

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Muḥaddith's Etiquette

Imām Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad al-Dhahabī رحمه الله

It is an imperative that the student of knowledge correct his intention: whoever studies *Ḥadīth* to compete, boast, [publicly] narrate,⁽¹⁾ to find employment or to be applauded on his knowledge, is a failure; and whoever seeks it for Allāh ﷻ, to act upon it, as a righteous deed of sending abundant salutations upon His Prophet ﷺ and to benefit the people, is a winner. Should the intention be a mix of both, the dominant intention will have the upper hand.

If one studies it due to immense love for *Ḥadīth*, ignoring the reward and [pleasing] the people – which is often the case with many students of knowledge – then perhaps Allāh ﷻ will inspire him with the [correct] intention at a later stage. Also, whoever seeks knowledge for the *Ākhirah*, this knowledge will clothe him with the fear (*khashyah*) of Allāh ﷻ, and he will become humble and modest; and whoever seeks it for the *Dunyā*, he will become arrogant, conceited and haughty with his knowledge, and belittle the Muslim laity. The consequence of this will be of lowness and despicability.

Therefore, the *muḥaddith* is [to study] in anticipation of reward: the hope to be included in the Prophet's ﷺ utterance:

«نَضَّرَ اللَّهُ أُمَّرَأً سَمِعَ مَقَالَتِي فَوَعَاها، ثُمَّ أَدَّاهَا إِلَى مَنْ لَمْ يَسْمَعْها»

“May Allah brighten the one who hears my speech, learns it, and then propagates it to one who has not heard it.”⁽²⁾

He [the *muḥaddith*] should go to all lengths for the outstanding students, especially if he has isolated narrations; and he should cease at old age and memory loss.⁽³⁾ While he is still credible, he should appeal to his family and brothers [in knowledge] to prevent him from narrating when they notice his memory deteriorating.

However, if the one whose memory declines possesses only a [small] number of *ḥadīths* which he knows to perfection, there is nothing wrong in him narrating them even after his memory weakens.

(1) That is, to run after cheap fame by wanting to become a public figure known to be of such a profession. (Translator)

(2) Al-Dārimī (234) with a weak chain. It has been narrated with sound chains by Abū Dāwūd (3660), al-Tirmidhī (2657), Aḥmad (21590) and Ibn Ḥibbān (66), albeit with slightly different wordings. (Translator)

(3) That is, he should put an end to narrating *ḥadīths* for fear of erring due to old age and a feeble mind. (Shaykh ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghuddah رحمه الله)

There is also nothing wrong with his granting a warranty of authorisation (*ijāzah*) during this state, since his principles are intact and have not changed, and he is aware of what he is authorising. However, should his memory deteriorate and become feeble, others are to be prevented from taking *Ijāzah* from him.

Some etiquette are:

- That one not narrate in the presence of someone more adequate than he is, due to [the latter being more senior in] age and [possessing] higher skill.
- That one not narrate anything which others narrate with higher chains than his.
- That one not deceive beginners, but guide them to what is more important; after all, *Dīn* is genuine sincerity.⁽⁴⁾ Therefore, if he guides them to an elderly layman and notices their [the beginners'] incapability to rectify the narrations of the layman, he should advise and guide them to a knowledgeable man to whose recital they may listen. Alternatively, he may attend to the layman's gathering with them and narrate with lower chains, killing two birds with one stone.

Imām Mālik رحمه الله is on record as having used to bathe prior to narrating, as well as putting on different types of perfume, wearing his better clothes, maintaining dignity and peace of mind, reprimand those who raise their voices, and read the *ḥadīth* at a moderate pace.⁽⁵⁾

Nowadays,⁽⁶⁾ people have resorted to [reading with an] appalling speed with which some words remain unclear. Such hearings will have no distinctive effect on the acquisition of *Ijāzah*. Rather, *Ijāzah* is a [warranty of] truth, and your saying 'I heard/read this whole book' – by mumbling and eating up the words – is a lie.

Imām al-Nasā'ī رحمه الله, in many places in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*,⁽⁷⁾ has said: "... and he mentioned a phrase which means so-and-so."

The pioneers of (*ḥuffāz*) of *Ḥadīth* used to hold gatherings to dictate [the words, so students can write them down verbatim]. This is lost today.⁽⁸⁾ Listening through dictation further ascertains the clarification of words for [both] the narrator and listener.

⁽⁴⁾ This is the text of a *ḥadīth* recorded by Muslim (95). (Translator)

⁽⁵⁾ This shows how particular the early scholars were in the recital of *ḥadīths*: along with outer beauty, they used to adorn the texts with their voices by prioritising the clarity of words over speed. (Translator)

⁽⁶⁾ This book was written sometime before 748 AH / 1348 CE. (Translator)

⁽⁷⁾ Referring to his *Sunan*. Scholars before the author [al-Dhahabī رحمه الله] are known to have been lenient in calling it a '*Ṣaḥīḥ*'. (Shaykh 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghuddah رحمه الله)

⁽⁸⁾ One must not forget this book was written prior to 748 AH / 1438 CE. If such was the case in the bygone eras, what would remain of the later men? Allāh ﷻ is the One from Whom assistance is sought. (Translator)

He [the *muḥaddith*] should avoid narrating complicated *ḥadīths* which the hearts of the laity cannot comprehend;⁽⁹⁾ should one narrate them, let it be in private gatherings.

It is *ḥarām* upon him to narrate fabricated (*mawḍūʿ*) and discarded (*maṭrūḥ*) accounts, unless it be to clarify for the people, so they are wary of it.⁽¹⁰⁾

Translated by Shahin-ur Rahman, Northampton, UK.

⁽⁹⁾ For example, those narrations which modern science has not yet progressed enough to understand or explain. (Translator)

⁽¹⁰⁾ *Al-Mūqīzah*, pp. 65-67 [Maktab al-Maṭbūʿāt al-Islāmiyyah (Beirut, Lebanon) eighth edition (1425 AH / 2004 CE)].