

The Spiritual Guide

The Importance of the Spiritual Guide (Murshid)

Translated & adapted by Waseem Ahmed from Al-Mawsū'ah a;-Yūsufiyyah of Shaykh Yusuf Khattar.

Allah says in the Quran:

And for every people there is a guide.¹

This ayah indicates, both in terms of a religious beliefs and way of human nature, that every group has a guide they follow. Therefore Allah sent Messengers giving glad tidings and warning in order that people may not argue with Allah.

Allah says:

And we were not to punish until we had sent a Messenger.²

Allah did not leave people to their own thoughts and intellects, regardless of how great they were or how much they achieved. Rather Allah sent revelation and guidance down to human kind through the Prophets and Messengers. Allah, in the Quran, commands us to take the prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, as an exemplar.

He says:

And surely for you in the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, is a beautiful example.³

And surely, there was for you all a beautiful example in Ibrahim alayhi salam and those who were with him.⁴

A good example is only a good example if the goal is Allah and this is something Allah mentions repeatedly in the Quran. He says :

And follow the path of the one who repents to me.⁵

And do not follow the path of the corrupters (those that do wrong).⁶

O my people! Follow me I will guide you to the path of guidance.⁷

And follow the path of those who do not seek any recompense and they are rightly guided.⁸

And those are the ones Allah guided, so follow their guidance.⁹

¹ Qur'an (13:7)

² Qur'an (17:15)

³ Qur'an (33:21)

⁴ Qur'an (60:4)

⁵ Qur'an (31:15)

⁶ Qur'an (7:142)

⁷ Qur'an (40:38)

⁸ Qur'an (36:21)

⁹ Qur'an (6:90)

Had Allah wanted He could have sent down a book without a prophet. However, he did not send a book except that he sent with it a prophet to explain what was revealed to the people. The books were conveyed by the messengers and they received revelation through Jibrīl, peace be upon him.

We see in our messenger ﷺ that he spent time with Jibrīl, peace be upon him, learning the Quran and learning its recitation and memorizing it in order to pass on to his Ummah. We also see in the example of prophet Musa, peace be upon him, and the story of Khidr, peace be upon him, how Musa, peace be upon him submitted himself to the teacher. This passage is mentioned in the Quran in Surah Al-Kahf.

If we take the example of reading the Quran itself. Is it possible for someone to correctly and accurately read the Quran without not only a teacher but somebody who has received that recitation and had it checked & corrected by a teacher? This process continuing in a similar fashion back to the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him.

This applies to all sciences within Islam as well as all fields and professions. The idea of taking a Shaykh (spiritual guide) is from the principle:

‘Something that is required to establish an obligation is also an obligation.’

The goal in life is to purify our hearts and submit to our Creator and Lord. This requires effort and recognising our blemishes & flaws. Not only recognising them but rectifying them. This dictates that we need somebody to help us to do this. Just like in any other field, when we do not know how to fix something or when ill and we don’t know how to diagnose our illness we turn to someone who does. Some who can first recognise the cause of the problem and secondly provide a practical solution. It is common sense and a well-known practice to seek advice and guidance from experts.

Allah says in the Quran:

The Merciful. Ask regarding him the one who is well acquainted!¹⁰

And ask the people of remembrance if you do not know.¹¹

Nobody will inform you like someone who is well acquainted.¹²

From these ayat we can see that we need someone who is well acquainted with the means of journeying to Allah. Who knows how to remove the blemishes from our hearts, get us away from sins and maintain sincere repentance to Allah.

If a seeker of knowledge (student of the sacred sciences) did not have a teacher to teach him the Arabic language, how to make wudu and pray etc he would make many errors and become misguided. He would be prey for Satan, follow his whims and he would ultimately destroy himself. This religion is not taken from books alone. It is taken from the authors and

¹⁰ Qur’an (25:59)

¹¹ Qur’an (21:7)

¹² Qur’an (35:14)

teachers (of those books). Those who understood the contents, its purport and meaning. Without a doubt for all sciences there is a requirement of having a teacher.

The same principle applies when we embark on a spiritual struggle. An aspirant needs a instructor who will guide and direct him, uncover for him the plots and tricks of Satan in worship, in transactions, in business and so forth. He will make sure that the aspirant is not following his internal egoistic desires by taking him away from them to following and submitting to the commands of Allah and His Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him.

Allah talks about having a spiritual guide¹³ for remaining safe on the right path. Allah says in surah 18 ayat 17:

And whoever he causes to go astray and you will not find for that person a protecting guide.¹⁴

The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, was given this very role. His job was not merely to convey the message of the Quran to his companions but also help them to purify their hearts. The terminology used in the Quran is the term *tazkiyah*, which carries the meaning of growth through purification.

Allah says:

Just as We have sent among you a messenger from yourselves reciting to you Our verses and purifying you and teaching you the Book and wisdom and teaching you that which you did not know.¹⁵

From this ayah we can see the role of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, was manifold. He was to teach the book, the wisdom¹⁶ and he was also to purify them. The meaning of this last duty refers to him being the means of their purification by guiding them to correct actions, teaching them how to remove human caprices and to obey the commands of Allah.

Allah has also commanded the believers to be amongst the truthful (*sādiqīn*), He says in The Qur'an:

O you who believe! Fear Allah and be with those who are true (in word and deed).¹⁷

In another ayah of the Qur'an Allah informs us who the *sādiqīn* are, He says:

¹³ Murshid

¹⁴ وَبَيْنًا مُرْشِدًا

¹⁵ Qur'an (2:151)

¹⁶ Some interpretations suggest this is the sunnah.

¹⁷ Qur'an (9:119)

Only those are believers who have believed in Allah and His messenger, and have never since doubted, but have striven with their belongings and their persons in the cause of Allah, such are the *sādiqūn*.¹⁸

Allah is commanding us to be in the company of the *sādiqūn*. Those that believe in Allah, His Messenger, have no doubts and struggle in the path of Allah with their wealth and selves. This would dictate that we have to be in the company of the pious in order to become pious, the company of the truthful in order to become truthful etc.

Allah also says:

Nor should the believers all go forth together. If a contingent from every expedition remained behind, and devote themselves to (deeply) understanding the religion. And when the others return they admonish them, in order that they (may learn) to guard themselves (against evil).¹⁹

So this group that is to remain behind is to stay and learn the deen of Allah in depth. Learn the outer sciences of salah and purification and laws of marriage and commerce and they also learned the inner science of *tazkiyah*; how to help others purify themselves and come closer to Allah.

So having a spiritual guide (shaykh), somebody who is aware of the plots of satan, somebody who knows the path to Allah based upon sound experience and wayfaring is a requirement of all Muslims.

Without a doubt accompanying a shaykh who helps us by showing us our faults and guiding us to a higher state of worship and presence with Allah is part of our journey to Allah and our purpose in this life. This is why we have a beautiful saying of Imam Ibn Ata'illah al-Sikandri:

“Do not accompany someone whose state does not awaken you and whose speech does not guide you to Allah.”

Earlier we mentioned the story of Musa, peace be upon him, and how he took a teacher, not only to learn but to be guided and to have patience on the journey to Allah and to receive special knowledge. We read in the Qur'an in Surah al-Kahf:

And they found a slave from our slaves whom we had granted mercy from ourselves and taught him knowledge directly from ourselves. Musa said to him “Shall I not follow you so that you teach me from what you have learnt of guidance. He said “Surely you will not be able to have patience with me and how can you have patience with something that you have not yet encompassed with of knowledge and experience. Musa said “You will find me, if Allah wills, patient and I will not disobey a command of yours.²⁰

¹⁸ Qur'an (49:15)

¹⁹ Qur'an (9:122)

²⁰ Qur'an (18

This is a clear proof from the Qur'an for having the requirement of a teacher in order to learn this religion, its commands and how to apply them in order to improve ourselves. If we do not learn then we will not progress and in order to learn we need teachers. Therefore we need a connection to someone who can guide us to Allah bot inwardly and outwardly. Outwardly, this is called *Ta'lim*²¹. You have an *Ālim*²² and a *Muta'allim*²³. We also have a teacher of *tarbiyah*²⁴ or a *murabbī*²⁵. This is someone who not only teaches you about outward actions but also teaches you about inward actions and we need to learn both because Allah says in the Qur'an:

“And abandon the outer of sin and the inner of it.”

Abandoning the outer of sin is learning the prohibitions of Allah as in the Qur'an and Sunnah and avoiding them. How then would we avoid the inner of sin? What is the inner of sin referred to here? It is the attributes of our ego such as arrogance, envy, hatred, self-conceit, greed and love of this world. How do we remove these from our hearts? How do we abandon these inner sins and traits which take us away from Allah? This requires knowledge of the inner and this is what a shaykh and *murshid*²⁶ does.

We can conclude that having an instructor to guide us on a spiritual journey is a essential part of our life as Muslims seeking to gain proximity to Allah and improve ourselves.

May Allah grant us the strength to find and benefit from spiritual guides and be good Muslims.

²¹ Teaching, Educating

²² Scholar, Teacher

²³ Student, Learner

²⁴ Nurturing, Cultivating

²⁵ Someone who does *tarbiya* - educator

²⁶ Spiritual guide