10678 - Disadvantages of limiting oneself only to books

the question

What is the way to gain knowledge? What are the obstacles faced by the seeker of knowledge?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

There are two ways of acquiring knowledge:

1 – Acquiring it from trustworthy books, which have been written by scholars who are known for their knowledge and trustworthiness and whose ‘aqeedah (belief) is known to be free of innovations (bid’ah) and myths.

Taking knowledge from books can help a person to reach a certain level, but there are two obstacles:

The first obstacle is that this takes a long time, because one needs a lot of time and a lot of painstaking effort until he gets the knowledge he wants. Many people may not be able to overcome this obstacle, especially when they see that those around them have wasted their time without gaining anything, so they get bored and tired, then they do not get what they want.

The second obstacle is that the knowledge of the person who acquires knowledge from books is usually weak, because it is not built on a solid foundation. Hence we find many mistakes made by those who take their knowledge from books, because they have no guidelines or principles with which to deal with minor issues referred to in the Quran and Sunnah. We find some people come across a hadeeth which is not mentioned in the reliable books of Saheeh and Musnad, and this method goes against the principles followed by the scholars and indeed by the ummah, then they take this hadeeth and build their belief on it. Undoubtedly this is wrong, because the Quran and

Sunnah have principles around which the minor issues revolve, and if there is something that contradicts these principles and cannot be reconciled with them, then that should be abandoned.

2 – One of the ways of gaining knowledge is to learn from a scholar who is trustworthy with regard to his knowledge and his religious commitment. This way is quicker and is more reliable, because in the first method the seeker of knowledge may go astray without realizing it, either because of misunderstanding or because he is lacking in knowledge, or for some other reason. But in the second method he can discuss, give and take with his teacher, which will open to the student many doors to understanding and examining, how to defend the correct views and refute weak views. The student should prioritize and read book which summarize knowledge before studying it in depth. In this manner he will progress gradually. He should not move on to the next level before he has thoroughly grasped the current level; in this way his progress will be sound.

From *Fatawa al-Shaykh Muhammad ibn Salih al-'Uthaymeen, Kitab al-'Ilm*, prepared by Fahd ibn Nasir al-Sulayman, p. 71