

On the Way to Attend Study-Sessions

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333. If you attend a study-session, behave only like someone who wishes to increase his knowledge and to win greater recompense from God. Do not behave like someone who is content with what he has, who is looking for some fault to criticise or a curious detail to hawk around. This would be the behaviour of vile men who never succeed in their studies.

If you come to it with good intentions, you will always obtain the best results. Otherwise, to stay at home would be less tiring for your body, more worthy of your moral conduct and more salutary for your religious life.

334. If you do attend under the conditions that we have indicated, take care to adopt one of these three attitudes and there cannot be a fourth: [First,] you may keep quiet in the silence of ignorance. Thus you will obtain the reward of your intention in attending the study-session, praise for your reserve, dignity in your behaviour and the friendship of those you mix with.

335. [Secondly,] if you do not behave like this, ask the questions which someone would ask who wished to learn. Then you will obtain, in addition to the four advantages just mentioned, a fifth, which is to increase your knowledge. What characterizes the questions asked by someone who wishes to learn is that he only asks about the points he does not know, not those he does know. To ask about what one already knows is a proof of ineptitude and a weak spirit, it is only palaver and a useless waste of time for oneself and for others. By doing this you will only provoke dislike and it will only be pure verbiage. So do not play games, it is a bad fault.

If the person you are asking replies satisfactorily, stop questioning. If his reply is not satisfactory, or if you do not understand it, say to him, "I do not understand", and ask him to elaborate. If he does not explain himself more clearly, if he keeps silent or if he repeats what he said before without adding anything, keep silent, otherwise you will only bring upon yourself trouble and dislike, without obtaining the desired enlightenment.

[Thirdly,] you can riposte as a scholar would, that is to say that you can reply to the arguments advanced in a way that refutes them clearly. If you are not capable of replying in this way, if you are able only to repeat yourself or to reply using arguments which your adversary will not find convincing, do not insist for you will not gain by your repetitions any extra result or any information. You will only succeed in annoying yourself and starting a hostility between the two of you which could have serious consequences.

337. Guard against the questions that a prejudiced man would ask or the ripostes of a show-off who is bent on being right without knowing anything about the matter. These two attitudes are bad: they witness to absence of piety, a great tendency to verbiage, a weakness of spirit and considerable vanity. Let us commend the matter to God who is our best support.

338. If certain statements are put to you verbally, or if you come across a written text, guard against reacting violently, which will bring about excesses in language, before you have assured yourself by irrefutable proof that the ideas expressed are erroneous.

Neither should you accept them with the enthusiasm of someone who is credulous and convinced

until you have assured yourself of their veracity by an irrefutable proof. In the two cases, you would be shutting your eyes and turning away from knowing the truth. On the contrary, consider what is being put to you as one would who is neither against it nor for it, one who wants to understand, to the best of his ability, what he has heard and read in order to increase his knowledge, to adopt the new ideas if they are good or reject them if they are erroneous. It is certain that if you behave like this you will be generally rewarded, greatly praised and your merit will be recognized.

339. A man who is content with the small fortune that he has and does not envy your opulence is as rich as you, even if you are a Croesus. If this man resists the bait of gain to which you have succumbed, he will be much richer than you.

340. Anyone who rises above the things of this world to which you kneel is mightier than you.

341. It is a pious duty for Muslims to teach the good and to practice it. Anyone who does both these things at once is doing two virtuous deeds to perfection. But a person who contents himself with teaching the good without practicing it is acting well by teaching and acting badly by failing to put his teaching into practice, so mingling a good with a bad deed. This case is preferable to that of the person who would not teach the good any more than he would practice it. Such a man, although not virtuous, is more worthy of imitation, he is less blameworthy than someone who forbids the teaching of good and opposing anyone who practices it.

342. If it was only a man completely without sin who had the right to forbid evil, if it was only the man of perfect virtue who could teach the good, nobody yet would have forbidden evil or ordained the good since [the death of] the Prophet peace be upon him. This should be enough to make clear to you the corruption, wickedness and opprobrium of anyone who might think this.

343. Abu Muhammad - may God be satisfied with him said, "Here someone contradicted, protesting, 'When al-Hasan [al-Basri] - may God be satisfied with him - forbade something [bad], he never did it himself, and when he ordained something [good], he himself put his orders firmly into practice. Wisdom requires that we do the same, for it has been said that: nothing is more odious than to preach something and not practise it, or to preach against an action and then to do it.'"

344. Abu Muhammad replied, "The person who said that was lying. There is something more ugly, that is, not to preach good and not to preach against evil and also to allow oneself to act badly and not to do good."

345. Abu Muhammad added: Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali said this: Do not forbid a vice that you are given to yourself, for great shame will fall on you. Start with yourself and forbid yourself your own misdeeds. If you stop devoting yourself to them you will become a wise man. Then your sermons will be accepted, people will take their example from your knowledge and your teaching will be profitable.

346. Abu Muhammad continued: Abu al-Aswad wished to condemn only someone who has done a deed after forbidding it to others: such a deed would be doubly bad for having been committed by the very person who forbade it. The poet was quite right for this is what the Almighty said, "Will you command people to do good and forget to do it yourself?" [Qur'an 2:44]. It cannot be believed that Abu al-Aswad wanted to express any other idea. As for thinking that he did not want to be condemned for a bad deed, God protect him from that! That would have been to act like a wicked man.

347. Here is a true story about al-Hasan: When he heard someone say that only a person who did no evil had the right to forbid evil, he replied, 'Satan would like us to believe that, and then nobody could forbid evil or ordain good.'

Abu Muhammad confided: "Al-Hasan was right, and that is what we said before."

348. May God grant that we may count among the number of those whom He permits to do good and to practice it, and among the number of those who see the straight road, for no one is without faults; someone who perceived his own weaknesses will forget those of others. May God permit us to die in the Sunna [law] of Muhammad. Amen, O Lord of the Worlds!