

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

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## Abstract

In the previous part, we mentioned different types of remembrance (*dhikr*) and then examined some of the definitions of *dhikr* given by scholars. In this part, reviewing different types of remembrance of God, i.e. remembrance by word, by meaning, by heart, and by act, we explain the real meaning of *dhikr* and then refer to the role of *dhikr* in achieving light. Remembering God, after some modifications, is defined as repaying attention to God's essence, attributes, or acts with a positive attitude.

**Keywords:** *types of remembrance, attention, positive attitude, light*

## Different Types of Remembrance

There are different types of remembrance (*dhikr*): One type is what we call remembrance by words (*dhikr-e-lafzi*). We invoke or remember God

by saying His names, such as Allah, Rahman, Rahim, Ghafur, and Aziz, and phrases like *Subhan Allah*, and *Allah-u Akbar*. However, saying God's names without attention is not very fruitful—just like it is not enough for a patient to merely say, “O Doctor, O Doctor!” In *Dua Kumayl*, we say, “O One whose name is medicine and whose remembrance is healing!” which indicates that remembrance is the main thing. If you have a medicine but do not take it, you will not recover. God's name is medicine, but remembering Him is healing.

Although remembrance by words is important, it does not reach the level of the second type of remembrance: remembrance by meaning. In the second type, in addition to saying God's names, we pay attention to their meanings and let the names of God enter our hearts. For example, when I say, “O Healer!” I should think about God being the Healer; or when I say, “O Healer of the one who does not have any healer!” I should pay attention to the meaning in my heart.

The third type of remembrance is remembrance by heart. Remembering God by heart is not about making your heart remember God by uttering and paying attention to His names; rather, it is about remembering Him by your heart and then naturally saying some of His Names. For example, you go to a beautiful landscape where there are pretty flowers, beautiful butterflies, and lovely birds, and you are amazed at the beautiful creation of God and then you say, “*Subhan Allah!*” This kind of saying “*Subhan Allah*” is much more valuable than saying it and then paying attention to its meaning, because it is like the fruit of your heart. It is good to get ready for prayer when the adhan is called, but it is more important to pray and talk to God when you miss Him even if it is not yet the adhan's time. This is remembrance by heart.

At another level, we have remembrance by act (*dbikr-e 'amali*). This is what Allamah Majlisi has put forth. Everything that we do for the sake of God can be counted as remembering Him: praying, fasting, giving alms, going to hajj, helping people, serving your parents, showing care and love to your children, studying, and earning money to provide for your family. Everything that you do with a godly intention may be regarded as remembering God by act.

### **Definition of Remembrance**

So we have four types of remembrance of God. Let us now define remembrance of God so that we understand why all these four can be included under the heading of remembering God. Muslim scholars have given different definitions for remembrance of God. For example, a great contemporary philosopher and commentator of the Quran says that remembrance of God is attention of the heart to God (Tabataba'i 1973, 16:136) Anything less than attention of the heart does not count as remembrance of God. Another great contemporary scholar, who is also a jurist and commentator of the Quran, says that remembrance of God is to pay attention to Him and feel that He is present and sees you (Makarim Shirazi 1425 AH, 1:362).

Although the wording may be different, what is common between the two definitions is that remembrance of God is attention of the heart either to His essence, His attributes, or His acts. While this definition is acceptable, it seems that it is in need of some modification, which seems to be acceptable to those scholars as well.

First of all, remembering God is not any attention to God. Remembrance is attention to something that you already know. So remembrance is paying attention again. If someone just enters a room

and I see him for the first time, I cannot say, "I remember him." So remembering God means that one is already familiar with God and has some knowledge of Him, and then renews his memory of God. So it is re-paying attention, not just paying attention. Human beings are not in need of being taught about God. They are only in need of being reminded of God. This is why the Quran calls sacred scriptures *dhikr* (remembrance). The Quran calls itself specifically nothing other than a reminder for all people (Quran 81:27).

Even Prophet Muhammad (s) himself is introduced as reminder:

قَدْ أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْكُمْ ذِكْرًا ﴿١٠﴾ رَسُولًا يَتْلُو عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ مُبَيِّنَاتٍ لِيُخْرِجَ  
الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ ...

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. (Quran 65:10-11)

So the Quran is a reminder, and the Prophet is a reminder. Reminder is what brings back your memories of God. This was the first modification of the definition of *dhikr*.

Another modification is that not everyone who pays attention to God and refreshes his memory of God is doing *dhikr*. *Dhikr* must be a type of attention to God which comes with loyalty, love, faith, or at least openness. If a person who does not believe in God thinks about God, he is not doing *dhikr*. If a hypocrite (*munafiq*) is thinking about God, this is not *dhikr*. Or, suppose that a person says, although God has told us to fast, I do not fast. This person has full attention to God and His command, but can we say that he is doing *dhikr*? Of course not. *Dhikr* is to think about God and remember Him in a positive way. One

remembers God only if one believes in Him or loves Him or at least seeks the truth and opens his heart towards the light of God.

To clarify this a bit more, we can refer to the Quran to see whether dhikr can be used only for a person who believes, or it can be used even for a nonbeliever. We can use dhikr to refer to the attitude of a person who does not yet believe in God but may possibly open his heart. For example, God told Prophet Moses and Aaron to go and speak with Pharaoh in a soft way so that Pharaoh would remember God, become humble before Him, or stand in awe of Him. Awe is a special type of fear; it is not fear of something frightening but a fear accompanied by admiration and reverence for something great.

فَقُولَا لَهُ قَوْلًا لَّيِّنًا لَّعَلَّهُ يَتَذَكَّرُ أَوْ يَخْشَىٰ

Speak to him in a soft manner; maybe he will take admonition or fear.’ (Quran, 20:44)

God says, if Pharaoh is spoken with softly, there will be a chance of him taking admonition. This is a very great and important lesson for us that even with someone like Pharaoh we have to speak softly. Maybe his heart becomes lightened and open. My point here is that God says maybe Pharaoh *yatadhakkar* (will remember). Now, Pharaoh was not a believer, so his remembrance was not the remembrance of a faithful person. His remembrance would have been that of one who would open his heart to God. So he would have remembered God by refreshing the knowledge he had of God from the past.

Remembrance (*tadhakkur*) can also be used for a faithless person (*kafir*) who embraces faith. Consider the following:

عَبَسَ وَتَوَلَّى ﴿١﴾ أَنْ جَاءَهُ الْأَعْمَى ﴿٢﴾ وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّهُ يَزَكَّى ﴿٣﴾ أَوْ يُدَكَّرُ  
فَتَنفَعَهُ الذِّكْرَى ﴿٤﴾

He frowned and turned away when the blind man approached him. And how do you know, maybe he would purify himself, or take admonition, and the admonition would benefit him! (Quran 80:1-4)

This is about the story of a blind person who came to the Prophet (s) to seek guidance. The Prophet (s) was speaking at that time with someone else (who was not much interested in Islam) and got upset with the blind man interrupting him and thus did not pay attention to him. We do not interpret the verse in this way. It was not the Prophet (s) who did not pay attention; rather, it was someone else who was there and was not happy that the blind man came and made the rich person, whom the Prophet (s) was talking to, leave. In the above verses, God says that when this blind person has come and is seeking guidance, why do you think that there is no chance for him? Maybe this person seeks purity or remembers. So, again, when a faithless person accepts the truth and embraces faith, we can say that he has remembered. And this is why some people prefer the word “revert” to “convert.” “Revert” indicates that the person who has embraced Islam has not embraced something new; rather, he has returned to his original and default state of faith, since every human being was born with some knowledge of God.

So, remembrance of God (dhikr) means to refresh your knowledge and your understanding of God, to pay attention again to Him, to bring back your memory of Him into your mind and heart, either in a faithful way, with love, or at least for understanding and seeking the

truth, because whoever is seeking the truth is indeed moving towards God, because God is the Truth.

ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْحَقُّ وَأَنَّ مَا يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ الْبَاطِلُ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْكَبِيرُ

That is because Allah is the Reality [Truth], and whatever they invoke besides Him is nullity, and because Allah is the All-exalted, the All-great. (Quran 31:30)

If someone is really looking for the truth, whether he knows or not, he is moving towards God. Once, I had a discussion with an unbeliever. He was from Germany, and the conversation was about whether God exists or not. At the end of our conversation, that person asked me whether God loved him or not. I said God certainly loves you, even if you are in this state, as long as you are researching, thinking, and trying to find the truth. You still do not know what the truth is, but just the fact that you are pursuing the truth is by itself a sacred activity. One who is reading, studying, and asking whether God exists or not, this search is a search for truth, and indeed it is a search for God, because we do not have doubt that God is the Truth. So, I said, as long as you are searching, you are loved. But if the truth becomes clear for you and yet you do not accept it, or do not continue your search, you are not on the right track anymore.

There are also people who enjoy searching and asking questions but not in order to understand. They enjoy asking questions with no intention of finding the truth and accepting it. This is not a sincere search for truth. A sincere search for truth is like a thirsty person's searching for water. Such a person will drink water as soon as he finds it. However, if one just enjoys looking for water but never takes it, one will not benefit from it. In Farsi, there is a proverb that says, "Search less for

water, and try to find thirst.” The problem with many people is that they are not thirsty.

So it is very important to search for the truth sincerely. As long as you are seeking the truth, God loves you whether you believe in Him or not. Take the example of Salman, who was initially a Zoroastrian, but his religion did not satisfy him. So he became a Christian and then learned about the last prophet whose time was about to come. He went to the Arabian Peninsula waiting for our Prophet (s) and then believed in him and became one of his best companions, because he was looking for the truth.

### **The Substantial Role of Remembrance in Achieving Light**

After defining the concept of remembrance and surveying some hadiths about it, we want to turn to its central position in obtaining spiritual light. We human beings are going towards God and will meet Him on the Day of Judgment:

يَا أَيُّهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّكَ كَادِحٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ كَدْحًا فَمُلَاقِيهِ

O man! You are labouring toward your Lord laboriously, and you will encounter Him. (Quran 84:6)

So every human being will go before God and meet Him on the Day of Resurrection. People then will be one of two major groups. Some people will meet God while they are pleased with Him and while God is pleased with them. These are the people who prepared themselves for their meeting with their Lord. Suppose someone is going to have an interview. If he has worked hard and prepared himself, he has no

worries. Likewise, people who have prepared themselves for encountering God, they are very happy to meet Him:

﴿٣٨﴾ ضَاحِكَةٌ مُسْتَبْسِرَةٌ ﴿٣٩﴾  
وُجُوهُ يُؤْمِنُ بِمُنْفَرَةٍ ﴿٣٨﴾ ضَاحِكَةٌ مُسْتَبْسِرَةٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

Some faces will be bright on that day, laughing and joyous, (Quran 80:38-9)

But there are people who forgot God in this world and insisted on wrongdoing and defiling their hearts. So when they stand before God, they feel ashamed. They cannot look at God's face (which is, of course, not a physical face). The Quran describes them as follows:

﴿٤٠﴾ تَرَهَقَهَا فَتْرَةٌ ﴿٤١﴾  
وُجُوهُ يُؤْمِنُ بِمُنْفَرَةٍ ﴿٤٠﴾ تَرَهَقَهَا فَتْرَةٌ ﴿٤١﴾

And some faces on that day will be covered with dust, overcast with gloom. (Quran 80:40-1)

Their faces are dark and covered with dust; there is no joy or happiness in their faces, because they have not been ready to meet God.

According to such Quranic phrases as “Indeed we belong to Allah and to Him do we indeed return” (2:156), “that the terminus is toward your Lord,” (53:42), and “Allah will bring us together and toward Him is the destination” (42:15), we are all going towards God. A faithful person is the one who aspires to return to God and tries to meet his Lord even in this world. In this world, you can reach the state that people are destined to have in the Hereafter. There is a hadith that states, “Die! Before you die” (Majlisi 1403 AH, 69:59), which means make yourself ready for death, release yourself from all the attachments to the material world and you would be free, then death would not be an important thing for you. This is just like changing a dress that has lots of buttons

when you must change within a few seconds. If you haven't already unbuttoned your dress, you have to tear it and maybe injure yourself; but if you have already unbuttoned it, you can easily change. Likewise, when one is not attached to this world, he can easily leave it.

Describing the pious, Imam Ali (a) says,

لَوْ لَا الْأَجَلُ الَّذِي كَتَبَ اللَّهُ [لَهُمْ] عَلَيْهِمْ لَمْ تَسْتَقِرَّ أَرْوَاحُهُمْ فِي أَجْسَادِهِمْ طَرْفَةَ عَيْنٍ شَوْقًا إِلَى الثَّوَابِ وَخَوْفًا مِنَ الْعِقَابِ

If there had not been fixed periods (of life) ordained for each, their spirits would not have remained in their bodies even for the twinkling of an eye because of (their) eagerness for the reward and fear of chastisement. (Nahj al-balagha, sermon 193)

A believer longs to leave this world, but a disbeliever is so much attached to this world that he does not dare to think about leaving it. For some people, death is more painful than removing their nails. Nails are so attached to our fingers that removing the whole nail causes an extreme pain. Some people are so much attached to this world that leaving it— that is, leaving their house, money, family, and position— is more painful for them than removing their nails.

God says,

O you who have faith! What is the matter with you that when you are told: “Go forth in the way of Allah,” you sink heavily to the ground? Are you pleased with the life of this world instead of the Hereafter? But the wares of the life of this world compared with the Hereafter are but insignificant. (9:38)

A faithful individual looks forward to God's permission to depart this world. Suppose someone has a very important journey, such as hajj, for which he has waited all his life. When everything becomes ready for him to visit the House of God, he remembers that he has a five-hour flight before he reaches his destination, and wishes that these few hours pass quickly, because he can't wait to arrive. This is the situation of a believer waiting for death, which is his departure to meet God.

It is a fact that everyone returns to God and meets Him on the Day of Resurrection (Quran 84:6). What matters is to make oneself ready and prepared for one's meeting with God. It would be helpful for this purpose to remember God and the Day of Resurrection and to remember that we have come from God and we are going back to Him.

Now, according to our tradition, mosques are God's houses in which He is remembered:

Who is a greater wrongdoer than those who deny access to the mosques of Allah lest His Name be celebrated therein, and try to ruin them? (Quran: 2:114)

The divine light can be found in these houses of worship, "in houses Allah has allowed to be raised and wherein His Name is celebrated" (Quran 24:36). The desirable light of God comes from remembrance.

In another verse, we read,

رَجَالٌ لَا تُلِهِمْ بِحَارَةٌ وَلَا يَبِيعُ عَنْ ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ وَإِقَامِ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءِ الزَّكَاةِ يَخَافُونَ يَوْمًا  
تَتَقَلَّبُ فِيهِ الْقُلُوبُ وَالْأَبْصَارُ

... by men whom neither trade nor bargaining distracts from the remembrance of Allah and the maintenance of prayer and the giving of zakat. They are fearful of a day wherein the hearts and the sights will be transformed. (Quran 24:37)

Hence, remembrance of God and remembrance of the next world are factors that make these houses sources of light. Commenting on this verse, Imam Baqir (a) says, "The houses in which God is constantly remembered are the houses of prophets, and the house of Ali (a) is one of them" (Kulayni 1407 AH, 4:556).

It is reported that the Prophet (s) was reciting the Nur Verse (Quran 34:35-36) when someone asked him about the houses mentioned in this verse. The Prophet (s) said, "They are the houses of prophets." The first caliph was there, and he asked whether the house of Ali and Fatimah was one of those houses as well. The Prophet (s) said, "Yes. Among their best ones!" (Makarim Shirazi 1374 Sh, 14:482). Why do we call Ahl al-Bayt (a) Ahl al-Bayt? *Bayt* means house, and Ahl al-Bayt means the people of the house of the Prophet (s), but what is meant is not the physical house of the Prophet (s); rather, Ahl al-Bayt live in the spiritual house of the Prophet (s), which is the abode of the divine light. The houses of prophets, such as Moses (a), Jesus (a), Abraham (a), and Muhammad (s), and the house of Imam Ali (a) and lady Fatimah (a) are the ones that the verse refers to. When we want to visit the shrine of Imam Rida (a), for instance, we are instructed to ask for permission to enter. We say, "Oh God! I am standing before one of the gates of the house of the Prophet (s)." Although it is the shrine of Imam Rida (a), we look at it as a part of the house of the Prophet (s), because the Imams (a) do not have independent houses. The Imams (a) are Ahl al-Bayt, the people of the Prophet's house. They live in the same house where the Prophet (s) lives. When you enter a shrine, you must not think that you

are entering a cemetery or a graveyard. You are in fact entering a house, a place of life. Then you continue to say, “You have prohibited people from entering without asking for permission: ‘O you who have faith! Do not enter the Prophet’s houses for a meal until you are granted permission’” (Quran 33:53).

Therefore, the shrines of Ahl al-Bayt are parts of the house of the Prophet (s), from which light spreads. If you can go and visit, then you should do so; otherwise, at least face them, try to pay attention to them, and remember them so that you can receive this light. It is possible that we connect our houses to the house of the Prophet (s). If we remember God constantly and become a good faithful person and follower of the Prophet (s) and Ahl al-Bayt, then our houses will also be connected to their house. We can even become one of them. Salman was a true follower of Ahl al-Bayt, who reached such a high level that Ahl al-Bayt called him “one of us.” He was no longer a stranger or just a visitor; he became one of the people of the same house. There is a difference between one who lives in a house and one who comes as a visitor. Salman became an inhabitant of the house. We can follow the Prophet (s) and Ahl al-Bayt whole-heartedly and remember God constantly so that our houses also become a part of the house of the Prophet (s).

The importance of the Prophet’s house is not due to its material, large size, or beautiful neighborhood; indeed, the house of the Prophet (s) was physically one of the smallest houses in the world. But what makes a house significant is the one who lives in the house. Unfortunately, because we do not have high regard for ourselves, we try to gain people’s attention by driving expensive cars or living in luxury houses. But this is not something that makes one significant. If an important person stays even in a small room, the room becomes significant. The honor for the place comes from person who is in that place, not vice versa.

The house of the Prophet (s) is significant since there are significant people in that house who remember God, glorify Him, and remember the Day of Resurrection.

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