

Resilience and the Cultivation of the Self: A Contemporary Reading of Khwājah ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī's Manāzil al-Sā’irīn

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Abstract

Contemporary psychology has produced an extensive body of research on resilience and psychological well-being, yet this literature has rarely engaged classical Islamic sources of spiritual formation. This article offers a contemporary reading of Khwājah ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī's *Manāzil al-Sā’irīn* (d. 481/1089), a foundational text of practical Sufism structured as an ordered sequence of "stations" (*manāzil*) marking the wayfarer's inner transformation. Rather than treating the text as a purely devotional document, this study asks what resources it offers for understanding resilience, emotion regulation, and meaning-making in the face of adversity. Using a conceptual-mapping method that places the classical stations in dialogue with constructs from resilience psychology—cognitive reappraisal, distress tolerance, locus of control, and post-traumatic growth—the article argues that Anṣārī's schema constitutes an implicit model of psychological hardiness grounded in surrender (*tawakkul*), patience (*ṣabr*), and meaning derived from transcendence. Particular attention is given to the station of *ṣabr* as an anticipation of contemporary resilience theory, and to the advanced stations of love (*maḥabbah*) and subsistence (*baqā’*) as resources for meaning-making beyond hedonic well-being. The article concludes by considering applications and limits of this model for pastoral counseling and mental-health practice, cautioning against conflating spiritual surrender with maladaptive passivity or "spiritual bypass." The study contributes to an emerging conversation between Islamic contemplative traditions and positive psychology.

Keywords: *Manāzil al-Sā’irīn*; resilience; Islamic psychology; spiritual well-being; meaning-making.

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1. Introduction

Resilience has become one of the most productive constructs in contemporary psychology, describing the capacity of individuals to sustain or recover psychological functioning in the face of adversity (Masten 2001, 227; Southwick and Charney 2012, 3–5). As the field has matured, however, researchers have increasingly recognized that resilience is not simply an individual trait but a relational and cultural achievement, shaped by the meaning-systems—religious, spiritual, or philosophical—through which people interpret suffering (Bonanno 2004, 20; Park 2010, 258). Despite this recognition, the empirical and theoretical literature on resilience remains disproportionately oriented toward secular, Euro-American frameworks, with comparatively little sustained engagement with the contemplative and ascetic traditions of Islam.

Among these traditions, the *manāzil* ("stations") literature of classical Sufism offers a particularly rich resource. Khwājah ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī's *Manāzil al-Sā’irīn* (d. 481/1089) maps the wayfarer's journey through one hundred ordered stations, beginning with "awakening" (*yaqzāh*) and culminating in "subsistence" (*baqā’*) (Anṣārī 2014, 12–18; Kashani 1994, 45). Although composed as a work of devotional and metaphysical instruction, the text's staged architecture of inner transformation—moving from disorientation, through disciplined endurance, to stable equanimity and renewed selfhood—bears a striking structural resemblance to models of resilience developed independently within contemporary psychology.

Existing scholarship on Anṣārī has approached *Manāzil al-Sā’irīn* primarily as an object of textual, doctrinal, or comparative-mystical study (Chittick 1992, 24–31; Nasr 2007, 88–94; Renard 2004, 112–120). A parallel and more recent body of work in "Islamic psychology" has sought to integrate classical Islamic sources into clinical and counseling practice (Haque 2004, 358–362; Keshavarzi et al. 2020, 5–12; Rothman 2021, 3–9), but this literature has drawn mainly on Qur’anic and prophetic material rather than on the more technical vocabulary of the stations literature. The specific resources of *Manāzil al-Sā’irīn* for resilience theory have not, to my knowledge, been systematically examined.

This article addresses that gap. It asks: what does Anṣārī's staged model of spiritual conduct contribute to a contemporary understanding of resilience and psychological well-being, and under what conditions can this contribution be responsibly applied in mental-health contexts? The method is conceptual mapping: classical stations are first read in their own devotional register, then placed in correspondence with constructs from resilience and positive psychology, and finally assessed for their practical and clinical implications.¹ The remainder of the article proceeds in four parts: a review of conceptual foundations in both traditions; a station-by-station analysis; a discussion synthesizing the findings into an integrated model; and a concluding assessment of applications and cautions for practice.

2. Conceptual Foundations

2.1. Resilience and Psychological Well-Being

Resilience is generally defined as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, or significant sources of stress (Masten 2001, 228). Contemporary theory distinguishes resilience from mere absence of pathology, framing it instead as an active, often effortful process involving specific psychological skills: cognitive reappraisal, or the reinterpretation of a stressful situation to alter its emotional impact (Gross 1998, 275–278); distress tolerance, the capacity to withstand negative affect without resorting to avoidance; and a stable, internalized sense of agency, or locus of control (Rotter 1966, 1–5). Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder (1982, 8–12) further distinguish "primary control," the attempt to change external circumstances, from "secondary control," the effort to align oneself psychologically with circumstances that cannot be changed—a distinction of particular relevance below.

Alongside resilience, the related construct of eudaimonic well-being emphasizes purpose, self-acceptance, and positive relatedness over mere hedonic satisfaction (Ryff 1989, 1071–1074). Viktor Frankl's logotherapy adds a further dimension, arguing that the capacity to locate meaning—even, or especially, in suffering—is a decisive factor in psychological survival and growth (Frankl 2006, 76–80). Building on this insight, Park (2010, 259–266) has proposed an integrative model of "meaning-making" in which global beliefs and values are used to reappraise stressful events, while Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004, 4–8) describe "post-traumatic growth" as a positive transformation that can exceed pre-adversity functioning, distinguishing growth from mere recovery or resilience narrowly defined (Bonanno 2004, 21–23).

2.2. Religion, Spirituality, and Coping

A substantial literature within the psychology of religion has examined how religious belief and practice function as coping resources. Pargament's (1997, 90–98) influential framework distinguishes "positive" religious coping—including seeking spiritual support, benevolent reappraisal, and collaborative religious problem-solving—from "negative" religious coping, such as passive deferral to God or interpreting suffering as divine punishment, which is associated with poorer mental-health outcomes. Koenig's (2012, 2–6) review of the clinical literature similarly finds that religious and spiritual engagement is associated with lower rates of depression and greater resilience, though the association depends heavily on the *form* that religious coping takes. This distinction between adaptive and maladaptive modes of religious coping is essential background for the analysis that follows, and is returned to in the discussion of clinical cautions in section 5.3.

2.3. *Manāzil al-Sā'irīn* as a Resource for Well-Being

Manāzil al-Sā'irīn organizes its hundred stations into three broad divisions: the "beginnings" (*bidāyāt*), concerned with the initial reordering of the self; the intermediate "stations of transaction and conduct" (*mu'āmalāt*), concerned with the stabilization of virtue; and the "states and realities" (*aḥwāl wa ḥaqā'iq*), concerned with the deepening and eventual transformation of inner life (Kashani

1994, 45–52). This tripartite architecture is read here not as a set of therapeutic techniques—Anṣārī's own purpose was thoroughly devotional rather than clinical—but as an indigenous phenomenology of resilient selfhood: an internally coherent account of how a person moves from disorientation to durable stability under conditions of hardship, formulated centuries before the emergence of resilience science.²

3. Analysis: Stations of Spiritual Conduct and Dimensions of Resilience

3.1. Awakening (*Yaqzah*) and Cognitive Reappraisal

The journey in *Manāzil al-Sā'irīn* opens with *yaqzah*, the moment in which the individual is startled out of heedlessness (*ghaflah*) and begins to perceive his situation, and his responsibility within it, differently (Motie, Delshad Tehrani, and Asadi 2013, 35). This reorientation of perception, prior to any change in external circumstance, closely parallels what emotion-regulation research terms cognitive reappraisal: the reinterpretation of a situation's meaning in order to alter its emotional trajectory (Gross 1998, 275). In both frameworks, adaptive change begins not with the alteration of events but with a shift in the interpretive frame through which those events are apprehended.

3.2. Repentance (*Tawbah*) and Active Coping

Tawbah, the first deliberate act of the wayfarer, involves a conscious reordering of one's conduct and commitments (Kashani 1994, 307–310). Unlike avoidance-based coping, which is associated with poorer long-term adjustment, *tawbah* requires direct engagement with one's failures and an active, effortful reconstruction of behavior—a pattern consistent with what resilience research identifies as "active coping," one of the strongest predictors of favorable adjustment trajectories after adversity (Bonanno 2004, 22–24). Anṣārī's insistence that *tawbah* is a sustained process with distinct conditions and degrees, rather than a single emotional episode, further anticipates the contemporary understanding of coping as an ongoing regulatory effort rather than a discrete event.

3.3. Case Study: Patience (*Ṣabr*) and Distress Tolerance

The station of *ṣabr* offers the clearest point of contact with resilience theory and is examined here as a case study. In Anṣārī's account, *ṣabr* is not passive endurance but an active steadfastness that preserves moral and spiritual direction under pressure, difficulty, or delay (Kashani 1994, 183–189). This formulation corresponds closely to distress tolerance—the capacity to withstand negative affect without recourse to avoidance or impulsive relief—and to what Duckworth (2016, 54–58) terms "grit": sustained passion and perseverance toward long-term goals despite setbacks.

A brief illustrative vignette may clarify the clinical relevance of this correspondence. Consider a client presenting with acute grief following bereavement, who reports an urge to numb distress through avoidance (substance use, social withdrawal, or compulsive distraction). A counselor working within an Islamically integrated framework might draw on the *ṣabr* schema not to instruct the client toward stoic suppression, but to reframe endurance as an active, meaningful orientation—distinguishing, as Anṣārī does, between mere endurance of pain and steadfastness *within* a meaningful trajectory (Kashani 1994,

187). This reframing is structurally similar to acceptance-based interventions in contemporary distress-tolerance training, which likewise distinguish tolerating discomfort from avoiding or suppressing it (Gross 1998, 280–282).

3.4. Trust in God (*Tawakkul*) and Locus of Control

Tawakkul denotes the conscious entrusting of outcomes to divine power, combined—crucially—with continued individual effort and responsibility (Kashani 1994, 285–291). This dual structure maps closely onto Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder's (1982, 8–12) distinction between primary control (efforts to change one's circumstances) and secondary control (psychological accommodation to circumstances that cannot be changed). Read this way, *tawakkul* functions as a culturally embedded mechanism of secondary control: it does not eliminate primary-control effort but relieves the individual of the anxiety generated by the illusion of total control, a mechanism with clear relevance to anxiety-related presentations in clinical practice (Bandura 1997, 145–148).

3.5. Contentment (*Ridā*), Tranquility (*Sakīnah*), and Emotion Regulation

The stations of *ridā* and *sakīnah* describe a settled, non-reactive emotional stability achieved through the sustained practice of the preceding stations (Kashani 1994, 411–413). This state should be distinguished from emotional suppression, which research consistently links to poorer well-being; it more closely resembles what Gross (1998, 285–288) describes as regulation through reappraisal and acceptance rather than avoidance. In Ryff's (1989, 1071) terms, the settledness described at this station corresponds to the well-being dimensions of environmental mastery and autonomy—a stable relationship to one's circumstances that does not depend on their alteration.

3.6. Love (*Maḥabbah*), Divine Unity (*Tawḥīd*), and Meaning-Making

At the station of *maḥabbah*, moral and spiritual conduct is transformed from externally imposed obligation into intrinsically motivated desire (Kashani 1994, 337–342). *Tawḥīd*, in turn, describes a unification of perception, intention, and conduct around a single transcendent center of value. Read through the lens of meaning-making theory, these stations describe the endpoint that Park (2010, 262–265) identifies as the successful integration of a stressful appraisal into one's global system of meaning—and they echo Frankl's (2006, 76–80) claim that a love or purpose oriented beyond the self is among the most reliable sources of psychological endurance under extreme adversity.

3.7. Annihilation (*Fanā'*), Subsistence (*Baqā'*), and Post-Traumatic Growth

The final stations, *fanā'* ("annihilation" of egoic self-regard) and *baqā'* ("subsistence," or renewed abiding), describe a radical dissolution and reconstruction of selfhood (Kashani 1994, 411–413). This trajectory bears a notable resemblance to post-traumatic growth, which Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004, 4–6) define not as a return to a prior baseline but as a qualitative transformation of one's assumptive world following the shattering of previous certainties. Where resilience-as-recovery models describe a return to equilibrium (Bonanno 2004, 20), the *fanā'*–*baqā'* sequence more closely resembles growth models in which the post-adversity self is structurally different from, and in important respects more integrated than, the self that preceded the disruption.

Station	Classical Meaning	Resilience / Well-Being Construct
<i>Yaqṣah</i> (Awakening)	Emergence from heedlessness	Cognitive reappraisal (Gross 1998)
<i>Tawbah</i> (Repentance)	Volitional reordering of life	Active coping and agency (Bonanno 2004)
<i>Ṣabr</i> (Patience)	Steadfastness under hardship	Distress tolerance and grit (Duckworth 2016)
<i>Tawakkul</i> (Trust in God)	Entrusting affairs to God amid effort	Secondary control (Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder 1982)
<i>Riḍā</i> / <i>Sakīnah</i> (Contentment/Tranquility)	Calm acceptance and inner stability	Emotion regulation (Gross 1998); psychological well-being (Ryff 1989)
<i>Maḥabbah</i> / <i>Tawḥīd</i> (Love/Divine Unity)	Intrinsic motivation and unity of intention	Meaning-making (Park 2010); logotherapy (Frankl 2006)
<i>Fanāʾ</i> / <i>Baqāʾ</i> (Annihilation/Subsistence)	Dissolution and renewal of the self	Post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004)

Table 1. Correspondences between the stations of *Manāzil al-Sāʾirīn* and constructs in resilience and well-being psychology

4. Discussion: Toward an Islamic Model of Resilience

Read together, the seven stations examined above suggest an integrated model in which resilience is not a discrete trait activated at the moment of crisis but the cumulative product of a staged formation of the self, undertaken well before adversity strikes. This has two implications that distinguish Anṣārī's implicit model from many contemporary resilience frameworks. First, meaning-making here is prior to, rather than merely consequent upon, coping: the wayfarer's capacity to tolerate hardship at the station of *ṣabr* depends on orientations toward transcendence already partially established at the earlier stations of *yaqṣah* and *tawbah*, rather than being manufactured in the moment of crisis itself (compare Park 2010, 266, on the role of pre-existing global meaning systems in shaping situational appraisal).

Second, the model is explicitly relational and transcendent rather than individualistic: resilience is not framed as self-sufficiency but as a disciplined form of dependence—on God, and, in the wider Sufi tradition, on a community of practice and guidance (Chittick 1992, 27–30). This positions Anṣārī's schema closer to communal and spiritually embedded models of resilience found in some non-Western psychological traditions than to the more individualistic

trait models still common in mainstream resilience research (Southwick and Charney 2012, 10–12).

5. Implications for Mental Health Practice

5.1. Clinical and Counseling Applications

For clinicians working with Muslim clients, the stations schema offers a culturally and religiously congruent vocabulary for interventions that might otherwise be introduced in secular clinical terms. The *yaqzāh-tawbah* sequence, for example, can scaffold psychoeducation around cognitive reappraisal and active coping, while the *ṣabr* station offers an idiom for distress-tolerance work that does not require clients to set aside their religious framework (Keshavarzi et al. 2020, 45–52). Such integration is consistent with broader calls within Islamic psychology for interventions that are religiously congruent rather than merely religiously tolerant (Rothman 2021, 15–18).

5.2. Pastoral and Community Care

Beyond the clinical setting, the stations model may also inform pastoral and community-based support, including bereavement groups, premarital counseling, and mentorship structures organized around religious institutions. Because the model frames spiritual development as inherently staged and gradual, it offers religious leaders a way of normalizing incremental progress—resisting the expectation, sometimes implicit in devotional discourse, that mature acceptance or contentment should be immediate rather than cultivated over time.

5.3. Cautions: Distinguishing Healthy Surrender from Spiritual Bypass

This model requires an important caveat. The construct of "spiritual bypass"—the use of spiritual beliefs or practices to avoid confronting painful feelings or unresolved psychological issues (Welwood 2000, 11–14)—describes a genuine clinical risk in the application of *tawakkul*. Pargament's (1997, 94–97) distinction between positive and negative religious coping is directly relevant here: an appeal to *tawakkul* that functions as passive fatalism, or that forecloses appropriate help-seeking, corresponds to negative religious coping and is associated with poorer outcomes, whereas *tawakkul* understood—as Anṣārī himself insists—as compatible with continued effort and responsibility corresponds to adaptive secondary control. Clinicians and religious counselors applying this model should therefore assess, on a case-by-case basis, whether a client's invocation of surrender is functioning as active meaning-making or as avoidance.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that Khwājah ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī's *Manāzil al-Sā’irīn*, though composed as a work of devotional and metaphysical instruction, contains an implicit and internally coherent model of resilient selfhood that anticipates, and in some respects exceeds, the individualistic assumptions of much contemporary resilience theory. The stations of *yaqzāh*, *tawbah*, *ṣabr*, *tawakkul*, *riḍā*, *maḥabbah*, and *fanā’-baqā’* correspond, respectively, to cognitive reappraisal, active coping, distress tolerance, secondary control, emotion regulation, meaning-making, and post-traumatic growth—while remaining embedded within a transcendent framework of meaning that differs in important ways from secular models.

Further research might usefully pursue empirical validation of this correspondence, including qualitative interviews with practitioners of Islamic-integrated counseling and the development of measurement instruments grounded in the stations vocabulary. Such work would extend the emerging dialogue between Islamic contemplative traditions and positive psychology beyond conceptual analysis toward testable clinical application, while remaining attentive—as this article has sought to be—to the risk of collapsing a devotional text into a merely instrumental therapeutic technique.

Notes

1. The term "resilience" is used here in its contemporary clinical-psychological sense. Some Arabic-language Islamic-psychology literature instead renders related concepts as *ṣumūd* (steadfastness) or *muqāwamah* (resistance), terms that carry stronger political and communal connotations than the individually oriented clinical usage adopted in this article.
2. This reading is offered as a hermeneutical and interpretive exercise rather than a claim about Anṣārī's own intentions, which were thoroughly theocentric and devotional. The correspondences proposed here are the product of the present analysis, not assertions about the author's awareness of, or interest in, psychological theory.

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