Al-Ghazālī

Manners to Be Observed by Teachers and Students

(1096)

Many scholars believe that, with the exception of Mohammed himself, no one has influenced the development of Islamic thought more than Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111). Al-Ghazālī lived during Islam's golden age of intellectual development, when the spread of Islam from Spain to India opened borders and created an unprecedented flow of people, goods, and ideas across three continents. Arab scientists and mathematicians during this time made discoveries that remain important, and Muslim philosophers rediscovered Plato's and Aristotle's works and translated them into Arabic.

During the eleventh century, Aristotle's philosophy dominated the intellectual climate of the Islamic world. Philosophers and logicians such as al-Fārābī (870–950) and Avicenna (980–1037) had already devised complex systems for integrating Aristotelian philosophy with Islamic principles. Al-Ghazālī was trained in this system of thought, and, by all accounts, excelled in it. He was appointed the head of Baghdad's prestigious Nizamīyyah College and became one of Islam's most celebrated thinkers. However, in 1095, al-Ghazālī suffered a spiritual crisis that left him unable to reconcile pagan philosophy with the tenets of his religion. He renounced his academic position and wrote *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, in which he argued that Islam was fundamentally incompatible with philosophy as his colleagues understood it. (For a brief selection from *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, see p. 384.)

After his spiritual crisis, al-Ghazālī turned toward Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam that focuses on forming a direct relationship with God and holds that all life on Earth is part of God. Sufi beliefs pervade his most important work, *The Revival of Religious Learning* (1096–97), a massive, four-volume treatise that covers nearly every important aspect of life in the medieval Islamic world. In this work, al-Ghazālī aimed to move the discussion of important subjects away from the theoretical abstractions of the philosophers and toward what he considered the unchanging truths of Islam.

For nearly a thousand years, *The Revival of Religious Learning* has been the most frequently read book in the Muslim world after the Quran. "Manners to Be Observed by Teachers and Students" constitutes only a small portion of the first volume, but it provides an excellent introduction to al-Ghazālī's overall argument. In listing the duties of both students and teachers, al-Ghazālī covers a number of important points, some of which are just as applicable to secular instruction as to religious instruction. But he always emphasizes education's spiritual dimension, without which, he believes, neither teaching nor learning can occur meaningfully.
Manners to be observed by teachers and students. These manners comprise ten duties.

(1) The first duty of a student is to keep himself free from impure habit and evil matters. Effort to acquire knowledge is the worship of mind. It purifies secret faults and takes to God. Prayer is observed by outward organs and as outward purity is not gained except by outward organs, so worship by mind, the fountain head of acquisition of knowledge, cannot be attained without the removal of bad habits and evil attributes. The Prophet said: Religion is founded on cleanliness. So outward and inward purities are necessary. God says: The polytheists are impure. . . . It is understood from this that purity and impurity are not merely external as the polytheists also keep their dresses clean and bodies clean, but as their mind is impure, so they are generally impure. The inward purity is of greatest importance. The Prophet therefore said: Angels do not enter a house wherein there are dogs. Human mind is a house, the abode of angels, the place of their movements. The blameworthy evils like anger, lust, rancour, envy, pride, conceit and the like are dogs. When dogs reside in a heart, where is the place for the angels? God takes the secrets of knowledge to the hearts through the angels. They do not take it except to the pure souls. Hazrat Ibn Masud said: Knowledge is not acquired through much learning. It is a light cast in heart. A certain sage said: Knowledge is God-fear. As God said: The learned among the people fear God most.

(2) The second duty of a student is to reduce his worldly affairs and keep aloof from kith and kin as acquisition of knowledge is not possible in these environments. For this reason, a certain sage said: God has not gifted two minds to a man. For this reason, a certain sage said: Knowledge will not give you its full share till you surrender your entire mind to it.

(3) The third duty of a student is not to take pride or exalt himself over the teacher but rather entrust to him the conduct of all his affairs and submit to his advices as a patient submits to his physician. The Prophet said: It is the habit of a believer not to flatter anyone except when he seeks knowledge. Therefore a student should not take pride over his teacher. Knowledge cannot be acquired except through modesty and humility. God said: Herein there is warning for one who has got a heart or sets up ear while he himself being a witness. . . . The meaning of having a heart is to be fit for receiving knowledge and one who is prepared and capable of understanding knowledge. Whatever the teacher should recommend to the student, the latter should follow it putting aside his own opinion. . . .

(4) The fourth duty of a student is that he should first pay no attention to the difference, whether about worldly sciences or sciences of the hereafter, as it may per-

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1. The Prophet: Mohammed.
2. Hazrat Ibn Masud: "Hazrat" is a Persian title of respect used in the Sufi tradition to designate great teachers or leaders. Abdullah ibn Mas'ud was an early convert to Islam and a companion of Mohammed.
plex his mind and he may lose enthusiasm. He should adopt first what the teacher says and should not argue about the different mazhabs\(^3\) or sects.

5. The fifth duty is that a student should not miss any branch of knowledge. He should try to become perfect in them as all branches of learning help one another and some branches are allied with others. If a man does not get a thing, it becomes his enemy. God says: When they do not find guidance they say, it is an age-long lie. . . . A poet said: A sweet thing is bitter in the mouth of a patient as sweet water is tasteless to a sick man. Good knowledge is acquired according to one's genius. It leads man to God or helps him in that way. Each branch of knowledge has got its fixed place. He who guards it, is like a guard who patrols the frontiers in jihad. Each has got a rank in it and each has got a reward in the hereafter according to his rank. The only condition required is that the object of acquisition of knowledge should be to please God.

6. The sixth duty of a student is that he should not take up all branches of knowledge at a time, but should take up the most important one at first as life is not sufficient for all branches of knowledge. A little learning if acquired with enthusiasm perfects the knowledge of the hereafter or the sciences of the worldly usages and the sciences of revelation. The object of the science of worldly usages is to acquire spiritual knowledge. The goal of the spiritual knowledge is to know God. Our object by this knowledge is not that belief which is handed down from generations to generations. Our object for this knowledge is to acquire light arising out of certain faith which God casts in soul. Such light was acquired by Hazrat Abu Bakr. The Prophet said about Abu Bakr: If the faith of the people of the world is weighed with the faith of Abu Bakr, his faith would be heavy. In short, the highest and the noblest of all science, is to know God. This science is like a sea of which the depth cannot be ascertained. In this science, the highest rank is that of the Prophets, then of the friends of God and finally that of those who follow them. It has been narrated that the portraits of two ancient wise men were seen on the wall of a mosque. One of them held a piece of paper in which it was written: If you purify everything, don't understand that you have even purified one thing till you know God and know that He is the cause of all Causes and the Creator of everything. In the hand of the second man, there was a scroll in which it was written: I removed thirst before by drinking water and then I have come to know God. But when I have come to know God, my thirst was quenched without any water.

\(^3\) Mazhabs: the major schools of thought about Islamic law. The four current mazhabs within Sunni Islam have been consolidated from many more that existed in al-Ghazali's time.

\(^4\) Jihad: This Islamic concept is much misunderstood in contemporary political discourse. In traditional Islamic law, \textit{jihad}, or "holy war," can refer to the personal struggle to acquire knowledge and live the tenets of Islam. It can also refer to a defensive war necessary to preserve Islam itself. It cannot, in classical Islamic thought, refer to a war of conquest, a war to punish enemies of Islam, or a war designed to bring about religious conversion.

\(^5\) Hazrat Abu Bakr: a close associate of Mohammed who succeeded him as leader of the Muslim community in Mecca. Abu Bakr is generally considered the first caliph, or non-prophetic Islamic leader.
(7) The seventh duty of a student is that he should not take up a new branch of learning till he has learnt fully the previous branch of learning, because it is requisite for the acquisition of knowledge. One branch of knowledge is a guide to another branch. God says: Whoso has been given the Quran recites it with due recitation. . . . In other words, he does not take up one learning till he masters the previous one. Hazrat Ali⁶ said: Don't conceal truth from men, rather know the truth, then you will be the masters of truths.

(8) The eighth duty of a student is to know the causes for which noble sciences are known. It can be known from two things, nobility of its fruit and the authenticity of its principles. Take for example the science of religion as medicine. The fruit of the science of religion is to gain an eternal life and the fruit of the other is to gain a temporary life. From these points of view, the science of religion is more noble as its result is more noble. Take up mathematics and astrology; the former is nobler because the former is more authentic in its foundations. From this, it is clear that the science of the knowledge of God, of His angels, of His books and of His prophets is the noblest and also the branches of knowledge which help it.

(9) The ninth duty of a student is to purify mind and action with virtues, to gain proximity to God and His angels and to live in the company of those who live near Him. His aims should not be to gain worldly matters, to acquire riches and properties, to argue with the illiterate and to show pride and haughtiness. He whose object is to gain nearness of God should seek such learning as helps towards that goal, namely the knowledge of the hereafter and the learnings which are auxiliary to it. God said: God will raise herewith in rank who are believers and to whom knowledge have been given. . . . God said: They have got stages, some lower, some higher. The highest rank is that of the Prophets, then of the friends of God and then of the learned who are firm in knowledge and then of the pious who follow them.

(10) The tenth duty of a student is that he should keep attention to the primary object of knowledge. It is not in your power to enjoy bliss of this world and that of the next world together. This world is a temporary abode. Body is a conveyance and the actions run towards the goal. The goal is God and nothing else. All bliss and happiness lie in Him. So give more importance to the sciences which take to that ultimate goal . . .

Second Subject-Duties of a Teacher

Whoever takes up the profession of teaching should observe the following duties:

(1) He will show kindness and sympathy to the students and treat them as his own children. The Prophet said: I am to you like a father to his son. His object should be to protect the student from the fire of Hell. As parents save their children

from the fire of this world, so a teacher should save his students or disciples from
the fire of Hell. The duties of a teacher are more than those of parents. A father is
the immediate cause of this transient life, but a teacher is the cause of immortal life.
It is because of the spiritual teacher that the hereafter is much remembered. By
teacher, I mean the teacher of the sciences of the hereafter or the sciences of
the world with the object of the hereafter. A teacher ruins himself and also his students
if he teaches for the sake of the world. For this reason, the people of the hereafter
are journeying towards the next world and to God and remain absent from the world.
The months and years of this world are so many stations of their journey. There is
no miserliness in the fortunes of the next world and so there is no envy among them.
They turn to the verse: The believers are brethren. . .

(2) The second duty of a teacher is to follow the usages and ways of the Prophet.
In other words, he should not seek remuneration for teaching but nearness to God.
. . . God instructs us to say: I don’t want any remuneration for this from you. . . .
Wealth and property are the servants of body which is the vehicle of soul of which
the essence is knowledge and for which there is honour of soul. He who searches for
wealth in lieu of knowledge is like one who has got his face besmeared with impu­
rities but wants to cleanse his body. In that case, the master is made a servant and
the servant a master.

(3) The third duty of a teacher is that he should not withhold from his students
any advice. After he finishes the outward sciences, he should teach them the inward
sciences. He should tell them that the object of education is to gain nearness of God,
not power or riches and that God created ambition as a means of perpetuating knowl­
edge which is essential for these sciences.

(4) The fourth duty of a teacher is to dissuade his students from evil ways with
care and caution, with sympathy and not with rebuke and harshness, because in that
case it destroys the veil of awe and encourages disobedience. The Holy Prophet is
the guide of all teachers. He said: If men had been forbidden to make porridge of
camel’s dung, they would have done it saying that they would not have been for­
bidden to do it unless there has been some good in it.

(5) The fifth duty of a teacher is that he shall not belittle the value of other sci­
ces before his students. He who teaches grammar naturally thinks of the science
of jurisprudence7 as bad and he who teaches jurisprudence discourages the science
of traditions and so on. Such evils are blameworthy. In fact the teacher of one learn­
ing should prepare his students for study of other learnings and then he should observe
the rules of gradual progress from one stage to another.

(6) The sixth duty that a teacher should do is to teach his students up to the
power of their understanding. The students should not be taught such things as are
beyond the capacity of their understanding. In this matter, he should follow the

7. Jurisprudence: the study of law or of legal
philosophy.
Prophet, who said: We prophets form one class. We have been commanded to give every man his rightful place and to speak to men according to their intellect. The Prophet said: When a man speaks such a word to a people who cannot grasp it with their intellect, it becomes a danger to some persons. Hazrat Ali said, pointing to his breast: There is much knowledge in it, but then there should be some people to understand it. The hearts of pious men are graves of secret matter. From this, it is understood that whatever the teacher knows should not all be communicated to the students at the same time. Jesus Christ said: Don't hang pearls around the neck of a swine. Wisdom is better than pearls. He who knows it as bad is worse than swine. Once a learned man was questioned about something but he gave no reply. The questioner said: Have you not heard what the Prophet said?—He who conceals any useful knowledge will on the Resurrection Day be bridled with a bridle of fire. The learned man said: You may place the bridle of fire and go.

If I don't disclose it to one who understands it, then put the bridle of fire upon me. God said: Don't give to the fools your property. . . . There is warning in this verse that it is better to safeguard knowledge from those who might be corrupted by it. To give a thing to one who is not fit for it and not to give a thing to one who is fit for it are equally oppression. A certain poet therefore said:

Should I cast pearls before the illiterate shepherds?
They will not understand, nor know their worth.

If God by His knowledge sends one with knowledge, I will give my goods to him, and gain his love. He wastes his learning who gives it to one unworthy. He commits sin who withholds it from one worthy.

(7) The seventh duty of a teacher is that he should teach his backward students only such things as are clear and suited to their limited understanding. Every man thinks that his wisdom is perfect and the greatest fool is he who rests satisfied with the knowledge that his intellect is perfect. In short, the door of debates should not be opened before the common men.

(8) The eighth duty of a teacher is that he should himself do what he teaches and should not give a lie to his teaching. Knowledge can be grasped by internal eye and actions by external eye. Many people have got external eyes but very few have got internal eyes. So if the actions of a teacher are contrary to what he preaches, it does not help towards guidance, but it is like poison. A teacher is like a stamp to clay and a student is like clay. If the stamp has no character, there is no impression on clay. Or he is like a cane and the student is like the shadow of the cane. How can the shadow of the cane be straight when the cane itself is crooked? God said: Do you enjoinder good to the people and forget it for yourselves . . . ? Hazrat Ali said: Two men have broken my back, the learned man who ruins himself and the fool who adopts asceticism. The learned man misleads the people through his sins and the fool through his evil actions.