

## ***Ikhwan al-Ṣafa on the Ethics and Wisdom of Friendship: Philosophical Reflection***

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Published: Pakistan Times 1985

Revised: 2026

**Abstract:** *The Rasa'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (Epistles of the Brethren of Purity) constitute one of the most remarkable encyclopedic legacies within Islamic intellectual history. This compendium of fifty-two epistles, attributed to the circle known as the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', stands as both a milestone of Arabic philosophy and a synthesis of Shariah, ethics, and spirituality. While scholarly debate continues regarding the authorship and chronology of the work, the Rasa'il are widely acknowledged as a comprehensive guide to human existence, employing narrative, allegory, and parable to address metaphysics, psychology, ethics, and social relations. Within the Fatimi Ismaili tradition, the Rasa'il are situated in the intellectual milieu shaped by the ninth Fatimi Imam, Aḥmad al-Mastūr (as), whose Talīm combined rational inquiry with esoteric Ma'arif, thereby safeguarding Shariah through Hikmah Rūḥāniyyah (spiritual wisdom). Among the central themes elaborated in the epistles is that of Ukhūwah (friendship), conceptualised not merely as a social bond but as a determinant of spiritual destiny. Drawing upon the Aḥādīth of Rasūlullāh (S) and the Ta'lim of the Ahl al-Bayt (as), the Ikhwān underscore that righteous companionship shapes intellect, character, and preparation for the Ākhirah. Negative traits, hypocrisy, miserliness, dishonesty, and ignorance are portrayed as corrosive to both individual virtue and communal harmony. Conversely, true friendship is described as a source of guidance toward Allah, steadfastness in adversity, and illumination of the soul. Allegories such as the parable of the blind man and the cripple (symbolising the interplay of body, soul, and intellect) and the story of the three friends (emphasising the superiority of virtuous deeds over wealth or kinship) communicate these ethical truths. Thus, the Rasa'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' advance companionship as an epistemological and spiritual principle. In line with the Qur'an injunction to invite to the path of Allah with wisdom (Q. 16:125), the choice of companions is presented as integral to īmān, Walāyah, and ultimately Najāt (salvation).*

**Keywords:** Friendship, Rasulullah (S), Hadith, Ahl al-Bayt (as), Islamic ethics, Ikhwan al-Safa, Shariah, Companionship, Aql, Nafs, spiritual companionship; Walayah; Aql, intellect; Good character

*The wise will always distinguish between what constitutes as good or bad before making anything part of their life, be it material, social or any other aspect of existential dimension. Friends and friendship can be considered as one of the most influential and important aspects of human life. Therefore, how is it possible that Rasulullah(S) who came as a Rahmah (mercy) for the entire universe would not have addressed this aspect of human life? He (S) definitely did so. Let us read and reflect on how Rasulullah (S) has enlightened us in this regard. A Hadith says: [1] "Man is influenced by the Aqidah of his friends. Therefore, be careful of whom you associate with".*

*Rasulullah(S) who had the noblest character gave us a clear and simple Talim with regard to how a friend should be chosen. As per Rasulullah (S), we should choose a friend who believes and abides by the religion of Islam and has great reverence for what Allah and His Rasul (S) have ordained. Similarly, we should always stay away and protect ourselves from those who are not well mannered and have complete disregard for Aqidah and practice, for such people are surely capable of affecting us negatively and there can absolutely be no benefit in having a friend who drowns us in sins and displeases Allah. A Hadith says: [2]*

*"The example of a good friend and a bad one is like that of the seller of Musk, and the one who blows the blacksmith's bellows. Therefore, even if you choose not to buy from the seller, you can still enjoy the fragrance of the Musk. As for the one who blows the blacksmith's bellows, either he will burn your clothes or you will get an odious smell from him."*

*Have you ever thought about choosing a decent friend and the criteria for doing the same? The importance of a friend in one's life is so great that according to scholars and intellectuals, every person could be identified through his/her friends. Moreover, a true and good friend can be a strong supporter and assistant in all stages of life, and guide towards attaining a proper destination. In contrast, the wrong friend, who is not chosen based on a suitable criterion, could prevent one from progress or even cause one's decline. Therefore, the decision as to whom we choose to forge friendships with and associate with, and whom we avoid, is of great importance. The Imams of Ahl al-Bayt (as) have also paid special attention to this issue.*

*Amongst the most important Islamic tenets which both Rasulullah (S) and Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) have enjoined is the issue of selecting good friends and associates. Those who have developed evil or indecent characters may produce negative effects on friends and associates, inflicting upon them irreparable damage. Due attention should be given to traits such as hypocrisy, ignorance, miserliness, evil-doing and lying and remember that those with such qualities are not worthy of being befriended. Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) has advised on keeping away from and not befriending such people for the expediency and benefit of a Muslim and a Mumin: [3]*

*i). Munafiq (hypocrite) is the most distrustful and unjust person and he is not truly faithful to the Imam but only pretends to be such. He is a vicious liar and says what he never does. Every time he meets someone he only thinks of deceiving them in one way or another. They are sweeter than honey when it comes to words but deep inside are full of venom.*

ii). A Jahil (ignorant) person – although he may be kind and intimate with you – will be unable to offer correct advice. Hence, even though he may desire to benefit his friend, out of ignorance his actions will harm him instead.

iii). A stingy or shortsighted person – since he is attached to ordinary things more than anything else – will continue his friendship with others as long as they do not stand in need of him. In the time of need, he will not be ready to part with his worldly possessions and will abandon his friend, possibly even when a little help might be enough.

iv). An evil-doer who commits debauchery and corruption is also among those we should avoid befriending. An evil-doer loses his human dignity and honour, his happiness and salvation on the last day, an exchange that he has made for the trifling pleasures of life. Therefore, it is more certain that such a person will not value his friends either, bartering his friendship for any petty consideration that might appeal to him.

v). A Kazib (liar), too, is not worthy of friendship because he is prone to deceiving others. A liar can be likened to a mirage, an effect produced by hot air conditions causing an optical illusion, especially the illusive appearance of a pool of water in the desert. This is because he projects bad deeds as good. Consequently, one who befriends a liar will be deceived by his words and develop two major defects in life:

a) He will turn away from good acts because he imagines them to be bad;

b) He will be impelled to commit bad deeds since due to the ill-advice of his lying friend he will assume those bad deeds to be good.

Al Shakhs al-Fadil, Saheb al-Rasail, the 9<sup>th</sup> Shi'i Fatimi Ismaili Imam, Al-Imam Ahmad al-Mastur (as) has narrated a Hikayah in "Ikhw'an al-Safa" which provides guidance to those who ponder. He says: [4]

"A blind man along with a crippled person lived in a city. One day they both passed by a garden. When the owner of the garden saw these two handicapped men, he felt grief about their physical disability. He gave them a place to live in the garden and told them that there were fruits on the trees which should not be harmed. Both of them replied that they were disabled and that it wasn't possible for them to reach fruits on the top of those trees. After listening to this, the owner of the garden was satisfied. He also instructed the gardener about these two disabled men and went away. After some days these men decided that since the gardener didn't give them fruits regularly they should find another way. The blind instructed the handicapped to sit over his shoulder and this way they plucked fruits aplenty. Later on the gardener discovered that the garden was in a terrible condition. Curious, he questioned them about the same but they feigned ignorance.

This was repeated the second day as well when the gardener went out. Upon returning, he again inquired about the loss of fruits and as to who was responsible for it. The disabled yet again denied liability. With his suspicion building, the third day the gardener watched the garden hidden. He saw how the handicapped man plucked fruits while standing on the shoulders of the blind. The gardener reprimanded them and warned them from ever doing it again but they ignored his warning and continued. Eventually, the gardener informed the

owner of the garden about what had been going on after which the landowner meted out punishments. He ordered that each of them be thrown separately into the jungle where the beasts devoured them.”

In this episode the Saheb al-Rasa'il "Ikhwa'an al-Safa" has communicated that Nafs (soul) is akin to a disabled person and the body resembles a blind being. The garden is this world. The owner of the garden is Allah while the gardener is Aql (human wisdom). Aql always commands the person to do well and prevents from misdeeds. Aql advises Nafs, but Nafs does not listen and frequently commits sins till death. At the time of death, both body & soul get separated. In this condition the Malaek, the servants of the owner of the garden, Allah, take them away forcibly from this world. It is known that people need company in this world. There are occasions of joy and sorrow for everybody. On such occasions, people participate in each other's happiness and sorrows. The wise is one who treats everybody with love and befriends only the good. There are several kinds of friends in this world. The best and the most sincere friend among them is one who helps in need, especially in difficult times. It isn't surprising that people want to associate with the rich. As long as there is honey in the nest, bees are there but they fly away as soon as it is finished. A similar attitude of selfish friends we experience time to time. May Allah protect us from shrewd and opportunist friends. The truth is that there is no success without friendship. Friends are treasures which should be sought, and in order to find them, one should make effort in distinguishing precious pearls from worthless oysters. These delicate matters have caused people to go two extremes: some have decided not to have any friends and become secluded, while others have considered befriending any and everybody. If we look carefully, we realize that both these methods are incorrect! Neither choosing friends randomly nor becoming secluded from people is correct. So what should we do? What is the correct criterion for choosing friends?

At the time of Essa (as), people had the same question, so they went to Essa (as) and questioned him: [5]

“Ruh Allah! Whom should we befriend?”

He replied:

“Befriend someone who reminds you of Allah, whose words increase your knowledge, and whose deeds encourage you towards the A'akhirah...”

The issue of befriending someone and having affection towards them is the most influential factor in changing one's personality; therefore, if the selection of a friend is based on a correct criteria, it will lead to guidance. However, if it is based on improper criteria, it may turn into a fire that destroys one's life. If we look around ourselves, we will find people whose actions, deeds, characteristics, appearance, and behaviour remind us of Allah, whose words open the fields of knowledge, and whose actions encourage us towards doing good. These are people one should associate with and befriend. To invite people towards the practice of the Shariah, the Qur'an informs:

“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good advice and dispute with them in a manner that is best. Indeed your Lord knows best those who stray from His way, and He knows best those who are guided.” (Ayah 125: Surah al-Nahl 16)

On the basis of the above Ayah, the Fatimi Ismaili Imam Ahmad al-Mastur (as) delivered the instructions of the Shariah through “Muezat Hasanah” (teachable tales), in philosophical tone. The Ismaili Imam (as) adopted this unique faculty of knowledge in the first encyclopedia of Islam, “Ikhw’an al-Safa” – to guide Muslims in the most dangerous era of history. The Abbasid emperor Mamun (L) tried to replace the Shariah with Greek philosophy but in vain. He used all his might to abolish the practices of Shariah and enforce and merge a foreign ideology with Islam. The son of Fatimah (as), the Shi’i Fatimi Ismaili Imam Ahmad al-Mastur (as), observed the situation minutely and tactfully encountered the Abbasids plot in a philosophical manner. The Imam established the necessity of the Shariah in human society for ultimate salvation.

The following narration is a glimpse of the discussion of “Al Shakhs al-Fadil, Saheb al-Rasa’il Ikhw’an al-Safa (as), encouraging the practice of the Shariah and offering of Fard Salaat on time and establishing it as one of the valuable assets of A’akhirah:

A person had three friends:

First friend: He loved him very much. Both spent all their time together.

Second Friend: He wasn’t as close to him compared to the first friend, and spent about 10 to 12 hours daily.

Third friend: He didn’t love this friend as much. He met him rarely on occasions. If he was met with any difficulty, he went to his first friend for help. Hence, it was unlikely that he went to his second and third friends. One day the Emperor called him. Anxious, he went to his first friend to seek his advice. He asked him:

“You are my sincere and trustworthy friend; can you help me in this regard?

The first friend replied:

“I have no solution for your problem. All I can do is provide you with the best dress but I cannot go with you.”

Hearing this, the man went to his second friend with whom he didn’t have as much contact as his first friend. When he spoke of his worry to his second friend, he replied:

“I cannot solve your problem, but can accompany you to the Emperor’s palace and bid you farewell at the gate. However I cannot go along with you to the Emperor.

He then went to his third friend with whom his friendship was confined only to greetings. When he spoke of his difficulty to this third friend, he replied with great affection:

“Do not worry, the Emperor respects me. I shall escort you to recommend you to the Emperor”

Now surely you would want to know who these three friends are.

First Friend: This is wealth in whose pursuit man remains busy day and night.

Second Friend: This is family with whom one spends less time than the first friend.

Third Friend: These are one’s deeds. These are the virtues and qualities.

When the time of death approaches, he asks for help from these friends. At that time the first friend only provides him with a coffin. The second friend goes to his grave to bid him goodbye but doesn’t stay. The third friend however remains with him forever and removes all worries by giving him company. This third friend has the power to recommend one to Allah. May Allah give us the opportunity to adopt this last friend.

*Our religion Islam is based on reason and is addressed to people of Aql (intelligence). Allah has given the gift of Aql to humans only. Now whoever has Aql will understand that there is a purpose to life greater than merely living; and that purpose is A'akhirah, the life of eternity. And that is achieved through Walayah (obligatory love of Ahl al-Bait), which means Taat (obedience) of Allah, His Rasul (S) and Al Imam uz Zaman (as). This perfection can be achieved through adherence to the Shariah-based upon the seven pillars, Walayah, Taharah, Salaat, Siyaam, Zakaat, Haj and Jih'ad. This is the best investment anyone can make, and it is an investment which will earn them everlasting prosperity, in this world and A'akhirah. Whenever a person goes to visit a King or a President or any dignitary, as per tradition he takes with him a gift to present to them. Allah is the King of Kings. When we eventually appear in his presence, we must have with us the gift of our best Aam'al (deeds).*

### ***Selected Bibliography:***

[1] Hadith

[2] Hadith

[3] Kalam Amir al-Mumineen Ali Ibn Abi Talib (as)

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[5] Qasas al-Anbiya,

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