
N A F A S : B R E A T H O N T O L O G Y I N R U M I ' S P O E T R Y

Z a h r a R a s h i d

The Irigarayan proposition to bridge dichotomies through breath extends to the so-called divide between Eastern and Western Philosophy. And it makes sense to look to the East for inspiration in a philosophy of breath, since many Eastern traditions, including Buddhism and Sufism, include breathwork in their somatic practices. In my paper, I wish to show how Rumi – a 13th century Muslim theologian and Sufi – used breath or *nafas* in his Persian poetry to outline how breathing is an originary phenomenon.

Jelaluddin Rumi lived in Konya, in modern-day Turkey, and was ranked as one of the most prestigious scholars in his city. His life took a turn on meeting Shams of Tabriz, who became his spiritual companion and mentor. After this point, Rumi turned to poetry to express his ideas to his students in his instated spiritual order – the *Mevleviye* – and to his wider audience. My paper will take a few samples of his poetry to demonstrate how breath connotes a new-ness through the “gift” of life that it endows upon us, and how this creative, endowing and primal nature of breathing is linked to an open-ness to the Divine Other and to others. This in turn will help us develop a respiratory ontology that aims to conceive of dualities through a new interrelated perspective and does not pitch each against the other.

Embodied Rituals in Sufism and Eastern Cultures

As a preliminary, it is important to situate breathing within the larger economy of Sufi practices that formed Rumi’s background. Sufism is considered the mystical tradition of the Islamic world, with variations stretching across Central Asia, South Asia and North Africa.

It is worth noting that Sufism, as a tradition, even though it stakes its claim to authority through the ethical-legal sources of revelation in Islam, has arguably imbibed several different traditions in its process of development. The origins of Sufism and its practices have remained an important debatable issue within academia, whereby scholars such as Arthur John Arberry argue that it originated within the religion of Islam,¹ and Duncan B. Macdonald² and Reynold A. Nicholson³ posit that the seeds of Sufism are within Islamic thought, while others insist on demonstrating its syncretic roots. The latter consisted historically of comparative theorists who speculated regarding Christian influences on Sufi thought,⁴ or regarded Sufism as “far from being a natural or inevitable growth in Islam [...] on the contrary, a direct infiltration from an Indian source.”⁵ This approach and its adherents, referred to as “externalists” by Nile Green,⁶ placed an emphasis on locating the origins of Sufism within other cultures and traditions. Given both sides of the debate, Lloyd Ridgeon argues that it is important for anyone exploring the development of Sufism to remember that such “vertical” explorations of origins might not hold as much value as “horizontal” explorations “in which individuals and movements are embedded at any historical moment disclose valuable details related to the development of Sufism.”⁷

Depending on which region we refer to, historically, Sufi practitioners have integrated local indigenous practices, symbols, and ideas. Much of this could be attributed to the local and communitarian outreach of

¹ Arthur John Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London, UK: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), 11.

² Duncan B. Macdonald, *Aspects of Islam* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1911), 184.

³ Reynold A. Nicholson, “A Historical Enquiry Concerning the Origin and Development of Sufism, with a List of Definitions of the Terms ‘Šūfi’ and ‘Taṣawwuf,’ arranged chronologically,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38, no. 2 (1906): 304, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25210250>.

⁴ Margaret Smith, *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 1995), v.

⁵ Robert Charles Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), viii.

⁶ Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 26.

⁷ Lloyd Ridgeon, “The Origins of Sufism,” in *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 4.

Sufi orders and figures. For example, Nile Green established that Sufi personalities in India, before the 19th century, carried significance for both Hindus and Muslims regardless of their religious identification.⁸ Even in other earlier contexts such as the Middle Eastern regions where Islam originated, he argues elsewhere that Muslims in these areas were outnumbered by Christians and these regions were more “thoroughly Christianized than even Western Europe at this time.”⁹ As a result, it comes as no surprise that, “the Middle East Fertile Crescent was a landscape of churches, monasteries and saintly shrines [...] Tombs of Christian saints and prophets were recognised as Muslim pilgrimage centres.”¹⁰ However, rather than framing this as a question of Sufism’s syncretic roots, Green encourages us to think of “small-scale allegiances based on the face-to-face reciprocity of protection and devotion”¹¹ at play, which enabled Sufism to carry weight among followers of different religious traditions in India, and in other regions where Islam spread, as has been noted earlier in the example of the Middle East. Therefore, he concludes: “From a universalising Sufism based on written theories of mystical abstraction, we have come to a localizing Sufism based on human bodies in emotional contact.”¹²

Therefore, given the localising nature of Sufism that has been witnessed historically, it comes as no surprise to find heavy Indian or Buddhist influences standing out in Sufi discourse, given that there was contact, communication and correspondence between these cultures. Such influences can be charted across many somatic rituals that mark the relationship that Eastern cultures cultivate with embodied existence. Such as the ritualistic movement of *sama*’ in Sufism, which Schimmel compares to other dance rituals in “primitive” cultures.¹³ Much like the other bodily rituals in indigenous cultures, *sama*’ also aims at cultivating a certain form of embodiment for enabling its spirituality. As

⁸ Nile Green, “Making Sense of ‘Sufism’ in the Indian Subcontinent: A Survey of Trends,” *Religion Compass* 2, no. 6 (2008): 1057, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2008.00110.x>.

⁹ Green, *Sufism*, 19.

¹⁰ Green, *Sufism*, 19.

¹¹ Green, *Sufism*, 19.

¹² Green, *Sufism*, 19.

¹³ Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (London, UK: East-West Publications, 1980), 219.

S. H. Nasr notes, this ritual has in fact been described by Sufi masters as a “spiritualization of the body and the corporealization of the spirit.”¹⁴ This cultivation of embodiment, with direct attention paid to the body, was what attracted many Western phenomenological thinkers who emphasised experiential reality. Such as Luce Irigaray, who proposed turning to “Eastern teachings” for a “return to the cultivation of sensible perception”¹⁵ or Merleau-Ponty who began his anthology *Les Philosophes célèbres*, with “Two Indian Philosophers” and “Two Chinese Philosophers.”¹⁶

However, considering the prevalence of such rituals and customs across various Eastern cultures, it becomes difficult to delineate where they originated and how. Even if the origin is determined, this does not imply that the culture or tradition integrating practices from other traditions was not experimenting with it in order for it to take on a new form. As I would argue, the two explanations of the origins of Sufism need not be at odds with each other; external influences could very well be shaping a tradition but its own impetus for growth and evolution might alter the course as well. As Stepaniants claims:

While Sufism was subject to external influences as much as the whole of Islam, and was doubtless influenced by various non-Islamic schools, it would be more reasonable to consider Sufism as a product of Muslims’ spiritual evolution.¹⁷

Even though she prioritises one explanation over the other, my purpose in quoting her is to demonstrate that both factors were at play in the historical development of Sufism.

In the case of breathwork, which is found in many indigenous cultures, we can also argue that Sufism’s internal and external influences combined to constitute these practices. Far from positing a transcen-

¹⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1987), 128.

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, trans. S. Pluháček (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), 56.

¹⁶ Jin Y. Park and Gereon Kopf, “Introduction: Philosophy, Nonphilosophy, and Comparative Philosophy,” in *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism*, eds. Jin Y. Park and Gereon Kopf (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2009), 1.

¹⁷ Marietta Stepaniants, *Sufi Wisdom* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1994), 14.

dental principle that unifies or brings together all such practices, and portraying Sufism in abstract universal terms, I will instead make the case that each culture and tradition holds its unique place in the broad spectrum of breathing practices. Of course, as we employ methods of comparison, we will encounter similarities and underlying logics that unite each practice, but even then, the historicity of each culture would beg us to not deracinate it from its original context. Its historicity, for our purposes of navigating a respiratory philosophy, may add more richness to the depths we seek to explore.

Breathing, Breathwork, and Sufism

Turning to the Sufi practice of breathwork, as we begin to explore the heritage that Rumi was a part of, one fact stands out that is common across other Eastern cultures. That is the absence of any textual form of breathwork instructions. This can largely be attributed to the presence of instruction in oral forms and mainly relying on the master-disciple relationship. This means that instructions were passed on from generation to generation without any textual sources at our behest to understand the content that was transferred. However, this changed at the turn of colonialism, when local cultures also turned to print to disseminate their ideas in the wake of foreign hegemony. As Nile Green has noted with respect to the South Asian region under British imperialism:

Print, then, stood at the centre of the transformation of an earlier ecumene in which the symbolic capital of certain forms of knowledge had been guarded through the social barriers presented by traditions of secrecy and controlled initiation.¹⁸

What had been transmitted across generations through proper channels of direct contact with a spiritual master, was laid open for the public through the arrival of print media.

¹⁸ Nile Green, "Breathing in India, c. 1890," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 2–3 (2008): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X07003125>.

Notwithstanding the lack of textual sources centred on breathwork, we still find replete references to breath and breathing even in pre-colonial Sufi discourse. We begin to see the significance these enjoyed in Sufi discourse when we pay attention to the linkages it carried with the Divine, the ultimate beloved on the Sufi path to gnosis. According to the Sufis, the first human ever, Adam, was created when the Divine blew into him. They refer to a verse from the Holy Scripture for Muslims, which states: “And I Blew into it my *ruh*.”¹⁹ Similarly, another prophetic saying attributes life being “blown” into the foetus by an angel, during gestation at a prescribed time.²⁰ Since the Sufis believed that the source of life or sustenance for our earthly bodies lies in the Divine Breath, they viewed each breath as a special reminder of connecting to the Divine. A belief that, as we shall see later in our discussion, has strong repercussions for how breath is viewed as a “gift.” This notion of attaching value and significance to breath was upheld throughout the tradition. Even earlier Sufi scholars such as Sahl Tustarī, who resided in Basra in the 9th century, have noted the import of breath and breathing. His commentary on the Muslim’s Holy Scripture is known to be one of the first Sufi exegeses of Divine Revelation, which was later compiled into a text by his disciples. While explaining the verse: “God takes the souls at the time of their death, and those that have not died, in their sleep” (39:42), he claims that it is the “subtle breath [*nafas laṭīf*]” from

¹⁹ *Quran*, 15:29. I have not translated *ruh* in this verse, which is employed in the Sufi tradition to refer to the spiritual side of each human’s entity. In this verse, it has been attributed to the Divine, relating how He put life into Adam after creating him. Verses from the *Quran* are available online, see *Quran*, online Tanzil – Quran Navigator, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://tanzil.net>.

²⁰ This prophetic saying is recorded in *Sahih Muslim*, Book of Predestination, Chapter on the creation of a human in the mother’s womb and the writing of their sustenance, death, deeds and their blessedness or wretchedness. The relevant portion of the saying is: “Indeed each of you is put together in the womb of their mother in 40 days, then they become a clot of congealed blood for a similar period, and then a piece of flesh for a similar period. Thereafter, God sends an angel, and he is ordered to write four things. It is said to him: ‘Write their deeds, their sustenance, their death and whether they will be blessed or wretched.’ Then he breathes the *ruh* into him...” Depending on how the text is read, it can be translated as I have done above, though another reading could be: “Then the *ruh* is breathed into him,” which does not attribute the action to the angel. Nonetheless the event of spiritual life being breathed into the foetus remains. See Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Naysaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, accessed October 19, 2023, <https://sunnah.com/muslim>.

the spiritual self that enables a person to live after they awaken from sleep,²¹ pointing towards the role that breath played in Sufi discourse even in pre-modern times.

Later, when Sufi scholars systematically brought their ideas into print in the postcolonial era, breathing and breathwork remained an integral part of their discourse. As Nile Green notes, a book entitled *Asrar-e-Dervish* (or *The Secrets of the Mystic*) detailed Sufi breathing and visualisation techniques.²² This book stands out because it draws connections between breathing and the wider universe. The author describes different methods of breathing under differing circumstances, which ranged from “ensuring a safe journey” to “meeting a king.”²³ Clearly, for the Sufis the breath serves as a bridge between a person’s embodied consciousness and the world it directs its consciousness towards. Similarly, another Sufi manual by the renowned South Asian Sufi, Haji Imdad Allah teaches methods of breath control or *pas anfas*. He even teaches a breathing technique that enables a student to mystically breathe the breath of their spiritual master.²⁴ Again, the breath serves as a door or window of opportunity that opens our consciousness towards the other, an underlying theme that will be noticed in Rumi as well.

In sum, it was against this background of Sufi instruction and veneration of breathing and breath that Rumi may be situated to fully understand the sense he created through his metaphorical poetry on breath.

A Breathing World: Newness, Creativity and Change

The first instance of his poetry that I would like to cite speaks to his readers about the possibilities of creativity and change that each new breath carries. He says:

²¹ Sahl b. Abd Allah al-Tustarī, *Tafsir al-Tustarī*, trans. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 171.

²² Green, “Breathing in India,” 8.

²³ Green, “Breathing in India,” 9.

²⁴ Green, “Breathing in India,” 14.

جان ما را هر نفس بیستان نو
 گوش ما را هر نفس دستان نو
 ماهیانیم اندر آن دریا له هست
 روز روزش گوهر و مرجان نو
 تا فسون هیچ کس را نشنوی
 این جهان کهنه را برهان نو

My life is a new garden with every breath,
 My ears hear a new story with every breath
 We are the fishermen of that sea
 that brings forth a new pearl every day
 So that you do not listen to any other's person narrative
 And grant new demonstration to this ancient world ²⁵

Interestingly, the newness and creativity of a changing world that Rumi is speaking of is characteristic of any ontology that defines change as the basis of existence. Several differing ontologies may base this on processes or temporality or any other concept, but Rumi chooses to tie this to breath and breathing. It is breath that relates to the adoption of a “new demonstration” for an “ancient world.” I am not proposing that the other aforementioned themes in the ontology of change are not present in his poetry, but my point is to highlight the importance given to breath amongst these themes, showing how Rumi deftly interweaves breath into his poetic ontology.

Furthermore, this possibility for creativity and change is based on an openness to the world, or a *being-in-the-world* in Heideggerian terms. Clearly, every breath brings with it a new garden to witness and a new story to hear. This shows how Rumi draws our attention to our consciousness and the relations it enjoys with the world it inheres in by placing the possibilities for our consciousness within the nexus of our embodied perceptions.

To understand this openness to the world, we may employ the argumentation at work in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Merleau-

²⁵ Jelaluddin Rumi, *Diwan e Shams*, ghazal no. 2228, accessed July 14, 2023, <https://ganjoor.net/moulavi/shams>. Author's own translation.

Ponty's philosophy, even though it was a continuation of his predecessors' (Husserl and Heidegger) project, is integral for the purposes of our paper because of his differing contribution to dialectical phenomenology where man is the dialectical junction between *pour soi* and *en soi*.²⁶ He made a difference by putting forth a dialectic that accounted for the subjectivity of the subject and the objectivity of the world. His earlier works, such as *Phenomenology of Perception*, focused on the grounding of perceptual and other modes of consciousness within the body and the system of "self-others-world" that it is embedded in.²⁷ Later on in his life, Merleau-Ponty wanted to develop an ontology that could "reformulate what the traditional correlation between the object and the subject [...] does not adequately express."²⁸ *The Visible and the Invisible*, one of his last works, presents a flesh ontology that explicates reality as a mesh of relations. As he himself explains:

my body [...] is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrustated into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body.²⁹

Even in this explication of an ontology, Merleau-Ponty does not leave behind the emphasis on embodiment that he began with.³⁰ Rather, as Glen Mazis believes, his philosophy begs us to

²⁶ Scott Warren, *The Emergence of Dialectical Theory: Philosophy and Political Inquiry* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 103.

²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 69.

²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Merleau-Ponty in Person: An Interview with Madeleine Chapal, February 17, 1958," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, eds. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 386–387.

²⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 125.

³⁰ It is important to clarify a misunderstanding that could arise for some readers due to Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body. This misunderstanding chiefly results from a conventional perspective in observing thinkers and their works through traditional debates of philosophy such as materialism and idealism. Briefly stated, his project brought forth a conception of a body that was not strictly materialist. He was able to do so by incorporating the subjectivity of the body's consciousness with its world's objectivity. It would be reductionist to assume that his conception of a body translated to a materialist understanding, especially since he referred to such formulations as a "corpse body." On the other hand, to assume that Rumi stood on

leave behind the notion of a contained body – a corpse-body, as he calls the notion of body as object – and to see embodiment as the way we are inextricably caught up in relations with all that is, and we, our embodiment, are nothing more and nothing less.³¹

Rumi's poetic words, through their openness to the ever-changing world around them, beckon us towards this mesh of relations that our embodiment is inextricably linked to. Therefore, understanding Rumi and his breathing as a chance to appreciate the countless possibilities that each breath offers in relation to an embodied engagement with the world around us, enables us to realise how each inward breath connects us to the outward world. By doing so, he can create room within his poetic ontology of a world that breathes with us, and each breath offers a new possibility of locating our embodied existence in this mesh of relations that we refer to as the outward world. This ushers in the potential for newness, change, and creativity because thanks to our interconnectedness with the world, we are emplaced in, we may breathe in new experiences.

The Gift of Breath: Sufi Conscious Breathing

Another striking feature of his metaphor, which is grounded in the Sufi discourse of holding breath as a form of Divine sustenance as ex-

the opposite end of the spectrum of materialism would also be a disservice to his thought. I've aimed to establish how Sufism and its practices grounded themselves in the material body, and my work has precedent in the works of other Sufi studies scholars such as S. H. Nasr (*Islamic Art and Spirituality*), Scott Kugle (*Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality and Sacred Power in Islamic Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007)) and Shahzad Bashir (*Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011)). This can be observed in several Sufi rituals such as breathwork and especially in the spiritual order initiated by Rumi that formally incorporated *sama'* as a somatic ritual. Despite Rumi and Merleau-Ponty's differing contexts, the philosophical questions of materialism and idealism (among others that they faced) were similar, and even though their approach to these questions might be based in differing grammars, it can still be studied through a unifying critical lens that appreciates their similarities and differences.

³¹ Glen Mazis, "The Flesh of the World is Emptiness and Emptiness is the Flesh of the World, and Their Ethical Implications," in *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism*, eds. Jin. Y. Park and Gereon Kopf (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2009), 184.

plained earlier, is the endowing nature of breath. As can be seen in this next example:

ای ز در رحمتت هر نفسی نعمتی
 زان همه رحمت، فرست بجانب ما رحمتی
 ای به خرابات تو، جام مراعات تو
 داده بهر ذره نوع دیگر عشرت،
 هر نفسی روح نو، بنهد در مرده
 هر نفسی لرح نو، بخشد بی مهلتی

O you, in whose mercy every breath is a blessing
 As all of this mercy, send your mercy towards me
 O you, through your taverns, and through the wine of your consideration
 You grant a new life to a particle
 Every breath is a new life put in the dead,
 Every breath is a new relief granted without respite³²

Rumi's address to his Divine Beloved and his engagement with them not only shows us the openness to the other or to the world, as we had discussed earlier, but it also brings out the nurturing, endowing, granting or gifting nature of breath. Perhaps one may turn to Luce Irigaray, who has expounded upon this aspect of breath.³³ She termed it a gift from the mother to the child. To highlight the importance of this gift, she speaks of how the mother gives her breath, or rather shares it with

³² Rumi, *Diwan e Shams*, Tarji'at no. 14.

³³ A link to Irigaray's philosophy is important because, as a scholar, she herself purported turning to "Eastern teachings" to bridge the gaps in Western philosophy. Her own work was informed by her engagement with her Yoga practice, which certainly differs from Rumi's Sufism but its approach segues into the underlying philosophy of non-duality found in Sufi doctrines of Divine Unity. This dialogue between Rumi's poetics and Irigaray's philosophy does not imply deracinating the former from his context as long as one consciously mediates the linkages between both, while being aware of the tools employed in this dialogue. For any scholar who is approaching a historical figure embedded in a unique socio-historical context, the recognition of one's tools is probably more important than being able to accurately recognize the said socio-historical context. I say this because each scholar is carrying their own tools and, therefore, claims that their tools have led them to "the" context of the historical person can be a scientifically inaccurate claim.

her foetus, enabling them to survive. In a way, she “passes on physical and metaphysical existence to the other.”³⁴

In a similar vein, Rumi feels his breath is a gift from the Divine Beloved, who by granting another breath to a body, grants a new life in a way. To the extent that Rumi recognises the vitality of the Beloved’s breath as sustenance for existence and claims:

نفسی یار شرام نفسی یار کبایم

The breath of the Beloved is my drink, the breath of the Beloved is my food.³⁵

This metaphorical poetry then evokes in the reader a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation for the next breath that awaits them, inevitably opening the door to conscious breathing.

Unconscious breathing on the other hand, as Irigaray lamented, is merely a replication of gestational breathing: “After birth, whoever does not breathe, does not respect his or her own life and takes air from the other, from others.”³⁶ Rather for her, it is merely a form of “vital breath” that keeps us alive and not yet anything spiritual,³⁷ as Emily A. Holmes explains: “In a way, the individual is not yet fully born – he exploits the breath of others because he breathes unconsciously, without acknowledging the gift of air.”³⁸

The appreciation of breath in Rumi’s poetry in fact does the opposite. It creates a sense of reverence for the Divine Gift of Breath and in turn marks it as a respectable exchange on both sides, which means that it is not merely a “taking” of air on our side but an auspicious acceptance. This introduces conscious breathing, which in Irigarayan terms, takes us from vital breathing to spiritualised breathing.

³⁴ Irigaray, *Between East and West*, 81.

³⁵ Rumi, *Diwan e Shams*, ghazal no. 162.

³⁶ Irigaray, *Between East and West*, 50.

³⁷ Irigaray, *Between East and West*, 76.

³⁸ Emily A. Holmes, “The Gift of Breath: Towards a Maternal Pneumatology,” in *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*, eds. Lenart Škof and Emily A. Holmes (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2013), 37.

The Gift of Existence and the Primacy of Breathing

Another feature that stems from the endowing nature of breath is the primacy of breathing. In fact, this is directly linked to the gift of breath, because as breath denotes bringing into existence for Sufis, it becomes an originary phenomenon. This can be understood via phenomenologists such as Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty, who emphasise how primal breathing is and how that indicates its deep-rootedness in any discourse on existence. The former achieves this by detailing how breath is “the first autonomous gesture of the living human being” because it is the first action that the foetus takes without their mother.³⁹ This “autonomous gesture” not only reveals to us our primordial openness to the world as we inhale and exhale the air “outside” of us but also brings forth the primacy of our subjectification as it commemorates the beginning of our worldly life. Škof and Holmes aptly summarise:

Breath is also a primal cosmological and biological phenomenon, which precedes all ethical and socio-political reflection – it is “breath” that can provide the human community with its first and primal experience and act of communication, that is, of the being-in-the-world-with-others mode. But even more importantly – it is precisely through breath that humanity has its most natural access to the phenomenon of life.⁴⁰

Merleau-Ponty has referred to this aspect of the primordial nature of breathing in various parts of his works. The first instance is when he notes in “The Child’s Relations with Others”:

At the beginning of the child’s life [...] the body is already a respiratory body. The whole respiratory apparatus gives the child a kind of experience of space. After that, other regions of the body intervene and come into prominence.⁴¹

Clearly, he acknowledges how crucial, essential and primary breathing is in our study of existence by pointing out that respiration provides

³⁹ Irigaray, *Between East and West*, 73.

⁴⁰ Lenart Škof and Emily A. Holmes, “Towards Breathing with Luce Irigaray,” in *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*, eds. Lenart Škof and Emily A. Holmes (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2013), 7.

⁴¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 122.

a sense of space for a child and it is only once they have grown up that other forms of interaction with the world such as perception step in. Similarly, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he quotes the example of falling asleep as a removal of consciousness from the surrounding world it is embedded in: “During sleep, on the other hand, I hold the world present to me only in order to keep it at a distance, and I revert to the subjective sources of my existence.”⁴² The “subjective sources” referred to here are not any transcendental form of existence, but rather our very embodiment, as has been analysed by Berndtson as well.⁴³ This is why, for Merleau-Ponty, our embodied consciousness even in the state of sleeping, remains connected to the world. He makes a similar case for dreaming, regarding which he claims: “[...] the world obsesses us even during sleep, and it is about the world that we dream [...]”⁴⁴ He even argues for reflecting on how certain dreams are related to “concomitant respiratory states”⁴⁵ and thus:

We must understand how respiratory or sexual events, which have a place in objective space, are drawn away from it in the dream state, and settle in a different theatre. But we shall not succeed in doing so unless we endow the body, even in the waking state, with an emblematic value. Between our emotions, desires and bodily attitudes, there is not only a contingent connection or even an analogical relationship [...]⁴⁶

Through the analysis of the relatedness of dreaming and breathing, he explains how our embodied consciousness remains embedded in the world, even in our sleeping state, showing that these “subjective sources” of our existence are primordial for us. He explains:

In this sense the sleeper is never completely isolated within himself, never totally a sleeper [...] But what, in the sleeper [...] makes possible a return to the real world, are still only impersonal functions, sense organs and language

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 331.

⁴³ Petri Berndtson, *Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing: The Respiratory Primacy of Being* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 48.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 341.

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 331.

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 331.

[...] Sleep and waking [...] are not modalities of consciousness or will, but presuppose an “existential step.”⁴⁷

Therefore, in a way, he is also able to demonstrate the primary nature of breathing for our consciousness, because it is amongst our “anonymous alertness of the senses” – the “last link” to the world, which makes “waking up a possibility.”⁴⁸ Sleep then is essentially a primordial connection with the world. That is why he described breathing as the sleeper’s respiration via “some great lung outside myself,” as he claimed:

I am breathing deeply and slowly in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath. A certain rhythm of respiration, which a moment ago I voluntarily maintained, now becomes my very being, and sleep, until now aimed at as a significance, suddenly becomes a situation.⁴⁹

Essentially then, the primordial nature of breathing paves the way for an ontology that attributes great significance to our connection or embeddedness in our surrounding world.

Take, for instance, the following words of Rumi, which speak to us regarding the gift of breathing and how that relates to our primary existence:

یک دمی مرده شو از جمله فضولی‌ها ببین
 هر نفس جان بخشید، هر دم مسیحو آساید
 یک نفس در پرده عشقتش چو جانانت غسل کرد
 همچو مریم از دمی بینی تو عیسی زایی

For one moment (or breath) become dead to all that is futile and see
 Every breath will grant life to you and become an Isa
 For one breath, wash yourself behind the veil of love
 Like Maryam, through (the miracle of) breath you will witness giving
 birth to an Isa⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 190.

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 190.

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 246.

⁵⁰ Rumi, *Diwan e Shams*, ghazal no. 2807.

Notice especially the usage of the symbology of Maryam and Isa, or Mary and Jesus, which compels the reader to attach the gift of breath to birth and subsequently to our primary form of existence. For just as Jesus granted a new life to others through his breath, and Mary was granted Jesus in the form of an angel breathing into her, it becomes clear to the reader that not only is existence tied to Divine Breath but it is also constituted through it. Rumi manages all of this by cultivating a deep regard for breathing in his readers, which demonstrates how essential breath is and how primary for existence. Moreover, it is this primal mode of breathing that connects us to the Divine Other and to others because we receive this gift from them. In an Irigarayan and Merleau-Pontian sense, this conveys the notion of being embedded in this world and intrinsically connected to it, a concept that enjoys importance in Rumi's Sufi scheme of breathing.

Breath: the Bridge Between the Finite and Infinite

I have expounded upon the creative, endowing, and primal nature of breathing with the last subsequently emphasising our interconnection with this world. Finally, I would like to end with a verse by Rumi that brings together all the themes by focusing on how each new breath is a reminder of our finite existence. This is because once breath leaves our body, our life ends. However, it also points towards the infinite possibilities it houses with the change that a new breath brings. This merging of the finite and infinite is what Rumi points towards by saying:

باو نفس، مر سینه را ز اندوه صیقل، مه زند
گریک نفس گیرد نفس مر نفس را آید فنا

The wind of breath through grief polishes my heart
If I take a breath, it annihilates another breath⁵¹

There is grief upon the passing of a breath, but this breath polishes the heart bringing newness and change because of one resounding fact: even though I have lost something, I have gained something else. Notice

⁵¹ Rumi, *Diwan e Shams*, ghazal no. 26.

how Rumi explicates the finiteness of each breath and implicates it with the new breath, which annihilates the previous one but brings a newness with it. He does so through the concept of *fana*, usually translated as “self-annihilation” – the central feature of Sufi discourse that aims to negate any notion of an “I” that can hinder a Sufi on their path.⁵² The Sufi journey may be qualified as a quest where any illusion of a “self” is left behind. The goal of *fana*, as Chittick explains, is: “Man’s existence, or ego, or selfhood, call it what you will, must be annihilated so that he can attain to his true self, which is his existence and ‘subsistence’ within God.”⁵³ In a sense then, the aim of *fana* is to decentre subjectivity and place the individual Sufi within a network of interrelations inhabited by the Sufi, their world and the Divine Beloved, so that they arrive at a conscious realisation “that everything he is derives absolutely from God.”⁵⁴ This objective of annihilating the self can be traced in other Eastern philosophies as well, as Berndtson claims regarding the spiritual practice of *zazen* by Zen masters who cultivate mindful breathing to experience “nothing.”⁵⁵ In the same vein, Sufi masters aim for *fana*, which marks a complete transformation. It becomes a fertile ground for the renewal or rebirth of the Sufi, who emerges in *baqa* (or self-subsistence with the Divine), its “correlative term.”⁵⁶

⁵² Some might object that for Rumi and the Sufis of his time, *fana* meant negating all wrong conceptions of our self to attain the “true” self and this does not imply any relation between the inner and outer as I have outlined. There does not seem to be any contradiction between these interpretations as all incorrect conceptions of the self could inevitably be external (social or cultural) judgements or perceptions that one must shed on the Sufi journey. Therefore, even in this understanding, *fana* is bridging the internal and external worlds of the Sufi. However, it is important to note that any notion of a “true” self does not downplay the importance of the body because that again takes us back to the idealist/materialist categories of Modern Western Philosophy, whereby we are identifying Rumi as an idealist ignoring the material body. Rumi’s Sufism defies these categorizations and I have repeatedly made this point in my paper through my emphasis on embodied rituals being a core of Sufi ideas and practices.

⁵³ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983), 179.

⁵⁴ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 179.

⁵⁵ Petri Berndtson, “The Possibility of a New Respiratory Ontology,” in *Atmospheres of Breathing*, eds. Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2018), 30.

⁵⁶ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 179.

This merging of the finite and infinite, through this realisation of our finite existence that carries infinite possibilities in *fana* and *baqa*, is in effect a merging of dualities. A merging that reminds us of the interiority and exteriority accompanied by breathing, for when I inhale external air and then exhale my internal air, it reflects Irigaray's statement: "I bear the other within me."⁵⁷ The relating of inner-outer dichotomies through breath is a case presented by James Morley as well. He studies breath control practices in yoga and claims that the aim of these exercises is to maintain a relationship between the inside and outside. In his words, breath control is "the concrete experience of the body as a relation between inside and outside."⁵⁸ Blurring the boundaries of our conceptual categories, breathing becomes a powerful tool in any ontology or philosophy that seeks to describe reality.

That is why, for Irigaray, the air becomes "a clearing for appearing and disappearing, for presence and absence."⁵⁹ According to Berndtson, Irigaray radicalises the Heideggerian clearing (*Lichtung*) and fashions air as the space where Being manifests itself through presence and absence.⁶⁰ This implies that air becomes the "universal dimensionality" and our embodiment is therefore a "respiratory openness" towards the clearing of air.⁶¹

Similarly, for Sufis such as Rumi who emphasised cultivating conscious breathing, their insistence on paying attention to breath was informed by their acceptance of how vital it was to bridge the gap between the inside and the outside. Once we realise the universal dimensionality of the air we breathe, it actualises the possibility of what Sufis practice as conscious breathing and what is termed as spiritual breathing by Irigaray. Subsequently, our myopic notions of self, inner, interior or other, outer, exterior are shaken up and replace our existing self-certitude and self-centredness with an ambiguous space of interconnections that un-

⁵⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (London, UK: Continuum, 2008), 43.

⁵⁸ James Morley, "Inspiration and Expiration: Yoga Practice Through Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of the Body," *Philosophy East and West* 51, no. 1 (2001): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2001.0013>.

⁵⁹ Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary Beth Mader (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999), 9.

⁶⁰ Berndtson, *Phenomenological Ontology*, 91.

⁶¹ Berndtson, *Phenomenological Ontology*, 92.

derlie our reality. This is, I believe, the true potential of Rumi's work and his service in developing a respiratory ontology.

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