

RESEARCH TITLE

A Study of Sufi Poet Rumi's Thought on "Desire"

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HNSJ, 2025, 6(5); <https://doi.org/10.53796/hnsj65/33>

Received at 07/04/2025

Accepted at 15/04/2025

Published at 01/05/2025

Abstract

Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273) is a famous poet and one of the greatest Sufi scholars in the world of Islam, whose educational thought exerted far-reaching impact on later generations. With the Islamic principles of tawhīd and wisal al-haqq in Sufism (al-Şūfiyya) as the basis, his literary creation centered upon a series of interrelated concepts--love, God, spirituality and "the perfect man" as the main themes. This article expounds on the spiritual significance of desire and the way to find truth, as well as the importance of self-control in the pursuit of self-perfection through analyzing relevant poems in his work. Knowledge of the relationship between "desire" and "the perfect man" will help to promote the understanding of Rumi's thought among nations and contribute to social development in world civilizations.

Key Words: Rumi; Desire; the Perfect Man; Mathnawi.

I. Introduction

Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207–1273), a towering intellectual figure and poet of medieval Islamic Sufism¹, was born in Balkh, in present-day Afghanistan, and died in Konya, located in modern-day Türkiye. Originally named Muhammad Jalal ad-Din, he later came to be known by the honorific Mawlana, meaning "our mentor". Well-versed in Qur'an, the corpus of the sayings or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) known as hadith as well as the principles of Sufism, Rumi produced his magnum opus, the six-volume narrative poem known as the *Mathnawi*². As a narrative exegesis of Qur'an, hadith and Islamic beliefs and teachings, the *Mathnawi* features profound mystical insight in terms of fulfilling religious obligations and inner spirit. Rumi's moral philosophy seeks the annihilation of base desires through ascetic discipline and contemplative devotion, culminating in the highest state of *wisal al-haqq*. Undoubtedly, his thought has captivated scholars worldwide, and his poetry continues to offer practical guidance to the world of literature.

II. The Ideal of Rumi's Educational Thought: The Perfect Man

Rumi stands as one of the most influential Sufi scholars of the 13th century in the Anatolian Peninsula (modern-day Türkiye). At the age of six, compelled by political events stemming from the Mongol invasion, he departed from Balkh and settled in the Anatolian city of Konya. It was in this city that he matured into a renowned Sufi scholar and poet (Schimmel 9-13). From Rumi's standpoint, human beings are inherently of a dual nature constituted of both material and spiritual dimensions, while serving as bearers of the sacred faith. Whether they ascend through faithfulness or fall through apostasy depends entirely on the exercise of free will (Erol 8). In the *Mathnawi*, Rumi's principal aim is first to cultivate self-knowledge and self-discipline; then, by purifying the soul of its animalistic impulses and negative traits—transforming them into virtues of humanity and moral excellence—one attains the station of the Perfect Man for the ultimate purpose of approaching his Creator God. Rumi's philosophy of life and his perception of humanity are completely determined by Islamic teachings; while the Qur'an and sunnah (hadith) serve as his primary guides for obedience to God. The statement, "As long as my soul resides in my body, I am a servant of the Qur'an; I am the soil of the path of Muhammad, the Chosen One" (Veyis Değirmençay 69), illustrates that Rumi acted in accordance with Quranic principles, modeling his life after the Prophet's path. An examination of Rumi's life and works reveals that a God-centric viewpoint receives paramount importance. In the *Mathnawi*, he elaborates on the methods for liberating oneself from various base motives as well as pride, hatred, enmity, and desires, and details how to engage in moral education and training to approach God. The Turkish scholar Fuat Köprülü remarks, "The *Mathnawi* is not merely Rumi's work, but perhaps the most famous work in all of Sufi literature" (Köprülü 227). This acclaim stems from its nature as an instructive narrative poetic collection, recording profoundly sincere and impassioned mystical spiritual experiences. It remains entirely removed from formalism, employing suitable stories to convey every idea, piece of advice, and theory. Azizüddin Nesefi posits that the Perfect Man is composed of "Word," "Deed," "Virtue," and "Knowledge," asserting that one who consummates these four aspects achieves perfection (Nesefi 69). Concurrently, some Sufi scholars maintain that the Perfect Man is also cultivated through the discipline of a spiritual journey (Sancaklı 143). According to Rumi, however, Sufism represents an inner exploration—a means of finding direction through the process of self-discovery. Consequently, for an individual to attain the true essence of Sufism, they must first embark

¹ Sufism is a mystical Islamic belief.

² The *Mathnawi* is composed of six books. To save space and avoid repetition, each citation in the main text indicates book and couplet number, for example: (*Mathnawi* 1-234).

upon this path and purify their own desires. This is because Sufism fundamentally involves the renunciation of all that distances one from God; it is the path towards maturation, culminating in spiritual union with God.

III. The Attributes of Desire

A truth-seeker must resolve to rid himself of inner desires; hence, self-control is the primary requirement if one wishes to attain the state of a perfect human being. The cultivation of self-control is achieved through confronting the bad habits and evil thoughts of the "nafs," from which comes sinning and deviation from the truth. "Nafs" is an Arabic word from the Qur'an, literally meaning "self." William Chittick believes that the ego is the basest animalistic and Satanic dimension within a person (Chittick 12). Rumi, on the other hand, views the "self" as the human nature without inherent good or evil, the key, however, lies in controlling it, hence stressing the struggle against the demands arising from the animalistic side of ego with its negative traits.

Sufism considers victory in the struggle against human desires as the first stage on the path to becoming a perfect man. Although physically similar to animals, man should seek characteristics that differentiate himself from animals, understand themselves and the purpose of creation, and ultimately achieve victory in this struggle. Therefore, Rumi believes that the two great enemies that lead human beings towards vice are anger and lust. Regarding these, he states: "Anger and lust make a man squint-eyed, they change the spirit (so that it departs) from rectitude. When self-interest appears, virtue becomes hidden: a hundred veils rise from the heart to the eye." (Mathnawi 1:333-334). This illustrates that cruelty, desire, and evil thoughts impede one's spiritual perfection, leading to the obscuring of human nature. "Love and tenderness are qualities of humanity; passion and lust are qualities of animality." (Mathnawi 1:2436). What is sinful is lust, not the supreme intellect; what is sinful is the passion, not the spirit. He likens evil thoughts to a mouse stealing grain, and the pure nature of a person to a granary. In this analogy, the granary is dug out by the mouse's claws, and its cunning empties the granary. Thus, he points out: "O soul! In the first place avert the mischief of the mouse, and then show fervour (zeal) in garnering the corn." (Mathnawi 1:380). Because evil deeds cancel out good deeds, desires are constantly surrounded by people's internal and external environments. Therefore, to achieve inner perfection, clearing evil thoughts is paramount, moving towards the path of "enjoining good and forbidding wrong." In the struggle against desires, one should know: "This vile fleshly soul desires thee to earn that which passeth away: how long wilt thou earn what is vile? Let it go! Enough! If the vile fleshly soul desire thee to earn what is noble, there is some trick and plot behind it." (Mathnawi 2:2604). One should stay away from it to attain essential beauty and move towards maturity. To reach the state of maturity, the soul must shed negative attributes and various moral vices, triumph in the self-struggle, and thereby draw closer to God (Yakıt 197).

In Islam, the most perfect man that has ever lived in the world is the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). As his followers, Muslims regard him as the role model because he is the perfect follower of all Islamic rules and the leader of all believers. Hence, Rumi points out: "When you are free from anger, sexual desire, and greed, you will possess the spirit and charity of the Prophet." (Mathnawi 5:4026). This emphasizes the significance of detachment from desire, anger, and greed on the path towards becoming a perfect man. He further adds: "External fire, water can extinguish it, but the fire of desire leads people to hell. Water cannot make the fire of desire calm and waveless, because it has the nature of hell and is tormented." (Mathnawi 1:3698-3699). Though fire can be extinguished with water, the fire of desire is a fiendish blaze from hell, against which even the seawater is powerless.

Rumi emphasizes that man should escape the greed for external vanities which blind the

eye of the heart from seeing the truth of God. According to Rumi, "The blindness of the (physically) blind is not far from (the Divine) mercy; 'tis the blindness of greed that is inexcusable." He then points out: "Greed makes one blind and foolish and ignorant. For that fool takes what is really death to be life." (Mathnawi 4:1706; 5:2823). Greed and desire make people deaf and blind. Therefore, clearing the heart's eye of greed is essential to ultimately receive God's blessings. He calls on practitioners to perform self-restraint and be content with what they have. If one's heart is filled with greed, his heart's eye will be obscured, ultimately leading to the destruction of life; therefore, the rope of greed should be severed. Rumi's metaphors are very clear and adequate, using simple stories and animal characters to warn people about abstruse religious rules and moral values. In this case, Rumi uses the analogy of the greedy hunter and the covetous fish: "The greed of hunting makes (one) oblivious of being a prey." (Mathnawi 5:752). The hunter is so fervently coveting his prey that he is unaware of the threats in the surrounding nature. "Many a fish lives secure in the deep waters, yet is caught in the net for want of greed." (Mathnawi 3:1695). The food scattered by the hunter is not alms given out of generosity but a bait to lure his prey, which loses its life due to greed for food. He also describes the attributes of greed and contentment: "Though thou pour the ocean into thy pitcher, it can hold no more than one day's store. The pitcher of the desire of the covetous never fills, the oyster-shell fills not with pearls till it is content" (Mathnawi 1:20-21), he says, adding that "No one was ever deprived of spiritual life by contentment; no one was ever made a spiritual king by covetousness." (Mathnawi 5:2398) A greedy person's desires will never be satisfied, nor will he ever reach his destination, but a content person stays safe from life's perils and becomes a valuable individual. Contentment is like a treasure and one must abstain from greed in order to obtain this hidden treasure.

IV. Inner Paths to Abnegation of Desire

The abnegation of desire is a central concept in Sufi practice. Rumi argues that desire, by its very nature, is the soul's enemy, and one must be prepared for an inner struggle. He states: "Take heed! Do not wish your currish (fleshy) soul alive, for it is the enemy of your spirit since long ago." (Mathnawi 2:474). He describes the various desires that are enemies to people's souls and explains why their abnegation is necessary. True life does not reside on the earth, but within the human heart and soul. In *Maktubât (Letters)*, he states: "Worldly possessions, from head to toe, bring headaches. Even if you obtain the sun and the moon, do not place so much suffering upon your head. Pay attention! When life ends, you will lie upon a single brick." (Gökçün 164) For Rumi, everything in the world is merely a dream and one must not regard the world as a permanent abode. "To pursue desire is to flee from God, to slaughter devotion before His justice." (Mathnawi 6:377). If the world is a trap and its bait is desire, one must escape and turn the face toward truth.

Due to the corrupting influence of desire which can lead one to disobey the path of truth, Rumi states: "In God's sight the slave of lust is worse than menials and slaves brought into servitude." (Mathnawi 1:3815). This is because a slave can gain freedom, but a slave of carnal desire deserves the punishment and has only the grace of God to look upon; thus, desire is an enemy that torments one's spirits. He then speaks of the tendency to flee from desire: "What is the remedy for the fire of lust? The light of the Religion" (Mathnawi 1:3700). The secret to struggling against desire lies in the heart's devotion to the light of religious faith, which means revering God, associating with honest people, and striving to obey divine commands. The difference lies in whether one chooses the path of "indulging desire" or "mastering desire." He further emphasizes the importance of freeing oneself from anger: "A sober-minded man said to Jesus: 'What is the hardest to bear of all things in existence?' Jesus replied: 'O (my dear) soul, the hardest is God's anger, on account of which Hell is trembling as we (are).' He

asked again: 'What is the security against this anger of God?' Jesus replied: 'To abandon thine own anger at once.'" (Mathnawi 4:113-116). One should calm the eye of anger, for the raging fire of anger allows sensory perception to overwhelm conscientious knowledge, and desire to replace intellect. The anger that emanates from within causes fear in others, and it burns the heart like the fire of hell. A person's fury ignites like the hellfire; only the light of the spirit can extinguish the rampant fire of lust.

Rumi likens desire to a donkey, emphasizing that one must take in control of the reins in the hand. "The donkey, at odds with the highway and drunk on grass, has cost so many a donkey-keeper his life." (Mathnawi 1:2954). As the donkey is at odds with the main road, and a person does not know the way, then acting contrary to what the donkey (desire) wants is the right path. Desire and aspiration should be restrained, for left unchecked they divert us from the way of God. Therefore, people should use their intellect to guide desire so that it generates positive energy. However, if a person abandons evil deeds and turns back from the path astray, repents to God, and extinguishes the desires within himself, he will receive freedom and salvation, hence gaining tranquility, peace of mind and the best possible outcome.

Patience is another indispensable virtue on the Sufi's journey toward spiritual light. "To practise patience is the soul of thy glorifications: have patience, for that is the true glorification. No glorification hath such a (high) degree (as patience hath); have patience: patience is the key to relief (from pain). Patience is like the bridge Sirát, (with) Paradise on the other side." (Mathnawi 2:3145-3147). Rumi believes that: "Grief is better than the empire of the world, so that you may call unto God in secret." (Mathnawi 3:203). If one's heart is filled with sorrow and suffering, he must endure these pains and pray for God's protection and rescue. It is sorrow and suffering that keep people away from oblivion of prayers and draw them to God. "Endure poverty until weariness is left behind—the light of the Greatest shines within that very poverty." (Mathnawi 1:2374). One must endure poverty, pain, sorrow, ruthless offense and slandering, as the key to truth is born from patience, as he says: "Patience expands and broadens the heart. Endure—when your feelings change, you will see all clearly and overcome every hardship." (Mathnawi 6:1407, 1:1039).

Rumi posits that moderation in eating, drinking, and sleeping enables one to encounter with God with offerings of gifts. A moderate diet has two benefits: first, while hunger may cause discomfort, it is far less detrimental than the illnesses resulting from overindulgence. Second, though painful, hunger fortifies the soul, as he asserts: "Indeed hunger is the king of medicines: hark, lay hunger to thy heart, do not regard it with such contempt. Everything unsweet is made sweet by hunger: without hunger all sweet things are unacceptable." (Mathnawi 5:2832–2833). Hunger is a special gift from God, strengthening one's inner spirit and enhancing self-discipline. Since hunger often leads to impatience and negative thoughts, restraining one's appetite and exercising self-control brings one closer to God. Furthermore, a well-satiated stomach usually results in a befuddled mind. Rumi likens food to soil while the heavens represent the ultimately perfect path to the truth, stating that people feed on soil—as bread and meat are but soil—and should eat less to avoid being tethered to the ground. Those who focus solely on nourishing the body would fail to perceive truth. Conversely, one should eschew gluttony and refrain from filling the stomach with worldly sustenance so that his heart's eye shall be guided by Divine light. "And make patience a ladder to climb upwards: patience is the key to success." (Mathnawi 6:4913).

Dhikr is another crucial condition for purging inner evil thoughts and is deemed indispensable for Sufi practitioners on their spiritual journey. Rumi regards dhikr as the wise words that keeps one from illusions and falsehood. Persistent dhikr brings one toward perfection, as reverence and love for God are lifelines to divine grace. The act of dhikr

encompasses God's mercy and compassion, as it is God's calling that brings those who perform dhikr closer to Him. According to Rumi: "The perfumes of our (good) words ascend even unto Him, ascending from us whither God knoweth; Our breaths soar up with the choice (words), as a gift from us, to the abode of everlastingness; Then comes to us the recompense of our speech, a double (recompense) thereof, as a mercy from (God) the Glorious; Then He causes us to repair to (makes us utter) good words like those (already uttered), that His servant may obtain (something more) of what he has obtained. Thus, do they ascend while it (the Divine mercy) descends continually: mayst thou never cease to keep up that ascent and descent!" (Mathnawi 1:882–886) He believes that attaining God's mercy hinges on unceasing praise (tasbih), and that such "pure breaths" entitles one to divine gifts in the afterlife. Dhikr frees people from desires and greed. As he notes: "The water is recollection (dhikr) of God, and the hornet is the remembrance, during this time, of such-and-such a woman or such-and-such a man. Swallow (hold) your breath in the water of recollection and show fortitude, that you may be freed from the old thought and temptation." (Mathnawi 4:437–438) Should one's body and soul become as pure as water, the wasps of desire, fearing the water of God, will flee and no longer cause disturbance.

V. External Forms for Negating Desire

Cultivating inner spirituality alone is insufficient to renounce desire, as such cultivation must be coupled with the external form of worship through praying salah. "I created the jinn and mankind only that they might worship Me." (Quran, Adh-Dhariyat, 51:56) This verse clearly indicates the primary purpose of God's creation of human beings. Rumi reiterates this scripture, emphasizing that the ultimate goal of human creation is to revere God. "Man hath the power (of action) in everything, but this service (of God) has (ever) been the (final) object of him." (Mathnawi 3:2987) Salah (prayer) represents the external manifestation of worship. It is not only an indispensable pillar in Islam but also serves to eliminate desires.

He discusses the path of performing salah, which is divided into "form" and "spirit," ultimately referring to it as "sincere worship." Regarding the spiritual aspect, he notes, "For to him that gives thanks increase is promised, just as nighness (unto God) is the reward for prostration (in the ritual prayer)." (Mathnawi 4:10) Performing salah brings the human heart closer to God, but one must maintain faithfulness during salah. He continues, "Devotion without relish brings no fruit to ripeness. Kernels are needed that seeds may yield their trees—how can a seed without a pit become a sapling? A form without soul is but a dream and nothing more." (Mathnawi 2:3396–3397) He believes that salah lacking inner spirituality is like a seed without a core—empty within. The outward form and goodwill of the worshipper serve to demonstrate inner compassion. Therefore, only the combination of internal and external worship enables man to attain spiritual rank and closeness to God. Conversely, salah without the presence of the heart will not be accepted. In other words, spiritual piety is the foundation of the external form of salah, and performing prostrations devoid of devotion is incomplete.

Rumi emphasizes that individuals should not abandon prayer but should actively engage in the necessary acts of supplication, understanding the significance of God's absolute decrees. Regarding the meaning of prayer, Rumi introduces a profoundly important concept with Sufi characteristics. Traditionally, Muslims have prayed to God seeking "rewards" or to "avoid punishment", in which framework religious teaching and teaching of social moral values are conducted. Believers aim for noble qualities to enter the Paradise and obey His commands out of fear of hellfire. This perspective confines their prayers and actions to superficial forms, neglecting heartfelt sincerity, while still harboring desires for "entering paradise." Rumi states: " Without tasking himself, and not on account of the (future) reward

and recompense; nay, his nature has become so goodly. He does not desire his life for himself nor to the end that he may enjoy the life that is found sweet (by others)." (Mathnawi 3:1907–1908). Specifically, rather than enduring pain out of fear or seeking rewards out of greed, one should inherently and purely follow the path God has illuminated. Renouncing desire and sincerely embracing obedience to God's commands as a path of jubilation is central to Rumi's educational thought concerning worshipping God. He continues: "He lives for God's sake, not for riches; he dies for God's sake, not from fear of pain. His faith is (held) for the sake of (doing) His will, not for the sake of Paradise and its trees and streams. His abandonment of infidelity is also for God's sake, not for fear lest he go into the Fire." (Mathnawi 3:1910–1912). Rumi not only points out that the purpose of worship and reverence is to draw near to God, but he also emphasizes attaining the love and grace of God. He reminds people not to worship God for the purpose of entering paradise or fearing hell but worship Him because He is inherently worthy of thanks and praise. Historically, many believers in God, especially monotheists (Jews, Christians, and Muslims), have conscientiously and meticulously followed religious laws out of concern for the afterlife, fear of hell, and hope for paradise. As a result, in their hearts, "fear of God" has surpassed the "love for God." A true believer does not resist divinely ordained calamities and does not feel troubled by God's commands. People's noble qualities stem from their innate nature, not from fear of punishment or hope for rewards; they are cultivated through self-discipline and moral refinement.

"If love were (only spiritual) thought and reality, the form of your fasting and prayer would be non-existent." (Mathnawi 1:2625) implies that one must not only devoutly remember God but also engage in formal acts of worship. Sincere prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and other heartfelt actions serve as tangible evidence of steadfast faith. "Dishes of food and hospitality are for the purpose of declaring that 'we, O noble (guests), have become in true accord with you.'" (Mathnawi 5:185). This suggests that when performing salah, one should embody goodwill and sincerity—outwardly demonstrating obedience and reverence, while inwardly maintaining devotion and restraining desires—to truly fulfill the essence of worship.

VI. Conclusion

In summary, Rumi's Mathnawi employs poetic narratives to elucidate the interplay of desire, reason, and love, thereby portraying a full picture of the ideal human character. Self-control is emphasized as the primary requirement and an indispensable practice on the Sufi path. On the journey toward becoming a "Perfect Man", it is essential to transcend the negative traits inherent in the "self." This involves self-restraint, patience, dhikr, and the avoidance of greed, anger, and lust, coupled with the purification of inner evil inclinations. Meanwhile, one must engage in outward rituals such as prayer (ṣalāh), fasting (ṣawm), and pilgrimage (ḥajj). In this context, the "Perfect Man" depicted in the Mathnawi serves as a model of noble qualities that bring one closer to God, with the struggle against "desire" being a tangible manifestation of this ideal. As Rumi states: "The fleshly soul is a sophist: beat it constantly, for beating does it good, not arguing with it." (Mathnawi 2:3500). The criteria for the Perfect Man begin with self-awareness, followed by inner contemplation and external ascetic practices. This process entails the annihilation of evil desires within the soul, ultimately achieving a spiritual state of wisal al-haqq. Rumi's unwavering commitment to truth and his wholehearted pursuit of the spiritual path provide enduring inspiration for future scholars to advance courageously through darkness.

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