

# Forever in Ascent

Al-Qushayrī on the Persistence of Spiritual States and Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī  
on the Vanishing Claim of the Self

*A study of ḥāl, maqām, shurb, maʿrifa, and the logic of unending spiritual ascent*

*Hassan Al Ma'bari*

فَأَبَدًا يَكُونُ فِي التَّرَقِّي

*“Thus he is forever in ascent.”*

*Al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla*

The classical Sufi doctrine of *ḥāl* is often reduced to a simple question of duration. Is a spiritual state something that flashes upon the heart and quickly disappears, or can it remain and become an abiding condition of the seeker? The early sources reveal that the problem is considerably deeper. The masters are not merely debating how long a spiritual experience lasts. They are asking how a state enters the heart, what distinguishes a divine visitation from an acquired station, whether a fleeting experience can become inwardly established, and what happens to the seeker’s awareness of himself once that transformation has taken root.

Al-Qushayrī provides one of the most sophisticated accounts of this entire problem. He preserves the older teaching that a *ḥāl* may descend like lightning and vanish almost as suddenly as it appeared. Yet he also records another position according to which a genuine state may become enduring, and his own explanation ultimately favors this second understanding. What makes his treatment especially remarkable is that endurance never becomes spiritual immobility. A divine meaning may settle within the heart, but newer and subtler visitations continue to arise above it. The servant can therefore become established without becoming complete. Earlier grace becomes the ground upon which a higher grace may descend, which is why al-Qushayrī can say that the seeker remains “**forever in ascent.**”

Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī illuminates another dimension of this doctrine. His securely transmitted sayings do not establish him as the simple representative of an opposing view in which every authentic

state must necessarily be momentary. That formulation belongs much more clearly to al-Junayd. Bāyazīd instead turns attention toward the self that experiences the state. For him, the realized knower reaches a point at which he no longer regards a station or state as something belonging to himself. Al-Qushayrī therefore gives us the most complete account of how spiritual transformation develops and endures, while Bāyazīd reveals what must happen inwardly if that transformation is not to become another possession of the ego.

## 1. States are gifts while stations are acquisitions

Al-Qushayrī begins with the fundamental distinction between *ḥāl* and *maqām*. The essential difference is not initially one of duration. It concerns the manner in which each is received. A *maqām* is associated with spiritual acquisition through discipline, worship, struggle, and sustained practice. A *ḥāl* arrives as a bestowal that the seeker cannot simply manufacture through his own effort.

He expresses the distinction in one of the most concise formulas of the *Risāla*.

فَالْأَحْوَالُ مَوَاهِبٌ وَالْمَقَامَاتُ مَكَاسِبٌ

“States are gifts, whereas stations are acquisitions.”

He then immediately adds another statement that gives the doctrine its dynamic character.

وَصَاحِبُ الْحَالِ مُتَرَقٍّ عَنْ حَالِهِ

“The possessor of a state is ascending beyond his state.”

This second sentence is indispensable. A state may be divinely bestowed and genuinely present within the heart, yet the person who receives it is never meant to regard it as the final horizon of the path. The gift itself becomes the ground of further movement. The seeker is transformed by what has been received, but that transformation enlarges his capacity for what may still be given.

This also explains why an enduring *ḥāl* does not automatically become a *maqām*. If duration alone distinguished the two, every lasting state would eventually cease to be a state. Al-Qushayrī’s distinction is more subtle. A condition may remain a divine bestowal even after it becomes deeply rooted. Its persistence alters the way the servant inhabits the gift, but it does not necessarily transform that gift into something acquired through his own effort.

The first principle of al-Qushayrī’s account is therefore already clear. Spiritual stability and spiritual movement are not opposites. A state may become real and settled precisely while the seeker continues to be raised beyond the degree in which he currently stands.

## 2. The older teaching of the lightning flash

The clearest early formulation of the transient theory appears in Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's *al-Luma'*, where he preserves a definition attributed to al-Junayd.

الْحَالُ نَازِلَةٌ تَنْزِلُ بِالْقُلُوبِ فَلَا تَدُومُ

*"A state is a visitation that descends upon hearts, and it does not endure."*

Al-Qushayrī knows this understanding and preserves an even more vivid expression of it.

الْأَحْوَالُ كَالْبُرُوقِ فَإِنْ بَقِيَ حَدِيثُ نَفْسٍ

*"States are like flashes of lightning. If one remains, it is the discourse of the self."*

The image expresses a genuine early Sufi concern. Lightning appears suddenly, illuminates what had been hidden, and disappears before the observer can possess it. A divine state may act upon the heart in much the same way. It arrives without being summoned, reveals something that ordinary consciousness could not produce for itself, and passes beyond the seeker's control.

The warning concerning a state that remains must therefore be understood within this concern for divine gratuity. If the seeker can reproduce an experience whenever he wishes, continually turn toward it, or begin defining himself by it, the masters feared that what remains may no longer be the original visitation. The ego may preserve an image of the experience and then mistake that image for the experience itself. What began as divine interruption may gradually become spiritual self contemplation.

This older teaching should not simply be attributed to Bāyazīd. The explicit early authority for the definition that a state descends and does not endure is al-Junayd as transmitted by al-Sarrāj. Bāyazīd's important sayings on the subject concern something different. They do not primarily define how long the state lasts. They describe what happens to the knower's claim over whatever state may be present.

## 3. Al-Qushayrī and the persistence of aḥwāl

Al-Qushayrī next records another group of masters whose understanding moves in the opposite direction.

وَأَشَارَ قَوْمٌ إِلَى بَقَاءِ الْأَحْوَالِ وَدَوَامِهَا

*"A group held to the persistence and continuity of the states."*

For these masters, an experience that merely appears and disappears may not yet deserve to be called a fully established *ḥāl*. It may belong instead to the preliminary flashes and sudden spiritual

inrushes that precede a settled state. According to this understanding, the state reaches its maturity when the divine meaning becomes continuous within the heart.

Al-Qushayrī illustrates the position through Abū ‘Uthmān al-Ḥirī, who is reported to have said that for forty years God had not placed him in a condition that he disliked. Al-Qushayrī interprets this as evidence for the continuity of *riḍā*, or contentment, and explicitly places *riḍā* among the spiritual states.

The point is not that Abū ‘Uthmān experienced one unchanging emotion for four decades. Contentment in this context is far deeper than a passing emotional feeling. It is an inward orientation toward the divine determination. Outward circumstances may change dramatically, and the servant may still encounter grief, difficulty, relief, or joy, yet the deeper orientation of the heart remains established in acceptance of God.

This distinction allows al-Qushayrī to affirm real continuity without reducing the spiritual path to emotional sameness. A person may remain established in contentment while encountering new trials. He may remain established in trust while discovering more demanding forms of dependence upon God. He may remain established in love while entering depths of love that were previously beyond his experience.

Al-Qushayrī’s subsequent explanation makes clear that he regards the affirmation of enduring states as fundamentally correct. Yet he does not solve the disagreement merely by rejecting the masters who compared states to lightning. Instead, he develops a model capable of explaining why both transience and permanence can appear within the same spiritual life.

#### 4. From tasting to drinking and from stability to further ascent

The key to al-Qushayrī’s synthesis lies in the language of *shurb*. A spiritual meaning may eventually become the servant’s *shurb*, his drink or inward draught. Elsewhere in the *Risāla*, al-Qushayrī explains the imagery through a progression from *dhawq* to *shurb* and finally to *riyy*.

وَأَوَّلُ ذَلِكَ الذَّوْقُ ثُمَّ الشُّرْبُ ثُمَّ الرَّيُّ

“The beginning of that is tasting, then drinking, then quenching.”

The imagery describes increasing assimilation. Taste gives an immediate but limited encounter with the reality. Drinking takes that reality inward more deeply. Quenching suggests a condition in which what had once been merely encountered has now become profoundly integrated into the servant’s spiritual life.

This progression helps explain what al-Qushayrī means when he speaks of an enduring *ḥāl*. A divine meaning may first come as a fleeting visitation. Through repeated bestowal it may eventually become inwardly established. Yet above that settled condition appear new *ṭawāriq*, new spiritual

visitations that knock upon the heart. These higher visitations may initially remain unstable, just as the earlier state was once unstable. If they too become established, the seeker is raised into a subtler degree.

Al-Qushayrī then gives the principle in its most beautiful form.

فَأَبَدًا يَكُونُ فِي التَّرَقِّيِّ

*“Thus he is forever in ascent.”*

The apparent disagreement between the transient and enduring theories can now be understood more carefully. The masters who compare *aḥwāl* to lightning are describing the newly arriving edge of spiritual experience. The masters who speak of enduring states are describing what happens when those meanings become assimilated into the heart.

A visitation may therefore be fleeting at one stage and abiding at another. Once established, it does not close the path. It becomes the ground from which another visitation can be received.

This is the deepest strength of al-Qushayrī’s position. He gives us **permanence without stagnation**. Stability does not mean finality, and continuity does not mean closure. The servant can become established in one divine gift while remaining completely open to a higher gift. Earlier transformation need not be discarded when later transformation arrives. What was once the summit may become the foundation for what comes next.

Al-Qushayrī deepens this principle through the teaching of his master Abū ‘Alī al-Daqqāq. In his interpretation of the Prophet’s repeated seeking of forgiveness, al-Daqqāq understands the Prophet ﷺ as continually being raised from one spiritual degree into another that is higher than the one before it. A previous degree may appear relatively deficient only because a greater perfection has now been disclosed.

The movement is therefore not from sin into righteousness or from falsehood into truth. It is movement from excellence into greater excellence. What was genuinely perfect relative to one degree appears limited only when viewed from a degree beyond it.

Behind this interpretation lies an even deeper theological principle. Divine generosity has no final point at which the creature can declare that every possible subtlety has been received. The servant is finite while the divine possibilities of grace are not exhausted by finite reception. Every opening enlarges the capacity of the heart, and that enlarged capacity prepares it for another opening.

The phrase “forever in ascent” is therefore not merely devotional language. It follows from the relationship between the finite servant and the inexhaustibility of divine generosity.

## 5. Bāyazīd and the disappearance of spiritual ownership

Bāyazīd approaches the same spiritual world through a different question. Within al-Qushayrī's own chapter on *ma'rifa*, he transmits the remarkable saying

لِلْخَلْقِ أَحْوَالٌ، وَلَا حَالٌ لِلْعَارِفِ

*"Created beings have states, but the knower has no state."*

If isolated from its context, the statement might appear to deny the existence of spiritual states altogether. Yet that cannot be the most convincing interpretation. Bāyazīd elsewhere speaks positively about spiritual *aḥwāl*, and the explanation surrounding the saying points instead toward the effacement of the knower's self awareness.

The knower has "no state" because he is no longer standing apart from his transformation and contemplating it as something he owns. The experience remains real, but the possessive relationship to the experience disappears. The realized knower is no longer occupied with thoughts such as having attained contentment, possessing gnosis, reaching a particular station, or becoming a person of some distinguished spiritual rank. The more completely he becomes occupied with the Known, the less he remains occupied with himself as one who knows.

This interpretation becomes especially powerful when we notice how al-Qushayrī himself arranges the chapter. Shortly before transmitting Bāyazīd's statement, he describes the realized knower and says

يُسَمَّى عِنْدَ ذَلِكَ عَارِفًا وَتُسَمَّى حَالَتُهُ مَعْرِفَةً

*"At that point he is called a knower, and his state is called gnosis."*

Al-Qushayrī can therefore say that the knower's state is gnosis while Bāyazīd can say that the knower has no state. The two statements only contradict one another if they are forced to speak from the same perspective.

From the perspective of the spiritual teacher, the knower's transformation can be described and classified. His state is *ma'rifa*. From the inward perspective of realized gnosis, however, the knower no longer turns toward himself as the possessor of *ma'rifa*.

The surrounding discussion reinforces this interpretation when al-Qushayrī describes the knower as

مُخْتَطَفٌ عَنْ إِحْسَاسِهِ بِكُلِّ وَصْفٍ هُوَ لَهُ

*"Snatched away from awareness of every quality belonging to himself."*

This is almost the interpretive key to Bāyazīd's statement. The spiritual condition remains describ-

able from outside, while the inward act of spiritual proprietorship disappears.

## 6. Humility and the refusal to turn grace into identity

Another Bāyazīd report preserved by al-Qushayrī makes this meaning even clearer. When asked when a person becomes truly humble, Bāyazīd answers

إِذَا لَمْ يَرِ لِنَفْسِهِ مَقَامًا وَلَا حَالًا

*“When he sees neither a station nor a state as belonging to himself.”*

The crucial idea is that he does not see these things **for himself**. Bāyazīd is not denying the reality of stations or states. He is denying that the realized servant should transform divine gifts into personal spiritual capital.

This is one of the most subtle dangers of the path. The ordinary ego may define itself through wealth, knowledge, lineage, achievement, or social standing. The spiritual ego can reproduce the same possessive structure through more refined objects. A person may begin thinking of his state, his unveiling, his nearness, his knowledge, or his gnosis as evidence of what he has become. The language changes, but the self remains at the center.

Bāyazīd breaks that structure. The more elevated the servant becomes, the less appropriate it becomes for him to construct an identity around his elevation. A gift that truly draws the heart toward God should make the servant less fascinated with himself as the receiver of the gift.

An early report preserved by al-Kalābādhī also confirms that Bāyazīd did not reject the vocabulary of spiritual states.

آخِرُ نَهَايَاتِ الصِّدِّيقِينَ أَوَّلُ أَحْوَالِ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ

*“The furthest end of the veracious is the beginning of the states of the prophets.”*

وَلَيْسَ لِنَهَايَةِ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ غَايَةٌ تُدْرَكُ

*“And the final limit of the prophets is not a limit that can be attained.”*

Whatever qualifications may be required when interpreting the precise hierarchy implied by the saying, its relevance here is clear. Bāyazīd can speak positively about *aḥwāl* and about open ended spiritual degrees. His statement that the knower has no state therefore cannot simply mean that states cease to exist. It means that the self no longer remains in the posture of possessing and admiring its own condition.

## 7. Drinking the seas and still asking for more

One further passage brings Bāyazīd and al-Qushayrī remarkably close. In al-Qushayrī's chapter on tasting and drinking, Yaḥyā ibn Mu'ādh is reported to have written to Bāyazīd that whoever drinks a single cup of love will never thirst afterward. Bāyazīd replies

عَجَبْتُ مِنْ ضَعْفِ حَالِكَ، هَهُنَا مَنْ يَحْتَسِي بِحَارِ الْكَوْنِ وَهُوَ فَاعِرٌ فَاهُ يَسْتَزِيدُ

*"I marvel at the weakness of your state. Here one may drink the seas of existence and still remain open mouthed, asking for more."*

The point is not dissatisfaction with God. It is the inexhaustibility of the divine object of longing. Finite reception can never contain the whole horizon of divine generosity. The servant may receive beyond anything he previously imagined and still discover that what remains is greater than what has already been received.

The image therefore fits beautifully with al-Qushayrī's theory of ascent. Genuine spiritual drinking does not eliminate receptivity. It enlarges it. The person who has truly tasted becomes capable of drinking, and the one who has drunk deeply discovers a capacity for an even greater reception.

Bāyazīd's poetic language and al-Qushayrī's technical account converge upon the same intuition. Spiritual realization does not culminate in creaturely self satisfaction. The higher the gift, the wider the horizon that opens beyond it.

## 8. Endless ascent without spiritual self possession

The relationship between the two masters can therefore be expressed with considerable precision.

Al-Qushayrī describes the **objective continuity of spiritual transformation**. A state descends as a divine gift, may first appear as a fleeting visitation, can become inwardly assimilated, and may eventually settle into an abiding condition from which subtler visitations become possible. His theory explains how spiritual stability can coexist with perpetual ascent.

Bāyazīd describes the **subjective disappearance of the one who claims that transformation as his own**. At the level of humility and gnosis, the servant no longer turns toward himself and treats the state as evidence of his own spiritual importance. The state may remain real, but the possessive relationship to it is progressively effaced.

This is why al-Qushayrī ultimately gives the fuller technical account of *aḥwāl*. He explains their origin, their distinction from *maqāmāt*, the dispute concerning their duration, the possibility of their becoming established, and the continuing emergence of higher states above them. His model preserves divine gratuity without sacrificing development, and it preserves stability without sacrificing movement.



Bāyazīd then supplies the necessary inward correction. The more stable the grace becomes, the more dangerous it would be for the servant to turn that grace into a stable spiritual ego. Al-Qushayrī protects the seeker from saying that there is nowhere higher to go. Bāyazīd protects him from concluding that because he has risen, he has become someone worthy of contemplating himself.

Together, these teachings produce a vision of the spiritual path that is richer than the simple opposition between fleeting and permanent states.

A state may endure without becoming inert.

The heart may become established without becoming closed.

Gnosis may truly be called the state of the knower while the knower ceases to experience that gnosis as his personal possession.

Earlier grace may remain while later grace deepens it.

The servant may drink and still thirst, arrive and still journey, become established and still ascend.

The spiritual life therefore becomes more continuous even as its horizon becomes more open. The servant is genuinely transformed, but every transformation reveals more clearly that divine generosity has not been exhausted. The higher he rises, the less meaningful it becomes to construct an identity around being high. The more profoundly he knows, the less interested he becomes in contemplating himself as one who knows.

This is perhaps the deepest harmony between al-Qushayrī and Bāyazīd. Al-Qushayrī explains how grace can become abiding without ending the journey. Bāyazīd explains how the servant can receive that grace without turning it into another possession of the self.

The result may be expressed in one phrase.

**Endless ascent without spiritual self possession.**

And so al-Qushayrī's extraordinary statement stands as the most fitting conclusion to the entire discussion.

فَأَبَدًا يَكُونُ فِي التَّرَقِّيِّ

*"Thus he is forever in ascent."*

## Principal Sources

Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*

The Dār al-Ma'ārif edition edited by 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd ibn al-Sharīf. Volume I, pages 154 to 155 contain the central discussion of *ḥāl*, the transient and enduring positions, *shurb*,

*ṭawāriq*, and the statement that the servant remains forever in ascent. Volume I, pages 178 to 179 contain the discussion of *dhawq*, *shurb*, and *riyy*, together with the exchange between Yaḥyā ibn Mu‘ādh and Bāyazīd. Volume I, page 279 contains Bāyazīd’s saying concerning humility. Volume II, pages 477 to 479 contain the chapter on *ma‘rifā*, including al-Qushayrī’s statement that the knower’s state is gnosis and Bāyazīd’s statement that the knower has no state.

**Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *al-Luma‘ fī al-Taṣawwuf***

The Nicholson edition, printed page 42, preserves al-Junayd’s definition of a state as a visitation descending upon hearts that does not endure.

**Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī, *al-Ta‘arruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf***

The relevant passage, commonly printed around page 68 in accessible editions, preserves Bāyazīd’s statement concerning the furthest degree of the *ṣiddīqūn* and the beginning of the states of the prophets.

**Annabel Keeler, *Bāyazīd, The Life and Teachings of the Mystic Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī***

Brill, 2025. The study is especially valuable for reconstructing Bāyazīd’s teachings through comparison of the earliest available sources and for avoiding the assumption that every later attribution belongs to the same historical layer.