

Eight Lessons by Imam Ghazali (Radi Allahu anhu)



YOUNG MAN: Reflect, too, upon the story of Hatim the deaf who was the companion of Shaqiq al-Balkhi (may the mercy of Allah be upon them both). One day Shaqiq enquired of Hatim: "For 30 years you have been my companion. What, pray, have you gained from it?" Hatim replied: "I have gained eight benefits with which I am contented and from which I expect my salvation and my deliverance." "And what are they?" Shaqiq asked. Said Hatim:

"**THE FIRST** is that I looked at creation and noticed that to everyone there belongs a beloved. And a part of that which is beloved to him accompanies him to his death – sickness, while another part accompanies him only to the edge of his grave. But none (of the above) enters with him. So I reflected and said to myself: "The most beloved is the companion accompanying one into the grave! I found this companion to be none other than Righteous Deeds. So I embraced her as my beloved to be a shining light and an intimate friend never to abandon me when I would be most alone.

THE SECOND is that I looked at man and found him guided by his whims and fancies, forever hastening to the fulfilment of his lower desires. So I meditated upon the verse: "But as for him who feared to stand before his Lord and restrain his soul from lower desires; his abode will be the Garden.." and came to know, with the knowledge of certainty, that the Qur'an was indeed the Truth. Then swiftly I moved to free myself from its vain desires until they rested, contented, in obedience to Allah, the High, the Exalted and finally consented to His Will.

THE THIRD is that I noticed every single person greedily striving to gain for himself the vanities of the world. Then I reflected upon the verse: "What is with you must vanish and what is with Allah must endure." So I spent my life's earnings in the way of Allah and divided them amongst the poor to be as a treasure for me in the care of Allah.

THE FOURTH is that I saw a number of people who thought that their honour and strength resided in the sheer abundance of their clan and kinsfolk. Others claimed and boasted that it was contained in the amount of their wealth and children. Others reckoned that it was to be found in the extortion of wealth, oppression of others, and the shedding of their blood. Yet another group believed that strength and honour was to be found in extravagance – in the wasting and squandering of money. Then I thought about the words of Allah: "Verily, the most honoured of you (is he who) is the most righteous of you." I then chose righteousness for myself for I had come to know with firmness of belief that the Qur'an was indeed the truth and that their opinions and assumptions were false and ephemeral.

THE FIFTH is that I saw people finding fault with each other and back-biting one another. The root of this I discovered to be envy (hasad) – envy of wealth and rank and knowledge. So I reflected upon the verse: "It is We who portion out between them their livelihood in the life of this world.."

and came to know that apportionment was from Allah, the Sublime, and ordained in eternity. With this I envied none and contented myself with the allotment of Allah, the Most High.

THE SIXTH is that I saw people feuding – for one reason or another – amongst themselves. But after reflecting upon the Verse: “Verily Satan is an enemy to you; so treat him as an enemy...” I realised that hostility to other than Satan is not permissible.

THE SEVENTH is that I saw people striving so earnestly in search of support and livelihood that they debased themselves and diminished their self-respect by falling prey to the dubious and the prohibited. Consequently I thought about the words of Allah: “There is no moving creature on earth but its sustenance depends on Allah...” and realised that since my sustenance depended solely on Allah the Most High, He indeed would ensure it. So I turned my attention to the devotion of Allah, the Most High, and may Him alone the object of desire.

THE EIGHTH is that I saw everybody dependent on created things. Some depended on the dirham or the dinar and others on wealth and possessions. Some depended on a craft or vocation while others depended on people like themselves. But after I reflected upon the verse: “And he who puts his trust in Allah, sufficient is (Allah) for him, Allah will surely accomplish his purpose. Verily, for all things has Allah appointed a due proportion.” I firmly placed my trust in Allah for He, most certainly, is sufficient for me and the most excellent of those in whom we can trust. Shaiq then said: “May Allah grant you success. Indeed I have looked into the Torah, the Injil (Gospel), the Zabur (Psalms), and the Furqan (Qur’an) and found that these eight principles constitute the essence of that which is contained in these four books. He who acts in accordance with these principles acts in accordance with the teachings contained in these books.”

YOUNG MAN: From these two examples you can see that there is no need for a vast increase in your learning. I will now explain to you what is necessary for those who choose to travel upon the path of Truth. Know that it is essential for you to attach yourself to a Spiritual Guide and Teacher who, through his spiritual instructions, will purify yourself from evil tendencies and replace them with nobility of character. And the definition of this “spiritual instruction” may be likened to that of the husbandman who removes the thorns and plucks out the weeds from the young plantation so that it may grow to perfection. It is necessary for the traveller (salik) to attach himself to a spiritual master to guide and instruct him in his journey to Allah the Most High, for Allah Himself sent to His worshippers a Prophet to guide them along His path. The Prophet in his turn has left behind those who act as his successors and who guide to the way of Allah. The necessary condition, which qualifies the guide to act as the viceroy of Prophet, is that he has to be deeply learned. But this condition is not sufficient, for every learned man does not by virtue of his learning alone qualify as a successor of the Prophet. I will now explain to you in a general manner the signs by which you may recognise the true guide, so that not just anyone can lay claim to this position. We say: He who renounces love of the world and the desire for rank; and he who follows an enlightened guide whose spiritual chain extends in unbroken sequence to Muhammad, the Lord of the Messengers (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him); and he who excels in refining himself by observing modesty in eating, speaking and sleeping, and by much praying, almsgiving and fasting; and he who, in imitation of an enlightened guide, makes virtue his way of life-amongst which are counted patience, prayer, prayer, thanksgiving, dependence on Allah, certainty of knowledge, generosity contentedness, inner peace, clemency, humility, knowledge, truthfulness, modesty, reliability, sobriety, tranquillity, and perseverance. He who meets these requirements may be considered as a light of the lights of the Prophet and worthy of emulation. However, the existence of such a one is rare, and, if found, is mightier than red sulphur (al-kibrit al-ahmar). If good fortune helps the seeker in finding such a guide, then it behoves him to respect him both outwardly and inwardly. As for outward respect it consists in refraining from argumentation with your guide and from vying with him in the derivation of proofs even if you know that he is wrong. You should also refrain from placing your prayer carpet in front of him except during the times of obligatory prayers. As for the extra prayers, do not prolong their performance in his presence. Lastly, do what he orders you to do according to your capacity. Inner respect, on the other hand, is not to reject inwardly in deed or in word – that which you hear and seem to accept from him outwardly. For that is the sign of the hypocrite. Furthermore, in order to avoid the influence of the Satans of the jinn and of man, one should refrain from the companionship of he who is of ill repute. In this way one becomes purified (and saved) from all satanic evils. One should also, under all circumstances, choose poverty above richness. Know, too that sufism (tasawwuf) embraces two important characteristics:

ONE: Righteousness (istiqamah) and

TWO: To be at peace with (the rest) of Creation. He therefore, who perfects his morals and treats others with kindness and gentleness, is indeed a true sufi. And righteousness is to sacrifice his personal pleasures in order to attain the pleasure of Allah, the Most High. As for moral excellence it is to judge others- as long as they do not violate the Sacred Laws – not in terms of the excellence you assume in yourself, but in terms of the excellence you assume in them.