

Except from

Ibn Khaldun: *Shifa al-Sa'il li Tahdhib al-Masa'il*

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CHAPTER

On the Necessity of following a Shaykh

on the Struggles in Which He is Necessary,
on Those in Which He Is Indispensable,
and on Those in Which He is Not Necessary,
and on the Reasons for All This

Know that our study has led to the conclusion that tasawwuf is basically struggle and following the Path, the perfecting of which leads to unveiling and contemplation.

It is then that the seeker is given knowledge about God, His attributes, His actions, and on the mysteries of His Realm, as well as about everything mentioned earlier. We have demonstrated why the knowledge resulting from this unveiling and contemplation should not be recorded in books and why some later Sufis erred when they named these very stations tasawwuf, turning it into a codified science that can be learned through books and documents. "Tasawwuf" is a light God sends forth into the heart that has been purified through struggle and turned towards the Truth. Sometimes, a divine mystery or wisdom is clarified with this light, and a legal problem or ambiguity in the Book or Tradition is elucidated. The Sufi must neither dwell upon this gift nor be contented with it lest it become a veil that disrupts the Path.

He must persevere on his way to God. To disclose a divine secret would only weaken him; God's secret is most deserving of being kept hidden.

We have explained how spiritual struggles differ according to their underlying motives. If the goal is salvation only, then the novice struggles to be in the station of the fear of God and moral care. If the goal is felicity and the higher levels of the hereafter, then the seeker struggles for righteousness. Finally, if the goal is gnosis, the disclosure and contemplation of God in this world, the spiritual struggle of the seeker is unveiling. We have also mentioned that the name tasawwuf applies to all three struggles, in spite of the fact that it is more often used to describe only the last two. The great Sufis whose lives are compiled in the Risalah, along with their followers, spoke of these last two struggles, their laws, rules and terminology. The teacher Abu'l-Qasim al-Qushayfi has explained the difference between the struggle for

righteousness and that of unveiling with their different underlying motives. He said: If the seeker believes the teachings of these Sufis and believes in good conduct and in gradual progress toward the goal, he will share in the knowledge they have been given of the invisible world. He does not need to search elsewhere. If he and others wish to follow the more conservative way within a traditional pattern until they reach realization, then they should emulate their predecessors and travel this Path, for those who have gone before are more trustworthy than others.(1)

Know that the need for the guidance of a Shaykh and for the advice of a teacher varies according to the struggle. Sometimes his presence renders the struggle more complete and worthier, more thorough and sounder; sometimes his presence is so essential that the struggle cannot be without him.

Let us explain and describe this in detail.

The struggle for the station of the fear of God, which is achieved through moral care, does not require the presence of a Shaykh. It suffices to know the rules of God's Law and its limits, and this knowledge can be drawn from a book, taught by a guide, or studied with a teacher. This is so because, as we said earlier, this particular struggle is incumbent upon every man subject to the Law. How could it be right then, that a man should wait for a Shaykh and thus neglect his duty and delay the fulfillment of God's commandment? The Shaykh will not add anything to what has been said by scholars in their writings, in which they transmit the teachings of the Book and the Tradition, informing us of their sources and principles.

Sometimes the struggle of the believer on this Path is indeed perfected if he follows a Shaykh (al-Shaykh al-mu'allim) who guides by being an example and thus shows him the true meaning of ritual actions. The use of sensory perception is a condition for any worthy teaching. Knowing God's Laws and limits is understanding the nature of the actions, and this knowledge is based either on perception and example or on transmission and information; it is more perfect when it relies on perception.

This is why the Sahih tells us how the Prophet (may God bless Him and grant Him peace!) was taught how to pray: "Gabriel came and prayed, so did the Prophet (may God bless Him and grant Him peace); then He prayed and so did the Prophet (may God bless Him and grant Him peace); then He prayed and so did the Prophet (may God bless Him and grant Him peace); then He prayed and so He prayed...thus, five times." (2) Gabriel taught the prayer entirely through example. This was necessary to make His teaching more perfect.

When Arab delegations came to the Prophet (may God bless Him and grant Him peace!), asking to be taught their religious duties, he not only handed over the information to them but he would send some of his oldest Companions to them to explain and practice with them what they had been told to do, and the men imitated them. Sometimes these men were given directions only, as in the tradition about the delegation from the tribe of Rabi'ah: "He ordered you four things and forbade you four. (3) Another time: "Commit them to memory and transmit them." (4) But this was rare; more often the Companions would be sent to instruct the

inquirers. In the same vein we see that it is often more effective to perform the duties like prayer or ablution in front of Muslim children, using example rather than statements and words. The rituals of the pilgrimage, for instance, are taught during its season by people who have been trained for this. You will see that in the compilation of the laws on pilgrimage, although he has thoroughly studied the subject, the jurist relies more on the knowledge of these instructors than on his own. He is guided by them and learns the rituals from them. Indeed, the soul trusts perception more than words. To emulate a Shaykh is only a condition for the perfecting of this struggle, not for its fulfillment.

In the struggle for righteousness, where one must be molded by the Koran and by the virtues of the prophets, the seeker may need a Shaykh to guide him. Indeed, it is difficult to know the nature of the self and the hidden transformations of the heart; it is difficult to cure and free the heart and self. Nevertheless, the struggle for righteousness is not an obligation binding on everyone subject to the Law. Therefore, in this specific Path, the novice may need to look for a Shaykh in order to follow one who has already passed through its obstacles. Yet even this need is not an obligation or compulsion because the foundation of this struggle is the Book and the Tradition and the terminology is common knowledge. Even the many deeper aspects of its teachings and rules do not escape will power and acquisition. He who clings to the Tradition is safe from the dangers of this Path. He can correct past mistakes and is able to use his judgment in talks and discussions and in the study of writings, theories, and laws.

As to the struggle for unveiling and contemplation, its aim is the lifting of the veil, the knowledge of the spiritual world and the heavenly and earthly realms. In it the seeker needs a teacher, a guide, the one referred to as a Shaykh. It is not only a need but a duty, a necessity without which this goal can seldom be attained, for several reasons:

The first reason

The foundation of this struggle is the Book and the Tradition. Yet, as we said earlier, its recent monastic trends are innovations. The Path set by the Sacred Law is the common way for everyone subject to this Law in order that they may reach salvation and felicity in the hereafter. This struggle is the way for those who aspire to attain before death the seed of ultimate felicity and the unveiling which normally occur only with death itself. Therefore this struggle is a special Path with its own rules and methods that can only be followed through the observance of these rules and methods. *All Sufis agree on the need for a Shaykh in this instance and warn against self-reliance and solitude in the wilderness of this Path. They enjoin the seeker to lay the reins of his life into the hands of a Shaykh who has travelled this Path, who has been led to the goal in his contemplation, and who has himself experienced rather than just heard from others of the perils of the way, its hidden problems, dangerous moments, and adverse forces.* The seeker is then like the corpse in the hands of the washer and like the blind man on the seashore who holds on to the hand of his guide. (5) Since our knowledge of this struggle and of its laws comes only from the Shaykhs, how could we forgo our need for them in this Path?

The second reason

In this struggle, the seeker undertakes to seek two qualities: The first quality lies within his power of acquisition and choice; and this is the purification of his self from its blameworthy traits and the acquisition of laudable virtues. The second quality does not lie within his power of acquisition and choice; this has to do with the states that befall the seeker before, during and after the unveiling.

The teacher Abul Qasim said: "A servant is characterized by his deeds, virtues, and states. Deeds are the actions he does by choice; virtues are his by nature, although they can change with effort, time and repetition; as to the states, they envelop the seeker from the beginning of his search and their purity is in accordance with the purity of his deeds." (6) (Those are his words.)

The states that do not depend on free choice are the fruits of the acquired virtues, which are the results of the deeds. Some of these states are caused by others, and lead eventually to contemplation.

The states may be hidden, they may be endless or uninterrupted to the extent that if imperfection has penetrated a state, the ensuing one is affected, since every state rests upon what precedes it. A corrupted state is one that reaps corruption. This is the ruin of the seeker—may God protect us! One can never remedy or reform such a state because it escapes free will. However, this corruption does take place, and if it triggers a series of like states damaged by the initial corruption, then the duration and importance of the evil increases and its impact spreads. Neutralizing this corruption is not subject to the exercise of the will except by setting forth on another conduct which would deal anew with the virtues liable to acquisition. In this manner the seeker opens himself to divine compassion for the eradication of the corruption that crept into his heart in the initial states. Sometimes it is difficult to renew this behaviour; it may be too late to turn the heart, seat of all states, from what might have settled in it. Corrupted states breed heresy, freethinking, and rejection of the Sacred Law, as well as all the ensuing consequences, such as laziness and listlessness; the seeker loses his incentive and motivation. It becomes extremely difficult to cure this condition and it may in fact be too late to repair the damage. God Most High says: "Would that we might be returned, and then cry lies." (7) But it is too late to lament.

If the seeker is watched over by a Shaykh who can correct his conduct and modify his behaviour, then this behaviour can be rectified, fears can be dispelled, and perils avoided. The Shaykh has walked this Path himself and can differentiate between corrupted states and sound ones; he knows what causes corruption and what causes soundness, and why both arise; and he knows what is a help or an obstacle in the Path; he understands the relation between states and deeds and the relation between the degree of purity and actions and states. He has realized all this by test, hardship, and training, not through books and stories.

In his condition, the seeker is similar to the dyer who tries out red, yellow or green dyes; but selecting the particular color is not within his competence or a matter of his choice. His

responsibility is merely to immerse the cloth in special dyes, whether mineral or vegetal, according to set formulae. The cloth must be ready for the adhesion of the suggested colours. For this, a master is indispensable; he knows the quantities of the different elements, their proportion, the amount of time necessary for the mixture, whether it must be heated or fermented, as well as the manner in which it should be made and the timing of the whole process. He teaches his apprentice by showing him. Otherwise, the apprentice might apply a dye other than the one suggested, and then might never be able to change it. The first colour settles into the cloth and it is no longer able to absorb a different dye.

So it is with the seeker who wishes to color his heart with the knowledge that leads to felicity. If the wrong color has settled in his heart, the damage can no longer be rectified. The training Shaykh (al-Shaykh al-murabbi) is the one who shows the seeker how to use the color, what the right elements and dosages are, what proportions and time. A Shaykh is, therefore, indispensable, for one cannot apply dye at random and approximatively. One is always careful not to damage fine cloth; how much more careful one should be not to ruin the heart when eternal suffering may be the result! May God protect us from this!

The third reason

The essence of this Path is premeditated death (al-mawt al-sina'i), which is, as we said earlier, the extinction of all human forces until the seeker is dead in body but alive in spirit. The seeker tries to experience this death before he really dies in order to achieve the unveiling that normally happens only at the moment of natural death (al-mawt al-tabi'i). If the final unveiling has not been reached, the seeker attempts to attain the states closest or most similar to it. The seeker works to see the veils lifted before physical death occurs and he trains himself to achieve this death. We have already mentioned the words of the Prophet (may God bless Him and grant Him peace) as the point of departure for this spiritual exercise: "Die before you die." (8)

All technical instruction has to do with some natural matter; and there, a man cannot grasp it by himself. To learn it, he must have a master who guides him through the secret of its workings because the ways of nature are hidden and are almost always impossible to see. If the guide is a competent teacher, then the goal is reached and the training is successful; otherwise it is not. This is true for all sciences.

The fourth reason

This is the most obvious of the reasons in our discussion of the problem, namely, that the ideas by which the spiritual way is explained and supported are of two types:

The first kind belongs to the category of conventional ideas, whether from concrete or abstract perceptions, that are set down in rules and expressed in books and words. This deals

with the sensorial form of the Path, the severing of the ties with the self, the observance of retreat, the remembrance of God in a particular way, and after the struggles for the fear of God and of righteousness have been traversed, the strict observance of obligatory prayers and some supererogatory devotions.

The second kind of idea does not belong to the category of the conventional, either in the mind or in its concepts. It cannot be grasped by the sensible faculties, nor by reasoning, nor through acquired sciences. It is linked to the spiritual taste and mystical intuition (*umur dhawqiyyah wa wijdaniyyah*) that man finds in his inner self, but he cannot describe it to someone else except through parables or remote examples. It is impossible to capture this notion with scientific rules or technical definitions, nor can it be classified in the standard chapters and sections of professional knowledge. To the seeker on his way, it is manifested in the shape of unexpected obstacles (*'ilal*) or states (*ahwal*), inspirations (*warida*), enlightenment (*ilqa'at*), and ecstasies (*mawajid*), as well as in all that befalls him from the beginning to the end of his way until his immersion in the sea of gnosis and union.

This type deals with the essence of the way, its mystery, its secret reality without which nothing can be achieved. So long as the seeker does not grasp these meanings, cannot distinguish them one from another, nor differentiate between that which tends towards the goal and that which withholds him from it, his knowledge is useless. From the beginning to the end his search has produced nothing. Books are of no avail at all in this, nor will explanations help him. He must have a Shaykh who, because of his spiritual intuition, recognizes their essences, differentiates between the harmful and the beneficial, and can call the seeker's attention to these realities the way the dumb man does, by pointing his finger to sensorial elements without being able to describe them with words. Pointing out realities is more eloquent than using words. This is why you will not find these matters summarized in books, or set out in manuals by those who have explained the meanings of *tasawwuf*, except in allusions or stories, the words of which do not uncover the essence of the goal.

The Teacher Abul Qasim al-Qushayri said: "This group of people use terms among themselves with the intention of disclosing the meanings only to each other and hiding them from those who oppose their way. Thus, the meanings remain vague to outsiders, and their secrets are protected from outsiders. Indeed, these realities are not gathered through personal acquisition nor earned through effort. They are ideas deposited by God into the hearts of some men, and through these realities, he saved for Himself the innermost being of the elect." (9) (This is the end of al-Qushayri's statement-may God bless him!)

References:

1. Qushayri, Risalah, p: 314-315.
2. Muslim, 5, 166; Bukhari, "Mawaqit al-Salah", i.
3. Muslim, "Iman", 23; Bukhari, "Mawaqit al-Salah".
4. Bukhari, "Ahad", 5.
5. If the novice is able to find a Shaykh, he should emulate him, be guided by his words and deeds, and hold on to him like the blind man on the seashore holds on to his guide. – Ihya, vol. 3, p. 76; Sharh al-Ihya, vol. 7, p. 371
He should surrender himself to him and be like a corpse in the hands of the washer. – Qushayri, Risalah, p. 129
6. Qushayri, Risalah.
7. Qur'an, 6:26.
8. In this struggle, the heart must be void of all things but Him, as if this earthly existence were obliterated, extinct. The Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace!) referring to this state, says: "Die before you die." – Al-Jarrahi, Kashf al-Khafa, p. 291
9. Qushayri, Risalah, p: 52.

Source:

[1] Ibn Khaldun, *Shifa al-Sa'il li Tahdhib al-Masa'il*, Translated by Youmna Adal as "Sufism in Ibn Khaldun An Annotated Translation of the *Shifa al-Sa'il li Tahdhib al-Masa'il*", p. 239-252