

Foundations of the Spiritual Path

By Sidi Ahmad Zarruq
Translated by Hamza Yusuf

The noble scholar, the unique of his age, the regulator of the scholars and the saints, Sidi Ahmad Zarruq al-Barnusi al-Fasi, may Allah be pleased with him, wrote the following:

IF ANYONE IS asked about the foundations of his path, he should reply,

The foundations of our path are five:

- ✦ *Taqwa* – mindfulness of Allah, privately and publicly
- ✦ Adherence to the Sunna in word and deed
- ✦ Indifference to whether others accept or reject one
- ✦ Contentment with Allah in times of both hardship and ease
- ✦ Turning to Allah in prosperity and adversity.

The realization of mindfulness of Allah is through scrupulousness and uprightness. The realization of adherence to the Sunnah is through caution and excellent character. The realization of indifference to others' acceptance or rejection is through patience and trust in Allah. The realization of contentment is through acceptance of what one is given and turning over the management of one's affairs to Allah. The realization of turning back to Allah is through praise and gratitude in times of prosperity and taking refuge in Him in times of affliction.

The foundations of the preceding five are in the following five:

- ✦ Exalted aspirations
- ✦ Maintaining Allah's reverence
- ✦ Expending oneself in excellent service of others
- ✦ Fulfilling one's resolves
- ✦ Magnifying one's blessings.

He whose aspirations are exalted is raised in rank. Allah maintains the respect of he who preserves His reverence. He whose service is for others is ennobled by it. He who does that which he resolves to do is assured continual guidance. He who deems blessings to be great by his own eye has shown gratitude. And he who is grateful ensures an increase in blessings from the Giver of gifts according to the promise of the Truthful One.

The foundations of right conduct are five:

- ✦ Seeking sacred knowledge in order to fulfill Allah’s commands
- ✦ Keeping company with spiritual guides and the fraternity of aspirants to gain insight into one’s faults
- ✦ Foregoing dispensations and interpretations concerning injunctions for one’s own protection
- ✦ Organizing one’s time with the remembrance of Allah to maintain presence of heart
- ✦ Suspecting the selfish soul (*nafs*) in everything in order to free oneself from its whimsical desires and to be safe from destructive circumstances.

The pitfall of seeking knowledge is the company of sophomoric people, whether due to their age, intellect, or deficient religious practice – in other words, those who do not refer to sound principles of guidance in their actions.

The pitfall of keeping company with the spiritual guides and the fraternity is elitism, deception, and self-righteous meddling in the affairs of others.

The pitfall of foregoing dispensations and interpretations concerning injunctions is self-pity due to hardships.

The pitfall of organizing one’s time with devotional works is ostentatious practice and ritualized perfunctory devotion.

The pitfall of constantly suspecting the selfish soul is inclining towards its upright states and goodliness, yet Allah says, “*Were he to offer every kind of compensation, it would not be accepted from him*” (Quran 6:70).

Moreover, the noble son of the noble one, Joseph the son of Jacob, peace be upon them both, says, in the Quran, “*I do not say the selfish soul was free from blame. The selfish soul indeed commands to evil acts – except for those on whom my Lord has mercy*” (12:53).

The foundations of what will cure the sickness of the soul are five:

- ✦ Moderation achieved by lightening

the stomach’s intake of food and drink

- ✦ Taking refuge in Allah from harm when it actually occurs
- ✦ Vigilantly avoiding places where one fears misdeeds will occur
- ✦ Continually asking forgiveness of Allah coupled with devotional prayers upon the Prophet, peace be upon him, in both solitude and gatherings of people
- ✦ Keeping company with one who guides to Allah. Unfortunately, such a one no longer exists!

Abu Hasan Shadhili, may Allah be pleased with him, said,

My beloved counseled me not to put my feet anywhere except where I hoped for Allah’s reward, not to sit anywhere except where I was safe from disobedience to Allah, not to accompany anyone except someone in whom I could find support in obedience to Allah, and not to select anyone for myself other than those who increased my certainty, and how rare they are to find!

He also said, may Allah be pleased with him,

Whoever directs you to this world has cheated you; whoever directs you to deeds has exhausted you; but whoever directs you to Allah has truly counseled you.

He also said, may Allah be pleased with him,

Make piety (*taqwa*) your abode, and the delight of your selfish soul will do you no harm so long as it is discontent with its faults and does not persist in acts of disobedience nor abandons the awareness of Allah in solitude.

I say that being content with the self, persisting in disobedient acts, and abandoning awareness of Allah are the foundations of all illnesses, tribulations, and pitfalls.

I have also seen that the seekers of this age are afflicted with five things:

- ✦ The preference of ignorance over knowledge
- ✦ Being deluded by every spiritual impostor
- ✦ The inability to prioritize important matters
- ✦ Using the spiritual path as a means to inflate the selfish soul
- ✦ Attempting to expedite a spiritual opening without fulfilling its prerequisite conditions.

This has resulted in five other afflictions:

- ✦ Preferring innovations as opposed to the tried and true prophetic practice (Sunna)
- ✦ Following the people of claims and conceit as opposed to the truth
- ✦ Acting on capricious desires in all of their affairs, even the most celestial
- ✦ Preferring fantasies to realities
- ✦ The manifestation of claims without sincerity.

From these last five, five more have emanated:

- ✦ Obsessive compulsive thoughts in acts of devotion
- ✦ Laxity in matters of habitual practice
- ✦ Perfunctory devotional gatherings of invocation and chanting that lack inspiration
- ✦ Inclination toward people of rank and authority
- ✦ Companionship of those immersed in worldly matters, even mixing with the opposite sex and childish companions, based upon far-fetched rationalizations they extrapolated from witnessing the like among real people of the path. They will even mention such people's states and stations as a justification. On the other hand, had they had true enlightenment, they would have understood that seeking one's provision is a dispensation for those lacking certainty, and that

includes only the necessities of life without exceeding the necessary. Anyone lax in these matters is distant from Allah.

As for devotional gatherings, they are permitted for people overpowered by their states or as a respite for people of excellent character. Indeed, such practice is akin to settling upon the carpet of truth if done in accordance with its requisite conditions among suitable people and in an appropriate place, not to mention fulfilling its required courtesies and protocols.

Obsessive-compulsive thoughts arise from innovation, the basis of which is in ignorance of the prophetic practice or in some psychological affliction.

Any propensity toward creation is by nature the lack of such toward the truth. This is especially so coming from an obsequious chanter, a heedless tyrant, or an ignorant sufi.

The company of the immature is harmful, as well as a worldly and otherworldly shortcoming, and an acceptance of such company even worse. Shaykh Abu Madyan said, “*The immature’ means anyone who is not in conformance with the spiritual path you are on, even if it were someone who reached ninety years of age.*”

I say the immature are those who are not firmly rooted in principle; they accept things at face value and are impassioned by them. The vast majority of such people are those who are pretentious in their associations with a spiritual group and prefer conversations to real spiritual work. Avoid them to the utmost of your ability.

Anyone who claims to have a station with Allah while any of the following five happen to emanate from him is either a liar or deluded:

- ✦ Allowing any of his members to fall into sinful disobedience
- ✦ Affectations in his devotional practice
- ✦ Expectations from the creation
- ✦ Backbiting against the people of Allah

- ❖ Lacking the proper respect for Muslims in accordance with the commands of Allah. Indeed, such people rarely die in a state of grace.

The qualifications of the spiritual guide with whom the seeker may safely entrust his self are the following five:

- ❖ Unadulterated spiritual experience
- ❖ Sound outward knowledge
- ❖ Celestial aspirations
- ❖ A pleasing state
- ❖ Penetrating inner perception.

Whoever has any of the following five cannot be a true spiritual guide:

- ❖ Ignorance of the religion
- ❖ Disregard for the reverence of other Muslims
- ❖ Engaging in matters of no concern to him
- ❖ Following his caprice in his affairs
- ❖ Unashamed displays of bad manners followed by lack of remorse.

The spiritual courtesies of a student with his or her spiritual guide and fellow wayfarers are also five:

- ❖ Following the directions of the guide, even if it is contrary to one's own

preference

- ❖ Avoiding what the guide forbids, even if it would appear to be highly adverse to the student
- ❖ Maintaining utmost reverence for them in their presence and absence, during their lives and after their deaths
- ❖ Giving them their due according to one's ability without stint
- ❖ Relinquishing one's own understanding, knowledge, and leadership to that of the teacher, unless these are already in accordance with one's teacher.

Should the seeker not find a guiding teacher or find one who is lacking in any of these five conditions, he should depend on him only in those conditions the teacher fulfills. As for areas he is wanting in, he should treat him like a brother regarding them.

Thus ends the five foundations with the praise, help, and perfect success of Allah.

It is necessary to read this every day, once or twice, and if that is not possible, then at least once a week until its meanings are imprinted on one's soul and manifest in one's behavior. Indeed, it contains that which

THE COUNSEL OF IMAM NAWAWI

[Translator's note] *In addition to the above work, there is a large portion about the path to Allah that appears in the great Imam Nawawi's al-Maqaasid, which Sidi Ahmad Zarruq did not mention in his work; it is a wonderfully succinct summation of the path to Allah. Imam Nawawi, may Allah sanctify his secret, says,*

ONE REACHES ALLAH Most High by repenting from all things, unlawful or offensive; seeking sacred knowledge in accordance with one's needs; maintaining ritual purity; performing the obligatory prayers in the first of their time and in congregation, including the Sunna prayers that correspond to each of the obligatory prayers; adhering to the eight *raka'ats* of the midmorning prayer (*Duha*) and the six *raka'ats* after the sunset prayer and before the night prayer; performing the night prayers (*tahajjud*) after awaking from one's sleep; fulfilling the *witr* prayer; fasting on Mondays and Thursdays and on the three days of the full moon – i.e. the 13th, 14th, and 15th of the lunar month – and also the days of the year in which fasting is recommended; reciting the Quran with the heart's presence coupled with reflection upon its meanings; frequently asking forgiveness of Allah (*istighfar*); maintaining prayers and blessings upon the Prophet, peace be upon him; and, finally, adhering to the meritorious invocations of the morning and the evening that have come to us from the Sunna (*adhkaar as-sabaah wa al-masa'*).

enables one to dispense with many books and much advice, and it is said, “Surely they have been denied arrival by their neglect of the foundations.” Whoever reflects

deeply on what we have said will acknowledge its truth, and he will continue to have recourse to it, using it as a reminder for him. Success is ultimately by Allah. *finis*

THE COUNSEL OF SIDI AHMAD ZARRUQ

[Translator’s note] Finally, we add an extraordinary counsel from Sidi Ahmad Zarruq, may Allah sanctify his secret, taken from his two books *The Poor Man’s Book of Assistance* (Kitab al-‘Iaana) and *The Principles of Tasawwuf* (Qawaa’id at-Tasawwuf). It is as follows:

KNOW – MAY ALLAH give you and us success, rectify our worldly and otherworldly lives, and grant us adherence to the way of the Truth in our journeys and our sojourns – that repentance (*taubah*) is a key, piety (*taqwa*) is vast, and uprightness is the source of rectification. Furthermore, a servant is never free of blunders, shortcomings, or lassitude. Therefore, never be neglectful of repentance; never turn away from the act of returning to Allah; and never neglect acts that bring you closer to Allah. Indeed, any time you fail to do one of these three things, repent and return. Any time you make a mistake, listen and obey. Anytime you display shortcomings or show lack of enthusiasm, don’t desist in your efforts. Let your main concern be to remove from your outward state anything displeasing, and then continue to work on your outward state through continuous counsel.

Continue doing this until you find that fleeing from anything outwardly displeasing is second nature to you and that your avoidance of the boundaries of prohibited things is as if it has resulted from a protective net that was placed before you. At this point, it is time to turn inward toward your heart’s presence and to its reality with both reflection and remembrance. Don’t hasten the end result before you have completed the beginning, but, likewise, don’t begin without looking toward the end result. This is so because the one who seeks the outset at the end loses providential security, and the one who seeks the end at the outset loses providential guidance.

Act in accordance with principles and the appropriate legal rulings and not in accordance with stories and fantasies. Don’t even consider stories of how things went with others except as a tonic to strengthen your resolve, certainly not as a reference based upon their outward forms or what they seem to be revealing. In all of this, depend upon a clear path to which you can refer and a foundation upon which you can rely no matter what your state. The best of these is the path of Ibn ‘Ata Illah because it gives clear direction to Allah. Do not take from others’ words unless it is in accordance with your own path, but submit to their implications if you desire realization. Avoid all forms of vain and foul speech to your absolute utmost. Put aside anything if unable to discern its benefit immediately. Beware of being extremely hard on your selfish soul (*nafs*) before you have obtained a mastery over it, but also beware of being too lax with it regarding any of the sacred rulings. This is so because it is constantly fleeing from moderation in everything, and it inclines toward extremism in both matters of deviance and guidance!

Seek out a companion to help you out in your affair, and take his counsel concerning matters that occur from both your inward states and your outward affairs. If you do indeed take his companionship, then treat him in a manner commensurate with his state, and give him of yourself based upon his inabilities and abilities because the perfected companion can no longer be found. Indeed, in these times, even a suitable companion who is agreeable rarely lasts. Furthermore, beware of the majority of people concerning both your religious

and worldly affairs, unless you have ascertained they have a sound relationship with their Lord, rooted in knowledge which is free of caprice and love of leadership, and they are in possession of sound intellect, free of the pitfalls of hidden agendas. Do not be heedless of the machinations of others or their hidden states. Consider these two from both their origins and their actions. People of high character and family distinction are almost always beneficial; on the other hand, excruciating circumstances compel a person of low character and origin to forsake others in need.

Be extremely vigilant of the dominant qualities of a given people in any given land, and don't be heedless of the Divine wisdom in the creation; notice gathering in separation. Some of this we have already covered in the book, *al-Qawaa'id*, so study the subject further there.

Organize your hours in a manner appropriate to each time's specific needs, using a gentle and tolerant approach all the while being very wary of the extremes of rigidity and laxity. With laxity, this is especially necessary given that too much latitude in permitted matters sets the heart back on its journey to such a degree that even a man of resolve ends up looking like a foolish child.

Work for this world as if you will live forever, but work for your next life as if tomorrow you die. In other words, do not neglect the externals of your worldly needs, all the while keeping in mind your end and final resting place. Be extremely vigilant about avoiding positions of leadership, but should you be tried with such matters, know your own limitations. Be absolutely sincere to Allah with the sincerity of one who knows full well the One who is placing demands upon him. Surrender completely to His decree with the submission of one who knows he can never overcome Him. Have a firm foundation in all of your affairs, and you will be safe from their pitfalls. Organize your devotional practices, and you will find your time is extended due to the grace that pervades it.

Never be fanatical about anything, whether it is the truth or not, and your heart will remain in a state of soundness toward others. Never claim anything to which you are entitled, not to mention that to which you are not entitled, and you will be safe from connivance and treachery. Indeed, anyone claiming a rank above his own will fall, scandalized and humiliated. Moreover, those who claim a rank they warrant will have it stripped from them. Conversely, those who claim a lesser rank than their own will be elevated to an even higher one than they deserve.

Never reveal to your companion anything of your state other than what his own state warrants. The reason is that if you go down to his level, he'll have contempt for you; whereas if you attempt to raise him up to your level, he'll forsake you.

Never demand a right from anyone, whether an intimate or a stranger. The reason is simple: a stranger owes you nothing, and one close to you is too important to direct your blame toward. Never assume that anyone in this world can really understand your circumstances other than from the perspective of his own circumstances, because, in reality, people see things only in accordance with their frames of reference and their personal path. However, when aims, purposes, and aspirations are similar, people tend to work together toward a common goal.

Never belittle any talk that concerns absent people even if there is no harm in it due to the likelihood of harm entering into it. Guard your secrets even if you feel safe with someone because the one to whom you divulge your secret is not a safer vessel than your own heart before you revealed it.

Never leave an atom's weight of your regular devotional practice. Never be lenient with yourself in either relaxed times or those of high resolve. Indeed, should you miss some of your practice at a given time, redress it later. If you are not able to do your usual practice, at least occupy yourself with some other similar practice. Never obey your selfish soul even for a moment nor believe any of its claims no matter what it says. To the utmost, guard your resolve in all affairs; and should you resolve to do something, do it immediately before it abates or dissipates. Examine your soul constantly in matters you are obliged to do or those that you should do. Leave off anything you don't need to do, even the recommended – in short, do not involve yourself in anything other than the absolutely necessary or that in which a real discernible need exists.

Treat others just as you would want to be treated, and fulfill what is due. All of this is epitomized in the words of the poet when he said,

<p><i>If you desire to live such that your religion is safe And your portion is full and your honor is sound Guard your tongue; never mention another's faults For you too have faults and others too have tongues!</i></p>	<p><i>Take care the eye, when it reveals another's faults Saying, "O my eyes, remember the eyes of others!" Live treating well all others and avoid aggression And should they oppress, repel it but with kindness.</i></p>
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The source of these words is in fact the traditions of the Prophet, peace be upon him, when he said, *"Be vigilant of Allah wherever you are, and follow a misdeed with a good deed, and it will remove it; and treat others with the most excellence of character."*

In another, he, peace and blessings of Allah upon him, said, *"Every child of Adam makes mistakes, and the best of those who make mistakes are those who seek to redress them."*

He also said, *"The Holy Spirit inspired my heart's core that no soul will die until it fulfills its decreed portion of this world and its appointed time here, so be conscious of Allah, and make your requests with dignity."*

In summation, repentance, awareness of Allah, and uprightness are the foundations of all benefits. The truth is manifest, and its details are weighty and significant. The affair belongs to Allah. Success is in His hands. Peace. *finis*

FROM AL-QAWAA'ID

Our Shaykh Abul 'Abbaas al-Hadrami said:

Spiritual training was elevated [to a science] due to the development of a technical vocabulary, but benefit from it is derived only as a result of aspiration and spiritual states, so adhere to the Book and the prophetic practice without omitting or adding anything. This applies to all of your transactions with your Creator, the creation, and yourself. As for what is between you and God, three matters are concerned: fulfilling obligations, avoiding prohibitions, and submitting completely to His decrees. As for dealing with the self, this also involves three necessities: an unbiased approach to the truth; abandoning defense mechanisms, such as self-justification; and guarding against the dangers of the self in respect to its attractions and aversions, its acceptances and rejections, and its comings and goings. As for dealing with people, this concerns three requirements also: ensuring their rights are fulfilled; virtuous lack of desire for their possessions; and absolute avoidance of anything that adversely affects their hearts unless it concerns an obligation to the Truth that cannot be ignored.

Any aspirant of this path who inclines toward the following preoccupations will perish: horseback riding; general self-interests; occupation with changing social wrongs or with

fighting in military *jihads* while neglecting the acquisition of personal merit and virtue believing that he is in no need of rectifying his own soul or that he can obtain all of the virtues; seeking out the faults of his brothers and others; excusing himself by claiming abandonment of the world; spending all of his time in religious devotion; spending a good deal of time in public gatherings or seeking company, not for teaching or learning but simply for human companionship; inclining toward the people of wealth, claiming he is doing so for religious reasons; preoccupying himself with spiritual matters of the heart before learning the basis of sound transactions or the rectification of his faults; thrusting himself forth as a spiritual teacher without being appointed by a true spiritual master, scholar, or Imam; mindlessly following anyone who says, “follow me,” whether his words be true or false, without ascertaining the details of his state; belittling someone who is among the people of Allah, even if he should deem that person insincere based upon some proof he has; inclining toward dispensations and interpretations; putting the inward before the outward; being satisfied with the outward to the detriment of the inward; extracting from one what contradicts the other; being content with knowledge devoid of action or with action devoid of an inward state or knowledge; believing that an inward state suffices without the other two; or having no principle to which he has recourse in his actions, knowledge, states, or religious practices from the accepted principles in the books of the Imams, such as the books of Ibn ‘Ata Illah concerning inward matters, especially *at-Tanwir*, and, concerning outward manners, the book of Ibn al-Hajj, *Madkhal*, and those of his Shaykh, Ibn Abi Jamrah, as well as of others who follow the same path from among the realized masters; may Allah have mercy on all of them. Any aspirant who is of the above mentioned types is in fact ruined and has no salvation on this path, but whoever holds to the Book and the prophetic practice will be safe and Godspeed arrive. Protection is from Him alone, and success is by Him.

The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, was once asked about Allah’s words, “*Tend to your own souls.*”

He replied, “*If you see covetousness obeyed, passions and whims followed, and every opinionated person marveling at his own opinions, then tend to your own soul.*”

He, may Allah grant him peace and blessings, also said something to this effect:

In the Tablets of Abraham, upon him be peace, it is written, “An intelligent person should know the age in which he lives; he should hold his tongue and mind his own business. An intelligent person should have four portions of his day for the following: a portion to take his soul to account, a portion to converse with his Lord, a portion to spend time with his brothers – meaning those who help him to see clearly his faults and direct him to his Lord – and a portion to indulge in his own personal recreation from the permissible appetites of man.”

May Allah provide us with that and help us to fulfill it. May He always maintain us in a state of grace, for we cannot survive without His bestowal of grace and prosperity. Allah is enough for us, and God is the best of protectors. May prayers and peace be upon our master Muhammad and his family and his companions.