

Muftī Shabbir Ahmad Patel, Blackburn, UK

*Originally written as a foreword to the first part of
his commentary of Sunan al-Tirmidhi (Turath Publishing)*

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful
All praise is to Allah, Lord of the worlds.

I was blessed to study the entire *Sunan* of Imām Abū ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892) with our shaykh, Muftī Shabbir Ahmad Patel, in Darul Uloom Al Arabiya Al Islamiya, Bury, UK, in 1996.¹ This was a blessed year in that we were honoured to study several ḥadīth collections as part of the *dawrat al-ḥadīth* or final year of the ‘ālimiyya course, with different teachers. The six books, known as the *ṣiḥāḥ sitta* (authentic six), namely, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, *Sunan al-Nasā’ī*, and *Sunan Ibn Māja*, along with the two *Muwatta’s* of Imām Mālik ibn Anas and Imām Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī, are completed during this *dawra* year. It is a year of immersion into the acts and words of the beloved Messenger of Allāh Muḥammad g.

Each of our teachers holds an unbroken chain of transmission through the authors of the books to the most beautiful role model for all of mankind (*uswa ḥasana*), our beloved Prophet Muḥammad g.

I have profound memories from this year, especially from the lessons of *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* with Muftī Shabbir. He is an extremely charismatic and exciting teacher. One would sit riveted in his class, despite the long hours of study, which were demanding and rigorous. His powerful voice, inflecting the serious topic of study, was always full of life, refreshing, and vibrant. His approach kept our hearts and minds fully captivated, yearning for more. There was never a dull moment.

Having only eleven months of the academic year in which to cover the eight books, consisting of thousands of ḥadīths, makes it virtually impossible to cover each and every narration with a comprehensive commentary. Therefore, in many seminaries, a lengthy commentary is often provided for the several chapters at the beginning of each book, such as “Kitāb al-Īmān,” “Kitāb al-‘Ilm,” “Kitāb al-Ṭahāra,” “Kitāb aṣ-Ṣalāt,” or the first half of the book, and the remainder is completed by being read in the *maqra’a* style to establish the chain of transmission from the teacher to the student. Some seminaries remedy the issue of a lack of time by asking the various teachers of the six books to focus their commentary on specific chapters of each book, and then to complete the remaining chapters in the *maqra’a* style. This

¹ Although his family originally hailed from Jogwad, Gujarat, India, Mufti Shabbir Ahmad Patel was born in 1957 in Zomba, Malawi, where his father had migrated in the 1930s. They moved from there to the UK in 1969. He initially studied in Darul Uloom Bury and then in Mazahir ‘Ulūm Saharanpur, and since his return to the UK in 1981 has been teaching at Darul Uloom Bury and more recently also in Darul Uloom Blackburn.

way, students are afforded the opportunity to study each topic within the various chapters in detail.

The distinctive aspect of Muftī Shabbir’s lessons on *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* was his ability to complete the book, while providing a comprehensive commentary on nearly every chapter. From the start, he would pace himself, by covering more difficult chapters alongside some of the easier sections. He would take advantage of every opportunity, including teaching additional chapters if another teacher was absent. His discussion was meticulous; yet he was able to maintain a brisk pace. Students had to be very quick in note-taking in order to record the precise details that were provided, ranging from linguistic implications of syntax, historical context, contemporary application, to fully-rounded discussions on juristic extrapolations, as well as the arguments and counterarguments of each position, as will be demonstrated in this book.

I had been tasked to be the reader for his class, in addition to the class on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* with our Shaykh Mawlānā Yusuf Motala (d. 2019) (may Allāh have mercy on him). The benefit and honour of this is immense as it provides the opportunity to read the entire book, cover to cover, with the teacher and not simply follow along. This is an excellent opportunity as it is not easy to read out an entire ḥadīth collection. It also provides the reader with the opportunity to identify nuances within the text, recognise variant readings, and to gain an intimate familiarity with the narrations. The reader, however, has to remain constantly alert and read each narration quickly, trying not to make mistakes, a skill that takes time to develop and hone. As most of the earlier editions of the eight books are unvowelled, a firm grounding in Arabic grammar is essential, along with the ability to apply the rules as the words are being read. This skill is acquired from the prolonged practice of reading Arabic texts, as well as a familiarity with the eloquent wording of Prophetic narrations found in works such as *Riyāḍ aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn*, *Al-Tajrid aṣ-Ṣarīḥ* and *Mishkāṭ al-Maṣābīḥ*. Another helpful skill is the ability to process the words in the mind faster than they can be recited on the tongue. This way, one can constantly be processing and preparing the text mentally, while the tongue vocalizes what has been processed. This ensures a smooth and uninterrupted reading experience.

The procedure is that the shaykh says “read” and the student starts reading until the shaykh stops him in order to provide commentary. In the meantime, the student tries to take notes, but has to resume reading as soon as the teacher gives the command. Other students in the class follow the reading and take notes. This was a constant challenge for me, but I am thankful to Allāh for Muftī Shabbir’s affection toward me in that he would repeat the discussion if he felt I had not been able to capture it all. Despite the busy schedule, he was never one to refuse questions, or even animated discussions, with students. His generosity in this regard was immense, and I pray to Allah to forgive me if I ever overstepped my boundaries in debating an issue with him.

Muftī Shabbir is one of the most dedicated teachers I have sat with. In fact, I do not recall him ever missing a class during our *dawra* year. He never gave up his classes, despite the immense administrative responsibilities he had at the time in Darul Uloom. His relentless love and passion, even obsession, is for teaching ḥadīth. The Prophet’s words (Allah bless him and give him peace), expressed in his mosque, in ʿĀ’isha’s home (may Allah be pleased with her), on an expedition, during a battle, or during a night vigil, over fourteen centuries years ago,

permeate his soul even more today. Whenever I have subsequently visited him at his home, he is nearly always sitting, surrounded by numerous commentaries, reading and preparing for his lessons, even though he has taught these books for decades.

His personal copy of *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, the extra-large 38 x 26 cm H. M. Sa'īd Company edition, was unique (as were the copies of his other books) in that it had been taken apart and rebound after inserting an additional sheet of white paper after every page. The copy was then divided into two large volumes due to the number of pages having doubled.

Each of those inserted white sheets have long since been filled with years of relentless study, neatly inscribed by Muftī Shabbir's beloved wife, a scholar in her own right. These intricate entries is what forms his personal unpublished commentary of *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*. Many have requested him to prepare his notes for formal publication, but he had always refused.

Muftī Shabbir has been teaching *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* since 1991, which meant we studied it in his fifth year of teaching. Since then, he has continued to teach it, and I have been informed that so much more has been added to his commentary than was delivered to us.

Before teaching *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, Muftī Shabbir taught *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* for ten years along with the *Sunan* of Ibn Māja, the *Muwatta'* of Imām Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī, *Mishkāṭ al-Maṣābīḥ*, Ṭaḥāwī's *Sharḥ Ma'ānī al-Āthār*, *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn*, and Qur'ānic translation. He has also taught *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* for at least fifteen years, for which he also possesses comprehensive notes in a similar format. More recently, he has taught *Kitāb al-Āthār* of Imām Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī and select chapters of *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*.

Muftī Shabbir has also held the esteemed honour of leading the first *dār al-iftā* (fatwā department) in the West. He was instated as the head *muftī* in 1981, the year he started teaching, and for 35 years formulated thousands of *fatwās*, and assisted the UK public at large in their juridical needs.

Along with ḥadīth, Muftī Shabbir has always enjoyed a special connection with the Qur'ān. My late grandmother (may Allah have mercy on her) used to mention that every time she saw him in Blackburn during the 1970s, after he had completed his *ḥifẓ* (memorisation) of the Qur'ān, he was constantly reciting it, even while walking from one place to the next. Whenever required, he would remove a small copy of the Qur'ān from his pocket and check his reading. It is said that now he knows the Qur'ān so well that seldom does he need to open the *muṣḥaf* to verify his memorisation. I was there when he was testing a student on his translation of the Qur'ān, and when the student struggled, Muftī Shabbir, not only recalled the original Arabic, but simultaneously began to recite an Urdu translation of several verses entirely by heart. Through the blessing of his attachment to the Qur'ān, his wife and nearly all of his children (two sons and four daughters) are also blessed with being *ḥāfiẓ* of the Qur'ān, and at least two completed memorisation by the age of seven, aided by Muftī Shabbir's good friend (and also my teacher), Ḥāfiẓ Ali Musa Vali of Bolton (may Allah bless him).

All praise is to Allah that in 2010, Muftī Ismail Lala, who after having completed two Masters degrees in Arabic, *tafsīr* and *taṣawwuf* from Manchester and Oxford Universities, and after having studied Arabic and other subjects in Amman, Jordan and Harvard University, decided to complete his studies in a traditional Islamic seminary. He enrolled in Darul Uloom, Bury, and began the *dawra*, which included studying *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*. He became inspired by Muftī Shabbir and assiduously began recording his notes. After completing the *dawra*, he

enrolled in the *mufti* class. While there, he took up the task of writing out Mufti Shabbir's commentary in English and answered the heartfelt call of his teacher for someone to undertake this task for universal benefit. Mufti Shabbir had spent the bulk of his life focused on his immediate students and had not allocated any significant time for public lectures. Mufti Ismail strongly felt that the awe-inspiring erudition and scholarship of Mufti Shabbir needed to be showcased to the larger scholarly community and beyond. His efforts have led to the preparation of this first volume, which is to be followed by other sections of the work. No doubt, this is a long and laborious journey, but we pray that Allāh allow the rest of the work to be completed soon.

While I do not consider myself worthy of writing a foreword to my teacher's work; a teacher who remains an inspiration for me, it would have been ungrateful of me to turn down his insistence to pen something. Hence, I avail myself of the opportunity to express my gratitude and give voice to the sentiments of appreciation that have been swirling in my heart and mind for two decades. Alas, there is no way for me to do justice to the prodigious learning of Mufti Shabbir, for, as the saying goes, "It needs a Muzanī to demonstrate the true significance and status of Imām Shāfi'ī."² And I am no Muzanī. However, it is an honour for me that Allāh has also tied us together through kinship as both my mother and father are his third cousins. He was also instrumental in my enrolment in Darul Uloom, Bury, and thus in my pursuit of the Divine. I pray that Allāh Most High repay him, and make me (and all his students) a source of perpetual charity (*ṣadaqa jāriya*) for him.

Unfortunately, my inabilities, the constraints of time, and the imminent publication of this volume, does not allow me to write more than this. I already feel that I have overstayed my welcome. My *du'ā'* is that Allāh enables one of his more able students, many of whom now hold various distinguished positions around the world, to do justice to this task. Mufti Shabbir's scholarship and experience as a senior administrator, educator, and mentor at the first Islamic seminary in the western world is surely a beacon of inspiration for us all.

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² Abū Ibrāhīm Ismā'īl ibn Yaḥyā al-Muzanī (d. 264/878) was one of Imām Shāfi'ī's companions and primary students. A native of Cairo, he was a man of great insight and learning, a *mujtahid*, one skilled in the art of debate, and a great intellectual mind. He became one of the main inheritors of Imām Shāfi'ī's knowledge, such that the Imām said about him, "Muzanī is the standard-bearer of my school." Hence, it is only students of this calibre who can gauge the true worth of their teacher.