

THE CONFLUENCE OF WISDOM ALONG THE SILK ROAD

Omar Khayyam's Transformative Poetry

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Cover design by Foaad Farah.

This book is dedicated to Razia, Nadia, and Shukria, Afghan sisters orphaned since 2002 who, against all the odds, have created a life for themselves in Kabul. Now all in their twenties, Razia is a Montessori preschool teacher, and Nadia and Shukria are midwifery students. Their will to seize life and go forward should enliven courage and optimism in those of us who sometimes lose hope.



The cosmos in commotion is an echo of our degenerating body;
The Oxus River is an expression of our untainted tears;
Purgatory is but a flare of our futile anguishes;
And paradise is made up of the moments of our tranquility.

- Khayyam

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Prelude

Personal remarks

In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, tumultuous events have befallen our modern world ranging from expansionism, dictatorship, religious fundamentalism, gender inequality, human rights violation, refugee crises, climate change, the lingering effects of colonialism, and the Coronavirus pandemic, as well as the age-old human problems of poverty, angst, insecurities, and existential confusion. The beginning of the twentieth century also saw similarly serious global circumstances when in the first quarter of the century, the world experienced devastation due to World War I, colonialism, ongoing slavery, and the Influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 (Spanish flu), which is estimated to have infected almost one-third of the world population with about 50 million deaths, followed by a stark economic depression.

In the face of those seemingly hopeless events at the beginning of the last century, some in society sought psychological solace in a variety of ways. Perhaps feeling the need for a fresh start and different answers, people began exploring new realms in order to change things for the better, including Eastern spirituality, philosophy and countercultural pursuits as means of transformation and self-therapy. Poetry, literature, music, art, and cinema also became agencies of adjustment in order to heal psychological wounds and engage in soul-searching.

Post-WWI, one particular book gained increasing attention among such seekers—the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. This collection of poetry offered a simple message of living a joyful life. A large number of translations enabled widespread reading of the 900-year-old *Rubaiyat*, and Omar Khayyam clubs sprang up in America and England, evidence of how much people craved his message during a dark time.

In our new century, we are again walking a thin existential line in safeguarding our vulnerable social and individual psyches. And once again, the philosophical poetry of Khayyam is proving to be effective in keeping psychological turmoil at bay. His poetry often prompts a paradigm shift in readers towards viewing the world in a realistic and joyful light. It entails taking an uncorrupted, secular look at nature the way exactly as it presents itself, bringing thinkers closer to nature and appeasing their confusing fears and beliefs. Prescient Khayyam was aware that if such confusing fears are removed, natural joy gradually takes their place. Khayyam's poetry, in fact, was much more than just poetic lines. It presented a philosophy of life.

Perhaps Khayyam's philosophical poetry resonates so much for us because Khayyam himself also lived during a very tumultuous period. His verses were composed during critical times, for critical times, especially for people struggling with the politics of the day while doubting the meaning of their own lives. Khayyam was well aware that the combination of sociopolitical and psychological factors can deeply entangle people in life's quandaries, and issues of Khayyam's world in the twelfth century were not all that different from those we face today.

Other great thinkers have also offered philosophy combined with poetry as a counterbalancing force. Laozi (Lao Tzu) and Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu), the founders of Daoism, wrote their treatises between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C.E, during China's brutal state wars and the accompanying repugnant bloodshed and inflammatory politics of the day. Laozi and Zhuangzi invited people to focus instead on character-building and psychological peacefulness rather than the agonies of war.

The same reformative stance was taken by the first century B.C.E. Roman poet and Epicurean philosopher Lucretius. He composed a 7,400-lined poetic treatise not only releasing people from fallacious religious understandings about the workings of nature, but also advising Romans to seek their own pleasure in life and liberate themselves from the shackles of the Roman imperial ambitions. Lucretius's rebellious position has had profound application in inculcating a deeper understanding of life and death, as well as valuing life in its given beauty. He encouraged people to diligently take care of themselves rather than to be politically or socially manipulated.

The poet Khayyam also encouraged emancipation from shackles of all sorts, whether political, religious, social, or psychological. The eleventh and twelfth centuries were a period when the military demagogues of the Seljuq Dynasty, Ismaili militias, ambitions of outside power contenders, and the gloomy prospect of a fanatical religious culture loomed over people's sense of well-being and security. Given the desperate psychological necessity, he wrote the *Rubaiyat* for people during these times, but in fact, the religious environment was too sensitive for the poems to be openly circulated, and few of his contemporaries had the chance to benefit from it. But fortunately, it survived, and his message has been highly relevant ever since.

Besides being a poet, Khayyam was a mathematician. His empirical, rationalist nature rebelled against unsubstantiated theories and claims regarding the reason for existence, the role of god, and beliefs of an afterlife as promoted by religion. His empirical poetry stood the test of time by pointing to nature and its verifiable body of unbreachable laws. The only verifiable purpose for life that Khayyam could identify was to do one's best to live with a relaxed, painless, and joyful state of being in this abundant world for as long as one's life lasted.

The prescient language of the *Rubaiyat*, even after 900 years, still echoes the same longings most of us seek in this life. Khayyam warned that if self-care is neglected and postponed to some obscure notion of ‘tomorrow,’ the pleasure of living in the now is irreversibly lost. He poured out Zen-style verses to remind readers that each moment of life is complete in itself, by itself, and that the incompleteness manifests itself only in the mental states of people who are not yet aware. The natural world lives independently for itself, unattached to our feelings of pain and joy, and in Khayyam’s view, acknowledging this liberating fact is the first step towards having a pleasant life.

Khayyam’s message offers a philosophical and universal mandate that is both transformative and therapeutic. The rediscovery of Khayyam’s legacy is a rediscovery of the rational wisdom of the ongoing human odyssey. His poetry is not merely for reading and understanding in the moment, but it is for developing an integrative knowledge of life—for implementing it and taking it one step further, beyond an intellectual understanding, towards ‘post-understanding.’ The present book with its intertwined subjects of anthropological philosophy and therapeutic philosophy presents a more modern approach towards the *Rubaiyat* not only to better understand Khayyamian thought and its cultural interconnections today, but also to offer a new perspective on using his poetry for personal transformation, particularly in difficult times.

The Confluence of Wisdom

This book is a first effort to trace the themes of the *Rubaiyat* back to powerful Hellenic, Chinese and Indian philosophical traditions by uncovering surprising parallels in original works by Heraclitus, Zhuangzi (Daoism), Nagarjuna (Mahayana Buddhism), and the Upanishads. Given the healing power of the ideas within such ancient wisdom traditions over the course of centuries, connecting them with the central themes of the *Rubaiyat* enables us to look at Khayyam’s work in a therapeutic light and see the *Rubaiyat* as a source of wisdom therapy and a psychological alternative.

In general, there have been two dominant approaches to Khayyam as a philosopher, and the two somewhat contrasting approaches have inadvertently overlapped each other. In one approach, Khayyam is seen as a scholastically conformist philosopher feasibly influenced by mysticism and the author of six treatises closely oriented to the Aristotelian-Avicennian-style of classic “*falsafa*.” But in the other approach, he is seen as a freethinker with a hidden life, secretly pouring out verses about a naturalist-hedonist philosophy in creating what would eventually become the *Rubaiyat*. The present book focuses on this second approach because the first approach is insufficient to support or explain the wide-ranging themes of the *Rubaiyat*.

There are numerous publications on Omar Khayyam and many translations of his *Rubaiyat*. But the idea and methodology of the present book are radically different because the narrative takes a wider approach, situating Khayyam and his ideas in the cultural corridors of the Silk Road through exploring his cosmopolitan and inclusive positions. The book presents in three parts: first, the transformative ideas of Khayyam in connection with four ancient schools of philosophy; secondly, the therapeutic aspects of Khayyam's poetry; and finally, a fresh translation of the *Rubaiyat* with a unique classification of his quatrains.

Part I entails an investigation of the cultural and intellectual interactions among the major cities of the Silk Road, particularly in the Central Asian-Eastern Iranian region of Khayyam's birth. Since his hometown of Nishapur was situated at the intersection of the Iranian, Indian, and Chinese worlds and Greek philosophical works were also readily available, it is highly probable that Khayyam studied and perhaps even borrowed from the philosophies of Heraclitus, Zhuangzi, Nagarjuna and the Upanishads. The similarities to these works that echo in the *Rubaiyat* hint at the interconnections among ancient wisdoms circulating freely along the Silk Road over the centuries.

In Part II, four essays explore therapeutic perspectives that broaden the psychological utility of Khayyam's poetry. They show how Khayyam counted on the power of words and images for the deconstruction of unreason and the process of unshackling the mind from misleading perceptions of reality and explain how these are themselves powerful steps to alleviating existential discontent. Khayyam's bluntness about inescapable natural laws is a reminder to turn off the "hot" cognition which generates overpowering emotions and unfounded beliefs and, far more gravely, can breed stressful states.

His verses simultaneously turn on a "cold" cognition, cooling down the mind for a judicious accessing of the true nature of existence while also energizing an appreciation for life the way it flows. The cold cognition that Khayyam turns on praises the beauty of life for what it has for us here-and-now, rather than focusing on what it lacks or for all that has gone. Khayyam declares the perspective of happiness to be inherent in us; it simply has to be reawakened. We are reminded to enjoy the day at hand—'carpe diem therapy.' It is actually this aspect of his poetry that contributed to the reputation of hedonism associated with the *Rubaiyat*. But more than merely being a hedonist, Khayyam was a pathbreaker in terms of being aware of how one lived daily life. What was called 'hedonism' was, in fact, Khayyam's approach to living a life in the moment with a balanced appreciation for the nature of reality. In addition, the philosophy of life in his poetry became a conduit for alternative social thinking, stepping outside of dogmatic and tyrannical cultures. Khayyam himself epitomized the counterculture movement of his time by valuing logic and rationality over the claims of culture.

The impetus for a fresher translation of poems that comes in Part III was not only to bring the words and ideas of Khayyam in Persian¹ closer to the meaning Khayyam most probably intended, but also to contextualize his ideas in the nexus of the philosophies prevalent on the Silk Road during his time. In addition, a new re-classification of the verses of the *Rubaiyat* divides the quatrains into five sections following Khayyam's stepwise approach to life. The order of the five categories highlights the expected progression of life and the human experience of it and Khayyam's corresponding recommendations. The aim here is to correct misinterpretations of Khayyam being either depressing and nihilistic, or frivolously hedonistic. Such extreme or one-sided views of Khayyam are not keeping the whole body of his work in view and have thus been detrimental to a fuller understanding of his philosophy and stance on existential issues. In fact, Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* represents a broader balanced picture of life, presenting two sides of the same coin: not burying joy under the sting of death, nor covering up the pain of death by imagining endless joy. In an image arising from his Silk Road roots, Khayyam described life as a steady stream of "caravans" of people who are born on earth for their impermanent stay to simply to take delight in the flowing joy of now before moving on.

Taken all together, this volume presents two major layers of Khayyam's work. The *outer* layer or the 'skin' is an anthropological study connecting the origins and similarities of Khayyam's intellectual ideas and inspirations to other ancient cultures and philosophies. This goal leads us to embrace an intercultural approach in exploring the larger context of philosophical ideas on the vibrant culture of the Silk Road.

The *inner* layer of this study, or the 'heart,' concentrates on the key existential messages of the *Rubaiyat*. This includes the archetypal messages of the *Rubaiyat* and their interpretation in the context of what matters in life, regardless of where and when. The essence of these inner meanings, as extracted from the entire premise of the *Rubaiyat*, lies in the cultivation of contentment while living in harmony with nature.

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¹ As for the translation of original quatrains of Khayyam, I have translated the entire 143 *Rubais* from Sādiq Hedayat, *Tarāneh-hāye Khayyam*, (Tehran: Entesharat Javidan, 1934).

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