

## CONTEMPLATION (PATH OF REACHING DEPTHS [ESOTERIC MEANINGS] IN THE QURAN) FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE HOLY QURAN AND PROPHETIC TRADITIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*Quranic verses and prophetic traditions suggest that the Holy Quran has an exoteric and esoteric meaning, both inferred from the Divine Word and one is inferior to the other, which is in turn superior to the former, although both do not have the same status. If we intend the exoteric meaning, this is not to say that we do not believe in the esoteric meaning. By the same token, if we intend the esoteric, this does not imply that we do not believe in the exoteric. To overcome the exoteric meaning of the Quran and reach the esoteric one, contemplation is needed. Contemplation means passing through the primary levels and exoteric meanings of Quranic verses and contemplative penetration into the deep layers for the discovery of hidden truths that would not be revealed without consideration and contemplation. In fact, contemplation is an intellectual and spiritual current that comes to existence through a type of relationship between mind and heart. The Quranic verses and prophetic suggest that having physical and spiritual purity and perfect intellect (men of understanding) is the prerequisite of contemplation of the Holy Quran. The current essay aimed at evaluating the lexical and terminological meanings of contemplation, the difference between contemplation and exegesis, the difference of contemplation with thinking, and the importance of the contemplation.*

**Keywords:** Contemplation, Exegesis, Understanding Quran, Heart, Recitation, Interpretation of Quran with Quran.

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Lexical and Terminological Meanings of Contemplation*

*Tadabbor*, the Arabic equivalent of contemplation, is from the root word "Dobr" which means thinking of what lies behind things and this refers to the profound thinking and reflection on ends and its result is the discovery of realities that cannot be seen with the naked eyes. In *Mufradat* of Al Ragheb Esfahani, it is argued that *contemplation represents the act of thinking about what lies behind the manifest appearance of the objects* (Ragheb Esfahani, 1992).

In *Misbah Al Munir fi Gharib Al-Shahrh Al Kabir* by Ahmad Ibn Mohammad Ibn Ali Al Maqari Al Fumi, it is suggested that "*Dobr*" refers to whatever does not stand in front of man and lies behind the appearance and this is why the end of a thing is called *Dobr* and it is indeed whatever to which man turns his own back and *tadabbor* (contemplation) represents the act of thinking precisely to the end of a thing" (Fumi, 1994).

In *Majmah Al Bahrayn* of Sheikh Fakhr-al-Din Tarihi, it is noted that "contemplation refers to one's effort for understanding what constitutes the end of something, i.e. that which the thing is supposed to return".

Contemplation is indeed concerned with the intellectual delineation of something. In verse 82 of Surah Nisa, the Lord God invites the believers to contemplate over the end of affairs.

Moreover, he states that the difference between contemplation and thinking lies in the fact that contemplation is the possession of heart through taking the consequences into consideration, while thinking is the possession of heart taking the reasons into consideration (Tarihi, 1988).

In *Lexicon of Quran* by Mr. Qarashi, it notes that *Dobr* is the opposite of front and it denotes whatever stands behind and contemplation or *tadbir* is thinking to the end of an affair.

Not contemplating a word implies failing to understand it and this has been also mentioned in the Quran as its content (Qarashi, 1992).

In *Tafsir Nemooneh*, the author has interpreted verse 82 of Surah Al Nisa as follows: *Tadabbor* (contemplation) is from the root word "*Dobr*" that refers to what lies behind something. Therefore, contemplation refers to the thinking of the consequences and results of something and its difference with thinking lies in the fact that the latter is indeed concerned with the study of the causes and features of an existent but the former is concentrated on the consequences and results (Makarem Shirazi et al., 1987).

In *Al Mizan*, Allama Tabataba'i asserted that contemplation implies inferring something from another thing and as regards, Quranic verses' contemplation means the reflection on one verse after the other verse or reflection after reflection (Tabataba'i, n., 5).

As to the difference between contemplation and thinking, Abi Helal Askari in his *Fruq Al Lughavyah* stated that contemplation denotes possessing one's heart through taking the consequences of the affairs into consideration, while thinking is an act of possession of heart through taking the reasons of affairs into consideration and *Majma Al Bayan* has also noted the same point (cf. Askari, 1984).

Then, contemplation means thinking and reflecting on what lies behind the appearances, through which, the hidden sides of the affairs are uncovered. Exploration of the innermost nature of affairs and paying attention to the consequences and results are two basic characteristics of contemplation, but thinking is more general and concerned with the evaluation of both the manifest and hidden features of the affairs including the causes and results of them, because thinking is focused on the discovery of the unknown as a whole.

The effort for discovering the ends of affairs unavoidably leads man from the manifest to the depth. This point is highlighted in the verses of contemplation particularly the verse 82 of Surah Al Nisa because understanding the divine nature of Quran requires contemplation and profound reflection otherwise the outside surface of Quranic verses is composed of the letters and words with which, the Arabs communicate that does not have any difference with human words from the superficial points of view. Nahjulbalaghah in sermon 106, insists that God has created Islam as a kernel for contemplation. The kernel lies beyond the shell and is uncovered via contemplation.

The other point is that "contemplation of Quran" refers to tracking Quranic verses one after another as well as a reflection on the depth of their relationship because the discovery of consistency and harmony and lack of differences requires the study of verses of a chapter as a whole and their relationship with Quran. This study indicated that a book that has been revealed in the course of 23 years of the hard life of the Prophet of Islam, cannot be the product of a human mind rather every corporeal creature is continuously exposed to change and movement from the deficiency towards its relative perfection. Then, contemplation of the Quran is supposed



to discover the hidden concepts and relations that exist in each of the verses as well as their relationship with other verses of the same chapter of Quran. In *Kashf Al Asra va Udat Al Abrar* by Abulfazl Rashid Al-Din Meibodi, it is argued that contemplation is the reflection on the consequences of affairs in order to see the relationship between the beginning and end. Then, Abu Usman Maghribi is quoted to have said that “contemplation has three types: first, self-contemplation, which is also known as contemplative advice; second, ascetic contemplation; third, contemplation of Quran, which is known also as contemplation of truth and intuition and is a characteristic of the mystics. Mystics have the sense of intuition that allows them to tear the existing curtains between the exoteric and the esoteric meaning of the Quran and become united with the Lord”. In this way, they achieve all their wishes. Their intuition submerge them in the brook of compassion, their hearts are filled with the remembrance of God, their tongue is silenced, their eyes are shut, they forget themselves, unite with the angels and heavenly men, and experience the peace of the righteous ones; if someone does not reach this point, he will not find a way into the majesty of Quran and cannot discover the hidden gems of it (Meibodi, 1979).

### *The difference of Contemplation and Exegesis*

Upon the reflection of the Quran's verses, it becomes clear that "contemplation" is something other than the so-called exegesis and there are striking differences between them, some of which are as follows:

1. In contemplation of the Quran, all social classes take part regardless of their level of understanding, as well as scientific and spiritual levels and having mere access to the translation is sufficient for contemplation. Nevertheless, exegesis belongs to the high ranked jurists specialized in understanding Quran who are equipped with the scientific keys of contemplation. The aforementioned point can be seen in the verses inviting people to contemplation, which address the public as a whole even the infidels:

In verse 68 of Surah Al Mumenun, God states: "*Do they not ponder over the Word (of Allah), or has anything (new) come to them that did not come to their fathers of old?*"

In verse 24 of Surah Mohammad, it is stated: "*Do they not then earnestly seek to understand the Qur'an, or are their hearts locked up by them?*"

In verse 82 of Surah Al Nisa Quran states: "*Do they not consider the Qur'an (with care)? Had it been from other Than Allah, they would surely have found therein Much discrepancy.*"

2. In contemplation, the thought and heart both are involved but exegesis is an intellectual stream that is not necessarily associated with a cordial stream.
3. In contemplation, the depths of verses and the consequences, outcomes, and requirements of verses are studies, while in the exegesis, these issues are not part of the overall plan.
4. In contemplation, the person considers himself as the addressee of the verses and seeks to cure his own intellectual and heart pains, while in exegesis the exegete, considers himself to be the commentator and missionary of the revealed words. Contemplation can lead to the promotion of religion but this is not the case with the exegesis as it can be void of contemplation.
5. Contemplation is a spiritual-intellectual process that is triggered by harmonic recitation or listening of/to divine words and continuing with the exploration of verses, leading to the inference of the medication of one's pain and its application. Thus, reading the divine words



is its context and action is its result (reading-understanding-action), while in exegesis, these premises and consequences are not necessary.

6. In contemplation, the infidels also take part while exegesis belongs to an expert seasoned Muslim jurist.
7. In many cases of contemplation, there is no need for referring to the prophetic traditions because such a reference requires expertise. When the one who contemplates on the verses is an infidel and seeks to reach the truth, there is no occasion for this reference. Nevertheless, in exegesis, a reference to prophetic traditions is essential and vital and without these traditions and having a thorough knowledge of them, one cannot provide a dependable exegesis (Naqipurfar, 1995).

In fact, the process of contemplation is the correct recitation of the Quran that begins with reading and continues with a deep understanding and leads to action.

Imam Sadeq (peace be upon him) in his exegesis of the verse "they recite the Quran in a genuine way" states that "a genuine recitation is merely contemplation of the understood verses that includes melodic recitation of verses, understanding meanings, and action according to the judgments, trust in divine promise, dread of punishment, envision of stories, taking lessons of selected events, implementation of the orders, and avoidance of inviolable things. Although neither the lexical meaning of recitation nor the lexical meaning of contemplation is of such expanse, it becomes clear that all these refer to the process of true recitation of the Quran, which is united with the process of contemplation of the verses, which begins with recitation, continues with understanding and leads to action" (Rey Shahri, 2000).

#### *The cases that the Quran invites believers to contemplation:*

- 1- Contemplation of body and soul (Surah Al Momenun, verses 12-14);
- 2- Contemplation of the stages of human existence (Surah Al Hajj, verse 5 – Surah Al Insan, verse 2);
- 3- Contemplation of the end of life (Surah Al Zumar, verse 30);
- 4- Contemplation of Ultimate Goals (Surah Al Baqara, verse 156);
- 5- Contemplation of world, universe, and human souls (Surah Yunis, verse 6);
- 6- Contemplation of the past nations and their destiny (Surah Yusuf, verse 109);

#### *Relationship of Contemplation with the Recitation of the Quran*

In a number of Holy Quran verses, contemplation in the Quran has been discussed (e.g. Nisa: 82; Mohammad: 23). It is by contemplation that the spirit of the Quran is fathomed, otherwise, the printed book does not have any enthusiasm and movement. The features of spirit, light, eloquence, expression, etc., all belong to the Quran, which must be read and is concerned with ears and heart, not the "book", which is indeed a printed piece of paper. Contemplation of the book, even if we suppose that it can take place, does not come to fruition and the blessings of the essence of the Quran.

The renowned verse "when Quran is recited, listen to it and stay silent may you are endowed with God's Mercy" (Al Araaf: 204) expresses the same point that when Quran is recited, people should stay silent to pave the way for contemplation that leads to divine mercy. We should know and believe that any change in this instruction and any type of shortcoming in the implementation of this principle will overshadow that consequence.



We need to pay earnest attention to this fundamental difference that exists between the Quran and other revealed books. The Quran is from the root word "Qara". Bible is derived from Graeco-Latin Biblia, which means "written". The evangile refers to glad tidings. Torah is in the sense of divine law and tradition that has been revealed to Moses; Avesta is composed of preposition "A", participle "visteh" from the infinitive "vid", which means knowing and knowledge. They together mean the book of knowledge. According to another etymological speculation, Avesta means foundation and basis. Upanishad is from the root word "upa" in the sense of near and "ni" which means "under" and "sad" in the sense of sitting. Then, Upanishad means sitting under. The pupils must sit under the feet of the master in order to learn the truth and overcome their ignorance (in another etymology, Upanishad has been used in the sense of worshipping).

In none of these names, there is a sign of reading, which is the root of the Quran. Reading and readability of the Quran are related to the functions of this book and the categories of listening and contemplation and leading to the heart, which has been assayed in this work (Bible: 111; Upanishad: 1, 99; Avesta, 2002: 2, 932).

It should be mentioned that the main reason for these titles is not clear and Holy Quran has also appreciated previous divine books as guidance, light, delineation of everything and prayer (Maeda: 44 and 46; Anbia: 48). It is, of course, clear that "language" in those books, does not have the place that it has in Quran and if it once had with the destruction of these books, these languages are no longer able to be used as a means of communication.

### *Decisive Role of "Listening" in Contemplation*

The reading (recitation), which was mentioned above, is indeed a reading that is accompanied by listening and silence. In the recitation of Quran, listening is more important than mere reading. Many of us, during reading, do not listen to our own voice, while Imam Sadeq (peace be upon him) asks his Lord: "During the recitation of Quran, do not seal my ears" (Majlesi, n., Bihar Al Anwar, 92/207).

"Listening" is of vital importance in prophetic traditions as regards the recitation of Quran insofar as without it "reading" cannot take place let alone "recitation"; thus Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) states: "The man who does not hear his own voice can never read".

The methodology of pouring the Quran into one's heart is of crucial importance in the debate of contemplation. Listening is indeed the key to contemplation. The heart's knots will open in the contemplation if the seals on the ears are broken for the realization of listening. "When I recite the Quran, please do not seal my ears" (Majlesi, n., Bihar Al Anwar, 92/ 207).

Contemplation takes form in the context of recitation and the latter can never come true without "listening" and here is the point where listening and contemplation meet. In a tradition from Ibn Abbas, the place of "ear" and "listening" and its direct relationship with "heart" is completely clear. When he sees someone reading the Quran fast, he says: "Recite the Quran in a way that your ears can be able to hear and your heart has the opportunity to understand" (Ibn Qayyim, 1992: 1/ 339).

The one who does not listen to his own recitation of the Quran is not indeed reciting at all. Holy Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) stated: "This is why I read it for its esoteric meaning, while you read its manifest words." Here, some people asked the Prophet: "What is the esoteric meaning?" He answered: "I read it with contemplation and follow it, while you read and pass it" (Hindi, 1989: 622).





As we see, in this tradition, there is a direct relationship between reading and contemplation. The Prophet means that his reading provides the context of contemplation and this contemplation benefits him; but the ordinary people read without contemplation and after reading, leave the book aside.

Moreover, it is quoted that a group of people asked the Prophet “O' Messenger of Allah, why our recitation is not like yours? When we listen to you reciting Quran we hear, we see and understand things that are not accessible to us when we recite the Quran ourselves”. In his answer, the Prophet referred again to the quality of the two recitations and stated: “my recitation provides the context for contemplation, while this is not the case with your recitation” (Hindi, 1989: 22).

It is also quoted from the Holy Prophet that he once had said: "Recite the Quran night and day, repeat it for yourself and contemplate on it, may you reach happiness" (Hindi, 1989: 611).

Here we see that continuous and stable recitation in a way that man repeats the verses for himself is a requirement for contemplation.

Allama Tabataba'i argued that when the Quran speaks of "true recitation", it indeed refers to the recitation associated with contemplation (Tabataba'i, n.: 1/ 269).

Rather, listening to the Quran is more important than reading. Many of us do not hear our own voice during recitation. However, in prophetic traditions, listening is of particular importance in the issue of recitation insofar as it is noted that recitation depends on "listening". Holy Prophet is quoted to have said: "The one who does not allow his ears to hear his own recitation, has not indeed recited anything".

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Here we need to lay the emphasis on the point that Holy Quran is a "language", a living and active language; and it needs to be taught as a language so that the scheme of language and expression of the one who learns Quran to be activated and his heart and thought to be influenced by it. If this path is not treaded, Holy Quran will not have many of its own effects as delineated by the Holy Prophet of Islam. As to the learning and teaching of the Quran, it is important to remember that no language is learned unless the learning process is neared to the process of learning mother language and based on a natural approach.

In the contemporary era, the psychologists and linguists are unanimous on the fact that language is indeed an oral phenomenon. Therefore, the methods of its teaching must be proportionate to this oral state. Not only the basis of language is oral, but also the process of learning language is more related to the sense of hearing (Barry: 21).

The importance of "hearing" and its precedence over "sight" is insisted by the Holy Quran. Observation of this point in the field of teaching, particularly teaching Quran, is of vital importance and new scientific findings have highlighted this point. Among the reasons of Quranic evidence of this, one can refer to the following: Surah Al Kahf, verse 11; Surah Molk, verse 9 and 23; Surah Ahqaf, verse 26; Surah Anaam, verse 46; Surah Al Fusilat, verse 20 and 22.

### *The interrelation of Teaching Quran and Contemplation*

The most important thing that contemplation owes its existence and manifestation is the correct process of teaching the Quran. In the discussions that are made today concerning contemplation, the issue of teaching Quran is not at stake at all. Man can contemplate the Quran without learning it or not learning it through any method that he can use. Thus, in these discussions, with these presuppositions, we see that people are continuously invited to contemplation and the advantages of contemplation are enumerated as well as its necessity and also its stages, methods, and extensions.

In this issue, like all issues related to the Quran, we have referred to the true scholars of Quran and know the essence of the issue from the delicate points hidden in their words. By referring to the school of Shia Imams, we know that contemplation of Quran is not separated from its reading, recitation, teaching, and learning. It is not so that man first learns the Quran and after a while begins to contemplate it. Rather in this school, correct teaching of Quran is the premise of contemplation and whenever "methodology of teaching of Quran" is taken into earnest consideration; "contemplation" will reach its true place. By the same token, the issue of the breathing quality as such is at the issue in the discussion regarding sleeping, eating, and exercise and it is not an independent and later stage. Imam Sadeq in his praying at the opening of the recitation of Quran asks his God: "When I recite the Quran, do not make my ears deaf and do not blind my eyes and do not make my recitation the one, which is void of contemplation and do not put a seal on my eyes and do not make my recitation vain" (Majlesi, 92/ 207).

In this paragraph of the prayer, the issue is that of the method of recitation with contemplation and its opposite. As we saw in the school of the Shia Imams, contemplation has found its place in the recitation. Recitation must be associated with contemplation. When someone's recitation is void of contemplation, there is no other place where we can search for the contemplation although we consider numerous principles and prerequisites for contemplation. The recitation is supposed to be a recitation from which contemplation is born and recitation is the place of acquisition, manifestation, flourishing, and growing of contemplation. When the recitation is void of the special etiquettes, we cannot wait for its natural result (Lesani and Moradi, 1996: 158).



### ***Human Heart, the Vehicle and Means of Contemplation of the Quran***

In addition to what was mentioned about the "human heart, the proper place of Quran", the human heart is also a means of contemplation on the Quran. However, upon reflection on the verses where the word "contemplation" has been used, we find out that contemplation is not a new and independent phenomenon that we would want to acquire it in an independent way, rather if the Quran enters human heart, which is the headquarter of his body, contemplation will also emerge out of the depths of his heart:

"Don't they reflect on the Quran or a seal has been put on their hearts?" (Mohammad: 24).

Yes, the heart is the place of contemplation and what is important is putting Quran at the heart and this issue has a direct and close relationship with the method of teaching Quran. In other words, the Quran's teaching must take place in a way that Quran directly enters the heart of the Quran's learner and not just into his brain. Moreover, upon a reflection on the context of the verses of contemplation, we come to the conclusion that "contemplation" is nothing but "remembering"; contemplation and remembering are two expressions of the same truth: "The

book that has been revealed to you, is divine so that you contemplate of its verses and the men of understanding will take their own lessons" (Sad: 29).

If we try to distinguish between these two concepts, we cannot find essential differences between them. As long as the Quran is in the human heart, he will always remember it. In this state, we say that this man is carrying the Quran and contemplates it. The Quran verses will be present at the whole individual and social life of this man and will govern all actions, words, and intentions of him. This state is tantamount to contemplation and its requirement is that man must be always remembering the Quranic verses and the Quran to be present, living and active by him. This is possible only and only via correct teaching of Quran.

There are numerous people who have memorized the Quran and at the same time due to their incorrect method of memorizing the Quran, they are not able to take theoretical, scientific, and applied advantages of the Quran verses and the Quran does not have a colorful presence in his life. The maximum use of these individuals from the Quran is that they can use similar verses that contain a specific issue in order to infer certain conclusions. Of course, this can be easily done with the help of computers and various lexicons.

On the other hand, there are people who carry the Quran in their hearts and the fountains of contemplation have sprung from the depths of their hearts. They are continuously contemplating the Quran verses even when they are sleeping. The verses of Quran are present in their whole social and individual lives and if we take a close look, we see that all details of their actions, words, and intentions are impressed by the verses of Quran. The existential scaffold and details of their actions and behaviors have been founded on the Quranic culture. The esoteric guidance of the verses of Quran has become reflected in each one of their movements and behaviors; they are continuously repeating the Quran, and in every situation, they recite verses that are completely proper in their heart and thought. There is no independent effort here for any intention.

Recitation with the correct method brings the Quran to the human heart and makes him simultaneously "remembering" and "contemplating". Here contemplation is not one of the necessary and permanent features of the man in a way that he can no longer contemplate.

The tone of verses regarding contemplation in the Quran is in a form that is taken as the principle in Quran and the lack of contemplation is against the latter principle. To put it otherwise, a natural and genuine procedure in carrying the Quran is that man is in continuous contemplation. Then, if someone is not in this state, there are certain problems in this procedure that should be tackled. By the same token, a fountain is supposed to give always clear and limpid water and if one day this fountain becomes dry or the water rate declines, we should search for various factors and effects. We have to ask: why this fountain does not have any water or its water is limited; if there are certain impediments; if its head is obstructed and ...!

Quran always asks its questions about the exceptions that are against the natural processes and it never asks about the original. It does not ask any question of belief, servitude, submissiveness, etc. and so forth, but it asks about their lack (infidelity, animosity, arrogance, etc.): Why they do not believe? Why they are avoiding remembering God? What happened to them? Why the fountainhead of thinking, contemplation, and intellection is dry? What impediments exist on its path? (cf. Al Inshiqaq: 20; Al Mudathir: 49; Baqara: 107; Nisa: 75; Al Anaam: 119; Tawbah: 116; Hud: 113; Ankaboot: 22, 25; Shura: 31, 47; Jasiah: 34; Hadid: 8, 10).





These are all questions of the illnesses, diseases, and impediments without which the path is paved for the presence and emergence of belief and remembering and their fountains will start to spring again (Lesani and Moradi: 106).

Imam Ali (peace be upon him) stated: "In the Book of Allah, some parts are speaking by some other parts in the same way that some parts provide evidence for some other parts and there is no difference in the book" (Nahjulbalagha: Sermon 133).

He has also stated: "This Quran is a written paper between two covers and it does not speak for itself and its needs an interpreter" (Nahjulbalagha, sermon 125).

This type of prophetic tradition lays emphasis on the necessity of the contemplation of Quran and questioning the verses by the assistance of true bearers of the book. If the second part of this integrated reality fails, the Quran will turn to papers on the spears and will mislead a group of shallow-minded people. It is in this spirit that the Holy Prophet stated: "These pending books should not make you arrogant. Verily God does not punish the heart which is bearing Quran" (Majlesi, n., 91/92).

"Pending book" is referring here to the Quran's verses printed on the papers versus the living Quran, which is springing from the heart of the true bearer of Quran.

*"Have you not seen how Allah sets forth a parable that a good deed is like a good tree, its roots are firm and its branches are in the heaven, yielding its fruit every season by the permission of Allah? Allah gives parables to mankind so that they might remember."* (Surah Ibrahim: 24, 25).

To use the Holy Quran as a book that contains the rules and orders for humankind in the best possible way, we need to contemplate it because the Holy Quran besides its exoteric appearance, has numerous esoteric depths. These esoteric meanings must be revealed via contemplation.

The unending depth of Quran is the main secret of the eternity of Quran in a long course of time. There is a huge difference between contemplation and exegesis including the fact that in contemplation, all social classes take part while exegesis belongs to the seasoned jurists.

In contemplation, the thought and heart both are involved but exegesis is a product of thought. Holy Quran invites humans to contemplate over human soul and existential states and his final end.

Whenever reading is associated with listening and appointment, contemplation takes place.

The process of contemplation is identical to the process of true recitation of the Holy Quran, which begins with reading, continues with deep understanding, and ends up in action.

In the Holy Quran, hearing precedes the vision and this has been demonstrated by contemporary science.

Holy Quran is itself an exegete of itself and this is indeed exegesis of the Quran by Quran, which has been used as a method by Allama Tabataba'i in his exegetical work.

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