A MEANS OF ATTAINING MA`rifah Allah According to Al-Qushayri

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ABSTRACT

Every individual is obligated to know their Creator, Allah the Almighty God. To become acquainted with their Lord, Muslim scholars have found that the heart and developing it is important. This is a qualitative study of dhikrullah as a means to know Allah, conducted through a textual content analysis of a work by the Sufi scholar, al-Qushayri, entitled Tartib al-Suluk fi Tariq Allah Ta’ala. The study finds that al-Qushayri’s overall purpose for practising dhikrullah is to instil within an individual a heart that is prospered with the constant remembrance of Allah, to become acquainted with His greatness and supremacy (ma’rifatullah), thus eradicating negativity within himself. The paper concludes that al-Qushayri has brought an important work for producing noble virtues and cleansing of the heart by making dhikrullah a means to attain ma’rifatullah.

Keywords: ma’rifatullah, dhikr ism al-dhat, al-Qushayri, Tartib al-Suluk

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sufi scholars have long imparted distinctive dhikr practices (remembrance of God) to students of Sufism on a mystical path of ma’rifatullah (gnosis, inner knowledge of Allah). One of these practices is called the dhikr ism al-dhat, a practice that is mentioned in passing by Sufi scholars. According to present findings that date from the first generation of Muslims up until the fourth century Hijri, most mentions of dhikr ism al-dhat in the scholars’ works appear only as recommendations and encouragements. There are few mentions of the methods by which to invoke ‘Allah’ repetitiously, the benefit, etiquettes and proper times to perform dhikr ism al-dhat.

Among the earliest figures to discuss dhikr ism al-dhat in his work is Abd al-Karim Ibn Hawazin Ibn Abd al-Malik Ibn Talhah Ibn Muhammad Al-Qusyairi (Shahrizal et.al 2017), otherwise known as al-Qushayri (d.465H). This paper is a study of dhikr ism al-dhat as a practice for reaching ma’rifatullah according to works by al-Qushayri. The objective is to explain the practice and its importance as a Sufi discipline, and how it establishes a believer’s connection to tawhid (Oneness of Allah) of his Lord (Omar et.al 2017) in attaining ma’rifatullah.

In his work, Tartib al-Suluk fi Tariq Allah Ta’ala, al-Qushayri provides a detailed account for performing dhikr Ism al-Dhat for his students in the Sufi order (al-Qushayri, n.d.). His focus, however, remains on the various stations of the heart (ahwal) that a murid (novice) undergoes when performing the dhikr (Omar et.al 2017b).

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research design in which data is derived from a content analysis of al-Qushayri’s writing, Tartib al-Suluk fi Tariq Allah Ta’ala, and supported by secondary data. Data were analysed according to selected themes relevant to the objectives of this study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The practice of Dhikr Ism Al-Dhat

According to al-Qushayri, the practice of the dhikr ism al-dhat is the beginning of one’s journey towards knowing Allah the Almighty God. To seek the pleasure of Allah while on the path, al-Qushayri prescribed several ideals for the individua: (al-Qushayri, n.d.): One should dispel a sense of dependence on worldly matters. One should have knowledge of the fardhu ain (the basic knowledge of the fundamentals) that are assigned to him in matters of aqeedah (Islamic creed) and the Shari’ah (Islamic legal rules). One should be physically clean and wear clean garments only. One should seek a preceptor whose path has been lit by Allah, a guide whose soul has undergone various purification processes in order to reach ihsan (a state of perfection). One should refrain from worldly matters. One should prefer poverty over wealth, humility over glory, and shun all forms of excessive eating, idle speech and apathy.

After consenting with the aforementioned terms, the tariqa shaykhs (spiritual teachers) may begin to teach the murid that all matters of the self, as well as the hidayah (guidance) received, are essentially from Allah. Thereafter the murid is taught to invoke Allah repeatedly as a means to train the mind and the inner sight to focus only on Allah. Should the murid’s mind become side-tracked, he must regain his focus immediately (al-Qushayri, n.d.).

According to al-Qushayri, an individual who devotes his life to the practice of dhikr ism al-dhat will undergo spiritual and emotional transformations. This occurs only to devoted individuals who perform dhikr ism al-dhat on his tongue with true passion and reverence for Allah. For example, the devotee may feel as if his physical body has grown larger in size and...
he has become more powerful than other beings. However, it is then that Allah will cast a fear of disobedience in his heart towards Him thereby humbling him to feel insignificant once more (al-Qushayri, n.d.). This experience may ensue repeatedly until the devotee is drowned in the state of remembrance of Allah.

Stations of Dhikr Ism Al-Dhat

Al-Qushayri encapsulates that one will undergo several stations or state when he is practicing the *dhikr ism al-dhat*. The first is the *dhikr al-lisan*, which is to invoke Allah with the tongue. At this stage, the *murid* may undergo several *dhikr* transformations: first, *al-ghaybah `an jami` al-`ashya‘*, also termed by his contemporary, the Sufi philosopher al-Harawi, as *dhikr* at the *idha nasita ghayrahahu* stage. This is to experience a loss of awareness of all things except for oneself (al-Harawi, n.d.). Secondly, an experience called the *al-ghaybah bi al-dhikr min nafsih*, which is being in state where the *murid* only remembers Allah and forgetting his sense of self (al-Harawi, n.d.; al-Qushayri, n.d.). Thirdly is to reach the highest peak, termed by al-Qushayri as *al-ghaybah bi al-dhikr `an al-dhikr*, a state where the mind focuses intensely on the meaning of *dhikr* that makes him remember only Allah (al-Qushayri, n.d.) and to witness the singularity of Allah and His attributes. Al-Harawi termed this state *al-takhallus min shuhud dhikrik* (al-Harawi, n.d.).

The fourth state is *al-ghaybah wa al-hudur*. *Al-ghaybah* means the third level, while the meaning of *al-hudur* is the state of the *murid* who is on the second stage as discussed beforehand. According to al-Qushayri, the *dhikr* performed at this stage will continue for a length of time, depending on the devotee’s diligence and blessings bestowed by Allah (al-Qushayri, n.d.).

It is understood from al-Qushayri’s writing that the word *Allah* is invoked repeatedly on the tongue. The only difference is the *murid*’s level of consciousness or self-awareness. When the *murid* continues to practice *dhikr* correctly, he will undergo an experience where he feels as if all his past spiritual experiences have never existed. He will also find that his sight and hearing have been dulled and his attention towards his surroundings during his *dhikr* will have ceased. During this state, his tongue feels laboured, and so the heart takes over to invoke Allah. Al-Qushayri calls this state *hal al-baqa‘* where the senses become one with the heart that he can even hear his heartbeat invoking Allah clearly. He may also be convinced that others around him can hear his heart invoking the *dhikr*. Although this is not true, he wishes for solitude in a desert (al-Qushayri, n.d.).

It should be noted that the *dhikr* of the heart at the *hal al-baqa‘* station, according to al-Qushayri, is not performed in *takalluf* (compulsion) by the devotee as it may be assumed. It is a choice made by the devotee’s own heart to invoke the name of Allah as if it is uttered on the tongue (al-Qushayri, n.d.).

Analysis of the Dhikr Ism Al-Dhat Practice

Al-Qushayri places heavy emphasis on the spiritual experience that the *murid* undergoes during *dhikr*. Perhaps these spiritual experiences are a sign or a symbol of the level of *dhikr* that the *murid* is on. According to al-Qushayri, when a *murid* is mentally engrossed in the remembrance of Allah during *dhikr*, he experiences an emotional transformation that affects his feelings regarding his physical transformation. Thus a devotee may feel as if his body has grown larger and his fear of disobedience to Allah growing intense while in the state of *dhikr* (al-Qushayri, n.d.). Therefore when a person feels a deep sense of fear of Allah, then his mind would be intensely focused on the meaning of Allah's Greatness, Majesty and Perfection, and not on matters unrelated to Allah (Omar et al., 2017c).
It is likely that al-Qushayri’s experience of this is based on an authentic source. A close analysis reveals several Qur’anic verses that imply this aforementioned relationship between the mind, emotions and body. For example, in the Qur’an, it is stated that "Their limbs do forsake their beds of sleep, while they call on their Lord, in Fear and Hope" (al-Sajdah 32: 16). In another verse (al-A‘raf 7: 56), Allah mentions, "But call on Him with fear and longing (in your hearts)." In al-Hajj verse 35, "To those whose hearts when Allah is mentioned, are filled with fear." Similarly in al-Zumar verse 23: "Allah has revealed (from time to time) the most beautiful Message in the form of a Book, consistent with itself (yet) repeating (it’s teaching in various aspects: the skins of those who fear their Lord tremble: then their skins and their hearts do soften to the celebration of Allah’s praises.”

The above verses reveal the relationship between the mind, emotions and body as elucidated by al-Qushayri. In the verses above, Allah describes those who remember and pray to Him as having khawf (fear) and tam` (hope), attributes that are a result of another attribute, which is the remembrance of Allah referred to in the Qur’an as dhukira Allah, yad`una Rabbahum, or 'ud`uh. This means to possess a conscious understanding of Allah’s permanence, producing both a fear of Allah for His Greatness (Jalal) and a hunger for His approval for His Perfection (Jamal).

When the relationship between the mind and emotions are firmly established, the murid’s physical nature is thus affected. This is mentioned in the Qur’an as a form of trembling (taqsha’irr) of the entire body (julud) that occur to God-fearing men. The trembling and the lightness of the body (talin juluduhum) are examples mentioned in the Qur’an that imply a connection between the physical, the emotion and the mind of those who remember Allah (Mohd Safri et. al., 2018). This does not dismiss other physical sensations that are experienced during dhikr by al-Qushayri and other devotees, as the matter depends upon the degree of their sincere devotion to making dhikr and this should be left for the sheikhs to determine its truthfulness.

Al-Qushayri divides the stations that the murids undergo during dhikr ism al-dhat according to the level of intensity. Thus, the more intense his remembrance is towards Allah, the higher he ascends. It is therefore essential that at every station of the dhikr, the murid’s heart is focused only towards Allah, rather than on having a spiritual experience. It should also be noted that it is not sufficient for a murid to remain at the lowest station of dhikr (al-Qushayri, n.d.).

The various states of dhikr is also termed as tajalli of Allah, self-manifestation towards His servant (Shahrizal et al, 2017). This means that Allah bestows ma’rifah (divine gnosis) on the devotee by granting an understanding of the meaning of perfection, greatness and majesty of His essence and attributes that a devotee witnesses (mushahadah) while he is in one of the states of dhikr. For example, when a murid is at al-ghaybah `an jami‘ al-`ashya‘ and al-ghaybah bi al-dhikr min nafsih states (al-Qushayri, n.d., Omar et al., 2017b), he is bestowed ma’rifah of the concept of fana (annihilation) of all existence of creations, thus seeing only Allah with his inner sight. This is an understanding and acknowledgement of the verse: “All that is on earth will perish. But will abide (forever) the Face of your Lord—Full of Majesty, Bounty and Honour” (al-Rahman 55: 26-27).

In the third and fourth stations, which are al-ghaybah bi al-dhikr `an al-dhikr and al-ghaybah wa al-hudur (al-Qushayri, n.d.), the ma’rifah that may be revealed to the murid is the meaning that Allah’s actions is the only reality (tawhid al-af‘al) (Omar et al., 2017). It is when one comes to a realisation that all creations come from the Creator; this is an acknowledgement of the meaning of this verse: "But Allah has created you and your handwork" (al-Saffat 37: 96).
4. CONCLUSION

According to al-Qushayri’s dhikr practice, dhikr ism al-dhat is practiced in the first station, which occurs at the dhikr al-lisan stage but through four different states. These are al-ghaybah `an jami’ al-’ashya’, al-ghaybah bi al-dhikr’ an nafsih, al-ghaybah bi al-dhikr’ an al-dhikr and al-ghaybah wa al-hudur. In the second station, termed hal al-baqa’, dhikr ism al-dhat is still practiced but only with the heart. The purpose of the practice is to cultivate a heart that thrives on the dhikr of Allah, eradicating all negativity within oneself, thus ultimately leading to ma’rifatullah. It is concluded that al-Qushayri has put forward an important guide for creating noble virtues that would please Allah for individuals from his own generation to the contemporary generation.

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