

Sufi *Ijtih[d]*: Zarr]q's Perception of Sufi Ethics and Master-Disciple Relationship

*Ghulam Shams-u-Rehman

Abstract

A+mad Zarr]q (d. 899;1493) was a M[lik] jurist and Sufi of the Sh[dhillyah Order. By virtue of his ijtih[d] dynamism he strove to revitalise Sufism, grounding it in the basic principles of Islamic law. My paper considers the efforts of this late mediaeval scholar to reform Sufism; in particular, I shall discuss his reinterpretation of traditional concepts of Sufi ethics and of the master-disciple relationship. To this end, I shall analyse some extracts from Zarr]q's magnum opus, the Qaw[<id al-Ta-awwuf, in order to approach his ideas as expressed in his own words.

Keywords: Zarr]q, Sufi *ijtih[d]*, Islamic Law, Sufi ethics, Master-disciple relationship, North African Sufism

Introduction:

Personal reasoning (*ijtih[d]*) is the third source of Islamic law after the Qur>[n and the *sunnah* and is very important in legislating for contemporary problems. It is a dynamic force that maintains the vigour of the sacred law in all times. Zarr]q recommends independent reasoning to resolve problems and to understand the spirit of religion. He criticizes imitation or blind conformism (*taqlld*) bitterly. He writes: "*Taqld* prevents one from achieving one's objective and attaining success." He also quotes the saying of Ibn <Abb[d (d. 792;1379): "I would like to give you a piece of advice which only a wise man will understand and practise and only a negligent and forgetful man will disrespect. My advice is not to seek this knowledge (Sufism) from any arrogant, innovator of reprehensible matters (-[+ib *bid<ah*) and blind follower (*muqallad*)."¹

It is necessary to understand the concept of *ijti+[d]* and *taqlld* in Zarr]q's writings and thoughts. Being a M[lik] jurist, he produced many commentaries on the famous books of M[lik] jurisprudence, but did not present any revolutionary ideas for the reconstruction of Islamic thought or some foundational *ijti+[d]* opinions in the juridical realm. He was a man who strictly followed the rules of M[lik] jurisprudence and composed many commentaries to endorse M[lik] standpoints. However, he condemned the blind imitation and the excessively rigid thought of different sections of the Muslim community. Zarr]q defines the terms *taqlld*, *iqtid[>*, *taba--ur* and *ijti+[d]*:

*Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Studies, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.

Taqld is taking an opinion without knowing the status of the scholar and accepting an opinion without knowing the methodology which has been applied in establishing it. This is absolutely condemnable because the blind follower is disgracing the rich science of the religion. Emulation (*iqtid[>]*) is taking an opinion solely because of the religiosity and knowledge of the scholar. This is the way of a follower in a school of thought with the founders of that school. Therefore this type of *taqld* is allegorical and symbolic. Whereas, insightfulness (*taba--ur*) is taking an opinion with knowledge of the particular evidence relied upon to establish it, without ignoring the primacy of the transmission or being self-opinionated. This is the way of the masters and advanced students of learning. Personal reasoning (*ijti+[d]*) constitutes rules from the evidence without refereeing to other authorities and if there is no previous precedent the ruling is absolute, otherwise it is limited.²

Zarr]q explains the reason for differences of opinion, and he not only accepts the authority of the experts of all juridical schools of thought, but considers emulating them to be obligatory. He explains the theological position of infallibility and deduces legal position on emulation there from. He argues that only the infallible (*al-ma<-]m*) one is to be followed because he is free from faults and errors; or the one whose superiority is testified to, and plainly evident should be followed because he who validates the just is himself just. The Prophet testified that the best of the ages was his, then that of those who followed his, then those who followed them.³ Thus, their superiority is according to their position and same is to be applied to their followers.

The companions of the Prophet were scattered around different regions and each one of them had certain aspects of religious knowledge, as Im[m M[lik (d. 179;785) said: "Perhaps one of them had knowledge on abrogating ruling (*n[sikh*) whereas another had knowledge of abrogated ruling (*mans]kh*), similarly some of them had knowledge of absolute rules (*mu%laq*) whilst others had knowledge of limited rules (*muqayyad*) and perhaps some of them had knowledge of general rules (<[mm) and another had knowledge of particular rules (*kh[--*) as often was the case. Eventually all these variations were gathered in later transmissions. When they collected all these scattered traditions and evaluated them, they could not analyze them all, on juridical grounds although they did analyse some of them. Thus, knowledge was transmitted to the third generation. At this stage, they compiled them, verified their transmissions and comprehended their meanings thus the task of their compilation, assessment and comprehension were completed. Consequently, nothing remained to be accomplished; «now they should] act upon what they had ascertained and established by way of rules and regulations." There were distinguished scholars in all disciplines of knowledge in those generations whose superiority in knowledge and piety were celebrated such as M[lik, al-Sh[fi< (d. 204;820), A+mad (d. 241;855) and Nu<m[n (d. 150;767) in jurisprudence and al-Junayd (d. 297;910), Ma<r]f (d. 200;815) and Bishr (d. 227;841) in Sufism.⁴

Zarr]q validates the opinion of the early scholars and gives them very conspicuous rank but he never denies the right of interpretation. He urges scholars to

discuss and investigate the opinions of predecessors because they were not infallible and successors may ascertain truths which remained unveiled on the early scholars. He asserts that the religious scholars should be considered right in whatever they revealed because they conveyed whatever they had in [their] custody. It is a matter of further investigation to evaluate what they stated because it was only the end result of their intellectual reasoning and they are not infallibles. Therefore discernment (*al-taba--ur*) is essential for finding out the truth and investigating it properly, not for the sake of contradicting the speaker or transmitter. It does not matter that a scholar of the later generations ascertains some facts which were not considered by the early scholars. He is to be treated in accordance with his [intellectual] rank. The criticism of the teachings of the earlier scholars does not mean the degradation of their intellectual prominence. However, the righteousness and honesty of the earlier scholars demands that they should accept the reality when it is described. It is their obligation to accept the reality even though it refutes their own verdicts. But, in the case of truth being merely probable, they have no need of accepting the new interpretation because probability is also manifested within it. This is an intellectual tradition and the later religious scholars used to refute ideas of the earlier scholars of the *ummah* without defaming anyone in either of the two groups.⁵

Zarr]q urges his disciples to use his intellect to understand the wisdom of the religion. He asserts that when the origin of knowledge has been verified, its contents are recognised, its principles and branches are known, then its understanding is general for its followers and there is no priority of an earlier scholar over a later one, although the earlier has the advantage of preference, but knowledge is the deciding factor. The analysis of the later scholar is sounder because he has more information when compared with the former. Insights and inspiration from All[h is hoped for every one. What a wonderful man Ibn M[lik (d. 676;1274) was, who said: "Since the sciences are divine favours and special gifts, it is not impossible, that some later scholar can unravel the intricacies of a problem which had remained unresolved by many of the earlier ones."⁶ On the basis of *ijtih*[d] ideas, Zarr]q attempted to reinterpret the Sufi ethics and master-disciple relationship in accordance with time and space.

Zarr]q's Perception of Sufi Ethics:

Zarr]q devotes a reasonable portion of *Qaw[<id* to state the value of ethics. He explains different ethical terms, their meanings and application. According to Zarr]q, 'moral character (*khulq*) is a state that is ingrained in one's self (*al-nafs*) from which deeds effortlessly come forth. Thus the goodness of these actions is very good and evil of these actions is deeply so. They materialize themselves in opposites, such as: covetousness and generosity; modesty and arrogance; malevolence and benevolence; envy and compassion; greediness and superiority; conquest and forgiveness, and so on.⁷

Zarr]q explains that bad ethical behaviour can be improved by practising their opposites. He writes that bad qualities can be abolished by reacting against them when they happen, for instance by praising the man who has good qualities, and praying for the good for the oppressor and dealing with him in a positive

manner, because of the statement of the Most High: "Repel [evil] with what is fairer, and, lo, the one with whom you are at enmity will become like a warm friend."⁸ Also there is the saying of the Prophet: "The son of Adam is not free from three things: jealousy, doubt and foreboding. If you feel jealousy, do not amplify it. If you observe bad thing, leave. If you have some doubts leave them."⁹ This discussion as a whole seems to discharge one from these things so that they may remain safe from their harm. It has been said: "Righteous is a man who does not harm [another] the slightest bit. The believer is like earth. All kind of malice and wastage are thrown in it but only good things come out from it."¹⁰

Zarr]q believes that the development of ethical character is a gradual process and it is very difficult to acquire good character traits at the time of need by disintegrating its opposite trait, except where prior preparation has been made for this. Otherwise the novice of this path will be exhausted. He (peace and blessing upon him) has said: "Knowledge can be sought only by learning and forbearance (+ilm) can be achieved through embodying forbearance (*ta'allum*). He who searches for good will be bestowed with it and he who saves himself from evil will be sheltered."¹¹ Zarr]q considers self accountability to be important in improving morals.

The benefit in the examination of the faults of the ego and its actions, and understanding the intricacies of spiritual states is the awareness of one's self, modesty towards his Lord and the observation of his mistakes and deficiencies. However, it is not within the power of a human being to purify their self from all faults. Nonetheless, you cannot attain God until you have eradicated your ignoble traits and arrogance.¹²

Zarr]q holds that fear of God and regret for wrongdoing inspire people to goodness and piety. 'Among the motivations for action in this regard is the existence of fear (*khashlyah*) of God, which is the respect of Him with trepidation. Fear (*khawf*) is unease of heart due to the Lord's vengeance/ retribution. Whilst hope (*al-rij[>]*) is a calmness that results in the blessing of Him Most-High through the confirmation of His work in everyone, if [calmness is not through this], it is vanity. The sign of perfect love is to act upon the desire of the beloved, and it is not love to go against the desire of one's beloved. One is not subject to extreme condemnation simply for committing a mistake, because he (peace be upon him) says: "Do not curse him, indeed he loves God and his Prophet"¹³ concerning a person who was caught many times in a drunken state. Similarly, in another tradition a Bedouin asked, "When is the day of resurrection?" He (the Prophet) said: "What have you prepared for that day?" He replied: "Nothing, but I love God and his Prophet."¹⁴ Indeed the lover never does anything that goes against the desires of his beloved, and insistence on this kind of act is impossible from a lover. However, if at any time he was overcome by the desire of self, he should hurry to the state of satisfaction through regret and repentance (*tawbah*)'.¹⁵

Zarr]q believes that trust in God is the foundation for all kinds of goodness, piety and faithfulness, and can be improved through consistency in action, piety and

regret. He writes: "The claim of a claimant is evaluated by the result of that claim. If the result appears as claimed then the claim is convincing; otherwise the claimant is a liar. Thus regret not followed by piety (*taqw*) is void, and piety without consistency is imperfect; and consistency without faithfulness (*wara*) is deficient; and faithfulness which does not produce asceticism is inadequate; and asceticism that does not generate the trust (*tawakkul*) in God is unproductive; and trust that does not result in disconnection from all [that is other than God] and relying on Him is only an [outer] form without [an inner] reality. Therefore true regret appears only when prohibited things are denied. The perfection of piety and consistency comes through the regular recitation of litanies without innovation, and showing faithfulness in situations of doubt where selfish desires [otherwise] inspire. If he gives up these selfish desires then there is faithfulness or, otherwise there is nothing.

Asceticism is self-denial when faced with a choice of options and submission, in conflict, thus [the ascetic] is not concerned whether the world draws its attention to him or turns its back on him. Trust in God manifests itself when the state of affairs is difficult, [for example] when there is no sign of rain in the sky and there is sterility of the earth and there is death of all creatures. In this situation if heart is calm then trust is present, otherwise there is nothing'.¹⁶

Zarr]q believes that it is necessary for a true novice to develop his character by evaluating the faults of his ego, understanding the intricacies of spiritual states, self-analysis, showing humbleness in the presence of God, and admitting his own faults and shortcomings. However it is beyond the power of human beings to eradicate all of their faults. The annihilation of all imperfection and elimination of all bad qualities is not necessary to reach the Lord; otherwise no one can achieve proximity to God.¹⁷ There are many principles in *Qaw[-id al-Ta-awwuf* which explain different ethical terms and their meanings and applications. It seems the author considers all ethical teachings as an indispensable part of Sufism. However, he re-evaluates the traditional Sufi ethics and rituals through the application of *Sunnah*. The following discussion aims to study Zarr]q's critique of master-disciple relationship in Sufi ethos.

Sainthood and Master-Disciple Relationship:

Zarr]q's concept of Sufism is one for the elite, and he considers that the laymen have no ability to benefit from this science. He writes: "Everything demands a special ability, and has a rationale, a position and a reality. The required ability for Sufism is a man who has a sincere intention, or a gnostic who has realized the Reality, or a truthful devotee, or a merely seeker, or a scholar who is fastened with the esoteric realities or an expert of jurisprudence who is tied with the extensive sense of the text. But a man is incapable and inept for Sufism if he is ignorant or is a false claimant of knowledge, or a habitual user of harsh language in argument, or an unintelligent layman, or an unenthusiastic seeker, or a man who has firm determination in blind imitation of great men."¹⁸

According to Zarr]q, a disciple must have the above mentioned qualities for seeking Sufism. Moreover, he emphasises the requirement of a teacher in Sufism,

who inspires the seeker to search for a true guide. He believes that a Sufi master must have five qualifications to guide a novice:

- 1- Correct knowledge
- 2- A good spiritual disposition
- 3- Lofty ambition
- 4- Contentment of heart in all circumstances
- 5- Sharp discernment and wisdom

Zarr]q disapproves the mastership (*mashikhah*) of those who possess the following qualities:

- 1- Lack of religious knowledge
- 2- Lack of respect for Muslims
- 3- Participation in what does not concern them
- 4- Acquiescence to self-desire in everything
- 5- Being shamelessly ill-mannered/uncouth

Zarr]q believes that a strong and constructive relationship must exist between the *shaykh* and disciple in order to attain the truth. He endorses the establishment of this relationship on propriety and every disciple must observe five manners and etiquettes with his master:

- 1- Following the orders of the master, even though he observes him going against [his own advice to the disciple] it.
- 2- Keeping away from what he prohibits
- 3- Giving him esteem in his presence and absence, whether he is alive or dead
- 4- Trying to fulfil his rights as far as possible
- 5- Leaving aside one's own wisdom, knowledge and status before the master, although very few people are able to do so.

If he does not find any guiding master then he should seek righteousness and advice from the brethren and deal with them according to the proper conduct due to them. But if he finds any one who lacks something from the above mentioned conditions then he should take advice from him and treat him as a brother with respect to the remaining conditions."¹⁹

Zarr]q considers it necessary to seek guidance from a guide to reach the destination through the sound way. He explains this idea in various *qaw[<id* with different arguments. According to Zarr]q, it is necessary to avoid separation and disintegration [to this end], one should fasten oneself to a principle which would be the source of all of his knowledge and actions. Therefore it is indispensable to seek the guidance (*iqtid[>*) of a *shaykh* whose obedience to the *sunnah* is established, and authority in gnosis is recognized, and to seek advice from him about the validity of noble matters, as well as other unique benefits he may possess. Wisdom is an object of a long-cherished wish of the believer who is like a honey bee that collects nectar from all flowers, but does not sleep in another's beehive otherwise its honey would not benefit it.

There was difference of opinion among the later saints (*fuqarā*) of Andalusia regarding whether books were sufficient without *shaykhs*. Then they sent letters to the various parts of the country and each master answered according to their illumination. There were a number of shared points in their responses. The first of these concerns the necessity of *shaykhs*. Books are sufficient for an intelligent person who knows the sources of knowledge, and exempts him from need for a teacher of theoretical instruction (*shaykh al-ta'lim*). Companionship (*-u+bah*) is sufficient for a religious, intelligent, and truthful seeker and exempts him from the need for a teacher in spiritual instruction. Meeting with a *shaykh* and obtaining blessing from him fulfils the need for a master of meditative ascension (*shaykh al-ḥarqiyah*). However taking all of these from one source is the best of all.

The second is regarding the state of the seeker. It is necessary for the dull minded (*al-labid*) to consult a *shaykh* who guides him. Although books are sufficient for an intelligent person for his meditative ascension, he will not be safe from the pride of his own ego even though he has achieved the desired destination. The third point is related to the spiritual struggles (*mujāhidat*) required. Piety does not require any *shaykh* to elucidate or expound it, but consistency of rectitude needs *shaykh* to discern the more virtuous. The intelligent person can perform without him through the study of books and spiritual struggle for illumination. However a *shaykh* is necessary for the spiritual ascension as one whom the seeker may consult about their revelations, as the Prophet consulted Waraqah b. Nawfal (circa, d. 12BH.611) when suddenly revelation came. This way is close to the first but *sunnah* is with both.²⁰ On the basis of this argument, Zarr]q concludes that seeking knowledge and practice from the *shaykhs* is more ideal than receiving it from others as mentioned in the Qur'an: "But these are clear signs in the breasts of those who have been bestowed knowledge."²¹ Therefore seeking guidance from the saints is necessary as particular companions sought it from the Prophet (peace and blessing upon him), and he received it from Gabriel following his allusion to be 'the servant of God and a Prophet'.²² The followers of the Companions (*tābiḥīn*) sought this science from the companions. Each one had a group of followers who followed them in particular such as Mu'ammad b. Sirīn (d. 110;729), Ibn Musayyib (d. 94;713), and al-A-raj (d. 117-735) learning from Ab] Hurayrah (d. 59;679); ^[w]s (d. 106;724), Wahb (d. 114;732), and Mujāhid (d. 104;722) taking from Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68;673) and so on. Thus getting knowledge and practice from the experts is obviously amongst the essential things they have described, and in the way that they described them. However advantage (*ifḍāh*) is according to one's motivation and spiritual state (+/!). Thus Anas (d. 93;712) indicated: "We had hardly cleaned our hands from the dust of the burial of the Prophet and then we denied our hearts."²³ It is evident that seeing and experiencing the gracious personality of the Prophet was beneficial to the hearts of the Companions, because a man of a high spiritual state affects all those who are in his company. Therefore it is commanded to remain in the company of righteous people and to stay away from the company of transgressors.²⁴

Zarr]q believes that every Sufi has to face many difficulties in his spiritual states. Sometimes a disciple fails to maintain the proper norms of the way. Therefore

a *shaykh* is necessary who monitors his actions and practices to correct them and lead him to the proper way of *sunnah*. Without a *shaykh*, a disciple may be committing grievous errors and grave misjudgements in his deeds, or in the understanding of his ecstatic utterances «because of that» he may either destroy himself, or others, or the both. Therefore a guiding master or a righteous jurist, or a well-educated trainee or a faithful companion is necessary to guides him when he falls in error, and to serve as a mirror for him, and advises him in all states.²⁵

Conclusion:

Zarr]q does not question the need of a *shaykh* for spiritual ascension. Indeed, he underscores the authority of the spiritual guide, but with the condition that the *shar]ah* must be followed in all situations. In point of fact, Zarr]q's *ijtih[dl* temperament led him to criticise blind adherence to religious law and rigidity in enforcing it. He emphasised that one should adorn oneself with good ethics by eliminating bad traits, but stressed that complete elimination of sinful behaviour is beyond the capacity of human beings since infallibility is granted only to the Prophets. Through the application of the theological concept of infallibility of the Prophets, the author reiterates the authority of the *shaykh*, even one who occasionally violates the *shar]ah*. At the same time, Zarr]q advocates limiting the master's authority through *shar]ah* rule. Similarly, he evaluates the mater-disciple relationship according to this rule and stipulates submission to the *shar]ah* for both master and disciple.

References:

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² Ibid., 36;2.

³ Al-Bukh[r], @a+l+, Al-Bukh[r], Mu+ammad b. Ism[<l (d. 256AH), @a+lh, (Riyadh: D[r al-Sal[m, 1999), kit[b fa#[>il a-+[b al-nab], b[b fa#[>il al-nab] wa-man -a+ib al-nab], +ad\th No. 3651.

⁴ Zarr]q, *op.cit.*, 37-39;2.

⁵ Ibid., 33, 34;2.

⁶ Ibid., 33;2.

⁷ Ibid., 193;2.

⁸ Q.41; Fu--ilat. 34; translated by Jones, Alan, *The Qur>[n*, (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007), 440.

⁹ Al-^abr[n Sulaym[n b. A+mad (d. 360AD), ed. | amd\ <Abd al-Maj\d al-Salfa, *al-Mu<jam al-Kabl*, (Mosul: Ma%ba<at al-zahr[>, 1984), +ad\th No. 3227.

¹⁰ Zarr]q, *op.cit.*, 199;2.

¹¹ Ab] Nu<aym al-I-fah[n, A+mad ibn <Abd All[h (d. 430AD), | *ilyat al-Awliy[> wa-^abaq[t al-A-fiy[*, (Cairo: Ma%ba<at al-sa<[dah, 1351/1932), 175;5; Zarr]q, *op.cit.*, 202;2.

¹² Zarr]q, *op.cit.*, 202;2.

¹³ Al-Bukh[r\, @a+l+, kit[b al--+ud]d, (5) b[b m[yakrah man la<n sh[rib al-khamr, +ad\th No, 6780.

¹⁴ Al-^abar[n\, *al-Mu<jam al-Kablr*, +ad\th No. 3061.

¹⁵ Zarr]q, *op.cit.*, 227, 228|2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 225, 226|2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 202|2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10|2.

¹⁹ Khushaym, <Al\ Fahm\, *A+mad Zarr]q wa-al-Zarr]qlyah: dir[sat hay[h wa-fikr wa-madhhab wa-~~ar~~lqah*, (^ar[bulus [L\biy[]: D[r Maktabat al-Fikr, 1975), 182.

²⁰ Zarr]q, *op.cit.*, 71|2.

²¹ Q29| al-<Ankab]t. 49.

²² Al-^abar[n\, *al-Mu<jam al-Kablr*, +ad\th No. 10686.

²³ Ibn M[jah Mu+ammad b. Yaz\d al-Qazw\l\ (d. 273AH) , *Sunan*, (Riyadh: D[r al-Sal[m, 1999), abw[b m[j[< fl al-jan[>iz, (65) b[b dhikr waf[tihi wa-dafanihi, +ad\th No. 1631.

²⁴ Zarr]q, *op.cit.*, 68-70|1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 214|2.