

## FREEDOM OF MAN THROUGH FANĀ', BAQĀ', AND RIḌĀ: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON CLASSICAL SUFI SOURCES

### A LIBERDADE HUMANA ATRAVÉS DE FANĀ', BAQĀ' E RIḌĀ: UMA ANÁLISE COM BASE NAS FONTES SUFISTAS CLÁSSICAS

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#### Abstract

Although the question of freedom has been addressed in Islamic theology (kalām), jurisprudence (fiqh), and philosophy, in all these traditions freedom has remained fundamentally an external category. Classical Sufi thought approached this question from an entirely different perspective: for the Sufis, the primary bondage of the human being originates not in external constraints but in the domination of the soul's passions, habits, and attachments to everything other than God (māsiwā). This article analyses the liberating process constituted by the triad of fanā' (annihilation), baqā' (subsistence), and riḍā (contentment) in classical Sufi thought, and examines how this process leads to genuine tawḥīd (divine unity) and the highest state of 'ubūdiyya (servanthood). Fanā' is the threshold at which inner bondage is dissolved; baqā' is the reconstitution of the transformed will in alignment with the divine will; riḍā is the station that renders this alignment permanent. When all three are completed, genuine tawḥīd is realised, and the human being attains the deepest freedom — liberation from every bond, both interior (anfusī) and exterior (āfāqī). Drawing on the primary Arabic works of al-Muḥāsibī, al-Sarrāj, al-Kalābādhī, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, al-Qushayrī, al-Hujwīrī, al-Ghazālī, and al-Suhrawardī, this article addresses a gap in the existing literature: no independent study has yet analysed this triad through the axis of freedom and tawḥīd based on primary classical sources.

**Keywords:** Sufism. Fanā'. Baqā'. Riḍā. Tawḥīd. 'Ubūdiyya.

#### Resumo

*Embora a questão da liberdade tenha sido abordada na teologia islâmica (kalām), na jurisprudência (fiqh) e na filosofia, em todas essas tradições a liberdade permaneceu fundamentalmente uma categoria externa. O pensamento sufista clássico abordou essa questão a partir de uma perspectiva inteiramente diferente: para os sufistas, a principal servidão do ser humano não se origina em restrições externas, mas no domínio das paixões, dos hábitos e dos apegos da alma a tudo o que não é Deus (māsiwā). Este artigo analisa o processo libertador constituído pela tríade fanā' (aniquilação), baqā' (subsistência) e riḍā (contentamento) no pensamento sufista clássico, e examina como esse processo conduz ao tawḥīd (unidade divina) genuíno e ao mais elevado estado de 'ubūdiyya (servidão a Deus). Fanā' é o limiar no qual a servidão interior é dissolvida; baqā' é a reconstituição da vontade transformada em alinhamento com a vontade divina; riḍā é a estação que torna esse alinhamento permanente. Quando os três são completados, o tawḥīd genuíno se realiza e o ser humano alcança a liberdade mais profunda — a libertação de todo vínculo, tanto interior (anfusī) quanto exterior (āfāqī). Com base nas obras árabes primárias de al-Muḥāsibī, al-Sarrāj, al-Kalābādhī, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, al-Qushayrī, al-Hujwīrī, al-Ghazālī e al-Suhrawardī, este artigo preenche uma lacuna na literatura existente. Ainda não foi realizado nenhum estudo independente que tenha analisado esta tríade através do eixo da liberdade e do tawḥīd com base em fontes clássicas primárias.*

**Palavras-chave:** Sufismo. Fanā'. Baqā'. Riḍā. Tawḥīd. 'Ubūdiyya.



## 1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of Islamic thought, the question of freedom has been approached in markedly different ways across the disciplines of theology (*kalām*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and philosophy. The Sufi tradition, however, has engaged with this question from an altogether different vantage point. For the Sufis, the central issue is not humanity's freedom in relation to the external world, nor the metaphysical tension between free will and divine decree, but rather the human being's freedom in relation to his own soul (*nafs*). From this perspective, true bondage does not originate in the coercion of another person or social institution; it arises from the domination of one's own passions (*hawā*), habits, and ego-driven desires. The Sufis constructed a tradition that maps the path beyond this inner bondage with systematic precision, divides it into stages and stations (*maqāmāt*), and maintains that this journey ultimately leads to genuine divine unity (*tawḥīd*) and the supreme form of freedom.

At the centre of this article stand three concepts that are deeply and inseparably interrelated in classical Sufi thought: *fanā'*, *baqā'*, and *riḍā*. A careful reading of the Sufi literary corpus reveals that these three concepts are not isolated technical terms but successive and mutually completing stages of a coherent and unified process of liberation. *Fanā'* signifies the deliverance of the soul from its internal pressures and from the illusory centre of the ego-self; *baqā'* denotes the transformation that follows this deliverance and the reconstitution of the will and of human existence; *riḍā* represents the permanence and deepening of this process. When all three are brought to completion, the human being attains genuine *tawḥīd* — that is, he does not merely affirm with the mind that God alone is the true agent of all things but lives this truth with his entire being. It is precisely this lived, realised *tawḥīd* that, in the classical Sufi understanding, constitutes the deepest form of freedom.

The classical Sufi literary tradition has treated this question within an extraordinarily rich conceptual framework. al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) defined the inner vigilance of the soul (*murāqaba*) and its self-reckoning (*muḥāsaba*) as a systematic discipline of inner liberation. Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) produced the first systematic classification linking the degrees of *fanā'* to the levels of *tawḥīd*. al-Kalābādhī (d. 380/990 or 385/995) treated Sufi concepts with measured methodological

rigour, positioning fanā' as the practical dimension of tawḥīd. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) was among the earliest major Sufi authors to articulate with full clarity the essential unity of servanthood ('ubūdiyya) and freedom. al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) defined ḥurriyya (freedom), riḍā, fanā', and baqā' as independent technical terms and drew the connections between them with consummate precision. al-Hujwārī (d. ca. 465/1072) maintained a vigorous critical stance against misreadings of fanā' and baqā'. al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) undertook the most comprehensive analysis of how riḍā, tawḥīd, and 'ubūdiyya together constitute the ground of inner freedom. al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234) emphasised the dimension of baqā' as a return to the world and ethical and social responsibility, demonstrating that this freedom is not a reclusive withdrawal but an active mode of existence in the world.

The classical Sufi tradition represented by these figures never treated the question of freedom as an abstract philosophical problem. For them, freedom is not a doctrine but a path; not a concept but a state; not a goal but a transformation. The realised tawḥīd to which the fanā'-baqā'-riḍā triad leads liberates the human being not only from the inner pressures of the ego-soul but from every bond, both interior (anfusī) and exterior (āfāqī). At this point the most arresting paradox of the Sufi understanding also comes into view: to be a complete servant of God ('ubūdiyya) is the highest state of freedom. For the person who is a slave to his own nafs is in bondage to countless masters, whereas the person who is a servant of God alone is free from everything.

A survey of the existing academic literature reveals that significant work has been produced in both Arabic and English on the concepts of fanā' and baqā'. Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Alexander Knysh's *Islamic Mysticism*, and Michael Sells's *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* stand among the essential reference works in the field (Schimmel, 1975; Knysh, 2000; Sells, 1994). The station of riḍā has been treated tangentially in studies of al-Qushayrī and al-Ghazālī. However, no independent academic study has been identified that analyses fanā', baqā', and riḍā together, as a unified whole, through the axis of realised tawḥīd and freedom, on the basis of primary classical Arabic sources. The present article aims to fill this gap. In doing so, it also contributes a fresh perspective to broader conversations on freedom, offering the classical Sufi paradigm of inner liberation as a distinctive counterpoint to modern conceptions of freedom.

The article proceeds in six main sections. The first examines the distinctive meaning and semantic transformation of ḥurriyya (freedom) in classical Sufism. The second analyses the function of fanā' as the threshold of liberation from inner bondage. The third investigates the nature of baqā' as a reconstituted will and a new mode of existence. The fourth discusses the role of riḍā as the station that renders freedom permanent. The fifth examines the relationship between realised tawḥīd and freedom as the summit to which fanā'-baqā'-riḍā together lead. The sixth and final section considers 'ubūdiyya as the highest state of freedom.

## 2 THE MEANING OF FREEDOM IN THE CLASSICAL SUFI TRADITION

In Arabic, the word ḥurriyya denotes the social and legal status of the free-born or manumitted person, as opposed to the slave (riqq). Islamic jurisprudence regulated this social reality in considerable detail, while the theological tradition addressed freedom within the framework of debates concerning free will (ikhtiyār) and divine decree (qadar). In both traditions, freedom remained fundamentally an external category — a matter either of one's social standing or of the relationship between divine providence and human agency. The Sufi masters of the classical period subjected this concept to a radical semantic transformation, transposing ḥurriyya from an external status into an interior state, from a social category into a spiritual station (maqām).

The earliest and most systematic expression of this transformation appears in the work of al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī. In his *al-Ri'āya li-Ḥuqūq Allāh*, al-Muḥāsibī insists emphatically that the primary bondage of the human being originates in his subjection to the passions of his own soul (hawā al-nafs). In his view, the person who follows his passions is in reality a slave, however outwardly free he may appear, for each of his desires surrenders him to a different master (Muḥāsibī, 1940). al-Muḥāsibī presents this observation not merely as a psychological insight but as a profound theological inference: to be subject to anything other than God — whether a human being, a desire, or a habit — is to undermine tawḥīd from within and to sever oneself from the divine bond that alone makes genuine freedom possible. Within this framework, freedom is a state to be earned — an inner transformation to be achieved through the practice of murāqaba (self-vigilance) and muḥāsaba (self-reckoning).

Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī carries this understanding considerably further. According to al-Makkī, freedom in the Sufi tradition exhibits a three-layered structure: freedom from worldly attachments (*zuhd*), freedom from the domination of the ego-soul over itself, and finally complete emancipation from everything other than God (Makkī, 1995). This last layer constitutes al-Makkī's most original contribution. True freedom is not merely liberation from external dependencies but liberation from the inner chains forged by the self itself. At this point al-Makkī performs a striking inversion, arguing that being a complete servant (*'abd*) and being genuinely free are two faces of the same reality: for the person who is a servant of God alone is no one's slave, and this is the highest state of freedom accessible to a human being (Makkī, 1995).

al-Qushayrī is among the first Sufi authors to treat *ḥurriyya* as a technical term under its own independent heading. His definition is admirably precise: "Freedom is the emancipation of the servant from everything other than servitude to God" (Qushayrī, 1972). He immediately appends an important qualification: those who interpret freedom as liberation from the obligations of the *sharī'a* have distorted the concept at its very foundation. The freedom of the Sufi tradition is the name not of irresponsibility but of the deepest responsibility; not of lawlessness but of the most fully internalised order. This warning reflects a conscious effort on the part of classical Sufi masters to distinguish their understanding of *ḥurriyya* from the danger of antinomianism (*ibāḥiyya*).

al-Sarrāj does not treat *ḥurriyya* under a dedicated heading, yet the content of the concept is constructed indirectly across his chapters on *tawḥīd*, *fanā'*, and *ma'rifa*. For al-Sarrāj, true freedom is a state that discloses itself spontaneously in the heart in which knowledge of God and divine unity have together been realised — a freedom that is not acquired through strenuous effort but is the inevitable fruit of spiritual maturation (Sarrāj, 1914). al-Kalābādhī, in his *al-Ta'arruf*, links *ḥurriyya* to the condition of the servant in whom *fanā'* has been completed and in whose interior no place remains for anything other than God (*māsiwā*) (Kalābādhī, 1933). This definition is distinguished from the others by its foregrounding of the ontological dimension of freedom: freedom is no longer merely a psychological transformation but a reconstitution at the level of being itself.

al-Suhrawardī is the classical-period author who articulates the social and practical dimension of *ḥurriyya* with the greatest clarity in his *'Awārif al-Ma'ārif*. In his view, the freedom attained through *fanā'* and *baqā'* does not sever the Sufi from the

world; on the contrary, it returns him to the world with a freer, more responsible, and more divinely oriented gaze (Suhrawardī, 2006). This freedom is not an escape but a transformation; not a negation but a transcendence. al-Suhrawardī's emphasis demonstrates that the classical Sufi understanding of ḥurriyya is not a form of reclusive individualism but a mode of existence that has internalised social responsibility and brought itself into alignment with the divine will.

al-Ghazālī, rather than defining ḥurriyya directly, presents it as the inevitable fruit of riḍā and tawḥīd. According to al-Ghazālī, the person who genuinely acquiesces in God's decree preserves his inner freedom in the face of every manifestation of destiny: neither joy leads him to arrogance nor does affliction break his resolve. This equilibrium originates not in external circumstances but in an interior transformation, a reconstitution of the soul (Ghazālī, 1982). al-Ghazālī's framework is distinctive in positioning ḥurriyya not as a state to be aimed at but as a consequence: freedom is not targeted; it is realised spontaneously through the process of fanā'-baqā'-riḍā.

The common ground shared by all these authors is the following: in Sufism, freedom is a matter not of the human being's relationship with the external world but of his confrontation with his own inner world. True bondage lies within rather than without; consequently, true freedom can only be won within. This freedom is not a passive submission or an irresponsible lawlessness but the fruit of a demanding and systematic process requiring the transformation of the soul, the purification of the will, and the alignment of existence with the divine will. Fanā' is the threshold of this process, baqā' its maturation, and riḍā its permanence. Genuine tawḥīd is realised when all three are completed together, and it is this realisation that brings the human being to the highest freedom — a freedom from every bond, both interior (anfusī) and exterior (āfāqī).

### **3 FANĀ': THE THRESHOLD OF LIBERATION FROM INNER BONDAGE**

In the Sufi literary tradition, fanā' carries in its lexical sense the meanings of "passing away," "ceasing to exist," and "coming to an end." As a technical term, it denotes the dissolution of the ego-centre of the soul, of its passions and desires, its habitual dispositions, and its orientations toward everything other than God. The classical Sufi masters, however, defined fanā' not as a one-dimensional annihilation but as a

graduated, dynamic, and ultimately liberating process of transformation. Fanā' is not the self-destruction of the human being but his purification from everything that has falsely constituted him. It is the process in which inner bondage is dissolved, the chains of the ego-soul are broken, and the door of genuine freedom is opened.

The early uses of fanā' in Sufi literature rest directly upon a Qur'ānic foundation. The verse "All that dwells upon the earth is perishing, yet still abides the Face of your Lord, majestic and munificent" (al-Raḥmān 55:26-27) forms the theological backbone of the fanā'-baqā' dyad. The Sufis read this verse not as a cosmological statement but as the template of the spiritual wayfarer's journey: not merely to grasp intellectually the transience of everything other than God (māsiwā) but to live this truth with one's entire being and, within this lived apprehension, to arrive at divine baqā'. In his examination of the Qur'ānic origins of fanā', Paul Nwyia has shown that in early Sufi literature this concept first acquired a moral-psychological content before subsequently developing an ontological one (Nwyia, 1970). This development demonstrates that fanā' is not merely a mystical experience but the technical expression of a systematic process of purification and liberation.

### 3.1 The three degrees of fanā' in al-Sarrāj

The earliest systematic classification of fanā' is offered by Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj in his *Kitāb al-Luma'*. al-Sarrāj treats fanā' at three degrees: the annihilation of blameworthy attributes (fanā' al-awṣāf al-madhmūma), the annihilation of individual will (fanā' al-irāda), and finally the passing beyond even one's own consciousness of annihilation (fanā' al-fanā') (Sarrāj, 1914). This threefold classification is of great importance, for it demonstrates clearly that fanā' does not consist in moral purification alone, even though it begins there.

The first degree, the annihilation of blameworthy attributes, is the mystical dimension of moral transformation. When pride, envy, greed, passion, and their like are extinguished, the human being is freed from the inner despotism these attributes have established. It is here that al-Sarrāj establishes most concretely the relationship between fanā' and freedom: every blameworthy attribute is a form of bondage to one's own ego-soul; the annihilation of these attributes is the dissolution of this bondage. The second

degree, the annihilation of individual will, opens the door to a deeper freedom: the wayfarer no longer perceives his own will as a separate and independent centre standing over against the divine will; this consciousness of separateness dissolves. Yet as al-Sarrāj explicitly emphasises, this is not the extinction of the will but its transformation — the will ceases to move from its own independent source and becomes instead a transparent instrument of the divine will (Sarrāj, 1914). The third degree, fanā' al-fanā', is the subtlest and most paradoxical: the wayfarer passes beyond even his consciousness of his own annihilation; no subject remains who could say “I have attained fanā'.” This degree is the expression of emancipation from even the finest residue of selfhood's claim.

### 3.2 Fanā' and ontological transformation in al-Kalābādhī

al-Kalābādhī approaches fanā' in his *al-Ta'arruf* from a perspective different from al-Sarrāj's. He positions fanā' primarily as the practical dimension of tawhīd: the person who truly comprehends the unity of God inevitably comes, as a consequence of this comprehension, to live the relativity of his own existence before God — and it is precisely this lived relativity that forms the basis of fanā' (Kalābādhī, 1933). Within this framework, al-Kalābādhī distinguishes two dimensions of fanā': the annihilation of qualities (ṣifāt) and the annihilation of states (aḥwāl). In the annihilation of qualities, the wayfarer's blameworthy characteristics dissolve; in the annihilation of states, a threshold is crossed in which even the spiritual journey itself is surpassed and even the awareness of “being on the path” is left behind (Kalābādhī, 1933). This second dimension converges with al-Sarrāj's fanā' al-fanā' and demonstrates that both authors conceive of fanā' not as a merely initial experience but as a continuously deepening process of liberation.

### 3.3 The psychological depth of fanā' in al-Qushayrī

al-Qushayrī adds powerful psychological depth to the concept of fanā' in the relevant section of his *al-Risāla*. In his account, fanā' begins when the wayfarer passes beyond his own attributes; he then passes beyond his awareness of this very passing; and he finally arrives at a state that transcends every form of duality (Qushayrī, 1972). al-Qushayrī employs a remarkably careful language in describing the experience of fanā'.

The wayfarer's consciousness does not weaken or grow dim during fanā'; on the contrary, a sharper and clearer mode of perception emerges. Yet this perception is no longer a consciousness that curves back upon the self; it is a transparency that opens in the self-disclosure of the divine presence. This account expresses the liberating character of fanā' with the utmost precision: when the human being is freed from the ego-claim that has falsely constituted his existence, he becomes more rather than less; he sees more clearly rather than less clearly; he moves more freely rather than less freely.

al-Qushayrī also defines the process of the soul's transformation by establishing fanā''s connection with Qur'ānic anthropology. Through the fanā' of the nafs al-ammāra (the soul commanding to evil) there emerges the nafs al-lawwāma (the self-reproaching soul), and through the fanā' of the latter there emerges the nafs al-muṭma'inna (the tranquil soul) — the soul that is now guided not by passion but by the divine call (Qushayrī, 1972). This process sets out with the greatest clarity the Qur'ānic ground of Sufism's understanding of freedom: the verse “O tranquil soul, return to your Lord, well-pleased and well-pleasing” (al-Fajr 89:27-28) announces the threshold at which fanā' is completed and baqā' begins.

### 3.4 The precondition of fanā' in al-Muḥāsibī: Murāqaba and Muḥāsaba

Although al-Muḥāsibī does not employ the term fanā' as extensively as a technical term in the way other authors do, his systematic psychology of the soul in *al-Ri'āya* and *al-Waṣāyā* retains its character as the classical source that defines the necessary precondition of fanā' in the greatest detail. According to al-Muḥāsibī, liberation from the inner bondage of the soul is not a contingent experience but a systematic practice of liberation won through murāqaba (continuous inner vigilance) and muḥāsaba (self-reckoning) (Muḥāsibī, 1940; Muḥāsibī, 1986).

In *al-Ri'āya*, al-Muḥāsibī defines murāqaba as the servant's awareness at every moment that God sees him, and the keeping of his soul under discipline in the light of this awareness (Muḥāsibī, 1940). This discipline is not merely a moral restraint; it is a practice of inner freedom that brings to light every form of the soul's self-deception, every concealed desire, and every hidden dependency. Through murāqaba the human being begins to perceive the traps his own soul has laid for him; through muḥāsaba he extricates

himself from them step by step. al-Muḥāsibī's system is in this respect less a theoretical description of fanā' than a practical guide — a roadmap of liberation that shows, stage by stage, how inner bondage is to be recognised and overcome.

### 3.5 Against the misreadings of fanā': al-Hujwārī's critique

al-Hujwārī in his *Kashf al-Maḥjūb* rejects with vigour two fundamental misreadings of fanā'. The first misreading is the interpretation of fanā' as the ontological annihilation of existence. al-Hujwārī finds this interpretation incoherent: what is annihilated in fanā' is not the substance of the servant (dhāt) but his ego-claim and his dependency upon everything other than God (Hujwārī, 1911). The second misreading is the use of fanā' as justification for moral irresponsibility and exemption from religious obligations. al-Hujwārī refutes this reading on both logical and spiritual grounds: in a heart in which genuine fanā' has been lived, the ego-claim has dissolved, and with it the capacity of that ego to declare "I am exempt from obligation." The claim of exemption from obligation is evidence not of fanā' but, on the contrary, of the soul's continuation in its subtlest and most dangerous form (Hujwārī, 1911).

al-Hujwārī's critique illuminates a dimension of the classical Sufi understanding of fanā' of the utmost importance. Fanā' reconstitutes freedom as responsibility rather than irresponsibility. The person who has been freed from the tyranny of his own soul no longer experiences the obligations of the sharī'a as rules externally imposed upon him but as the natural expression of his own transformed will. This is the highest and most ideal form of freedom: not submission to law under compulsion but being in natural harmony with the law.

## 4 BAQĀ': RECONSTITUTION AND THE TRANSFORMED WILL

In the Sufi literary tradition, baqā' carries in its lexical sense the meanings of "remaining," "continuity," and "permanence." As a technical term that has come to serve as the counterpart and complement of fanā', baqā' denotes the reconstitution that follows fanā', the alignment of the transformed will with the divine will, and the return of the human being to the world in what amounts to an altogether new mode of existence. Baqā'

without fanā' is impossible; fanā' without baqā' is an incomplete and dangerous half-measure. These two concepts are not sequential stages but two faces of a whole that contains and constitutes each other.

#### **4.1 The relationship between baqā' and fanā': two faces of an inseparable whole**

al-Sarrāj presents baqā' and fanā' in his *Kitāb al-Luma'* as an inseparable pair. In his account, fanā' and baqā' occur simultaneously in the same heart: as the wayfarer passes beyond everything other than God (fanā'), he abides in God (baqā'); as he is emancipated from the pressures of his ego-soul, the divine life is disclosed within his heart (Sarrāj, 1914). This simultaneity is of great importance, for it shows that baqā' is not a separate process that begins after fanā' has ended. On the contrary, each degree of fanā' brings with it a corresponding degree of baqā': as blameworthy attributes are extinguished, praiseworthy ones take root; as individual will is dissolved, the manifestation of the divine will is strengthened; as one passes beyond the consciousness of fanā', the pure and unassuming state of baqā' becomes established.

al-Kalābādhī illuminates this relationship from a different angle. In his account, baqā' denotes the permanence and continuity of the wayfarer's relationship with God. Fanā' may be experienced as a transient state, a passing condition; but baqā' is the consolidation of this experience — the permanent and settled reconstitution of the wayfarer's very being (Kalābādhī, 1933). al-Kalābādhī's emphasis here is significant: baqā' marks the point at which fanā' ceases to be an experience that must be repeatedly undergone and becomes instead the wayfarer's continuous and enduring state. This is a decisive threshold in Sufism's understanding of freedom: inner freedom is no longer an acquired state that must be laboured for; it has become the wayfarer's natural and permanent mode of existence.

#### **4.2 The definition and scope of baqā' in al-Qushayrī**

al-Qushayrī offers the most comprehensive classical definition of baqā' in the relevant section of his *al-Risāla*. According to al-Qushayrī, baqā' is the replacement of everything transient in the wayfarer's relationship with God by what is enduring: the place

of transient attributes is taken by divine attributes, that of transient will by the divine will, that of transient love by abiding love (*maḥabba*) (Qushayrī, 1972). The significance of this definition for the concept of freedom is profound: in *baqā'* the human being acquires a structural freedom with respect to false and transient attachments. Nothing transient that might enslave him can any longer find a genuine foothold in his heart, for that heart is now filled with nothing but what endures.

al-Qushayrī also establishes the connection between *baqā'* and the Qur'ānic verse in *Sūrat al-Raḥmān*, demonstrating that this concept is not merely a psychological but a theological and ontological reality (Qushayrī, 1972). In *baqā'* the wayfarer does not merely affirm intellectually the enduring nature of God; he experiences this endurance as a truth lived within his own being.

#### **4.3 The dimension of freedom in *baqā'* according to al-Hujwīrī**

In treating *baqā'*, al-Hujwīrī maintains the critical stance he developed against misreadings of *fanā'*. In his account, *baqā'* is the reconstitution of the wayfarer's being at the point where *fanā'* has been completed — but this reconstitution now takes place on the ground not of the ego-soul but of the divine will (Hujwīrī, 1911). At this point al-Hujwīrī makes an observation of importance in the history of Sufism: the true mark of *baqā'* is not a diminishment of the wayfarer's engagement with and responsibility toward the world but an increase of them. Before *fanā'*, the human being is attached to the world for the sake of his ego-soul; in *baqā'* he returns to the world for the sake of God. This return is the moment in which freedom manifests in its fullest sense: there is no longer a recluse fleeing the world nor a prisoner enslaved to it; there is only a free servant who exists in the world by means of a transformed will (Hujwīrī, 1911).

#### **4.4 The social and practical dimension of *baqā'* in al-Suhrawardī**

al-Suhrawardī offers in his *'Awārīf al-Ma'ārīf* the most original and most practically oriented interpretation of *baqā'* in the classical period. In his view, *baqā'* is not a pure inward turn but a state of freedom that internalises the return to the world and social responsibility (Suhrawardī, 2006). al-Suhrawardī draws attention in this context to

two opposing dangers that arise in the wake of fanā': the first is to be overcome by the spiritual intoxication (sukr) that fanā' produces and to fail to attain the sobriety (ṣaḥw) that baqā' requires; the second is to fall into the trap of spiritual arrogance by making a public display of the spiritual maturity that baqā' brings (Suhrawardī, 2006). Both dangers distort the true nature of baqā', for the essence of baqā' is neither the perpetuation of mystical intoxication nor the exhibition of spiritual achievement. The essence of baqā' is the silent and unassuming manifestation of the transformed will within the world.

al-Suhrawardī's presentation of the Prophet Muḥammad as the most perfect exemplar of baqā' is highly significant (Suhrawardī, 2006). The Prophet, while standing at the very summit of spiritual maturity, lived at the very centre of society, bearing its most intense responsibilities — and this life demonstrated in practice that baqā' means engagement rather than withdrawal. Baqā', within this framework, crystallises the social and ethical dimension of Sufism's understanding of freedom: the liberated human being is not one who flees the world but one who transforms it.

#### 4.5 The relationship between baqā' and moral transformation in al-Ghazālī

Rather than defining baqā' directly, al-Ghazālī in various sections of his *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* positions it as the summit of moral transformation. In his account, baqā' is the permanence of the wayfarer's love for and proximity to God as a settled state — a permanence that marks the station in which moral virtues are no longer lived as habits requiring effort but as a natural mode of being (Ghazālī, 1982). al-Ghazālī distinguishes within this framework between two dimensions of baqā': spiritual baqā', which is the continuity of the wayfarer's proximity to God; and moral baqā', which is the reflection of this proximity in human relationships, everyday life, and social responsibility.

al-Ghazālī's emphasis on moral baqā' illuminates a dimension of Sufism's understanding of freedom of the greatest importance. The freedom won in baqā' is the freedom of living virtue not as necessity but as freedom itself. Before fanā', the human being lives moral virtues as externally imposed rules — and this is the experience of virtue as compulsion, which is itself a concealed form of bondage. In baqā', by contrast, moral virtues become the natural expression of the transformed will — and this is the experience of virtue as freedom. It is this profound insight that forms the animating spirit

of al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā'*: the human being that Sufism aspires to produce is not one who lives conformity to the sharī'a as an obligation but one who lives harmony with the sharī'a as the deepest point of his freedom (Ghazālī, 1982).

## 5 RIḌĀ: THE STATION THAT RENDERS FREEDOM PERMANENT

In the Sufi literary tradition, *riḍā* carries in its lexical sense the meanings of “contentment,” “satisfaction,” and “acceptance.” As a technical term, it denotes the state in which the heart rests in complete serenity and contentment before the judgements and decrees of God, bearing no objection, complaint, or inner resistance toward the divine will. The classical Sufi masters, however, carried *riḍā* far beyond this lexical definition. In their understanding, *riḍā* is neither a passive submission nor an emotional contentment with destiny. *Riḍā* is the permanent and deepened form of the will transformed through *fanā'* and *baqā'* — the station that lifts freedom from the level of a transient state and makes it the wayfarer's continuous mode of existence. In this respect, *riḍā* marks the point at which the *fanā'*–*baqā'* process has been completed and freedom has ceased to be something laboriously acquired and has become, instead, a naturally lived reality.

### 5.1 The question of whether *riḍā* is a state or a station

Among the classical Sufi masters, the question of whether *riḍā* is a state (*ḥāl*) or a station (*maqām*) became a subject of considerable debate. In general usage, states (*aḥwāl*) are transient spiritual experiences bestowed upon the servant by God without the servant's own effort; stations (*maqāmāt*) are the spiritual positions that the wayfarer settles into permanently through systematic striving and discipline. This distinction is of great consequence for understanding the nature of *riḍā*.

al-Muḥāsibī treats *riḍā* primarily as a station that must be earned. He emphasises that *riḍā* is capable of becoming permanently settled only after the soul has undergone systematic transformation, and that *riḍā* experienced before this transformation is complete is not genuine contentment but merely an emotional satisfaction (Muḥāsibī, 1940). This observation is of great importance: the value of *riḍā* from the standpoint of freedom derives from its permanence. A transient contentment does not liberate the

human being, for the structures that enslave him remain fully in place. The true liberating power of *riḍā* manifests only when it is lived as a permanent and deepened station.

al-Qushayrī, by contrast, addresses both the state and the station dimensions of *riḍā* together, resolving the debate in a nuanced way. In his account, *riḍā* is initially bestowed as a state; yet the wayfarer's preservation and deepening of this state transforms it into a station (Qushayrī, 1972). al-Qushayrī's resolution further enriches the meaning of *riḍā* from the standpoint of freedom: freedom is not a static condition acquired at a single moment and thereafter maintained but a dynamic process of continuous deepening and maturation.

## 5.2 The psychological foundation of *riḍā* in al-Muḥāsibī

al-Muḥāsibī is, among the classical Sufi masters, the author who analyses the psychological ground of *riḍā* with the finest degree of detail. In the relevant sections of *al-Ri'āya*, he defines *riḍā* as the complete dissolution of the hidden resistance that the soul harbours toward the judgement of God. The most dangerous dimension of this hidden resistance is its capacity to persist in forms of which the wayfarer is entirely unaware: a person may outwardly raise no objection to God's decree while still carrying, in the depths of his being, a murmur of discontent, a small dissatisfaction, or a veiled complaint (Muḥāsibī, 1940).

According to al-Muḥāsibī, this hidden resistance is one of the deepest forms of the soul's bondage. If the human being is inwardly shaken when events fail to unfold as he desires, this agitation is a sign that he still places his own will before the divine will. Genuine *riḍā* is the state in which this prioritisation has been completely reversed: the human being now sincerely desires that events be shaped not according to his own wishes but according to the divine will, and he experiences the realisation of this desire as his deepest satisfaction (Muḥāsibī, 1940). This transformation is the purest form of freedom: the human being is no longer a slave to circumstances, for he is in complete harmony with the divine will that determines all circumstances.

### 5.3 The connection between *riḍā* and *tawḥīd* in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī

Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī positions *riḍā* as the inevitable fruit of *tawḥīd* lived within the heart. In his view, the person who truly comprehends the unity of God knows that every event proceeds from a single source — the divine will — and together with this knowledge grasps the meaninglessness of developing different emotional responses to different events. If joy and sorrow, gain and loss, health and illness all proceed from the same source, then to respond to all of them with the same *riḍā* is the practical realisation of *tawḥīd* (Makkī, 1995).

al-Makkī treats *riḍā* within this framework at two levels: acquiescence in divine decree and destiny (*riḍā bi'l-qaḍā' wa'l-qadar*) and acquiescence in the divine ordinances (*riḍā bi'l-aḥkām*). The first is inward contentment with everything God has created in the universe — including affliction; the second is the acceptance of the ordinances God has established as religion, with inner enthusiasm and freedom (Makkī, 1995). al-Makkī's distinction illuminates the freedom-dimension of *riḍā* along two different axes: cosmological freedom is an inner serenity that remains unbroken in the face of the flow of events; moral freedom is the experience of the divine ordinances not as externally imposed rules but as the deepest truth inwardly embraced.

### 5.4 The definition and scope of *riḍā* in al-Qushayrī

al-Qushayrī is the classical-period author who treats this station most systematically in the *riḍā* section of his *al-Risāla*. His definition reads: "Riḍā is the heart's not beating against the divine judgement" (Qushayrī, 1972). This definition is of rare precision and depth: *riḍā* is not the bearing of positive emotions or the appearance of contentment with everything, but the inner equilibrium and tranquillity of the heart. However heavy the events may be, this equilibrium is not disturbed, for the heart is no longer bound to events but to the divine will that brings all events into being.

al-Qushayrī also addresses the degrees of *riḍā* in the same section. At the lowest degree, *riḍā* consists only in patience and forbearance: the human being raises no open objection to the divine decree but is not inwardly content either. At the middle degree, *riḍā* has become a genuine state of the heart: the human being sincerely believes that the

divine decree brings what is most beneficial for him, and this belief brings him deep tranquillity. At the highest degree, *riḍā* is the state in which the wayfarer responds to pain and pleasure, loss and gain, constriction and expansion, all with the same serenity, no longer distinguishing between them (Qushayrī, 1972). This highest degree is the fullest form of freedom: the human being is no longer a slave to any condition, for no condition can disturb his inner equilibrium.

### 5.5 The dimension of freedom in *riḍā* according to al-Ghazālī

al-Ghazālī offers in the *Kitāb al-Riḍā wa'l-Shukr* of his *Iḥyā'* the most comprehensive and most penetrating analysis of *riḍā* in the classical period. al-Ghazālī defines *riḍā* as the matured and permanently settled form of love (*maḥabba*). In his account, the person who truly loves God experiences every divine judgement as the realisation of his own deepest desire, for whatever the beloved does is sweet to the one who loves (Ghazālī, 1982). Within this framework, *riḍā* is not an acceptance externally imposed but a contentment that arises from within — and this contentment is the manifestation of a fully free will.

al-Ghazālī's most original contribution to the analysis of *riḍā* is his demonstration that this station liberates the human being both from the past and from the future. The person who possesses *riḍā* does not continuously resurrect past sorrows in his mind and hold himself captive to them; fears and anxieties about the future do not paralyse him. These two liberations — emancipation from the pain of the past and the fear of the future — place the human being genuinely in the present moment; and the present is the sole real time of the divine will's manifestation (Ghazālī, 1982). al-Ghazālī shows in this context that *riḍā* further consolidates, against time itself, the freedom won through *fanā'* and *baqā'*: the person without *riḍā* lives as a slave to the past and the future; the person with *riḍā* exists freely in the present, in which the divine will manifests anew at every moment.

al-Ghazālī also examines in the same section the deep bond between *riḍā* and gratitude (*shukr*) (Ghazālī, 1982). *Riḍā* and *shukr* are two stations that nourish and deepen each other: *riḍā* is the acceptance of every state as coming from God; *shukr* is the expression of this acceptance in active thankfulness. Together they demonstrate that

freedom is not a static condition but a dynamic one: the person who possesses riḍā does not merely accept; he actively expresses his gratitude, and this expression carries him to a deeper riḍā, so that the cycle between riḍā and shukr continuously regenerates freedom.

### 5.6 The relationship between riḍā and baqā' in al-Suhrawardī

al-Suhrawardī positions riḍā in his *'Awārif al-Ma'ārif* as the station that consolidates and deepens the ground of baqā'. In his view, the transformed will acquired in baqā' remains fragile without riḍā: the wayfarer who encounters a sufficiently powerful shock faces the danger of returning to his old patterns. Riḍā is the station that fortifies and reinforces the freedom that baqā' has brought against every kind of condition (Suhrawardī, 2006). In this respect, fanā'-baqā'-riḍā is not a sequence of stages that follow one another but a whole that completes and strengthens each of its parts: fanā' is the threshold at which the human being's bondage to himself is dissolved; baqā' is the freedom in which the transformed will manifests in the world; riḍā is the permanence of this freedom, preserved and deepened under every condition.

al-Suhrawardī also draws attention in this context to the social dimension of riḍā. The person who possesses riḍā has been liberated not only at the individual level but in his social relationships as well. The treatment others direct toward him — whether praise or blame, loyalty or betrayal — does not shake him from within, for he moves under the guidance not of human beings but of the divine will (Suhrawardī, 2006). This social dimension of freedom demonstrates that riḍā is not merely an individual spiritual state but a station that transforms the very ground of the human being's social existence.

## 6 GENUINE TAWḤĪD: THE SUMMIT TO WHICH FANĀ'-BAQĀ'-RIḌĀ LEADS

In the theological tradition, tawḥīd is the intellectual affirmation of the existence and unity of God. In the jurisprudential tradition, it is the practical correlate of a faith purified of all associationism (shirk). The classical Sufi masters approached tawḥīd from a perspective that is at once different from and far deeper than either of these traditions. In their understanding, tawḥīd is not merely an intellectual affirmation or a practical

purification but a realisation lived through every layer of the heart, every depth of the will, and every dimension of existence. It is this lived tawḥīd — realised, made into a state, leaving its mark upon being — that defines the summit reached when fanā’, baqā’, and riḍā have been completed together, and it is this very realisation that constitutes the deepest freedom, liberating the human being from every bond, both interior (anfusī) and exterior (āfāqī).

### 6.1 The degrees of tawḥīd in the sufi tradition

al-Sarrāj treats these degrees in the tawḥīd section of his *Kitāb al-Luma’* within a threefold scheme. The first degree is the tawḥīd of the common people (tawḥīd al-‘amma): the intellectual affirmation that God is one, the verbal profession of faith (shahāda), and the reflection of this affirmation in practical life. This degree constitutes the necessary minimum of faith; yet in the depths of the heart there remains space for everything other than God (māsiwā), and the ego-claim persists (Sarrāj, 1914). The second degree is the tawḥīd of the elect (tawḥīd al-khawāṣṣ): at this degree the servant begins to live the existence of God not only in his mind but in his heart as well. The withdrawal of māsiwā from the heart and the dissolution of hidden attachments to everything other than God take place at this degree — and this is the level at which fanā’ and baqā’ are lived. The third and highest degree is the tawḥīd of the elect of the elect (tawḥīd khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ): at this degree the servant lives the unity of God with his entire being; there remains place for neither the past nor the future, neither the ego-soul nor māsiwā — only the divine will and its self-disclosures (Sarrāj, 1914). It is this third degree — the tawḥīd that riḍā renders permanent and that gives birth to genuine freedom.

al-Kalābādhī illuminates the highest degree of tawḥīd from a different perspective in his *al-Ta’arruf*. According to him, genuine tawḥīd is the servant’s perception of the relativity of his own existence before the existence of God — a perception that is not merely intellectual but ontological (Kalābādhī, 1933). al-Kalābādhī gives concrete form to this perception through the servant’s recognition of nothing other than God as a true agent: events, human beings, and circumstances do not, in any real sense, “do” anything; the sole true agent is God. For al-Kalābādhī, the living of this truth with one’s entire being constitutes the essence of genuine tawḥīd, and the living of this essence emancipates the

human being from every relationship of dependency upon relative agents — that is, from every form of inner bondage (Kalābādhī, 1933).

Although al-Muḥāsibī does not treat tawḥīd systematically under a dedicated heading in *al-Ri'āya*, the entirety of his psychology of the soul furnishes a framework that constructs the inner dimension of genuine tawḥīd. According to al-Muḥāsibī, the human heart worships, unknowingly, a multitude of relative gods: its own passions, its habits, the expectations of others, its fears about the future, and its regrets about the past. These hidden forms of divinity are the manifestations of the shirk that persists in the heart while God's unity is affirmed at the intellectual level (Muḥāsibī, 1940).

al-Muḥāsibī's system of murāqaba and muḥāsaba is a practical instrument directed precisely toward the diagnosis and remedy of this hidden shirk. Through murāqaba the human being begins to perceive the hidden dependencies in his heart; through muḥāsaba he resolves them step by step. The completion of this process is the settling of genuine tawḥīd within the heart — a settling that produces the deepest freedom, liberating the human being from the domination of the false gods within. al-Muḥāsibī emphasises forcefully in this context that interior freedom (*anfusī*) precedes exterior freedom (*āfāqī*): liberation from the external world is possible only when one has first been liberated within; and inner liberation is achieved only when genuine tawḥīd has been established in the heart (Muḥāsibī, 1940).

al-Qushayrī distinguishes three dimensions of tawḥīd: tawḥīd by the tongue (the profession of faith), tawḥīd by the intellect (cognitive affirmation), and tawḥīd by the state (*ḥāl*) — the tawḥīd of the heart and the will (Qushayrī, 1972). The third dimension, tawḥīd by the state, is the point to which *fanā'*-*baqā'*-*riḍā* together lead, and al-Qushayrī defines it as the highest state of freedom.

According to al-Qushayrī, the person who attains tawḥīd by the state lives an inner freedom that no *māsiwā* can direct. Praise does not make him arrogant; blame does not break him; prosperity does not intoxicate him; affliction does not destroy him; the affection of others does not make him dependent; their aversion does not unsettle him (Qushayrī, 1972). This inner equilibrium is the fruit not of detachment from external conditions but of the capacity to perceive God as the sole true agent behind every condition and of being bound to Him alone. Genuine tawḥīd, in this respect, produces

simultaneously an emancipation from the false gods of the ego-soul at the interior (anfusī) level and from the transient attractions of the world at the exterior (āfāqī) level.

al-Makkī treats tawḥīd as a realisation that emerges at the point where fanā'-baqā'-riḍā have been completed together and that permeates the whole of one's being. He expresses this realisation through the concept of the realisation of tawḥīd (taḥqīq al-tawḥīd) and explains how it differs from a merely intellectual comprehension (Makkī, 1995). Taḥqīq al-tawḥīd is the servant's beholding of the divine will alone in every moment, every event, and every relationship — his witnessing of the sole true agent behind all relative agents. This witnessing is not merely knowledge; it is a state, a mode of being, and the highest form of freedom.

al-Makkī articulates in this context the deepest meaning of tawḥīd from the standpoint of freedom: liberation from everything that is dependent upon anything other than God is possible only through being fully bound to God (Makkī, 1995). This is not a paradox but the expression of the most fundamental truth of existence. The human being is, by nature, a being dependent upon God; to deny or suppress this dependency produces no result other than enslaving him to māsiwā. But to accept and live this dependency with one's entire being liberates the human being from every form of māsiwā's domination.

al-Ghazālī presents in the *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd wa'l-Tawakkul* of his *Iḥyā'* the most comprehensive analysis in the classical period of the genuine tawḥīd to which fanā'-baqā'-riḍā leads and of its relationship with freedom. In a manner similar to al-Qushayrī, al-Ghazālī divides tawḥīd into four degrees: at the first degree, tawḥīd is affirmed by the tongue alone, and this is the tawḥīd of the hypocrite; at the second degree, tawḥīd is verified intellectually, and this is the tawḥīd of the common people; at the third degree, tawḥīd is witnessed with the eye of the heart, and this is the tawḥīd of the elect; at the fourth and highest degree, tawḥīd is lived with the whole of one's being, and this is the tawḥīd of the ṣiddīqūn and the prophets (Ghazālī, 1982).

al-Ghazālī's fourth degree is the point reached when fanā'-baqā'-riḍā have been completed together. At this degree the servant sees God alone — yet this “seeing God alone” is not the negation of existence but the beholding of existence as the totality of the divine self-disclosures. al-Ghazālī associates this state of witnessing with the deepest form of tawakkul (reliance upon God): the person of genuine tawakkul does not deny the

existence of causes; yet he is never for a moment heedless of the sole true agent behind all causes — God (Ghazālī, 1982).

al-Ghazālī's most original contribution to the relationship between tawḥīd and freedom is the following: the tawḥīd of the fourth degree liberates the human being not merely at the psychological level but at the level of being itself. At this degree the human being is emancipated simultaneously from every pressure of the ego-soul at the interior (anfūsī) level and from every domination of the world at the exterior (āfāqī) level. Interior freedom is realised through the dissolution of the ego-soul's claim to false divinity — a point al-Muḥāsibī also emphasises; exterior freedom emerges through the cessation of the perception of the world, human beings, and circumstances as genuine agents. Both freedoms are nourished from the same source: genuine tawḥīd (Ghazālī, 1982).

al-Suhrawardī in his *'Awārif al-Ma'ārif* focuses less on the theoretical dimension of genuine tawḥīd and more on its practical manifestations. In his account, the tawḥīd to which fanā'-baqā'-riḍā leads makes itself evident in unmistakable ways in everyday life: the person who lives tawḥīd is neither a slave to expectation nor dependent upon approval in his relationships with others; he is neither fragile nor insensible in the face of events; he is neither a fugitive from his responsibilities nor crushed beneath them (Suhrawardī, 2006). This equilibrium draws the portrait of practical freedom as it emerges from genuine tawḥīd: to be fully within the world while being the slave of nothing in the world.

al-Suhrawardī draws particular attention in this context to the social responsibility of the person who lives genuine tawḥīd. The Sufi who lives tawḥīd exists not in reclusive individualism but at the very centre of society, within the most intense web of relationships — yet this existence is no longer ego-centred but centred upon the divine will. He serves others because he sees the divine self-disclosures in them. He assumes responsibilities because they are no longer burdens imposed from without but trusts (amānāt) bestowed upon him by the divine will (Suhrawardī, 2006). al-Suhrawardī's interpretation lays bare the most practical and most human dimension of genuine tawḥīd's understanding of freedom: this freedom is not the freedom of flight from the world but of embracing the world in full freedom.

## 7 ‘UBŪDIYYA: THE HIGHEST STATE OF FREEDOM

In the Sufi literary tradition, ‘ubūdiyya carries in its lexical sense the meanings of “servanthood,” “slavery,” and “service.” In its social and juridical context, this concept denotes the position of the slave before the master. The classical Sufi masters, however, subjected ‘ubūdiyya to a profound and paradoxical conceptual transformation proceeding from this very lexical meaning. In their understanding, ‘ubūdiyya is the name of the human being’s relationship of servanthood toward God — yet this servanthood is not a dependency that diminishes the human being, restricts his freedom, or renders him passive. On the contrary, the classical Sufi masters without exception maintained powerfully that the highest state of ‘ubūdiyya and the highest state of freedom are two faces of the same reality. It is precisely in this paradoxical truth that the most concrete and most human manifestation of the genuine tawḥīd to which fanā’-baqā’-riḍā leads discloses itself: to be a servant in the fullest sense is to be free in the fullest sense.

### 7.1 The conceptual transformation of ‘ubūdiyya: from bondage to freedom

To understand the transformation of ‘ubūdiyya within the Sufi tradition, it is necessary first to bring into clear view the tension the concept carries. The classical Sufi masters addressed the apparent contradiction between freedom and servanthood to God not through the opposition between autonomy and heteronomy as constructed in modern Western thought but from an altogether different perspective. In their understanding, there is no tension between servanthood to God and freedom; on the contrary, servanthood to God constitutes the very ground and fulfilment of freedom.

The earliest and most systematic expression of this transformation again appears in al-Muḥāsibī. In *al-Ri‘āya*, al-Muḥāsibī treats ‘ubūdiyya at two levels: formal servanthood (‘ubūdiyyat al-zāhir) and genuine servanthood (‘ubūdiyyat al-ḥaqīqa). Formal servanthood is the external performance of acts of worship and fulfilment of the obligations of the sharī‘a; this level is necessary but not sufficient. Genuine servanthood, by contrast, is the orientation of the servant’s entire will, desire, and attention toward God — an orientation in which not even the finest residue of the ego-claim finds a place (Muḥāsibī, 1940). According to al-Muḥāsibī, the person who attains genuine servanthood

has arrived at the deepest freedom, for no force — inner or outer — remains that could enslave him.

## 7.2 The Identity of 'ubūdiyya and freedom in abū ṭālib al-Makkī and al-Sarrāj

al-Makkī is the classical-period author who articulates the 'ubūdiyya-ḥurriyya paradox most openly and most boldly in his *Qūt al-Qulūb*. In his view, genuine freedom (al-ḥurriyyat al-ḥaqīqiyya) is attained only through complete servanthood (al-'ubūdiyyat al-tāmma); these two are not mutually exclusive but mutually necessitating realities (Makkī, 1995). al-Makkī illuminates this paradox with a concrete analysis: the human being faces two alternatives — either he becomes a servant of God or a servant of everything other than God. The person who is a servant of God has been emancipated from every form of māsiwā's domination; the person who is a servant of anything other than God, however outwardly free he may appear, is under the yoke of countless masters (Makkī, 1995).

al-Makkī distinguishes within this context three layers of 'ubūdiyya. At the first layer, 'ubūdiyya is the performance of acts of worship — this is what the sharī'a requires. At the second layer, 'ubūdiyya is moral transformation — this is what the ṭarīqa requires. At the third and deepest layer, 'ubūdiyya is the servant's complete passing beyond his own will and becoming instead the very locus of the divine will's manifestation — this is what the ḥaqīqa requires (Makkī, 1995). It is this third layer that is the point to which fanā'-baqā'-ridā together lead, and al-Makkī defines it as the highest state of freedom accessible to a human being.

al-Sarrāj, in his *Kitāb al-Luma'*, positions 'ubūdiyya as the practical dimension of genuine tawḥīd. In his account, the person who has reached the highest degree of tawḥīd has simultaneously reached the highest degree of 'ubūdiyya; these two degrees are two different expressions of the same reality (Sarrāj, 1914). al-Sarrāj gives concrete form to this connection: tawḥīd is the living of God's unity with one's entire being; 'ubūdiyya is the reflection of this lived unity in the servant's everyday life, relationships, and actions. Without tawḥīd, 'ubūdiyya collapses into ritual; without 'ubūdiyya, tawḥīd collapses into theory. When both are completed together, genuine freedom emerges.

### 7.3 The resolution of the ‘ubūdiyya–ḥurriyya paradox in al-Qushayrī and al-Hujwīrī

al-Qushayrī addresses the ‘ubūdiyya–ḥurriyya paradox most systematically in the ḥurriyya section of his *al-Risāla* and resolves it with a definitive formula: “al-ḥurru man taḥarrara min riqq al-māsiwā: free is the one who has been emancipated from the bondage of everything other than God” (Qushayrī, 1972). This formula summarises the classical Sufi understanding of freedom with admirable precision: true freedom is emancipation from the domination of everything other than God, and this emancipation is realised only through complete servanthood to God. According to al-Qushayrī, the servant in whom outward ‘ubūdiyya — the performance of acts of worship and obligations — and inward ‘ubūdiyya — the complete orientation of the heart, will, and attention toward God — have been realised together has simultaneously reached the summit of ‘ubūdiyya and the summit of ḥurriyya, for at this summit the two are no longer distinct (Qushayrī, 1972).

al-Hujwīrī in his *Kashf al-Maḥjūb* approaches and resolves the ‘ubūdiyya–ḥurriyya paradox from a different angle. In his view, this paradox appears to be merely a conceptual contradiction; yet when examined in depth, the two concepts are seen to necessitate each other (Hujwīrī, 1911). al-Hujwīrī analyses it as follows: bondage occurs when a relationship of dependency is established between subject and object; in this relationship, the slave is in a state of continuous uncertainty and vulnerability because he is subject to the changing will, caprice, and circumstances of his master. In servanthood to God, however, the situation is completely reversed: God’s will is unchanging, just, and the will of the One who knows all things best. To submit to this will is to be emancipated from uncertainty and vulnerability — that is to say, it is the deepest freedom (Hujwīrī, 1911).

### 7.4 The summit of the freedom-dimension of ‘ubūdiyya in al-Ghazālī

al-Ghazālī composed his *Minhāj al-‘Ābidīn* as a work in which he treats systematically all the dimensions of the human being's relationship of servanthood toward God. In this work al-Ghazālī presents the seven degrees of ‘ubūdiyya — repentance, the overcoming of obstacles, renunciation (zuhd) with respect to worldly pleasures, the

removal of external impediments, the purification of motivations, gratitude, and praise — as a path in which each degree is built upon the one before it (Ghazālī, 1964).

al-Ghazālī's most original contribution in this work is his explicit demonstration of the dimension of freedom won at each degree of 'ubūdiyya. Repentance liberates from the burden of the past; the overcoming of obstacles liberates from ego-driven resistances; renunciation liberates from the attraction of the world; the removal of external impediments liberates from social pressures; the purification of motivations liberates from ego-centred objectives; gratitude and praise render these liberations permanent (Ghazālī, 1964). The journey of 'ubūdiyya thus becomes a comprehensive process of transformation that encompasses a new liberation at every step and that ultimately emancipates the human being from every bond, both interior and exterior.

al-Ghazālī completes this journey from the perspective of love (*maḥabba*) in the *Kitāb al-Maḥabba* of his *Iḥyā'*. In his account, the person who lives the highest state of 'ubūdiyya loves God so deeply that this love surpasses and empties all other loves — and this emptying is the deepest freedom (Ghazālī, 1982). The one who loves is prepared to risk everything for the beloved; yet in the love of God this “risking of everything” is in reality a “liberation from everything,” for the person who truly loves God attributes no real value to anything other than Him — and to that to which one attributes no value, one is not enslaved.

### **7.5 The social dimension of 'ubūdiyya in al-Suhrawardī**

al-Suhrawardī, as in his treatment of the other concepts examined in this article, approaches the freedom-dimension of 'ubūdiyya from the perspective of social relationships. In his account, the person who attains genuine 'ubūdiyya undergoes a radical transformation in his social relationships as well: he is no longer in need of others' approval nor afraid of their criticism; he neither strives for rank and position nor fears the loss of them (Suhrawardī, 2006). This social freedom is one of the most visible fruits of 'ubūdiyya and constitutes one of the clearest criteria by which it may be assessed whether a Sufi has genuinely attained it.

al-Suhrawardī emphasises in this context that the Sufi who lives genuine 'ubūdiyya, though standing in the midst of society, is emancipated from society's

pressures. This is not a flight from society but the highest form of existing freely within it. The Sufi serves others — yet without being enslaved to their expectations. He fulfils his duties — yet without allowing these duties to define him. He assumes social responsibilities — yet without being crushed beneath their weight (Suhrawardī, 2006). al-Suhrawardī's portrayal lays bare the most practical and most human dimension of genuine 'ubūdiyya's understanding of freedom: in the midst of the world, among human beings, amid responsibilities — yet free from all of them.

## 8 CONCLUSION

This article has analysed the process of liberation formed by the concepts of fanā', baqā', and riḍā in classical Sufi thought, and has examined how this process leads to genuine tawḥīd and the highest state of 'ubūdiyya. Grounded in the primary sources of al-Muḥāsibī, al-Sarrāj, al-Kalābādhī, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, al-Qushayrī, al-Hujwīrī, al-Ghazālī, and al-Suhrawardī, this analysis has brought to light the distinctive, profound, and coherent approach that the Sufi tradition brings to the question of freedom.

The central argument of the article may be summarised as follows: the classical Sufi masters conceived of freedom not as the absence of external constraints or as an abstract volitional autonomy but as a simultaneous emancipation from the inner domination of the ego-soul and the external pressures of māsiwā. This emancipation is not a spontaneous experience but the fruit of a systematic process of transformation formed by fanā', baqā', and riḍā acting together. Fanā' is the threshold at which the inner bondage of the soul is dissolved; baqā' is the reconstitution in which the transformed will is aligned with the divine will; riḍā is the station that secures the permanence of this alignment. When all three are completed together, genuine tawḥīd is realised, and the human being lives the deepest freedom — a freedom emancipated from every bond, both interior (anfusī) and exterior (āfāqī).

The second significant finding brought to light by the analysis is that the classical Sufi masters guarded this understanding of freedom with great care against two opposing misreadings. On one side stands the mistaken interpretation that reads fanā' and 'ubūdiyya as passive submission, spiritual inertia, or social irresponsibility; on the other stands the antinomian deviation (ibāḥiyya) that employs these concepts as justification

for exemption from the obligations of the sharī'a. From al-Muḥāsibī's system of murāqaba to al-Hujwārī's vigorous critiques, from al-Ghazālī's comprehensive moral psychology to al-Suhrawardī's emphasis on social responsibility, all of these authors maintained powerfully that Sufism's understanding of freedom is not inertia nor irresponsibility but, on the contrary, encompasses the deepest responsibility and the most active mode of being-in-the-world.

The third significant finding is that the classical Sufi understanding of freedom does not hold its individual and social dimensions apart from each other. al-Suhrawardī's emphasis on the dimension of baqā' as a return to the world, al-Hujwārī's definition of the social manifestations of 'ubūdiyya, and al-Ghazālī's analysis of the liberating power of riḍā with respect to the past and the future — all of these demonstrate that Sufism conceives of freedom not merely as an individual spiritual state but as a mode of existence that transforms the very ground of social being. This freedom is not a reclusive individualism but the name of being fully present in the world, within relationships and responsibilities, yet enslaved to none of them.

The contribution of this study to the existing academic literature derives from the fact that no independent study has yet been produced that analyses the four concepts of fanā', baqā', riḍā, and genuine tawḥīd together and in their entirety through the axis of freedom and 'ubūdiyya, grounded in primary classical Arabic sources. The valuable works of scholars such as Schimmel, Knysh, and Sells have treated these concepts separately; yet their analysis as an integrated process through the axis of freedom and 'ubūdiyya has not hitherto been undertaken. This article has aimed to fill that gap and to introduce into academic discourse the distinctive and profound contribution that the classical Sufi tradition makes on this question.

Finally, it should be noted that the classical Sufi understanding of freedom continues to offer an extraordinarily valuable and inspiring resource for contemporary discussions. At a time when negative freedom — the absence of external constraints — is increasingly perceived as an insufficient framework, and when positive freedom — the self-determination of reason — is understood to be inadequate on its own, the understanding of freedom that Sufism constructs through its fanā'-baqā'-riḍā triad — a freedom emancipated from the ego-soul and from māsiwā, aligned with the divine will, and manifested at both the individual and social levels — offers a distinctive and profound

perspective to contemporary debates on freedom. The subjection of this perspective to broader comparative studies in the philosophy of religion and comparative mysticism appears as a fruitful and valuable avenue for future research.

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