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# THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE THAT IS ESSENTIAL AND ANECDOTAL

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All praise is due to Allaah, and I testify that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allaah alone and that He has no partner. I testify that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger, the one whom He selected and His close friend. May Allaah send His peace and blessing upon him, his family, and his Companions until the Day of Judgment. And as to what follows:

I ask Allaah the Exalted, the most High, to make you and me from those whom whenever they are given something they are thankful, whenever they are tested they remain patient, and whenever they commit sins they seek forgiveness. This, according to Shaykhul-Islam Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdul-Wahaab (*rahimahullaah*), is wherein happiness lies. I ask Allaah the Exalted, the most High, to make you and me firm upon the truth and guidance, and that He does not deviate our hearts after having guided us. I ask Allaah the Exalted, the most High, that He inspires us to the truth and that He favours us with the ability to follow it and to stick to it. And that He directs us to the guidance of Muhammad (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) in all situations - in times of poverty and in times of prosperity, in times of joy and in times of anger. As usual, we put forth these lessons as a prelude for seeking knowledge, perchance it maybe of benefit, *insha’allaah*.

## Categories of Knowledge

As it is well known, knowledge can be divided into two categories as stated by the people of knowledge such as As-Shaatibee, as he mentioned in his book ‘*Al-Muwafaqaat*’, “Knowledge is of two types: ‘*uqd*’ (essentials) and ‘*mulh*’ (anecdotes).” The essentials are those that the heart retains, and the anecdotes are those that are needed by the student of knowledge to continue along that path. This is because the soul longs for variety and it needs to be polished and revived by anecdotes. Hence, Ibn ‘Abdul-Barr and other scholars narrated that whenever Ibn Shihaab Az-Zuhree, the great Imaam, gave a class on *hadeeth* at the end of it he would say, “Give me your anecdotes, let me hear your poems, tell me your stories.”

So, this one would relate his story, that one would narrate his encounters and so on. The soul is relaxed by the discussion of such topics; hence the soul is refreshed and prepared for future lessons. The main objective (of seeking knowledge) is to obtain the essential aspects of knowledge, and the anecdotes are just the means to this end, for the anecdotes serve to expand one's intellect.

## What is Essential Knowledge?

Essential knowledge is of two types:

- 1) **The Core Branches of Knowledge**
- 2) **The Supportive Branches of Knowledge.**

The core branches of knowledge are those sciences such as *tafseer*, *hadeeth*, *fiqh* and *'aqedah*. The supportive branches of knowledge are those sciences such as *mustalahul-hadeeth* (*hadeeth* terminology), *usoolul-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence), principles of *tafseer*, Arabic grammar, and so forth. The student of knowledge needs both branches of knowledge to complete his understanding of the *deen*.

There are other aspects of knowledge that the student needs to supplement this foundation, and this according to some scholars, is referred to as anecdotes. For example: news, history, eloquence, poetry, biography, debates, etc. are all considered anecdotes. This means it is beneficial to read such topics, however the one who is unaware of such matters, his ignorance of such issues will not be of a loss to him. Hence, one finds that there are some major scholars who may not be aware of the detailed biography of others scholars; when they died, and so on. This is because this is not essential knowledge whereby if a person does not know about such information he will fail to become a student of knowledge or a scholar.

The difference between essentials and anecdotes is that for the essentials, one is in need of men, the people of knowledge, to explain these essentials. There are two methods of obtaining this knowledge that is essential, either by verbal communication or by reading books, but the proper understanding and the ability to derive rulings from this type of knowledge is obtained through the scholars. Hence, the *salaf* have a saying, "knowledge used to reside in the chest of men," (i.e. before the books of *hadeeth*, *tafseer* and *fiqh* were written) "then it was put into books; however its keys remained with the scholars." It is possible for one to open, read, research and refer to books, but opening one's understanding to what is in those books remains at the hands of the scholars.

## What are Anecdotes?

As for the anecdotes, such knowledge does not require the explanation of a scholar. Read whatever you want to read, for this knowledge is not sought as an end in of itself. Except if a person desires to specialise in one of these fields such as poetry, history, *balaaghah* (eloquence), etc. In this case, such a person will need to study with a scholar, because this subject has become for him one that is sought as an end in of itself and not a means to an end. And to become an all-round student requires some of this and some of that.

However, a question arises, which of the two should the student of knowledge give the most concern to? Should he be more engaged in the anecdotes such as biographies, history, stories, plucking knowledge from small booklets of *fataawaa*, and so forth? Or should he give priority to the essential aspects of knowledge? It appears from what we mentioned that the correct methodology is for a person to refer to these anecdotes to the extent that it is needed. This is because if a student of knowledge lives in a world of only core knowledge without anecdotes, he will become exhausted after sometime and he will be reluctant to continue seeking knowledge. For '*mulhi*' (anecdotes) is like '*milli*' (salt) in food, it opens a person's appetite for more. One can relate to the anecdotes because it expands ones' horizons and it compliments his interest, whether it is history, poetry, biographies, etc.

What happens is that we notice that the young ones accentuate more on the anecdotes to the expense of core knowledge. Hence, you find some of them possessing much information about different topics but they are not firmly grounded. This is a result of placing too much emphasis on anecdotes. Such a person knows the biographies of the scholars, this happened to that one, this person debated with that one and animosity came between them, the ruling of this is... and this incident happened... stories, poems, but where is his real knowledge? If a person is aware of such information after having firmly grounded himself with the essentials and this information is used supportively, then this person has adopted the correct methodology. However, if a person gives precedence to anecdotes and abandons the essential aspects of knowledge, then this person has made anecdotes a goal in of itself and this contradicts the way of the people of knowledge.

## Balancing Between Essentials and Anecdotes

Likewise reading, memorising and seeking knowledge in a serious manner without having some anecdotes creates an unstable ground for the student of knowledge, because he must have some of this and some of that. Moreover, if he begins with much enthusiasm without having any anecdotes, after a while he will become lazy and experience proves this. Every student of knowledge goes through a phase of zealousness for knowledge whereby he does a lot of memorisation, revision and research, then afterwards this period is followed by one of nonchalance. However, this should not hinder the student of knowledge, rather he should have a balance, and this is achieved by reading anecdotes such as the news, events, stories, biographies, etc.

Hence, one finds Ibn ‘Abdul-Barr who is an Imaam from Imaams that are known to have many great works, such as ‘*At-Tamheed*’ (the explanation Imaam Maalik’s ‘*Al-Muwatta*’). In this book he stated that his intent by writing the book was to rid himself of stress, for whenever he looked at the book he felt relaxed and comfortable. From his other works are ‘*Al-Kaafi*’ in *Maalikee fiqh*, ‘*Al-Jaami*’, and ‘*Bahjatil Majaalis*’ which is about poems, stories, etc. Does this mean that a major scholar writes about such topics because he has nothing to do with his time? Of course not, but in order to have a balanced approach towards knowledge, he does not want to leave one branch of knowledge except that he enters into another. Therefore, the essential fundamental aspects of knowledge is the premise by which one devotes his time, however one must also give concern to anecdotes such as news, history, eloquence, poetry, biography, debates, etc. This not only strengthens one knowledge base, but it also rejuvenates a person’s desire for knowledge.

Therefore, we can summarise from this the importance of being balanced, and being balanced here does not mean being equal (between essential and anecdotal knowledge), rather give each its rights. One should give the essential aspects of knowledge its due, the anecdotes its due and one should judge oneself in this matter. Thus, the student whilst seeking knowledge, he first of all goes through a period of enthusiasm, then followed by one of sedation, and finally one of apathy. As the Messenger (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said, “Indeed for everything there is a (period) of culmination, and for every (period) of culmination there is wane, so whoever culminates at my *sunnah* has indeed succeeded and is saved, and whoever culminates at *bid’ah*, then he has failed and is in a state of loss.”<sup>1</sup>

This should make the student of knowledge pay close attention to himself lest he flunks as a result of failing to give each its rights. And this is what we found – some students of knowledge seeking knowledge for a short while, and then afterwards becoming lazy due to a lack of balance. In the beginning he had a lot of energy, but after some time he exhausted himself because he thought that with his stamina he can gain everything in one shot, but the human being needs to be gradual.

**“Be you Rabbaaniyoon, because you are teaching the Book, and you are studying it.”**

[Soorah Aali-‘Imraan, 3:79]

And the *rabbaanee* (the one who strive to implement that which they know) is the one who teaches the people the easy aspects of knowledge before the more difficult ones.

## The Importance of Research

Doing research is one of the things that makes a student love seeking knowledge (i.e. the student must sometimes receive knowledge from others, and at other times he must do research himself). For if he only receives knowledge all the time without researching,

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<sup>1</sup> *Saheeh, Saheehal-Jaami*’ Al-Albaanee: 2152

investigating, authenticating *ahaadeeth*, verifying matters of *fiqh* etc. Then it is very likely that his interest in knowledge will dwindle. Researching is also one of the main reasons for a person's increase knowledge. Thus, we say the every student of knowledge must have times whereby he memorises and attends classes, and other times whereby he researches and investigates. Researching does not mean that he conducts research on a particular matter, then he promotes his research so that it can be published and his name appears on the front cover of a book, this is not what is meant. His research is to strengthen himself, for there is no one from the people of knowledge except that he has some research that he did at the time of his youth that he needs to go back to every now and again.

Imaam An-Nawaawee (*rahimahullaah*) alluded to this in the first part of his book, '*Al-Majmoo Sharhul-Muhhadhab*' wherein the first section of the book he mentioned some very beneficial statements about the etiquettes of seeking knowledge and the etiquettes of those who carry it. There are some people who did research, and some of their research may have even been printed, but the foremost scholars are not pleased with their research. Why? Because such people simply restricted their efforts to gathering the statements of the people of knowledge about a particular topic, and knowledge is not simply just about regurgitating, rather knowledge is understanding, deduction and conveyance. The Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) said, "Many a bearer of knowledge is not versed in it. And many a bearer of knowledge conveys it to one who is more versed than he is."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, a person may convey knowledge without having an understanding of what he conveys, or he may have some understanding of what he conveys, however someone who is more knowledgeable than him does not agree with what he deduced from the knowledge he conveyed. Thus, research is a means of strengthening one's knowledge and the objective behind it is not for the student of knowledge to publish and propagate his research for the people, except if a number of people from the scholars approve of it. This should not be surprising, for Imaam Muslim (*rahimahullah*) when he wrote his '*Saheeh*' that he presented it to the scholars of his country, as consequence had it, they agreed with some of the *hadeeth* he had put in the book, and they disagreed with him about others. However, he did not have the time that would have allowed him to complete his book the way he wanted. Hence, this is the only book from the books of the scholars of *hadeeth* whereby the author (Imaam Muslim) gave an '*ijazah*' to narrate his book to Ibn Sufyaan, without him (Imaam Muslim) hearing Ibn Sufyaan read the book to unto him, nor did Imaam Muslim get a chance to read his Saheeh to Ibn Sufyaan. The point is that Imaam Muslim presented his book to the scholars of his time and they approved of it, thus he disseminated his book.

## **The Etiquette of the Student with the Scholars**

The student of knowledge is always in need of renewing his love for knowledge, and this is not possible except by being in constant contact with the people of knowledge. This means

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<sup>2</sup> *Saheeh Ibn Maajah: Al-Albaanee*

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that one should always seize the opportunity to attend their lectures and their gatherings, and to avoid putting their statements against each other, because the one who opposes the people of knowledge prohibits his own self (from what is good), and this occurs quite often. Therefore, the student of knowledge should continuously be in touch with the scholars because by observing their manners, how they solve problems, how they deal with knowledge, how they deal with the people of knowledge, this all helps to discipline the student of knowledge. Moreover, whenever the people of knowledge miss someone who is usually in contact with them, they will inquire about his whereabouts and his welfare, thus this contact serves as a support in a person's endeavour to seek knowledge. However, his relationship with them should not be one whereby one takes a defiant stance towards people of knowledge, meaning that he would not accept anything from them nor would he benefit from them. Rather, his relationship with them should be one whereby he intends to benefit from them and not argue with them. Moreover, he should try his best to listen much more than he speaks whilst in the gatherings of the people of knowledge. This should suffice us and now we will answer some questions about the topic we discussed [End].

