

# Degrees

*"[There] they found one of Our servants whom We had granted a mercy from Ourselves, and taught him a knowledge from Our own. Moses said to him, 'May I follow you for the purpose that you teach me some of the probity you have been taught?' He said, 'Indeed you cannot have patience with me! And how can you have patience about something you are not in the know of?' He said, 'You will find me, God willing, to be patient, and I will not disobey you in any matter.' He said, 'If you follow me, do not question me concerning anything until I [myself] make a mention of it to you.'" (18:65-70)*

*John Abbott has said: "How do you know so much about everything?" was asked of a very wise and intelligent man; and the answer was, "By never being afraid or ashamed to ask questions as to anything of which I was ignorant."*

Our continuation through the stories of the Qur'an brings us to one of the 'resolute Prophets' – Moses, peace be upon him, and his encounter with al-Khidr. However before we delve into this Qur'anic experience, let us get to know al-Khidr a little bit better as he is one of those 'mysterious' personalities of the Qur'an...

According to the scholars of Islam, al-Khidr is either a 'saint' or a prophet who lived during the era of Prophet Moses, peace be upon him, and is the one whom Moses learnt from. He is not mentioned by name in the Qur'an however he is referred to as, "A servant from amongst Our servants whom We have given from Our mercy and whom We have taught knowledge from Ourselves."

Other than his mention in Suratul Kahf (ch. 18), we don't see any reference to him in the Qur'an, however he is referred to the supplication of al-Mashlool and the supplication of Rajab, known as the Du'a of Umm Dawud, alongside other Prophets and

some traditions refer to him as the Prophet al-Yasa'a who is mentioned in the Qur'an by name ["...and Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah and Lot – each We graced over all the nations."](ch. 6, v. 86)

There is a tradition from the Commander of the Faithful, Ali b. Abi Talib, peace be upon him, in which he mentioned six prophets who are known by two different names – one of these prophets being al-Khidr was is also known as Taaliyaa and that his full name was Taaliyaa b. Malkaan b. 'Aamir b. Arfakhsad b. Saam b. Nuh (Prophet Noah), peace be upon all of them.

Imam as-Sadiq, peace be upon him, has stated that al-Khidr was sent by God towards his community to teach them monotheism, belief in the prophets of God and to have faith in the Books which He revealed and that one of his miracles was that anytime he sat on or passed by dry, barren land, it would transform into green pastures (thus his name al-Khidr which literally means 'green'). He is also one of the men of God who has been granted an extra-ordinary long life as is still living on Earth.

The journey of Prophet Moses and al-Khidr is lengthy and on this trip, they went through many lands, saw many people and experienced many life-altering moments – mostly for Prophet Moses – however the lesson which we wish to derive from this meeting of the minds is the importance of HOW to seek knowledge.

Without a doubt, when we study the teachings of the Prophet and the infallibles, we understand that knowledge itself and those who possess knowledge is grand – so much so that as traditions tell us that even the fish in the oceans ask for forgiveness on behalf of those who are seeking knowledge! However with all such Islamic 'guarantees', there are pre-requisites which we need to follow – and if we wish to be successful in our quest for enlightenment and receive the rewards stored for the seeker of truth, there are certain points which must be kept in mind.

In our quest for knowledge – and in our discussion, knowledge of Islam – the following three points must be kept in perspective:

1. *Knowledge must be coupled with action.*

1. Imam Ali, peace be upon him, has said that the scholar who does not act according to his knowledge is as the ignorant person walking around aimlessly who will never come out of his state of ignorance. Rather, the proof of God against him (the scholar) is greater (than against others); his loss is greater (than others) and he is more worthy of and deserving of a great punishment from God than others [when he does not act according to what he knows].

One of the first things which a man or woman who is seeking Islamic knowledge must keep in mind is that the quest for knowledge must be coupled with acting upon what is learnt. Just imagine a person who spends 20 years in school studying to become a doctor or another professional and then “leaves” that profession entirely to relax and “enjoy his life” not even using what they had learnt for even one day! Most people would think such a person to be insane to dedicate his nights and days to reading, studying, attending classes and taking part in exams to just disregard everything.

When it comes to Islamic knowledge, one must not go into it hoping to become a “Shaykh” or “Alim” or to lead a community or to gain notoriety and popularity and be on the “speaking circuit” – rather, first and foremost, the knowledge must be FOR SELF and this means that whatever one learns – even if it is one sentence – must be put into practice. The seekers of knowledge need to sincerely study and learn to better themselves!

2. *Speaking without knowledge.*

1. Imam Ali, peace be upon him, advised his son,

Hasan al-Mujtaba, peace be upon him, saying that he must not speak about those things which he has no knowledge of and must keep quiet in regards to those things which are not “his business”.

If this statement from the Commander of the Faithful was all that we had in our sources of Islamic guidance on how to carry ourselves in society, and everyone lived by it, we would be in a utopia! Just imagine if every single person of every single faith and every single strata of society lived these words!

First off, the Imam commanded his son (also an infallible) – and as an extension to all of us – to not speak about things which we have no knowledge about and that we should “mind our own business” and not feel that we need to always be saying something. The famous thinker Plato has rightly been quoted as saying, “A wise man speaks because he has something to say; a fool speaks because he has to say something.” Indeed, these two points are extremely important in our society more now than ever.

At one level, our communities and religious centres are in disarray as many have no ‘trained’ religious scholars to impart teachings and we rely upon the ‘local Mulla’ (we use this term very loosely and facetiously) who has read a few books, Googled a few articles and upon donning his Arab clothing, through employing verbal acrobatics, is able to impress the people, convincing them he is a scholar and is able to spell-bind the audience. When asked a question or requested to clarify something, as his knowledge is just facts spewed out, he is not able to respond and may even mislead people!

Even worse than this is the one who has no knowledge however feels that he knows everything about everything and is somehow entitled and obligated to espouse his opinions on God, the Prophet and Islamic teachings even when he is not asked or approached!

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this happens in no other field except for Islam!

We don't have people who read medical text books and then become over night doctors; we don't have people who watch CSI and become ace-detectives; we don't have people who watch Judge Judy and feel that they are now ready to pass judgment – however we do feel that donning a hat and Arab clothing, speaking a few words of Arabic and maybe having a beard (and for our lady speakers, wearing a hijab when they enter the centre but remove it when they are in the society) entitles us to sit on the pulpit (mimbar) of the Prophet and be an expert on religion!

Consider this very powerful verse in regards to something as trivial as a DOG! One of the stories of Surat al-Kahf (18) is about the People of the Cave and at the end of the story, the people “dispute” with one another in regards to the number of people in the cave and who else was with them. The Qur'an speaks about it in this manner in verse 22: “They will say, “(There are) three; their dog is the fourth of them. They will say, (they are) five, their dog is the sixth of them,’ taking a shot in the dark (speaking with no knowledge). They will say, (they are) seven, their dog is the eighth of them.’ Say, ‘My Lord knows best their number and none knows them except a few.’ So do not dispute concerning them except for a seeming dispute, and do not question about them – any of them!”

Glory be to God! We are ORDERED by the Creator of the Universe not to talk and “dispute” about the “Companions of the Cave” and their loyal and trustworthy DOG and how many there were as only God knows how many were present, yet we who have no knowledge want to dispute with others about the Qur'an, Allah, the Prophet, the Imams, and everything else held sacred!?! Have we no shame!

### *3. What is the best knowledge that one can learn?*

1. Imam Ali, peace be upon him, has been quoted as

saying that people should not learn the 'science of the stars' (astrology) except that portion of studying the heavenly bodies which would help guide a person on land and sea.

This piece of guidance, which is a part of a much longer text, was given at a critical time in the history of Islam but the lesson to learn from it is that there is some good in all types of knowledge however NOT ALL BRANCHES of knowledge are beneficial to learn. In fact, in the supplication we read after the Asr prayers we say, "O God, I seek refuge in You from knowledge which does not benefit me."

When we have Q&A sessions with our local scholars or visiting guests, in many cases, the queries of the believers has a lot to be desired. Rather than discussing the points of knowledge which can benefit us and give us life and can make us progress in various fields of secular or religious life, we ask the 'regular' questions about music, movies, makeup, mixed gatherings and the status of eating various types of food or food made by people of other religions. Islam has already given clear guidance on these issues in the books and all it takes is for us to go to these sources, however we seem to focus on the rudimentary aspects of life!

In closing as although much more could be said on this issue, we need to go back to the points outlined by al-Khidr to his "student", Prophet Moses and work upon ourselves and our quest for Islamic knowledge.