

The Acquisition of Knowledge

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يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا قُوا أَنفُسَكُمْ وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ عَلَيْهَا مَلَائِكَةٌ غِلَاظٌ شِدَادٌ
لَّا يَعْصُونَ اللَّهَ مَا أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ

O you who believe, save yourselves and your families from a fire, the fuel of which is human beings and stones, appointed on which are angels, stern and severe, who do not disobey Allah in what He orders them, and do whatever they are ordered to do.¹

Within the Islāmic tradition a vast hoard of provisions exist and are attainable which facilitates not only ones own salvation from being cast into the eternal pit of *jahannam* [hell] but also that which allows our relatives, friends, colleagues and acquaintances to derive benefit from, thereby distancing themselves from chastisement. The primary fortune within this trove is the acquisition of sacred knowledge (*ilm*). Having knowledge of that which within the tradition is permissible or non-permissible, rewardable or punishable is such that it allows the correct path to be distinguished and embarked upon which designates the beginning of a journey, a journey whose end leads to the entrance of the abode of paradise (*jannah*).

Ignorance from such knowledge is the primary route which leads one the pathway of sin, taking one towards *jahannam* [hell]. Take the example of the one whose earnings within the Islāmic framework are deemed unlawful, with regards to such a person it is narrated that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said:

يَا كَعْبَ بْنَ عُجْرَةَ إِنَّهُ لَا يَرُؤُ حَلْمَ نَبْتٍ مِنْ سُحْتٍ إِلَّا كَانَتْ النَّارُ أَوْلَىٰ بِهِ

“[O K’ab son of ‘Ujra] There is no piece of flesh that nurtures on the unlawful but the fire will claim him.”²

¹ Surah Al-Tahrīm. (6:66).

² Sunan Tirmidhī. Virtues of prayer. #614

With respect to the acquisition of sacred knowledge, it is narrated that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said:

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ

“Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.”³

عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ عَمْرٍو أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ مَرَّ بِمَجْلِسَيْنِ فِي مَسْجِدِهِ ، فَقَالَ :
كِلَاهُمَا عَلَى خَيْرٍ وَأَحَدُهُمَا أَفْضَلُ مِنْ صَاحِبِهِ أَمَّا هَؤُلَاءِ فَيَدْعُونَ اللَّهَ وَيَرْغَبُونَ إِلَيْهِ فَإِنْ شَاءَ
أَعْطَاهُمْ وَإِنْ شَاءَ مَنَعَهُمْ وَأَمَّا هَؤُلَاءِ فَيَتَعَلَّمُونَ الْفِقْهَ وَالْعِلْمَ وَيُعَلِّمُونَ الْجَاهِلَ فَهُمْ أَفْضَلُ وَإِنَّمَا
بُعِثْتُ مُعَلِّمًا قَالَ ثُمَّ جَلَسَ فِيهِمْ

‘Abdullah Ibn ‘Amr رضي الله عنه narrates: Once the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم passed by two groups of people in his Masjid. He said “Both of them are upon good, however, one is more virtuous than the other. As for them (the 1st group), they are supplicating to him and are inclined towards him. If he wishes he will give them and if he wishes he can withhold it from them. As for them (the 2nd group), they are learning Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and knowledge and educating the ignorant, they are more virtuous. Verily, I have been sent as a tutor” The narrator said: He then sat amongst them (i.e. the 2nd group).⁴

The knowledge and duties of Islām are divided into two main categories. The first is known as those duties which are individual obligations (*fard al-‘ayn*), this incorporates that which every Muslim, male or female is obligated to both have knowledge on and perform, such as the 5 daily prayers (*salāt*). The second duty is known as the communal obligation (*fard al-kifāya*), this is that which suffices for a select few members of the community to have knowledge on or perform in order to alleviate the obligation upon the whole community, such as the knowledge of exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the *Qur’ān*.

³ Ibn Mājah.

⁴ Sunan Ad-Dārimī. #357

⁵ Sunan Tirmidhī. #2425

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ لَا تَزُولُ قَدَمَا عَبْدٍ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ حَتَّى يُسْأَلَ عَنْ
عُمُرِهِ فِيمَا أَفْنَاهُ وَعَنْ عِلْمِهِ فِيمَ فَعَلَ وَعَنْ مَالِهِ مِنْ أَيْنَ اكْتَسَبَهُ وَفِيمَ أَنْفَقَهُ وَعَنْ جِسْمِهِ
فِيمَ أَبْلَاهُ

Abū Barzah Aslamī رضي الله عنه narrates The Messenger of Allāh صلى الله عليه وسلم said: “On the day of resurrection the feet of a slave will not move until he is asked about [Four things]: His life and how he spent it; His knowledge and how he acted upon it; His wealth, from where he earned it, and how he spent it; His body and how he used it.”⁵

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ مَنْ خَرَجَ فِي طَلَبِ الْعِلْمِ كَانَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ حَتَّى
يَرْجِعَ

Hasan Ibn Mālik رضي الله عنه narrates The Messenger of Allāh صلى الله عليه وسلم said: “If any on goes out seeking knowledge then he is upon the path of Allāh till he returns.”⁶

Although it is not a requirement for every person to become a scholar, one should most definitely engage in the acquisition of sacred knowledge at every available opportunity. Learning may be accomplished through the reading of books, through listening to audio lectures or through modern interactive methods however it should always be noted that these do not inculcate the true spirit of sacred knowledge, they are merely a supplement and not a substitute. True knowledge is obtained from sitting at the feet of the scholars as they disseminate their learning's through a chain of narration (*isnād*) going back to the messenger of Allāh صلى الله عليه وسلم. Knowledge is the legacy of the Prophets, described as inheritance; fortunate are those who acquire it as heirs. Unfortunately we live in such times where the circles of scholars remain with but a few individuals and the amount of views on Youtube increase daily, knowledge has been reduced to a mechanism of passive listening, devoid of the spiritual benefit of sitting in the gatherings in which the angels (*malāika*) are present. Is it then any wonder why we fail to implement the information and transform it into knowledge? How we have abandoned the local scholars who tirelessly invite us only to have us leave them for mere recordings.

⁶ Sunan Tirmidhī. #2656

The consequences of this are seen by noting the behaviour of our youth towards the scholars; recently we see an upsurge of those who are unjustly verbally attacking scholars on social media and other platforms without themselves first having gained the requirements to determine whether a particular view is correct, in some cases it has gone as far as where those who have no training in the Islāmic sciences are dispensing legal rulings and declaring apostasy (*takfir*) upon individuals. For the layman it is his/her duty to absolve oneself of any such responsibility and refer to the appropriate qualified juristic authorities.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ ۖ فَإِن تَنَازَعْتُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَالرَّسُولِ إِن كُنتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ۗ ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا

O you who believe, obey Allāh and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. Then, if you quarrel about something, revert it back to Allāh and the Messenger, if you believe in Allāh and the Last Day. That is good, and the best at the end. ⁷

Muftī Muhammad Shafi' Uthmānī states in his *Tafsīr Ma'āriful Qur'ān*:

“Lexically أُولِي الْأَمْرِ translated here as ‘those in authority’ refers to those in whose hands lies the management and administration of something. Therefore, Sayyidinā Ibn ‘Abbās, Mujāhid and Hasan al-Basrī, the earliest commentators of the *Qur'ān*, may Allāh be pleased with them all, have said that أُولِي الْأَمْرِ fittingly applies to the scholars (*‘ulamā'*) and jurists (*fuqahā'*) since they are the succeeding deputies of the Holy Prophet صلي الله عليه وسلم and the proper regulation of religion is in their hands.” ⁸

“According to this verse it becomes necessary to obey Muslim jurists in matters which require juristic research, expertise and guidance as it would be equally necessary to obey those in authority in matters relating to administrative affairs.” ⁹

⁷ Surah Al-Nisā'. (4:59).

⁸ Ma'āriful Qur'ān. Al-Nisā' (58-59). Vol 2. Page No. 475.

⁹ Ma'āriful Qur'ān. Al-Nisā' (58-59). Vol 2. Page No. 477.

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا قَبْلَكَ إِلَّا رِجَالًا نُوْحِي إِلَيْهِمْ ۖ فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

And We did not send before you messengers except men whom We inspired with revelation. So, ask the people (having the knowledge) of the Message, if you do not know. ¹⁰

Muftī Muhammad Shafi' 'Uthmānī also states in his *Tafsīr Ma'āriful Qur'ān*:

“Imām Qurtubī has said in his exegesis that this verse has made it clear that ignorant persons who are not acquainted with the rules of the sharī‘a must seek knowledge from scholars and follow them accordingly.” ¹¹

Today it has become common practice for the layman to acquire the books of translated *ahādīth* [*prophetic narrations*] and begin applying them as they have been read; the dangers of this become evident when one examines the sciences pertaining to understanding of the apparent meaning, the context and its applicability of each particular *hadīth*. To some extent the apparent meaning and somewhat of the context can be comprehended by the *muhaddithīn* [*specialists in prophetic narrations*], however the applicability is known to those who are qualified in the field of jurisprudence, i.e. The *fuqahā'*.

The late Shaykh Al-Hadīth Muhammmad Zakariyyā Kāndhlawī mentions the causes of the differences between the *fuqahā'* with respect to the narrations of *ahādīth* and consequently the derived rulings. From his writings one can extrapolate that in order to understand the prophetic narrations in light of Islamic law one must have a high level of proficiency in comprehending the following ¹²:

- Varying commands for different people and circumstances
- Special cases taken as general orders
- Apparent contradictions
- General orders taken as special cases
- Perceptive differences
- Underlying causes
- Lexical multiplicity
- Injunctions for highlighted contemplation
- Affectionate injunctions vs Cautionary injunctions

¹⁰ Surah Al-Anbiyā'. (21:7).

¹¹ Ma'āriful Qur'ān. Al-Anbiyā' (1-10). Vol 6. Page No. 178-179.

¹² The Difference of the Imāms by Sh. Muhammmad Zakariyyā Kāndhlawī. Trans. by Ml. Muhammad Kadwa. Published by White Thread Press.

- Narrations of admonishment
- Narration by meaning
- Difficulties in narrating by memory
- Abrogation
- Human error
- Narrations of love
- Narratory links and assessment
- Weak narrations
- Fabricated narrations
- Tampering with sound narrations
- Weak hadīths in later generations

From this it becomes evident that in order for one to derive juristic rulings from the collections of *ahadīth*, one must not only be well versed in the sciences of the narrations which can be incredibly confusing for the scholar let alone the layman, one must also have a depth of proficiency with regards to the harmonisation of narrations and the principles of juristic preference. For the layman deep knowledge of these sciences are beyond scope, so it is his/her duty to refer to a reliable scholar in matters concerning his religion and it is not permitted for such a person to derive rulings directly from the *Qur'ān* and *ahadīth*.

For a detailed explanation with respect to the concept of *taqlīd* [*Adoption of the legal rulings of a scholar without knowledge of the detailed evidences*] in the light of shari'a along with proofs and evidences, the following books are highly recommended:

Understanding Taqlīd, Following One of the Four Great Imams – Mufti Muhammad Sajaad

The Legal Status of Following A Madhab – Mufti Taqi 'Uthmānī

Towards Understanding Taqlīd – Mufti Afzal Hoosen Eliās

May Allāh سبحانه و تعالی allow us to be true students of knowledge who sit at the feet of the scholars remaining silent about that which we do not have authority in and may we be given the ability to implement what we learn. *Āmeen*.

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