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ORIGINAL STUDY

Ego, Spiritual Ascension, and the Path to Social Harmony: A Sufi Analysis of Rūmî's Thought

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concept of spiritual tranquility in the philosophy of Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, the discipline of the self (nafs), and the impact of these notions on the establishment of social peace from a Sufi perspective. The aim of the study is to analyze the metaphysical and ethical relationship between individual spiritual development and societal harmony, while also evaluating the applicability of these ideas within modern social, psychological, and ethical contexts. Rūmī's legacy encompasses not only spiritual perfection within the Sufi tradition but also universal approaches to humanity, society, and peace. In his system of thought, achieving inner harmony and tranquility is regarded as a primary prerequisite for the emergence of peace and solidarity in the social sphere. In this sense, the transition "from inner peace to social harmony" constitutes the central conceptual axis of Rūmī's philosophy.

From the perspective of Sufi psychology, according to Rūmī, the heart is not merely the center of emotions but a spiritual locus that opens to Divine truth. The conflict between the self (nafs) and the spirit disrupts inner balance and gives rise to spiritual tension. Attaining inner tranquility becomes possible through purifying the self from negative inclinations and filling the heart with divine love and mercy.

Consequently, the peace model grounded in Rūmī's views is not confined to a religious-spiritual framework; rather, it emerges as a universal conceptual framework applicable to modern social and moral issues. This model, extending from inner peace to social harmony, demonstrates the interrelationship between individual transformation, social cohesion, and human values on a conceptual and scientific basis.

This article analyzes the philosophical and mystical essence of the concept of *nafs* (ego) in Rumi's thought, its role in the process of spiritual ascent, and the idea of attaining union with the Divine Being. In Rumi's worldview, the *nafs* is portrayed as an inner force that hinders the attainment of spiritual perfection by directing human beings toward material desires and selfish inclinations. Rumi considers the struggle against this force to be the most essential duty of humankind. Through the purification and discipline of the *nafs*, a person discovers the divine light hidden within the inner self and ascends toward the Truth. The driving force of this spiritual journey is *love*. According to Rumi, love is both the creative principle of the universe and the source of human spiritual revival.

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The article also explains how the Sufi concepts of *maqām* (spiritual station) and *ḥāl* (mystical state) are manifested in Rumi's mystical doctrine and how the stages of spiritual development influence the soul's inner evolution. As a result, it is emphasized that Rumi's teaching presents a universal model of human liberation from the *nafs* and union with the Divine Being. This perspective holds significant value in the modern age for overcoming spiritual emptiness and restoring inner harmony.

Keywords: Rūmī, Sufism, Inner peace, Social harmony, Sufi psychology, Unity of Being (Wahdat al-Wujūd), *nafs*

Introduction

Jalâl al-Din Rumi, one of the most prominent figures of Islamic mystical and philosophical thought, places the human endeavor toward spiritual perfection and the path of union with the Divine Truth at the center of his mystical system. In his doctrine, the essence of human existence is comprehended not solely through rational cognition but also through spiritual and mystical experience. Rumi interprets the *nafs* (ego) inherent in human nature as the main obstacle to spiritual ascent. In this respect, the *nafs* is depicted as a force that alienates the human being from his or her true essence and weakens the spiritual energy directed toward the Divine Reality.

The relevance of the topic lies in the fact that Rumi's idea of "liberation from the *nafs*" offers a universal spiritual model not only for individual moral and spiritual development but also for addressing contemporary challenges such as increasing spiritual emptiness, the loss of moral values, and the crisis of identity in the modern world.

In Sufi literature, the concept of *nafs* is one of the fundamental categories used to explain the spiritual and psychological essence of the human being. In traditional sources, this concept is defined in various forms. According to some Sufi texts, the *nafs* is described as a subtle, vapor-like substance existing within the body, endowed with will, sensation, and vital force (Çatak, 2012, p. 218). In other interpretations, the term nafs is employed in a dual sense: On the one hand, it denotes the inner force that "commands evil," directing the human being toward material desires and sin; on the other hand, it refers to the rūḥ-i raḥmānī the divine self or the spirit breathed into man by God (Ayni, 1930, p. 2–3).

The majority of Sufi thinkers regard the nafs as the center of negative qualities and instinctive tendencies such as lust and anger. From their perspective, the nafs is a subtle faculty or hidden essence within the human being, which serves as the source of all immoral dispositions. The rūḥ (spirit), on the other hand, is considered the source of all virtuous attributes in man – compassion, love, and divine attachment. Thus, the human being is constantly engaged in an inner struggle between the spirit and the nafs: While the spirit strives to ascend toward divine perfection, the nafs draws the individual downward through material desires and egocentric inclinations (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, 1993, p. 235; al-Ghazālī, 1993, p. 4).

In the Sufi system, this struggle namely, the "disciplining of the nafs is regarded as one of the essential stages on the path to spiritual perfection. The Sufis believed that the more a person purifies the nafs, the closer he or she draws to the Divine Light (Ögke, 1997, p. 15). The subjugation of the nafs is not merely an act of moral discipline but also a process of "deification," that is, the unification of the human will with the Divine Will through self-transcendence (Atay, 1997, pp. 2–3). For this reason, the struggle against the nafs in Sufism is not viewed merely as a form of worship, but as the highest spiritual endeavor leading to the liberation of the soul.

Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī is recognized in the history of Sufism not merely as a poet, but as a spiritual teacher, philosopher, and mystic who explored the inner harmony of the human being. His legacy has significantly influenced both the Islamic world and Western philosophy and literature (Kilicheva & Klicheva, 2022). In his works, the path toward spiritual perfection, union with God, and the attainment of both individual and social peace is clearly articulated. In this respect, Rūmī serves as a universal guide not only for Sufi circles but also for diverse cultures and religious traditions (Citlak & Bingul, 2007).

In Rūmī's philosophy, spiritual tranquility is not regarded solely as an inward psychological state; rather, it possesses transformative potential for social relations and the establishment of communal harmony. Within the Sufi tradition, purification of the heart, discipline of the self, and orientation toward divine love ensure not only individual spiritual maturity but also provide the foundation for tolerance, mutual respect, and social cohesion. This framework reveals the conceptual trajectory in Rūmī's thought from "inner tranquility to social harmony."

In the contemporary world - marked by increasing social conflicts, ethnic and religious tensions, and collective psychological pressures - Rūmī's philosophy retains its relevance. By explaining the relationship between individual spiritual development and social harmony within a Sufi-ethical framework, his thought offers inspiration for constructing universal models addressing both classical and modern social challenges.

The concept of nafs in Rumi's thought

In Rumi's philosophical and mystical system, the only way for a human being to truly know the Lord is through the understanding of one's own *nafs* (self). For Rumi, the comprehension of human spiritual development and the relationship between man and the universe becomes possible only by penetrating the mysteries of one's inner world. The more a person recognizes the essence and true nature of the *nafs*, the closer he or she draws to the essence of the Divine Being. This perspective is grounded in the well-known Sufi maxim, "He who knows himself knows his Lord." Rumi interprets this saying not merely as a religious principle, but as a key to understanding the mysteries of existence. According to him, self-knowledge essentially means the recognition of the divine essence bestowed upon humanity by God.

Rumi expresses this idea through various metaphors in both the Mathnawī and Fīhi mā fīhi. He likens the human being to "a drop separated from the sea," stating that as long as the drop forgets its origin, it will remain thirsty; yet the moment it recognizes its source, it will reunite with the ocean. This metaphor symbolizes the human condition of estrangement from the Divine Truth when bound by the nafs, and the return to one's divine origin through self-awareness and spiritual purification. According to Rumi, man can attain union with the Haqq only by transcending the nafs and purifying the self through Divine Love. In this sense, love in his philosophical–mystical system functions simultaneously as the means, the goal, and the very essence of Truth itself. It is through this love (*ʿishq*) that the human being draws near to God, transcends the limits of individuality, and attains harmony with the universal order of existence.

For Rumi, the recognition of the nafs is not merely a matter of identifying and restraining negative traits; it is also a process through which the human being discovers the divine light hidden within – in other words, the stage of "knowing the God within oneself." He portrays the understanding of the nafs as a form of "inner journey," in which the deeper the individual delves into the layers of the self, the more clearly he or she perceives the manifestation of the Divine Truth (Haqq) therein.

For Rumi, the process of understanding the nafs signifies the human being's ascent from the consciousness of the "I" to the state of "We." This transformation represents the unification of the individual self with the Divine Being – the state of "annihilation in God" (*fanāʾ fi'l-Ḥaqq*). At this stage, the human no longer exists merely as a created being, but as a manifestation of the Creator. Rumi illustrates this state through the image of "a spark hidden within ashes," implying that the divine light within the human self is veiled by the dust of the nafs; to cleanse it that is, to know and transcend the nafs is to rekindle that hidden flame. In describing the human path toward spiritual perfection, Rumi employs profound symbols and metaphors. He likens man to a drop separated from the ocean, emphasizing that just as the drop suffers from thirst when it forgets its source, the human soul, estranged from Divine Truth, burns in spiritual thirst. Yet the moment the drop remembers its origin its divine source it reunites with the ocean, just as the human being attains union with the Lord upon recalling his or her divine essence. This metaphor, in Rumi's teaching, symbolizes the nafs as the veil that creates distance between the human and God; the lifting of this veil requires a turning inward toward one's own inner reality. In Rumi's thought, the recognition of the nafs is not merely the awareness of moral weaknesses or carnal desires; it is the discovery of the divine presence hidden within the manifestation of the Haqq in the human self. This process of realization constitutes an inner journey of contemplation and stillness, wherein the deeper one descends into the layers of the self, the more clearly one perceives the light of Divine Truth and comes to know one's true being through that light. For Rumi, the ultimate goal of spiritual development is to transcend the limits of the individual "self" (nafs) and attain union with God. He calls this state fana fi'l-Haqq the dissolution of the self in the Divine Reality where the human ego becomes silent and the Divine Presence manifests within the soul. Rumi illustrates this state through the symbol of "a spark hidden within ashes": The divine light within the human being is veiled by the dust of the nafs and worldly desires. The recognition and purification of the nafs ignite this hidden spark once again, signifying the revival of the divine light within man (Mevlânâ, 1990, p. 45; Yalçınkaya, 2025, p. 101).

Rumi identifies the nafs as the greatest obstacle on the path to spiritual perfection. In his view, this inner adversary, hidden within the human being, resembles Satan in its obstinacy and continually strives to divert a person from the right path. Rumi asserts that if the nafs did not block the inner path of the human soul, then the external evils sins, temptations, and corrupt influences would not be able to reach or affect the individual. The activity of the nafs, that is, its awakening and influence within the inner world, originates primarily from lust, greed, anger, egocentric desires, and the corrupting tendencies of the intellect (Mevlânâ, 1991). In this regard, Rumi places the human being face to face with the nafs as the main battlefield in the struggle against Satan. According to him, Satan's influence on human beings is never direct; rather, he seeks to mislead by arousing the carnal and instinctive inclinations inherent in human nature. Therefore, for Rumi, the nafs constitutes the central element of the inner spiritual conflict Satan's whisper enters through the gate of the nafs. The subjugation of the nafs thus becomes the only path through which a person can transcend the limitations of the self and ascend toward divine truth.

In Rumi's mystical philosophy, the process of human ascent toward the Divine Being centers upon the purification of the nafs, the revitalization of the soul through love, and the passage through the spiritual stages known as maqām and ḥāl. This perspective closely aligns with the principles of classical Sufi theory, in which the spiritual journey of the human being is depicted as a gradual progression through established maqāms (stations) toward higher states of ḥāl (spiritual conditions or experiences) (Alizade, 2020, p.145).

Rumi's poetic imagery vividly illustrates these stages of spiritual transformation through living metaphors such as the reed turning into a flute, the drop reuniting with the sea, and

the ember rekindled beneath the ashes. From this perspective, these symbolic representations constitute one of the fundamental structural elements of Rumi's mystical thought a view also emphasized by scholars such as Franklin D. Lewis, who interprets such imagery as central to the coherence of Rumi's spiritual system. In Rumi's view, love ('ishq) is the primary driving force behind spiritual ascent. Within his writings, love functions both as a cosmic principle and a personal spiritual impulse a transformative power that dissolves the nafs, liberates the individual self from its limitations, and draws the human being toward the Divine Reality. In her analysis of Rumi's teachings, Annemarie Schimmel identifies the concept of love as the central motivating energy of the Sufi path. According to Schimmel, Rumi's mystical system envisions the human journey toward spiritual perfection as passing through the stages of fanā' (the dissolution of the self or annihilation of the ego) and baqā' (subsistence in God). She characterizes Rumi's mystical experience as a process of spiritual death and rebirth (Schimmel, 1978, p. 305).

Research indicates that within the Sufi tradition, maqāms are described as the systematic stages of spiritual discipline, while aḥwāl represent the transient states of divine grace or spiritual experience that emerge as a result of those stages (Alizade, 2020, pp. 146–147). Rumi, however, demonstrates that these two categories are mutually complementary, showing that true spiritual ascent unfolds through both maqāms and aḥwāl. Within this framework, the human being distances the self from the nafs and thereby attains divine knowledge.

Spiritual tranquility and the ontological perspective in Rūmī

In Rūmī's thought, spiritual tranquility becomes foundational for both individual perfection and social harmony when integrated with his Sufi ontological worldview. Inner peace is achieved through purification of the self from egocentric tendencies and the illumination of the heart by divine love.

Although not identical with pantheism, Rūmī's metaphysical outlook reflects a panentheistic Sufi understanding in which Divine manifestation (tajallī) permeates existence. Through this perspective, the individual perceives both self and cosmos as part of a sacred whole. Such awareness reduces egocentrism and fosters harmonious relations with others. Thus, spiritual tranquility transcends personal experience and becomes a transformative force for social peace.

Divine love ('ishq) constitutes the central axis of Rūmī's poetic and philosophical discourse. In his verses, love is not merely an emotional attachment but the unifying spiritual force sustaining the cosmos. Love purifies the heart from ego-based impurities and illuminates it with divine light (Hashim Mutlaq, 2022).

Contemporary studies affirm that love in Rūmī's works liberates the individual from ego, purifies the spirit, and directs it toward God (International Journal of European Research Output, 2023). This process corresponds to self-knowledge and liberation from selfish desires, ultimately leading to spiritual perfection (insān al-kāmil). Such a spiritually mature individual abandons hostility and discrimination, recognizing unity with the cosmos (Boloji, 2023).

Rūmī's ontological unity also carries ethical implications. Since all existence reflects Divine manifestation, respect and compassion toward all beings become moral necessities (Hashim Mutlaq, 2022). Psychological interpretations further suggest that belief in cosmic unity protects individuals from alienation, aggression, and isolation while cultivating empathy and solidarity (Gupta, 2021).

Thus, the integration of spiritual tranquility, cosmic unity, and divine love forms a universal peace model:

- The individual attains tranquility within the heart.
- Ego-driven behaviors diminish.
- Compassion toward others and nature emerges.
- Social tolerance and dialogue develop.
- Inner peace transforms into social harmony.

This model remains relevant today in discussions of interfaith dialogue, cultural pluralism, social justice, and ecological responsibility.

Asceticism (Zuhd), self-discipline, and social balance

Sufi tradition emphasizes spiritual discipline through ascetic detachment (zuhd). Zuhd entails not merely renouncing material possessions but liberating the heart from attachment to them. Excessive attachment to worldly pleasures distances the individual from Divine truth (Işıtan, 2018).

From a psychological standpoint, sustained attention intensifies attachment; thus, spiritual training requires conscious redirection of desire. Inner peace and social harmony depend upon purification of the heart from egoistic inclinations (Işıtan, 2014). A purified individual embodies empathy, compassion, and social responsibility (Açıkel, 1998).

Justice represents another pillar of social harmony. A society lacking justice cannot sustain peace (Çağrıcı, 1998). The Sufi principle of "giving everything its due" fosters ethical integrity and social trust (Müftüoğlu, 2005). Research in psychology likewise demonstrates that trust contributes fundamentally to emotional stability and social cohesion (Işıtan, 2015).

Rūmī describes the world metaphorically as a prison for the soul in the *Masnavi* (Rūmī, 2004). Excessive attachment to worldly forms obstructs perception of deeper meaning. Therefore, he urges humanity to transcend superficial appearances and seek essential truth.

Self-discipline requires courage, for restraining the commanding self (nafs al-ammāra) is a lifelong struggle (Frager, 2005). In Sufi terminology, this struggle is termed the "greater jihad." Rūmī warns that the internal enemy - the ego - is more dangerous than external adversaries (Rūmī, 2004).

Only by overcoming ego-centered impulses can individuals embody lasting virtues grounded in Divine inspiration. Such virtues constitute the ethical foundation of enduring social harmony.

Unity (Tawḥīd) and social pluralism

Unity (tawḥīd) forms the metaphysical core of Rūmī's philosophy. Acceptance of Divine unity implies recognition that all multiplicity derives from a single source. In Sufi metaphysics, multiplicity is relative and temporary, whereas unity is essential (Işıtan, 2014).

Rūmī expresses this ontological truth poetically: "We were once a single essence, pure light before division" (Rūmī, 2004). Spiritual unrest arises from forgetting this unity.

His distinction between "unity of meaning" and "multiplicity of form" underscores that cultural and linguistic diversity does not negate essential unity. He famously states: "Many speak the same language, but few share the same heart."

Thus, differences in culture and religion become spiritual enrichment when grounded in unity-consciousness. Social peace requires cultivating the "language of the heart," characterized by empathy and shared humanity.

Conclusion

Rūmī's philosophy offers a spiritual pathway from inner tranquility to social harmony. Through purification of the self and illumination of the heart by divine love, individual balance is achieved and extends outward into society. Peace, for Rūmī, begins with self-discipline: Without reforming oneself, reforming the world is impossible.

In the modern era, his message of love, mercy, justice, and unity provides a profound spiritual framework for rebuilding tolerance and coexistence. His model transcends religious boundaries and offers a universal ethical vision in which inner peace becomes the foundation of sustainable social harmony.

The mystical-philosophical system of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī seeks to comprehend the spiritual essence of human existence and to guide it toward divine perfection. Within his thought, the concept of the nafs represents the center of inner spiritual trials, negative tendencies, and egoistic desires inherent in human nature. The nafs functions as a veil between the human being and God, and the lifting of this veil becomes possible only through spiritual discipline, contemplation, and love.

For Rumi, the process of spiritual perfection begins with the disciplining of the nafs, deepens through love, and culminates in union with the Divine Being. In this journey, the human being transcends the sense of "I" and ascends to the level of "We," the state of unity with al-Ḥaqq (the Absolute Truth). The subjugation of the nafs is not merely a form of spiritual discipline but also signifies a transformation in the perception of existence, for as the human being is liberated from the self, they discover within their own inner world the divine light concealed in their being.

In Rumi's thought, the spiritual ascent toward the Divine Being simultaneously constitutes a philosophy of love. Love, in his view, is the cosmic force that sets the universe in motion, unites all beings, and draws the human soul toward al-Ḥaqq (the Divine Reality). Through this love, the human being transcends the boundaries of the nafs, "dies before death," and is reborn in divine truth. Thus, spiritual ascent is not merely an act of individual salvation but also the realization of the wholeness of existence – a process through which the human being aligns the self with the divine harmony of the cosmos.

Rumi's teachings on the nafs and spiritual ascent remain profoundly relevant in the modern era. His doctrine presents a universal model for establishing inner balance, spiritual purity, and a way of life grounded in divine values. Rumi's insights reveal that the greatest struggle of the human being is the battle against the self within, and that the one who triumphs in this struggle attains true freedom in the light of the Divine Being.

AI usage statement

The author(s) declare that no generative articial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the conception, writing, analysis, interpretation, or preparation of this manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no confict of interest.

Author contribution

Khatira Yusifova conceptualized and designed the study, gathered and analyzed the sources, wrote the manuscript, and reviewed and approved the final text.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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