

# AVICENNA

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*Many people think that Neoplatonism flourished only in the Roman Empire around the third and fourth centuries CE. However, it re-emerged again in the Islamic lands in later centuries. In this article, Connie James, SRC, presents the story of a great Muslim, pantheist, Neoplatonic philosopher, and mystic who influenced Western thought for hundreds of years.*



A thousand years ago the Muslim world had reached a high degree of civilization with a rich and diverse culture, great centers of learning, a developed commerce, and a high standard of living. Muslim civilization exhibited a vitality and energy unmatched in backward Europe. In fact, the Muslim world, with its roots in what was left of Classical civilization, acted as a cultural bridge between the great civilizations of the past and the later European Renaissance. Knowledge, which might have been lost, was preserved and elaborated upon. Building on what the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans had earlier synthesized, Muslim thinkers made much progress in science, particularly in mathematics, astronomy, alchemy, chemistry, physics, and medicine. Many great minds emerged as guiding lights of this civilization. The one who is best known in the West is the Persian physician and philosopher Avicenna (Ibn Sina) (980 – 1037).

Abu Ali al-Hussain Ibn Abdallah Ibn Sina was born in 980 at Afshaneh, a village

near Bukhara in modern Uzbekistan. His father was a member of the Ismaili sect and came from the city of Balkh. The Ismailis have esoteric doctrines, which developed under the influence of Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. Avicenna was educated in Bukhara, at that time the capital of the Persian Samanid dynasty, the first native dynasty to arise in Iran after the Arab conquest, and who were responsible for a new Persian renaissance. Bukhara was a trading, scientific and cultural center; one of the most ancient cities in Central Asia, once conquered by Alexander the Great, when it was a part of the Persian province of Sogdia. The name of the city is said to be derived either from the Buddhist word “vihara” meaning “monastery” or from a Zoroastrian word meaning “source of knowledge.” The Samanids controlled Transoxiana (north of the Oxus or Amu Darya river) and Khorâsân (south of the Oxus river). Bukhara and the nearby city of Samarkand were the cultural centers of the kingdom and lay on the fabled Silk Road from China to the Mediterranean. Bukhara was known as “the meeting place of the highest intellectuals of the age, the horizon of the literary stars of the world.” It attracted the greatest minds of the time. Although Persian was the spoken language of the region, it was around this time that the gradual turkicisation started in Transoxiana, whose countries remain mainly Turkic speaking to this day.

Raised among the intellectuals of Bukhara, Avicenna was exposed to philosophical and metaphysical ideas at an early age. His father’s house was a meeting

place for people of learning in the area. He amazed scholars who met at his father's house with his remarkable memory and ability to learn. Exceptionally bright, by the age of ten he had become well versed in the study of the Qur'an, poetry, and various sciences. Having mastered all branches of formal learning, including Euclid, law, and medicine, he became a physician at the age of sixteen. He also studied logic, philosophy, and metaphysics. In his autobiography, Avicenna stated that he was more or less self-taught, but that at crucial times in his life he received help. At seventeen Avicenna successfully treated the seriously ill ruler of Bukhara, the Shah Nuh ibn Mansur, when his own doctors had given up hope. His renown as a physician spread throughout the Muslim world. Refusing any monetary reward, Avicenna asked only to be allowed free use of the royal library, which contained many rare and unique books and was one of the most extensive collections of works on philosophy and science then extant. Avicenna studied avidly, devouring all the contents of the library. By twenty one, he had composed his first book, and within a few years was recognized as one of the most learned people in the world.

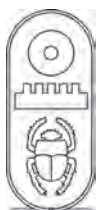
If the fortunes of the Samanids had taken a different turn, Avicenna's life might have been very different. The Shah had appointed Sebüktegin, a former Turkish slave as governor of Ghazni in present-day Afghanistan, and his son, Mahmud, was made governor of Khorâsân. However the Turkish tribes already in Transoxiana joined with the two governors in an attempt to overthrow the Shah. Bukhara was taken in 999, and it was during these turbulent times when the newer Turkish elements were replacing the Persian domination of Central Asia that Avicenna's father died. Without the support of his father or his patron, he travelled westward to Khiva, and then to avoid being kidnapped by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, he fled westward again

to Gurganj, the modern Köneürgenç in northern Turkmenistan, which was the sophisticated, cultured, and cosmopolitan capital of the Khorezmshahs. There, the state-sponsored Academy of Learning sparkled with the brilliance of such great minds as Avicenna and al-Biruni. By day he lectured on law, logic, and astronomy, while in the evening he gathered students around him for philosophical and scientific discussion.

Later he travelled south into Persia, to Rey, just south of Tehran, where he started a medical practice; and then later still, he moved further west to Hamadân. There he cured the ruling Buyid Amir of severe colic. For this he was made court physician and vizier. A mutiny among the army caused his dismissal and forced him to flee to Esfahân, disguised as a Sufi. But when the Amir's colic returned, he was summoned back; the Amir apologized to him and reinstated him. This was a very hectic time for Avicenna. By day, as vizier, he was concerned with the administration, while the nights were spent lecturing and dictating notes for his books. Students would gather at his home to read his books, especially his two greatest, the *Shifa* and the *Qanun*.

After the death of his patron in 1022, he went to Esfahân once again, only to return several years later to Hamadân, worn out by hard work. His friends advised him to slow down and take life in moderation, but this was not in his character and he died in 1037 at the age of fifty-seven. His mausoleum, with its twelve pillars, can still be seen in Hamadân.

Avicenna's writings on medicine and the sciences brought him fame in both the East and West. He wrote mainly in Arabic, though some of his works were in his native Persian. His most famous work, the *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* or "Canon of Medicine," is an immense encyclopedia of over one million words, based on the findings of the Greeks, Romans, and Arabs,





The opening decoration and invocation to Allah from Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*, copied in 1597-8. From the Medical Historical Library at Yale University.

and containing all medical knowledge available at the time. The *Qanun* or “Canon” as it was called in the West, was translated into Latin in the twelfth century, and for several centuries thereafter, it was the medical authority in both East and West, having reputedly had a significant influence on the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci. It was divided into five books. The first deals with general principles; the second with some 760 drugs arranged alphabetically; the third with diseases of the organs and other parts of the body; the fourth with diseases such as fevers; and the fifth with compound

medicines. Due to its systematic approach, it superseded the works of Galen and remained supreme for six centuries. His important contributions included such advances as the recognition of the contagious nature of tuberculosis, the distribution of diseases by water and soil, the interaction between psychology and health, and a treatise on drugs. He was the first to describe meningitis and he made rich contributions to anatomy, gynecology, and child health. He pointed out the importance of diet, the importance of climate and environment on health, and the use of oral anesthetics. He noticed the



close relationship between emotions and the physical condition and felt that music had a definite physical and psychological effect on patients. Avicenna's early interest in medicine and science probably led to his interest in alchemy. Along with many learned people of his time, he considered alchemy to be of great importance. It was through his alchemical researches that he was able to produce many new compounds and medicines.

Avicenna is also remembered as a great philosopher. His early reading of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and the writings of other Greek thinkers led him to pursue philosophy with an intense interest and original thinking, though he acknowledged his debt to al-Fârâbi, the real founder of Islamic Neoplatonism, and his avowed spiritual master. His own philosophy combined elements of Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism, attempting to reconcile Greek and Islamic beliefs. Mystical, Hermetic, and Gnostic ideas are evident in some of his later writings. His *Kitab al-Shifa*, or "Book of Healing" is a vast scientific and philosophical work covering the natural sciences, mathematics based on Euclid's "Elements," astronomy, music, philosophy, metaphysics, and various other subjects. It is a compilation of the entire corpus of knowledge of the ancient world. In physics he studied the different forms of energy, heat and light, and the concepts of force, vacuum, and infinity. He made the observation that if the perception of light is due to the emission of some sort of particles by a luminous source, the speed of light must be finite. He proposed an interconnection between time and motion, and also commented upon gravity. Through careful observation he even deduced that the planet Venus must be closer to the Sun than Earth.

Avicenna completed most of his works, both major and minor, in Arabic. But in his native Persian, he wrote a large manual on philosophy entitled the *Danishnâme-ye Alai*.

One of his most celebrated Arabic poems describes the descent of the Soul into the body from the "Higher Sphere."

Among his major contributions to philosophy, and where he comes closest to Rosicrucian ontology, are his discussions on reason and reality. He claimed that the Divine is pure intellect and that knowledge consists of the mind grasping the intelligible. He discussed the difference between reality and actuality, and examined the concept of "existence," seeking to integrate all aspects of science and religion into a grand metaphysical vision. Using this vision he tried to explain the formation of the universe. He regarded the world as an emanation from the Divine, and what we see around us as a process of gradually evolving complexity which through time, has resulted in the world we see around us today. Writing about "Nous," or the "Active Intellect" as he termed it, he believed in the existence of the soul and that the human body was composed of both material and immaterial components. He wrote about the use of intuition and the nature of psychic events, and taught that the ultimate fate of the soul was to achieve "conjunction" with the Active Intellect or Nous, something akin perhaps to what we would today call "Cosmic Consciousness."

The modern world owes much to this Muslim scientist-philosopher and mystic. It has been said that his *Shifa* and *Qanun* mark the apex of medieval thought, and constitute one of the major syntheses in the history of the mind. As Rosicrucians, we acknowledge the great part he played in upholding and developing the tradition he traversed, one which has contributed greatly to our own teachings.

