

## Recommended Additional Reading

### The Correct Methodology of Acquiring **Islamic Knowledge**

**Praise be to Allah**, the Mighty, the Exalted, and blessings and peace be upon His chosen messenger.

The Qur'anic and ḥadīth texts on the virtues and excellences of knowledge are numerous, and need not be listed here, for they are not the subject of disagreement. Those who so desire may peruse them in the appropriate references. What is, however, sometimes overlooked, is that knowledge is taken first and foremost from the scholars; **books alone are not sufficient to make a person a scholar**. The scholars say, "Knowledge may not be taken from a **ṣuḥūfī** ('journalist - one who studied only from books) nor the Qur'ān from a **muṣḥafī** (one who learned to recite the Qur'ān on his own, without a teacher)."

#### 1. Evidence from the Qur'ān and Sunnah

Allah sent the Qur'ān - **a book** - with a Messenger - **a teacher**, to explain its contents. ("**And We have sent down to you the Reminder in order that you might explain to people what has been sent down to them.**") [Qur'ān]

The story of the Ṣaḥābī who misinterpreted the verse about the black and white threads of dawn is well known. And, according to a narration in *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, the Prophet (ﷺ) criticized those Companions who, based on the outward meaning of the Qur'ān, gave the fatal **fatwā** that tayammum is not permissible for one who has water, even if he fears the water will harm him. It is reported that he said, "Could they not have asked, since they did not know? The only remedy for incompetence is asking."

Also indicating that knowledge is obtained from the scholars, rather than merely from reading, is the ḥadīth, "Allāh will not take away this knowledge by lifting it out of the hearts of people; but He will take away knowledge by taking away the 'Ulamā'

(scholars) .” [Riyāḍu’s-Ṣāliḥīn] And, similarly, the ḥadīth, “Whoever was asked about [some] knowledge, but concealed it, will be bridled, on the Day of Resurrection, with a bridle of fire.” [Ibn Majāh]

Why should he be afflicted with this severe punishment if the questioner could just as easily go to a book and read?

## 2. Statements of the Mujtahid Imāms

If we turn next to the statements of the Imāms, we see the same attitude reflected: Someone told Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, “In the mosque there is a circle (**ḥalaqah**) in which the people are looking at Fiqh.” He asked, “Do they have a head (i.e. a teacher)?”. The man replied, “No.” The Imām said, “These will never gain knowledge of Fiqh.” [Reported by al-Khatib al-Baghdādī, through his isnād, in “*al-Faqīh wal-Mutafaqqih*”]

Imām al-Awzā’ī said, “This knowledge remained ‘**azīz** (rare, or distinguished) as long as it remained in the hearts of men. Then, when it was transferred to books, unsuited people took it.” [Reported by al-Dārimī in the introduction to his *Sunan*, and by al-Bayhaqī in *al-Madkhal*.]

Imām Mālik was asked, “Can knowledge be taken from a man who has not [to his credit any] seeking [of knowledge] nor sitting [with scholars]?” He said, “No.” [Reported by al-Ṣuyūṭī in *Is’af al-Mubatta’*]

Imām al-Shāfi’ī said, “Whoever takes knowledge from books loses the regulations.” (man akhadha al-’ilma min al-kutubi Dayya’a al-aḥkāma). [Reported by al-Nawawī in the introduction to *al-Majmu’*]

‘Abdullah, the son of Imām Aḥmad, said, “My father said : ‘Knowledge is only that in which one says : So-and-so told us . . . . And, al-Manṣūr asked my father to discuss [something] with Ibn Abī Du’ad, but he turned his face away, saying, ‘How can I discuss with someone whom I have not seen at the door of a single scholar?!’” [Reported by Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ in *al-Ilmā’*]

## 3. Statements of Latter Scholars

The ‘Ulamā’ (scholars) of later times reiterated this concept. Ibn Rushd said, “In the early age, knowledge was in the hearts of men, and thereafter, it was transcribed onto the skins of animals, but the keys to it remained in the hearts of men.” [Quoted by al-Shātībī in *al-Muwāfaqāt* ]

Imām al-Shātībī discusses in his “*al-Muwāfaqāt*” the methodology of acquiring knowledge. He mentions the **two** possible means: **a)** learning from scholars, and **b)** reading from books, and then comments that although the latter is theoretically a possibility, it turns out in practice that a teacher is indispensable. He observes that among the benefits of a teacher are acquiring his good character traits, in addition to his academic expertise and guidance. He cites the example of (the writer omits here

the name of a famous scholar) who was criticized by scholars for his lack of etiquette and respect, which were a consequence of his not having stayed with any of his shaykhs for a prolonged period such as to benefit from his character. He also mentions that reading books can be beneficial only if one is aware of the bases and terminologies of the science in question, (and this knowledge itself must be taken from the scholars orally).

Imām **al-Juwaynī** said, in verse, (although some attributed it to al-Shāfi'ī himself), "My brother, you will not attain knowledge except through six [things] . ." The last two of these are : "the instruction of a teacher" (**talqīni ustādhin**) and "a long time" (**ṭūli zamāni**).

Shaykh Ḥasan Hito, a contemporary scholar in Kuwait, says in his book, "al-Mutafayhiqūn" (which translates approximately to '**the big-headed loud-mouths**'), that a teacher is indispensable; to explain ambiguities, restrictions of absolute statements, and details of generalities.

Shaykh Ḥusīn Shūat, a lecturer in the Islamic Institute in Fairfax, VA, once remarked to the writer of these lines, "Whoever has his book as his teacher, his mistakes are more than his rectitudes."

#### 4. Problems associated with relying only on books

Shaykh Ḥasan Hito mentions several examples of errors and problems arising from trying to take knowledge from books alone. Among them:

- someone who misread the ḥadīth which says that a believer is clever and intelligent (kayyis faṭīn) as "kis quṭn" (a bag of cotton)!
- someone who read the ḥadīth (the writer of these lines, have also heard this story with reference to "Al-Umm" rather than a ḥadīth) that one should approach Ṣalāh with sedateness and tranquility (**sakīnah wa waqār**), and misread it as **sikkīnah wa-far** (a knife and a rat), so that he put a knife and a rat in his pocket, and proceeded to the mosque!
- his own experience, while at university. He was reading a book of **fiqh**, and was perplexed by a statement which seemed to say, "It is prohibited to sell a Barambalūl in exchange for a Barambalūl." He had never heard of this word, "Barambalūl," and had no clue what it might mean. He checked the commentaries, annotations and explanations of the text he was reading, but none of them offered any guidance. He began to think badly of the author, and that perhaps this was a mistake, until it struck him that the problem must be with himself, it not being conceivable that tens of commentators could have overlooked this point. He then consulted one of his shaykhs who told him, "Brother, this does not need dictionaries and thesauri; it needs **only humility** such as you have displayed by asking. What the book is saying is, "burr mablūl" (wet wheat)." !!!
- one of Shaikh Hito's students, who was reading aloud before him, and read

that it is appropriate for the Muṣallī, "**sadd farjihī fī al-Ṣaff**" (meaning: to block his private parts in the Ṣaff (row of praying people)). The shaykh asked him, how should he block it? The student said, "with something like cotton wool." "Why?" the shaykh asks? "In order to be certain of purity; to prevent any urine from reaching his clothing." The other students around laughed. The book actually says, "...**sadd furjatin fī al-Ṣaff**" (...block/close up a gap in the row).!!

Shaykh Mustafa al-Sibā'ī, in his book "*Al-Sunnah wa-makānatuhā fī al-tashrī'*", also mentions some examples:

- someone who, for many years refrained from having a haircut on Friday morning, because he had read a ḥadīth which he thought was saying that the Prophet (ﷺ) forbade hair-cutting/shaving (Ḥalq) before Jumu'ah prayers. Eventually, he learned that the ḥadīth was actually talking about Ḥilaq- circles/gatherings in the mosque, which are prohibited because their presence hinders people who are coming/gathering for Ṣalātu'l-Jumu'ah.

- some muḥaddithīn of earlier times (who had not studied fiqh), and came across a hadith saying that it is not appropriate for a man to use his water to irrigate his neighbor's garden. They said, "In the past, when we had excess water, we would give it to our neighbors for their gardens, but now, we seek forgiveness from Allāh." The hadith is actually referring to committing adultery with one's neighbor's wife!

In addition to blatant examples such as the above, there are other dangers associated with attempting to learn only from books:

- there may be **typographical errors** in the text
- one may be confused by the **terminology** used
- one may not have **sufficient background** to understand what the author is saying, and hence misinterpret it based on one's shallow knowledge. e.g. according to some scholars, a **makrūh tanzihī** act entails a sizable sin, although according to the majority it does not.
- the author of the book may have made **a mistake**, such as overlooking evidence, or **misrepresenting** the view of a madhhab other than his own. (This can occur even in renowned books)

More commonly, the author will present his arguments, and the **naive reader may become convinced** that this is the truth, and anything else must be wrong! Yet, careful consideration clarifies that such reading is not sufficient in this regard because:

i) fairness demands that one **hear both sides of an argument**. Even though a scholar may mention the other side's arguments and refute them, he is presenting the evidence as he sees it; he may be overlooking something, or there may be alternate interpretations.

ii) even if both sides are heard, **a person must be qualified** in the Islamic

sciences in order to be able to competently judge between them. It is worthwhile to note that **reading a handful of books does not make one a mujtahid!** A Samarqandī scholar once remarked, "None shall attain this knowledge except he who abandons his shop, destroys his orchard, and abjures his brethren, and whose loved ones die without his witnessing their funerals!" [Quoted by Shaykh 'Abdul-Fattāḥ Abū Ghuddah in "*Safahāt min Ṣabr al-'Ulamā'*"] Although this statement contains some exaggeration, it serves to get the point across. Another example, mentioned by Shaykh Muhammad 'Awwāmah in one of his books, is that of the Prophet (ﷺ)'s hajj - was it **tamattu'**, or **qiran**, or **ifrad**? Before you rush to answer, realize that scholars differed about this, and **Imām Abū Ja'far al-Tahāwī** wrote around **1000 pages** discussing the issue!

May Allah save us from all the evils associated with knowledge.

*Subḥānakallāhumma wabi ḥamdik. Ash hadu allā ilāha illā anta. Waḥdaka Lā Sharīka lak. Astaghfiruka wa atūbu ilayk.*

Your brother in Islam