

Mustafa Abu Sway

كنوز من الغزالي

# A TREASURY OF GHAZALI



A Companion for the Untethered Soul

THE TREASURY SERIES IN  
ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND CIVILISATION

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Mustafa Abu Sway



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A TREASURY OF  
AL-GHAZALI



*A Companion for the  
Untethered Soul*





*A Treasury of al-Ghazālī: A Companion  
for the Untethered Soul*

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# Are You in the Wrong Business?



فَاعْلَمْ أَيُّهَا الْحَرِيصُ الْمُتَقَبِّلُ عَلَى اقْتِبَاسِ الْعِلْمِ الْمُظْهِرِ مِنْ  
نَفْسِهِ صِدْقَ الرَّغْبَةِ وَفَرَطَ التَّعَطُّشِ إِلَيْهِ أَنَّكَ إِنْ كُنْتَ  
تَقْصِدُ بِطَلَبِ الْعِلْمِ الْمُنَافَسَةَ وَالْمُبَاهَاةَ وَالتَّقَدُّمَ عَلَى الْأَقْرَانِ  
وَاسْتِمَالَةَ وُجُوهِ النَّاسِ إِلَيْكَ وَجَمْعَ حُطَامِ الدُّنْيَا فَأَنْتَ  
سَاعٍ فِي هَدْمِ دِينِكَ وَهَلِكِ نَفْسِكَ وَبِيعَ آخِرَتِكَ بِدُنْيَاكَ  
فَصَفَقْتِكَ خَاسِرَةً وَتِجَارَتِكَ بَائِرَةً وَمَعْلَمَكَ مُعِينٌ  
لَكَ عَلَى عِصْيَانِكَ وَشَرِيكَ لَكَ فِي خُسْرَانِكَ  
وَهُوَ كِبَائِعُ سَيْفٍ لِقَاطِعِ طَرِيقٍ.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore know, O you who is keen on knowledge and set out to acquire it and shows a genuine desire and real thirst to obtain it, that if your intention for seeking knowledge is rivalry, boasting, surpassing

2. Al-Ghazālī, *Bidāyat al-Hidāyah*, p. 8.

your peers, drawing people’s attention to you, and amassing the vanities of this world, then you are in reality in the process of ruining your religion, destroying yourself and selling your Hereafter in exchange for this worldly life—your transaction would therefore be an utter loss, and your trading profitless. [In such a case] your teacher would also be helping you in disobeying Allah and is your partner in loss, just like the person who sells a sword to a highway robber.\*



This quotation is from Imām al-Ghazālī’s *Bidāyat al-Hidāyah* (*The Beginning of Guidance*), a small work which captures the essence of *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*), to which there are many cross-references.

Scholarship is laden with spiritual traps because it can nourish and sustain egotism. It can also lead to negative competition, showing off, and self-aggrandisement. Imām al-Ghazālī also warns against scholarship which is solely sought as a ticket to gain material wealth and accumulate what he described as the wreckage of this world. Every new thing that is desired in the world of commodities carries the mark of finitude. Every new thing, whether natural or artificial, has an expiry date and is destined to wither away. In the words of Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawiyah, ‘All that which is on the surface of dust is dust itself!’

---

\* Muhammad Abul Quasem, *Al-Ghazali on Islamic Guidance*, 1979, p.18 (Modified).

Elsewhere, Imām al-Ghazālī says that if you were to find yourself on a sinking ship, you would carry with you only that which will save you! Carrying your weighty belongings, even if they were of gold in such a situation is definitely not wise. Likewise, it is your good deeds (and bad ones too!) that continue with you after death. Your good deeds are your boat to safety!

Though Imām al-Ghazālī is here warning the students of knowledge who aim at occupying public offices, such as becoming a judge or an imam, everyone can benefit from checking their intentions, whether one studies the exact sciences, the humanities or art. There may still be room for egotism or ill intention in seeking any kind of knowledge or position, even when it apparently complies with Islamic law.

One should not be casual about what one is doing or why one is doing it. The challenge is to be God-conscious, watch one's heart carefully to detect the residues of 'I' and cleanse one's heart of such impurities. This is why one seeks refuge in Allah against associating anything or anyone with Him. Muslims are very careful about idol worshiping when the idol is physical, but the same should be applied to metaphorical idols such as fame and wealth. This is why the Sufis talk about the state of annihilation (*fanā'*) whereby the heart is only aware of the Divine presence and nothing else.

## Seek Felicity



السَّعَادَةُ الْأُخْرَوِيَّةُ الَّتِي نَعْنِي بِهَا بَقَاءٌ بِلَا فَنَاءٍ، وَلَذَّةٌ بِلَا عَنَاءٍ،  
 وَسُرُورٌ بِلَا حُزْنٍ، وَغِنَىٌ بِلَا فَقْرٍ، وَكَمَالٌ بِلَا نَقْصَانٍ، وَعِزٌّ  
 بِلَا ذُلٍّ. وَبِالْجُمْلَةِ: كُلُّ مَا يُتَصَوَّرُ أَنْ يَكُونَ مَطْلُوبًا طَالِبًا،  
 وَمَرْغُوبًا رَاغِبًا، وَذَلِكَ أَبَدَ الْآبَادِ، عَلَى وَجْهِ لَا تُنْقَضُهُ تَصَرُّمُ  
 الْأَحْقَابِ وَالْأَجَالِ. بَلْ لَوْ قَدَّرْنَا الدُّنْيَا مَمْلُوءَةً بِالذَّرْرِ، وَقَدَّرْنَا  
 طَائِرًا يَخْتَطِفُ فِي كُلِّ أَلْفِ سَنَةٍ حَبَّةً وَاحِدَةً مِنْهَا، لَفَنَيْتِ  
 الذَّرْرُومَ يَنْقُصُ مِنْ أَبَدِ الْآبَادِ شَيْءٌ.<sup>3</sup>

The otherworldly felicity we are concerned with is subsistence without end, pleasure without toil, happiness without sadness, richness without impoverishment, perfection without blemish and glory without humiliation.

In sum, it is everything that can [at the same time] be conceived of as sought and seeking, desired and desirous, eternally and forever, such that it is undiminished by the passage of time and successions of generations. Indeed,

3. Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān al-ʿAmal*, edited by Sulaymān Dunyā, Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1964, pp. 180–181.

if the whole world was full of gems and a bird was to pilfer one of them every one thousand years, then the gems will be exhausted but everlasting eternity would not be diminished a bit.\*



No matter how plentiful they are, the good and enjoyable things in this world are finite. In fact, even the bad things are finite. Worldly pleasures, often conflated with happiness, are dependable on finite components. Even when they are wholesome and there is nothing controversial about them, or about how they are acquired, they are always incomplete and lacking. Material fulfilment is temporary in its very nature and the physical pleasures cannot be maintained, even when wealth and good health are at one's disposal. One cannot eat continuously, for example, because food is plentiful and tasty, even if one does not care about health issues. Eating continuously is not sustainable. Everything that one builds will inevitably wither away in time, and all those beloved to one will either leave one or one will leave them, just as every accumulated wealth, big or small, will one day be left behind. It is foolish to prefer what is finite and perishable to everlasting

---

\* Being a translation of a chapter from Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī's *Criterion of Action (Mizān al-ʿAmal)* Ed. By S. Dunyā (Dār al-Maʿārif Press, Cairo, 1964) pp. 180-181. Translation by Muhammad Hozien, modified by Mustafa abu Sway.

life, perpetual happiness and infinite rewards, where no effort is required. An abode where there is no striving or toil, where all joys are eternal, without any negative associations as in this worldly life.

It is important not to confuse wealth with the state of happiness. Material wealth does not translate necessarily into happiness, for there are many people who are comfortable financially yet lead a miserable life. Many of them end up committing suicide due to a lack of meaning in their lives. Yet, material wealth does not necessarily preclude happiness, nor could it be automatically considered antithetical to a fulfilling spiritual life. It all depends on what is going on in one's heart, and not on what is available in one's bank account. The heart may be obsessed with material wealth to the extent that this prevents one from tending to one's spiritual needs.

Muslims are, for instance, enjoined to perform the Pilgrimage to Makkah and circumambulate the Ka'bah, the first house established for the worship of Allah. This pillar of Islam is required once in a Muslim's lifetime if he or she is capable financially and physically. Yet, many choose to circumambulate the malls and the marketplaces time and again, often buying unnecessary things, or simply walking around as if time is not the most precious 'commodity'. What is life if not the sum of these moments, whether utilised properly or not. But leading a purposeless life is not about time, it is about the path one charts. Not using time properly

is an act of ingratitude towards Allah who has gifted one with life. Is death not an end to time in this life? Is wasting time not a kind of death of the wasted months and years? Why, then, does one lament and feel a deep sense of sorrow for the former form of death but not lament or feel a deep sense of sorrow for the latter form?



## Travelling

وَالْفَوَائِدُ الْبَاعِثَةُ عَلَى السَّفَرِ لَا تَخْلُو مِنْ هَرَبٍ أَوْ طَلَبٍ. فَإِنَّ  
 الْمُسَافِرَ إِمَّا أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُ مُزِجٌ عَنِ مَقَامِهِ وَلَوْلَا هُ لَمَا كَانَ لَهُ  
 مَقْصَدٌ يُسَافِرُ إِلَيْهِ، وَإِمَّا أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُ مَقْصَدٌ وَمَطْلَبٌ. وَالهُرُوبُ  
 عَنْهُ إِمَّا أَمْرٌ لَهُ نِكَايَةٌ فِي الْأُمُورِ الدُّنْيَوِيَّةِ. كَالطَّاعُونَ وَالْوَبَاءَ إِذَا  
 ظَهَرَ بَبَلَدٍ أَوْ خَوْفٍ سَبَبِهِ فِتْنَةٌ أَوْ خُصُومَةٌ أَوْ غَلَاءُ سِعْرِ. وَهُوَ  
 إِمَّا عَامٌّ كَمَا ذَكَرْنَا هُ أَوْ خَاصٌّ كَمَنْ يُقْصَدُ بِأَذِيَّةٍ فِي بَلَدَةٍ فَيَهْرُبُ  
 مِنْهَا. وَإِمَّا أَمْرٌ لَهُ نِكَايَةٌ فِي الدِّينِ كَمَنْ أَبْتُلِيَ فِي بَلَدِهِ بِجَاهٍ وَمَالٍ  
 وَاتَّسَاعِ أَسْبَابِ تَصَدُّهُ عَنِ التَّجَرُّدِ لِلَّهِ، فَيُؤَثِّرُ الْغُرْبَةَ وَالْخُمُولَ  
 وَيَجْتَنِبُ السَّعَةَ وَالْجَاهَ، أَوْ كَمَنْ يُدْعَى إِلَى بَدْعَةٍ قَهْرًا أَوْ إِلَى  
 وَلَايَةٍ عَمَلٍ لَا تَحِلُّ مُبَاشَرَتُهُ فَيَطْلُبُ الْفِرَارَ مِنْهُ.<sup>13</sup>

The benefits that motivate travelling are either running away from something or seeking out something, for the

13. Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, edited by Sulaymān Dunyā, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, p. 245.

traveller is either bothered about something where he is staying, without which he would not aim to travel, or he has an objective and purpose in doing so. Running away takes place because of worldly issues that have adverse effects on him, such as the plague and epidemics when they appear in a country, or out of fear because of sedition, a dispute or a hike in prices. The reasons for travelling are either general, as mentioned, or particular such as being targeted with personal harm in a town so that one runs away. The reason for travelling may also be for matters detrimental to one's religion such as being tried with prominence, money and a host of other material causes that prevent one from dedicating one's time for the sake of Allah, thus preferring the life of an unknown person or a stranger to avoid wealth and status. And it may be that one is coerced to subscribe to a blameworthy innovation in religion or invited to take a public office which is unlawful to assume, and hence one flees from it.



**A**l-Ghazālī captures [in the above passage] the essence of travel. One travels to avoid danger or discomfort, to look for better conditions for one's final destination, or simply to seek some other good. There is nothing more iconic than the image of refugees coming from different religious, ethnic and national backgrounds, trying to cross the Mediterranean in overcrowded boats. They ran away from war and poverty. Their plight does not end simply by reaching their new destination. If they survive the waves of the sea, the tide of xenophobia is awaiting them.

The Prophet ﷺ sent two waves of early Muslims to Abyssinia to seek refuge because Muslims were persecuted in Makkah. The Makkan idol worshippers were the first known Islamophobes. They tried unsuccessfully to poison the air between these Muslim refugees and the Negus of Ethiopia, their host.

Travelling, al-Ghazālī adds, is sought either for worldly gains or for religious purposes. The latter can be divided into seeking knowledge or action. Knowledge covers personal practical ethics that can be acquired through travelling, but also the knowledge of geography which reflects the marvels of the earth. As for action, it can be divided into acts of worship such as the formal Pilgrimage or the visitation of Makkah, Madīnah and Jerusalem.

Today, People flock to Makkah and Madīnah without hesitation, but not to Jerusalem because it is still under occupation. There is a strong scholarly argument encouraging Muslims to visit al-Aqsa Mosque because it is spiritually meritorious to do so. Imām al-Shāfi‘ī, founder of the legal school to which al-Ghazālī belonged, said in one of his poems, extolling the merits of travelling:

Travel, you will find recompense for what  
 you leave behind  
 And strive, for the pleasure of life is in  
 working hard.

I have seen water stagnating when left still,  
Refreshing when flowing, if not it doesn't  
taste well.

Travelling may take place to avoid tribulations and unwanted personal roles that defy Allah's plan for humanity. Al-Ghazālī travelled to seek knowledge, but once he became the most famous scholar in the Muslim world, he left Baghdad in order to purify his heart from egotistic residues resulting from fame, money and power.



## Listening to Songs

السَّمَاعُ قَدْ يَكُونُ حَرَامًا مَحْضًا، وَقَدْ يَكُونُ مُبَاحًا، وَقَدْ يَكُونُ  
 مَكْرُوهًا، وَقَدْ يَكُونُ مُسْتَحَبًّا. أَمَّا الْحَرَامُ: فَهُوَ لِأَكْثَرِ النَّاسِ  
 مِنَ الشُّبَّانِ وَمَنْ غَلَبَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ شَهْوَةُ الدُّنْيَا فَلَا يُحْرِكُ السَّمَاعَ  
 مِنْهُمْ إِلَّا مَا هُوَ الْغَالِبُ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ مِنَ الصِّفَاتِ الْمَذْمُومَةِ.  
 وَأَمَّا الْمَكْرُوهُ: فَهُوَ لِمَنْ لَا يُنْزِلُهُ عَلَى صُورَةِ الْمَخْلُوقِينَ وَلَكِنَّهُ  
 يَتَّخِذُهُ عَادَةً لَهُ فِي أَكْثَرِ الْأَوْقَاتِ عَلَى سَبِيلِ اللَّهْوِ. وَأَمَّا الْمُبَاحُ:  
 فَهُوَ لِمَنْ لَا حَظَّ لَهُ مِنْهُ إِلَّا التَّلَذُّذُ بِالصَّوْتِ الْحَسَنِ.  
 وَأَمَّا الْمُسْتَحَبُّ: فَهُوَ لِمَنْ غَلَبَ عَلَيْهِ حُبُّ اللَّهِ تَعَالَى وَلَمْ  
 يُحْرِكِ السَّمَاعَ مِنْهُ إِلَّا الصِّفَاتِ الْمَحْمُودَةِ.<sup>14</sup>

Listening [to songs] can be absolutely prohibited, permitted, reprehensible or praiseworthy. As for that which is prohibited, it is for most young men

14. Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, edited by Sulaymān Dunyā, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifaḥ, p. 306.

who are overwhelmed with the lust of this world; for listening will stir up in them nothing but the reviled attributes prevalent in their hearts. As for that which is reprehensible, it is for those who do not project what they listen to into the image of human beings, but take listening as a habit for most of the time, for entertainment. As for that which is permitted, it is for those whose share of listening is restricted to enjoying beautiful voices. As for that which is praiseworthy, it is for the one who is captivated by the love of Allah Most High, and listening will only stir in him his praiseworthy attributes.



Centuries ago one had to go to special places and gatherings to listen to songs, which were not available all the time. When Muslim scholars discussed and ruled over listening to music and songs, they could not imagine a time in the future when literally millions of recorded songs would be stored in a virtual reality that are readily available all the time. But what are they listening to?

Imām al-Ghazālī's first concern was about the content which might lead youngsters to psychological projection and fantasising about sexuality. They colour what they hear through their own lustful desires. Once the content in itself is problematic, it becomes prohibited. The degree of prohibition of this type of songs may have been more severe had the scholars of old known about some of the explicit lewd

content of many songs today. And while there are songs today that may be considered positive, because they motivate people to overcome challenges and do something good, there are dark-themed songs that entertain suicide and encourage wrong behaviour.

Once the song is devoid of problematic content according to Islamic universal norms, and the listener does not project any ill thoughts, but only listens by way of habit for extended periods, then listening is reprehensible. Al-Ghazālī is concerned here with wasting time, as with any type of extended activity that does not generate personal or public good, material or spiritual. Listening here is a distraction from a purposeful life. It is interesting that the synonyms of ‘entertainment’ include diversion and distraction.

The third category is when listening to songs is simply permitted. Here the listener enjoys the beautiful voice and the melody. There is no transgression in content and it is done only occasionally. The fourth category is when listening becomes commendable. It is for those whom the love of Allah occupies their whole time, emotions and actions. They are the opposite of the first category, for once they hear a song about the beloved, they think of Allah. The song, in their case, becomes a tool that helps in bringing forth the best in their souls and character.



# كنوز من الغزالي

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