

SELF DISCIPLINE IN THE ISLAMIC PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL TRADITION: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE

By:

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Abstract

Makalah ini menganalisis konsep dan amalan disiplin diri dalam tradisi psiko-spiritual Islam. Dalam tradisi ini, amalan mendisiplinkan diri adalah bermatlamatkan mensucikan jiwa manusia dari segala kekotoran material demi meletakkannya pada landasan yang sepatutnya menuju Allah SWT yang merupakan matlamat akhir kewujudan manusia. Kajian ini mendedahkan bahawa pendisiplinan diri bagi tokoh-tokoh psiko-spiritual Islam, yang juga dikenali sebagai Sufi, terkandung dalam ibadat. Kajian ini juga meneliti jalan-jalan menuju *ihsān* merangkumi maqam-maqam taubat, ikhlas niat, takwa, wara' dan pensucian jiwa. Ia juga membincangkan tentang fungsi dan peranan Pembimbing Rohani dalam proses pendisiplinan diri.

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Introduction

Deeply engrossed in materialism, hedonism, and individualism, and armed with powerful technological gadgets, modern man is on the brink of destroying himself, and the entire universe with him. As if it were not enough to condone sensation-seeking and impulsiveness, modern mass-media actively scoff at those who hold onto the values of temperance, modesty, and self-restraint, which are taught by religion. The result: disintegration of social institutions (especially the family), rampant promiscuity and substance abuse. All these inevitably lead to the escalating scourge of HIV/AIDS which is threatening the entire human race.

This study is based on the firm belief that the problems humanity is suffering from today are results of human acts, both of commission as well as omission. Central among the omitted traits is the practice of self-discipline, also referred to as self-control and self-restraint. This trait is so central among the teachings of Islam that Muslim scholars have studied it in detail, outlined methods for inculcating it, and established entire institutions around it. The purpose of the present study is to briefly outline how Muslim scholars in what may be referred to as the "Islamic Psycho-spiritual Tradition" understood, practices, and taught self-discipline. It is hoped that contemporary Muslims, especially scholars, educators, and leaders, may get some insight for dealing with the current problems. The study begins with an explanation of the concept of self-discipline, followed by a brief discussion of its importance in the lives of individuals and societies. Lastly, the techniques and practices of self-discipline in the Sufi tradition are discussed in detail.

The Concept of Self-Discipline

In the English language the term discipline has various meanings. Of prime importance to educators and religious practitioners is concept of 'internal self-

discipline', sometimes referred to as self-control. This is considered, in contemporary psychological literature, to be the essential internal link between the will and action'.¹

The term discipline may have roots in the Latin "*discere*" (to learn). In that case it is directly related to the English term disciple "one who follows the instructions of the teacher". This root is also related to terms like decent, docile, dignity and decorous.² On the other hand, it may be from the Latin *discipulus* "pupil" which also has connotations of grasping and understanding. Mahoney concludes that "To be disciplined is to be caught up by the teachings of a guide... the person who undertakes such discipline may be understood, then, to be a disciple of that which is felt to be true, a captive of that which is valuable".³ Interestingly, religious traditions do not view this kind of discipline as punishment: "Rather, they generally stress the notion that this very captivity allows one to become who he or she really is or really could be."⁴

In the Islamic tradition, the term which can be considered close enough in meaning to the English discipline is *adab*. In fact the term *adab* is even more encompassing and has a deeper spiritual signification. Professor al-Attas defined *adab* as the discipline of the body, mind and soul; the discipline that assures the recognition and acknowledgement of one's proper place in relation to one's physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials; the cognition and acknowledgment of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically according to their various levels (*marātib*) and degrees (*Darajāt*).⁵

¹ D.H. Shapiro (1984), "Self-Control" in the *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, ed. R.J. Corsini, New York: John Wiley, 3: 282.

² W. K. Mahoney (1986), "Spiritual Discipline", in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, New York: Macmillan, 14: 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 14: 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ S.M.N. Al-Attas (1990), *The Concept of Education in Islam*, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, p. 22.

This definition recognizes the metaphysical, epistemological, ontological as well as the spiritual dimensions of discipline. It recognizes the complexity of discipline as we shall see in due course. It suffices to note that professor al-Attas's definition seems to be a very high level synthesis of the views of prominent Sufis regarding self discipline.

• Self discipline as explained by the Sufis is very much linked to the nature of the soul. Sufis tried hard to distinguish between *nafs* and *rūḥ*. For al-Suhrawardī, *rūḥ* is the abode of good character whereas *nafs* is the abode of evil.⁶

The other two related concepts are *qalb* and *shy*. In this context however we shall dwell on *al nafs*. Sufis have emphasized the Qur'anic explanation of the levels of the soul and these are referred to as *al-nafs al-'ammārat bi al-sū'*, *al-nafs al-lawwāmah*⁸, and *al-nafs al-muṭma'innah*.⁹ These however, should not be seen as different souls within an individual, but rather as different levels within the soul which are all present simultaneously, some being latent and others being active. The relative strength of one of them depends on one's inborn disposition, his upbringing, his self discipline in adulthood and finally God's grace.

Giving due recognition to the role of the soul in human behavior, self discipline is the totality of the techniques that are applied to ensure that man's good nature prevails and that he is not dominated by his irrational animal passions and desires. In other words it is a means to controlling and directing the activity of the *nafs* (soul). According to al-Ghazālī, the essence and secret of self-discipline is that the soul should not derive pleasure in any thing that will not be present in the grave apart from that quantity which can not be dispensed with. Thus self discipline involves preventing the soul

⁶ Shihābuddīn al-Suhrawardī (1977), *Kitāb Adab al-Murīdīn*, ed. Manahem Milson, Jerusalem: Hebrew University, p. 33.

⁷ *Yūsuf* 12: 53.

⁸ *Al-Qiyāmah*, 75: 2.

⁹ *Al-Fajr*, 89: 27.

from taking pleasure in what is permitted and instead, softening it with constant sadness and remembrance of God.¹⁰

The self discipline explained thus far goes straight to the core of the concept of *'Ibādah*, which is the reason d'être for the creation and existence of mankind. A number of concepts are linked with the practice of self-discipline, either as motivators or as results. The most directly applicable concepts are *al-khawf* (fear) and *al-rajā'* (Hope). Both of them are components of a structure which culminates in *al-shukr* (gratitude to Allah).

Before embarking on the explanation of methods used in spiritual self-discipline, it is important to highlight another dimension in the conception of self-discipline as practiced by the Sufis. The famous West African Tījānī Sheikh, al-Ḥajj 'Umar al-Fūṭī considered self discipline to be synonymous with major *jihād*. This clearly is derived from the prophet's teachings which distinguished between minor and major *jihād*. By minor *jihād* he referred to fighting against the enemies of Islam, whereas by major *jihād* he referred to self-discipline or fighting against one's own soul. To al-Fūṭī, major *jihād* is more important than, and actually includes, minor *jihād*. He also saw *hijrah* to be clarified in the same manner. Minor *hijrah* includes the physical bodily shifting from place to place. Major *hijrah*, on the other hand, means spiritual self-discipline, through which one is purified, strengthened and enabled to withdraw (*yuhājiru*) from its physical and material desires.¹¹ In that manner both *hijrah* and *jihād* which are central in Islam are intricately linked. To Sufi, they both point towards depriving the carnal

¹⁰ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1995), *Disciplining the Soul*, tr. T. J. Winter, Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, pp. 60-62.

¹¹ Omar Jah, "Sufism in the Nineteenth Century Jihad Movements in the Western Sudan: A Case Study of al-Hajj 'Umar al-Fūṭī's Philosophy of Jihad and its Sufi Bases," Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, (July, 1973), p. 164. al-Hajj 'Umar was apparently referring to the Prophet's Hadith in which *jihād* against the soul is referred to as the major *jihād*.

soul of its desires and its terrestrial affairs, and turn it to Allah in all its acts.¹² One may wonder why jihad against the infidels was considered lesser than the jihad against the *nafs* (or spiritual self-discipline)? Al-Ḥajj 'Umar al-Fūti's position was clearly articulated as follows:

Spiritual self discipline and denying one's soul excessive material demands is an individual obligation (*fard 'ayn*) whereas *jihād* against the infidels is a communal obligation (*fard kifāyah*). Secondly, the carnal soul is a more serious enemy than an infidel, because in *jihād* against infidels one never loses; if he kills his enemy he is rewarded for killing him, and should he himself be killed, he becomes a martyr. But the *jihād* against one's own self, there is only one chance that is to conquer the soul. Otherwise, if one is overcome by his *nafs* then one is definitely ruined... further more, the *jihād* against ones own self is more difficult, because killing others is easier than killing one self by denying the self its desires (the very source of its corruption).¹³

From the above exposition of the nature of self-discipline, it is clear that for the Sufis *adab* or spiritual self discipline means far more than what can be conceived of in the western definitions. To them, *adab* entails proper knowledge of man's position towards his Lord (*rabb*), his knowledge of the purpose of his existence (i.e. *'ibādah* and *ma'rifah*), and knowledge of his natural weakness, which tends to prevent him from fulfilling the purpose of his existence. Basing on that knowledge, he undertakes actions which enable him to domesticate his soul and direct it towards worshipping/serving Allah at the level of *'ihsān* (excellence) so that hopefully he can be elevated to the station of *'ubūdiyyah* (servitude) which is the real actualization of the *raison d'être* of man's existence. The above exposition shows the significance of concept of

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

discipline in Sufi thought and action. It embraces the totality of their thinking, actions, *'ibādah* rituals and entire livelihood.

Importance of Self Discipline

Discipline as outlined above is of great significance in human life. Terrestrially speaking, good discipline is the root to success in all aspects of life, including studies, family life, work, and relationship with others. Psychotherapists have also recognized it as an important ingredient in personal adjustment and mental health, which are of paramount importance to overall human functioning.

To the Sufis, worldly well-being and success is just a side effect of their activity, but not their major concern. The real focus of their attention is on the hereafter. Nevertheless, the attitude of *sālik* (traveler on the spiritual path), modes of thought and systems of behavior adopted by the Sufis have a deep moral content and go a long way in ameliorating human life on earth. In fact in Islam, behavior is considered as important as worship. That is why the prophet used to say in supplication: "O Lord God! Thou hast made good my creation; therefore make good my character also". He also said: "A bondsman (of Allah) may attain through his character high and noble degrees in the after life, even though he be feeble in his worship".

However, it is always stressed that character is much dependent on self discipline. the prophet himself said: "Heaven is surrounded by unpleasant things, while hell is surrounded by desires".¹⁴ That may be the reason why Sufi masters used to say: "If you see a man who has been given renunciation (*zuhd*) of the world, and goodly speech, then draw close to him for he has been taught wisdom."¹⁵ Imam al-Ghazālī dwelled so much on the importance of character. Of concern to us here is that he considered it to involve four aspects: doing some thing

¹⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Kitāb Jannah*, No. I.

¹⁵ 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (1990), *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, ed. Ma'rūf Zurāiq, Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, p. 324.

beautiful or ugly; the ability to act; cognition of the act; and a condition of the soul by which it inclines to one side or the other and which renders the beautiful or the ugly thing easy to do. This is a matter of self discipline." Imam al-Ghazālī emphasizes that for a person to be of good character, he must attain a harmonious balance between the rational faculty (*quwwat al-'ilm*), the irascible faculty (*quwwat al-ghaḍab*), the appetitive faculty (*quwwat al-shahwāh*), and the faculty¹⁶ which maintains a just equilibrium between the three things.¹⁷ He however emphasizes that the purpose of character traits which arise from a harmonious balance of those faculties is to "cut the love of this world away from the soul and set firmly therein the love of God, so that one could love nothing so much as the meeting with Him".¹⁸

Discussion on the relationship between self discipline, character, and morality finally leads us back to the teachings of the Tījānī Sheikh 'Umar al-Fūtī. He considered the practice of *al-amr bi al-ma'rūf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* to be the real determinants of the success of the 'ummah.¹⁹ To achieve that practice and to fully harvest its fruits, the sufi *tarbiyah*, which is based on spiritual self discipline and observance of the right *adab* with God has to be applied. He in fact implicitly stressed that the whole of the religion of Islam has so much to do with spiritual self-discipline. He wrote that:

The main objective of the *sharī'ah* is to provide the worshippers with spiritual self disciplined by means of freeing one's soul from the confinement of the body and all detestable human qualities and substituting for than other qualities until one is enable to acquire the true knowledge of God (*ma'rifat Allāh*).²⁰

¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Disciplining the Soul, op.cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁹ Omar Jah, *al-Fūtī, op.cit.* p. 156.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

There is no better way of explaining the importance of the spiritual self discipline than that. It is the culmination of all the guidance revealed in the Qur'an and actualized in the life and character of the prophet Muhammad. His disciples, who followed his guidance step by step, were elevated by their practice of self discipline to a level whereby they became shining stars which can guide all seekers to the ultimate truth.²¹

All this could be because they actually lived the message of Islam worshipped Allah at the level of *'ihsān*. They worshipped Him as if they saw Him, and they always did remember Him. Imam al-Ghazālī briefly states the purpose of self discipline as being "to find one's heart constantly in the presence of God. This it will only be able attain when by virtue of long inward strife it has been emptied of all else".²²

From the foregoing exposition, it is clear that self discipline is important both for worldly life as well as for the here after. However, the basic concern of the Sufi is with the hereafter. Worldly life is only important as a road through which one has to pass to go to the hereafter. Thus the basic importance of self discipline lies in its being the only means of attaining the rewards promised in the hereafter. In fact all the attitudes of mind, knowledge, practice and mode of life propagated by Islam are impossible without self discipline. Perhaps Allah is referring to this when He says:

And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint - none but persons of the greatest good fortune. (*Fuṣṣilat*, 41: 35)

The Sufi Approach to Self-Discipline

In spite of the spiritual and worldly importance of self discipline as explained above, most humans often fail to practice it. Many people normally tend to rationalize their laziness by claiming that the practice of self-discipline is

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²² Al-Ghazālī, *Disciplining the Soul*, *op.cit.*, p. 98.

impossible to them. The argument adduced is that character is as fixed as one's external makeup. To this many psychologists have always answered that character is changeable as long as there is the will and ability to do so. Imam Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī argued that if it were true that character is fixed and the practice of self discipline is futile, then the missions of prophets and educators would be futile.²³ However, it is known in the history of mankind that there have been so many people who elevated themselves by the practice of self-discipline (through spiritual struggle and exercise) to exalted levels of conduct.

Imam al-Ghazālī maintains that the basic method of self-discipline is by constraining the soul to perform good actions. "By practice and struggle one reaches a point at which doing good becomes pleasurable and habitual. In this process, one is aided by his *fiṭrah* (innate deposition) seeking and keeping the company of people who are good and accustoming oneself to do righteous deeds."²⁴

In line with the above, Sufis have developed such a wide array of methods of spiritual self-discipline that it would be difficult to enumerate them. Imam al-Ghazālī, well aware of the variety of methods available, stressed that the method used differs from person to person depending on each individual's circumstances. The basic principle however remains that an individual should renounce those things of the world which are found pleasurable, and should intend by whatever he does to gain the pleasure of Allah. The different methods used by the Sufi for spiritual self-discipline are briefly discussed below.

The basic step in self-discipline is purifying the intention. Prophet Muhammad stressed the importance of will-power and clear intention (*niyyat*) in the famous hadith that all actions are judged depending on the individual's intention. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī one of the pioneer Sufis, declared that men will be consigned to heaven or hell only by virtue of

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

their intentions.²⁵ Imam al-Muḥāsibī was very emphatic on the role of *al-niyyah* (intention) in self-discipline. He lamented that people engage in self-mortification, but their intentions are tarnished by an element of unwitting vanity (*al-riyā'*)²⁶. Thus, all their efforts end up being useless or even harmful. Imam al-Muḥāsibī taught that for each action, one should ask "why" and "for whom"? If it is for Allah, then one should continue with it. Otherwise, one should cease it and blame one's soul for having misguided him.²⁷

Expressing his doubts about the intentions of the some people who pretend to be Sufis, al-Muḥāsibī writes:

I am afraid that many of the worshippers of our time are deluded. How many of those who put on tattered clothes, and display humility in themselves are holding fast on the easy things of the *dunyā*? How many who pray, fast, participate in *jihād*, perform Hajj, weep and offer supplications and display renunciation and rejection of worldly life without being truthful in the conscience and without being fearful of the Lord of the worlds? They pretend by showing purity to the servants of God in their worshipping, and think they are sincere whereas their bodily organs are scattered despite that. Their eyes look at what Allah hates, their tongues utter what Allah does not like, whether during anger or during enjoyment of the company of people and talking to them backbiting others, and so on.²⁸

This clearly shows the importance of intention. The actions themselves can be good. Some one may practice all the techniques and rituals normally practiced by the Sufis whereas he does not have the proper *tawajjuh*, the direction

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁶ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (n.d.), *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyyah, 4:312.

²⁷ T.J. Winter in his introduction to al-Ghazālī's, *Disciplining the Soul*, *op.cit.* p. xxvi.

²⁸ Al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (1985), *al-Ri'āyat li Ḥuqūq Allāh*, ed. Aḥmad 'Aṭā, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, p. 41.

and dedication of his feelings towards Allah. In that case he may attain self discipline in the *dunyawī* (worldly) sense but not the real self discipline as practiced by the Sufis.

After purifying the intention, Sufis have always taught that the first step in the road to self discipline is *tawbah* (repentance). Imam al-Qushayrī, after citing the relevant verses of the Quran and hadiths of the prophet, enumerated the conditions of *tawbah*. These are: regretting the evils one committed, abstaining from wrongdoing immediately, and deciding not repeat the evil deeds in the future.²⁹ Al-Qushayrī advises that for some one to do real *tawbah* he should leave evil friends, try to be in the company of good people and observe their actions. This will help to strengthen his commitment to leave evil deeds and to lead a disciplined life.³⁰

Sufis saw an intimate relationship between *al-niyyah* (Intention) and the practice of *al-taqwā* (God fearing). *Al-Taqwā* can be understood as minding one's duty to Allah. The Sufi considered it, just like other Islamic concepts, to have both esoteric and esoteric dimensions. According to Ibn Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandārī, the esoteric dimension of *taqwā* is keeping within the bounds of Allah (i.e the distinction between *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*). The esoteric dimension refers to *al niyyah* (intention) and *al-Ikhlās* (sincerity / dedication).³¹ Thus, the multitude of injunctions in the Quran and exhortations to Muslims to practice *taqwā* could be understood to refer to the purification of their intentions and dedication of their actions towards Allah, as well as doing what was commanded and avoiding what was forbidden. Al-Muḥāsibī is in line with that meaning. On the importance of *taqwā*, he wrote that: It is important "because almighty Allah does not accept except those whose actions which are intended for Him".³²

Related to *taqwā* is the concept of *wara'*. This was defined by al-Qushayrī as "avoiding *al-shubuhāt* (doubtful

²⁹ Al-Qushayrī, *Risālah*, *op.cit.*, p. 92.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³² Al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Ri'āyah*, *op.cit.* p. 41.

actions).³³ It entails, among other things, avoiding whatever is hateful to Allah.³⁴ Al-Qushayrī quoted Yūnus bin ‘Ubaid who took this a bit further declaring that true *wara’* involves “abstaining from all doubtful actions (*shubuhāt*) and calling the *nafs* to account for every blinking of the eye.³⁵ The story of Mālik ibn Dinār was cited to illustrate this. Mālik lived in Baṣrah for forty years but refused to eat from its produce for fear that it could be contaminated by *haram*. Abū Tālib al-Makkī advises the seekers to practice *wara’* by being very careful whenever they encounter something doubtful, be it a feeling, an idea, or action.³⁶

Thus, the Sufi practice of self discipline is directly connected with the concepts of *ikhlaṣ al-niyyah*, *taqwā*, and *wara’*, which are very basic and extremely important concepts in Islam. This ensures that whatever action someone undertakes to subdue his carnal soul is intended to bring him closer to his Lord and to prepare for his abode in the hereafter.

After making proper *tawajjuh* (direction) of the intention towards Allah, which involves an intricate combination of *al-niyyah*, *al-taqwā* and *al-wara’*, one has to take the steps leading to *tadhkiyat al-nafs* (self purification). This is no doubt a Qur’anic term.³⁷ However, Imam al-Ghazālī could be considered a pioneer in clearly expounding the steps involved in that process. He maintained that successful people responded to Allah’s command to persevere, by conditioning their souls first by *al-mushāraṭah* (imposing conditions on the soul), then by *al-murāqabah* (keeping vigilant and watching over the soul), then by *al-muḥāsabah* (calling it to account for its deeds), then by *al-mu’āqabah* (punishing it for its misdeeds), then by *al-mujāhadah*

³³ Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālat*, *op.cit.*, p. 110.

³⁴ Al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Ri’āyah*, *op.cit.* p. 40

³⁵ Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālat*, *op.cit.*, p. 110.

³⁶ Abū Tālib al-Makkī (1990), *Qūt al-Qulūb fī Mu’āmalat al-Maḥbūb*. Ammān: Mu’assasat Khaldūn, p. 162. Henceforth cited as *Qūt al-Qulūb*.

³⁷ It is used, for instance, in *Sūrat al-Shams*, 91:9

(opposing it), and finally by *al-mu'atabah* (blaming the soul for its misdeeds).³⁸

Al-Ghazālī agrees that just as we put conditions on our employees so that we can succeed in worldly business, we have to put conditions on our souls so that we can succeed in the hereafter.³⁹ He considers the intellect to be a master over the carnal soul (*al-nafs al-'ammārah*). Therefore, a believer has to advise his soul, put conditions for it and enjoin it to be dedicated and subservient to Allah in all its actions. He should warn it of the dire consequences of neglecting its duty to Allah. This should be done before one embarks on any action. It is clear that this level is firmly linked with the *niyyah* explained above. Its efficacy, however, lies in constantly reminding the soul of its duty to Allah and the primordial covenant it undertook to always obey Him.

After enjoining and instructing the soul to remember Allah in all actions, it is not left to act as it wishes. It is closely scrutinized as it goes about all actions. This is what is called *al-murāqabah* (lit., being vigilant, watching over and observing). This stage is the culmination of worshipping Allah as if you are seeing him. When al-Muhasibi was asked about the nature of *al-murāqabah* he said: "It begins with the knowledge of Allah's nearness".⁴⁰

Murāqabah is basically an attitude of the mind whereby the individual knows certainly that Allah is close to him, observing all his actions, feelings and emotions as well as thoughts. It is recognition that nothing can be hidden from Allah, and that He will reward every body for all his actions accordingly. With this certainty, if someone is intending to do any thing, he, first of all, purifies his intention. If he is embarking on an action, if it is allowed, he tries his utmost to be sincere, dedicated and observes the right *adab* in doing it. If it is not allowed, he repents (*tawbah*) and abstains from it immediately.⁴¹

³⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, op.cit., 4:394.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4: 398.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4: 402-03.

Murāqabah is intimately related with *al-shukr* (gratitude) and *al-ṣabr* (patience/ perseverance). If a person knows that all the good he gets is from Allah and that he has been saved from much mishap by Allah, he will then be thankful to Allah. In contrast, if any mishap befalls him, he surely knows that Allah is close to him and will not abandon him. Since Allah commanded believers to be patient, he endures the hardship, hoping for deliverance from Allah sooner in this world or later in the hereafter.

After *al-murāqabah* comes *al-muḥāsabah* (calling the *nafs* to account for its actions). his is two fold. It may refer to future actions, whereby it is like taking care before any step is taken to avoid slipping. It basically involves purifying the intention, doing whatever is good and wholesome, and avoiding whatever is evil and the doubtful. In other words, it is made up of the practices of *al-niyyah*, *al-wara'*, and *al-taqwā* described above. On the other hand, *al-muḥāsabah* may be about completed actions. In this case it is a complete review of the intention and motivation which led to the actions: were they performed for seeking Allah's pleasure or not? It also involves contemplating about the action and the manner in which it was done: whether it is was lawful and performed well, with the right *adab*.⁴²

This eventually leads to *tawbah* (repentance). Clearly, this practice is enjoined by the Qur'an and Sunnah. In the Qur'an, each individual is supposed to reflect upon what he has presented for the morrow.⁴³ The prophet is reported to have said: "The intelligent person is one who calls his *nafs* to account for what will come after death. The failure is one who follows the desire of his soul and has wishes from almighty Allah". Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb used to exhort believers saying: "Question your souls before you are questioned".

Abū Tālib al-Makkī and al-Muḥāsibī took the practice of *al-muḥāsabah* to a very high level. They stressed that one has to check all his thoughts (including *Khawāṭir* and

⁴² *Ibid.*, 405. See also al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Ri'āyah*, *op.cil.* p. 48.

⁴³ *Sūrat al-Ḥashr*, 59: 18

wāridāt) against the stipulations of the Shari'ah. If they are not acceptable he should reject them immediately and concentrate on remembering Allah.⁴⁴ Al-Muḥāsibī reminds that it is always important to remember the defects of the soul. This helps the individual not to follow it in its disobedience.

Al-Ghazālī mentioned that if the results of *al-muḥāsabah* show that the soul committed evils, it has to be punished. This is the stage he called *al-mu'āqabah* (punishment). If one eats a morsel of food which is doubtful, he has to punish himself by hunger; if he looks at a woman whom he is not allowed to look at, he should punish himself by not looking at any one. Each organ of the body which disobeys is punished in a similar manner.⁴⁵

The last of the stages enumerated by al-Ghazālī is *al-mujāhadah* (struggling against the *nafs*). This in some ways resembles the foregoing processes only that it goes further. If a person detects signs of laziness in the *nafs* in doing *'ibādah* or if he detects some slight inclination to what is forbidden or a preference of worldly pleasures, he has to steer it back to the right track by practicing *al-mujāhadah*. In this, *al-mujāhadah* and *al-mu'āqabah* are almost similar. If you are lazy in doing *dhikr*, for example, you have to practice *al-mujāhadah* by doing as much *dhikr* as possible. If you miss a prayer in congregation, you have to not only perform all obligatory prayers in congregation but also to undertake heavy supererogatory acts which can weaken the *nafs* and bring it back to Allah. When Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb once missed to pray *'asr* in congregation, he punished his *nafs* by donating a very valuable piece of land.⁴⁶

Al-Ghazālī advised that the best way to do *al-mujāhadah* is to read so much and to listen to the stories of the

⁴⁴ Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 1: 162; al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Ri'āyah*, p. 96; al-Qushayrī takes this further by stressing that even thoughts which appear acceptable by the shari'a should not be followed if they are incompatible with one's *maqām* (spiritual station). See his *Risālat Tartīb al-Sulūk 'alā Ṭarīq Allāh*, ed. Pir Muhammad, Pakistan: Central Islamic Research Institute, n.d., pp. 73-75.

⁴⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ullām al-Dīn*, *op.cit.*, 4: 407.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4: 408.

previous Sufis who struggled hard against their evil souls. Another means is to seek the company of righteous people who strived so much in worshipping Allah. You have to observe their actions, speech, and overall behavior and try to emulate them.

It has to be remembered that *al-mujāhadah*, as well as the other methods of self purification and self discipline, is not one-off practices: they are life-long processes, or even more appropriately, modes of life. Once a person chooses to lead a life of serving God at the level of *'Ihsān*, he has to constantly struggle against the passions and desires of his lower soul. It is victory in that lifelong battle that distinguishes him and elevates him to the station of those with whom Allah is pleased and who are pleased with Allah's blessing. Even though other methods mentioned earlier and those to be mentioned later are also methods of struggle against the soul, the term *jihād al-nafs* which has also been referred to as the major *jihād* (*al-jihād al-akbar*) is very directly applicable to *al-mujāhadah*. The arguments used by al-Hajj Umar al-Fūtī to stress the importance of major *jihād* are very appropriate here.

Al-Qushayrī quotes Ibrāhīm ibn Adham's views on the conditions of *al-mujāhadah*. Among the hurdles one has to overcome to become righteous are: closing the door of enjoyment and opening the door of hardship; closing the door of haughtiness and opening that of humility, closing the door of laziness and opening that of struggling, closing the door of sleeping and opening that sleeplessness, closing the door of wealth and opening that of poverty, and finally, closing the door of hope (in worldly success) and open that of preparing oneself for death.⁴⁷ This is a wonderful summary of the principle underlying Sufi self-discipline. It is a determination that this worldly life is a transitory stage. As such, maximum focus should be put on the final abode, which is the hereafter. Thus, a person should constantly struggle to ensure that he attains the pleasure of Allah, by which he will be saved in the hereafter. Worldly enjoyment

⁴⁷ Al-Qushayrī, *Risālah*, *op.cit.*, pp. 98-99.

is just for a short while and will soon disappear, leaving the individual in total loss and destruction.

To show how people have failed to practice discipline and struggle for the attainment of the eternal bliss in the hereafter, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī put forward factors which could be considered antithetical to those mentioned above. He mentioned six factors to be the causes of degeneration and loss for human kind: weakness of intention in working for the hereafter; bodies becoming slaves of passions; very long worldly hopes despite the nearness of *'ajal* (appointed time); preference of pleasing creatures over pleasing the Creator; following desires and abandoning the prophet's *Sunnah*, and considering slips of the tongue as evidence.⁴⁸ This exactly and perfectly describes the situation we are facing today. It reminds us to make fresh re-alignment (*tawajjuh*) to God and embark on *mujāhadah*.

Self-discipline at the level of *mujāhadah* may be by means opposing the soul in its desires. It is the prevention of the *nafs* from indulging in its desires. In other words, it is the practice of self-control. Those who can successfully tame their souls have been promised eternal bliss by Allah.⁴⁹ Prophet Muḥammad is reported to have said: "what I fear most for my *Ummah* is following desires and having much hope (about the world) which makes them forget the hereafter". Remember also that opposing the self (*nafs*) is the most important aspect in *'ibadah*. This clearly shows the position of opposing the carnal soul in Sufi self-discipline.

Finally, al-Ghazālī mentions rebuking the soul and blaming it for its shortcomings as one of the techniques of self purification. By this practice, it is hoped that the soul may be elevated to the level referred to in the Qur'an as the self reproaching soul (*al-nafs al-lawwāmah*). This is done by constantly reminding it of its ignorance and stupidity.

The above approaches should not be considered as different stages to be traversed in a linear fashion. Even though Sufi masters have indicated that a novice has to linearly progress through the *maqāmāt* (stages) of *taṣawwuf*,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 101.

⁴⁹ *Al-Nāzi'āt*, 79: 40-41.

when it comes to self discipline, it is a little bit different. The view of al-Ghazālī that each individual should use what is appropriate for his circumstances has already been mentioned. Moreover, in practice, it will be found that an individual is encountering different challenges from the *nafs* simultaneously. He is at the same time very much attached to the material world, lazy in doing *'Ibādah*, inclined to the forbidden things, forgetful of his responsibility towards Allah, and he performs the religious rites for the sake of ostentation. A person in this kind of situation may need to apply all the techniques outlined above.

The techniques or tools briefly outlined above in some way embrace the six cardinal virtues, which al-Ghazālī considered to be the mothers of all spiritual virtues. These are resolve (*al-niyyah*), sincerity (*al-ikhhlās*), truthfulness (*al-ṣidq*), vigilance (*al-murāqabah*), self-examination (*al-muhāsabah*), and meditation (*al-tafakkur*). There is a strong bond connecting all these virtues, as mentioned above. Their significance in the process of self-discipline lies in the fact that they are primarily concerned with the internal relationships of the faculties within the soul and with regulating its operations. Thus their role is to "prepare the way and provide the psychological basis for the major mystical virtues".⁵⁰ They enable the Sufi to discipline the soul and prepare it to ascend through the various spiritual stations (*maqāmāt*).

Besides those major steps, all other *maqāmāt* (stations) are crucial for self-discipline. As a matter of fact, some may be more applicable to self-discipline than others. Among the very useful practices for disciplining the soul is the practice of *al-khalwah/al-'uzlah* (seclusion). Al-Qushayrī stressed that the real *khalwah* is avoiding bad deeds and paying attention to God in the midst of people.⁵¹ Others include *al-zuhd* (renunciation of the world): *al-ṣamt* (silence), *al-huzn* (sadness), *al-jū' wa tark al-shahwah* (hunger and avoiding/suppressing desires), and so on. Of paramount importance, however, is *al-dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) and *al-tafakkur*

⁵⁰ Ahmed Muhammed Sherif (1975). *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue*, New York: State University of New York Press, p. 115.

(contemplation). Al-Suhrawardī stresses that the main element in all the Sufi practices of self-discipline is constant remembrance of Allah and constant awareness of His closeness.⁵²

The foregoing discussion may give the impression that by emphasizing self-discipline and orientation of the self towards Allah, the Sufi totally rejects this world and the good things in it. On the contrary, the Sufis taught that self-discipline should be balanced. The material world need not be totally rejected. According to al-Ghazālī, desire has been created for a purpose, and is an indispensable part of human nature. What is required is not the total extirpation of these things, but rather the restoration of their balance and moderation, which is the middle point between excess and defect.⁵³

Al-Hajj ‘Umar al-Fūṭī embraced that position by teaching that self-discipline does not depend on “suppression of one’s physical being and its desires, but on sincerity, love, and gratitude to Allah”.⁵⁴ Going beyond the position of al-Ghazālī, he stressed that followers of the Tījānī order practice the way of *al-shukr* (gratitude), which involves worshipping Allah with sincerity and devotion, in appreciation of the innumerable bounties He has bestowed upon us. This is contrasted with the way of *riyāḍah* (austere Sufi practices), which involves a lot of fasting, *dhikr* (reciting invocations), constant *khalwah* (seclusion), and aims at attaining a higher place in the Sufi hierarchy.⁵⁵ One of the best ways to understand the Sufi approach to self-discipline is to see it as an indifference to the temptations of the world. Al-Junayd wonderfully expressed this when he remarked that *zuhd* refers to the heart being empty of what the hand is empty of.⁵⁶ This symbolizes the highest level of self-discipline.

⁵¹ Al-Qushayrī, *Risālat*, *op.cit.*, p. 102.

⁵² Al-Suhrawardī, *Adab al-Murīdīn*, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

⁵³ Al-Ghazālī, *Disciplining the Soul*, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

⁵⁴ Omar Jah, *al-Fūṭī*, *op.cit.*, p. 170.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Quoted in al-Qushayrī, *Risālat*, *op.cit.*, p. 327.

The Role of the Sheikh (Spiritual Guide) in Self-Discipline

Considered theoretically, the methods and practices discussed above may seem quite simple. In practice, however, they are very difficult to implement. It is almost practically impossible to attain full actualization of the spiritual self-discipline without the guidance of someone who has got the grace of spiritual enlightenment and has the permission to lead seekers on the way of Allah. This is the Sheikh.

In his discussion of the means of attaining self-discipline, al-Ghazālī stressed that it is important to have a complete diagnosis of the self before embarking on the daunting task of disciplining it. Such diagnosis can be done by the individual himself, by asking close and sincere friends to tell him his shortcomings, by listening to the criticism of his enemies against him, and by mixing with people to observe their negative tendencies and avoid them. He however emphasized that the best way is to come under the guidance of an illuminated master who can delve deep into his *nafs*, observe all its shortcomings and inclinations and propose the best method for overcoming them.⁵⁷

This is an ongoing process. After diagnosis, the sheikh has to administer the appropriate dosage of spiritual treatment to his disciple after careful consideration of the factors surrounding him. On his part, the seeker has to absolutely and unquestioningly surrender himself to the guidance and control of the sheikh. He should not hide any thing from him. He should expose to him all the doubts, silent whispering, and distracting thoughts (*khawāṭir* and *wāridāt*), as well as all his dreams. By interpreting them, the sheikh can properly know the situation of his disciple.⁵⁸ Referring back to the roots of the English term discipline which is derived from Latin

⁵⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Disciplining the Soul*, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

discipere (surrender to the guidance of a master), this marks the real essence of spiritual self-discipline.

Imam al-Ghazālī at one point even tends to imply that without the guidance of a sheikh, spiritual self-discipline is impossible. He wrote that:

A man who sets out alone, and with no guide along the dangerous roads which lie across a desert has exposed himself to a grave peril, and will be lured to destruction. Similarly, someone who treats his soul by himself is like a tree which grows without husbandry, which must soon dry up; even should it survive for a while and put out leaves, yet it will not bear fruit.... Let him therefore hold fast to him in the way a blind man might clutch his guide on a river bank, putting himself entirely in his hands and never contravening his instructions whether in the matter of his regular duties or of anything else. He should leave nothing outside the compass of his aspirancy, since he must know that he would benefit more even from a mistake of his sheikh (were he to make one) than from his correct opinion or act which might proceed from his own soul.⁵⁹

This clearly illustrates the central role of the sheikh in the practice of self-discipline. It is inconceivable that someone can attain self-discipline without the guidance of a sheikh. When the prominent Tijānī Sheikh al-Ḥajj ‘Umar al-Fūṭī explained self-discipline in the form of major *jihād* and major *hijrah*, he stressed that it has to be based on Sufi *tarbiyah* under a sheikh who has received permission from a higher authority to guide people on the path. Such a sheikh is the perfect inheritor of the prophet. He writes:

He who tries to reach the divine presence by himself without the right guidance of a perfect

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 88.

Sufi sheikh, who has permission to do so, is looking for impossibility, even if he mastered all the sciences and enjoyed the companionship of all creatures.⁶⁰

It is clear that the emphasis of having the guidance of the sheikh is because such a sheikh has already got the grace of acquiring true knowledge (*ma'rifah*) of Allah. His inner self is illuminated of divine light, and who is endowed with Allah's wisdom.⁶¹

This is clearly because he can understand the deeper meaning and significance of what the novice is facing. There are many dreams which carry significant meaning, but because someone is not illuminated, he may not understand apart from the surface meaning. The same applies to thoughts and inclinations. This level of discipline is what may be considered by the western scholars as heteronomous discipline.⁶² The term heteronomous however carries negative connotations as it implies lack of self-determination and self-direction. In the Sufi sense, however, total submission to the sheikh signifies a high degree of autonomy, that is, freedom from being controlled by the misguided soul and from being attached to the transient beings. There is no level of autonomy higher than that.

Conclusion

This study has focused on the Sufi theory and practice of self-discipline. Embedded in the practices of *Tadhkiyat al-nafs* (purifying the soul), *Tathīr al-qalb* (cleaning the heart), and *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* (refinement of character), self-discipline is a core element in the process of serving Allah at the station of excellence (*maqām al-'ihsān*), which is the proper definition of Sufism. It permeates all practices, ranging from the dedication and sincerity of the intention, through *tawbah* (repentance) and all the other *maqāmāt* (spiritual stations).

⁶⁰ Al-Ḥajj 'Umar al-Fūṭī, *Rimah Hizb al-Rahīm*, quoted by Omar Jah, *al-Fūṭī*, *op.cit.*, p. 165.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159.

⁶² See Mahoney, *Spiritual Discipline*, *op.cit.*, p. 20.

However, it is very difficult to practice spiritual self-discipline without the guidance of a divinely illuminated *sheikh*. In contemporary terms, this is the therapist, mentor, or teacher who guides one in the process of self-improvement and spiritual development. The difference between contemporary practice and Sufi self-discipline is that the Sufi way is based on constant awareness and mindfulness of Allah (*al-dhikr*) and total devotion and dedication of the intention in all actions to Allah, while at the same time taking care to operate within the limits set by Allah. In that way, it is the best means of attaining success in this world and in the hereafter. Further studies will explore how this powerful practice can be harnessed to empower Muslims and to guarantee them success in this world and the hereafter.