

Remembering God and Refining the Soul

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The scholars of ethics, following the glorious Qur'an, greatly emphasize on the remembering God as an important act of worship which purifies and awakens the soul. They prescribe repeating certain names of God during each stage of one's spiritual journey; for example, repeating the phrase *Ya Ghaffar* (O All-Forgiver!) in the stage of repentance, *Ya Hasib* (O Reckoner!) in the stage of reckoning the soul, and *Ya Rahman* (O All-Merciful!) and *Ya Rahim* (O All-Compassionate!) in the stage of asking for God's blessings, and so forth.

Remembrance of God is among the best acts of worship that safeguards human being against the attacks of the tempting self and the influences of Satan. It destroys selfishness and conceit, which are the greatest enemies of one's salvation. Remembrance of God awakens human beings from ignorance and makes them aware of the dangers that threaten their salvation.

Remembrance of God is like life-giving raindrops which fall on the land of one's soul and grow various seeds of virtue on it. The importance of this act of worship is so great that it could not be reflected by words.

Here are some verses of the Qur'an in which the importance of this act of worship has been bolded:

- Those who have faith and whose hearts find rest in the remembrance of God; Look! The hearts find rest in God's remembrance! (13: 28)
- Maintain the prayer; indeed the prayer prevents indecencies and wrongs, and the remembrance of God is surely greater. (29: 45)
- Indeed I am God —there is no god except Me. So worship Me, and maintain the prayer for My remembrance. (20: 14)
- Go ahead, you and your brother, with My signs and do not flag in My remembrance. (20: 42)
- But whoever disregards My remembrance, his shall be a wretched life. (20: 124)
- Content yourself with the company of those who supplicate their Lord morning and evening, desiring His Face, and do not lose sight of them, desiring the glitter of the life of this world. And Do not obey him whose heart We have made oblivious to Our remembrance, and who follows his own desires, and whose conduct is [mere] profligacy. (18: 28)
- So avoid those who turn away from Our remembrance and desire nothing but the life of the world. (53: 29)
- O you who have faith! Remember God with frequent remembrance, and glorify Him morning and evening. It is He who blesses you, and so do His angels, that He may bring you out from darkness into light, and He is most merciful to the faithful. (33: 41- 43)

- Indeed Satan seeks to cast enmity and hatred among you through wine and gambling, and to hinder you from the remembrance of God and from prayer. (5: 91)
- By men whom neither trading nor bargaining distracts from the remembrance of God. (24: 37)

Interpretation

The first verse indicates the influence of the remembrance of God on the tranquility of hearts; the kind of tranquility which is able to prevent one's slips and adorn him with moral virtues. God states,

“Those who have faith and whose hearts find rest in the remembrance of God” (Qur'an 13:28).

Then the same concept has been presented as a general principle:

“Look! The hearts find rest in God's remembrance!”
(Qur'an 13:28)

Worries sometimes are about indefinite future; for example, about the probability of losing blessings, becoming sick or incapable; and sometimes they come as a result of a dark past. Also, worldliness, suspicions, illusions, and the fear of death could disturb one's tranquility. Stinginess, jealousy, greed, covetousness, and the like could also cause worry.

Remembrance of God, who is the All-Munificent, All-Generous, All-Compassionate, Most-Merciful, and All-Sustainer can solve all these problems. God brings tranquility to the hearts and grows moral virtues in them:

“O soul at peace! Return to your Lord, pleased, pleasing! Then enter among My servants! And enter My paradise!” (89: 27-30)

The second verse states that,

“The remembrance of God is surely greater” (29: 45).

The essence of prayer is remembrance of God. It is remembrance of God that makes the prayer preventive against wrongdoings, because it reminds us of the blessings of God, which in turn forbids us from disobeying the Giver of those blessings.

On the other hand, this remembrance reminds people of the Day of Judgment and the divine court of justice, and helps them see themselves present before that great court, when they see the full records of their deeds and their punishments or rewards before themselves. This also prohibits people from sins and immoral acts.

Some exegetes of the Qur’an have interpreted that this passage (i.e., “The remembrance of God is surely greater.”) suggests that the remembrance of God is the servants’ most valuable act of worship.

Another suggestion is that here “remembrance of God” is God’s remembrance of His servant, which takes a servant to the highest positions of servitude and is better than anything else. However, it seems that the first interpretation is more plausible.

The third verse refers to the first revelation to the Prophet Moses (a) near the tree in the valley Tuwa near Mount Tur:

Indeed I am God —there is no god except Me. So
worship Me, and maintain the prayer for My
remembrance. (Quran, 20: 14)

Here, remembrance of God has been mentioned as the philosophy of prayer, which show its great importance, especially because it has been mentioned just after referring to monotheism.

The fourth verse addresses Moses and his brother, Aaron, when Moses was ordered to go to Pharaoh:

Go ahead, you and your brother, with My signs and
do not flag in My remembrance. (20:42)

God's command to remember Him in this context shows how effective the remembrance of God is in giving power and courage. In *Fi zilal al-Qur'an*, we read the following commentary on this verse: "God told Moses and Aaron that My remembrance is your means and winning instrument and the support you can rely on!" (Sayyid Qutb 1412 AH, 4:2336)

Some exegetes have interpreted the word *dhikr* (literally meaning "remembrance") in this verse as preaching the call of previous prophets (s), some have interpreted it as the order of God alone, and some others interpreted it as the "remembrance of God." There is no conflict among these different interpretations, and all of these meanings can be understood from the verse in its broad sense.

It is evident that when a prophet is mindful of God and strengthens himself with that remembrance, he delivers God's message more effectively.

The fifth verse states some of the consequences of abandoning the remembrance of God:

"But whoever disregards My remembrance, his shall
be a wretched life, and on the Day of Resurrection We
shall raise him blind" (20: 124).

Sometimes, having a poor and wretched life is because of having a low income, but sometimes although one has a high income, his greed makes his life miserable. Such people do not share what they have with the poor, but they do not enjoy their wealth either. Imam Ali (a) says:

“[The miserly] live in the world like the poor and will be judged in the hereafter like the rich” (Majlisi 1403AH, 69:199).

What Is the Remembrance of God?

In many hadiths, *dhikr* has been interpreted as Hajj or *wilayah* (guardianship) of the Commander of the Faithful, Imam Ali (a). It is evident that these two are important examples of the wide range of the examples of *dhikr*. Hajj is a collection of *dhikrs*, and *wilayah* of the Commander of the Faithful (a) reminds us of God.

The sixth verse addresses the noble Prophet (s) and prohibits him from following those whose hearts are ignorant of the remembrance of God and enjoins him to accompany those who remember Him constantly:

Content yourself with the company of those who supplicate their Lord morning and evening, desiring His Face, and do not lose sight of them, desiring the glitter of the life of this world. And Do not obey him whose heart We have made oblivious to Our remembrance, and who follows his own desires, and whose conduct is [mere] profligacy. (18: 28)

These ignorant people follow their carnal desires and their deeds are wicked.

It can be understood from this verse that ignoring the remembrance of God affects people’s morality and draws them to desire-seeking and profligacy.

The human’s soul would be satisfied with either God or desires. Desire-seeking is the source of forgetting God and people and the cause of alienation from moral principles. It utilizes one’s resources and makes him ignorant of all other things.

The seventh verse addresses the noble Prophet (s) and orders him to avoid those who are ignorant of God:

So avoid those who turn away from Our remembrance and desire nothing but the life of the world. (53: 29)

Regarding the interpretation of “remembrance” in this verse, some exegetes have suggested that it refers to the Qur’an itself; some have suggested that it refers to the logical reasons; and some others suggested that it refers to faith; however, it is apparent that remembrance of God has a broad sense and thus can include all these examples.

In this verse, the relation between “worldliness” and “ignoring the remembrance of God” is clarified and thus, the fruits of remembrance of God in developing moral virtues and the consequences of ignoring it in the development of vices become evident.

The eighth verse addresses all the believers and invites them to the remembrance of God and relates it with going out of darkness and entering the light.

It is interesting that the verse commands the believers to the remembrance of God in its broad sense and also to praising Him every morning and night. Then the verse mentions that God blesses those who obey and so do the angels, and that He will bring them out of darkness into light. The remembrance of God fully removes the darkness of vices from one’s soul and gradually develops virtues instead.

In *Tafsir al-mizan*, it is mentioned that this verse in fact gives the reason behind the command to “frequent remembrance” which is mentioned in other previous verses (Tabataba’i 1417AH, 16:329). There are different opinions about the interpretation of the “frequent

remembrance.” Some have said that it means “not forgetting God”; some have said that it refers to remembering divine names and attributes; and some others have mentioned specific *dhikrs* as the reference of frequent remembrance.

In this regard, Ibn Abbas has reportedly said,

“Every command of God is for certain circumstances and does not apply if one has certain excuses, except the command to the remembrance of God which is neither specific to certain circumstances, nor is there any excuse for ignoring it.”

In any case, *dhikr* has a broad meaning and range of applications and examples which include all the instances mentioned above.

There are a variety of opinions regarding what the “darkness” and “light” mean in the above verse. It has been suggested that the verse refers to going out of darkness of disbelief and entering the light of faith, or to going out of the darkness of the material world and entering the light of spirituality, or to going out of darkness of sin and disobedience and entering the light of obedience. Additionally, it can also be interpreted as going out of the darkness of vices and entering the light of moral virtues, which is among the most important fruits of the remembrance of God.

Again, it is obvious that these interpretations are not incompatible with each other.

The ninth verse mentions the aftermaths of drinking wine or gambling, which are incurring enmity and preventing the remembrance of God and prayer. Thus, remembrance of God is an important wealth like prayer and amity among people, losing which is a great loss. Moreover, it can be understood from the verse that there

is a relation between abandoning “remembrance of God and prayer” and “incurring enmity and other corruptions.”

The tenth and last mentioned verse, which comes after *Ayat al-nur* (Qur’an 24:35), speaks about the great men who dwell in the houses that are centers for the divine light.

Thus, the first attribute of the men who guard the divine light is that they do not get distracted from remembrance of God by any worldly engagements.

From the mentioned verses, it can be understood that remembrance of God brings tranquility of the heart, prohibits evil, strengthens the faithful against the enemy and eradicates greed, worldliness, and other vices.

The wayfarers of the path of God must not ignore this key to happiness and should know that if remembrance of God becomes a habit and a part of one’s life, then it brings with it awareness and power in passing through dangerous passes.

The Relation between Remembrance of God and Purifying the Soul in Hadiths

The importance of remembrance of God in hadiths is so great that it cannot fit in this short introduction; however, we try to discuss it as an element of purifying the self and developing moral virtues. In this regard, there are many hadiths narrated from the Infallibles (a). The Prophet (s) is reported to have said, “Remembrance of God is the cure for the hearts” (Payanda 2003, 493). The following hadiths, narrated from Imam Ali (a), shed further light on this topic:

1. One who builds up his heart through constant remembrance [of God], his deeds become good whether done secretly or apparently (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 189).

2. Constant remembrance brings power to the soul and is the opening to the good (Ibid.).
3. The key to the goodness of the heart is its engagement in remembrance of God (Ibid., 188).
4. Remembrance of God is the medicine for diseases of the souls (Ibid.).
5. Remembrance of God is the peak of all the faithful's property, and its benefit is protection against Satan (Ibid.).
6. The remembrance [of God] is the sharpness of eyes and the light of souls (Ibid., 189).
7. Whoever remembers God, the Glorified, He will revive his heart and illuminate his mind and his mouth (Ibid.).
8. Persist on the remembrance [of God], since it illuminates the heart and is the best of worship (Ibid.).
9. Remember God with a pure remembrance [which makes you] live the best of life and by which you go on the path of salvation (Kulayni 1407AH, 8:17).
10. I advise you to fear God, O my son! And [I advise you about] its necessity and building up your heart through remembering Him (Nahj al-balagha, Letter 31).
11. Remembrance of God is repeller of Satan (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 188).

According to the above-mentioned hadiths, there is a close relation between the "remembrance of God" and "purification of the soul". This relation illuminates the heart, cures spiritual diseases such as conceit, vanity, ignorance, meanness, and envy and purifies the heart.

According to some great scholars of ethics, the human's heart cannot be empty [of love for something]; thus, if remembrance of God fills it, Satan's temptations will keep away from it; otherwise, they will occupy it.

Moreover, since God is the source of all perfections, remembering Him draws human beings closer and closer to His absolute perfection

day by day and moves them away from vices, the source of which is imperfections.

Thus, the wayfarers of the path of God must have remembrance of God as their most powerful weapon, their best means of conveyance and brightest lamp to pass ups and downs of that journey quickly and safely until they reach the final destination.

There are three necessary points to add here:

i. What is the Essence of Remembrance?

According to Raghīb's *al-Mufradat*, *dhikr* has two meanings: having something in mind, and preserving knowledge and beliefs in the heart (Raghīb al-Isfahani 1412AH, 1:328).

Great scholars of ethics have said, "Remembrance of God is not only to say His names and praise Him frequently by tongue, but it is to be always mindful of God and His Magnificence and know Him as Omnipresent and Witness.

Without doubt, such remembrance is the beginning of moving towards all the good and can build a strong barrier between human beings and vices.

Accordingly, we read in a hadith from the noble Prophet (s) addressing Imam Ali (a), "There are three things that this nation cannot fully accomplish: doing justice to their religious brothers in financial issues; reserve the rights of people, and remembering God everywhere, which is not [just saying] '*Subhanallah* (Glory be to God!), *alhamdulillah* (Praise is due to God!), *la ilaha illallah* (There is no god but God!) and *Allahu akbar* (God is greatest!),' but [it is] fearing God, the Almighty and the Glorious when one faces something forbidden and abandoning it" (Majlisi 1403AH, 90:151). Similar hadiths are quoted from Imam Baqir (a) and Imam Sadiq (a) as well (Ibid.).

In another hadith, we read from Imam Ali (a):

“Remembrance [of God] has two kinds: Remembrance upon hardships is good and beautiful, but better than that is remembering God when facing a forbidden thing, since it will be a barrier” (Majlisi 1403AH, 75:55).

Thus, remembering God is a kind of remembrance which deeply influences one’s soul and his mental and practical directions, purifies his soul, and calls to the way of God.

One who praises God by tongue but follows the footsteps of Satan is not a true rememberer. In a hadith from Imam Rida (a), we read that,

“ne who praises God [by tongue] and does not hasten to meet Him, is only making fun of himself” (Ibid., 356).

2. Stages of Remembrance

Great scholars of ethics have mentioned different levels and stages for remembrance:

The first stage is remembrance by tongue when a person says the names of God without paying attention to their meaning, like those who pray without paying attention to the meaning of the phrases they say. Although such remembrance is not futile—because it is a start, and the one who performs prayer connects to God at least by standing before Him and fulfilling the obligation that he has, even though he might not fully know the meaning of every part—such a remembrance has a low value and is not much effective in the purification of the soul.

The second stage is spiritual remembrance which is one’s reflection upon the meaning of what he says. It is obvious that the more

attention he pays to the meanings of the phrases he utters, the more beneficial they would be for his edification.

The third stage is remembrance by heart, which is the reflection initiated from inside the heart and flown to the tongue; for instance, when a person reflects on God's creation, its amazing order, and its exquisite delicacy, one remembers the magnificence of God and then says: "Magnificence belongs to God, the One, the All-Dominant," this is a remembrance that coming from the heart.

Sometimes, a person experiences a direct feeling of spirituality, without any certain cause and begins praising God and remembering Him. Such a remembrance is greatly effective in the purification of the soul and the cultivation of moral virtues. It is similar to the angels' remembrance of God upon seeing the wonder of the creation of Adam and his knowledge of "the names":

"They said, 'Immaculate are You! We have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed You are the All-knowing, the All-wise'" (Qur'an 2:32),

In the glorious Qur'an, some of these stages of remembrance have been mentioned; for instance, we read:

"So celebrate the Name of your Lord, and dedicate yourself to Him with total dedication" (73:8).

Or elsewhere, it states:

"And remember your Lord within your heart beseechingly and reverentially, without being loud, morning and evening, and do not be among the heedless" (Quran, 7:205).

In verse (73:8), the focus is on verbal remembrance and its ultimate level is said to be dedicating oneself to Him with total dedication;

whereas, in the second verse (7:205), remembrance by heart has been emphasized when it is done “beseechingly and reverentially, without being loud” and that it must be from within the heart and flow to the tongue.

3. Obstacles of Remembrance

There is no significant obstacle against verbal remembrance; since whenever a person wishes to say the the names of God and glory or praise Him, he can; though those who are so occupied with worldly issues, may not get the chance to even say such verbal expressions.

However, remembrance by heart has many obstacles, which are mostly rooted in one’s soul. God is Omnipresent and All-Observer, as mentioned in the Qur’an:

“We are nearer to him than his jugular vein” (50:16);

He is before anything and after anything and with anything as mentioned in the hadith by Imam Ali (a): “I have seen God before everything” (Mulla Sadra 1383 Sh, 1:250); however, it often happens that a person’s actions and attributes veil his eyes, so he cannot feel the presence of God. This is mentioned in the famous supplication of Imam Sajjad (a), known as *Du’a Abu Hamza al-Thumali*: “You do not conceal yourself from Your creation; their actions have hid You from them” (Tusi 1411 AH, 2:583). And the most important action among the actions referred to in this supplication is egotism, which stops people from worshipping God and remembering Him.

An egotist person does not see God. Egotism is a kind of disbelief, which is not compatible with monotheism and seeing the Truth.

In a hadith from Imam Ali (a), we read, “Whatever distracts [a person] from remembrance of God is from Satan” (Muhammadi Reyshahri

1389, 4:246-7). And in another hadith from him (a), we read: “Whatever distracts [a person] from remembrance of God is [a kind of] gambling” (Ibid.), and we know that in the Qur’an, gambling has been mentioned together with idol-worshipping and prohibited with it (Qur’an 5:90).

We finish this discussion with an interesting hadith from the noble prophet (s) describing those who are addressed by this verse:

“O you who have faith! Do not let your possessions and children distract you from the remembrance of God, and whoever does that —it is they who are the losers” (63:9).

The Prophet (s) said:

“These [believers] are a people of my ummah, among whom there are righteous ones who would not be distracted from remembrance of God or the five daily prayers by any dealings or business” (Suyuti 1404 AH, 6:226).

Wherever they are and whatever they say or hear, they are mindful of God.

The clue of happiness, O brother, seek for!
And this precious life, do not spend in vain!
Constantly everywhere, with everyone, in every work
Keep your eye upon the Friend!

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