

The Etiquette of Seeking Knowledge

The Islamic tradition teaches us that both students of sacred knowledge and their teachers have lofty principles and refined codes of conduct that they must adhere to in order to ensure that they can truly achieve virtue through their knowledge and that God opens up for them (*futūḥ*) the full extent of wisdom and perception. From the most distinguished of these etiquettes (*ādāb*) that must accompany teaching and seeking knowledge are the following.



1) **To have respect in one’s heart and exhibit reverence for gatherings of knowledge.** This is embodied in some of the following practices:

a) To have ritual purity and cleanliness before leaving to attend gatherings of knowledge.

The Companions of the Prophet ﷺ and their followers used to be very attentive to this matter. It is reported that Imām Mālik رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهُ used to be meticulous in his veneration of gatherings of knowledge to the point that before narrating hadiths, he would make *wuḍū’*, wear his best clothes, sit upon his cushion, comb his beard, put on perfume, and sit in the most dignified and respectful posture. When asked about this he replied, “I love to exalt the hadiths of the Messenger of God ﷺ.”

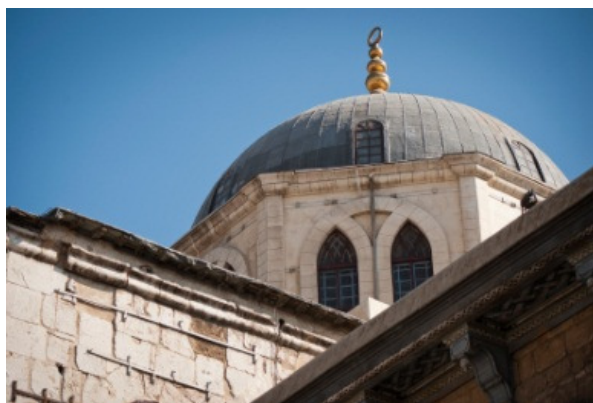
Another form of purification before attending gatherings of learning is that of the purification of the heart from traits such as backbiting, envy, grudges, and other spiritual diseases through various forms of worship and acts of obedience. This is done to exert an

effort to expand one's heart and state of mind in a way that will make the student more susceptible to absorbing knowledge and implementing it. It is commonly said, "In the presence of scholars guard your tongue. And in the presence of the knowers of God, guard your heart."

- b) A student should come in a state of stillness of the heart, mind, and body (*sakīna*) along with a demeanor of a dignified seriousness (*waqār*) that is derived from an understanding of the gravity and significance of being in a circle of learning. Ḥasan al-Baṣrī رضي الله عنه used to say, "Seek knowledge and seek in order to [attain] knowledge stillness and seriousness (*sakīna wa al-waqār*) as well as humility towards whom you are learning from and towards those you are teaching."

Due to the intense reverence that

Imām Mālik رضي الله عنه had for the hadiths of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم, it is reported that he once remained seated in the same position while teaching for four hours, even though he had been stung by a scorpion and his color had changed. Upon being asked about this he replied,



"I did not want to interrupt the hadiths of the Messenger of God صلى الله عليه وسلم." In this is revealed the depth of Imām Mālik's رضي الله عنه understanding of the majesty of God and the rank of His Messenger, upon him be peace. Indeed, God has said in the Qur'an, "Whoever honors the symbols of God, verily it is from the piety of the hearts."¹

2) To have humility and respect for scholars and to honor them.

Humility is an essential characteristic that a student must have to truly benefit from his or her teacher. In the hadith of the Messenger of God صلى الله عليه وسلم, when the angel Jibrīl عليه السلام came to ask the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم about Islam, *Imān*, and *Iḥsān*, he is described as having, "put his knees against the

¹ Qur'an, *Al-Hajj*: 32.



knees [of the Prophet ﷺ] and placed his hands on his thighs.”² When the Companions used to sit with the Messenger of God ﷺ, they did not used to raise their heads up to him out of their reverence for him. It is reported on the authority of Anas رضي الله عنه, “If the Messenger of God ﷺ used to enter the

mosque, none of us used to raise our heads except Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. They used to smile at him and he used to smile at them.”³ It is also reported on the authority of ‘Ubāda b. al-Ṣāmit that the Messenger of God ﷺ said regarding respecting scholars and honoring them, “He is not from my community who does not venerate our elders, have mercy on our youth, and know the rights of our scholars.”⁴

Imām ‘Alī رضي الله عنه would say regarding the manners of respect a student should have with his or her teacher, “From the rights of the scholar over you is that you give greeting to people generally and greet him specifically, that you do not ask him questions excessively, you do not meet his answers with discord, you do not pressure him if he tires, you do not grab his garment if he sets forth, you do not reveal to him secrets, you do not back bite anyone in his presence, you do not seek out his shortcomings, and if he makes a mistake you accept his excuse. It is incumbent upon you to respect and honor him for the sake of God as long as he adheres to the commands of God. And [you must not] sit with your back towards him, and if he has a need you should hasten before everyone in serving him.”

It is related by Sha‘bī that, Zayd b. Thābit led a funeral prayer. He then brought his riding animal near so he could ride it and Ibn ‘Abbās came to assist him in mounting. Upon

² *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: vol.i/ *Kitāb al-imān* 1-*bāb* 1/h. 1

³ *Al-Mustadrak*: vol.i/ p.121.

⁴ *Majma‘ al-zawā‘id*: vol.i/p.127

this, Zayd said, “Do not do this O, son of the Messenger of God’s uncle.” Ibn ‘Abbās replied, “This is how he ordered us to treat our scholars and elders.”

Sufyān al-Thawrī entered the gathering of Imām Mālik رضي الله عنه while his students around him were seated as if there were birds perched on their heads. He later recited the following poem to describe this:

يأبى الجواب فلا يراجع هيبة
والسائلون نواكس الأذقان
أدب الوقار وعز سلطان التقى
فهو المهيب وليس ذا سلطان

He refuses to answer [excessive questions and the questioner] will not return out of awe
Those who ask [in his presence] sit with their necks bent
Refined manners, grace, and the dignity of a chief of piety
He inspires awe [in hearts] yet he is no king

Al-Shāfi‘ī said: “Out of my reverence for him, I used to turn pages while being seated in the presence of Mālik رضي الله عنه with gentleness so that he does not hear the pages turn.”



It is related by Ṣāliḥ b. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, “Al-Shāfi‘ī came one day to visit my father while he was ill. He [Ibn Ḥanbal] leapt towards him, kissed him between the eyes, made him sit in his place and he sat in front of him.” He said, “Then he spoke to him for an hour. When al-Shāfi‘ī got up to leave, my father rose and took hold of his saddle and walked with him. When [news] of this reached Yaḥya b. Ma‘īn, he

questioned my father saying, ‘O Abū ‘Abd Allāh, *subhānallah!* Were you forced to walk by the side of al-Shāfi‘ī’s riding animal?’ My father replied, ‘And you O Abū Zakariyya, had you walked on the other side you would have benefitted.’ Then he said, ‘Who wishes for goodness should follow the tail of that beast.’” It was said to Iskandar, “Why is your reverence for your spiritual guide (*al-mu‘addib*) greater than your reverence for your father?” He said, “Because my father is the cause of my temporary life while my spiritual guide is the cause of [success] in my eternal life.”

Many of the Muslim rulers and caliphs also used to give immense importance to knowledge and the reverence of scholars. It is related that Hārūn al-Rashīd used to send his two sons al-Amīn and al-Mā‘mūn to learn from Imām al-Kisā‘ī who was one of the seven reciters of the Qur’an. One day after class was finished; al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn were competing to carry the sandals of the *shaykh*. Each one wanted to carry them and then they settled for each of them carrying one sandal. Meanwhile, Hārūn al-Rashīd was watching them from an elevated place in his residence. He later invited him to a table he had prepared for him. He then asked him during the meal, “Who is the happiest of people?” The *shaykh* said to him: “You are O Leader of the Believers.” He said, “No. The happiest of people is the one who the two heirs of the Leader of the Believers (*amīr al-mu‘minīn*) quarrel to carry his sandals.”



From amongst the forms of respect that students must have for teachers is that they should listen with complete attentiveness even if the teacher is saying something which they already know from a quote, story, or poem. ‘Aṭā’ said, “I listen to a hadith from a man and I am more knowledgeable of it than him. However, I do not show him that I surpass him in anything.” Similarly, he should not precede the scholar in explaining a matter or answering a



question posed by one of the students. It is said, “Learn silence the way you learn to speak. And be more vigilant about listening than speaking.”

As for humility, this not only means that students should be in a state of humbleness while learning but that they must also humble themselves to knowledge in the exertion of their

efforts to seek it. Ibn ‘Abbās used to say, “I lowered myself seeking, and then I became sought (*dhalaltu ṭāliban fafiztu maṭlūban*).” It is also related that he said, “When the Messenger of God ﷺ died, I said to a man from the Anṣār come lets seek out the Companions of the Messenger of God ﷺ for they are many today. He said, ‘I am surprised by you, O Ibn ‘Abbās! Whom amongst the Companions of the Messenger of God ﷺ do you see as better than yourself?’ He said, So I left him and I set out to ask the Companions of the Messenger of God ﷺ and [news of] a hadith from a man had reached me. I came to the door of the one saying [the hadith] and I spread my cloak on his doorstep, all the while the wind was blowing sand in my face. He came out and saw me and said, ‘O son of the Messenger of God’s ﷺ uncle, what brought you here? Had you sent for me, I would have come.’ I said to him, ‘It is more fitting that I should come to you.’ He said, and I asked him about the hadith. This man of the Anṣār then lived until he saw me when people had gathered around me asking me, and he would say ‘This youth is more intelligent than me.’”

It is also related that Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī ﷺ would not abandon anyone he knew to possess any knowledge except that he sought him out and found him. Ibrāhīm b. Sa’d said, “I asked my father, how did Ibn Shihāb surpass you?” He said, ‘He used to come to the center of gatherings and not leave an elderly person except that he asked him and not leave a youth except that he asked him. Then he used to go to the homes of the Anṣār and he would not leave a youth he did not ask or an elderly person he did not ask. He used to even speak to the women of the households.’”

Finally, it is incumbent that a student does not acquire pride or vanity after having gained an amount of knowledge, remembering that it is ultimately God who granted this to him or her. Also because the amount of knowledge that one has accumulated regardless of the heights a student has reached is insignificant in comparison to the knowledge of God the Exalted and High. God says in the Qur'an, "He has taught humans what they knew not."⁵ He also says, "And God took you out of the wombs of your mothers [with] you not knowing anything."⁶ God also says, "I have not given you from knowledge except a little,"⁷ and He says, "Above each [person] with knowledge is [one] more knowledgeable."⁸



3) **Sincerity:** It is essential that those seeking of knowledge do so with an intention sincerely for the sake of God, both when learning and practicing it. This is also the case when teaching and spreading knowledge. The Messenger of God ﷺ said, "Who learns a science which is learnt for the sake of God not seeking from it anything but a portion of the world will not smell the scent of Heaven on the Day of Resurrection."⁹ He also said, "Whoever learns knowledge to rival scholars, to debate with fools, or to draw people to him, is in the Fire."¹⁰ Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said, "The punishment of the scholars is the death of the heart. The death of the heart is seeking the world through the works for one's hereafter." And Sahl has said, "All of knowledge is of this world except for the portion one practices which is of the other world. And all of deeds are dust except for sincerity."

⁵ Qur'an, *Al-'Alaq*: 5.

⁶ Qur'an, *Al-Nahl*: 78.

⁷ Qur'an, *Al-Isrā'*: 85.

⁸ Qur'an, *Yūsuf*: 76.

⁹ *Sunan Ibn Māja*: vol.i/al-Muqaddima-bāb 23/h. 252

¹⁰ *Majma' al-zawā'id*: vol.i/ p. 141.

- 4) **Trustworthiness:** From the codes of conduct associated with knowledge in the Islamic tradition is trustworthiness (*amāna*). In a related hadith, “Be faithful in knowledge for the betrayal of one in his knowledge is worse than his betrayal in his property. And God will be your questioner on the Day of Resurrection.”¹¹ From the trusts of knowledge is that the scholar remains within the bounds of what he knows and does not say that which he does not know. Also, from intellectual honesty is to attribute sayings and ideas to their sources.

¹¹ *Majma‘ al-zawā‘id*: vol.i/ p.183.