

From *Nafs* to Tranquility: A Psychospiritual Transformation Process

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: October 2025

Revised: July 2026

Accepted: April 2026

Abstract. Islamic psychology identifies *nafs al-muthmainnah* as a form of human developmental attainment, yet its conceptual structure and relation to *nafs* and *ruh* remain empirically underexplored. This study reconstructs these concepts through an integrative psychospiritual model distinguishing *ruh* as a stable, non-transformative transcendent dimension from *nafs* as a dynamic, transformable self. Using a phenomenological approach, expert interviews were conducted with ten purposively sampled Islamic scholars and psychology experts, analyzed through process-oriented thematic analysis. Findings show *nafs* as a developing psychospiritual system, while *ruh* remains a stable orientation toward God. *Nafs al-muthmainnah* emerges as a higher stage marked by inner calmness, moral consistency, and psychological stability, achieved through repentance (*taubat*), *mujahadah*, and *riyadlah*, integrating consciousness, moral regulation, and God-awareness as a form of eudaimonic well-being.

Keywords: *Nafs*, *Nafs al-Muthmainnah*, Repentance, *Ruh*, Sufism

Abstrak. Psikologi Islam mengidentifikasi *nafs al-muthmainnah* sebagai capaian perkembangan manusia, namun kejelasan empiris mengenai struktur konseptual dan relasinya dengan *nafs* dan *ruh* masih terbatas. Penelitian ini merekonstruksi konsep tersebut melalui model psikospiritual integratif yang membedakan *ruh* sebagai dimensi transenden stabil yang tidak mengalami transformasi, dan *nafs* sebagai diri yang dinamis dan dapat berkembang. Melalui pendekatan fenomenologis, dilakukan wawancara ahli terhadap sepuluh partisipan (ulama dan pakar psikologi Islam) yang dipilih secara *purposive*, dianalisis dengan analisis tematik berorientasi proses. Hasil menunjukkan *nafs* sebagai sistem psikospiritual yang berkembang, sementara *ruh* menjadi sumber orientasi stabil kepada Allah. *Nafs al-muthmainnah* muncul sebagai tahap lebih tinggi yang ditandai ketenangan batin, konsistensi moral, dan stabilitas psikologis melalui proses *taubat*, *mujahadah*, dan *riyadlah*, mengintegrasikan kesadaran, regulasi moral, dan kesadaran akan Allah sebagai bentuk kesejahteraan eudaimonik.

Kata kunci: *Nafs*, *Nafsul mutmainnah*, Pertobatan, *Ruh*, Sufisme

Religion increasingly shapes both private and public life worldwide, with numerous studies demonstrating its important role in enhancing adherents' well-being (Koenig, 2012; Unterrainer et al., 2010; Villani et al., 2019). This is reflected in Indonesia, where the 2021 Indonesian Happiness Index shows a happiness level of 71.49, an increase of 0.80 points from 2017 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2021). These results, spanning nearly all life domains, indicate that Indonesians are relatively happy, with higher levels of eudaimonic happiness (e.g., self-acceptance, purpose in life, positive relations, autonomy, personal growth, and environmental mastery) than hedonic happiness, reflected in a meaning-in-life score of 73.12 versus a lower emotional score of 65.61. In terms of life satisfaction, Indonesians score higher on social dimensions (80.07) than personal dimensions (70.26), suggesting that despite lower personal satisfaction, they find alternative pathways to fulfillment, with purpose in life (eudaimonic) contributing more to overall happiness than affection (hedonic) (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2021).

This suggests Indonesians have potential for greater happiness, with the spiritual-religious dimension identified as a key supporting factor (Akhyar et al., 2019; Anggraeny et al., 2015; Awad & Mayasari, 2015; Diponegoro & Ru'iyah, 2013; Hamka et al., 2020; Nafi'ah & Arham, 2024; Supriatna & Septian, 2021). Indonesians generally hold strong religious beliefs, reflected in high levels of practice: most Muslim respondents rate religion as important or very important, frequently think about religion, and consistently perform daily prayers, Ramadan fasting, and zakat (Pepinsky et al., 2018). Awad and Mayasari (2015) argue that Islamic religiosity provides meaning and purpose in life, enhancing eudaimonic well-being, which may explain why eudaimonic happiness outweighs hedonic happiness among Indonesians.

Beyond meaning and purpose, Islam also offers its own conceptualization of happiness: Altiner describes a state, known as *nafs al-muthmainnah*, in which individuals experience happiness spanning both intellectual and spiritual realms (Altiner, 2015, Afandi, 2021, Amiruddin, Qorib, & Zailani, 2021). According to Altiner, this condition reflects a higher stage of *nafs*, representing true happiness derived from knowledge and virtue. In line with this, Islamic psychology identifies *nafs al-muthmainnah* as a developmental attainment, an integrated stage reflecting individual maturity (Shafii, 2004). Shafii attempted to explain the developmental stages toward *nafs al-muthmainnah* using Erikson's theory of maturity, yet this level remains insufficiently explained, as it extends beyond Erikson's framework.

The literature on *nafs al-muthmainnah* highlights the importance of this construct, as it describes an optimal level of human functioning associated with the ideal or perfected human (Hikmah, 2009; Mujib, 2006), the purpose of transformation (Picken, 2005), the state in which individuals experience true happiness (Altiner, 2015), and a condition representing optimal mental health (Handayu, 2012). While various studies have emphasized its importance, there remain limited empirical studies that clearly conceptualize *nafs al-muthmainnah*. In Indonesia, only a few studies have examined this construct, such as Handayu (2012); Mafrukha (2009); Sari (2015); and Suriyanti (2009). Each of these studies includes a different set of definitions and characteristics.

Nafs al-Muthmainnah

Qur'anic Basis of Nafs al-Muthmainnah

In the Qur'an, *al-muthmainnah* and its derivatives appear thirteen times, seven linked to *qalb* (heart) and one to good deeds, suggesting righteous conduct fosters inner tranquility. When paired with *al-nafs*, it denotes a calm or tranquil soul (Baharuddin, 2007). Contemporary Islamic psychology interprets this state as an indicator of psychological well-being rooted in spiritual alignment and meaning-making.

Definition of Nafs al-Muthmainnah

Nafs al-muthmainnah can be defined as a "tranquil" or "serene self," characterized by inner peace and alignment with divine values, described in the literature as "*the higher self at peace, the satisfied, peaceful, God-realized rational soul*" (Altiner, 2015), and "the serene self" (Frager & Fadiman, 2012). It has also been framed as the goal of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, the purification of the soul toward a higher form of *nafs* (Picken, 2005). In modern terms, this state parallels constructs such as emotional regulation, self-integration, and eudaimonic well-being, marked by coherence, purpose, and inner stability.

Levels of Nafs

Al-Hosani states that there are three basic levels of *nafs*. These levels are associated with different types of motivation (Hosani, 2015) and varying degrees of spiritual attainment and human development (Picken, 2005). The three basic levels are *al-nafs al-ammarah* (the commanding self that motivates individuals to fulfill worldly desires without considering the consequences), *al-nafs al-lawwamah* (the self-reproaching self), and *al-nafs al-muthmainnah* (the tranquil self). However, the literature presents differing views regarding whether *al-nafs al-muthmainnah* represents the

highest level of *nafs* (Baharuddin, 2007) or whether additional levels exist beyond it (Adz-Dzakiey, 2008). These additional levels include *nafs al-radhiyah* (the self that is content with everything given by God), *nafs al-mardhiyah* (the self that is accepted by God), and *nafs al-kamilah* (the perfected self). In contemporary terms, these levels can be paralleled.

Conceptual Roots: The Meaning of Nafs

Since *nafs al-muthmainnah* is recognized as a level of *nafs* (Hosani, 2015), it is rooted in the broader concept of *nafs*, which, per Wehr's dictionary, carries multiple meanings, including soul, psyche, spirit, mind, self, and personal identity (Netton, 2011). The relationship between *nafs* and *ruh* has long been debated among theologians and philosophers (Bakry, 2015), with contemporary psychologists often using "soul," "spirit," or "psyche" interchangeably (Berghash & Jillson, 1998), paralleling modern discussions of self, identity, and personality. Recent Islamic psychology scholarship frames *nafs* as a dynamic, developing self encompassing cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions (Rothman & Coyle, 2018; Keshavarzi & Haque, 2013).

Nafs and Ruh in Islamic Tradition

Islamic traditions vary in distinguishing *nafs* from the "soul": in Sufism, *nafs* is often equated with the psyche, while *ruh* denotes the soul (Hosani, 2015). Other literature further separates the two, defining *nafs* as the life-giving force animating the body, and *ruh* as an entity from Allah orienting humans toward the Divine (Adz-Dzakiey, 2004; Baharuddin, 2007; Muhaya, 2015). Contemporary interpretations increasingly frame *ruh* as a transcendental source of meaning and divine orientation, while *nafs* represents the experiential, transformable dimension of self, paralleling modern distinctions between core self, consciousness, and higher-order meaning systems.

Nafs and Ruh in Islamic Tradition

The Qur'anic terms *nafs* and *ruh* carry varied meanings, extensively studied through their different usages and contexts (Baharuddin, 2007; Bakry, 2015). Baharuddin (2007) notes that *nafs* appears 297 times in the Qur'an across singular (140 times) and plural forms (*nufus* twice, *anfus* 153 times, verb forms twice), occasionally referring to God's self, but predominantly to the human self.

In defining the human self, *nafs* carries multiple meanings, ranging from the totality of the human being (physical and psychological) to the inner self (e.g., lust), the breath of life, and the soul. In contrast, *ruh*, appearing 24 times in the Qur'an (Baharuddin, 2007), refers to God's help,

the Angel Gabriel, revelation, or the human psychic dimension, with five verses denoting the spirit breathed into humans by God, which Bakry (2015) describes as a divine mystery placed within humanity. Contemporary scholars view *ruh* as a metaphysical dimension beyond empirical observation, while *nafs* remains more accessible to psychological inquiry.

Nafs in Islamic Psychology

The study of *nafs* within Islamic monotheism and psychology has been widely discussed (Adz-Dzakiey, 2007; Baharuddin, 2007; Frager, 1999; Muhaya, 2015; Purwanto, 2007), reflecting its centrality to psychology itself, which is fundamentally the science of the soul (psyche = soul). Kaukua (2021), in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Science, and Technology in Islam*, describes psychology (*'ilm fi al-nafs*) as the branch of natural philosophy studying living bodies through their cause, the soul (*nafs*). While classical and contemporary scholars have discussed *nafs* extensively, empirically integrated studies remain limited. Recent work in Islamic psychology has sought to bridge classical concepts with modern theories of self-regulation, well-being, and personality development, given *nafs*'s accessibility to psychological inquiry and human experience (Apriyanti et al., 2023; Keshavarzi & Haque, 2013; Rothman, 2021).

It can therefore be concluded that the concept of *nafs* is fundamental within the Islamic paradigm of psychology. This can also be seen in Rothman and Coyle's research, who found that the concept of the soul is central to the conceptualization of the person within Islamic psychology (Rothman & Coyle, 2018). Although classical and contemporary scholars have extensively discussed *nafs*, empirical and theoretically integrated studies remain limited. Recent developments in Islamic psychology have attempted to bridge classical concepts with modern psychological theories, including models of self-regulation, well-being, and personality development (Keshavarzi & Haque, 2013; Rothman, 2021; Trimulyaningsih et al., 2024). Nevertheless, researchers have found difficulties in explaining *nafs al-muthmainnah* and its conceptual framework, which relates to various explanations about the term.

From the explanation, it is clear that there are many confusing concepts regarding *nafs al-muthmainnah* and its root concept (*nafs*). There is a needs to build a comprehensive understanding of *nafs al-muthmainnah* and the theory behind it. This research tries to answer the research questions: what *nafs al-muthmainnah* is and how it relates to the underlying theory of *nafs*. From this research question, researchers hope to obtain an explanation regarding:

1. What is *nafs*: definition, essence, and the difference between *nafs* and other related terms?
2. What is *nafs al-muthmainnah*: definition, essence, characteristics, and how to attain it?
3. What are the implications of the linkage between the concepts of *nafs*, *ruh*, and *nafs al-muthmainnah*?

Method

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected experts to ensure relevance to the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002), using a semi-formalized format with pre-set questions but no fixed expectations for responses (Libakova & Sertakova, 2015). All data collection and analysis were conducted by the researchers. This phenomenological design carries inherent limitations: reliance on participants' lived experiences may introduce researcher subjectivity (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009); its focus on depth over breadth limits generalizability (Creswell, 2007); and interpreting experiences embedded in specific religious and linguistic contexts poses further challenges (Moustakas, 1994). To enhance credibility, researchers employed several strategies (Creswell, 2007; Gibbs, 2007): (a) extended engagement with data sources to minimize analytical errors; (b) rigorous recording and transcription; (c) constant comparison across themes and categories; (d) rich, detailed description of findings; and (e) peer debriefing with fellow researchers to ensure credibility beyond the researchers' own perspective.

Research subject

Participants were selected via purposive sampling (Sulistyo, 2019), targeting experts with a structured understanding of *nafs* in their respective fields. Inclusion criteria required either: (1) clergy with in-depth Qur'anic and Hadith knowledge and teaching/discussion experience on *nafs/nafs al-muthmainnah*, or (2) Islamic psychology scientists with at least five years' of relevant experience. Ten experts were selected, five clergy member and five Islamic psychology scholars, a composition deemed adequate to capture diverse yet in-depth perspectives.

Research methods

This study employed qualitative phenomenological research to understand experts' lived experiences and interpretations of *nafs*, *ruh*, and *nafs al-muthmainnah*, aiming to capture the essence of how individuals make sense of these terms' spiritual and philosophical meanings and their implications for Islamic psychology. The expert interview method was used, a qualitative

approach for exploring specialized knowledge (Meuser & Nagel, 2009), well-suited to concepts rooted in specific intellectual traditions (Libakova & Sertakova, 2015). This method suits *nafs* and *nafs al-muthmainnah*, which involve specialized paradigms held by practitioners; as Pfadenhauer (2009) notes, expert interviews are "*geared to the reconstruction of specific knowledge stocks... about particular knowledge stocks and practices.*" The research followed a structured process: proposal development, in-depth interviews, full transcription, coding and categorization to identify themes, and an independently written report synthesizing the results and discussion.

Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using a process-oriented interpretive approach adapted from expert interview research (Meuser & Nagel, 2009), focusing on understanding how knowledge is generated, reflected upon, and finalized. Analysis centered on thematic units, passages with similar topics across interviews following six stages: (1) Transcription: only thematically relevant passages were transcribed, rather than full recordings. (2) Paraphrase: text was organized into coherent thematic units. (3) Coding: paraphrased passages were thematically categorized while preserving interviewees' original terminology. (4) Thematic comparison: comparable passages across interviews were grouped, with categories kept close to the data and continuously re-checked for validity. (5) Psychological conceptualization: similarities and differences were identified using theoretical knowledge, with generalizations grounded strictly in empirical data. (6) Theoretical generalization: categories were organized by their interrelationships into empirically grounded, theoretically informed findings, connecting meaning structures into broader typologies.

Result

The findings of the final analysis, following an iterative process of back-and-forth analysis and theoretical generation, are presented below.

The Themes Found in the Concept of Nafs

Findings show that *nafs* is structured across interconnected themes spanning ontological meaning and lived experience. Literally, *nafs* is understood variously as soul, psyche, self, blood, flesh, breath, lust, or desire, distinct from *ruh*, reflecting a layered construct spanning physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. By definition, *nafs* is described as the self's core existence, actualizing the potential of *ruh* and the body, and serving as the "master of self" or inner nature, phenomenologically, it is the center of subjective experience integrating inner awareness with

outward expression. Functionally, *nafs* enables bodily function, houses conscience, and mediates between spirit and body. Its indicators appear through attitudes, behavior, speech, and *akhlak* (moral character), making it accessible through lived expression. In terms of tendency, *nafs* is mortal, embodied, and developing, caught in ongoing tension between following the body and the spirit. It is further situated within a broader psychospiritual system (self-system, *qalb* function) and perceived as evolving across developmental stages, with illness of the soul linked to damage in the body or *qalb*. Overall, *nafs* emerges as a dynamic, multidimensional construct continuously shaped through bodily, psychological, and spiritual interaction.

The Themes Found in the Concept of Ruh

Findings show that *ruh* is articulated through themes emphasizing its transcendental origin and metaphysical nature. Literally, *ruh* is linked to *rih* (wind), meaning, and the Angel Gabriel, reflecting linguistic roots and symbolic association with divine agency, and is experienced not as an abstract concept but as a subtle, dynamic presence tied to life, movement, and divine communication. Its origin theme reinforces this: the human *ruh* comes from God, positioning it as a divine endowment connecting human existence to its ultimate source. In its nature, *ruh* is described as meaningful, containing the science of life and vitality, holding potential for truth, and interacting with the body and *nafs* to give rise to new elements. It is framed as a metaphysical, unseen entity that is holy, God-oriented, and illuminating to the soul. Phenomenologically, *ruh* emerges as the source of inner illumination and existential meaning, shaping purpose, direction, and divine connection, as a foundational, non-material dimension that interacts with, yet remains distinct from, the embodied and transformable self.

The Themes Found in the Concept of Nafs al-Muthmainnah

Findings show *nafs al-muthmainnah* to be a multidimensional state of inner transformation centered on peace, alignment, and return to the divine. It is defined as a peaceful, calm soul that has returned to its origin (*ruh*/Allah), marked by faith, submission (*ridla*), consent, and piety (*nafsul alimah*, *rohatul qulub*, *nafsul kamilah*), reflecting existential calmness rooted in surrender and conscious divine connection. At the level of self-existence, this state involves the synchronized alignment of the soul under conscience (*qalb*), health, and closeness to Allah, accompanied by internal transformation of *qalb* (into *shodrun* and *fu'adun*) and *aql* (into analytical *fikrun*), reflecting an integrated development across emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions. Experientially, it manifests as positive emotion (solemnity, humility, contentment, sincerity) and

stability (calm, steady, consistent across conditions), reflecting sustained psychological equilibrium. *Nafs al-muthmainnah* is further marked by constant God-consciousness, acceptance of divine decree (*qodlo wa qadar*), contentment (*qana'ah*), and reliance on Allah alone. Individuals remain trustworthy and ethically grounded; even residual anger (*nafsul ammarah*) is expressed without harming others, and the state manifests in altruism and consistent prosocial behavior. Overall, *nafs al-muthmainnah* represents a stable, integrated, morally grounded state reflecting the culmination of psychological and spiritual development.

Themes Found in the Attainment Process toward Nafs al-Muthmainnah

The process toward *nafs al-muthmainnah* is experienced as a dynamic transformation, *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul), in which the soul becomes cleaner, less worldly-bound, closer to *ruh*/Allah, and better able to actualize the potential of *ruh*, accompanied by improved character, mental health, and awareness. Phenomenologically, this is a gradual deepening rather than a sudden change, closely tied to repentance as a movement from dispersion toward unity with the divine. Practically, this transformation is enacted through *riyadhoh* (worship, physical purification, social practice, appreciation of religious values) and *mujahadah* (struggle, sincerity, intentional self-preservation), shaped by determining factors such as faith, deliberate intention, divine guidance, sacred knowledge, and mentorship from experienced others. The transformation's scope is holistic, spanning physical, soul, and *qalb* dimensions. Overall, attaining *nafs al-muthmainnah* is a continuous, lived process of purification and alignment achieved through conscious effort, spiritual discipline, and divine orientation.

Discussion

The findings suggest that *nafs*, *ruh*, and *qalb* should be understood as an integrated psychospiritual system rather than as isolated concepts. *Ruh* represents the transcendent source of meaning and orientation toward God, while *qalb* functions as the mediating center of awareness and conscience. In contrast, *nafs* appears as the experiential and transformable dimension of the self, expressed through desire, emotion, behavior, morality, and psychological functioning. This interpretation is consistent with recent frameworks in Islamic psychology, which conceptualize the human person as a holistic being whose psychological life is inseparable from spiritual orientation and moral development. For example, Rothman's model of Islamic psychology

emphasizes that Islamic understandings of the self and soul can inform contemporary psychological theory and psychotherapy.

Based on the data, *nafs* is defined as the existence of the self at the spiritual or innermost level, originating from the *ruh* that embodies it, and emerging as the actualization of the potential of the *ruh* and the entire human body. This definition complements and clarifies earlier definitions proposed by previous scholars (Adz-Dzakiey, 2004; Baharuddin, 2007; Muhaya, 2015). This definition is grounded in the view that, in addition to having a physical body, human beings possess an element referred to as *ruh*. This understanding was shared by all interviewees and is consistent with the existing literature. *Ruh*, as explained by many scholars and previous studies, is understood as originating from God and present within the human being. As such, *ruh* is considered holy and unable to directly actualize its potential. This interpretation is consistent with Ibn Sina's explanation that *ruh* cannot actualize its potential without the body; therefore, *ruh* must be embodied and sustained through a new entity referred to as *nafs* (Sina, 2009). This finding clarifies Bakry's view that the distinction between *nafs* and *ruh* lies in their characteristics, while their similarity lies in their substance (Bakry, 2015).

This definition encompasses the term “*self*.” One of the literal meanings of *nafs*, as identified by the experts, refers to the self. Other literal meanings identified in this study include the soul, desire, psyche, blood, breath, *nifas*, person, lust, and *ruh*. Some of these terms are often used interchangeably in the literature to correspond with *nafs*, which may contribute to conceptual ambiguity due to the lack of further clarification. In modern psychology, the term “*self*” lacks universally agreed-upon conceptual framework, whether in its definition or its structure. Baumeister defines the “*self*” as “... *the direct feeling that each person has of his or her own privileged access to thoughts, feelings, and sensations ...*” (Baumeister, 1997). Another perspective suggests that self does not refer to a single entity but rather to multiple structures and processes. Differences arise not only in definitions but also in views on the origin of the self. Historical accounts indicate that one view holds that the self is not a physical entity but rather arises from a soul or spirit. However, with the development of modern science, many researchers have moved away from this dualistic perspective and have generally adopted a materialistic approach, suggesting that “the self is clearly dependent, in some manner, on the brain. If we did not have a brain, we would not have a self.” (Robins et al., 2008).

The findings reveal diverse perspectives among contemporary psychological researchers regarding the concept of *nafs*. The experts in this study define *nafs* as “self-existence, our self-existence” (2nd expert) and as “the human self ... the whole person ... the whole spiritual body ...” (8th expert). Based on this analysis, the term “self” in this study refers to the existence of the human being as a whole, encompassing both the physical body and the mind/spirit. Thus, the term “self” denotes the unity of the human body and spirit, whereas *nafs* refers to a particular dimension of the human being, namely the spiritual or inner existence.

Most experts in this study (Indonesian native speakers) use the term “soul” (*jiwa*) to refer to *nafs*, although some experts use *ruh* (spirit) interchangeably with *nafs* (10th expert) or equate *nafs* with the “self” (6th and 10th experts). The first expert further explains that the term “self” implies an “inner orientation,” which may lead to conceptual overlap when used as a synonym for the soul. This is illustrated in the following quotation:

“I learned the last information from Mr. Frager... He defined *ammarah bi al-sū*’ as the orientation of the self... In the past, I thought it referred only to anger or lust, similar to the id. However, it is not merely the id. According to Robert Frager’s interpretation, concepts such as self-confidence and self-esteem are also part of *ammarah bi al-sū*’...” (1st expert). Meanwhile, the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* defines the soul (*jiwa*) as “the human spirit (which resides in the body and enables life); the entirety of the inner aspects of human life, including feelings, thoughts, and dreams” (Kemdikbud, 2018). This definition is consistent with the findings of this study. Based on these descriptions, the term “soul” appears to capture the core meaning of *nafs* without overlapping with other related concepts.

This finding also highlights differences between *nafs* and the “soul,” as discussed by Rothman and Coyle (2018), who conceptualize *nafs* as a part of the soul or as the lower self. This perspective is partially reflected in the present study, where some experts associate *nafs* with desire (*nafsu*), while others relate it to *ruh* or a higher form of existence. These variations suggest that terms such as soul, desire, psyche, blood, breath, *nifas*, person, lust, and *ruh* represent different expressions or potentials of *nafs*, which are influenced by context, structure, and relational dynamics that remain insufficiently defined.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the soul is understood as an inward or spiritual entity that cannot be directly observed (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 8th experts). Nevertheless, its existence is inferred through its functions within the human body, including behavior, cognition (brain

function), sensory perception, emotions, and physiological processes such as the functioning of the heart, bile, kidneys, and others. This expands on the perspective of Berghash and Jillson, who describe the soul and spirit as inhabiting the body and shaping various aspects of inner life. In this study, *ruh* is closely aligned with the concept of “spirit,” as described by Berghash and Jillson (1998). The findings indicate that, in addition to its inward or spiritual existence, the soul also manifests through observable symptoms. As expressed by one expert, the *ruh* that embodies the human being gives rise to the soul, which activates the functions of the body, including the brain and other organs. Although the soul itself cannot be directly observed, its existence can be inferred through its manifestations, such as thoughts, attitudes, and behavior.

The study further suggests that the soul can be examined through moral indicators (*akhlak*), which reflect the condition of the individual’s inner state. Several experts agreed that physical, psychological, and spiritual functions can serve as measurable variables, as these are considered expressions of psychic symptoms. This highlights that the existence of the soul is closely linked to its functional manifestations within the human being. Another important finding concerns the dynamic process of growth or transformation of the soul. This transformation is associated with qualitative changes, including becoming cleaner and holier, less attached to worldly matters, gaining higher capacity, becoming closer to God, increasingly actualizing the potential of the *ruh*. It also involves improvements in moral character (*akhlak*), mental health, and awareness. This process reflects a continuous development in which individuals move through different levels of the soul.

The findings show that these levels include *nafs ammarah bi al-sū’*, *nafs lawwamah*, *nafs mulhamah*, *nafs al-muthmainnah*, *nafs al-radhiyah*, and *nafs al-mardhiyah*. While some experts consider *nafs al-muthmainnah* the highest and most perfect level, others suggest that further levels may exist beyond it. The process of attaining *nafs al-muthmainnah* is closely associated with the purification of the soul through repentance (*taubat*), supported by factors such as parental upbringing, prayer, and human development. At the level of *nafs al-muthmainnah*, individuals experience a condition of inner peace, stability, and psychological well-being. This peaceful state is reflected both in the existence of the soul and in its observable expressions, such as calm thoughts, attitudes, and behavior. As noted by the experts, when the soul attains a state of peace, it influences the body, although physical conditions may not always fully reflect this inner calmness.

Furthermore, *nafs al-muthmainnah* is characterized by specific conditions, including a peaceful and healthy soul, being blessed by Allah, and a harmonious integration of the elements within the soul, guided by the *qalb*. At this stage, the soul is oriented toward its origin (Allah), and its internal elements undergo transformation (e.g., *qalb* into *shodrun* and *fu'adun*, and *aql* into *fikrun*). This condition is also marked by positive emotional states, including peace, happiness, and stability, which are natural and non-manipulative, and grounded in submission to God. Although negative emotions may still arise, individuals maintain ethical behavior (*akhlak*) and avoid harming others.

Finally, *nafs al-muthmainnah* involves a stable and sustained awareness of God, reflected in a state of consciousness dominated by remembrance of God. This aligns with broader psychological perspectives on consciousness as a perceived mental state that integrates awareness of internal and external experiences, enabling individuals to manage their lives in a unified and meaningful way (Gallego, 2011).

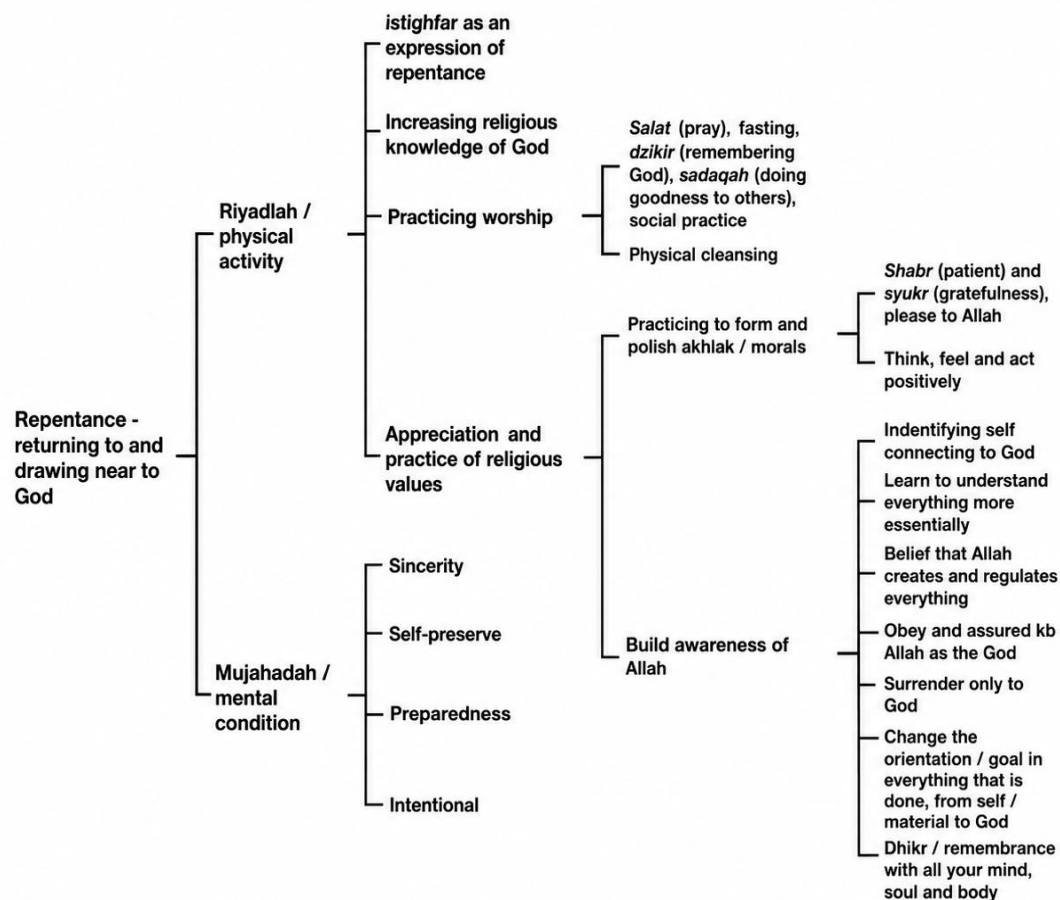
In addition, Kokoszka states that consciousness is the ability of the individual to know their own psychological condition (Kokoszka, 2007). This is consistent with the findings of the present study, in which consciousness is understood as the capacity to know and remember God, as emphasized by the experts. As illustrated by one expert: “How we regulate and habituate *thuma'ninah* (sincerity) and remain consistent is by maintaining constant awareness and remembrance of God through *dhikr*, not only verbally but also sincerely in the heart (*qalb*). This leads to a state of full awareness. In Buddhism, this is referred to as mindfulness; in this context, mindfulness is comparable to *dhikr*. Through such practices, individuals become aware of what they feel, what they are doing, and what they will do, by cultivating a form of consciousness that is essential.” (10th expert)

The findings further indicate that individuals who have attained *nafs al-muthmainnah* exhibit specific characteristics of consciousness. These include faith and obedience to God, understanding God as the ultimate purpose of life, possessing knowledge of God and divinity, and perceiving life experiences as meaningful in relation to God. In addition, such individuals demonstrate a deep sense of acceptance grounded in submission to Allah. This acceptance is reflected in attitudes such as accepting God's commands, prohibitions, and decrees; facing life's challenges with sincerity, trustworthiness, and *tawadlu'* (humility); relying solely on God; embodying *ridla* (acceptance of all conditions, including *qodlo wa qadar*); practicing *qana'ah*

(contentment with what is given); and fearing nothing but Allah. Furthermore, individuals at this level are characterized by trustworthiness in their social interactions and a strong orientation toward goodness. They consistently strive to perform good deeds, help others, and avoid mixing good with evil. These behavioral expressions indicate that *nafs al-muthmainnah* is not only an internal state but also manifests in observable moral and social conduct.

Based on the data analysis, the process of attaining *nafs al-muthmainnah* involves the purification of the soul, particularly through repentance (*taubat*). In this study, repentance is understood as returning to and drawing closer to God. These findings clarify that repentance is not merely regret over past mistakes but a transformative process that enables individuals to realign themselves with God and avoid repeating past actions (Hoddin & Thullab, 2012). In this sense, repentance serves as a mechanism for purifying the soul and fostering a sense of purpose in relation to oneself, others, the environment, and God.

Figure 1.
Details results of repentance



The findings indicate that the meaning of repentance in this study encompasses two key components, namely *mujahadah* and *riyadlah* (see Figure 1). Several experts define *mujahadah* as the serious exertion of one's inner capacities to restrain desires (*ammarah*) and maintain the purity of the heart. Al-Qusyairi (2007) explains that *mujahadah* involves freeing oneself from habitual desires and consistently opposing lustful impulses. Based on the analysis, *mujahadah* reflects an individual's internal condition, characterized by sincerity, self-preservation, awareness, and a conscious intention to repent.

In contrast, *riyadlah* refers to external or embodied practices. It is understood as engaging in disciplined physical and behavioral efforts, tailored to the individual, as a means of cultivating the soul and seeking God's forgiveness, ultimately guiding the individual back to their essential origin as a servant of God. These practices include increasing knowledge of God, performing acts of worship, and embodying religious values in daily life. The interconnection between *nafs*, *qalb*, repentance (*taubat*), *mujahadah*, and *riyadlah* has been extensively discussed in classical Sufi scholarship, particularly in the works of figures such as Imam al-Ghazali and Imam al-Qusyairi. The study also reveals that the process of growth toward *nafs al-muthmainnah* requires guidance from experienced individuals who have themselves undergone similar spiritual development. This finding is consistent with the characteristics of the participants, among whom six out of ten identified as Sufi practitioners. In the Sufi tradition, the role of the *mursyid* (spiritual guide) is central, functioning as a mentor who directs the path and protects the seeker from potential errors (Darat, 2017; Shafii, 2004). This supports the view that the development of *nafs* toward higher levels of maturity cannot occur optimally without proper guidance.

Sufism, as a spiritual discipline within Islam, encompasses diverse definitions and approaches, with no single universally agreed-upon formulation. Sufi practitioners are distinguished not by formal theological or legal traditions alone, but by their emphasis on experiential and intuitive knowledge in understanding the deeper dimensions of life. Contemporary scholars often interpret Sufism as an effort to explore the mysteries of existence and human experience through spiritual practice. Within this tradition, there are structured methods aimed at moral refinement, self-purification, and the integration of inner and outer life, ultimately leading to enduring happiness and spiritual fulfilment (Bilqies, 2014). This perspective provides an important foundation for understanding the findings of this study, particularly in explaining the depth and complexity of *nafs al-muthmainnah* as a psychospiritual construct. The

emphasis on purification, transformation, and experiential knowledge suggests that the development of higher levels of *nafs* is deeply rooted in classical Sufi teachings. Therefore, future theoretical and empirical developments in this area may be significantly enriched by engaging more systematically with the classical Sufi tradition.

The central contribution of this study lies in identifying *taubat* as the key mechanism of transformation toward *nafs al-muthmainnah*. The findings indicate that *taubat* is not merely a ritual act, but a process of returning to and drawing closer to Allah through self-awareness, moral evaluation, remorse, and intentional reorientation. In psychological terms, this process can be read as a form of self-regulation and meaning reconstruction: the individual becomes aware of misalignment, evaluates the self, redirects desire and behavior, and commits to a higher value system. This bridges the Islamic concept of repentance with contemporary psychological ideas of self-reflection, emotional regulation, and purposeful change.

This study aligns with the argument that Islamic psychology requires a non-instrumental empirical approach focusing on the experiential dimension of human life. In this context, direct experience (*al-zauq*) provides access to the inner dynamics of *nafs* as a transformable self that cannot be fully captured through objective methods alone (Dewi, 2018). This is consistent with the findings of this study, which show that *nafs* develops toward *nafs al-muthmainnah* through transformative processes such as repentance, *mujahadah*, and *riyadlah*, while *ruh* remains a stable dimension oriented toward God. Thus, the experiential approach serves not only as a method but also as an epistemological bridge linking *nafs* and *ruh* in psychospiritual transformation. This perspective also resonates with Popper's emphasis on experience as a means of testing and enriching theoretical understanding.

The process does not stop at *taubat*. The findings show that transformation requires *riyadhoh* and *mujahadah*, namely disciplined worship, physical purification, social practices, sincerity, preparedness, and intentional struggle. These processes function as repeated practices that stabilize the transformation of *nafs*. In this sense, *riyadhoh* and *mujahadah* can be interpreted as behavioral and spiritual training that gradually strengthens self-regulation, character, and awareness of Allah. This is also aligned with recent work on *nafs al-muṭma'innah*, which describes spiritual transformation as a process involving sustained spiritual practice, purification, and increasing awareness (Trimulyaningsih, Subandi, & Yuniarti, 2024).

Theoretically, this study contributes in three ways. First, it clarifies the distinction between *ruh* as a divine, metaphysical, and orienting dimension, and *nafs* as the transformable self that appears in lived psychological experience. Second, it positions *qalb* as a mediating structure that connects spiritual illumination with moral and psychological functioning. Third, it proposes *taubat* as a central mechanism of transformation, supported by *riyadhoh* and *mujahadah*, through which the self moves toward *nafs al-muthmainnah*. This model offers a process-based framework for Islamic psychology and provides a clearer bridge between classical Islamic concepts and contemporary psychological theories of self-regulation, meaning-making, and well-being.

Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion, it can be seen that *nafs* is best matched by the term “soul.” The soul differs from *ruh* and experiences growth/transformation. *Nafs al-muthmainnah* is known as one of the stages to be achieved in the process of soul growth/transformation where individuals exhibit a healthy, calm, and stable soul condition. This growth can be achieved through repentance/*taubat*. Importantly, the study identifies *taubat* as a central mechanism of transformation, supported by *riyadhoh* and *mujahadah*, through which individuals progressively align their inner state with divine values. By linking these classical Islamic concepts with contemporary psychological perspectives on self-regulation, meaning-making, and well-being, this study contributes to the development of a more integrative framework in Islamic psychology while highlighting the need for further empirical research on the developmental trajectory toward *nafs al-muthmainnah*.

Suggestion

Future research should further examine the developmental mechanisms of *nafs al-muthmainnah* through broader empirical approaches involving diverse participant groups beyond experts, including individuals who actively engage in spiritual practices. Longitudinal studies may provide deeper insights into how processes such as repentance (*taubah*), *mujahadah*, and *riyadlah* contribute to psychospiritual transformation over time. Future studies are also encouraged to operationalize the constructs identified in this research into measurable psychological variables, particularly those related to consciousness, moral regulation, emotional stability, and well-being. In addition, comparative studies between Sufi and non-Sufi perspectives may enrich the theoretical understanding of *nafs* development within Islamic psychology. Finally, integrating classical

Islamic scholarship with contemporary psychological frameworks may contribute to the development of more comprehensive indigenous models of mental health and human development.

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