

# The Ten Essentials Poem

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## Abstract

A short article presenting and explaining the Arabic poem on the ‘Ten Essentials’ (Al-Mabādi’ al-’Asharah) by Imam Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Ṣabbān, a foundational framework for studying any discipline in the Islamic tradition.

## 0.1 The Poem

A poem by Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Ṣabbān (d. 1206/1791)

إِنَّ مَبَادِيَّ كُلِّ فَنٍّ عَشْرَةٌ الْحَدُّ وَالْمَوْضُوعُ ثُمَّ الثَّمَرَةُ وَنِسْبَةُ وَفَضْلُهُ وَالْوَاضِعُ وَالْإِسْمُ وَالْإِسْتِمْدَادُ حُكْمُ الشَّارِعِ  
مَسَائِلُ وَالْبَعْضُ بِالْبَعْضِ اكْتَفَى وَمَنْ دَرَى الْجَمِيعَ حَازَ الشَّرَفَا

Verily, the principles of every art are ten:

1. **The Definition (al-ḥadd):** A concise and comprehensive explanation of the discipline.
2. **The Subject Matter (al-mawḍū‘):** The specific area or topic that the discipline addresses.
3. **The Fruit (ath-thamarah):** The benefit, outcome, or practical application gained from studying the discipline.
4. **Its Relation (nisbah):** How the discipline relates to and is distinguished from other fields of knowledge.
5. **Its Virtue (faḍluh):** The inherent merit and honor of the discipline.
6. **The Founder (al-wāḍi‘):** The individual or group who first established the discipline.
7. **The Name (al-ism):** The title or nomenclature by which the discipline is known.
8. **Its Derivation (al-istimdād):** The sources from which the principles of the discipline are drawn.
9. **The Ruling of the Lawgiver (ḥukm ash-shāri‘):** The religious or legal ruling on studying the discipline.
10. **Its Issues (masā’il):** The specific problems and questions that are discussed within the discipline.

The verses conclude by stating that some may suffice with knowing only a portion of these, but whoever comprehends them all attains honor.

The concise Arabic poem by the 18th-century Egyptian scholar, Imam Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Ṣabbān (d. 1206/1791), which masterfully encapsulates the ten foundational principles for studying any discipline, holds an enduring place in Islamic pedagogy and scholarship. Far from being a mere theoretical curiosity, this poem serves as a practical and indispensable roadmap for students of knowledge, ensuring a systematic and comprehensive approach to learning. Its importance can be understood through its widespread usage as both a pedagogical tool and a framework for mastering the Islamic sciences. A comprehensive understanding of these principles is said to bestow honor and a thorough grasp of the subject.

At its core The Ten Principles (*Al-Mabādi' al-'Asharah*) is a foundational teaching tool. Traditionally, before a student embarks on the study of any new science—be it jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*), Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), or even ancillary sciences like Arabic grammar or logic—the teacher would first introduce these ten principles as they apply to that specific field.

This methodology serves several crucial pedagogical purposes:

- **Provides a Holistic Overview:** By presenting the definition, subject matter, and purpose of a science from the outset, the student gains a “bird’s-eye view” of the entire discipline. This contextualization prevents the student from getting lost in the minutiae without understanding the broader landscape.
- **Sets Clear Expectations:** Understanding the “fruit” or benefit of a science motivates the student by clarifying the practical and spiritual rewards of their study.
- **Establishes a Solid Foundation:** The principles act as a mental schema, allowing the student to organize new information coherently. As they delve deeper into the subject, they can relate new concepts back to this foundational framework.
- **Cultivates Respect for the Tradition:** By learning about the founder and the sources of a science, the student develops an appreciation for the scholarly lineage and the intellectual effort that went into the formation of that discipline.

The poem itself concludes with the powerful assertion that “whosoever knows them all acquires excellence (or honor).” True mastery of a subject is unattainable without a firm grasp of these foundational elements.

This systematic approach ensures that the student’s knowledge is not haphazard but is built upon a solid and well-defined structure.

In conclusion, Imam al-Ṣabbān’s poem is far more than a piece of didactic poetry; it is the crystallization of a sophisticated and time-tested Islamic epistemology. Its importance lies in its ability to provide a clear, concise, and comprehensive framework that guides a student from the initial introduction to the ultimate mastery of any field of knowledge, making it an invaluable tool in the rich intellectual tradition of Islam.