

Do You Need a *Shaykh*?

The great legal theorist, Abu Ishaq Ibrahim ibn Musa al-Shatibi al-Gharnati, author of *al-Muwafaqat* and *al-‘Itisam*, once asked the great Sufi master of his time and Friday speaker of the *al-Qarawiyyin* central mosque, Abu ‘Abd Allah ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abbad al-Nafzi al-Rundi if it was an obligation on the one traveling on the path (*salik*) to Allah to have a spiritual guide (*shaykh al-tariqah wa al-tarbiyah*) to help complete his/her spiritual education, development, and maturity. His reply was as follows:

“The *shaykh* who is referred to in behavioral refinement (*suluk*) divides into two divisions: [1] the *shaykh* of [both] exoteric and esoteric knowledge (*ta’lim wa tarbiyah*), and [2] the *shaykh* of exoteric knowledge with no esoteric knowledge. The *shaykh* of esoteric knowledge (*tarbiyah*) is not essential (*daruri*) for every traveler (*salik*). Rather, the one whose wits are dull and whose carnal self (*nafs*) is incorrigible has need of [one like] him (the *shaykh*). As for he who is sharp witted and whose carnal self is compliant [to good], then such [a *shaykh*] is not compulsory in his regard. But binding one’s self to [one like] him is more fitting (not a duty). As for the *shaykh* of exoteric knowledge (*ta’lim*), such is required of every traveler.

As for the reason that the *shaykh* of esoteric knowledge is binding for those we have mentioned, it is apparently obvious (*zahir*), since the veils (*hujub*) of their carnal selves [barring them from God’s light] are very dense. And only the *shaykh* of spiritual knowledge (*murabbi*) can lift and remove them. They [on the other hand] are like those who suffer from chronic illnesses and incurable diseases of the body. Without any doubt, they are in need of a skilled physician who treats their illnesses with cogent remedies.

As for the reason a *shaykh* of spiritual knowledge is not required for one who is sharp-witted and in control of his carnal self, it is that the abundance of his intelligence and the compliance of his carnal self [to good] avail him from such [a *shaykh*], such that what the *shaykh* of exoteric knowledge conveys to him keeps him straight in a way that would not keep others straight [who are not of the same characteristics]. And he will complete the path (*wasil*) by God’s permission, Most High. No harm is feared to befall him in the path of behavioral refinement (*suluk*) when he seeks it out in its appropriate manner, and comes to it from its [proper] door.

Reliance upon the *shaykh* of esoteric knowledge (*tarbiyah*), it is the way of the latter day Imams (*muta’akkkhirin*) of the Sufis. And reliance upon the *shaykh* of exoteric knowledge (*ta’lim*), it is the way of the first among them (*al-awa’il minhum*). And this appears in the books of many of their authors, like Al-Harith Al-Muhasibi, Abu Talib al-Makki, and others, from the fact that they did not expressly stipulate [the need for] the *shaykh* of esoteric knowledge (*tarbiyah*) in their books in the manner that the Imams of the latter days mentioned. In spite of that, they mentioned the foundations of the sciences of the [special] people (*qawm*) and their branches, as well as their anterior and posterior conditions, especially Shaykh Abu Talib. So the lack of their mention of it (the *shaykh* of the

spiritual path) is evidence of it not being a condition and of its unbinding nature in the path toward behavioral refinement.

And this is the path traveled upon that most travelers have followed. And it has a greater resemblance to the state of the ancient Forbearers (*Salaf*), since it has not been reported that they took on *shaykhs* of esoteric knowledge [and the spiritual path], bound themselves by them, or adhered, with them, to what the pupils adhere to it with their *shaykhs* of spiritual teachings. Rather, their state was one of acquiring the sciences, and seeking the improvement of [their] states by way of [righteous] companionship (*suhbah*) and [caring] fraternization (*mu'akhat*) with one another. And they would achieve an enormous increase whose trace they would find in their hearts (*bawatin*) and appearances (*zawahir*) from meeting and visiting one another. For that reason, they roamed about in the [different] towns, and made it an aim to meet the friends of Allah (*awliya*), the scholars (*'ulama*), and the pious worshippers (*'ubbad*).

As for the books of the People of Sufism, they are founded upon [study with] the *shaykh* of exoteric knowledge (*ta'lim*), because it is not valid to derive benefit from them unless the one looking into them believes that those who wrote them are from the people of [both exoteric] knowledge (*'ilm*) and spiritual acquaintance (*ma'rifah*), and one of those who it is valid to emulate. And this belief only results through a *shaykh* who is relied upon in his view or from a way that he trusts. So if what he derives benefit from is clear and in conformity with the outer (judgments) of scripture (*shar'*) in a clear and congruent fashion, he considers that sufficient. Otherwise, he is obliged to refer to a *shaykh* – i.e. from the *shaykhs* of exoteric knowledge (*ta'lim*) – who gives clarity to him. So the *shaykh* is something inescapable!”¹

¹ Taken from Shaykh 'Abd Al-Fattah Abu Ghuddah's commentary on Imam al-Muhasibi's '*Risalat al-Mustarshidin*' Dar al-Salam: pp. 39-41. The quote is referenced from Shaykh Ibn 'Abbad's '*Al-Rasa'il al-Sughra*' pp. 106-107 and pp. 125-126.