ILUSTRACIJA ~ Kur'an (detalj), Širaz, Iran, datiran 12.11.1881. © Khalili Collection London, QUR 188, fols 1b-2a.

ILLUSTRATION ~ Qur'an (detail), Shiraz, Iran, dated 12 November 1881. Khalili Collection London, QUR 188, fols 1b-2a.

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MOŽEMO LI POSTATI HODAJUĆI QURANI? (Poboljšanje naše sposobnosti da slijedimo Poslanikov sunnet)

**CAN WE BECOME WALKING QURANS?
 (Improving Our Capacity to Follow the Prophetic Sunnah)**

CAN WE BECOME WALKING QUR'ANS?

As Muslims, we are taught that we are to follow the Prophet's *Sunnah*, his precedent and praxis. The first steps we learn on how to do this is to pray as he did, give the *zakah* as generously as he did, fast as he did, perform *ḥajj* and *'umrah* as he did; that is, by performing the rituals of the faith.

Clearly, following the Prophetic *Sunnah* involves more than just the physical performance of our rituals.

Achieving excellence in following the Prophetic *Sunnah* was something that the early Muslims sought to achieve, and is revealed in the *ḥadīth* of a *tābi'ī* (a person of the generation after the Prophet's generation who was either too young when the Prophet died or born just after his death) who, wanting to know more about how the Prophet was like, went to his widow Aisha and asked her. Her response was that the Prophet was effectively a 'Walking *Qur'ān*.'

We too should make that our objective.

Which means that we should embark on several tracks simultaneously:

First it means that we should read the *Qur'ān*, listen to the *Qur'ān*, and internalize as much as we can of its lessons, its commandments and instructions.

Second, it means recognizing and internalizing the difference between *doing* and *being*. We can *do* something perfectly and yet not *be* that. In other words, we can perform Islam perfectly: i.e. we can perform the five-time daily prayers perfectly, we can fast perfectly, we can memorize the *Qur'ān* and recite it perfectly etc., and still be a rotten and evil human being. This reality is indicated in the *Qur'ān* by the frequent mention of hypocrites, which scared the Prophet's followers and made them very concerned about falling into the sin of hypocrisy; and also by several Prophetic *ḥadīths*. One of these is the hadith where the Prophet says many a person fasts but gains nothing from his fast but hunger and thirst, and many person does *qiyām al-layl*, meaning the additional prayers like *tarāwīḥ*, and gains nothing from his prayer but fatigue. Another *ḥadīth* is where the Prophet tells us that a time will come when there will be people who recite the *Qur'ān*, but that it will not descend further than their throats—meaning that it will have no impact on their behavior.

Hadīths like these should prompt us to question ourselves whether we are guilty of such criticism. Do we feel the effects of our prayers, and of our fasting? When we recite the *Qur'ān*, do we register its meanings and strive to follow it; or are we just giving it lip service? E.g., if we recite *sūru al-Naṣr* in our prayers, which ends with the verse, *fasabbih bi ḥamdi rabbike wastaghfir-hu*, in which *Allah* commands us: so hymn your Lord with gratitude and seek His forgiveness, do we respond to this Divine command and repeatedly say *subḥanallahi wa bi-ḥamdihi* as well as *astaghfirullah*, or do we stop at its mere recitation? Is this verse, in the words of the Prophet, going below our throats and making an impact on our behavior? The Prophet himself said in a *ḥadīth* that he does *istighfār* 70 times a day. In Arabic, 70 is a number used figuratively as well as literally; like when you complain to your child: "I've told you a hundred times to neaten up your room"! It means countless times, so the Prophet may have done *istighfār* way more than 70 times daily.

Do we feel that performing our prayers reduces our propensity to sin, as *Allah* says in the *Qur'ān*, in *sūra al-Ankabūt*, 29:45: *Inna al-ṣalāta tanhā 'an al-fahshā'i wa al-munkari wa la dhikrullahi akbar*.

"Indeed, prayer erases obscene and unacceptable behavior, but for sure the remembrance of *Allah* is greater" [in its effective force in erasing indecency and evil.]

Internalizing verses like these means that we have to ask ourselves, are my prayers removing my tendencies to act obscenely or atrociously? And are they making me a better person? If we don't feel that they eliminate the negative aspects of our behavior and amplify our ethical behavior, then what's the point? All we're getting is, as the Prophet said, fatigue.

This is an example of performing an act of Islam perfectly, but not benefitting from such performance spiritually.

What we learn from the *ḥadīth* of Jibril is that *islām*, *īmān* i *iḥsān* are inter-related and interact with each other. *Iḥsān*, which the Prophet described and defined as worshipping *Allah* as if you see Him, connects us back to the first and primary act of Islam, which is to bear witness to *Allah*, His Oneness and His Absoluteness. This nudges us to shift our performance of the *shahādah* from just being an expression on our tongue, to being something that we actually see or witness. You can recite the *shahādah* perfectly, but never have witnessed God. How then, if we want to make the *shahādah* go beyond our throat, in the words of the Prophet, do we do this? How do we give real meaning to our *shahādah* so that we actually witness God?

I have often related the story of how I was taught to perform my prayers when I was about 9 years old, and by the time I was 13 I felt bothered every time I recited the *shahada* in my *julūs* (when I was seated in my *ṣalāh*). Every time I said *ashhadu an lā ilāha illa Allāh*, I felt a pang of hypocrisy in my heart, so much that I actually questioned my father about it. In my case, my prayer spurred me to want to experience the reality of witnessing God, otherwise I felt my pronouncing the *shahada* was fairly void of meaning. It took me a year or more till I had a powerful experience of witnessing God, which at that point made me comfortable that I had finally fulfilled the first part of the *shahada*.

But I still struggled with the second part of the *shahada*. How was I to truly witness that Muhammad was *Allah's* messenger? I wasn't fully satisfied with just following the Prophet's *sunnah* in my acts of worship. It took me another 20 years until I witnessed the Prophet in a dream, when finally I felt that my *shahada* was fully realized and authentic. Until then I parsed my *shahada* of Muhammad as messenger of God as meaning that I *accepted* Muhammad a.s.

messenger of God; but I could not honestly say that I *witnessed* him as such.

My witnessing the Prophet in a dream only happened after I joined a circle of dhikr. The power of dhikr confirmed for me verse 29:46, that “indeed *salah* erases obscene and unacceptable actions, *but the remembrance of Allah is greater* [in its impact].”

You will read in the writings of many if not all spiritual teachers, that our ego is our worst enemy on the spiritual path. *Sheikh* Wālī Araslān, in his short but powerful work titled *Risālah fī al-tawḥīd*, says that when you disconnect from your ego, then you witness Him. Here is the translation of the last few lines of his *Risālah*:

If you surrender to Him, He will bring you near
If you contest with Him, He will distance you
If you approach Him through Him, He will bring you near
If you approach Him through yourself, He will distance you
If you ask Him for yourself, He will obligate you
If you ask Him for Him, He will guide you
Your nearness to Him is therefore your exit from yourself, while your distance from Him is your holding onto yourself
If you approach Him detached from your ego, He accepts you
If you approach Him with attached to your ego, He veils you
As you set aside your desire, your faith/*iman* strengthens
As you set aside your ego, your *tawḥīd*/oneness [with *Allah*] strengthens
Creation is a veil, and you are a veil, but the Absolute is not veiled
He is veiled from you by you
And you are veiled from Him by you
Detach from you, and you shall witness Him!

The fact is that *Allah* exists everywhere. There is nowhere where *Allah* is absent. *Allah* says in the *Qur’ān*,
Wa lillah al-mašriqu wa al-maghribu, fa ayna mā tuwallū, fa thamma wadḥullah!

To *Allah* belongs the east and the west; so wherever you turn, there is *Allah’s* Face [*Qur’ān* 2:115].

If *Allah* is everywhere, then the issue is not where you can see/witness *Allah*, but how you can see/witness Him. Since *Allah* is everywhere, the way we get to witness Him is via a process, and primary is getting your ego-your self-out of the way, as *Sheikh* Walī Raslan explains.

This is why our ego is considered the greatest impediment on the spiritual path.

In fact, *Sheikh* Wālī begins his *Risālah* by stating the very same point he concludes with:

Wa’lam anna kullaka shirkun khafīyyun, wa mā yabīnu laka tawḥīduka illa idhā kharajta ‘anka.

„Know that you are entirely a hidden (subtle) shirk, which means a company/duality with God, and your oneness about *Allah* doesn’t appear until you exit from yourself/your ego”.

What this means is that when you truly experience the reality of *Allah*, the boundaries of your ego disappear.

Much like the saying, when the sun rises the stars disappear. The stars are still there; it's just that the brightness of the sun makes them disappear. What happens when you feel *Allah's* presence so powerfully is that the boundaries of yourself disappear and you actually feel a oneness with God, what our spiritual teachers have called *fanā' fillahi*. It is then that your act of witnessing God is at its very best and purest.

As for the process of helping you acquire this, our spiritual teachers have taught us that the essence of this spiritual journey comprises two things: *dhikrullah* and appropriate *ṣuḥbah*, which means remembering *Allah* and appropriate companionship. This is based on the historical beginnings of our faith, which was based on the *Qur'ān* as the primary source of *dhikr* and *ṣuḥbah*, companionship, of the Prophet. From a spiritual perspective a *ṣaḥābī* of *rasulūllah*, a companion of the Prophet, is a person who was enabled to witness *Allah* by the spiritual power, *himma*, of the Prophet.

Since then, this program has been maintained by a line of spiritual teachers who taught their disciples how to remember *Allah* and by their spiritual companionship. From this spiritual perspective, a *ṣaḥābī*, or companion of the Prophet, was not just a contemporary of the Prophet, but a person who imbibed from the Prophet his noble companionship, through which the companion received a spiritual transmission that transformed him or her.

In our contemporary time you therefore are advised to find a spiritual teacher who can introduce you to the transformative powers of *dhikrullah*, and by holding fast and seriously to their companionship, by being a companion/ *ṣaḥābī* to him, and by imbibing from him such a spiritual transmission. This is how the experience of Islam was transmitted throughout its history, and this was how Islam spread through the traditional Muslim World. It was not, as some assert, spread by the sword. In fact, after the destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate in 1453, it was these spiritual teachers who expanded the geographical boundaries of Islam further into India, Africa and into Central and Far Eastern Asia.

Therefore, I urge you to take seriously your personal experiencing of the meaning of remembering *Allah*, which is the meaning of *dhikrullah*. We urge you to actively engage in a program of *dhikr* and feel its effects in your soul. For *dhikrullah* is like food for your soul. You will and should feel it nourishing your soul. *Allah* repeatedly commands us in the *Qur'ān* to remember Him:

Yā ayyuhalladhīna āmanu udhkurullah dhikran kathīran wa sabbiḥūhu bukratan wa aṣīlā. Huwalladhī yuṣallī 'alaykum, wa malā'ikatuhu li yukhrijakum min al-ẓulumāti ilā al-nūr. Wa kāna bi al-mu'minīna raḥīmā. Taḥiyyatuhum yawma yalqawnahū salām. Wa a'adda lahum ajran karīm.

"O you who have believed. Remember *Allah* a lot, and hymn Him mornings and evenings. He is the One Who does *salah* on you, and so do His angels, to exit you from darkness into light, and He is ever compassionate to the believers. Their greeting on the Day they will meet Him will be Peace! And He has prepared for them a noble reward". [*Qur'ān* 33:41-44]

Here *Allah* commands us, the believers, to remember Him frequently and a lot, to *sabbiḥūhu*, to hymn Him, mornings and evenings, explaining that this is the means by which He performs His *salah* upon us, which means this is how *Allah* connects Himself to us, via our *dhikr*, and that the result of this is that we exit darkness and enter into light.

Note that *Allah* uses the word *ṣalāh*, to describe His actions upon those who remember Him. This is significant. We perform *ṣalāh* to attach ourselves to *Allah*. *Allah* performs *ṣalāh* upon us to lead us out of spiritual darkness into His Light.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Ludwig Deutsch, *Učeni čovjek iz Kaira*; Pariz 1886.

ILLUSTRATION ~ Ludwig Deutsch, *The Learned Man Of Cairo*; Paris 1886.

In *Sura al-Baqarah*, verse 152, *Allah* says *fadhkurūnī adhkurkum* – You remember Me and I will remember you”. Which also informs us that *the purpose of our remembering Allah is to achieve His remembering us*.

A few verses later, 155-156, *Allah* directs the Prophet to give the good news to those who are patient and persevere, and who, when disaster strikes them, say that indeed they belong to *Allah*, and to Him they are all returning: *they are the ones upon whom is Allah's ṣalawāt and mercy, and they are guided aright*.

Wa bashshir al-ṣābirīn alladhīna idhā aṣābathum muṣibatun qālu inna lillahi wa innā ilayhi rāji'ūn. 'Ulā'ika 'alayhim ṣalawātun min rabbihim wa raḥamah, wa 'ulā'ika hum al-muhtadūn.

It is rare when *Allah* uses in the *Qur'ān* the term *ṣalāh* to describe His action, an action He performs upon the believers. Most of us are more familiar with the expression *allahumma ṣalli 'ala sayyidina Muḥammad* – O *Allah*, do make *ṣalāh* upon our master Muhammad – an expression we recite in our five-time daily prayers, asking and even urging *Allah* to perform His *ṣalāh* upon our Master Muhammad. We are rarely taught or instructed to *effectively* perform that which will *effectively* evoke *Allah's ṣalāh* upon us, although asking *Allah* to bestow His *ṣalāh* upon the Prophet is one of the ways we invoke *Allah's ṣalāh* upon ourselves. This is a lacuna in much of our religious education, one which we hope future educators of Islam will seek to fill.

Many of you have engaged in such practice of *dhikrullah*. You may have noticed that when you begin to perform *dhikr*, a new quality of radiance shines on your faces that didn't exist before. This is the light that *Allah* is here speaking of. This light is *Allah's* light that He injects into us via His *ṣalāh* upon us, which is precipitated by your *dhikr*. This is the light that *Allah* describes in *Sura* 66:8 as *radiating from the front of them and from their right sides on the Day (Judgment Day) that Allah will not disgrace the Prophet and those who believed with him*.

This assures us of being greeted well by *Allah* on the Day of Resurrection, and greeted by the word *salām*, peace. In *Sura Yasin*, *Allah* says *salāmun qawlan min rabbīn raḥīm* – Peace is a word, an utterance, from a compassionate Lord. When you sincerely do *dhikr*, you should and you will feel this sense of peace, and it is so comforting, so nourishing and so calming. This calmness, this *sakīnah*, is a blessing that *Allah* bestows on whom He wills of His servants. Although this in itself is a worthy reward, *Allah* affirms that He will generously bestow on us beyond that a fantastic reward!

In this blessed time, as we celebrate the 15th of the month of *Sha'ban*, and prepare ourselves for the upcoming blessed month of *Ramadan*, may we flee toward the warm embrace of *Allah* (*fa-firru ilallah*), as *Allah* commands us in *Qur'ān* 51:50.

May we all flee to *Allah*, and there find our safety and comfort in and with Him, and may we all be blessed thereby. Amen!

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