

## One Step to God:

'Ayn al-Qozat on the  
Journey of the Heart

By MOHAMMED RUSTOM

Before Rumi wrote his sublime verses on love and all of what he had to say about the unfolding of the heart and the spiritual life, there were many masters in the Arabic and Persian Sufi traditions who preceded him. One of the greatest authors of Persian Sufism was 'Ayn al-Qozat Hamadani (d. 1131),<sup>1</sup> the famous disciple of Ahmad al-Ghazali (d. 1126).<sup>2</sup> At the age of thirty-four, 'Ayn al-Qozat was imprisoned in Baghdad for a brief period and then

## executed in Hamadan on the order of the Seljuq Sultan Mahmud II.

An age-old myth is that 'Ayn al-Qozat was put to death by the "orthodox" Seljuqs because his teachings squarely contradicted mainstream Muslim theology. But as we now know, the reasons for his death had nothing to do with his ideas and were largely political. 'Ayn al-Qozat, a very prominent voice in Hamadani society and a person of great public influence, was a vehement critic of the Seljuq regime and its injustices towards the poor and the needy. It was therefore in the Seljuqs' best interest to murder 'Ayn al-Qozat, and to do so by justifying it as a state-sponsored execution of a person proven to have been a "heretic."<sup>3</sup>

Beyond his image as a Sufi martyr, 'Ayn al-Qozat is perhaps best known for having been a drunken lover of God who was a first-rate judge, theologian, philosopher, and spiritual guide. A closer look at his writings also reveals our sage from Hamadan to have been a profound psychologist, seer, and commentator on the human condition. He therefore has much to say about personhood, which he often connects to the seat of human consciousness, namely the heart (*qalb* in Arabic, *del* in Persian).

An entry point into 'Ayn al-Qozat's treatment of the heart comes in the form of a rather straight-forward passage in his writings wherein he speaks about purifying the heart. He says, "So long as your heart is not cleansed of attachments, it will not be full of knowledge, light and gnosis."<sup>4</sup> That is to say that we have to rid ourselves of the things that keep us busy and attached to the world at the expense of being attached to God. If these attachments are not completely severed from the soul and from a person's psyche, purity of heart and true knowledge will not come about.

The heart thus has to be cleansed and emptied of all attachments. After all, the only thing that God wants from us is our hearts: "God does not have any condition for you other than for you to empty your heart."<sup>5</sup> At the highest

level, 'Ayn al-Qozat says that we must even be detached from the desire for the fruits and consequences of our actions, which means wanting God and nothing else.

To be truly detached, 'Ayn al-Qozat says that we must relinquish "habit" (*adat*). A person perpetually given to his mental, psychological, and physical habits is referred to by him as a "habit-worshipper" (*adat-parast*). 'Ayn al-Qozat also makes it clear that this unflattering designation also applies to good actions which are done perfunctorily and therefore without presence of mind and heart.<sup>6</sup> Habit worship on the human level is all-too-common. It ultimately leads to a kind of constriction in the soul and a tightness of the heart which then obscures the heart's transparent nature so that it can no longer reflect the realities that are right in front of it—precisely the illumination and luminosity that come from God.

Another way 'Ayn al-Qozat speaks of purifying the heart of all alterity is by drawing attention to what it is and where it is to be found: "The heart of the believer is at once God's intimate, His lover, and the locus of His mysteries." And then he quotes the Hadith: "The heart of the believer is the throne of the All-Merciful," and follows this up by saying, "Whoever circumambulates the heart finds the goal. And whoever errs and loses the path of the heart becomes so distant that he will never find his self."<sup>7</sup>

We enter into a state of spiritual crisis precisely when we lose our way, when we forget how to "circumambulate" the heart. Imagine somebody visiting the Ka'ba but not knowing how to circumambulate the Ancient House. What would happen? For starters, he would likely be crushed by the crowds if he is not agile on his feet and perhaps paces in the wrong direction. Such a person would be right in front of his goal and not know how to attain it. On a spiritual level, if we walk away from what the Sufis call the Ka'ba of the heart (*ka'ba-ye del*), we are walking away from our true selves.

To cite 'Ayn al-Qozat again: "The heart knows what the heart is, and it knows where it is."<sup>8</sup> What is the heart? He tells us that it is nothing other than the *nazargah-e khoda* or the place wherein God looks: "The heart is the object of

Divine gaze and is worthy of this.”<sup>9</sup> The heart therefore is worthy enough for God to look into it. This then gives our author an opportunity to cite the famous Hadith, “God looks at neither your forms, nor your actions, but He looks at your hearts.” God wants to see Himself when He looks into the heart. God does not want a sullied and rotten heart, one which is not pure enough for Him to look into. He wants a pure and free heart. How is such a pure heart to be achieved on an operative level? ‘Ayn al-Qozat shines here when he speaks about the importance and nature of the search for the heart:

*Whoever does not have a heart is not a human. Seeing that you are human and have reached maturity, praying, fasting, performing the Hajj, and paying the alms tax are obligations for you. But ahead of all of these, the search for your heart is obligatory upon you. Why do you not walk the Path so that the heart can be found?*<sup>10</sup>

‘Ayn al-Qozat is saying that if you want to perform the pilgrimage or pray, you must learn how to do so. The same goes with the other pillars of Islam. But the discovery of the heart is the greatest obligation, which is to say that you must go and search for it. And only if you search for it will you be able to find it:

*You have heard from Muhammad, who was asked, “Where is God?” He said, “In the hearts of His believing servants.” This is the meaning of “The heart of the believer is the house of God.” Search for the heart so that the pilgrimage is the pilgrimage of the heart.*<sup>11</sup>

Let us move on to another passage which will take us back to the question of the pilgrimage: “Search for the heart and grab a hold of it! Do you know where the heart is? Search for it ‘between the two fingers of the All-Merciful’.”<sup>12</sup> The heart is between God’s two fingers, as the Hadith states. That is where we should search for it, between the Divine beauty (*jamal*) and the Divine majesty (*jalal*), as these two fingers have often been interpreted by various Sufis and philosophers. If a person searches for the heart, he will always find it. But he must know where to look for it. As Rumi famously says to a group of people who are going on the pilgrimage:

*O people departed on the pilgrimage! Where are you? Where are you?  
The Beloved is here. Come back! Come back!*

'Ayn al-Qozat also offers a beautiful and meaningful wordplay on two Persian terms: *gel*, which means "clay," and *del*, which as we have seen means "heart." He says, "He who goes to the Ka'ba of clay will see himself. But he who goes to the Ka'ba of the heart will see God."<sup>13</sup> What 'Ayn al-Qozat is calling us to do is to look beyond the outward form of our humanity and the thing that seems to make us most common in the world, namely our bodies and our forms. There is in fact something that makes us much more common than these external forms, and that is our hearts. If we can go and recover our hearts and discover them, we will cease to be self-seers, people who are only concerned with the outward forms of things, and will by virtue of that discovery be able to get to the inner nature of who we really are. This journey of the heart, as 'Ayn al-Qozat reminds us, is but one step: "O dear friend! The path to God is not from the right and left, from above and below, from far and near. The path to God is in the heart, and is one step—'leave yourself and come!'"<sup>14</sup>

According to a well-known report in the Sufi tradition, the words "leave yourself and come!" were uttered by God after having been asked by the great master Abu Yazid Bastami (d. ca. 874) how he can reach Him. 'Ayn al-Qozat also cites a popular Persian Sufi poem which forms a perfect commentary upon his emphasis on finding the path to the heart and the relinquishment of self:

*I said, "O King! How can I search for You,  
and how can I describe Your majesty?"  
He said, "Search for Me on neither the Throne nor in Paradise,  
but in your own heart, for in the heart is where I dwell."<sup>15</sup>*

Leaving one's self and journeying to the heart in other words entails not only dying to the negative character traits of the soul, but also to give up wanting anything other than God, which includes "where" we would normally expect to find Him.

While 'Ayn al-Qozat's treatment of the heart neatly fits into the mold of the

Persian Sufi tradition of the school of passionate love (*mazhab-e 'eshq*), he is unique if only because of the directness of his language when speaking about the journey to the heart. With this point in mind, it is most fitting to close with one more passage from 'Ayn al-Qozat's writings. Here, he connects the idea of searching for God, transcending the two worlds, and journeying into the heart in a manner that is as profoundly simple as it is simply profound:

*How do you know what I am saying? I am saying that the seeker must not seek God in the Garden, this world, or in the next world—he should not search in whatever he knows and sees. The very path of the seeker is inside of himself. He must take the path in his self: and within your selves—do you not see? (Q 51:21). All existent things are the heart-travelling seeker: there is no path to God better than the path of the heart.*<sup>15</sup>

#### NOTES

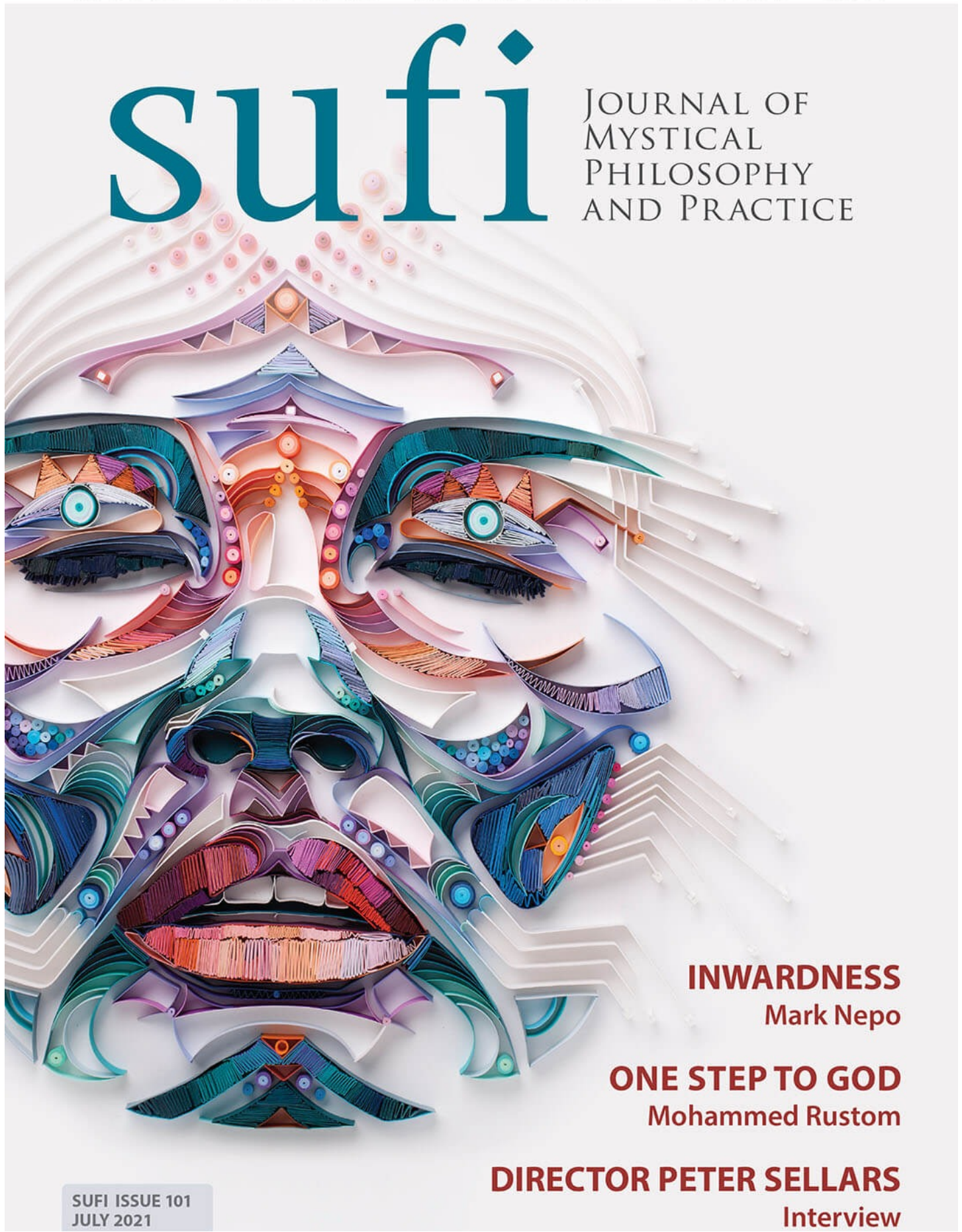
1. For a presentation of his life and teachings, with over 750 passages from his writings in translation, see Mohammed Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of 'Ayn al-Qudat* (Albany: SUNY Press, forthcoming in 2022). For a translation of 'Ayn al-Qozat's important treatise on Sufi metaphysics, see 'Ayn al-Qudat, *The Essence of Reality: A Defense of Philosophical Sufism*, ed. and trans. Mohammed Rustom (Library of Arabic Literature; New York: New York University Press, in press).
2. A fine introduction to his life and thought can be found in Joseph Lumbard, *Ahmad al-Ghazali, Remembrance and the Metaphysics of Love* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016).
3. The details surrounding 'Ayn al-Qozat's execution are discussed in Omid Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam: Negotiating Ideology and Religious Inquiry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), chapter 6 and the introduction in Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*.
4. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Tamhidat*, ed. 'Afif 'Osayran (Tehran: Manuchehri, 1994), 65, § 88.
5. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Nama-ha*, ed. 'Ali Naqi Monzawi and 'Afif 'Osayran (Tehran: Asatir, 1998), 2:92, § 128.
6. For this important notion in 'Ayn al-Qozat's thought, see Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*, chapter 5.
  7. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Tamhidat*, 24, § 36.
  8. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Tamhidat*, 146, § 198.
  9. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Tamhidat*, 146, § 198.
  10. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Nama-ha*, 2:370, § 577.
  11. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Tamhidat*, 93, § 131.
  12. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Tamhidat*, 146, § 198.
  13. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Tamhidat*, 95, § 135.
  14. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Tamhidat*, 92, § 131.
  15. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Tamhidat*, 24, § 36.
  16. 'Ayn al-Qozat, *Tamhidat*, 23, § 35.



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