

Sacred Ecstasy

I

could hear the seagulls' calls and smell the salty air of the Sea of Marmara from the small café by the grand Blue Mosque of Istanbul. An old man pushed a cart loaded with freshly baked round bread covered with sesame seeds. I felt at home. It was a beautiful warm day in early June 2011, and I was getting ready to start a Peace Mission tour of Turkey. It was a time when I would read one Rumi poem a day and seek wisdom from the great Sufi mystic's timeless teachings.[1]

“More chai?” The waiter brought me some more Turkish tea in a small transparent blue glass shaped in a feminine curve. Sweet tea. Life is good!

I opened my book to a random page and received a gift. I was about to spend two weeks with the Sufis and Roma gypsies of Turkey, and Jalaluddin Rumi's poetry provided me with a much-needed perspective. Eight

hundred years ago, he observed that artists – unlike seekers who enter the fire of ecstasy – merely flirt with the Divine, flirt with the Creator, the Source of life.

I often have felt transitory connections to a mysterious energy, during graceful and blessed moments that highlight my concerts and workshops. We, the artists, touch this great mystery momentarily ... and then it is lost. The bliss is there one moment and gone the next. Here it is, and there it disappears. Are we flirting with Source, or is it teasing us?

Whenever we support dervishes with devotional music, as when we participated in the hidden rituals of our Turkish Sufi friends, we provide a runway for which they may fly higher and reach an ecstatic state, the true fire. The sacred ecstasy they experience is above and beyond the mere "flirtation of artists."

This quest for ecstasy has fascinated the Sufis of Islam, the mystics of Judaism (Kabbalistic and Hassidic), as well as the ancient Greeks. Often, ecstasy is connected to music and dance. This brings to mind a tribal circle.

You are there, standing among several indigenous men and women whom you have never met. Everyone around you is drumming and chanting. The drumbeat is tantalizing; it feels so good to be a part of such a group. The collective group's presence slowly overwhelms your individuality. As the beat gets faster and faster, you and everyone around you stop thinking, stop being aware of time, stop being aware of who – you think – you are. And the rhythms and vocal chants drive

everybody into an ecstatic trance where there is no self-consciousness or judgment.

Then gradually, the music slows down and fades. You are physically and emotionally exhausted, yet your senses are so sharp, you feel more alive and awake than ever before! You look around, and in a magical way, all your fellow drummers seem simply beautiful. There is a certain smile in their eyes and a misty light over their faces. You feel an intimacy and closeness to them, something you never could have imagined feeling just an hour ago, before the ecstatic drumming began.

This is just one expression of sacred ecstasy, the kind that has been practiced for centuries in tribal societies. It is also an important part of Sufism, Hassidic Judaism and the mystical practices of East Asian religions. The terminology may vary, but the essence is the same: It is an attempt to transcend individual perception, the sense of separation between us and our fellow man and between us and the Creator, and the illusion that the physical world around us is all that exists.[2]

And this illusion is not child's play. It is one of the most powerful misperceptions that we carry with us. Our ordinary five senses inform us that we only exist in the zone between our minds and the tip of our toes, between our brain and our skin. That is the "I" – the individual. The rest of life – including other people, life forms, and the whole universe – we perceive as "they" or the "other" or definitely not "me." Therefore, we unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) focus on the survival of "me" and

care much less about how “they” are surviving. This is an expression of limited vision, is it not? It appears selfish, but in truth, such a perception is based in fear. In other words, concerns for the survival of “me” are rooted in fear of death and suffering.

Sacred ecstasy takes us beyond this limited view of life. But the journey toward ecstasy is difficult because of the way we are wired. The nature of our mind, our consciousness and possibly even our physicality belie our connection to the All.[3] Is it possible to go beyond ordinary perception?

From ancient time onward, the motivation for attempting this seemingly impossible quest was always connected to the human desire to utilize and to benefit from a superior creative force. For example, a connection to the Divine was deemed necessary for success in shamanic medicine, music, dance, and other spiritual rituals. If a person could connect with or channel super beings or spirits, he or she could become a powerful healer, magician, dancer, musician, or tribal leader. But beyond these practical needs, spiritual experimentation historically has addressed the human *longing* to comprehend and connect to the mystery of all mysteries: the Creator, the Source of all life. Thus, the mystics of all traditions have advised that if we go beyond the mere physical, we may unite with the metaphysical, intangible, spiritual aspect of life.

Every once in a while, I get a call from a university where I am about to give a lecture on “Sacred Ecstasy.” The voice on the other end of the line asks,

“Would you mind not mentioning the word ‘ecstasy’ during your visit?”

“Not to worry,” I reply. “I won’t promote the mind-altering drug that has adopted and misused the word ‘ecstasy’.”

All joking aside, I am aware that some young people believe they have experienced “ecstasy” after taking a drug, a chemical short-cut to reaching an altered state of mind. However, let us look up the original meaning of the word.

From the Greek, ecstasy means “to be outside of oneself.” In other words, ecstasy permits us to transcend individualistic perception, to sense beyond the regular senses which normally lead us to believe that we do not exist beyond our own flesh and mind. When we truly reach an ecstatic state, we are able to *feel* that we actually exist beyond ourselves. That we *are* everything!

In a sacred, ecstatic state of mind, we feel connected to all living things. We feel that we are within all of creation, and that all of creation is within us. Some might cry out at such moment, “God is in me!” as some Sufi saints have expressed. But the words are not important; we may call Source anything we like. A deep sense of the unity of all things is what we are seeking – not an intellectual understanding of the idea of unity. It is a gut feeling, a sensation, a perception. Yet, is this a true perception or just another illusion?

The mystics of old have been saying for centuries and in various terms that the unity of all things is the *true*

reality. They have insisted that we *do* exist beyond our bodies. Isn't it fascinating that recent research is now confirming that our brain neurons actually reach beyond our bodies, connect with, convey information to, and affect living things *outside* of our bodies![4]

The implications of such neurological studies are far reaching and support the mystic's assertion that we are inseparable from all creation. If we truly feel that we and the "other" are one, if we truly love the "other" as we love ourselves, then peace would be the natural consequence. Having gained this comprehension, we would never dump toxic waste in our neighbor's yard, we would be generous with a stranger, and we would never unleash violence in a distant part of the world. That is the essence of the ancient Great Commandment: *Love your neighbor as you love yourself.*[5]

Even though the concept that "you are everything" is extremely difficult for many of us to truly internalize, there are numerous ways to experience it. Within ancient shamanic wisdom, it is told that music and ecstatic movement *can* move us outside of ourselves so that we may reach an altered state of mind – a state of sacred ecstasy – the same goal of ecstatic rituals and celebrations conducted by Hassidic Jews, Sufi Muslims, and Pentecostal Christians.

Therefore, the question arises: *Which music and what kind of movement should be used for such an ecstatic journey?* It is interesting that both Sufis and Hassidic Jews use circling movements to commence the journey toward sacred ecstasy. The Sufi whirling

dervishes take the path of turning around the heart, a practice credited to Rumi, the 13th Century Sufi master. This practice, however, is more ancient than Rumi, as it has been a native practice of the people of Central Asia and the Middle East.[6]

Circling is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as a form of worship and ritual practiced at the first Jerusalem Temple built by King Solomon. Indeed, the Hebrew word for “holiday” – *chag* – means, literally, to “turn in a circle.” And earlier portions of the Bible note that circling is a way to invoke powerful metaphysical powers, as with the circling of Joshua around Jericho. Sacred circling also is a movement used in ecstatic dances at Hassidic wedding parties and by brides during Jewish Kabbalistic wedding ceremonies. Similarly, in the Islamic tradition, circling is part of the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca – a tradition that dates back to the 7th Century, six hundred years before Rumi. Circling the Kaaba, which contains the holy “Black Stone” of Mecca, likely has its roots in pre-Islamic pagan Arabia. This tradition is one of the most ecstatic and hypnotizing rituals in human history.[7]

The Sufis, as with all mystics, prefer the deep poetic meaning over the literal one. And so they ask: *Why go to Mecca, as the real Kaaba is in you? It is in your heart. Circle your heart. That is the sacred stone on which you should focus your attention. That is where you may find the Beloved (the Creator).* They therefore turn and circle around the inner beauty, the inner “honey,” around the divine spark of Light (Kabbalistic terminology)[8] or the *Atman* (in Hinduism). They circle around their own hearts on the way to sacred ecstasy ...

just as atoms circle within all particles of nature, as the Earth spins on its own axis while at the same time circling the Sun, all of which are twirling in our galaxy in an ever-expanding Universe.[9]

The secret of the circle is its expression of *hypnotic repetition*. And repetition is crucial for the initial stages of the ecstatic mind-altering process, as we will soon see in the case of ecstatic music as well.

The mental journey toward bliss must begin with a gradual surrender of the “watch dog” function of the mind. If you want to lower a person’s guard or passively put their mind to rest so that they are less apt to intellectualize, you only need subject them to some type of repeated experience.

Let’s say you repeat and repeat and repeat the same pattern in front of a person. It could be the same movement, the same sound, or the same word (if it is a word, it should be repeated with the exact same intonation). Or, you may use a visual pattern, by showing a person the same image again and again and again. Better yet, combine *all* the above modalities, and loop them for a good while. The result of this repeated experience is that the person will be subconsciously directed toward an altered state of mind.

How does it work? First, the lack of new stimuli calms the mind, which then ceases analyzing the sound, movement, or image stimuli. In other words, looping the stimulus tricks the mind into a state of rest. At this point the “guard” is taking a break (a/k/a the “monkey” is sleeping).[10] Now, the mind is primed to advance

toward an altered state, ready to receive a new perception of reality.

Music and audio stimulation provides another great method for relaxing, hypnotizing, and altering moods and mental perceptions. That is why the devotional music of the Sufi and Hassidic traditions includes constant repetition of the same melody. What changes is the rate of the musical pulse or beat. People, especially kids, get excited when music and dance are slowly accelerated. The intensifying rhythms help us forget about our inhibitions and promote release of the intellect.

I recall times when my children were small and their young friends would visit. Often, I would play for them the “Bird’s Song,” an Armenian mountain shepherd melody.[11] As I began to speed up the tempo, the excitement and the joy in the room would build. The children would then run around, waving their little arms like bird wings, racing faster and faster around our living room. The more rapidly I played the music, the more joyful their expressions and the less their self-awareness.

Psycho-acoustic research and clinical studies on music therapy clearly demonstrate that speeding up the pulse of background music drives the listener’s heart rate higher.[12] Such accelerated pumping, especially if accompanied by repeated movements such as jumping or turning, leads us to a different state of mind. Thus, musical acceleration, which causes the intensifying of biophysical pulsations in the body, assists us in releasing control of the conscious/intellectual mind. Instinct/intuition

then take over, allowing the mind to focus on more visceral information coming in via the senses of hearing, smelling, and touching. Then, our consciousness may tune to the metaphysical sense of Oneness of all things.

With music, the journey to an ecstatic experience typically starts with a dark, intimate, and introspective tone. Both the Sufi and the Hassid begin with a slow and pleading musical melody, almost a lament; but, it is actually the sensation of *longing* that the music evokes. The foundation for this quest is the human condition of separation. The soul is captured in a physical body in a physical world, yearning for Spirit, pleading for Union, aching to reach the Source of life – the powerful energy that is behind everything. The musical modes (i.e., the musical note combinations) that are used in the Turkish Sufi and Hassidic Jewish traditions share some striking similarities. Both paths employ modes that express pain and longing but – when sped up – evolve into powerful and joyful musical expressions.[13]

The lyrics of the Sufi devotional songs, the *Illahis*, often use poetry from the “School of Love,” the work of such masters as Rumi, Yunus and Hafiz, who favor the imagery of lovers – an intimate relationship between the seeker and the Divine. In these poems and songs, the seeker is the lover and the Beloved is the awesome life force behind the reality we see with our eyes. Just like the Sufis, the Hassidic lyrics often express the longing to unite with the Creator. One such song repeats the mantra *Tzama lecha Nafshi*, which means in Hebrew, “My soul is thirsty for you.” In the biblical “Song of Songs” (traditionally credited to King Solomon) and in some

mystical Kabbalistic poetry, we find the same metaphor of the lovers, which the Sufi poets often used to describe the ecstatic path to Unity.[14]

If a Hassidic song includes lyrics, the words simply become a meditative mantra and fade to the background of the mind, which soon may become ecstatic. Yet, the Hassidic spiritual leaders also have established a tradition of using meaningless syllables, almost gibberish, such as: *lai, lai, lai, bim, bim-bam, zum, zum, zum, ya, ya, ya*. [15] This tradition is called *Nigunim* (“tunes” in Hebrew). These lyric-less tunes provide another way to vocally side-step the intellect. When you utter no words and all you sing are simple syllables, the mind has nothing to chew on, no food for thought, nothing to analyze and no stimuli for the language center in the brain. Hence, a new portal opens which allows us to enter into an ecstatic mind-set.

Kabbalistic terminology which is used by the Jewish mystics to describe the process of sacred ecstasy gives us further hints about what is occurring. That embrace of lovers, which the Sufis seek, is called *Dvekut* by the mystic Kabbalists. This is a difficult word to translate in English. It comes from the root of the Hebrew word *devek*, which means “glue.” In our context, it means “adhesive” or “to bond,” which implies strong connections, like friendship, marriage, and ultimately Union – all of which are a part of love. This incredibly emotional process of bonding with the Divine – reaching out and attaching one’s soul to the Source of life, getting glued to it, and potentially achieving Union – is perfectly encompassed in the loaded Hebrew word *Dvekut*.

One may be led toward such a mystical bond through Hassidic music and movement, but there is another aspect to consider. The Kabbalistic word – *hitlahavut* – provides yet another clue on how to attain sacred ecstasy. *Hitlahavut* means “excitement,” but upon closer examination, we find that it contains the shorter Hebrew word *lahav*, which means both “blade” and “flame.” Thus, as the music gets faster and the circular repeated movements hypnotize and disengage the analytical mind, the seeker becomes excited (the state of *hitlahavut*). The seeker then goes “into the flame” or “becomes the flame.” The ecstatic fire acts as a sharp blade (*lahav*) which cuts through the illusion of the physical world to access higher realms. Then the soul (*neshama*) may reach the spiritual dimension for the sake of Union (*Dvekut*).

Whether it is an embrace of lovers or a fiery bonding of the soul, the Sufi and Hassidic paths to Union are paved with soulful music, circular movements, and gradual acceleration of the musical pace and the pulse of the human heart. The fire ... the blade ... the drum ... the soulful cry of the reed flute or the singer – all tell the intellect to take a break so that the mind may stop analyzing and allow the soul to fly as high as a dove and to circle, whirl, and twist itself about the Beloved.

At the small café in Istanbul, I drank another cup of sweet chai tea, as the narrow streets became noisy and crowded with people on their way to work. From my vantage point, I saw seagulls flying in circles over the Blue Mosque and down toward the salty Sea of Marmara. Were they merely looking for food? Or was it

possible that the birds, like our souls, also were in search of spiritual nourishment? Perhaps they were searching for such emotional sustenance while spinning on high, flirting with bliss, and circling the mystery of all mysteries.

[1] Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273) was a 13th Century poet and teacher of the Sufi path, a mystical branch of Islam. His poems have been translated into nearly every language, and many later artists (authors, poets, playwrights, musicians, and dancers) have been divinely inspired by his work. The general themes of Rumi's poetry include the concepts of Oneness and Unity with the Divine, which the seeker has lost and longs to restore.

[2] This illusion (or the veil) of the physical world has been called *Maya* by the ancient Hindu religion. There are numerous references to it in various other mystical traditions, such as Kabbalah, Sufism, and Gnostic Christianity.

[3] See the research and theories of neuroscientist Vilayanur Ramachandran, Ph.D., involving phantom limb sensations and the brain. Some of Dr. Ramachandran's studies suggest that physical body parts seem to block brain identification with other human beings outside of us.

[4] See various neuro-scientific studies of "mirror neurons" – brain cells that interact outside of our bodies and connect us to others beyond our skin. See also an article at www.Edge.org entitled "Mirror Neurons and Imitation Learning as the Driving Force Behind 'The Great Leap Forward' in Human Evolution" by Dr. Ramachandran (2000).

[5] The "Golden Rule" expressed in all religious and indigenous traditions.

[6] For example, the Tatar people in Central Asia and the ancient Hebrews and Arabs in the Middle East.

[7] This is seen, for example, in the movie *Samsara* by Ron Fricke and Mark Magidson (website: www.barakasamsara.com/samsara). The soundtrack for the film also includes one of Yuval Ron tracks from the CD *Oud Prayers on the Road to St. Jacques* (track titled “La Illah aillah la/Nigun le Mashiakh”). It can be heard at: www.cdbaby.com/cd/yuval8.

[8] See the DVD *Seeker of Truth* with Dervish Aziz and the Yuval Ron Ensemble at the World Festival of Sacred Music in Los Angeles, CA (2008). On YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJBqAZYlfek; and on Vimeo: www.vimeo.com/16682894.

[9] At the equator, the Earth is spinning at over 1,000 mph. The Earth circles the Sun at more than 67,000 mph. And the Milky Way Galaxy is turning at approximately 537,000 mph.

[10] For a discussion of the “Monkey Mind,” see Chapter IV entitled, “Meditation, Unity, and Why Should You Tame the Monkey.”

[11] The song is entitled “Tseter” (“Birds”), and it was recorded by the Yuval Ron Ensemble CD *Tree of Life*. Online at: www.cdbaby.com/cd/yuval5.

[12] See M. H. Thaut article entitled “Physiological and Motor Responses to Music Stimuli,” in *Music Therapy in the Treatment of Adults with Mental Disorders: Theoretical Bases and Clinical Interventions*; R. F. Unkefer, Editor; New York: Schirmer (2005).

[13] Both traditions use the *Hijaz* mode. Listen to the track “Sufi” from the CD *Seeker of Truth* (online at: www.cdbaby.com/cd/yuval9) and “La Illah aillah La/Nigun Le Mashiakh” from the CD *Oud Prayers on the Road to St. Jacques* (online at: www.cdbaby.com/cd/yuval8).

[14] See Yehuda Halevi’s poem *Yonat Rekhokim*.

[15] For more on the Hassidic spiritual tradition see Chapter VI entitled “Master of the Good Name,” which tells the story of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hassidic movement.

www.yuvalronmusic.com

Watch a 5 min. clip of Hebrew music and dance performed by Yuval Ron Ensemble:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=GEIKNsKKf8#t=26