



SHAYKH ‘ABD AL-QĀDIR JĪLĀNĪ THE TEACHER

The most elated of all saints, the ‘*Great Helper*’ with the permission of Allāh, the one who assertively stated that ‘*his foot is on the neck of every friend of Allāh*’, the perfect spiritual guide, the one could hear the call of his devotee from the other side of the world, the ultimate Sufi - these are just some of the affectionate titles we associate with the great Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jilānī (d. 561 AH/1166 CE). This paper will focus on one particular aspect of his countless qualities, his role as a teacher. In many ways, this was his most important role. After all, along with his character, it is imperative we learn today about his teachings and guidance.

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jilānī formally began teaching in 521 AH, when he was about fifty years old and continued to do so for the next forty years. He would teach three times a week, Friday mornings, Tuesday evenings and Sunday mornings.

The judge Abū Sa’īd al-Mukharrimī had built an Islamic college (Dār al-Ulūm) near al-Azajj gate in Baghdad. When he died, he gifted it to Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir. Very soon, the college was too small to accommodate all. The people began to purchase the adjacent land and so the college was extended. Thousands began to attend his session. Muhammad ibn al-Khidr al-Sinjārī reported that his father said:

“One of the saintly miracles of al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir was that despite the huge number of those who attended his assemblies, he was clearly heard by all those present: the ones sitting in front and the ones at the back.”¹

¹ *The Onlooker’s Delight - Biography of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jilānī*, Hafiz Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani

He led the daily prayers too in the Dār al-Ulūm.

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī taught thirteen different Islamic disciplines, including Qur’ānic exegesis, hadīth and Islamic Law. He was totally focussed on teaching, though the sessions served other religious purposes too. Observers note that in each session of his, a Jew or a Christian would accept Islam or a Muslim would repent sincerely to Allāh. There would also be religious decrees offered by the Shaykh during these sessions. Once, a man from Persia came to Baghdād with a legal question, but none of the scholars of Baghdād were able to provide him with an answer. The question was as follows: a man swore to divorce his wife three times irrevocably, if he fails to worship Allāh in a way that no-one else could do while he performs such an act of worship. When this question was brought to Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī, he wrote straightaway:

‘The Holy Sanctuary [of Makka] should be evacuated and this man should be allowed to perform *tawāf* around the Ka’ba alone for a week, and his oath would thus be vitiated.’²

When he received this answer, the man concerned did not remain in Baghdād another night; he headed straight for Makka.

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī’s scholarly circles attracted people from all walks of life. Even the scholars and *Shuyūkh* of the time eagerly attended his lessons. In each lesson, four hundred scribes would attend, who would write down everything he said. Sometimes his lessons would attract the extraordinary too. Sālim ibn Ahmad al-Khattab, the servant of al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir, related the following:

“The Shaykh was once delivering a speech of admonition when he suddenly rose a few steps in the air and said: ‘Stop, O Israelite,

(translated by M. Guezzou), HSBT Publications, 2016, p. 50.

² Ibid, p. 18.

and listen to the words of the Muhammadan,' and then returned to his seat. When he was asked about his action, he said: 'Khidr was passing by my assembly in a hurry, and so I went up to him and said what you have heard.'"³

Witnesses note that Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī's lessons were a spiritual experience like no other. People would die in his gatherings due to the strong impact of his words. Once he sat on the lectern, no-one present talked, spat, blew his nose or cleared his voice, out of awe towards him. Upon taking his seat, the Shaykh used to say: *'The talking is over and it is time for the state of the spirit.'*

Observers would see many miracles during his sessions. On one occasion, people gathered around the Shaykh to listen to his admonition. However, when it started to rain and people began dispersing, the Shaykh raised his head towards the heavens and said: 'What, I gather them and you disperse them.' Upon saying this, rain stopped falling inside the Shaykh's college while continuing to fall outside. On another occasion, Muhammad ibn Abī al-Fath al-Harawī noted:

"I attended one day the gathering of al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir. I heard him speak and when he was fully absorbed in his speech he said: 'If Allāh wished to send a green bird to listen to my words, he would do so.' He hardly finished his sentence when a beautiful green bird came, got into the Shaykh's sleeve and never came out."⁴

Though undoubtedly a large amount of time was dedicated to public lecturing, Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī was a wonderful, personal teacher too, able to offer tailor-made advice to eager disciples. He was a personal teacher and guide too, not just a lecturer.

³ Ibid, p. 30.

⁴ Ibid, p. 67

Mansūr ibn al-Mubārak al-Wāsitī said:

“When I was young, I went to visit al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir and had with me a book dealing with philosophy and occultism. Without looking into the content of the book, the Shaykh said to me: ‘O Mansūr, this book of yours is the worse companion you can ever have. Go and wash it off.’ Since I could not bring myself to wash the book off, I resolved to leave it at home and not carry it with me anymore. I had further memorised some points mentioned in the book. When I was about to get up to leave, the Shaykh looked at me and I could no longer stand up. It was as if I was tied up. Then the Shaykh said to me: ‘Hand me over your book.’ When he opened it, all its pages became blank. He looked into the pages for a while and then said: ‘This book’s title is The Virtues of the Qur’ān,’ and he gave it to me. I flicked through its pages, and it was indeed as he said, written in a most beautiful manner. The Shaykh said to me: ‘Repent to Allāh for saying with your tongue what is not in your heart.’ I stood up and left with all that which I had memorised from that book erased from my memory. It was as if I had never read that book.”⁵

This last report is a reminder for us too that our righteous teachers decide what we learn, not us.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Being a teacher is a role respected by all members of society, in all ages. A teacher holds an immense position in Islam too. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ wanted to be remembered as a teacher. In a beautiful report⁶, the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ came to the mosque to find his Companions gathered in two circles, one were reciting the Qur’ān and supplicating to Allāh whereas the second were learning and teaching. He complimented both sets of Companions, though he

⁵ Ibid, p. 32.

⁶ *Sunan al-Darimi*, the preface, chapter 32.

chose to sit with the latter. As he did so, he said:

انما بعثت معلما

“Verily I have only been sent as a teacher.”

We love teachers for their selfless dedication and their sincere desire to inspire their students for the rest of their lives. No one forgets a good teacher on this very basis. A thousand years have passed and we still derive inspiration from Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī, which certainly suggests his remarkable success as a teacher.

Perhaps one of the reasons for his lasting success was his pursuit of self-perfection, before trying to perfect others. Observers will undoubtedly note that Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī did not begin teaching at an early age, like it has been the hallmark of many great Islamic scholars, but rather he adopted this course quite late on in his life. There is a reason for this; Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī spent the early part of his life perfecting himself before turning to others. Decades of hunger, thirst, struggle, loneliness and unbelievable hardship ensured that when he did finally teach, his words had weight and profound effect on his subjects. Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī only addressed others when he first addressed himself. In this is a poignant reminder for us all; that one cannot expect others to accept our advice when we do not act upon it ourselves.

May Allāh shower His infinite mercy upon the final resting place of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī, *ameen*.

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