

AḤMAD YASAWĪ AS A LEADING EARLY CENTRAL ASIAN SŪFĪ: RE- EXAMINATION OF HIS PERCEPTIONS ON ṬARĪQAH (ORDER)¹

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Abstrak

Aḥmad Yasawī adalah antara shaykh sufi Turki yang terkenal yang hidup di Asia Tengah sekitar kurun kelima dan keenam Islam. Dalam kalangan masyarakat Turkistan, beliau dikenali sebagai Khwājā Aṭā Yasavī. Karyanya utamanya *Dīwāni Ḥikmat* adalah karya yang memuatkan kesemua syair sufinya. Namun begitu, semasa usaha pengumpulan syair sufinya dilakukan sebahagian dari diwannya telah hilang dan dengan peredaran

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masa beberapa perubahan telah dilakukan. Begitu juga beberapa syair baru yang mempunyai semangat dan ungkapan yang serupa telah ditambah. Oleh yang demikian, keasliannya telah secara beransur-ansur hilang. Walau bagaimanapun, berasaskan keseluruhan syairnya ini, akidah, pemikiran bahkan dasar-dasar tarekat Aḥmad Yasawī masih boleh dijumpai. Sumbangan dan pemikiran Aḥmad Yasawī, melalui para muridnya, telah tersebar dari Asia Tengah hinggalah ke Balkan di barat melalui Anatolia, ke dunia Arab (khususnya Bilād al-Shām) di sebelah barat daya, dan ke tanah Parsi sehingga ke bahagian utara India. Sumbangan dan peranan beliau ini jarang mendapat perhatian para pengkaji moden. Makalah ini akan cuba menganalisis dan mengetengahkan pemikiran Aḥmad Yasawī khususnya pemikiran beliau tentang tasawuf dan tarekat.

Katakunci: *Ṭarīqah Yasawiyyah*; Asia Tengah; *Dīwān-i Ḥikmat*; *murshīd-murīd*.

Abstract

Aḥmad Yasawī is one of the oldest and most famous Turkish *shaykhs* and mystics living in Central Asia in the fifth and sixth centuries of Islamic era. Among the people of Turkistan, he is known as Khwājā Aṭā Yasavī. His major compilation is *Dīwān-i Ḥikmat*, which covers all his mystical poems. However, during the collection of his mystical poems part of his *dīwān* was lost or with the passage of time some changes were done, and also some new poems that had the similar spirit and expression were added. Therefore, it has gradually lost its originality. However at the basis of all his mystical poems Aḥmad Yasawī's belief and thought as well as the bases of his *tarīqah* (order) can be found. It is well-known that through his disciples (*murīd*), Aḥmad Yasawī's contributions

and thoughts spread from Central Asia to the Balkans on the West via Anatolia, to the Arab world (particularly Bilād al-Shām) in South-West, and to the Persian lands up to the Northern part of India. However, recent modern scholars, particularly Muslims, generally have somehow neglected to study the important role that he played and examine his contributions. This article will try to analyze and bring some light on Aḥmad Yasawī's ideas as well as offer new comments on his understanding of Sufism and *ṭarīqah* (order).

Keywords: *Ṭarīqah Yasawiyyah*; Central Asia; *Dīwān-i Hikmat*; *murshīd-murīd*.

The Life of Aḥmad Yasawī and his Works

Aḥmad Yasawī is one of the oldest and most famous Turkish *shaykhs* and mystics living in Central Asia in the fifth and sixth centuries of Islamic era. His biographers differ on his birthplace, according to *Islam Ansiklopedisi*³ he was born in Sayram, a small town on the Karasu in the Tarim Basin, in the Chinese Province of East Turkistan. This town also was called Ispicāb (Ispicāb) or Aqshehīr (Akşehir). And according to some other sources⁴ he was born in Yasi which is now called Tashkent. The year of his birth is not known, but he died in 562 A.H./1166A.D. His biographers again differ in his age when he died, some of them say that he was 63 years old⁵ and some others say 120 years old⁶. The people of Turkistan were calling him Khwājā Aṭā Yasawī.

³ Kamal Eraslan "Ahmed Yesevi", *TDV Islam Ansiklopedisi* vol. 1, (Istanbul, 1989).

⁴ Mawlānā 'Alī b. Ḥusain Šāfi, *Rashahāt-i 'Ain al-Ḥayāt* ("Trickles from the Source of Life"), trans. into Turkish in 993 A.H. by Ahmad Ra'ūf Chalabī, printed in Istanbul in 1257 A.H.; P. Melioranski, "Ahmad Yesevī", *First Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 1, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987).

⁵ P. Melioranski "Ahmad Yesevī", that in his *Dīwān* it is stated.

⁶ Hasan Lutfi Shushud, *Masters of Wisdom of Central Asia*, trans. from Turkish by Muhtar Holland, (North Yorkshire: Combe Springs Press, 1983), p.12.

'Aṭa' means 'father' in the Nūvāi dialect, but they were applying it to the great Turkish *shaikhs*.

His father was Shaikh Ibrāhīm, one of the prominent *shaikhs* of Sayram, while his mother, Lady 'Ā'ishah, was the daughter of Shaykh Mūsā, one of Shaykh Ibrāhīm's deputies. Aḥmad Yasawī was seven years old when his father died. His mother having died even earlier, he was brought up by his only sibling, his elder sister Lady Gawhar Shahnāz. Shaykh Ibrāhīm's pedigree goes back to the venerable Imām 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, by way of Khwāja Iṣḥāq Baba, Cardinal Saint of Turkistan⁷.

When Aḥmad Yasawī was seven years old he became a disciple of a certain Baba Arslan, concerning whom no further information has been found. After his death Aḥmad's early development as a Sufi was essentially acquired by heredity, then he went to Bukhārā, where he became an adherent of the celebrated Shaykh Yūsuf al-Ḥamadānī (d.535/1140)⁸. In Bukhara he studied the exoteric sciences, becoming one of the experts of his day in rationalistic and traditional scholarship alike. After the deaths of Shaykh Yūsuf al-Ḥamadānī and his first two successors, Shaykh Ḥasan al-Andāqī (d. 552/1157) and Shaykh 'Abdullah Barqī (d. 555/1160), Aḥmad Yasawī remained for some time at his teaching post in Bukhārā, then returned to Yasi near the end of his life and spent his last days in his native land. He was widely renowned among his contemporaries in those regions. Many people were coming to him for guidance and, as a means of instructing them in morals, sacred law, mysticism, and spiritual reality, he would compose rhymed and metrical aphorism in Eastern Turkish⁹.

In Turkistan, during the time when Aḥmad Yasawī began with his spiritual guidance in Yasi, there was very strong Islamization of the people. Beside this, there was very strong movement of mysticism (*taṣawwuf*) all over the Islamic world. Under these suitable conditions, Ahmad

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁸ P. Melioranski "Ahmad Yesevī".

⁹ Hasan Lutfi Shushud, *Masters of Wisdom of Central Asia*, pp.13-14.

Yasawī had a great influence among the Turkish migrants in the vicinity of Yesi (Tashkent) and Siriderya. The native people and migrants, with their sincere faith to Islam, gathered around him. Aḥmad Yasawī, who was well-versed in Islamic sciences, and knew Arabic and Persian, taught them the fundamentals of Islam, Islamic law (*shari'ah*), the rules and principles of *tariqah*, etc. In addition, he composed some mystic poems in syllabic meter called '*ḥikmat*' (wisdom). The content of some of these mystic poems also gives some information about Aḥmad Yasawī's life.¹⁰

Aḥmad Yasawī, with his literary, intellectual and legendary life, was the greatest name in the Turkish world of Central Asia and the founder of a whole school of mystics, and is as such highly revered.

Dīwān-i Ḥikmat is the title of Aḥmad Yasawī's compilation which covers all his mystical poems. Some copies of *Dīwān-i Ḥikmat* differs with regard to the content and language, these obviously show that they were transmitted from the different people and in the different places. During the collection of his mystical poems part of his divan was lost or with the passage of time some changes were done, and also some new poems, which had the similar spirit and expressions were added. Therefore, it has gradually lost its originality. However, at the basis of all his mystical poems, Aḥmad Yasawī's belief and thought as well as the bases of his *tariqah* can be found.

His *Dīwān* has often been published in Chagatay-Turkish, in Kazan, Tashkent, and Istanbul under the title of *Dīwān-i Ḥikmat-i Ḥadrat Sulṭān al-'Ārifīn Khwādja Aḥmad*. Recently, after the collapse of Communism in Soviets, the '*Dīwān-i Ḥikmat*', during 1991-1992 in Uzbekistan, 500.000 copies have been published, and, in 1992 in Turkmenistan, 50.000 copies and under the title '*Hikmetler*'.¹¹ In addition, some of the old manuscripts are available in the Asiatic Museum at St. Petersburg under the numbers 293b, 293c,

¹⁰ Kamal Eraslan, "Ahmed Yesevi", *Islam Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 1, (Istanbul, 1989).

¹¹ Hoca Ahmed Yesevi, *Dīwān-i Ḥikmet*, ed. By Hayati Bice, (Ankara: Turk Diyanet Vakfi, 1993) p. XVI. (Editor's Introduction).

293d and 293e.¹² According to *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, this *Dīwān* has not yet been examined in detail, which is not true. Cotemporary Turkish scholar such a Because we find some Turkish scholars today which they have examined it in detail like Kemal Eraslan, Irfan Gunduz, Muştafa Kara, and others.

Moreover, the *Fakrnāma*, which is attributed to Aḥmad Yasawī, appears in both Tashkent and Kazan publications of the *Dīwān-i Hikmat*. *Fakrnāma*, which looks like a prose introduction to *Dīwān-i Hikmat* rather than a separate booklet, is not found in any of the original manuscripts of the *Dīwān-i Hikmat*.¹³ It shows that this is not written by Aḥmad Yasawī, but by those who compiled the book and included it.

Aḥmad Yasawī's Understanding of *Ṭariqah*

Aḥmad Yasawī, who appeared with a national identity in form and with an Islamic identity in essence and ideology, became a leader and guidance for the confused and suffering masses who did not know whom to follow.¹⁴

Because in this social atmosphere, there were some influential and representative groups who were out of religion and *taṣawwuf*, and also were misinterpreting the concept and understanding of *ṭariqah*. In addition, they were destroying people's faith with wrong ideas and beliefs. Therefore, in adherence to the Sunnah of the Prophet Muḥammad and with an understanding of *ṭariqah*, by emphasizing the importance of *Shari'ah*, Aḥmad Yasawī was able to protect the people of Turkestan from pervert ideas and lead them on the right path.¹⁵

However, Aḥmad Yasawī's understanding of *ṭariqah* was not a passive one, requiring blind unconscious obedience.

¹² P. Melioranski, "Ahmad Yesevi", vol. 1, *First Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

¹³ Kamal Eraslan "Ahmed Yesevi", vol. 1, *Islam Ansiklopedisi*.

¹⁴ M.K. Ozergin, "Dini ve Taṣavvufi Edebiyatimiz dan Divān-i Hikmat", *Nesil Dergisi* (Turkish magazine), June-July 1980, no. 45-46, pp. 8-12.

¹⁵ Irfan Gunduz, "Ahmed Yesevi'nin Tarikat ve İrsad Anlayisi", *İlim ve Sanat* (Turkish magazine), July 1993, no.35-36, pp.6-7.

Also, he did not approve withdrawal into solitude and putting oneself in God's hands, expecting that God will arrange things for him. On the contrary, he was an active contemplative and thinking person. He kept his physical and moral energy under control and encouraged being awake. With an active understanding of *tawakkul* (trust in God) and by encouraging earning one's livelihood by oneself, he indirectly provided labour and manpower to the society.¹⁶

Aḥmad Yasawī lived with his own efforts by making wooden oars and ladles until he reached the age of 63 years. By taking into consideration Prophet Muḥammad's death at the age of 63 years, he said that to live in this world after this age is a *bid'ah*. With this belief, he withdrew himself into seclusion.¹⁷

In *Fakrnāma*, he advises his followers to 'eat lawful (*ḥalāl*) and healthy food'. And he complains about 'hypocritical ascetics, begging sufis and faking dervishes'.¹⁸

Aḥmad Yasawī initiated and became one of the representatives of the tradition of catechism (*'ilmihāl*) writings, which is peculiar to Turkish culture. '*ilmihāl*' writings were written to teach the people the fundamentals of the religion and were considered as the commentaries to the so-called 'hadīth Jibrīl' (Gabriel Tradition). Aḥmad Yasawī can be considered as a real moralist and educator for the people, if one studies his views expressed in *Fakrnāma*¹⁹ and *Jawāhir al-Abrār*²⁰.

As we stated earlier while talking about Aḥmad Yasawī's life story, he was the son of Shaikh İbrāhīm whose ancestry went back to Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and was educated by Shaikh Yūsuf al-Ḥamadānī who was a sufi *par excellence*. Due to these

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Irfan Gunduz, "Ahmed Yesevi'nin Tarikat ve irsad anlatısı", *Ilim ve Sanat*, July 1993, no.35-36, pp.6-7, quoted from Ali, *Kunh al-Abrār*, (Istanbul), vol.: V, p.54.

¹⁸ K. Eraslan, "Yesevinin Fakr-namesi", I.U. *Edebiyat Fakültesi Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Dergisi*, (Istanbul, 1977), p.74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ F. Koprulu, *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar*, (Ankara, 1976), pp.98-100.

influences Aḥmad Yasawī integrated well his understanding of *ṭarīqah* with the fundamentals of *Shari'ah*. Thus, just after him, the *ṭarīqah* of Yasawiyyah became strong in a milieu of dominant Persian mystical culture. Just like his master Yūsuf al-Ḥamadānī, one of the eminent and great scholars of that time, Aḥmad Yasawī tried to spread his ideas all over Turkestan. During the spread of Islam among the Turks, Aḥmad Yasawī and his *ṭarīqah* played an important role in getting rid of Persian culture and *Shi'ah* belief, and thus making Islam acceptable to the people of Turkestan.²¹

For the pilgrimage to Mecca the dervishes of Transoxiana (*Māwarā' al-nahr*) preferred to go via India. The *tekkes* (dervish lodges) of Baba Palangpust and Baba Misafir in Deccan were established by the dervishes of the Yasawiyyah order (*ṭarīqah*). The aims of these *tekkes* were not only to entertain pilgrims, but also to convey the Turkish understanding of *taṣawwuf* to the people of India. Thus, the sufis who were known as 'Hindī' in the Ottoman State were actually Turkish migrants from Central Asia settled in India. Because, when the Mongols occupied Central Asia, some Central Asian Muslims fled to Anatolia (Minor-Asia), and some others to India. In this way the order of Yasawiyyah entered India.²²

The Yasawiyyah with its great number of *murīds* and successors, in the beginning, started around the districts of Seyhun and Tashkent, then spread in Kharezmi, and started to be more powerful in all over Transoxiana. However, this *ṭarīqah* later reached not only Khorasan, Azerbaijan, Anatolia and the Balkans in the north-west of Seyhun and Kharezmi, but also India in the south-east.²³ According to Zarccone, quoted from Abbas Rizvy's *The History of Sufism in India*, the Yasawī dervishes fought against unbelievers (non-Muslims) in Benghal.²⁴

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

²² *Ibid.*, p.42-43; see also Zarccone Thierry's *Turkish Sufism in India* trans. into Turkish by S. Derin, *Dergah* (turkish magazine), C. IV., no.38, April, 1993, pp-19-20.

²³ Hoca Ahmed Yesevi, *Dīvān-i Hikmet*, ed. By Hayati Bice, (Ankara: Turk Diyanet Vakfi, 1993) pp. XIV-XVI. (Editor's Introduction).

²⁴ Zarccone T., p.19.

Yet even during the first periods, a relationship and link between Baktashiyyah and Yasawiyyah appear, as expressed by al-Wāṣitī (744/1343), who is considered the oldest source.²⁵ When we compare *Fakrnāma* and *Makālāt*²⁶, we find that some parts resemble each other, and others are identical. Thus, perhaps it can be said that the origin of Baktashiyyah goes back to Yasawiyyah and that the '*aqīdah* (creed) of early Baktashiyyah was of Sunni character. Later on, the beliefs and creed of this *ṭarīqah* were spoilt and this somehow had a negative influence on the *ṭarīqah* of Yasawiyyah²⁷.

Aḥmad Yasawī explained the realization of derwishhood and spiritual progress in the following principle: "In Sufism the course of one's progress from the initiation to the advanced level depends upon four bases: Space (*Makān*), Time, Brotherhood, and *Shaykh or Rabt-i Sulṭān* (i.e. Master)". Thus, he emphasizes the psychological aspects of *ṭarīqah*, and with this method, aims at educating and keeping his followers together.²⁸

Aḥmad Yasawī also showed his devotion to the classical *taṣawwuf* education, where he pointed out that *shaykh-murīd* (master-disciple) relationship can be achieved only through a material and spiritual co-operation. And he stated in one of his poems, as follows:

"Whoever joins the *ṭarīqah* without *sharī'ah*,
Satan comes and takes his faith (*imān*) away,
And whoever sets out without a *pīr*²⁹ (master),
Becomes confused and goes astray,
The *ṭarīqah* needs a wise guide (*shaykh or murshid*),
And this guide needs a faithful ('*itiqād*) *murīd*
(disciple)."³⁰

²⁵ Abū al-Faraj al-Wāṣitī, *Tiryāk al-Muḥibbīn*, (Egypt, 1887), p. 47 f.

²⁶ *Makālāt* is the work of Hacı Baktash Vali, the founder of Baktashiyya order.

²⁷ İrfan Gunduz, *Ahmed Yesevi'nin Tarikat ve İrsad anlayışı*. İlim ve Sanat (Turkish magazine), July 1993, no.35-36, p.8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Pīr* is a spiritual guide who has great knowledge and experience.

³⁰ Kemal Eraslan, *Dīvān-i Hikmet'ten seçmeler*, (Ankara, 1991) p. 217. (the translation of poems is mine).

Moreover, Aḥmad Yasawī pointed out to the necessary quality of the guide (*murshid*) and its importance by putting some conditions to the guidance: “(if a person) has not studied seventy sciences and has not passed through seventy ranks (*maqām*), he can be neither a master (*shaykh*) nor a guide (*murshid*)”.³¹ These conditions he links to some required fundamentals which are as follows: “Certain (*yaqīn*) knowledge of religion (*dīn*), clear discernment, kind patience, great satisfaction, sincere friendship and proximity to the Glorious”. With all these, he tried to protect the people from false guides (*murshids*).³²

When we try to analyze Aḥmad Yasawī’s thought and understanding of *ṭarīqah*, we see that he was very systematic and placed some regulations for the *ṭarīqah*, which he summarized as follows: “Knowledge of truth, absolute consciousness, realized truthfulness, full certainty, total reliance upon God for subsistence and subtle contemplation”. As for obligations, they are summarized as follows: “Seeking of His (God’s) Perfection and proximity to His Majesty, continuous communion with Him, having hope in whichever condition, continuous praise of God and thinking of meeting the Most Exalted One”.³³

Besides all, Ahmad Yasawī in his poems and *taṣawwuf* literature paid much attention to the remembrance of death, which he called ‘*Rabita-i mev’*’.³⁴ In this way, he expected from his disciples (*murīds*) to have self-control and make preparation for the grave in their worldly life.

Aḥmad Yasawī and his followers gave importance, as we mentioned earlier, to the praise (*dhikr*) and seclusion (*halvet*). But in their collective praise, instead of *sema* and *raks* (i.e. whirling dance performed by the dervishes) they preferred the ordinary way of praise.³⁵

³¹ İrfan Gunduz, “Ahmed Yesevî’nin Tarikat ve İrsad Anlayışı”, *İlim ve Sanat* (Turkish magazine), July 1993, no. 35-36, p. 8.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*; for more details see Kemal Eraslan, *Dīvān-i Hikmet’ten seçmeler*, (Ankara, 1991) pp. 301, 311.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

In our concluding remarks, it is very obvious that Aḥmad Yasawī's theological belief as well as his understanding of *ṭarīqah* was based mainly on the Sunnah of the Prophet Muḥammad and he was very much against the hypocritical sufi leaders and false dervishes. In addition, we realize that Yasawī, among other issues, emphasizes to the concepts and practices that have universal values.

