

The Nature & Importance of ‘Ilm:

Notes on the Introductory Session to the Advanced Islamic Studies Course

The Reality of ‘Ilm

‘Ilm, its pursuit, its dissemination and being connected with it is something regarded as highly praiseworthy in Islām. For example, the Prophet (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wasallam) has taught that entry into Jannah will be made easy for one pursuing ‘ilm. But in order for something to be regarded as “‘ilm” in Islām, there are two conditions, one related to its content and the other to its effect.

Content

As al-Ghazālī and others have clarified, ‘ilm refers only to “‘ulūm shar‘iyyah” (religious, sacred sciences). It refers to the knowledge left behind by the Beloved Messenger (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wasallam), that is knowledge of the Qur‘ān and Sunnah, knowledge of Allāh, the attributes of Allāh, the Dīn of Allāh and how to attain His nearness, and so on. It does not refer to secular knowledge or secular subjects, like mathematics, medicine and engineering. These fields of study are not included in the ‘ilm that is praised in Sharī‘ah.

(This does not however mean that those who pursue secular fields of study, without engaging in anything impermissible, are blameworthy. In fact, if done with the correct intention, even this activity can be rewarded just like all mundane activities, and all activities of a worldly nature, like sleeping, eating, drinking, etc., when done with the correct intention of fulfilling Allāh’s command and facilitating obedience and worship of Him.)

The Prophet (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wasallam) said that the bearers of ‘ilm are inheritors to the prophets, and prophets do not leave behind gold or silver as their legacy, but leave behind ‘ilm. Hence, the ‘ilm that is being referred to is what was taught by the Prophet (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wasallam). Of course, he did not teach secular subjects, but taught Dīn.

Quadripartite Division of ‘Ilm

As al-Ghazālī has explained, the religious sciences consist of four components:

1. **The Uṣūl (foundations).** These are the basic components of ‘ilm, namely the Qur’an, Ḥadīth, and the example of the Prophet (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wasallam) as well as that of the first community of Muslims (the ṣaḥābah) who embodied the teachings of Islām at a communal level.
2. **The Furū’ (branches).** These are fields of study that are derived from the Uṣūl. This includes Fiqh (practical laws of Dīn), ‘Aqīdah (doctrines of Dīn) and Akhlāq (laws about internal states). The latter refers to elements of a person’s internal character, some of which are necessary and some of which are forbidden. For example, while engaging in ‘ibādah it is forbidden to do it for praise and glorification, or for fame and reputation. This is an internal state that is blameworthy, and must be rectified.
3. **The Muqaddimāt (preliminaries).** These are subjects that need to be studied in order to gain access to the essential subjects above. This includes knowledge of the language, Arabic, as one cannot learn the Qur’an and Sunnah without Arabic. It includes knowledge of reading and writing, as in order to access the knowledge, we need to use books. It should be noted that literacy, i.e. the ability to read and write, is a tool or an instrument to access knowledge, and is not itself knowledge. The most knowledgeable person to walk this earth, who knew the most about Allāh and His Dīn (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wasallam), was unlettered (Ummī), and not able to read and write. Reading and writing is not “knowledge” itself and thus not knowing it is not “ignorance”. The Prophet (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wasallam) received his knowledge directly from Allāh via the angel Jibra’īl. We, however, must use books to access the knowledge, hence why we need to be literate.
4. **The Mutammimāt (Gap-Fillers).** These are subjects that were invented by the Muslims for the preservation of knowledge, which were not required in the early period. For example, the science of Isnād (chain) and Rijāl (narrator-biographies). In the second/third generation after the Prophet (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wasallam), it was necessary to create a system of authentication to determine what is

genuine from what came from the Prophet (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wasallam) and what is not. Hence, the great and skilled experts on ḥadīth meticulously recorded the human chains through which the knowledge came to us, and the biographies of the narrators and how reliable they each are. This knowledge was of course not required in the time of the Prophet (ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wasallam), but was required later on. This also falls within religious sciences.

Effect

‘Ilm, however, is not only an intellectual exercise, where certain pieces of information or data are gathered. Scholars of the Salaf would say: ليس العلم بكثرة المسائل “‘Ilm is not lots of data.” Rather ‘ilm is the intellectual pursuit of acquiring the above-described knowledge, together with the spiritual and practical effect it brings into the lives of its pursuers.

That is, for the knowledge to penetrate and overcome the heart, such that one becomes disconnected from worldly things and becomes connected to Allāh and to the Next Life. Imām Abū Ḥanīfah said: ما العلم إلا العمل به، والعمل به ترك العاجل للأجل “‘Ilm is nothing besides acting upon it, and acting upon it is abandoning the short-term for the long-term.” Meaning, to abandon the luxuries and pleasures of the Dunyā, for the gains of the Next Life – this what ‘ilm means. If someone truly knew the worthlessness and fleeting nature of this life, and the worth and permanence of the Next Life, he will put all his efforts and ambitions in the Next Life, and this life would only be used as a vehicle to take him to his true destination and goal.

Similarly, Imām Mālik said: إنما العلم خشية الله “‘Ilm is nothing besides reverence of Allāh.” If someone truly recognised the characteristics of Allāh, how immense, powerful, grand and mighty He is, how in a moment He could overturn the whole creation and turn it into nothingness, he will be in complete reverence and fear of Allāh at every moment, and this would overpower his heart. Just like a person who is facing an impending doom, the only thought in his mind will be the death that awaits him; similarly, a true knower of Allāh will have little space for anything else besides His fear and reverence.

Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī described the truly learned one, the faqīh, as one disconnected from the Dunyā, connected to the Ākhirah, learned about matters of Dīn and constant in the ‘Ibādah of his Creator.

Hence, 'ilm, studied correctly, reorients its pursuer towards a focus on Allāh and Ākhirah. It should therefore not be studied like a secular field of study. Secular subjects are oriented primarily towards this world, not towards the Next.

Intention and Effort

To acquire this effect, it is necessary to adopt the correct intention, which is that this 'ilm is being acquired to please Allāh and to aid in His obedience. The intention should be to correct one's practice, beliefs and internal states, and the intention can also be to benefit others.

A practical effort needs to be made, by exercising one's willpower, to actively and consciously bring this effect into one's life. This is by staying away from all things disapproved by Allāh, doing what is obligatory and engaging in extra acts of devotion, like Tahajjud, fasting, giving in charity and so on. The Prophet (ṣallallāhu 'alayhi wasallam) said: "The Mujāhid is the one who struggles against his soul in the obedience of Allāh."

A student of Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal reports that he once spent the night at his residence, and Imām Aḥmad left a container of water near his room for him to perform wuḍū. In the morning when Imām Aḥmad noticed that the water was left untouched, he proclaimed:

سبحان الله، رجل يطلب العلم وليس له ورد من الليل!؟

"Subḥānallāh! A man pursuing 'ilm who does not offer any regular worship at night?!"

It was inconceivable for the Salaf that a pursuer of 'ilm could be without the practical manifestations of 'ilm, because 'ilm in the Islāmic understanding is nothing without the spiritual and practical effects it brings.

The Importance of 'Ilm

True success is entry into Jannah in the Next Life and safety from Jahannam. In several places of the Qur'ān this is referred to as "success" (*fawz*). Success is not worldly success, money, fame, health etc., but is the success of the Next Life, the eternal success. To acquire success, there are two necessary ingredients that the Qur'ān mentions:

1. إيمان
2. أعمال صالحة

Īmān is the firm conviction in لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله and declaring it with the tongue. A'māl ṣaliḥah is to do deeds that are good and not do deeds that are bad. The real cause of salvation and success is īmān, but a'māl ṣaliḥah are required to maintain īmān. Īmān is the greatest gift Allāh has bestowed on the Mu'minīn. But if a Muslim gives in to his desires and does evil deeds and abandons good deeds, his desires may eventually penetrate into his beliefs also, and result in denying necessary aspects of the Dīn and thus losing īmān altogether – Allāh save us! Hence, īmān is the most important ingredient of success, while a'māl ṣaliḥah are required for the preservation of īmān and for death upon īmān. May Allāh grant us death upon īmān, āmīn.

For both īmān and a'māl ṣaliḥah, however, a prerequisite is: 'ilm. Without 'ilm, one will not know what īmān constitutes of. Without 'ilm, one will not know how his acts of worship will be sound and correct, what he must avoid and what he must do, and so on. Thus, the fact that 'ilm is required for both the ingredients of true success demonstrates its profound importance.

The Journey of 'Ilm

'Ilm is a journey, not a destination. It is a constant pursuit to gain the knowledge Allāh has conveyed to us via revelation to His Prophet (ṣallallāhu 'alayhi wasallam). The aim is only the rewards in the Next Life. Imām Aḥmad was seen in a ripe old age carrying an inkpot. Somebody called out to him saying, "Until when (are you going to be doing this), O Ibn Ḥanbal!" Imām Aḥmad replied: "From the inkpot to the grave!" This pursuit should continue right until our last moments.

About the Course

The Course is therefore designed to set participants on this journey, to give them the essentials and the tools required for them to move forward in their pursuit of 'ilm. It has 7 subjects:

1. Fiqh. In the first year, there will be a brief introduction to Fiqh and subjects that are of most practical benefit will be covered. This will be based on the teacher's own research, and will be patterned after the classical work Tuḥfat al-Mulūk.

2. Arabic. This will be based on the popular Madīnah Books. These books were chosen as they are not too overly technical or grammar-oriented, which can be off-putting to beginner-students. The grammar will be introduced slowly and organically as the course progresses.
3. Qur'ān. After an introduction on the importance of reciting Qur'ān regularly and reflecting over its meanings, a study will be carried out on the first Juz' in the first year and the final Juz' in the second year. The purpose will be to gain an understanding, based on classical Tafāsīr, of what Allāh, our Master, True Benefactor and Guide, has relayed to us, and how we are to respond and reflect on this.
4. Ḥadīth. After an introduction on the field of ḥadīth, three texts of Imām al-Nawawī will be studied: the *Arba'ūn* (complete), *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥin* (partial) and *Adhkār* (partial). Imām al-Dhahabī, one of Nawawī's student's students said: "My brother, I impress on you to reflect on the Book of Allāh, [for scholars] to constantly look into the *Ṣaḥīḥs* of Bukhārī and Muslim and the *Sunan* of al-Nasā'ī, and [for non-scholars to constantly look into] Nawawī's *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥin* and *Adhkār*. If you do this, you will succeed and achieve [your goal]." *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥin* and *Adhkār* were authored by Imām al-Nawawī, a man devoted to Allāh and the Ākhirah, precisely for the purpose of providing seekers of Ākhirah the instructive and effective material that they will need from the ḥadīths of the greatest guide of all humanity.
5. 'Aqīdah. After an introduction, this will consist of a detailed study of Imām al-Ṭaḥāwī's famous and comprehensive classical 'aqīdah text.

'Aqīdah will not continue for the duration of the two years and will be replaced by other subjects:

6. Tajwīd. This will consist of an introduction to the importance of Tajwīd and a breakdown of the theoretical rules of Tajwīd, based mainly on a comprehensive book called *Ahkām Qirā'at al-Qur'ān*. While there will be an element of practical study, this will not be the

main focus of this subject. Hence, participants who have not had practical training in Tajwīd will be recommended to join a separate Tajwīd course or something equivalent.

7. History. This will consist of an outline of the Sīrah, and the periods of the Khulafā' Rāshidūn, Umawīs and early 'Abbāsīs, based on al-Suyūṭī's *Tārīkh al-Khulafā'*.
8. Spirituality. This will consist of some important discussions from al-Bigivī's *al-Ṭarīqat al-Muḥammadiyyah*.

Elements of the last three subjects will also be incorporated into the subjects of Qur'ān and Ḥadīth.