

كتاب الذريعة إلى مكارم الشريعة

THE ART OF CULTIVATING
Noble Character

An annotated translation with an introduction of

RĀGHIB AL-IṢFAHĀNĪ'S

Kitāb al-Dharīʿa ilā Makārim al-Sharīʿa

by

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White Thread

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Publisher's Preface

It is with immense honour and academic fervour that we present *Kitāb al-Dharī'a ilā Makārim al-Sharī'a* (The Path to the Noble Virtues of the Divine Law), a seminal work by the esteemed scholar Imām Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī. Despite his profound influence and the depth of his contributions, Iṣfahānī remains relatively underappreciated in the West (and probably in the East), with few of his works translated into English and scant academic attention devoted to his scholarship. This volume seeks to redress this oversight by bringing to a broader audience the rich intellectual heritage and nuanced insights of a thinker whose ideas have shaped Islamic ethical and legal thought.

Iṣfahānī's brilliance is manifest in his masterful ability to elucidate the subtleties of various expressions and related terms with remarkable clarity. As a linguist and adept wordsmith, he employs his skill to present vivid examples, parables, metaphors, and analogies that offer profound reflections on the human condition. The text is replete with parallels, proverbs, and equivalences, further demonstrating his intellectual dexterity. Among its many discussions, Iṣfahānī's suggestions of herbal remedies and other practical advice attest to his holistic approach to understanding human well-being.

What sets this work apart is its seamless integration of philosophical ethics with Qur'ānic principles. Iṣfahānī's theory, while rooted firmly in Islamic Qur'ānic tradition, presents complex ideas with exceptional lucidity. His ability to effortlessly weave Qur'ānic verses and ḥadīths into his discourse, connecting ethical discussions to divine principles, is unparalleled. The work's influence is evident in the writings of notable scholars such as Imām Ghazālī, who drew extensively from Iṣfahānī's ideas, often quoting him verbatim in his own seminal works.

The book is structured into seven chapters, each delving into different facets of human nature and morality. The first chapter explores the psychology of the soul, followed by discussions on reason, knowledge, and their corresponding virtues and vices. Subsequent chapters address the appetite and anger faculties,

justice and injustice, and the ethical dimensions of business and professions. This comprehensive treatment of human attributes and ethical conduct reflects Iṣfahānī's depth of insight and his commitment to exploring the divine blueprint for human flourishing.

During my recent Ramaḍān 2024 *i'tikāf* (retreat), the text was read to a group of attendees, and it was heartening to see the profound impact it had. The more discerning listeners particularly appreciated the work's depth, recognising its capacity to help individuals understand what it means to be a true human according to the Qur'ānic paradigm. Such reflections underscore the enduring relevance of Iṣfahānī's insights and their significance in contemporary contexts.

Over the years, many scholars and intellectuals have expressed a keen interest in seeing this classic work translated into English. It is with great pleasure that White Thread Press has been entrusted with this noble task. The translation process has been both rigorous and meticulous, thanks to the dedicated efforts of Dr Yasien Mohamed of Cape Town, whose painstaking work has brought this text to a new audience.

I first became acquainted with Dr. Yasien in 2017 during an *i'tikāf* program at the Ottery Maṣjid in Cape Town. From the moment we met, I was struck by his profound humility and gentle demeanour. Soft-spoken yet deeply insightful, he carried himself with a quiet strength, always aiming for excellence in both his scholarship and his personal character. His interactions were marked by genuine politeness and an unwavering commitment to sincerity, reflecting a balance between academic rigor and spiritual depth. Despite his scholarly achievements, his modesty remained ever-present, making him not only a respected intellectual but also a truly admirable individual.

In our commitment to presenting this text with the utmost fidelity and scholarly rigor, we engaged multiple scholars to review and refine the translation. Over the course of more than three years we worked diligently on the book, mindful of the time constraints and the translator's recent milestone—his 70th birthday. Consequently, I personally undertook a thorough edit of the text, ensuring it met the White Thread Press house style while preserving the integrity of Iṣfahānī's work.

We have made enhancements to the text to better convey its message in English, including editing and refining the poetic elements. Qur'ānic verses have been italicised and capitalised where appropriate, and we have left them without quotation marks for clarity. Our aim has been to respect the original while making the text accessible and engaging to our readers.

Though the Arabic title literally translates to “The Path to the Noble

Virtues of the Divine Law,” we have rendered it as “The Art of Cultivating Noble Character” to better capture the essence of the original while conveying its central themes of character refinement and moral development in natural English.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all those who contributed to this endeavour. May this work serve as a beacon of reflection and guidance, reminding readers of their divine purpose and aiding them in aligning with Allāh’s intended design for humanity.

ABDUR-RAHMAN MANGERA

London, UK

Rabī‘ al-Thānī 1446

October 2024

وَأَفْعَلُوا الْإِحْسَانَ

*And do good,
so that you may prosper*

Hajj, 22:77



Foreword

You hold in your hands one of the most important books of the Islamic tradition. The Proof of Islam, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, memorized by heart *Kitāb al-Dharīʿa*. Nevertheless, whenever he travelled, he always took a copy of it along with him. Anyone familiar with Imām Ghazālī's works will recognize the immense influence this book had on him, as the translator points out in his introduction and notes. *Kitāb al-Dharīʿa* has been a constant companion to me as well on my own journey in this faith. I have read it in its entirety many times and have also perused sections of it countless times. *Kitāb al-Dharīʿa* along with Imām Ghazālī's works, Imām Ṭarṭūshī's *Sirāj al-Mulūk*, and the works of Sidī Aḥmad Zarrūq altogether inform my understanding of this faith and its purposes, as each of these authors plumbed the depths of revelation and distilled the meanings, facilitating for us their grasp, given their heavenly source and lofty and rarefied presentation.

Imām Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī wrote this masterpiece in the fifth century after the Hijra to provide us with a means to realize the station of caliph of Allāh on earth. While the word *caliph* has many dimensions, its root contains the idea of one left behind or one who comes after. It hints at the purpose of man's creation, which Imām Rāghib brilliantly derives is threefold based upon his reading of the Qur'an:

- to know Allāh through devotion,
- to replace those who preceded us as stewards for those to come after us,
- and finally, to cultivate the earth, by bringing about true and prosperous civilization through the arts and crafts that are beneficial to our families, communities, and the world at large.

The caliphate or stewardship of the earth was first given to Ādam ﷺ and his progeny. Throughout history, prophets have come to renew the requisites for this immense responsibility. The final revelation, the most complete program for this renewal of man's immense role reveals itself in the Qur'an sent to the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ.

Imām Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī mastered the path to perfection outlined in the

Qur'an in a way few men have accomplished. His splendid intellect enabled him to master the language of the revelation and distil from the Book a complete program to achieve the very purpose of the Book, which is to make us fully human. He understood well that accomplishing this necessitated a mastery of the language of revelation to enable one to grasp its subtleties and ambiguities, which would in turn unlock the Qur'an's central themes. Having accomplished it himself, he wanted the same for others and thus produced the finest dictionary of the Qur'an in the Islamic scholastic tradition. He composed a multi-volume commentary to accompany it, but unfortunately most of it has been lost. In addition, he formulated an extraordinary six-volume compendium of the Arabic language's finest literary examples to ensure a deep reading, knowing that the complexities of poetry and rarefied language provide the best tools of penetrating the inexhaustible richness of revelation.

Though Imām Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī clearly understood the centrality of language in the process of becoming fully human and the pivotal role literature plays in humanizing our species (which is why we call such subjects “the humanities”), nevertheless, his masterpiece, *Kitāb al-Dharī'a* (The Book of Means) is different. In this book, he has distilled the message of revelation knowing that, for most, the Qur'an remains a “hidden Book” that only the purified penetrate (Qur'an 56:78–9). The first generation had such access to the Qur'an through the purifying presence of the Prophet ﷺ.

The Qur'an reminds us that “Allāh has sent among the unlettered a messenger reciting Allāh's signs, purifying them, and teaching them the Book and the wisdom” (62:2). To fully grasp the Book, as only “the pure can touch it” (Qur'an 56:79), one needs those pure teachers to explain the Book: such teachers comprise those who fully embody its teachings and have applied its principles until they become, as the Prophet's wife 'Ā'isha ؓ described him, “the walking Qur'an.” To that end, Imām Rāghib presents a roadmap—a path to perfection, or at least as close as one can come to it—to embodying the noble qualities and virtues of the Sacred Law delivered to humanity by the last messenger of Allāh ﷺ.

Undoubtedly, the crisis of our species has always been an ethical one. As individuals, we have been created in a triune form that when disordered wreaks havoc on ourselves and others. The metaphysical form inheres in our physical form. At the base lie our base appetites: eating, drinking, and sexual desire—i.e., the appetites of the stomach and genitals. Above those are the emotions, traditionally understood to be centred in the liver and heart. At the apex is the head, where thought, direction, and will (both for physical motility and

mental thought) lie. The verticality of our stature reflects the order of function: reason should govern both emotion and appetite. With the inversion of this order, chaos results with sometimes devastating effects. To tame the beast demands much effort, which is known as *mujābada* (struggle with the self). This book provides both the theory and practice of how to do that *mujābada*, as one must understand what is necessary and then how to realize it.

We owe a great debt to Dr. Yasien Mohamed for bringing this exceptional work into English. The translator's job is a selfless one. A good translator must act as a vehicle only to carry the thoughts of the author across the borders of language to the minds of others. Hence, he must know both languages and have an excellent grasp of the content of the work. Dr. Yasien Mohamed fulfils all three conditions; with excellent knowledge of Arabic and English coupled with a serious background in ethics, he provides us with a translation that works well and conveys the contents of the Imām's work. Due to Imām Rāghib's mastery of Arabic, his usage presents great difficulties for the modern reader; hence, even educated Arabs, whose English often surpasses their knowledge of classical Arabic, will find benefit in this most useful and important translation.

The Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ said, "I have been sent only to complete noble character," and the Qur'ān confirms that he was upon a vast ethos (68:4). The poet Aḥmad Shawqī rightly reminded us that:

Nations flourish only as long as character remains,
When their character dissipates, so too the nations.

The greatest teacher of ethics in human history emerged over fourteen hundred years ago to teach the world the path to perfection of human character, renewing prophetic teachings once again and for the last time. The true character of the Prophet ﷺ remains largely unknown in most of the Northern hemisphere and has been grossly misrepresented by unethical forces with axes to grind. Hence, he has been much maligned in the Northern hemisphere, prophetic teachings are sorely in need of restoration. Muslims can do much to reflect to the decaying societies of the global North the man who reminded us once again of that precious golden rule when he ﷺ said, "No one truly believes until he wants for his fellow man what he wants for himself." True belief in Allāh and Allāh's Messenger ﷺ will enable you to know what you should want for yourself and why, and then desire it for others. This book was written to realize that sentiment.

HAMZA YUSUF
Makka al-Mukarrama
7th Jumādā al-Ūlā 1446

the world and that the world has been created and there is a creator of the world that is different from it. Certainly, Allāh is exalted above all things. [77]

THE FACULTIES OF MAN

Allāh created man with five faculties. Their existence can be confirmed by their effects. First, there is the development faculty (*ghidhā*): birth, stages of growth, educational development, and childbearing. Second, the sensory faculty (*hiss*) enables us to experience pleasure and pain. Third, the imaginative faculty (*takbayyul*) equips us to have a keen sense of objects once they have become hidden from our senses. The fourth faculty is a conscious craving (*nuzū*¹) that enables us to seek what is agreeable [to us], and to avoid what is contrary [to our innate nature]. Traits such as pleasure, displeasure, selflessness and dislike are all associated with this faculty. The fifth faculty is thinking (*tafakkur*): through this faculty we can speak, reason, reach sound conclusions, deliberate, work, consult with others and form opinions. As for the faculties perceived from these, they are five: imagination,¹ thought,² reason, memory,³ and the five senses.

Each of the five senses affords special means of perceiving reality [78]. The sense of touch enables us to perceive ten things: heat, coldness, humidity, dryness, softness, roughness, stiffness, limpness, heaviness and lightness. The sense of taste lets us perceive seven: sweetness, bitterness, saltiness, sourness, pungency, sharpness, and tastelessness. The sense of smell distinguishes between pleasant fragrances and unpleasant odours. The sense of hearing discerns simple sounds and complex sounds [which are soft and loud sounds]. Finally, there are ten things we can perceive through the sense of sight: light, darkness, colour, and [seven qualities of] physical things,⁴ [that is,] their surface, form, position, dimensions, movement, place and quantity.

The lowest in rank of these perceptive faculties is the sense of touch, then taste and then smell. The soul uses them for the health of the body, and hardly ever for any other purpose.⁵ The highest perceptions are those of the intel-

1 Imagination (*khayal*). See Iṣfahānī, *Dharīʿa*, p. 183, 11–16, for a distinction between estimative faculty (*wahm*) and imagination; cf. Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology*, p. 79, where *mutakbayyila* represents the sensory imagination and *mufakkira*, the rational imagination.

2 Thought (*fikr*). This is the second highest level of perception after intellect (*ʿaql*). They apprehend spiritual things.

3 Memory (*ḥāfiẓa*). Cf. Iṣfahānī, *Dharīʿa*, p. 196, 7–10.

4 *Jism* signifies a body or material substance; a solid, a thing having length and breadth and thickness; so that when it is cut and divided, no portion thereof ceases to be a *jism* (see Lane, s.v. *jism*).

5 Cf. Miskawayh, *Tabdhīb*, pp. 7–10/ trans. pp. 8–10. Miskawayh states that the soul derives

lect, followed by thought, imagination, and sense. The intellect and thought perceive spiritual things. Hearing and seeing are middle perceptions—they serve both the soul and the body. Their service to the body is greater as they also perceive physical realities.

Midway between the intellect and thought, and the faculties of hearing and seeing, lies the imaginative faculty. In a waking state, it transfers information from hearing and seeing to the intellect and thought, and in a state of sleep, it transfers information from intellect and thought to hearing and sight. [79]

In attributing the function of these faculties to the brain, it is said that thought is in the centre of the brain, imagination to the front, and memory and remembrance to the rear. Because the brain and the body are sustained by the heart, the source of natural heat, these faculties are sometimes attributed to the brain. Thus, we say, a person is “brainy” when these faculties are strong in him, and “brainless” when they are weak. But at other times these faculties are associated with the heart, as is implied in Allāh’s words: *Indeed, in this is a reminder for whoever has a heart or lends an ear while he witnesses* (Qāf, 50:37). Since most realities can be perceived only by these cognitive faculties, and since thought serves the intellect, and imagination sometimes serves the intellect and thinking and sometimes serves hearing and seeing, Allāh chose to mention the heart which is on one side and the hearing and seeing which are on the other side.

Allāh Most High has greatly favoured man by giving him these three means of perception: *He gave you hearing, sight and hearts, so you may give thanks* (Nahl, 16:78). He says in condemnation of those who neglect them: *They have hearts, but do not understand; they have eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear. They are like cattle, or rather are even more misguided. They are the truly heedless* (An‘ām, 7:179). He says, *They are deaf, dumb and blind, and so they do not understand* (Baqara, 2:171). This is not because they do not have the senses, but rather because they do not grasp the meaning of things which are derived by thought and comprehended through the intellect.²

sound principles from itself, not from the senses, and it perceives the intelligible and not the sensible.

1 Cf. Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt*, p. 181. *Dhikr* is sometimes said to mean the constitution in the soul by which man preserves the knowledge he acquires. It is similar to *ḥifẓ*, which pertains to acquisition of knowledge, and *dhikr* pertains to its evocation. *Dhikr* signifies memory, a conscious act of calling something to the mind, but *ḥifẓ* preserves what is in the mind. Thus, *dhikr bi’l-qalb*: the presence of a thing in the mind. Lane, s.v. *dhikr*.

2 On Iṣfahānī’s concept of the heart/intellect as a source of intuitive perception, see Mohamed, *Path to Virtue*, chapter 4. On early use of the word, see Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Jūzū, *Mafḥūm al-‘Aql wa’l-Qalb fi’l-Qur’ān wa’l-Sunna*, pp. 45 f, 187 f.

save them.¹ Allāh refers to people who suffered a similar fate when He says: *My wealth availed me not. My power has passed from me*² (Ḥāqqa, 69:28–29). [392]

ON WEALTH, HOW IT IS ACQUIRED,
AND THE ETHICS OF ITS ACQUISITION

Wealth can be used for good or evil, generally to bring honour and glory to the wealthy. In the poet's words:

Society scorns the destitute, their pockets bare,
Yet showers kindness on the wealthy, a bias laid bare.

It is said, "The wealthy man is revered and respected." The Prophet ﷺ said, "How excellent is pure wealth for the righteous man.³ And how right the invocation made by Talḥā, "O Allāh, grant me honour and wealth, because honour is not perfect without wealth, and wealth is not perfect without glory." Mutanabbī makes a similar point: "There is no glory in this world for the man who has no wealth, and there is no wealth in this world for the man who has no glory."

Some sages have urged, "Seek knowledge and wealth, and you will lead all people: the elite will value you for your knowledge and the commoners will value you for your wealth."

It is more difficult to acquire wealth from lawful sources, but easier to spend it. In the words of the poet:

Upward climbs, a daunting quest, while downward, ease unfolds its crest.

The righteous acquire wealth with difficulty, but the unrighteous acquire it easily as they do not care what source it comes from. The righteous earns wealth as a means to [393] acquiring the divine reward, but not to hoard it. Naḍr ibn Ju'ayya wisely said:

The dirham, a stranger in our humble purse,
Swiftly passes, a coin in fleeting traverse.
Yet if, perchance, amassed for a day's chance,
Spent swiftly in kindness, life's sweet advance.

The unrighteous loves to accumulate wealth, but not to spend it. He seeks

¹ Cf. Ghazālī, *Mizān*, p. 373.

² The verse echoes a recurring theme in the Qur'ān: that worldly possessions, despite their material advantages, often hold no value in the hereafter (see Kahf, 18:46). The term "My power" (*sultāniya*), denoting authority, signifies its passing, indicating that the individual no longer has control over their own destiny. Consequently, they will regret all they neglected to do to prepare for the hereafter.

³ *Musnad Aḥmad* (18081).

wealth for its own sake, and not for the sake of virtue. Wealth may be obtained legitimately in two ways: either through luck, inheritance, discovering a treasure, or a gift, or alternatively through hard work, as in the case of a trader or craftsman. It is said: “Make the effort, even if you do not attain success in the end.”

Material fortune is legitimately obtained, many times through luck and inheritance, and at other times through hard work. However, the building of character and the acquisition of spiritual goods in preparation for the hereafter always require much effort. Allāh warns:

If anyone desires [only] the fleeting life, We speed up whatever We will in it, for whoever We wish; in the end We have prepared Hell for him in which to burn, disgraced and rejected. But if anyone desires the life to come and strives after it as he should, as a true believer, his striving will be thanked (Isrā, 17:18–19).

Allāh grants material blessings to whomever He wants. Allāh’s will, not human effort, is the primary condition for acquiring them. Allāh also grants spiritual blessings and rewards, this depends primarily on human faith and effort, and secondarily on Allāh’s will. The rational person knows that material things are easy to obtain, but also easy to lose. He should not fear their loss and should accept his destiny. He will obtain material goods, irrespective of whether he asks for them or not. [394]

Sages have said: Fortune can be represented by a deaf and blind fat woman with gems on her lap. She sits on a turning stone, and people come to her to acquire what she has. She cannot see them, nor hear them talk. Many people sit nearby, and a few others watch from a distance. Every now and then she picks the gems from her lap and gives to any one of them, whether they are familiar people or strangers.

The following poem may be applicable to such a woman:

Ibn Abbād,¹ neither hailed for lavishness nor scorned for thrift,
His wealth’s sway not driven by hoard or gift.
Melancholy, the unseen force that guides his hand,
Neither miserly nor benevolent, but by *wasāwis*² command.

1 Reference could be to Šāhib Ibn ‘Abbād (d. 399/1008), a poet and probably older contemporary of Iṣfahānī. In Isfahan edition: *Ḥasanān fi ’l-majd*. No specific name is mentioned.

2 *Wasāwis*: melancholia is marked by a preoccupation of the imagination and judgement with dark thoughts, vulgarly attributed to diabolical prompting, but attributed by the science of the time to a predominance of black bile, leading to intellectual confusion. See Lane.