

Rumi's View Of The Imam Husayn

Rumi's View Of The Imam Husayn



William C. Chittick

Al-Islam.org

Al-Serat Vol. 12 - 1986

[1] [1]

SHARES

[Get PDF](#) [2] [Get EPUB](#) [3] [Get MOBI](#) [4]

Authors(s):

[William C. Chittick](#) [5]

Publisher(s):

[Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#) [6]

Topic Tags:

[Ashura](#) [7]

[Poetry](#) [8]

Person Tags:

[Rumi](#) [9]

[Imam Husayn](#) [10]

Rumi's View Of The Imam Husayn

William C. Chittick

State University of New York at Stony Brook

Al-Serat Vol 12, Spring & Autumn 1986

The martyrdom of the Imam Husayn can hardly be called a major theme of Rumi's works; in over 50,000 couplets he refers to it less than twenty times. Nevertheless, these few lines are sufficient to suggest how the events of Karbala' were viewed not only by Rumi, this great representative of the Sufi tradition, but also by his listeners, who constituted a pious cross-section of Islamic society.

The first thing one notes is that it was sufficient for Rumi to mention one of three words to conjure up the image of Husayn's martyrdom for his listeners: Husayn, Karbala', 'Ashura'. Yazid and Shimr had a similar evocative power. There was no need for Rumi to describe the tragedy to a Muslim public, since

everyone was already familiar with it; even among Sunnis, it must have been part of the Islamic lore that was commonly called upon – especially in the context of popular preaching – to drive home points about good and evil, martyrdom, injustice, and similar themes.

There is, of course, nothing surprising in this: scholars have often remarked on the indelible imprint left in the Muslim awareness by the Imam Husayn's martyrdom. What should perhaps be noted is that the name Husayn, along with the other words mentioned above, functioned to call up a whole set of images, just as, for example, it is sufficient for Rumi to mention the name Abraham for his listeners to think of Nimrod and the fire that turned into a rose-garden; numerous other examples could also be cited.

One might ask about the sources of Rumi's information concerning Husayn, but this would be like asking where he learned about Islam. Nevertheless, one can say that among Sufi poets that were known to have been read by Rumi, Sana'i (d. 525/1131) employs the terms Husayn and Karbala' as poetic images in much the same manner that Rumi does, while 'Attar (d. 618/1221) apparently does not refer to him except in the context of panegyrics on the Prophet and the first few caliphs (e.g., in his *Mosibat-nama*).

Sana'i invokes the name of the Imam Husayn either to stress the necessity of suffering and tribulation in the practice of one's religion,¹ or to point out that the saints – the men of God are those who have experienced the death of their individual selves.² In one instance he compares Husayn, Yazid, and Shimr to contrary forces working within the souls of men,³ and here, as in the first two instances, parallels are found in Rumi's poetry.

For Rumi, love for God is the heart and soul of Islam.⁴ Certainly the 'forms' (*surat*) of our acts and religious practices are important, but they are given values by the 'meanings' (*ma'na*) which animate them. Thus, for example, when asked if anything is more important for Islamic practice than the ritual prayer (*salat*), Rumi replies that the animating spirit (*jan*) of the prayer is better, just as faith (*iman*) is more excellent. Faith must be continuous, whereas the prayer is performed at five different times during the day. The prayer can be omitted for a valid excuse, but faith can never be omitted. Faith without prayer has certain benefits, whereas prayer without faith is hypocritical and useless. Finally, faith is the same in all religions, while the form of prayer in each is different.⁵

Were Rumi to be asked this question in more general terms, i.e., 'Is anything more important than the religion of Islam itself?', I think he would answer that love for God is so, since all these outward forms of ritual and devotion, all the teachings and practices that make up Islam, exist for the sake of that love. This is not to suggest that the 'forms' are without importance – far from it; the 'meaning' – love – cannot exist without its outward supports. But one must not fall into the error of thinking that the doctrines, practices, and outward forms are their own 'raison d'être', for 'prayer without faith is useless'. As Rumi remarks:

If the exposition of meanings were sufficient,

the creation of the world would be vain and useless.

If love for God were only thought and meaning,
the form of fasting and prayer would not exist.

The gifts that lovers exchange
are naught in relation to love except forms,
So that the gifts may give witness to the love hidden within.[6](#)

The forms of religion, then, are the necessary concomitants of the
meaning of religion, which, for Rumi, is love:

My religion is to live through love –
life through this spirit and body is my shame.[7](#)

The distinguishing feature of Rumi's 'Religion of Love' is that it negates the reality of 'everything other than God' (*aghyar*) with the sword of the *shahada*: 'There is no god but God.'

The joy and heartache of the lovers is He,
the wages and salary for their service He.

Were aught to be contemplated other than the Beloved,
how would that be Love? That would be idle infatuation.

Love is that flame which, when it blazes up,
burns away everything except the Beloved.

It drives home the sword of 'no god'
in order to slay other than God.

Consider carefully: after 'no god', what remains?

There remains 'but God'; the rest has gone.

Bravo, oh great, idol-burning Love![8](#)

The chief 'idol' or 'other' that must be negated on the Path of Love is the seeker's own self: 'The mother of all idols is your own ego.'[9](#)

You are God's lover, and God is such that when He comes,

not a single hair of you will remain.

Before His glance a hundred like you are annihilated.

Is it that you are in love with your own negation, sir?

You are a shadow in love with the sun.

The sun comes, and the shadow is quickly naughted. [10](#)

The first attribute of the true lover, then, is that he must be ready to sacrifice himself for God.

O Love, pass the bitter judgement!

Cut me off from other than Thyself!

O torrent, you are roaring.

Roar! You take me to the Ocean. [11](#)

But most men fear the torrent and flee the sword. They refuse to enter into the way of self-sacrifice, even though they are promised every manner of joy and felicity. Their faith is not strong enough to allow them to surrender their own wills and existences to God. Total readiness for martyrdom is the first quality of God's lover.

What does it mean to be Love's familiar?

Only to separate oneself from the heart's desire.

To become blood, to swallow down one's own blood,

and to wait at fidelity's door with the dogs.

The lover sacrifices himself—

for him death and removal are no different from staying.

On your way, O Muslim!

Be shielded by safety and strive at your piety,

For these martyrs have no patience without death—

they are in love with their own annihilation.

Flee if you want from affliction and fate—

their fear is to be without affliction.

Perform the fast on the recommended days and on 'Ashura'–

you cannot go to Karbala'! [12](#)

To be a human being in the true sense means to undertake the struggle against one's own ego.

The prophets and saints do not avoid spiritual combat. The first spiritual combat they undertake in their quest is the killing of the ego and the abandonment of personal wishes and sensual desires. This is the Greater Holy War (*jihad al-akbar*). [13](#)

If Husayn is a model worthy to be emulated, it is not because he was killed by villains – this goes without saying. What is truly noteworthy about his life was his victory in the Greater Holy War; only by virtue of his spiritual greatness do the events that led to his physical martyrdom have meaning. The emulation of him that is incumbent upon his followers is then engagement in the Greater Holy War.

Why do you sit there with your own thoughts?

If you are a man, go to the Beloved!

Do not say, 'Perhaps He does not want me.'

What business has a thirsty man with such words?

Does the moth think about the flames?

For Love's spirit, thinking is a disgrace.

When the warrior hears the sound of the drum,

at once he is worth ten thousand men!

You have heard the drum, so draw your sword without delay!

Your spirit is the sheath of the all-conquering Dhu'l-Fiqar!

You are Husayn at Karbala', think not of water!

The only 'water' you will see today is a sword of the first water! [14](#)

But in order to attain the Kingdom of Love a man must first suffer the pain of separation from his Beloved. For the more he understands the nature of his goal, the more he will understand the depth of his own inadequacy.

Whoever is more awake has greater pain,

whoever is more aware has a yellower face. [15](#)

Nevertheless, the pain that the lover suffers always attracts him toward the object of his love.

Every heartache and suffering that enters your body and heart

pulls you by the ear to the Promised Abode. [16](#)

The reason for this is clear:

Your inward nature is full of dust from the veil of 'I-ness',

and that dust will not leave you all at once.

With every cruelty and every blow,

it departs little by little from the heart's face,

sometimes in sleep and sometimes in wakefulness. [17](#)

Eventually the pain and suffering of love will lead to the death of the ego and rebirth in God.

Night died and came to life, for there is life after death:

O heartache, kill me! For I am Husayn, you are Yazid. [18](#)

Or again,

O Murtadha of Love! Shams al-Din of Tabriz – look at me!

I am like Husayn, sitting in my own blood,

or like Hasan, drinking down poison. [19](#)

Again:

Whoever has my fire wears my robe –

he has a wound like Husayn, a cup like Hasan. [20](#)

In short, it is only through the suffering and tribulation of the spiritual journey as exemplified in the outward world by the trials of the Imam Husayn and his family that man can attain the perfection for which he was created. Then, however, he has every right to speak of the joy and felicity of union with God. If Rumi, in one passage of the *Mathnawi* (VI 777–805), is able to poke fun at the Shi'a of Aleppo for their celebration of 'Ashura', [21](#) it is precisely because here he is looking at the good news of joy and union which are announced by the Imam's spiritual victory and which are the meaning beyond the form

of his outward suffering:

The spirit of a sultan has escaped from a prison,

Why should we tear our clothes and bite our fingers?

Since he was the king of religion,

his breaking of the bonds was a time of joy,

For he sped toward the pavilions of good fortune

and threw off his fetters and chains.[22](#)

In conclusion, let me quote two more of Rumi's ghazals, which can serve to summarize the Imam Husayn's significance as pictured in Rumi's works:

Where are you, martyrs of God,

you who have sought affliction

on the plain of Karbala'?

A stranger, a poet,

arrived at Aleppo on the day of 'Ashura'

and heard all that lamentation....

He went along asking questions in his search:

'What is this sorrow?

For whom are you mourning?....'

Someone said to him,

'Hey, are you mad? Are you not a Shi'ite?

Are you an enemy of the Family?

Don't you know that it is the day of 'Ashura',

a day of mourning

for a soul who was greater than a generation?...'

The poet replied,

‘True, but where are the days of Yazid?

When did this tragedy occur!

How long the news has taken to reach you here!

The eyes of the blind have seen that loss!

The ears of the deaf have heard that story!

Have you been asleep until now

that you have just begun to tear your clothes in mourning?

Then mourn for yourselves, oh sleepers,

for this heavy sleep of yours is a terrible death!

The spirit of a sultan....’

Where are you, light-spirited lovers,

you who fly better

than the birds in the sky?

Where are you, kings of the heavens,

you who have found the door

that leads outside the circling spheres?

Where are you,

you who have been delivered from spirit and place?

Indeed, does anyone ask of the intellect, ‘Where are you?’

Where are you,

you who have broken the door of the prison

and given freedom to the debtors?

Where are you,

you who have opened the door to the treasury,

you who possess the wealth of poverty?

For some time now all of you have been swimming

in that Ocean of which this world is but the foam.

The forms of the universe are but the Ocean's foam –

if you, oh listener, are a man of purity,

pass beyond these bubbles!

These words are but the picture of my heart's bubbling –

if you are one of us,

leave aside the picture and go to the heart.

Rise from the east, O Sun of Tabriz,

for you are the root

of the root

of the root of every radiance.[23](#)

In the fire of its yearning, my heart keeps up its cries,

hoping that a welcoming call will come to it

from the direction of union.

My heart is Husayn and separation Yazid –

my heart has been martyred two hundred times

in the desert of torment and affliction (*karb wa bala'*).

Outwardly made a martyr, in the unseen world it has gained life –

in the eyes of the enemy it is a prisoner,

in the Void, a king.

Dwelling in the paradise of union with the Friend,

it has been delivered from the depths of hunger's prison

and freed from the cheap and the dear.

Were the root of its tree not well nourished in the Unseen,

why are the blossoms of its union open for all to see?

Silence! Speak from the direction of your awareness.

For the Universal Intellect is asking you,

'Will you not understand?' (2:44, etc.).[24](#)

[1.](#) For example:

Until they turn away from happiness,
men of purity will not be able to step onto Mustafa's carpet.
How should there be joy in religion's lane when,
for the sake of empire, blood ran down Husayn's throat
at Karbala'?
For the sake of a single 'Yes'
spoken by the spirit in eternity-without-beginning (7:172),
The men of Yes (hala) must submit themselves to affliction (bala)
until eternity-without-end.

[Diwan, ed. Mudarris Radawi (Tehran, 1341/1962), pp. 40-41.]

Once you set out in this way,
your only provision will be annihilation,
even if you are an Abu Dharr or a Salman.
If you are Husayn,
you will see naught of the beauty of the bride's face
but daggers and arrows.

[Diwan, p. 97]

This world is full of martyrs,
but where is a martyr like Husayn at Karbala'?

[Diwan, p. 571.]

[2.](#) For example:

Lift up your head in the garden of Verification,
so that in religion's lane you may see alive, group by group,
those who have been killed.
In one row you will see those killed with a blade like Husayn,
in another those stricken with poison like Hasan.

[Diwan, p. 485.]

Sana'i, since you have not been cut off from your own self,
how can you tell tales of Husayn?

[Diwan, p. 552.]

3. Religion is your Husayn,
while desires and hopes are pigs and dogs–
yet you kill the first through thirst and feed these two.
How can you keep on cursing the wicked Yazid and Shimr?
You are a Shimr and a Yazid for your own Husayn!

[Diwan, p. 655.]

4. See W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany N.Y., 1983), esp. pp. 194ff.

5. *Fihi ma fihi*, ed. B. Furüzünfar (Tehran, 1348/1969), pp. II, 32; cf. A. J. Arberry (trans.), *Discourses of Rumi* (London, 1961), pp. 24–43.

6. Mathnawi, ed, and trans. R. J. Nicholson, 8 vols. (London, 1925–40), Bk 1, vss. 2624–27 (all translations are my own).

7. Mathnawi, VI, 4059.

8. Mathnawi, V, 586–590.

9. Mathnawi, I, 772.

10. Mathnawi, III, 4621–23.

11. *Kulliyat-i Shama yu diwan-i kabir*, ed. B. Furuzanfar, 10 vols. (Tehran, 1336–46/1957–67), v. 35823.

12. *Kulliyat*, ghazal no. 2102.

13. *Fihi ma fihi*, p. 130; *Discourses*, pp. 140–41.

14. *Kulliyat*, vss. 3656–62.

15. Mathnawi, I, 629.

16. *Kulliyat*, vs. 35487.

17. *Kulliyat*, vss. 12078–79.

18. *Kulliyat*, vs. 9206.

19. *Kulliyat*, vs. 20517.

20. *Kulliyat*, vs. 6358.

21. On the day of 'Ashura'

all the people of Aleppo gather at the Antioch gate
until nightfall.

Men and women –

a great congregation –

mourn the family of the Prophet.

On 'Ashura'

the Shi'a wail and lament with tears for Karbala....

22. Mathnawi, V1, 797–99.

23. *Kulliyat*, ghazal no, 2707.

24. *Kulliyat*, ghazal no. 230.

[1] [1]

SHARES

Source URL: <https://al-islam.org/al-serat/vol-12-1986/editorial-vol-11-no-2-shomali>

Links

[1] <https://www.addtoany.com/share>

[2] <https://al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/199942>

[3] <https://al-islam.org/printepub/book/export/html/199942>

- [4] <https://al-islam.org/printmobi/book/export/html/199942>
- [5] <https://al-islam.org/person/william-c-chittick>
- [6] <https://al-islam.org/organization/muhammadi-trust-great-britain-and-northern-ireland>
- [7] <https://al-islam.org/tags/ashura>
- [8] <https://al-islam.org/tags/poetry>
- [9] <https://al-islam.org/person/rumi>
- [10] <https://al-islam.org/person/imam-husayn>