

المنهجية في طلب العلم

*The Methodology of Seeking
Knowledge*

By The Eminent Sheikh Salih Ibn Abdul Aziz Ali Sheikh

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Translated by:

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Prepared for the new student of knowledge, in order to preserve him from making the same mistakes as those who came before him. We ask Allah to give him success in his studies. If there is any good in this translation then it was from Allah and if there are any mistakes then it is from myself and the Shaytan.

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The Methodology of Seeking Knowledge

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Introduction

All Praise is for Allah. We praise Him, seek His assistance and forgiveness. We seek refuge with Allah from the evil of our own souls and the evil of our deeds. Whomsoever Allah guides there is none to misguide him and whomsoever He misguides there is none to guide him. I bear witness that none deserves to be worshiped except Allah alone without any partners, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His slave and final Messenger.

يأيها الذين ءامنوا اتقوا الله حق تقاته ولا تموتن إلا وأنتم مسلمون

"O you who believe fear Allah as He deserves to be feared and do not die except in a state of total submission to Him (i.e. as Muslims)" - [Surah Al Imran (3:102)]

يأيها الناس اتقوا ربكم الذي خلقكم من نفس واحدة وخلق منها زوجها وبث منهما رجالا كثيرا ونساء واتقوا الله الذي تساءلون به والأرحام إن الله كان عليكم رقيبا

"O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul and then created from him his wife, and from them both, spread many men and women. Fear Allah, through whom you demand your mutual rights, and do not sever ties with the wombs that bore you indeed Allah is a Watcher over you." - [Surah An Nisaa'a (4:1)]

يأيها الذين ءامنوا اتقوا الله وقلوا قولا سديدا, يصلح لكم أعمالكم ويغفر لكم ذنوبكم ومن يطع الله ورسوله فقد فاز فوزا عظيما

"O you who believe, fear Allah and always speak the truth, He will direct you to do righteous good deeds and will forgive you of your sins. Whoever obeys Allah and His Messenger then indeed he has achieved a tremendous achievement." - [Surah Al Ahzab (33:70-71)]

Important Characteristics

To Proceed,

Indeed the most truthful speech is the Book of Allah, and the finest guidance is the guidance of Muhammad (Sallahu alaihi wa salam) and the most evil of affairs are newly invented matters in the religion; every newly invented matter is an innovation; and every innovation will lead one astray; and everything that will lead one astray will eventually take him to the hell fire.

Many of the young students of knowledge read a variety of different books, at times relating to Hadeeth and at others relating to Tafseer or Fiqh. They listen to many lectures and attend the circles of Knowledge, but if they would stop for a moment and re-evaluate themselves, as some of them attend these lectures for one year and some for two years, they would realize that they never fully comprehended these lectures which they were attending, or they would realize that the benefit was not all that tremendous.

This is because they did not acquire a knowledge based foundation before attending these lectures, which would have allowed them to format and comprehend the information they were absorbing, and would have enabled them to follow the correct path when seeking knowledge. Hence the sole reason for this deficiency in their comprehension and understanding is the lack of an accurate systematic knowledge based methodology when seeking knowledge.

It is imperative for the student to develop and follow a distinctive and systematic method in his search for knowledge, and if he fails to do so, he will eventually fail in his quest for knowledge. It is because of this that we see many students become bored and loose interest for seeking knowledge, and after a few years he abandons the path of seeking knowledge all together. You will find after a few years that this same individual eventually returns to his original state of being just a layman from the Muslims, or from those who suffice themselves with reading from books!!

We want the individual who is embarking upon the path of seeking knowledge to adorn himself with two very important characteristics:

The First: To follow the same systematic path of seeking knowledge as those who came before you from the People of knowledge; those who, after following this path, eventually became scholars.

The Second: To condition yourself in exerting every effort possible in seeking knowledge; by giving knowledge all of your time, without becoming bored or losing your aspiration for knowledge, regardless of the difficulties you may encounter.

Khateeb Al Baghdaadee (Rahimahullah) mentioned in one of his monumental books¹ [Jam'i Akhlaq ar Raawi wa A'dab us Sam'i] that one of the students of knowledge in the science of Hadeeth from the Salaf had a very strong desire for seeking knowledge, but he aspired to gather all of the knowledge at one time by sitting in all the circles of knowledge. Then after some time he began to realize that he was not benefiting from the knowledge which he was trying to acquire, and he said to himself:

¹ He was Al Imam Al Hafidh Abu Bakr Ibn Ali ibn Thabit al Khateeb al Baghdadee (died 463) in his monumental book "Jam'i Akhlaq or Raawi wa A'dap"

إني لا يناسبني هذا العلم

This path of seeking knowledge is really not for me!”

Consequently he abandoned the circles of knowledge altogether, considering himself to be incompetent and lacking understanding of the various intricate matters of knowledge; or he thought that it was not meant for him to be a student of knowledge. So one day he came across a boulder which appeared to be eroding due to the trickles of water which were falling on top of it. So he pondered over this for a moment and said:

هذا الماء على لطافته أثر في هذه الصخرة على قساوتها, فليس عقلي وقلبي بأقسى من الصخرة وليس العلم
بألطف منه من الماء

“This water along with its softness is eroding this boulder along with its coarseness!! My heart and intellect are not harder than this boulder, nor is water softer than knowledge!!”

So he decided to return to the path of seeking knowledge and was patient, until he eventually became from the most prominent scholars of his time.

This will show you that in order to be a true student of knowledge you have to possess strong determination and ambition, which will safeguard you from becoming discouraged. The student should not say, “I studied but I really did not benefit much!” as if he is saying that he did not comprehend. The lack of understanding is not the reason why many of the youth who embark upon the path of seeking knowledge fail to grasp the details of the information which they hear. Rather most of them comprehend, but the reason why they don’t benefit as much from their knowledge is because they have not acquired the knowledge by following the correct methodology.

They did not follow the path of the people of knowledge who came before them. This path is very simple and much easier than the path taken by many of the youth who have embarked upon seeking knowledge today. If this point is understood, then there is a very important question which many of the youth ask. This question is: “What is the most correct methodology in seeking knowledge? How does the student of knowledge follow the path of seeking knowledge in light of the Minhaj of those who came before him? And if Allah gives him success on this path, will he eventually become a true student of knowledge?”

This question is extremely important, and there is no doubt that attending the circles of knowledge is very beneficial. The most tremendous benefit which the student will find is that when he leaves these circles, he understands and comprehends what was mentioned, and he is able to disseminate that information to others in a manner which they can comprehend.

The student of knowledge should possess specific characteristics and etiquettes which he adorns himself with constantly in his quest for seeking knowledge:

Sincerity

Firstly: The most vital and important characteristic is that he has to be sincere to his Lord in seeking knowledge. This is due to the fact that seeking knowledge is Ibaadah (i.e. worship) and the noble angels lay down their wings out of respect for the student of knowledge. This was mentioned in the authentic hadeeth Sunan of Abu Dawud, from the famous hadeeth of Abu Ad Dar'daa Radiyallahu anhu 2/341. So the fact that seeking knowledge is an act of worship necessitates that it has to fulfill the condition of being done solely for the sake of Allah, Jala wa Ala, in order for it to be acceptable to Him.

Meaning, he does not seek knowledge to obtain worldly status; he does not seek knowledge of the legislation of Allah, knowledge of the Qur'an and the Sunnah in order to obtain reputation, to become a teacher or lecturer or someone who everybody is turning their attention towards, or the likes of these lowly aims and ambitions. Rather his sole intention for seeking knowledge is to worship Allah with the knowledge he is acquiring upon Baseerah, and to rid himself of ignorance.

Imam Ahmad (Rahimahullah) was asked:

كيف الإخلاص في العلم؟

“How does one have sincerity while seeking knowledge?”

He replied:

الإخلاص فيه أن ينوي رفع الجهالة عن نفسه لأنه لا يستوي عالم وجهول

“Having sincerity while seeking knowledge is by making your intention to remove ignorance from yourself, because the one who is knowledgeable is not the same as the one who is ignorant”

Then he recited the statement of Allah:

أمن هو قانت ءاناء اليل ساجدا و قائما يحذر الأخرة ويرجو رحمة ربه قل هل يستوي الذين يعلمون والذين لا يعلمون

“Is he who is obedient to Allah, prostrating himself and standing in prayer during the hours of the night, fearing the hereafter and hoping for the Mercy of his Lord (like the one who disbelieves)? Say: “Are those who know equal to those who don’t know?” - [Surah Az Zumar (39:9)]

And the statement of Allah in Surah Mujadilah:

يرفع الله الذين ءامنوا منكم والذين أوتوا العلم درجات

“Allah will exalt in degrees those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge...” - [Surah Mujadilah (58:11)]

Thus Allah has given the People of Knowledge preference over others. The one who seeks knowledge to worship Allah upon Baseerah and to rid himself of ignorance, in order to live his life in accordance to what Allah has legislated, then this individual has truly obtained Ikhlaas in his search for knowledge. This is due to the fact that he sought the Face of Allah and freed himself from blindly and ignorantly following his desires.

There are many books which have been written on the etiquettes of the student of knowledge, some small treatises and others more extensive and lengthy.

Moderation

Secondly: The student should be moderate in his search for knowledge, as the Prophet (Sallahu alaihi wa salam) informed us about Allah:

إن الله يحب الرفق في الأمر كله

“Indeed Allah loves gentleness in everything...” - [Sahih Al Bukhari from the hadeeth of A’isha Radiyallahu anha - 5/2242]

This is general and applies to every situation, he (Sallahu alaihi wa salam) also said:

إن الرفق ما كان في شئ إلا زانه

“Gentleness is not put into anything except that it beautifies it...” - [Sahih Muslim from the hadeeth of A’isha Radiyallahu anha - 4/2004]

This also includes seeking knowledge. So how does the student become moderate in seeking knowledge? His is such by not trying to gather all of the matters of knowledge at one time, just as it was mentioned by Imaam Az Zuhri (Rahimahullah) who was a well known Tabi’ee:

من رام العلم جملة ذهب عنه جملة, وإنما العلم يطلب على مر الأيام والليالي

“Whoever seeks to acquire knowledge all at once, then it will go away from him all at once, rather knowledge is sought by the passing away of many days and nights.”(i.e. in time)

This principle was eloquently explained by the poet who said:

اليوم علم وغدا مثله من نخب العلم التي تلتقط

يحصل المرء بها حكمت وإنما السيل اجتماع النقط

“Today knowledge and tomorrow the like of it and through this process the individual will obtain the wisdom he needs, for the river becomes such by the gathering of droplets of water.”

Hence, moderation is required when seeking knowledge; and the student cannot obtain this moderation by trying to acquire knowledge all at once. For example, the student desires to acquire all the knowledge of Tafseer, so he goes and reads Tafseer Ibn Jareer [i.e. Jaa’mi ul Bayan an Ta’weel il Qur’an by the Imam the Mufassir Abu Ja’far Muhammad Ibn Jareer At Tabari Rahimahullah] which is a very extensive and comprehensive book that all the other explanations of the Qur’an is dependant on.

The individual who does this has sought to acquire knowledge all at once, in that he started and ended with one of the most extensive works in the field of Tafseer. If you were to ask him how much he comprehended from this book you will find that he only understood a little. He can remember that he

read such and such from the explanation of certain verses, but he lacks the ability to explain to you what he understood in a manner which is consistent with the true meaning of the verse.

It is imperative for the student of knowledge to learn these matters moderately and gradually, which is actually from the Sunnah and a vital etiquette in the realm of seeking knowledge. Likewise, the individual who desires to study the science of hadeeth, he hastily begins with Nayl ul Awtar [of Imaam Muhammad Ibn Ali Ash Showkaani Rahimahullah] or Fath ul Bari [Explanation of Sahih Al Bukhari by Al Hafidh Ahmad Ibn Ali Ibn Hajr Al Asqalaani Rahimahullah]; know that this individual will never acquire knowledge in light of the methodology of the People of Knowledge who came before him. He resembles the one who reads books and magazines on current affairs, he has some scattered pieces of information but this is not, in essence, true foundational knowledge.

Also in the matters of Fiqh, if you ask him; “What books have you read from the matters of Fiqh?” He will reply, “I am currently reading Al Mughni” [of Imaam Muwafaq ud Deen Abu Muhammad Abdullah Ibn Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Qudamah Al Maqdasi Rahimahullah] or “I am reading Majmoo’a” [of Imaam An Nawwawi]. It is safe to say that this individual is not moderate in seeking knowledge due to the fact that, by this methodology of his, he is seeking to acquire all of the knowledge at once. Al Mughni and Majmoo’a are two of the most extensive and comprehensive books in the field of Fiqh, and they tackle some of the major and most complicated matters of the People of Knowledge in the matters of Fiqh.

Therefore the new student should not begin his quest for seeking knowledge by reading these types of books from beginning to end. There is no doubt that these books are resources for him when he needs to research a matter, and he should refer to them and other extensive books in the field of Fiqh if the situation necessitates this, but he should not read them from front to back for the sake of saying that he read them!!

Also from the branches of being moderate when seeking knowledge is that the student, at the beginning of his quest for knowledge, should not emphasize greatly the extensive details of certain knowledge based issues which he is studying. If he neglects this principle then he is eventually going to forget many of the fundamental matters, and by such, he is going to defeat his purpose of seeking knowledge. The lack of a firm academic foundation causes the student to neglect the necessary principles which will enable him to comprehend the specifics of certain issues relating to knowledge.

Some of us attend lessons, which are extensive and very detailed, for many years, and sometimes completing these lessons or certain chapters from them. You find some students sit for six months at a time attending these lessons and they believe they are truly acquiring knowledge, but this is not the case. This is not the correct methodology in seeking knowledge; rather they neglected the principle of moderation. Allah Jala wa Ala says:

و لكن كونوا ربانيين بما كنتم تعلمون الكتاب و بما كنتم تدرسون

“...Be you Rubaaniyoon because you are teaching the book and because you are studying it.” -
[Surah Ali Imran (3:79)]

Imam Al Bukhari (Rahimahullah) explained the meaning of the word Rubaani in his Sahih:

الرباني هو الذي يرب الناس بصغار العلم قبل كباره

“The Rubaani is the scholar who nurtures the people with the simple matters of knowledge before the difficult ones.” - [Sahih Al Bukhari in the Chapter of Knowledge from the statement of Abdullah Ibn Abbas Radiyallahu anhuma 1/37]

It is neither virtuous nor appropriate for the scholar, or the student of knowledge, to mention to those whom he is teaching all of what he knows about a particular issue of knowledge. The teacher only gives to those who are listening to him what is necessary for them to understand the issue at hand, and he avoids giving them what is above their comprehension. Therefore it is imperative for the student of knowledge to be moderate in his search for knowledge, and learn at a gradual pace. If he learns in this manner, then he will teach and disseminate the information which he has in the same manner.

Time

Thirdly: The student should give seeking knowledge the best of his time. He should not devote the time when his mind is busy with something else, or when his comprehension level is low, to seeking knowledge. Give knowledge the best of your time, the time in which your mind is free and your comprehension level is high. This issue is connected to another matter, which is the student of knowledge should busy himself with knowledge all day and all night, until his mind becomes so immersed in knowledge that his sole aspiration is knowledge. Even when he wants to sleep there is a book next to him, because there may be an issue he wants to review before he goes to sleep. Because of this, some of the Salaf used to say:

“If you see the books of a student of knowledge neatly placed in order on the book shelf then know that he is a student that doesn’t read, rather he has abandoned his books.”

Meaning, he does not take the time necessary to understand the intricate matters of knowledge, rather he spends the same amount of time as someone who reads books and magazines on current affairs. The student does not have what is commonly called “reading time” due to the fact that all of his time is devoted to seeking knowledge; rather he wakes up in the morning and goes to sleep at night while his mind is completely focused on the matters of knowledge.

During his years of adolescence, when he is in the prime of his life, he should take advantage of this time to acquire a tremendous amount of knowledge because he has a substantial amount of time to

devote totally to seeking knowledge. His most precious time, where his intellect and conscious are free, he should choose to read those subjects which he is in dire need of like Fiqh and Usool ul Fiqh, and those subject similar to them. These subjects deserve the best of his time, the time where his concentration and ability to grasp detailed information is at its best. At those times where his concentration is not that great, he should choose those subject matters which do not require his full attention like Tafseer or Mustalah Hadeeth [i.e. Hadeeth Terminologies] or the likes of the subjects.

Likewise, those times when his concentration is weak he should choose to read subjects like Adab [i.e. Etiquettes and Manners] and those books which contain the biographies of the Salaf, the books of Islamic History and their likes. So, the student is constantly busy with seeking knowledge whenever and wherever he is, and he does not allow himself to be distracted from this by taking breaks, leisure time or even by his closest friends.

The main shortcoming I see with those who consider themselves to be students of knowledge is that they spend countless hours in gatherings which consist of “he said she said” and conversations which are totally void of the matters of knowledge; and they are on different levels, but those who indulge in such behavior are not truly students of knowledge.

As for the student of knowledge, his aspirations and desires are all devoted to seeking knowledge and those gathering which contain the mention of knowledge based issues and conversations about academic matters relating to the religion or clarification of some matters Allah revealed in His Book or those found in the Sunnah of the Messenger (Sallahu alaihi wa salam). These are the types of gatherings where the heart finds tranquility and they consist of teaching and clarification of academic matters of the religion.

So it is imperative for the student of knowledge to adorn himself with these beautiful etiquettes and characteristics; that he continuously busies himself with seeking knowledge; and that he doesn't give seeking knowledge some of his time, rather he devotes all of his time or majority of it – especially during the time of his youth where acquiring knowledge is much easier. Some of the Salaf used to say:

اعط العلم كلك يعطيك بعضه

“If you give knowledge all of you, it might give you some of it”

This is because knowledge is opulent and the matters relating to it are various and abundant, and because of this, when one of the Imams of hadeeth was on his death bed he would say to the one responsible for recording his narrations:

اكتب العلم حصله في هذه اللحظة

“Record this knowledge! Perhaps you can benefit from it even in these last few moments!”

This shows you his sincerity and devoted following of the Sunnah, and the fact that his heart was totally immersed in knowledge. When Imam Ahmad (Rahimahullah) was on his death bed during his final sickness, which was at times very painful, some of his students came to visit him. They narrated to him with the Isnad from Muhammad Ibn Sireen, on the authority of Anas Ibn Malik (Radiyahallahu anhu), that he disliked moaning during the pangs of sickness. After they mentioned this narration to Imam Ahmad, one of them said, “I never heard him whimper until he died!”

There is a beneficial point in this for the student of knowledge and the scholar and that is, he does not know what Allah will place in his future of good, and his main objective should be seeking knowledge night and day. Another point to mention is that he should never belittle the benefit that comes to him, whether by way of someone who is less than him in knowledge or above him. You find some people, that if a benefit comes to him from someone who is less than him in knowledge, he becomes arrogant or he is not completely attentive to him due to the fact that he considers himself above him in knowledge. But he fails to realize that when he does this, he forfeits the benefit of knowledge.

It is possible to find that someone who is less in knowledge can possess something that he who is greater in knowledge doesn't have. The Ulamaa use as an example of this the story of Sulayman (Alaihis Salam) and the bird (i.e. Hudhuda). The bird, along with its lowly status in the eyes of the human being, and the superior status of Sulayman with Allah and the rest of creation, the bird said to Sulayman:

أحطت بما لم تحط به وجئتك من سبأ نبيا عظيم

“...I have grasped the knowledge of a thing which you have not grasped, and I have come to you from Saba' with tremendous news.” - [Surah An Naml (27: 22)]

So the bird taught Sulayman (Alaihis salam) what he was ignorant of, and the People of Knowledge extract the principle from this story that you should not be arrogant towards the one who brings you some knowledge you can benefit from, whether he is more knowledgeable than you or not. Rather you should humble yourself and listen to him because this opens many doors for you.

These are a few very important characteristics and etiquettes for the student of knowledge, and there are many others which are detailed in the books which concentrate on this particular subject matter.

Most Effective Methodology

But now we want to concentrate on the most important question which is, “How does the student of knowledge become moderate in his search for knowledge and tread this path gradually?” and “What is the most effective methodology in seeking knowledge?”

The response to this question is that the legislative sciences are various and abundant. From them are those which are foundational, and those which are secondary and assist the student of knowledge in his understanding of the essentials of the religion. These types of subjects are referred to as academic tools.

The foundational sciences are the Qur'an and the Sunnah, meaning the sciences of Tafseer. Hadeeth, Fiqh and the sciences of Tawheed, which are all extracted from the Qur'an and the Sunnah and the true understanding of these sciences, is a branch from the understanding of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

Hence the foundational subjects for the student of knowledge are as follows:

- Tawheed
- Hadeeth
- Fiqh

And those academic tools which assist the student in his understanding of these matters are:

- Usool ul Tafseer, or what is commonly known as the sciences of the Qur'an
- Usool ul Hadeeth, or what is commonly known as Mustalahu Hadeeth
- Usool ul Fiqh
- Nahwu (i.e. Arabic Grammar) and its various branches and sciences

There is also another category which the Ulamaa mention will assist the student in his understanding of the foundational subjects, and these are the books which concentrate on the biographies of the Salaf, the various dictionaries, and books of Islamic history.

Tafseer

Firstly: Tafseer

The new student of knowledge should begin learning the subject of Tafseer gradually, step by step. He should start with the extremely concise books of Tafseer, reading them to understand the meanings entailed in the speech of Allah, the Qur'an, especially if he is someone who has memorized the whole Qur'an, as this is the most beneficial thing for him to start with. The later generations from the People of Knowledge greatly emphasized Tafseer Jalalayn [of Imaam As Suyooti], which is very beneficial, but caution should be taken as it relates to the inaccurate interpretation of certain verses.

The student should start off by reading the explanation of those verses which he is accustomed to hearing in the Salat. Begin with the first section, understanding their meanings concisely, as Tafseer Jalalayn is very concise and it only consists of two small volumes. Once you have read through fifty pages then you have completed the first section, understood and comprehended what you hear daily from the Qur'an in the Salat and so you now have a clear understanding of what is being recited.

How do you know that you have understood this concise version of Tafseer and that you are ready to move on to the next level? The reply is that if you have the ability to explain a Surah from what you have read, to yourself, for example you read the Tafseer of Surah As Shams from Tafseer Jalalayn and you understood what you read, you know that you have truly understood when you can close the book and begin to reiterate what you read from the tafseer of that Surah without relying on the book. If you are successful at this, then you have elevated in your comprehension of tafseer and maybe you can move to the next level, and this particular methodology is detailed in the same manner as it relates to subjects other than tafseer.

So the first book in the subject of tafseer the new student of knowledge should start with is Tafseer Jalalayn. After this he can move on to the more extensive books of tafseer like Tafseer As Sa'di or Tafseer Ibn Katheer or smaller books of tafseer if they exist, as long as they are void of any inconsistencies and false interpretations. He should read through them in a manner where he can understand the meanings entailed in the verses, because the information in these books are obviously much more extensive and detailed than the small amount information which he read in Tafseer Jalalayn.

Once he familiarizes himself with the information from these other extensive books of tafseer, his understanding is going to be less ambiguous. He read and understood the tafseer of Surah Ash Shams, but when he reads these extensive works like Ibn Katheer or Tafseer Al Baghawi then he is going to compare and realize the influx of information which he has acquired in relation to what he read and understood previously. If he continues in this manner after some time, he will realize that he truly understands the speech of Allah.

Tawheed

Secondly: Tawheed

Tawheed is two types:

- The First: Aqeedah (i.e. Creed)
- The Second: Tawheed ul Ibaadah

The first type is the knowledge of Tawheed which you are going to study, insha Allah, as a creed, and there are many books which have been written on this particular subject matter. From them are Lum'at ul I'tiqaad [i.e. Sufficiency in Creed by Ibn Qudamah Al Maqdasi], Al Aqeedah tul Wasiteeyah [of Sheikh ul Islam Ibn Taymiyah Rahimahullah], Aqeedah At Tahaweeyah [of Abu Ja'far Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Salaamah Al Masri At Tahawi al Hanafi Rahimahullah] and many others. These particular works concentrate specifically on the matters of creed, matters related to Imaan (i.e. belief in Allah), His Names and Attributes, His Lordship (i.e. Ruboobiyah) and those issues connected to these like belief in the Angels, the Books, the Messengers, the Last Day and those events that are going to take place on that Day.

They also focus on the matters of the grave and those related to paradise and the Hell-fire and the variety of people that are going to dwell in them, as well as the issues of the Qadr. They also focus on

the more detailed and specific matters like those related to the Awliyaa and their miracles, the Sahabah (Radiyallahu anhum), leadership and the intricate details surrounding it. Matters related to enjoining good and forbidding evil, etiquettes and manners.

The Aqeedah of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah should be studied gradually, step by step. The student should begin with a small concise book, which he should read to someone proficient in that field. If there is any ambiguity in what is being read then he should ask about it. It is imperative for the student to begin with reading the concise books on Tawheed for example, take the very concise text of Lum'at ul I'tiqaad. If you have memorized it then this is excellent and what is actually required of you. If you find difficulty in memorizing it, then at least read it a number of times in order that you familiarize yourself with it and comprehend its subject matter.

From the many mistakes which the students of knowledge fall into is that they choose a book to read, and before doing so they have neither read nor understood its subject matter. They read a particular paragraph from it and when they don't understand it they come to the scholar for a detailed explanation. This is incorrect; rather the appropriate thing to do is learn the subject matter of the book before delving into it. Lum'at ul I'tiqaad is a small book which you can read from beginning to end and easily understand its structure and the issues which are being presented in it. Then after you finish reading it you should read it to a scholar or someone who is proficient in the field of Aqeedah.

This is one of the first books the new student of knowledge should start with, because the issues that it deals with are concise and unambiguous and it establishes principles that, if the student comprehends them, then he has acquired a tremendous amount of knowledge about the matters of Aqeedah. He would then be ready to move on to the next level, which is Al Aqeedah tul Wasiteeyah. His methodology with this book is the same as we have mentioned previously with the first one.

After this, how does he know that he has accurately understood the matters of Aqeedah? Some people read, but when it comes time to reiterate verbally what they have read they express themselves using terminologies which are not consistent with the legislation or in a manner which is unacademic – showing that he never truly understood what he was reading initially. Why is this? The reason is because he did not test himself while he was reading to see whether or not he really understood this subject matter.

So when you read a chapter from the book Aqeedah Wasiteeyah, actually study it with yourself by saying, for example: “Sheikh ul Islam Ibn Taymiyah mentions in the introduction to his book Aqeedah Wasiteeyah that the creed of the Saved Sect, Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah...” Then begin to explain who the Saved Sect is and who is Ahlus Sunnah, until you are sure within yourself that you have indeed comprehended the meanings of these terminologies.

Likewise, in the chapter of the Names and Attributes of Allah, for example, the characteristic of Allah Uloo, Istiwa'a and the fact that He is above His Throne, in a manner that befits His Majesty, you mention what was presented about these terminologies and their meanings from the explanation of the book which you read, and this is how you acquire knowledge. And this is what the Ulamaa call Muthakarah (i.e. Studying).

There are narrations which mention that Imaam Ahmad and Abu Zur'ah, Ubaydullah Ibn Abdul Kareem (Rahimahullah) who was a well known Imaam, that they prayed Salat ul Isha together and afterwards they went into Imaam Ahmad's house, and suddenly before they knew it, the adhan for

Salat ul Fajr was being called, and this is because they spent the whole night reviewing the matters of knowledge!!

We pose a question here: “How does the student review his knowledge?” The reply: He along with one of his fellow students get together, this one mentions the Isnad [i.e. chain of narrators] of the hadeeth and the other mentions the appropriate text, and this one mentions the text of the hadeeth and the other mentions what the Ulamaa mention about its explanation and the issues of Fiqh which are connected to it, and in this manner they revise their knowledge and this assists the student in his understanding and helps him to keep his knowledge firm.

However, to just attend the lessons of the scholar, listen and leave, and the only thing that remains with you from his lesson is the last thing you heard him say before you left, then this individual will not acquire knowledge in this manner. He listened and benefited from the lesson and perhaps he may even be rewarded, insha Allah, but he will not acquire knowledge nor will he develop an academic foundation for himself in this manner.

Therefore, the sign to show you whether or not you understood is to close the book and reiterate the explanation which you read, and if you truly understood then your explanation will be accurate and there will be no confusion in your comprehension. But if there is some inconsistency in your understanding, you will notice it during the course of your explanation. You will also notice your frequent use of expressions which are inaccurate, all pointing towards the fact that you really don't understand. This is considering the fact that you were certain you did understand while you were reading, but after testing yourself you began to realize the shortcomings in your comprehension.

This is why you have to re-evaluate yourself, because if you do not have the ability to explain a portion of what you read, or a paragraph of it, then this means that you need to read it again and avoid moving on to the next level until you become proficient in this one.

In the past, students of knowledge would attend the lessons of their sheikh who would teach them, and at night the students would gather together to review what they learned. Each one would close his book and turn to the person next to him and explain to him what he understood from the lesson earlier. This is an excellent way to review your knowledge which is to have one close companion, and no more than this, to revise with. He explains to you and you explain to him and during the course of this, the mistakes in your understanding will become apparent and likewise the mistakes in his understanding, and you can both assist one another in correcting them.

When you have completely understood Aqeedah Wasiteeyah, then you should move on to the next level which is Hamaweeyah. If you desire, you can move on to Aqeedah Tahaweeyah and there is nothing wrong with this because after you have understood Aqeedah Wasiteeyah completely, you have the ability to comprehend any of the books of Sheikh ul Islam (Rahimahullah) by the permission of Allah.

What I find most amazing is that some students open Majmoo'a Fatawah and they still haven't comprehended the fundamentals of the creed!! A day where he is tired, ten to fifteen minutes right before he goes to sleep he says, “let me read something from Majmoo'a Fatawah!” then he opens it and begins to read and afterwards he wants to debate about a particular issue that, in reality, he himself doesn't even understand!! This happens many times.

You find this student, he comes and says that Sheikh ul Islam said such and such, but if you go back to that same reference you will notice that Sheikh ul Islam did not say that!! This is because he gave his reading and comprehension of that particular matter a portion of his time where his concentration was not paramount, and secondly is because he is not proficient in fundamental principles of the creed. As a result, his understanding of the speech of the Ulamaa in this issue is not exact.

What is more amazing is that this same individual has not even memorized Aqeedah Wasiteeyah, Fatawah Hamaweeyah or Lum'at tul I'tiqaad, and he wants to read the books of the Salaf like As Sunnah by Abdullah the son of Imam Ahmad (Rahimahullah), Kitab ul Imaan by Ibn Mundah (Rahimahullah), Kitab ut Tawheed by Ibn Khuzaymah (Rahimahullah), Kitab ut Tawheed by Ibn Mundah and the likes of these comprehensive works which contain the intricate matters of Aqeedah and are not detailed the likes of what we find in the books of the scholars today.

If you are firmly grounded in the fundamental principles, then your understanding of the statements of the Salaf will be accurate and consistent and by this you will develop as a student of knowledge insha Allah. You memorized and understood the statements of the Salaf and then you connect them to the issues and foundational matters which you studied in Aqeedah without taking them out of their context.

For example, it was mentioned in the beginning of the book Lum'at tul I'tiqaad, where the author stated in the chapter of belief in the Names and Attributes of Allah: "without (asking) how and without meaning" can the student who does not understand the fundamental principles of this particular chapter possibly understand what was intended here? When he reads the books of the Salaf, he has to have knowledge of the fundamental principles which will assist him in understanding these precise terminologies and phrases of the Salaf.

If he lacks this understanding, then he should refer those matters which are confusing to him back to the scholars who are proficient in these areas because they possess knowledge about these issues which others don't have. If you don't have the time which is necessary for this, then it is possible that you can go to those teachers who are proficient and firmly grounded in knowledge provided the conditions are met.

Hadeeth

Thirdly: Hadeeth

The first thing the student of knowledge should begin memorizing is the Forty Hadeeth by Imaam An Nawwawi (Rahimahullah). I am almost positive that if I asked those who are present now, how many of you have memorized the forty Hadeeth by Imaam An Nawwawi, most of you would say no. But yet most of the students have moved on to more extensive and comprehensive books like Nayl ul Awtar or Subul us Salam or Fath ul Bari, but the forty Hadeeth by Imaam An Nawwawi is the foundation.

Go back to those books which concentrate on the biographies of the later day scholars and read their biographies, you will not find that any one of them began seeking knowledge by reading the more extensive and lengthy works of hadeeth. For example, you will not find that any of scholars from the Salaf began seeking knowledge by reading Fath ul Bari or Majmoo'a [of Imaam An Nawwawi] but

you will find that he memorized the forty Hadeeth by Imaam An Nawwawi, Al Mulhah in the Arabic grammar, Al Umdah in Fiqh and Umdah tul Ahkam. These are the concise books that he will mention that he memorized, but why? Because of two reasons:

- **The First:** To show you the correct methodology of studying and seeking knowledge
- **The Second:** To show you the degree and level of that scholar and that his knowledge was firmly embedded and foundational due to the fact that he began with these concise works, memorized them, studied them with the scholars of his time, and did not proceed until they were understood. The detailed issues contained in these books can only be grasped after you are firmly grounded in the fundamental principles of Hadeeth.

So in the field of Hadeeth, the student should begin with memorizing the forty Hadeeth by Imaam An Nawwawi, and memorizing it is imperative. If you find difficulty in doing so, then you should read it everyday until it becomes easy for you to memorize, just as you memorized Surah Al Fatihah. Complete it every week, and every time you complete it your understanding of it will increase.

After memorizing the Forty Hadeeth, you should read one of the explanations of it, and if you can read it to one of the scholars then this is what is recommended. If not, then you should read it and familiarize yourself with the explanation of those Hadeeth, and ask the Ulamaa if there are any discrepancies about anything.

The most extensive explanation of the Forty Hadeeth is by Ibn Rajab Al Hanbali al Hafidh (Rahimahullah) [Jaami ul Uloom wal Hikam] and the more concise explanation of it is by Ibn Daqeeq Al E'id (Rahimahullah) and there are many other explanations. So read the explanation of these ahadeeth, for example, when you finish reading the explanation of the hadeeth "Indeed actions are by intentions..." [The first hadeeth in the Forty Hadeeth by Imaam An Nawwawi on the authority of Umar Ibn Al Khattab Radiyallahu anhu] close the book and begin to explain the hadeeth in light of what you read from its explanation. This will benefit you tremendously, especially if you want to give some sort of admonition or reminder in the masjid.

Due to the fact that you have memorized and understood the explanation of The Forty Hadeeth you have the ability to choose any hadeeth and begin with its explanation and this will be extremely beneficial, or you might be needed to do a khutbah on Jumu'ah. There may be a masjid where many students of knowledge frequent and each one points to the other when it comes time to give the khutbah! It is extremely important for the student of knowledge to always be prepared wherever he may be, and the least amount of preparation is to have a few verses from the Qur'an memorized which are particular to the issues of Fiqh or otherwise, along with the tafseer of those verses. For example, Surah tul Asr and its tafseer, Surah tul Ikhlaas or other than this, or the Forty Hadeeth by Imaam An Nawwawi along with its explanation.

It is extremely important for the student to have this type of foundation, which will assist him in his search for knowledge by the permission of Allah. After this, he should move on to Umdah tul Ahkam fil Hadeeth and after that he should move on to Bulugh ul Maram. If he notices within himself that he has the ability and wants to move directly to memorizing Bulugh ul Maram, then there is no problem with this. If not, then he should begin with what we mentioned previously.

There is nothing wrong with the student reading the other compilations of the Sunnah, like Sahih Al Bukhari, Sahih Muslim and others, but the student of knowledge should not begin initially with reading these books – especially if he is not grounded in the fundamental principles of Fiqh. This is because these books contain many hadeeth which you may come across and you don't understand their meanings – and it is possible that some of these hadeeth may have some sort of apparent inconsistency between them or entail some detailed Fiqh related issues which may cause some difficulty or confusion for you.

Fiqh

Fourthly: Fiqh

The new student of knowledge should begin with Umdah tul Fiqh by Ibn Qudamah (Rahimahullah) and those who are not from this country (i.e. Saudi Arabia) can begin with any small text from the works in Fiqh that he desires. He can also begin studying under any particular mathhab that he desires, but the mathhab of Imam Ahmad (Rahimahullah) has the least amount of indifferences and has the least amount of issues which are Marjooh [i.e. Unfavorable]. For example, Zaad ul Mustaqni'a is a short text and most of the issues presented in it are Rajih [i.e. Favorable].

So you can take the concise text of Umdah tul Fiqh, and study and understand the issues presented in each chapter. For example, start with the chapter of water, read through it quickly and understand the different types of water and the fiqh related issues connected to water. After understanding the issues mentioned in this chapter move on, reading this same chapter to a scholar, this is highly recommended. If this is not possible, then he should read it to himself due to the fact that he may be someone of status in his community maybe a teacher or the likes of this and time may not permit him to sit with a scholar on a consistent basis. So he should read it to himself and if any discrepancies arise then he should ask the People of Knowledge.

How should the student of knowledge read the books of Fiqh? This is a very important question, as many students of knowledge read books of Fiqh but without the correct methodology. Fiqh is a subject which is not like Tawheed, as the issues related to Tawheed are easy to visualize. For example, the issues related to the Characteristics of Allah. Generally they consist of the affirmation of these characteristics from the Qur'an and the authentic Sunnah, and mention the false interpretations of those deviant sects who, for example, interpret the Uloo of Allah to mean such and such or they interpret His Istiwaa over His Throne, in a manner which befits His Majesty, to mean such and such.

The subject of Fiqh consists of two vital components:

- The First: Visualization
- The Second: Categorization

Thus to visualize these issues is simple and clear, but the issues related to Fiqh are not that simple. Rather you have to visualize and understand them precisely in order that you do not confuse them with other issues similar to them. This is going to require from you as a student of knowledge to study Fiqh precisely and gradually. For example, water is categorized into three different types, so you say to yourself as you are studying: "How many types of water are there?" then you answer yourself by

saying: “There are three types of water and they are: Tahoor...” then you say to yourself “What is the definition of Tahoor?” etc. and this is the methodology you should follow when studying Fiqh meaning questions and answers along with the definitions of these terminologies.

For example, the definition of Tahoor is the type of water which remains in its natural state, pure within itself and purifying. So your book actually becomes your teacher as you ask the question you refer to the answer from the book.

Likewise when dealing the conditions of a particular issue or its opposite then you ask questions which are appropriate to that topic, for example, you say: “Water which remains in its natural state, but is this the case all the time?” and the answer or explanation that water has different stages which is goes through depending on what mixes with it, all of this is found in the book.

The second component is the most beneficial thing for the student of knowledge as you can take any issue and say, “this is categorized into such and such categories.” For example, you say, “Those things which fall into water in its natural state are two types; the first is that which mixes with water, and the second is that which doesn’t mix with water...” and then you reply with what Ibn Qudamah (Rahimahullah) mentioned in his book from the explanation of this issue and bring an example for each one.

You will find that Ibn Qudamah does not concentrate in this particular book on those opinions which are favorable, and that is because what is desired from you as a student of knowledge at this stage in your studies is to truly be a student and not a Mufti. What is required from you as you study Fiqh is to visualize the issues of Fiqh and understand the terminologies of the People of Knowledge in the various chapters. For example, begin with the concise version of Zaad ul Mustaqni’a, because we know the original text of Zaad ul Mustaqni’a consists of thirty thousand Fiqh related issues, and it is not possible that the student of knowledge in the beginning of his studies, can memorize every issue with its proofs and evidences and know the favorable or unfavorable opinion in every issue!!

Very few of the Ulamaa of our time have explained Zaad ul Mustaqni’a due to its extensiveness, as this was not the methodology which the Ulamaa of the past followed when explaining certain subjects. They would take the concise texts and begin with them and this is much more beneficial for the student of knowledge, and after some time of following this methodology, those same students eventually became scholars. This methodology is not present today as you find in some books that the explanation of one issue is extremely lengthy and this methodology does not allow the student to visualize the issue, as it is not possible for him to do so or memorize it due to the lengthy details and explanations. Rather the student is only able to understand the issue in light of that particular mathhab.

When you finish with the different categories of water, close the book and reiterate what you understood from the explanation, just as we mentioned previously. You will notice during the course of your explanation whether you went too much to the east or too much to the west, and there is great distance between the two, as the poet said:

سارت مشرقاً وسرت مغرباً شتان بين مشرق ومغرب

If there is any confusion between what you read in the book and what you hear from the sheikh who teaches, then go back to him and inform him that the Fatwah which he gave is inconsistent with what you read in the text of the book and inform him that the Rajih (i.e. favorable opinion) which you see as a student is such and such. The opinion of the scholar in every issue does not necessarily mean that it is the most favorable opinion, nor does it mean that the opinion of those who give Fatawah from the Major scholars is always the most favorable opinion in that particular issue. Rather when he informs you of the Fatawah of the Ulamaa, he is trying to connect you to the books of Fiqh by mentioning to you the opinions of the Ulamaa. This allows you to envision the way that they understood the issue.

Our scholars from The People of Knowledge used to mention to us in detail this methodology when studying Fiqh from Zaad ul Mustaqni'a. From that which they would mention to us is that you have to visualize the issue and the verdict concerning it, based upon what the author of the book mentioned.

For example, we ask: Does Sheikh ul Islam Ibn Taymiyah or his student Ibn ul Qayim (Rahimahumallah) hold opinions which are contrary to the opinions of the Hanbali mathhab? Yes, because they examined that mathhab and clarified those opinions which were unfavorable and opposed the most accurate opinion. For example, in the different types of water, your teacher may mention that water is three types and the position of sheikh ul Islam is that water is two types. But you don't need to go into the detailed justifications of every particular issue, nor does the teacher need to comment on every matter, but he mentions this to show you the diversity in how the Ulamaa understood things and the different Fatawah they gave based upon those understandings.

For example, he says: sheikh so and so's opinion in this issue is such and such, or sheikh Ibn Baz's (Rahimahullah) position in this issue is such and such. By this, he connects you to the issues of Fiqh by showing you the diverse understandings which the Ulamaa held and the Fatawah they issued based upon those understandings.

However, to come to a particular issue and mention that the evidence for this is such and such, and the Ulamaa used as evidence such and such, this proof is mentioned in such and such book, and in the narration there is such and such narrator and some of the Ulamaa spoke about him and because of that the hadeeth does not meet the conditions to substantiate this issue, and this opinion is unfavorable and the most accurate opinion is the opinion of Ishaaq and Shafi'ee, etc – this is not what is required nor necessary for the new student of knowledge. Except for the student who can absorb these types of detailed issues, he can read the more extensive books of fiqh.

Therefore objective of the sheikh with the new student of knowledge is not to give him all of what he can recollect about every issue, this is not the methodology of the People of Knowledge; rather their methodology is to give you what will be most beneficial for you at this stage in your studies. In every chapter from the various chapters of fiqh, you study them by visualizing the issues and absorbing concisely the most important matters mentioned therein. After some time, you will develop principles that you will rely on in order to understand and clarify these issues, and you will be able to distinguish the favorable opinion from the unfavorable opinion along with their proofs, like building a wall from the ground up.

In the beginning you may only grasp ten percent of what you read, but you start with those

matters which are most important and then those which are of less importance. Gradually, after one year, you will grasp about fifteen percent, and after two years about twenty percent, until you can grasp all the issues related to Fiqh in each chapter. This is the correct methodology to follow when studying fiqh, but the path you find most of the students following today, where he has a tremendous amount of detailed and extensive information in one issue but if you were to ask him about other issues, he is totally oblivious and void of any knowledge about them!! This methodology of seeking knowledge is totally incorrect.

Arabic

We are finished with the foundational sciences, and you continue with the secondary subjects which will assist you, as we mentioned previously, upon the same methodology. Begin with the concise works and then move on gradually to those more extensive books in that particular subject. I will add to what I mentioned previously of those secondary subjects, which will assist you as you go along in your studies. Islamic History, and this includes the biography of the Prophet (Sallahu alaihi wa salam), like the Seerah of Ibn Hisham, which is sufficient, and the other types of Islamic history.

It is also imperative for the student of knowledge to emphasize the sciences of Tafseer, Usool ul Fiqh and Usool ul Hadeeth which, as we mentioned previously, is commonly known as Mustalah Hadeeth. Likewise the **Arabic Grammar**, as you can not possibly acquire knowledge without the assistance of the Arabic Grammar as the poet so eloquently stated:

جمل المنطق بالنحو فمن يحرم الإعراب بالمنطق اختبل

You find that some of the students of knowledge are not proficient in the Arabic language and his speech is broken and void of eloquence, so how can someone like this be trusted with understanding the meanings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah and he doesn't even understand the basics of the Arabic Language?! He can not be trusted in reality; rather this type of student has to suffice himself with narrating and following exactly what he reads.

Many students come and present to me a picture that he is Mujtahid in understanding an issue, but his statements are inaccurate and his ability to express himself in Arabic is not good; rather by this, he shows me that he is not proficient in the Arabic language!! There is no doubt that this is erroneous and it shows that the individual has not prioritized his subjects. It is imperative for the student of knowledge to emphasize studying the Arabic language and the foundation of it is I'raab (i.e. syntax), read a concise text to a sheikh, and afterwards you will have the ability to know the sentence structure in any newspaper, Surah from the Qur'an or any hadeeth you read.

Some of the people of knowledge would question their students during the lessons about the grammatical sentence structure of what they were reading, they would say: "What is the I'raab of such

and such statement of Allah?” “What is the I’raab of this sentence?” – trying to increase their awareness of the Arabic Grammar and sentence structure. If you memorized Alfiyah tu Ibn Malik, you will reply that the I’raab is such and such and the proof is such and such. For example if your teacher asks you about the Mubtada’a (i.e. Subject) in a sentence you can respond by saying that Ibn Malik says:

مبتدأ زيد وعاذر خبر إن قلت زيد عاذر من اعتذر

The proofs and evidences connect us to the Arabic Grammar, but this methodology is rarely implemented today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I advise the students of knowledge to be diligent in establishing for yourselves a systematic methodology in seeking knowledge. The Ummah today is in dire need of Ulamaa and firmly grounded students of knowledge. The people are not guided by current affairs and personal opinions, rather the people are guided by the legislative knowledge of the Qur’an and the Sunnah, by understanding the fundamental principles and the speech of the People of knowledge in order that they worship Allah upon clarity.

We are in need of students of knowledge, as those who desire to study are many, but the true students of knowledge are very few!! The true students of knowledge are those who follow the same systematic methodology of the People of Knowledge who came before them, the same methodology I explained to you here in this piece of advice, and if you implement and follow this system you will benefit tremendously by the permission of Allah.

I ask Allah to brighten my heart and yours with guidance and steadfastness in His religion, and to make us from those true students of knowledge who fear Him. I also ask Allah to make us leaders, calling the people to guidance, guiding those who have gone astray and giving life with the Book of Allah to those who are religiously dead. And I ask Allah to give everyone who is present here a good ending in this life and that He facilitates for us the means to good wherever we may be.

We ask that He does not abandon us and leave us to make decisions on our own, not even for a blink of an eye, and that He guides us to every statement and action which is pleasing to Him for indeed He is capable of this and all other things. Glory be to your Lord, The Lord of all Honor and Power, He is free from what they attribute to Him, may peace be upon the Messengers, and all praise and thanks are to Allah the Lord of mankind. [Surah As Saffat (37:180)