

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH THE BENEFICENT THE MERCIFUL

A ninety-four year old man named 'Unwan al-Basri narrates, saying: "I had been studying under Malik ibn Anas for a number of years. When Ja'far as-Sadiq (AS) came to Madinah, I went to visit him and was interested in learning from him just as I had been learning from Malik. He said to me one day: "I am a man much sought after and am also occupied by various supplications throughout the day and the night so please do not disturb me in my state of supplication and go and learn from Malik and study under him just as you were doing before". I became sad on hearing this and left the Imam's presence, and said to myself, "If the Imam had perceived any good in me he would not have prevented me from studying under him and learning from him". I then went to the mosque of the Holy Prophet (SAWW) and I gave my salutations to him, then I turned from the grave and prayed two units of prayer at the *rawdha* (the area near the Prophet's (SAWW) grave which is considered to be a piece of paradise) and said supplicating Allah (SWT): "O Allah (SWT)! O Allah (SWT)! I beseech You please make Ja'far's (AS) heart incline towards me, and grant me from his knowledge that which will guide me on the right path". Then I returned home, sad and upset, and did not even attend Malik b. Anas's study circles for my heart was filled only with love for Ja'far (AS). I did not leave my house except to attend congregational prayers, until I finally ran out of patience. When I could bear it no longer, I put my shoes and my cloak on, and made my way to Ja'far's (AS) house after the 'Asr (afternoon) prayer.

When I arrived at his house, I sought permission to enter, and a servant of his came out and asked me what I wanted. I replied: "I've come to extend my salutations to the noble one. He said that the Imam was busy praying. So I waited on the doorstep, and it wasn't long before the servant came out again and said: "Come in by the grace of Allah (SWT)". So I entered and greeted the Imam, and he returned my greeting, saying: "Take a seat and may Allah (SWT) forgive you". So I sat down. Then he bowed his head, looking down for quite a long time before he asked me my title, to which I replied: "Abu Abdallah". He said: "May Allah (SWT) extend your progeny and enable you to succeed in doing what pleases Him". Upon hearing this, I thought to myself that if I were to take away nothing of benefit from this visit except this prayer (that he had wished for me), it would be more than enough. Then he bowed his head down again for a while, then raised it saying: "O Abu Abdallah, what do you want?" I replied: "I asked Allah (SWT) to give me a place in your heart and to grant me benefit from your knowledge, so I hope that Allah (SWT) will grant me what I asked Him for with respect to you".

The Imam said: "O Abu Abdallah, knowledge is not acquired through learning. Rather it is a light that illuminates in the heart of one who wants Allah (SWT) to guide him. So if you want knowledge, first seek out true servitude (to Allah (SWT)) within yourself. And seek knowledge according to its use (ie: what you can act upon) and ask Allah (SWT) to make you understand, and He'll make you understand".

I asked: "O noble one" and he immediately said: "Call me Abu Abdallah", so I started again: "O Abu Abdallah, what constitutes true servitude to Allah (AS)?" He replied: "Three things – 1) that in all that Allah (SWT) has placed at his disposal, the servant does not consider any of it his own possession, for verily servants do not have the right to ownership. They see all wealth as belonging to Allah (SWT) and so they dispose of it as Allah (SWT) commands them to. 2) that the servant does not make plans for himself (ie: does not see himself as the executer of his plans), and 3) that the servant occupies himself solely with observing what Allah (SWT) has commanded and refraining from that which He has forbidden. So when the servant does not see any of the wealth at his disposal as his own, giving from it in the way of Allah (SWT) becomes easy for him. And when the servant entrusts all his plans to the Master Planner, the tribulations of this world become insignificant in his eyes. And when the servant occupies himself with observing Allah's (SWT) commands and refraining from what He has forbidden, he no longer has time for showing off and useless debates with people.

So when Allah grants (SWT) these three characteristics to a servant, the world (ie: worldly matters), Satan and people (and their opinions) become insignificant in his eyes, and he does not seek after worldly gains to amass possessions, nor does he demand fame and status from people, and nor does he waste his time on futile things. This is but the first stage that the pious God-conscious ones (*muttaqoon*) reach. Verily Allah (SWT) says in the Holy Qur'an: "As for that future abode, We assign it to those who have no desire to exalt themselves in the earth nor to make mischief, and the good end is for those who are God-conscious (*muttaqoon*)".

I asked: "O Abu Abdallah, please give me some advice". The Imam replied: "I advise you on nine issues. Know that they are my advice especially to those who strive on the path to Allah (SWT), and I beseech Allah (SWT) to help you act upon this advice. Three of them are to do with self-discipline, three to do with clemency towards others, and three to do with knowledge, so learn them well, and do not take them lightly".

I emptied my heart of all else in order to receive this advice, and the Imam continued: "As for the three pieces of advice on self-discipline – firstly do not eat that which you have no appetite for, for this brings about idiocy and stupidity. Secondly do not eat unless you are hungry. And thirdly when you do eat, eat only that which is lawful (Halal) and begin in the Name of Allah (SWT), and remind yourself of the tradition of the Prophet (SAWW): "There is no vessel that man fills worse than his own stomach". So if you must fill it, then allow one third of it for food, another third for drink, and keep the last third for air.

The three pieces of advice to do with clemency are – firstly if someone were to say to you: "If you dare say a word, I'll give you ten back", then you should be such as to reply: "Even if you say ten words, you will not hear a single one back from me". Secondly, when someone insults you, say: "If you are right in what you are saying, then may Allah (SWT) forgive me for it, and if you are wrong then may He forgive you for it". And thirdly, when someone treats you harshly, return it with good counsel and pray for Him.

As for the advice to do with knowledge – firstly, ask the scholars that which you are ignorant of, but do not ask them obnoxiously or testingly. Secondly, do not act based on your own opinion about something, and exercise precaution in all things wherever possible. And thirdly, beware of giving religious decrees and legal opinions as you would beware of a lion, and do not put your neck at stake for people to walk all over.

Now please take your leave O Abu Abdallah, for I have advised you, and please do not preoccupy me further from my supplications, as I am a man who does not waste his breath. "And peace be on him who follows the guidance"."