

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Obstacles in Seeking Knowledge

حفظه الله Shaykh Abdus-Salaam ash-Shuway'ir

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The following are my notes derived from a lecture taught in 2014 by Sh. Abdus-Salaam ash-Shuway'ir - Allah protect him from all harms in this life and the Next. In this lecture the Shaykh mentioned some common obstacles students face while on the path in obtaining Islamic knowledge. I would like to point out that this is not a direct translation of the lesson, but instead benefits I extracted from the gathering which includes my wordings and extra commentary. This is the first time I am sharing these notes to the public. If there are any typos please contact us immediately, jazaakumullah khayran. May Allah accept this effort for His sake and allow us all to benefit from these advices.

As mentioned by the Abbasi King, Ma'mun, a person is either:

1. One who is constantly seeking knowledge or
2. One content with their level of ignorance.

Therefore, one should not say, "I am not a seeker of knowledge" thinking this is a form of humility. Making this statement essentially entails that one is under the 2nd category mentioned above. Which means they are content and pleased with their ignorance. No-one is pleased with being called ignorant **جاهل** and this is sufficient proof to show its lowly status. For this reason (and many others), everyone should desire to seek knowledge despite their age, gender, or level of knowledge.

However, while on the journey of seeking knowledge, one will surely find obstacles in their path preventing them from achieving their goal. These barriers can block the student from either obtaining beneficial knowledge and/or benefitting from the knowledge they have already have gained (via memorization, reading, listening & attending lectures). This lecture will clarify some of these obstacles and their solutions, in shaa Allah.

There are many obstacles that arise when seeking knowledge, among them are:

1. Having too many responsibilities: work, spouse(s), children, etc.

The older a person becomes, the more responsibilities they undertake.

For this reason, Umar ibn al-Khattaab **رضي الله عنه** said: **تفقهوا قبل أن تسودوا**

"Gain understanding of the religion before you are placed in the position of leadership."

ash-Shaafi'ee said: "The student must only marry 1 spouse so that he does not become too busied away from knowledge."

What measures can a person take in order to avoid this obstacle or lessen its harm while seeking knowledge?

A. Take advantage of free time, youthfulness before old age, and become accustomed to making knowledge a daily part of life (as the Arabs say, "Whoever becomes accustomed to something in his youth will grow old doing the same thing" or as we say in English, "Old habits die hard".)

B. Make sure to dedicate a portion of time strictly towards reading knowledge (Quran, Hadith, etc.) on a daily basis. Our Mother, Aisha **رضي الله عنها**, had a daily portion of Quran she would read. If she was unable to read it during the day, she would delay her sleep until

it was completed. Abu Ya'lah رحمه الله said that it is disliked for 40 days to pass while the Quran has not been read from cover to cover.

C. Do not abandon physically attending lectures. Some attend lectures for years then discontinue believing they have obtained knowledge and academic degrees, but this is a mistake as even Ibn Baaz رحمه الله continued to attend lectures in his old age.

D. Be diligent in scheduling your time. Ibn Abbas رضي الله عنهم would schedule Thursdays for his lessons.

2. Wealth:

- The Shaykh didn't mention having "alot" or "little" wealth. Rather "wealth" in general could be a barrier. As being poor can prevent a person from buying a book or traveling to seek knowledge.
- Abul Walid al-Baajee and Muhammad ibn Hazm رحمه الله were two scholars during their time. One time they had a debate and one of them won. al-Baajee said, "Pardon me, for I only was able to read a page or half (at night) only when a guard would pass by with his torch." (Meaning, because he was poor he could not afford light during the night and as a result it prevented him from reading)
- Being wealthy can too be a barrier preventing one from attaining knowledge. Being rich can prevent a person from spending time with knowledge as a result of being preoccupied with worldly possessions.
- Ibn Hazm responded (in the story above), "Pardon me, I am wealthy and I sought knowledge while reading night with the presence of golden plated lamps" (His point is that it was harder for him to seek knowledge due to having many distractions around him because of his abundant amount of wealth).
- If the student is poor and unable to buy a book, then they can obtain it via a public library, or by borrowing from another, or by trading their possessions. (Shaykh Khaalid ar-Raddaaee once mentioned that he sold his car in order to buy books at the annual book fair in Madina University). In these times, we can even find books online for free in PDF format! الحمد لله.
- The student should strive in making seeking knowledge his form of happiness and his poverty will never affect him. Sufyaan ath-Thawree رحمه الله said: "We experience such a delight (while seeking knowledge) that if the sons of the wealthy were aware of it, they would fight us with their swords in order to obtain it."

3. Hastiness in seeking knowledge: This is one of the major barriers.

- az-Zuhree رحمه الله said: “If you try to obtain knowledge all at once, it will leave you all at once, and if you exert all of your energy in obtaining it (or spend all your life seeking it), it will only give you a portion back.”
- If you do not understand an issue, then if Allah wills, you will be granted understanding of it after some time (be it a day, week, month, year or even more). There is a scholar who was in his 70s and he was presented an issue in Fiqh. When he heard the explanation, he responded that for 50 years he didn't understand the issue until that point!
- Scholars stress to their students the importance of abandoning teaching until they have reached at least 40 years old. ar-Raamahurmazi رحمه الله collected (in his monumental book “al-Muhaddith al-Faasil”) an entire chapter entitled: “The Muhaddith does not narrated Hadith until he has reached 40 years of age”
- Abdullah ibn Hajjaaj said (as collected by Ibn Jawzi), “I entered Baghdad in the year 203 AH and asked about Ahmad ibn Hanbal (in order to seek Hadith from him). The people said that he is in his home and he does not narrate Hadith (teach)”. Ibn Hajjaaj then traveled back home and returned to Baghdad the next year (204 AH) and asked for Ahmad ibn Hanbal again. The people said that he is narrating Hadith in the Masjid Mansur, and his gathering was the largest. Ibn Jawzi said, that in this year, 204 AH, Imam Ahmad reached the age of 40 رحمه الله.
- There is a very important principle that is applied to many affairs of the deen: “Whoever hastens to prematurely acquire anything shall be punished by being deprived of it.”
- Among the signs of the Hour is that the Ruwaybidah will speak. He is one who possesses little knowledge and speaks about the affairs of the Deen in front of those who are elder than him in age and knowledge.
- Some attend one lecture think they haven't benefited, and then subsequently stop attending. This is an example hastiness.

4. Falsely believing one is “too old”:

- People think that just because they did not grow up as a youth seeking knowledge and memorizing Quran, they will never be able to obtain both - but this is incorrect. Knowledge is not merely by memorization only. Rather knowledge is both memorization and understanding. When one is young, their memorization is stronger, and when one is older, their understanding is stronger.
- It is said that al-Quffaal (among the major scholars in the Shaafi'ee madhab) was a locksmith and he didn't begin seeking knowledge until he was 40 years old. Despite that, he became the most knowledgeable of his time.
- The one who has memorized while he/she was young, it is possible for them to forget what they have memorized, or lose their desire and drive to continue in seeking knowledge as they become older. For that reason, one should not use that as an excuse

to not seeking knowledge, despite their age. That's because seeking of knowledge is: 1. Worship which one will be rewarded for 2. Easiest means of entering Paradise - which is the ultimate goal.

- It is hoped - and Allah knows best - that it is easier to obtain sincerity in seeking knowledge for the one who is older in age. That's because he/she isn't faced with as many temptations in regards to obtaining that knowledge for worldly benefits (for example: earning a career path, seeking attention and pleasure from others). Whereas the youth generally may be more susceptible towards those diseases.

5. Arrogance: This is one of the biggest obstacles that prevents one from attaining knowledge.

- Mujaahid ibn Jabr, student of Ibn Abbas, said: "The arrogant nor shy will never obtain knowledge."
- Some are arrogant in obtaining knowledge. They say for example, "Why do I have to sit on the floor to learn? I am deserving of sitting in the best places!" One time a King requested a scholar to come and teach him in his palace, the scholar replied in the negative and told him that he will not narrate Hadith except in the Masjid, so come and learn with the people.
- While others are arrogant in not teaching others. They say for example, "You want me to teach children? I should be teaching adults!" Others say they won't teach unless there is a large amount of people. If one or two people show up, they won't teach (Allah's aid is sought). One of Sh. Shuway'ir's teachers taught for years and only one student would consistently attend.
- *Knowledge increases with teaching and spreading it. Ibn Qayyim discusses this in a page and a half affirming that the one who speaks about knowledge will increase in it. How many things were confusing at first, but then once you speak about it, the issue becomes clear (Yaa Subhanallah!)*

6. Shyness: Also among the biggest obstacles in seeking knowledge.

- Shyness has its place. If applied in the correct way then it is praiseworthy.
- Ibn Abbas said, "From the signs of the virtue of a young boy is his shyness."
- But if shyness prevents a person from their obligations, or asking questions, then it is dispraise-worthy.

7. Difficulties found while seeking knowledge:

- This can occur due to not understanding the language of a book. Perhaps a person begins to read a book that is too advanced for their level so they end up leaving the book altogether. This could be avoided by returning back to scholars and learning books based on one's level and then properly advance. One should also learn the terminologies of the book before beginning to read.

- The Shaykh mentions that during his time in the University, students would study ilm al-Mantiq in the first year in the Sharee'ah College. The administrators placed this course in the beginning of the B.A. program because of the large amount of students who enrolled in the college but were not serious in their studies. This then became a means of "weeding out" the weak students and prevent the college from becoming diluted.
- al-Faarūqī mentioned that sometimes Scholars of Fiqh would intentionally make summarized beginner works harder to understand so that none will be able to continue and obtain that knowledge except the sincere, truthful, and serious one. Scholars would intentionally make some issues hard so as to see who is serious in obtaining knowledge.
- The solutions to this barrier is to: develop practice in studying the books of Fuqahaa (by attending lectures), properly progressing in knowledge by studying the right way as laid out by Scholars, sitting with the People of Knowledge while asking them questions, familiarizing yourself with the terminologies of the book, and of course giving great importance to learning the Arabic language.
- Also included under this category are some people who look at knowledge and its vastness and they believe that they'll never be able to learn all of it, so they end up abandoning it. Yes, this knowledge is plentiful and no-one is able to obtain all of it except a Prophet as mentioned by ash-Shaafi'ee. There is a narration in al-Bukhari where a sparrow came and stood on the edge of the boat and dipped its beak once or twice in the sea. Al-Khadir said: "O Moses! My knowledge and your knowledge have not decreased Allah's knowledge except as much as this sparrow has decreased the water of the sea with its beak." None will ever be able to obtain all of this knowledge, however Scholars have made it easier to learn some of it and place for it levels. Therefore, strive in learning these levels properly and knowledge will be made easy to seek, with Allah's permission.