بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

A Scholarly Exchange

Four Letters on Madrasa Discourses

August – September 2026

Translated from the Urdu

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Preface

Among our forebears there was a long and distinguished tradition of civil conversation and the exchange of ideas: the tradition of the letter, in which a question was raised not to wound but to seek, and an answer was given not to conquer but to instruct. Of my own answer I would say the same: it is offered for instruction, not for silencing. The questions that Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī set before Ibn Miskawayh, and the answers Ibn Miskawayh graciously returned, produced, through that very correspondence, one of the rare books of the classical Islamic tradition, the one we know as *al-Hawāmil wa-l-Shawāmil*. A private exchange became the common inheritance of the community.

I · A Gracious Letter

Professor Dr. Muhammad Ghiyath, Lahore · 16 August 2026

Respected Professor Ebrahim Moosa, *al-salāmu ʿalaykum wa-raḥmatullāhi wa-barakātuh!*

Your essay "Inhabiting the Threshold: The Madrasa between Inheritance and Accommodation" is a rare specimen of intellectual maturity and deep insight. Within this creative dialogue between tradition and innovation, your bold and balanced critique of the Western colonial narrative and of the intellectual stagnation of Muslim societies deserves the highest appreciation. In particular, the scholarly and practical initiative of *Ḥiwārāt al-Madāris* (Madrasa Discourses) is an admirable endeavor to bring Islamic thought into harmony with the present age.

Nevertheless, on the closing section of the essay I offer a sincere critique and a few requests:

1. **Reliance on Western intellectual terminology.** To read the foundations of the Islamic tradition and of jurisprudence through Foucault, postmodernism, and the concepts of the Western academy creates an impression of undue dependence, as though Islamic thought required Western intellectual accreditation for its own legitimacy.
2. **The scholarly remedy for the reservations of traditional scholars.** To set aside the reservations of the traditional ulama regarding projects funded by Western and Christian institutions (the Templeton Foundation, for example) as mere "conspiracy theories" or a defensive posture is not appropriate. Against the background of colonial history, past and present, genuine intellectual concerns lay behind their disquiet.

Proposals:

1. That the principles of critical inquiry for the reform and renewal of the traditional sciences be drawn from the Islamic tradition itself—for instance from Illuminationist philosophy, *fiqh al-maqāṣid*, and the intellectual frameworks of Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi and ʿAllāma Iqbal—rather than from Western intellectual methods.
2. That future projects of renewal, instead of being confined to external institutions, be established in cooperation with the Muslim community itself and with independent Islamic academic institutions, so that the confidence of the traditional class may be fully restored.

With prayers for your continued intellectual and scholarly endeavors,

Professor Dr. Muhammad Ghiyath
16 August 2026

II · Some Clarifications

Ebrahim Moosa to Dr. Muhammad Ghiyath · 18 August 2026

Respected and esteemed Professor Dr. Muhammad Ghiyath, *al-salāmu ʿalaykum wa-raḥmatullāhi wa-barakātuh.*

Your gracious letter has reached me. My first thanks are due to you for reading the essay with attention and for finding some of its aspects worthy of regard. In the world of scholarship, to be read, and to be read seriously, is itself a blessing, and that is how I receive it.

A hemistich of Bashshār ibn Burd came to mind as I read:

لِلَّهِ دَرِّي، أَهْوَىٰ وَأَجْتَنِبُ

God reward me: I desire, and yet I hold back.

I would have preferred to keep silent and to pass over certain insinuations, allusions, and half-veiled imputations. That would have been the easier road. But because I am confident that much good may be expected of a person such as yourself, and that the pen of a scholar of your standing, once founded on accurate information, can render great service, I have taken it as my duty to place the true state of affairs before you. This letter is not a rejoinder. It is simply a clarification.

First: A Basic Request. The Reading Is Not Yet Complete

From the points you raise, it appears that the final installment of the essay has not yet passed before your eyes. I must say this because the two matters you have made the center of your critique—reliance on Western terminology, and the standing of the reservations of the traditional ulama—are both addressed explicitly in that concluding section. The essay itself may be consulted at hashiya.org/posts/inhabiting-threshold-dihlz. My request is that you read the full text first. It may well be that more than half of our disagreement dissolves there, and that what remains is genuine and open to conversation.

Second: The Etiquette of Counsel and the Condition of Inquiry

Counsel, *naṣīḥa*, holds an exalted station in Islamic ethics: "Religion is sincere counsel." But the same tradition has laid down conditions for counsel: knowledge, verification, and gentleness. The Qurʾān commands:

> "And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Indeed the hearing, the sight, and the heart—of all of these one will be questioned."
>
> Qurʾān 17:36

And:

> "O you who believe, avoid much suspicion; indeed some suspicion is sin."
>
> Qurʾān 49:12

Had you inquired first, of me or of those directly concerned, about the institutions, methods, and financial arrangements on which you have expressed reservations, the matter would have been settled in a few lines. Bashshār again:

إِذَا بَلَغَ الرَّأْيُ المَشُورَةَ فَاسْتَعِنْ ... بِرَأْيِ نَصِيحٍ أَوْ نَصِيحَةِ حَازِمِ

> *When judgment reaches the point of consultation, seek help*
> *from the opinion of a sincere friend, or the counsel of a resolute one.*

That is to say: counsel comes after consultation, not before it.

My second request concerns tone, and here let me also clarify my own position. In the essay I made no attack on the ulama; I did not name them as critics of this project. What I did write, and write plainly, is that one segment among them has become entangled in a conspiratorial cast of mind, and I stand by that today. But it was an open, reasoned statement, made to their faces, not an insinuation or a hint. My request is only that the reply come with the same directness. If there is a real grievance, let it be named, with evidence. If there is merely a suspicion, its remedy is inquiry, not innuendo. That is what I expect of you, and that is what befits your standing.

Third: The Scholarly Foundation of Madrasa Discourses

The impression that this project makes Islamic thought dependent on Western intellectual accreditation does not accord with the facts. The foundation of the curriculum is, first and foremost, the Islamic scholarly heritage itself: Ghazālī, Rāzī, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Taymiyya, Shāṭibī, Ibn Khaldūn, Mullā Ṣadrā, Shāh Walī Allāh, and Iqbal. Alongside these, the modern sciences—history, cosmology, the social sciences, moral philosophy—are studied for one reason: the questions of our day are rising from precisely these fields.

The most explicit guidance on this comes from Imam Ghazālī himself. In *Mīzān al-ʿAmal*, setting out the duties of the student, he writes:

الوظيفة الخامسة: للمتعلّم أن لا يدع فنّاً من فنون العلم، ونوعاً من أنواعه إلا وينظر فيه نظراً يطّلع به على غايته ومقصده وطريقه. ثم إن ساعده العمر وأتته الأسباب طلب التبحّر فيه، فإن العلوم كلها متعاونة مترابطة بعضها ببعض، ويستفيد منه في الحال حتى لا يكون معادياً لذلك العلم بسبب جهله به. فإن الناس أعداء ما جهلوا. قال تعالى: ﴿وَإِذْ لَمْ يَهْتَدُوا بِهِ فَسَيَقُولُونَ هَٰذَا إِفْكٌ قَدِيمٌ﴾ ... فلا ينبغي أن يستهين بشيء من أنواع العلوم، بل ينبغي أن يحصّل كل علم ويعطيه حقه ومرتبته، فإن العلوم على درجاتها إما سالكة بالعبد إلى الله، أو معينة على أسباب السلوك، ولها منازل مرتبة في القرب والبعد من المقصد

> "The fifth duty: the student should leave no branch of the sciences, nor any of its kinds, without examining it sufficiently to grasp its aim, its purpose, and its method. Then, if life allows and the means come to him, let him seek mastery in it. For the sciences are all mutually supportive and interconnected, and he benefits at once, since he will not become an enemy of that science through his ignorance of it—for people are enemies of what they do not know. God Most High says: "And since they were not guided by it, they will say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'" … He should not, therefore, belittle any kind of knowledge; rather he should acquire every science and give it its due and its rank. For the sciences, each according to its degree, either conduct the servant to God or assist him on the way, and they have graded stations of nearness to, or distance from, the goal."

Three things in this passage bear directly on our subject. First, the student is obliged to leave no branch of knowledge unexamined, at least far enough to know its aim, its purpose, and its method. Second, Ghazālī gives the reason himself: "all the sciences are mutually supportive and interconnected." Third, and this is the most delicate point, one purpose of such study is that a man not become the enemy of a science merely through his own unfamiliarity with it: "for people are enemies of what they do not know."

The Interconnection of the Sciences, and Your Question about Foucault

It is on this principle that I shall speak of Foucault and of other references of that kind. If the sciences are truly "mutually supportive and interconnected," then the division of knowledge is not drawn along a geographical line between East and West. It rests instead on whether a given science leads the servant toward God, or serves as an aid on that journey, and its rank is determined by that relation. By this measure an analytical tool—whether its object is power, or the relation of knowledge to institutional order—may be used, tested, and rejected wherever it proves deficient. A tool professes no creed of its own. Foucault does not appear in the essay as an authority; he is a means of posing a question, and the answer is drawn from the Islamic tradition itself.

Recall that the logic Ghazālī placed as a prologue to his jurisprudence was Greek at its source, and that the astronomy and arithmetic our forebears adopted came to them through the Indian and Persian inheritance. The tradition never rejected wisdom on account of its birthplace:

الحِكْمَةُ ضَالَّةُ الْمُؤْمِنِ، فَحَيْثُ وَجَدَهَا فَهُوَ أَحَقُّ بِهَا

> *Wisdom is the lost property of the believer; wherever he finds it, he has the best right to it.*

And the Example of Iqbal

Here is a point that may, for the moment, have escaped notice. You proposed that critical principles be drawn from the intellectual framework of ʿAllāma Iqbal rather than from Western methods. I welcome the proposal. But *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* is itself the most conspicuous example of how deeply a Muslim thinker descended into Western thought and returned with it, subordinated to Islamic purposes. Iqbal was educated at Munich and Cambridge. He engaged directly with Bergson's conception of time, with Whitehead's metaphysics, with Einstein's relativity, with Nietzsche, Hegel, and modern psychology, and the pages of the *Lectures* are filled with these references. His doctoral thesis, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, was written according to Western methods of research.

What Iqbal did, then, is the very principle on which we proceed: not aversion to modern learning, but command of it. If Iqbal's path is a fit model, and it certainly is, then the charge of Westernism cannot stand against those who walk the same road.

Let me add that in the sessions to which this objection is raised, both those who teach and those who participate are ulama—graduates of our madrasas and heirs of their own tradition.

Fourth: The Question of Funding. A Few Facts

Here I shall speak with complete plainness, because it is on this point that the greatest misconception rests.

One. The international system of research grants rests on merit and rigorous peer review. A proposal is submitted; experts examine it; and after approval, the academic content, the findings, and the conclusions remain entirely the property of the researchers. The funding institution neither commissions the essays, nor determines the results, nor imposes any doctrine. University agreements guarantee academic freedom in explicit terms.

Two. This is no exceptional arrangement. Hundreds of Pakistan's universities and research institutes, public and private alike, draw every year on foreign and international resources: Fulbright, the British Council, DAAD, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, JICA, and others. Many programs of the Higher Education Commission itself fall within this category.

Three. Consider proportion. From all bilateral and multilateral donors combined, Pakistan receives roughly four to four and a half billion dollars a year in official development assistance. Bear in mind that all of this capital comes from countries that are either Christian in majority or secular—the United States, Britain, Germany, Japan—and from global institutions whose principal patrons are these very countries. If a donor's religion is in itself a ground for objection, then the objection falls not on one educational project but on the whole of Pakistan's health, education, energy, and infrastructure. To

weigh a modest educational grant on the scale of "colonial influence" does no justice to the true dimensions of the matter, and I am certain you would not accept the conclusion yourself.

Four. A further aspect of which you may not be fully aware: Muslims living in the West conduct their scholarly, religious, and charitable work in partnership with all the major institutions here, many of which are Christian. Universities, hospitals, interfaith centers, research foundations: these are part of our everyday scholarly environment. The present writer is himself a professor of Islamic studies at a Catholic university, where Islam is taught with complete freedom. This is the reality on the ground, invisible from a distance, and it settles the question: cooperation does not, of itself, dissolve one's integrity.

Five. And a matter of principle: in the Islamic scholarly tradition, the weight of a statement is determined by its evidence, not by its expenses. If anything in the essay is contrary to verified fact, confront it directly, and I shall be grateful. But to make the source of funding a substitute for argument is a fallacy of reasoning.

One clarification is necessary here. The sincere and reasoned reservations of the ulama are, in my eyes, worthy of respect, and I welcome them. The sensitivity born of the colonial experience is also understandable. But sensitivity cannot substitute for inquiry, and where suspicion takes the place of evidence, conversation comes to a halt.

Fifth: Your Proposals, and a Request

Your first proposal is dear to me, and the good news is that it is already in practice. *Fiqh al-maqāṣid*, the intellectual framework of Shāh Walī Allāh, and Iqbal's *Reconstruction* are three central components of the curriculum, and the principles of critical examination are derived from them.

Your second proposal—that such projects be established with the Muslim community and with independent Islamic institutions rather than with external ones—is entirely correct in principle, and it has long been my own heart's wish. But here I must relate a personal experience. For years I labored in exactly this direction. I knocked at the doors of the educational endowments of the Gulf states, of Muslim philanthropists in South Asia and the West, of Islamic universities, international Islamic institutions, and Muslim foundations—wherever access was possible. In some places, silence. In some, encouragement, but no practical cooperation. In some, I was told that the intellectual renewal of the madrasas was not among their priorities. When every door was shut, the door that opened is the one through which the work began, on the condition that academic freedom remain complete. That condition holds in full to this day.

Now my request, and it is made in complete sincerity. If you know of any Muslim institution, endowment, or benefactor prepared to undertake work of this kind, kindly

direct me to it. I shall be grateful, and that would be counsel from you in the truest sense, for the real rank of counsel is to show a road rather than to close one. Should such a means become available, I shall be the first to move toward it.

Sixth: An Invitation to Examine the Materials

All the educational materials of Madrasa Discourses—the curriculum, translations, study guides, and video lectures—are publicly available at madrasadiscourses.nd.edu. I invite you to examine these resources for yourself, and if they are of any use in your own teaching or research, to use them without hesitation. There is no obstacle on our side. Nothing decides a question better than seeing for oneself.

In Closing

One graceful coincidence caught my eye. At the very place in *Mīzān al-ʿAmal* where Ghazālī says that "people are enemies of what they do not know," he cites as his witness the very verse that has come to my own mind in thinking of certain of my critics:

وَمَنْ يَكُ ذَا فَمٍ مُرٍّ مَرِيضٍ ... يَجِدْ مُرًّا بِهِ الْمَاءَ الزُّلَالَا

> *Whoever has a mouth made bitter by sickness*
> *will find even sweet water bitter.*
> al-Mutanabbī

Ghazālī offered it as an emblem of ignorance, and it is in the same sense that I offer it here: not to disparage anyone, but as a reminder that a fault in the palate is not cured by changing the water.

I hope you will receive this letter in the spirit in which it was written, the spirit of clarification and correction, not of contention. My doors are open to you. Let disagreement remain, if remain it must, provided it rests on knowledge.

Ebrahim Moosa
18 August 2026

III · Respected Teacher

Dr. Muhammad Irfan Nadeem to Ebrahim Moosa · 20 August 2026

Respected Teacher! With greetings and every good wish.

I have read your reply to Ghiyath Sahib with care, and I can say without exaggeration that you have written a thoroughly reasoned, comprehensive, balanced, and conclusive response. It is not merely the answer to an objection; it is a serious scholarly clarification in which argument is joined to civility of discourse, breadth of vision, and intellectual honesty.

Reading it, one feels that argument itself stands attentive before you, and that you have deployed it with great finesse, order, and discipline across its several dimensions. You have not simply pursued the objections one by one; you have taken hold of the premises, the assumptions, and the mental attitudes that lie behind them. This is what lifts the text above an ordinary reply and gives it the form of a serious scholarly exchange.

Your choice of words is exceptionally measured, deliberate, and exact. Nowhere does the prose feel contrived; nowhere does rhetorical emotion overpower the argument. Every sentence stands in its proper place, and every word carries its full weight of meaning. The verses cited at fitting moments, in particular, serve not as ornament but as something that lends the argument further depth and force; the poetry becomes an effective part of the proof rather than an embellishment of speech.

Its most striking merit is that you have seized every question and every objection at its root. To grasp the foundational premise of an objection and to challenge it at the very point of its origin requires a scholarly capacity of a distinct order, and this is precisely what you have done.

Concerning Madrasa Discourses, many friends, myself among them, have written at various times and tried, each in his own manner, to answer the questions raised against it. But the breadth and clarity with which you have addressed the matter is admirable. You have conducted the conversation on the basis of principles, scholarly method, and intellectual purposes, rather than of personalities, institutions, and slogans, and this is the real strength of your reply.

The references to Imam Ghazālī and ʿAllāma Iqbal, above all, have lifted the discussion to an entirely different plane. To invoke these two great thinkers is reminder enough that the Islamic tradition is no rigid, frozen conception; it carries within itself a robust tradition of critique, renewal, *ijtihād*, questioning, dialogue, and intellectual growth. In my view, after these references no serious devotee of tradition has any room left to reject projects of this kind on the strength of mere suspicion.

And finally, the mirror you have held up under the heading of “a request” is excellent too. The way you have laid bare the wish for scholarly collaboration with independent Islamic institutions, and set out its true background, leaves no question or objection standing. Throughout, you have chosen the path of clarification over defense, of understanding over rejection, of reform over criticism. That is why the text, for all its firmness, is without bitterness, and for all its disagreement remains courteous; even in answering, scholarly dignity is fully preserved.

Now if, after all these clarifications, arguments, historical evidence, and intellectual references, someone still insists on viewing such scholarly projects through the lens of doubt and suspicion, then your observation is entirely apt: a sick mouth cannot be made to taste rightly.

But there is one thing I would say at the end, and perhaps it is the aspect of this whole discussion that troubles me most. There is no doubt that you have given Ghiyath Sahib’s objections a scholarly and reasoned reply and have set the whole situation in clear light. Yet after this a question presses itself with some force: once the disease has been diagnosed, where does the physician’s responsibility end?

When a physician diagnoses a disease, he is not content merely to declare that the patient is ill, or that the illness is of such and such a kind. Diagnosis only deepens his seriousness. He reflects on the root of the disease, its causes, its complications, and every possible path of treatment, because his real office is not to identify the illness but to seek the way to a cure.

In that light, my submission is this. When you have come to know, and to feel, that among the people of the madrasa and the people of tradition there is, in places, misunderstanding, together with an indifference to new intellectual challenges, and in places only a limited awareness of the possibilities of their own great scholarly tradition, then your responsibility grows heavier still. As physician, your charge is that, along with knowledge of the disease, you should search out new methods, new measures, and new paths for its treatment.

This is my real anxiety, and for several years I have turned this question over: how are the people of the madrasa and the people of tradition to be made aware of this disease, and persuaded to accept treatment? How are they to be made to feel that what they hold is not merely a preserved past but a scholarly capital that can play a decisive part in building the future? And how are they to be convinced that fidelity to tradition demands not only that it be preserved, but that it be kept alive and carried forward?

That is why I ask you to keep this aspect too before you: the revival of the historical role of the madrasa, the treatment of its ailment, a sympathetic engagement with the people of

tradition, and the possible ways of transforming the madrasas into an effective center for the renewal and revival of the Islamic tradition. Continue to reflect on these, and continue to take practical steps.

This request is the restlessness of one who has been seeking an answer to this question for many years. Perhaps the reflection and practical endeavor of a scholar as great, sincere, and compassionate as yourself, a true well-wisher of the umma, may bring the thousands who share my restlessness to some direction.

Muhammad Irfan Nadeem
20 August 2026

IV · A Letter of Thanks

Ebrahim Moosa to Dr. Muhammad Irfan Nadeem · 3 September 2026

My dear Maulana Irfan Nadeem Sahib, may God increase your honor,

al-salāmu ʿalaykum wa-raḥmatullāhi wa-barakātuh.

Your gracious letter, sent in response to my letter to Dr. Ghiyath, and the affectionate reminder that followed it: both I receive with the deepest respect. First an admission of the truth, then my thanks.

First: What Happened, and How

God is my witness that no shadow of displeasure at your letter passed through any corner of my heart. The truth is far simpler, and far more shaming. On the day your letter arrived I read its opening lines; my heart paused; and I promised myself that I would read it in full, undistracted, and at leisure. Then the teaching term began, the pressure of completing a complicated paper descended upon me, and time snatched the promise away. So it was not indifference. It was the demand of the courtesy that such a letter deserved, and it was in discharging that very duty that I fell short. For this I ask your forgiveness.

And the truth is that in all my life no reminder has given me such delight as this one of yours, for it returned me to a letter that proved, for me, to be a gift of real consequence.

Second: What Your Letter Did to Me

Sir, in a single letter you have balanced the account of my years of time and labor against all the false accusations, the campaigns of disparagement, and the slanders that have accompanied this work from the beginning. I would gladly do the whole work again, from first to last, for the sake of this discerning and appreciative letter alone.

The Qurʾān asks:

هَلْ جَزَاءُ الْإِحْسَانِ إِلَّا الْإِحْسَانُ

> *Is the reward of goodness anything but goodness?*
> Qurʾān 55:60

And if I may be permitted a small liberty with the Qurʾānic idiom, I would say:

فَمَا جَزَاءُ الْإِحْسَانِ إِلَّا الْعِرْفَان

> *The reward of goodness is nothing but recognition—nothing, that is, but ʿIrfān.*

Your insight is without peer, and your grief and your intellectual care for our shared inheritance, heritage and tradition alike, are as sincere as they are rare. My prayer is that

God kindle this vision in many more hearts, and make you an instrument of transformation and dialogue among the different Muslim groups and rival schools of thought.

Third: The Rarity of Appreciation

The real message of your letter was not, for me, its proof and argument. It was your sincere affection, and your appreciation of the work we do together. That is a rare commodity. Few people give as open-heartedly as you do. The famous Arabic line comes to mind:

هَيْهَاتَ أَنْ يَأْتِيَ الزَّمَانُ بِمِثْلِهِ ۞ إِنَّ الزَّمَانَ بِمِثْلِهِ لَبَخِيلُ

How unlikely that time should bring another like him!
Time is miserly indeed with such as he.

Which is to say, *inna al-zamāna ʿalā mithlikum la-bakhīl*: people like you, all the friends and companions of Madrasa Discourses, and above all its honored teachers, are peerless; and time is tight-fisted and grudging in producing their like.

At this point Shakespeare reminds me how one ought to treat tried and tested friends. In *Hamlet*, Polonius counsels his son Laertes:

Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel.

The first line is the condition and the second the command: first test friendship on the touchstone, and then whoever proves true, do not let go. What Shakespeare has in view is the timber of a ship, whose planks will not hold their place until iron rings and bands bind them fast together. So it is with friendship: the planks alone are not enough; they need an iron ring to hold them, or everything scatters and whatever lies within drains away. Your letter is, for me, that iron ring. And all our friendship arose through knowledge and wisdom. What finer foundation could there be?

Fourth: The Two Moods of Abū l-ʿAlāʾ

Dear ʿIrfān! Had I wished, I could have contented myself with the complaint, and the sharpness, of my beloved and prized poet Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī:

وَلَمَّا رَأَيْتُ الْجَهْلَ فِي النَّاسِ فَاشِيًا ۞ تَجَاهَلْتُ حَتَّى ظُنَّ أَنِّي جَاهِلُ

فَوَا عَجَبًا كَمْ يَدَّعِي الْفَضْلَ نَاقِصٌ ۞ وَوَا أَسَفًا كَمْ يُظْهِرُ النَّقْصَ فَاضِلُ

When I saw ignorance spread abroad among men,
I feigned ignorance, until it was thought that I too was ignorant.
How strange—how many a deficient man lays claim to excellence!
How sad—how many a man of excellence lets his deficiency show!

But the option of that blind, keen-witted, and lofty man of Maʿarra is not open to me. The world treated him unkindly, and this seemed to him the only road of self-defense. I am somewhat more hopeful than he about our umma, and I place my confidence in the real possibilities that lie within the reach of your generation, provided that our own generation gives it a small push. Where we failed, your generation must succeed. Our shared inheritance, yours and mine, lies wasted by the harshness of the times and the failures of the umma.

And so, for what we have done in Madrasa Discourses, and for what we must go on doing, I would rather see my name and yours written into these other lines of al-Maʿarrī:

تُعَدُّ ذُنُوبِي عِنْدَ قَوْمٍ كَثِيرَةً ۞ وَلَا ذَنْبَ لِي إِلَّا الْعُلَىٰ وَالْفَوَاضِلُ

Among one people my sins are counted beyond number,
though my only sin is loftiness of aim, and generosity of deed.

Fifth: And a Final Word

Let me say again how deeply your letter moved me and how much it strengthened me. In moments of silence my confidence in the future sometimes falters. Your letter has not merely refreshed me; it has brought me back to life. And let me add this: I would be a culprit, indeed a sinner in the sight of God, were the thought ever to cross my heart that your generation has no concern for the tradition of our madrasas, for the classical inheritance of the Islamic sciences, and for its growth and elevation in every region of the Muslim world. Your deep and thoughtful letter has restored my confidence and prepared me to labor on with greater courage, greater trust, and greater hope.

Sixth: Where Does the Physician's Responsibility End?

Your restlessness is my restlessness too.

You asked how long the physician goes on administering medicine. My answer is this: until the patient recovers, or until the Angel of Death carries off the physician himself and consigns him to the divine will. There is no third limit beyond these two. We have no license to despair of our own people and wash our hands of them. And on this road we have no way but *al-mawʿiẓa al-ḥasana*, the fair exhortation:

ادْعُ إِلَىٰ سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحِكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ ۖ وَجَادِلْهُم بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ

Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation,
and reason with them in the manner that is best.
Qurʾān 16:125

Our aim is not to win the argument but to win the hearts of our friends and companions. And on the day their hearts are won, they too, like you, will become torchbearers of truth and enlightenment.

But there is a subtlety here that Imām Ghazālī grasped long before any of us. The physician's task is not only to write the prescription; he must also attend to the psychological condition of the one he treats. Winning a heart is, in truth, a matter of psychology: of the misinformation, the doubts, the anxieties, and the fears that have gathered in the interior of the person addressed. To these we must stay attentive, or the medicine will have no effect. For, again and again, the disease is not itself the disease but the symptom of a deeper unease, and that unease is the real cause. Until it is remedied, sweet water too will taste bitter. And when it is dispelled, then, and only then, does the sweetness return to the water.

On this very matter, what Ghazālī says to his interlocutor in *al-Qisṭās al-Mustaqīm* is a mirror of our whole situation, and lines written eight hundred years ago read as though written yesterday:

فَإِنِّي رَأَيْتُكَ مِنَ الِاعْتِزَازِ بِالظَّاهِرِ، بِحَيْثُ لَوْ سُقِيتَ عَسَلًا أَحْمَرَ فِي قَارُورَةِ حَجَّامٍ، لَمْ تُطِقْ تَنَاوُلَهُ لِنُفُورِ طَبْعِكَ عَنِ الْمِحْجَمَةِ، وَوَضَعْتَ عَقْلَكَ عَنْ أَنْ يَعْرِفَ أَنَّ الْعَسَلَ طَاهِرٌ فِي أَيِّ زُجَاجَةٍ كَانَ.

بَلْ تَرَى التُّرْكِيَّ يَلْبَسُ الْمُرَقَّعَةَ وَالدُّرَّاعَةَ، فَتَحْكُمُ بِأَنَّهُ صُوفِيٌّ وَفَقِيهٌ — وَلَوْ لَبِسَ الصُّوفِيُّ الْقَبَاءَ وَالْقَلَنْسُوَةَ حَكَمَ عَلَيْهِ وَهْمُكَ بِأَنَّهُ تُرْكِيٌّ. فَأَبَدًا يَسْتَجِرُّكَ وَهْمُكَ إِلَىٰ مُلَاحَظَةِ غِلَافِ الْأَشْيَاءِ دُونَ اللُّبَابِ.

وَلِذٰلِكَ لَا تَنْظُرُ إِلَى الْقَوْلِ مِنْ نَفْسِ الْقَوْلِ وَذَاتِهِ، بَلْ مِنْ حُسْنِ صَنْعَتِهِ أَوْ بِحُسْنِ ظَنِّكَ بِقَائِلِهِ؛ فَإِذَا كَانَتْ عِبَارَتُهُ مُسْتَكْرَهَةً عِنْدَكَ، أَوْ قَائِلُهَا قَبِيحَ الْحَالِ عِنْدَكَ — فِي اعْتِقَادِكَ — رَدَدْتَ الْقَوْلَ وَإِنْ كَانَ فِي نَفْسِهِ حَقًّا.

> "I have found you to be one who clings to appearances, so that if you were given red honey to drink from a cupper's flask, you could not bring yourself to taste it, merely because your nature recoils from the cupping-vessel; and you would have dismissed your reason from its office of recognizing that honey is pure in whatever glass it comes. Rather, you see a Turk wearing the patched frock and the woolen robe and you pronounce him a Sufi and a jurist; and were a Sufi to put on a tunic and a cap, your fancy would rule him a Turk. Your fancy forever drags you toward the husks of things rather than their kernel. For this reason, you do not look at a statement in itself and in its own right, but at the elegance of its craftsmanship or at your good opinion of the one who utters it. And so, if its phrasing is distasteful to you, or its speaker is ill-favored in your belief, you reject the statement, even if in itself it is true."
>
> al-Qisṭās al-Mustaqīm, p. 42

The whole of the Imam's emphasis rests on a single point: do not judge the statement by the eye you have for its speaker, and do not weigh the kernel by the husk. Honey remains honey even in a cupper's flask. And the real error of our critics is not one step beyond this: they look at the argument in the mirror of the means, and at the research in the mirror of the funder.

And let it be remembered, too, that not everyone will know the worth of our scholarly inheritance and its treasures. Shaykh Saʿdī of Shiraz reminds us of this in the seventh chapter of the *Gulistān*:

اگر ژاله هر قطره‌ای دُر شدی

چو خرمهره بازار از او پُر شدی

> *If every hailstone turned into a pearl,*
> *the market would be as full of them as of cheap glass beads.*

That is, whatever comes to everyone, everywhere, without reckoning, loses its worth. So, we must present our capital with discernment, to the right audience, and with grace. Imam Shāfiʿī's saying should stand before us:

فَمَنْ مَنَحَ الْجُهَّالَ عِلْمًا أَضَاعَهُ ۞ وَمَنْ مَنَعَ الْمُسْتَوْجِبِينَ فَقَدْ ظَلَمْ

> *Whoever bestows knowledge on the ignorant has squandered it;*
> *whoever withholds it from the deserving has done wrong.*

The pitfall lies on both sides: to scatter knowledge without occasion is waste, and to withhold it from the worthy is injustice. The narrow path between the two is our real craft.

And Now, Light from Another Direction

Into the assembly of the Shaykh al-Islām, the consummate gnostic Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309), there came a man of skeptical temper, one of those very patients whose palate had been spoiled. But when he heard the truth of *iḥsān* from the Shaykh's lips, the denier became a disciple. Shaykh al-Azhar ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd (d. 1397/1978), introducing Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh in his preface to *Laṭāʾif al-Minan*, gathered that truth into these words:

الْإِحْسَانُ هُوَ مَقَامُ شُهُودِ الْحَقِّ فِي الْقَلْبِ

> "*Iḥsān* is the station in which the Real is witnessed in the heart." That is, *iḥsān* is not merely excellence of action; it is that condition of the heart in which the Real, though hidden from the eyes, is not hidden from the heart.
>
> ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, introduction to Laṭāʾif al-Minan (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 2006), p. 7

Observe: it was not the argument that conquered him, but the testimony of the heart. This is the psychology to which I am pointing.

And this is why our work is confined to two tasks: *tadlīl* and *taqlīb*, furnishing the proof and turning the heart. The first is the work of the pen; the second is the work of prayer and love. Whoever contents himself with the first is only half a physician. And the truth is that the second task is not ours at all. The proof is our charge; the turning of hearts lies in the hand of Him whom we call upon as *yā muqallib al-qulūb wa-l-abṣār*, O Turner of hearts and eyes.

And Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh, in his *Ḥikam*, has given us that spellbinding wisdom too:

سَوَابِقُ الْهِمَمِ لَا تَخْرِقُ أَسْوَارَ الْأَقْدَارِ

The forward thrusts of aspiration cannot breach the walls of destiny.

On its face this maxim is a lesson in helplessness, and so it is: the wall is not opened by the force of aspiration but by the command of the Lord of the wall. Yet hidden within it lies another lesson: that for the aspiration which is joined to its Master, that very wall becomes a door. When aspiration and prayer meet, the servant climbs even walls invisible to the eye, and scales the mountains before which people sit down, calling them their fate.

So, my dear ʿIrfān, my counsel is this: go deep into your own tradition, draw its insights out into the open, and, armed with them, converse with the sciences of your age. Then we shall scale the mountains of challenge, and those unseen walls of destiny too, for you have often heard Iqbal say:

خودی کو کر بلند اتنا کہ ہر تقدیر سے پہلے

خدا بندے سے خود پوچھے، بتا تیری رضا کیا ہے

Raise your selfhood so high that before every decree of fate
God Himself asks His servant: tell Me, what is your will?

When, by the union of striving and prayer, we change our destiny, the water will taste sweet once more, and sweeter than before.

With my deep affection, my warm regard, and my prayers: for you, for your family, and for all the companions of our assemblies of learning and wisdom. May God keep you, and all

the fellow travelers who share in this gathering of knowledge and wisdom, forever in His blessings, and make the pen and the step of every one of you a means of good for the umma.

wa-l-salāmu ʿalaykum wa-raḥmatullāhi wa-barakātuh

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