

Title of the paper

Rumi's Spiritual Discourses: Mindfulness at Workplace

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Abstract

In Jallaluddin Rumi's *Fihi Ma Fihi*, he describes a king who regrets that he is not able to serve God due to his responsibilities with the state affairs. Rumi answers that the affairs of state were also the work of God: it provides peace and security to people enabling them serve God.

Rumi differentiates between comprehensive and individual action, and sees the linkages between acts converging into a unified whole. At the workplace, several individual actions as parts of a comprehensive action converge into a bigger organizational goal.

In *Fihi* Rumi says everyone has a need. Identification of individual needs and assembling them into a larger comprehensive shared vision will be the spiritual way of motivating people.

This paper covers the spiritual theory of mindfulness from *Fihi*, and its application at workplace.

Key words: Comprehensive action, Rumi's mindfulness, organizational application

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Through his mystical writings – both poetry and prose - Jalal ud Din Rumi (1207- 1273) has attracted spiritual seekers from almost every religion in the world. A lot has been written about his poetry – *Mathnavi Ma-anawi* (commonly referred to as *Mathnavi*) and *Divan-e-Shams Tabrez* (commonly referred to as *Divan* or *Divan-Kabir*) – which explain his philosophy of sufism and spirituality.

This paper is based on Rumi’s prose – *Fihi Ma Fihi*. This book provides a record of seventy-one talks and lectures given by Rumi on various occasions to his disciples. Originally written in Persian, it was translated in English by A J Arberry and was titled *Discourses of Rumi*.¹

Though Rumi did not use the term ‘mindfulness’, various discourses in Rumi’s *Fihi* cover the concept of mindfulness. Some concepts like experiencing with free mind, being non-judgmental, experiencing the whole, and human needs are discussed here.

Learning

Fihi Ma Fihi begins with a discourse on learning: Quoting Mohammed SAW (peace be upon him), the prophet, Rumi said, “The worst of scholars are those who visit princes...” Rumi explains that learning should be for the purpose of knowledge and not to seek favours from the princes. The purpose of learning is to open the mind.

Your thinking is like a camel driver,

And you are the camel;

It drives you in every direction under its bitter control

As a good Sufi teacher Rumi helps the learner to overcome obstructions to experience the deeper aspects:

Close the door of words

That the window of your heart may open

The Moon's kiss

Only comes

Through an open window

For Rumi words are the shadow of reality, a mere branch of reality. It is the inner bond that draws one person to another, not words. Rumi says, "If someone should see a hundred thousand miracles and divine blessings, still, without an inner connection to that saint or prophet who was the source of those miracles, all these phenomena would come to nothing." This inward element moulds thoughts in a positive way. There can be several expressions but the controlling thought is one.

Rumi emphasizes that one has go beyond words to experience the inward element of being.

Comprehensive Action

The *Amir* (king) said: "Night and day my heart and soul are intent upon serving God, but owing to my preoccupations with Mongol affairs I am not able to discharge that service."

Rumi answered, "Those works too are work done for God, since they are the means of providing peace and security for your country. You sacrifice yourself, your possessions, your time, so the hearts of a few will be lifted to peacefully obeying God's will. So this too is a good work. God has inclined you towards such good work, and your great love for what you do is proof of God's blessing."

Rumi describes the concept of comprehensive action in the passage quoted above. There are individual actions, which may appear unconnected and disjointed (as the king saw them), but these individual actions may be connected to each other, sometimes one feeding into other, to form larger whole. Rumi gives the example of a tree in winter and in spring. When people do not see anything happening in winter a tree looks idle to them. Whereas the fact is: tree is collecting nutrients. But in spring on seeing the buds, they think, it is working. There is a time for collecting, and a time for releasing: both individual actions at a different time produce a comprehensive action.

A tent was pitched for the King, and he kept certain people occupied in erecting this tent. One made the tent-rope, another made the tent-pins, the weaver weaved the cloth, and so on. Each person was busy in his own individual action. The comprehensive action was: a tent was being pitched. The rope maker could think the rope was most important, the pin maker could feel the pins were most necessary. But these judgments are wrong as the comprehensive action of pitching the tent could not be completed without completing each of those individual actions: it did not matter which individual action had more value.

A man traveling through the darkness is yet traveling. The disciple is learning when he does not know that he is learning. Therefore, life must be looked upon as a whole, as well as individually. However, the individual actions must be seen without being judgmental. Because use of judgment or discrimination at this stage may result in ignoring the individual action. So Rumi suggests one to be mindful of all the small actions without bothering to look for their significance. The second stage of Rumi's mindfulness experience is the ability to see the interconnectedness of the individual actions to form a

comprehensive whole. As the awareness of mind increases in the first stage the larger patterns become clearer enabling the mind to see the bigger whole.

Thus getting in tune with the whole plan, the comprehensive action of life, is essential to enlightenment.

Accepting and Reasoning

Rumi says, “Reason is fine and useful until it brings you to the door of the King. Once you have reached his door, give up reason, for in that hour reason is a sheer loss to you, a highway robber. When you have reached the King, surrender yourself to him, you have no use then for the how and wherefore.”

He gives the example of a person who has an uncut cloth that he wants to be made into a tunic or a cloak. Reason brings this person to a tailor. Until that moment reason is fine, for it brings the cloth to the tailor. Now in that very moment reason must be forgotten and the person must abandon himself wholly to the direction of the tailor. In the same way, reason is fine when a person is sick because it brings her to the physician. After that, reason is of no use since the person must surrender herself to the advice of the physician.

For Rumi, accepting is more important than reasoning to achieve a higher level of happiness. Reason is the beginning, acceptance is the end.

Withholding reasoning is useful for all five major factors of mindfulness: observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience and non-reactivity to inner experience.

Duality and Annihilation of Self (*Nafs*)

Rumi tells a story of a Turkish king who applauded the work of an Arab poet though he knew no Arabic; it was not the words themselves but the purport of the words that really signified. Phenomena are many; the ultimate object is one. If real purpose is kept in view, duality vanishes. Duality shows the branches, but the root is one. Rumi gives the example of two birds. If two birds are tied together, and despite their familiarity and the fact that their two wings have been changed to four, they will not fly. That is because duality exists. But let one bird give up its life and the other—even though tied to the first—will fly, because duality has vanished. In God's presence two I's cannot exist. You cannot know your self and God's Self; you die before God so that duality will not remain.

A bowl of poison was brought as a present to Hazrat Umar the Caliph. He was told that a little of that poison will secretly kill a person. Hazrat Umar said, "Give it to me to drink, for within me is a mighty enemy whom the sword cannot reach. I have no greater enemy in the world than he." That enemy within is the self (*nafs*).

Rumi says that multiplicity and duality vanish in the presence of God; a man must sacrifice his own self in order that God may be revealed in all His glory. Rumi says there are many things within a human being. There is mouse in the man, and there is bird. The bird carries the cage upwards, while the mouse drags it down. A hundred thousand different wild beasts are together within humans, but they are all converging on that moment when the mouse will renounce its mousehood and the bird its birdhood, and all become one. That moment of convergence signifies the moment when the self (*nafs*) has been successfully annihilated. For the goal is neither going up nor going down. When the goal shows itself clearly, it will be neither above nor below, it will be within.

Human Needs

Rumi narrates the story of a thirsty person who is served very hot and brackish water to drink by a Bedouin's wife in the midst of a desert. Feeling indebted he tells her that if they travel to nearby Baghdad, or Kufa they will get plenty of sweet and cool water, foods of various types, and other comforts of life. Little later the Bedouin comes with a few desert rats caught by him and asks the women to cook these. Some of these cooked rats are offered to the guest. In the night this person overhears the conversation between the Bedouin and his wife. The woman tells her husband about plenty of water and food in Baghdad. The Bedouin discourages her and tells her that she shall not pay heed to such advices because there are many envious people in the world who envy those living a life of ease and abundance and want to send them wandering away to deprive them of their fortune.

This story explains human needs at three different levels. At the first level is the basic need of thirst and food – which made the thirsty person drink brackish water and also eat cooked rats. At the next level of need is the Bedouin's wife who is getting her food, yet aspires for better things – that's why she repeats the story to her husband. And the third level of need is reflected by the Bedouin who is getting his food, considers it the best possible option, is satisfied with it, and does not want to strive for better.

God bestows both the desires and the provisions for each person, but if people sit at home acting self-sufficient then their provisions will never reach them.

Rumi says that everyone is in the midst of their own need. No living creature can be separated from its need. That need is their leash, drawing them this way and that, just like a nose-ring and chain. As in the story the need of thirsty person drew him to the Bedouin's house. The need of the woman drew her to share the story with her husband probably with an implicit desire to migrate to Baghdad.

While the needs and their power to act as leashes is established but the question is: who makes that leash? No one will make a leash for himself. Making a leash for oneself is absurd—so someone else must have made it for people. For Rumi that someone who gives the need is God. If people are in the midst of their own need, they are also in the midst of the One who gives them that need. Rumi says, “If we are constantly attached to our own leash, we are always connected to the One who draws that leash. But if our eyes are fixed upon our chain, we lose strength and hope. Rather our eyes should be fixed on the One who draws that chain. Then we gladly surrender and accept our limitations. For that leash is around our neck only to reveal the One who holds it.”

The spiritual need of the human spirit is to reveal the One holding the leash. However, until the need arises, the end of that leash or thread is hidden. Once a person is able to surrender himself (annihilation of self) it becomes easier to shift the glance from the leash to the one holding the leash. And then begins the journey towards the ultimate goal: Just as a bird that tries flying to heaven, even though it never reaches that goal, yet every moment it rises farther from the earth and outsoars the other birds.

End and Means

A golden collar on a dog does not make him a hunting dog. The quality of being a hunting dog is something specific in the animal, whether it wears a collar of gold or not. Becoming a hunting dog is the end, the training a dog undergoes for it is the means or the beginning. Some people see the beginnings of things, and some look towards the end. Those who look to the goal are great and mighty, for although their eyes are fixed on this moment; still they look into the world beyond.

But those who see the beginning are greater. The moral is that this world is like an echo - whatever you say, whether good or evil, you hear the same from the mountain. If you think, “I spoke beautifully and the mountain gave an ugly answer,” this is impossible. When the nightingale sings in the mountain, the mountain does not return the voice of a raven or a donkey? Those who see the beginning say, “Why look to the end? If wheat is sown in the beginning, barley will not grow. If oats are planted, you cannot reap corn.” So their gaze is fixed upon the beginning. They are concerned about the means.

Returning to the earlier example of pitching the tent, the tent itself is the end. But individual actions are the means to achieve that end. Imagine, if the weavers gave up weaving and sought to be viziers, the whole world would be naked and bare. So, they were given a joy for their craft. They are content with weaving. Therefore all are praiseworthy - the rope-maker, the carpenter, the tent-pin maker, the weaver, etc. The beginning comprising of all the individual actions has to be in order to make the end possible.

Mindfulness and Rumi

Spiritual concepts culled from Rumi’s discourses were presented earlier. These concepts have a close resemblance to the major factors of mindfulness.

- Learning – Words only reflect reality, go beyond words to experience reality.
- Comprehensive Action – Look at all the individual actions, the comprehensive action, and the interconnectedness of individual actions. Be non-judgmental.
- Accepting and Reasoning – Give-up reasoning and accept what is.
- Duality and Annihilation of Self (*Nafs*) – Control your inner self.
- Human Needs – Know the origin of needs.

- End and Means - See the end and also see the means to that end.

The ideas on observing (without being judgmental), increased awareness, exploring the inner self and gradually ‘killing’ the ‘I’ in self are closely associated with mindfulness. The skill to see both the end and the means make the journey of mindfulness more purposeful and purify the mind.

Mirdal² says that one of the goals of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy as well as of Rumi’s teachings is to identify and change ‘pre-conceived notions’ and old ‘unrealistic’ ways of thinking, and thereby to influence emotion and behavior. Recall the oft quoted ‘out-of-box thinking’: when one goes beyond constraining boundaries to challenge and transcend the given and traditional attitudes and norms one discovers the province of what one may call ‘wild mind’ that is both richer and less controlled than the safety of fixed ideas and rules.

Mulla Nasruddin once rode his donkey to the king's palace facing the donkey's back. When he was questioned by the king about riding the donkey in the wrong way, his simple answer was, “That is a point, so many people have told you that I was wrong; not a single person said the donkey was wrong!” After all on the way to the palace Nasruddin’s mind was focused on the king and the palace and he reached there, so he was right. But no one can be sure about the donkey. Nasruddin in his wisdom has pointed out what many of us have forgotten.

It is all about seeing different possibilities.

It is all about going beyond the obvious.

At the Workplace

Rumi's concepts on mindfulness can be easily applied to the workplace. In the context of workplace mindfulness may be interpreted to include:

- Accept the coworkers as they are – without being judgmental

The first step is knowing the coworkers. Quoting the example of stone statues with a water sprout, Rumi suggests that like the source of water sprouting from the mouth of statues, the source of speech coming out of people's mouth lies in their personality. Rumi says, "To know people, engage them in speech. By their words you will know them. If they are imposters, even if someone told them that people can be recognized by their words and they watch their words carefully to avoid being caught, still, in the end you will come to understand who they are." However, he warns that people's outward appearance could be temporary in response to a particular situation.

Rumi gives the example of how a man going into battle, puts on his battledress, girds on armor and places a helmet on his head to prepare for combat. But when he returns home he takes off those garments, since food and family are another business. Still, he is the same person. However, if someone has last seen him in that garment then that image of him in battle gear is the only image, even though he may have changed clothes a hundred times. The battle gear was in response to the battle field, normal clothes are in response to the family and home. The battle gear was just a guard which was put by this man. It served the purpose of locking himself to safety in the given situation. Similarly, people adapt their behaviours to suit situations. Their bad or unruly behaviours are like locks which they have put on themselves. Wherever men or women put a big lock, that is a sign of something precious and valuable. Just like the snake that

guards a treasure, do not regard a person's ugliness, but look instead at the preciousness of their treasure.

Judgments made on the basis of mere 'looks' will obviously be wrong. It is therefore advisable not to make judgments on outward appearances and behaviours of a person and see them in the overall context of the given situation.

- Adjust own behaviour to accommodate coworkers to achieve effective inter-personal relations.

Rumi's theory of comprehensive action highlights the importance and relevance of individual actions. In the organizational context it simply means: all jobs are important, hence all coworkers are important. So their contributions should be acknowledged and praised. This will improve their motivation levels.

Jesus was asked, "What is the most difficult thing in this world and the next?" He said, "The wrath of God." They asked, "And what can save us from that?" He answered, "Master your own wrath and anger towards others." When the mind wants to complain, Rumi suggests to do the opposite – give thanks. This will help change the other person because matching bad behaviour with bad behaviour will prolong the situation. Rumi quotes Shams Tabriz, "Hatred and rage lay hidden in your unconscious. If you see a spark leap from that fire, extinguish it, so that it will return to non-existence from where it came. If you insist on matching anger with anger and promoting the flame of rage, it will spring faster and faster from your unconscious, and become more and more difficult to put out."

In the process of adjusting own behaviour to accommodate others one has to suppress the inner self. Annihilation of self is key to that. This may at times result in a person moving to a position which is perceived lower. This may be a difficult task – nobody moves to a lower position willingly. Such movements do not make a person small. Rumi says that elevation and greatness of a person is beyond space and time. For instance if a silver coin is placed on the roof and a gold piece is kept under the silver coin, it will still be more valuable. Though silver is occupying a higher position, but that position does not change the value of gold. Rumi gives the example of the chaff: chaff is above the sieve and the corn falls under it; but how can the chaff be “above” the corn? The superiority of the corn does not come from its position in this world, but from its place in that world of realities. Similarly, all people in organization have their superiority in the world of realities – a young clerk who is trusted by the CEO occupies a better place than a manager who is one among many.

- Be aware of own needs and the needs of coworkers and link these to the organizational goal.

Human needs have been discussed. Every individual has needs and every need has a reason behind it. Rumi recommends to identify that reason and the source of that reason (leash and the holder of the leash). Since individual actions in the organization combine to form the larger comprehensive action at the organizational level, individual needs must be acknowledged and assembled to form a larger organizational vision in such a way that each individual aspiration gets reflected in it. An individual will only be satisfied when his own need gets fulfilled while doing his job to meet the organizational goals.

Quoting the story of *Majnun* Rumi highlights the importance of using discrimination to recognize barriers in the way of pursuing the purpose. When *Majnun*, as the story goes, was making for his beloved *Laila*'s home, as long as he was fully conscious he drove his camel in that direction. But when for a moment he became absorbed in the thought of *Laila* and forgot his camel, the camel turned in its tracks towards the village where its foal was kept. On coming to his senses, *Majnun* found that he had gone back a distance of two day's journey. For three months he continued this way, coming no closer to his goal. Finally he jumped off the camel, saying, "This camel is the ruin of me!" and continued on foot, singing:

My camel's desire is now behind,

My own desire is before.

Our purposes were crossed,

We can agree no more.

- Choose the correct path to achieve goals.

Through his discussion on the end and the means Rumi has emphasized the importance of selecting the correct path. For him beginning is more important than the end. At the organizational level a plan is to be made in the beginning with complete details of various processes and procedures involved to achieve the goals.

Though it is the root of the tree that drinks, it becomes evident on the head of the tree, through the branches and leaves and fruit. Suppose the root of a tree is destroyed or somehow closed, it cannot be watered through its leaves. Even if water is sprinkled on its leaves daily, the tree will dry up and will die.

Similarly, there is a path to organizational success. Unlike the tree, there could be multiple paths to nurture the organization and pursue its goals. One has to select the best out of these paths. Ability to see both the beginning and the end will be used to exercise discrimination to select the right path.

According to Rumi, for every path leading towards the goal, there are its subsidiary means and paths to the attainment of that objective. Overall objective cannot be attained save by way of those subsidiary means. So, he recommends breaking of larger goals into smaller milestones and move towards them through subsidiary paths. That way is a distant way, and full of pitfalls and obstacles; it may be that those subsidiary means will fall short of the objective, thus requiring a constant monitoring through use of discrimination.

Conclusion

Rumi has explained spirituality in detail and has discussed several issues which relate to mindfulness. This paper only presents a glimpse of it. Further research will reveal more of his thoughts. Rumi uses all tools of learning: serious discussions, examples, stories, and also jokes and humour. He has a special place for humour. In Rumi's words,

“If you want special illumination, look upon a human face:

see deeply, within laughter, the Essence of Ultimate Truth.”

Just to heed to Rumi's advice this paper is concluded with a Mulla Nasruddin story. He was searching for his bunch of keys. When asked by a passerby Nasruddin told that he had earlier dropped the key bunch elsewhere. The perplexed passerby asked Nasruddin that why was he then looking for it there. Nasruddin replied, “Because there is light here.”

In a cursory reading, it is a simple joke. Replace the word keys with ‘key to opening mind’, and the word light with ‘illumination of knowledge’ and the meaning changes.

Our minds get blocked in many ways and as time passes we lose the ‘key’ to open our mind. Those lost keys to open the mind can only be found in the light of wisdom – wisdom in the company of masters like Rumi!

¹ A J Arberry, *Discourses of Rumi*, New York: Samuel Weiser, 1972

² Gretty M. Mirdal, *Mevlana Jalal-ud-Din Rumi and Mindfulness*, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2010