

# Teacher-Student Relationships In Sufi Schools In Central Asia

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**Abstract:** The article examines mentor–disciple relationships through the lens of Sufi traditions. In particular, it offers an in-depth philosophical analysis of the educational legacy found within the Yassavi, Kubrawi, and Naqshbandi orders that emerged in Central Asia. Within Sufism, the bond between mentor and disciple is understood not merely as a process of transmitting knowledge, but as a multifaceted practice grounded in spiritual and moral cultivation, ethical perfection, and inner purification.

**Keywords:** Dhikr, motivation, moral immunity, classical education, social value, conversation method, devotion, divine love, arif billah, Turkish ethics, external, internal.

**Introduction.** In contemporary education systems, alongside the implementation of modern educational standards, special emphasis is placed on fostering the holistic development of the younger generation as well-rounded individuals. Considerable efforts are being made to encourage and support mentors, tutors, and teachers, while simultaneously increasing young people's sense of responsibility toward their own education and upbringing. In recent years, a range of new standards specific to the education system, along with large-scale enlightenment-oriented, ideological, and educational initiatives, have been introduced. These reforms have laid a solid foundation for the intellectual maturity and moral–spiritual advancement of a well-developed generation. As a result, the harmony between education and upbringing, along with the influential power of their substantive integration, is increasingly evident in the emergence of today's youth as intellectually competent individuals capable of meeting the demands of the era.

The pursuit of knowledge and the acquisition of skills constitute a demanding and labor-intensive process. Facilitating this process has long been regarded as a pressing issue in pedagogy, leading to the development of diverse teaching methods and methodological frameworks. Teaching approaches have continuously evolved and improved in response to changing social and educational demands. Within educational processes aimed at fostering creativity and skill development, the traditional poles of education—the mentor and the disciple—are undergoing transformation. The conditions of interaction between them are shifting in accordance with contemporary realities. For instance, creative and critical thinking methodologies require a balanced and dialogical relationship between teacher and learner. Similarly, in online education, mentor–disciple relations are established through digital resources, and the absence of direct face-to-face interaction necessitates a reconsideration of traditional teaching methods. Pedagogical competence, professional mastery, and adaptability to diverse audiences demand a departure from rigid conventional educational frameworks.

Under such conditions, revitalizing historical educational models is increasingly viewed as a viable solution for shaping a national education system, as it creates a need for spiritually meaningful relationships that satisfy both educators and learners. Establishing a bridge between generations—between ancestors and descendants—requires a strong historical foundation. For nations with deeply rooted historical traditions, this task presents fewer difficulties.

Within mentor–disciple relations, the Uzbek classical education system is particularly notable for its integration of education with moral upbringing. In Sufism especially, equal attention to the cultivation of intellect, body, and spirit offers significant potential for the development of modern national educational methodologies. Historically, Sufism has functioned not merely as a religious or enlightenment-based school, but as a comprehensive system of ideas aimed at achieving holistic human perfection. For this reason, its principles are capable of addressing the philosophical demands of contemporary education. The person-centered approach inherent in Sufism corresponds closely with modern pedagogical emphasis on individualization, while its focus on moral and spiritual education seeks to develop students' ethical resilience

and moral immunity. The analytical orientation of modern education aligns with the Sufi principle of “seeking and understanding the self,” and the emphasis on learning driven by inner interest and enthusiasm mirrors Sufism’s cultivation of intrinsic motivation. In Sufi thought as well, spiritual and gnostic knowledge cannot be imposed by force, but must emerge from inner readiness and personal aspiration.

In Sufism, the shaykh is portrayed not only as a transmitter of knowledge, but also as a spiritual guide who leads the disciple along the path of life, morality, and perfection. The relationship between mentor and disciple is not understood as a simple connection between teacher and student; rather, it is regarded as a social value founded upon devotion and respect. Husayn Voiz Koshifiy, in his work *Futuvvatnoma-yi Sultoniy*, glorifies the mentor and states: “No task can be accomplished without a mentor, and whoever undertakes a task without a mentor, the foundation of that task will not be firm.” In Central Asian Sufism, the methodological basis of the relationship between mentor (*murshid*) and disciple (*murid*) rests upon profound spiritual and educational principles. This bond has historically been viewed as a primary means of spiritual training, inner purification, and drawing closer to God. Moreover, unity with the people without severing one’s connection to the Divine is grounded in the Qur’an, Hadith, and the experiential legacy of Sufi shaykhs. Since the *murshid* has already traversed this path, he protects the *murid* from errors. Through a life characterized by honesty, purity, and humility, the mentor serves as a living example for the disciple. One of the most important instruments ensuring continuity in spiritual relations is *suhbat* (spiritual discourse), which plays a decisive role in moral growth by creating a heartfelt bond between mentor and disciple. In general, the methodological foundation of mentor–disciple relations in Sufism is shaped by inner attachment, spiritual training, devotion, dialogue, and lived experience.

Throughout historical development, Sufism has been approached from various perspectives. Whether during periods when Islamic law and religion defined the essence and direction of all activities, or in eras marked by atheistic worldviews that denied the divine altogether, the philosophy of divine love never ceased to attract attention. The primary reason for this lies in its close connection with human spirituality, a domain in which human understanding remains limited. As stated in the Qur’an, Surah al-Isra (17:85): “They ask you about the spirit. Say: the spirit is of the command of my Lord, and you have been given but little knowledge.” The distinctiveness of Central Asian Sufi schools lies in their continuous supervision of the spiritual transformation of the *murid*, whose social consciousness is still forming, and in preparing him for engagement with society while remaining on the path of Truth. Along this path, a number of requirements are also placed upon the mentor. In the *Faqirnama*, attributed to Khoja Ahmad Yassavi, these requirements are expressed as follows: “O seeker, if you desire the Truth and wish to repent, give your hand to such a *pir* who is an ‘ārif bi’Llāh in sharia, who knows the secrets in the *tariqa*, who is complete and perfect in truth, and who is an ocean in gnosis—such a *pir* will lead you to felicity.” This indicates that the mentor’s task does not end with imparting knowledge; it also involves practical moral training and the demonstration of an exemplary way of life. Accordingly, based on the *Hikmats*, the Yassavi order developed an educational method rooted in national and religious values, methodologically aimed at cultivating an independently thinking individual.

Human beings, by their very nature, are understood as reflective beings striving toward spiritual and moral perfection. Khoja Ahmad Yassavi maintains that true perfection is achieved through knowing God and drawing closer to Him. While grounding his teachings in the Qur’an and drawing upon Persian Sufi experiences, his greatest achievement lies in his fidelity to the ancient Turkic worldview, ethics, and beliefs. For instance, his conception of love for the homeland can be regarded as an innovation within Sufism. Yassavism is a path that calls for devotion to the land, the defense of the homeland, and striving for its prosperity. Alongside values such as truthfulness, humility, honesty, and loyalty to God, patriotism may also be included among the core principles of the Yassavi order. This corresponds to the spatial dimension of the conditions—place, time, brotherhood, and the spiritual guide—established for the *salik* (disciple).

Another prominent figure who established a major Sufi school in Central Asia was Najmuddin Kubra. In his youth, he studied under many shaykhs, though he did not remain permanently with all of them. His spiritual quest reflected a tension between acquiring exoteric–rational and esoteric–ecstatic knowledge, without abandoning the former for the latter. In his spiritual lineage, figures such as Ruzbihan Misri, Shaykh Ammar Yasir, and Ismail Qasri occupy an important place, all tracing back to Shaykh Abulnajib Suhrawardi. Suhrawardi’s Sufi thought included the theory of *futuwwa* (spiritual chivalry), emphasizing social justice and generosity in material relations. This orientation toward *futuwwa* within the training of the disciple resonated

with Najmuddin Kubra. In his work *Usul al-‘Ashara*, the fourth principle is termed *qana‘a* (contentment), which Ismail Haqqi Bursawi explains as distancing oneself from all egoistic desires and animal instincts beyond essential needs for survival. The superiority of virtuous expenditure over wasteful spending lies in the fact that righteous spending directs the strength derived from blessings toward worship of the Giver and dedicates each bodily faculty to a specific act of devotion.

Nearly all works devoted to Shaykh Najmuddin Kubra note that he was reprimanded by his mentors due to his initial reliance on exoteric knowledge in the context of khanaqah training, as they wished to cultivate in him an inner, esoteric vision. Exoteric knowledge resembles empirical knowledge in philosophy and is necessary for the correct performance of worship and understanding of its outward form; however, it represents only the beginning of the path. The acquisition of *ladunni* (divinely inspired) knowledge proved difficult, as such knowledge is inspired by God into the heart of the shaykh. For Najmuddin Kubra, esoteric knowledge was the ultimate goal, while exoteric knowledge served as a means. He extensively applied this approach in the training of his disciples, explaining that inner knowledge is attained through *shuhud* (inner witnessing), *kashf* (unveiling), and *zuhd* (renunciation of the ego).

Another Sufi order deeply integrated into Central Asian life and shaped by popular values is the Naqshbandiyya, founded by Khoja Bahauddin Naqshband. This order provided opportunities for spiritual purification through ordinary labor and supported an active social life. By critically engaging with earlier Sufi traditions, the Khojagan path refined and intensified their spiritual legacy. Bahauddin Naqshband also studied for twenty-two years in the Hakimiya order founded by Hakim Tirmidhi, where he deeply absorbed concepts such as asceticism, scrupulous piety, *futuwwa*, sainthood, knowledge of the heart, and struggle against the ego. In terms of spiritual lineage, however, the Naqshbandiyya traces back through Abdulkhalil Gijduvani and Yusuf Hamadani to Junayd of Baghdad and Bayazid Bistami. While Yusuf Hamadani harmonized the concepts of sobriety and ecstasy, conscious adherence to the Sunnah was inherited by the Naqshbandiyya from the Khojagan tradition. Bahauddin Naqshband received spiritual instruction through *Uwaysi* transmission from Abdulkhalil Gijduvani, as indicated in the remembrance practices of Khoja Muhammad Baba (Samosi).

Within the Naqshbandiyya, which synthesizes the most significant ideas and traditions of various gnostic paths, mentor–disciple relations were conducted through diverse methods, with particular emphasis placed on *suhbat* as a bond uniting hearts. The complexity of the mentor’s role in this order lay in harmonizing Sufi–religious heritage with the everyday life of the local population. The mentor was required to master the theoretical foundations of the path and employ pedagogical skill in conveying them. Understanding the essence of what he taught, he adapted the outward forms of instruction to prevailing conditions while also taking into account the character, temperament, social categories, and capacities of his disciples.

Mentor–disciple relationships within Central Asian Sufi orders are deeply rooted in religious, ethical, and philosophical foundations and have played a significant role not only in spiritual upbringing but also in the formation of moral values within society. In Sufi philosophy, human existence and its ultimate purpose are understood as a journey toward the Divine Truth (*Haqq*). The mentor–disciple relationship functions as guidance along this path: the mentor is viewed as a person who has comprehended the mysteries of existence, attained truth through experience, and achieved spiritual purification, whereas the disciple is one who has entered the path but has not yet reached perfection and therefore requires the mentor’s spiritual guidance.

By integrating exoteric and esoteric knowledge, the mentor leads the disciple from outward practices toward inner states of being. In this context, the mentor–disciple bond is not merely didactic, as in a conventional teacher–student relationship, but constitutes a spiritual and mystical process. The ethical conduct of the disciple (*murid*) is presented not as a simple social norm, but as the philosophical essence of an inner spiritual journey, which has contributed to the formation of numerous religious and national values within national pedagogical traditions. For example, the obedience of the disciple—often criticized by Western scholars—does not signify the suppression of inner motivation in Sufism; rather, it represents the process of discovering one’s true self through adherence to the mentor’s guidance and forms part of the Eastern conception of disciplined submission.

In this way, a distinct pedagogical model emerges under the guidance of the mentor. The transition from subjectivity to objectivity—that is, from personal desires to submission to the divine will—requires overcoming the primary obstacle of the ego (*nafs*). Through liberation from the ego, the individual becomes

aware of personal responsibility within the chain of existence. Throughout the spiritual transformations of Sufi lineages and the interactions among various orders, these values were gradually refined and consolidated. In the moral and spiritual education of the disciple (or individual), the Yassavi tradition emphasizes dhikr, service, and the school of discipleship, whereas the Naqshbandi order places greater value on silence, inner self-discipline, and javanmardlik (spiritual chivalry).

**Conclusions.** Mentor–disciple relationships in Central Asian Sufi schools are examined not merely as religious–practical processes, but as deeply developed pedagogical and philosophical systems. Experiences studied within the Yassavi, Kubrawi, and Naqshbandi orders demonstrate that the mentor does not limit his role to the transmission of knowledge alone; rather, he also supervises the disciple’s spiritual, moral, and social development. The exemplary character of the mentor, together with his devotion and esoteric knowledge, serves to cultivate the disciple’s inner motivation, foster self-discipline, and shape a sense of moral responsibility.

While the Yassavi tradition directs the disciple toward socialization through service, dhikr, and the structured path of discipleship, the Kubrawi order emphasizes education through the integration of exoteric and esoteric knowledge and through inner spiritual trials. The Naqshbandi path, in turn, strengthens self-awareness by promoting silence, inner supervision, and javanmardlik (spiritual chivalry). At the same time, the mentor–disciple model is not authoritarian in nature; rather, it is based on a system of responsible hierarchy that enables the disciple to consciously choose and internalize his own path of development.

In general, the mentor–disciple relationship is interpreted as a comprehensive pedagogical system aimed at shaping not only a knowledgeable individual, but also a spiritually mature, socially active, and morally responsible person. This characteristic fully corresponds to the priority orientations of contemporary educational philosophy and affirms the practical significance of the Sufi pedagogical approach in modern educational contexts.

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