

September 29, 2007
Saturday

**Title: LIVING THE QUR'AN THROUGH THE LIVING QUR'AN
Seeing Oneself in Reflection**

(This sohbet of the 29th was based on the [ISRA lecture](#) (given at GWU, Saturday, Sept. 22, 2007) and is an expanded version of the speech, which was not transcribed.)

In this text, following the dinner blessing is the prepared speech.

Dinner blessing: O Allah Swt, we are grateful to You for all the blessings You bestow upon us, for the bounties You give us and the wonderful favors You shower upon us. We ask You, Allah, to continue that; and [we ask] to be more and more aware [of Your favors] despite the ways in which they appear to us. Your mercy has many faces and Your compassion is endless. We ask you, O Allah, to make this a time of deep gratitude, in these last 10 days of Ramadān, [a time where] we should pause as often as we can and to retrain our minds to reflect upon You, and make *wuqufi qalbi*, to say Your name in the core of our heart just three times, and remember that Divine presence within us. O Allah, we ask You to shed Your mercy upon us. Without that, we are helpless and hopeless without You to relieve us of the pains of separation, and to uplift us in the joy of Your presence, and to see Your presence in everyone. O Allah, help us to help those who need help among us and around us in this world. And give us greater purpose. O Allah, end the miserable wars, pestilence, and poverty that are rampant in this world. Give us a world of health and hope. *Amin.*

Speech:

Bismillaahi-r-Rahmaani-r-Raheem Oh Allah, we ask You for words which will make certain Your Mercy, actions which will make certain Your Forgiveness,

freedom from every offence, a supply of every virtue, entering Jannah and safety from the Nār.

Introduction

Yaa ayyuhaa-n-naasu qad^a jaaa'atkum maw^cidhatum-mir-rabbikum wa shifaaa'ul-limaa fee as-suduuri wa hudañw-wa rahmatul-li-l-mu'mineen

O Mankind: There has come to you a direction from your Lord and a healing for the (disease) in your hearts - and for those who believe, a guidance and mercy!" (Qur'an 10:57)

Wa nunazzilu mina-l-Qur'aani maa huwa shifaaa'uñw-wa rahmatul-li-l-mu'mineena wa laa yazeedu-dh-dhaalimeena illaa khasaaraa

"And We sent down in the Qur'an that which is healing and a mercy to those who believe; to the unjust it causes nothing but loss after loss" (Qur'an 17:82)

Today I will attempt to address how one should view the Qur'an, in light of striving to make it alive in our life. We are all familiar with the traditional approach to the benefits of reciting and listening to Al Qur'an—and there are many, so well documented and experienced that I need not reiterate them. Instead, I will approach this topic, *insh'Allah*, from an internal perspective. The internal aspect of the process of interaction with Qur'an, which is based on both our intention and our refinement in *muraqabah*, must not be neglected or minimized. The ears and eyes of the heart are real. Let anyone who has felt the joy and the pain of love testify to this truth. How then can we read and live in the light and love of Qur'an and its Revealer, Allah Swt? How can we apply that experience and the knowledge, *marifa*, to our life, arriving at that state of application without thought...spontaneously and fully? In this talk I will begin to address this topic of

living the Qur'an; asking the questions: "How should we view the Qur'an?"
"How do we read and interpret the Qur'an?" and "How do we apply the Qur'an?"

How should we view the Qur'an?

The Qur'an, as we know, is more than a book or a series of Divine Utterances. It is more than a religious text to be reviewed, analyzed, and used for to justify our selfish ends. It is, in fact, an ever-changing extremely refined catalyst for understanding, for awakening, and for guidance in this world and the hereafter. It is food for the body and for the mind and for the soul. We must ask ourselves, "How can we nourish ourselves with Qur'an?" Qur'an nourishes the seed of *Iman* so that we can build our character and fulfill our purpose in life. In this month of Ramadan we may be fasting from physical food but we are permitted, encouraged, and indeed enjoined to feast on the delicacies of the nourishing Qur'an, the food for thought, food for healing, food for sharing and giving to others. It is a table filled with all that one needs, in any situation, for any illness, for any need.

The first Muslims received their guidance and training from the Qur'an. They also received their inspiration, knowledge, and the practices from the Qur'an. All came from the Qur'an, as it manifest through the Prophet (sal). The Qur'an suffused their minds, and it interacted with their decision-making, and it was the basis upon which they grew their insight and produced the fruit of knowledge and wisdom that has been handed down, generation after generation, to us.

There were no formal *hadith* at the time of the Prophet (sal). Everything that the Prophet (sal) taught, all decisions that he made, all inspiration that he gained, all instruction that he interpreted were based on the Qur'an. He (sal) was the living Hadith. The Qur'an and the Hadith awakened within and lived in and through our Prophet (sal). In time, we too can discover and rediscover this

treasure-house of wisdom, this agent of change within our self and watch as it emerges from our actions, lips, and attitudes. But to do this, we have to *allow* the Qur'an to live in us and through us.

As Sufis, we must examine how we look at things, re-define and re-adjust our way of defining; adjust our way of relating to spirituality, to Islam, to Qur'an, and to Tasawwuf. Yes, the Qur'an is not a book, although one finds it between exquisite covers in beautiful print, and even though there are many *tafsir* to read (and they are worthwhile to read). The real benefit comes from the interface between ourselves and the Qur'an, and the real benefit comes from within ourselves. We reflect on the Qur'an and it reflects the reality of our life.

The Qur'an tells us that when we truly listen, our *iman* (faith) and our *ihsan* (belief) increases. The heart, listening to the Qur'an, is like a fire that consumes everything that is placed in it. So too, all of our weaknesses and fears, the doubts that we have and all the things that we ignore and carry with us, can be fed to, consumed by, and transformed into faith by the fire of the Qur'an. To achieve this, we must truly learn to see through the *latifa* of the heart and from there to proceed deeper into the *ruh*, *sirr*, *khafi*, *akhfa*...into the world of command (*'alam al amr*). What will we discover there? What will we learn?

We will learn to see our doubts, weaknesses, and ignorance to be, in a sense, food for our faith. And, in that sense, all our frailties are but possibilities for a greater self to emerge, and a greater faith to come about. When we hear Qur'an, all too often, our hearts are not moved, our eyes do not fill with tears; our hearts are not expanded with knowledge and love, because we are distracted by the self. This *ghaflah*/distraction is inherent in human nature and needs to be overcome by affirmation and attention. To do this, we must approach the Qur'an as we approach someone we love, or respect; with the air of attentiveness we have as we listen to the diagnosis of our medical condition or news of our family from a distant place. Obviously, we have the capability, the experience and the

inclination. So what prevents our attentiveness, our *tawujjeh*? Allah answers this in Qur'an:

They say [to Mohammed]: " Ha Miim : A revelation from the Universally Merciful, the Singularly Compassionate. A Book whose Signs have been clearly spelled out—an expansive eloquent Recital—for people who know- (bringing) good news and warnings, yet most of them have turned away so that they will not hear and they say: 'Our hearts are shielded against that to which you are calling us, and our ears are deaf, and between us and you there is a veil, so work and we too are working.'" (Qur'an, 41:01-5)

And also, in Sura al-Araf

"...They have hearts but they don't understand with them, they have eyes but they don't see with them, they have ears but they don't hear with them. They are like livestock except that they are further astray. They are heedless." (7:179)

We have eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear. Therefore, our lives do not change much and we doubt-- as human beings do when they don't have what they expect or get what they want. Some people, eventually, may even begin to doubt the efficacy of the Qur'an, instead of doubting themselves and their means of approaching Qur'an. Instead of questioning our hearing; we question the speaker. But in truth, it is our inability to hear and to see, and our unwillingness to approach Islam and the Qur'an, or the Hadith, or the teachings properly that sustains the doubt.

Worse, however, than doubting Qur'an is the arrogance of interpreting the Qur'an as one wishes. People who do this, so that their *nafs* is justified and fulfilled in the name of "truth" can cite the "appropriate" *ayat*, even as they are led

astray by the inner whisperer—the ever-opportunistic Shaytan within. In *Suratul Baqarah*, it says about this type of arrogance:

And if you say to them, “Believe as the people believe,” they say, “Shall we believe as the fools believe?” Truly it is they who are the fools, but they don’t know it. (2:13)

As humble Muslims and Sufis we have to learn to retain the true message of Qur’an, capture and hold the vision; reach out and absorb the nutrients that are in every *āyat*, indeed, in every word...in every stroke of the pen. To learn to come to those revelations without any agenda other than that of being present, open, and willing (with *irāda*) to trust ‘willingly;’ actively to believe. In this way, the seed that has been planted in us from the very beginning of time will grow within our hearts. Let us not let our unwillingness or hesitation to surrender, believe fully, and to trust inhibit the message of Qur’an in reaching our heart. The heart is the most fertile ground for our belief and faith. It is the place to find Allah. As Allah revealed in *hadith qudsi*: **“Neither My earth nor My Heavens can contain Me, but the heart of the Believer contains Me.”**

How should we read/interpret the Qur’an?

Having begun to address how we should view the Qur’an, let me turn now to the question: “How should we read the Qur’an?”

Historically, we all know when the Qur’an was revealed. But the unique reality of Revelation is that it seeks a receptive heart and committed soul. When we read or study the Qur’an, we should treat that moment as if it is the potential spiritual moment of Revelation. As we read, that is the moment that ‘*āyat* or that *sūra* is being revealed to you and to me. So, depending on our reading, there is both the historical Qur’an and the “Ever-Living Qur’an.” Allah is *Al Hayyu Al Qayyum* , so then are *His* words and meanings.

We must not read Qur'an in a linear manner, as if it is an historical text of the past, a text that needs to be re-interpreted for the present or the future. We have to read it as if it is revealed today, accepting that it has a relevancy to our present questions and our immediate needs. The Qur'an is meant to be understood within the context of today, within the circumstances of today, the things we are facing and dealing with, the needs of ourselves, our family, and the society. That means that even the apparently controversial parts of the Qur'an, which we normally assign to history for explanation, demand of each of us the qualities and attributes of Allah Swt—patience, tolerance, perseverance, trust, and love, etc.—to understand their relevance in our life and in our world and for the people of our time. All parts of the Qur'an have meaning for today. It is an ongoing lesson in trust (*tawwakul*) and perseverance (*sabr*).

The problem with reading and interpretation of Qur'an is that, while what we see is pure, how we interpret what we see is often impure. What we hear is pure; how we interpret what we hear is impure. Let us look at the concept of reflection in the Qur'an:

Have they not reflected within themselves? Allah did not create the heavens and the earth and everything between them except with truth and for a fixed term. Yet many people reject the meeting with their Lord. (30:8)

Reflection, from the Arabic word: *fakara*, means to reflect, meditate, cogitate, ponder, and implies the faculty of reasoning and consideration. It also implies a very sophisticated kind of rational thinking. Thinking can be either pensive and considered (*tafkir*), or a reflexive means of supporting and justifying selfish desires or ego. There is also another type of thinking, unfortunately, found in those of us who are more educated, in the academic and social sense. It seems

that sometimes the degree to which we are educated is also to the degree to which we can misuse our speculative reasoning, our positive ability to question ...the ability to question with the intention to truly understand. Unfortunately, the ego's search for alternatives is often disingenuous to the point that the more we consider alternatives and possibilities, the more we confuse ourselves.

Yet Qur'an advises us to consider and contemplate it, so consideration can't be bad. Indeed, it is enjoined upon us in Qur'an to contemplate; to contemplate with a humble attitude and sincere yearning to comprehend.

Afalaa yatadabbaruuna-l-Qur'aana am 'alaa quluubin aq'faaluhaa
Will they not ponder on this Qur'an, or are there locks on [their] hearts? (Qur'an: 47.24)

The problem is, many of us seem to have forgotten the real meaning of consideration, seeking, and watching-- qualities that flourish in the context of *iman* and *tawwakul* (trust). We forget that when we reflect on something, there is the possibility our conclusions could be in error. This is a real danger when we open up the Qur'an, read it, interpret it in the way we see fit; close the Qur'an, and go about our life feeling justified in our choices. The person who is trying to draw specific conclusions never really knows whether they are true or false. I call this 'the survivalist approach' to the Qur'an. I.E.: trying to stay ahead of the criticism or even the real meaning/truth by using the Qur'an to justify immediate desires or perceived needs. This is an endless, and very dangerous process of obfuscation, confusion, and concealing the truth from our self.

Reflection is useless and misleading unless it is contemplation with the right intention, driven by a sincere will for all that is good. Watching, investigating, or inspecting is imperfect unless you do it in such a way as to draw correct conclusions--conclusions that are supportive to your soul, to the community, to those whom you love and who love you; conclusions that lead you to responsible decisions and actions.

Allah tells us that while it is important that we consider many different aspects of things, and reflect upon them and investigate them; we also need to develop and rely on trust and faith. Our trust ultimately must be in Him. To trust in Allah we must have faith that the truth of every situation will reveal itself. We must believe, as it says in Qur'an:

Maa aṣaabaka min ḥasanatiñ fa-mina-Llaahi wa maa aṣaabaka miñ sayyi'atiñ fa-min nafsika wa arsalnaaka li-n-naasi rasuulañw-wa kafaabi-Llaahi shaheedan

“Nothing of good comes to you except from Allah, and nothing of evil comes to you, except that it is from your self (*nafs*)....” (4:79)

In other words, it's wrong to depend solely on consideration in all areas. You cannot just consider without also having faith. When we try to rationalize our positions, when we try to reason out our attitudes and feelings, we are very much on the edge of the domain of consideration and reflection. But when we sublimate our rationalizations and reasoning to our faith, we enter into a realm of greater possibility for correctness and moreover we begin to become aware of our *qadr*/destiny.

The tendency and ability we have in our mind to use all of our education and sophisticated reasoning to investigate a situation is easily corrupted by our fears, desires, and images that we have allowed to dominate our consciousness. Knowledge and reasoning is demanded by life, yet it can also be dangerous to use only our intellect and neglect our heart. Because it's dangerous, we have to test it with our faith. Therefore, we must allow our faith to grow and develop at very least equal to, if not in more measure than our reasoning capacities. For that we have to see through the eyes of love, and listen carefully to the guidance of the Prophet, and be in the company of the good people: people of compassion and

patience, forgiveness and perseverance, servants of Allah. We must permit ourselves to see the limitations of our own reasoning, by humbly accepting that there are certain questions we cannot answer, things that only our faith can carry us through. There are things in life to which the only answer is patience and trusting in the ultimate good outcome.

... Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all of the apostles, endowed with firmness of heart, bore themselves with patience. Bear up with patience and do not seek to hasten for those [who are bent on denying the truth] their doom. (Qur'an 46:35)

What distinguishes us from other creatures is that we have been created with the duty of persevering in the refinement of our perceptual abilities. Thus, we have the ability to reflect and consider the signs of Allah. Allah Swt sent the Qur'an to us, the human beings.

If We had sent down this Qur'an onto a mountain, you would have seen it humbled, crushed to pieces out of fear of Allah. We make such examples for people so that hopefully they will reflect. (59:21)

The way to reflect is to strive to make every action *ibāda*/worship. When that is thwarted by our own *nafs* or by ignorance and lack of consideration, we have to reaffirm our worship and try to look with a different eye at the circumstance, and try to find correctness—i.e. ‘meaning’ in the circumstance—try to fulfill this overall purpose that Allah has created us for. In this way, specific understanding will emerge.

How do we apply Qur'an?

So finally, I will speak to the question, “How do we apply Qur'an?” As we reflect upon ourselves and make *muhasabah*, we realize that the most important struggle we have is against the residue in our minds, thoughts, behavior, and

habits. We have to remember that this path, this life is a process of purification, and that we are trying to cleanse ourselves of this residue, historical, social, personal, familial, lower nature, tendencies and habits. The result of inner purification/*tazkiyā* is that we will hear differently and see differently, we will change our perception and outlook on life and the world. And as we change ourselves we will be agents of change for the world too, because that is what Allah *Subhanallah wa'ta'ala* gave us to do: to represent the truth and be agents of positive change.

To know if we are correct, to keep our selves straight, we need to reflect on ourselves daily. That is part of the nutrition of Islam. We need to nurture the seeds that will create the fruit of Islam and Tasawwuf within us and for us, specifically. The Prophet (sal) said, **“The wise man is he who criticizes himself, and works for what comes after death. The foolish man is he who allows himself to follow his own guidance and wishes from God’s dreams.”**

We must look to the Qur’an and allow it to live in our lives; review our daily lives and see how we have done. In that way, we will become Muslims at a very high level, true *mu'min*. The *mureed* becomes the *murad*...the seeker [becomes the] one who is sought by Allah Swt. Our belief will be strong, knowledge increased, our words will be filled with the *nai'mah* of Allah *Subhanallah wa'ta'ala*, and we will find that we are humble, and are supplicants to His truth and to His will. *In'shallah*, the peace that we seek will be realized sooner than later.

CLOSING DU'Ā