QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES ISSN

Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678

Volume No: 03 Issue No: 01 (2026)

Self-Purification in the Narrations of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA): A Thematic Analysis and Contemporary Applications

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Abstract
This study examines the concept of self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) through the narrations and ethical teachings of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA), a distinguished Companion of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ renowned for his expertise in Qur'anic interpretation and spiritual guidance. The study aims to identify the major dimensions of self-purification reflected in his narrations and explore their relevance to contemporary moral and spiritual challenges.Using an inductive qualitative method and thematic analysis, the research investigates selected narrations from primary classical sources, including *Musannaf Ibn Abī Shaybah*, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyāʾ*, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, and *Jāmiʿ Bayān al-ʿIlm wa Faḍlih*. The narrations are analyzed under key themes such as self-accountability (*muḥāsabah*), fear of Allah (*khashyah*), sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*), asceticism (*zuhd*), Qur'anic spirituality, and adherence to the Prophetic Sunnah. The findings indicate that Ibn Masʿūd's teachings offer a comprehensive framework of self-purification that combines spiritual refinement, moral responsibility, and intellectual discipline. The study further demonstrates the continuing relevance of his ethical insights in addressing contemporary issues, including materialism, spiritual alienation, digital distraction, and moral relativism. By contextualizing Ibn Masʿūd's legacy within modern scholarly discourse, this research contributes to the fields of Islamic ethics, spirituality, and spiritual psychology, highlighting the enduring significance of the Companions' teachings for contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: Tazkiyat al-Nafs; ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd; Islamic Ethics; Islamic Spirituality; Spiritual Psychology; Moral Development.

Introduction

Tazkiyat al-nafs (self-purification) is a central concept in Islamic spirituality and moral development. The Qur'an emphasizes purification of the soul as a means to success, righteousness, and closeness to Allah. This holistic process integrates faith, ethical conduct, spiritual growth, and social responsibility, as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his Companions.

Among the foremost Companions, ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA) occupies a distinguished position due to his profound knowledge of the Qur'an, spiritual insight, and close association with the Prophet ﷺ. His narrations and sayings contain significant guidance on sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*), self-accountability (*muḥāsabah*), fear of Allah (*khashyah*), asceticism (*zuhd*), and adherence to the Prophetic Sunnah, all of which constitute essential elements of self-purification.While previous studies have examined Ibn Masʿūd's contributions to Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith, and jurisprudence, limited attention has been given to the spiritual and ethical dimensions of his teachings. This study addresses that gap through a thematic analysis of selected narrations,

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES ISSN

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identifying key principles of self-purification and exploring their relevance to contemporary moral and spiritual challenges. The study contributes to current scholarship on Islamic ethics, spirituality, and character development.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to examine the concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* in the narrations of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA) by identifying its major themes and underlying ethical principles. It further explores the contemporary relevance of these teachings in addressing moral, psychological, and social challenges, as well as their contribution to Islamic ethics and character development.

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the major themes and ethical principles of self-purification reflected in the narrations of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA)?
2. How can these teachings contribute to contemporary discussions on moral development, spiritual well-being, and character formation?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the scholarship of Islamic spirituality by examining self-purification in the narrations of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA), a dimension that has received comparatively limited attention in existing research. By highlighting the ethical and spiritual principles embedded in his teachings, the study enriches contemporary discussions on Islamic ethics, spirituality, and character development. It also demonstrates the relevance of classical Islamic spiritual heritage in addressing modern moral and psychological challenges, offering insights for educators, scholars, and researchers interested in faith-based approaches to personal and social development.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative design using inductive thematic analysis to examine narrations of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA) on *tazkiyat al-nafs* (self-purification). The aim is to identify key ethical and spiritual themes within the selected texts. Data were collected from major early sources, including *Musannaf Ibn Abī Shaybah*, *Kitāb al-Zuhd* by Ibn al-Mubārak, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyāʾ* by Abū Nuʿaym al-Aṣbahānī, and *Jāmiʿ Bayān al-ʿIlm wa Faḍlih* by Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr.A purposive sampling method was used to select relevant narrations, which were analyzed through open coding and thematic categorization. Key themes identified include sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*), fear of Allah (*khashyah*), asceticism (*zuhd*), self-accountability (*muḥāsabah*), Qur'anic spirituality, and adherence to the Sunnah.Textual and contextual analysis was applied to interpret meanings within the framework of Islamic ethics, supported by relevant secondary literature.

Literature Review

Islamic spirituality and *tazkiyat al-nafs* (self-purification) occupy a central position in classical Islamic intellectual tradition, where the moral and spiritual refinement of the human being is considered essential for attaining ethical excellence and proximity to Allah. Foundational works such as *Kitāb al-Zuhd* by Ibn al-Mubārak, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* by al-Ghazālī, and *Ḥilyat al-Awliyāʾ* by Abū Nuʿaym al-Aṣbahānī systematically emphasize key spiritual virtues including sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*), repentance (*tawbah*), remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*), ascetic discipline (*zuhd*), and self-accountability (*muḥāsabah*). Although these works provide

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Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678

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comprehensive ethical and spiritual guidance, their treatment of *tazkiyah* is generally broad and conceptual, rather than offering a focused thematic analysis of the narrations of individual Companions.

In contemporary academic discourse, Islamic spirituality has increasingly been examined through interdisciplinary lenses, particularly in relation to psychology, ethics, and human well-being. Scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muhammad Iqbal have highlighted its metaphysical depth and its role in addressing modern existential concerns, while Malik Badri has significantly contributed to the development of Islamic psychology by integrating spiritual concepts into therapeutic and behavioral frameworks. Despite their scholarly value, much of this contemporary literature remains largely theoretical and philosophical, with limited direct engagement with primary narrational sources and early Islamic ethical texts. A review of existing scholarship on the Companions (*Ṣaḥābah*) indicates that their intellectual contributions have predominantly been studied within the domains of Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith transmission, and jurisprudence. In the case of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd, academic attention has largely focused on his authority in Qur'anic interpretation, linguistic expertise, and legal reasoning. However, his spiritual insights and narrations related to self-purification have not been independently analyzed as a coherent ethical and psychological framework. As a result, the deeper moral and spiritual dimensions of his teachings remain comparatively underexplored in modern scholarship.

Furthermore, there exists a noticeable gap in contemporary research that systematically connects early Islamic narrations with modern discussions on moral psychology, ethical development, and spiritual well-being. Very few studies have undertaken a structured thematic analysis of Ibn Masʿūd's narrations on *tazkiyat al-nafs* or assessed their relevance to present-day moral, psychological, and social challenges. This study addresses this gap by offering a focused thematic examination of his narrations, aiming to highlight their underlying spiritual principles and demonstrate their continuing relevance in contemporary ethical and psychological discourse.

Conceptual Framework of *Tazkiyat al-Nafs* in Islamic Thought

Tazkiyat al-nafs represents a core dimension of the Islamic moral and spiritual worldview. Linguistically derived from the root "z-k-w," it signifies both purification and growth, indicating a process that involves removing moral vices and cultivating virtuous qualities. The Qur'an presents this process as essential for human success, stating: "He has succeeded who purifies it, and he has failed who corrupts it" (Qur'an 91:9–10).

Classical scholars such as al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-Qayyim conceptualize *tazkiyah* as an integrated process involving purification of intention, refinement of character, and alignment of behavior with spiritual consciousness. In Islamic thought, this process extends beyond individual self-improvement to include moral responsibility toward both God and society. The Companions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ embody the practical realization of this concept. Among them, ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA) is particularly noted for his deep engagement with Qur'anic teachings and ethical insight. His narrations emphasize key dimensions of self-purification, including sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*), self-accountability (*muḥāsabah*), fear of Allah (*khashyah*), ascetic restraint (*zuhd*), and adherence to revelation. In this study, *tazkiyat al-nafs* is understood as a multidimensional process of spiritual and ethical transformation. The narrations of Ibn Masʿūd

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are treated as a coherent thematic framework for analyzing spiritual development within an Islamic context, which forms the basis for the subsequent thematic analysis.

4.1 Muḥāsabah (Self-Accountability)

Muḥāsabah (self-accountability) is a key ethical principle in the narrations of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA), emphasizing continuous moral self-examination.

مَا أَحَدٌ مِنَ النَّاسِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِلَّا يَتَمَنَّى أَنَّهُ كَانَ يَأْكُلُ فِي الدُّنْيَا قُوتًا، وَلَا يَضُرُّ أَحَدَكُمْ عَلَى أَيِّ حَالٍ أَمْسَى وَأَصْبَحَ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا أَلَّا تَكُونَ فِي النَّفْسِ حَزَازَةٌ، وَلَأَنْ يَعَضَّ أَحَدُكُمْ عَلَى جَمْرَةٍ حَتَّى تَنْطَفِئَ خَيْرٌ لَهُ مِنْ أَنْ يَقُولَ لِأَمْرٍ قَضَاهُ اللَّهُ: لَيْتَ هَذَا لَمْ يَكُنْ.

ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA) is reported to have said that on the Day of Judgment every individual will wish that they had lived in the world only upon basic sustenance. A person is not harmed by any condition in which he ends his day or begins his morning, provided that there is no resentment in his heart. He further stated that it is better for a person to endure extreme physical suffering than to say regarding a matter decreed by Allah, "If only this had not happened."

Ibn Abī Shaybah, Al-Muṣannaf, Kitāb al-Zuhd, ḥadīth no. 37287.

This narration highlights contentment, inner purity, and acceptance of divine decree as foundations of self-accountability. It emphasizes that true moral stability depends on controlling inner resentment and aligning the heart with Allah's will.

عن مالك بن مغول قال: كنا جلوسًا مع القاسم بن عبد الرحمن فقال رجل -وأشار إلى القاسم- قال: قال عبد الله: وددت أني إذا مت لم أبعث، فقال القاسم برأسه هكذا: أي نعم.

Malik ibn Mighwal reported: We were sitting with al-Qāsim ibn ʿAbd al-Rahman when a man pointed towards him and stated that ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd said: "I wish that when I die, I would not be resurrected." Al-Qāsim indicated by nodding his head that he affirmed this report.

Ibn Abī Shaybah, Al-Muṣannaf, Kitāb al-Zuhd, ḥadīth no. 37259.

This narration expresses intense khashyah and self-scrutiny, understood within Islamic tradition as heightened moral consciousness rather than theological denial. It reflects deep humility and awareness of human accountability before Allah.

عن السري بن يحيى عن الحسن قال: قال عبد الله: لو وُقِفتُ بين الجنة والنار فقيل لي: من أيهما تكون، أو تكون رمادًا، لاخترت أن أكون رمادًا.

It is reported that ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd said: "If I were made to stand between Paradise and Hell, and it were said to me that I would either be informed of my final destination or become dust, I would choose to become dust."

Ibn Abī Shaybah, Al-Muṣannaf, Kitāb al-Zuhd, ḥadīth no. 37261.

This statement reflects extreme eschatological awareness and profound humility. Within the Islamic interpretive tradition, it is understood as an expression of moral seriousness and fear of accountability before Allah, rather than despair, highlighting the gravity of divine judgment.

4.2 Khashyah (Fear of Allah and Spiritual Consciousness)

Khashyah (reverential fear of Allah) in Ibn Masʿūd's narrations defines true knowledge as that which produces God-consciousness, humility, and moral responsibility rather than mere information accumulation. It links epistemology with spirituality, making ethical transformation the real measure of knowledge. This inner awareness functions as a regulating force that strengthens self-discipline and moral integrity.

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حدثنا محمد بن فضيل عن الأعمش عن عبد الله بن مرة عن ابن مسعود قال: بحسب المرء من العلم أن يخاف الله، وبحسبه من الجهل أن يُعجب بعمله.

ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd is reported to have said: "It is sufficient knowledge for a person that he fears Allah, and it is sufficient ignorance for him that he becomes impressed with his own deeds."

Ibn Abī Shaybah, Al-Muṣannaf, Kitāb al-Zuhd, ḥadīth no. 37237.

This narration defines true knowledge as that which produces fear of Allah (khashyah) and humility, while identifying self-admiration in one's deeds as a sign of ignorance. It establishes a direct link between epistemology and moral psychology, where authentic knowledge results in ethical self-awareness and protection from arrogance.

حدثنا أبو معاوية عن مالك بن مغول عن أبي صخرة الضحاك بن مزاحم قال: قال عبد الله: لوددت أني طير في منكبي ريش.

ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd is reported to have said: "I wish that I were a bird with feathers upon my shoulders."

Ibn Abī Shaybah, Al-Muṣannaf, Kitāb al-Zuhd, ḥadīth no. 37239.

This narration reflects extreme humility and ascetic consciousness (zuhd), expressing a desire for insignificance before divine accountability. It symbolizes self-effacement and detachment from worldly identity rather than a literal wish, emphasizing moral seriousness and fear of standing before Allah.

عن زهير عن أبي إسحاق قال: قال عبد الله: ليتني شجرة تُعضَد.

ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd is reported to have said: "I wish that I were a tree that is cut down."

Ibn Abī Shaybah, Al-Muṣannaf, Kitāb al-Zuhd, ḥadīth no. 37240.

This narration expresses deep ascetic humility (zuhd) and a desire for self-effacement in light of divine accountability. It symbolizes detachment from worldly existence and reflects heightened moral awareness and fear of standing before Allah, rather than a literal wish for non-existence.

4.3 Ikhlāṣ (Sincerity and Purity of Intention)

Ikhlāṣ (sincerity) in Ibn Masʿūd's narrations establishes intention as the decisive factor in the acceptance and moral value of actions, linking ethical worth to inward purity rather than outward form. It rejects ostentation (riyāʾ) and highlights the importance of aligning inner motivation with outward conduct. In contemporary terms, ikhlāṣ provides a corrective ethical framework against performative behavior and identity construction driven by social validation, especially in digital environments. It promotes psychological integrity by aligning intention, belief, and action, thereby fostering authenticity and moral consistency.

عن خيثمة قال: قال عبد الله: من أحب أن يُنصفه الله من نفسه فليأتِ إلى الناس ما يحب أن يُؤتى إليه.

ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd is reported to have said: "Whoever wishes that Allah deals with him justly regarding himself should treat people in the same manner as he wishes to be treated."

Ibn Abī Shaybah, Al-Muṣannaf, Kitāb al-Zuhd, ḥadīth no. 37283.

This narration establishes the principle of moral reciprocity, linking divine accountability with ethical treatment of others by emphasizing justice, fairness, and empathy in human conduct.

عن عبد الرحمن بن الأسود عن أبيه قال: قال عبد الله بن مسعود: إنما هذه القلوب أوعية، فاشغلوها بالقرآن ولا تشغلوها بغيره.

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Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678

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ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd is reported to have said: “Indeed, these hearts are vessels, so occupy them with the Qur’an and do not occupy them with anything else.”
Ibn Abī Shaybah, Al-Muṣannaf, Kitāb al-Zuhd, ḥadīth no. 37271.

This narration emphasizes the centrality of the Qur’an in spiritual formation, portraying the heart as a vessel that must be filled with divine guidance to achieve moral and spiritual purification while avoiding distractions that weaken ethical consciousness.

4.5 Zuhd (Asceticism and Ethical Reorientation of Material Desire)

Zuhd in Ibn Masʿūd’s narrations refers to the ethical reorientation of worldly attachment, where material life is engaged without becoming a source of identity or ultimate value. It emphasizes moderation, humility, and awareness of the transience of worldly possessions, directing human focus toward moral conduct and spiritual responsibility. In contemporary terms, zuhd offers a critical framework against consumer-driven identity formation by promoting inner contentment, self-restraint, and purposeful living.

عن يزيد بن أبي زياد عن أبي جحيفة قال: قال عبد الله: ذهب صفو الدنيا وبقي كدرها، فالموت تحفة لكل مسلم.

ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd is reported to have said: “The pure aspect of this world has passed, and only its remaining bitterness is left, and death is a gift for every Muslim.”
Ibn Abī Shaybah, Al-Muṣannaf, Kitāb al-Zuhd, ḥadīth no. 37235.

This narration highlights the transience of worldly life and reorients human perception toward the Hereafter by describing death as a form of relief for the believer.

عن أبي إسحاق عن أبي الأحوص عن عبد الله قال: وددت أني صُولحتُ على تسع سيئات وحسنة.

ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd is reported to have said: “I wish that I would be taken to account for nine sins and one good deed.”
Ibn Abī Shaybah, Al-Muṣannaf, Kitāb al-Zuhd, ḥadīth no. 37263.

This narration reflects profound humility and fear of accountability, emphasizing a moral consciousness in which human beings recognize the gravity of their sins and the scarcity of their good deeds before Allah.

5. Contemporary Applications of Ibn Masʿūd’s Spiritual Teachings

5.1 Spiritual Crisis and Psychological Well-Being

Contemporary psychological challenges such as anxiety, meaninglessness, and emotional instability highlight the limitations of purely material approaches to well-being. Ibn Masʿūd’s spiritual teachings offer an integrated framework in which dhikr, muḥāsabah, ikhlāṣ, and zuhd promote inner balance, self-regulation, and moral clarity. This model links psychological health with spiritual purpose and ethical accountability, providing a holistic alternative to modern fragmented approaches to mental well-being.

5.2 Social Media, Digital Culture, and Moral Consciousness

Ibn Masʿūd’s spiritual teachings, particularly *ikhlāṣ* (sincerity) and *muḥāsabah* (self-accountability), provide a corrective ethical framework for contemporary digital culture by shifting moral evaluation from public visibility and social validation to inner sincerity and accountability before Allah. In an environment where identity is often shaped through performative self-presentation and external approval, these principles restore inward moral coherence and reduce dependence on fluctuating social feedback. Accordingly, they promote

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Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678

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authentic selfhood and sustained ethical awareness amid the psychological and moral pressures of digital life.

6. Critical Analytical Discussion

The spiritual methodology of Ibn Masʿūd (RA) differs fundamentally from modern secular self-development models, as it is grounded in divine accountability and moral transformation rather than self-esteem or emotional comfort. A key strength of this framework lies in its integration of inward spirituality and outward ethics, where knowledge is understood as transformative, producing humility and fear of Allah rather than mere informational accumulation. This integrated approach ensures that intellectual growth is directly connected with ethical refinement, preventing the separation of knowledge from moral responsibility. Importantly, this spirituality maintains balance by avoiding monastic withdrawal and instead promoting moderated, responsible, and ethical engagement with worldly life.

In the context of digital modernity, concepts such as *muḥāsabah* preserve moral awareness in distraction-heavy environments by encouraging continuous self-reflection and accountability, while *zuhd* challenges consumerist patterns of identity formation and excessive attachment to material culture. Together, these principles cultivate a disciplined moral consciousness that resists ethical erosion in rapidly changing social conditions. From a psychological and social perspective, this framework fosters resilience, meaning, moral stability, and responsible conduct by aligning inner conviction with outward behavior. Thus, Ibn Masʿūd's teachings present a comprehensive and balanced paradigm for addressing contemporary moral, psychological, and social challenges in both individual and collective life.

7. Findings

The present study has identified the following key findings regarding the concept of self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) in the narrations of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA):

1. Ibn Masʿūd's understanding of *tazkiyat al-nafs* is comprehensive and holistic, integrating spiritual consciousness, ethical conduct, intellectual refinement, and social responsibility.
2. The central themes within his narrations include self-accountability (*muḥāsabah*), fear of Allah (*khashyah*), sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*), asceticism (*zuhd*), Qur'anic spirituality, and adherence to the Prophetic Sunnah.
3. His teachings consistently emphasize inward moral transformation rather than superficial religious formalism.
4. Ibn Masʿūd (RA) regarded authentic knowledge as inseparable from humility, reverence, and ethical accountability.
5. The Qur'an occupies a central position in his spiritual methodology as a source of moral transformation, emotional healing, and ethical guidance.
6. His concept of asceticism does not advocate withdrawal from worldly life but promotes moderation and freedom from excessive attachment to materialism.
7. The findings demonstrate the strong contemporary relevance of Ibn Masʿūd's teachings, particularly in addressing modern challenges such as consumerism, digital distraction, identity fragmentation, anxiety, and moral relativism.
8. His spiritual framework offers valuable insights for contemporary discussions in Islamic psychology, moral education, youth development, and ethical reform.

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9. His methodology presents a balanced alternative to both excessive legalism and purely emotional or unstructured forms of spirituality.
10. Overall, the narrations of Ibn Masʿūd (RA) contribute significantly to contemporary Islamic ethical discourse by presenting a practical, revelation-centered model of holistic human development.

8. Conclusion

This study has examined the concept of self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) in the narrations and ethical teachings of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA) through a thematic and contemporary analytical framework. The findings demonstrate that Ibn Masʿūd presents a comprehensive spiritual methodology rooted in Qur'anic ethics and Prophetic guidance, emphasizing *ikhlāṣ* (sincerity), *muḥāsabah* (self-accountability), *khashyah* (fear of Allah), *zuhd* (moderation), adherence to the Sunnah, and engagement with the Qur'an as core dimensions of spiritual refinement. The study further highlights the continuing relevance of this framework in addressing modern challenges such as moral uncertainty, psychological distress, materialism, and digital distraction. It provides not only devotional guidance but also practical ethical principles that support moral development, emotional stability, and social well-being. Unlike secular approaches that often separate spirituality from ethics, Ibn Masʿūd's model integrates inner purification with divine accountability and outward moral responsibility, offering a holistic paradigm of human development. The study also suggests the need for greater academic engagement with the ethical and spiritual heritage of the Companions within interdisciplinary fields such as psychology, education, and ethics. Future research may explore comparative analyses between classical Islamic spirituality and contemporary psychological theories, along with their applied relevance in modern institutional contexts. Ultimately, the narrations of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd (RA) provide enduring insight into moral and spiritual development, reflecting the timeless relevance of Islamic spirituality in fostering inner balance, ethical integrity, and meaningful human existence.

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