

The concept of zikr-e-kathir in Islam

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

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Introduction

The Quran makes direct reference of Zikr-e-kathir (ardent remembrance of God) atleast ten times and indirectly it is referred to several times. Remembrance of God is not a mere repetition of words, understanding it such is similar to underestimating God. Zikr (remembrance) is at the level of realisation of the greatness of the Creator of this vast universe and leads to submission. It is not difficult to understand that the Maker of this wonderfully meaningful universe cannot be fathomed by repetition of certain words. I always wanted to decipher the route to *Zikr-e-kathir* or ardent remembrance of God until recently when I met with a problem. I remembered the following saying of Caliph Ali according to which

Baat ke bigadne se maine khuda ko jaana (Nahjul Balagha)

In the wake of a crisis, man undergoes a brainstorm. A similar situation arose as I broke my spectacles, today morning. I was under a shock and felt helpless because I had to deliver today's talk in just sometime from then. Amidst my struggle, I discovered the formula that my mind always sought. When man deeply acknowledges God, he is overpowered by a sense of intense gratitude for Him and this makes him remember his Creator. In other words,

Aetraaf e-kathir (deep acknowledgement) leads to *shukr e-kathir* (deep thankfulness) and
shukr e-kathir leads to *zikr e-kathir* (deep remembrance)

Upon acknowledging the Maker of this universe, one gets immersed in a storm of gratefulness towards his Benefactor and this feeling takes the form of words that convey one's deepest emotions. This is real zikr. In this world therefore, you experience the glory of God every second. Be it the leaves that provide us oxygen or water that nourishes us – anything and everything is an example of the glory of God. An Arabic poet said

Everything is a reflection of God reminding man of the existence of Creator

Every thing therefore serves as a reminder of God. I was unwell some days back and it occurred to me that not only did God create water, He also created a throat that could gulp that water down and quench man's thirst. Why does man choose to remain ignorant?

Sitting in my balcony, I saw the sun as it rose and spread its light and warmth. It came to my mind that while looking at fire does not relax my eyes, looking at sunlight does. I realized that the pleasant color of sunlight was due to it being a mix of the several colours in the spectrum. When these rays of sun do not reach us because of overcast sky, it makes everything appear cold and frozen. Despite being there all the time, sunlight still does not reach man because the thick layer of clouds does not allow it to penetrate through. This is the case of man.

Man lives in negative thoughts. Negative thinking, behaviour, feelings act as a layer of clouds between man and God and do not allow him to remember God and receive Divine inspiration. Therefore, the only option is to convert negative experiences into positive learnings. Nature gives a clear demonstration of this principle through the cow. The cow is a special kind of animal. It takes grass and in return gives us milk. In other words, the cow is a divine industry which is able to convert non-milk into milk. God has made the cow a model for human behaviour in that it gives man a lesson in high morality. Man must develop this quality of conversion in our personality, so that he may convert negative thought into positive thought. The conversion of enmity into friendship, ill-will to well wishing and all negative emotions into positive will enable him to perceive the glory of God in every event.

Man harbours much hatred and negativity towards his fellowmen. The biggest disadvantage of this behaviour is that it comes in between man and divine inspiration just as cloud comes between rays of sun and surface of Earth. Blocking the 'rays' of Divine inspiration disallows man from establishing contact with God. This has been described in a Hadith such

He who does not acknowledge man, will not be able to acknowledge God (Abu Dawud)

To not acknowledge man is tantamount to being ungrateful to God. In order to lead a positive life and become worthy of being inhabited in paradise, man must pay a price. The price is to make himself a completely positive person who is able to derive positivity even from negative occurrences. Positivity is given such importance because negativity is the root cause of all forms of violence and eventually leads man to such utter despair that he resorts to suicide bombing.

Price of Paradise

Remembrance of God is the price of paradise. Man experiences this by pondering upon God's creations. God is visible in His creations, just as a human being sees his own reflection in the mirror, without having any doubts about it. The vastness of space tells man that God, its Creator, is boundless and the observation of the sun and the stars shows that God is all light. In other words, man sees God's bounties everywhere in nature. Such inspiration is possible only when man is free of negative emotions and is able to see good in fellow human beings. This is best explained by the following anecdote that relates a story of Gautam Buddha.

A milkman, deeply influenced by Gautam Buddha insisted that Buddha visit him and share his nuggets of wisdom. In lieu of this, the milkman offered to present milk to Buddha. He agreed. In the evening when Buddha set out to visit the milkman he took with him a container in which he intentionally put some mud. The milkman took the container but just as he was about to pour milk into it, the milkman realized that the container had some impurity. The milkman cleansed the container and removed all the impurities. He then poured the milk into it and gave it to Buddha. Upon getting the container, Buddha got up to leave. Surprised, the milkman asked Buddha why was he leaving before imparting any wisdom. Buddha replied that he just had. Unable to comprehend it, the milkman urged Buddha to explain the learning to him. Buddha told the milkman that our mind is similar to the container and the thoughts that preoccupy us are like the impurities in the container. In order to attain wisdom, we must purify our mind and make it free of all impure thoughts. Buddha asked the milkman to cleanse himself of his thoughts for only then will he be able to imbibe any further learning.

This illustration depicts the case of every individual. We cannot add more water to a glass full of water, it will only spill. The glass must be empty in order to imbibe wisdom. It is only a prepared mind that meets the right kind of situations that further harness his potential. Living in a narcissistic mindset is injurious to one's development. Such a way of life leaves no room for receptivity as one thinks about none but its own self. However the society that we reside in is like a rose plant. You may not like the thorns which essentially accompany roses, but it is not possible for you to pluck out all the thorns and destroy them completely. For, if you pluck out one, another will grow in its place. Even if you run a bulldozer over all rosebushes, new plants will grow in their place which will bear roses ineluctably accompanied by thorns. In the present scheme of things, roses can be had only by tolerating the existence of thorns.

Similarly, a peaceful society can be created only by creating and fostering the spirit of tolerance towards untoward instances. Despite being hurt by fellow men, man will have to prove that he can withstand the test. In other words, he will have to give the proof of being a flower amidst the thorns in society.

Complaining against God

The law of nature ensures prevalence of divergent viewpoints in a society. Complaining in such a scenario is tantamount to complaining against God because such divergence is a result of the Creation Plan of God. It therefore assumes great importance to develop a non-complaining attitude and strive to convert negativity arising from events into positive lessons. Those who do not pay heed to this are risking their hereafter. There might be some others who appear devoid of all negative emotions but as you dig deep and scrutinize their emotions, they manifest themselves as a clear case of negative thinking.

In his book '*Moral Wickedness*', C M Joad opines that hatred and violence are innate in man. I however disagree with this remark. The real aspect is that man fails to manage the hate items of society because of lack of awareness of the Plan of His Creator. According to this Plan, man finds himself totally free in the present world. However, this freedom does not belong to him as a matter of right, but is rather a test paper. What man has to do is to acknowledge the truth of One God, and surrender to him — not by compulsion but by his own choice. For the purpose of this test, man is placed in situations where he has to face hardships from time to time throughout his life. Difficulty and sadness are integral part of the creation plan. No man has the power to extricate himself from this life of trial and tribulation. This arrangement is to remind man of the fact that the present world has not been made as a place of luxury and comfort, but rather as a period of trial and as such as will help determine whether he is eligible or not for the eternal life in Paradise.

In spite of tremendous development in the present world, adverse conditions are still very prevalent. But people, owing to their lack of awareness of God's creation plan, do not understand why they exist. So, they continue to react negatively to situations and by giving such a response, prove themselves — in the eyes of God — to be failures in the examination He has set for them.

Managing Complaints

Complaints are prevalent in the house, society, country and even international level – be it Palestine, Kashmir, Iraq etc – as they deepen, complaints lead to violence. It is therefore truly in the favour of man to clean himself of hatred, complaints and negativity. An understanding of the Creation Plan of God reconciles man to the idea of the prevalence of negative situations in this world. Despite this, man will have to consciously maintain his positivity. As he strives to part the clouds of negativity and complaints, man sets himself in a position to receive inspiration from his Creator. In other words, remembrance of God cannot become a part of man's existence unless he consciously removes the dark clouds of negativity and allow positivity to inculcate.

Zikr or remembrance cannot be a quantitative phenomenon as it is directly related to intellectual development. Here I remember the lines of an old soothsayer in my village. He used to go around saying

Jo de uska bhi bhala, jo naa de uska bhi bhala

This means that if God gave something, He did good to me and if God did not give me something, He did good to me still. In other words, both the situations whether man receives or he does not receive are actually a favour bestowed by God.

Another poet, Faani Badayuni (d. 1940) is recorded to have said

Meri hawas ko aish-e-do alam bhi tha qabool

Tera karam ki tune diya dil dukha hua

The above indicates that because man does not have knowledge of the future, he yearns for immediate fulfillment of his desires. But God has the knowledge of the past, present and future and therefore His decision about man's upkeep must be patiently borne. Thinking on these lines allows man to acknowledge God and become grateful.

Universe – favourable to man's existence

An article in today's newspaper reported the findings of a recent study which indicates that the entire universe has been designed in a manner so as to favour the existence of man. In other words, the unfathomable universe is designed to support the existence of a creature as significantly inconsequential as man. Thinking such will immerse you in an ocean of gratefulness towards the blessings of the Creator. For example, our solar system lies in the inner rim of the minor spiral arm of the Milky Way galaxy. Had this not been so, life would not have been possible on Earth due to unbearably hot temperatures. Observation coupled with deep thinking unveils innumerable such facts which make man fathom the glory of his Creator. Realisation of God then, culminates into remembrance of God. Zikr-e-kathir therefore cannot be mere chanting. It is similar to saying that while worship has a form, the form itself is not worship. According to a Hadith, worship is called

He tasted faith (imaan) who discovered God as his Lord, Islam as his religion and became
steadfast (Bukhari)

Pomegranate for instance has a tough, leathery skin or rind and its interior is separated by membranous sacs filled with sweet pulp. Fruit in this case is not the cover but what exists inside and the taste that man feels is not of skin but the inner fruit. Similarly, the essence of worship is the spirit with which man submits before his Creator.

Towards the end

Once a person, attempting to ridicule the work of spreading the Quran, had raised apprehensions about its outcome as he felt *no one will read it*. He did not understand that man can accomplish only fifty percent work in the dawah mission, rest is up to God. In other words, God creates such condition that man reads the Quran. For example, the recent Quran bonfire popularized the reading of the Quran manifold. Here am reminded of an anecdote, which clarifies the role of man in this mission. A newly recruited forest officer, apprehensive about his protection from the wild animals sought from his employer, an understanding of the safety arrangement for him. His supervisor told him that the Government had already thought about it and assigned him a rifle for self-protection. Similarly, if God ordained the spreading of his message, He created conditions conducive to this so that it becomes a popular word and arouses curiosity amongst people.

In a recent occurrence, some high ranked army officials met some Kashmiris at a place in Srinagar. As one of my companions readied himself to join the discussion, he was discouraged by a Muslim who questioned the utility of the meet and expressed disdain about the Indian army who he said profited from the entire event. Our companion however did not change his mind and attended the discussion. Not only did the army officers receive the Quran gladly, a senior army official, while addressing the gathering said that it is in vain that the Muslims have associated glory with the bomb culture because the Quran is replete with verses such as the following

All glory be to God (1:1)

In the context of both gentlemen who tried to dissuade us at different times, I would say that people form opinions without thinking and succumb to emotional decision-making. It is only when thinking precedes speech that the deeper meaning is fathomed. Our team has a man-friendly approach which follows the realization that man must live positively amidst negative situations. Such an approach ensures prevalence of positivity and prepares man for dwelling in the neighbourhood of God.

Man must therefore live in this world like a flower and convert the negative events into positive lessons. The Quran says

He will abide forever in the gardens of eternity, through which rivers flow. This is the recompense of those who purify themselves (20:76)

It is pertinent to note that purification is needed when there is pollution. Therefore this verse clearly outlines that problems are an integral part of this world. Constant struggle ensures that man garners experience and learns to perceive the problems as potential opportunities. The glory of man is a reflection of the glory of God. Instead of complaining therefore, man must make an effort to fathom the truth. Only a hundred percent positive soul will qualify for paradise and the negative souls will be cast into Hell. Man must therefore consciously deliberate so that he can fathom the deeper meaning of occurrences and make them a reference point for remembrance of God.