

Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Ṣafa' on Perpetual Friendship: Insights from Classical Islamic Thought

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Published: The Mag Weekly, Daily News, Pakistan Times, 1995.

Revised: 2026

Abstract: The *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa* (Epistles of the Brethren of Purity) constitute one of the most remarkable monuments of Arabic-Islamic intellectual history. This encyclopedic collection of fifty-two epistles integrates esoteric Ta'lim, philosophy, natural sciences, mathematics, and spiritual guidance in a literary style that has captivated generations of readers. The structure of the *Rasa'il* is extraordinary, interweaving allegorical narratives, moral lessons, and rational inquiry into a coherent vision of truth. While Muslim and Western scholarship has long debated the precise identity of the *Ikhwan* and the century of composition, the significance of the *Rasa'il* transcends historical particulars, establishing them as both a literary landmark and a guide towards the Shari'ah. Indeed, the epistles convey the Hikmah (wisdom) of Shariah with elegance, psychological depth, and pedagogical sensitivity, earning recognition across the Muslim world and exerting profound influence in the West. The *Rasa'il* are more than a compendium of sciences; they are a garden of wisdom that reflect the insight Talim of Al-Shakhs al-Fāḍil, Ṣāḥib al-Rasā'il, the ninth Shī'a Fāṭimi Ismā'īlī Imām, Aḥmad al-Mastūr (as). The narratives combine entertainment with moral instruction, addressing the conduct of humans and offering spiritual Ta'lim rooted in the Nabawi legacy. Central themes include the nature of true companionship, sincerity in friendship, and the centrality of Ṣalāt as a pillar of the Shari'ah. Drawing upon Ayah of Qur'an, Nabawi Aḥādīth, classical Arabic poetry, and Fatimi-Ismā'īlī philosophical traditions, the *Rasa'il* emphasize that while wealth and family are transient, only righteous deeds accompany the soul into the Ākhirah. This paper explores these dimensions by situating the *Rasa'il* as both an encyclopedic synthesis of knowledge and a spiritual manual, highlighting their pedagogical value, ethical vision, and their enduring role in safeguarding humanity through obedience, worship, and righteous conduct.

Abstract: Keywords: Friendship, Salaat, Shariah, Fatimi Ismaili Philosophy, Islamic Pedagogy, A'akhirah, Walayah, Deeds, *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa*, Brethren of Purity, Encyclopedia, Esoteric Talim, Philosophy, Shariah, Arabic literature, Wisdom, Psychological insight, Spiritual Talim, Fatimi Ismaili Imam, Friendship, Sincerity, Salaat, Hadith, A'akhirah

A wise person is one who treats everybody with respect but befriends only a sincere few. There are several kinds of friends, the best amongst them those who help in the time of need. An apostate (Murtad) Arabi poet Mutanabbi says:

*“Several claim friendship during the time of comfort;
However a sincere friend is known only in difficulty.”*

As long as there is honey in the hive bees are there, but they fly away as soon as it's finished. A similar attitude among selfish friends is seen from time to time. May Allah protect us from wicked, opportunist, and cunning friends.

A beautiful Dua says:-

“May Allah save us from a so-called friend who is apparently sympathetic but his heart is filled with deceit. Witnessing a good quality in his friend, he buries it like a dead body in a grave but whenever he finds any weakness (error), broadcasts it among the masses.”

A Hadith narrated by Abdullah ibn Qart:

“The first act that the servant of Allah will be accountable for on the Day of Judgment will be Salaat. If it is good, then the rest of his acts will be good. And if it is evil, then the rest of his acts will be evil.”

Furthermore, Salaat was the first act of ‘ibadat that was made obligatory by Allah. Therefore, due to its extreme importance to the believer, Salaat should be one of the first acts of ‘ibadat that parents teach their children. Let us be realistic; learning how to offer Salaat is not easy for children or sometimes even for adults. It can take a lot of work to master even the simplest elements of Salaat. The learner must memorize various Dua and Surah of the Qur’an, not to mention the other required portions of the Salaat. This is not an overnight process but one that takes time. Therefore, this leaves us with the question – when should children learn how to offer Salaat?

It is important for parents to let kids “pretend” to offer Salaat with them. The benefits of this are twofold. First, it teaches children that it is necessary to be punctual with their Salaat. And second, it helps children learn the physical movements of the Salaat. It really is amazing how fast a two-year-old will learn the phrase Allahhu-Akbar when he performs Salaat alongside his parents!

The next step is to teach your child Surah al-Fatiha. This should begin around the age of three or four. When teaching children Surah or any other segment of the Salaat that must be memorized, it is important to remember to break down the instructions by using a reasonable number of Ayaat. In other words, teaching a child how to perform Salaat should be done gradually in small steps. It is important to practice reciting the previously learned material consistently every day along with any new material. These practice sessions should only last between 5 to 15 minutes. At this age, the duration of practice is not as important as consistency. Also, it is important to note that not every day will your child be ready to learn new material. Work on mastery of the material, not the quantity. Another frequently asked question is whether to teach Surah using Tajwid. Actually, many parents find it helpful to combine the two.

Children have an amazing ability to remember and memorize. However, at this age, it is important not to focus on the rules of recitation but the content.

While the presence of a teacher or parents teaching children the proper method of Salaat cannot be emphasized enough, many parents find supplemental materials helpful in teaching their offspring how to offer Salaat. Every year new educational products are being introduced into the market. Today, the availability of colouring books, storybooks, video tapes, audio tapes, and computer programs to enhance learning has made the process easier. Furthermore, one of the most important aspects of successful teaching is praise and encouragement. Remember that children like to please their parents. Praise motivates the child to continue to learn and accomplish new goals hence it is important that parents celebrate their children's accomplishments.

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, "Ikhwan 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 Shia Fatimi Ismaili Imam Ahmad al-Mastur (as), observed the situation minutely and tactfully encountered the Abbasid 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 Ikhwan 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 al-Zaman (as). This perfection can be achieved through adherence to the Shariah-based upon the seven pillars. 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).

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