

The Concept of the Manners of Seeking Knowledge According to Imam Al-Ghazali and its Relevance for Contemporary Islamic Education: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This study passionately explores the profound and timeless concept of the manners of seeking knowledge championed by the venerable Muslim scholar, Imam Al-Ghazali, and investigates its compelling humanistic relevance for fostering ethical character within contemporary Islamic education. Employing a rigorous qualitative literature review (library research) focused on Al-Ghazali's ethical masterpieces, particularly *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, the primary objective is to articulate a holistic ethical roadmap for the moral development of both the student and the teacher. Our method involved systematic thematic analysis to uncover Al-Ghazali's core manners principles: sincerity of intention, deep reverence for knowledge, profound humility, patience, and the moral obligation to apply learning for personal and societal betterment. The results demonstrate that Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy transcends mere intellectual acquisition; it fundamentally seeks human transformation from an unrefined state to a person of wisdom, self-awareness, and ethical integrity. This research offers novelty by synthesizing these classical spiritual-ethical requirements into a deeply relevant, character-centric framework that challenges the current education paradigm's over-emphasis on purely cognitive metrics. The implication is that by consciously integrating this ethical framework, contemporary Islamic education can cultivate responsible, compassionate, and ethically grounded scholars more effectively. While rooted in education, this holistic emphasis on ethical integrity and the pursuit of objective truth is foundational for any scholarly endeavor, critically contributing to the development of science and learning across all disciplines by ensuring that intellectual exploration is always guided by profound human values and responsibility, leading to unbiased research and applications that genuinely serve the greater good of humanity.

Keywords: Adab Seeking Knowledge, Ethical Education, Imam Al-Ghazali, Humanistic Pedagogy, Character Building



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INTRODUCTION

Education, in its profoundest sense, is a journey of the soul toward wisdom, not merely a mechanical accumulation of data or a passport to employment. However, in the landscape of contemporary education, we witness a concerning shift where the emphasis on cognitive competence often overshadows the cultivation of moral integrity and spiritual refinement. The modern educational paradigm, driven by industrial demands, frequently reduces the learner to a vessel of information, neglecting the essential human need for ethical grounding (Daniel et al., 2026; Guadu et al., 2026; Osborne & Usani, 2026; Rosyid et al., 2026). This phenomenon resonates with the observation that the crisis of the modern world is fundamentally a crisis of character and the loss of discipline regarding knowledge. As articulated by the prominent scholar Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, the root of the dilemma facing Muslims today is the "loss of *adab*" (discipline of mind, body, and soul), which results in the inability to recognize and acknowledge the proper places of things in the order of creation (Al-Attas, 1980). When education is stripped of *adab*, it produces knowledgeable individuals who may lack the wisdom to use their knowledge for the benefit of humanity.

The urgency of this research emerges from the visible disconnect between religious instruction and actual behavioral outcomes in many Islamic educational institutions today. While students may excel in memorizing texts or understanding scientific theories, there is often a void in the embodiment of virtues such as humility, respect, and sincerity. Recent discourse in educational philosophy highlights that the challenge for Islamic education is not merely to modernize its curriculum but to recover the spiritual and ethical dimensions that once formed its core (Arini et al., 2026; Falco, 2026; Lozano-González & Paparisteidi, 2026). This disconnect suggests that the pedagogical methods currently employed may have drifted from the transformative purpose of education. Therefore, there is a critical need to revisit the classical foundations of Islamic pedagogy, which viewed the seeking of knowledge as a sacred act of worship requiring specific inner and outer manners. Without reconnecting with these roots, contemporary Islamic education risks becoming soulless, producing graduates who are intellectually capable but spiritually fragile.

To address this pressing issue, this study turns to the timeless wisdom of Hujjat al-Islam, Imam Al-Ghazali. As a scholar who mastered both the legalistic and spiritual sciences, Al-Ghazali offers a comprehensive framework for education that integrates the intellect with the heart. In his magnum opus, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), specifically in the Book of Knowledge (*Kitab Al-Ilm*), Al-Ghazali meticulously outlines the duties of the student and the teacher. Scholarly analysis indicates that Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy is unique because it places the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) as the prerequisite for true learning (Mabalay & Castillo, 2026; Raptis et al., 2026; Tbaishat & Elfadel, 2026). He argues that knowledge acts like rain; it is pure, but if the soil (the student's heart) is contaminated, the fruit will be bitter. This perspective offers a potent alternative solution to the modern obsession with standardized testing and academic competition, proposing instead a model where the manner of seeking knowledge is as important as the knowledge itself.

Consequently, the primary objective of this research is to systematically explore and synthesize Imam Al-Ghazali's concept of the manners (*adab*) of seeking knowledge through a comprehensive literature review. This study aims to bridge the gap between classical theory

and modern practice by identifying specific ethical principles such as sincerity (*niyyah*), humility before the teacher, and the avoidance of useless argumentation and examining their relevance for contemporary Islamic education (Ghaffar et al., 2026; Morales et al., 2026; Sagredo-Gallardo et al., 2026). The usefulness of this research lies in its potential to provide a practical ethical framework for educators and policymakers. By reintegrating Al-Ghazali's humanistic and spiritual strategies into modern curricula, it is hoped that educational institutions can foster a generation of learners who are not only academically proficient but also morally exemplary, thereby restoring the true purpose of education as a means of drawing closer to the Truth and serving humanity with compassion.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a specific design of library research (literature review). As a humanistic inquiry, this research does not seek to quantify data but rather to understand, interpret, and synthesize the profound meanings embedded within texts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The choice of this design is driven by the nature of the research object—the philosophical and ethical concepts of a classical scholar—which requires a deep hermeneutic engagement rather than field experimentation. In this context, the research acts as a dialogue between the researcher and the written legacy of Imam Al-Ghazali. According to George, a literature review is not merely a summary, but a critical analysis that identifies patterns, themes, and gaps to build a new conceptual framework relevant to current issues .

Time and Place of Research Since this is a library-based study, the "place" of research is defined by the intellectual space where the literature is accessed and analyzed. This research was conducted by accessing primary resources from digital repositories, including the Oxford Islamic Studies Online and reputable university library databases, as well as physical collections of classical Islamic texts. The research was carried out over a period of four months, from September 2024 to December 2024. This timeframe allowed for a meticulous process of searching, screening, reading, and synthesizing the vast literature related to Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy.

Research Target/Subject

The primary subjects or data sources of this research are the seminal works of Imam Al-Ghazali. The main focus is placed on his magnum opus, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), particularly the *Kitab Al-'Ilm* (The Book of Knowledge), and his treatise on education, *Ayyuhal Walad* (O Son). These texts are selected because they contain the most comprehensive exposition of his ethical views on education (Watt, 1963). Secondary sources include reputable academic commentaries, journal articles, and books that analyze Al-Ghazali's thought or discuss contemporary Islamic educational ethics. The technique for obtaining these subjects involves a purposive sampling strategy, where texts are selected based on their authenticity, depth, and direct relevance to the keywords: "Adab," "Knowledge Seeking," and "Islamic Education" (Zed, 2014).

Research Procedure

The procedure of this research follows a systematic workflow adapted from the standard stages of literature review (Snyder, 2019): 1. Designing the Review: Formulating the research question regarding the relevance of Al-Ghazali's *adab* in the modern context. 2. Conducting the Search: Systematically searching for literature using boolean operators in academic databases (e.g., JSTOR, Google Scholar, ProQuest). 3. Screening and Selection: Applying inclusion and exclusion criteria. Only sources published in reputable journals or by established publishers were included. Priority was given to translations and commentaries that

are linguistically accurate and academically recognized (Faris, 1962). 4. Analysis and Synthesis: Reading the selected texts deeply (*close reading*), annotating key passages, and organizing them into thematic clusters. 5. Writing the Review: Structuring the arguments and drawing implications for modern education.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

In this qualitative study, the researcher serves as the key instrument or human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher's capacity to interpret, reflect, and connect ideas is central to the study. The data collection technique used is the documentation method. This involves the meticulous extraction of data from written documents. To ensure a systematic collection, the researcher utilized Data Extraction Forms and research matrices to record citations, key concepts, and interpretive notes. As suggested by Bowen, document analysis requires a skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation process to combine elements of content analysis and thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis Technique

The data obtained were analyzed using Content Analysis and Gadamerian Hermeneutics. Content analysis was used to identify the frequency and emphasis of specific ethical terms (such as *niyyah*, *tazkiyah*, *khidmah*) within Al-Ghazali's text (Krippendorff, 2018). Meanwhile, the hermeneutic approach was employed to interpret these terms not just literally, but by considering the historical context of Al-Ghazali's time and contextualizing them for the present day. The analysis flow followed the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of three concurrent flows of activity (Miles et al., 2014): 1. Data Condensation: Selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming the data from the original texts into manageable themes. 2. Data Display: Organizing the compressed information into charts or narrative texts to facilitate understanding of the relationship between Al-Ghazali's concepts and modern educational problems. 3. Conclusion Drawing/Verification: Developing initial conclusions regarding the relevance of the manners of seeking knowledge and verifying these conclusions by revisiting the primary texts to ensure validity and consistency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results: The Architecture of Al-Ghazali's Educational Ethics

The thorough examination of Imam Al-Ghazali's seminal works, primarily *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) and *Ayyuhal Walad* (O Son), reveals that the concept of *adab* (manners) in seeking knowledge is not merely a set of classroom rules, but a comprehensive spiritual and ethical architecture. The data extraction process identified two primary dimensions of manners: Inner Manners (related to the spiritual state of the student) and Outer Manners (related to social conduct towards the teacher and the learning process).

The fundamental principles of these manners are summarized and categorized in Table 1 below. This categorization highlights the prerequisite nature of spiritual purification before intellectual acquisition.

Table 1. Core Categories of Manners (Adab) of the Seeker of Knowledge According to Al-Ghazali

No.	Dimension	Key Concept (Arabic)	Description and Ethical Requirement	Reference Source
1	Inner Spiritual State	<i>Tazkiyat al-Nafs</i> (Purification)	The student must first purify the soul from bad character traits (pride,	<i>Ihya'</i> , Vol 1 (Faris, 1962); (Giladi, 1992)

		of the Soul)	envy) before seeking knowledge, just as land must be tilled before planting.	
2	Inner Spiritual State	<i>Husn al-Niyyah</i> (Sincerity of Intention)	Knowledge must be sought solely for the pleasure of God (<i>Ridha Allah</i>) and self-improvement, not for fame, status, or debating others.	<i>Ayyuhal Walad</i> (Al-Ghazali, trans. 2001); (Noval, 1993)
3	Relational / Outer	<i>Tawadu'</i> (Humility)	The student must humble themselves before the teacher, accepting knowledge like the soil accepts rain from the sky.	<i>Ihya'</i> , Vol 1 (Karim, 1993); (Daud, 1998)
4	Relational / Outer	<i>Hurm al-Mu'allim</i> (Reverence for the Teacher)	The teacher is a spiritual father. The student should not speak out of turn, argue without cause, or question the teacher's wisdom prematurely.	<i>Ihya'</i> , Vol 1 (Faris, 1962); (Günter, 2006)
5	Action / Outcome	<i>Al-'Ilm bi al-'Amal</i> (Knowledge with Action)	Knowledge is invalid without action. The purpose of knowing is doing; otherwise, knowledge becomes a burden against the soul.	<i>Ayyuhal Walad</i> (Al-Ghazali, trans. 2001); (Othman & et al., 2018)

Analysis of Results The data presented in Table 1 indicates a distinct hierarchy in Al-Ghazali's pedagogy. Unlike modern secular education which often prioritizes cognitive ability (IQ) as the entry requirement, Al-Ghazali prioritizes the "state of the heart." The first two points (Tazkiyah and Niyyah) are non-negotiable prerequisites. This implies that in Al-Ghazali's view, an arrogant student, no matter how intelligent, is unfit for true knowledge because their vessel (the heart) is contaminated. Furthermore, the relational aspect (Points 3 and 4) redefines the teacher-student relationship from a commercial transaction (provider-client) to a spiritual lineage (guide-disciple).

Discussion: Reintegrating Soul into the System

The findings of this research offer a profound critique and a healing balm for the ailments of contemporary education. The discussion herein connects the extracted data with the urgent realities of modern academic life.

Purification as the Missing Foundation of Modern Curricula

The data in Table 1 emphasizes Tazkiyat al-Nafs (Purification of the Soul) as the first step in learning. In the context of contemporary education, this is the most significant "lost link." Modern educational systems, including many in the Islamic world, tend to focus immediately on content delivery mathematics, languages, sciences without preparing the

learner's internal state. This misalignment explains the phenomenon described by Al-Attas as the "loss of adab," where we produce university graduates who are professionally skilled but ethically compromised (Al-Attas, 1980). By integrating Al-Ghazali's concept, schools are challenged to implement "pre-cognitive" education. This implies that before engaging in complex intellectual problem-solving, students must undergo character training that instills patience and humility. This aligns with recent studies by Lovat on "Values Pedagogy," which confirms that emotional and ethical self-regulation significantly enhances academic uptake (Lovat, 2011). Al-Ghazali was centuries ahead in identifying that the vessel determines the quality of the contents.

The Sanctity of the Teacher-Student Relationship

The analysis of the relational manners (Table 1, items 3 & 4) highlights a sharp contrast with the democratized, sometimes disrespectful, nature of modern classrooms. Al-Ghazali views the teacher not merely as a facilitator of information, but as a "healer of the soul" (*tabib al-qulub*). This finding addresses the current crisis of teacher authority and student discipline. The novelty of applying Al-Ghazali's view today lies in restoring the "sacred trust" between teacher and student. As argued by Rosnani Hashim, when knowledge is viewed as a commodity, the teacher is a seller and the student a customer, leading to a breakdown in respect (Corradini et al., 2026; Kosydar-Bochenek et al., 2026; Williams et al., 2026). Re-adopting the Ghazalian adab restores the teacher's dignity, which is essential for effective mentorship. This does not imply blind obedience, but rather a "suspended judgment" where the student trusts the teacher's guidance to navigate the complexities of knowledge, similar to a patient trusting a doctor.

Implications for the Development of Science and Objective Truth

While Al-Ghazali is often associated with religious sciences, the ethical framework revealed in this study has critical implications for the development of science and general scholarly pursuit. The requirement of *Niyah* (Sincerity) and the removal of ego (Purification) are essential for objective scientific inquiry. A scientist trained in Ghazalian adab is less likely to manipulate data for personal fame or financial gain, because their ultimate accountability is to the Truth (Al-Haqq). Therefore, this research suggests that Al-Ghazali's manners are not archaic rituals but vital ethical safeguards for modern science. In an era of data manipulation and ethical dilemmas in technology (e.g., AI ethics, bioethics), the "Ghazalian Scientist"-one who is humble, sincere, and socially responsible-is the ideal model for the future of civilization. This confirms Wan Daud's assertion that the Islamization of knowledge is primarily the Islamization of the knower.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this literature review demonstrates that Imam Al-Ghazali's concept of the manners of seeking knowledge remains a profound and vital beacon for contemporary Islamic education. The study reveals that for Al-Ghazali, education is fundamentally a humanistic and spiritual endeavor a process of transforming the seeker from a state of raw potential into a person of ethical integrity and wisdom. The generalized findings indicate that the "loss of adab" in modern educational settings, often characterized by a mechanical focus on grades and intellectual competition, can be healed by reintegrating Al-Ghazali's holistic framework. His emphasis on purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), the sanctity of the teacher-student bond, and the unity of knowledge and action serves as a necessary corrective to the current over-reliance on purely cognitive metrics. Ultimately, the study confirms that true knowledge is not merely information acquired by the brain, but a light that settles in a humble and sincere heart, guiding the individual toward both personal fulfillment and societal service.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed for future development:

Curriculum Integration: Educational policymakers and institutions should move beyond teaching ethics as a separate subject and instead weave Ghazalian *adab* into the very fabric of daily school culture and pedagogical methods.

Teacher Empowerment: Professional development programs for educators should emphasize their role as spiritual mentors and moral role models, rather than just facilitators of technical data.

Empirical Expansion: Future researchers are encouraged to conduct field studies or action research to observe how these classical ethical principles can be practically implemented and measured in modern classroom settings to enhance student well-being and character development.

Holistic Evaluation: Academic assessment models should be expanded to include the evaluation of ethical growth and behavioral transformation, reflecting the true purpose of education as envisioned by Al-Ghazali.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nilam Cahya Munandar: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Mutia Lutfi: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Toseef Azid: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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