

Shaykhs and Pīrs; the benefits of having a spiritual guide.

1.0. Who is a Shaykh/Pīr/Murshid?

He is a learned, practicing scholar who lends spiritual and religious support to his disciples (*Murīds*). He has gained knowledge – the inner and outer form – from his own spiritual guides and now he is entrusted with passing this on to those around him.

2.0. Do we actually need a Shaykh?

*Some people have seen the issue as central to Islām. They have gone as far to suggest that the absence of a *Shaykh* is the path to destruction. Ibn Abbād famously said: 'Whoever doesn't have a *Shaykh*, *Shaytān* is his *Shaykh*.'

*Others however see it as an intrusion between a person and his Lord. After the religion has been completed, the final and unchanged word of Allāh has descended in the hands of the Final Messenger (peace be upon him), what need is there for *Shaykhs* and *Pīrs*? What can they teach us that the Messenger (peace be upon him) did not?

* The answer to the question is simple. There are many Muslims who know the five pillars, have a basic understanding of *Īmān*, stay away from Harām and act upon the Halāl. They are happy and content with a simple version of Islām and are willing to fulfill the bare basics. For such people, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is their only *Pīr* or *Shaykh*.

But then there are people who want *more* and are not happy with the basics. They do not simply want to do *sajda* but want to know what it entails to. They want to be extra-ordinary Muslims, not ordinary ones. For such people, the path of greatness has to be undertaken in the companionship of a learned *Shaykh*.

An analogy can be drawn with every classroom and every office place in the country. There are always pupils who are happy with simply coming to class and staying out of trouble. There are always employees who do the 9-5 and then go home. But then there are employees who put in the extra hours, see it more than just a job and want to develop each and every day. There are always pupils who are not content with the C grade but will only settle for A*.

If you want more out of Islām, then you need a *Pīr* or *Shaykh*. The spiritual path is for those who want to do 'extra-curricular' activities and try to gain closeness to Allāh and the Prophet (peace be upon him). It is the road less travelled that requires a lot of patience and hard work.

So the answer to ‘do you need a *Shaykh*?’ is ‘how much do you want from your religion?’ If you are happy with the bare-basics, then you do not need one. If you love your religion and yearn for the vision of Allāh, then you need a *Shaykh*.

2.1. *Islām, Īmān and Ihsān.*

The above idea can be contextualized into the teachings of the Dear Messenger, peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him. In the famous *Hadīth of Jibrīl*, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) identified *Islām, Īmān* and *Ihsān*.

A. *Islām*; the five pillars.

B. *Īmān*; the seven key beliefs of every Muslim.

C. *Ihsān*; ‘that you worship Allāh as if you are observing Him. And if you [cannot do this] then Allāh is watching you.’

So that we can understand *Islām* and *Īmān*, everyone needs a teacher, guide, *Shaykh*, scholar or even a parent to teach them.

For *Ihsān*, we need someone who knows the inner dimensions of *Islām*, understands the subjective and spiritual aspects of our religion and can help us to reach the lofty stage of ‘worshipping Allāh as if we are observing Him.’

3.0. What are the benefits of having a *Shaykh*?

3.1. *Tailor-made advice to his disciples.*

A good *Shaykh* is able to understand the problems and circumstances of his disciple and offer specific advice accordingly. He can view the strengths and weaknesses of each individual and then prescribe certain acts.

This itself was the practice of the Messenger, peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him. A clear example of that is the question ‘which Islam is best?’ The Prophet (peace be upon him) was asked this question on many occasions. He never gave one, blanket, uniform answer. Rather, his answers included:

- ‘When others are protected from a Muslim’s hands and tongue’ (*Sahīh al-Bukhārī*).
- ‘To feed the poor, and to greet others with *Salām* to the ones you know and the ones you do not’ (*Sahīh al-Bukhārī*).
- ‘To believe in Allāh.’
- ‘*Jihād* in the path of Allāh.’
- ‘An accepted *Hajj* (*Hajj Mabrūr*).’
- ‘*Salāh* upon its [correct] time.’
- ‘Kindness to parents.’
- ‘The remembrance of Allāh’ (*Sunan al-Tirmidhī*).

Why did the Prophet (peace be upon him) give different answers to the same question? This was not a contradiction from our Messenger. Rather, he

understood that not all humans are the same. People need different advice according to different circumstances. To the one who was cowardly, the Prophet told him the best act is Jihād in the path of Allāh. To the one who was disobedient to his parents, the Prophet told him the best act is 'kindness to parents.'

Good *Shaykhs* look at their subjects, their needs, their strong-points and their weak ones and tender advice accordingly.

-To the one who is neglectful in his prayers, he will tell him to read something after every *Salāh* (for example *Yā Hayyu Yā Qayyum* eleven times). The purpose is not the *Yā Hayyu Yā Qayyum*, but the *Salāh* that precedes it.

-To the one who does not have good conduct, the *Shaykh* may tell him to keep his company for longer periods.

-To the *Murīd* who is also a scholar, he perhaps will give no *wazīfa* at all, but instead tell him to spend his time teaching others.

3.2. *Suhba* (Companionship).

*One of the most important benefits of having a *Shaykh* is good companionship. In the Holy Qur'ān, Allāh instructs us not to find knowledge but 'the men of knowledge.' Books are never enough for genuine guidance. Even the likes of Ashraf Alī Thānvī pointed out that a doctor needs hands-on training to become skilled. This is a purpose of a *Shaykh*.

*The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) compared good companionship to visiting a perfume seller. Even if a person does not purchase anything, he will leave with a nice fragrance lingering on his body and clothes. Similarly, extended companionship with a good *Shaykh* is like visiting a perfume seller. Even if a person does not learn something, at the very least, it stops him from bad acts, which itself is rewarding. As a guiding principle therefore, one should find a *Shaykh* with which he can maintain regular, one-to-one contact.

*The paramount importance of good *suhba* is reflected best in the title we give to those fortunate men and women who saw and believed in the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). We call them by their highest title; *al-Sahāba*. In other words, their greatest trait they possess is that they had the companionship with the best of all creations, peace be upon him.

*If *suhba* was not required, then Allāh would not have instructed Mūsā (peace be upon him) to find Khidr. The *suhba* was just as important as the knowledge derived.

In this story, it is also worth reflecting on the *type* of knowledge Mūsā (peace be upon him) derived from Khidr. None of the events (the damaging of the boat, the killing of a child, the re-building of the wall) were apparent to the ordinary eye; rather it was hidden, concealed knowledge. Mūsā (peace be upon him) being Prophet of Allāh, had all the Shari'ah in his hand. However Allāh told him to visit Khidr and learn a special type of knowledge. Mūsā (peace be upon him) could not understand Khidr's actions, due to the absence of wisdom and knowledge that

Allāh had only bestowed with his friend Khidr. Or to put it simply, Mūsā had Sharī'ah; Allāh sent him to Khidr to learn *Tarīqah*.

This story also touches upon the importance of following men of Allāh without question even though from our angle, it seems to be difficult to swallow. Khidr killed a boy, damaged the boat of someone who gave them a lift, and he rebuilt a broken wall in a town that had shunned them away. All acts were correct in the eyes of Allāh, but not necessarily in the eyes of man.

*You adhere to the *Shaykh's suhba* because he did the same with his *Shaykh*, who did the same with his *Shaykh* and so on. This is the real purpose and idea of the *silsila* and the different orders. It is a chain of authenticity leading to the best of all generations. The purpose is not to create a cult, denomination or some kind of competition between the different order. The *silsilas* are merely different carriages of the same train, heading to the same destination. Another important function of the orders is to prevent false *Pīrs* and imposters.

3.3. To realise our shortcomings.

Sometimes we do not see the deficiencies we have. We think we are perfect and faultless in our religion when we are not. It is the *Shaykh* who can correct this. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'The believer for a believer is like a mirror.' No one can cure themselves of their weaknesses on their own. It is only by looking at the mirror that we can see whether our face and appearance is acceptable. The *Shaykh* is that shining, clean mirror that can point out what is good with us and what is not.

4.0. What are the traits of a good *Shaykh*?

- One who reminds you of Allāh.
- One who reconnects you to Allāh. He is the signpost back to the correct path.
- One who shows the radiance of acting upon the perfect sunnah.
- One who does not act or order against Sharī'ah. The rule is '*La tā'ata li makh'lūq fī ma'siya al-khāliq*' (there is no obedience to a creation when it involves disobedience to the Creator).
- One who displays utmost humility. None of the true *Shaykhs* of the past were show-offs.
- One who has a recognised *silsila*.
- One who is held in high regard by other *ulamā* (scholars).
- One who has a group of morally-upright *Murīds* around him.

5.0. Al-Shaykh Abd al-Qādir Jilānī on the importance of a good *Shaykh*.

'You must work hard to ensure that your hearts are not locked out of the door of His nearness. Be sensible! You are getting nowhere. You must seek the company of a Shaykh who is learned in the law [hukm] and knowledge [ilm] of Allāh, and who will show you the way toward Him. Without seeing the successful [muflih], one cannot succeed. If a person does not seek the company of scholars who put their knowledge into practice [ulamā ummāl], he is a chicken from an egg abandoned by the rooster and the mother hen.'

6.0. Points to remember

- *Pīrs* are the means, not the ends. They show the path to Allāh, they are not the goal itself or the end destination. Like with so many different areas of Islām (and indeed life), they are the *wasīla* to reach Allāh.
- *Pīrs* are not *ma'sūm* (infallible). They do make mistakes. In fact, when they do they reinforce the lofty status of our Messenger as the only one who was truly infallible.
- They are not your saving grace. You have to fulfill the duties yourself.

7.0. Conclusion.

The afterlife for Muslims has two things on offer; *Janna* and the vision of Allāh. If a Muslim merely prays for *Janna* (in this world) then there is no need for a *Shaykh*. If a Muslim yearns for the vision of Allāh above everything else, then he needs to keep the company of a *Shaykh*.

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