

Movement and Stillness: The Practice of Sufi *Dhikr* in Fourteenth-Century Central Asia

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In this chapter, Shahzad Bashir argues that the Sufi practice of *dhikr* presupposes a continuum between mind and body, and between the individual and his social setting, in particular his master. This contrasts with the modern notion of meditation as a mental technique undertaken by an individual, in which the body and the social setting are typically seen as mere ancillary elements. The chapter describes Central Asian Sufi discussions during the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries CE over whether one should move or hold still the tongue and other parts of the body while performing *dhikr*, both camps placing equally strong emphasis on the body, including its external physical properties and its internal 'subtle' aspects. The chapter also points out that the instruction and guidance of a master situated within a chain of Sufi authority is seen as a necessary and integral part of the practice of *dhikr*. By treating individual practice and social factors in a conjoined way, Bashir argues for continual re-examination of the issue of terminology in the study of meditational paradigms.

As evident from the contents of this volume, the wide scope of the term meditation is a major benefit underscoring its use as a comparative category. To attempt to define meditation and ask the question whether a particular concept or idea falls within the category are intellectually productive endeavours irrespective of particular results. In this chapter, I take this perspective for granted and, going one step further, draw the term meditation into a single orbit with an Islamic concept that has a long history and can refer to a wide array of practices. The term in question is '*dhikr*', the Islamic concept most likely to come to mind when we seek an equivalent for the English term meditation. While the two terms do overlap significantly in what they denote, they also have significant differences. Here, I delve into the details of some particular forms of Sufi *dhikr* with the aim of laying out the general framework underlying the concept. Ultimately, the usefulness of the comparison between *dhikr* and meditation lies in the way it allows us to investigate them both as linguistic terms as well as sets of behavioural phenomena.

My specific concern in this chapter is the practice of Sufi *dhikr* in Central Asia during the approximate period 1300–1500 CE. *Dhikr* (in Persian: *Zikr*), or the effort to concentrate oneself on the remembrance of God, is traceable to the beginnings of Islamic history. *Dhikr* is an activity associated with the earliest Muslims who either called themselves Sufis or can, in hindsight, be recognized as the progenitors of Sufism as an Islamic perspective. In its origins, *dhikr* was a relatively straightforward activity in which the practitioner's aim was to achieve an extraordinary awareness of God through excluding the thought of anything else while repeating divine names or liturgical formulae (Ernst, 1997; Netton, 2000). The practice underwent much evolution in later centuries as Sufis adopted various complex techniques such as breath control and moving the body repeatedly in set sequences with the aim of producing mental states that connoted higher levels of consciousness or communion with the divine. By the period with which I am concerned, the way a Sufi group performed *dhikr* marked its communal identity and distinguished it from groups with variant practices. In Central Asia, *dhikr* ran the entire gamut, from a silent remembering of God in one's mind on one hand, to groups of individuals collectively doing elaborate dances to the accompaniment of music on the other.

Fourteenth and fifteenth centuries CE were a period of rapid expansion of Sufi communities in Central Asia that led to a greater role for Sufi practices in Muslims' ritual life. One consequence of this expansion was greater friction on the issue of internal Sufi differences that track more closely to matters of practice than ideology. The vigorous debate over whether the *dhikr* should be performed with or without bodily movement is perhaps the most emblematic element in this matter of internal differentiation. In what follows, I concentrate on two prominent Sufi masters active in Central Asia during the fourteenth century: Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshband (d. 1389) and Sayyid 'Alī Hamadānī (d. 1385). Hagiographical representations of these masters produced after their deaths characterize the two sides of the societal debate on *dhikr*.¹

I have divided my discussion of *dhikr* into three parts, corresponding with my sense for what is most useful when thinking about *dhikr* and meditation in conjunction. I begin by laying out the way the practices of 'vocal' versus 'silent' *dhikr* are described in the sources, concentrating on corporeal themes and internal understandings of the ultimate aims. The second section focuses on meditational practices' role in the representation of interpersonal relationships, particularly in the context of connections between masters and disciples. This part includes a consideration of initiatory practices that correlate with the discussion about *dhikr*. The third section consists of an explicit comparison between *dhikr* and what is usually understood by the term meditation.

The practices

Amidst all the diversity of ways of doing *dhikr* that can be documented from Islamic religious history, two issues seem to have been constants: doing *dhikr* regularly in some shape or form has been essential to being a Sufi; and the way the body is used while performing *dhikr* has indicated one's affiliation with a chain of Sufi authority that transmitted a distinctive religious practice through the centuries. The necessary

confluence of these two factors intertwines individual religious effort with social identity when we consider the place of *dhikr* in the history of Sufism.

Silent *Dhikr*

In the period of the history of Sufism that concerns me here, a number of influential Sufi masters considered it best that *dhikr* be performed silently and without moving the body. Such a practice had the advantage that it could be done in the midst of other activities rather than being limited to the specific times when one was free from other chores of life. Moreover, the silent *dhikr* avoided religious ostentation of any kind; it allowed one to practice the Sufi path without other people knowing about it and interpreting it in any way.

In Central Asia during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshband and his followers were the strongest advocates of silent *dhikr*. This group adhered to the motto 'solitude within society' (*khalvat dar anjuman*), with particular emphasis on silent *dhikr* as a cornerstone of the group's distinctive perspective (Weismann, 2007). The silent Naqshbandī *dhikr* did not involve moving the tongue or the body, but descriptions of how it was done nonetheless convey the sense of a practitioner paying very close attention to corporeal demeanour. This *dhikr* practice required the practitioners to force internal energy into different parts within the body through concentrating the mind and regulating the breath. This was to be undertaken while repeating the verbal formula that constitutes the Islamic profession of faith: 'there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God (*lā ilāha illā'llāh, Muḥammad rasūl allāh*)'. Theoretical explanations that prescribe the use of the verbal formula emphasize it as the ultimate articulation of negating (*naḥī*) the concerns of the material world and affirming (*ithbāt*) complete concentration on God and the example of Muḥammad. The verbal formula is thus seen as a pithy summation of the whole religious program. It seems to act as an aid for concentration that regulates the mind and body rather than being a theurgical incantation that is powerful in and of itself (Aḥmadi, 1970, pp. 119–21). A major Naqshbandī author describes the implementation of the formula in the following way:

The master says in his heart 'There is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.' The disciple brings his heart to presence and places it in front of the master's heart. He opens his eyes, purses his mouth, presses his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and places his teeth together. He gathers himself and obediently, with all his power, begins the *dhikr* together with the master. He says this in his heart, not by the tongue, being patient and doing three iterations per each breath. (Mu'iniyān, 1977, 1, pp. 43–4)

As the *dhikr* formula gets repeated, the practitioner has to observe further details that correlate specific words with locations on the practitioner's body:

The beginning of the word *lā* is at the navel and its [eventual] seat is at the right breast; the letter *alif* [in the next word] begins from the seat in the right

breast, going into the pineal heart [on the left] to form the word *allāh*; and [the remaining formula] *illā'llāh Muḥammad rasūl allāh* is attached to the heart. (ibid., 1, pp. 129)²

This description offers a contrast between the body's external stillness and the practitioner carrying something from one part of the body to the next in the inside.

When we consider the Naqshbandī *dhikr* closely, it seems that the issue of the body's stillness and movement appears in different lights depending on whose eyes we choose to utilize as our mediating vantage points. At the most obvious level, practitioners restrict an ordinary observer's ability to discern *dhikr* through the body's outward passivity. In contrast, the practitioners themselves are concerned fundamentally with directing the flows of forces within themselves. There is, then, a highly dynamic expenditure of psychic energy within the field of a detailed mental image of the body maintained with considerable care.³ Moreover, stories about the performance of this *dhikr* indicate that masters were supposed to be able to apprehend what happened inside the practitioners' bodies because of their insight and special relationships with the subjects. In one story, after a prominent master had taught a disciple the *dhikr*, he observed him doing it and said that that was wrong because the man had not managed to keep his heart, a hidden organ, absolutely still as prescribed (Kūrānī, n.d., fol. 22a–b). Similarly, another master once instructed one of his disciples to inscribe the formula to be repeated during *dhikr* on his heart and then stare at it. When the disciple failed to understand what this meant after being told twice, the master asked him to sit facing him. He then put his hands on his chest and when he next looked down, he saw the formula imprinted on his heart. He was astonished to see this and became a firm devotee of the master (ibid., fol. 103b–104a).

Vocal *dhikr*

Unlike the Naqshbandīs and some of their predecessors, most Sufi groups in Central Asia did not consider it a problem to use the tongue and the body during *dhikr*. For them, the benefits of using movement to reach desired states outweighed the danger of affecting ostentation and becoming ensnared in worldly concerns. Major chains of authority such as the Kubraviyya, the Yasaviyya, the Ni'matullāhiyya, the Ṣafaviyya, etc., all had *dhikr* practices involving bodily movements. Performing *dhikr* openly was a significant component of the hagiographic public personas of most masters belonging to these lineages.

A good case in point to show the use of *dhikr* with external movement is the practice ascribed to the Kubravī master 'Alī Hamadānī (d. 1385), whose lifetime overlaps with that of Naqshband almost exactly. The description of Kubravī *dhikr* resembles the Naqshbandī practice discussed above, except for the crucial differences that the words of the religious formula are said out aloud and the body is moved externally rather than internally. The practice is known as the 'four-beat' (*chahār zarb*) *dhikr* and is described as follows:

[From the upright position, the Sufi] brings his head down to the level of the navel while saying the word *lā*. Then he becomes upright while saying the word

ilāha. Then he inclines the head toward the right breast and says *illā*, followed by inclining toward the heart, which is on the left side, while saying *allāh*. The words have to be said connected to each other and in a single breath. Although some of God's friends do the *dhikr* while holding their breath, the honorable Sayyid [ʿAli Hamadānī] taught me to do each cycle of *dhikr* accompanied by a single breath. (Zafar, 1995, p. 101)⁴

The verbal formula utilized here is the first part of the Islamic profession of faith that, as discussed earlier, denotes a negation of earthly connections and affirmation of concentration on God (Hamadānī, 1991, pp. 535–9). This *dhikr* could be performed alone or in the company of other Sufis, and the verbal invocations contained in *dhikr* were expected to settle in all parts of the practitioners' bodies and become like a natural sound within them (Zafar, 1995, p. 169).

Whether silent or vocal, the ultimate purpose of all types of *dhikr* was to bring Sufis closer to God. All descriptions of progress along Sufi paths can be related to the practice of *dhikr*, although precise descriptions of what occurs inside a person during *dhikr* are relatively rare. The following account, which comes from a master known for vocal *dhikr*, is good for giving a general sense of the immediate results:

During the *dhikr*, or after it has finished, a flash of lightning flickers from the cloud so that the veil is torn up and the light of the one who is recalled in *dhikr* shines forth in the form of a special overseer and presence. It is necessary that, at this point, all parts of the individual person, both the inner and the outer, should be still as if dead, absent from the world as if annihilated. Observing this light relieves him from paying attention to the rest of his surroundings, although eventually, these things crowd in to force the eye of his heart away from staring at the light. (Norris, 1990, plate II)

The contrast between the body's movements during *dhikr* and its stillness afterward in this description indexes the ritual's function as a mediator between ordinary earthly experience and the direct communion with God sought by Sufis. The fact that practitioners can maintain the sacred condition only as long as they are immobile hints at the notion that embodiment is a kind of entrapment from which one needs to escape as much as possible through religious exercises.

Comparing the silent and vocal *dhikr*, it is easy to see that the body was at the centre of this quintessential Sufi ritual irrespective of the production of movement or sound. This is obvious in the case of vocal *dhikr*, but the silent version is also keyed very strongly to the practitioners' consciousness of their bodies. Keeping still while holding the breath requires intense bodily work, and the way the *dhikr* is described makes clear that practitioners projected their internal energies towards various parts of the image of their bodies that they held in their minds. Both types of *dhikr* were aimed also at regulating the body and bringing its internal and external movements under the purview of one's conscious control as much as possible.

Dhikr and the authority of masters

As we have seen already, even basic descriptions of *dhikr* presume the interpersonal relationship between master and disciple. We can underscore the significance of this theme by considering the broader fields within which *dhikr* practices function in Sufi narratives. For the first case discussed above, Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshband's best-known hagiographer reports that the master indicated that *dhikr* was effective only when a master specifically instructed a disciple to perform it. This meant that the method of *dhikr* had to be conveyed through a human chain down the generations and that it had no effect, or could even be harmful, if one took it up solely on personal initiative. Naqshband was affiliated with a chain of Sufi authority known as the Khwājagān, in which the prominent masters from the past had varied between preferring silent or vocal *dhikr*. Naqshband himself had been instructed in the silent *dhikr* by a master and had chosen it over the vocal method because he considered it 'stronger and better' (Sarioghlū, 1992, p. 145).

Naqshband is also reported to have placed special significance on the moment when a master instructed the disciple about how many times the formula 'there is no god but God' had to be repeated during *dhikr*. This 'knowledge of numbers' (*vuqūf-i 'adadī*) represented the first level of an intuitive knowledge ('*ilm ladunī*) that God bestowed upon Sufis in consequence of their religious endeavours. When conveying the knowledge of numbers to his own disciples, Naqshband made a point of reciting the names of the transmitters through whose mediation he had acquired this knowledge. In one instance of doing this, he affirmed the superiority of the silent practice by referring to a conversation between Khwāja 'Abd al-Khāliq Ghijduvānī and his master Imām Ṣadr al-Dīn, two early members of the lineage to which Naqshband belonged. One day as he was working on interpreting the Quran with the master, Ghijduvānī stopped on the verse: 'Call on your Lord, humbly and secretly; He does not love those who transgress' (7.55). He understood this to mean that the *dhikr* was to be performed silently, but thought that this led to a conundrum: if one were to use the tongue or the body to do *dhikr*, it could not be kept secret, since others could observe one's actions. But if one did it solely inside oneself, then it could be observed by the devil since Muḥammad had said, 'Satan flows in the veins of Adam's descendants like blood.' Ghijduvānī questioned Ṣadr al-Dīn about this and was given the answer that he had to wait to come across a master who could impart to him the intuitive knowledge that would make this issue understandable. Ghijduvānī did eventually learn the secret of the matter from a master, and it was this very understanding, denoted by the 'knowledge of numbers,' that was conveyed to Naqshband through a chain stretching from Ghijduvānī to his own times (Sarioghlū, 1992, p. 146).⁵

Although this story skirts around the issue of an actual number, Ghijduvānī's alleged puzzlement reveals something quite significant about the Sufi group's view of the place of the body in Sufi practice. His formulation of the problem sets up an opposition between the body's exterior (that which others can see) and its interior (veins susceptible to the presence of Satan), and his question points out that practice that is confined entirely to either side of the body is of questionable value. Exterior

practice risks ostentation, while purely interior practice is easily corruptible since it cannot be judged or corrected by someone with greater knowledge or authority. The solution to the problem lies in the link with a master, who must be seen as the only appropriate audience for a person's religious effort. The main point of Naqshband's teaching is that one can expose one's internal religious practice to the master without the fear that this will enmesh one in worldly concerns. And the master can preclude the presence of the devil in one's veins by teaching the right interior method and guarding against corruption through judging the disciple while being in a sustained interpersonal relationship.

As we see here, the correct way to perform the 'silent *dhikr*' has two necessary parts: to eschew public performance by not using the tongue or the body, and be intimately involved with a master who first teaches how to move internally through the *dhikr* and then keeps an eye on the practitioner's progress through periodic face-to-face contact. As I have already discussed above, the silent *dhikr* is not marked by outwardly body movements, but it implicates movement within the mental image of the body as well as the crucial interface between the bodies of the master and the disciple.

In accordance with the fundamental point of difference in the two practices, the way 'Alī Hamadānī is shown to have acquired his practice of *dhikr* correlates with movement being taken as a positive element of *dhikr* practice rather than a problem. In a hagiography written by one of his disciples, the master is said to have traced his own initiation into Sufism to a pious man whom his maternal uncle had taken in for the sake of his young nephew's education. Hamadānī started paying attention to this teacher's habits when he reached the age of 12 and noticed that he would go to a secluded place in the morning and the evening and would sit and move his head left to right continuously as a religious exercise. He asked him what this was and got the reply that this was *dhikr*. He then asked if it was necessary to move the head in this way for *dhikr*, and the old man responded yes, because this is what he had learned from his master, the Kubravī master Maḥmūd Mazdaqānī (d. 1364–5). He then asked the teacher to instruct him in the *dhikr*, to which he agreed. Three days after starting the practice, Hamadānī suddenly went into a trance (*ghaybat*) and saw Muḥammad sitting high above on a rooftop. He expressed the desire to join the Prophet but got the reply that he could not come up there by himself and needed the aid of Mazdaqānī. He then decided to travel to the place of this master and began practicing the *dhikr* in his company (Zafar, 1995, pp. 42–3).⁶

Like Naqshband's narrative about Ghijduvānī's affirmation of the silent *dhikr*, this story hinges on a question about the use of the body in *dhikr*, asked by a man who is, in the long run, destined to be a great saint and a role model for other Sufis. In both cases, the questioners adopt a recommended method of *dhikr* in conjunction with becoming hitched to the masters part of Sufi chains of authority. The actual modes of doing *dhikr* are primary in both cases and establish the young disciples' affiliation with particular Sufi paths. However, the full benefit of performing *dhikr* materializes only when it is done under the guidance of masters who convey its true meaning after accepting the young men as personal disciples.

***Dhikr* in the context of other practices**

While *dhikr* is a central and universal concern within Sufism, the groups that concern me here were involved in other practices as well that need to be taken into account in an appraisal of meditation as a Sufi concern. In the case of the followers of Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshband, one main author indicates that in this group, the method of concentration (*tavajjuh*) towards the end of enhancing one's inner reality began by imagining the form of the person from whom one had acquired affiliation with the group (i.e. the master). They would do so to the extent that the image would begin emitting bodily heat and then would continue to hold the image within them until it became imprinted on their hearts. The purpose of this procedure was to transform the heart from an ordinary lump of flesh into the organ through which human beings can connect to divine realities. Such a transformation required that the image of the master's body first be absorbed through one's bodily senses and then implanted into the heart using the internal senses. The whole process of the image settling into the heart went hand in hand with the practice of *dhikr* discussed above (Mu'niyān, 1977, 1, pp. 169–70).⁷

In parallel with this method of conjoining the master's form with the disciple's heart, in 'Alī Hamadānī's milieu, his disciple Ja'far Badakhshī's lament on the master's death emphasizes the significance of the connection. He describes the pleasure of having experienced physical proximity to the master with particular reference to *dhikr* when he narrates the moment of seeing Hamadānī's sweet-smelling body arrive for burial in Central Asia after the master had died on the road back from India:

This poor man, who is the collector of that noble man's effects, has trained other dervishes in seclusion for three months after having heard the sound of *dhikr* from every part of his abode and every part of his body. He has smelled his perfume and tasted the honey of the path on every one of his teeth. These experiences are all branches that have stemmed out from that noble person to reach these beggars, the collectors of his fruit. (Zafar, 1995, p. 284)

In the narratives I have presented, the practice of *dhikr* anchors the development of relationships between the men involved. Juxtaposing these stories without getting lost in the forest of historical details allows us to see that, far from being a mere index of the larger interpersonal relationships, *dhikr* is the defining feature around which these Sufi narrators weave their images of great masters interacting with their disciples.

Beyond the dyadic master-disciple relationship, the practice of *dhikr* had consequences for the larger society as well. The internal Sufi differentiation regarding silent and vocal *dhikr* was a part of the keenly contested religious world of Central Asia during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁸ We can substantiate this by considering the way stories regarding masters preserved in hagiographical narratives revolve around questions of practice. One major reason underlying the competition was clearly the struggle between masters and lineages to acquire disciples. In an emblematic story in this regard from a major compilation of Naqshbandī hagiographies, a master named Shams al-Dīn Rūjī (d. 1499) is said to have chosen his affiliation on the basis of the way the Naqshbandīs practiced their *dhikr*. The source states that when Rūjī first decided to

follow the Sufi path, someone recommended the famous master Zayn al-Dīn Khwāfi (d. 1435) in Herat as the guide to whom he should attach himself. However, when Rūjī went to visit this man, he became disinclined to join him because of the din his followers were making while practicing their vocal *dhikr*. On the way back from the expedition, he came across an acquaintance who told him to visit a Naqshbandī master instead. When he did this, he was greatly impressed by the calm and stillness that reigned during silent *dhikr*, which led him to join the Naqshbandīs (Muʿīniyān, 1977, 1, pp. 328–9).

Bahāʾ al-Dīn Naqshband is himself shown as being able to protect his followers from the negative effects of vocal *dhikr* through miraculous intervention. For instance, one evening when Naqshband was visiting the home of a disciple that was in the vicinity of a palace, the prince who lived there had invited a party of singers (*qavvālān*) who were performing loudly accompanied by dance and ecstatic cries from the audience. Naqshband told his disciples that this wanton behaviour was unlawful and that these sounds should not enter one's hearing. He then indicated that the solution was to put cotton in the ears. Then as soon as he put cotton in his own ears, the whole company assembled in front of him stopped hearing the sounds. Later, some neighbours inquired from Naqshband's disciples about how their group had managed to pass the night in the house given their opposition to music. When they told the neighbours what had happened, they were so impressed by Naqshband's powers that they decided to join the ranks of his devotees (Sarioghlu, 1992, pp. 254–5).

In direct opposition to Naqshband's attitude, a main hagiographer of ʿAlī Hamadānī cites statements from Muḥammad to assert emphatically that the vocal *dhikr* as it was practiced and taught by Hamadānī was not an improper 'innovation' (*bidʿat*), one of the usual ways to proclaim a practice as being religiously deviant in Islamic thought (Zafar, 1995, p. 197). Moreover, in stories about Hamadānī, *dhikr*'s vocal quality is precisely the element of the practice that is shown to lead to spiritual breakthroughs. A hagiography states that in the very beginning of Hamadānī's religious journey, he was unable to derive any benefit from *dhikr* until his inner self became receptive to the outer stimulus of hearing other people doing the *dhikr*. Once *dhikr* started to take effect, he got to the point where he would lose himself completely upon hearing it and his master forbade other disciples to perform it in his hearing lest his spirit completely leave the body. His overall reaction to the outside world then changed so drastically that he lost all consciousness of his surroundings and was kept in chains for three months and force-fed in order to keep him alive. Once out of this condition, he began to practice *samāʾ*, a term that means 'audition' and denotes ecstatic dancing to accompany *dhikr*. He later told his hagiographer that anyone who does not love audition in the beginning of the path is not going to produce great work later in life (*ibid.*, pp. 46–8). A work by Hamadānī on *dhikr* affirms this attitude through the remark that the ear is the bodily organ with the most sensitive connection to the heart. Unlike the eye and the mouth that can be closed to stop seeing or talking, the ear can be precluded from sensing only if one removes oneself completely to a place where no sound is being made at all. Ultimately, the creation of sound in *dhikr* brought speakers and listeners into a single participatory space and joined individuals together to create a social body (Hamadānī, 1991, p. 542.)

Dhikr and meditation

In its most commonsensical English meaning, the term meditation conjures the image of individual practice, focused on a single body and mind and connected to personal goals, whether religious or otherwise. Using such an understanding, we may regard the physical and social set-up surrounding forms of meditation as ancillary concerns that may be disassociated from the core of the activity. If we consider the types of *dhikr* I have discussed above as forms of meditation, we would be inclined to make an analytical separation between the activities undertaken by practitioners on one side and the way these relate to interpersonal relationships on the other. This would cast *dhikr* asunder from the human relationships that enable the enactment of the practice. While such a separation is certainly justifiable from our analytical perspective, I believe that the material I have surveyed indicates that it would stand in considerable tension with respect to the internal Sufi perspective on the practice.

Treating *dhikr* in conjunction with meditation – but without subsuming either into the other – has the benefit of highlighting particularities that are obscured if we see the two as neutrally descriptive terms. On the side of *dhikr*, it is highly significant that all descriptions of the practice are embedded within larger narratives that take special care to locate it as something that is born of interpersonal connections. At least in the milieu that I have highlighted, there are no texts that describe or prescribe the practice without tethering it securely to the Sufi authority structure represented by the master–disciple relationship. In fact, nearly all works that represent *dhikr* state explicitly that taking up *dhikr* without the permission and supervision of a master is harmful rather than helpful while trying to progress on the Sufi path. Furthermore, whether the practice is observable physically or has no outward signs (i.e. vocal or silent *dhikr*), stories associated with *dhikr* indicate masters' ability to judge its propriety or effectiveness because of their special insight into the affairs of their disciples. It is utterly clear, then, that from the Sufi perspectives I have highlighted, the practice of *dhikr* cannot be disassociated from the social context in which it takes place.

In my view, the inextricability of the personal and the social in the practice of *dhikr* is tied to the fact that in Sufi theory, the ultimate purpose of following the Sufi path is to cultivate a particular form of human religious subjectivity that conjoins many different aspects of human existence. In its most elaborate and sophisticated form, Sufi theory includes a keen appreciation for relationships between physical sensations, emotions and mental conceptualizations including both rational thought and imagination. Human subjects are composites formed of the inter-articulation of all these factors. A human person never exists in isolation since she/he is thought always to be involved with others through processes of mimesis, attraction and repulsion. Given this understanding, even a technique that seems to be an individual practice is, in the last instance, inextricably connected to the social world surrounding the particular person who undertakes it. As all the stories I have cited amply indicate, phenomenality and sociality are inherently interconnected in Sufi understandings. To take *dhikr* out of context therefore amounts to nullifying its purpose in a fundamental way.⁹

On the meditation side of things, the comparison between *dhikr* and meditation is instructive for highlighting the fact that our commonsensical modern understanding of meditation is also premised on a particular conception of the human person that is far from a human universal valid across cultures and time periods. The idea that individual practice is localizable to a single person rests on the notion of individual sovereignty and is connected to a particular conception of rights and responsibilities that has acquired an aura of universality and inevitability only since the worldwide spread of modern western ideas. The modern concept of meditational practice is premised on this base understanding, which is why it resembles, but cannot be interchangeable with, the place of *dhikr* within a different system such as Sufi thought and practice. Just as thinking about *dhikr* as meditation helps us understand the practice better, examining meditation in the light of presumptions coming from *dhikr* highlights meditation's connection to modern forms of human subjectivity that are ingrained in the way we think and act but are not always easily visible. I would suggest, then, that *dhikr* and meditation are not synonymous terms; however, they bear a kind of 'family resemblance' to each other and thinking about their similarities and differences provides an excellent venue to deepen our understanding of both.