

# A Journey from Darkness towards Light: The Quranic Perspective on the Concept of Light - Part VI

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## Abstract

In this part, we speak of moving from darkness towards light. Remembering God is one of the main factors that leads man to light. Also, all divine scriptures and prophets, especially the Prophet of Islam (s), are sources of light. According to Qur'anic verses and Islamic traditions, dhikr gives light to the intellect and heart. It is the cure for spiritual diseases. Muslim thinkers have normally divided dhikr into three types: verbal dhikr, attentive or mindful dhikr, and dhikr by heart. Finally, we conclude that dhikr is the repaying of attention to, or remembering, something with faith, with love, or with the spirit of truth-seeking. One of these three is sufficient, and they may overlap.

**Keywords:** *light, dhikr, remembering God, verbal dhikr, attentive dhikr, dhikr by heart.*

## Celebrating God's Praise

I want to reflect on the concept of *dhikr* (remembering God). Everything in the world glorifies God:

وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ

There is not a thing but celebrates His praise. (Quran 17:44)

Therefore, not only do angels praise and glorify God but also the rest of creation. In the case of human beings, it is a matter of their choice; they can choose to do the same or abandon remembering God altogether. This is why God commands us to remember Him:

فَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ

Then celebrate the praise of your Lord. (Quran 110:3)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اذْكُرُوا اللَّهَ ذِكْرًا كَثِيرًا ﴿٤١﴾ وَسَبِّحُوهُ بُكْرَةً وَأَصِيلًا ﴿٤٢﴾

O you who have faith! Remember Allah with frequent remembrance, and glorify Him morning and evening. (Quran 33:41-2)

As far as I know, the term “dhikr” (remembrance) is used only for human beings, not for angels or any other creatures. This is because dhikr can be used for someone who may forget or neglect. Dhikr is seen to be the opposite of either forgetting (*nisyan*) or negligence (*ghaflah*). We, human beings, may or may not remember God. If we remember Him, it is called dhikr; if we do not remember Him, it means we have either forgotten or neglected. However, since angles constantly praise and glorify God and are unceasingly aware of Him, we do not use the term “dhikr” for them.

## Remembrance as Applied to God

Can the term “dhikr” be used for God? The answer is yes. Dhikr can be used for God, not because He may forget, but because He may have a special type of remembrance that is not always there, a type of remembrance which involves further support and guidance. This further support may or may not be provided. Therefore, it is right to speak about God’s remembering or forgetting a person:

فَاذْكُرُونِي أَذْكُرْكُمْ

Remember Me, and I will remember you. (Quran 2:152)

نَسُوا اللَّهَ فَنَسِيَهُمْ

They have forgotten Allah, so He has forgotten them. (Quran 9:67)

There is another sense in which dhikr is applied to God: when it is the opposite of the mental state of someone who is absolutely empty-minded about something. If God does not remember the faithful or the faithless, they will disappear. In this sense, He always remembers everything. If we were not remembered by Him in this sense, we would not exist:

هَلْ أَتَى عَلَى الْإِنْسَانِ حِينٌ مِّنَ الدَّهْرِ لَمْ يَكُنْ شَيْئاً مَّذْكُوراً

Has there been for man a period of time when he was not anything worthy of mention? (Quran 76:1)

With respect to our voluntary actions, we may, or may not, remember God, but with respect to our involuntary actions or aspects of being, we cannot fail to remember God either. For example, my body is always glorifying and praising God; it is completely obedient and submissive

to God, because my body is not different from any other being. When God commands a person's body to become old, ill, or healthy, it obeys Him, whether the person is faithful or faithless. But when God commands us to be good to people or to be kind with our parents, this is where we have choice and freedom to obey or disobey.

Now, let us focus on the voluntary type of remembering God, which is called dhikr. This is where forgetting or negligence may occur.

### Divine Scriptures and Prophets as Reminders

All divine scriptures, particularly the Torah, the Gospel, and the Quran, are sources of light. The Prophet (s) is also described in the Quran as being a source of light:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ شَاهِدًا وَمُبَشِّرًا وَنَذِيرًا ﴿٤٥﴾ وَدَاعِيًا إِلَى اللَّهِ بِإِذْنِهِ وَسِرَاجًا  
مُنِيرًا ﴿٤٦﴾

O Prophet! Indeed, We have sent you as a witness, as a bearer of good news, and as a warner and as a summoner to Allah by His permission, and as a radiant lamp. (Quran 33:45-6)

This does not mean that other prophets do not give light, but our Prophet (s) particularly is mentioned as a source of light, constantly charged by *salawat* (salutations) from God.

Dhikr is very similar to divine books. All divine books are reminders:

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى وَ هَارُونَ الْفُرْقَانَ وَ ضِيَاءً وَ ذِكْرًا لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ

Certainly, We gave Moses and Aaron the criterion, a light, and reminder for the God-wary. (Quran 21:48)

In Arabic, *farq* means to split, discern, or detach, so *furqan* (criterion) is something that helps you distinguish between right and wrong. It is also one of the names of the Quran.

According to the above verse, the Torah was to be a reminder. Reminding can be regarded as one of the most important Quranic points with regard to guidance. The whole point in guiding people is to remind them, as the whole point in being guided is to remember.

God says:

﴿۲۷﴾ لِمَنْ شَاءَ مِنْكُمْ أَنْ يَسْتَقِيمَ ﴿۲۸﴾

It is just a reminder for all the nations, for those of you who wish to be steadfast. (Quran 81:27-8)

The Quran is a reminder; it does not teach something strange or odd. Of course, those who actually benefit from this reminder are those who wish to be guided to the right path, but the Quran is a reminder for all people.

God frequently says:

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِنْ مُدَكِّرٍ

Certainly, We have made the Quran simple for the sake of admonishment. So is there anyone who will be admonished? (Quran 54:17)

God has designed Quran in a special way to be easily remembered. Are we willing to remember, or are we happy with our forgetfulness? Sometimes, people enjoy their sleep so greatly that they do not want to be awoken.

Prophet Muhammad (s) is the only prophet who is mentioned in the Quran as a reminder. This does not mean that other prophets do not remind; it is only an emphasis that he assumes an important role as a reminder. Consider the following verse:

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ يَا أُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا قَدْ أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْكُمْ ذِكْرًا ﴿١٠﴾ رَسُولًا يَتْلُو  
عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ مُبَيِّنَاتٍ لِيُخْرِجَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى  
النُّورِ ۚ وَمَنْ يُؤْمِن بِاللَّهِ وَيَعْمَلْ صَالِحًا يُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ  
فِيهَا أَبَدًا ۖ قَدْ أَحْسَنَ اللَّهُ لَهُ رِزْقًا ﴿١١﴾

So be wary of Allah, O you who possess intellect and have faith! Allah has already sent down to you a reminder, an apostle reciting to you the manifest signs of Allah that He may bring out those who have faith and do righteous deeds from darkness into light. And whoever has faith in Allah and does righteous deeds, He shall admit him into gardens with streams running in them, to remain in them forever. Allah has certainly granted him an excellent provision. (Quran 65:10-11)

The expression *Ulu al-albab* in this verse means those who think, reflect, and understand, so the verse suggests that those who possess intellect and faith should safeguard themselves against anything that displeases God. This is what *taqwa* (God-wariness) means. One can have faith only if one thinks.

Some commentators have suggested that we need to add the word “and” when interpreting this verse and say: “a reminder *and* an apostle.” However, this addition is not necessary and must be avoided. The best interpretation is that dhikr (reminder) is the Prophet (s) himself. This interpretation is supported by many hadiths as well. In *Tafsir al-Burhan*, there is a hadith in which Imam al-Rida (a) is reported to have said,

الذكر رسول الله (صلى الله عليه و آله)، و نحن أهله

The Prophet (s) is the reminder, and we are his family.  
(Bahrani 1416 AH, 5:413)<sup>1</sup>

In addition to being characterized in the Quran as a reminder (dhikr), the Prophet (s) is also described as “a radiant lamp” (*siraj munir*). The link between these two characteristics is interesting. The Prophet (a) as a radiant lamp is the one who reminds us of God, just as an “enlightening book” (*kitab munir*) reminds us of God. Therefore, the whole point in enlightening people is to remind them of God, and the whole point for people to receive light is to remember God. This is why we say in Dua Kumayl: “O Allah! I seek proximity to you with your remembrance.” As long as we remember God, we move towards Him.

### Significance of Remembering God

Imam Ali (a) says:

من عمر قلبه بدوام الذكر حسنت أفعاله فى السر و الجهر

He who develops his heart by constant remembrance of God, his hidden and manifest deeds will become good. (Tamimi al-Amidi 1375 Sh, 1:198)

It is impossible that someone constantly remembers God and does something bad intentionally.

أصل صلاح القلب اشتغاله بذكر الله

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<sup>1</sup> This is why *Ahlulbayt* are *Ahl al-Dhikr*. When the Quran says “فاسألوا اهل الذكر” the best example of *Ahl Al-dhikr* are *Ahlulbayt*.

The foundation of the purification of the heart is its preoccupation with the remembrance of God. (Ibid, 1:198)

ذِكْرُ اللَّهِ دَوَاءٌ أَعْلَالِ النَّفُوسِ

Remembering God is the treatment for the diseases of souls. (Ibid, 1:369)

يا من اسمه دواء و ذكره شفاء

O He whose name is a remedy and whose remembrance is a cure! (Tusi 1365 Sh, 2:844)

The names of God are remedies that we should use in order to be cured. If we have medication but do not use it, we will not be cured. Sometimes we say the names of God and even repeat them, but we stop at this stage and do not go further. In other words, we do not really *take* them, so the result disappears or at least decreases.

الذكر جلاء البصائر و نور السرائر

Remembering [God] is the clearness of visions and the light of souls. (Tamimi al-Amidi 1375 Sh, 1:74)

مَنْ ذَكَرَ اللَّهَ سَبَّحَانَهُ أَحْيَا اللَّهُ قَلْبَهُ وَ نَوَّرَ عَقْلَهُ وَ لُبَّهُ

He who remembers God, God revives his heart and enlightens his intellect. (Ibid, 1:644)

استديموا الذكر فانه ينير القلب و هو افضل العبادة

Continue remembering [God], because it gives light to the heart, and it is the best worship. (Ibid, 1:155)

It was because of remembering God that prayer (*salat*) was legislated (Quran 20:14). We must perform *salat*, fast, and recite the Quran as

much as possible, because they are the best type of the remembrance of God. We should not forget that the whole point is to remember God. If we make ourselves just physically busy with the rituals without remembering God in our hearts, we miss the point.

Prophet Muhammad (s) said,

ذکر الله شفاء القلوب

Remembrance of God is the healing of the hearts  
(Muttaqi al-Hindi 1971, 1:414)

### Different Sorts of Remembrance

In one of his works on the Quran, Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi, one of our living *maraji'*, divides dhikr into three categories (Makarim Shirazi 1425 AH, 1:361-62). Allama Majlisi also mentions another category (Majlisi 1403 AH, 90:153). We will mention these four categories of dhikr here.

The first category is *verbal dhikr*, that is, uttering the names of God and praising and glorifying Him with the tongue. Although this type of dhikr has some impacts, it is not the real dhikr, because even a person whose heart is preoccupied with something else may say the names of God constantly. Even Satan may utter the names of God, as he did when he said "By Thy glory, I shall pervert them all together" (Quran 38:82).

The second type of remembering God, as stated by Ayatollah Makarim, is to remember Him through meanings (*dhikr-e-ma'navi*); that is, when you say, for instance, "*Allah akbar*" (God is the greatest), you try to pay attention to its meaning.

The third type is to remember God with the heart. In this type, as Ayatollah Makarim explains, you first pay attention to the names of God, to God Himself, or to His acts, and then automatically you utter His names, as when you go to some beautiful scenery or a very beautiful jungle and, being enchanted by its beauty, you say, “*Subhan Allah*” (Glory be to God!). This kind of saying, “*Subhan Allah*” is different in quality from when you say it just as a habit. This is an outcome of your remembrance of God.

Consider another example. When God created Adam (a), the angels did not object; they just asked why God had decided to appoint Adam (a) as His vicegerent (*khalifah*) while they were glorifying and praising Him. So, God wanted to show them that there was something in Adam that they lacked:

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾ وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٣١﴾ قَالُوا سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣٢﴾

When your Lord said to the angels, “Indeed I am going to set a viceroy on the earth,” they said, “Will You set in it someone who will cause corruption in it, and shed blood, while we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your sanctity?” He said, “Indeed I know what you do not know.” And He taught Adam the Names, all of them; then presented them to the angels and said, “Tell me the names of these, if you are truthful.” They said, “Immaculate are You! We have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, You are the All-knowing, the All-wise.” (Quran 2:30-2)

The angels said that they had no knowledge except what God had taught them. Their lack of knowledge was not because they could have learned but God did not teach them; rather, it was because they did not have the capacity for that kind of knowledge. Had they possessed the capacity, God would have taught them. When they realized this imperfection in themselves, they automatically said, “Immaculate are You!” We also should be like the angels; when we realize our shortcomings or weaknesses, we should not get angry with the people who mention them to us. The angels did not get angry with God. Instead, they said very nicely that God was right and that they did not know those things. Not only they do not keep any hostility toward Adam and his children but also they constantly ask God to forgive faithful human beings (Quran 40:7).

However, the third type of remembrance comes from the heart. It is more important than the first and second types, because when you just say dhikr or pay attention to the meanings, it is not a fruit of your heart.

Afterwards, Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi mentions some verses of the Quran and explains that the verses refer to these different types of dhikr. For example, God says,

وَادْكُرْ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ وَتَبْتَئِلْ إِلَيْهِ تَتَّبِعًا

So celebrate [or remember] the Name of your Lord and dedicate yourself to Him with total dedication (Quran 73:8)

When the Quran speaks of remembering the *name* of God, I believe, verbal remembrance is meant. This can be seen, for instance, in the verses that instruct us to remember the name of God when slaughtering animals (Quran 22:36). The word “dhikr” in these verses denotes

uttering. Therefore, it is not enough to remember God's name by the heart; rather, we must utter His name. However, the above verse requires us to move from verbal remembrance to a spiritual condition of being exclusively dedicated to God.

In another verse, we read,

وَ اذْكُرْ رَبَّكَ فِي نَفْسِكَ تَضَرُّعًا وَ خِيفَةً وَ دُونَ الْجَهْرِ مِنَ الْقَوْلِ بِالْغُدُوِّ وَ الْآصَالِ  
وَ لَا تَكُنْ مِنَ الْغَافِلِينَ

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)

According to this verse, we have two forms of remembrance: remembering God by the heart in a silent way and remembering Him by words. I think this is to save us from making the remembrance of God a habit. If we remember God always in the same way, it is more likely to become a habit.

Allamah Majlisi introduces another type of dhikr: remembrance by means of acts or *practical dhikr* (Majlisi 1403 AH, 90:153). According to him, whatever you do for the sake of God is dhikr. For example, praying, fasting, hajj, giving *khums* and alms, enjoining good, and prohibiting evil, are all regarded as dhikr. In the case of Prophet Moses (a) and Aaron (a), God gave them the great tasks of going to Pharaoh, speaking to him, and guiding and leading the Israelites, which continued for many years. God, Moses, and Aaron regarded the whole process as the remembrance of God:

قَالَ رَبِّ اشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي ﴿٢٥﴾ وَيَسِّرْ لِي أَمْرِي ﴿٢٦﴾ وَاخْلُفْ عَقْدَةً مِن لِسَانِي  
﴿٢٧﴾ يُفَقِّهُوا قَوْلِي ﴿٢٨﴾ وَاَجْعَلْ لِي وَزِيرًا مِّنْ أَهْلِي ﴿٢٩﴾ هَارُونَ أَخِي

﴿٣٠﴾ اشدُّدْ بِهِ اُزْرِي ﴿٣١﴾ وَاَشْرِكُهُ فِيْ اَمْرِي ﴿٣٢﴾ كَيْ نُسَبِّحَكَ كَثِيْرًا  
﴿٣٣﴾

He said, “My Lord! Open my breast for me. Make my affair easy for me. Remove the hitch from my tongue, [so that] they may understand my discourse. Appoint for me a minister from my family, Aaron, my brother. Strengthen my back through him, and make him my associate in my affair, so that we may glorify You greatly and remember You greatly.” (Quran 20:25-34)

It is very interesting that Moses (a) looks at all these things as instances of the remembrance of God, and I think that God somehow indicated this to him:

اِذْهَبْ اَنْتَ وَاُخُوْكَ بِآيَاتِيْ وَ لَا تَنْبِا فِيْ ذِكْرِيْ

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

God sends him to Pharaoh and to lead the Israelites and tells him not to flag in His remembrance. This is why Moses then says, “... so that we may glorify You greatly and remember You greatly” (Quran 20:34).

An instance of practical dhikr is studying for the sake of God to learn something that is useful for society. The students who study with this intention and purpose, not only their presence in classes but also their other actions such as their commute to schools can all be seen as instances of remembering God.

### **The Real Essence of Remembrance**

What is the real essence of remembering God? When can we say that someone remembers God? Is it the act of uttering certain phrases? Is it

paying attention to God by the heart? Muslim scholars normally maintain that the remembrance of God consists in paying attention to Him by the heart. Therefore, if you say God's names but your heart is occupied with something else, that is not dhikr.

However, I think this definition needs modification. First of all, there is no need for the qualification "by the heart," because it is impossible to pay attention to something without the heart being involved. So, it seems that this qualification is added only for emphasis.

The main problem, however, is that paying attention to God is not necessarily dhikr. For instance, suppose that I know that God wants me to avoid doing something, but I want to do it, because I have a desire for it, and finally I decide to do it. Here, my decision comes after paying attention to God. I am not like someone who is not aware that this is *haram*. However, this kind of paying attention to God is obviously not dhikr. Hence, remembering God requires something more than attention.

The second point is that attention can be given to something for the first time. Someone just enters a room and I pay attention to him, but this is not dhikr either. Dhikr is refreshing your attention or memory of something. Paying attention to something for the first time is not dhikr.

Dhikr is the repaying of attention to, or remembering, something with faith, with love, or with the spirit of truth-seeking. One of these three is sufficient, and they may overlap. One may remember God in a spirit of faith or love,<sup>2</sup> and one may remember Him in his search for truth,

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Quran, there are people whose hearts are repelled when God is remembered (39:45).

even if he has no faith in God. I will give you references for this from the Quran.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, remembrance is among the most valuable human acts, which has many benefits, including illuminating the heart, as mentioned in Islamic traditions. Verbal dhikr, remembrance by paying attention to the meaning of God's names, and remembering God by the heart are different types of dhikr, but the real essence of remembrance is repaying attention to God in a spirit of faithfulness, love, obedience, or, at least, truth-seeking. If someone has one of these, then he has the state of remembrance.

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