

## Understanding Worship

From: *Provisions of the Journey Vol.1*, by Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi

Abu al-Aswad Du'ili says, "When Abu Dharr was living in exile in Rabadhah, I went to visit him. While I was there with him, he narrated a hadith to me. Abu Dharr said, 'Early one morning, I went to see the Noble Prophet (S) in the Mosque. He was seated with no one present save 'Ali ('a). After being admitted in His Holiness' audience and subsequent to greeting him with respect, I availed myself of the opportunity and presented my humble request to him. I said 'May my father and mother be thy ransom! Give me a piece of advice by means of which Allah will grant me good'."

The Noble Prophet (S) kindly stated,

*'O Abu Dharr! What a noble man you are, and you are surely reckoned as one of our household.*

*I give you advice with the expectation that you will safeguard it and act upon it; because this counsel consists of all the paths which lead to good and prosperity. If you put this will and counsel into practice, the good of both the world and hereafter will become inexpensive for you.*

*O Abu Dharr! Worship Allah as though you are seeing Him, because if you do not see Him, He nevertheless sees you. Goodness means that you ought to worship Allah as if you see Him.'*

Maybe the best advice for Abu Dharr, a man who has been trudging the path of devotion to Allah for many long years and a person who aspires to derive optimum benefit from the Prophet's (S) recipes in order to attain felicity is to inculcate in him the method of procuring benefit from worship and open a way in front of him that leads to acquiring the best fruits from his acts of adoration, and that implies having the presence of heart during worship.

The means of attaining the presence of heart is practice and exercise and perceiving the presence of Allah: that is to say man ought to always perceive himself in the presence of Allah and close to Him, because if man becomes fond of Allah, never does he get tired of conversing with Him and listening to His words; for the reason that the more the lover is in the presence of his beloved and speaks with Him, the thirstier he becomes for more love.

The reason why we quickly get tired when performing our acts of worship and why we recite our prayers with haste and with the intention of quickly embarking upon our daily duties, and the reason why not only do we not feel any pleasure from worship but reckon that we are trapped in a cage once prayer takes long is because we do not perceive before whom we are standing and with whom we are talking! It is possible for us to discern our status of servitude in regard to Allah and conceive His lofty position and greatness by means of acquired knowledge, but this acquired knowledge has not had any effect on our hearts and does not give fruit to real affinity with Allah.

That which causes real and true connection with Allah is the presence of heart when we are performing acts of devotion. The only acts of worship which we are successful at fulfilling only serve to clear us from religious obligation and we do not derive the kind of benefit which we ought to gain because our acts of devotion have no life-giving spirit and are discharged without the presence of heart. Pre-occupation with worldly affairs is an impediment to rapport with Allah and the presence of heart during acts of devotion, and that is the problem with which we are faced. It is always asked that what ought we to do in order to acquire presence of heart when performing acts of devotion? Attaining the presence of heart needs strict exercise and self-discipline. In the

beginning, man has to sit in solitude and contemplate that Allah is seeing him. Some ethical mentors used to recommend making use of imaginative aspects of the mind during this exercise; that is to say that if you are in spiritual retreat in a room and/or are spending your days in a secluded place, imagine that a man is hidden and is watching your conduct and that you do not see him. Is your behavior the same when someone is watching you with when no one is watching you? Especially when that person is not an ordinary man but a person you consider as of great importance and believe that your destiny lies in his hands? You are desirous of being beloved by him and of him loving you. Can you in this case completely pay no heed to him and get busy with other matters?

If man, with the help of exercise, conceives this point that he is in the presence of Allah and that Allah constantly looks at him and even if man himself does not see Allah, Allah nonetheless sees him, he will bit by bit attain presence of heart when performing acts of worship and such kind of worship has a life-giving spirit. This kind of worship will not only result in clearing us from duty, but will result in spiritual progress, ascendance through the stations of perfection and nearness to Allah.

It is therefore necessary for people who have not yet had practice to have presence of heart during prayer to set aside some time during the course of the day for sitting in seclusion and concentrating on this point that Allah is seeing them.

In the first section of this hadith, the Noble Prophet (S) has cited worship as man's key to prosperity. Thereafter, in the following sections, he begins to explain the stages that worship of Allah consists of. In addition to that, in the first section of the hadith, recommendation has been made with respect to the quality of worship and the fact that acts of devotion ought to have a life-giving spirit, and that spirit is the presence of heart, and in reality, no mention with regard to the origin of worship has been made, as though that point has been taken for granted.

If we pay attention to the ways of life of great men, we notice that one of the inseparable principles of their lives is devotion to Allah. All the people who had the merit of achieving the status of 'Kalimullah (the Interlocutor of Allah)', 'Khalilullah (the Friend of Allah)', and 'Habibullah (the Friend of Allah)' only arrived at those lofty stations by means of traversing this course and undergoing hard and difficult trials. Not even one individual can be found who attained [even] one perfection from the volitional perfections of man without devotional servitude to Allah. In addition to what has been said, achieving stations such as the stations of contentment, certitude et cetera et cetera have to be searched for in the adoration of Allah.

Allah in the Qur'an states:

وَأَعْبُدْ رَبَّكَ حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِيَكَ الْيَقِينُ

**“And serve your Lord until there comes to you that which is certain.**

The stages of worship of Allah

a) Knowledge of Allah. In continuation of the hadith, the Noble Prophet (S) embarks upon propounding the stages of worship:

*Know O Abu Dharr that the first stage of devotion to Allah is knowledge of Him. Verily, He is the first before whom there is none, He is the One and the Only, and there is none like Him. He is the Everlasting, the Eternal. He is the One who created the heavens and the earth and that which is between them. Allah is the Knowing, the Kind and He is capable of doing anything.*

In this section, the first stage of worship mentioned is knowledge of Allah; of course, cognition of Allah has a great deal of stages, but that which is necessary in worship and adoration of Allah is a

general awareness of Him; man ought to know that Allah exists and He is the Creator of man and the world. If this stage of knowledge is not attained by man, the turn does not come for worship and adoration of Allah.

For this reason, this stage of knowledge is prior to worship. Of course, at the ultimate destination of his spiritual journey towards his perfection, man reaches the highest stages of cognition and awareness especially reserved for the saints [awliya'] of Allah, and we [the ordinary people] cannot find our way to its reality and truth. We know in brief that the ultimate knowledge which the saints [awliya'] of Allah attain at the end of their spiritual wayfaring is very valuable and high and that it is the last phase of devotion to Allah.

After man has attained the first stage of worship and has perceived that Allah does exist, it is incumbent to meditate upon the attributes and effects of Allah in order for that knowledge to become firm, grounded and constant so that it does not only remain as a mental conception but is turned into a present and lively awareness that leaves an impression on man.

b) Belief in the Prophet (S) and acknowledgement of his divine mission

*At the second stage you ought to believe in me and acknowledge that Allah, the Exalted, has appointed me to be the giver of glad tidings, the admonisher, the caller towards Allah by His permission and the light of guidance for all mankind...*

Every one of the attributes mentioned in the hadiths and Qur'an about the Noble Prophet (S) stand in need of explanation and interpretation, and if our faith in the Noble Prophet's (S) divine mission becomes strong and complete, we will not get ensnared in a great number of doubts. The lack of adequate knowledge and faith in regard to the Noble Prophet (S) in a lot of Muslims of weak faith results in their getting entangled in skepticisms and by the passage of time they get deviated from the correct path and in the end, Allah forbid, they are drawn towards disbelief; the reason for this is because they have not believed that whatever the Noble Prophet (S) says is correct.

Some people of weak faith say that the Islamic laws which the Noble Prophet (S) brought are not binding in our age. These injunctions and decrees were meant for bringing order to the disorderly state of the people of the Arabian Peninsula in the age of the Noble Prophet (S) and there is no more need for Islamic laws in our age! This [vain] talk is a result of their not having faith in Allah's Prophet (S), and if they had faith in the Noble Prophet's (S) words in which he stated, "I have been sent to all mankind", they would not have placed any limitations of time on his prophetic mission. In reality, it must be said that all the deviations that appear in religion are a result of weak faith in both Allah's Prophet (S) and the fruits of his divine mission.

c) Love for the Prophet's Ahl al-Bayt ('a)

*The third stage is love for my Ahl al-Bayt ('a), those whom Allah has cleansed and purified from every kind of impurity.*

Emphasis upon love for the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) is not on account of their being the Noble Prophet's (S) near ones, for the reason that the Noble Prophet (S) had several wives and no such recommendation has been made in regard to any one of them but this emphasis is because Allah has purified them from every kind of impurity.

Likening the Ahl al-Bayt to Noah's ('a) vessel and the gate of repentance for the Children of Israel

*Know O Abu Dharr! The Honored and Glorified Lord has made my Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) like the vessel of Noah (‘a), upon which everyone who embarked got saved and whoever did not embark got drowned.* The Noble Prophet’s (S) emphasis on love for the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) is not a sentimental issue so that some people might mistakenly imagine that the natural love and affection of the Noble Prophet (S) for his children and near ones caused him to always make recommendations and advices about friendship and fondness for them, but these counsels go beyond natural love and affection and are made as a result of his believing that the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) are the ship of salvation for the Islamic ummah (universal community of the Muslims) and for the reason that he is convinced that every person lost and bewildered in the valley of perplexity will get saved from drowning in the sea full of turbulence, contortion and deviations, in the same way that Noah’s (‘a) community got saved from divine damnation by embarking upon Noah’s ship and those who disobeyed, amongst them Noah’s son, perished and got annihilated.

The other message of this section of the hadith is that the most fundamental stage of worship consists of matters of the heart and inner deeds; that is to say, no person can derive enough benefit from worship unless he has knowledge, faith in Allah, love for the Pure and Infallible Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) and conviction in the Noble Prophet (S). For this reason, adoration is not confined to external matters and outward deeds, but the origin and roots of devotion are inner conceptions and all acts of worship that spring from the heart.