

*The Jewel of Knowledge*¹

Lady Nafisa (8th-9th century), who was known as “the jewel of knowledge” and “the mother of the helpless,” was the great-granddaughter of Hasan, son of Lady Fatima and Imam ‘Ali. She was born in Mecca in the year A.H. 145 (760 A.D.) and brought up in Medina. Her life was the expression of good works and immersion in the worship of God.

Nafisa married Ishaq, son of the Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, and bore him two children, al-Qasim and Umm Kulthum. After her marriage, [they] went to Egypt with her cousin Sakina al-Madfuna, and settled down to live not far from the Khalifa’s palace in Cairo. Like the other ascetics of Islam, she used to fast all day and spend the night in prayer.

She was reputed to know the Qur’an and the commentaries by heart and was so versed in religious knowledge that even her great contemporary, the Imam al-Shafi’i,² used to come and listen to her discourses and enter into discussions with her; the degree of his respect for the scholarship of this saintly woman and for her sanctity also, may be judged from the fact that he used to pray with her the special prayers for Ramadan.³

[Whenever Al-Shafi would fall ill, he would send word with a messenger to Nafisa asking for her prayers and as soon as the messenger would return to Al-Shafi he would find him recovered from his ailment. When he came down with his fatal illness, he again sent the messenger to Nafisa, but this time she told the messenger to go back and tell Al-Shafi that, “God has blessed him with the pleasure of seeing His Noble Face.” When the messenger returned to the imam he asked the messenger what happened, and when he relayed the words of Lady Nafisa, Al Shafi knew his time had come to make his final preparations. He made his last will and testament asking that Lady Nafisa perform the funeral prayers for him when he died. When the

¹ This chapter about Lady Nafisa is excerpted from *Women of Sufism, A Hidden Treasure* by Camille Adams Helminski, Shambhala Publications, 2002.

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² Al-Shafi was one of the four great Sunni Muslim jurists. Lady Nafisa had studied in her youth with one of the other great jurists, Malik ibn Anas. The four major schools of legal thought in Islam are the Shafi, Maliki, Hanbali, and Hanifi. The Ja’fari school of law, upon which the Shi’ite Muslims base their practice, follows the interpretation of Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq (the sixth Imam descended from Ali), Lady Nafisa’s father-in-law. Lady Nafisa was one of the many early Sufi women who were well-versed in the principles of law (based on the Qur’an and the hadith). Her opinion on rightful ways of action and being was sought by many notables of her time, as was her illuminative presence. (C.A.H.)

³ Ramadan is the annual lunar month of fasting for Muslims. Observation of this month of fasting is one of the pillars of Islam and is understood to bring great blessing in many ways. From first light of day until sunset, Muslims refrain from eating and drinking, and sexual intercourse. They also are especially during this month to refrain from gossip and to carefully watch what issues from their mouth so that no ill words might be spoken. During this month special prayers are recited and families and friends gather frequently in intensified remembrance and worship of God. (C.A.H.)

imam died, his body had to be brought to her house because she was so weak due to her constant fasting and worship that she could not leave her house to go to him to perform the prayer. . . . She prayed extensively for him and offered the eulogy: “May God have mercy on Al-Shafi because he performed his ablutions in the most beautiful way.” She said this because she understood that ablution⁴ is the key to prayer and that whoever excels in ablution excels in the other works of the Way.⁵

[Lady Nafisa’s niece, Zaynab, was asked about her aunt’s sustenance. She said, “She used to eat once every three nights. She would hang a small basket in front of her place of prayer; whatever she needed she would find in that basket. I used to find in it things I would never imagine finding there, and I never knew where they came from. This amazed me and I asked my aunt about it. She told me, “O Zaynab, whoever sets things right with God, the whole universe is theirs.”]⁶

[During the time of Lady Nafisa, there was an old, poor widow with four daughters who made their living by weaving cloth and then selling it. One day, the old woman was on her way to the market with their weaving when a bird swooped down and snatched the sack in which she was carrying it. The woman was so distressed that she fainted. When she regained consciousness, she reflected, “What shall I do? How will I provide for my family?” and she began to weep. People gathered around her and when they heard what had happened, they took her to Lady Nafisa. Nafisa listened to her story and then began to pray for her, saying, “O my God, You are exalted in ability, and You are the Compelling Sovereign. Relieve your servants from their sorrows. They are Your creation and Your dependents and You have ability over all things.” Then she said to the widow, “Stay here a while, and know that God has power over all things.” The Old woman sat down, full of concern for her children’s plight.

[After a while a group of people came to the house asking for Lady Nafisa. When they entered her presence they told her, “An amazing thing happened to us. We were traveling by ship and when we approached your coast, our vessel was damaged and water began filling our ship. We tried to plug the hole but could not, and we thought we would drown. Then suddenly a bird swooped down from the sky and dropped a sack on us. We found in it woven cloth which we used to plug the hole enough to be able to reach safety by God’s will. And we are here to give 500 dinars as a gift of our gratitude for our safety.” When Nafisa heard this, she burst into tears and said, “My God, my Master, my Friend! How merciful You are! How gentle you are with Your servants!”

⁴ Ablution is the ritual washing that precedes all prayer. Certain conditions nullify the ablution and one must renew it. As one cleans the body one is simultaneously with intention clearing the inner capacities as well and renewing one’s connection with one’s Sustainer. The faithful strive to as much as possible always be in a state of ablution so that they might also rightfully be continuously in prayer and ever ready for the meeting with their Lord. As one never knows when the moment of death may arrive, one wishes always to be as clear as possible, outwardly and inwardly prepared for that meeting. (C.A.H.)

⁵ Saad, Sheikh Taha Abdul Rauf and Saad Hasan Muhammad Ali, *Al Sayyidah Nafisat al Ilm Karimat al Daariya*, p 33, translated by Mahmoud Mostafa.

⁶ Ibid, p. 31-32.

[She then called the old widow near to her and asked her how much she would have expected to receive in exchange for her goods at the market. The woman told her she had hoped to earn 25 dirhems; Nafisa handed her the 500 dinars (a much greater amount). The woman took the money home to her daughters and related to them what had taken place. They all returned to Lady Nafisa and devoted their lives in her service.]⁷

Lady Nafisa was famed throughout Egypt and wherever she went her reputation followed her, and she gained the full approbation of all, both individuals and the people generally, who revered her for her good works,⁸ her frequent pilgrimages,⁹ her lengthy fasts, and her nights spent in prayer. She died in Cairo in the month of Ramadan, in the year A.H. 208 (824 A.D.).

One of her biographers relates that when she was at the point of death, and, as usual, fasting, those with her tried to compel her to break her fast, but she refused, saying, "This would seem a strange thing to me. For thirty years I have been asking God that I should meet with Him when I was fasting, and shall I break my fast now? This shall not be." Then she repeated the *Surah al-An'am* and when she reached the part where God said, "For them is an abode of peace with their Lord,"¹⁰ she passed away.

The same writer tells us that during her life-time she had dug her grave with her own hands and had descended into it and prayed and there repeated the whole Qur'an six thousand times. When Nafisa died, the people assembled from all the villages and towns in the neighbourhood and lighted candles that night and the sound of the wailing for the dead was heard from every house in Cairo, and they prayed over her body, while many bore witness that they had seen none like her. Then she was buried in the grave that she had dug in her own house. Up to the time of the writer, and even to the present time, her shrine has been a place of pilgrimage for travelers from afar. Her husband, indeed, wished to convey her body to Medina, for burial in the sacred city, but the people of Cairo begged that she should be buried among them.

Many miracles, showing her charity towards others, were attributed to Nafisa. The story is told of how one year the Nile failed to rise in flood at the usual time and the people were in great distress. They were afraid that for lack of water for their crops they would perish from famine, and in this extremity they came to the saint, appealing for her help. She gave them her veil and bade them cast it into the river, and when they had done so, immediately the river rose in an unusually high flood and the people were saved.

⁷ Ibid p.32-33.

⁸ When people complained to her about the Egyptian governor of that time, she is said to have stood in his path and handed him a note in which she accused him of tyranny and called on him to be more just. ~ Wiebke Walther, *Women in Islam*, p110.

⁹ She is reported to have made thirty pilgrimages. (See Wiebke Walther, *Women in Islam*, p.110.)

¹⁰ Surah 6:127.

Her tomb like that of many of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (family of the house, of Muhammad) continues to be a place of pilgrimage and prayer where many receive blessings. The shrine of her great-aunt, Sayyida Zaynab, is another shrine of one of the women of the early *Ahl al-Bayt* where many find great blessing (both Muslim and Christian). Lady Nafisa was particularly known for the ability to heal eye ailments.¹¹ The Egyptian government, not blind to her healing influence, established a hospital specifically for the healing of eye diseases in the neighborhood of her tomb in Cairo.

¹¹ True vision, *basirah*, clear-sightedness both outwardly and inwardly, is one of the gifts of God to the faithful. See also Rabia Terry Harris's article, "Reflections on Retreat," p. of this text. (C.A.H.)