Ibrāhīm Niasse’s community stressed that the realization of divine cognizance necessitated apprenticeship to a living spiritual trainer (murabbī). The reception of cognizance depended on the purification of the self: in fact, the rooting of disposition or receptivity in the being of the disciple. The teaching of ma’rifa thus clearly drew upon an earlier practice of person-to-person knowledge transmission in the Islamic religious disciplines (ʿulūm al-dīn) more generally. Disciples accompanied Sufi guides because the knowledge they sought could not be properly internalized without a master whose bodily presence had already become fused with this knowledge. This chapter explores the lively discourse surrounding master-disciple relations in the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse. After examining the general understanding of the practice from primary sources, further consideration is given to the respective guidelines for the conduct of both disciples and instructors. Since this was a discourse in which both teachers and students participated, I then discuss the meaning of discipleship from the perspective of students themselves.

Discipleship is perhaps the key practice and controversy surrounding Sufism. William Chittick explains,

The relationship between the shaykh or spiritual guide and his disciple is one of the more complex issues in the practical dimension of Sufism... All Sufis agree that entering the path without a shaykh is impossible. If someone thinks he has done so, in fact he has gone astray.¹

In Kāshīf al-ilbās, Ibrāhīm Niasse summarized Sufi thought on the importance of having a spiritual master:

It is well known that the religious scholars are the heirs of the Prophets. So seeking nearness to them is absolutely essential. It has been said concerning them: “Whoever is afflicted by a condition he cannot cure (himself), they will persuade him out of it.” The author of al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya said: “The aspirant must be refined (yata’addab) by the shaykh, for if he has no teacher, he will never succeed.” This was put in

¹ Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 270.
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a similar way by Abū Yazīd (al-Bistāmī): “Whoever has no teacher, his leader (imām) is Satan.”

Two primary reasons for the disciple’s affiliation to a shaykh may be deduced from this citation. The first was the need to connect with the chain of knowledge transmission through the “religious scholars,” the heirs of the Prophet Muḥammad. Second was the danger of being misled on the path by internal sicknesses and devilish whisperings. The guidance received from the shaykh in this case was defined as “refinement” (ta’addub), the inculcation of exemplary disposition (adab) or habitus.

The idea of the Sufi master’s inheritance from the Prophet Muḥammad was an allusion to the ability of the bodily presence to carry transformative spiritual knowledge, which can then be transferred through person-to-person instruction. Many writers, particularly anthropologists, have reduced the Sufi aspirant’s affiliation to personalized chains of knowledge transmission (sil-sila or sanad) to the search for baraka, a concept more closely associated with worldly blessing than knowledge of God and the formation of character. Students affiliated themselves to Sufi shaykhs in order to actualize the example of the Prophet Muḥammad as the ideal personification of Islam. Nile Green thus observed in his study of Sufism in Islamic history,

In embodying the charisma and the teachings of Muhammad in the physical presence of a living master with whom one could speak and whose hand one could clasp in a pledge of initiation, . . . the local representatives of the Sufi brotherhoods were able to bridge the distance of time, space and culture that separated the Muslims of the middle ages from the distant age and homeland of the Prophet.

2 Ibrāhīm Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 25. The statement, “The scholars are the heirs of the Prophets,” is a Prophetic hadith reported by Abū l-Dardā’, and related by Abū Dāwūd. Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072) was an important Persian scholar, known for hadith scholarship, Qurʾān exegesis and his Sufi teachings. Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī (d. 874) was a prominent early Sufi from Persia.

3 Chittick similarly offers these same two explanations—the spiritual power in the chain of transmission and the hidden deviancy of the untrained carnal soul—for the logic of affiliation to a Sufi shaykh. See Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 207.
