



[Iqra Bismi Rabbika](#)

Reaching for Knowledge to Understand

Allah says in Surah ar-Rahman:

In the Name of Allah the Merciful, the Mercy Bestowing, the Universally Merciful, He taught the Qur'an. He created a human being. He taught them clear speech. The sun and the moon move according to a precise reckoning. And the sun and the trees prostrate themselves. And He has raised up the sky and set the balance that you may not transgress from that balance. So weigh with justice, and do not skimp in the balance. And the earth He sent down for all the creatures. In it, fruits and palm trees with sheathed clusters, and grain, and fragrant herbs. Which of the favors of your Lord will you deny?

He also says in Sura al-Nahl:

And Allah brought you forth from the bellies of your mothers knowing nothing, and gave you hearing, and sight, and hearts, so that perhaps you might be thankful.

Then He goes on to show us the natural phenomena of the birds in the air flying obedient to the laws of Allah, and homes, and places where you live. We have two statements of value. Another one is:

I sent messengers of good cheer in order that they might have no argument against Allah. After the messengers, Allah is mighty, and wise.

But Allah Himself testifies concerning that which He has revealed unto you in this knowledge He has revealed. And the angels also testify that Allah is a sufficient witness.

There are two statements of value. One is the intricacy of the power the knowledge, the power which is knowledge that Allah has given as a gift to humankind. We see to what degree is the exactness with which He has created this creation. In addition, Allah Swt has given us an inherent gift of knowledge which is a process to know how to learn. It is a gift of knowledge He has not given to any other creature, not to a bird, or an insect, or anything else. They have inherent knowledge; they know how to migrate, or how to build their nests. They don't say, "I think I'm going to build a nest today. Or maybe I'll wait till tomorrow. The weather's not going to be good today." I haven't heard a bird say that. Have you?

The dimension of the depth of knowledge that has been given to human beings is quite different. That's because our function is different. But with everything like that, there is also another side to it. The other side of it is, is knowledge just intellectual understanding, or is it something that is to be experienced? He has given us knowledge in order for us to fulfill a very specific function, which is to be the *khalifa*, the deputy, the vice regent on earth. [He has given us knowledge] to make us able to do that with a sense of efficiency, and a sense of urgency, and love and concern, to make us able to do it righteously and properly, and make use of these inherent abilities, which are inherent characteristics or essential characteristics of Allah Himself.

[In] the exploitation, and development, and the sustaining of the resources of nature, and of the heavens [we are] to use them in a very creative way so that they reflect in some small way, in the microcosm of human life, the macrocosm of the

creation itself. That's why Allah says that He created us in His own image, with His own hands. Knowledge, of course is one of the greatest gifts of Allah. It is mentioned many, many times. He taught us to use the pen/*qalam*. These and other verses in the Qur'an tell us that there are oceans of knowledge, untold treasures, and untold wisdom. In the first verse of Surah Iqra (Alaq), the mystic pen and mystic record are symbolized by symbols of permanent revelation. They are symbolic foundations of the revelation to humankind: **Iqra bismi rabbika.**

Everywhere we look, Allah has symbolically shown us the depth and breadth of our capabilities, and the knowledge that we could have. He speaks about the power. He speaks about the works of knowledge. He speaks words that people can understand. Everything Allah has spoken to us is filled with meaning, and all we have to do is extract the meaning out of it. In Arabic the word *qirah* or *qiraha* means to read, to study, to examine, to investigate, to research. It also includes the whole concept of knowledge. You can find similar words in Hebrew. It is impossible to really translate the whole meaning of the phrase in the Qur'an where Allah says to read and to teach. Or it talks about writing with a pen, and implies the writing of knowledge that would be read, and consequently would be learned.

It means that all science, all knowledge, all knowledge about oneself, knowledge about spirituality, knowledge about human conditions, and human communities are all included in this knowledge. But there's another alliterative meaning for this word. It also means to reach. That is certainly what we do when we try to gain knowledge; we reach for something that we didn't know. We reach for new information. We reach to know things that Allah has emblazoned, provided, disclosed in these doorways to knowledge in nature, in life, in wakefulness, in sleep, and human development, and consciousness. In our arrogance and in our fears, we

view ourselves perhaps. In the animals and in the minerals, everything is reflected. And everything is like a doorway to that knowledge.

You can look at the outside and you can say, "Wow. How did all this happen? How did this get created? This is pretty amazing. What's on the inside? What can I use this for? How long has it been this way? Why did Allah create it this way in the first place?" We reach for understanding. Then the prophets come, and they give us some direction. They disseminate the truth. And the comprehensive meaning of *iqra*, which comes from *qirah*, becomes clearer. It not only refers to a particular person, or a type of individual, or an occasion. But also it gives us a direction, a kind of universal direction. This comprehensive meaning you see running through the whole Qur'an as "those who understand," meaning also those who reach for knowledge. Those who reach for knowledge, who read, who investigate, who research, who seek to reach forward are the people who eventually understand, if they reach for it in the right way – not through philosophy, not through intellectual knowledge.

That's what we need to be—people who reach, but not just with our heads. When we appreciate a beautiful day like today, do we appreciate it just intellectually? We say it, "Oh, it's a beautiful day. What is the temperature? Oh, the sun is out." We compare it to other days; we compare it to other levels of beauty. It's hardly an intellectual statement, but it is one of knowledge. We were given knowledge, which distinguishes us from other creatures. It gives us superiority over other creatures. We've been given the ability to write, the *qalam*/pen, the ability to read. Why write if you can't read?

To transmit that knowledge is a gift. If it wasn't for that, human beings would not be able to learn from one another. They would not be able to protect the heritage of

their knowledge. They would not have a history of knowledge. They couldn't fulfill their functions. They would not be able to really be vice-regents of Allah. Well, you could say that monkeys learn from one another. There's the Hundredth Monkey Story. Orangutans, gorillas, chimpanzees – other animals learn from each other, but can you see them as the *khalifas* of all creation? They may learn from one another to use a stick to probe into an anthill, or to feed on certain foods, or avoid certain traps, but you can't see them as the *khalifas* of the creation. The Khalif Ali (as) said,

It was by the sheer grace of Allah that He gave his servant's knowledge that they did not know, and thus brought them out of the darkness of ignorance into the light of knowledge, and created a desire in them to gain more knowledge, and to learn the art of writing, which has multifarious benefits.

The truth is you cannot come to understand anything, unless you seek to understand. You may not like what you understand. You may not, in the beginning, agree. You may find it to be against certain principles, or ethics, or ideologies, or religious beliefs, whatever. But eventually, if you really seek to understand, and not minimize things, and not be such a reductionist that you reduce things down to everything being a doubt, or accusation, or something to be questioned, or any of the justifications and mass generalizations that human beings make, you understand that things have different facets. Life has many facets—knowledge, events, circumstances, relationships. While seeing these different facets, you get a greater sense of the complexity and dimensions of life. One cannot give up that understanding to simple answers, or just to emotional responses, or just to emotions without answers.

This verse of Surah Iqra (Alaq) indicates that Allah intended our education to be continuous, endless. First we are educated at the breast of our mothers in our

homes. Then we are educated in schools. Then we are educated by our experience of life, along with that. Then we are educated by our own attempts to understand ourselves, and it goes on and on and on. But first Allah gave us the mind, the intellect, and the intelligence, which is the greatest means of knowledge, because we can acquire so many things to study, and using our minds. Secondly, He has given us open proof, of the perfection of His power in nature – the wonders, the majesty, the manifestations. Then there is the knowledge of many other things that has been put into our minds, so we can reach by intuition, by instinct, by sensing, by reflecting, by experiences.

We gain a lot by just our dialogue with one another, our verbal and our mental dialogues, without knowing how much information is being added to our minds daily. Every day we get new information. But the problem is we process it through old ways of processing. No matter how much new information comes in, we keep processing it through old ideas, old attitudes, old rationales, old assumptions, and old desires mixed up with our ego that really likes how smart we are. But we are just as ignorant as we were before, because now there's more we could understand than there was prior to that. Allah says in the Holy Qur'an:

It was He who brought you forth from the world of your mothers. When you knew nothing He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affection that you may give thanks to Him.

When we were born, we were only potential. Then Allah gives us an environment and circumstances in which capacity can be developed. Capacity may not be exactly the same as capability. Capacity may be a potential for human beings, but capability may be limited by the certain human being. You could reverse them, but you understand what I mean. When we build capacity in institutions or individuals like

we do our work, we have to understand: capacity for what, to what degree, to accomplish what ends? We know that everybody has different capacities. So we have a choice. The fact that some people use their power and attributes to deny Allah and Allah's existence is evident everywhere in the world. We have the choice to accept or reject. That's why Allah gave us this unique characteristic of free will.

We can use that free will and any number of ways we want. It means we are equally free to follow the evil ways as we are the ways of righteousness, to employ our abilities to spread ignorance, or darkness, or *fitna*, or evil, which are against the wishes of Allah, or to spread goodness, and righteousness, and truth. Allah tells us:

Does not man see that it was He who created them from a drop? Yet behold, he stands forth as an open adversary against Us, and strikes out likenesses of Us, and he forgets his own Creator, his own creation.

(36:77)

We find this in daily life. We strike out at the truth. We don't like something. We are uncomfortable with something, and were not trusting of someone or something, and we are sure we are right. Yet Allah has given us reasons and good guidance for all things of life that we should struggle to understand as much as we can; otherwise, we are limiting our capacities. Even if we have capability, we are limiting our capacity to use that capability in a way to get understanding of a person or circumstance. And to note that if we don't understand something, that is also understanding. We just don't understand. So we can seek to understand, or we can accept certain things that we don't understand, understanding that is our only recourse.

Reaching out for knowledge is a continuous thing. You have to build the capacity to see it, to understand it. That takes us back to the circle of discussions on humility, and openness, and trust, and understanding who you are, why you are, what you are, and what you could be. Try to gain humility and confidence, so that as the *khalifas* of Allah Swt we do not shirk our duties, and do not commit the *shirk* of comparing our knowledge with that of Allah. We should not shrink from our responsibilities. Allah constantly reminds us of this in the Qur'an, but we probably don't know how to read it, let alone understand it. So we should strive for that.

Just in the circumstances of the world we are facing now, again there is the potential for war on some moral and ethical grounds. It has many, many implications to it –to think about what it takes to make a decision, and what are the influences on an individual to make such a decision, and then to be sure that such a decision is correct. On what basis is it made – a treaty, a conference, power, some moral and ethical principle that you abandon on one hand and accept on another? These are the complexities of life. We have to keep reaching out for more and more knowledge, and not just of the mind, but of the heart, and to experience the inner meaning.

We shouldn't think that the inner meaning is just reserved for some religious activity, or spiritual activity, or at the time of prayer, or at the time of the teaching. The inner meaning is to be sought everywhere with patience. The main keys to unlock that are humility and gratitude, compassion and mercy, love and patience. Quiet the mind. If you quiet the mind, there is a whole world of activity. There is a whole world of understanding, of knowledge that can only be found when the mind is quiet.

Some of the greatest scholars of humanity would go to the mountains to get away. The Prophet Isa (as) goes to the mountain. Prophet Mohammed (sal) goes to the mountain. Prophet Musa (as) goes to the mountain. These are the prophets. Countless *awliya-Llāh* go to the mountain, literally and figuratively. Somewhere, every day, we should go to the mountain quiet our minds, and then accept what comes to you. Yes, it seems to be knowledge, but is not philosophy or theory. You don't look for the support of it in bibliographies. Take a moment and quiet the mind, and ask Allah what you think your needs are. *Asalaamu aleikum.*