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Thursday



Title: The Purpose and Practice of Music in the Khanaqah

DVD title: The Purpose and Practice of Music in the Khanaqah
The Spiritual Act of Listening and Its Preparation

In the early 9th century when the mystics, Sufis, organized the *turuq*, they adopted music as a support for the *muraqabah* and the *dhikr* and for the tafakkur. I thought I would spend a few minutes on what happens on Thursday when we listen, especially to this ensemble, Ibn Araby. Music, in the case of the people of *turuq*, from that time to this time (12 centuries) is used as an access to the *nai'ma*, the *fadl*, and the ecstatic state of grace and of bounty of Allah (swt), as a means of feeding our soul. [It is] also something that should feed our bodies, should stimulate our cells, our physical bodies.

In those days, people's bodies were tired from the rigor of living a more ascetic life, as opposed to today when our bodies are tired from driving back and forth to Roanoke or Lynchburg, Virginia; or mowing the lawns or whatever we do. I'd like to think that, if nothing else, these people were healthier than we are. It should give strength to the body and to the soul. The *sama*, in certain places like the Mevlevi where the gatherings are held in the Samakhah, the Hall of Listening, the secret lies in listening. Listening how? With just the ears? Listening in a spiritual fashion to the music, to the *dhikr*, to the *nāt*, to the different forms of supplications, songs, chanting, and accompanied with ritual to some degree, like the turning, like the *hadra*, like the movement we have in our *sama*, like the serving of the *shirin*, the sweet, and the tea.

It should be done like dance—not tripping over, jiggling the cups and saucers, looking here and there to see who's got it and who doesn't have it. If you need an extra person, the extra person should be there. If you need a *rebab*, add a *rebab*. If you need a *qanun*,

add a *qanun*. If you need a voice, add a voice. It has to fit the time, and the place, and the circumstance. But it should be like a dance, carried out in the right rhythm. It shouldn't take 20 minutes one day, 37 minutes another day, and 14 minutes another day. It should be choreographed, with some modification or deviation, of course, because it's nature. When spring comes around here, the frogs come out sometime between the end of February and the middle of March. The rhythms are always the same. Frog rhythms are always the same.

The very name *sama* means listening. Listening suggests that the act of actually listening is a spiritual act. It carries through in many ways: listening to nature; listening to the heart. We have been talking a lot about *basīra*, watching, seeing and insight, but listening is extremely important: listening to the words of the *shaykh* that come from concepts that are constantly flowing, as *fayd* (overflowing light) from the *ghaib* through the ‘*ālam al-mithāl* into the world of *dunya* (the *ālam al-amr* and the *ālam al-khalq*, from the world of command to the world of creation).

The music that we hear is often interspersed with the words of Qur'an. Most are music in another form. One gives support and meaning to the other. The spiritual act of listening, without the music or poetry necessarily being overtly religious in content, in that sense can refer to any natural, artistic or subtle sound. But predominantly, the word *sama* is synonymous with understanding. Listening, *sama*, also means to understand. *Basara* can mean sight, but *basīra* means insight. *Sama* means to listen, but it also means to understand. Just like you listen to a *dars* like this one, you are not just listening to hear an explanation, but to understand something. Understand means you take it in and it has to do something to you internally. Music is chosen from the time of the 9th century on to facilitate understanding.

One knows there is understanding when one has accepted the call from Allah, which can lead to moments of ecstasy, as happens sometimes in the *sama*—moments of enraptured

bliss, an unveiling of mysteries that should be understood, not just experienced. The music acts as a means to unravel mysteries, not because it is music, but because it is music that comes through the understanding played through the heart of a person who understands, through their fingers, their lips, their *rebab*, their words, and their voice. It has an effect on the listener. The player is listening to a distant call, if the person has achieved the state of mastery of their instrument of listening, translated through the instrument of their playing, and then transmitted from that to us who are the listeners.

The major intention of these early Sufis was to give a taste of this ecstasy, but in context. The rapture or the ecstasy, or the upliftment had real content and the music had true meaning to it. They had to reply to those people who felt that this was *bida* and who have a purpose. The purpose is sort of like Iblis: to put you on guard. If you are going to be a Muslim and a Sufi and engage in this playing or recitation or listening, you should understand its true meaning. You are on notice. You have to be on guard, because it is not just entertainment.

Some of the essential or foundational myths behind the practice were invoked at the time, such as the original covenant, the “*Alast*” when Allah (swt) asked Adam’s (as) potential children, who were trapped in his loins, “***Alasti bi rabbikum? Am I not your Lord?***” Everyone replied in pre-eternity before they were born. All of potential humanity replied, “Yes, we testify.” Even today, even if you listen to the Mevlevi recitations, they will return this sort of ecstatic reply to the voice of the Creator, of whom this music is an allegory or metaphor. They say, “Yes, my Beloved; yes my Lord, yes my Friend.” When we listen, if it evokes that kind of “Yes, my Beloved; yes, my Friend; yes, my Lord,” “Ah, yes, this is great music,” but from a spiritual essential place, then you know you are in the sway of that meaning.

The first *sama* was attributed to the angels who used it to capture Hazrat Adam’s soul in its state of bliss and confined it within his body. This myth has its opposite when we

remember that music also enables a soul to escape the physical body and move outside the contingencies and exigencies of time and space. The music is a kind of vibrating echo of the Divine Action, the Divine Verb of angelic harmonies and sounds. We say, “The winds of paradise,” or the “sounds of the cosmos,” or the “music of the spheres, “the celestial sounds or musicians.” In fact, according to many of the gnostics, teachers of the past, it is one of the elements of the essential reality, order of the worlds.

As we know, every moving thing makes a sound. All the planets and stars make sounds. The symphony of sounds, whether we can hear or not hear them, just like the myriad of sounds within our own bodies, comprises intervals and rhythms. It draws its nature from the music of the spheres, from the worlds of creation. They get the breath to move from Allah, as if Allah blows, and the celestial move starts to happen. When we listen, and we move, there are meanings. There is Qur'an; there are meanings. There is *dhikr, lā ilāha illa-Llāh*, and there is poetry in all the things that I have been playing for you and listening to for many months here, having discovered this wonderful group. I haven't looked into their hearts or eyes, but I can hear. I am listening.

Of course, historically, certain *shaykhs* made very little use of music. Others were very passionately attached to the *sama* and *hadra*. A very few went so far as to advise against music; but even the followers of some of the more orthodox groups of Sufism never spoke out against the practice of using music, unlike the *ulema* who speak out against it today. What most of them did was put a lot of emphasis on the way you listen—not just listening. Debates were held and waged over the centuries between the Sufis and the more orthodox of the believers on music in general and specific, whether it was legitimate or the proper use of it. But the accent, the intention and focus was always more on the act of listening than on the music itself.

If you were to analyze the music, that's one thing. But if you learn how to listen to the music that is coming as an echo of the music of the spheres through the hearts of people

who are submitted and pure in their *niyyat*, that is another thing. You can tell the difference between the secular and the religious music, not just by the words, but even the rhythms are different. The *maqam* is different. You can tell the different between a drunk ecstatic who is playing, and a drunk who drank and is playing.

What is the foundation of listening? That's what you are anxious to hear. You have to listen with your heart, not with your body. You have to listen with your breath, not with your body. Who's quote is that? Mevlana said that about the *sama*. Why? Because the people were whirling, moving their bodies. You can say the same thing about the pottery that is often put to the music. One should listen to the words with one's heart and soul, not with the body that is made of the earth and clay, water and fire. That's what Attar said. This means a certain set of conditions should be created so that you can guarantee you have the best crop and can reap the best harvest.

Let me tell you about some of those conditions. If you go with me to a Thursday night *dhikr* or Qur'an reading or *sama* in Sarajevo, or if you go with me to one in Cairo, or to a weekly meeting in Damascus where there is a *shaykh* present (and note what I'm leaving out), or if you go with me to one in Istanbul, you won't see green and red and brown and beige and black and white and this and that. You won't see the men with the sweater and Tshirt like that, and a shirt like that and a sweater like that. In the *tariqah* where the women are participating, you won't see them all dressed differently. They will all be dressed similarly. In Sarajevo or Istanbul, you'll see this (references a garment he is wearing). You will not see people wearing the clothes they wore during the day into the *khanaqah*. No, no. You will know who the guests are, for they will come in with those clothes. The men will be wearing similar *kufi*. The women will be wearing similar *hijab*; although they may have a little more leeway depending on what the occasion is. The men, as soon as they come, will put on their waistcoats. They will have similar colored pants, maybe black. You won't see any jeans. Their clothes will be clean.

Do you pray dirty? Do you make wudu before you pray? Yes. If the music, the *sama*, the dhikr, the reciting of Qur'an is a form of worship, it would make sense that you would be wearing clean clothes. That's what you would find. And what I said earlier about the way people dance serving the food; it will be like a dance. Before you turn around, the tea is there. They will come out with a big tray of lamb and rice, chicken. Vegetables! The men who play the music, just at the right moment, will gather. It won't be absolutely totally formal, but they will gather at the right moment and the instruments will come out. The scene has been set. It's another form of worship, of *du'ā*. *Salawat* will take place. You see it in Indonesia and in Malaysia at the *khanaqahs* and *zāwiyas*: nice clean white shirts, nice clean pants, or sarong, nice hat. Everybody fresh looking. Why? Because they are going before their Lord. In America, we say, "Accept me as I am. I've had a busy day, O Lord. I haven't had time to do the laundry. I barely had enough time to clean my nails. Oh, I didn't."

Content and context. How you come to worship your Lord is very important. How you come to hear your *shaykh* is very important. How you come to discuss the higher things is very important. That's why, many of you know, the ritual of the coffee is more important than the coffee. The ritual of the tea is more important than the drinking of the tea. In fact, you should be listening to these words I'm saying with the background of the music, as if you are listening to the music. And you should listen to them with your heart and soul and not with your body and not with your mind. They are anxious to come.

We used to sit in Sarajevo in a coffee shop opposite the main *mosque*. Someone would come in and say, "We're going to the *tekkia*; we're going to see the *shaykh*." Everybody would jump up and go. You get there, and the garden is beautiful. The pathway in is beautiful. Is there mud? No. Is there dirt? No. The dirt is in the garden. There are beautiful flowers blossoming in this war-torn, horrible, miserable place. You see it on the cover of the CD—that beautiful little fountain, with the marble ball rolling in it with

the names of Allah on the ball. It's like walking into Jannah. On the wall, the waistcoats and ima of the former *shaykhs* are on the wall—the swords and everything. The *shaykh* walks in the room and feels 10 generations of *shuyukh*, and he picks which one he is going to wear that night for the *sama*. Is it a useless, foolish ritual, because “we know better”? When have I come and given you one *dars* in my jeans? When have you seen me enter the mosque, except during the day when I come for prayer with the children? Even those of you who work with me at Legacy, what do I wear to my work? A pair of pants, a nice shirt, and a jacket. I come respectfully to my work. I am not criticizing you. I am telling you, in the context of this, what we are doing here. Have you seen me come in anything other than *shelwa* and a waistcoat and *kurta* or *thobe* ever, to give you a *dars* ever? Must I carry the burden for everyone? Fine.

Have I ever given this talk before, ever? How many of you men, have I buttoned the top button for you in the *sama*? Has that happened? Don’t take me as angry; I am not angry. Don’t take me as frustrated; I am not frustrated. I am sad that you can’t hear the music properly. I have been told my whole life—and I have failed miserably, *astaghfiru-Llāh* (and I mean that *astaghfiru-Llāh* very seriously because *muhasabah* is never-ending for me)—that if you are the example, others will follow. But, if the rule is you wear a white *thobe* and white clothes on Saturday night, that’s easy. That’s a rule. But if it doesn’t carry over to the way you act and dress and present yourself to the same Lord on Sunday, and the same Lord on Monday, and on Tuesday, and Wednesday and Friday, then what has been learned? Another rule, another silly, stupid rule. At least, I see, some of you, you make an effort. I see, *Alhamduli-Llāh*, (I hope) most of you are wearing clean clothes. There is no American uniform, I know. Sarajevo is Sarajevo, and Istanbul is Istanbul, and India is India. Everybody has their national costume. Our national costume is sloppy. Our national costume is whatever you want to wear. I can make a case for that.

If you want to understand what you are hearing, begin your preparation before you arrive. If you were to give a lecture tomorrow to a very esteemed group of people, I bet you would have prepared for it before tomorrow morning. If your boss said to you, we will have a meeting tomorrow morning on the work you are doing, I bet you would review your work before you go into the meeting. If your Board of Directors says to you, “Tom, we need to know what is happening with the finances,” you would prepare. Coming to the *sama*, the *dhikr*, the *dars* is preparing. Isn’t it? So you are cheating yourselves. Hence, the power of such music—I am making a jump now. (Selects and plays some *salawat* music.) Having said all that, how many seconds does it take to uplift you? Even if you are half-deaf, it uplifts you. What would you be hearing if you weren’t deaf at all? Musa is deaf in two ears, but he can hear with his heart as well as his ears. Fareeda can hear with her heart, as well as her ears. (The assembly listens to the music.)

What are the conditions to reap the harvest? Samani, who died in the early 14th century (not too long ago, 700 years) said, “*One must give up the world, be one who has given up desire, and one who struggle against his overriding self. A person who practices the dhikr (remembrance of Allah), a person who considers Allah to be present, a person who sees everything with eyes that are pure.*” So, brothers and sisters, there is a right time, a right place, and right people that participate. They participate at different levels. The young people have to call me on the phone if they come to *sama*. Though I still question myself when I let someone who is 11, 12, or 13 come to the *sama*, I’ve seen in other places great benefits from it. They have to sit before they are allowed to take part. I question why they are taking part, if they have never sat with me and discussed with me, and the parents have never brought them to me and asked me to explain what the meaning of *sama* is. I don’t know what the parents are saying to the children, or what the children understand or don’t understand.

You have to not force yourself to move or act out; but try to stay very quiet. But as we know, Sufis are sons and daughters of the moment, so you have to act as directed by the

waqt, the moment. And you do, *Alhamduli-Llāh*. Of course I'm describing to you the optimal conditions for listening, listening to the music on a certain aesthetic and spiritual level. The experience of what is beautiful is also the experience of what is grand and magnanimous, *jamal* and *jelal*. The experience of what is beautiful and what is holy are two paths that meet up in your heart, paths that lead to the perception of the Divine Presence. If you know you are on a journey to meet the king, then it's a good idea to bring at least the gift of your listening and your attention, if not the gift of your sincerity and cooperation, the gift of your presence, and your voice, etc. That will take me perhaps to some teachings of the Chisti order. *Asalaam Aleikum.*