

The notion of *Dhikr* in Islamic Mysticism

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Abstract:

The word *dhikr* is probably the most frequently used form of prayer in Islamic mysticism. This term includes all kinds of mentioning, worshiping, and remembering God and can be performed out loud or silently, according to the place or the character of the mystic. The Qur'an sometimes refers to itself by this term, and it is sometimes attributed to the Prophet Muhammad since he was as a "reminder." Muslim mystics believe that people are directed away from the nucleus of their being and that their consciousness is imprisoned in some kind of delusion and forgetfulness (*ghafla*). Therefore they should "remind" (*dhikr*) and be reminded constantly so that they will "remember" what they have "forgotten." When *dhikr* is performed, that is an indication in the person's heart that he or she has not forgotten God but is aware of his or her weaknesses and need for constant guidance. Consequently, this "remembrance" is a spiritual ornament that ought to be deeply entrenched in the hearts of all human beings: it is a way to happiness; a lock opener on the humans' journey toward the Divine love; it is the foundation and cornerstone of good deeds and excellent conduct.

Key Words: *dhikr, sheikh, murid, ghafla, salah, du'a, Qur'an, Hadith, sabr, Shahadah, sunnah, silsila, salik, sharia, baqiyah, faniyah, khanqah, fuqara, majlis, khalifa, adab, fana, ma'rifat, wahy.*

Probably one of the most important parts of the Islamic mystical experience is the concept of *dhikr*. Hence, an appropriate examination of this term is required for the proper understanding of the nature of Islamic mysticism. It can be said that Sufis (mystics) use this term to designate the method for achieving a undivided concentration on their beloved God. According to them, *dhikr* is a key to happiness, a lock opener on the journey of the human soul toward the Divine love. In addition, *dhikr* is the foundation and cornerstone of good actions and conduct; it is a spiritual ornament that should be genuinely entrenched in the hearts of all human beings who seek to get closer to God.

In this article I will examine *dhikr* as behavior associated with Sufi meditation. To get a better grasp of the subject, I will divide what follows into six parts. In the first part I will explore the definition of the word *dhikr* itself. In the second part I will examine the origin of such performance and see if its source is Islamic or if it has been derived from other traditions in the pre-Islamic era. In the third part I will investigate what Islam's two main sources, the Qur'an and the *hadiths* (the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad), say about this notion. In the fourth part I will look at the role and importance of the *shaikh* (Sufi master) and his relationship with his *murids* (students, disciples). In the fifth part I will analyze the im-

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portance and significance of *dhikr* in Sufi practice. And, finally, I will examine the different ways and techniques of performing *dhikr* among the Sufis.

The Definition of the Word *Dhikr*

In Islamic mysticism, the word *dhikr* is probably the most frequently used form of prayer.² All repetitive recitations of sacred formulas or sacred speeches performed by Sufis, whether out loud or silently, are designated by a common term, *dhikr*. This term can mean "mention," "recollection," "evocation," and "memory."³ It is an act of reminding, the oral citing of the memory, an incessant repetition of an ejaculatory litany; a technique of this citing and reminding.⁴ In the Qur'an the word *dhikr* is used as an important factor of piety: "and remember God often" (Sura 33:40) for, as another word attests, "the recollection of God makes the heart calm" (Sura 13:28).⁵

To understand the meaning of this word better, let us explore its roots and its meaning in the Arabic language. The Arabic verb *dh-a-k-a-r-a* and its various modifications, based on the root *DH-K-R*, have a range of meanings that include at least these four: that which reminds one of something, the act of remembering, the ongoing state of mindfulness or of spiritual presence, and the physical action of speaking that results in an audible citing of something.⁶

Religious scholars agree that the word *dhikr* does not always occur with the same connotation but has different meanings. For example, Montgomery Watt gives a definition of the root, saying that it has a rich semantic development in Arabic religious writings. He goes on to state that in the Qur'an the word *dhikr* sometimes (as in 2:200/169; 5:91/3; 62:9; 63:9) has the sense of public or private worship. He compares the word *dhikr* to two other versions from the same root, *dhikra* and *tadhkira*. These nouns, according to him, are from the verb *dhakara*, "to remember, to mention," which in the second stem, *dhakkara*, means "to remind, to admonish." In several passages the Prophet Muhammad is instructed to remind or admonish people, and in 88:21 he himself is called an admonisher, *mudhakkir*. The three nouns cited are often used in association with this sense of the verb; *dhikr* is thus found in 7:63/1 and 69/7, 12:104, 38:87, 68:52, and 81:27; *dhikra* is found in 6:69/8 and 90:11:114/6, and 120/1, and 74:31/4; *tadhkira* is found in 69:48; 73:19 and 76:29. Insofar as these words are applied to the revealed message or a part of it, the aspect that is intended is obvious and is certainly present. Indeed, in 38:1 the Qur'an itself is described as *dhu al-dhikr*, "having

² L. Gardet, "Dhikr" *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. II, p. 223.

³ Titus Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, trans. by D.M. Matheson (Lahore: Ashraf Press, 1959), p. 123.

⁴ Gardet, p. 223.

⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 167.

⁶ John Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 24.

the reminder."⁷

Diverted from the true core of their being, which has its roots in the Eternal, the consciousness of human beings is comparable to being imprisoned in a kind of dream or a state of forgetfulness (*ghafla*). Therefore people should be "reminded" of that which they have "forgotten." For that reason, Sufis practice *dhikr* in a variety of ways since this act means "recollection," "mindfulness," "contemplation" and "invocation."⁸

The word *dhikr* encompasses all kinds of mentioning, remembering, and worshipping of God, publicly or privately. The term is sometimes used of the Qur'an itself, sometimes of the Qur'an's recitation, and sometimes of the Prophet Muhammad. The term *dhikr* is also associated with all kinds of prayers, *du'as*,⁹ that Muslims perform during their daily life and their daily prayers, *salah*, as well. Also, *dhikr* was sometimes used as encouragement for studying and teaching Islamic sciences.

The Origin of the Word *Dhikr*

The source of the word *dhikr* and its practice is very controversial. There is no common agreement among scholars of religion regarding its origin. There are those who think that the *dhikr* experience stems from the pre-Islamic era and that its roots are found in the primitive asceticism of either Christianity or Buddhism. Titus Burckhardt says that "Sufi orders in the East, such as the Naqshibandis, adapted certain techniques of hatha-yoga and so differentiated their form of dance. Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, who founded the Mawlawiyya order, drew the inspiration for the collective *dhikr* of his community from the popular dances and music of Asia Minor."¹⁰ Another scholar, Reynold Nicholson, believes that the word *dhikr* has a Christian origin. According to him,

Many Gospel texts and apocryphal sayings of Jesus are cited in the oldest Sufi biographies, and the Christian anchorite (*rahib*) often appears in the role of a teacher giving instruction and advice to wandering Muslim ascetics. Also, the woolen dress, from which the name "Sufi" is derived, is of Christian origin: vows of silence, *dhikr*, and other ascetic practices may be traced to the same source.¹¹

Schimmel also believes that *dhikr* (*theomnemie*) is borrowed from Christianity or, more specifically, from Byzantine Christianity.¹² Julian Baldick finds the roots of *dhikr* practice are not only Christian but also Jewish, with deeper roots in

⁷ Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), pp. 144-45.

⁸ William Stoddart, *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam* (New York: Paragon House, 1985), p. 46.

⁹ Renard, *Seven Doors To Islam*, p. 53.

¹⁰ Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 130.

¹¹ Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (Beirut: Khayats Book and Publishing Company, 1996), p. 10.

¹² Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 167.

ancient Greek philosophy. He says:

One particular Christian expression continues to play a major role in Sufism: that of "remembrance of God", in Greek *mneme Theou*, which is found first among the Stoic philosophers. It is also used in the Hebrew Bible, from the term *zakar*, which means "remembering". The remembering of God is also connected with the celebrated "Jesus prayer", the continually repeated invocation of the name of Jesus which is a distinctive feature of Eastern Christianity.¹³

Fazlur Rahman does not think that *dhikr* was derived from the Islamic tradition. He says: "An initiation ceremony was adopted which commonly betrays an un-Islamic origin and in some cases had its source in Christian practices but was nevertheless transformed into an Islamic tradition."¹⁴ There are other scholars, like William Stoddart, who discuss the relation of *dhikr* with Hinduism. According to him, *Madhkur-Dhakar-Dhikr* corresponds to the Hindu ternary *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, with *Sat* being the Divine Object, *Chit* the Divine Subject and *Ananda* the Divine Union.¹⁵

The article on *dhikr* in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* explains this notion more broadly, discussing it in accordance with its practice in different religions without claiming that this practice comes from a particular one:

As an ejaculatory litany tirelessly repeated the *dhikr* may be compared with the "prayer of Jesus" of the oriental Christians, Sinaitic then Anthonic, and also with the *djapa-yoga* of India and the Japanese *nembutsu*, and this quite apart from historical outfit which may have played a role in one direction or another. One may recognize in these modes of prayer, without denying possible influences, a universal tendency, however climates and religious beliefs may differ.¹⁶

There are some Sufi masters (*shuyukh*) who go beyond the physical and material world and connect *dhikr* with the creation of the spirits that occurred before human beings came to life in this world. They claim that people heard their first *dhikr* when God addressed them, saying *alastu birabbikum*, "Am I Not Your Lord?" Since then, this *dhikr* was buried in their hearts, just as the fact was secreted in their intellects. So when people heard *dhikr*, the secret things of their heart appeared.¹⁷ This means that people have already heard *dhikr* before they were sent to live in this world, and when they hear it, they automatically remember something that they knew.

As was mentioned earlier, the meaning of *dhikr* is very old and cannot be claimed to derive from the Islamic or any other tradition specifically. It is true that the expression of inner life is a reality of all traditions of belief. Given the fact that Islam is the youngest of the Abrahamic faiths, it is quite understandable that this

¹³ Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, Ltd., 1989), pp. 16-7.

¹⁴ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 152.

¹⁵ Stoddart, *Sufism*, p. 68.

¹⁶ Gardet, p. 224.

¹⁷ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 172.

kind of "remembering God" existed in Christianity and Judaism, since it is also true that religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, which are even older, had such mystical experiences as well. Therefore, it is normal that such practices existed in these traditions. Moreover, ancient Greek philosophers may have used such expressions. Consequently, I would say that the doctrine of *dhikr* is probably one example where religions and traditions meet not only in pure metaphysics but also in pure prayer.¹⁸

***Dhikr* in the Qur'an and Hadiths**

The phrase "Remember God often" constantly recurs in the Qur'an; in its context it has an obvious, neutral meaning, but the Sufis interpreted it in a particular way, and in time the word *dhikr* itself acquired a very specific connotation.¹⁹ One of the greatest errors of human beings, according to Muslim thinkers, is forgetfulness. Therefore, the purpose of the revelation, *wahy*, to the prophets and to the Prophet Muhammad as well is to enable humans to "remember." One of the names of the Qur'an itself is *Dhikr Allah*, "Remembrance of Allah," and the ultimate end and purpose of all Islamic rites and all Islamic injunctions is to remember God. One special attribute of the remembrance of God is that it has been placed in direct correspondence with God's own remembrance of us. Here are some examples of *dhikr* in the Qur'an:

Then do ye remember Me; I will remember you. (2:152)

And remember your Lord much (by praising Him again and again), and glorify Him in the afternoon and in the morning. (3:41)

'When you have finished As-Salat (the congregational prayer), remember Allah standing, sitting down, and (lying down) on your sides. (4:103)

Verily! I am Allah (none has the right to be worshipped but I), so worship Me, and perform As-Salat for my remembrance. (20:14)

And the remembering of Allah is greater indeed. (29: 45)

O you who believe! Remember Allah with much remembrance. (33:41)

The word *dhikr* in the Qur'an is used in different ways. It is sometimes used for revelation, not only in reference to the Qur'an but also previous revelations such as the Torah and the Gospel. William Chittick asserts that:

The Qur'an commonly refers to the knowledge brought by the prophets as "remembrance" (*dhikr*) and "reminder" (*dhikra*, *tadhkir*), terms that derive from the root *dh-k-r*. This word refers to other prophetic messages, like the Torah and Gospel, by the same words."²⁰

The phrase "offers prayer" in the verse above is a translation of a word whose root came to be associated with the five daily ritual prayers known as *al-salat*. The

¹⁸ Stoddart, *Sufism*, p. 67.

¹⁹ A.J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1959), p. 22.

²⁰ William Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), p. 52.

early Meccan text just cited suggests three meanings of the root *DH-K-R*: the act of reminding, that of which one is to be mindful, and the state of mindfulness. The Qur'an developed these themes further during the middle Meccan period. In those later texts the Qur'an and *dhikr* are virtually synonymous, and *dhikr* is linked with the prayer or invocation (*du'a*), and with patience (*sabr*), a virtue that the Qur'an associates strongly with the Prophet Joseph.²¹

Since the Qur'an is the main religious text of Muslims, they seek to memorize it. Sufis attempt not only to memorize it but also strive to understand its esoteric meaning and then act according to its requirements. Arberry elucidates:

To understand the extreme lengths to which the Sufis were prepared to go in reading esoteric meanings into the quite simple language of their Scriptures, it is necessary to remember that the Qur'an was committed to memory by all deeply religious men and women; so that the mystic was in a state of uninterrupted meditation upon the Holy Book."²²

The basic meaning of the term *dhikr* can be brought out by answering three questions: What, Why, and How? What is to be remembered? Why should it be remembered? How it can be remembered? The object of remembrance is God, whose reality is designated briefly by the first *Shahadah*, "There is no god but God," and in more detail by the whole range of names and attributes mentioned in the Qur'an. God should be remembered because He has commanded human beings to remember Him and because ultimate happiness depends upon remembrance. God can be remembered by imitating the Prophet himself, whose tradition (*Sunnah*) provides the model for correct activity and right remembrance.²³ When God influences the hearts and the believer unites himself with the Divine Name in passionate invocation, he inwardly frees himself from manifestation of worldly affairs and its concomitant suffering.²⁴ This will bring to the minds of humans the greatness and the intensity of His Majesty against those who disobey Him.

The Prophet Muhammad's role in Islamic spirituality is as complex as it is essential. The Prophet remains a devotional focus and the model of the seeker of Divine love.²⁵ Therefore, Sufis produced a vast number of spurious traditions to support their contention that Sufism is, in truth, the esoteric teaching of the Prophet.²⁶ Remembering the Prophet Muhammad and sending the blessings of God to him is the fruit of love for him and a message that those who remember him are following his tradition and are taking him as a model for their ideal life.

It is commonly believed that Sufism was not organized during the time of the

²¹ Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, p. 24.

²² Arberry, *Sufism*, pp. 22-23.

²³ Chittick, *Sufism*, p. 53.

²⁴ Stoddart, *Sufism*, p. 65.

²⁵ John Renard, *Windows on the House of Islam* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998), p. 120.

²⁶ Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Idea of Personality in Sufism* (Lahore: Ashraf Press, 1970), p. 9.

Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet did not encourage the formation of monasticism in any form. However, even in his time, there were spiritual fraternities in the form of associations and assemblies of ascetics and dervishes. Such associations increased in number on account of the mystical efforts of the first caliph, Abu Bakr (A.D. 634), and the fourth one, 'Ali (A.D. 661).²⁷

Mystics believe that this world is contaminated by lust, selfishness, and other deprived desires of humans' ego that darken the heart and lead people away from their innate nature. All of this caused people to live in a position of forgetfulness, heedlessness, and, inevitably, spiritual failure. The Prophet Muhammad said: "There is a polish for everything that takes away rust; and the polish of the heart is the invocation of Allah."²⁸ Dhikr leads to a complete spiritualization, and "he who remembers God permanently is the true companion (jalis) of God," for God has promised in a Hadith Qudsi: "ana jalisu man dhakarani," i.e., "I am the companion of him who recollects Me."²⁹ Abu Hurayra narrates another *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad that shows the weight and value of *dhikr* before God:

Groups of angels keep looking for persons engaged in *dhikr*. Whenever they find such a gathering they summon their companions, rejoice over their discovery and cover it with their wings, right unto the heaven. (When the angels return to their Lord to describe the scene) they are commanded to bear witness to the Divine forgiveness announced for everyone in that gathering. One of them submits that a particular person did not intend to do *dhikr*, but was present by chance. Allah says: This is assembly that no one present in it shall be deprived of my forgiveness.³⁰

The notable Sufi master, al-Qushayri, narrates another *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad, from Abu al-Darda, where it is clearly shown that *dhikr*, remembering God, is the most important rite a Muslim can perform. The Prophet Muhammad says to his companions:

Should I tell you of the best of your good works, the purest of them in your Lord's sight, the highest of them in your ranks, that which is better than giving gold and silver in charity and fighting your enemies and striking their necks?" The companions inquired, "What is that, o Messenger of God?" He replied, "Remembrance of God."³¹

In another *hadith* the Prophet calls *dhikr* the best act of worship. Every word that a person utters in this life will be counted against him/her in the hereafter, except commanding one to honor (*amr bi al-ma'ruf*), forbidding dishonor (*nahy an al-munkar*), and remembering God, (*dhikr*).³²

²⁷ R.S. Bhatnagar, *Dimensions of Classical Sufi Thought* (Delhi: East West Publications, 1984), p. 175.

²⁸ Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1975), p. 59.

²⁹ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 168.

³⁰ Bukhari, Vol II, p. 948; Maulana Allah Yar Khan, *An Objective Appraisal of the Sublime Sufi Path*, trans. by Abu Talha. (Chakwal: Idarah-Naqshbandiah Owaisiah, 1976), p. 123.

³¹ Al-Qushayri, *Principles of Sufism*, trans. by B.R. von Schlegell, with introduction by Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1990), p. 206.

³² Chittick, *Sufism*, p. 55.

Shaikh: The Perfect Prototype

An essential element in the Sufi organization is the *shaikh*, a spiritual master around whom disciples gather and from whom they receive the initiation that through a long chain, *silsila*, is believed to derive from the Prophet Muhammad himself. Since many generations occurred between the time of the Prophet and the present day, the *silsilas* are now many and complex, but most of them can be traced back to one of companions of the Prophet, notably the caliphs Abu Bakr and 'Ali.³³ Moreover, some techniques of performing dhikr were traced back to the first caliphs: the Prophet allegedly taught Abu Bakr the silent dhikr when he was with him in the cave during the move to Medina, whereas 'Ali was granted the dhikr said aloud.³⁴

Like any other Muslim, the Sufi follows the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, but in addition, he also follows a man who is considered to be the living example of piety and devotion; he is considered to be the best model of the Prophet. The more closely they follow this accessible example of the Prophet, the more closely they come to resemble the Prophet and therefore, themselves become more perfect examples. For a Sufi then, the shaikh is the living prototype of ethical perfection.³⁵

Sufis in general believe that the salik (the seeker of God) can never reach the goal of excellence without the spiritual guidance of a shaikh who mediates between the wayfarer and God.³⁶ The role of the shaikh is so important that he has unlimited power over the disciple, the murid.³⁷ Shah Wali Allah al-Dihlawi devotes a whole section of his *Sata'at* to this phenomenon. To show the importance of the role of shaikh for a mystic, he says that dhikr should be learned from, if not a living master, then Khidr, the mysterious guide of the wayfarers. The formula has to be transmitted through the chain of spiritual leaders that goes back to the Prophet himself.³⁸ According to al-Dihlawi, the shaikh is then the only alternative by which a mystic can learn the path of spiritual perfection since not all people have access to a mysterious Khidr.

One of the most important duties of the shaikh is to guide his muridun (students, disciples) on their spiritual path according to their individual needs. Since not all people have the same character and attitude, the guidance changes according to their characters. One Sufi master, Bahauddin Naqshiband, describes this procedure:

³³ Stoddart, *Sufism*, p. 56.

³⁴ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 169.

³⁵ Mark J. Sedgwick, *Sufis: The Essentials* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000), p. 25.

³⁶ Bhatnagar, *Dimensions of Classical Sufi Thought*, p. 184.

³⁷ Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 111.

³⁸ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 169.

Dervishes join the Order most suited to their inner nature. They remain with their teacher until he has developed them as far as possible. After this they may go or be sent to another teacher, in order to participate in the special exercises which he may offer. This is because there may be a side of them, which will be benefited by this specialization. In the Path of the Masters we follow the bases of the Dervish Work. Some of our exercises are used in one way, some in another. Some are reversed, because they do not apply to this place or this time.³⁹

As an example of relationship between the *shaikh* and his disciples, the Indian Naqshibandi Sufi master, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) writes to one of his disciples:

My dear! You have time, and you are in good health and free from worries. Engage yourself all the time in the *dhikr* of God. Remember that everything you do according to the Shar' (Islamic law) is *dhikr* even if it is so ordinary as buying and selling. Observe, therefore the rules of the Shar' and all activities so that the whole of life becomes *dhikr*.⁴⁰

From this letter we see that Sirhindi not only recommends his disciple to perform *dhikr* but also advises him to obey the *sharia*, the Islamic revealed law. This shows that Sufis consider *sharia* to be a prerequisite for their path. Another important aspect of this letter is that we understand that *dhikr* can be also considered to include all work and duties that people perform in their ordinary life on a daily basis. If people act with the awareness of God's presence, that will lead them to be more careful and vigilant so as not to violate the principles of faith. Therefore, according to this, the particularly attractive aspect of *dhikr* is that in its primary form (not in its later, highly developed phase that mystics reach in his path), it is permitted in any place and at any time; its practice is restricted neither to the exact hours of ritual prayer nor to a ritually clean place. God can be remembered anywhere in His world.⁴¹

***Dhikr* and Sufism**

Unlike Christianity, Islam does not hold to the notion of the original sin that accompanies people from their birth; but it does accept the fall of humankind from the primordial and original state of perfection in which humans were created. Indeed, humans are created in such way that they forget their promises to abide by God's rules. They very easily forget that the life of this world is transitory (*faniyah*), and the hereafter, *akhira*, is eternal (*baqiyah*). Therefore, it is necessary for people to be reminded of who they were and why they were created; otherwise they will continue in their unawareness and they may completely forget their duties and mission in this world. By being reminded of and remembering God, people will see the paths that lead them to understand and recognize their own essence, that will enable them to remember their fundamental nature and become

³⁹ Shah, *The Way of the Sufi*, p. 157.

⁴⁰ Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, p. 197.

⁴¹ Schimmel, "Mystical Dimensions of Islam," p. 167.

people with whom the Almighty God will be satisfied.

Sufis believe that remembering God is a splendid act that every servant of God should carry out. It is an honorable effort at earning God's pleasure, an effective weapon to overcome unlimited desires and passions, and an inoculation against evil manners. Furthermore, *dhikr* is as necessary for the heart as water is for fish. *Dhikr* is a bridge to the One whom humans need to remember and near whom they need to be all the time. If they cannot have the Beloved in their embrace, they want, at least, to keep the Beloved in mind.⁴²

In his book *al-Munqidh min al-dalalah* (The Deliverer from Error) Imam al-Ghazali gives details of his return to Sufism after many stages he went through in his life. He emphasizes the importance and significance of *dhikr* by saying:

I turned my attention to the way of Sufis. I knew that it could not be traversed to the end without both doctrine and practice, and that the gist of their doctrine lies in overcoming the appetites of the flesh and getting rid of its evil dispositions and vile qualities, so that the heart may be cleared of all but God; and the means of clearing it is '*dhikr Allah*,' commemoration of God and concentration of every thought upon Him.⁴³

Dhikr can be performed alone or in a group. If *dhikr* is performed within a group, then choosing good companions is very essential. One of the most influential Sufi masters, Shaikh Bayazid, says: "Better than being what you imagine to be good is to be with those who really are good. Worse than doing something evil is to be with those who are evil."⁴⁴ For Sufis, the gatherings of *dhikr* are the gatherings where the lawful (*halal*) and the prohibited (*haram*) things are discussed. These are gatherings where the name of Allah is mentioned and where the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad is learned. These are meetings where angels are present and the devil is absent.

It is believed that the origin of Sufi orders and practices in a more ordered structure was a reaction to the luxurious life of people in government. Such people lived in extravagance, ignored the lower classes, and lived far from them. More devoted people who wanted to avoid such luxuries and not become involved in the worldly affairs of the rulers, wanted to meet, meditate, and not be affected by moral erosions of their time. Mosques were usually associated with the political authority, and therefore they refused to meet there so they could remain far from authorities. They met in their own houses instead. The residence of their *shaikh* was usually the starting point for meetings. When different paths, *tariqas*, came into existence, the center of mystical activity was no longer the master's or a disciple's house. A more institutional structure proved to be necessary to cope with the growing number of disciples. These centers were usually called *khanqah*⁴⁵ or *tekke*.

⁴² Chittick, *Sufism*, p. 112.

⁴³ Bhatnagar, *Dimensions of Classical Sufi Thought*, p. 80.

⁴⁴ Shah, *The Way of the Sufi*, p. 226.

⁴⁵ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 231.

In the gatherings of *dhikr*, the *shaikh* would compose meditations to be memorized and repeated in *dhikr* rites by means of verbal formulae.⁴⁶ Since the remembrance of God is considered the very foundation of good actions, therefore the required amount of *dhikr* is "as much as possible." As a result, *dhikr* gatherings would last very long, sometimes from the Night Prayer to the Morning Prayer.

The notion of *dhikr* was also a characteristic of mystical poetry. Many mystical poets composed poems in which they emphasized the importance and significance of *dhikr*. As an example, the celebrated Sufi Awhad al-Din Kirmani (d. 1237) communicates the intensity of his longing for God in these lines:

Without the remembrance of you earthly life would be nothing,
 Without your love our hearts and souls nothing.
 If we miss one breath of your invocation (*dhikr*)
 in the two worlds our reward would be nothing.⁴⁷

Techniques of Performing Dhikr

There are two main ways to perform *dhikr*: one is in the *majlis* (session, meeting, and gathering) of *fuqara* and the other is in *khalwa* (spiritual retreat).⁴⁸ The process of *dhikr* requires some preparation before the meditation, and there are various techniques for this. One Sufi author, Shaikh Muhammad Amin al-Kurdi al-Shafi'i al-Naqshibandi, described many ways of performing *dhikr* in his book *Tanwir al-qulub*. His "successor" (*khalifa*), Shaikh Salama al-'Azzami of the Azhar (celebrated Islamic University in Cairo), edited this book with its in-depth knowledge of the Sufi rituals, including information regarding the performance of *dhikr*. One of the most curious sections of the book is that in which the author gives instructions on how to perform the *dhikr qalbi*⁴⁹ (*commemoratio cordis*). *Dhikr* is divided into two parts; the first is in the Name of Essence (Allah), the second is by way of negation (*la-ilaha*) and asseveration (*illa-Allah*), the whole formula making up the first article of the Muslim confession of faith ("There is no god but God"). It comprises eleven preparatory exercises (*adab*), as follows:

Perform the ritual purification.
 Pray two *rak'as* (units).
 Face the *qibla* (Mecca) in a deserted place.
 Sit on folded legs, as at prayer.
 Ask for forgiveness for all your sins, while picturing all your misdeeds as assembled simultaneously before you in God's sight.
 Recite the *Fatifa* once and the *Ikhlas* thrice, offering them to the spirit of Muhammad and the spirits of all the Naqshibandi shaikhs.

⁴⁶ Renard, *Windows on the House of Islam*, p. 120.

⁴⁷ Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, p. 123.

⁴⁸ Stoddart, *Sufism*, p. 67.

⁴⁹ Silent *dhikr*, *dhikr* of the heart.

Close your eyes; keep your lips tightly sealed; and press your tongue against the roof of your mouth in order to perfect your humility and to exclude all visual disturbances.

Perform the "grave exercise," i.e. imagine that you are dead, that you have been washed, wrapped in your winding sheet and laid in your tomb, and that all the mourners have departed, leaving you alone to face the Judgment.

Perform the "guide exercise" i.e. when the neophyte's heart confronts the heart of his *shaikh*, keeping his image in mind even though he is absent, seeking the *shaikh's* blessing and, as it were, passing away (*fana*) in him.

Concentrate all your bodily senses, expel all preoccupation and wayward impulses of the heart, and direct all your perception toward God. Then say, "O God, Thou art my Quest, and Thy Pleasure is my desire." Then, commemorate the Name of the Essence within your heart, recalling that God is present, watching and encompassing you.

Then await the "visitation" (*warid*, i.e.-spiritual epiphenomenon) of the *dhikr*; when it has been over for a little while you open your eyes.⁵⁰

Dhikr can also consist in saying the word "Allah," the declaration of faith, *shahadah*, formulas asking for forgiveness or formulas praising the Lord, or, very important, one of the 99 Most Beautiful Names of God (*al-Asma al-Husna*).⁵¹ The contemplative life of the lover of God begins from this stage leading to the soul's enlightenment at the later stages of the path.⁵² Although *dhikr* can be performed aloud or silently, according to the common opinion, the tongue and mind should work together.⁵³

The creedal phrase "La ilaha illa Allah" (There is no god but God)⁵⁴ and invocations of God by any of his 99 Names – such as Ya Rahman (O Merciful One) or Ya Sabur (O Patient One) – are also commonly used.⁵⁵ The rosary can be used in the ritual; with its 33 or 99 beads it is used for counting the names of Allah and keeping track of the frequency of saying these names. They may be repeated one by one, beginning with Ya Rahman, Ya Rahim (O Merciful, O All-Compassionate One) and ending with Ya Sabur (O Patient One).⁵⁶

Meditation and the recollection of Divine Names leads to Divine knowledge (*ma'rifat*),⁵⁷ which will cause hearts to wake up from their slumber and spiritual loss in a state of spiritual development and achievement of internal peace. When hearts are satisfied, they turn to the highest levels without being diverted by the desires and lust that are deeply rooted in the human heart.

All the names and attributes of God have different meanings. Sufi masters

⁵⁰ Arberry, *Sufism*, 131.

⁵¹ Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction*, p. 111.

⁵² Bhatnagar, *Dimensions of Classical Sufi Thought*, p. 167.

⁵³ Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, p. 46.

⁵⁴ This expression is a fruit of belief in *Tawhid*, the oneness of God. It is the first and most important thing for Muslims: it is a declaration of being a member of the Islamic faith.

⁵⁵ Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, p. 54.

⁵⁶ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 176.

⁵⁷ Bhatnagar, *Dimensions of Classical Sufi Thought*, p. 48.

have carefully laid down the rule for the use of each divine name at a certain moment. Ibn 'Ata Allah (d. 1309), the great teacher of the Shadhiliyya order in Egypt, made some interpretations regarding the beautiful names of God. According to him, the name *al-Hadi* (the Guiding One) must work upon the adept when he turns to God in his *dhikr*. The name *al-Latif* (The Subtle, the Kind) should be used by the mystic in seclusion in order to make his nature subtle. The name *al-Hafiz* (The Preserver) should be used when one is attempting to preserve one's mystical state. *Al-Wadud* (The Loving Beloved) makes the mystic loved by all creatures, and, if it is constantly recited in seclusion, intimacy and divine love will increase. The name *al-Fa'iq* (The Overpowering) should never be used by the beginner but only by the mystic [seeker] who is at a high level.⁵⁸

The *Shahadah* (the declaration of faith) is commonly called "the best *dhikr*." In the formula *la ilaha illa-Allah* (there is no god but God), each of the four words denotes a degree, and the final *ha'* of the name of Allah symbolizes the self (*Hu-wa*).⁵⁹ Ibn Ata Allah says that: "No one says [there is n]o god but God correctly unless he negates everything other than God from his soul and heart." Another Sufi master, Ibn Ata Allah's contemporary Najm al-Din Razi, explains the meaning of the *Shahada* by dividing it into two parts. According to him:

With *no god* the practitioner negates other than the Real, and with *but God* he affirms the Presence of Exaltation. When he does this constantly and clings to it, the spirit's attachment to other than God is gradually cut with the scissors of *no God*. The beauty of *but God's* authority discloses itself from behind the Pavilion of Exaltation. In keeping with the promise, *Remember Me, and I will remember you* (2:152), the remembrance is disengaged from the clothing of letters and sound. The specific characteristics of *Everything is perishing but His face* (28:88) become evident in the disclosure of the light of Divinity's magnificence.⁶⁰

The litanies (*dhikr* formulas) are in fact different among the various regional organizations, but there is nothing unorthodox in variations, since they are usually composed of passages and phrases from the Qur'an. A representative formula is "I seek the pardon of God, the Mighty. Glory be to God, O, God! Bless our master Muhammad and his family and Companions. There is no God but God." The first three sentences are recited a hundred times each while the last is repeated five hundred times.⁶¹

Repeated words or phrases include, for example, Ya Allah (O God); Allahu Akbar (God is Supreme); Allah (which fades away until only its last soft h dies out), followed by hu (he i.e., God).⁶² Dhikr with *hu*, *hayy*, and *haqq* are pronouns and names of the Almighty God and used very often in *dhikr* sessions. This comes from the verses of the Qur'an (2:255): ...*Huwa al-Hayy al-Qayyum*.

⁵⁸ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 177-78.

⁵⁹ Lings, *What is Sufism?* p. 69.

⁶⁰ Chittick, *Sufism*, p. 58.

⁶¹ Rahman, *Islam*, p. 160.

⁶² Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, p. 54.

As we mentioned earlier, *dhikr* can be performed silently or out loud. This can be practiced differently among the mystical orders. For example, the *tariqa* of Qadiriyya are known for their performing *dhikr* aloud, while the Naqshibandiyya are well known for their silent *dhikr*. When someone decides to be part of one mystical order, they also see if their nature tends more toward performing *dhikr* out loud or silently. If their character was more energetic, they would probably prefer to be part of *dhikr* that expresses their meditation aloud.

The remembrance made of the tongue mirrors the situation of the heart. If the heart is full of love for God, then the tongue moves in the appropriate direction to express what is inside. *Dhikr* returns from the outward feature, which is the tongue, to the inward, which is the heart. However, since one person can practice silent *dhikr* and at the same time be doing everyday work, some of the Sufi masters understand silent *dhikr* to be even more important because of its continuity.

Attention and complete concentration is a very important part for the efficient performance of *dhikr*. This meditation is supposed to allow people to reach the stage of *Ihsan*, or excellence, praying to God as they see Him. During this contemplation they may break out in ecstasy into wild, uncontrolled screams.⁶³ At this stage not only does the tongue make *dhikr*, but all the parts of the body feels its effect. In this state the *dhikr* of the eyes is weeping, the *dhikr* of the ears is listening, the *dhikr* of the tongue is praise, the *dhikr* of the hands is distribution and giving, the *dhikr* of the body is effort and accomplishment, the *dhikr* of the heart is fear and hope, and the *dhikr* of the spirit is surrender and satisfaction in God.⁶⁴ This will result in hearts being softened, and when the hearts are softened, then the Divine love becomes rooted there and people are drawn closer to Him. This will open up the path that leads them to become friends of God (*Waliyy Allah*).

When speaking about *dhikr* in his *Ihya 'ulum al-Din* (Revival of Religious Sciences), Imam Al-Ghazali talks about the spontaneous movement of the tongue that occurs in this performance. He describes this movement in this mode:

You must be alone in a retreat ... and, being seated, concentrate your thoughts on God without other inner occupation. This you will accomplish, first pronouncing the name of God with your tongue, ceaselessly repeating: Allah, Allah, without letting the attention go.⁶⁵

Another phenomenon that accompanies *dhikr* is the presence of music. Some Sufi orders use music as an element of their *dhikr* performance. It can probably be said that the dances and music of the dervishes are among the best known and most popular of the manifestations of Sufism.⁶⁶ Among the Sufi masters, Jalal al-Din al-Rumi stands out with respect to techniques and styles of *dhikr*. He expands

⁶³ Tor Andrae, *In The Garden of Myrtles*, trans. by Brigitta Sharpre with Foreword by Annemarie Schimmel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 82.

⁶⁴ Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, p. 55.

⁶⁵ Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 130.

⁶⁶ Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 130.

the ritual of his religious order, with its dancing and music, so that the drum, the reed, pipe, and the whirling movements of the dervishes are included in the mystical order. With his idea of rotation and under the inspiration of the Mawlawi dance, he invented a wonderful symbolism of circling spheres and planets, of mill wheels and millstones.⁶⁷ Mawlawis see the whirling dance performed by *fuqara*⁶⁸ as an outward support and expression of their *dhikr*.⁶⁹

Dhikr may sometimes be chanted rhythmically rather than stated; the movements may be more pronounced. The chanting may become musical and the followers may stand, perhaps in lines rather than a circle, and sway. Those with particularly fine voices may lead the chanting, drums or cymbals or pipes may be introduced, and the swaying may become swinging.⁷⁰

Some Muslim scholars see music as compromising their religious experience. Fazlur Rahman says that: "Compromised with popular religious modes and ideas, Sufism succumbed to them and a point of no return seems to have been reached by the end of the 7th/13th and the beginning of the 8th/14th centuries. Especially prominent among these new features was the introduction of music and dancing."⁷¹ Music was condemned not only by many Muslim scholars but was also disapproved of by many tariqas as inappropriate for Islamic mysticism. Nevertheless, the Sufis who perform *dhikr* together with music find support in the Qur'an. They interpret certain verses of the Qur'an (e.g. 39:23) as supporting the use of outward movement, such as the swaying of the body in sacred dance, as a means for inward concentration: "It causeth the skins of those that fear their Lord to thrill. Then their skins and their hearts grow pliant (or supple) unto the remembrance of God."⁷²

In conclusion, I would say that *dhikr* is probably the most important part of prayer and meditation in the Sufi tradition. For Sufis, to remember God is to remember the essence of ourselves, to understand the goal of our creation, and to be aware of our mission in this world. Remembrance is not only reading a particular formula, but it is reading all around us that will lead us to focus on God. As much as we remember God, He will remember us, and the closer we feel to Him, the closer He will be with us. Having a living example not only enables people to see someone who is spiritually better than themselves but at the same time provides a model whom good people follow. That will structure a community of admirable people for whom religion is not only about rituals and physical requirements.

Some scholars believe that *dhikr* is the central practice that differentiates Sufi

⁶⁷ Arberry, *Sufism*, p. 116.

⁶⁸ The plural of *faqir* (poor, "poor in spirit"). Members of Sufi orders are known as *fuqara* (or, in Persian, dervishes). This is how Sufis refer to themselves.

⁶⁹ Stoddart, *Sufism*, p. 57.

⁷⁰ Sedgwick, *Sufis*, pp. 40-41.

⁷¹ Rahman, *Islam*, p. 152.

⁷² Lings, *What is Sufism?* p. 60.

Muslims from non-Sufi Muslims; some even believe that dhikr may be considered an attitude that separates believers from non-believers.⁷³ Whether it is performed silently or out loud, this mystical experience will remain in the focus of the mystics as a way of spiritual purification.

In the end, we can say that remembering God is considered an important aspect whereby a mystic can taste the sweetness of the faith, iman. Himself a religious scholar and a mystic, Hasan al-Basri stated: "Seek sweetness in three things: prayer, making remembrance of God, and reciting the Qur'an. It is to be found there or not at all. If you find no sweetness in these, then know that the gate is shut."⁷⁴

⁷³ Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, p. 24.

⁷⁴ Al-Qushayri, *Principles of Sufism*, p. 211.

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