

Ethics in the Search of Knowledge: A Note to Muslim Students

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Abstract: Muslims should inculcate in their mind the idea that knowledge in Islam is sought and spread purposely for Allah's sake but not for one's recognition or fame as viewed by many. When searching for knowledge appropriate manners (A'daab) are to be observed with a view to getting beneficial knowledge from the teachers. This no doubt suggests that good manners lead to prosperity while bad ones lead to misery. In relation to this fact, the Prophet (SAW) was reported to have said in one of his traditions that "through good manners one reaches the status of the person who not only fasts but who also stands late in the night to pray¹". He also says in another Hadith that "Shall I not inform you of the most beloved to me and the one seated closest to me on the Day of Resurrection? Those of you who are best in manners². The two Ahadith quoted stress the importance of good manners expected to be imbibed by every Muslim who, particularly, wants his search for knowledge yield positive result. This is true if we only understand that knowledge cannot be acquired or gained by merely consulting books. However, it is against this background that this article intends to discuss ethics in the search of knowledge: A note to Muslim students.

I. Ethics in the Search of Knowledge

Islam is a comprehensive way of life and ethics is one of its cornerstones. Ethics being one of the fundamental sources of any nation's strength occupies a very prominent position in Islam. Therefore, the guiding principles for the behavior of a Muslim is virtuous deeds. Taking this into consideration, the term ethics covers all other aspects of human progress as it refers to a system of moral principles governing the appropriate conduct of a particular person. However, Muslim scholars of highly repute discussed extensively on the ethics while searching for knowledge that would be adhered to, if the search of knowledge is meant toward attaining Allah's pleasure. For this therefore, anyone who wants his search for knowledge to be fruitful he must display the best ethics before his teachers. Scholars have categorized various manners in order of priority that students of knowledge should observe, into five (5) as follows:

a. Ethics pertaining to the student's relationship with Allah

The student should be sincere to Allah in his intention for search of knowledge. With this, it is understood that one should not seek for Islamic knowledge in order to gain status. However, knowledge can be acquired but of little value when it is sought to please other than Allah.

This will be the type of knowledge which bears neither fruit nor influence on character. Therefore, the goal of knowledge should not be material acquisition, but rather, the acquaintance with the realities and refinement of character. The Hadith of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) states that:

Whosoever seeks for knowledge with intention to get other than Allah's pleasure should prepare his/her abode in Hell³.

Students should not transgress the limits set up by Allah (SWT). This point is further clarified in the Glorious Qur'an where the Exalted says:

And so amongst men and crawling creatures and cattle are they of various colors. Those truly fear Allah among His Servants who have knowledge: for Allah is Exalted in Might Oft- Forgiving⁴.

The more a person grows in knowledge the more humble he becomes before Allah. To confirm this statement, Malik bin Dinar says in the following words:

Whoever does not acquire knowledge that guides his conduct, then that knowledge he has acquired is of no value or benefit to him⁵.

Students should feel strongly about the teachings of his faith. In other words, he should have enough concern to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. This is in line with what the Prophet (SAW) stated on religion and sincerity in the following Hadith:

Religion is sincerity. We asked, to whom, O messenger of Allah? He said: to Allah, His Book, His messenger and the leaders of the Muslims and to the common Muslims in general⁶.

Students should also accept what ever Allah has set forth in the scriptures of religious rulings and teachings. They are not expected to give their personal opinions or preference over the clear dictates of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Regarding this aspect Almighty Allah says in His divine Book:

O you who believe! Put not yourselves forward before Allah and His Apostle: But fear Allah: for Allah is He who hears and knows all things⁷.

b. Ethics of students towards their teachers

Students are to respect their teachers and should, as well, beseech Allah's mercy and forgiveness for their scholars in their prayers. In reference to this, Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal⁸ lamented that every night he prays to Imam Ash-Shafi'i, his teacher, and asks Allah's forgiveness to him the act of which he has been doing for over thirty years. Students should know that they can not acquire knowledge nor benefit from it until and unless they show deference and respect for the knowledge (itself) and the teachers⁹. They should also focus on the scholars' strength thereby over looking their short comings and mistakes. Maintaining the same line of veneration, the students should always assume the best about the scholars.

They should never disgrace any one of them (scholars) on account of an opinion that they might have held, instead, the students are to assume that the scholars expressed that opinion because they believed it to be right and believed it to be what is pleasing to their Creator, Allah. More so, the students are encouraged to ask Allah to reward their scholars for what they got right and to forgive them for the mistakes that they might have committed. Moreover, students should take as much care as he can to choose scholars of proven integrity¹⁰.

A notable scholar, Ibn Sirin, observed that 'this knowledge is of the religion, so be careful who you take your religion from'¹¹. Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi¹² maintained similar opinion when he stated that 'a student should seek a legal teacher who is known for being righteous, who has a reputation for good conduct as well as proficiency. Similarly, on their part, students should behave humbly in the presence of their teachers and should as well show them respect. Allah (SWT) has clearly shown the position of scholars in His Book, the Glorious Qur'an when He says:

O ye who believe! When ye are told to make room in the assemblies (spread out and) make room: (Ample) room will Allah provide for you. And when ye are told to rise up rise up: Allah will raise up to (suitable) ranks (and degrees) those of you who believe and who have been granted Knowledge: and Allah is well-acquainted with all ye do¹³.

However, points and verse mentioned above are further supported by the Hadith of the Prophet (SAW) in which he was reported to have said that:

Whoever fails to show honor to our elders, mercy to our children and respect to our scholars is not one of us¹⁴.

It is one of the ethics of search of knowledge that students should remain under their teachers' tutelage with a view to benefiting from their conduct and their practice.

Imam ash-Shaukani informed us that:

Some scholars advised me that I should never give up writing, even if that meant writing only two lines every day. I acted in accordance with this advice and I reaped its fruits¹⁵.

This is in line with the teaching of Hadith of the Prophet (SAW) in which he said:

The best deed in the sight of Allah is the one that a person continues to do, even if it is something small¹⁶.

Students should emulate good manners of their teachers and should avoid behaving contrary¹⁷. Prophet, Muhammad (SAW) elucidated this in one of his traditions that:

Whoever emulates a people is among them...¹⁸

Students should sit in the presence of their teachers attentively. They are also encouraged not to let their minds wander. This is evident in the Glorious Qur'an:

Allah has not made for any man two hearts in his (one) body: nor has He made your wives whom ye divorce by *Zihar* your mothers: nor has He made your adopted sons your sons. Such is (only) your (manner of) speech by your mouths. But Allah tells (you) the Truth and He shows the (right) Way¹⁹.

Students are expected to bear any harsh treatment or reproach that their teachers might have done²⁰ and find a means of excuse for it. They are also advised to always be polite and respectful in asking questions. One of the best approaches to seeking knowledge is to ask questions in the right manner. But in case the teacher remains silent, students should not press him to answer, this is a sign of disobedience to him²¹. It should be clearly understood here that asking questions is not harmful but types of questions to be asked need to be properly scrutinized in order to avoid silly ones.

Ibn Anas (RA) was once asked on how he has acquired his knowledge? He replied: with a questioning tongue and a discerning heart'. In a way to analyze this statement, it is good to know that, it is allowed to ask scholars questions but those that have direct benefit dealing with aspects of religion and those of worldly affairs.

Equally, they should know that one of the activities that brings them joy and happiness in the course of knowledge acquisition is to read many books that will develop their minds. The Glorious Qur'an, as a book, is a companion that does not praise you and does not entice you to evil. It is also a friend that does not bore you, and is a neighbor that causes you no harm. In fact, when a student is going through the pages of a book his senses are stimulated and his intellect is sharpened. Sometimes, a student may learn from pages of a book in a month, that which he may not learn from the tongues of men. Being attached to books suffices students from having company with idle people who are frivolous in their characters, foul in their speech and in woeful ignorance. Al-Hassan al-Lulu'ee revealed that:

Forty years have passed, and I have not dozed off in the day or in the night...except that a book was resting on my chest²².

In his words, Ibn al-Jahm mentioned that:

If I feel drowsy when it is time to sleep, I take up a book from the books of wisdom and I find bliss in coming across a pearl (of wisdom)....if I find a book to be agreeable and enjoyable, and if I deem it to be beneficial, you will see me hour after hour checking how many pages are left, from fear of being close to the end. And if it is voluminous (book) with great number of pages, my life and happiness are complete²³.

Going on the same line, students are to listen attentively in front of their teachers even if they were well versed and conversant with the topic being discussed. To further make it lucid, they should ponder on the words of wisdom uttered by 'Ata' bin Rabah (RA) when he said:

If I hear a youngster relates a Hadith, I listen as if I have no knowledge of it at all, even though the truth is that, I heard it (the Hadith related) before he was born²⁴.

c. Students' relationship with their classmate (s)

It is incumbent upon any student try to show humility whenever he is in the midst of his classmates. This, no doubt, means that he should not behave arrogantly and that he should not, in any way, present himself as one who is above them. But in case he has stronger or retentive memory resulting to quick grasp of certain things, he should know that it is Allah's blessing granted to him and that this can be granted to any one by One

who offered it to him i.e. Allah. In such a case he should only be thankful to Allah. Students are also encouraged to work hand in hand with their class mates with a view to improving their knowledge. It is hoped that students benefit each other among themselves with the available knowledge they have acquired and must be cautious not to be dragged by pride in learning (certain things) from one another.

It is also advisable that students should show kindness and desire for their peers the same success they may wish for themselves. This can be done through encouraging and helping each other as much as they can. In addition to this, students should avoid too much joke with their fellow colleagues. The issue of belittling or envying one another should have no forum whatsoever.

d. Students' personal conduct

Students are warned against laxity and reluctance in putting into practice what they have learnt in respect of many branches of knowledge being imparted to them. Students should not, under any circumstance, allow the teaching of the following verse be applied to them. Allah (SWT) mentions in the Glorious Qur'an:

The similitude of those who were charged with the (obligations of the) Mosaic Law but who subsequently failed in those (obligations) is like that of a donkey which carries huge tomes (but understands them not). Evil is the similitude of people who falsify the Signs of Allah: and Allah guides not people who do wrong²⁵.

Ali, while commenting on this very verse²⁶, particularly, described the children of Israel as beasts of burden that carry learning and wisdom on their backs but do not understand or profit by it. So, by extension, one should not allow himself to become like those people described as beasts of burden having acquired knowledge and wisdom but such knowledge that has no value for them for they failed to put into practice what they have learned at all. To further strengthen what has been said above, the Noble Prophet, Muhammad (SAW) was reported to have affirmed that:

A person will not pass by on the day of judgment until he is asked about four things; his youth, how he spent it, his knowledge, how he acted upon it, his wealth, how he earned it and how he spent it and his body, how he used/wasted it²⁷.

Moreover, a prominent scholar, al-Sha'abi (RA) uttered useful statement regarding the practicing students as far as knowledge is concerned, when he made mention that:

We used to aid our memorization of Hadith by acting upon it and we used to aid our learning of Hadith with fasting²⁸.

Students should not cease in inculcating good morals into their minds as they learn them from the scholars for this will help them to establish themselves firmly into the oceans of good behaviors worthy of emulation by any one. A great scholar, Imam Malik (RA) revealed that:

His mother used to put his turban on and say 'go to Rabi'ah (RA) and learn good manners from him before learning from his knowledge²⁹.

This shows the significance of good manners to the extent that they should, first of all, be learnt before one embarks in seeking knowledge.

On the other hand, he used to say that one cannot attain the heights of intellectual glory, unless faced with poverty³⁰. Imam Malik furthermore, cautioned students not to take knowledge particularly that of Hadith from four categories of people when he said that:

Knowledge is not to be taken from four types of people: A foolish person who openly acts foolish, even if he reports the most narrations; an adherent of bid'ah who calls to his desires; a person who lies, even if I don't accuse him of lying in hadith; and a righteous pious worshipper who does not accurately retain what he narrates³¹.

'Abd Allah bin al-Mubarak (RA), a servant scholar, also informed us that:

We used to learn good manners before acquiring knowledge, and that, I spent thirty years learning manners and then spent twenty years learning knowledge³².

This is considered as if good manners are three-fifth (3/5) of knowledge. Another pious scholar, Abu Zakariyyah al-Anbari (RA) clearly explained that:

Having knowledge without good manners is like having a fire without fuel, and that having manners without knowledge is like having a body without a soul³³.

This means that both knowledge and good manners are two sides of the same coin so much so that one cannot stand in itself without the other. Similarly, students should always be patient and diligent enough in their studentship. Scholars counted patience (*sabr*) as one of the manners for search of knowledge. They opined that if *Jihad* requires an hour of patience, then the seeker of knowledge must be patient till the end of his life³⁴. Abu Tamam, in his words, exclaimed:

Let me scale the heights that cannot be scaled, for reaching high things is difficult whilst reaching low things is easy³⁵.

Stressing the position and importance of knowledge as well as the difficulties (likely) to be encountered while searching for it, a poet lamented by saying:

You seek to attain glory, and those who seek to attain glory strive their utmost and roll up their sleeves for that purpose. They strive hard but most of them became tired. But those who have **patience** and perseverance attain the heights of the glory that they desired. Do not think that attaining glory is as easy as eating date; you cannot attain glory until you swallow the bitterest medicine³⁶.

It is of paramount importance for students of knowledge to know that seeking knowledge is one of the best actions; rather it is part of the struggle³⁷ and striving in the path of Allah (SWT). Yahya bin Abi Kathir shed light on this regard when he stated that:

Knowledge does not come with out effort, and that students of knowledge should not be deceived by the little knowledge they might have acquired, instead, their prayer should always be ‘O! My Lord increase me in knowledge’ in addition to their effort in making sure that they acquire all the available knowledge easy for them to access³⁸.

Imam al-Shafi’i, however, encouraged the students to seek for knowledge while in their youthful age, saying that, ‘obtain knowledge before you are tasked with high positions in life, because when you are tasked with positions, there is no way to obtaining knowledge³⁹. We can say that whoever neglects learning in youth loses the past and is dead for the future. One important point here is that students should discard the habit of learning aspects of knowledge at a time, instead they are advised to learn one aspect of knowledge at a time followed by another so that they may not lose anything in that regard⁴⁰.

II. Conclusion

Today, many students searching for knowledge neglect that day to day happening viewing it as some thing that has no bearing or concern to them. The world now is developing and has already become a global village, so it is pertinent for them, in the course of their search for knowledge, to include other aspects of knowledge that relate to us and the World itself. This is in line with the understanding of Imam al-Ghazali when he expatiated that:

A student should not neglect any respectable discipline or branch of knowledge. He should, at least, be acquainted with its general subject and its objectives. If his life time permits, he should make a detailed study of it all. Otherwise, he should prioritize, dealing with what is most important and making an over view of the rest⁴¹.

Students should not waste time in paying back the dues that their knowledge requires of them. This can be done by imparting it to others. They were encouraged to do so by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in the following Hadith:

Convey from me though it is a single verse⁴².

Students of knowledge must also know that one's ethics shall be strong enough in the search of knowledge. In fact, this should be the yard stick in which one's intention and desire to look for the beneficial knowledge should be judged. Ethics in Islam, therefore, addresses every aspects of a Muslim's life so much so that it becomes universal in its scope as well as its applicability. It is however, pertinent to note that Muslim students are not only required to be virtuous but they must also enjoin virtue. Thus, they must not only be ethically health and upright but must contribute to the uplift of Muslims' ethical code of conduct as a whole.

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