The Concept of Tazkiyatun Nafs (Purification of the Soul) in Al-Ghazali's Thought and It's Implications for Character Education

Mulyadi, Ismaraidha, Bahtiar Siregar

Abstract

Character education is a fundamental issue in contemporary Islamic education, particularly amid the phenomena of moral degradation, crises of integrity, and the weakening of the spiritual dimension in educational practice. One classical concept that remains highly relevant to these challenges is *tazkiyatun nafs* in the thought of Imam al-Ghazali. This study aims to analyze in depth the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* according to Imam al-Ghazali and to examine its implications for character education within the context of Islamic education. This study employs a qualitative approach using library research methods. Data were obtained from primary sources consisting of the works of Imam al-Ghazali, particularly *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, *Mizan al-'Amal*, and *Ayyuha al-Walad*, as well as secondary sources in the form of books and journal articles relevant to Islamic education and character education. Data collection was conducted through documentation, while data analysis employed content analysis and descriptive-analytical methods. The findings indicate that *tazkiyatun nafs* in Imam al-Ghazali's thought is a systematic and continuous process of inner education aimed at purifying the soul from reprehensible traits (*takhalli*), adorning it with praiseworthy qualities (*tahalli*), and guiding individuals toward a higher level of spiritual awareness (*tajalli*). This concept is actualized through stages and methods such as *mujahadah*, *riyadhah al-nafs*, *muhasabah*, *muraqabah*, and *tawbah*, which are substantively oriented toward the formation of internal moral awareness and self-control. The implications of *tazkiyatun nafs* for character education suggest that Islamic character education should not merely emphasize outward behavior and normative compliance, but must be directed toward the formation of intrinsic character grounded in spiritual awareness and moral responsibility to Allah SWT. Character education based on *tazkiyatun nafs* is holistic, integrative, and transformative, as it integrates cognitive, affective, spiritual, and practical dimensions. Thus, the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* in Imam al-Ghazali's thought is both relevant and significant as a philosophical foundation for the development of Islamic character education in the contemporary era.

Keywords: *Tazkiyatun Nafs*, Imam Al-Ghazali, Character Education, Islamic Education

Mulyadi[1]
[1]Islamic Religious Education Study Program, Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi, Indonesia
e-mail: mulyadiamar3@gmail.com[1]

Ismaraidha[2], Bahtiar Siregar[3]
[2,3]Islamic Religious Education Departement, Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi, Indonesia
e-mail: ismaraidha@dosen.pancabudi.ac.id[2], bahtiarsiregar@dosen.pacabudi.ac.id[3]

Introduction

Education in Islam is not solely oriented toward intellectual development, but also aims to shape personality and noble moral character. One of the key concepts in this process of character formation is *tazkiyatun nafs*, or the purification of the soul. The term derives from the root *zakka–yuzakkī–tazkiyah*, which means to purify, nurture, and refine the self in order to attain moral and spiritual perfection (al-Ghazali, 2005). From an Islamic perspective, education is meaningless without the process of purifying the soul, because only a purified soul enables human beings to receive the truth and consistently put it into practice (Al-Attas, 1980).

In the context of modern life, human beings are confronted with increasingly complex moral challenges. Moral crises such as corruption, violence, intolerance, the misuse of technology, and the degradation of spiritual values have become tangible phenomena in society (Nata, 2016). This condition indicates an imbalance between intellectual progress and moral decline. Therefore, the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs*, which emphasizes the purification of the heart and the control of base desires, is highly relevant to be actualized within the educational system, particularly in character education.

One of the Islamic scholars who extensively discussed the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* is Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (450–505 AH / 1058–1111 CE). In his monumental work *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, al-Ghazali explains that the pinnacle of moral education is the attainment of purity of the heart (*qalb salīm*) through the processes of *mujahadah* (spiritual striving) and *riyadhah* (discipline of the soul) in order to subdue base desires (al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, vol. III). According to him, the success of education is not measured solely by cognitive achievement, but also by the extent to which learners are able to exercise self-control, demonstrate good moral conduct, and draw closer to Allah SWT (al-Ghazali, 2002).

Al-Ghazali's thought has strong relevance to modern concepts of character education, which emphasize the formation of moral, spiritual, and social-ethical values within learners (Lickona, 1991). Character education that is oriented only toward knowledge without the cultivation of the soul will produce individuals who are intellectually intelligent but morally empty. Therefore, the integration of the values of *tazkiyatun nafs* into character education can serve as a solution for developing individuals who are both knowledgeable and morally upright. In the context of Islamic education in Indonesia, efforts to strengthen character have become an important agenda, as stipulated in Regulation of the Ministry of Education and Culture No. 20 of 2018 on the Strengthening of Character Education (PPK). However, the implementation of character education often remains largely normative and has not sufficiently addressed the deeper spiritual dimension. In fact, al-Ghazali has offered a comprehensive spiritual framework encompassing the dimensions of knowledge, experience, and inner awareness in forming the complete human being (*insān kāmil*). Therefore, examining the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* in al-Ghazali's thought and analyzing its implications for character education constitutes an important step in enriching the philosophical and methodological foundations of contemporary Islamic education.

Literature Review
The Concept of *Tazkiyatun Nafs*

Etymologically, the term *tazkiyah* derives from the root *zakka–yuzakkī–tazkiyah*, which means to purify, cleanse, nurture, and reform (Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, 1990). In the Qur'an, this term is mentioned, among other places, in Surah Ash-Shams (91): 9–10: *"Qad aflaha man zakkāhā wa qad khāba man dassāhā"* ("Indeed, successful is the one who purifies the soul, and indeed, unsuccessful is the one who corrupts it").

This verse emphasizes that human success lies in the ability to purify the soul from reprehensible traits. According to al-Ghazali, *tazkiyatun nafs* does not merely signify moral purification from sin and disobedience, but also involves a process of spiritual formation leading to closeness to Allah (al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, vol. III).

The concept of *tazkiyah* encompasses two main dimensions:

1. Takhliyah – the process of emptying oneself of blameworthy traits such as ostentation (*riyā'*), envy (*ḥasad*), arrogance (*takabbur*), and excessive attachment to worldly life.
2. Taḥlīyah – the process of adorning oneself with praiseworthy qualities such as sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*), patience (*ṣabr*), reliance upon God (*tawakkul*), and asceticism (*zuhd*) (al-Ghazali, 2002).

Thus, *tazkiyatun nafs* constitutes a process of inner education aimed at achieving moral excellence (*al-akhlāq al-karīmah*) and true happiness (*al-sa'ādah al-ḥaqīqiyyah*).

The Concept of *Tazkiyatun Nafs* According to Imam al-Ghazali

Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (450–505 AH / 1058–1111 CE) is one of the prominent Islamic scholars who integrated the dimensions of *sharī'ah*, philosophy, and Sufism within a comprehensive system of moral education. In *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, al-Ghazali describes the human soul (*nafs*) as a potential that can incline toward either good or evil, depending on the process of its purification.

According to al-Ghazali, the human soul consists of three principal states:

1. An-nafs al-ammārah bi al-sū' – the soul that constantly incites evil.
2. An-nafs al-lawwāmah – the self-reproaching soul that censures itself after committing wrongdoing.
3. An-nafs al-muṭma'innah – the tranquil soul that has attained spiritual purity (al-Ghazali, *Ihya'*, vol. III).

The process of *tazkiyatun nafs* is carried out through several stages:

1. *Mujāhadah* (striving against base desires)
2. *Riyāḍah al-nafs* (spiritual and moral discipline)
3. *Muḥāsabah* (continuous self-introspection)
4. *Murāqabah* (awareness of Allah's presence in every action)
5. *Tawbah* (repentance and returning to Allah with a purified heart)

Al-Ghazali emphasizes that the success of soul purification depends greatly on the education of the heart (*tarbiyah al-qalb*), as the heart is the center of moral and spiritual control in human beings (al-Ghazali, *Ihya'*, 2002). Therefore, education according to al-Ghazali is not merely intellectual (*ta'līm*), but also moral and spiritual (*tarbiyah*).

Character Education in the Perspective of Islamic Education

Conceptually, character education is a systematic effort to instill moral, ethical, and spiritual values so that learners become individuals of noble character (Lickona, 1991). In Islam, character education is synonymous with moral education (*ta'dīb*), which encompasses the dimensions of knowledge, behavior, and sincere intention for the sake of Allah (Al-Attas, 1980).

According to Abuddin Nata (2016), character education in Islam comprises four main dimensions:

1. Spiritual dimension – cultivating God-consciousness (*tawḥīd*).
2. Moral dimension – instilling Islamic ethical values.
3. Social dimension – fostering concern and responsibility toward others.
4. Intellectual dimension – developing sound and critical thinking abilities.

Thus, character education in Islam represents a holistic process of nurturing the totality of the human being (*kullī al-insān*), oriented toward balance among intellect, heart, and behavior.

The Relevance of *Tazkiyatun Nafs* to Character Education

Al-Ghazali's thought on *tazkiyatun nafs* has significant implications for the development of modern character education. Several points of relevance can be identified:

1. Integration of spiritual and moral dimensions. Character education often tends to be

cognitive and normative, whereas *tazkiyatun nafs* emphasizes a deeper spiritual dimension. The process of soul purification cultivates inner sensitivity and directs learning motivation toward seeking Allah's pleasure rather than merely worldly achievement.

2. Education through role modeling (*uswah ḥasanah*). Al-Ghazali emphasizes that teachers are central figures in moral education. The moral character of the teacher serves as a reflection for learners in cultivating values such as honesty, patience, and sincerity (al-Ghazali, *Ayyuha al-Walad*, 2001).
3. Character formation through habituation and spiritual discipline (*riyāḍah*). Moral values cannot be internalized without continuous practice. *Riyāḍah al-nafs* as taught by al-Ghazali represents a form of character education based on spiritual habituation.
4. Education based on self-awareness (*muḥāsabah* and *murāqabah*). In modern education, self-reflection is an essential method for building integrity. This aligns with al-Ghazali's emphasis on *muḥāsabah* as a means of moral introspection.
5. The ultimate goal of education: true happiness (*al-sa'ādah*). Character education from the perspective of *tazkiyatun nafs* not only produces socially moral individuals, but also leads to inner tranquility and closeness to Allah SWT—an authentic form of happiness.

Thus, *tazkiyatun nafs* in al-Ghazali's thought provides a strong philosophical framework for the development of integral Islamic character education encompassing intellectual, spiritual, moral, and emotional dimensions.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research approach. According to Zed (2014), library research is conducted by examining and analyzing written sources that are relevant to the object of study, without engaging in field research.

The approach adopted in this study is both philosophical and pedagogical, as it seeks to explore the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* within the framework of al-Ghazali's thought and to analyze its implications for the concept of character education from the perspective of Islamic education. Bogdan and Taylor (1993) explain that qualitative research aims to understand phenomena in depth through the interpretation of meaning within specific contexts. In this regard, the researcher interprets the meaning of moral education and character formation as conceptualized by al-Ghazali through classical texts (*turāth*), particularly *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*.

The primary sources of this study are the works of Imam al-Ghazali that contain his ideas on *tazkiyatun nafs* and moral education, namely:

1. Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2002.
2. Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *Kimiya' al-Sa'adah* (*The Alchemy of Happiness*). Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 2005.
3. Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *Ayyuha al-Walad*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2001.

These three works serve as the principal sources for understanding the concept of soul purification, methods of moral cultivation, and moral education according to al-Ghazali.

Results
The Essence of *Tazkiyatun Nafs* in the Thought of Imam al-Ghazali

The findings of this study indicate that the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* in the thought of Imam al-Ghazali constitutes the primary foundation of the entire system of moral education and human character formation. In *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, al-Ghazali emphasizes that the success of education is not determined solely by the breadth of knowledge, but rather by the purity of the soul and the readiness of the heart to receive and practice the truth.

Al-Ghazali views the soul (*nafs*) as a dynamic entity possessing a dual potential—inclining either toward goodness or toward evil. Therefore, *tazkiyatun nafs* is understood as a conscious and continuous process of purifying the soul from blameworthy traits (*al-akhlaq al-*

mazmumah) and adorning it with praiseworthy qualities (*al-akhlaq al-mahmudah*). This process is not instantaneous, but rather unfolds through systematic and well-directed spiritual stages.

These findings affirm that *tazkiyatun nafs*, according to al-Ghazali, is not merely a normative ethical concept, but a form of inner education that touches the deepest dimensions of human personality. Education that is not accompanied by *tazkiyatun nafs* is regarded by al-Ghazali as imbalanced and potentially producing individuals who are intellectually intelligent yet morally weak.

The Structure of the Human Soul and the Urgency of Soul Purification

Analysis of al-Ghazali's works shows that his understanding of *tazkiyatun nafs* cannot be separated from his conception of the structure of the human soul. Al-Ghazali divides the soul into three main levels: *an-nafs al-ammarah bi al-su'*, *an-nafs al-lawwamah*, and *an-nafs al-muthma'innah*. These three levels depict the continuously evolving spiritual conditions of human beings.

A soul that has not been purified tends to be dominated by desire, egoism, and worldly orientation, resulting in deviant behavior. Therefore, according to al-Ghazali, education must be directed toward transforming the soul from the state of *ammarah* to *muthma'innah* through a planned process of *tazkiyah*. In this context, character education is insufficient if it merely regulates external behavior; it must address the root of moral problems, namely the condition of the heart and the inner consciousness of learners.

These findings demonstrate that al-Ghazali had far surpassed a behavioristic approach to character education. He emphasizes that genuine character transformation can only occur when accompanied by a transformation of consciousness and life orientation.

Stages and Methods of *Tazkiyatun Nafs* as a Process of Character Education

The findings reveal that al-Ghazali proposes stages and methods of *tazkiyatun nafs* that have direct implications for character education, including:

1) Mujahadah: Moral Discipline and Self-Control. *Mujahadah* is understood as a serious struggle against base desires and negative tendencies within the human self. In the educational context, *mujahadah* functions as a means of cultivating self-discipline, emotional control, and moral steadfastness. Character education oriented toward *tazkiyatun nafs* requires learners to become accustomed to confronting difficulties and consciously restraining negative impulses.

2) Riyadhah al-Nafs: Habituation and Character Training. *Riyadhah al-nafs* refers to spiritual and moral training carried out repeatedly until good habits are formed. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that moral character can be shaped just as skills can be trained. These findings affirm that character formation requires a consistent process of habituation, whether through acts of worship, etiquette, or everyday social behavior.

3) Muhasabah and Muraqabah: Internal Moral Awareness. Al-Ghazali stresses *muhasabah* (self-introspection) and *muraqabah* (awareness of Allah's constant supervision) as the core of self-regulation. In character education, these methods function to develop internal moral awareness, so that learners behave ethically not due to external pressure, but out of spiritual consciousness.

4) Tawbah and the Purification of the Heart. *Tawbah* is viewed by al-Ghazali as the primary gateway to soul purification. Character education grounded in *tazkiyatun nafs* does not eliminate the possibility of error, but rather emphasizes reflection, self- improvement, and sustained moral commitment.

Implications of the Concept of *Tazkiyatun Nafs* for Character Education

The findings show that the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* in al-Ghazali's thought has highly significant implications for character education, both philosophically and practically.

First, *tazkiyatun nafs* positions the spiritual dimension as the foundation of character

education. Character education is not solely oriented toward the formation of positive social behavior, but also toward strengthening God-consciousness and a meaningful life orientation.

Second, character education based on *tazkiyatun nafs* demands the integration of knowledge, spiritual experience, and moral practice. Values such as honesty, responsibility, and discipline are not sufficient to be taught cognitively, but must be cultivated through spiritual experience and behavioral habituation.

Third, the role of educators becomes highly strategic. In al-Ghazali's perspective, educators are not merely instructors, but *murabbi* and moral exemplars who guide learners through the process of soul purification. The educator's role modeling becomes the primary instrument in the internalization of character values.

Fourth, character education based on *tazkiyatun nafs* is oriented toward the formation of sustainable intrinsic character. Learners are expected to exercise self-control, act honestly, and demonstrate responsibility even in the absence of external supervision.

The Relevance of the Concept of *Tazkiyatun Nafs* in Contemporary Education

The analysis indicates that the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* is highly relevant to the challenges of character education in the modern era. The phenomena of moral degradation, crises of integrity, and spiritual emptiness amid technological advancement underscore the importance of educational approaches that address the inner dimension of the human being.

Al-Ghazali's concept offers a holistic and transformative paradigm of character education that not only shapes outward behavior, but also transforms life orientation and the structure of learners' consciousness. In the context of contemporary Islamic education in Indonesia, *tazkiyatun nafs* can serve as a philosophical foundation for developing character education that is more substantive, spiritual, and sustainable.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion presented, it can be concluded that the concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* in the thought of Imam al-Ghazali constitutes the principal foundation for holistic moral and character formation. *Tazkiyatun nafs* is not understood merely as an individual spiritual teaching, but as an integral educational framework encompassing cognitive, affective, spiritual, and behavioral dimensions.

Imam al-Ghazali views the ultimate goal of education as the formation of the complete human being (*al-insan al-kamil*)—an individual who is not only intellectually intelligent, but also possesses a purified soul, a sound life orientation, and noble moral character. Therefore, character education according to al-Ghazali must begin with the purification of the soul from blameworthy traits (*takhalli*), followed by the adornment of the soul with virtuous values (*tahalli*), and directed toward the attainment of spiritual closeness to Allah SWT (*tajalli*).

This study finds that the stages and methods of *tazkiyatun nafs*—such as *mujahadah*, *riyadhah al-nafs*, *muhasabah*, *muraqabah*, and *tawbah*—are highly relevant to the principles of contemporary character education. What distinguishes al-Ghazali's approach from modern character education concepts is his emphasis on internal moral consciousness and the divine dimension as the primary drivers of ethical behavior.

Thus, character education based on *tazkiyatun nafs* does not stop at the formation of social compliance or normative behavior, but is directed toward the development of intrinsic character rooted in spiritual awareness and moral responsibility to Allah SWT. Such education is believed to be more sustainable and resilient against negative environmental influences.

In the context of contemporary Islamic education in Indonesia, al-Ghazali's concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* offers an alternative paradigm capable of addressing problems of moral degradation, crises of role modeling, and the tendency of education to overemphasize cognitive aspects. This concept enriches the discourse of Islamic educational thought with a transformative, humanistic, and spiritual approach.

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