

Classic Poetry Series

Rabia Al Basri
- poems -

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Rabia Al Basri(717 - 801)

Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (Arabic: رابعة العدوية القيسية) or simply Rabi'ah al-Basri (Arabic: رابعة البصري) was a female Muslim saint and Sufi mystic.

Not much is known about Rabia al Basri, except that she lived in Basra in Iraq, in the second half of the 8th century AD. She was born into poverty. But many spiritual stories are associated with her and what we can glean about her is reality merged with legend. These traditions come from Farid ud din Attar a later sufi saint and poet, who used earlier sources. Rabia herself though has not left any written works.

After her father's death, there was a famine in Basra, and during that she was parted from her family. It is not clear how she was traveling in a caravan that was set upon by robbers. She was taken by the robbers and sold into slavery.

Her master worked her very hard, but at night after finishing her chores Rabia would turn to meditation and prayers and praising the Lord. Foregoing rest and sleep she spent her nights in prayers and she often fasted during the day.

There is a story that once, while in the market, she was pursued by a vagabond and in running to save herself she fell and broke her arm. She prayed to the Lord "I am a poor orphan and a slave, Now my hand too is broken. But I do not mind these things if Thou be pleased with me. " and felt a voice reply "Never mind all these sufferings. On the Day of Judgement you shall be accorded a status that shall be the envy of the angels even"

One day the master of the house spied her at her devotions. There was a divine light enveloping her as she prayed. Shocked that he kept such a pious soul as a slave, he set her free. Rabia went into the desert to pray and became an ascetic. Unlike many sufi saints she did not learn from a teacher or master but turned to God himself.

Throughout her life, her Love of God. Poverty and self-denial were unwavering and her constant companions. She did not possess much other than a broken jug, a rush mat and a brick, which she used as a pillow. She spent all night in prayer and contemplation chiding herself if she slept for it took her away from her active Love of God.

As her fame grew she had many disciples. She also had discussions with many of

the renowned religious people of her time.

Though she had many offers of marriage, and tradition has it one even from the Amir of Basra, she refused them as she had no time in her life for anything other than God.

More interesting than her absolute asceticism, however, is the actual concept of Divine Love that Rabia introduced. She was the first to introduce the idea that God should be loved for God's own sake, not out of fear--as earlier Sufis had done.

She taught that repentance was a gift from God because no one could repent unless God had already accepted him and given him this gift of repentance. She taught that sinners must fear the punishment they deserved for their sins, but she also offered such sinners far more hope of Paradise than most other ascetics did. For herself, she held to a higher ideal, worshipping God neither from fear of Hell nor from hope of Paradise, for she saw such self-interest as unworthy of God's servants; emotions like fear and hope were like veils -- i.e., hindrances to the vision of God Himself.

She prayed "O Allah! If I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise. But if I worship You for Your Own sake, grudge me not Your everlasting Beauty.

Rabia was in her early to mid eighties when she died, having followed the mystic Way to the end. By then, she was continually united with her Beloved. As she told her Sufi friends, "My Beloved is always with me"

Philosophy

She was the one who first set forth the doctrine of Divine Love and who is widely considered to be the most important of the early Sufi poets.

Much of the poetry that is attributed to her is of unknown origin. After a life of hardship, she spontaneously achieved a state of self-realization. When asked by Sheikh Hasan al-Basri how she discovered the secret, she responded by stating: "You know of the how, but I know of the how-less."

One of the many myths that surround her life is that she was freed from slavery because her master saw her praying while surrounded by light, realized that she was a saint and feared for his life if he continued to keep her as a slave.

While she apparently received many marriage offers (including a proposal from Hasan al-Basri himself), she remained celibate and died of old age, an ascetic, her only care from the disciples who followed her. She was the first in a long line of female Sufi mystics.

It is also possible that she helped further integrate Islamic slaves into Muslim society. Because of her time spent in slavery early in life, Rabi'a was passionate against all forms of it. She refused a slave later in life.

Die Before You Die

Ironic, but one of the most intimate acts
of our body is
death.

So beautiful appeared my death - knowing who then I would kiss,
I died a thousand times before I died.

"Die before you die," said the Prophet
Muhammad.

Have wings that feared ever
touched the Sun?

I was born when all I once
feared - I could
love.

Rabia Al Basri

Dream Fable

I saw myself in a wide green garden, more beautiful than I could begin to understand. In this garden was a young girl. I said to her, "How wonderful this place is!"

"Would you like to see a place even more wonderful than this?" she asked.

"Oh yes," I answered. Then taking me by the hand, she led me on until we came to a magnificent palace, like nothing that was ever seen by human eyes. The young girl knocked on the door, and someone opened it. Immediately both of us were flooded with light.

Only Allah knows the inner meaning of the maidens we saw living there. Each one carried in her hand a serving-tray filled with light. The young girl asked the maidens where they were going, and they answered her, "We are looking for someone who was drowned in the sea, and so became a martyr. She never slept at night, not one wink! We are going to rub funeral spices on her body."

"Then rub some on my friend here," the young girl said.

"Once upon a time," said the maidens, "part of this spice and the fragrance of it clung to her body -- but then she shied away."

Quickly the young girl let go of my hand, turned, and said to me:

"Your prayers are your light;
Your devotion is your strength;
Sleep is the enemy of both.
Your life is the only opportunity that life can give you.
If you ignore it, if you waste it,
You will only turn to dust."

Then the young girl disappeared.

Rabia Al Basri

If I Adore You

If I adore You out of fear of Hell, burn me in Hell!
If I adore you out of desire for Paradise,
Lock me out of Paradise.
But if I adore you for Yourself alone,
Do not deny to me Your eternal beauty.

Rabia Al Basri

In My Soul

In
my soul
there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church
where I kneel.

Prayer should bring us to an altar where no walls or names exist.

Is there not a region of love where the sovereignty is
illuminated nothing,

where ecstasy gets poured into itself
and becomes
lost,

where the wing is fully alive
but has no mind or
body?

In
my soul
there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque,
a church

that dissolve, that
dissolve in

God.

Rabia Al Basri

Love

I have loved Thee with two loves -
a selfish love and a love that is worthy of Thee.
As for the love which is selfish,
Therein I occupy myself with Thee,
to the exclusion of all others.
But in the love which is worthy of Thee,
Thou dost raise the veil that I may see Thee.
Yet is the praise not mine in this or that,
But the praise is to Thee in both that and this.

Rabia Al Basri

My Beloved

My peace, O my brothers and sisters, is my solitude,
And my Beloved is with me always,
For His love I can find no substitute,
And His love is the test for me among mortal beings,
Whenever His Beauty I may contemplate,
He is my "mihrab", towards Him is my "qiblah"
If I die of love, before completing satisfaction,
Alas, for my anxiety in the world, alas for my distress,
O Healer (of souls) the heart feeds upon its desire,
The striving after union with Thee has healed my soul,
O my Joy and my Life abidingly,
You were the source of my life and from Thee also came my ecstasy.
I have separated myself from all created beings,
My hope is for union with Thee, for that is the goal of my desire

Rabia Al Basri

My God And My Lord

Eyes are at rest, the stars are setting.
Hushed are the stirrings of birds in their nests,
Of monsters in the ocean.

You are the Just who knows no change,
The Balance that can never swerve,
The Eternal which never passes away.

The doors of Kings are bolted now and guarded by soldiers.
Your Door is open to all who call upon You.

My Lord,
Each love is now alone with his beloved.
And I am alone with You.

Rabia Al Basri

My Greatest Need Is You

Your hope in my heart is the rarest treasure
Your Name on my tongue is the sweetest word
My choicest hours
Are the hours I spend with You --
O Allah, I can't live in this world
Without remembering You--
How can I endure the next world
Without seeing Your face?
I am a stranger in Your country
And lonely among Your worshippers:
This is the substance of my complaint.

Rabia Al Basri

Reality

In love, nothing exists between heart and heart.
Speech is born out of longing,
True description from the real taste.
The one who tastes, knows;
the one who explains, lies.
How can you describe the true form of Something
In whose presence you are blotted out?
And in whose being you still exist?
And who lives as a sign for your journey?

Rabia Al Basri

Take Away The Words Of The Devil

O God, take away the words of the devil
That mix with my prayer-
If not, then take my prayer as it is, devil and all.

Rabia Al Basri

The Holy Water

No one lives outside the walls of this sacred place, existence.
The holy water, I need it upon my eyes: it is you, dear, you – each form.

What mother would lose her infant – and we are that to God,
never lost from His gaze are we? Every cry of the heart
is attended by light's own arms.

You cannot wander anywhere that will not aid you.
Anything you can touch – God brought it into
the classroom of your mind.

Differences exist, but not in the city of love.
Thus my vows and yours, I know they are the same.

I have just peeled the skin from the potato
and you are still contemplating its worth,
sweetheart; indeed there are wonderful nutrients in all,
for God made everything.

You joined our community at birth.
With your Father being who He is, what do the
world's scales know of your precious value.
The priest and the prostitute – they weigh the same before the Son's
immaculate being,
but who can bear that truth and freedom,
so a wise man adulterated the
scriptures;
every wise man knows this.

My soul's face has revealed its beauty to me;
why was it shy so long, didn't it know how this made me suffer
and weep?

A different game He plays with His close ones.
God tells us truths you would not believe,
for most everyone needs to limit His compassion; concepts of
right and wrong preserve the golden seed
until one of God's friends comes along and tends your body
like a divine bride.

The Holy sent out a surveyor to find the limits of its compassion
and being.

God knows a divine frustration whenever He acts like that,
for the Infinite has
no walls.

Why not tease Him about this?
Why not accept the freedom of what it means
for our Lord to see us
as Himself.

So magnificently sovereign is our Lover; never say,
'On the other side of this river a different King rules.'
For how could that be true – for nothing can oppose Infinite strength.

No one lives outside the walls of this sacred place, existence.

The holy water my soul's brow needs is unity.
Love opened my eye and I was cleansed
by the purity of each
form.

Rabia Al Basri

With My Beloved

With my Beloved I alone have been,
When secrets tenderer than evening airs
Passed, and the Vision blest
Was granted to my prayers,
That crowned me, else obscure, with endless fame;
The while amazed between
His Beauty and His Majesty
I stood in silent ecstasy
Revealing that which o'er my spirit went and came.
Lo, in His face commingled
Is every charm and grace;
The whole of Beauty singled
Into a perfect face
Beholding Him would cry,
'There is no God but He, and He is the most High.'

Rabia Al Basri