

The Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ Miraculous Methods of Teaching

By Mufti Abdullah Momla,

Teacher, JQU

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was renowned for his unparalleled approach to teaching, which combined wisdom, compassion, and a deep understanding of human nature. His methods were not only effective but also left a lasting impression on his companions, as evident in numerous hadiths.

The Prophet ﷺ exemplified gentle correction and deep understanding as a teacher. In one narration, Mu'awiyah ibn al-Hakam recounts an incident during prayer where he spoke out loud after a man sneezed, saying, "Allah have mercy on you!" The companions reacted with disapproving looks, but the Prophet ﷺ, instead of rebuking him harshly, gently corrected him after the prayer. Mu'awiyah said:

"...I declare that neither before him nor after him have I seen a leader who gave better instruction than him. I would ransom my father and my mother for his sake. I swear that he did not scold, beat, or revile me but said: 'Talking is not appropriate during salah, for it consists only of glorifying Allah, declaring His Greatness, and recitation of the Qur'an.'" (Sahih Muslim 537)

The Prophet's primary mission as a teacher was to impart knowledge and wisdom. His role as a teacher was highlighted when he once entered the Masjid and saw two groups: one was engaged in the recitation of the Qur'an and supplication, and the other in learning and teaching. He recognized the value in both but emphasized his purpose. The Prophet ﷺ said: "Both of them are good. However, these people are learning and teaching. Verily, I have been sent as a teacher." Then he sat down with them (*Sunan ibn Majah* 229).

The Prophet ﷺ emphasized ease and compassion in his teaching approach, making learning accessible and heartfelt for all. He clearly stated that he was not sent to make things difficult or burdensome but to make them accessible and understandable:

"God did not send me to be harsh, or cause harm, but He has sent me to teach and make things easy." (Sahih Muslim 1478)

Methods of Teaching Adopted by the Prophet ﷺ

1. Leading by Example and Demonstrations

The Prophet ﷺ effectively taught through his actions, embodying the principles he advocated. The Qur'an underscores his exemplary role: "Indeed, for you there is an excellent example in the Prophet ﷺ, for anyone who hopes to meet Allah and the Last Day" (Surah al-Ahzab, 21).

One vivid example of this method is seen in the Prophet ﷺ's approach to the ritual sacrifice during the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah. After concluding the treaty, he instructed his Sahabah to perform the rituals of slaughtering their animals and shaving their heads. He repeated the command three times, yet none of the companions initially moved. The Prophet ﷺ then sought advice from his wife, Umm Salamah, who suggested that he should perform the ritual himself to prompt them. Following her advice, the Prophet ﷺ completed the sacrifice and shaved without speaking to anyone. Witnessing his actions, the companions hurriedly followed suit, illustrating the power of leading by example (*Sahih al-Bukhari* 2731).

In another instance, the Prophet ﷺ used a practical demonstration to teach proper etiquette. He saw phlegm stuck on a mosque wall, and instead of simply ordering someone, he cleaned it himself. He used the occasion to explain the importance of maintaining cleanliness in places of worship. He also demonstrated how to dispose of phlegm properly and introduced the practice of using perfume to cover any marks left behind (*Sunan Abi Dawud* 485).

The Prophet ﷺ frequently employed demonstrations to teach various aspects of worship. When asked about prayer times, he invited the questioner to stay with him and observe the prayer schedule over two days. This hands-on approach allowed the questioner and others present to learn effectively through direct experience (*Sahih Muslim* 611). Similarly, when asked about ablution, he demonstrated the process to ensure clarity (*Sahih Muslim* 250).

Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, in his work *al-Isabah*, illustrates how the Prophet ﷺ's practice of leading by example was profoundly impactful. He recounts how the Prophet ﷺ sent Amr ibn al-'Aas to invite al-Julanda, the king of Oman, to embrace Islam. Al-Julanda was drawn to the Prophet ﷺ not only for his teachings but also for his embodiment of those teachings. He admired how the Prophet ﷺ was the first to act upon good deeds and the first to abandon evil. Al-Julanda noted that the Prophet ﷺ did not display arrogance in victory or harshness in defeat, and he fulfilled his promises and covenants. This portrayal of the Prophet ﷺ's character and actions underscored the effectiveness of teaching through personal example (1:637).

These methods highlight how the Prophet ﷺ's teaching was not just about verbal instructions but also about embodying the practices he wished to impart, making his guidance both practical and profound.

2. Teaching in Stages

The Prophet ﷺ followed a gradual approach in his teaching, prioritizing matters in order of importance and introducing topics gradually to make them easier to understand and implement. As narrated by Jundub ibn 'Abdullah:

"We were with the Prophet ﷺ, and we were strong youths, so we learned faith before we learned Qur'an. Then we learned Qur'an and our faith increased thereby." (Sunan Ibn Majah 61)

The Prophet ﷺ's method of teaching faith first before the detailed laws of the Qur'an helped the companions build a strong foundation of belief, which then enhanced their understanding and implementation of the Qur'anic guidance.

Additionally, when the Prophet ﷺ sent Mu'adh رضي الله عنه to Yemen, he instructed him to first invite people to the oneness of Allah, then to the prayers, and finally to zakah. This gradual approach ensured that the people would first accept the core tenets of faith before being introduced to additional obligations:

"You are going to a nation from the people of the Scripture, so let the first thing to which you will invite them be the oneness of Allah. If they learn that, tell them that Allah has enjoined on them five prayers to be offered in one day and one night. And if they pray, tell them that Allah has enjoined on them zakah of their properties and it is to be taken from the rich among them and given to the poor." (Sahih al-Bukhari 7372)

Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, in *Jami' Bayan al- 'Ilm*, emphasizes this method by quoting Ibn Shihab, who advised against acquiring knowledge all at once and recommended a gradual approach, likening knowledge to many valleys that should be traversed slowly to avoid overwhelming oneself (652). The Companions themselves practiced this method by learning and mastering ten verses of the Qur'an at a time before moving on to the next set of verses (*Musnad Ahmad* 19970).

3. Observance of Moderation and Avoidance of Longwindedness

The Prophet ﷺ was mindful of the time commitments and personal circumstances of his companions. He would carefully choose the timing and frequency of his reminders to avoid causing disinterest or weariness. Abu Wail reported:

"Abdullah (Ibn Mas'ud) used to give a religious talk to the people every Thursday. Once a man said, 'O Aba Abd al-Rahman! I wish you could preach to us daily.' He replied, 'The only thing which prevents me from doing so is that I hate to bore you, and no doubt I take care of you in preaching by selecting a suitable time just as the Prophet ﷺ used to do with us, for fear of making us bored.'" (Sahih al-Bukhari 70)

4. Observance of Individual Differences

The Prophet ﷺ was attentive to the individual differences and needs of his companions, tailoring his advice accordingly. Anas ibn Malik narrated:

"The Prophet ﷺ addressed Mu'adh ibn Jabal as he was riding behind him and repeated his name three times. He said, 'If anyone testifies sincerely that there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is His slave and His messenger, Allah will protect him from the Hellfire.' Mu'adh asked if he should inform people so they would be happy. The Prophet ﷺ said that they might become complacent, so Mu'adh only revealed this at the time of his death, to avoid the sin of concealing knowledge." (Sahih Muslim 32)

This indicates that advanced or sensitive knowledge should be shared with those who have the capacity to understand and appreciate it rather than with those who might misapply it or take it for granted.

Additionally, Abdullah ibn 'Amr ibn al-'Aas reported a scenario where the Prophet ﷺ provided different responses based on age and context, demonstrating his sensitivity to individual circumstances:

"A young man asked if he could kiss while fasting, and the Prophet ﷺ said no. When an old man asked the same question, the Prophet ﷺ said yes, explaining that the older man was able to control himself." (Musnad Ahmad 19972)

And in another instance:

"A person sought permission to join Jihad, but the Prophet ﷺ asked if his parents were alive. Upon confirming they were, he was told to focus on serving them instead." (Sahih Muslim 2549)

The Prophet ﷺ's responses varied according to the situation and the individual's context, reflecting his deep understanding and consideration of personal needs and circumstances.

5. Teaching through Conversation and Questioning

The Prophet ﷺ often employed a teaching method centered on conversation and questioning. This approach aimed to captivate the listener's attention, prompting them to ponder and seek answers. By encouraging them to think for themselves, the Prophet ﷺ made his responses more impactful and easily understood when they were eventually provided. For example, in a hadith narrated by Abu Hurairah, the Prophet ﷺ posed a question to his companions:

"Just see, can anything of filthiness remain (on the body of) any one of you if there were a river at his door in which he washed himself five times daily?" They said, "Nothing of his filthiness will remain (on his body)." He said: "That is like the five prayers by which Allah obliterates sins." (Sahih Muslim 667)

This method not only engaged the companions but also made the analogy of purification through prayer more relatable and memorable. In another instance, the Prophet ﷺ asked his companions:

"Do you know who is the bankrupt one?" They replied, "The bankrupt one amongst us is one who has no dirham with him nor wealth." The Prophet ﷺ said, "The bankrupt of my ummah is the one who comes on the Day of Resurrection with prayers, fasting, and zakah, but he had also hurled abuses upon others, slandered others, consumed the wealth of others, shed the blood of others, and beaten others. His good deeds will be given to those he wronged. If his good deeds fall short, the sins of the wronged ones will be transferred to him, and he will be thrown into the Hellfire." (Sahih Muslim 2581)

Another example of this is the famous Hadith of Jibreel, wherein he asked the Prophet ﷺ important questions regarding Islam, Imaan, the Hour, and other significant matters, thereby elucidating the pillars of Islam for the Sahabah (Sahih Muslim 1).

6. Teaching through Intellectual Discussion and Negotiation

The Prophet ﷺ utilized intellectual adjudication through question-and-answer sessions as a teaching method. This approach served two purposes: to dispel misconceptions held by those favoring falsehood and to reinforce the truth for those finding it unfamiliar or dubious. An illustrative example of this is the incident narrated by Abu Umamah al-Bahili:

A young man approached the Prophet ﷺ and said, "O Messenger of Allah, permit me to commit adultery." The people around him scolded him and said, "What are you saying?!" The Prophet ﷺ, however, asked him to come closer and sit down. Then, he asked the young man, "Would you like that for your mother?" The young man replied, "No, by Allah, O Messenger of Allah, may I be sacrificed for you." The Prophet ﷺ then said, "Neither do other people like it for their mothers." (Musnad Ahmad 22211)

Through this calm and reasoned dialogue, the Prophet ﷺ addressed the young man's request without alienating him. He guided the youth to consider the broader implications of his desires by making the matter personal and relatable. This method effectively corrected the young man's understanding and instilled in him a deeper awareness of the values of respect and morality.

In conclusion, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ's teaching methods were divinely inspired and remarkably effective, combining compassion, wisdom, and a deep understanding of human nature. His approach to teaching, which included gentle correction, a focus on ease and compassion, leading by example, and addressing individual needs, remains a timeless model for educators and leaders across generations.