CHAPTER 6

Didactics of Blame and Tactics to Tame

Al-Sulamī's ʿUyūb al-Nafs wa-Mudāwātuhā

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1 Introduction

A distinctive feature of Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), in its formative period, is a vision of religious growth as a path or a journey. A believer travels along the path toward God making progress along the way. The ethics of the Sufi master Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) express this general trend, with varying points of emphasis across his literary corpus. This chapter will concentrate on al-Sulamī's treatise *ʿUyūb al-Nafs wa-Mudāwātuhā* ("The Maladies of the Soul and Their Remedies"), a brief Arabic text that stands in dynamic tension with the remainder of al-Sulamī's oeuvre. While he often elsewhere approaches questions of religious growth through the categories of proper customs (*ādāb*), virtues or character traits (*akhlāq*), and the spiritual states (*aḥwāl*), *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* generally lacks these characteristic elements. The treatise relies on imagery of healing and therapy rather than travel or discipline, collecting isolated practical strategies to address specific defects in a believer's religio-moral life. This analysis of *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* in the context of al-Sulamī's larger ethical project will thus concentrate less on what the good life looks like than on how one moves toward it—how healing and progress occur in the life of the believer. The strong influence of the path of blame on al-Sulamī has long been recognised, and the remedies al-Sulamī prescribes for these sixty-nine maladies of the *nafs* contribute to our understanding of the fusion of the *malāmatiyya* and other spiritual currents during the formative period of Sufism. Setting al-Sulamī's work in dialogue with ethical theories inherited from the Greek philosophical tradition—a tradition that appears to have left no visible trace on his writings—also enables one to identify al-Sulamī's distinctive contribution with greater precision.

2 Al-Sulamī's Life

Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī was born in Nīshāpūr, probably in 325/937, descending from Arab tribes on both sides of

his family (Thibon 2009). Al-Sulamī's father passed on to him an inclination toward *taṣawwuf*, but his more meaningful formation in the Sufi path took place under the guidance of his maternal grandfather Ibn Nujayd (d. 366/976) (Thibon 2018; al-Sulamī and Ibn Nujayd 2010, 9–15). Al-Sulamī grew up in a bustling city at the peak of its prosperity, benefitting from the dynamic flow of languages, cultures, and trade through the region. Intra-Sunnī factionalism marred this prosperity and contributed to the conquest of the city in 429/1038 by the Seljūq Turks (Paul 2005). This factionalism affected al-Sulamī's scholarly concerns, as he lived in a time when, in the words of Kenneth L. Honerkamp, Nīshāpūr's "social fabric was beginning to unravel" (al-Sulamī 2003, 89). Under different circumstances, the diversity of intellectual trends among the city's residents could have been combined with the constant traffic on the trade routes to maintain the city's status as a potent incubator for economic and scholarly life. Instead, the chasms cleaving the main social factions gradually grew deeper and the personal relationships more acrimonious. Most sources demarcate this conflict according to doctrinal or legal affiliations, with the main battle between Ḥanafīs/Muʿtazilīs and Shāfiʿīs/Ashʿarīs, and a smaller skirmish on the side-lines between Shīʿīs and Karrāmīs. Richard W. Bulliet (1972; 1979) famously argued that the roots of Nīshāpūr's factionalism lay in a generational conflict between the descendants of families whose ancestors converted to Islam in different periods.[1] According to Bulliet's hypothesis, tightly knit networks of patrician families retained and handed down different assumptions about what Islam is and what an Islamic society should look like, and because these families rarely intermarried with each other as they struggled for power over the course of generations, the fault lines between them gradually increased even though they were all nominally Sunnī. The patriotism (*ʿaṣabiyya*) that Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) would later portray as a source of strength, a "group feeling" that enables tribes to survive in the desert and possibly ascend as a dynasty, denotes in the history of Nīshāpūr only a toxic and lamentable factionalism.

Nīshāpūr's social divisions simmered for decades and eventually boiled over. This shift from simmer to boil provides the backdrop for al-Sulamī's writings about companionship, one of his signature concerns and a cornerstone of his ethics. Al-Sulamī writes from the heart of a cosmopolitan centre that on one hand knew full well its power and prestige, but on the other, increasingly perceived its own fragility, breathing insecurity out and in. Searching for ways to promote healthier social ties, al-Sulamī becomes acutely concerned

1 Over the course of his long career Bulliet revisits and revises aspects of his analysis in these frequently cited books, but to understand the effect of Nīshāpūr's *ʿaṣabiyya* on al-Sulamī, these works suffice.

with companionship (*ṣuḥba*) and fellowship (*ʿishra*). While some of his treatises concentrate either on the bond between master and disciple or on the bond that links a small group of Sufi adherents in a lodge, other key texts show his concern with the larger social fabric and how to hold this strained garment together (Berger 1998, 83–101). His tendency to abstain from divisive scholarly debates between schools of theology and law manifests this concern for social cohesion, although his identity as Shāfiʿī and Ashʿarī—like nearly all Sufis in Nīshāpūr—was never in doubt (Malamud 1994; Melchert 2001, 242–243). Al-Sulamī's pronounced distaste for speculative theology emerges most clearly in the treatise *al-Radd ʿalā Ahl al-Kalām* ("Refutation of the People of Theology"), a text al-Sulamī uses to criticise the project of *kalām*, not to take sides in *kalām* debates (al-Sulamī and al-Muqriʾ 1996; cf. Thibon 2009, 167–169).

Throughout his adult life, al-Sulamī met with scholars and disciples in his lodge and some of his students became prominent in their own right, none more so than al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), author of the famous *al-Risāla fī ʿIlm al-Taṣawwuf* ("Treatise on Sufism"). Scholars who studied with al-Sulamī to varying degrees include Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066), the great traditionist who frequently narrates through al-Sulamī; Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī, author of *Ḥilyat al-Awliyāʾ* ("The Adornment of the Friends of God") (Melchert 2012); and Abū Saʿīd ibn Abī l-Khayr (d. 440/1049), the mystic celebrated by the Persian hagiographical masterpiece *Asrār al-Tawḥīd* ("The Secrets of Monotheism"). Al-Sulamī died on Sunday 3 Shaʿbān 412/12 November 1021 and was buried at the site of his lodge in Nīshāpūr, but no remains of his lodge or tomb remain in our day.

3 Al-Sulamī's Literary Corpus

Al-Sulamī wrote prolifically and his texts span different literary genres. Several scholars follow the framework in Gerhard Böwering's numerous publications on al-Sulamī and place al-Sulamī's writings into three categories: Qurʾānic commentary, biographical dictionaries, and treatises (al-Sulamī 1999a, 87; 2010, xvii). I will proceed as such, noting that it might be better to speak about al-Sulamī's Qurʾānic commentary, his biographical dictionaries, and his "everything else." "Treatises" in this context simply denotes writings of varying length—from a few pages to fifty or sixty pages in a modern Arabic edition—that often focus on a particular theme but rarely by means that could be considered systematic. Al-Sulamī arranges his material in a way that does not strike readers today as intuitive, but highlighting a contrast between the modern

mind and the medieval mind does not resolve the challenge; even by comparison with the manuals of al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), al-Kalābādhī (d. 385/995), and al-Kharkūshī (d. 407/1016)—all of whom preceded al-Sulamī—or with those of al-Qushayrī or al-Hujwīrī (d. 465–469/1072–1077) in the generation following al-Sulamī, al-Sulamī's organisation can seem haphazard. Julian Baldick put this point in an exceptionally caustic way, blasting al-Sulamī for his "atomistic and disorderly presentation of materials" and dismissing al-Sulamī's treatise on *futuwwa* as "nothing but a succession of banalities about the ethical implications of sacrificing oneself for others" (Baldick 1989, 57–58). In fairness, one can say that al-Sulamī chose a path well-worn by many Muslim authors before him: as much as possible, he attempts to efface his own thought in favour of transmitting material transmitted to him. His treatises provide a more accessible point of entry into his ethical project, because in his *tafsīr* and *ṭabaqāt* the relevant material is scattered throughout the wise maxims of Sufi masters collected in those works, whereas in his treatises the relevant material is more concentrated. A number of his treatises have only been edited and published in the last two decades (al-Sulamī 2009–2010; 2009b; al-Sulamī and Ibn Nujayd 2010), so recent research benefits from new material available and in some of it al-Sulamī argues more explicitly on his own authority. The publication of a scholarly French translation of *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya* ("The Generations of Sufis") (al-Sulamī 2019) marks a turning point in the study of al-Sulamī. Previously, his treatises had drawn the greatest attention from translators, perhaps because they are shorter and more manageable. Several of al-Sulamī's treatises have been translated into European languages, and those which have been translated tend to exist in two or more translations. This is true for *ʿUyūb al-Nafs wa-Mudāwātuhā*, which has been rendered into English, French, Italian, and Spanish versions of widely varying quality.[2]

4 Al-Sulamī's Ethical Project

Fazlur Rahman once noted that theological thought in Islam had little influence on ethical thought, whereas the Sufi ethic proved far more consequential (Rahman 1984). Given al-Sulamī's lack of interest in *kalām* debates and constant concern for growth in virtue and pious comportment, his literary corpus stands fully in line with Rahman's assessment. Indeed, in al-Sulamī's writings focused on *taṣawwuf*, one struggles to identify a distinction between

2 Translations of passages from *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* in this essay are my own, although I have consulted the translations indicated in the bibliography.

ethical growth and progress in Sufism (cf. Heck 2016). Likewise, any distinction between ethical growth and obedience to the Sunna of the Messenger of God cannot be sustained. Etan Kohlberg's comment that *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* occupies a "middle ground between the worlds of *ḥadīth*, *adab*, and ethics" (al-Sulamī 1976, 17) may have some validity in regards to literary genres, but has no basis in al-Sulamī's conception of what these terms meant.

Al-Sulamī does not describe ethical cultivation or religious growth with a consistent framework that cuts across his many writings, but several key terms recur frequently and demonstrate their significance for the author by their sheer weight in his discourse (Welle 2024, 17–20). First among these is the centrality of *adab* (pl. *ādāb*), a loaded word that can be translated as "comportment," "correct behaviour," "etiquette," "rules of conduct," "attitudes," "ways," "customs," "practices," or the like. A famous maxim al-Sulamī attributes to Abū Ḥafṣ al-Naysābūrī (d. ca. 270/883) sums this up best: "The whole of Sufism is proper ways" (*al-taṣawwuf kulluhu ādāb*) (al-Sulamī 1969, 119 §19). The term *adab* never carried the weight for Baghdad Sufis that it would later enjoy in Khurāsān (Thibon 2016, 102–103), and the gravitas it holds for al-Sulamī exceeds that of his contemporaries in the region. One may justly apply to al-Sulamī a moniker that Qamar-ul Huda has used for other Sufi masters: his thought consists of an "*adab* theology," as *adab* provides an inclusive and comprehensive concept for the pursuit of saving knowledge (Huda 2004, 461–462). Al-Sulamī did not attempt to probe *adab* as a theoretical concept or craft a succinct definition of it, but his discourse revolves around *adab* and he presupposes that sincere believers desire to learn good comportment and grow in it. One sees this in the rhetorical structure of some of his treatises. Just as *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* consists almost entirely of a sequence of paragraphs beginning with "Among its maladies is …" (*wa-min ʿuyūbihā …*), al-Sulamī compiled at least two treatises with a snowballing list of moral principles and wise vignettes each beginning with "among its proper ways …" (*wa-min ādābihā …*). The importance of proper *adab*, in which one's outer comportment aligns perfectly with one's inner orientation, cannot be underestimated as an element of al-Sulamī's ethical project. Al-Sulamī's consistent emphasis on the unity of outer (*ẓāhir*) and inner (*bāṭin*) hinders any attempt to distinguish his ethical project from his idea of progress on the mystical path; the two are thoroughly intertwined.

Two other key terms that recur frequently in conjunction with *ādāb* in al-Sulamī's description of spiritual progress are *akhlāq* and *aḥwāl*. *Ādāb*, *akhlāq*, and *aḥwāl* exist in an ascending hierarchy, based on the agent involved (al-Sulamī 1979, 19 §16). A Sufi's progress begins with disciplined attention to the Sufi ways then advances to virtues and states. These three categories interpenetrate each other to some degree, but progress through this hierarchy

involves a gradual shift in agency from the believer to God. The spiritual labour that a believer performs generally falls into the categories of *ādāb* and *akhlāq*, while God alone grants *aḥwāl* (Honerkamp 2012). Here, al-Sulamī does not seem desperately concerned with Ashʿarī debates about the origins of human actions; his use of these three key terms suggests a more fundamental insight that growth in Sufism involves a collaboration between a believer and God in which the stress on divine agency expresses itself more robustly in the later stages. A believer freely submits to the religious law, carries out that law, and puts into practice the customs of the Messenger of God and the Sufi path. As the believer takes the initial steps along the path by voluntarily learning these ways and striving to actualise them, the believer acquires virtues (*akhlāq*) that enable perseverance in proper practice. *Akhlāq* are traits that result both from human volition and divine volition. God responds to the good actions of God's servant by adorning the servant with noble *akhlāq*, and these stable dispositions themselves serve the servant because they keep the servant directed toward that for which a true servant should always strive.

By translating *akhlāq* as "virtues," I do not intend to suggest the influence of Greek ethical thought on al-Sulamī. Philosophers like Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī (d. 363/974) and Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) normally used *faḍā'il* as their preferred term to designate virtue in the sense inherited from the Platonic tradition, in keeping with the terminology in Arabic translations of Greek philosophical works. Al-Sulamī's use of this term—as well as its antonym, vices (*radhā'il*)—is rare. Scholars in recent decades have noted the connection between the revival of virtue ethics in philosophy today and the ethical systems of classical Islamic thinkers like al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). Such inquiry demands increasing precision about what kind of virtue ethics is at play for different thinkers (Kukkonen 2016). Here, it suffices to note that such interest has concentrated on medieval Muslims indebted to the Greek philosophical tradition in one way or another, while the exploration of latent parallels with early Sufis who show no marked influence of Greek thought has only just begun (Zargar 2017; Khalil 2018; Welle 2024). Though al-Sulamī's writings do not manifest the author's exposure to the Greek concept of virtue, al-Sulamī's understanding of *akhlāq* nonetheless remains surprisingly consistent with the philosophical tradition. He conceives *akhlāq* as stable dispositions of the soul to perceive things, believe things, and most especially, to actively behave in a proper way as a matter of habit. The prominent role that God plays in the acquisition of virtue contrasts al-Sulamī's usage of the term *akhlāq* with some of the philosophers. On one hand, al-Sulamī assumes that believers will not experience a transformation of their morals without making the proper free choices: one must decide to actualise the ways that characterise the Sufi path.

On the other hand, al-Sulamī elsewhere lays the emphasis on God granting the believer virtues (*awrathahu Allāh tilka al-akhlāq*) like modesty, generosity, courage, and the like (al-Sulamī 2009–2010, 3:137). Once a Sufi grows in discipline by means of *ādāb*, God provides assistance along the path. That process—the movement from *ādāb* to *akhlāq*—ideally culminates in God's gift of spiritual states (*aḥwāl*). At the level of the spiritual states, the initiative and agency unambiguously belong to God alone. Based on one's effort and one's persistence in the virtues, one has good cause to hope that God will grant the blessing of spiritual states, but such an occurrence is far less certain or predictable than the transformation of *akhlāq* many believers experience. The spiritual states are a pure gift of mercy that descend upon a Sufi and open the Sufi's heart (al-Sulamī 2009b, 31 §113; cf. al-Sulamī 2009–2010, 3:136). Although one can identify certain familiar patterns in early Sufi literature regarding the experience of the spiritual states (Avery 2004), precisely how and when a state will descend cannot be foreseen.

The mention of spiritual states gives rise to another category many Sufi manuals use to describe progress on the path: the mystical stations (*maqāmāt*, sg. *maqām*). Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/859 or 248/862) famously distinguished between the stations and the states, and early Sufis generally assumed that the difference lay in the duration and constancy of the experience. States are transitory and might be only momentary; stations involve longer duration and a believer generally remains in one station until passing upward to another. Al-Sulamī generally concurs with reigning assumptions about the fleeting nature of the states (al-Sulamī, 2009–2010, 3:554 §2), but by comparison with some other Sufis in the formative period, his use of the term *maqāmāt* is less central and less consistent. He does not always separate the states from the stations in his writings (Berger 1998, 80; Thibon 2009, 238), even speaking in one place of "the states of the stations" (al-Sulamī 2009–2010, 3:80–81 §4). Further, he defines the term *maqām* in two different ways in *Manāhij al-ʿĀrifīn* ("The Open Roads of the Knowers"). The beginning of that treatise includes the line, "Sufism has a beginning, an end, and stations (*maqāmāt*)" (al-Sulamī 1979, 25 §1).[3] Al-Sulamī later claims that "God disposed the means to arrive at the realities according to stations (*maqāmāt*) and stages (*darajāt*)," specifying that

3 This is the first line of the treatise in the two published versions, but Thibon's more recent translation includes manuscript evidence that was not available to Kohlberg or Süleyman Ateş (al-Sulamī 1979; 1981) and situates the line in the third paragraph. In anticipation of Thibon's publication of a new edition of this treatise, it suffices to say here that the additional material does not resolve the ambiguity regarding al-Sulamī's use of the term *maqām* (al-Sulamī 2012).

some of the stations are the station of health (*ṣalāḥ*), the station of the martyrs (*shuhadāʾ*), and the station of the truthful (*ṣiddīqūn*) (al-Sulamī 1979, 30 §6). Later, at the conclusion of the treatise, al-Sulamī adds that "Sufism has three spheres (*maqāmāt*): ways (*ādāb*), virtues (*akhlāq*), and states (*aḥwāl*). Ways are an acquisition, virtues are an imitation, and states are a gift" (al-Sulamī 1979, 38 §16; cf. al-Sulamī, 2009–2010, 3:136). Al-Sulamī chooses not to wed himself to a technical definition of *maqām*. Jean-Jacques Thibon, author of a magisterial study of al-Sulamī, correctly analyses that in *Manāhij al-ʿĀrifīn*, the first usage of *maqām* has a dynamic and progressive character; one advances through a series of stations (Thibon 2009, 211–212, 436–440). The latter usage involves enumerating constitutive elements, rendered more complicated by the fact that the constitutive elements named—*ādāb*, *akhlāq*, and *aḥwāl*—can each be further subdivided into different stages or elements. One may summarise by noting that like his contemporaries, al-Sulamī provides lists of some of the virtues and spiritual states, but unlike some of his contemporaries, he neither relies on the term *maqām* nor consistently invests it with technical meaning. He remains committed to the Sufi vision of religio-moral growth as a journey along a path but does not bind himself to the concept of the stations as an expression of this growth.

5 *ʿUyūb al-Nafs*

Among the many texts attributed to al-Sulamī, his authorship of *ʿUyūb al-Nafs wa-Mudāwātuhā* is one of the most secure, extant in two manuscripts copied within sixty years of his death (Böwering 2006, 221). Except for the brief introductory and concluding sections, *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* consists of a long list of different maladies of the soul and concrete strategies to cure them. The treatise begins with a familiar rhetorical device, suggesting that al-Sulamī labours in response to a particular query.

> One of the *shaykh*s requested that I compile for him some passages on the maladies of the soul that would indicate what lies behind them. I complied with his request and compiled these passages for him.
>
> AL-SULAMĪ 1976, 70 §2

Al-Sulamī styles several of his treatises as a reply to a request; the novel element here is that the request originates with one of the *mashāyikh*, which could indicate a master on the path or simply an elder resident of the city. If such a request actually existed, in context, the former seems more likely,

although scholars still struggle to articulate precisely how such documents were used in this period. One could imagine *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* serving as a reference work in al-Sulamī's library—a text that he and others would consult—and this would comport with the idea that the treatise responds to a request from a local spiritual master. Al-Qushayrī recounts a famous episode in which Abū ʿAlī al-Daqqāq (d. 405/1015) identifies the precise location of a book in al-Sulamī's library without actually being there, suggesting the intimate access to his scholarly resources al-Sulamī granted his colleagues (Thibon 2009, 100–102). More likely, a treatise of this sort was intended as a teaching document, but the manner in which a text like this would be used for instruction is not entirely clear.

6 The Structure of the Soul

Al-Sulamī nowhere provides a fully elaborated physiology of the *nafs* (Chowdhury 2019, 182), but the early section of *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* and his engagement with Qurʾānic passages there offers a window onto his thinking.

> So I say, know well that the soul (*nafs*) is divided into three parts (*aqsām*): the soul that incites to evil (*nafs ammāra*), the blaming soul (*nafs lawwāma*), and the soul at peace (*nafs muṭmaʾinna*).
>
> AL-SULAMĪ 1976, 70 §3

In his edition of this treatise, Kohlberg emphasises that here, al-Sulamī speaks of three parts of the one soul, not of three separate souls (*anfus*) or forms of soul (al-Sulamī 1976, 14), but whether al-Sulamī saw this point as important is not clear. Thinkers drawing on the Platonic tripartite conception of the soul were not themselves in agreement about how to articulate the soul's "threeness." Galen, whose *Peri Ēthōn* ("On the Passions") survives only in its Arabic abridgement, *Fī l-Akhlāq*, confesses his ambivalence about whether one should call these three "things" (*ashyāʾ*) separate souls, parts of one soul, or three faculties of the same essence (Kraus 1937 §193; cf. Mattock 1972, 237; Singer 2013, 138). Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī had said that that soul has three faculties (*quwā*), but that each of these is still called a "soul" (*nafs*) (Ibn ʿAdī 2002, 14–15). Miskawayh posits three parts (*aqsām*) in the soul, labelling each one a "faculty" (*quwwa*). Exactly how al-Sulamī sees the relationship between these parts of the soul is no more evident than for these philosophers, although al-Sulamī doubtlessly does not frame these three Qurʾānic usages of *nafs* as functional synonyms for the rational (Ar. *nāṭiqa*; Gr. *logistikon*), spirited (Ar. *ghaḍabiyya*; Gr. *thymoeides*),

and appetitive (Ar. *shahwāniyya*; Gr. *epithymētikon*) souls. The comparison between Plato's concept of the appetitive soul and the Sufi notion of the *nafs* as ego-self—the lower self or carnal soul—has been much discussed in modern scholarly literature. It suffices to mention again that, especially by comparison with contemporaries like al-ʿĀmirī (d. 381/992) or Miskawayh, al-Sulamī seems not to have been meaningfully shaped by the Greek philosophical tradition. He frames his portrait of the soul as a reflection upon the Qurʾānic revelation and one needs nothing more than this—along with the dynamics of the *malāmatiyya, futuwwa*, and early *taṣawwuf*—to account for his explanation.

Al-Sulamī begins his reflections on the soul at peace by recalling a verse in which the Qurʾānic voice explicitly addresses the *nafs muṭma'inna*.

> As for the soul at peace, it has realised with certainty that God is its Lord. It is at peace with what God has promised, accepts as true what God has said, and is patient with God's command. It is a believing soul and God illuminates its countenance. God gives it its register in its right hand and thus it is purified. It is content with God's decree and with God's allotment of affairs, whether for good or for evil, for benefit or harm. It is the soul to which God speaks, saying, *Return to your Lord well-pleased*—meaning well-pleased with God—and *well-pleasing* (Q 89:28)—meaning well pleasing to God by means of pious practice and believing God's promise to be true.
>
> AL-SULAMĪ 1976, 70–71 §3[4]

Al-Sulamī gives this explanation on his own authority but relates similar comments in his Qurʾānic commentaries. In *Ziyādāt Ḥaqā'iq al-Tafsīr* ("Supplement to the Realities of Qurʾānic Interpretations"), he attributes to an unnamed master the same interpretations of "well-pleased" and "well-pleasing" just given (al-Sulamī 1995, Q 89:28). Al-Sulamī also reports that Aḥmad Ibn ʿAṭāʾ (d. 309/922) taught that the soul at peace is the soul of divine gnosis, which never withholds itself from God even for the blink of an eye (al-Sulamī 2001a, Q 89:27–28).

Al-Sulamī then moves on to the blaming soul, with a brief explanation that immediately evidences the influence of the *malāmatiyya* on him.

4 Citations of the Qurʾān generally follow M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's translation, with modifications when necessary.

> It is the soul that blames in good times and in bad and has no patience, whether in prosperity or trial. This soul regrets opportunities that passed by and reproaches itself saying, "If only I had done such and such or not done such and such."
>
> AL-SULAMĪ 1976, 71 §3

Al-Sulamī's Qur'ānic antecedent for the blaming soul is Q 75:1–2, "[I swear] by the Day of Resurrection and by the self-reproaching soul (*al-nafs al-lawwāma*)!" Al-Sulamī encourages here the subtle and quietist path of self-deprecation that characterises the path of blame. By contrast with the ostentatious public piety of the Karrāmīs, another influential spiritual trend in Nīshāpūr, the *malāmatī* constantly heaps scorn and criticism upon his *nafs*, which was both corrupt and indestructible (Karamustafa 2007, 49). The methods of the path of blame were excessively introverted, seeking a psychological purity free of avarice and selfishness. Unfortunately, their refusal to display publicly the distinctive elements of their religiosity resulted in the loss of much knowledge about the movement, as their spiritual masters tended not to leave writings behind. Al-Sulamī's *Risālat al-Malāmatiyya* ("The Epistle of the Malāmatiyya") is the most substantial source for knowledge of this group, who functionally disappeared in the next generation as they were absorbed under the larger umbrella of *taṣawwuf*. Although he does not name this trend here, al-Sulamī demonstrates his commitment to its spiritual methods with his fundamentally positive description of the blaming soul, at least in terms of its healing practice: blaming yourself is good for you.

Al-Sulamī concludes this discussion of the soul with the *nafs ammāra*, the part of the soul that "habitually orders evil-doing" (Kohlberg 1976, 14).

> As for the soul that incites to evil, it is what God mentioned in the story of Joseph when God said, *Surely the soul incites to evil* [Q 12:53].
>
> AL-SULAMĪ 1976, 71 §3

To this Qur'ānic verse, which explicitly mentions the *nafs ammāra bi-l-sū'*, al-Sulamī mentions two other verses that do not do so, clarifying that al-Sulamī himself understands these as references to the *nafs ammāra*. Q 79:40, "for anyone who feared the meeting with his Lord and restrained himself from base desires," thus reflects in the mind of al-Sulamī not self-restraint in a general sense, but the control of that part of the soul that incites to evil. Q 45:23 asks the Prophet, "Have you considered the one who has taken his own desire as a god …?" This verse does not explicitly mention the *nafs* but focuses on the evils of the soul and its lack of inclination to accomplish the good. Al-Sulamī

suggests that other Qur'ānic verses indicate the same, as does a *ḥadīth* on the authority of Abū Hurayra (d. 57/678, or slightly later) (al-Sulamī 1976, 71–72 §3).

Strangely, this distinction between the three *aqsām* of the *nafs* does not do any real work for al-Sulamī later in the treatise and his "topography of the soul" remains ambiguous. He never meaningfully returns to the importance of this distinction, although one may functionally assume that the maladies al-Sulamī discusses throughout the remainder of the treatise adhere to the *nafs ammāra*. That the *nafs muṭma'inna* does not recur in the treatise does not surprise—it is the soul at peace, free from malady, and thus need not be discussed in a treatise on maladies—but the subsequent absence of the *nafs lawwāma* does surprise. Al-Sulamī neither presents specific maladies that characterise either the soul that incites to evil or the blaming soul, nor describes a believer progressing from the more serious version of a malady—tied to the *nafs ammāra*—to a milder version of the defect in the *nafs lawwāma*. Al-Sulamī's writings elsewhere unfortunately do not bring clarity to the matter. In his Qur'ānic commentary, for example, al-Sulamī reports Sahl al-Tustarī's (d. 283/896) interpretation of Q 75:2—cited above—that the *nafs lawwāma* is the *nafs ammāra bi-l-sū'* (al-Sulamī 2001a). This tripartite schema of the soul does not play a serious role in al-Sulamī's understanding of the healing process. He never returns to it, other than an oblique reference at the end of the treatise, and the schema does not recur explicitly in his other writings. Likewise, one finds in al-Sulamī's corpus a seminal version of a fourfold schema of spiritual centres, or *laṭā'if*, that other Sufi thinkers would later espouse, but his usage of the terms *nafs, qalb*, *sirr*, and *rūḥ* does not engage the three *aqsām* discussed here and leaves many questions unanswered (al-Sulamī 2010, 12–13 §50–54). That this nascent discussion of the spiritual centres occurs primarily in *Risālat al-Malāmatiyya* (al-Sulamī 1945, 100–105; cf. Berger 1998, 51–58) suggests that al-Sulamī has not attempted to integrate the discourse of the path of blame comprehensively throughout *'Uyūb al-Nafs*. Rather, this influence manifests itself in the form of numerous isolated references.

7 The Maladies of the Soul

Al-Sulamī then immediately launches into sixty-nine different maladies of the soul, which he presents in almost a perfect parallel structure. He begins by naming the *'ayb*, immediately offering any additional explanatory commentary on the malady in case it could be unclear. He then indicates the remedy, which he nearly always bolsters with some sort of citation from the Islamic tradition: Qur'ānic verses are by far the most common, followed by *ḥadīth*, followed by

wise maxims of Sufi masters. Most paragraphs only contain one such citation: it seems that al-Sulamī favours a Qur'ānic verse if he has one, a *ḥadīth* if he does not, and a Sufi saying as a last resort. The treatise contains eight maladies of the soul for which al-Sulamī does not offer any sort of citation from the tradition. Thibon rightly argues that one may thus infer that al-Sulamī began from the maladies and tried to articulate their remedies. He did not have a set list of Qur'ānic verses and *ḥadīth*s—the remedies—for which he reverse-engineered the *ʿuyūb* (Thibon 2009, 528–529).

The list of maladies presented here shows some of al-Sulamī's characteristic points of emphasis, especially those deriving from the influence of the path of blame. He identifies as illnesses of the soul calling attention to oneself, concerning oneself with one's outward appearance (al-Sulamī 1976, 80 §15–16), seeking positions of authority through knowledge while boasting and glorying in this, making one's acts of religious obedience and love known to others, and similar defects. Such concerns about public vanity and pride recur (al-Sulamī 1976, 81 and 86 §20 and 26). One paragraph adequately represents the concerns that drive this treatise.

> Among its maladies is its love for divulging the maladies of one's brothers and companions. The remedy is to return to [examine] oneself, and then to love for others what one loves for oneself. It was narrated from the Prophet that he said, "The Muslim is the one who desires for his brother what he desires for himself." Also, "Whoever conceals the faults of his brother Muslim, God will conceal his fault."
>
> AL-SULAMĪ 1976, 94 §44

Al-Sulamī's conciseness here, drawing upon two *ḥadīth*s that address the malady from complementary perspectives, characterises many of the paragraphs in *ʿUyūb al-Nafs*. Al-Sulamī's list shows the distinct concerns of the path of blame, but nonetheless should be considered fundamentally consistent with the lists of vices that characterise other major Sufi figures in the period, beyond the scope of the Khurāsān-based *malāmatiyya*. He includes greed (*ṭamaʿ*/*ḥirṣ*), laxity (*kasal*), anger (*ghaḍab*), dishonesty (*kadhib*), miserliness (*bukhl*), envy (*ḥasad*), etc.

Al-Sulamī occasionally lumps several problems together into the same paragraph, addressing the constellation of them as a whole:

> Among its maladies are heedlessness, negligence, persistence [in sin], procrastination, amplifying one's expectations (*taṭwīl al-amal*), and imagining that one's final moment remains far in the future (*tabʿīd al-ajal*).
>
> AL-SULAMĪ 1976, 79 §14

A vignette transmitting al-Junayd's teaching about pure *tawḥīd* provides the remedy here. Especially in the early paragraphs of the treatise, al-Sulamī catalogues maladies that cannot be reduced to technical terms like "heedlessness," or "negligence," because the malady itself demands explanation. Such longer-form diagnosis of the malady constitutes a more common feature of the treatise's rhetoric than al-Sulamī's occasional willingness to bundle problems together. He reports that one malady of the *nafs* is that it imagines it stands at the door of its own salvation (*tatawahhamu anna-hā qā'ima ʿalā bāb najātihi*) (al-Sulamī 1976, 72 §4). The next malady is that when the *nafs* weeps, it finds comfort and refreshment in this (*idhā bakat, tafarrajat wa-starwaḥat*) (al-Sulamī 1976, 73 §5). Immediately following, al-Sulamī says that a malady of the *nafs* is perceiving that harm comes from one who has no control over it, hoping to benefit from one who has no power over it, and being concerned about what has already been provided for it (al-Sulamī 1976, 74 §6, cf. 89 §33). Al-Sulamī's catalogue of *ʿuyūb* thus does not consist of technical terms that the master then glosses and explains. His writings elsewhere show his willingness to proceed in such a manner: he penned a brief treatise titled *Tafsīr Alfāẓ al-Ṣūfiyya* ("Explanation of Sufi Expressions") to define key technical terms for the mystics, a treatise he redacted from al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ* ("The Book of Illumination") (al-Sulamī 2009, 31–36). By contrast, a key element of al-Sulamī's rhetoric in *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* is his tendency to give a verbose synopsis of the malady itself.

Although al-Sulamī structures *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* around the maladies, one must immediately acknowledge that he does not organise these maladies in any discernible way. Indeed, several seem to repeat themselves in nearly synonymous mutations and these tend to be scattered throughout the treatise rather than grouped together. Avarice provides one example. Al-Sulamī names *ṭamaʿ* (greed, avarice, or excessive desire) as a malady (al-Sulamī 1976, 86 §27). He indicates that the remedy is to know that coveting causes one to enter into this world (*dunyā*) and to forget the sweetness of worship. In the very next paragraph, al-Sulamī names the pursuit of building up and multiplying worldly things (*ḥirṣ*) as a malady. Here again, the nature of the problem is the attachment to the things of this world, remedied by knowing that one has no lasting home in this world and that the world to come will endure. The difference between *ṭamaʿ* and *ḥirṣ* is subtle: among the first derivatives for the root *ṭ-m-ʿ* in both Ibn Manẓūr's (d. 711/1312) *Lisān al-ʿArab* ("The Tongue of the Arabs") and al-Fīrūzābādī's (d. 817/1415) *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* ("The Comprehensive Dictionary") one finds *ḥaraṣa ʿalayhi*, the intense desire or longing for something. One might assume that al-Sulamī intends a meaningful distinction here between *ṭamaʿ* and *ḥirṣ*, but *ḥirṣ* recurs twice more, later in the treatise. The first of these recurrences indicates *ḥirṣ* as a malady remedied by knowing that avarice will

not increase the sustenance that God has decreed for a person (al-Sulamī 1976, 98 §55). Four paragraphs later, al-Sulamī speaks about a particular kind of *ḥirṣ* through accumulating wealth and withholding it. For the sake of argument, one could frame this as a type of *takhṣīṣ*, but other similar examples mitigate the possibility that al-Sulamī has systematically distinguished between shades of avarice. It seems rather that over the course of the treatise al-Sulamī circles around the fundamental problem—attachment to things of this world—and indicates helpful strategies to grow out of that attachment, generally by reawakening oneself to the reality of divine decree. Kohlberg searched for clues as to the treatise's organisation. He discusses a hypothetical distinction between sins as discrete acts at the beginning of the treatise and sins as base qualities at the end of the treatise, but in the end, Kohlberg considers this hypothesis unsatisfying (al-Sulamī 1976, 16). Al-Sulamī was a compiler, not a systematiser. Despite his integral role in preserving much Sufi material that might otherwise be lost, al-Sulamī's jumbled style explains why scholars, past and present, have found some of his near-contemporaries more attractive as matter for study. Part of his rhetorical strategy thus unfortunately becomes a reason why readers may shy away from him: the Nīshāpūrian master sows countless nuggets of wisdom throughout his writings, returning again and again to key attitudes and practices seen from different vantage points.

8 Companionship Revisited

How does *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* fit into al-Sulamī's larger ethical project? First, the treatise provides the only example in al-Sulamī's oeuvre of a work dedicated primarily to vices, defects, or weaknesses and how to overcome them. The title of another treatise, *Kitāb Bayān Zalal al-Fuqarāʾ* ("The Book of Exposition of the Errors of the Poor"), suggests that it could be a work of this type, but Honerkamp's edition and translation of that treatise—incorporating a previously unstudied manuscript—renders the title as *Kitāb Bayān Tadhallul al-Fuqarāʾ* ("The Book of Exposition of the Humility of the Poor"). Honerkamp's title more accurately expresses the contents of that treatise, which is not an exposition of lapses or mistakes, but a guide that could be characterised as "applied Sufism," uniting practical counsels from *taṣawwuf* in general and the path of blame in particular (al-Sulamī 2003, 107). As a catalogue of maladies, *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* stands alone. Saying this, however, does not imply that *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* contributes material that is totally novel. The types of counsels offered here are consistent with al-Sulamī's writing elsewhere and had the treatise been lost, our understanding of al-Sulamī's spiritual method would not

radically change. The principal novelty of the treatise lies in its format, not in its content.

One striking feature of the treatise is the relative absence of *ṣuḥba* as a prominent concept by comparison with al-Sulamī's other writings. Given the centrality of companionship for the acquisition of knowledge and for religio-moral growth (Welle 2024), one sees why Thibon describes al-Sulamī's understanding of companionship as "therapeutics of the soul" (Thibon 2009, 228–232). Spiritual brotherhood stands at the heart of the Sufi path and *ṣuḥba* can be considered a form of spiritual struggle against the self (*mujāhadat al-nafs*). In al-Sulamī's case, one must add the note of caution that *ṣuḥba* does not automatically denote association with the master (*ṣuḥbat al-shaykh*). The biographical dictionary *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya* generally uses the root *ṣ-ḥ-b* to indicate the beginning of a relationship between master and disciple (Gril 2012, 40), but other treatises by al-Sulamī use the term with greater flexibility, denoting companionship more broadly. The role of the Sufi master (*shaykh*) in the life of a disciple (*murīd*) evolved throughout the formative period of Sufism. Fritz Meier famously described a shift from the *shaykh al-taʿlīm*, or the teaching *shaykh*, to the *shaykh al-tarbiya*, or the directing *shaykh* (Meier 1999; cf. Katz 2018; Silvers 2003; Thibon 2009, 238–244; Knysh 2017, 149–170; Gobillot and Thibon 2012). According to this schema, the former guides the ethical growth of disciples by teaching them in groups; the *shaykh al-tarbiya* engages in personalised spiritual direction, prescribing particular disciplines to individual disciples whom he knows well. Meier argued that al-Qushayrī's writings manifest that the transition from teaching to directing was complete, making al-Sulamī's generation the bridge generation (Meier 1999, 217). Lutz Berger, in assessing whether one should associate al-Sulamī with "classical" or "post-classical" Sufism, suggests that al-Sulamī's approach to the relationship between master and disciple can be considered "modern," insofar as al-Sulamī's concept of Sufi education involves holistic formation: the *shaykh* shaping the whole person of his disciple (Berger 1998, 195).

While subsequent scholars have argued that the transition from teaching to directing was more complicated and perhaps occurred earlier than Meier hypothesised, one may nevertheless identify al-Sulamī with a period in which the exaltation of the *shaykh*'s role and the insistence on magnifying esteem and reverence for the *shaykh* become increasingly commonplace in Sufi literature. This focus on the bond between master and disciple should not, however, eclipse the ongoing consciousness among Sufis of the importance of horizontal bonds. Relationships among brothers of equivalent spiritual rank provide an opportunity for growth in the knowledge of God (Welle 2024). One sees this interest in al-Sulamī's writings elsewhere, but the matter emerges in *ʿUyūb*

al-Nafs because in that treatise, al-Sulamī never speaks about the *shaykh*. The treatise seems much more like a self-help guide than an "other-help" guide, if the latter were a document encouraging someone with a malady of the soul to seek assistance from others in remedying a defect. In a stark contrast with his approach to companionship elsewhere, al-Sulamī here portrays *ṣuḥba* as dangerous. This hesitance about *ṣuḥba* comes from al-Sulamī's concern that believers act to win the esteem of others, as well as their forgetfulness of the next life.

> Among its maladies is the inclination toward fellowship with one's peers and companionship with the brothers. The remedy is knowing that any companion he has will be separated from him and any fellowship will be ultimately cut off. It was narrated on the authority of the Prophet that Gabriel said to him, "Live as you will, for you will die. Love whom you love, for you will be separated from him. Do what you will, for you will be called to account for it. Know that the honour of the believer is in performing the night vigil and his esteem is that he has no need of others." Abū Qāsim al-Ḥakīm said, "Friendship is enmity unless you act with purity, and accumulating wealth is an affliction unless you act with charity, and mingling [with people] causes confusion unless you act with good disposition."
>
> AL-SULAMĪ 1976, 92 §38

As was the case for several maladies already mentioned, the risk here has to do with attachment. Nothing in this world will last, even companionship and fellowship, and a believer must remember the transient nature of these earthly bonds. Elsewhere in the treatise, the risk in social relations usually adheres to vanity or cognate vices, seeking the praise of others, the attention of others, positions of importance, etc. To be clear, one could never suggest that *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* encourages a hermetic lifestyle or antisocial behaviour. This would run roughshod over al-Sulamī's thinking. Companionship with pious people provides healing in a believer's life. Several of the remedies al-Sulamī describes in *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* involve associating with righteous people (*ṣāliḥūn*), and here al-Sulamī does not seem to encourage close personal guidance under a spiritual master. Rather, he seems to encourage fellowship and association with good people in a more general sense. The treatise thus runs into a long-standing debate within the Sufi tradition: when does a believer most need a *shaykh* (cf. Knysh 2017, 155ff.)? Is the master most essential at the beginning, to guide a seeker's initial progress on the path, after which the *murīd* knows what is necessary to make continued progress alone? Or should a believer do

the initial work without a *shaykh*, seeking out and relying on a *shaykh* only for the higher levels of spiritual achievement? Al-Sulamī does not address this question explicitly, but in this treatise, he implicitly seems to favour the latter, at least insofar as the *shaykh* goes unmentioned for initial treatment of these maladies. *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* thus could silently support a vision of the *shaykh* as indispensable in the achievement of the higher levels of spiritual progress. In this schema, a mature disciple depends not only upon God, but must come to realise as a fact his dependence on an earthly master.

We can conclude this discussion of companionship in al-Sulamī's spiritual method with a poignant example from *Kitāb Ādāb al-Ṣuḥba* in which al-Sulamī connects several of the key notions already described.

> Among its ways (*ādāb*) is to become endowed with the best of virtues (*yatakhallaq bi-maḥāsin al-akhlāq*) and to excel in companionship (*yatamayyaz fī al-ṣuḥba*). … Abū Muḥammad al-Jarīrī said, "The perfection of a man consists in three things: voluntary exile (*ghurba*), companionship, and discretion. As for voluntary exile, it is for the ego-self (*nafs*). As for companionship, it is to become endowed with the virtues of [excellent] men. As for discretion, it is for discernment."
>
> AL-SULAMĪ 1954, 47

This brief teaching demonstrates the breadth of companionship in al-Sulamī's religious imagination: any growth in virtue contributes to one's living as an authentic companion. *Kitāb Ādāb al-Ṣuḥba* ("The Book of the Etiquette of Companionship") abounds in discourse about *ādāb* and invokes in several places the importance of *akhlāq*. This prepares the believer for the advanced stages of growth that can occur through companionship with a *shaykh* and for reception of the spiritual states that God may grant to those who persevere in their worship and service.

9 Conclusion

Al-Sulamī's treatise *ʿUyūb al-Nafs wa-Mudāwātuhā* stands as a key work in his own oeuvre and in the formative period of Sufism both for what it contains and for what it lacks. This brief treatise lacks the systematic organisation of some well-known Sufi manuals, lacks the terminological precision that historians of ideas might desire to find, and lacks the focus on companionship and fellowship that broadly characterise the author's approach to ethical growth. *ʿUyūb al-Nafs* contains a unique list of maladies of the soul, contains advice

pertinent both for Sufi adepts and for Muslims generally, and contains a witness to the fusion of the different currents of religious thought and practice in Khurāsān in the period. Responding to a religious milieu in which many believers experienced the acute burden of a soul inciting them to evil—a *nafs* that was unyieldingly corrupt—al-Sulamī offers hope for healing. The therapeutic tactics he suggests to tame one's sinful inclinations catalogue key features of the *taṣawwuf* emerging in Khurāsān and provide a point of comparison not for the heights of mystical experience described in some better-known Sufi texts, but for the rudimentary progress that characterises ordinary believers striving to inculcate the *adab* of the Messenger of God.

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