

# Mevlana Jalāl-ad-Dīn Rumi and Mindfulness

Gretty M. Mirdal

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**Abstract** The use of mindfulness-related methods for the treatment of a variety of psychological, somatic and interpersonal problems has increased dramatically in the last decade. Almost all mindfulness-based therapies include the practice of meditation in addition to various cognitive and/or behavioral techniques. The source of inspiration for mindfulness has traditionally been Buddhism, while Islamic thought has not been present in this development despite the similarities in philosophy and a growing need for mental health support among Muslim populations throughout the world. It is in this context that Sufism and especially Rumi's teachings seem to be promising both in terms of research on consciousness and in terms of culturally sensitive methods of healing. The aim of the present article is to highlight the commonality of mindfulness-based therapies and Rumi's religious philosophy. Introducing concepts, images and metaphors based on Rumi's universe can constitute a meaningful alternative to Buddhist-inspired practices in the trans-cultural clinic, especially in encounters with clients with Muslim background.

**Keywords** Mindfulness · Transcultural · Psychotherapy · Rumi · Sufism · Meditation

## Introduction

In the last 25 years, the role of religion and spirituality has become more and more visible in psychological treatment both due to societal changes and to scientific advances. Neuroscientific evidence that ideas and beliefs affect human physiology and that emotions have a broad range of effects on brain function and structure (McEwen 2000; Lazar et al. 2005; Lamprecht and LeDoux 2004; Bremner 2007) has contributed to the growth of interest in the psychology of religion(s). Globalization and migration have also added to the focus on cultural and religious diversity, and the growing need to provide mental health services to immigrants and refugees in western societies has required more

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G. M. Mirdal (✉)  
Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen, Oester Farimagsgade 2A,  
1353 Copenhagen K, Denmark  
e-mail: gretty.mirdal@psy.ku.dk

knowledge about different religions. These changes have in turn played a role in the creation of new forms of psychotherapy, some of which have roots in Eastern religious and spiritual traditions, especially mindfulness-based therapies, which have gained an unprecedented popularity.

The fascination with Buddhism and Taoism in psychology is not new, although their combination with scientifically driven therapeutic methods is relatively recent. Islamic thought and mysticism have however not been present in this development despite the similarities in philosophy and a growing need for mental health support among Muslim populations throughout the world. It is in this context that Sufism, and especially Rumi whose philosophy and poetry will be introduced in this article, seems to be promising as a different source of inspiration in terms of research on consciousness as well as culturally sensitive methods of healing. Rumi's work has been compared to Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and according to Helminski (2000), his poetry is read more than any other writing except for the Qur'an in Islamic cultures. He influenced Turkish, and especially Anatolian Islam significantly, and many Turkish homes still have his famous sayings framed and hanging on their walls (Kilic 2010). Concepts, images and metaphors based on Rumi's teachings could therefore constitute a meaningful background and the basis for a more open encounter between therapist and client in the interpretation of adversity, and especially in transcultural therapy with Muslim clients.

Since almost all types of healing aim at relieving suffering, distress and demoralization, it is natural that similar techniques are found across cultures and across the variety of healing practices. These include generally a reframing, a new way of looking at problems of living; they provide new ways of coping, of unlearning bad habits and learning more constructive ways of dealing with stress, loss and grief; they offer rituals based on a myth or a theory of what constitutes "a good life"; and finally, they impart belief and hope, that the process will restore health and well-being. It is in this context that Rumi's work combined with professional mindfulness-based approaches to psychotherapy could provide a meaningful alternative to the cultural heritage of Judaism and Christianity upon which western psychology is currently based. The mindfulness therapies, although not culture-free, seem particularly appropriate for a connection with Rumi's open and tolerant philosophy because their Buddhist philosophical background has many common elements with Rumi's form of Sufism as illustrated in the following. Furthermore, both approaches challenge the focus on the primacy of the individual self and on the narrow pursuit of mundane success which are not necessarily meaningful goals in non-western cultures.

### **Mevlânâ Jalal-ad-Din Rumi: Theologian, Mystic, Poet**

Rumi, also known as Mevlânâ, was born in 1207 in Balkh, present-day Afghanistan which was a part of Persia at the time, and he died in Konya, Turkey, in 1273. On the 800th anniversary of his birth, UNESCO (2007) described him as an "eminent philosopher and mystical poet of Islam who advocated tolerance, reason and access to knowledge through love. His mystical relationship to Islam produced masterpieces that well beyond the borders of Turkey have marked Islamic culture and devotion."

Sufism is a form of Islamic mysticism, and The Mevlevi Order started by Rumi is probably the best known Sufi order, also known through the 'Whirling Dervishes' who perform their worship in the form of the dance and music ceremony called the "sema". The dervishes turn around with open arms, the right hand facing the sky and the left hand

the earth, thus “distributing to Man what they receive from God”. Sema comes from the words “to hear” and “to listen”. It is listening to music with one’s full being.

Throughout 800 years, many legends have circulated on Rumi, some historically more reliable than others. It is well established that his father was a theologian, jurist and a mystic from the province of Horasan, between Afghanistan and Iran, and that he emigrated westward with his family and a group of followers. Rumi’s father finally settled in Konya and became the head of a religious school. When he died, Rumi who was then 25 became his father’s successor. Rumi himself was trained in Aleppo in one of the main centers for Islamic instruction and was a serious and respected scholar who acquired hundreds of disciples at a relatively young age.

When Rumi was in his mid-thirties, he met a man who changed the direction of his life and work, Shamseddin called Shams of Tebriz. Shams was an older hermit, a wild man and wanderer. According to the legend retold by most Sufi scholars, both Shams and Rumi had prayed for years to meet someone with whom they could share their respective knowledge and divine love. One day Shams heard a voice that told him to go to Konya where he would meet the soul he was looking for. There are many versions of their first encounter. In one of them, Shams tests Rumi by asking what the prophet Mohammed had meant when he said to God: “I did not know you as I should have”. At Rumi’s answer, namely that the prophet was always thirsty for coming closer to God, that it was not a sign of ignorance but an unquenched thirst that made him say so, Shams realized that Rumi was the man he had looked for. The encounter was forceful for both of them, and Rumi is said to have fainted and remained unconscious for over an hour. From then on, they did not part and they remained in seclusion for 40 days.

### Religious Philosopher and Profane Poet

Rumi abandoned teaching and became more and more absorbed in the revelations to which Shams initiated him. Deeply provoked by this change and new mode of life, Rumi’s former disciples threatened Shams and forced him to leave Konya and go back to Damascus. Rumi fell ill of grief and longing and begged his son to bring Shams back to Konya. Shams did come back, but some time later disappeared again one night, and he was never seen again. It is in the periods of deep sorrow and agony that Rumi began to write his mystical poetry. “Shams” means sun in Arabic, and in the words of the Rumi scholar, Annemarie Schimmel: “He, who had searched for Shams, the ‘Sun of Truth,’ in vain, discovered that he was united with him in himself. *I am him and he is me.*” (Schimmel 1988).

The oscillation between erotic desire and heavenly love is an element of much mystical writing and is widespread in Middle Eastern and Persian poetry. A peculiarity of the type of poems which are called *masnavi* is that they almost always possess, beneath the literal meaning, a subtle spiritual signification. Many poems are religious, moral or mystic, but a much larger number are allegorical. The ambiguousness with respect to erotic versus spiritual love is thus not surprising in the case of Rumi, and like the “Song of Songs”, Rumi’s verses can also be read as lyric poetry about erotic love and sexual desire.

*The tender words we said to one another  
are stored in the secret heart of heaven:  
One day like rain they will fall and spread.  
And our mystery will grow green over the world.*

Rumi was unconventional and in opposition to the establishment of his time. He was unconditionally immersed in his religion, but he questioned at the same time the spiritual assumptions of his day. By the standards of his time, his songs of union with the divine are rebellious and even blasphemous. However, Rumi scholars like Lewis (2000), author of the recent *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*, remind that when Rumi invited his listener or reader to leave the yeses and nos of conventional belief behind, he did so as a Muslim who unquestioningly accepted Mohammed as the Prophet and the Koran as God's last word. Likewise, Schimmel (1988) has criticized the vulgarization of Rumi's concept of love and the emphasis on his role as the timeless, spaceless, ecstatic, the master of Love, especially in the social circles where love of Rumi has become almost fashionable in the last decades.

It is therefore not without apprehension that the present article selects those aspects of Rumi's thoughts that seem to be applicable to contemporary psychology without due respect to their religious background. There is always a risk when disconnected parts of a philosophy or religion are removed from their original context and wedged into an entirely different background. The motivation and excuse for my approach is the experience of working with Muslim clients and patients living in Europe, and the belief that the idiom and imagery of Rumi's psychology will enhance mutual understanding and open up for more meaningful therapeutic encounters.

### Mindfulness-Based Therapies

Mindfulness entails the kind of attention characteristic of Buddhist meditative practices. Although there are many different religious and meditative practices, and although they differ between Buddhism, Taoism and Sufism, there are also many parallels among them. Izutsu (1983) who has compared the key philosophical concepts of Sufism and Taoism writes that the former goes historically speaking back to a form of Semitic monotheism, while the latter is a philosophical elaboration of the Far Eastern type of shamanism. "It is highly significant", writes Izutsu, that "they share on the philosophical level, the same ground. They agree with each other, to begin with, in that both base their philosophical thinking on a very peculiar conception of Existence which is fundamentally identical, (...) and that philosophizing in both cases has its ultimate origin not in *reasoning* about Existence but in *experiencing* Existence." (p. 479).

According to Kabat-Zinn (1990) who introduced the method of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction about 25 years ago, this approach entails the kind of attention characteristic of Buddhist meditative practices without however necessarily adopting Buddhist traditions and religious vocabulary. For Kabat-Zinn (2003), "mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment." (p. 147). It is based on certain key attitudes, so-called attitudinal foundations: being non-judgmental and accepting or observing without evaluation; being patient; having "a beginner's mind", i.e., meeting every situation as if for the first time; trusting one's intuition; non-striving and experiencing the present moment without focusing on future goals; and letting-go, in the sense of neither grasping nor pushing away. A more recent exploratory factor analysis of the items in the measures which are presently in use yielded five factors which are comparable to the above-mentioned seven key concepts of mindfulness: observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience and non-reactivity to inner experience (Baer et al. 2006).

In the last two decades, the use of mindfulness-related methods for the treatment of a variety of psychological, somatic and interpersonal problems has increased dramatically (Baer 2003, Brown et al. 2007). Several therapeutic approaches based on mindfulness have developed (e.g., “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction” (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn 1990), “Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy” (Segal et al. 2002), “Dialectical Behavior Therapy” (Linehan 1993, 1994) and “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy” (Hayes et al. 1999). These therapies will not be differentially presented here, the aim of this article being to highlight the commonality of mindfulness-based therapies in general and their relation to Rumi’s religious philosophy (for reviews of the similarities and differences between the various forms of mindfulness-based interventions, see: Baer 2003; Kabat-Zinn 2003; Ivanovski and Malhi 2007).

Most of the mindfulness therapies include the practice of meditation in addition to various methods mainly based on cognitive and/or behavioral techniques. Meditation and the training of awareness, of attention and of consciousness have been used for centuries as methods of healing mental suffering. However, during meditation, especially untrained persons experience that seemingly irrelevant thoughts, sensations or emotions go through their mind and that they cannot suppress them. The focus is generally on a mantra, a single word, sound or sensation, and the person is supposed not to be distracted and to concentrate attention exclusively on the stimulus. In contrast to many such forms of concentration-based meditation, mindfulness involves an observation rather than control of one’s present moment experience, bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings. Instead of blaming one’s self for not being able to keep the mind on track, mindfulness training suggests that these be observed carefully, without evaluating them as good, bad, wise, silly, important or trivial.

Mindfulness is not goal directed; it is not about getting anywhere or striving to achieve a more desirable state. It is about experiencing sensations that are usually blunted and even distorted by thoughts, emotions and expectations, regardless of whether they feel pleasant or unpleasant, experiencing the sensations without judgement, editing or censorship. It is this element of acceptance that differentiates mindfulness from other forms of treatment that also use meditation. Acceptance involves acknowledging thoughts and feelings without attempting to change them. It is enhanced through defusion techniques such as observing thoughts go by without engaging in them or modifying them. Such techniques have been shown, among other effects to increase participants’ willingness to experience pain in laboratory settings, and seem therefore appropriate for the treatment of depression and chronic pain (e.g., Gutierrez et al. 2004; Hayes et al. 1999; Hayes and Plumb 2007).

In the following part of this article, I will attempt to highlight how Rumi’s teachings through his tales and poems cover very similar theories and techniques of healing from an Islamic and Sufistic perspective rather than a Buddhist point of view.

## Principles of Mindfulness in Rumi’s Psychology

The key concepts in Rumi’s teachings are as follows: acceptance and acknowledgement of both positive and negative experiences; unlearning of old habits and looking at the world with new eyes; decentering, changing one’s focus from Self to Other; and attunement of body and mind through mediation, music and dance. The attainment of these psychological and spiritual states requires a facilitator or a teacher just as mindfulness training necessitates a person in authority to whom the patient turns for help. Likewise, “intentions” are considered as the foundation of development and change in both practices. Vows play a major role both in Rumi’s teachings and in more recent forms of mindfulness such as

acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). Patients are guided toward finding their deepest intentions, and they then formally commit to them (Rosch 2007).

### Accepting the Present Moment—Facing Sorrow and Pain

*The cure for pain is in the pain  
Good and bad are mixed. If you don't have both,  
you don't belong to us.  
When one of us gets lost, is not here, he must be inside us.*

The acknowledgement of the dark sides of existence and accepting to maintain contact with unpleasant and painful internal states, thoughts, sensations and emotions is a recurrent theme in Rumi's poetry. He stresses the importance of openness to all forms of experiences. In contrast to "experiential avoidance" which refers to the escape from negative experiences, Rumi could be said to advocate a lifestyle of "experiential approach". A series of mental disorders and much human suffering are exacerbated by efforts to avoid unpleasant thoughts or escape from painful memories or bodily sensations. Accepting and containing whatever arrives to us is for Rumi an act of courage and a means of gaining insight. It is comparable to the unbiased receptivity of mind that is encouraged in all mindfulness-based therapies which facilitate insight into that part of reality which remains hidden from view when we refrain from consciously experiencing what we feel.

*This being human is a guest house  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.*

Facing reality and accepting its many aspects often leads to the processes of reassessment and reframing. The term reframing in mindfulness-based cognitive therapies refers to restating the client's problems so that they can be seen in new ways. The techniques of looking at a problem from a different angle, of re-interpreting it, re-diagnosing and giving it a novel character, have always been part of any creative therapeutic practice. Also, the Sufi teacher works with stories, metaphors, poetry, spiritual practice or music, in order to get beyond and behind the defences that people generally use in order to protect themselves from fear, shame and guilt. Shifting points of view, letting-go and yet remaining observant and attentive lead to new ways of understanding and knowing, and

thus to a re-interpretation of one's situation and new ways of coping. The good Sufi teacher is one who helps the learner to overcome obstructions to the experience of joy and love as well as pain and suffering:

*Close the door of words  
That the window of your heart may open  
The Moon's kiss  
Only comes  
Through an open window*

### Unlearning and Looking at the World with "A Beginner's Mind"

Most Sufi stories aim to help us "unlearn," that is, to go beyond the emotional boundaries and mental concepts which are based on previous experiences and learning. In Umberto Eco's terms, most people travel knowing in advance what they are on the verge of discovering because past reading has told them what they are supposed to discover, and they tend to interpret their experiences on the basis of "background books" (Eco and Weaver 1998).

One of the goals of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy as well as of Rumi's teachings is to identify and change such background books, such "petrified", "distorted" or "unrealistic" ways of thinking, and thereby to influence emotion and behavior. For Rumi, we go beyond constraining boundaries when we challenge and transcend the given and traditional attitudes and norms. We find ourselves in the province of what one may call "wild mind." We discover an inner landscape that is both richer and less controlled than the safety of fixed ideas and rules, as in the story of Mulla Nasruddin:

#### *The Key in the Dark*

*It is late at night. The legendary wise fool, Mulla Nasruddin, is crawling on his hands and knees under a corner street light. A close friend discovers him and, thinking that Mulla may be a little drunk, tries to help:*

*"Mulla, let me help you up! Do you need help to find your way home?"*

*"No... no, my friend.... I've lost the key to my house. Here...get down on your hands and knees and help me look."*

*Groaning, Mulla's friend lowers himself onto the hard pavement and begins to crawl around. He makes a thorough search, peering into all the crevices in the cobblestones, gradually and laboriously widening his search. After what seems like hours, his knees are aching. No luck.*

*"Mulla, I've looked everywhere within thirty feet. Are you sure you lost your keys here?"*

*"Noo....actually, I think I lost them about a block away, over there."*

*"Mulla, Mulla— you idiot! Why are we wasting our time here then?"*

*"Well, the light was better here...."*

### Decentring

Shifting attention from the Self to the Other is another important concept in Rumi's teachings. This process is similar to "disidentification" where one ceases to identify with one's own thoughts, feelings and images. This process is similar to Piaget's "decentration," Safran's "decentering," Bohart's "detachment," Deikman's "observing self,"

Tart's "dehypnosis," Teasdale's "metacognitive awareness," Wilber's "differentiation and transcendence" and Kegan's "de-embedding" (Martin 1997; Wilber 2000).

*Your thinking is like a camel driver,  
And you are the camel;  
It drives you in every direction under its bitter control*

The concept of decentering used in the mindfulness therapies is tied to removing the focus of attention from the self toward others, in other words in becoming less egocentric and more receptive and attentive. In cognitive therapy, the term for a similar process is "cognitive-shifting", a method used in awareness management and describing the mental process of re-directing one's focus of attention away from a fixed idea or recurring thought, and toward a different focus of attention.

One of the most important outcomes of mindfulness is the reduction in inner self-talk or rumination. "Only by quieting self-chatter—the running flow of mental commentary, thoughts about the past and future, self-evaluations, judgments, and other extraneous reactions—can people remain highly attuned to their present experience" (Leary and Tate 2007, s. 251). Self-talk is reduced by continually returning attention to breathing or by mentally describing experiences with concrete, non-evaluative labels.

Also in Rumi's universe, the task of the dervish is to act from tranquility and love: to view life through the lens of our individual self as well as from the point of view of the other. The true "jihad", the real holy war for Rumi, is our own eternal battle with the "nafs": the struggle with our false self (Reinhertz 2001).

*If you could get rid  
Of yourself just once,  
The secret of secrets  
Would open to you.  
The face of the unknown,  
Hidden beyond the universe  
Would appear on the  
Mirror of your perception*

In Sufi tradition openness to the Other (as opposed to self-centeredness), a sense of feeling, devotion and compassion for others is cultivated at the outset. The development is described as spiral, the person's movement becoming more "spiritual" as it shows less domination by the ego, public opinion or conventionality.

### Meditation: Breathing and Walking

According to Walsh and Shapiro (2006), the term meditation refers to a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control and thereby foster general mental well-being and development and/or specific capacities such as calm, clarity and concentration. Additional psychological mechanisms are relaxation, exposure, desensitization, catharsis and counter-conditioning (Murphy et al. 1997). The physiological mechanisms related to meditation include reduced arousal, modified autonomic nervous system activity, stress immunization, hemispheric synchronization and laterality shifts (e.g., Cahn and Polich 2006; Davidson 2003).

The easiest and most effective way to begin practicing mindfulness as a formal meditative practice is to simply focus one's attention on breathing. "There are a number of



different places in the body where breath can be observed. ... No matter which location you choose, the idea is to be aware of the sensation that accompanies your breathing. Paying attention to your breathing means just paying attention. Nothing more.” (Kabat-Zinn 1990, p. 51).

The word “spiritual,” comes from the Latin “spiritus,” meaning “wind” or “breath.” Sufi teachers, like mindfulness trainers or yoga teachers, direct their students to experience the awareness of breathing as a means to achieve higher levels of spirituality. Breathing constitutes a link between limitation (called *nafs*) and freedom (*fana*), between body and mind (Mirdal 1994, 1998, Mirdal et al. 1998). Awareness of breathing brings better sense of body awareness similar to that cultivated by eutony, relaxation, somatic experiencing and other somatic arts therapies. The student progresses from simple awareness of the breath (its direction, duration and intensity) to a gradual release of the blocks, to effortless breathing.

Breathing practices in the Sufi tradition elicit greater awareness as well as an interruption of habitual maladaptive patterns of breathing. In the use of these practices, one needs a teacher to ensure that one’s habitual patterns of breathing are not displaced onto the practice—thereby making the practice itself part of the problem.

*Breathe into  
me. Close the language- door and  
open the love window. The moon  
won’t use the door, only the window.*

Traditional Sufi walking practices are also encouraged because they enhance the ability to distinguish various states of awareness and control them. Since walking is a movement used in everyday life, the walking meditations in this Sufi tradition bridge the gap between the seemingly divine and seemingly commonplace. One source of these walking meditations is a traditional aphorism of the Naqshibandi Sufi order: “Look down and see whose feet are those that walk.” In the introductory walking practices, the participant may be told simply to walk breathing “in the feet” or another part of the body, or to be aware of the rhythm of the breath. After becoming aware, one is enjoined to try a different rhythm by comparison, a different direction or intensity of breathing, or a different intention of feeling (for instance, walking toward a goal). One is asked to become aware of any changes in the inner state, and any thoughts or emotions that may arise.

The next step in refinement of the walking meditations involves concentration on breathing in different centers of the body. This involves altering the direction, intensity and duration of the breathing and enlarging the body awareness to notice small differences of perception. For instance, students may be encouraged to feel the elements as the body awareness of the bones/ligaments (earth), muscles/connective tissue (water), heart/lungs/bloodstream (fire) and skin (air) (Douglas-Klotz 2002).

The psychiatrist Eugene d’Aquili and radiologist Andrew Newberg have used brain-imaging (SPECT) to study Buddhists during meditation and Franciscan nuns at prayer (D’Aquili and Newberg 1998; Newberg and Iversen 2003; Newberg et al. 2003, 2010). When subjects reported a feeling of boundless perspective and self-transcendence during meditation, the researchers found decreased blood flow in the brain’s “object association areas” where perceptions between boundary and self are normally processed. Their hypothesis is that the ultimate mystical state of “hyperlucid unitary consciousness often experienced as God” (e.g. Nirvana, unio mystica) occurs when the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems are both discharging at maximal levels, with neither predominating (Atran 2002).

## Attunement of Body and Mind Through Music and Dance

Already in early times, the Sufis were attacked because of their fondness for music; a beautiful voice might induce them to ecstasy, regardless of whether the context of the text was from the Koran, the Divine word or a profane love poem. They often indulged in whirling movement to attain ecstasy in sessions called “*sema*”, where they whirled around their axis, often rending their garments so that not only orthodox circles but also more sober groups among the mystics were scandalized (Schimmel 1988).

A key feature of the creativity of human worship, not only in Sufism but also in many mystical movements and meditative traditions, is the use of music in social ritual. In a survey of persons who reported a religious experience, music emerges as the single most important elicitor of the experience (49% of cases), followed by prayer (48%) and attending group services (41%). Reading the Bible (31%) and being alone in church (30%) trail significantly behind (Greeley 1989).

According to Friedlander (1992), the dervishes develop an independent center of balance that can lead to a sense of “being turned” rather than turning. The dervish’s attention must absolutely remain on the breath, the arms are upraised, one palm reaches up, the other down “as the turning dervish presents the image of a funnel receiving from the heavens and giving to the earth”. The movement and the music reinforce the impression of transcendence to higher spiritual levels, and the experience of “not-self” gets stronger (Douglas-Klotz 2002).

*A secret turning in us  
Makes the universe turn.  
Head unaware of feet,  
And feet head. Neither cares.  
They keep turning.*

### “Flow” and Letting-Go

Passion is considered to be one of the nine attributes that create the power of flow, a concept described by Csikszentmihalyi in the early 1990 s and the subject of considerable study and publishing since that time. Flow is a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1990). The experience of flow comprises the following elements:

- *Clear goals* (expectations and rules are discernible, and goals are attainable and align appropriately with one’s skill set and abilities).
- *Concentrating and focusing* (a high degree of concentration on a limited field of attention (a person engaged in the activity will have the opportunity to focus and to delve deeply into it).
- *Loss of the feeling of self-consciousness* (the merging of action and awareness).
- *Distorted sense of time*—one’s subjective experience of time is altered.
- *Balance between ability level and challenge* (the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult).
- *Control* over the situation or activity.
- *Effortlessness of action*.

Although the term “flow” is not used in Rumi’s work, many of its characteristics are related to the elements of the state described above:

*Let go of your worries  
and be completely clear-hearted  
like the face of a mirror  
that contains no images.*

*When it is empty of forms,  
all forms are contained in it.  
No face would be ashamed  
to be so clear.*

*This is to love: to fly toward a secret sky,  
to cause a hundred veils to fall each moment  
First, to let go of life.  
In the end, to take a step without feet.  
To regard this world as invisible,  
and to disregard what appears to the self*

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this article, I have attempted to illustrate the compatibility between one of the presently most widespread forms of treatment in contemporary western psychology, namely mindfulness-based therapy, and a religious and poetic way of understanding and dealing with the problems of living, namely the teaching of the Sufi poet, Rumi. The aim of this article is not to encourage the introduction of new religious practices to professional psychotherapy; it is to draw attention to some concepts of personhood and to images and idioms which although rooted in non-western cultures can be a source of inspiration for modern approaches to the treatment of stress and suffering.

The common aspect of the different forms of mindfulness-based therapies is their use of some methods of Buddhist meditative practices. The success of mindfulness is however not due to a faithful transposition of Buddhism to modern psychology. As a matter of fact, eastern religious teachings are applied to mindfulness therapy without adopting Buddhist traditions and religious vocabulary, and most often, the translation of practices is conducted in highly unorthodox ways (Elsass, [in press](#)). This re-interpretation of the practices of an eastern religion in the light of the psychological and spiritual needs of modern men and women in western societies could be criticized from a religious or theological point of view. It has however contributed to making mindfulness accessible and understandable to a bigger audience for the benefit of a large group of people. A similar process of re-interpretation could be attempted with respect to Rumi's teachings, because the practices that he advocates are deeply embedded in local Muslim communities and convey a sense of continuity while intertwining with modern discourses of commerce, science and progress (Froggett 2001).

Most psychiatrist and clinical psychologist trained within a scientific and academic context find it difficult to incorporate a spiritual dimension in their professional work. With the exception of pastoral counsellors, the majority of health professionals are not trained to be attentive and receptive to the religious aspects of their patients' lives, they do not feel comfortable with the subject and many patients do not even bring up spiritual issues in therapy for fear of being disapproved. This is possibly even truer of patients with a Muslim background, even when religion is a very important part of their existence.

The argument proposed in this article is that the universal wisdom of Rumi's philosophy, originating from Islamic thought and yet adapted to the challenges of the modern world, could be a source of inspiration for transcultural psychotherapists. It is neither necessary nor desirable for western psychologists and psychiatrists to become religious counsellors, thereby assuming functions for which they are not qualified. It is however possible to cultivate an interest for the religious experiences of clients and patients and to listen to them with an open mind and an open heart. The healing potential of the therapeutic relationship is only activated when it is attuned to the meaning ascribed by individuals to their distress and suffering. I have argued that Rumi's teaching and poetry could be a tool for the attunement of meaning in the alliance between patient and therapist, especially when they belong to different cultures.

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