



*Muslim Saints  
and Mystics*

*Episodes from the  
Tadhkirat al-Auliya' ("Memorial of the Saints")  
by Farid al-Din Attar*

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128-29 (trans. pp. 208-09). "I Am Your Lord Most High" is Koran, LXXIX, 24, words put into the mouth of Pharaoh. The story of Rābe'a being "schooled" in her sickness occurs in al-Qoshairi, *op. cit.*, p. 136; the "stitching of the shift" is from al-Qoshairi, *op. cit.*, p. 64. Rābe'a's disapproval of Sofyān al-Thauri for reciting Traditions is mentioned by Abu Ṭāleb al-Makki in his *Qut al-qolub* (Cairo, 1310 (A.H.)), I, 156. "O Soul At Peace" is Koran, LXXIX, 28. Monkar and Nakir are the two angels who interrogate the newly dead in the grave.

"Prayers of Rabe'a": *T.A.*, I, 73.

### *Rabe'a, her birth and early life*

If anyone says, "Why have you included Rabe'a in the rank of men?" my answer is, that the Prophet himself said, "God does not regard your outward forms." The root of the matter is not form, but intention, as the Prophet said, "Mankind will be raised up according to their intentions." Moreover, if it is proper to derive two-thirds of our religion from A'asha, surely it is permissible to take religious instruction from a handmaid of A'asha. When a woman becomes a "man" in the path of God, she is a man and one cannot any more call her a woman.

The night when Rabe'a came to earth, there was nothing whatsoever in her father's house; for her father lived in very poor circumstances. He did not possess even one drop of oil to anoint her navel; there was no lamp, and not a rag to swaddle her in. He already had three daughters, and Rabe'a was his fourth; that is why she was called by that name.

"Go to neighbour So-and-so and beg for a drop of oil, so that I can light the lamp," his wife said to him.

Now the man had entered into a covenant that he would never ask any mortal for anything. So he went out and just laid his hand on the neighbour's door, and returned.

"They will not open the door," he reported.

The poor woman wept bitterly. In that anxious state the man placed his head on his knees and went to sleep. He dreamed that he saw the Prophet.

"Be not sorrowful," the Prophet bade him. "The girl child

who has just come to earth is a queen among women, who shall be the intercessor for seventy thousand of my community. Tomorrow," the Prophet continued, "go to Isa-e Zadan the governor of Basra. Write on a piece of paper to the following effect. 'Every night you send upon me a hundred blessings, and on Friday night four hundred. Last night was Friday night, and you forgot me. In expiation for that, give this man four hundred dinars lawfully acquired.' "

Rabe'a's father on awaking burst into tears. He rose up and wrote as the Prophet had bidden him, and sent the message to the governor by the hand of a chamberlain.

"Give two thousand dinars to the poor," the governor commanded when he saw the missive, "as a thanksgiving for the Master remembering me. Give four hundred dinars also to the shaiikh, and tell him, 'I wish you to come to me so that I may see you. But I do not hold it proper for a man like you to come to me. I would rather come and rub my beard in your threshold. However, I adjure you by God, whatever you may need, pray let me know.' "

The man took the gold and purchased all that was necessary.

When Rabe'a had become a little older, and her mother and father were dead, a famine came upon Basra, and her sisters were scattered. Rabe'a ventured out and was seen by a wicked man who seized her and then sold her for six dirhams. Her purchaser put her to hard labour.

One day she was passing along the road when a stranger approached. Rabe'a fled. As she ran, she fell headlong and her hand was dislocated.

"Lord God," she cried, bowing her face to the ground, "I am a stranger, orphaned of mother and father, a helpless prisoner fallen into captivity, my hand broken. Yet for all this I do not grieve; all I need is Thy good pleasure, to know whether Thou art well-pleased or no."

"Do not grieve," she heard a voice say. "Tomorrow a station shall be thine such that the cherubim in heaven will envy thee."

So Rabe'a returned to her master's house. By day she continually fasted and served God, and by night she worshipped

standing until day. One night her master awoke from sleep and, looking through the window of his apartment, saw Rabe'a bowing prostrate and praying.

"O God, Thou knowest that the desire of my heart is in conformity with Thy command, and that the light of my eye is in serving Thy court. If the affair lay with me, I would not rest one hour from serving Thee; but Thou Thyself hast set me under the hand of a creature."

Such was her litany. Her master perceived a lantern suspended without any chain above her head, the light whereof filled the whole house. Seeing this, he was afraid. Rising up, he returned to his bedroom and sat pondering till dawn. When day broke he summoned Rabe'a, was gentle with her and set her free.

"Give me permission to depart," Rabe'a said.

He gave her leave, and she left the house and went into the desert. From the desert she proceeded to a hermitage where she served God for a while. Then she determined to perform the pilgrimage, and set her face towards the desert. She bound her bundle on an ass. In the heart of the desert the ass died.

"Let us carry your load," the men in the party said.

"You go on," she replied. "I have not come putting my trust in you."

So the men departed, and Rabe'a remained alone.

"O God," she cried, lifting her head, "do kings so treat a woman who is a stranger and powerless? Thou hast invited me unto Thy house, then in the midst of the way Thou hast suffered my ass to die, leaving me alone in the desert."

Hardly had she completed this orison when her ass stirred and rose up. Rabe'a placed her load on its back, and continued on her way. (The narrator of this story reports that some while afterwards he saw that little donkey being sold in the market.) She travelled on through the desert for some days, then she halted.

"O God," she cried, "my heart is weary. Whither am I going? I a lump of clay, and Thy house a stone! I need Thee here."

God spoke unmediated in her heart.

"Rabe'a, thou art faring in the life-blood of eighteen thousand worlds. Hast thou not seen how Moses prayed for the vision of Me? And I cast a few motes of revelation upon the mountain, and the mountain shivered into forty pieces. Be content here with My name!"

### *Anecdotes of Rabe'a*

One night Rabe'a was praying in the hermitage when she was overcome by weariness and fell asleep. So deeply was she absorbed that, when a reed from the reed-mat she was lying on broke in her eye so that the blood flowed, she was quite unaware of the fact.

A thief entered and seized her chaddur. He then made to leave, but the way was barred to him. He dropped the chaddur and departed, finding the way now open. He seized the chaddur again and returned to discover the way blocked. Once more he dropped the chaddur. This he repeated seven times over; then he heard a voice proceeding from a corner of the hermitage.

"Man, do not put yourself to such pains. It is so many years now that she has committed herself to Us. The Devil himself has not the boldness to slink round her. How should a thief have the boldness to slink round her chaddur? Be gone, scoundrell! Do not put yourself to such pains. If one friend has fallen asleep, one Friend is awake and keeping watch."

✓ Two notables of the Faith came to visit Rabe'a, and both were hungry.

"It may be that she will give us food," they said to each other. "Her food is bound to come from a lawful source."

When they sat down there was a napkin with two loaves laid before them. They were well content. A beggar arrived just then, and Rabe'a gave him the two loaves. The two men of religion were much upset, but said nothing. After a while a maidservant entered with a handful of warm bread.

"My mistress sent these," she explained.

Rabe'a counted the loaves. There were eighteen.

"Perhaps it was not this that she sent me," Rabe'a remarked. For all that the maidservant assured her, it profited nothing. So she took back the loaves and carried them away. Now it so happened that she had taken two of the loaves for herself. She asked her mistress, and she added the two to the pile and returned with them. Rabe'a counted again, and found there were twenty loaves. She now accepted them.

"This is what your mistress sent me," she said.

She set the loaves before the two men and they ate, marveling.

"What is the secret behind this?" they asked her. "We had an appetite for your own bread, but you took it away from us and gave it to the beggar. Then you said that the eighteen loaves did not belong to you. When they were twenty, you accepted them."

"I knew when you arrived that you were hungry," Rabe'a replied. "I said to myself, How can I offer two loaves to two such notables? So when the beggar came to the door I gave them to him and said to Almighty God, 'O God, Thou hast said that Thou repayest tenfold, and this I firmly believed. Now I have given two loaves to please Thee, so that Thou mayest give twenty in return for them.' When eighteen were brought me, I knew that either there had been some misappropriation, or that they were not meant for me."

One day Rabe'a's servant girl was making an onion stew; for it was some days since they had cooked any food. Finding that she needed some onions, she said,

"I will ask of next door."

"Forty years now," Rabe'a replied, "I have had a covenant with Almighty God not to ask for aught of any but He. Never mind the onions."

Immediately a bird swooped down from the air with peeled onions in its beak and dropped them into the pan.

"I am not sure this is not a trick," Rabe'a commented.

And she left the onion pulp alone, and ate nothing but bread.

Rabe'a had gone one day into the mountains. She was soon surrounded by a flock of deer and mountain goats, ibexes and

wild asses which stared at her and made to approach her. Suddenly Hasana of Basra came on the scene and, seeing Rabe'a, moved in her direction. As soon as the animals sighted Hasana, they made off all together, so that Rabe'a remained alone. This dismayed Hasana.

"Why did they run away from me, and associated so tamely with you?" he asked Rabe'a.

"What have you eaten today?" Rabe'a countered.

"A little onion pulp."

"You eat their fat," Rabe'a remarked. "Why then should they not flee from you?"

Once Rabe'a passed by Hasana's house. Hasana had his head out of the window and was weeping, and his tears fell on Rabe'a's dress. Looking up, she thought at first that it was rain; then, realizing that it was Hasana's tears, she turned to him and addressed him.

"Master, this weeping is a sign of spiritual languor. Guard your tears, so that there may surge within you such a sea that seeking the heart therein, you shall not find it save in the keeping of a King Omnipotent."

These words distressed Hasana, but he kept his peace. Then one day he saw Rabe'a when she was near a lake. Throwing his prayer rug on the surface of the water, he called,

"Rabe'a, come! Let us pray two *nak'as* here!"

"Hasana," Rabe'a replied, "when you are showing off your spiritual goods in this worldly market, it should be things that your fellow-men are incapable of displaying."

And she flung her prayer rug into the air, and flew up on it. "Come up here, Hasana, where people can see us!" she cried. Hasana, who had not attained that station, said nothing. Rabe'a sought to console him.

"Hasana," she said, "what you did fishes also do, and what I did flies also do. The real business is outside both these tricks. One must apply one's self to the real business."

One night Hasana with two or three friends went to visit Rabe'a. Rabe'a had no lantern. Their hearts yearned for light.

Rabe'a blew on her finger, and that night till dawn her finger shone like a lantern, and they sat in its radiance.

If anyone says, "How could this be?" I answer, "The same as Moses' hand." If it is objected, "But Moses was a prophet," I reply, "Whoever follows in the footsteps of the Prophet can possess a grain of prophethood, as the Prophet says, 'Whoever rejects a farthing's worth of unlawful things has attained a degree of prophethood.' He also said, 'A true dream is one-fortieth part of prophethood.'"

Once Rabe'a sent Hasan three things—a piece of wax, a needle, and a hair.

"Be like wax," she said. "Illumine the world, and yourself burn. Be like a needle, always be working naked. When you have done these two things, a thousand years will be for you as a hair."

"Do you desire for us to get married?" Hasan asked Rabe'a.

"The tie of marriage applies to those who have being," Rabe'a replied. "Here being has disappeared, for I have become naughted to self and exist only through Him. I belong wholly to Him. I live in the shadow of His control. You must ask my hand of Him, not of me."

"How did you find this secret, Rabe'a?" Hasan asked.

"I lost all 'found' things in Him," Rabe'a answered.

"How do you know Him?" Hasan enquired.

"You know the 'how'; I know the 'howless'," Rabe'a said.

✓ Once Rabe'a saw a man with a bandage tied round his head.

"Why have you tied the bandage?" she asked.

"Because my head aches," the man replied.

"How old are you?" she demanded.

"Thirty," he replied.

"Have you been in pain and anguish the greater part of your life?" she enquired.

"No," the man answered.

"For thirty years you have enjoyed good health," she remarked, "and you never tied about you the bandage of

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thankfulness. Now because of this one night that you have a headache you tie the bandage of complaint!"

Once Rabe'a gave four silver dirhams to a man.

"Buy me a blanket," she said, "for I am naked."

The man departed. Presently he returned.

"Mistress," he said, "what colour shall I buy?"

"How did 'colour' come into the business?" Rabe'a demanded. "Give me back the money."

And she took the dirhams and flung them into the Tigris.

One spring day Rabe'a entered her apartment and put out her head.

"Mistress," her servant said, "come out and see what the Maker has wrought."

"Do you rather come in," Rabe'a replied, "and see the Maker. The contemplation of the Maker pre-occupies me, so that I do not care to look upon what He has made."

A party visited her, and saw her tearing a morsel of meat with her teeth.

"Do you not have a knife to cut up the meat?" they asked.

"I have never kept a knife in my house for fear of being cut off," she replied.

Once Rabe'a fasted for a whole week, neither eating nor sleeping. All night she was occupied with praying. Her hunger passed all bounds. A visitor entered her house bringing a bowl of food. Rabe'a accepted it and went to fetch a lamp. She returned to find that the cat had spilled the bowl.

"I will go and fetch a jug, and break my fast," she said.

By the time she had brought the jug, the lamp had gone out. She aimed to drink the water in the dark, but the jug slipped from her hand and was broken. She uttered lamentation and sighed so ardently that there was fear that half of the house would be consumed with fire.

"O God," she cried, "what is this that Thou art doing with Thy helpless servant?"

"Have a care," a voice came to her ears, "lest thou desire Me to bestow on thee all worldly blessings, but eradicate from thy heart the care for Me. Care for Me and worldly blessings can never be associated together in a single heart. Rabe'a, thou desirest one thing, and I desire another; My desire and thy desire can never be joined in one heart."

"When I heard this admonition," Rabe'a related, "I so cut off my heart from the world and curtailed my desires that whenever I have prayed during the last thirty years, I have assumed it to be my last prayer."

A party of men once visited her to put her to the test, desiring to catch her out in an unguarded utterance.

"All the virtues have been scattered upon the heads of men," they said. "The crown of prophethood has been placed on men's heads. The belt of nobility has been fastened around men's waists. No woman has ever been a prophet."

"All that is true," Rabe'a replied. "But egoism and self-worship and 'I am your Lord, the Most High' have never sprung from a woman's breast. No woman has ever been a hermaphrodite. All these things have been the speciality of men."

Once Rabe'a fell grievously sick. She was asked what the cause might be.

"I gazed upon Paradise," she replied, "and my Lord disciplined me."

Then Hasan of Basra went to visit her.

"I saw one of the notables of Basra standing at the door of Rabe'a's hermitage offering her a purse of gold and weeping," he reported. "I said, 'Sir, why are you weeping?' 'On account of this saintly woman of the age,' he replied. 'For if the blessing of her presence departs from among mankind, mankind will surely perish. I brought something for her tending,' he added, 'and I am afraid that she will not accept it. Do you intercede with her to take it.'"

So Hasan entered and spoke. Rabe'a glanced up at him and said,

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"He provides for those who insult Him, and shall He not provide for those who love Him? Ever since I knew Him, I have turned my back upon His creatures. I know not whether any man's property is lawful or not; how then can I take it? I stitched together by the light of a worldly lamp a shirt which I had torn. For a while my heart was obstructed, until I remembered. Then I tore the shirt in the place where I had stitched it, and my heart became dilated. Ask the gentleman pray not to keep my heart obstructed."

Abd al-Wahed-e Amer relates as follows.

I went with Sofyan-e Thauri to visit Rabe'a when she was sick, but out of awe for her I could not begin to address her.

"You say something," I said to Sofyan.

"If you will say a prayer," Sofyan said to Rabe'a, "your pain will be eased."

"Do you not know who has willed that I should suffer? Was it not God?" Rabe'a demanded.

"Yes," Sofyan agreed.

"How is it that you know that," Rabe'a went on, "and yet you bid me to request from Him the contrary of His will? It is not right to oppose one's Friend."

"What thing do you desire, Rabe'a?" Sofyan asked.

"Sofyan, you are a learned man. Why do you speak like that? 'What thing do you desire?' By the glory of God," Rabe'a asseverated, "for twelve years now I have been desiring fresh dates. You know that in Basra dates are of no consequence. Yet till now I have not eaten any; for I am His servant, and what business has a servant to desire? If I wish, and my Lord does not wish, this would be infidelity. You must want only what He wishes, to be a true servant of God. If God himself gives, that is a different matter."

Sofyan was reduced to silence. Then he said,

"Since one cannot speak about your situation, do you say something about mine."

"You are a good man, but for the fact you love the world," Rabe'a replied. "You love reciting Traditions."

This she said, implying that that was a high position.

"Lord God," cried Sofyan, deeply moved, "be content with me!"

"Are you not ashamed," broke in Rabe'a, "to seek the contentment of One with whom you yourself are not content?"

Malek-e Dinar relates as follows.

I went to visit Rabe'a, and saw her with a broken pitcher out of which she drank and made her ritual ablutions, an old reed-mat, and a brick which she occasionally used as a pillow. I was grieved.

"I have rich friends," I told her. "If you wish, I will get something from them for you."

"Malek, you have committed a grievous error," she answered. "Is not my Provider and theirs one and the same?"

"Yes," I replied.

"And has the Provider of the poor forgotten the poor on account of their poverty? And does He remember the rich because of their riches?" she asked.

"No," I replied.

"Then," she went on, "since He knows my estate, how should I remind Him? Such is His will, and I too wish as He wills."

One day Hasan of Basra, Malek-e Dinar and Shaiq-e Balkhi went to visit Rabe'a on her sickbed.

"He is not truthful in his claim," Hasan began, "who does not bear with fortitude the lash of his Lord."

"These words stink of egoism," Rabe'a commented.

"He is not truthful in his claim," Shaiq tried, "who is not grateful for the lash of his Lord."

"We need something better than that," Rabe'a observed.

"He is not truthful in his claim," Malek-e Dinar offered, "who does not take delight in the lash of his Lord."

"We need something better than that," Rabe'a repeated.

"Then you say," they urged.

"He is not truthful in his claim," Rabe'a pronounced, "who does not forget the lash in contemplation of his Master."

A leading scholar of Basra visited Rabe'a on her sickbed. Sitting beside her pillow, he reviled the world.

"You love the world very dearly," Rabe'a commented. "If you did not love the world, you would not make mention of it so much. It is always the purchaser who disparages the wares. If you were done with the world, you would not mention it either for good or evil. As it is, you keep mentioning it because, as the proverb says, whoever loves a thing mentions it frequently."

When the time came that Rabe'a should die, those attending her deathbed left the room and closed the door. Then a voice was heard saying, *O soul at peace, return unto thy Lord, well-pleased!* A time passed and no sound came from the room, so they opened the door and found that she had given up the ghost.

After her death she was seen in a dream. She was asked, "How did you fare with Monkar and Nakir?" She replied, "Those youths came to me and said, 'Who is thy Lord?' I answered, 'Return and say to God, with so many thousand thousand creatures Thou didst not forget one feeble old woman. I, who have only Thee in the whole world, I shall never forget Thee, that Thou shouldst sent one to ask me, Who is thy God?' "

### *Prayers of Rabe'a*

O God, whatsoever Thou hast apportioned to me of worldly things, do Thou give that to Thy enemies; and whatsoever Thou hast apportioned to me in the world to come, give that to Thy friends; for Thou sufficest me.

✓ O God, if I worship Thee for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thy own sake, grudge me not Thy everlasting beauty.

O God, my whole occupation and all my desire in this world, of all worldly things, is to remember Thee, and in the world to come, of all things of the world to come, is to meet Thee. This is on my side, as I have stated; now do Thou whatsoever Thou wilt.