

Sufism & GOOD CHARACTER

Prophetic Guidance on the Spiritual Path

Imām Zafar Aḥmad ʿUthmānī

being the final chapter of his monumental *Iʿlāʾ al-Sunan*
with commentary from ʿAlī al-Qārī and Kumushkhānawī

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White Thread
P R E S S

CONTENTS



Translator's Preface	9
What is Sufism?	9
Imām Zafar Aḥmad ʿUthmānī	10
The Book of Sufism	15
<i>The Ḥadīths</i>	19
On Renunciation & Scrupulousness	25
On Warning Against Base Character	35
<i>The Ḥadīths</i>	42
On Encouraging Good Character	47
On Remembrance & Supplication	51
<i>The Ḥadīths</i>	57
Biographies of the Commentators	63
Imām Kumushkhānawī	63
Mullā ʿAlī al-Qārī	64

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE



THIS BOOK IS a clear presentation of the importance of Sufism in Islam and its role in developing good character—of which the Prophet ﷺ said, “On the Day of Resurrection, nothing will weigh heavier upon the scales than good character” (*Abū Dāwūd* and *Tirmidhī*). At the heart of the book are 80 ḥadīths of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ that relate to the spiritual way. The author, Imām Zafar ‘Uthmānī, explains the practices of Sufism through these noble ḥadīths.

To further the benefit of the book, commentary on many of the ḥadīths has been added from the classic works of two great jurists and ḥadīth masters, Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī and Mawlānā Aḥmad Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn al-Kumushkhānawī. Notes explaining key terms and concepts have also been included where necessary.

What is Sufism?

The great North African Sufi, Shaykh Aḥmad Zarrūq, gave perhaps the clearest and most complete definition of Sufism. He said it is “sincerity in turning to Allāh,” and explained that “the necessary condition of sincerity of approach is that it be what the Truth Most High accepts, and by the means He accepts. Now, something lacking its necessary condition cannot exist: “And He does not accept unbelief for His servants” (Qur’ān 39:7), so one must realize true faith (*īmān*), “and if you show gratitude, He will accept it of you” (Qur’ān 39:7), which entails applying Islam. So, there is no Sufism without com-

prehension of Sacred Law, as the outward rules of Allāh Most High are not known save through it. And there is no comprehension of Sacred Law without Sufism, as works are nothing without sincerity of approach, as expressed by the words of Imām Mālik (may Allāh have mercy on him):

He who practices Sufism without learning Sacred Law corrupts his faith, while he who learns Sacred Law without practicing Sufism corrupts himself. Only he who combines the two proves true (*Īqāz al-Himam fi Sharḥ al-Ḥikam*, 5-6; from *The Reliance of the Traveler*, w9.3, 862).

Similarly, Shaykh Muṣṭafā Najā explained that the basis of the spiritual way is “absolute uprightness (*al-istiḳāma al-tāmma*), being with Allāh, having presence of heart in one’s slavehood, and conforming to the Qur’ān and Sunna in every breath, step, spiritual experience, and state. Its pillar is keeping the company of the people of divine knowledge and Sacred Law, and making much remembrance with presence of heart” (*Kitāb Kashf al-Asrār li Tanwīr al-Afkar* 41).

This is the understanding of Imām Zafar, who combined between profound knowledge of the Sacred Law, and steadfast commitment to the path of Sufism and its principles.

Imām Zafar Aḥmad ʿUthmānī (1310–1394 AH)

He was the authoritative scholar of the Islamic sciences, the Qur’ānic exegete, ḥadīth expert, jurist, and Sufi, Zafar Aḥmad ibn Laṭīf ʿUthmānī al-Thānawī.¹ He was born the 13th of Rabīʿ al-Awwal, 1310 AH. His mother died when he was only three, so his grandmother raised him. She was a righteous woman who had performed the ḥajj.² She raised him well, and he benefited from her rectitude and piety (*taqwā*).

¹ This biography is adapted from Shaykh ʿAbd al-Fattāh ʿAbū-Ghudda’s preface to *Iʿlāʾ al-Sunan* (p. 8–10), which contains a 553 page introduction to the ḥadīth sciences. The preface has also been published separately as *Qawāʾid fi ʿUlūm al-Ḥadīth* (Principles of the Science of Ḥadīth). The biography has been abbreviated for reasons of clarity and space.

² In the days before commercial aviation, performing the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca, es-

WARNING AGAINST BASE CHARACTER



THE WEAK servant of Allāh [Imām Zafar ‘Uthmānī (may Allāh have mercy on him)] says:

Refining character traits (*tazkiya*) is one of the central concerns of the Sufis, for they consider noble traits to be stations on the spiritual path. They are distinguished from others by their good character, and through it they are known. Whoever examines the Qur’ān and Sunna with deliberation will know that good character is as central to religion as a foundation is to a building.

Improving character traits is not possible except through spiritual struggle at the hands of a perfected spiritual guide (*shaykh*)¹⁴ who has

14 Imām Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Thānawī, who is not related to the author, warned that “When a seeker (*murid*) thinks he has found a spiritual guide, it is incumbent upon him to be cautious and exert his utmost effort in finding out whether the guide is fit to be a shaykh or not. Many seekers have been misled and have perished in this area [by following would-be guides]; rather, most of humanity has been led astray and has perished by following misguided leaders. The proper way, then, is to carefully examine whether the spiritual guide is uprightly adhering to the Sacred Law (*Sharī‘a*), the [principles of the] spiritual way (*tariqa*) and the higher realities (*ḥaqīqa*). If he is an innovator, this can be known by what [learned] people say about him, and by the conduct of those who follow and love him without correcting him. If the seeker

struggled with his own self, opposed his caprice, abandoned base character traits, and adorned himself with praiseworthy ones. Whoever thinks they can achieve this through mere knowledge and the study of books has erred and gone far astray. Just as (outward) knowledge is only acquired through study with scholars, good character is acquired by struggling to attain it at the hands of the knowers of Allāh.

Good character is an attribute of the Master of the Messengers ﷺ,¹⁵ and the best of the works of the truthful (*ṣiddiqīn*), and is in reality half of religion. It is from the fruits of the spiritual struggles of the god-fearing, and the efforts of the worshippers. Base character is a lethal poison, a fatal destroyer, and a humiliating debaser—manifest vileness, and filth that distances one from the sanctuary of the Lord of the worlds. It makes the one characterized by it of the devils, and it is the open door to the burning fire of Allāh that “leaps up over the hearts (of men)” (Qur’ān 104:7). Good character, on the other hand, is the open door to the bounties of the Gardens and proximity to the Merciful. Base character is a sickness of the heart and a disease of the lower self. It is a sickness that endangers the ever-lasting life. Therefore, it is necessary to pay utmost attention to it, even more than outward sickness.

Character traits are attributes of the self by which it leans to either beauty or ugliness. Complete outward beauty is not possible through the beauty of the eyes alone, without the nose, mouth, and cheeks. Rather, it is necessary that all these be beautiful. Similarly, inward beauty requires four essential elements. And good character is completed through an appropriate balance and temperance of these

finds out that the scholars of the time are not critical of this spiritual guide, and that some scholars and notables, young or old, take him as a guide and turn to him in their search for the spiritual way and higher realities, then he will know that such a spiritual guide is worthy of being followed” (*Kashshāf Istilāḥāt al-Funūn* 1:1050).

¹⁵ Allāh Most High said of the Prophet ﷺ, “And lo! Thou art of a tremendous nature” (Qur’ān 68:4). Imām Junayd (may Allāh be pleased with him) explained that “His nature was tremendous because he had no desire but Allāh” (*Al-Bariqa al-Maḥmūdiyya fī Sharḥ al-Ṭariqa al-Muḥammadiyya* 2:41).