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ON PATIENCE (ŞABR) IN SUFI VIRTUE ETHICS

Atif Khalil

In his brief chapter on the “station of Sufism,” or *maqām al-taşawwuf* in the *Meccan Revelations*, Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240 CE) opens his inquiry by quoting a saying of the Sufis. “The Folk of the Way of God,” he writes, “say that Sufism is good character, and that he who surpasses you in character has surpassed you in Sufism.”¹ The word used for “character” here is *khuluq*. Indeed, this is the same *khuluq* of which we read in the Quran when the Prophet, according to Muslim tradition, is addressed by God with the words, *innaka la‘alā khuluqin ‘aẓīm*, which is to say, *Surely you are of a tremendous character* (68:4). The Prophet himself underscored the importance of the formation of *khuluq*, or character development, in his mission when he declared in a well-known hadith, “I was sent to bring beautiful character to perfection,”² a sentiment he reiterated on another occasion when he said, “Surely those of you most beloved to me are those of most beautiful character.”³

If we are to take seriously the words of the “Folk of the Way of God,” Sufism in the deepest sense is Islam’s science of *akhlāq*, or character formation. Even the unveilings and metaphysical insights of which the Muslim mystics have often spoken and celebrated are themselves rooted and made possible by *tabdīl al-akhlāq*, the “transformation of character” required by the inner life of Islam, without which any claims to higher knowledge remain empty, at least from the vantage point of

1. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Cairo, n.d.), 2:266 (chapter 164). The saying is attributed to Abū Bakr al-Kattānī (d. 322/934) in Qushayrī’s *Risāla*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. Sharif (Damascus: Dār al-Farfūr, 2002), 427.

2. Mālik, *Muwatta’*, Ḥusn al-khuluq, 8.

3. Bukhārī, *Faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba*, 27; Tirmidhī, *Birr*, 71.

Sufism itself. This is because only by drawing into the proximity of God through the assumption of the divine Names, or Qualities, in the form of beautiful character traits—premised on the principle that like attracts like—may the soul open itself up to celestial knowledge. To the extent that the transformation of character involves the acquisition and internalization of certain key virtues and the uprooting and divestment of corresponding vices, Sufism in so far as it is the science of *akhlāq* may also be described as a discipline that encompasses (but is not confined to) Islamic virtue ethics, and it is for this reason that the most elaborate inquiries into what outsiders might classify as Islamic virtue theory often took place within the pages of Sufi manuals (in particular, to those sections of the texts devoted to the states and stations).⁴

Generally speaking, the *akhlāq*, or virtues, central to Islamic piety may be divided into two categories. There are, first, those involving one's relationship with others, and then there are those involving one's relationship with God. The character traits are not restricted to just one's dealing with God's creatures here below, but must also define one's relation with Heaven above. Among the latter are such virtues as repentance (*tawba*), fear (*khawf*), trust (*tawakkul*), and hope (*rajāʿ*). One thus turns in repentance only to God, fears only Him, places trust only in Him, and puts all hopes in none other than Him. Among the character traits that involve interpersonal (and even inter-sentient) relations with others are such virtues as generosity (*sakhāwa*), compassion (*rahma*), and forbearance (*hilm*). One thus shows generosity not to God, but to people; one is compassionate not to God, but towards His creatures; one is gentle and benevolent towards others, but not towards God. Indeed, just as we are ourselves the passive objects of divine mercy, generosity, benevolence and kindness, we actively manifest (or are at least summoned to manifest) these very qualities towards all of God's creatures. As the Prophet said, "Be compassionate to those on the earth and the One in Heaven will be compassionate towards you,"⁵ and "He who does not show compassion will not be shown compassion."⁶

To these two, we can also add a third category of virtues that overlap insofar as their objects include both God and His creatures. Among them, we may identify such qualities as sincerity (*ikhlaṣ*), gratitude (*shukr*), and having a good opinion of the other (*husn al-dhann*). After all, we are to be sincere and grateful towards both God and people, just as we are to think well of them. It is true that the early Sufi manuals tend to give pride of place to the virtues centered around relations with God in light of the theocentric nature of Islam and, by extension, its mystical tradition. This, however, is not because the virtues involving others are considered less important, but rather due to the belief that by setting aright one's standing with God, one's relations with others will follow suit. Moreover, since the higher

4. For more on this theme, see my essay, "Sufism and Qur'anic Ethics," in *The Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: Routledge, 2020), 159-171. On the states and stations, see *idem.*, *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 77-83; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 68-83. On Sufi ethics, see Cyrus Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (London: Oneworld, 2017), 15-19, 153-296.

5. Tirmidhī, *Birr*, 16.

6. Bukhārī, *Adab*, 18; Muslim, *Faḍā'il*, 65.

metaphysics of Sufism often blurs the distinction between the world and its divine origin, even in one's interactions with others, there is an awareness that one is in fact interacting with God. This point was colorfully illustrated by the famous remark of Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), "For thirty years I have been speaking to God, while people imagined that I was speaking to them."⁷

In broad terms, it would not be incorrect to suggest that the categories of the two sets of virtues just described (those involving God and His creatures) reflect two categories of acts in Islamic Law: those that lie within the domain of *'ibādāt*, on the one hand, and those that fall within the purview of *mu'āmalāt*, on the other. The former, as we know, involve individual expressions of religious piety ranging from ritual prayer to the fast in Ramadan, the obligations of which collectively form the *ḥuqūq Allāh*, or "rights of God." The latter involve one's dealings with others and comprise what are often called the *ḥuqūq al-'ibād*, the "rights of God's servants," that is to say, the rights others have over us or our obligations towards them. And in the same way that certain sets of religious obligations overlap, creating in effect a third category, such as the payment of the alms tax (*zakāt*), similarly, certain virtues as we just saw also intersect. Moreover, in the same way that the laws of the *sharī'a* determine and regulate what Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) and other moral psychologists described as the *a'māl al-jawāriḥ*, or "acts of the limbs," the laws of the *ṭarīqa* determine and regulate what have been described as the *a'māl al-qulūb*, the "acts of the heart."⁸ To speak of the virtues, or what may also be called the *faḍā'il*, is therefore to speak of a realm of human conduct that is more interiorized and less perceptible than outward activity, even though it is itself the basis of what happens even in the realm of action, much like the unseen world that is itself the ground of the seen world—like a tree whose intertwined roots lie concealed under the surface of the earth.

When it comes to the theme of *ṣabr*, or patience, we are dealing with a virtue that falls within the third category, one involving our relation with both God and others. The centrality of the virtue in Muslim piety is underscored by the frequency with which the ṣ-b-r root (from which the word stems) occurs in the Quran. Its derivatives appear in more than a hundred instances, in such verses as, *So patiently bear your Lord's judgement* (76:24), and *Surely in that are signs for every patient and thankful one* (14:5, 31:31, 34:19, 42:33).⁹ And the Prophet extolled the eminence of patience in numerous traditions, as when he said, "In patience over those matters which you detest, there is much good."¹⁰ In the hadith literature, *ṣabr* also figures as a divine quality,¹¹ thereby providing a basis for the inclusion of *al-Ṣabūr*, the Ever-

7. Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Kalābādī, *al-Ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-tasawwuf*, ed. Yuḥannā Ṣādir (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2001), 107. For more on Sahl, see Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'anic Hermeneutics of the Ṣūfi Sahl at-Tustarī* (d. 283/896) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980).

8. On the influence of this distinction in medieval Jewish piety, see Diana Lobel, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya Ibn Paquda's Duties of the Heart* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 196-197. The best study of Muḥāsibī's moral psychology to date is to be found in Gavin Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Works of al-Muḥāsibī* (London: Routledge, 2011), 168-215.

9. I follow here the translation in *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

10. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 1:307.

11. See Tirmidhī, *Da'awāt*, 82; Muslim, *Jihād*, 68.

Patient, among the Names of God in Islamic theology. It also became the basis for later Sufi inquiries into the precise nature of the sharing of the quality between God and the human being.¹²

While usually translated as “patience,” *ṣabr* can also be mean “forbearance” and “steadfastness.” In Arabic, the principal lexical sense of the word is *ḥabs al-nafs*, that is to say, “to hold the soul back” or “exercise self-restraint” with respect to what it might otherwise have a natural inclination towards. In his lexicon of Quranic vocabulary, al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 443/1060) defines *ṣabr* as “*ḥabs al-nafs* with regard to what is demanded of it by the intellect or religious law—or both.”¹³ And in the *Qūt al-qulūb* (*Nourishment of Hearts*), Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996 CE) states that *ṣabr* is “*ḥabs al-nafs* from moving towards passion, and it is to restrain the self so that it might struggle to earn the good-pleasure of its Master.”¹⁴ The accent on a conscious, willful, volitional, and taxing act of control and restraint cannot be overstated, and is illustrated by the word’s use in pre-Islamic Arabic, where it might signify binding and holding an animal down for slaughter.¹⁵ The etymology of *ṣabr* also allows us to identify some subtle differences with our English term “patience,” a word that stems from a Latin root having to do with suffering (*patiendo*). Cicero (d. 43 BCE) writes that “patience is the voluntary and prolonged endurance of arduous and difficult things for the sake of virtue or profit.”¹⁶ And for Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274 CE), “patience, like fortitude, endures certain evils for the sake of good.”¹⁷ There is a passiveness here in the sense of enduring toil and hardship that appears to be lacking in the Arabic, whose root connotes a more active and engaged virtue.

Ṣabr also appears to be a much broader quality than what we might typically associate with patience, and this extends far beyond simply etymological considerations. In the early Sufi literature, the authorities often speak of four categories of the virtue. There is *ṣabr* in carrying out God’s commandments, *ṣabr* in avoiding His prohibitions, *ṣabr* in acquiescing to His pre-eternal decree in the form of trials and afflictions, and finally, *ṣabr* in enduring injuries brought on by others without a desire for retribution.

At least some of the early masters considered self-restraint in the face of breaching divine law to be the most eminent form of the virtue. There is a tradition where Sahl said that *ṣabr* is a testament to one’s veracity and sincerity (*taṣḍīq al-ṣidq*), and that “the loftiest form of obedience to God entails patience in restraining oneself from sin, and then after that, in fulfilling God’s injunctions.”¹⁸

12. On *al-Ṣabūr*, see Ghazālī’s discussion in *al-Maqaṣad al-asnā* (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2008), 211. See also the recent translation of Aḥmad Sam’ānī’s (d. 562/1166) treatise on the divine Names by William Chittick, *The Repose of the Spirits: A Sufi Commentary on the Divine Names* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

13. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt al-fāz al-qur’ān*, ed. Najīb al-Mājīdī (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Aṣriyya, 2006), 291.

14. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, ed. Sa’īd Nasīb Mukarram (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1995), 1:394.

15. See “Trust and Patience” (Scott Alexander), in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. J. D. McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006).

16. Cited in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), 3:1743. For the entire discussion, see 3:1743–1747.

17. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3:1747.

18. Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:391. Since other seemingly contrary views have also been ascribed to Sahl, even in Makkī’s own works, one has to be careful about absolutizing positions attributed to him. The rhetorical element (also present in the hadith literature) cannot be ignored either.

Incidentally, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350)¹⁹ would later explain that *ṣabr* in avoiding wrongs is superior to the patient endurance of trials because the former is governed by a person's free choice, while the latter is not. Recounting Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 728/1328) commentary on the Quranic story of Joseph, he quotes his teacher as saying, "The patience of Joseph in withholding himself from yielding to the demands of the viceroy's wife was more perfect than his patience in enduring being thrown into the well by his brothers, being sold, and being separated from his father by them. This was because he had no choice in these matters."²⁰ But unlike Sahl, Ibn Taymiyya considered *ṣabr* in fulfilling a positive commandment superior to avoiding a negative one, because the former brought one closer to perfection.²¹

As for *ṣabr* in carrying out divine commandments, Makkī argues that the virtue is required in three stages: before, during, and after the completion of the pious deed. *Ṣabr* before the act is to hold the soul back from misplaced and impure intentions, to strive for *ikhhlāṣ* or sincerity. *Ṣabr* during its performance entails striving to bring it to perfection. And *ṣabr* in its wake is to conceal the deed from others, to hold the soul back from revealing it to the public, to avert one's own attention from it, and to belittle it in one's own eyes lest one fall into pride, self-admiration, and spiritual hubris.²² After all, as Makkī notes, the Quran warns, *And do not nullify your deeds* (44:33),²³ which is to say, do not nullify them by displaying them before the gaze of others. Unsurprisingly, Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) elaborates upon this tripartite classification of *ṣabr* in his own book on patience and gratitude in the *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (*Revival of the Religious Sciences*), where he also points out that because of the close relation of the virtue to volition and will, patience is altogether absent in both the angels and the beasts, and therefore unique to humans and God.²⁴

Part of *ṣabr*, as noted, is to endure the harm of others. Ḥātim al-Aṣamm (d. 237/852), a disciple of Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/810), considered it one of the four requisites of the spiritual life. "Whoever desires to follow our way," he once said, "must assume four qualities of death." These include the "white death" of hunger, the "red death" of opposing the passions, the "green death" of donning patched garments, and finally the "black death" of putting up with the injuries and abuses brought upon one by others.²⁵ These were for Ḥātim four intertwined dimensions of the death of which the Prophet spoke when he said, "Die before you die."²⁶ As for the black death involving patient forbearance of the harms (*adhā*) inflicted upon one by God's creatures, this is a recurring theme in the Sufi literature on *ṣabr*. Makkī writes that, "One of the marks of patience is to restrain the self from requital against injuries brought upon by others, and to patiently endure their harms, all the while

19. For some reflections on his relation to Sufism, see Ovamir Anjum, "Sufism without Mysticism? Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah's Objectives in *Madārīj al-Sālikīn*," *Oriente Moderno* 90, no. 1 (2010): 153-180.

20. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madārīj al-sālikīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, n.d.), 2:163.

21. Likewise, he felt that the heinousness of failing to carry out an obligatory act was greater than of performing a prohibited one. See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madārīj*, 2:163.

22. Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:396.

23. Alternatively, *Let not your deeds be in vain* (from *The Study Quran*).

24. Ghazālī, *Book of Patience and Thankfulness*, trans. H. T. Littlejohn (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2011), 14-16.

25. Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 83.

26. For a commentary on these deaths, see 'Abd al-Majid al-Sharnūbī, *Sharḥ tā'īyyat al-sulūk ilā mālik al-mulūk* (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Aṣriyya, 2011), 57.

placing one's trust (*tawakkul*) in God."²⁷ He also quotes one of the gnostics, "The servant of God does not become firmly rooted in the station of trust in God until he is harmed and patiently endures the harm to which he is subjected."²⁸ Ibn al-ʿArabī goes so far as to say that God describes Himself as *Ṣabūr* because He endures the "harm" of human beings:

Know—God grant you success—that God says, *Those who harm God and His Messenger* (33:57). He reports that He is harmed, and this is why He is named *al-Ṣabūr*. It is on account of the harm done by His creatures. And, just as He asks His servants to avoid this harm for which He rightfully deserves His name *al-Ṣabūr*, so too is the name "patient" never lifted from the servant when he is in a state of tribulation and asks God to lift that tribulation from him. Such was the case with Job when he said [in sorrow], *harm has touched me* [21:83]—from You—and *You are the most Merciful of the merciful* [21:83]. Despite his request, God praised him and said, *Surely We found him patient* [38:44].

Patience is not to restrain the self from complaining to God that He lift or avert a tribulation. Patience is merely to restrain the self from complaining to and relying upon other than God. I have made it clear to you that God requests from His servants to avoid that harm by which they cause Him harm, despite His being able to not create that quality of harming in them. Understand then the mystery of this patience, for it is among the most beautiful of mysteries!²⁹

In other words, just as humans exercise *ṣabr* in response to the injuries and hurt they inflict upon each other, so too does God. In fact, for Ibn al-ʿArabī, patience is only possible in this life, since the harm towards which the quality is a response is confined to this world. In other words, neither God nor humans will exercise patience in the afterlife since the conditions for its existence, namely harm, will be removed. "With the end of the world," writes Ibn al-ʿArabī, "the infliction of harm comes to an end on everyone who is harmed, and with the end of harm, patience itself comes to an end."³⁰ God is only *al-Ṣabūr* in this world.

Makkī ties patience with others into the virtue of humility, drawing attention to the *mukhbitīn* about whom the Quran says, *And give glad tidings to the humble* (22:34). The eminence of their rank is due in part because they seek neither vengeance nor retribution against those who do them wrong, even though it falls within their right to seek justice. They are people of *faḍl* instead of *ʿadl*,³¹ argues Makkī, because they adhere to the preferred path of forgiveness described by God when He says, *And if you punish, then punish with the like of that wherewith you were punished. But if you are patient, it is better* (16:126). Of those who stand in this station, the *maqām al-mukhbitīn*, Makkī declares, "It has been said, they are those who do no wrong to

27. Makkī, *Qūr*, 1:396.

28. Makkī, *Qūr*, 1:396.

29. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 2:206.

30. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 2:206.

31. 'Adl is "justice," while *faḍl* may be translated as "favor," "grace," or "bounty." In relation to God, the former involves giving the human being her due, while the latter entails conferring on her undeserving bounty. In interpersonal relations, *faḍl* may entail treating the other with compassion, love and benevolence even when it is entirely unwarranted. In the Quran, divine *faḍl* appears as a recurring motif.

others, and if they are themselves wronged, they do not seek revenge.”³² In many of the Sufi meditations on patiently forbearing the belligerence of others, we find an Islamic equivalent to the Christian virtue of turning the other cheek.

Finally, there is patience in trial and hardship. When Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778) was asked, “What is the best of deeds?” he replied, “Patience in the face of tribulation (*al-ṣabr ‘ind al-ibtīlā’*).”³³ This entails resignation to fate, one of the most recurring themes in Sufi literature—an ideal reflected in the prayer of the Prophet, “I ask You for contentment after the passing of decree.”³⁴ In Sahl’s commentary on the words of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/660), “God loves every sleeping slave,” he explains that this is because “they remain still under the flow of divine ordinances, that is, with neither aversion, nor resistance.”³⁵ For our Sufi authorities, *al-ṣabr ‘ind al-ibtīlā’* requires holding the soul back as much as possible from excessive distress, anxiety, and unease, that is, from *jaza’* (a Quranic antonym of *ṣabr*³⁶). And this may be realized through meditating on the brevity of the life of this world (the arena of trials), the eternal felicity that awaits the pious after death, the wisdom behind divine decree, the cleansing and purification of the soul made possible through hardship, the raising of the soul’s rank before God through patience in adversity, and of course, the fact that what God chooses for us is always better than what we might choose for ourselves. As Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh (d. 709/1309) writes,

Surely a compassionate father who makes his son undergo the rigors of a surgery never intends to inflict his son with pain! Likewise, a doctor may advise a remedy for your health calling for razor-sharp scalpels even though it may cause you intense pain. If you followed your own choice, you would avoid the treatment altogether! But you would only get more sick.³⁷

Affliction is also, from the vantage point of Sufi virtue ethics, a mark of divine love,³⁸ and to patiently endure trials and hardships is to follow the footsteps of the friends of God and the prophets, all of whom suffered. Indeed, as the hadith states, “If God loves a people, He tries them.”³⁹ Or as Sahl would put it, “God did not praise anyone except on account of patience exercised over trials and hardships.”⁴⁰

32. Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:395–397.

33. Cited in Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:397.

34. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 5:191.

35. Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:400.

36. E. M. Badawi and M. A. Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 62.

37. Translation taken, with a slight modification, from Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, *The Book of Illumination*, trans. Scott Kugle (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005), 64.

38. The most recent studies of love in Sufism include Mohammed Rustom’s essay in this volume; Joseph Lumbard, “Love and Beauty in Sufism,” in *The Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, 172–186; and Hany T. Ibrahim, “Love in the Writings of Ibn ‘Arabi,” (PhD diss., University of Calgary, 2020). See also the third chapter (“Rābi’a the Lover”) in Rkia E. Cornell’s *Rābi’a from Narrative to Myth: The Many Faces of Islam’s Most Famous Woman Saint, Rābi’a al-‘Adawiyya* (London: Oneworld, 2019), 147–212.

39. Tirmidhī, *Zuhd*, 57.

40. Cited in Makkī, *Qūt*, 1:392.

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