



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DHIKR IN THE LIVES OF THE
KHOJAGAN-NAQSHBANDI SHAYKHS OF MAWARANNAHR

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Abstract: This article examines the significance of dhikr in the lives and teachings of the Khojagan–Naqshbandi shaykhs of Mawarannahr and analyzes the spiritual, ethical, and social foundations of the Naqshbandiyya tariqa. Particular attention is devoted to the development of silent dhikr (dhikr khafi), the integration of spirituality into everyday social life, and the role of remembrance of God in moral and spiritual refinement. The study explores the formative contributions of major spiritual figures, especially Khwaja Mahmud Anjir Faghnawi and Khwaja Baha al-Din Naqshband al-Bukhari, whose teachings established the Naqshbandi understanding of inward spirituality combined with active participation in society. The article highlights how the Naqshbandi tradition emphasized sincerity (ikhlas), refined ethical conduct (adab), social responsibility, and spiritual awareness while rejecting excessive asceticism and isolation from communal life. Furthermore, it demonstrates that dhikr in the Naqshbandi worldview functioned not merely as verbal remembrance, but as a continuous inward state of consciousness and spiritual presence with God. The research concludes that the spiritual legacy of the Khojagan–Naqshbandi shaykhs continues to provide important moral and intellectual guidance for contemporary society.

Keywords: Khojagan, Naqshbandiyya, dhikr, dhikr khafi, tasawwuf, Mawarannahr, Baha al-Din Naqshband.

The Khojagan–Naqshbandiyya tariqa occupies a distinguished position in the history of Sunni Islamic mysticism (tasawwuf). Its formation and development took place through a spiritual chain of perfected hearts that evolved over many centuries. Although the order bears the name of Shaykh



Baha al-Din Naqshband al-Bukhari (1318–1389), its spiritual foundations can be traced back to the twelfth century.

The Naqshbandi path is a luminous way transmitted from heart to heart. The shaykhs of this tariqa guided people not merely through speech, but through spiritual state (hal); not through disputation, but through exemplary conduct. For them, spiritual leadership was not a form of domination, but a responsibility; dhikr was not merely vocal utterance, but an inward state of the heart; knowledge was not a source of pride, but a burden of responsibility; and marifa (gnostic knowledge) signified not only understanding, but living in accordance with divine truth.

This article examines the formation of the Naqshbandi tariqa, the Khojagan spiritual lineage that served as its foundation, and the lives, teachings, and spiritual legacy of its shaykhs, with particular attention to the significance of dhikr in their worldview. The subject is not merely a historical inquiry, but also a source of moral instruction for hearts, guidance for life, and illumination for scholarship.

Baha al-Din Naqshband emphasized living dhikr inwardly within the heart, spiritual guidance through silence, and remaining spiritually present with God while living among people. His famous maxim, “Dil ba yar, dast ba kar” (“The heart with God, the hands at work”), became one of the defining spiritual symbols of the Naqshbandi tradition. In this manner, he harmonized tasawwuf not only with spiritual perfection, but also with social responsibility, service, and productive labor.

The Naqshbandi path does not call the individual to withdraw from worldly life. On the contrary, it encourages one to live actively within society, to serve others, and to cultivate oneself not only as a sincere servant of God, but also as a beneficial member of the community. Such a model of life remains profoundly relevant for the modern individual as well.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Naqshbandiyya is the practice of silent dhikr (dhikr khafi), whereby remembrance of God is performed inwardly and silently, with deep reverence rather than through loud vocalization. In this tradition, dhikr becomes engraved upon the heart and serves as a means of spiritual ascent toward God. Thus, dhikr in the Naqshbandi understanding is not merely speech, but spiritual state; not sound, but inward presence; not mechanical repetition, but continual spiritual renewal.

Another important feature of the Naqshbandi school is its emphasis on preserving spirituality within the realities of everyday life rather than retreating from society. Baha al-Din Naqshband himself was engaged in craftsmanship and lived among ordinary people. Later Naqshbandi masters, such as Khwaja



Ubayd Allah Ahrar, extended the ethical and spiritual principles of tasawwuf into the spheres of economics, politics, and social justice.

The Naqshbandiyya therefore does not isolate human beings from life. Rather, it urges them to live meaningfully within society, to render service, and to become morally beneficial individuals. The shaykhs of the order did not seek political domination, yet they consistently called for justice; they engaged in commerce, yet upheld honesty and ethical conduct; they possessed wealth, yet remained unattached to worldly possessions.

This path continues to serve as a model for contemporary society because it rejects excessive asceticism, ostentation, and empty ceremonialism, while emphasizing sincerity (ikhlas), social engagement, and refined ethical conduct (adab).

The lives of each of the spiritual figures discussed in this article remain exemplary for contemporary scholars, intellectuals, and seekers of spiritual refinement. The path they traversed is still alive today, though it is discovered not merely through words, but through lived spiritual experience and inward transformation.

Khawaja Mahmud Anjir Faghnavi: The Shaykh Who Brought Dhikr into Social Life

Khawaja Mahmud Anjir Faghnavi (d. ca. 1286 CE) occupies an important position within the spiritual lineage of the Naqshbandiyya tariqa and is regarded as a spiritual disciple of Khawaja Arif Riwgari. His epithet “Anjir Faghnavi” is associated with the village of Anjir Faghna, located in the region of Bukhara.

Faghnavi was known as a shaykh who remained close to ordinary people, possessing purity of heart, firmness of will, and constant inward remembrance of God through dhikr. He is remembered as one who translated the spiritual states of tasawwuf into practical life and transformed dhikr into a living reality within mosques, marketplaces, and society at large.

Prior to Faghnavi, the practice of dhikr among many Sufi masters was generally confined to khanqahs and limited spiritual gatherings. However, he emphasized that: “Dhikr within the heart is not confined to silence alone; it continues even amidst active life. Through remembrance of the Truth (al-Haqq), life itself is renewed”.

He institutionalized the practice of silent dhikr (dhikr khafi) even within communal settings, maintaining inward recollection of God while outwardly engaged in ordinary activities. His spiritual conversations and guidance took place not only in religious settings, but also in marketplaces, mosques, and during agricultural labor – in the very midst of daily life.



Through this approach, the Naqshbandi tradition gradually developed the principle of “dhikr within society”, which later became one of the foundational ideals of Baha al-Din Naqshband, famously expressed in the maxim: “To be with God while among the people”.

Faghnavi placed dhikr at the center of spiritual discipline and moral cultivation. For him, Sufism consisted not merely in spiritual exercises, but in the harmonious integration of:

remembrance of the heart (qalbi dhikr),
silence grounded in proper adab,
purity within labor and livelihood,
and active engagement in life.

According to his understanding, dhikr was not only a means of purifying the heart, but also a method for disciplining and overcoming the lower self (nafs).

He is reported to have said: “Even while among people, do not allow your inner consciousness to turn elsewhere. Remember God, even if your tongue remains silent”.

Khwaja Baha al-Din Naqshband al-Bukhari: The Essence of the Naqshbandi Path

Khwaja Baha al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Bukhari was born in 1318 CE in the village of Qasr-i Arifan near Bukhara. From an early age, he was raised in an environment shaped by ritual purity (tahara), refined ethical conduct (adab), and spiritual discipline of the heart. His spiritual formation was profoundly influenced first by Shaykh Muhammad Baba al-Sammasi and later by Amir Kulal, both of whom played a decisive role in his moral and mystical development.

Baha al-Din Naqshband never claimed spiritual authority for himself. Rather, it was his spiritual state, silence, refined character, and inner purity that naturally guided people toward God. His influence emerged not through outward display, but through inward realization and exemplary conduct.

Two principal explanations are traditionally given concerning the origin of the title “Naqshband”:

1. It derives from the concept of “engraving” or “imprinting” the remembrance of God upon the heart — that is, inscribing the Divine Name inwardly within one’s spiritual consciousness.

2. It is associated with his engagement in weaving and craftsmanship, symbolizing the Naqshbandi ideal of combining spiritual discipline with productive labor and active participation in worldly life.

The Naqshbandiyya tariqa subsequently developed into a spiritual school founded upon inward purification, disciplined practice, and moral refinement.



Baha al-Din Naqshband systematized this tradition and endowed it with its distinctive identity, spiritual methodology, and ethical orientation.

His method of spiritual guidance (irshad) rested upon three central principles:

“To be with God while among the people.”

“Service is the soul of the path.”

“Adab is the essence of the path.”

Baha al-Din Naqshband lived as a humble and hardworking individual whose inner spiritual radiance transformed those around him. He encouraged the practice of dhikr not only within mosques and secluded spaces, but also within marketplaces and everyday social life. According to his teaching, dhikr was not a condition detached from life; rather, it constituted the very essence of living itself.

Among the most prominent disciples and successors who disseminated and developed his spiritual legacy were:

Khawaja Muhammad Parsa, who elevated the intellectual and ethical dimensions of the tradition;

Ala al-Din Attar, who preserved and continued the spiritual lineage;

and Khwaja Ubayd Allah Ahrar, who revitalized the role of tasawwuf within social and public life.

Through these figures and their successors, the Naqshbandiyya spread widely across the Islamic world and became one of the most influential Sufi traditions in Sunni Islam.

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