

THE CONCEPT OF *ZUHD* ACCORDING TO HASAN AL-BASRĪ AND IMĀM AL-GHAZĀLĪ

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Received: 31-01-2026

Revised: 16-02-2026

Accepted: 16-02-2026

INFO ARTICLE	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords: <i>Zuhud, Hasan al-Basri, Imam al-Ghazali, Sufism, Islamic Spirituality</i></p>	<p>This study aims to explore and compare the concept of <i>zuhud</i> according to two prominent figures in classical Sufism, Hasan al-Basri and Imam al-Ghazali. The novelty of this research lies in its comparative analysis of the two scholars' perspectives, highlighting both their similarities and differences within the historical, spiritual, and ethical contexts of Muslim life. The study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a library research approach, utilizing various literary sources such as books, journals, and relevant scholarly works.</p> <p>The findings reveal that, according to Hasan al-Basri, <i>zuhud</i> means perceiving the world merely as a bridge to the hereafter, without attachment to material wealth or worldly pleasures. For him, <i>zuhud</i> encompasses an attitude of trust (<i>tawakkul</i>), fear (<i>khawf</i>), and hope (<i>raja'</i>), which complement and balance one another. In contrast, Imam al-Ghazali defines <i>zuhud</i> as complete reliance on what has been decreed by Allah rather than on one's own possessions. He considers <i>zuhud</i> as a means of purifying the heart, consisting of three essential aspects: knowledge (<i>ilm</i>), spiritual state (<i>haal</i>), and practice (<i>amal</i>), each with its own levels and defining characteristics.</p> <p>The study concludes that, despite living in different historical and intellectual contexts, both Hasan al-Basri and Imam al-Ghazali share a common essence in their teachings: <i>zuhud</i> represents detachment from worldly attachments as a path toward achieving closeness to Allah SWT.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Sufism, commonly referred to as Islamic mysticism, seeks to attain a direct and intimate relationship with God. Western orientalisks generally use the term *Sufism* to describe this phenomenon. The term

is exclusively associated with mysticism in Islam and is not applied to mystical traditions in other religions (Harun Nasution, 2010). The relationship emphasized in Sufism highlights the awareness of humans as servants who continuously devote themselves to Allah SWT. Consequently, there emerged a group of Muslims who were not content with merely being close to God, but aspired to experience an even deeper sense of closeness to Him (Harun Nasution, 1985).

During the time of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, the term *tasawwuf* had not yet been introduced; however, the practices associated with it had already been exemplified by the Prophet himself. For instance, his way of life was characterized by simplicity in dress, food, and drink. Moreover, he regularly performed night prayers, often to the point of tears, and consistently demonstrated gratitude and patience (Mustafa Zahri, 1985). Such a way of life was also recommended by the Prophet Muhammad SAW to his followers, as his life exemplified the essence of a pure Sufi lifestyle and represented the true spirit of Islamic living. This model of life was later emulated by the Khulafā' al-Rāshidīn and subsequent Islamic leaders.

During the reign of Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān, moral deviations began to emerge. His son, Yazīd, was known for his indulgence in drinking and his neglect of religious teachings, largely due to the luxurious lifestyle he pursued. Among the Umayyad caliphs, only Caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz (717–720 CE) was renowned for his piety, adherence to Islamic principles, and simple way of life qualities that distinguished him from other caliphs who were immersed in luxury. A similar situation occurred during the Abbasid period: al-Amīn, the son of Hārūn al-Rashīd, led a life far removed from piety. Consequently, upon the succession of leadership, a conflict arose between the two brothers, al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn (Asmaran As 2002). Similar conditions continued into the Abbasid period, where the pursuit of power and luxury fueled the ascetics' concern for the spiritual integrity of the people.

Observing such phenomena, the early Sufi leaders distanced themselves from worldly luxury and embraced a life of simplicity, following the example set by the Prophet Muhammad SAW and the *Khulafā' al-Rāshidīn*. Therefore, this study aims to examine the concept of *ḡubd* as articulated by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and Imām al-Ghazālī, two prominent figures in the field of Sufism, particularly with regard to their perspectives on asceticism (*ḡubd*).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method using a library research approach. The data sources are derived from various literature related to the concept of *ḡubd* according to Hasan al-Basri and Imam al-Ghazali, including books, journals, and other relevant scholarly works. Data were collected through documentation techniques by reviewing, recording, and analyzing the content of these sources. The data analysis was conducted descriptively and analytically by systematically describing the thoughts of both scholars, followed by comparing their similarities and differences regarding the concept of *ḡubd*. The results of the analysis were then interpreted to obtain a deeper understanding of the meaning of *ḡubd* from the perspective of classical Islamic Sufism

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hasan Al-Basrī

Biography of Hasan Al-Basrī

Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥasan ibn Yasār, better known as Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, was a prominent figure in early Islamic mysticism (*Sufism*) during the first and second centuries of the Hijri era. He was born in Medina in 21 AH / 642 CE and passed away in 110 AH / 728 CE in Basra. Hasan al-Basri grew up in an environment close to the Prophet's companions, which formed the foundation of his spirituality from an early age.

By the age of twelve, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī had memorized the Qur'an, and at fourteen, he and his family moved to the city of

Basra, Iraq. From that time onward, he became known as Ḥasan al-Baṣrī “Ḥasan of Basra.” During that period, Basra was recognized as a center of learning and a hub of rapid intellectual and cultural development. While residing in Basra, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī played an active role in pursuing knowledge. He studied *tafsīr* (Qur’anic exegesis), *ḥadīth*, and *qirā’at* under the guidance of Ibn ‘Abbās, and acquired knowledge of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), language, and literature from other Companions of the Prophet. While his parents became wealthy through trade, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī began delivering religious counsel to the public at the age of twenty (IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Writing Team, 1992).

Numerous testimonies from various scholars highlight the exceptional qualities and virtues of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. One such statement comes from Abū Qatādah, who said: “Teach this shaykh! I have personally witnessed that among the *ṭabī’in*, there is none who most closely resembles the Companions of the Prophet except this man” (Hamka 1984). He became renowned for his spiritual life, which is frequently discussed in classical works on Sufism such as *Qūt al-Qulūb* by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* by al-Sha‘rānī, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’* by Abū Nu‘aym, and several others (Asmaran As 2002).

Ḥasan al-Baṣrī lived in a social environment characterized by extravagance, particularly among the upper class. This prompted him to reject such a lifestyle and to openly criticize those who indulged in it. In response to these moral and social conditions, he began holding religious gatherings as an expression of concern for his community. This movement eventually established Ḥasan al-Baṣrī as a central figure in the development of Sufi life in Basra. Furthermore, he is often regarded as the founder of the *ṣūḥb* school (*madrasah al-ṣūḥb*) in the city of Basra (Ahmad Bahjat, 1997).

In the year 110 AH, on a Friday night in the month of Rajab, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī passed away at the age of eighty. The people of Basra attended his funeral with profound sorrow, mourning the loss of a great scholar pious, virtuous, and eloquent in speech.

Thoughts of Zuhud Hasan Al-Basrī

Ḥasan al-Baṣrī was a Sufi *tābi'ī* known for his wisdom, piety, and asceticism (*zuhd*). He received *ḥadīth* from several Companions of the Prophet and narrated that 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (r.a.) had been granted profound knowledge, which deeply impressed him. The emergence of *zuhd* thought and movements was closely related to the political turmoil among Muslims during that period. Initially, *zuhd* arose from purely religious motives; however, over time, it became influenced by various external factors. This movement grew increasingly prominent during the Umayyad era, and one of its foremost proponents was Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (Syukur Amin, 1997).

During the reign of Mu'āwiyah (661–680 CE), significant changes began to take place. His son and successor, Yazīd (680–683 CE), was known for his indulgence in drinking and moral laxity. This situation prompted many individuals to adopt a more religious and ascetic outlook. Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, for instance, chose to withdraw from a society that he perceived as being on the brink of moral collapse. Those who had known the Prophet or lived close to his era were compelled to take such a stance due to the widespread moral decay among the upper classes. Convinced of the righteousness of their position, they openly condemned such corruption and warned that divine punishment would soon befall those responsible (Arthur John Arberry 1985).

According to Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *zuhd* means regarding this world merely as a bridge to be crossed, without building anything upon it. The fundamental concept of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's Sufism is *zuhd* toward worldly life rejecting its splendor and directing one's devotion solely toward Allah. This includes *tawakkul* (trust in God), *kehanf* (fear), and *raja'* (hope), all of which are inseparable. One should not fear Allah alone, but accompany that fear with hope fearing His wrath while simultaneously hoping for His mercy and bounty (Hamka 1984).

Ḥasan al-Baṣrī classified *zuhd* into two levels. The first, or elementary level, refers to abstaining from what is forbidden (*ḥarām*), while the higher level involves renouncing even what is

permissible (*halāl*). Ḥasan al-Baṣrī himself was believed to have attained the second level of *zuhd*, which he expressed through practices such as eating little, avoiding attachment to food and drink, and maintaining simplicity in his lifestyle. He once stated, “If I could find a means to avoid eating altogether, I would have done so.” He also remarked, “I would be content to eat once and be full forever, just as cement fills and remains solid forever” (Abd al-Hakim Hasan, 1954).

According to Hamka, there are several key principles of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī’s concept of *zuhd*, which include the following:

1. Your fear that leads to a peaceful heart is better than a sense of peace that results in fear.
2. The world is a field of deeds; whoever faces it with detachment and *zuhd* will be blessed and reap its benefits. However, whoever lives in this world while his heart clings to it will ultimately face misery, for he will be swept away by the passing of time that he cannot endure.
3. Reflection (*tafakkur*) leads a person toward goodness and encourages righteous action, while remorse for evil deeds leads to their abandonment. Worldly possessions, no matter how abundant, can never equal the eternal blessings of the hereafter, even if they are few. Guard yourselves against this fleeting and deceptive world.
4. This world is like an old, bent widow.
5. A true believer grieves in the morning and in the evening, for he lives between two fears: the fear of past sins and the retribution that Allah may impose, and the fear of what lies ahead—of death and the dangers it brings.
6. It is therefore fitting for a believer to remain mindful that death constantly threatens and that the Day of Judgment inevitably approaches.
7. Indeed, the many sorrows of this world strengthen the spirit toward pious deeds. (Hamka 1984).

Imām Al-Ghazālī

Biography of Imām Al-Ghazālī

Imām al-Ghazālī's full name is Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī al-Ghazālī. In his childhood, he was known as Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. After marrying and having a son named Ḥāmid, he became known by the *kunya* Abū Ḥāmid. The former derives from the name of his birthplace, the small village of *Gaḏālah*, while the latter refers to his father's profession as a weaver (*ghaḏḏāl*), a maker and seller of woven cloth. Al-Ghazālī was born in the city of Ṭūs, in the province of Khurāsān, Persia (modern-day Iran), in 450 AH / 1058 CE (Zainal Abidin Ahmad, 1975)

Al-Ghazālī's father possessed a strong intellectual spirit and high aspirations. In his spare time after completing his work, he would often visit the *fuqahā'* (Islamic jurists) and pray to Allah SWT to bless him with intelligent children endowed with vast knowledge. Shortly before his death, Al-Ghazālī's father entrusted his two sons, Al-Ghazālī and his brother Aḥmad, to one of his close friends who was an expert in the field of Sufism, instructing him to guide and educate them to become great scholars using the remainder of his estate. When the inheritance was eventually depleted, their father's friend advised Al-Ghazālī and his brother to reside in a free boarding school established by the vizier Niẓām al-Mulk in the city of Ṭūs (Zainal Abidin Ahmad, 1975).

In 484 AH / 1091 CE, al-Ghazālī was appointed as a professor at the Niẓāmiyyah University in Baghdad. During his tenure in Baghdad, al-Ghazālī experienced a profound spiritual crisis and reached the height of doubt. Consequently, he renounced his professorship and relinquished his wealth, keeping only what was necessary for his journey in pursuit of spiritual knowledge. His travels took him to several regions, including Shām (Syria), Palestine, Cairo, Mecca, and Medina, before he eventually returned to Nīshāpūr in 499 AH / 1105 CE. Upon his return, al-Ghazālī was reappointed to lead the Niẓāmiyyah University; however, his tenure was brief, as he aspired to establish a Sufi-oriented educational

institution in his hometown of Ṭūs. Imām al-Ghazālī passed away at the age of fifty-five on the 14th of Jumādā al-Ākhirah, 505 AH / 1111 CE.

According to Badawi, al-Ghazālī authored a total of forty-seven works. Among the titles of his books are as follows (Ahmad Zaini, 2016):

1. Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*) a comprehensive work discussing various branches of religious knowledge.
2. Tahāfut al-Falāsifah (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*) a critical examination of the views of philosophers from an Islamic theological perspective.
3. al-Iqtīṣād fī al-I'tiqād (*Moderation in Belief*) a concise exposition on the principles of 'ilm al-kalām (Islamic theology).
4. al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl (*Deliverance from Error*) an autobiographical account explaining the purpose and secrets of true knowledge.
5. Jawāhir al-Qur'ān (*The Jewels of the Qur'an*) a discussion of the spiritual meanings and hidden wisdom contained in the Qur'an.
6. Mīzān al-'Amal (*The Criterion of Action*) a philosophical reflection on ethics and religious practice.
7. al-Maqāṣid al-Asnā fī Ma'ānī Asmā' Allāh al-Ḥusnā (*The Most Beautiful Names of God*) an exposition on the meanings and theological implications of God's names.
8. Fayṣal al-Tafrīqah bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqah (*The Decisive Criterion between Islam and Heresy*) a treatise distinguishing true Islamic belief from heretical deviation.
9. al-Qistās al-Mustaqīm (*The Just Balance*) a methodological work on reasoning and resolving intellectual or doctrinal disagreements.

Thoughts of Zuhud Imām Al-Ghazālī

The concept of *zuhd* according to Imām al-Ghazālī is not merely limited to abstaining from what is lawful (*ḥalāl*) or

renouncing wealth. For al-Ghazali, the essence of asceticism is not material poverty, but rather a shift in the orientation of belief: from dependence on personal possessions to absolute dependence on the decree of Allah. According to Imām al-Ghazālī, the life of *zuhd* consists of three dimensions: its *essence*, *foundation*, and *fruit*. The essence of *zuhd* is to detach oneself from worldly matters and turn away from them through sincere obedience to Allah. The foundation of *zuhd* lies in knowledge and the divine light that illuminates the heart, which enables one to realize that the light of the hereafter is far more enduring than the fleeting nature of this world just as fruit is more valuable than mere ornaments. The fruit of *zuhd* is a sense of contentment and gratitude for the blessings bestowed by Allah SWT (Ismail Yakub, 1998).

Imām al-Ghazālī strongly opposed certain scholars' interpretations of *zuhd* that defined it merely as refraining from efforts to fulfill one's material needs for the future, an attitude often referred to in religious terminology as *wara'* or *wirā'i*. He argued that such an understanding is inappropriate for the general public, as even the unjust (*ẓālim*) and unbelievers (*kuḥfār*) possess a natural desire to accumulate wealth. Consequently, this misconception leads to the false belief that the poor are inherently righteous while the wealthy are necessarily unjust or unbelieving. According to Imām al-Ghazālī, such an attitude marks the beginning of the moral and spiritual decline of religion (Ahmad Zaini Mahmud, 2020).

Imam ghazali said:

“If someone argues that wealth, when likened to what is ḥarām, has become overwhelmingly abundant and intermingled with the unlawful to an immeasurable degree, then our response is as follows: in our view, to abandon such wealth is an act of wara' (pious caution), while to make use of it is not ḥarām, since its origin is ḥalāl and it does not become forbidden except through certain and explicit indications. One should only increase what is necessary and strive to act in accordance with the principles of religion in managing one's possessions. Therefore, we consider such restraint as a true form of wara', especially for those who seek to follow the spiritual path toward the hereafter. However, it is impossible to apply

this principle in its absolute form, nor should it be incorporated into the general fatwā of society, since the hands of the unjust often extend into the excess wealth of others. Were this understanding applied universally, it would lead to the negation of essential religious obligations such as ḥajj, zakāh, kaffārāt (expiations involving wealth), and other acts of worship connected to material possessions. Consequently, when people are left with nothing beyond their bare necessities, such a fatwā would be both unreasonable and harmful” (Imam Ghazali, Ihya Ulumuddin).

According to Imām al-Ghazālī, *zuhd* consists of three interrelated dimensions: knowledge (‘ilm), state (ḥāl), and action (‘amal). The dimension of knowledge refers to the awareness that the hereafter is far better and everlasting, whereas worldly life is merely temporary and deceptive. The state (ḥāl) of *zuhd* is reflected in a person’s character how one lives within society, interacts with others, and embodies noble morals. Meanwhile, the actions (‘amal) that arise from this inner state of *zuhd* manifest in sincere obedience to Allah SWT through consistent worship, humility, and detachment from worldly attachments.

1. Instilling in the heart a deep love for obedience to Allah.
2. Removing from the heart any attachment to worldly pleasures.
3. Renouncing worldly possessions or anything that leads to spiritual dislike or heedlessness.
4. Detaching the eyes and hands from the love of worldly things.
5. Directing the eyes, hands, and all other limbs toward acts of obedience and devotion (Imam Ghazali, Ihya Ulumuddin).

In his seminal work *Ihya’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, Imām al-Ghazālī categorizes *zuhd* into three distinct levels. The first level is that of the *mutaẓabbid* (one who strives to be ascetic). This is considered the lowest stage of *zuhd*. At this level, an individual outwardly renounces the world and its pleasures, yet the heart still inclines toward worldly desires. Such a person struggles internally, resisting the temptations of material attachment while earnestly striving to remain steadfast in *zuhd*.

The second level refers to those who find it easy to detach themselves from worldly possessions because they regard the world

as base and insignificant. However, their renunciation remains tied to the hope of receiving divine reward in the Hereafter. Thus, their *zuhd* is motivated by the anticipation of recompense from Allah SWT rather than by pure spiritual detachment.

The third and highest level is the *zuhd al-a'la* (the supreme asceticism). At this stage, a person desires nothing except closeness to Allah SWT and seeks no reward or recognition in return. Those who attain this level have reached the peak of spiritual realization (*ma'rifa*) and complete awareness of Allah's presence. Their *zuhd* stems from the understanding of their utter insignificance before Allah SWT, reflecting the purest form of detachment and devotion.

Imām al-Ghazālī asserts that there are three characteristics that distinguish a person who possesses the quality of *zuhd* (asceticism). **First**, when such a person possesses something, he neither rejoices excessively nor grieves when it is lost. He remains composed and exhibits the same attitude in both gain and loss, demonstrating emotional stability and detachment from material possessions.

Second, for one who practices *zuhd*, praise and criticism are regarded as equal. A *zāhid* (ascetic) does not become proud or arrogant when receiving praise, nor does he feel humiliated or saddened when criticized. Instead, he remains grateful in times of appreciation and humble when faced with reproach, maintaining inner tranquility regardless of others' opinions.

Third, the heart of a *zāhid* is filled with love for Allah SWT, leaving no room for worldly attachment. Al-Ghazālī likens this to water and air in a glass when water fills the glass, air is displaced, and vice versa. Similarly, when the heart is occupied with love for Allah SWT, worldly love cannot coexist within it. Thus, a person whose heart is devoted to Allah SWT finds no space for wealth or worldly desires. The main indicator of a *zāhid* according to al-Ghazālī is the independence of the heart; material things may be in physical grasp, but they must not interfere with the space of devotion in the heart. (Zainal Abidin Ahmad, 1975).

CONCLUSION

According to Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *zuhd* is “to treat this world merely as a bridge to be crossed, not as a place on which to build.” The fundamental concept of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī’s Sufism lies in *zuhd* toward the world rejecting its luxuries and directing one’s heart solely toward Allah through *tawakkul* (trust in Allah), *khanf* (fear of Allah), and *raja’* (hope in Allah), all of which are interrelated and inseparable.

Meanwhile, according to Imām al-Ghazālī, *zuhd* means placing greater trust in what is in the hands of Allah than in what is in one’s own possession. He explains that *zuhd* encompasses three dimensions: knowledge (*ilm*), state (*hāl*), and action (*amal*). Furthermore, al-Ghazālī classifies *zuhd* into three levels and identifies three main characteristics, as elaborated in his seminal work *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*.

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