

Way to the Qur'an

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A momentous Journey

You are about to undertake a momentous journey _ a journey that will take you through the endless joys and riches of the words that your Creator and Lord has sent to you and all mankind. As you come to the Qur'an, you will come to a new world _ a world of untold treasures of knowledge and wisdom to guide you on the pathways of life, of thought and action; of deep insights to capture your imagination; of radiant light to illumine the deeper reaches of your soul; of profound emotions and glowing warmth to melt your heart and bring tears running down your cheeks. It is the Qur'an, and only the Qur'an which can lead you on and on to success and glory in this world and the hereafter.

It is beyond the power of a human being to comprehend or even to describe the greatness and importance of what the Qur'an holds for him. Yet you must have some idea of what it means to you, to inspire you, to immerse the whole of your self in the Qur'an, in total commitment and complete dedication, as it demands. The Qur'an is Allah's greatest blessing for you. It is the fulfilment of His promise to Adam and his descendants: *There shall come to you guidance from Me, and whosoever follows My guidance no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow* (2: 38).

It is the only weapon to help your frail existence as you struggle against the forces of evil and temptation in this world. It is the only light, as you grope in the darkness, with which to find your way to success and salvation. It is your only sanctuary as you are tossed around in the stormy sea of life. It has been brought down by one who is powerful and trustworthy in the Heavens _ the angel Gabriel. Its first abode was that pure and sublime heart, the like of which people had never seen _ the heart of the Prophet Muhammad. More than anything, it is the only `way' to come nearer and closer to your Creator. It tells you of Him; of His attributes; of how He rules over the cosmos and history; of how He relates Himself to you and how you should relate to Him, to yourself, to others and to every other being.

What you read in the Qur'an is the word of Allah, the Lord of the Worlds, which He has conveyed to you in a human language, only because of His infinite mercy, care and providence for you. This act of Divine mercy is enough to awe and overwhelm you and inspire you to ever-greater heights of gratitude, yearnings and endeavours to enter the world of the Qur'an. The majesty of the Qur'an is so overpowering that, *If We had sent down this Qur'an upon a mountain, you would have seen it humbled, split asunder out of the fear of Allah* (59: 21). Indeed, no treasure is more valuable and precious for you than the Qur'an, as Allah says of His generosity: *O People! There has come to you an exhortation from your Lord, a healing for what is in the hearts, and a guidance, and a mercy for believers. Say: In [this] Bounty of Allah, and in His mercy _ in it let them rejoice. It is better than whatever they amass* (10: 57_58).

Rejoice as you must, in the mercy, blessing and generosity of Allah. But the Qur'an opens its doors only to those who knock with a depth of yearning, sincerity of purpose and exclusiveness of attention that befits its importance and majesty. Only they are allowed to gather its treasures while they walk through it, who are prepared to abandon themselves

completely to its guidance and do their utmost to absorb it. What a tragic misfortune it would be if you came to the Qur'an and went away empty-handed _ soul untouched, heart unmoved, life unchanged _ `they went out as they came in'. You may recite its words and turn its pages endlessly and laboriously, yet fail to make an encounter with it that enriches and transforms your whole person. The Qur'an's blessings are limitless, but the measure of your fill depends entirely upon the capacity and the suitability of the receptacle you bring to it. Nine months spent in the womb of your mother have transformed a drop of water into `you' _ hearing, seeing and thinking. Can you imagine what a lifetime spent with the Qur'an _ seeking, hearing, seeing, thinking, striving _ can do for you? It can make you into an entirely new `being' _ before whom even angels will feel proud to kneel. So, at the very outset, make yourself more deeply aware of what the Qur'an means to you and what it demands of you; and make a solemn determination to recite the Qur'an in an appropriate manner, so that you may be counted among *Those whom We have given the Book, they recite it as it ought to be recited; [it is only] they who believe in it (2: 121).*

Tilawah or recitation is an act in which your whole person _ soul, heart, mind, tongue and body _ should participate. To recite the Qur'an, thus, as it deserves to be recited, is not a light task; neither is it difficult nor impossible. Otherwise the Qur'an could not have been meant for a layman; nor could it be the mercy and the guidance that it surely is. But it does entail many a travail of heart and mind, soul and intellect, spirit and body; and requires that certain conditions be observed and obligations be fulfilled _ some inwardly, some outwardly. You should know them all before you enter the glorious world of the Qur'an.

Attitudes of Heart and Mind

There are certain basic attitudes of heart and mind, integrated deeply in the conscious soul and in action, which constitute the necessary pre-requisites to any fruitful study of the Qur'an.

1. Firm Faith and Conviction

Come to the Qur'an with the deep, firm faith and conviction that it is the revealed word of Allah. Such is the charm of the Qur'an that even if a person takes it up and starts reading it as he would an ordinary book, he will still benefit from it, provided he reads it with an open mind. But, this is the Book of Allah; and you should always remain conscious that each word you are reading has been sent to you by Allah. This constant awareness is vital in developing the right attitude and strong determination required to reach the heart of the Qur'an and assimilate its message. Think of His majesty, glory and power, and you will feel the awe and devotion and a longing for His Words. That is why the Qur'an reminds you of this important Truth at the beginning of most *Surahs* and frequently in between.

2. Purpose of Recitation

Recite the Qur'an with no other purpose than to come nearer to your Lord and to seek His guidance and good pleasure. You should seek guidance from the Qur'an, for your total life, and only from the Qur'an. It is the Word of Allah; and it requires as much exclusiveness as He does. One who desires worldly ends from the Qur'an may get them, but he shall surely lose a whole ocean that could have filled his cup. One who has the Qur'an with him and yet goes to other sources for guidance, is surely running after mirages.

3. Accept Truth, Knowledge and Guidance

Accept, without the slightest doubt or scepticism, every piece of truth, knowledge and guidance that the Qur'an conveys to you. You have every right to enquire, reflect and understand what it contains; but what you cannot fully comprehend is not necessarily unreasonable. You have a right to reject that it is the Word of Allah; but once you have accepted it as His, you have no basis whatsoever to doubt even a single word of it. There must be a total surrender to the Qur'an. Your own opinions, beliefs, notions, whims and caprices should not be allowed to override any part of it.

4. Readiness to Change Attitudes and Behaviour

Have the determination and readiness to change and mould your attitude and behaviour _ inwardly and outwardly _ in accordance with the teachings you come across in the Qur'an. Unless you are prepared and begin to act, mere intellectual exercises will never bring you anywhere near the real treasures of the Qur'an.

5. Seek Refuge with Allah

Remain aware, as you embark upon reciting the Qur'an, that the possibilities and the potentials of your advancement are so great that Satan will, on this occasion, make greater efforts to deprive you of the fruits of your labour. He may pollute your intention; make you unmindful of its meaning and message; create doubt in your mind; create barriers between your soul and the Words of Allah; or tempt you away from obeying the Qur'an. It is with the full consciousness of these perils and dangers that your tongue should, in obedience to the Qur'an _ *When you recite the Qur'an, seek refuge with Allah from Satan, the rejected* (16: 98) _ say *A[udhubillahi min al-Shaitan al-Rajim*.

6. Allah's Infinite Mercy

Realise that, just as it has been Allah's infinite mercy that has brought His words to you in the Qur'an, so it can only be His Mercy that can lead you to the full rewards of its reading. Your desire and effort are the necessary means; but His will and support are the only guarantees, so approach the Qur'an with humility, with a sense of utter dependence upon Him, with trust in Him and with supplication and devotion to Him at every step.

7. Constant Praise and Gratitude

Make yourself pulsate constantly with intense praise and gratitude to your Lord for having blessed you with His greatest gift _ the Qur'an, and for having guided you to its reading and study. It is but natural for your heart to beat with joy and murmur: *Thankful praise be to Allah, who has guided us to this; [otherwise] never could we have found guidance, had Allah not guided us* (7: 43). The more you are grateful, the more Allah will give you from the riches of the Qur'an.

In this spirit of dependence, trust, praise and gratitude, let your heart and tongue, in mutual harmony, begin the recitation: *In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful* the verse which appears at the head of all but one of the 114 *Surahs* of the Qur'an. And also pray: *'Our Lord! Let not our hearts swerve [from the truth] after You have guided us; and bestow upon us Your grace, indeed You alone are the bestower'* (3: 8).

PRESENCE OF HEART

Before starting to recite the Qur'an, you should ensure that so long as you are with the Qur'an, your 'heart' remains with you; not merely a piece of flesh, but the centre of all your attention, remembrance, emotions, aspirations and activities; or, your whole inner 'person'. Only then will you have the capability to receive the great gifts of Allah and respond with humble devotion. The seven pre-requisites discussed earlier lay the foundations for the communion of the Qur'an with your heart. In addition to these, the observance of a few more rules will greatly increase the intensity and quality of this presence of heart.

1. In the Presence of Allah

Always keep yourself alive to the reality that, while you are reciting the Qur'an, you are in the very presence of Him who has sent these words to you. *He is with you wherever you are* (57: 4). *We are nearer to him than his jugular vein* (50: 16). *You recite not the Qur'an . . . but We are witness to you when you are engaged in it* (10:61). *Remember Me and I will remember you* (2: 152). You may not see Him, but He certainly sees you.

2. Listening to the Qur'an from Allah Himself

Feel, as a part of your effort to 'remain' in the presence of Allah, as if you are listening to the Qur'an from Allah Himself. Al-Ghazali tells, in the *Ihya Ulumuddin* (Revival of the Sciences of Learning), of a person who could move nearer to the Qur'an and could taste more of its sweetness by feeling; first, as if he was listening to it from the Prophet, then, as if from the Angel Gabriel; and lastly, as if from Allah Himself.

3. Direct Addressee of the Qur'an

Consider that you, individually and personally, are the direct addressee of the Qur'an. Though the Qur'an has been received by you indirectly through persons, time and space, let all these intermediaries recede and disappear for some moments and allow yourself to receive the Qur'an as if it is talking directly to you, penetrating your heart and intellect. The very thought of such direct reception will keep your heart seized by what you are reading.

4. Let your Posture Reflect your Inner Submission

Make your outward posture reflect your inner awe, respect, devotion and submission for the words of your Lord. There is a deep connection between the outward and the inward manifestations of a person. The 'presence' of the body will keep the 'heart' present. There should be a difference in your posture while reading the Qur'an in comparison to an ordinary book.

5. Purify Yourself

Purify yourself as much as you can. You know that only the 'pure' are entitled even to touch the Qur'an. You know that your body, dress and place should be clean. You also know about the purity of intention. But you should also realise that the purity of 'heart' and body from sins is equally important. No one can be completely free from sins; but try to avoid as much as you can. And if you happen to commit some, try to turn to Allah in repentance and ask for His forgiveness, as soon as you can. Also take care that, while reading the Qur'an, you are not

eating that which is *haram*, wearing that which is *haram* or living in a *haram* situation, in other words through means not permitted by Allah. The purer you are, the more your heart will remain with you, and the more it will open itself to the Qur'an.

UNDERSTANDING AND REFLECTING

It is vital that you should understand what Allah is saying to you and reflect over it as much as you can. If you read the Qur'an without understanding, you may derive some reward because of your sense of devotion and your desire to read this Book. But this would not, in the least, fulfil the purpose for which it has been revealed. It has come to vitalise you, mould you and lead you to a new life and existence. It is not merely a source of blessing, a sacred ritual, a revered relic or a piece of holy magic. The Qur'an is full of exhortations asking you as to why you 'hear not', 'see not', 'think not', 'reason not' and 'ponder not'. It says that, *When they are reminded of the verses of their Lord, they fall not deaf and blind thereat (25: 73)*; and that, *Do they not ponder over the Qur'an, or are there locks on the hearts? (47: 24)*.

You will find elsewhere better guidance on how to understand and ponder over the Qur'an, but there are certain important principles you should keep in mind.

1) Understand and reflect over the Qur'an as if it was being revealed today, as each word of it is as living and relevant today as it was when it was first revealed. In this light, you should try to relate and apply it to your own life, concerns, experiences and levels of knowledge and technology. Do not consider any verse of the Qur'an as merely a thing of the past.

2) Read the whole of the Qur'an, from beginning to end, with the help of a translation. This will give you an overall idea of the Book, its style and message.

3) Initially, read only short but good commentaries and do not delve into long and detailed *tafsirs*.

4) Try to learn at least as much Arabic as will enable you to understand the meaning of the Qur'an without the help of a translation. It may seem an arduous task, but I have known semi-illiterate people accomplish this within a few months, once they took it seriously and devotedly.

5) Ponder and think deeply over the various parts of what you read. This requires reciting a particular verse or portion thereof slowly (with *tartil*) or even repeatedly. The more you think and reflect, you will have a greater share of its rich and unlimited meanings. It is in this sense that Ibn Umar spent eight years on *Surah al-Baqarah* (Chapter 2) alone. The Prophet and many others used to spend whole nights repeating just one verse.

INNER PARTICIPATION

The Qur'an was first sent down to the 'heart' or the inner person of the Prophet. You will, therefore, reap its full joys only when you are able to involve your inner self in your recitation. This will not prove difficult if you are mindful that you are reading the words of Allah, in His presence, and if you understand and reflect over what you read. Such a state of involvement may be achieved and intensified in certain other ways too.

1. Receiving the Qur'an with Your Heart

Always keep reminding yourself of what the Qur'an itself tells of those who receive it with their hearts, and of how the Prophet, his companions and others used to involve themselves in it. *When Allah is mentioned, their hearts quake; and when His verses are recited to them, it increases them in faith (8: 2). Whereat shiver the skins of those who fear their Lord; then their skins and hearts soften to the remembrance of Allah (39: 23). When it is recited to them, they fall down upon their faces, prostrating, and say: 'Glory be to our Lord! Our Lord's Promise is fulfilled.'* *And they fall down upon their faces, weeping; and it increases them in humility (17: 107-109). And when they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of what they recognise of truth. They cry, 'Our Lord! We believe; so You do write us down among the witnesses [to the truth]'* (5: 86).

2. Consider it Personally

You have already prepared yourself to receive the Qur'an as being addressed to you from Allah, and as being fully relevant to your own times. Now consider that the message in each verse is meant for you personally, whether it be a norm or value, a statement or piece of knowledge, a promise or a warning, a command or a prohibition.

3. Sincere Response

Your heart should then come alive and respond to the various notes and themes that are struck in it by different verses. Make it pass through the various states of adoration and praise, awe and wonder, hope and despair, assurance and anxiety, love and fear, happiness and sorrow, devotion and submission.

4. Sincere Expression

These states of heart should find expression through your tongue. That is how the Prophet used to recite the Qur'an in his night prayers. He used to say *Subhanallah* after verses telling of the majesty and glory of Allah, and *Alhamdulillah* after verses describing His bounties and graces. He sought forgiveness and refuge with Allah and asked for His favours and bounties after verses containing corresponding themes.

5. Sincere Involvement

The heart should also overflow through the eyes to express its involvement. Often the Prophet, his companions and others, 'who had a real encounter with the Qur'an', would weep when they recited it. You may even make yourself cry, if you think of the heavy responsibilities, the warnings and the joys that the Qur'an brings to you.

Living by the Qur'an

The whole purpose of the Qur'an is to guide you and to change you by bringing you into submission to Allah. As you read it, also try to live by what it invites you to. If it does not have any impact upon your actions and if you do not observe what it enjoins and avoid what it prohibits, then you are not getting anywhere nearer the Qur'an. In fact, one who reads the Qur'an and does not try to act upon it may be more likely to be cursed and punished by Allah.

The Prophet said: 'Many of the hypocrites in my *ummah* will be from among the reciters' (*Ahmad*); and 'He is not a believer in the Qur'an who makes *halal* (permissible) what it has made *haram* (prohibited)' (*Tirmidhi*). It is narrated that, companions like Uthman and Abdullah ibn Masud once they learnt ten verses from the Prophet, did not move further unless they had 'learnt' it fully – both in understanding and in action; that is how they sometimes spent years in learning only one *Surah* of the Qur'an.

If you sincerely start changing your life according to the Qur'an, Allah will certainly help you and make the path easy for you.

RULES OF RECITATION

There are a few additional obligations regarding the recitation of the Qur'an which you should keep in mind.

1) Daily Reading

Read the Qur'an every day; in fact do not consider a day complete without it. It is better to read regularly, even if it be a small portion, than to read large sections, but only occasionally.

2) Memorise

Memorise as much of the Qur'an as you can. You can start with small *Surahs* and short passages, and then move on to longer portions.

3) Recite the Qur'an in Prayer

Read as much of the Qur'an in prayer as you can, especially during the night, after the *Isha*, before the *Fajr* and in the *Fajr*, as nothing is more effective in making you attuned to the Qur'an and ensuring you absorb it than reading it in the night or in the morning.

4) Melodious Voice

Read the Qur'an in a good voice, as we have been told: 'Beautify the Qur'an with your voices'; but also remember that 'the one whose voice reflects the fear of Allah is the one who reads the Qur'an well.'

5) Read with Concentration and Understanding

Do not read hastily without proper concentration and understanding. The Prophet told Ibn Umar not to finish reading the Qur'an in less than a week, and also said that one who finished it in less than three days did not understand any of it. One companion said that he preferred to read a short *Surah* like *al-Qaria* with proper understanding than to hastily finish long ones like *al-Baqara* and *Al-Imran*.

THE LIFE OF THE PROPHET

To absorb the Qur'an, you must move as close as you can to the Prophet who received it first from Allah. His whole life is a 'living Qur'an'. If you want to 'read' the Qur'an in action, observe the Prophet in his deeds, as Aisha said: 'His conduct was nothing but the Qur'an' (*Muslim*). To move closer to the Prophet, you should read his sayings (*ahadith*) and His life (*sira*) as much as you can.

Let us, in conclusion, pray to Allah to enable us to recite the Qur'an as it ought to be recited and not to make us like those, *to whom the Book was given before, but with the lapse of time, their hearts became hard* (57: 16); or *who were given the burden of the Torah, then they did not carry it, they are like a donkey carrying books* (62: 5); or about whom the Prophet will, on the Day of Judgement, complain '*O my Lord! These my people have abandoned the Qur'an*' (25: 30).

Our Lord! Enable us to imbibe the meaning of the Qur'an and guide us to and lead us along the Straight Path.