



Etiquette as Spiritual Nourishment: The *Adab* of the Student according to al-Ghazali and al-Isfahani

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Introduction

This essay is devoted to the etiquette (*adab*) of the student as understood by two classical Islamic ethicists of the eleventh century, al-Isfahānī (d. 1040) and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111).¹ For them, *adab* as a mode of practice is aimed at knowledge of God (*maʿrifah*). The term *maʿrifah*, according to lexicologists, is synonymous with *ʿilm*.² But for al-Isfahānī, there are distinctions in meaning. *Maʿrifah* is apprehending a thing by reflection upon its effects, a more particular kind of knowledge than *ʿilm*. One does not say, *ya ʿlamu Allāh* (he knows God), as that would imply that he knows God’s essence, but does say *ya ʿrifu Allāh*, because he knows the effects of God in creation.³ Thus, *maʿrifah* indicates knowledge of God that is not only cognitive and inferential, but also experiential and intuitive. In classical Islamic ethics, *adab* is the key to *maʿrifah*, and scholars such as al-Isfahānī and al-Ghazālī emphasize the intuitive dimension of *maʿrifah*, which is based on the purification of the soul.

Al-Ghazālī did not abandon philosophy after he left Baghdad; he recognized it as a valid way of knowing God. However, after his conversion to Sufism, he seemed to have placed greater emphasis on attaining direct, experiential knowledge of God through the disciplining of the soul. Consider al-Ghazālī’s *Scale of Action*, where he acknowledges two ways of knowing God: the way of the Sufis and the way of the theoreticians (*nuzzār*). The purification of the soul is important for them both, but the Sufī approach is less focused on learning the sciences and more on asceticism, remembering God, and cultivating virtue. Sufis stress the importance of

¹ On the ethical educational influence of al-Isfahānī on al-Ghazālī, see Yasien Mohamed, “The Ethics of Education: al-Isfahānī’s *al-Dhariʿa* as a source of inspiration for al-Ghazālī’s *Mizān al-ʿamal*,” in *The Muslim World*, ed. M. Afifi al-Akiti 101, no. 4 (2011): 633–57; Yasien Mohamed, “Duties of the Teacher: Isfahani’s *al-Dhariʿah* as a Source of Inspiration for al-Ghazālī’s *Mizan al-Amal*,” in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī*, papers collected on his 900th anniversary, vol. 1, ed. Georges Tamer (Leiden: EJ Brill, 2015): 186–206; “Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science”, *Texts and Studies*, series editor, H. Daiber et al., vol. 94.

² Lane states: “*al-ʿilm* and *maʿrifah* and *al-shuʿur* are made to have one meaning; and this is mostly said by most of the lexicologists: but most of the critics discriminate every one of these from the other; and *ʿilm* according to them, denotes the highest quality, because it is that which is allowed to be an attribute of God.” See Edward Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge: Islamic Text Society, 1984), 2138–40.

³ Al-Isfahānī, *Mufradat*, ed. Nadim Marʿashli (Beirut: Darul Fikr, n.d.), 343. For an exposition on the epistemology of al-Isfahānī, and his definitions of *ʿilm* and *maʿrifah*, see Yasien Mohamed, *The Path to Virtue: The Ethical Philosophy of al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 2006), chap. 4.

mu'āmalah (praxis), though the attainment of direct, intuitive knowledge of God is ultimately dependent on divine Grace.⁴

This brings us back to *adab*, which facilitates *ma'rifah* through praxis. A key part of the process lies in the etiquette of the student. When knowledge corresponds with virtue, we attain knowledge of God through our intellect *and* our soul. Purification of the soul enables knowledge of the self, and knowledge of the self enables experiential knowledge of God. If the soul is subject to desire, it will descend away from God; but if driven by faith, it will ascend towards Him.

Discovering *adab*

The starting point for the purification of the soul is *adab*, cultivated via an educational method known as *ta'dīb*. The common translation of *adab* as “etiquette” can be misleading, as that particular meaning emerged from royal court protocol in the Abbasid period. Graeco-Arabic translation activity during the ninth century had an impact on Islamic philosophical education, and terms such as *adab* and *ta'dīb* came to roughly correspond with the Greek *paideia*.⁵ From its originally narrow meaning of “literature,” *adab* grew into a type of character cultivated by litterateurs, poets, and government secretaries,⁶ exemplified by refinement, grace, and charm. It was an ethical concept encompassing “high quality of soul, good upbringing, urbanity and courtesy,”⁷ as well as positive “moral and social upbringing, intellectual education and entertainment.”⁸

The Qur'anic concept of *adab* differs from mere cultural refinement. It was elaborated in the eleventh century by Muslim ethicists, who expanded *adab* into a

⁴ Joel Kramer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 10–11.

⁵ Monographs on philosophical education have not been preserved. However, Plato's “Exhortation on the Education of the Young Men” (*Adab al-ṣibyān*) had been embodied by Miskawayh's *Jawadhin khiradh*, and excerpts attributed to Plato are preserved in al-ʿAmīrī's *Kitāb al-saʿādah*. Likewise, the section on children's education by the neo-Pythagorean Bryson was available in the tenth century in an anonymous Arabic translation and had an impact on Muslim educational monographs, including the ethical works by Miskawayh and al-Ghazālī. Cf. Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), 284–85; Martin Plessner, *Der Oikonomikos des Neupythagoreers “Bryson” und sein Einfluß auf die Islamische Wissenschaft* (Heidelberg: Orient und Anteka, 1928).

⁶ Joel Kramer, *Humanism*, vi.

⁷ *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, s.v. “Adab,” by Hilary Kilpatrick, 1998, 56.

⁸ *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, “Adab,” 56.

full-fledged discipline.⁹ *Adab*, for al-Iṣfahānī (d. 431/1040) and then al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), is not only directed to clarity of the mind, but also purity of the heart. While they were partly inspired by the Greek philosophical heritage, they drew most of their understanding from the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. Aristotle identified the virtues of the soul as wisdom, temperance, courage and justice, but he understood them as leading only to happiness in this world. To Aristotle's purely philosophical virtues, Muslim ethicists added theological ones. Al-Iṣfahānī and al-Ghazālī defined *adab* in terms of both outward etiquette and inward character-building. While Aristotle settles for simply identifying the virtues whose cultivation would purify the soul, Al-Iṣfahānī and al-Ghazālī reframe these virtues as predicated on faith in God and directed towards eternal happiness.

Through *adab*, humankind “reaches the most sublime states and the highest ranks in this world and the next.”¹⁰ Felicity in the afterlife, which depends on the moral purification of the soul, should be distinguished from mere salvation, which depends primarily on the declaration of faith (*shahādah*).

While we will focus on al-Iṣfahānī and al-Ghazālī, readers may want to deepen their insights into the classical Islamic contribution to *adab* by examining the views of other early Islamic educationists, including Muḥammad Ibn Saḥnūn¹¹ (d.

⁹ Knowledge and its relation to moral conduct became an important educational theme between the ninth and eleventh centuries, and it was this key theme that al-Iṣfahānī and then al-Ghazālī incorporated into their educational philosophies.

¹⁰ Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulāmi, *A Collection of Sufi Rules of Conduct*, trans. Elena Biagi (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2010), XXXIV.

¹¹ Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 290f. Cf. Muḥammad Ibn Saḥnūn (Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Salām), *Kitāb adab al-mu‘allimīn*, ed. Muhammad al-Arusi al-Mutawi (Tunis: Dārul-Kutub al-Sharqiyyah, 1972). In the sphere of the etiquette of religious education, Muḥammad Ibn Saḥnūn produced the earliest monograph on elementary teaching of the Qur’ān, *Ādāb al-mu‘allimīn (The Behavior of Teachers)*. This work recommends treating pupils equally and using corporal punishment sparingly.

240/871), al-Māwardī¹² (d. 450/1058), Ibn Jamā‘ah al-Kinānī¹³ (d. 733/1333), Burhān al-Dīn al-Zarnūjī¹⁴ (d. 620/1223). We will examine some key excerpts on the etiquette of the student in al-Isfahānī’s *al-Dharī‘ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī‘ah* (Means to the Noble Virtues of the Sacred Law),¹⁵ al-Ghazālī’s *Mīzān al-‘Amal*¹⁶ (The Scale of Action), and the *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*¹⁷ (The Revival of the Religious Sciences). Both authors agree on the principles of student etiquette.¹⁸

¹² Bradley Cook, *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2010), xxxv–xxxvi; Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 269–70. Al-Māwardī (d. 1058) wrote the *Kitāb adab al-dunyā wa l-dīn*. He integrated the literary and ethical dimensions of *adab* and produced a treatise on moral-didactic literature. Like al-Isfahānī’s *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabā’* he identifies knowledge with *adab* and the intellect. See al-Isfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabā’*, vol. 1–4 (Beirut: N.p., 1961), 45–58. The first chapter deals with respect for mature students, the merits of memorization, the value of asking questions and admitting one’s ignorance, and the problem of diverse knowledge. The pedagogics considers the disparity in the mental capacity of the students, cautions against poor teaching habits, advises the withholding of complex knowledge from students who are not receptive, and states the importance of imparting complex knowledge to those who are ready for it.

¹³ Ibn Jamā‘ah, *Tadhkirat al-sāmi‘* (Hyderabad, 1353 AH); Shoaib Shah, trans., *Etiquette of the Learner* (N.p.: Turath Publishing, 2015). Shāfi‘ī Imam Badr al-Dīn ibn Jamā‘ah al-Kinānī wrote *Tadhkirat al-sāmi‘ wa l-mutakallim fī adab al-‘ālim wa l-muta‘allim*, which is relevant for the etiquette of the student.

¹⁴ In his *Ta’līm al-muta‘allim tarīq al-ta‘alum* (Instruction of the student: The method of learning), he looks at religious duties, personal hygiene, and responsible independence. He was probably inspired by al-Isfahānī’s *Means to the Noble Virtues of the Revealed Law*. In his ethical treatise, al-Zarnūjī mentions the name of Abu’l Qasim, which is also the name of al-Isfahānī: “The Most Illustrious Imam, the martyred Sayyid Naṣr al-Dīn Abu al-Qāsim composed a book on ethics, and praiseworthy is what he composed—a book which is necessary for every Muslim to bear in mind!” See Cook, *Classical Foundations*, 111. And on page 276, the translators, G. E. Von Grunebaum and Theodor M. Abel, suggest that the author of the ethical treatise could be al-Isfahānī, because the name Abu’l Qāsim is included in the name Abu Qāsim al-Ḥusayn bin Muḥammad bin al-Mufaḍḍal al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī. This is a plausible hypothesis, because the name Abu’l Qāsim is mentioned, and also because al-Isfahānī is the author of an ethical treatise. Another point worthy of note is that al-Zarnūjī refers to him as “*al-shahīd*,” a martyr, perhaps because he was one of the scholars who might have died during the sacking of Isfahān.

¹⁵ For a concise introduction into the life, thought, and works of al-Isfahānī, see: Yasien Mohamed, “The Ethical Philosophy of al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (1996): 51–75; for a detailed exposition of his ethical thought, refer to Mohamed, *Path to Virtue*.

¹⁶ We make use of al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān al-‘amal*, ed. Sulayman Dunyā (Cairo: Dārul Ma‘ārif, 1964). For other Arabic editions, see al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān al-‘amal*, ed. Ahmad Shamsudin (Beirut: Dārul Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1989); al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān al-‘amal*, ed. Ali Bu Mulhim (Beirut: Dār wa Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1995); al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān al-‘amal*, ed. Mahmud Bijū (Damascus: Dār al-Taqwā, 2008). For a recent translation into German, see *Das Kriterium des Handelns* (Ghazālī’s *Mīzān al-‘amal*), translation with notes by Abd-Elšamad Abd-Elḥamīd, Darmstadt, WBG.

¹⁷ Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, corr. A. A. I. al-Sirwānī, 5 vols. (N.p.: Beirut, n. d.).

¹⁸ Previous research on al-Isfahānī’s educational impact on al-Ghazālī appeared in Mohamed’s *Path to Virtue*; Jules Janssens, *al-Ghazālī’s Mizan al-Amal: An Ethical Summa based on Ibn Sina and al-Raghib al-Isfahani, Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages: Studies in Text, Transmission, and Translation, In Honour of Hans Daiber*, ed. Anna Akasoy and Wim Raven, 123–38; M. Afīf Alakiti, “The Madnun of al-Ghazālī: A Critical Edition of the Unpublished Major Madnun with Discussion of his Restricted Philosophical Corpus,” (DPhil thesis, Worcester College, 2007) for a section dealing with the connection between al-Isfahānī’s *al-Dharī‘ah* and al-Ghazālī’s *Mīzān*.

Proper decorum between student and teacher provides fertile soil for the cultivation of virtues. The specific manners of how to greet or sit in front of the teacher are important, but they only take on a deeper meaning when they're attached to the broader goal of cultivating virtue and knowing God. Bearing in mind that this higher knowledge is the ultimate goal, we expound in this essay the etiquette of the student along three broad principles of *adab*:

1. The etiquette of the student towards the self
2. The etiquette of the student towards the teacher
3. The etiquette of the student towards knowledge

The student's etiquette towards the self

Adab towards the self is key to purifying the soul. This is why both al-Isfahānī and al-Ghazālī identified *adab* of the soul as the first duty of the student. Such soul-purification requires adopting a detached attitude to the world (*zuhd*).

Purification of the soul

One purifies the soul by taming its irascible faculty (anger) and concupiscent faculty (desire) through its rational faculty. The victory of reason over desire and anger grants the soul knowledge of itself, and of God, that extends beyond the theoretical to the intuitive. We use the term *ma'rifah*¹⁹ here to refer to this experiential knowledge of God.

Al-Isfahānī states that there are three ways in which one can acquire knowledge of God's oneness and attributes. The highest way is through divine light. This gives knowledge of the Prophets, the righteous, and the witness (*shahīd*).²⁰ This knowledge comes from the soul once it has subdued its lower faculty, otherwise known as desire.

¹⁹ This distinction between theoretical and experiential knowledge of God was elaborated later in Islamic history, as it does not appear in the Qur'an. The Qur'an defines "*ulama*" as those who intimately know and fear God. See also Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 22–24. "Marifa is not given any special connotation in the Qur'an, except that it is never applied to God, only to humans, which suggests acquired knowledge after not having it, according to some scholars."

²⁰ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 200ff; Mohamed, *Path to Virtue*, 162–63.

Al-Isfahānī states:

The first duty of the student is to cleanse the soul of vices as soil is cleansed of weeds.²¹ Just as prayer without a clean body is incomplete, so worship without a clean soul is incomplete.²² The starting point for the student is to purify the soul of worldliness. The tradition that “religion has been built on cleanliness” not only connotes cleanliness of the body, but also the soul. Also, the tradition [that states], “The angels do not enter into a house where there are dogs,” refers to both the dogs of the physical house and the metaphorical dogs of the spiritual house, which is the heart.

Thus, just as one should cleanse the body before prayer, so too must one cleanse the soul before *maʿrifah*. Cleansing the soul removes its vices, including anger, envy, and animosity. Only such a soul, or such a person, is deserving of being God’s vicegerent (*khalīfah*). Al-Isfahānī cites a verse from the Qurʾan to prove that vicegerency, or stewardship on earth, is one of the goals of humanity. While ritual worship (*ʿibādah*), also a goal of humanity, benefits the individual only, stewardship benefits humanity as a whole, and requires the cultivation of virtues.²³ The righteous are those who practice such supererogatory virtues. By contrast, “the polytheists are truly unclean.”²⁴ Those who associate partners with God may wear spotless garments, but they are spiritually impure.²⁵

Detachment (*zuhd*)

The student of knowledge who wants to purify his soul would have to live a life of *zuhd* (asceticism). This entails not just detachment from the world, but also a life of devotion to God. Much like the Stoics, the *zāhid* views attachment to the transient pleasures of this world as foolish. We may enjoy the blessings of this

²¹ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharīʿah*, 240–241; al-Ghazālī, *Ihyāʾ*, 1:76; Nabih Amin Faris, trans., *The Book of Knowledge* (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1979), 126.

²² Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharīʿah*, 96; cf. al-Ghazālī, *Mizān*, 341f; al-Ghazālī, *Ihyāʾ*, 1:76.

²³ Ritual worship is obligatory (*fard*) and the pursuit of virtue is supererogatory (*nafl*). When *nafl* is performed in addition to the *fard*, the aggregate total is superior to that of performing only *fard*. Scholars generally agree on this, because of the famous hadith *qudsi* in Bukhari, “My servant does not draw closer to Me with anything more beloved to Me than the obligations. Then, he continues coming closer to Me with the voluntary actions.” Thus, the practice of virtues are part of these voluntary actions (*nawafil*), which will lead to closeness to God, intuitive knowledge of God, and felicity in the hereafter.

²⁴ Qurʾan 9:28.

²⁵ For al-Isfahānī, the word *najis* signifies more than just spiritual and moral impurity. This is confirmed by his quotation of verse 6:15, which refers to unbelievers. But this does not detract from the literal meaning of *najis*, which signifies ritual or physical impurity.

world, but God reminds us that: “The life of this world is naught but the enjoyment of delusion.”²⁶ Rather than become distraught over what we will inevitably lose, we should focus on cultivating virtues that are stable and abiding.

The early ascetics (*zuhhād*) used to practice the highest form of abstention, but the novice is expected to do only the minimum, such as fasting in Ramadan. The student must learn to restrict his worldly needs and abstain from the unlawful. Al-Isfahānī states that *zuhd* is to restrict oneself to very little, and cites the Qur’anic verses permitting us to scoop a little from the river.²⁷ The advanced ascetic, however, focuses on God alone and is not distracted by worldliness. A distracted person is like a stream that flows in different directions. The earth and the air absorb the water, and little is left for the plants.²⁸ The true student is not like that stream. He has a single-minded devotion to God, and is not diverted by anything else. He is detached from the *dunyā*, and pursues knowledge with sincere intentions, as Ibn Jamā‘ah states:

[A student should] cut as many as possible of the attachments that distract and obstacles that hinder the completion of the quest, the exertion of effort, and the strength of diligence in obtaining an education, for these things are like roadblocks. That is why the earliest Muslims recommended leaving one’s family and departing from one’s homeland, because the mind, if distracted, cannot attain to truths and abstruse subtleties. “God has given no man two hearts in his body.”²⁹

The reference to two hearts suggests that one should give undivided attention to the pursuit of knowledge that will lead to the knowledge of God. We should not be distracted by material things, as they will not avail us on the Day of Judgment: “Disgrace me not on the day they are resurrected, the Day when neither wealth nor children avail, save for him who comes to God with a sound heart.”³⁰

²⁶ Qur’an 57:20.

²⁷ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dhari‘ah*, 320; Qur’an 2:249.

²⁸ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dhari‘ah*, 240; cf. al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, 343f; al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 1:76, 67f; Faris, *Book of Knowledge*, 129.

²⁹ Bradley J. Cook, *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2010), 178; Qur’an 33:4.

³⁰ Qur’an 26:87–89.

Al-Ghazālī, as we can sense from his writings,³¹ and especially from his autobiography *The Deliverance from Error*, experienced a psycho-spiritual crisis. He realized, during his time as a professor in Baghdad, that he searched for and disseminated knowledge not for the sake of God, but for fame. Al-Ghazālī knew that his mind was like a stream dispersed in all directions, and that his heart was not sound. His Shaykh advised him: “The way is to detach yourself from the material world to such an extent that your heart does not turn even to family, wealth, country, knowledge or power.”³² Al-Ghazālī heeded the advice of the Shaykh, and stated in his autobiography:

I also perceived that I could not hope for eternal happiness unless I feared God and rejected all the passions;³³ that is to say, I should begin by breaking my heart’s attachment to the world. I needed to abandon the illusions of life on earth to direct my attention towards my eternal home with the most intense desire for God, the Almighty. ... I perceived that all my studies were futile since they were of no value for the Way to the Hereafter.³⁴

He felt the need to pursue knowledge, not for wealth or fame, but for the pleasure of God. He said to his disciples: “You would occupy yourself with the meditation of the core of your being and the recognition of the attributes of the self, relinquishing the attachments of this world, and purifying your self of its blameworthy disposition.”³⁵ Al-Ghazālī’s spiritual teacher wanted him to tame his ego and to learn proper *adab*.

Etiquette towards the teacher

The essential condition for the moral training of the student is recognition of the educator’s authority, whether it be a parent or teacher. Engaging in obedience to parents early facilitates obedience to the teacher later. This is not a blind

³¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, 343f; al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, 1:67–76.

³² Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān al-‘amal*, ed. Sulaymān Dunya (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’arif, 1964), 197.

³³ This must be qualified, lest the reader thinks that Islam rejects desire or passion completely. While Augustinian Christianity promotes the obliteration of desires, Islam considers these desires to be natural, but to be regulated. For instance, while Christianity casts lust as sinful, Islam casts it as natural and necessary and something that must be regulated through marriage or fasting.

³⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, trans. Muhammad Abu Layla (Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2001), 92.

³⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Letter to a Disciple: Ayyuha’l walad*, trans. Tobias Mayer (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2005), 29.

obedience, but an act of kindness. This is *adab*. We recognize our teachers' high status in Islam, and we feel indebted to them. The Qur'an states: "Be good to your parents" (*bi'l-wālidayn iḥsān*)."³⁶ We are expected to extend that same kindness to our teachers.

Ibn Jamā'ah, inspired by al-Ghazālī, describes the thirteen rules of etiquette that students should have with their teacher. They should defend him against those who speak ill of him; they should visit his grave; they should seek forgiveness and offer charity on his behalf, they should apologize if he is angry; they should thank him for his guidance; they should ask permission to enter his room; they should sit respectfully before him; they should ask for clarification politely; they should not interrupt him while speaking; and they should not speak to their classmates while he speaks."³⁷

Inspired by a Prophetic Tradition, al-Iṣfahānī states that a teacher should be like a father to his students. He should guide them gently, always encouraging them but never stifling them. The teacher is to be accorded more honor than the father, for while the father is primarily concerned for the child's material welfare, the teacher is concerned most for his spiritual welfare. Al-Iṣfahānī states:

The teacher must treat his students as his children. He is more important to them than their own parents. When he was asked whether he honored his teacher more than his father, al-Iṣfahānī replied, "Indeed my teacher is more honored, for he is the cause of my eternal life; my father is the cause of my transient life." The Prophet ﷺ also said, "I am to you like a father."³⁸ Thus, the teacher of ethics should follow the example of the Prophet ﷺ in guiding people and should be kind to his students. God describes the Prophet ﷺ as "deeply concerned for you and full of kindness and a mercy towards the believers."³⁹ Thus, the teacher should be kind and compassionate towards his students, just as the Prophet ﷺ was kind and compassionate towards his companions.

³⁶ Qur'an 2:83, 4:36, 6:151.

³⁷ Cook, *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought*, 165–170.

³⁸ *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, *kitāb al-ṭahārah wa sunanihā*, *bāb al-istinjā bi 'l-ḥijārat wa 'l-nahy 'an al-rawth wa 'l-rimmah*, no. 313; *Sunan al-Nasā'ī*, *kitāb al-ṭahārah*, *bāb al-nahy 'an al-istiṭābah bi 'l-rawth*, no. 40.

³⁹ Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 240; Qur'an 9:128.

Students should trust teachers and the knowledge they impart, just as patients trust doctors and the medication they prescribe.⁴⁰ They should be receptive to the teacher's instruction, just as the soil is receptive to rain.⁴¹ God states: "There truly is in this a reminder for whoever has a heart or gives ear as witness."⁴² Believers, then, should not merely hear the Qur'an but should listen to it attentively, absorb its meaning, and apply it to their lives.

The student should honor the teacher by not asking about matters irrelevant to the subject at hand. Moses asked the pious servant Khidr: "Shall I follow you so that you may teach me of the good you have been taught?"⁴³ He was willing to learn, but the condition Khidr placed upon him was not to question him. According to al-Isfahānī, this condition does not contradict the verse: "Ask those who have knowledge if you do not know."⁴⁴ The point is not that the student shouldn't ask questions; the point is that the student should not indulge in polemical matters which he is not ready to understand, and which might lead him astray. Questions should be posed in a respectful manner and aim to clarify rather than confuse.⁴⁵

A true scholar is always a student, as knowledge is a life-long pursuit. Even Prophets can learn from others. Prophet Moses thought that he was the most knowledgeable about religion in his time, until God told him there was a man who could teach him certain things about the esoteric sciences (*bāṭinī* knowledge). Moses, though a Prophet and obviously superior in knowledge, especially of the exoteric sciences (*ẓāhirī* knowledge), still humbly sought knowledge from Khidr, a servant of God.⁴⁶ Al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) observes in his commentary on Qur'an 18:60:

⁴⁰ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 240; cf. al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, 344f; al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 1:68f; Faris, *Book of Knowledge*, 129–32.

⁴¹ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 244–46.

⁴² Qur'an 50:37.

⁴³ Qur'an 18:66.

⁴⁴ Qur'an 16:43.

⁴⁵ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 242–43.

⁴⁶ Though not mentioned by name in the Qur'an, he is named by Islamic scholars as the figure described in Qur'an 18:65–82 as a servant of God who has been given "knowledge." Prophet Moses questions him about his unjust actions, such as killing a man, sinking a ship, and repaying inhospitality by repairing a wall. Only after Khidr explained to him at the end did Moses realize that those actions were appropriate for the context.

The account of Moses and Khidr makes it clear that even Prophets such as Moses do not possess all knowledge, for “above every possessor of knowledge is a knower.”⁴⁷

Among the lessons we learn from this story are the student’s humility before the teacher; his eagerness to learn new things from the teacher; the sacrifices he can make, such as traveling far to meet the teacher; and the importance of respecting the authority of the teacher, and not engaging in polemical matters beyond his understanding.

Etiquette towards knowledge

This section will deal with three aspects of our attitude towards knowledge: The importance of being aware of the gradation of knowledge; the importance of judging the value of a particular discipline by its fruit; and the importance of having respect for all disciplines of knowledge.

The gradation of knowledge

The *adab* of the student requires him to respect all disciplines of knowledge while acknowledging that they exist in a hierarchy, as some disciplines are given priority over others. He should study the basics before proceeding to more advanced levels.

Al- Isfahānī states:

A person should not study a new subject until he has enough knowledge of its foundations, for a flood of jumbled information can confuse him and hamper his understanding. When God speaks of “those to whom we have given the book and they read it with due sincerity and commitment,”⁴⁸ He refers to those who are sincerely committed to the mastery of an art or science, theoretically and practically. They would only proceed to the next level of study if they have mastered the previous level.⁴⁹

There are two implications to *ḥaqq tilāwatih* [read it with due sincerity and commitment] in verse 2:121. The first implication is that one should recite the

⁴⁷ Al-Razi, cited in Nasr, *Study Quran*, 752; Qur’an 12:76.

⁴⁸ Qur’an 2:121.

⁴⁹ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 237.

Qur'an with *tajwīd*, or excellence in pronunciation, but should also have a heart that is sincere and fearful of God. The second implication is that one should practice (*'amal*) the message of the Qur'an. Thus, for al-Isfahānī, mastery of knowledge does not only pertain to its theoretical mastery, but also to its practical application:

Knowledge should never be divorced from good deeds. Faith and good works are always combined in the Qur'an. We read of "those who believe and do good deeds,"⁵⁰ and we are told that "Unto Him ascends the good word, and it is He who exalts each deed of righteousness."⁵¹ It is said: "The key to sin is the separation of knowledge from action." It is also said: "Knowledge is like a foundation, and action is like a building; if the building is not constructed on the foundation, it is bound to fall."⁵²

Thus, knowledge and action should not be separated. *Adab* is necessarily action-oriented. It is practice that embeds virtues in the human soul. The good deed confirms the good word; God does not accept the latter without the former. He is remembered both by the utterances of the tongue and the movements of the limbs.⁵³ It is not enough for one to say, "*Yā Karīm*" (O Generous One); one must also act with generosity.

The gradation of knowledge also implies that the student must proceed from one level to another, in accordance with his ability. The student should only seek the knowledge needed for his current level. Al-Isfahānī illustrates this with the analogy of a traveler.

[The student's] duty should be to treat the various sciences like provisions that he requires for the various stages of travel. He should consume what he needs from it for each stage and not depend on his own effort to attain perfection in a particular field. This could take a lifetime or more, and still, he will not probe its depth or reach its height.⁵⁴

A student traveling the path of knowledge must consume its fruits in small servings, lest he struggle to digest what he is taught. Proper mastery of one

⁵⁰ Qur'an 18:107.

⁵¹ Qur'an 35:10.

⁵² Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 237.

⁵³ Shafi, *Ma'arif al-Qur'an*, 327–28.

⁵⁴ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharī'ah*, 236.

discipline is preferable to a superficial understanding of many disciplines, as “the tree with few fruits is not useless as long as it benefits people.”⁵⁵ When it comes to learning, then, a measured pace is best. The path of knowledge requires a lifetime to traverse, and attempting to rush through it will only ensure that the student never arrives at true knowledge of God.

In sum, al-Isfahānī and al-Ghazālī agree that the foundations of knowledge are of paramount importance. Just as a weak foundation cripples a building’s capacity to carry a heavy load, a weak epistemic foundation cripples the student’s capacity to shoulder the quantity and complexity of true knowledge. Sophisticated subjects in philosophy and theology (*kalām*) tend to resist digestion and foster confusion. The student, therefore, must find a teacher whose focus is on essential knowledge and its practice.

How to recognize the value of a discipline

Any discipline is beneficial if it is directed towards the knowledge of God⁵⁶ and the welfare of humanity, just as any discipline is harmful if it aims for more malicious ends. For example, the study of nuclear science for the development of weaponry is harmful, but its study for the provision of electricity is beneficial. While knowledge for material benefit is fine, this is not the end of knowledge.

Al-Isfahānī states that the virtue of knowledge can be recognized by “the nobility of its fruit and the authenticity of its principles.” The science of religion is more noble than the science of medicine;⁵⁷ the former relates to eternal life, whereas the latter benefits temporal life.⁵⁸ The religious sciences are to be accorded the greatest

⁵⁵ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 236–237; cf. al-Ghazālī’s sixth duty in *Mīzān*, 348; *Iḥyā’*, 1:76f; trans. Faris, *Book of Knowledge*, 134–136. Al-Ghazālī does not mention al-Isfahānī’s analogy of a traveler with provisions that appears in the next paragraph.

⁵⁶ The seventh duty does not correspond with the seventh duty in *Iḥyā’*, but with another part of bk. 1, chap. 1; cf. Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 237.

⁵⁷ Medicine in the classical sense was not limited to treatment of pathological conditions, but also focused on the patterns of conduct necessary to ensure health.

⁵⁸ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 231. Compare the same point in al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, 351–52. As al-Isfahānī explains, “We speak of the science of religion as more noble than the science of medicine because the fruit of religion is eternal life and the fruit of medicine benefits us in this temporal life. The science of religion is also more authentic as it is based on revelation, whereas the science of medicine is based on experiments. Not only virtue, but the benefit of a science should be measured by its fruit or its principles. Medicine is more beneficial to health than Algebra. But in terms of the authenticity of its principles, Algebra is more beneficial than medicine: it is a pure science, and it does not require experimentation.”

value, as together with *adab* and worship (*‘ibādah*), they enable us to attain experiential knowledge of God (*ma‘rifah*). Knowledge of the practical aspects of religion, including the Shari’ah, ethics, worship, human relations, diet, marriage, and penalties⁵⁹ all deepen our understanding of God. The fruits such knowledge yields actualize one’s innate human inclination towards God.

The natural and human sciences, then, are valuable insofar as they are supportive of the religious sciences. These auxiliary sciences include medicine, mathematics, logic, philosophy, and dialectical theology. However, they are not essential for the masses (*‘awām*), but for the intellectually inclined. Although these are auxiliary sciences, they assist the student in the attainment of eternal happiness.

A student should not be averse to a discipline

The fact that disciplines exist in a hierarchy of value does not justify dismissal of any of them. “People are enemies of that of which they are ignorant.”⁶⁰ Scholars often sneer at disciplines they have not mastered. The student of hadith might boast about his own specialization, and look down upon the student of *kalām*, and vice versa. This is why students should acquire general knowledge before specializing, so they appreciate the merit of other branches of knowledge. It is true that believers rank differently in God’s view according to their station of knowledge: “They [the believers] have different grades in the sight of God”;⁶¹ and “God will raise in degrees those among you who believe and those who have been given knowledge.”⁶² However, all disciplines should still be respected, as they all have the potential to direct us to the knowledge of God:⁶³

⁵⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, 230. The theoretical dimension of religion pertains to the ontological realities, including the realities of God; the prophets; the angels; the Last Day; the intellect; the soul; basic principles of matters; the pillars [of Islam]; the heavenly sciences; knowledge about the sun, moon, and stars [astronomy]; and knowledge about plants [botany], animals [zoology], and, finally, human beings [medicine].

⁶⁰ al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, 348. The disbelievers reject the Qur’an because they are incurious about it, as God states: “Since they will not be guided by it, they will say: ‘This is an ancient perversion.’” (Qur’an 46:11). Their ignorant rejection is confirmed by the verse: “Nay, but they deny that whose knowledge they cannot comprehend and whose interpretation has not yet come to them” (Qur’an 10:39). This verse, although relevant to the context, is not cited by al-Ghazālī in the *Mīzān* and the *Ihyā’*.

⁶¹ Qur’an 3:163.

⁶² Qur’an 58:11.

⁶³ Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, 348.

A wise person will never despise any type of knowledge. He will value it and be grateful to the teachers who taught it to him. Some sages have said: “We should thank our fathers who instilled in us the doubts that inspired us to seek knowledge, more than we should thank those who imparted a little knowledge to us. Without such doubts and knowledge, we would be confused and unable to acquire knowledge that can benefit us in this world and in the hereafter.”⁶⁴

The wise person is inspired by doubt, as it impels him to probe deeper, and he is grateful to the teachers who stimulated him to think.⁶⁵ This is not the existential doubt of the atheist, but a methodological skepticism. It is to have a critical approach towards all schools of thought and all disciplines. One should not follow these blindly. If the intellectual sciences, such as philosophy and dialectical theology, lead us to knowledge of God, then God will reward those exponents of philosophy and theology, although their disciplines rank lower than the religious sciences, such as Qur’anic memorization, hadith, and jurisprudence. Al-Ghazālī states:

Just as the care of the nurses is important on the battlefield, and the help of the water-suppliers is important during pilgrimage, so too are theologians and philosophers useful with their demonstrative proofs for the religious sciences. God will reward them if they glorify Him. Highest in the glorification of God are the Prophets, followed by the saints, and then the scholars, and then the pious who follow them.⁶⁶

Discursive knowledge, whether philosophical or theological, is not to be pursued for its own sake, but as a means to glorify God in this world. But to truly know God—to transcend the limited understanding offered by books—we turn to *adab*. As already stated, *adab* has a purpose higher than mere courtesy; it must ultimately lead to *ma‘rifah*.

⁶⁴ Al-Isfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah*, 232; cf. al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, 348.

⁶⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, 409. Al-Ghazālī valued doubt as a means of gaining certainty. He was not anti-intellectual. His *Scale of Action* (especially the last chapter) and his *Deliverance from Error* demonstrate his method of doubt, which he used to critique the Islamic schools of thought of his time.

⁶⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān*, 361–62; corresponding to the ninth duty in the *Ihyā’*; Fazlul Karim, trans., *Essential Ihyā’ ‘ulum al-dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2015), 1:53–54.

In sum, we should respect all branches of knowledge, regardless of their rank. We judge the value of disciplines by their fruit, so any discipline is valuable provided it can orient us towards the glorification of God.

Conclusion

The Islamic ethicists of the eleventh century conceived of education as a means to the moral formation of the individual and society. They understood the observance of proper etiquette as essential for the building of character. This essay aimed to provide the Qur'anic perspective on the etiquette of the student through the lens of al-Isfahānī and al-Ghazālī.

Al-Ghazālī adopted and elaborated upon al-Isfahānī's duties of the student in a more systematic manner in the *Scale of Action*. These duties provide a pathway for the cultivation of virtue, which is the key to experiential knowledge of God. I have condensed the duties of the student into three main principles of etiquette: etiquette towards the self, the teacher, and knowledge itself.

The starting point for attaining the knowledge of God (*ma'rifah*) is the purification of the soul (*nafs*). This is the etiquette (*adab*) towards the self. This requires acquisition of virtues, whether internal, such as courage, or external, such as wealth. These virtues, when inspired by faith, should lead to *ma'rifah*. All knowledge should serve this end. Knowledge that prepares one for this world is important for one's physical nourishment, but knowledge that prepares one for the hereafter is important for one's spiritual nourishment. Al-Isfahānī and al-Ghazālī agree that knowledge of *adab* is insufficient; one must live that *adab*. Only through relentless practice does the believer imbibe virtues, and only when virtues have become second nature is a believer defined by them. A generous person is one whose generosity comes from within, rather than from the external impositions of the law or society.⁶⁷ *Adab* is about disciplining the self, whereby the internalization of virtue generates *ma'rifah*.

⁶⁷ As observed by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "As it is not one swallow or a fine day that makes a spring, so it is not one day or a short time that makes a man blessed and happy." The writer Will Durant summarized Aristotle's view, in a quote that has been widely misattributed to Aristotle, in the following way: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

Al-Isfahānī and al-Ghazālī also held that the *adab* of the student is to acknowledge the hierarchy of knowledge by aiming for its peak: knowledge of God. All disciplines are important, but some disciplines are more important than others.⁶⁸

It may seem difficult to imagine, but al-Isfahānī was concerned about the oversaturation of information in his time. One wonders how there could be a flood of information in an age with no electricity, printing press, or internet. Now imagine how much more challenging is the situation we face today, in the digital age. We are bombarded with so many Islamic videos, live sessions, articles, and social media posts that we struggle to cope with the avalanche of disjointed data, with distinguishing truth from falsehood. How fleeting the reading and how little the comprehension of this deluge of material. It seems that the more information we have, the shallower our knowledge of Islam.

Modern liberal pedagogy attempts to cultivate “critical thinking,” but we have not even acquired or internalized the core religious knowledge essential for our moral and spiritual transformation. Classical Islamic learning was based on the oral tradition. The student would read the text in front of the teacher, usually in the mosque or the *madrassa*, and only after he mastered the text or the discipline would he proceed to the next stage. This traditional method of learning is hardly practiced today. Online teaching is gradually supplanting face-to-face classroom teaching, which makes it even more difficult for the teacher to cultivate *adab* in students.

In contrast to modern Western education, which focuses on developing our technical skills in preparation for the market economy, Islamic education teaches us how to nurture our souls in preparation for knowledge of God and felicity in the hereafter. We need the sciences to build our civilization and earn our livelihood, but we must not live under the illusion that material comfort alone will make us happy. Fulfilling our bodily needs earns us momentary pleasure, but fulfilling our spiritual needs earns us eternity. To think otherwise is to alienate ourselves from our *fiṭrah* and forget the purpose of our existence. Classical Islamic philosophers, such as al-Isfahānī and al-Ghazālī, ultimately remind us that reintroducing *adab*

⁶⁸ For an in-depth insight into al-Ghazali’s theory of knowledge and the philosophical and Sufi ways to certainty and knowledge of God, see Nabil Yasien Mohamed, “A Critical Study of Doubt and Certainty in al-Ghazali’s Epistemology” (MA thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2021).

into our education will allow us to truly discover God and ourselves, and attain happiness in this world and the next.