

Tazkiyat an-Nafs (Purifying the Self):

A Driving Sufi Principle

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The Sufi teachers of old spread Islam across the Indian Subcontinent, throughout Central and Southeast Asia, in Africa and even some parts of Russia—just as contemporary Sufi teachers are spreading the faith through Europe and America today. But where did the Sufis originate? When did they first appear? And what was the position of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence and the scholars of the Community regarding Sufism, or *tasawwuf*?^[1]

Today, Islam is taught only with words by people who do not care to practice it purely nor to purify themselves in practice. This unfortunate devolution was foreseen in many *ahadith* that state, for example, “*They will order people and not heed their own warning, and they are the worst of people.*”^[2] Similarly, the Prophet (s) said, “*I do not fear for you only the anti-Christ.*” They asked, “*Then who else are you afraid of?*” He said, “*The misguided scholars.*”^[3] The Prophet (s) also said, “*What I fear most for my nation is a hypocrite who has a scholarly tongue.*”^[4] Such was not the way of the Companions including the People of the Bench (*Ahl as-Suffa*), concerning whom the following verse was revealed:

And restrain thyself with those who call upon their Lord at morning and evening, desiring His countenance, and let not thine eyes turn away from them, desiring the adornment of the present life; and obey not him whose heart We have made neglectful of Our remembrance so that he follows his own lust, and his affair has become all excess. (18:28)

Nor was this the way of Abu Bakr as-Siddiq (r), about whom the Prophet (s) said, “*Abu Bakr does not precede you for praying much or fasting much, but because of a secret that has taken root in his heart.*”^[5] Nor was this the way of the Successors (*tabi`een*) such as Hasan al-Basri, Sufyan al-Thawri, and others of the later generations of Sufis who looked back to them for models. Al-Qushayri relates that al-Junaydsaid, “*Tasawwuf is not the profusion of prayer and fasting, but wholeness of the breast and selflessness.*”^[6]

Nor was this the way of the Four Imams who emphasized doing-without (*zuhd*) and true god-fear (*wara*), above the mere satisfaction of obligations. Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal composed two books with those two qualities as their respective titles. He placed the knowledge of saints above the knowledge of scholars, as is shown by the following report by his student, Abu Bakr al-Marwazi:

I heard Fath ibn Abi al-Fath saying to Abu Abd Allah (Imam Ahmad) during his last illness, “*Invoke God for us that He will give us a good successor to succeed you.*” He continued, “*Who shall we ask for knowledge after you?*” Ahmad replied, “*Ask Abd al-Wahhab.*” Someone who was present there related to me that he said, “*But he does not have much learning.*” Abu Abd Allah replied, “*He is a saintly man, and such as he is granted success in speaking the truth.*”^[7]

In a celebrated *fatwa* (legal ruling), the Shafii scholar al-`Izz ibn `Abd al-Salam gives the same priority to the gnostics, or Knowers of God (*`arifin*), over the jurists. Imam Malik

places the same emphasis on inner perfection in his saying, “Religion does not consist in the knowledge of many narrations, but in a light which God places in the breast.” Ibn `Ata Allah quoted Ibn `Arabi as saying, “Certainty does not derive from the evidences of the mind but pours out from the depths of the heart.”

This is why many of the imams of religion cautioned against the mere thirst for knowledge at the expense of the training of the ego. Imam Ghazali left the halls of learning in the midst of a prestigious career in order to devote himself to self-purification. At its outset, he wrote his magisterial *Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihya `ulum al-din)*, which begins with a warning to those who consider religion to consist merely of *fiqh*, or jurisprudence.

One of the early Sufis and the greatest of the *huffaz*, or *hadith* masters, of his time, Sufyan al-Thawri, sounded the same warning. He addressed those who use the narration of *hadith* for religion, when he said, “If *hadith* was a good it would have vanished just as goodness has vanished. Pursuing the study of *hadith* is not part of the preparation for death, but a disease that preoccupies people.”

Dhahabi comments:

By God he has spoken the truth. Today, in our time, the quest for knowledge and *hadith* no longer means for the *hadith* scholar the obligation of living up to it, which is the goal of *hadith*. He is right in what he said because pursuing the study of *hadith* is other than the *hadith* itself.^[8]

It is for “the *hadith* itself,” for the purpose of living up to the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (s) and the Holy Quran, that the great masters of self-purification forsook the pursuit of science as a worldly allurements, and placed above it the acquisition of *ihsan*, or perfect character. This is in accordance with the well-known *hadith* of Aisha (r) concerning the disposition of the Prophet r.^[9] An example is Abu Nasr Bishr al-Hafi, who considered the study of *hadith* a conjectural science in comparison to the certitude in belief imparted by visiting Fudayl ibn al-Iyad.^[10] Both *ihsan* and the process that leads to it are known as *tasawwuf*, as illustrated in the following pages.

[1] *Tasawwuf* here means the Islamic Science of Purification of the Self and adapting the perfected character of the Messenger of God, Sayyidina Muhammad (s).

[2] Reported on the authority of `Umar, `Ali, Ibn `Abbas, and others. These were collected by Abu Talib al-Makki in the chapter entitled “The Difference between the scholars of the world and those of the hereafter” in his *Qut al-qulub fi mu`amalat al-mahbub* (Cairo: Matbaat al-maymuniyya, 1310/1893) pp. 1:140-141.

[3] Ahmad narrated it in his *Musnad*.

[4] Ahmad narrated it in his *Musnad* with a good chain.

[5] Related by Ahmad with a sound chain in *Kitab fada'il al-Sahaba*, ed. Wasi Allah ibn Muhammad Abbas (Makkah: Muassasat al-risala, 1983) 1:141 (#118).

[6] al-Qushayri, *Risalat kitab al-sama* in *al-Rasail al-qushayriyya* (Sidon and Beirut: al-maktaba al-asriyya, 1970) p. 60.

[7] Ahmad, *Kitab al-nara* (Beirut: Dar al-kitab al-arabi, 1409/ 1988) p. 10.

[8] Dhahabi, as cited in Sakhawi, *al-Jawahir na al-durar fi tarjamat shaykh al-Islam Ibn Hajar* (al-Asqalani), ed. Hamid `Abd al-Majid and Taha al-Zaini (Cairo: wizarat al-awqaf, al-majlis al-ala li al-shuun al-islamiyya, Iajnah ihya al-turath al-islami, 1986) p. 21-22.

[9] When asked about the Prophet's (s) character, Aisha (r) said, “His character was the Quran.”

[10] See Ibn Sa`ad, *Tabaqat* (ed. Sachau) 7(2):83; al-Arusi, *Nata'ij al-afkar al-qudsiyya* (Bulaq, 1920/1873); and `Abd al-Wahhab al-Sh`arawi, *al-Tabaqat al-kubra* 1:57.