

SANKORE'



Institute of Islamic-African Studies

Iqtibāsul ‘Ilm



The Acquisition of Knowledge By Shehu Uthmān Ibn Fodiyo

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Peace and blessings be upon our master Muhammad, his family and companions.

Says the poor slave in need of the mercy of his Lord, Uthmān Ibn Muhammad Ibn Uthmān, famous as Dan (*The son of*) Fodiyo (*the scholar*). May Allah engulf him in His mercy, Amīn!

The austere Imām, the adornment of *deen*, the proof of Islam, the nobility of the Imāms, the Shaykh Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, may Allah be pleased with him, said, “All praises are due to Allah and peace and blessings be upon His Prophet Muhammad, His servant and messenger, and upon his family and companions. To continue: this is the book called,

Kitāb Iqtibāṣul ‘Ilm (The Book of the Acquisition of Knowledge)

Realize O brother eager to acquire knowledge, upon whom it is clear in his soul the truthfulness of his desire (to seek knowledge) and his excessive thirsting after it. If you intend by seeking knowledge: competition with others; boastfulness and pride; seeking preference over one’s colleagues; turning the faces of people towards you; or gathering the rubble of this worlds life – then you have helped in the destruction of your *deen*, destroyed your self, and bartered your Hereafter for your worldly life. Thus your bargain has become profitless and your trade has become unproductive. Everything, which you have learned, will only assist you in your disobedience and it will be a partner with you in your destruction. It is similar to your selling a sword to a highway robber to rob you with. For whatever or whoever helps you in disobedience, even by a single word, has become a partner with you in the crime.

However, if your intention and aim in seeking after knowledge is concerning that which is between you and Allah Ta’Ala, by learning knowledge and being guided, without mere showing-off; then rejoice for the Angels have spread out their wings for you when you go out, and the inhabitants of the sea seek forgiveness of you when you proceed.

Before everything it is necessary for you to realize that guidance, which is the fruit of knowledge, has a beginning and an ending, an outward and an inward. None can arrive at the ending of guidance except after laying down the principles of its beginning. Likewise none can discover the inward of guidance except after stopping with its outward.

Thus I will indicate for you the beginning of guidance by inking towards it, and when your *nafs* has become pliant to it, then it is incumbent upon you to strive for the end of guidance and incite yourself to enter into the seas of knowledge.

Realize that if in seeking after knowledge your heart leans towards heedlessness or if in behaving according to the dictates of knowledge you procrastinate – then realize that the inclinations of your soul is only the soul which commands evil (*an-nafsul-ammara-bis-sū*). This soul has propelled you to following the accursed Satan who urges you on with his deceptions and incites you with his tricks towards ignorance of destruction. This is because the sole objective of Satan is to present evil to you in the adornment of good until he allies you with those who are among the losers. Their deeds will be counted amongst those whose labors have gone astray in this life and in the next although they consider that they are amongst those who do good deeds. At this point Satan shows you the benefits of knowledge, the high ranks of the scholars and what has been related concerning their noble narrations and stories until you become completely diverted from three things which the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace said:

(1) The first being, *“Whoever increases in knowledge but has not increased in guidance has not increased in anything except remoteness from Allah.”*

(2) The second being his words, May Allah bless him and grant him peace; *“Verily the severest people of punishment on the Day of Judgment will be the scholar whom Allah did not benefit by his knowledge.”*

(3) The third being his words, May Allah bless him and grant him peace: *“On the night of the ascension, I passed by some people whose lips were being cut with scissors made of fire. I then said, “Who are you?” They replied, “We used to command others to good and refused to do it ourselves. We used to forbid others from evil but did it ourselves.”*

Therefore, beware O poor man, of being repelled towards the crookedness of Satan, nor be pulled by the rope of his deceits. For woe once to the ignorant man for not seeking after knowledge, woe a thousand to the scholar for not acting in accordance with his knowledge.

Realize that in regards to seeking knowledge people are divided into three states.

(1) The man who seeks knowledge in order to take it as a provision for his final destiny. He does not intend in that anything except seeking the face of Allah the Mighty and the Next Life. This person will be among those who will attain bliss.

(2) The man who seeks knowledge as a vehicle, which assists him in his livelihood and in order to obtain standing among men and wealth. This person by means of that reveals the lowliness of the state of his heart and the vileness of his intention. This one will be among those who will be lost. If his appointed time rushes upon him before he makes repentance, it is then feared for him an evil ending. The remaining years of his life continues in a very precarious state under the Divine Will of Allah. However, if repentance occurs for him before his appointed time comes and he connects his knowledge to sound action and behavior in order to attain what his errors had caused him to miss – he then will be counted among those who will attain bliss. This is because the one who repents from sins is like the one who has no sins.

(3) The third man is one whom Satan has seized. He takes his knowledge as a pretext for increasing in wealth. He takes his knowledge as a cause for boasting of his rank and status. He takes his knowledge as a motivation for strengthening his many followers. By his knowledge he enters every place hoping to swoop down upon something of this world and its beauties. Further, he thinks in the deep recesses of his soul that he has a place with Allah due to the fact that in his dress and words he is characterized with the characteristics of the scholars and is described with their description. All the time he is outwardly and inwardly greedy for the things of this world. This one will be among those who are destroyed and among the stupidest of those who are deceived. His sense of false hope cuts him off completely from repenting to Allah, due to the fact that he considers that he is among the doers of good. In reality he is among those about whom the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace said, “*Verily I am not among the charlatans (dujjāl) and there is nothing more I fear than my fear for you regarding the lying charlatans.*” It was said. “Who are they O Messenger of Allah?” He said, “*The evil scholars*” This is because the *Dajjāl* has attained the furthest extent of error. The likeness of such a scholar is that he diverts mankind from this world by his tongue and teachings, but he invites them to it by his corrupt actions and vile spiritual state. Realize that the tongue of one’s spiritual state is more eloquent than the tongue of one’s words. The nature of man inclines more to be encouraged by one’s behavior than they are to following one’s words. For who can be more corrupt than such a self deceived one who deceives with his actions more than what he corrects with his words? This is so since the ignorant ones are not insolent in yearning after this world except by means of the insolence of the evil scholars in their greed for this world.

The knowledge of such a one has become only a pretext for encouraging the slaves of Allah in their disobedience. Actually his soul is ignorant along with the fact that he indulges in the false hope and thinks that he is better than many of the slaves of Allah.

Therefore, O seeker of knowledge, be among the first group and beware of being among the second group. How many there are who procrastinate and his appointed time rushes upon him before he is able to make repentance. He thus becomes among the losers. However, never be among the third group for you will be destroyed with devastation in which there is no hope of your redemption nor expectation of your correction.

If you were to say, “Then what is the beginning of guidance so that my soul may rehearse it”? Realize that the beginning and outward of guidance is fearful awareness (*taqwā*). Likewise the end and inward of guidance is fearful awareness of Allah. There is no guidance except for those who have fearful awareness. Fearful awareness is an expression, which is tantamount to following the commands of Allah and avoiding His prohibitions. Following the commands and avoiding the prohibitions are divided into two divisions. Here I will indicate in a concise and general fashion what is apparent in the meaning of the two divisions.

(1) The first division is obedience. Realize that the commands of Allah are either obligations (*farā'id*) or superogatory acts (*nawāfil*). The obligations are like the capital and by means of these one arrives at the root of salvation. The superogatory acts

are like profits and by means of these one attains exalted ranks. The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace said, “Allah the Exalted says, ‘*Those brought near do not draw near to Me more than the like of them performing what I have obligated upon them. My slave continues to draw near to me by means of the superogatory acts until I love him. When I love him, I become the hearing by which he hears, the sight by which he sees, the tongue by which he speaks.*’

(2) The second division is that as a student of knowledge you cannot attain the station of performing the obligations of Allah the Exalted except by means of the constant vigilance (*murāqaba*) of your heart and limbs in all movements and breadths; from your morning until you evenings. Realize that Allah the Exalted is totally aware of your inner cores. He oversees your outer and inner natures and completely encompasses all of your expressions, glances, steps, still-nesses, and movements During all of your mixing with people and solitude you are turning between His hands. No tranquil thing is still nor does a moving entity stir in the manifest kingdom (*mulk*) or hidden kingdom (*malakūt*) except that the Compeller of the heavens and the earth observes it.

Therefore O poor man! Behave with excellent courtesy outwardly and inwardly like the courtesy of the humiliated reprobate slave in the presence of the Compeller, the Overpowering, the Conqueror.

Make strenuous effort that your Master does not see you where He has forbidden you and that He does not miss you where He has ordered you. This reality cannot be truly obtained except by dividing your times up with specific times of remembrance of Allah (*awrād*) in your mornings and evenings. Be attentive to what is cast at you from the commands of Allah the Exalted from the time that you awaken from you sleep until the time you return to your beds.

