

## AI-ZARNŪJĪ AND THE METHOD OF LEARNING: A MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC TREATISE of EDUCATION

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**Abstract** – The high esteem and reverence that knowledge and education are accorded in Islamic Civilization is manifested in a number of treatises composed during Middle Ages by practioners, instructors and philosophers alike. Burhān al-Dīn al-Zarnūjī is one of the medieval figures that offered practical approaches in education informed by Qur’anic and prophetic injunctions, old-age proverbs and wisdom sayings of the ancient masters and his immediate teachers. His student-centered approach to the process of learning is replete with pedagogical premises and didactic narrative. Written in Arabic during the early Middle Ages, this treatise has been translated into Latin and several modern languages. The following survey examines al-Zarnūjī’s treatise on teaching the students the method of learning by assessing and critiquing some of its premises. This study aims to demonstrate that according to al-Zarnūjī’s theoretical and practical framework the students should be made aware of the tools that they possess and make use of them with proper methodology.

**Keywords:** Education, Learning, Religious Education, al-Zarnūjī, Ta’līm al-Muta’allim, Student-Centered Education

**Özet** – İslam Medeniyeti'nde bilgi, öğrenme ve eğitime gösterilen yüksek saygı ve değer, Orta Çağ'da öğretmenler, eğitimciler ve filozoflar tarafından yazılan birçok risalede açıkça görülmektedir. Burhāneddīn ez-Zernūcī, Kur'an ve peygamber öğretileri, eskimez atasözleri, kadim üstatların ve onun yakın öğretmenlerinin hikmetli sözlerini temel alarak eğitimde pratik yaklaşımlar sunan ortaçağ figürlerinden biridir. Öğrenme sürecine yönelik öğrenci merkezli yaklaşımı pedagojik öncüller ve didaktik anlatılarla doludur. Erken Orta Çağ'ın zamanlarında Arapça yazılan bu eser Latince'ye ve birçok modern dile çevrilmiştir. Aşağıdaki araştırma, ez-Zernūcī'nin öğrencilere öğrenme metodunu öğrettiğine yönelik yazdığı risalesini ve bazı öncüllerini değerlendiren ve eleştirirrel bir analize tabi tutan bir incelemedir. Bu çalışma, ez-Zernūcī'nin teorik ve pratik çerçevesine göre öğrencilerin sahip oldukları araçlar hakkında bilinçlendirilmesi ve bunları uygun bir metodoloji ile kullanmalarının sağlanması gerektiğini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Eğitim, Öğrenim, Dini Eğitim, ez-Zernūjī, Ta’līmü'l-Müte’allim, Öğrenci-Merkezli Eğitim

## 1. Introduction: The Author and the Book

Most of the information that is available on al-Zarnūjī (d. 620/1223 ?) is inferred from his only available book *Ta'līm al-Muta'allim Ṭarīq al-Ta'allum*. He was known by the epithet of either Burhān al-Dīn or Burhān al-Islām (The proof of religion and/or Islam), both of which seem to be honorific titles rather than given names.<sup>1</sup> Al-Qurashī (d. 775/1373), the author of the earliest biographical work on Ḥanafī scholars *al-Jawāhir al-Muḍī'a*, noted that al-Zarnūjī was from al-Zarnūj, a place within the Turkic lands beyond the river Oxus.<sup>2</sup> Plessner claimed that he was an Arab philosopher,<sup>3</sup> however, the verity of this claim cannot be ascertained. Moreover, it should probably be refuted by the fact that al-Zarnūjī condemned the use of red ink on the basis of its being the practice of philosophers.<sup>4</sup> From so many references that he makes in his treatise to the famous scholars and founders of the Ḥanafī school of law, we infer that he was a strict adherent of Ḥanafism. Given the fact that some of the scholars that he refers to as his teachers were contemporaneous with al-Zarnūjī and were scholars of jurisprudence, we can safely assume that al-Zarnūjī was also a scholar of jurisprudence. His date of birth is unknown and the date of his death is a subject of controversy among the researchers, who variably gave a date between 1194-1223 CE.<sup>5</sup> The fact that most of his teachers died within the last decade of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, whereby he is assumed to have been in his youth, we can roundly conclude that he died within the first quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

As for the purpose of writing his treatise, al-Zarnūjī stated that he saw around him many students struggling for acquiring knowledge but falling short of their goal in the attainment of knowledge or being deprived of its benefits and fruits.<sup>7</sup> Al-Zarnūjī believed that the reason for failure was that those students did not have the proper methodology and ignored certain conditions. It indicates that his point of departure was a practical concern. So, he felt obliged to explain the methodology which “he had either read about in books or heard from his masters”.<sup>8</sup> The themes of the book are mainly, though not exclusively, concerned with teaching the method of learning to the youth and adults. Al-Zarnūjī, in supporting his argumentations, used religious texts, logical reasoning, customary practices and wise sayings of previous scholars, poems and various parables.

In this survey, we will explore and analyze the main themes of the book, offer our critique on some points and present our conclusions.

The book was first translated into Latin with the title *Enchiridion Studiosi* in 1709 by H. Reland and again in 1838 by Carolus Caspari.<sup>9</sup> The first translation into English with the title *Instruction of the Student the Method of Learning* was made in 1947 by Gustave Edmond Von Grunebaum and Theodora Mead Abel.<sup>10</sup> The book is available both in manuscript and print forms in several modern languages.<sup>11</sup>

The title of the book is *Ta'līm al-Muta'allim Ṭarīq al-Ta'allum* [*Teaching/Instruction of the Student the Method of Learning*]<sup>12</sup> It consists of a preface and 13 chapters.

## 2. Textual Analyses and Critique

<sup>1</sup> Burhān al-Dīn al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'līm al-Muta'allim Ṭarīq al-Ta'allum*. Ed. Marwān Qabbāni (Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1981), 18.

<sup>2</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'līm al-Muta'allim*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> See Martin Plessner, “Zernūcī” *İslam Ansiklopedisi*, (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1986), 13/541.

<sup>4</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'līm al-Muta'allim*, 85.

<sup>5</sup> Mehmet Faruk Bayraktar, “Zernūcī”, *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi (DİA)*, (Istanbul: Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2013), 44/294-295.

<sup>6</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'līm al-Muta'allim*, 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> Grunebaum and Abel, *Instruction of the student*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'līm al-Muta'allim*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Nakosteen, Mehdi, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education, A.D. 800-1350: With an Introduction to Medieval Muslim Education* (Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1964), p. 101

<sup>10</sup> Gustave Edmond Von Grunebaum - Theodora Mead Abel *Al-Zarnūjī, Instruction of the student: The Method of Learning*. (New York: King's Crown Press, 1947).

<sup>11</sup> For the record of MS copies and print information in various languages see Mehmet Faruk Bayraktar “Zernūcī”, 44/294-295.

<sup>12</sup> We chose to rely on our own translation of Arabic words. However, we will also provide the transliteration of certain words where deemed convenient.

Probably the most distinguishing character of this treatise lies in its focus. Al-Zarnūjī devoted his composition to the single subject of learning. The way he structured his treatise is in itself a methodology. If we look at the title of it *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim Tarīq al-Ta'allum (Teaching/Instructing the Student the Method of Learning)*, we understand that it is a treatise dealing only about how a seeker of knowledge can acquire it. Thus, al-Zarnūjī explains his goal in writing his treatise stating that "I sought and desired to explain to them (the seekers of knowledge) the ways (methods) of learning".<sup>13</sup> His purpose was practical and he, as it were, is putting his message in practice. The principles of focus and particularity, with which the whole treatise is imbued, constitute the best example for the first and foremost principle in learning, which is the focus and specialization. Throughout the entire work, he treats only the subject of learning. And if there was a topic which fell outside the realm of learning but somehow was related to it, he would not plunge into it and would not digress from his main subject, but he would simply orient the reader to the appropriate reference. For example, when he touches on the necessity of acquiring the knowledge of good and bad character traits he only refers the reader to a certain book of ethics and/or morality (*akhlāq*).<sup>14</sup> As another example, he refers the reader to *the Book of Advice (Kitāb al-Waṣiyya)* written by Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150-767).<sup>15</sup> In another instance and elsewhere he states that "bad character traits are learned from the *Kitāb al-Akhlāq* and this book of ours does not offer the discussion of them".<sup>16</sup> Thus, al-Zarnūjī tries to remain focused to a great extent on the subject of the method of learning. He is careful not to digress or deviate and presents his own treatise as a live example for the principle of focus. Thus, we can probably draw the conclusion that he was a practitioner and that he did not write his treatise normatively. He saw the failure of many students around him and thought that their failure stemmed from their practices and lack of required methodology therein.

One of the longest chapters of al-Zarnūjī's treatise is devoted to the subject of respecting knowledge and its possessors. It indicates that the author attached great significance to the subject of respect. He stressed on making a distinction between respect and obedience, urging for the former and condemning the latter. The significance of respecting knowledge and its possessors has the practical implication that respect for something adds value to it. So, if the seeker of knowledge respects knowledge and its possessors, he holds them in high esteem and attaches them great value. This is a fundamental principle for al-Zarnūjī since he stated that "know that the seeker of knowledge does not acquire knowledge nor profit from it unless he holds knowledge and its possessors in high esteem".<sup>17</sup> Therefore, respect makes the student realize that what he is pursuing is very valuable. This notion will also have a positive influence in arousing motivation and vigor. Lack of respect will translate into little value attached to knowledge. The inevitable conclusion is that no one will pursue, or rather vigorously pursue, invaluable things. It is also important to note that the mental activity of respect translates into a bodily activity of vigorous pursuit and industriousness. Al-Zarnūjī also pointed to the fact that respecting the possessors of knowledge is part of respecting knowledge itself.<sup>18</sup> He also instructed the students the how of respecting knowledge and its possessors by way of giving a few examples from his venerable predecessors.<sup>19</sup> We tend to believe that the ways of respect are culturally constructed, interpreted and socially formulated. Therefore, the examples he gives might be reconstructed from time to time and from society to another. Thus al-Zarnūjī gave the formula for what should count as respect stating that "in short, he (the student) should seek his (the teacher's) approval, avoid his resentment and obey his orders in things which are not in disobedience of God".<sup>20</sup>

Al-Zarnūjī, throughout his treatise, conveys an important idea about the significance of the student in learning and he gives the student pivotal place and makes him the central figure in the process of

<sup>13</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, p. 70

<sup>16</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, 86

<sup>17</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, 78.

<sup>18</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, 78.

<sup>19</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, in *passim* and 79-88.

<sup>20</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, 79.

acquiring knowledge. He believed that the required motivation, impetus, vigor and liveliness were all to come from the student himself. He stated that “it is necessary for the student to exert himself for the acquisition of knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> He also stated that “for an intelligent person, the pleasure of knowledge, comprehension and understanding is enough an incentive for the attainment of knowledge.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, al-Zarnūjī implies that even before the religious injunctions and advices, which are incentives that come from outside, come to play as strong incentives, self-invoked pleasure is enough a stimulus to create a desire for the acquisition of knowledge. al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), before al-Zarnūjī, also voiced the idea of the student being the central figure in acquiring knowledge in his own terms. He proposed an interactive system that involved both the student and the teacher. He also viewed it the student’s responsibility to work actively and vigorously with his new acquisitions until he can use them in new contexts.<sup>23</sup> But here one wonders how a seeker of knowledge comes to the point of contemplating on the virtues of knowledge. What drives a person to do so and why should a person contemplate on the virtues of knowledge? We should also question how a person, before setting out to seek knowledge, gains the pleasure of knowledge. One does not gain the pleasure of knowledge until one has acquired knowledge. Is it an innate property of an individual or is it an injunction of religion to become a seeker of knowledge? We believe al-Zarnūjī is right about designating the student as the central figure in the acquisition of knowledge and the fact that the student is equipped to create the necessary motivation for it, however we do not believe he answers the question of why a student should motivate himself, unless we refer back to the religious-prophetic injunction which deems the quest of knowledge obligatory on every Muslim male and female student.

On choosing the subject of study, the teacher and the friends, al-Zarnūjī makes the learner the central figure again, and attributes to him the responsibility and, to a certain degree, the freedom of making the appropriate choices. As for the subject of study, he advised the student to choose the best parts in every discipline. The best part of every discipline for al-Zarnūjī is the established truths of a given subject. His idea at this point runs parallel with that of al-Ghazzālī who also stated that life is too short to learn everything, so the student should aim at the best part of every discipline.<sup>24</sup> A student, al-Zarnūjī thought, should give priority to “the discipline of *Tawhīd* (unifying God) and knowing God through evidence.”<sup>25</sup> He drew our attention to the importance of knowledge based on evidence. Notwithstanding the fact that belief in God without evidence is accepted in his religious view, al-Zarnūjī still urged for this to be acquired through evidence. Therefore, al-Zarnūjī advises the students not to accept a given thought, claim, theory or truth unless they have learned about hows and whys of it. This concept had its roots within the Ḥanafī school of thought that knowledge through evidence and reasoning allowed for the growth of the intellect and for the intellectual realization of the relation between man and God. Also, earlier Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) and Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 581/1185) voiced the same idea that the human intellect was capable of discovering divine wisdom.<sup>26</sup>

As for choosing the teacher, he urged the student to observe and consult before making their final decision. The elements of focus, perseverance and continuity have a practical relationship with observation and consultation before choosing the subject and the teacher. For once the choices are made, the student should not change his teacher and the subject. Consequently, it is imperative that the student make the right choices. If a student realizes that he made wrong choices in the subject and the teacher after he started his study, he will have wasted his time, he will lose his interest and motivation, which will translate into laziness, lack of interest and lack of focus. Therefore, making the right choices in the subject of study and the teacher is of utmost importance, and therefore, the student should not immediately decide but should wait, observe and consult with those who had gone through the same path.

<sup>21</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 94.

<sup>22</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 96

<sup>23</sup> Günther, Sebastian. “Be Masters in That You Teach and Continue to Learn: Medieval Muslim Thinkers on Educational Theory” *Comparative Education Review* (2006), 373-375.

<sup>24</sup> Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, (Cairo: Maṭba’at Muṣṭafā Bāb al-Ḥalabī wa Awlādūh, 1939), 58.

<sup>25</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 85.

<sup>26</sup> M. Abdul Mu’id Khan, “The Muslim Theories of Education during the Middle Ages” in *Islamic Culture*, 18(1944), pp. 418-433.

Choosing the associates is also very important for al-Zarnūjī. The student should “befriend the diligent, the religious, and those who are imbued with good character and understanding.”<sup>27</sup> Our author viewed learning as a social activity as well. Therefore, he believed that the student’s social environment has direct relationship with the success of the student. He cited a line of poem by an anonymous author to explain this relationship:

*Contagion spreads quickly from the lazy one to the lively one,  
just as when one places a burning coal in ashes, the fire is allayed.*<sup>28</sup>

Al-Zarnūjī advised the students to engage in various activities in a continuous manner during their learning. These activities, for the author, are conducive to motivation as well. It is important to note here the link that the author establishes between activities, which are partially physical in look, and the motivation, which is the mental or emotional outcome. These activities constitute the pillars of learning. Industriousness, assiduity, ambition and aspiration (*al-himma*), discussion, argument and debate, questioning, repetition, contemplation and taking notes are all activities that a student cannot dispense with.<sup>29</sup> All these activities should be practiced with vim and alacrity.<sup>30</sup>

No less equally significant for al-Zarnūjī’s learning paradigm is the capacity of the learner. The amount of study for a beginner should be as much as he can retain in memory by only being able to repeat twice easily. Everyday, the student should add so much as he can retain with two repetitions. The student should start learning the subjects that are easily understood.<sup>31</sup> The reason for this is that the easy subjects are better retained in mind, are not boring, and more commonly circulate amongst people. Al-Zarnūjī also pointed to the significance of taking notes and writing down after retention in memory and repetition.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, al-Zarnūjī urged the students not to rely on memory alone. This was historically practiced by medieval Muslim students, that they took complete notes on each lecture. The reason was that the lecture had to substitute for a text which was, for lack of printing, scarce.<sup>33</sup> The practical benefit was that the students could review their knowledge in the future.

The amount of learning for al-Zarnūjī had to be in accordance with the ability of the student to retain in memory with ease, and the increase should be in gradual manner and accustomed amount. This prescription guides the student to develop his own methodology in the acquisition of knowledge. In a nutshell, he tells the students to learn the way that is best suited for every individual, which practically means that they should learn or discover their own way of learning.

Retention in memory is a significant pillar in the acquisition of knowledge, since what is forgotten cannot be considered knowledge. This idea is reflected in the old adage that *al-’ilm mā ḥaḍara* (knowledge is what is present).

Retention in memory and repetition should be followed with contemplation and reflection on the subject being learned.<sup>34</sup> These three elements of retention in memory, repetition and reflection should lead to the final stage of understanding, which al-Zarnūjī considered to be much more important than memorizing.<sup>35</sup> Thus he stated that “memorizing is better than (mere) listening to two loads of knowledge, and understanding two letters is better than memorizing two lines.”<sup>36</sup> However, the fact that al-Zarnūjī devoted an independent chapter on the causes of memory and forgetfulness indicates the significant weight that he attached to them. It must have become clear by now that al-Zarnūjī does not urge for literal memorization of words without understanding their meanings and contemplating on them. Earlier he had stipulated that the student should memorize a book of jurisprudence, so that it will become much easier

<sup>27</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 76.

<sup>28</sup> Grunebaum - Abel, *Instruction of the Student*, 31.

<sup>29</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, in *passim* and 88-112.

<sup>30</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 111.

<sup>31</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 100-101.

<sup>32</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 100-101.

<sup>33</sup> Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins*, 58.

<sup>34</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 102.

<sup>35</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 102.

<sup>36</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 102

for him the acquisition of further knowledge within the same subject.<sup>37</sup> The reasoning behind this stipulation might be the idea that it prepares the student mentally to receive in a much easier fashion the knowledge that is similar to what he had already acquired. It may also be for the reason that what we are already acquainted with and in which we have a strong background is much easier to acquire than the subjects that we receive for the first time.<sup>38</sup> The necessity of combining memorization with understanding had also been expressed by al-Jāhiz (d. 255/869), who stated that if rational reflection is neglected, ideas do not come to mind quickly, and if memorization is neglected ideas do not stick in mind.<sup>39</sup> Al-Zarnūjī also stated that reading the Qur'an while looking at it or contemplating in its meaning (*qirā'at al-Qur'ān nazaran*) is what causes increase in memory the most. It is not obvious enough how and why it is so, but it should be duly noted that he does not say anything about memorizing the Qur'an.

Repetition was so important for al-Zarnūjī that he elaborated on how it should be conducted. He stated that "it is necessary to repeat the subject of yesterday five times, and that of the day before yesterday four times, and that of the day before three times, and that of the day before twice, and that of the day before once. And this (method) is more stimulating for memorizing and repetition."<sup>40</sup> Normally one would think that what is learned earlier will more likely be forgotten than what is learned later, since the later acquisition is fresher and, therefore, one would need to repeat the older acquisition more than the newer one. Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850-1909), the famous German psychologist on the experimental study of memory, provided the answer for this dilemma. Having conducted his experimental survey on memory and forgetfulness, Ebbinghaus stated that forgetfulness is more immediate to what is memorized newly, then it (forgetfulness) diminishes gradually. He also stated that the average rate of forgetfulness reaches its lowest level after two to six days of repetition.<sup>41</sup> This is almost exactly what al-Zarnūjī prescribed, i.e. five days of repetition.

Continuity in the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge is another principle of learning for al-Zarnūjī. Thus, he stated that "it is necessary that there be no break and no intermission in the pursuit of learning, for this is indeed ruinous."<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere he expressed it differently: "Thus, it is important for the learned one to concern himself with study at all times."<sup>43</sup> He also quoted one Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥasan (al-Shaybānī? d. 189-805) saying that "this profession of ours —scholarship, pursuit of knowledge— is from cradle to grave, so, he who wishes to refrain from this for even an hour might as well leave it entirely at this very moment."<sup>44</sup> Al-Zarnūjī wants to make it understood that to become a man of knowledge is a life-long occupation. The reason for this advice is that intermission or breaking away from studying chips away the strength of stimulus; and longer the interruption, lower the motivation.<sup>45</sup>

Al-Zarnūjī must have been aware of the downsides of being engaged in the activity of learning at all times. However, he does not talk at all about recreational activities of sports, games or anything else which a student would need in order to relax his mind and body. The eminent physician, al-Rāzī, sang and played, in his student days, an instrument like mandolin, called *al-'ūd*.<sup>46</sup> But al-Zarnūjī prescribed another methodology against boredom and tedium that would result from non-stop study: He offered diversification. Thus he stated that "if the student becomes bored or tired with one discipline or subject, he should occupy himself with another one."<sup>47</sup> Here we have to draw attention to the point where he emphatically advised the students to remain focused on the subject or discipline that they chose in the beginning of their study and not to deviate or digress from it until they have completed it. Consequently,

<sup>37</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'līm al-Muta'allim*, 112,

<sup>38</sup> S. A. 'Uthmān, *Al-Ta'allum 'inda Burhān al-Islām al-Zarnūjī*. (Cairo: Maktaba al-Angelo al-Miṣriyya, 1977), 78-79.

<sup>39</sup> Gunther, "Be Masters", 372. See also 'Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Mu'allimīn in Kitābān Li-Jāhiz*, ed. Ibrāhīm Khalīl Jarīs, ('Akka: Maṭba'at al-Surūjī], 1980), 57-87.

<sup>40</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'līm al-Muta'allim*, 110.

<sup>41</sup> 'Uthmān, *al-Ta'allum*, 79.

<sup>42</sup> Grunebaum - Abel, *Instruction of the Student*, 54

<sup>43</sup> Grunebaum - Abel, *Instruction of the Student* 57.

<sup>44</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'līm al-Muta'allim*, 115.

<sup>45</sup> 'Uthmān, *al-Ta'allum*, 67.

<sup>46</sup> Khalīl A. Totah, *The Contribution of the Arabs to Education*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1926), 47.

<sup>47</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta'līm al-Muta'allim*, 117.

there is an inconsistency between his ideas at this juncture. We should also note our reservation that it is probably not a very good idea to urge a student to devote all his time to studying.

On the other hand, diversification of learning methodology is of greater significance and we find that al-Zarnūjī touched on this subject as well. He urged the students to use the methods of “discussion, argument and questioning”<sup>48</sup> these elements were actually the feature of medieval Muslim educational practices in which questions were asked by the students and discussion of ideas was allowed and even encouraged.<sup>49</sup> Students were also allowed to differ with the teacher provided they brought evidence to support their position.<sup>50</sup> It is important to note that these activities require the interactive involvement of the students and the teachers, as well as among the fellow students. Al-Zarnūjī preferred the benefits of discussion and questioning to the benefits of mere repetition since he thought that the former comprised repetition and more. Thus, he stated that “the benefit of discussion and questioning is greater than the benefit of repetition; and the reason is that discussion and questioning include repetition and more.”<sup>51</sup> What al-Zarnūjī means by “more” is that the joint activity of learning is more useful than the individual activity of learning. Thus he quoted anonymously that “posing questions for an hour is better than a month of repetition.”<sup>52</sup> The preference of joint activity of learning is manifested in the fact that a student, by way of others’ involvement, can observe the results and extent of his own learning through repetition and through an objective and outside judgment.<sup>53</sup> Al-Zarnūjī is also aware of the fact that this joint activity needs moral attributes in order to succeed and benefit the students. Therefore our author added that “it is necessary that each one of these (activities) should be exercised with fairness, circumspection and consideration, and the student should abstain from altercation and anger.”<sup>54</sup> Here we may also add that other studies noted that these moral behaviors do not translate into actions if the student does not respect knowledge, his teachers and his fellow students.<sup>55</sup> Al-Zarnūjī urged the students to “avoid anger and altercation” since he believed that “discussion and debate are consultation, and consultation aims at bringing out the truth, and this goal can only be attained through fairness, circumspection and contemplation.”<sup>56</sup>

An important element that the student should take into consideration during these activities in particular and during the learning process in general is the necessity of reflection and contemplation on the knowledge being acquired. He thought it “necessary for the seeker of knowledge to be reflecting and contemplating at all times on the particulars of the subjects and to be accustoming himself thereto.”<sup>57</sup> It indicates that a student cannot learn all the particulars and subtleties of a given subject from his teachers. The reason for this might most likely be the fact that “life is short and knowledge is extensive”<sup>58</sup> It also indicates that what is acquired as knowledge does not become “the knowledge” unless it is perfected, through reflection and contemplation, with comprehension. Thus, he quoted anonymously advising the students: “contemplate (*ta’ammal*), so you may comprehend.”<sup>59</sup> Also implied at this juncture is the fact that learning is an inner-interactive process, and it is not mere reception of information or its transfer from one person to the other. Moreover, it is inferred that *ta’ammul* is itself learning. For the student learns it so long as he practices it, and as much as he practices it, he becomes much better and much able at conducting it, and as his command and capability increases he becomes able and capable to engage with more complicated and high level subjects.<sup>60</sup> That is why al-Zarnūjī urged the students to make it a habit.

<sup>48</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 103.

<sup>49</sup> Totah, *The Contribution*, 58.

<sup>50</sup> Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins*, 57.

<sup>51</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 104.

<sup>52</sup> Grunebaum - Abel, *Instruction of the Student*, 49.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Uthmān, *al-Ta’allum*, 97.

<sup>54</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 103.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Uthmān, *al-Ta’allum*, 93.

<sup>56</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 103.

<sup>57</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 104.

<sup>58</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 134.

<sup>59</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 104.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Uthmān, *al-Ta’allum*, 65.

The principle of questioning was manifest even during the early period of Muslim society. Al-Zarnūjī recounted that when Ibn al-‘Abbās (d. 68/688) was asked how he attained knowledge, his answer was: “with an inquisitive (*sa’ūl*) tongue and a discerning (*‘aqūl*) heart.”<sup>61</sup> He also pointed to the custom of attributing to the student the name of “what do you say?” (*mā taqūl?*), since the students at earlier times would mostly utter only the words of “what do you say on this matter?”<sup>62</sup>

Healthy body and sound mind are necessary elements in the process of learning, and they are as significant as any other requirement. This notion of al-Zarnūjī stems from his belief that the seeker of knowledge needs energy (*al-quwwa*).<sup>63</sup> Healthy body and sound mind are the sources of energy and power, through which the seeker of knowledge can devote all his time to the quest of knowledge. Focus and being disengaged with worldly matter are the quintessential elements in learning. That is also why al-Zarnūjī urged the students to travel in order to cut off their worldly affiliations.<sup>64</sup> Al-Ghazzālī also voiced the importance of this element in learning that the student should be freed from worldly cares and should not be distracted by them.<sup>65</sup> Travel was also true tradition of Muslim learning in medieval times and the Arab students left their home and withstood hardship and spent many years studying in different parts of the world.<sup>66</sup>

These are not all the points that al-Zarnūjī devoted his treatise to. But we have tried to limit our survey to a few selective important premises of his treatise.

### 3. Assessment and Conclusions

An important feature of the treatise was its focus and particularity on the subject of learning. al-Zarnūjī did not digress from his focus and if there was a point which is somehow related to it, he would refer the reader to the corresponding source. al-Zarnūjī’s interest in this particular subject of learning stemmed from his belief that the student is the central figure in the process of knowledge acquisition. He believed that the student was equipped with all the necessary tools in the quest for knowledge. All that a student needed to do was to realize them and make use of them in the ways and methods that al-Zarnūjī thought were necessary to attain knowledge. Motivation, vigor, industriousness, assiduity, perseverance were all to originate within the student. Respect and reverence were an important concept for al-Zarnūjī, since he believed that it adds value to the respected. It follows that what is valuable is desired more. However individualistic al-Zarnūjī might seem in giving the student greater importance, he also pointed to the social nature of the activity of learning. This is the reason that al-Zarnūjī urged the students to consult with others and observe the religious factors in choosing the teachers and friends.

Religious imprint is the pervasive feature throughout the book. It is the common feature of most of the medieval Muslim writings, since the Muslims believed that the religion regulated all aspects of life. It should not mean that there can be nothing which non-religious men of knowledge should benefit from. In fact, al-Zarnūjī, by virtue of being a strict Ḥanafī, added rational reasoning to his thoughts and belief. It is also important to note that it is due to these very religious beliefs that the concept of knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge gained great respect and reverence, sacredness and dignity. Pursuit of knowledge was made the ideal occupation and viewed as spiritual undertaking. The high esteem that the concept of education and knowledge gained in Islam is manifested in many Qur’anic verses, prophetic traditions and countless proverbs, aphorisms, as well as poetry and prose texts.<sup>67</sup>

Al-Zarnūjī believed that physical and mental soundness are closely related. Healthy bodies, a sound mind, vigorous and lively activities, diversification in activities of learning are all necessary tools for the seeker of knowledge. Mental and memorial faculties were so important for al-Zarnūjī that he

<sup>61</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 106.

<sup>62</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, in passim 107-114.

<sup>63</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 124.

<sup>64</sup> al-Zarnūjī, *Kitāb Ta’līm al-Muta’allim*, 114-115.

<sup>65</sup> al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’*, 56.

<sup>66</sup> Totah, *The Contribution*, 42.

<sup>67</sup> Günther, “Be Masters”, 368-369.



mainly aimed at improving them in the students.<sup>68</sup> That is why he made greater emphasis on memory and repetition. However, al-Zarnūjī also added that memorization and repetition are to be accompanied with understanding and comprehension. Totah thought that the element of relying on memory had both defects and merits. A defect was that it was developed extensively, so that, by time, the importance of understanding and comprehension became neglected. A merit on the other hand, was thoroughness.<sup>69</sup> Thoroughness was so important for al-Zarnūjī that, following the footsteps of al-Ghazzālī, memorization of the primary textbooks was required.

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<sup>68</sup> Khan, "The Muslim Theories of Education", 418-433.

<sup>69</sup> Totah, *The Contribution*, 63.