Rabi`a al-Adawiyya, or Rabi`a al-Qaysiyya

who was born in Basra, Iraq between the years 95 A.H. and 99 A.H. (about 717 C.E.).
She prayed: ‘O God! If I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine Everlasting Beauty.’

In Sufism, in common with many mystical traditions, there are two paths: first for those who seek a Master (Pir) to act as an intermediary on ‘The Way, the second for those who do not see the footprints of ‘creatures of God ’ before them but God only do they seek. Of the latter, Rabi’ā is highly acclaimed.

Sufi doctrine of Union with the Divine teaches that our duty is to overcome all that is ‘Not-Being’ to achieve absorption, which is only fully possible after death of the body, but of which glimpses are known in life. We overcome ‘Not-Being’ through Love, overwhelming Love and Gnosis.

On the Way there are 'states', (ahwâl), and 'stations', (maqâmât), and in these comparisons may be considered with 'The Interior Castle' of St Teresa of Avila. A ‘state’ is temporary while once a ‘station’ has been achieved then it is permanent.

Repentance (tawba):
‘O Beloved of hearts, I have none like unto Thee, therefore have pity this day on a sinner who comes to thee. O my Hope and my Rest and my Delight, the heart can love none other but Thee.’
Rabi’ā’s teaching on repentance is that tawba is a gift from God and not due to the effort of the person......’If God turns towards thee, you will turn to Him.’ So she would also say, ‘To ask forgiveness of God, itself needs forgiveness.’ Together with other such saints she is often to be found weeping for those moments in her life when she felt separated through sin.

Patience (sabr):
Life is full of the swings of fortune and Rabi’ā lost the freedom in her family when she was sold into slavery by bandits. Then again she was freed but into a life of poverty. Patience is the quiet presence behind these continual changes and when Rabi’ā was told, ‘Seek what it is that you desire from God’, she replied:
‘If I will a thing and my Lord does not will it, I shall be guilty of unbelief.’

Gratitude (shukr):
Gratitude is the partner of patience and sub-divides into faith, feeling and action. This faith that all things come from God produces the feelings of joy and humility and hope. These feelings lead to actions: acts of gratitude in the forms of praise and thanksgiving.
There is an often related story of Rabi’a’s response to her maidservant who was in the garden on a beautiful day. ‘O mistress, come and see the works of God.’ called the maidservant.
‘Come you inside that you may behold their Maker. Contemplation of the Maker has turned me aside from contemplating what He has made.’

In order to understand that fully we may consider the words of later Sufi poets, Jami: and Baba Kuhi of Shiraz.
'His Beauty everywhere does show Itself, and through the forms of earthly beauties shine, obscured as through a veil..................Where'er you see a veil, beneath that veil He hides.'

'In the market, in the cloister...only God I saw. In the valley, on the mountain, only God I saw. Him I have seen beside me oft in tribulation; In favour and in fortune only God I saw. In prayer and in fasting, in praise and contemplation, in the religion of the Prophet...only God I saw. Neither soul nor body, accident nor substance, qualities nor causes...only God I saw. Like a candle I was melting in His fire. Amidst the flames outflashing...only God I saw. Myself with my own eyes I saw most clearly, but when I looked with God's eyes...only God I saw. I passed away into nothingness, I vanished, and lo, I was the All-living...only God I saw.'

With such aspirations we can understand why Rabi'a would put aside two stations on the way, hope and fear, which are important for some Sufis, when she prays: ' O God! If I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise: but if I worship Thee for thine own sake, withhold not Thine Everlasting Beauty.'

And why her answer to the question, 'Why do you not ask God for Paradise?' she replied: 'The Neighbour before the house.'

Poverty (faqr):
Poverty, asceticism or renunciation, is the complete merging of the individual will in the Will of God. As such it is a high station in Sufism and when Rabi'a was early on her spiritual path Attar tells a story of her pilgrimage to Mecca. She had reached Mt. Arafat where the Prophet had given his farewell sermon when she heard the voice of God saying to her,' O you who invoke Me, what request have you to make of Me? If it is Myself you desire then I will show you one flash of My Glory but in that you will be absorbed and melt away.'

Rabi'a replied,' O Lord of Glory, Rabi'a has no means of attaining to that degree but I desire one particle of spiritual poverty'
The voice replied, 'When but a hair's breadth remains between them and Union with Us, everything is changed and Union becomes separation.'

Renunciation (zuhd):
Renunciation is the companion of this poverty and the final veil is the renunciation of renunciation itself. On this way, the renouncing of worldly things leads to a sweetness of inner contentment, peace and these too are renounced so that an even finer sweetness arises. Ultimately renunciation leads to an intimacy with God and this intimacy is the mystic state called 'uns'. So we may say that on this way at first we renounce that which is unlawful, then that which is lawful and then finally the renunciation of all that distracts one from the Supreme, the zuhd of the gnostics. This is a subtle path and some stories of Rabi'a help explain.
She went to a teacher called Sufyan who was lifting up his hands and saying, 'O God, I ask Thee for freedom from this world.' And Rabi'a wept. Sufyan asked why she was weeping:

'You are the cause of my weeping. Do you not know that freedom from this world comes only from renouncing what is in it and how can that be when you are defiled by it?'

Sufyan asked her,' What is the best thing the servant to do who desires proximity to his Lord?'

Rabi'a said, 'That the servant should possess nothing in this world or the next, save Him.'

Unification (tawhid):
The union of the lover with the Beloved is central to so much of Sufi poetry but it is to be noted that at this particular station it is unification of the drop of water with the ocean rather than union.

Renunciation involves unification and we may see this in the words of the Christian mystic, Bernard of Clairvaux, who taught that the drop of water may appear to be absorbed in the wine yet the two are different, iron may take on the heat and colour of the fire but the two remain distinct substances. 'So it is with the natural life of saints; they seem to melt and pass away into the Will of God.'

In the story of her life this process can be observed and there is the common thread: 'My hope is for Union with Thyself: for that is the goal of my desire.'

Love (mahabba):
'I have loved Thee with two loves, a selfish love and a love that is worthy of Thee. As for the love which is selfish, I occupy myself therein with remembrance of Thee to the exclusion of others, As for that which is worthy of Thee, therein Thou raisest the veil that I may see Thee. Yet there is no praise to me in this or that, but the praise is to Thee in that or this.'

In these words Rabi'a gives us the final stations of love (agape?), gnosis, vision and union. They are the homecoming of a journey from the discovery of our state of separation, through the yearning of repentance, patience and gratitude, encouragement by a flash of a vision of the Beloved until the call becomes irresistible, until the Word of the call unites in Itself.

We may consider three aspects of these final stations in which the relationship between the lover and the beloved becomes intimate, with two sides, as it were:

- **Satisfaction (rida):** Out of submission to the divine will, through patience, emerges a satisfaction that mirrors the satisfaction of God with the penitent. So a central Sufi teaching is, 'If my heart is satisfied with God Most High I know that He is satisfied with me. ( Al Qushayri ).

  Jafar asked Rabi'a,'When is the servant satisfied with God Most High?'
  'When his pleasure in misfortune is equal to his pleasure in prosperity.'

- **Yearning (shawq):** In this station the feeling of intimacy intensifies and Al Sarraj describes it, 'the fire of God Most High which He has kindled in the hearts of His
saints, so that it may burn up all vain desires and wishes and hindrances and needs.' In its highest degree this yearning burns up itself for it realises that the absence that has been felt is in fact a proximity and as the heart rejoices the longing departs.

Rabi'a said:

*The groaning and the yearning of the lover of God will not be satisfied until it is satisfied in the Beloved.*

- **Fellowship (uns):** Where the worshipper feels awe, the lover finds intimacy. Once again, this intimacy arises from a feeling of proximity which merges into a final station. Even the intimacy of proximity is transcended. Rabi'a was asked 'What is love?' and her answer is based upon Qu'ran V.59: 'Love has come from Eternity and passes into Eternity and none has been found in seventy thousand worlds who drinks one drop of it until at last is absorbed in God, and from that comes the saying, "He loves them, his saints, and they love Him."'

**Gnosis (ma'rif)**

The love that comes from eternity burns up all previous formulations and interpretations so Rumi wrote: *'How long wilt thou dwell on words and superficialities? A burning heart is what I want; consort with burning! Kindle in thy heart the flame of love, And burn up utterly thoughts and fine expressions. O Moses! the lovers of fair rites are one class, they whose hearts and souls burn with love are another. Lovers must burn every moment.'*

With the removal of limited knowledge fullness flashes and the lover appears as a madman who has no power to govern his or her own state. Al Ghazali, a major Sufi writer, was commenting on the above words of Rabi'a when he wrote: *'If someone reaches this high knowledge he or she will be attacked because their words have passed beyond the limits of their minds, and many will consider such speech mad and unbelieving.'*

**Vision (munazala)**

These later stations have the mutual quality that they are both points of ascending and descending: the ascent belongs to us and the descent is of God. With the enlightened eye of gnosis the mystic gazes upon that vision, and thus beholding, is rapt up into union with the Divine. But this 'beholding' is also a state of supreme listening for it has been born out of the earlier station of 'patience.'

Ibn al Farid has been called the greatest of Sufi poets and his words summarise Rabi'a's vision:

*With my Beloved alone I have been, when secrets more tender than evening airs passed,*
*And the Vision blest was granted to my prayers, that crowned me, else obscure with endless fame.*
*The while amazed between His Beauty and his Majesty I stood in silent ecstasy revealing that which o'er my spirit went and came.*
*Lo, in His face commingled is every charm and grace;*  
*The whole of Beauty singled into a perfect face beholding Him would cry: "There is no God but he, and he is the Most High."'*
This is where the final veil disappears and the Qu'ranic verse is understood:
'I am closer to you than your jugular vein.' Qu'ran 50.16

**Union (wasl)**

It is now that we meet a very fine distinction in this concept of union and only those with direct experience know it in reality while others may write their books of explanation. We may talk of 'The Unity of the Manyness' and the 'Unity of the One', the latter only ever Itself. Rabi'a wrote:
'My hope is for union with Thee for that is the goal of my desire.'
'I have ceased to exist and have passed out of self. I am become one with Him and am altogether His.'

'Up, O ye lovers, and away! 'Tis time to leave the world for aye.
Hark, loud and clear from heaven the 'from' of parting calls-let none delay!

O heart, toward they heart's love wend, and O friend, fly toward the Friend,
Be wakeful, watchman, to the end: drowse seemingly no watchman may.' Rumi

..............................

Rabi'a was in her early to mid-eighties when she died, having followed the mystic Way to the end. By then, she was continually united with her Beloved. As she told her Sufi friends, "My Beloved is always with me".
..............................

Some years after Rabi'a, out of 12th Century Cordoba, came Ibn Al Arabi and his many works are increasingly available in the West. Here is what he wrote on the veils, gnosis and union:

After examination, classification, and what has been given by Eternal Speech, we see that Thou art Thyself the veils. That is why the veils are also veiled and we do not see them, though they are light and darkness. They are what Thou hast named 'Thyself', the 'Manifest' and the 'Unmanifest'.
So Thou art the veil. We are veiled from Thee through Thee, and Thou art veiled from us only through Thy manifestation. However, we do not recognise Thee, since we seek Thee from Thy name, just as we look for a king by his name, even if he should be with us, but not manifest in that name and that attribute.
God has a manifestation through His essence, so He talks to us and we talk to Him; He witnesses us and we witness Him; He recognises us and we recognise Him.
....But we do not recognise that He is He until He gives us knowledge.....The gnostics never cease witnessing nearness continuously.....and that is nothing but the self-disclosure of the Real.'

**Reference**

Margaret Smith,  *Rabi’a and other Muslim Women Mystics*, 1922.

(Republished in 1994 and 2001 by Oneworld with new introduction by Professor Anne Marie Schimmel.)