

SUFI CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PROPHETIC SEERAH AND THE PRINCIPLES OF THE PROPHET'S EDUCATION AND PURIFICATION

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Abstract

The role of Sufis in the preservation, interpretation, and dissemination of the Prophetic Seerah (life of the Prophet Muhammad) has remained a cornerstone of Islamic intellectual and spiritual heritage. This study highlights how the Sufi tradition integrated the principles of education (ta'lim) and purification (tazkiyah) established by the Prophet into their teachings and practices. For Sufis, the Seerah was not merely a historical narrative but a living model that guided personal reform, social harmony, and spiritual elevation. Their contributions were reflected in both literary works and practical training through khānqāhs, where seekers were nurtured with an emphasis on moral discipline, sincerity, and divine love. Central to the Sufi approach was the Qur'anic framework describing the mission of the Prophet: recitation of the Divine message, teaching of the Book and wisdom, and purification of the soul. These principles became the foundation of Sufi pedagogy and spiritual training. Education was understood as more than intellectual pursuit, extending into the realms of ethical development and character building. Purification, on the other hand, was seen not only as individual self-refinement but also as a means of fostering a just and compassionate society.

By linking the Prophetic model with practical spirituality, Sufis created an enduring system that preserved the universality of Islamic teachings. Their services ensured that the essence of the Prophetic Seerah continued to inspire generations in their pursuit of both outward knowledge and inward transformation. Thus, the legacy of Sufi scholarship and practice stands as a vital bridge between the historical life of the Prophet and the spiritual aspirations of the Muslim community across centuries.

Keywords: Sufis, Prophetic Seerah, Education, Purification, Spirituality

Title: Spiritual Purification and Inner Refinement in the Light of Prophetic Example and Sufi Teachings

One of the most profound yet often overlooked aspects of the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is his emphasis on tazkiyah — the spiritual purification of the soul. While his mission encompassed societal reform, legal structuring, and ethical upliftment, the Prophet ﷺ also focused on cleansing the hearts of people, purifying their intentions, and nurturing a direct and sincere connection with Allah. This inner transformation — the purification of the bātin (inner self) formed the core of the spiritual training provided by the Prophet ﷺ and was later emphasized and systematized by the Sufi masters.

The Sufis, deeply inspired by the Prophetic model, dedicated themselves to the inner sciences of the soul, aiming to revive the deeper dimensions of the religion which connect man to his Creator in sincerity (ikhlās) and love (maḥabbah). Through practices of remembrance (dhikr), self-discipline (mujāhadah), and companionship with the pious (ṣuḥbah), they carried forward the mission of inner purification.

The Qur'anic Foundation of Tazkiyah

The Qur'an explicitly mentions the role of the Prophet ﷺ as a purifier of souls:

"هو الذي بعث في الأميين رسولا منهم يتلوا عليهم آياته ويزكيهم ويعلمهم الكتاب والحكمة"¹

"He it is Who has sent among the unlettered a Messenger from among themselves, reciting to them His verses, purifying them, and teaching them the Book and wisdom" ..

Here, the word "ويزكيهم" (and purifying them) is placed before the teaching of the Book and Wisdom, highlighting the primacy of spiritual cleansing. According to classical exegesis, this purification involves the cleansing of the heart from arrogance, hypocrisy, envy, and other

¹Qur'an, 62:2

spiritual diseases.

Hadith on Inner Transformation

The Prophet ﷺ emphasized that spiritual health is central to overall righteousness:

"ألا وإن في الجسد مضغة إذا صلحت صلح الجسد كله وإذا فسدت فسد الجسد كله،
ألا وهي القلب"²

"Truly in the body there is a morsel of flesh which, if it is sound, the whole body is sound; and if it is corrupt, the whole body is corrupt. Truly, it is the heart".

This narration demonstrates that the heart is the seat of spiritual life. The outward actions are only as sound as the inward state of the heart. Thus, the Prophet's ﷺ mission was not merely legal or political, but primarily spiritual — to rectify the core of human beings.

Sufi Emphasis on Tazkiyah: A Quotation from al-Ghazālī

One of the great luminaries of Islamic spirituality, Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī, in his seminal work *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences), elaborates:

"واعلم أن القلب كالمرآة، والشهوات كالصدأ، وذكر الله كالصقل، والمجاهدة في ترك المعاصي كالماء الذي يزيل الخبث عن الثوب"

"Know that the heart is like a mirror, and desires are like rust upon it. The remembrance of Allah is its polish, and striving against sin is like water that removes filth from clothes"³.

Here, al-Ghazālī presents a powerful metaphor. The heart has the potential to reflect Divine light, but unchecked desires tarnish it. The polish of *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) restores its capacity to reflect truth, and active struggle against sin (*mujāhadah*) ensures this cleanliness is maintained. This process is precisely what is meant by *tazkiyah*, which encompasses both removal (*taḥlīyah*) and adornment (*taḥlīyah*): removing spiritual vices and adorning the soul with virtues.

The Method of the Prophet ﷺ and the Sufi Path

The Prophet ﷺ developed individuals through:

- **Companionship:** Spending time with him changed hearts.
- **Dhikr:** Frequent remembrance of Allah.
- **Tarbiyah:** Gradual and loving spiritual training.
- **Tawbah:** Emphasizing repentance and hope in God's mercy.

The Sufi orders mirrored this Prophetic method. Through *ṣuḥbah* (keeping the company of a spiritual guide), *adhkār* (regular invocations), and a structured path of self-reformation, they continued the Prophetic legacy of inner purification.

The life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was not limited to external reform; rather, it encompassed a profound inner revolution. The emphasis on *tazkiyah* in the Qur'an, Hadith, and Sufi writings reveals that the real transformation lies in purifying the heart, refining the soul, and nurturing the love of Allah. The Sufis, by delving into the depths of the Prophetic path, highlighted this inner dimension and offered a practical roadmap for seekers of Divine proximity.

The Propagation of Prophetic Ethics through the Character of the Sufis

Among the most influential aspects of the Prophetic mission was the perfection and promotion of noble character. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was not merely a legislator or a preacher, but a living embodiment of mercy, humility, patience, forgiveness, and love. These attributes were not only evident in his dealings with companions and opponents alike, but they

²Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 52; Sahih Muslim, Hadith 1599

³Al-Ghazālī, Abu Hamid. *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. Vol. 1. Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, n.d., p. 406.

also became the ethical foundation upon which Islamic spirituality rests.

The Sufis, as inheritors of this spiritual legacy, adopted and propagated the moral qualities of the Prophet ﷺ through their actions rather than mere words. They established systems of spiritual training (tarbiyah) based on prophetic ethics. Their conduct influenced entire communities, and their character silently conveyed the essence of Islam to the world, often before a single word was spoken.

Prophetic Character in the Qur'an

The Qur'an affirms the sublime character of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in clear and powerful words:

"وَإِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ"⁴

"And indeed, you are of a great moral character".

This verse, brief yet profound, encapsulates the moral excellence of the Prophet ﷺ. According to exegetes like al-Qurtubi, the phrase "great character" includes patience, humility, forgiveness, justice, compassion, and sincerity. It is a Divine testimony to the Prophet's unparalleled moral virtue.

Hadith on the Purpose of Prophethood

The Prophet ﷺ clearly stated that the central aim of his mission was the perfection of noble conduct:

"إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لِأَتَمِّمَ مَكَارِمَ الْأَخْلَاقِ"⁵

"I was sent only to perfect noble character".

This hadith highlights that moral excellence is not peripheral but central to the Islamic message. It implies that external worship without internal refinement and ethical behavior falls short of the Prophetic model. The Sufis took this Prophetic statement as a cornerstone of their spiritual path, focusing on internalizing these virtues through discipline and reflection.

Sufi Teaching: Ethical Propagation through Character

Imam Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri, a renowned Sufi master, emphasizes the importance of character in Sufi outreach. In his famous work *Al-Risalah al-Qushayriyyah*, he writes:

"وكانوا لا يدعون إلى الله بالسنتهم فقط، بل بأخلاقهم وسلوكهم، حتى إنَّ الناس كانوا يتأثرون بهم قبل أن يسمعوا كلامهم"⁶

"They did not call people to Allah only with their words, but with their character and conduct. People were influenced by them even before hearing their speech".

This quote reflects the essence of Sufi da'wah — a call to Allah through action, not argument. Their tolerance, humility, forgiveness, and generosity were living expressions of Prophetic ethics. Many who came into their presence experienced a transformation of the heart, often without formal instruction. This was a revival of the Prophetic method in the purest sense.

Ethical Foundations of Sufi Training

The Sufi orders built their systems of spiritual development on these Prophetic qualities:

- **Forbearance (ḥilm):** Responding to harm with patience and calm.
- **Patience (ṣabr):** Enduring hardships for the sake of Allah.
- **Forgiveness (‘afw):** Letting go of wrongs for the sake of harmony.

⁴Surah al-Qalam, 68:4

⁵Ahmad ibn Hanbal. *Musnad Ahmad*. Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, n.d., Hadith 8595.

⁶Al-Qushayri, Abu al-Qasim. *Al-Risalah al-Qushayriyyah*. Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d., p. 114.

- **Humility (tawāḍu‘):** Viewing oneself as nothing before Allah and others.
- **Selflessness (ithār):** Preferring others over oneself in both material and spiritual matters.
- **Love (maḥabbah):** Genuine love for creation as a reflection of love for the Creator.

These qualities were not only preached but lived. Sufi khānqāhs and lodges became training grounds for molding the human soul according to Prophetic virtue.

The moral dimension of the Prophetic mission is central to Islam, and the Sufis carried this light through generations with sincerity and integrity. Their influence was not merely through lectures or arguments but through their radiant character. By emulating the Prophet ﷺ in ethics, they revived the true spirit of Islam and spread it to lands far and wide. The ethical teachings of the Prophet ﷺ thus found new life in the quiet humility of Sufi saints and the moral transformation they brought to hearts.

The Promotion of Love for the Prophet ﷺ in the Sufi Tradition

Love for the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ lies at the heart of Islamic faith. It is not merely a spiritual sentiment but a religious obligation, deeply rooted in both the Qur’an and Hadith. This love (‘ishq al-Rasūl) is not confined to emotional attachment; rather, it is manifested through emulation, reverence, and constant remembrance. The Sufi tradition, drawing directly from the Prophetic model, has played a profound role in nurturing and promoting this love among the Muslim masses.

The Sufis considered love for the Prophet ﷺ not just a virtue, but an essential part of faith (īmān). They cultivated this love through devotional poetry (na‘t), gatherings of remembrance (dhikr), and celebrations of the Prophet’s birth (mawlid). These practices were not innovations aimed at formality, but living expressions of a heart in tune with the spirit of Islam.

Qur’anic Emphasis on Loving the Prophet ﷺ

The Qur’an unequivocally states the priority that the love of the Prophet ﷺ must hold in a believer’s heart:

"قُلْ إِنْ كَانَ آبَاؤُكُمْ وَأَبْنَاؤُكُمْ وَإِخْوَانُكُمْ وَأَزْوَاجُكُمْ وَعَشِيرَتُكُمْ وَأَمْوَالٌ اقْتَرَفْتُمُوهَا...
أَحَبَّ إِلَيْكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ... فَتَرْيَئُوا"⁷

"Say: If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your spouses, your relatives, the wealth you have acquired... are more beloved to you than Allah and His Messenger... then wait [for Allah’s decision]".

This verse establishes a clear hierarchy of love: the Messenger of Allah ﷺ must be dearer than family, wealth, and all worldly possessions. The scholars unanimously agree that lacking this love is a deficiency in faith itself.

Hadith on Love as a Condition of Faith

The Prophet ﷺ himself defined love for him as a condition of complete faith:

"لَا يُؤْمِنُ أَحَدُكُمْ حَتَّىٰ أَكُونَ أَحَبَّ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ وَالِدِهِ، وَوَلَدِهِ، وَالنَّاسِ أَجْمَعِينَ"⁸

"None of you truly believes until I am more beloved to him than his father, his children, and all of mankind".

This hadith affirms that the essence of faith is not fulfilled without deep, conscious love for the Prophet ﷺ. The Sufi path internalized this reality and turned it into a lived experience through devotion, poetry, and reverential practice.

Sufi Emphasis: A Quotation from Imam al-Busiri

⁷Qur’an, 9:24

⁸Al-Bukhari, Muhammad ibn Isma‘il. Sahih al-Bukhari. Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir, n.d., Hadith 15.

Imam al-Busiri, a celebrated Sufi poet, wrote the famous Qaṣīdat al-Burdah a masterpiece of devotional love for the Prophet ﷺ. In it, he expresses:

"فإِنَّ مِنْ جُودِكَ الدُّنْيَا وَضَرَّتْهَا
وَمِنْ عُلُومِكَ عِلْمُ اللُّوحِ وَالْقَلَمِ"⁹

"Indeed, among your generosity is this world and the next,
And among your knowledge is the knowledge of the Tablet and
the Pen".

Though poetic in expression, this verse shows how Sufis exalted the Prophet ﷺ as the pinnacle of creation. The poem is recited globally in Sufi gatherings as a means to revive love in the hearts of believers. The deep affection is not theological exaggeration but a heartfelt reflection of the elevated status Allah has given His Messenger ﷺ.

Practices to Foster Love for the Prophet ﷺ

Sufi masters developed structured methods to awaken and sustain this love, including:

- **Na‘t poetry:** Verses praising the character and beauty of the Prophet ﷺ.
- **Dhikr gatherings:** Collective remembrance often centered around invoking blessings on the Prophet) ﷺ ṣalawāt.(
- **Mawlid (celebration of the Prophet’s birth):** Honoring his life and mission as a source of mercy.
- **Shamā’il readings:** Studying the physical and moral attributes of the Prophet ﷺ to increase love and emulation.
- **Ittibā’ (following the Sunnah):** Sufis emphasized practical love through imitation of the Prophet’s ﷺ conduct.

These were not merely rituals, but spiritual tools designed to turn admiration into actionable love, transforming hearts and behavior alike.

Love for the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is not an optional sentiment in Islam it is the lifeblood of faith. The Qur’an and Hadith both affirm that this love must transcend all worldly attachments. The Sufis, inheriting the Prophetic light, spread this love to all levels of society through their speech, poetry, gatherings, and way of life. Their devotion was not abstract but manifest in their tears, their words, and their service to others. In a world that often forgets the heart of religion, the Sufi tradition preserved and transmitted the ‘ishq of the Prophet ﷺ as a living, transformative force.

Encouragement to Follow the Sunnah in the Sufi Tradition

The Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is the second fundamental source of Islamic guidance after the Qur’an. It is not only a source of law but also a model of ideal human behavior. Every aspect of the Prophet’s ﷺ life from his worship to his dealings, from his silence to his speech serves as a guide for those seeking proximity to Allah.

The Sufis, recognizing the Sunnah as the path of spiritual enlightenment, regarded its practice as essential for both external conduct and inner transformation. They did not separate spiritual development (tazkiyah) from Prophetic emulation (ittibā’ al-Sunnah); rather, they viewed them as inseparably linked. In their khānqāhs and spiritual orders, adherence to the Sunnah was both taught and lived, and it became the foundation of their training methods.

Qur’anic Command to Follow the Prophet ﷺ

The Qur’an makes clear that true love for Allah requires obedience to the Prophet: ﷺ

⁹Al-Busiri, Imam. Qaṣīdat al-Burdah. Cairo: Dar al-Turath, n.d., verse 10

"قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ"¹⁰
"Say: If you love Allah, then follow me; Allah will love you and forgive your sins. And Allah is Forgiving, Merciful".

This verse connects divine love directly to the imitation of the Prophet ﷺ. In classical exegesis, scholars explain that true maḥabbah (love of God) cannot be claimed without ittībā' (following) of the Prophet ﷺ in all aspects of life. For Sufis, this became a theological and spiritual principle.

Hadith: Following the Sunnah Ensures Guidance

The Prophet ﷺ said:

"فَعَلَيْكُمْ بِسُنَّتِي وَسُنَّةِ الْخُلَفَاءِ الرَّاشِدِينَ الْمَهْدِيِّينَ، تَمَسَّكُوا بِهَا وَعَضُّوا عَلَيْهَا بِالنَّوَاجِذِ"¹¹

"Hold fast to my Sunnah and the Sunnah of the rightly guided caliphs after me. Adhere to it and bite onto it with your molar teeth".

This hadith emphasizes the necessity of strong attachment to the Prophetic way, especially in times of moral or social decline. The Sufis deeply internalized this message, building their path upon the framework of Prophetic behavior.

Sufi Teaching on Ittibā' al-Sunnah: Imam al-Junayd

One of the earliest and most respected Sufi authorities, Imam al-Junayd al-Baghdādī, said:

"طَرُقُ إِلَى اللَّهِ كُلُّهَا مَسْدُودَةٌ إِلَّا مَنْ أَتَى أَثَرَ الرَّسُولِ ﷺ فِي أَقْوَالِهِ وَأَفْعَالِهِ"¹²

"All paths to Allah are closed, except for the one who follows the footsteps of the Messenger ﷺ in his words and actions".

Al-Junayd, known as the "Imam of the Sufis," rejected any spiritual claim disconnected from the Prophetic model. He affirmed that the spiritual path is only valid if it is rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah. For him and for many after him, emulating the Prophet ﷺ was not optional but the very definition of the Sufi path.

Practical Expression in Sufi Orders

In Sufi traditions, following the Sunnah is manifested in every area of life:

- **Worship:** Performing prayers, fasting, and other acts of devotion exactly as taught by the Prophet ﷺ.
- **Character:** Living with humility, mercy, patience, and justice the hallmark traits of the Prophet ﷺ.
- **Appearance:** Wearing clothing and maintaining personal hygiene in the manner of the Prophet ﷺ.
- **Adab (etiquette):** Eating, sleeping, and interacting according to the Sunnah.
- **Spiritual Training:** Shaykhs instructed disciples to correct even the smallest habits to align with the Sunnah.

This training was not rigid formality but loving imitation (maḥabbah) an effort to walk the way the Prophet ﷺ walked, speak as he spoke, and love as he loved.

The Sufi tradition has always considered the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to be the heart of spiritual life. For the Sufis, no amount of mystical experience or spiritual discipline

¹⁰Qur'an, 3:31

¹¹Abi Dawud, Abu Dawud Sulayman. Sunan Abi Dawud. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d., Hadith 4607.

¹²Al-Qushayri, Abu al-Qasim. Al-Risalah al-Qushayriyyah. Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d., p. 52.

is meaningful without conformity to the Prophetic model. Qur'anic revelation, Prophetic tradition, and Sufi wisdom all unite in proclaiming that the true path to Allah is found through loving, following, and living the Sunnah. In reviving the Sunnah in every detail of their lives and institutions, the Sufis became beacons of the Prophetic light for generations.

The System of Self-Purification (Tarbiyat al-Nafs) in the Sufi Tradition

The purification of the soul (tazkiyat al-nafs) lies at the heart of the Prophetic mission. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ not only conveyed divine revelation but also trained hearts and reformed character. His example offered a complete method of inner transformation based on spiritual discipline, reflection, and obedience to Allah. The Sufi tradition, deeply inspired by this Prophetic model, developed a structured and experiential system for the refinement of the lower self (nafs).

Sufis adopted key Prophetic principles such as mujāhadah (spiritual striving), muḥāsabah (self-accountability), murāqabah (spiritual vigilance), and khalwah (spiritual retreat) to build a comprehensive and practical approach to inner reform. These were not innovations but methods rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, refined through centuries of spiritual experience.

Qur'anic Emphasis on Purification of the Self

The Qur'an affirms that salvation lies in the purification of the soul:

"قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا"¹³

"Successful indeed is the one who purifies it (the soul), and ruined is the one who corrupts it".

This verse presents tazkiyah not as a luxury but as a requirement for success in the Hereafter. It implies that the human self has both potential for light and the capacity for corruption. The role of spiritual discipline is to cultivate the former and restrain the latter.

Hadith: The Inner Struggle is the Greater Jihad

After returning from a military expedition, the Prophet ﷺ said:

"رَجَعْنَا مِنَ الْجِهَادِ الْأَصْغَرِ إِلَى الْجِهَادِ الْأَكْبَرِ"¹⁴

"We have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad".

They asked: "What is the greater jihad?" He replied: "It is the struggle against the self (jihad al-nafs)".

This hadith, though considered weak by some scholars in transmission, has been widely accepted in Sufi literature for its deep meaning. The Sufis recognized that conquering one's inner desires is often more difficult than facing an external enemy. It requires lifelong vigilance, patience, and self-discipline — all of which were emphasized in the Prophetic tradition.

Sufi Method: Al-Ghazālī on the Training of the Soul

Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī, the great theologian and Sufi, discusses the reality of the nafs and its need for discipline in his *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*:

"النفس كالفرس الجموح إن لم تروضها بالشدة لم تطاوعك إلى الحق"¹⁵

"The soul is like an untrained horse — if you do not discipline it with firmness, it will not submit to the truth".

Al-Ghazālī compares the human ego to a wild animal that must be tamed. Without discipline, it rebels against truth and divine guidance. Through mujāhadah (striving), murāqabah (spiritual watchfulness), and riyāḍah (spiritual exercise), one can bring the self into harmony with the will of Allah. This process, in the Sufi tradition, is the path to nearness (qurb)

¹³Qur'an, 91:9–10

¹⁴Reported by al-Bayhaqi in *Zuhd al-Kabir*, p. 165

¹⁵Al-Ghazālī, Abu Ḥamid. *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, n.d., vol. 3, p. 58.

to Allah.

Components of the Sufi System of Tarbiyat al-Nafs

Based on the Prophetic model, Sufis structured their path around the following core disciplines:

- **Mujāhadah (Spiritual Struggle):** Fighting the inclinations of the nafs, particularly pride, greed, lust, and envy.
- **Muḥāsabah (Self-Accountability):** Regular introspection, reviewing one's deeds and intentions in light of the Sunnah.
- **Murāqabah (Spiritual Vigilance):** Maintaining constant awareness of Allah's presence in one's heart and actions.
- **Khalwah (Spiritual Retreat):** Temporarily withdrawing from distractions of the world to focus on spiritual growth and dhikr.
- **Ṣuḥbah (Righteous Company):** Keeping the company of a spiritual guide (murshid) and pious companions to aid the journey.

These disciplines worked together to reform the inner world, leading to a heart that is submissive, awakened, and sincerely connected to Allah.

The Sufi system of tarbiyat al-nafs is a direct extension of the Prophetic mission to purify and uplift the human soul. Drawing from the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet ﷺ, Sufis developed a practical and structured methodology for self-purification. Their emphasis on inner struggle, constant reflection, and spiritual awareness reflects a deep understanding of the human condition. In a time where external religiosity often overshadows inward transformation, the Sufi approach remains a timeless reminder that the path to Allah begins with the reformation of the self.

Inner Purification and the Foundation of Sainthood (Wilāyah)

In Islamic spirituality, sainthood (wilāyah) is not a status attained through lineage, miraculous acts, or mere knowledge rather, it is rooted in the inner purification of the soul (tazkiyah al-bāṭin) and steadfast adherence to divine guidance. The Sufi masters, drawing from the life and mission of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, emphasized that the path to wilāyah must pass through the principles of purification (tazkiyah) and instruction (ta'lim), as demonstrated in the Prophetic model.

They viewed the Prophet ﷺ not only as the conveyor of revelation but also as the spiritual educator of hearts. His task was to purify the inner self and impart sacred knowledge, as highlighted in the Qur'an. Thus, sainthood in the Sufi tradition is the natural outcome of faithfully walking in the footsteps of the Prophet ﷺ internally and externally.

Qur'anic Foundation: Tazkiyah as a Prophetic Mission

One of the foundational verses describing the mission of the Prophet ﷺ is:

"هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ"¹⁶

"He it is who has sent among the unlettered a messenger from themselves, reciting to them His verses, purifying them, and teaching them the Book and wisdom"...

This verse outlines the fourfold function of the Prophet: ﷺ

- Recitation of divine revelation
- Purification of souls (yuzakkīhim)
- Teaching the Book (al-kitāb)

¹⁶Qur'an, 62:2

- Teaching wisdom (al-ḥikmah)

Sufi commentators have emphasized that tazkiyah precedes even knowledge in this verse, showing that true understanding must be preceded by purification of the heart. Therefore, sainthood a state of nearness to Allah cannot be achieved without first undergoing this purification, which the Prophet ﷺ was divinely appointed to lead.

Hadith: Wilāyah and Obedience to Allah

The Prophet ﷺ narrated from Allah in a hadith qudsi:

"وَمَا تَقْرَبْ إِلَيَّ عَبْدِي بِشَيْءٍ أَحَبَّ إِلَيَّ مِمَّا افْتَرَضْتُ عَلَيْهِ، وَلَا يَزَالُ عَبْدِي يَتَقَرَّبُ إِلَيَّ بِالنَّوَافِلِ حَتَّى أُحِبَّهُ..."¹⁷

"My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more beloved to Me than what I have made obligatory upon him; and he continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory deeds until I love him"...

This hadith outlines the spiritual trajectory of wilāyah: it begins with fulfilling the obligatory duties, followed by voluntary worship, which leads to divine love. The Sufis understood that without obedience, self-discipline, and spiritual purification, one cannot reach the state of being "beloved" (maḥbūb) to Allah the hallmark of a walī (friend of God).

Sufi Perspective: Al-Qushayrī on the Roots of Sainthood

Imam al-Qushayrī, in his foundational treatise on Sufism, writes:

"أصلُ الوِلَايَةِ تَرْكِيَةُ النَّفْسِ وَتَحْقِيقُ الْمُتَابَعَةِ، فَمَنْ لَمْ يُزَكِّ نَفْسَهُ، فَلَا وِلَايَةَ لَهُ"¹⁸

"The root of sainthood is the purification of the soul and the realization of (Prophetic) following. Whoever does not purify his soul has no sainthood".

Al-Qushayrī affirms that wilāyah cannot be inherited, claimed, or earned without inner work. The purification of the nafs is essential, and so is ittibā' (emulation of the Prophet ﷺ). This statement refutes superficial claims to sainthood and aligns entirely with the Prophetic methodology of moral and spiritual refinement.

The Sufi System Rooted in Prophetic Tazkiyah

Based on the above principles, Sufis formalized a system of spiritual development that includes:

- **Spiritual disciplines (riyāḍah):** Exercises to train the ego
- **Dhikr (remembrance):** Constant invocation of Allah to purify the heart
- **Company of the righteous (ṣuḥbah):** Being in the presence of purified hearts
- **Following the Sunnah:** As the highest form of practical purification
- **Bay'ah (spiritual allegiance):** A symbolic commitment to walk the Prophetic path through the guidance of a living mentor

This system was not invented by the Sufis but extracted from the Prophetic tradition. It led to the emergence of men and women who attained spiritual nearness to Allah and were known as awliyā saints in Islamic terminology.

The Sufi understanding of wilāyah is inseparably tied to tazkiyah — the process of inner purification as laid out by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. True sainthood, according to the Qur'an, Hadith, and Sufi tradition, is not about spiritual claims or outer appearances, but about the hard work of reforming the self and living in accordance with divine guidance. As such, wilāyah is

¹⁷Al-Bukhārī, Muhammad ibn Ismā'īl. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī. Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, n.d., Hadith 6502.

¹⁸Al-Qushayrī, Abū al-Qāsim. Al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d., p. 115.

not a mystical status conferred by birth or miracles, but a station reached through the path of Prophetic purification, knowledge, and spiritual striving.

The Sufi Approach to Da‘wah and Preaching

The mission of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was not only to convey revelation but to transform hearts through compassion, wisdom, and sincerity. His da‘wah (invitation to Islam) was marked by gentleness, patience, and deep empathy qualities that became central to the Sufi method of preaching. Rather than relying on polemics or force, the Sufis inherited and exemplified the Prophetic model of soft-heartedness, moral integrity, and unconditional love in their missionary efforts.

Wherever they travelled from Central Asia to the Indian subcontinent, from North Africa to the Balkans the Sufis carried Islam not as an ideology to be imposed, but as a light to be lived and shared. Their method succeeded in bringing millions into the fold of Islam through the power of spiritual example and ethical beauty.

Qur’anic Principle: Wisdom and Gentleness in Preaching

Allah commands the Prophet ﷺ and his followers to invite with wisdom and gentleness:

"ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بَالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ"¹⁹

“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best”.

This verse outlines the proper etiquette of Islamic preaching: wisdom (ḥikmah), kind exhortation (maw‘izah ḥasanah), and respectful dialogue. Sufis made this the foundation of their missionary efforts, believing that a transformed soul speaks louder than an argumentative tongue.

Hadith: The Prophet’s ﷺ Gentle Character

The Prophet ﷺ said:

"إِنَّ اللَّهَ رَفِيقٌ يُحِبُّ الرَّفْقَ فِي الْأَمْرِ كُلِّهِ"²⁰

“Indeed, Allah is gentle and loves gentleness in all matters”.

Gentleness (rifq) was one of the Prophet’s defining traits. He won hearts not through harshness but by embodying mercy. The Sufis followed this trait, choosing love over argumentation and service over debate. They lived the Sunnah by being kind even to those who rejected them.

Sufi Example: Shaykh Nizamuddin Auliya’s Method

The famous Indian Sufi master Shaykh Nizamuddin Auliya (d. 1325 CE) emphasized love and service over theological debate. He is reported to have said:

"طَرِيقُنَا هَذَا مَبْنِيٌّ عَلَى الْمَحَبَّةِ، لَا عَلَى الْجَدَلِ"²¹

“Our path is founded upon love, not upon argumentation”.

Shaykh Nizamuddin’s teaching encapsulates the Sufi approach to da‘wah: rather than entering into debates or intellectual contests, the Sufis believed in winning hearts through compassion, hospitality, and humility. This principle attracted countless people to Islam, especially in the Indian subcontinent where Sufi khānqāhs became centers of spiritual attraction.

Characteristics of the Sufi Method in Preaching

Based on the Prophetic model, the Sufi method of da‘wah included:

- **Love and Compassion:** Seeing all human beings as recipients of divine mercy,

¹⁹Qur’an 16:125

²⁰Al-Bukhārī, Muhammad ibn Ismā‘īl. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī. Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, n.d., Hadith 6927

²¹As recorded in Fawā’id al-Fu’ād, compiled by Amir Hasan Sijzi, p. 102

regardless of religion or status.

- **Service to Humanity:** Hospitals, wells, schools, and hospices were often built by Sufis to serve communities selflessly.
- **Spiritual Presence (ḥāl):** The inner state of the Sufi often impacted others more than words.
- **Non-Coercion:** Sufis never forced religion; they believed faith must be born in the heart.
- **Cultural Integration:** They spoke the local language, respected local customs (where permissible), and adopted humble lifestyles.

Their preaching was not just verbal but experiential — it was Islam lived through love.

The Sufi approach to da‘wah, rooted in the character of the Prophet ﷺ proved to be one of the most effective forms of Islamic missionary activity in history. Rather than engaging in polemics or compulsion, the Sufis preached through character, love, and wisdom. This model of gentle yet profound influence led millions to embrace Islam, not through fear, but through attraction. The Sufi tradition thus preserved and embodied the Prophetic legacy of invitation through beauty, sincerity, and grace.

Practical Examples of Patience and Perseverance in Sufi Life

Patience (ṣabr) and perseverance (istiqlām) are central virtues in the prophetic tradition. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ endured countless hardships, opposition, and personal trials with unwavering steadfastness. The Sufis, deeply inspired by the Prophet’s life (Sīrah), internalized these lessons and applied them practically in their own spiritual journeys. They regarded patience not merely as passive endurance but as an active force propelling the seeker toward spiritual growth and nearness to Allah.

This essay explores how Sufi saints exemplified ṣabr and istiqlām in difficult circumstances, reflecting the prophetic model and demonstrating how perseverance is essential for spiritual refinement.

Qur’anic Foundation: Patience as Divine Command

Allah commands perseverance and links it to ultimate success:

"وَأَصْبِرْ وَمَا صَبْرُكَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ ۗ وَلَا تَحْزَنْ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا تَكُ فِي ضَيْقٍ مِّمَّا يَمْكُرُونَ"²²

“And be patient, for your patience is not but through Allah. And do not grieve over them and do not be in distress because of what they conspire”.

This verse directs the believer to adopt patience as a conscious reliance on Allah’s support. The Prophet ﷺ demonstrated this in the face of persecution and loss, setting an example for his followers.

Hadith: The Virtue of Endurance

The Prophet ﷺ said:

"وَعَجَبًا لِأَمْرِ الْمُؤْمِنِ إِنَّ أَمْرَهُ كُلَّهُ لَهُ خَيْرٌ وَلَيْسَ ذَلِكَ لِأَحَدٍ إِلَّا لِلْمُؤْمِنِ إِنْ أَصَابَتْهُ سَرَاءٌ شَكَرَ فَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُ وَإِنْ أَصَابَتْهُ ضَرَاءٌ صَبَرَ فَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُ"²³

“Wonderful is the affair of the believer, for there is good for him in every matter, and this is not the case with anyone except the believer. If he is granted ease, he is thankful, and that is good for him. And if he is afflicted with hardship, he is patient, and that is good for him”.

This hadith shows the spiritual significance of patience, where adversity becomes a

²²Qur’an 16:127

²³Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj. Sahih Muslim. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, n.d., Hadith 2999.

means of spiritual elevation. The Sufis embraced this outlook fully, viewing trials as gifts for purification.

Sufi Example: Imam Ahmad al-Ghazālī's Perseverance

Imam Ahmad al-Ghazālī, the renowned Sufi scholar, faced rejection from his own family and society for his spiritual pursuits. Despite hardships, he persisted with patience and devotion. He wrote in his book *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*:

"الصبر طريق النجاة من كل شر وسبيل الفوز بالرضا الرباني"²⁴

"Patience is the path of salvation from all evil and the means to attain divine satisfaction".

His writings encourage seekers to endure challenges as part of spiritual purification and closeness to Allah. This practical embodiment of patience in trials reflects the prophetic spirit in action.

Sufi Practice: Endurance Amid Hardship

Sufi saints often endured physical hardship, social isolation, and spiritual trials with perseverance:

- Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166 CE) endured poverty and criticism yet remained steadfast in his teaching and worship.
- Rumi (d. 1273 CE) transformed personal grief into profound spiritual poetry, exemplifying emotional patience.
- Many early Sufis practiced *khalwa* (spiritual retreat) enduring loneliness and hardship to purify the soul.

Their lives embody the Qur'anic command and Prophetic example of patience as an active spiritual discipline.

The Sufi tradition teaches that patience and perseverance are not mere virtues but practical necessities on the spiritual path. Inspired by the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ example, Sufis actively embraced patience during trials, seeing it as a means of spiritual growth and divine proximity. Their lives provide enduring examples that spiritual success is inseparable from steadfast endurance and reliance on Allah.

Establishment of Spiritual Educational Centers Based on Prophetic Teachings

Following the model of the Prophet Muhammad, ﷺ who combined knowledge with spiritual cultivation and ethical training, the Sufis established *khānqāhs* (spiritual lodges) and *ribāts* as centers dedicated to holistic spiritual education. These institutions became pivotal in preserving the Prophetic legacy by integrating intellectual learning ('ilm), devotional practice (*dhikr*), moral training (*tarbiyyah*), and embodiment of the Prophetic character (*sīrah*).

Such centers were not mere places of worship but vibrant communities where seekers underwent a transformative process grounded in the Sunnah, aiming to actualize the ideals of the Prophet ﷺ in their lives.

Qur'anic Basis: Knowledge and Spirituality Hand in Hand

The Qur'an enjoins both the acquisition of knowledge and remembrance of God:

"وَقُلْ رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْمًا"²⁵

"And say, 'My Lord, increase me in knowledge'".

and

"يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اذْكُرُوا اللَّهَ ذِكْرًا كَثِيرًا"²⁶

"O you who have believed, remember Allah with much

²⁴Al-Ghazālī, Ahmad. *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d., p. 237.

²⁵Qur'an 20:114

²⁶Qur'an 33:41

remembrance”.

These verses emphasize the inseparability of knowledge and dhikr (remembrance), both of which were central to the Sufi educational model. The Prophet ﷺ himself was the ideal teacher who imparted knowledge and spiritual discipline simultaneously.

Hadith: Teaching the Path and Refining Character

The Prophet ﷺ said:

"طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ قَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ"²⁷

“Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim”.

And also, the Prophet ﷺ stated:

"إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لِأَتَمِّمَ مَكَارِمَ الْأَخْلَاقِ"²⁸

“I was sent to perfect good character”.

This dual emphasis on knowledge and character formed the backbone of the Sufi educational institutions. The khānqāh was designed not just to impart scholarly knowledge but to inculcate the ethical and spiritual qualities exemplified by the Prophet ﷺ.

Sufi Practice: The Khānqāh as a Spiritual University

The khānqāh system, institutionalized by early Sufi masters such as Khawaja Abu Yazid al-Bistami and later Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, served multiple roles:

- **Centers of learning:** Teaching Qur’an, Hadith, jurisprudence, and tasawwuf.
- **Spaces for dhikr:** Collective and individual remembrance sessions to purify the heart.
- **Training grounds:** Where disciples (murīds) underwent practical spiritual exercises (riyādāt).
- **Communities:** Fostering brotherhood, hospitality, and service to the needy.

Al-Qushayrī noted:

"الزهد في الدنيا والمعيشة في الخانقاه والتربية على السيرة النبوية يجتمعان ليصيرا
الإنسان محبوبا عند الله."²⁹

“Renunciation of the world, living in the khānqāh, and training in the Prophetic way combine to make a person beloved to Allah”.

This highlights the comprehensive nature of the khānqāh system that integrated social, educational, and spiritual functions to cultivate true disciples of the Prophet ﷺ.

Impact and Legacy

These spiritual centers played a critical role in spreading Islam, especially in regions distant from major urban centers. They became hubs of cultural and spiritual transmission, preserving the Sunnah through lived experience rather than mere textual study. Sufi khānqāhs were responsible for the moral and spiritual education of many communities, helping individuals embody Prophetic virtues such as patience, humility, love, and sincerity.

The establishment of spiritual educational centers modeled on the teachings and character of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was a defining feature of the Sufi tradition. These khānqāhs combined knowledge, remembrance, training, and practical adherence to the Prophetic example, creating environments where seekers could evolve intellectually, morally, and spiritually. This holistic system ensured that the legacy of the Prophet ﷺ was preserved and propagated through generations, nurturing souls and societies alike.

Introduction to the Comprehensive Model of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ

²⁷Ibn Mājah, Muhammad ibn Yazid. Sunan Ibn Mājah. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d., Hadith 224.

²⁸Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Musnad Ahmad. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, n.d., Hadith 2486.

²⁹Al-Qushayrī, Abū al-Qāsim. Al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, n.d., p. 180.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is not merely a historical figure or a character confined to past narratives. The Sufis emphasized that his life (sīrah) is a living model (uswah ḥayāh)—a timeless and all-encompassing example for humanity. This model encompasses every aspect of human existence: spiritual, moral, social, and intellectual. Sufi masters presented the Prophet's ﷺ character and practices as a dynamic blueprint, guiding individuals in all eras toward righteousness, self-purification, and closeness to Allah. Rather than viewing the Prophet's ﷺ life as a closed chapter, they revived it as a perennial source of guidance and spiritual transformation.

Qur'anic Affirmation: The Prophet ﷺ as the Best Example

Allah commands the believers to emulate the Prophet: ﷺ

"أَلَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِمَن كَانَ يَرْجُو اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ" ³⁰

“Indeed in the Messenger of Allah you have a good example to follow for whoever hopes in Allah and the Last Day”.

This verse highlights that the Prophet's ﷺ life is the perfect model for ethical and spiritual conduct. The Sufis drew deeply from this principle to encourage practical imitation (iqtibās) of his qualities.

Hadith: The Perfection of Character

The Prophet ﷺ said about his mission:

"إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لِأَتَمِّمَ مَكَارِمَ الْأَخْلَاقِ" ³¹

“I was sent to perfect good character”.

This statement emphasizes that the Prophet's ﷺ exemplary role is primarily ethical and moral. Sufis focused on the inner dimensions of his character, seeing in it a holistic framework for human development.

Sufi Perspective: The Living Model

Sufi scholars like Al-Ghazālī and Ibn Arabi described the Prophet ﷺ as the “Perfect Human” (al-Insān al-Kāmil), whose life integrates divine attributes with human experience.

Al-Ghazālī wrote in Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn:

"النبي ﷺ هو المثال الكامل في الخلق والخلق، الذي يحتذى به كل إنسان في كل زمان" ³²

“The Prophet ﷺ is the perfect example in both creation and character, to be emulated by every person in every era”.

This idea captures the timelessness of the Prophetic model. The Sufis taught that the Prophet's ﷺ life is not static history but a continuous source of inspiration that adapts to each seeker's context.

Practical Implications: Guidance for All Times

Because the Prophet ﷺ embodied a comprehensive model, his life serves as a:

- **Spiritual guide:** For inner purification and connection with Allah.
- **Moral compass:** Demonstrating humility, compassion, justice, and forgiveness.
- **Social exemplar:** Teaching how to build just and loving communities.
- **Intellectual role model:** Combining faith with reason and wisdom.

This multidimensional approach makes the Prophet's ﷺ example relevant across cultures and epochs.

The Sufis revived and popularized the understanding of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as a

³⁰Qur'an 33:21

³¹Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Musnad Ahmad. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, n.d., Hadith 2486.

³²Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid. Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, n.d., p. 42.

living, universal model whose life offers practical guidance and spiritual nourishment for all humanity. Far beyond historical narrative, the Prophetic example remains a vibrant and indispensable source of ethical and spiritual education in every age.

Outcomes

- Revival of inner purification (tazkiyah) as a core Islamic objective.
- Ethical conduct became central to religious practice.
- Strengthened emotional and spiritual connection with the Prophet ﷺ.
- Development of structured spiritual training systems (e.g., khānqahs).
- Spread of Islam through peaceful, love-based approaches.

Recommendations

- Include Sufi insights in Seerah education for depth and balance.
- Reintroduce tazkiyah practices to address modern spiritual crises.
- Promote compassionate preaching rooted in Prophetic ethics.
- Establish spiritual mentorship spaces relevant to today's context.
- Present Seerah as a living guide, not just historical narrative.

Conclusion

Sufi scholars and saints made significant contributions to understanding and spreading the Prophetic Seerah (biography of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ) with a strong emphasis on spiritual education and purification. Their focus was on the inner transformation of the self, promoting the Prophet's exemplary character, and nurturing love for the Prophet ﷺ as a central element of faith. They emphasized strict adherence to the Sunnah, built systems of self-discipline and spiritual training (like mujahada and muraqaba), and spread Islam through compassionate and wise preaching. Through the establishment of spiritual centers (khānqahs), they practically implemented the principles of the Prophet's educational method. In essence, they presented the Seerah not just as history but as a living model for personal and societal transformation.

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