span – except in remembrance of the Remembered, or in gratitude to the Giver, or in patience during hardship, or in contentment in affliction. In all this, he gazes toward the Watcher, listens for the Near One, journeys toward the Beloved, looks to no other, and clings to none but Him. He has made of his lifespan a single day, of the day a single hour, of the hour a single moment (*waqt*), of the moment a single state (*ḥāl*), of the state a single breath (*nafas*), of the breath a continuous awareness of God (*murāqaba*), and of this awareness of God a direct encounter (*muwājaha*).[46]

In sum, every godly breath – the noblest of all acts of worship – counts: it is counted by God, should be counted by the servants, and will be counted for or against them.[47] Few sayings express this ethos as memorably and succinctly

---

45 As opposed to breaths released without God's remembrance, which he considers dead and lifeless, both literally and spiritually, see al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Muḥammad Bāsil ʿUyyūn al-Sūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, n.d.), *sub* Q 7:205 and al-Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 317–8. See also the anonymous *dictum*: "The vigilant one (*al-murāqib*) is he whose aspiration rises above creation and whose breaths are connected to the Real," in Abū l-Ḥasan al-Sīrjānī (d. ca. 470/1077), *Sufism Black and White: A Critical Edition of* Kitāb al-Bayāḍ wa-l-Sawād, eds. Bilal Orfali and Nada Saab (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 290 [#635]. By contrast, unconscious breaths are sharply illustrated by Abū Saʿīd b. Abī l-Khayr (d. 440/1049): "Every breath not taken in the Truth, is rotten like a corpse before which an angel holds his nose," see O'Kane, *The Secrets of God's Mystical Oneness*, 430.

46 Given al-Tustarī's indirect influence on al-Makkī, a Sālimiyya perspective linking breath to direct encounter with God is plausible. See Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb fī muʿāmalāt al-maḥbūb wa-waṣf ṭarīq al-murīd ilā maqām al-tawḥīd*, ed. Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm Muḥammad al-Riḍwānī, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 1422/2001), 1:309–10.

47 Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, 196. In his commentary on the divine names, al-Qushayrī explicitly links several of them to the servant's breath – *al-Khabīr* (fully aware of it), *al-Raqīb* (ever-watchful over it), and *al-Muḥṣī* (the One who enumerates it). See al-Qushayrī, *Sharḥ asmā' al-ḥusnā*, ed. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Munʿim ʿAbd al-Salām al-Ḥulwānī, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār Āzāl, 1982), 165, 200. Commenting on Q 9:123, he sketches a hierarchy of religious functions – from ordinary believers to hadith transmitters, Qur'an-keepers, jurists, theologians, and

as the striking counsel of the Baghdādī master Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d. after 320/932), who distilled it into a single, aphoristic Sufi advice (*waṣiyya*): "Count your breaths and your Moments. That's it! (*wa-salām*)."[48]

6 Time, Between Two Breaths

The meditations of al-Makkī and Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī reveal a key dimension of Sufi breathing: the metaphysical intimacy between breath (*nafas*) and spiritual time (*waqt*) – the Moment – described in al-Sarrāj's early definition as "the breath between two other breaths." In this liminal span, the mystic opens to the truth of being and perceives reality as it is, in heightened spiritual awareness.[49]

"Breath" and "Moment" thus share a profound ontological kinship – suggested by the Persian word *dam*, which connotes both. Each is finite, fleeting, and confined to the immediacy of the present, quite literally "expiring" the instant it arises. Just as the *nafas* leaves the body, the *waqt* slips away from the mystic – each an ephemeral aperture for divine remembrance (*dhikr*) or, if missed, a lapse into heedlessness (*ghafla*).[50] This intimacy of breath and time was taken so literally by some early ascetics that they measured their days in breaths: ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Faraj al-ʿĀbid (d. early third/ninth century) is said to have counted fourteen thousand in a day and night, each one a distinct divine gift.[51] When each breath is a measure of time, to consciously breathe in God is to fully inhabit the Moment – to fully live one's appointed time. Al-Sulamī's

awliyāʾ – culminating in a small circle set apart from all outward duties: those devoted entirely to inner witnessing, whose defining discipline is to guard and watch their breaths with God. Al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*, *sub* Q 9:123.

48 E.g. al-Sīrjānī, *Sufism Black and White*, 219 [#469]. As Richard Gramlich noted in his extensive study on al-Wāsiṭī, the mystic incessantly stressed the importance of the Moment, see Richard Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder des Sufitums*, 2 vols. (Weisbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 1996), 2:304–6, 2:411. Later traditions describe him as a "possessor of the breath," e.g. Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyāʾ*, 732.

49 For a discussion on *waqt*, see Jean-Jacques Thibon, "Sufi Views on Time and History," in *Sufi Cosmology*, esp. 94–7. As for its early definitions, compare al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 404–5 with al-Sulamī, "Ādāb al-ṣūfiyya fī iʾtyānihim al-rukhaṣ," in *Majmūʿa-yi-athār-i Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī*, 553 [#11] and al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, 196. *nafas* is usually superior than *waqt*.

50 E.g. al-Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 436; similarly, Abū l-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 298/910) exhorted "to be mindful of the breaths the servant takes as his Moments (*awqāt*) pass," see al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 348.

51 O'Kane, *The Secrets of God's Mystical Oneness*, 372. Such reckonings of time in breaths recur frequently in Sufi literature, with varying enumerations; in another passage of the same work, for example, the daily total is given as thirty thousand, ibid., 430.

(d. 412/1021) celebrated exhortation to be "the son of one's Moment" then parallels the ideal of being "the possessor of one's breath" (*ṣāḥib al-anfās*). Both expressions convey a state of spiritual presence, poised between two absences: the Moment gone and the one not yet arrived; the breath past and the one yet to come.[52]

This link between time, breath, the physical universe, and human existence is further elaborated by al-Makkī in a passage worth quoting in full:

> Some of the gnostics (*ʿārifīn*) mentioned something even more wondrous and subtler concerning God's power and His hidden work. They said that night and day are twenty-four hours, and each hour is twelve minutes; each minute is twelve fractions (*shaʿīra*), and each fraction is twenty-four breaths (*anfās*). So the breaths emerge from the vault of the body, and give rise to the fractions, and the fractions arise and bring forth the minutes; and the minutes yield the hours; and the hours set the spheres in motion. The spheres turn, spreading night and day throughout the atmosphere (*jaww*) and the regions of the earth (*aqṭār*). And as night and day are spread, the sky turns across the horizons (*āfāq*), and the cosmic reckoning (*ḥusbān*) takes shape in detailed succession. When senses fade, the breaths cease, the spheres are loosened, the stars scatter, the sky splits apart, homes are laid waste, and the Hereafter appears. […] Glory be to the Subtle and Wise! He sets those thick spheres in motion by means of these subtle breaths […]. Thus, the servant is the cause of all this, the mover of all this, yet he is unaware of it. His pivot point (*madār*) is his breaths, his breaths are his hours, his hours are his life, his life is his appointed term, and his appointed term is his Afterlife – yet he is heedless, busy with his worldly life, and absorbed in vain play and passions. If you gaze upwards to the sky, you will see that it initiates the breaths; if you look at the breaths, you see them as turning the spheres; and if you look above what is above (*fawq al-fawq*), you become blind to everything else. There is no god but He, the Lord of the Great Throne. "The work of God Who perfected everything" (Q 27:88). "Indeed, my Lord is subtle in what He wills" (Q 12:100). "We will show them Our signs in the horizons (*āfāq*) and within themselves (*anfusihim*)" (Q 41:53). "And on

52 Similarly to al-Sarrāj, Abū Saʿīd b. Abī l-Khayr defines the Moment (*waqt*) has the present breath, between two breaths: the one that has just passed and the one that has not yet arrived, see O'Kane, *The Secrets of God's Mystical Oneness*, 430.

the earth are signs for the certain ones" (Q 51:20) "And within yourselves (*anfusikum*), do you not see?" (Q 51:21).[53]

This remarkable and little-noticed reflection reported by al-Makkī infuses the act of breathing with vast cosmological resonance, binding the microcosm of human respiration to the macrocosm of the celestial spheres. In this vision, breath is the subtle axis (*madār*) through which God harmonizes and sustains creation, so that what seems the seamless flow of time is in reality the unfolding of successive breaths – each an instant in which God renews creation. By attuning the inhalation and exhalation of human breathing to the cadence of the undifferentiated divine breath, the servant participates – often unknowingly – in this divine order that animates the cosmos. Breath thus becomes the bridge between time and eternity, body and cosmos, human contingency and divine decree – its rhythm synchronizing them all.

Yet the tragedy lies in heedlessness – failing to recognize one's place in this divine economy. The gnostic (*ʿārif*), by contrast, guards each breath as a conscious participation in the cosmos's sacred respiratory cadence, each Moment holding the possibility of witnessing the Real – a face-to-face encounter that renders one blind to all else, realizing God's *tawḥīd*. Al-Makkī's vision resonates with later, though distinct, meditations on breath, such as those of Ibn al-ʿArabī.[54]

7 Breathlessness

The gnostic's (*ʿārif*) realization of God's *tawḥīd*, as envisioned by al-Makkī, is not a gentle illumination but an all-consuming encounter. Al-Sulamī captures it in his short treatise *Nasīm al-arwāḥ* ("The Breeze of the Spirits"): "When the heart is enflamed by the fire of gnosis (*nār al-maʿrifa*) and illumined by the light of divine oneness (*nūr al-tawḥīd*), the breath of God's friends does not touch anything without consuming it – burning through all veils, up to the very

53 See al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 75–6.

54 Likewise prefiguring Akbarian themes, al-Wāsiṭī, commenting on Q 2:30 ("Indeed, I am placing a vicegerent on Earth") and Q 7:189 ("It is He who created you from one soul [*nafs*]"), states that human breaths "were kept in store with the Real until He brought them forth," implying that, though created, they preexisted in a hidden, preserved state with God, awaiting actualization. Compare al-Sulamī's *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 2:30 and Q 7:189 with Q 17:85.

Throne."[55] In such complete effacement, the very possibility of breath itself is at stake. As Abū ʿAlī al-Daqqāq (d. 405/1015) teaches, God permits the lover (*muḥibb*) to breathe, for without breath the lover would perish, unable to bear the intensity of love. The gnostic, however, stands in a still more exacting station: "The gnostic is not granted even a single breath, for God grants him no concession whatsoever."[56]

This spiritual "asphyxiation" that seizes the mystic in God's presence is described by one of the pivotal figures of early Sufism, Abū l-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 298/910). At the climax of the final paragraph of his brief yet intense *al-Ulūhiyya* ("On Divinity"), he depicts the elects as so overwhelmed that God "gathers their breaths into their breaths (*anfās*), imprisons their spirits within their spirits (*arwāḥ*), so that only through Him do they move toward Him." This inward contraction (*qabḍ*) – an overpowering divine disclosure – is presented by Junayd as part of the esoteric science of *tawḥīd*.[57]

A similar state of breathlessness is described by ʿAmr b. ʿUthmān al-Makkī (d. 291/903–4 or 297/909–10):

> His names vanish from earth and heaven; his lineages and his spiritual and worldly conditions are effaced; his attributes are stripped away, his life snatched, his breaths extirpated, and his traces erased – without the death of the dead or the survival of the living. Thus there remains no name for annihilation and no name for subsistence, nor does the name of subsistence remain within annihilation – nothing remains but the One, the Unique.[58]

---

55 Al-Sulamī, "Kitāb Nasīm al-arwāḥ," in *Majmūʿa-yi-āthār-i Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Sulamī*, 3:165.

56 Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, 196.

57 Suʿād al-Ḥakīm (ed.), *Tāj al-ʿĀrifīn: al-Junayd al-Baghdādī, al-aʿmāl al-kāmila* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1424/2004), 254–5. The same painful contraction – rendered with the identical phrase "their breaths imprisoned within their breaths" – appears in one of al-Junayd's letters "to some of his brothers," see ibid., 308–10. The expression "spiritual asphyxiation" is drawn from Roger Deladrière's introduction to his French translation of al-Junayd's work, see Roger Deladrière, *Enseignement spirituel: Traités, lettres, oraisons et sentences traduits de l'arabe* (Paris: Sindbad, 1983), 37, 136. In a later episode, al-Junayd instructed al-Shiblī to be with God, whereupon al-Shiblī began reciting the Qur'an. Al-Junayd then rebuked him: "Do you not know that whoever is truly with God is not even capable of breathing?" Maybudī, *Kashf al-asrār*, 6:575.

58 Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Daylamī, *Kitāb ʿAṭf al-alif al-maʾlūf ʿalā l-lām al-maʿṭūf*, eds. Ḥasan Maḥmūd ʿAbd al-Laṭīf al-Shāfiʿī and Joseph Norment Bell (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī; Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Miṣrī, 1428/2007), 209. Al-Wāsiṭī evokes a comparable state in his commentary on Moses' request to see God (Q 7:143), describing the prophet in

This is precisely the state felt by Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī in his *miʿrāj*: after the theophanic declaration – "This is neither 'I' nor 'other than I.' There is no god but I" – in which God transforms him from his selfhood (*anāʾiyya*) into His Essence (*huwiyya*), al-Biṣṭāmī recounts: "I remained in the Real through the Real, for a time in which I had no breath (*nafas*), no tongue, no ear, and no knowledge – until God created for me a knowledge from His Knowledge, a tongue from His Gentleness, and an eye from His Light."[59]

In later centuries, these spiritual experiences were systematized into ascetic and devotional disciplines, such as prolonged apnea during night vigils and breath retention below the navel with the tongue pressed to the palate, treating it as one's last breath.[60] This practice of "voluntary suffocation" would be memorably distilled in the poetic counsel: "When you see His face, do not speak – for breath injures the mirror."[61]

8 In One Single Breath

This is the state in which the Sufi passes from polarity to oneness: in its perpetual alternation of contraction and expansion, the Sufi symbolically mirrors the divine acts of creation and reabsorption of the universe, moving from the dual rhythm of breathing to the unifying stillness of divine oneness. In practice, each phase of breathing marks a stage of this interchange: inhalation opens to divine grace, assimilating the elements of the cosmos; the pause becomes the *waqt* of inner suspension; and exhalation releases individual traces, dissolving them in the divine oneness.[62]

One of the earliest theopoetic articulations of breath centered on this oneness appears in the verses of one of Sufism's most controversial figures, Abū l-Mughīth al-Ḥusayn b. Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), for whom breath is the divine medium of all existence – the very exhalation of God from which

---

the station of divine solitude as "absent from his own breaths and movements," al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 7:143.

59 Badawī, *Shaṭaḥāt al-ṣūfiyya*, 138.

60 E.g. Aḥmad Kāsānī's breathing instructions in Papas, "Creating a Sufi soundscape," 29.

61 Contained in Rūmī's *Dīwān-i kabīr*, as quoted and translated in Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 91. An earlier stage of this idea can already be traced to al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 373.

62 For a concise description, see ibid., 59. For the movement from duality to oneness in Sufism, see Sara Sviri, "The *Mysterium Coniunctionis* and the 'Yo-Yo Syndrome': From Polarity to Oneness in Sufi Psychology," in *Jung and the Monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Joel Ryce-Menuhin (London: Routledge, 1994), 192–213.

humans, the cosmos, and all beings arise, move, and return:[63] "You are the locus of all, and yet beyond all loci / You are in all of all, never perishing / In my heart, my soul, my conscience, my thoughts / In the alternation of my breaths and the movement of my tongue."[64] In al-Ḥallāj's verses, the ebb and flow of breaths – like the alternation of night and day – form a single, divine current: the breath blown into Adam, coursing beneath the mystic's skin, and sounding from Isrāfīl's horn on the Day of Judgment:[65] "I never breathed except that You were with my breath / The spirit flows through me, along all its pathways, by You."[66] To reach this state, the mystic must surrender his breaths to the "Creator of the breath of life" (*Bāriʾ al-nasam*), thus dying to self.[67]

One of the most vivid depictions of such offering appears in Abū al-Ḥasan Aḥmad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Rānī's (d. 421/1030) *Manāzil al-maḥabba* ("Stations of Love"): "It became clear to me that the dowry of love are the very breaths of souls / For the breath of the passionate lover, as long as he lives, remains captive to love / At that moment, I renounced all other intimacy, for the

63 See Pourjavady, "The Notion of the Breath (*nafas*) in Ḥallāǧ," 85–90; for the rich poetic tradition – up to al-Ḥāfiẓ – emerging from this theme, see also idem., "Nasīm-i uns," *Nashr-i Dānish* 17.1 (2000): 16–26.

64 Louis Massignon, "Le Dīwān d'al-Ḥallāj: Essai de reconstitution, édition et traduction," *Journal Asiatique* 218 (1931): 99–100 [*muqaṭṭaʿa* #64]. Massignon reads the last word "*janānī*" thus translating the last line as: "L'alternance de mes souffles et le nœud de *mon organisme*" and, in a revised edition, "*mon nœud vital*." I preferred the reading "*lisānī*" as in Qāsim Muḥammad ʿAbbās, ed., *al-Ḥallāj: al-Aʿmāl al-Kāmila* (Beirut: Riyāḍ al-Rayyis li-l-Kutub wa-l-Nashr, 2002), 328.

65 For alternations, see Louis Massignon, "Le Dīwān d'al-Ḥallāj," 67–8 [*muqaṭṭaʿa* #31]. For verses on Isrāfīl's horn, see al-Ḥallāj, *Dīwān al-Ḥallāj wa maʿahu Akhbār al-Ḥallāj wa Kitāb al-Ṭawāsīn*, ed. Muḥammad Bāsil ʿUyūn al-Sūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2002), 42–3 [*akhbār* no. 10]. Among others, Rūmī will also weave poetic reflections on the topic, see Kazuyo Murata, "The Life of the Breath of Life in Rūmī," 18–29.

66 Louis Massignon, "Le Dīwān d'al-Ḥallāj," 126–7 ["Fragments anonymes anciens décrivant l'état d'âme d'al-Ḥallāj" #10]. And yet, for God's breath to flow "along its pathways" through the mystic, he must be emptied of his own, which veil the single, uncreated breath. Hence al-Ḥallāj held that true *dhikr* cannot be attained through created (*mabdūʿa*) letters or fashioned (*maṣnūʿa*) breaths, al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 1:1. A similar intuition appears in the Egyptian mystic Dhū l-Nūn (d. ca. 245/859–60): "There are breaths for God that flow by God / I have no power over them except through God," al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, 347. Cf. *ibid*., 344, 393. As Carl Ernst note, depending on the poem, al-Ḥallāj depicts himself as indwelled, mingled, melted, joined, clinging, or plunged into the eternal divine Spirit (*rūḥ*), a desired "union" he defines as an "asymptotic limit, a line that is glimpsed and approached but never crossed," see Carl Ernst, *Hallaj: Poems of a Sufi Martyr* (Evansville, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 166.

67 This expression is present in one of the earliest works on divine love, i.e. Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm b. al-Junayd al-Khuttalī, *Kitāb al-Maḥabba li-Allāh subḥānahu*, ed. ʿĀdil b. ʿAbd al-Shakūr al-Zuraqī (Riyadh: Dār al-Ḥaḍāra, 1424/2003), 49 [#103].

Companion had drawn near." Here, the "breaths of souls" (*anfās al-nufūs*) are the true dowry of love (*mahr al-ḥubb*): life itself becomes the highest and most continuous offering the servant returns to the Beloved.[68]

9 The Secret Within Sufi Breaths

In this reconstruction of early Sufi teachings on breath, mention should be made of an underexamined work composed no earlier than the fourth/tenth century: *al-Sirr fī anfās al-ṣūfiyya* ("The Secret Within Sufi Breaths").[69] Though wrongly attributed in its entirety to al-Junayd, it was likely compiled by someone closely connected to his teachings or to Baghdādī Sufism, and was later famously commented upon by Abū Thābit Shams al-Dīn al-Daylamī (d. ca. 593/1197).[70] The text gathers wise sayings on core Sufi concepts, with breath occupying four of fourteen sections and reappearing in the appendix. Thirty-eight sayings provide valuable insights into early – especially Baghdādī – approaches to breathing.[71]

68 On this unbroken continuity, discussing Q 13:21 ("and those who *join together* what God has commanded to be joined"), al-Qushayrī reports an anonymous interpretation that individuates these people with "those who join their breaths one to another, so that no breath slips between them that is for other than God, nor by other than God, nor in the witnessing of anything other than God," see al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, *sub* Q 13:21.

69 The use of *anfās* in the title may stem from the initial focus on Sufi breath theory, or alternatively, from the fact that it is a collection of wise sayings (*anfās*) on various topics (breath, passing thoughts, divine deception, vision, knowledge, ecstasy, love, jealousy, truth, spiritual aspiration, and will), or both.

70 (Pseudo) al-Junayd, *al-Sirr fī-anfās al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Bāriʾ Muḥammad Dāwūd (Cairo: Dār Jawāmiʿ al-Kalim, 2005). For a recent discussion of this work, its manuscripts, its authorship, and its relation to Abū Thābit al-Daylamī's commentary, see Berat Eşgi, "Ebû Sâbit ed-Deylemî'nin Cüneyd-i Bağdâdî Yorumu: *Şerhu Kitâbi'l-Enfâs* Örneği" (MA thesis, Marmara University, 2022).

71 Nearly one third of the sayings are attributed to Abū l-Qāsim al-Junayd (Baghdādī, d. 298/910, 11 sayings), followed by Ibn ʿAṭāʾ (Baghdādī, d. 309/922, 8), Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (Baghdādī, d. 295/908, 5+3), Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (Baghdādī, d. 334/946, 4), Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq (Medinese, d. 148/765, 3), Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (Egyptian, d. 245/859, 2), Ruwaym b. Aḥmad (Baghdādī, d. 303/915, 1), and Abū ʿAlī al-Rūdhbārī (Baghdādī, d. 322/934, 1). As Berat Eşgi notes, the tripartite classification of breath and related themes in the *addenda* attributed to "Abū al-Ḥasan" likely refer to Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī, as similar typologies are ascribed to him earlier, and some sources give him the *kunya* Abū al-Ḥasan.

I focus here exclusively on the unedited reflections on breathing preserved in the work.[72] Al-Junayd's opening teaching (#1) develops a thought only briefly alluded to in his *al-Ulūhiyya*: every breath must bear witness to God's oneness (*tawḥīd*) and knowledge (*maʿrifa*), for it emerges between the heart – the seat of knowledge – and the innermost secret, where *tawḥīd* resides.[73] In saying #3, he enriches the familiar image of breath as the "wind of God against the fire of the heart" with the metaphor of respiration as the "murmur of light" (*hatf al-nūr*), echoing broader mystical associations between breath and light (as in al-Tirmidhī).[74]

Other sayings – especially by al-Junayd and al-Nūrī – address breath's origin (#4), its tripartite typologies (#10, #11, appendix #1–3), and its etiquette: when to breathe, when to hold one's breath, and when to release it (#12, #16–19, #24).[75] On this last point, both confirm that the apex of divine encounter is marked by breathlessness – whether in witnessing, unveiling, or beholding divine signs – when awe (*hayba*) seizes the breath entirely, leading to complete cessation (*inqiṭāʿ al-nafas*) or exhalations that never return (#14).[76]

---

72 For convenience, I numbered the sayings appearing in (Pseudo) al-Junayd, *Al-Sirr fī-anfās al-ṣūfiyya*, 125–57. Among already noted ideas: Ibn ʿAṭāʾ stresses the importance of every breath and guarding it (*ḥifẓ al-anfās*), since each breath may carry either disbelief or salvation (#6 and #7); al-Junayd highlights the significance of one's Moment and of one's breaths (#15). Abū ʿAlī al-Daqqāq's contrast between the breath of a gnostic and the one of a lover is somehow echoed in saying #27: the lover perishes if he falls silent, while the gnostic perishes if he does not fall silent. The gnostic is also said to be unable to take a single breath devoid of awareness (#28). Breathing is defined as the greatest act of worship (#5), as in al-Qushayrī's *Epistle* quoted above.

73 Any breath that does not arise in this manner is considered dead, and its bearer is held accountable. Al-Shiblī reinforces God's absolute knowledge of the servant's breaths through the idea that each breath passes over the heart (#29). He further presents breath as the ultimate locus of *tawḥīd*: a true offering to God only when it is utterly singular – purely for Him, stripped of all association, even in the servant's innermost being (#30).

74 *Hatf* can be translated as "murmur" or "whisper" or "sigh." For the idea of breath as relief, see #26. Among the most intriguing *dicta* linking breath (*rūḥ*) to light is the anonymous commentary on in al-Sulamī's *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 17:85: "The spirit is a ray of the Truth (*al-rūḥ shuʿāʿ al-ḥaqīqa*), whose effects differ from body to body." This anticipates the metaphysical worldview of later Sufis such as Ibn al-ʿArabī, in which God's breath refracts uniquely in each locus of manifestation. See also: al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, 389.

75 E.g. the breaths from God (*min Allāh*), to God (*ilā Allāh*), and with God (*maʿa Allāh*); or else: a breath in servanthood (*nafas fī al-ʿubūdiyya*), a breath in lordship (*nafas bi-l-rubūbiyya*), and a breath in the Lord (*nafas bi-l-Rabb*). The latter is attributed to Sufyān al-Thawrī in al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 36:16.

76 Several sayings – by Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (#19), al-Junayd (#20, #24), Ibn ʿAṭāʾ (#24), Abū ʿAlī al-Rūdhbārī (#22), and al-Nūrī (#32) – praise breathing in poverty, humility, remorse, reverence, and utter dependence on God – described as the "lowest" of breaths – which

Finally, of particular note are two sayings – attributed respectively to al-Junayd and al-Nūrī – containing the expressions *al-nafas al-raḥmānī* ("the breath of the Merciful") and *nafas al-raḥmāniyya* ("mercy-infused breath") (#8–9).[77] In them, both masters concisely encapsulate the all-encompassing reality of divine breath in Sufi thought, portraying it as a force emanating from the innermost human essence (*sirr*) that ignites or sweeps all it touches – up to the Throne – and ultimately annihilates every facet of the self (*qalb*, *ṣadr*, *nafs*) and even the *sirr* itself. Everything exhales into God's merciful breath.

10 The Communal Aspect: Breathing Among Brothers

To complement the preceding discussion of the literary and symbolic dimensions of breathing, a final observation on its practice is called for. Long before later Sufi manuals formalized collective breathwork, the earliest testimonies already suggest, both explicitly and implicitly, that breathing in early Sufism was not relegated to individual discipline but was also understood as a shared, interpersonal practice.

Advice literature on companionship (*ṣuḥba*) and on the disciple–*shaykh* relationship consistently emphasized the spiritual benefit derived from physical proximity to the righteous. The often-cited prophetic comparison of the pious companion to a musk seller – whose scent reaches those nearby – and the wicked companion to a blacksmith whose bellows spread smoke already cast physical companionship in a metaphorics of breath, scent, and diffusion.[78] Early Sufi narratives developed this idea further: for instance, one reads in the biography of Ibn Khafīf (d. 371/982) that his disciples would visit him "to draw from the preciousness of his breaths (*nafas*) – his earnest striving and his

pierce through veils and sins, drawing the servant nearer to God and deepening the realization of *tawḥīd*. On this, see also al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 27:62, in which God is said to be most attentive to the labored breaths of the anguished and the truly distressed – believer or not – in the mystical sense of one stripped of self-reliance, turning solely to the Master in pure oneness.

77 Al-Junayd said: "When the breath of the Merciful surges forth from the innermost secret (*al-sirr*), the heart, breast, and soul perish, and it does not pass over anything without burning it – even up to the Throne." Al-Nūrī said: "When a mercy-infused breath exhales, the innermost secret (*al-sirr*) too perishes."

78 al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, #5534. On the shaykh–disciple relationship, it is worth recalling a characteristic formulation: "If a disciple were to conceal even one of his breaths from his shaykh, he would be betraying him in what is rightfully his as a spiritual guide," al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, 574.

generosity."[79] Likewise, in the anonymous *ʿIlm al-Qulūb*, a seeker "of the people of love," overwhelmed by a sudden *ḥāl*, feels the urgent need to go out in search of someone "to breathe with."[80]

This shared dimension of breath is often described as inevitable: once touched by divine presence, the breaths of the saints (*anfās al-awliyāʾ*) cannot be confined but, like perfume, diffuse into the air, carrying meanings and blessings (*barakāt*). Just as the Prophet's breaths were infused with divine mercy and became a contagious source of mercy for his community, so the *awliyāʾ*'s breaths were conceived as the medium through which blessings were shared.[81] This idea recurs in intra-Sufi discussions on breath during *samāʿ*, where the broader question of whether the mystic should – or can – conceal his spiritual state is debated.[82] Abū ʿAlī b. al-Kātib (d. 343/954) expresses this poetically: "The scents of the breeze of love (*rawāʾiḥ nasīm al-maḥabba*) waft from lovers even if they conceal it; its signs appear upon them even if they hide it; it betrays them even if they try to cover it." He then recites: "When people's souls secretly mention His remembrance, their breaths are sweetened by it, and thus they spread it … And how could the fragrance of sweetness, entrusted to the wind, ever be concealed?"[83]

---

79 al-Daylamī, Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Muḥammad, *Sīrāt-i Abū ʿAbd Allāh b. Khafīf al-Shīrāzī*, ed. Annemarie Schimmel (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basimevi and Ankara Üniversitesi Ilahiyat Fakültesi Yayınları, 1955), 244.

80 (Pseudo) Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *ʿIlm al-Qulūb*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir Aḥmad ʿAṭāʾ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1424/2004), 211. The episode involves "trading" the "merchandise of the Hereafter," leading the editor to interpret *tanaffus* as exchanging spiritual insights. Yet it could also resonate with al-Tirmidhī's definition of *tanaffus* as a managed easing of the *nafs*: the relief gained by releasing (e.g. to a brother) what has accumulated in the chest – like clouds releasing rain so the sky "breathes." Yet al-Tirmidhī stresses that gnostics rarely need *tanaffus*: when trials intensify, they breathe only in God's presence. Al-Tirmidhī, *al-Furūq wa-manʿ al-tarāduf*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Juyūshī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Īmān, 1426/2005), 101–2; idem., *Kitāb al-Akyās wa-l-mughtarrīn = Ṭabāʾiʿ al-nufūs*, eds. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Sāyiḥ and al-Sayyid al-Jumaylī (Cairo: al-Maktab al-Thaqāfī, 1989), 56–7.

81 On the Sufi interplay of God's friends' breath and wind as bearer of divine blessings, see al-Wāsiṭī and Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Qāsim al-Sayyārī's (d. 342/953) interpretations of the verses concerning the winds God sends as bearers of glad tidings – in al-Sulamī's *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, *sub* Q 3:159 and Q 30:46, respectively. Note that the breaths of the *awliyāʾ* are said to ascend, in a vertical movement towards God, see al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*, *sub* Q 57:4.

82 E.g. "Keeping one's breath (*ḥifẓ al-anfās*) is the most difficult task for God's friends during moments of spiritual unveiling." al-Sulamī, "Kitāb Nasīm al-arwāḥ," in *Majmūʿa-yi āthār-i Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Sulamī*, 3:165.

83 Al-Sulamī, "Kitāb al-Amthāl wa-l-istishhādāt," in *Rasāʾil ṣūfiyya li-Abī ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī* (*d. 412/1021*) / *Sufi Treatises of Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī* (*d. 412/1021*), eds. Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 2009), 101 [#493].

Admittedly, the polysemy inherent in the term *nafas* precludes treating these passages as unequivocal evidence for literal respiration. In many contexts, *nafas* designates not physical breathing but spiritual insight or a charged utterance; accordingly, expressions such as *al-tanaffus bayna al-ikhwān* ("breathing among brothers") may be read non-literally, as denoting the exchange of subtle meanings or spiritually inflected words.

Yet this very ambiguity also points back to the embodied practices from which such metaphors likely emerged. References to "breezes of gnosis" (*tanassum al-maʿrifa*),[84] "winds of joy" (*riyāḥ al-bahja*),[85] or other spiritual wafts that permeate early reports of gatherings, *dhikr* and *samāʿ* sessions arise from settings that were, in fact, shared physical spaces – rooms where perfumes rose, bodies assembled, and breath circulated.[86] Even if metaphorical, these images emerge from environments in which respiration was literally felt and shared. The boundary between symbolic and literal breath is therefore porous.

Some early authors make this permeability explicit. As al-Qushayrī reports in his *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*, keeping company with "the people of estrangement" allows "the darkness of their souls" to pass into one's hearts "when you inhale the breaths they exhale."[87] Likewise, in the *ʿUyūn al-ajwiba*, when asked whether a servant's ecstasy (*wajd*) becomes perceptible to those present, he writes:

> Many people, when their moments are pure, or their ecstasies overpower them, or their breaths are refined, have the radiance of their lights spread to those present. The sweetness of their states reaches the hearts of others, and the brightness of their ecstasies extends to those around them. […] Their likeness is that of musk, whose fragrance spreads; of the sun, whose rays expand; and of the lamp, whose light benefits the inhabitants of the house […] and when the servant inhales these breaths and they blow upon his heart, they become imbued with the meanings they contain; then, when their possessor exhales them and another inhales them, he perceives their effect in his own heart. I said: "His breaths have subtly scented the air / so spirits harmonize through inhaling them / No soul

84 al-Sīrjānī, *Sufism Black and White*, 204 [#436].

85 al-Tirmidhī, *Taḥṣīl naẓāʾir al-Qurʾān*, ed. Ḥusnī Naṣr Zaydān (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Saʿāda, 1389/1969), 51–2.

86 On the explicitly spatial and embodied framing of *samāʿ* as a shared, delimited physical environment in which bodies, senses, and affects are co-present, including "pleasant scents," see, for instance, al-Sīrjānī, *Sufism Black and White*, 347 [#751].

87 al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*, *sub* Q 4:139–40.

> has ever passed by his dwelling / without tasting the coolness of their flavor."[88]

Here breath clearly emerges as the operative conduit through which spiritual conditions (*aḥwāl*) are transmitted and sensed within a physical environment. In this sense, seeking someone "of the same breath" could be quite literal, as the reception of spiritual insight and the benefits of physical proximity could merge in the embodied experience of shared breathing that enabled various forms of spiritual contagion.

Some early accounts move beyond such atmospheric descriptions toward intentional acts of breath transmission. In Abū al-Faḍl Sahlagī's (also: al-Sahlakī/al-Sahlajī, d. 476/1083) *Kitāb al-Nūr*, Abū Manṣūr al-Jīnawī – a disciple of al-Bisṭāmī – tests his own disciple for twenty-one years before finally "blowing (*nafakha*) into his mouth."[89] The disciple departs joyful and upright, exclaiming: "Who is like me? Abū Manṣūr has blown into my mouth!" The "blessing of that blowing," we are told, extended to "a thousand people" who became "among the people of divine knowledge." In this narrative, breath becomes an intentional act of transmission, passing directly from master to disciple and then spreading onward to others.[90]

Such explicit passages are relatively few in the earliest sources. Yet in light of them, even the most figurative treatments of breath become more readily legible as grounded in embodied practice and thus acquire a communal plausibility: already in early Sufism, conscious breathing does not appear solely as an individual discipline but takes shape as an interpersonal practice too. Sharing "breaths" – whether literally or figuratively – generated subtle but real forms of proximity and influence among those who shared the same

88 Al-Qushayrī, "'Uyūn al-Ajwiba fī funūn al-as'ila," in Florian Sobieroj, *Die Responsensammlung Abū l-Qāsim al-Qušhairī's über das Sufitum: Kritische Edition der* ʿUyūn al-aǧwiba fī funūn al-as'ila (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012, 23–4 (Arabic pagination) [#42].

89 al-Sahlakī, "al-Nūr min kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr," in *Shaṭaḥāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī (Kuwait: Wikālat al-Maṭbūʿāt, 1976), 77.

90 As Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi has suggested, these early and still obscure Sufi breathing practices may have involved actual breathing upon one another. Reading Ḥāfiẓ in this light, he takes the "breaths of the awakened at dawn" as an allusion to early mystics whose transmitted breaths conveyed spiritual energy – and even wonders whether they were imagined as literally blowing upon the poet. See Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Chanter la douceur de la prière," 121–41. Amir-Moezzi also explores how Persian mystical poetry intricately wove metaphors drawn from the sensory dimensions of breathing – such as the spiritual scent of divine or saintly breezes, the gustatory sweetness of remembrance, the flushed redness of the face in states of hyperventilation, and the subtle acoustics of whispered winds and sighing breezes.

presence, transmitting meanings, blessings, and even perceptible spiritual effects. Inhaling another's breath – whether as air or as utterance – could refresh the soul, bring inner relief, and at times extend a form of healing to the wider circle.[91]

11 Conclusions

This article has reconstructed an early Sufi breathscape that is both broader and more internally structured than the secondary literature typically allows, and that already contains in germs many of the elements later systematized in the grand metaphysical syntheses of the tradition. Beginning from Qur'anic and hadith resonances (*rūḥ*/*nafs*; wind/mercy), early sources link breath to healing practice, somatic discipline, and – crucially – to vigilant remembrance of God in every inhalation and exhalation.

Around the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, Sufi manuals and aphoristic lore define, typologize, and discipline the *nafas*, offering a kaleidoscopic perspective on respiration: in al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, it receives a physiological and pneumatic theorization; in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī and Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī, it is tied to *waqt*, so that time itself is counted – and at times literally measured – in breaths. The arc culminates in the "breathlessness" of *tawḥīd* in figures such as Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī and al-Junayd, where divine presence suspends respiration, and in al-Ḥallāj's theopoetics, where a single divine exhalation circulates through all being. Situating works like al-Makkī's encyclopedic *Qūt al-qulūb* or the underexamined *al-Sirr fī anfās al-ṣūfiyya* within this trajectory clarifies why every topical study of Sufism must draw on the widest possible range of early sources. Only then can we trace the continuity of these reflections and see how they evolve and build upon one another, while approaches that begin with the major synthesizers risk obscuring earlier insights.

A further dimension that emerges from these early witnesses is the communal character of breathing. Breath is not only the vehicle of individual remembrance and a measure of inner time; it also circulates among bodies and spaces as a medium of presence, transmission, and contagion. The imagery of breathing (with) someone, the diffusion of the saints' breaths in gatherings, and the

91 For supernatural breath effects – such as healing people, waters, aliments, or enduring underwater – within the context of God's Friends' miracles, see Richard Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes: Theologien und Erscheinungsformen des islamischen Heiligenwunders* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1987), 179–80, 189–91. Sources postdate the fifth/eleventh century.

explicit narratives of breath being blown from *shaykh* to disciple all point to respiration as a shared practice through which meanings, blessings, and spiritual conditions move within a circle.

More broadly, the Islamic breathscape as a whole remains largely uncharted, and Sufi respiration represents only one segment of a much wider field. A fuller account would require sustained philological work across genres – *tafsīr*, poetry, *adab*, medical and philosophical writing – as well as new critical editions and reassessments of early mystical materials, not least a re-examination of the manuscript tradition and attribution history of *al-Sirr fī anfās al-ṣūfiyya*. Taken together, the early Sufi witnesses suggest that respiration functions as a primary grammar of presence. Breath grounds remembrance, measures time, binds the solitary to the community, and figures creation itself as the breath of the Merciful. If breath is universal and each *nafas* is particular, early Sufism shows how this paradox can be cultivated into a disciplined practice of awareness in which the most ordinary of human acts becomes a site of encounter. Recognizing this opens a wider horizon for the study of Islamic spirituality, in which breath becomes a key to the subtle mechanics by which the unseen is made present and presence itself is sustained.