

A Sufi Saint.

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"In God there is no duality. In that Presence 'I' and 'we' and 'thou' do not exist, 'I' and 'we' and 'thou' and 'he' become one.....Since in Unity there is no distinction.....The quest and the way and the seeker become one."
—*Gulshan-i-Raz.*

Rabia was a great Sufi saint, her biographer Attār speaks of her as:—

"That one set apart in the seclusion of holiness, that woman veiled with the veil of religious sincerity, that one on fire with love and longing, that one enamoured of the desire to approach her Lord and be consumed in His glory, that woman who lost herself in union with the Divine, that one accepted by men as a second spotless Mary—*Rabia al-Adawiyya.*"

What a glorious description of true sainthood! To be in the world yet not of it, to live the life of the spirit while in the flesh, to be full of grace and goodness, so enlightened of heart, so full of devotion, her praise was on everyone's tongue.

The date of her birth is said to be about 717 A. D. and her birthplace was Basra where she spent the greater part of her life.

Rabia was quite young when she was left an orphan by the death of both parents. She became a slave by capture.

One night her master awakening out of his sleep looked through the window of his house and beheld Rabia with bowed head in worship praying, "O my Lord, Thou knowest that the desire of my heart is to obey Thee, and that the light of my eye is in the service of Thy court. If the matter rested with me, I should not cease for one hour from

Thy service, but Thou hast made me subject to a creature." While she was still praying, her master saw a lamp above her head, suspended without a chain, and the whole house was illuminated by the rays from that light. Rabia's master when he saw that strange sight, was afraid, rose up and hastened home where he sat pondering until the dawn of day. Then he called Rabia and spoke kindly to her and set her free. She then asked leave to go away, which being granted she wandered into the desert. After the lapse of some time she left the desert and secured for herself a cell where for a time she was engaged in devotional worship. According to one account Rabia at first followed the calling of a flute player, which would be consistent with a state of slavery. Then she became enlightened and built a place of retreat where she occupied herself with works of piety.

Rabia's life is full of interesting incidents and one might easily devote an article to them. But we must confine ourselves to what is most important in her spiritual unfoldment. Rabia received many offers of marriage, but spurned them all, choosing the celibate life in order to pursue her quest unhindered. When the Ābasid Āmir of Basra offered her as dowry of a hundred thousand dinars, and wrote saying that he had an income of ten thousand dinars a month and that he would bestow it all on her, she wrote back:—

"It does not please me that you should be my slave and that all you possess should be mine, or

that you should distract me from God for a single moment."

On another occasion, in answer to Hasan of Basra who is reputed to have said, "I desire that we should marry and be betrothed," her reply was:—

"The contract of marriage is for those who have a phenomenal existence (i. e., in my case) existence has ceased since I have ceased to exist and have passed out of self. My existence is in Him and I am altogether His. I am in the shadow of His command. The marriage contract must be asked for from Him, not from me."

Rabia's whole life was a testimony to the power of the *Christ* within to overcome all hindrances and stumbling-blocks to union with the Father. It proclaimed in every act and desire: "Not I but *Christ* that liveth in me." This is the sense in which the Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, says "Love has set the soul on fire and transmuted it into love, has annihilated it and destroyed it as to all that is not love."

Rabia's mystical teachings and her contribution to the development of Sufism are of considerable importance. She taught to others what she had interiorly learned of the Way.

Attār says of her, "Rabia was unique, because in her relations with God and her knowledge of things divine she had no equal, she was highly respected by all the great mystics of her time and she was a decisive proof, *i. e.*, an unquestioned authority, to her contemporaries."

To understand the extent and value of Rabia's contribution to the development of the Sufi movement, it is essential to give a brief outline of the Sufi doctrine. The Sufi view was and is that:—

Man's business is to eliminate so far as may be, the element of not-Being, and to attain to that union with God, that absorption into the Divine, which though to be fully achieved only after the death of the body is possible in a certain measure even in this present life.

But how is one to overcome the element of not-Being?

By conquering self.....And how is self to be conquered? By Love. By Love and by Love alone can the dark shadow of not-Being be done away. By Love and by Love alone can the soul of man win back to its Divine Source and find its ultimate goal in re-union with the Truth.

The mystic way of the Sufis, as that of the Christian aspirants, is the life of purgation, a life of asceticism through which the lower self is subdued and made subservient to the Spirit. When cleansed from the lusts of the flesh the soul can enter upon the Path which leads to Divine Union.

A great gnostic said, "The ways to God are as many as the believers," and another held that "The ways of God are as many as created things, that is, that to the contemplative there is a way to be found through every creature," and this is in accordance with the later Sufi view that the whole world is the book of God most High and that beneath the veil of each atom is hidden the soul-ravishing beauty of the Face of the Beloved.

After all the various stages of self-discipline through which the aspirant has to be subjected, the stage of Love includes so much that in practice it is the final stage, before the Sufi attains to the true Gnosis and the Beatific Vision, through which

becoming one with the Divine, He abides with and in Him for ever.

Rabia was a real Sufi, she knew the Truth and lived it. Like many of the saints, she lived to a ripe old age, and was about ninety when she passed on. It is recorded that in her decline, although feeble in body she was yet so clear in mind that she continued to be the guide and spiritual director of the many souls who sought counsel of her. She was certainly not afraid of so-called death, for it represented to her union with her Beloved, above and beyond the temporary experience of union which was all that could be obtained in this life. Although a union was attained there was always the presence of earthly limitations and the consciousness of being cribbed, cabined and confined in the flesh. It is related in what appears to have been her last illness, Rabia was visited by three of her friends, Hasan of Basra, Malik Dinar and Shaquiq Balkhi, and they like Job's friends endeavoured to teach her the duty of resignation. Hasan said, "He is not sincere in his claim to be a true servant of God, who is not patient under the chastisements of his Lord." Rabia said, "I smell egotism in this speech." So Shaquiq took up the thread and said, "He is not sincere in his claim who is not thankful for the chastisement of his Lord." Rabia said, "Something better than this is needed." Then Malik Dinar tried, "He is not sincere in his claim who does not delight in the chastisement of his Lord." Rabia said, "Even this is not good enough." They said, "Do thou speak", and she showed her idea of true resignation in her reply, "*He is not sincere in his claim*

who does not forget the chastisement in the contemplation of his Lord."

Rabai al-Adawiyya passed on A. D. 801, and was buried at Basra.

Her Persian biographer describes her passing as follows:

"At her last moments many pious folk were sitting around her and she bade them, 'Rise and go out; for a moment leave the way free for the messengers of God, Most High. All rose and went out and when they had closed the door they heard the voice of Rabia making her profession of faith and they heard a voice saying, 'O soul at rest, return to thy Lord, satisfied with Him, giving satisfaction to Him. So enter among my servants and enter into my Paradise:—

"There was no further sound heard, they returned and found that her soul had departed. As soon as she had rendered up her last breath, the doctors who were assembled had her body washed, recited over it the prayers for the departed and placed it in its last abode."

It is said that Muhammad Aslam al-Tusi and Namā Tartūsi both visited Rabia's grave, and said, "O thou who didst boast that thou wouldst not bow thy head for the two worlds, hast thou reached that exalted state?" and they heard a voice in reply, "I have reached that which I saw". She had arrived! United at last with the One Eternal Spirit without a second, beholding the Everlasting Beauty for ever and ever.

"Thy bonds are broke, thy quest
in bliss is found,
And,—on with That which comes
as Death and life,
Thou helpful one! Unselfish e'er on
earth,
Ahead, still and with love this
world of strife."