

Reading the Holy Quran:

The right and proper way *versus* ritual use

*Proper way as taught by the Holy Quran and the Holy Prophet,
revitalised by the Mujaddid of the time Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad*

by Zahid Aziz¹

It is stated in the Holy Quran, addressing the Holy Prophet:

“This is a book that We have revealed to you, abounding in good [or *mubarak*, blessed], that they may ponder over its verses, and that those who have understanding may be mindful.” — 38:29.

This shows that the good or the blessing that the Holy Quran contains can only be attained by a human being if he or she *ponders over its verses* and becomes *mindful* of its teachings. Nowhere is it stated in the Quran that a person can benefit from the Quran merely and only by reading out its words without any knowledge of what the words are saying. Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad said:

“People read the Holy Quran, but do so like a parrot, without thinking or understanding.... Neither the reader nor the listeners understand what is said. The manner of reciting the Holy Quran has become merely that two or three parts are read, without knowing what was read. At the most, they read it melodiously and pronounce the letters *qaf* and *‘ain* properly. It is no doubt good to read the Quran in a fine and melodious way, but the real purpose of reciting the Holy Quran is to find out the truths and knowledge contained in it and to bring about a change within oneself.”²

When Hazrat Mirza *sahib* was once asked the question, “How should the Holy Quran be read?”, he replied:

“The Holy Quran must be read with thought, reflection and concentration. It says in Hadith: ‘Many reciters of the Quran are cursed by the Quran’. He who reads the Quran and does not act upon it is cursed by the Quran. While reciting the Quran, when you reach a mention of mercy ask mercy from God, at a mention of chastisement ask protection from God’s chastisement. The Quran should be read with thought and reflection and you must act upon it.”³

¹ *Note:* This is a revised and slightly expanded version of a speech given in Urdu on 28 December 1997 at the annual gathering of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore in Lahore, Pakistan.

² *Malfuzat*, 1984 edition, v. 1, p. 428, 429; new edition, v. 1, p. 284–285.

³ *Malfuzat*, 1984 edition, v. 9, p. 199, 200; new edition, v. 5, p. 157.

Of course, when a child is learning to recite the words of the Holy Quran, that is a different matter, and it cannot be expected that the child should be taught the full meaning of all that he reads. Even at that stage though, the child can be given some indication of the general meaning, particularly when reading the verses dealing with the simpler subjects that a child can understand (for example, the oneness of God and simple moral teachings). In any case, that is only a passing phase of life, not a permanent state.

What is wrong is that grown up people, who have learnt the recitation of the Quran, continue throughout their lives reciting the Quran without ever trying to know its meaning, without attempting to implement its teachings in their lives, in the belief that the mere recitation is a deed which brings Divine reward. If it were true that mere recitation earned such reward, how could the Holy Prophet possibly say that some reciters of the Quran are cursed by it?

Misuse of Quran for ritual purposes

As Muslims generally ceased to try learning the meanings of the Quran many centuries ago, and therefore were unable to receive its real blessing, they invented their own ways of deriving its blessings. These rituals and customs find no support in the Holy Quran, the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, or the lives of his Companions. Let us take what is known as *Khatam-i Quran*, or finishing the Holy Quran. It is not found anywhere in the teachings of Islam that on certain occasions, of celebration or mourning, people should gather and be assigned various portions of the Quran to read so that the whole of the Quran gets read. Firstly, no one gains any knowledge of the Quran by reading it in this way. And secondly, this is opposed to the method of reading the Quran as instructed in the Quran itself and as advised by the Holy Prophet Muhammad.

Quran on how to read the Quran

The Holy Quran says:

“Recite the Quran in a slow, leisurely manner (*tartīl*).” — 73:4.

This is also mentioned in a hadith in Bukhari, and Maulana Muhammad Ali comments upon it as follows in his Urdu commentary of Bukhari:

“Reciting with *tartīl* means to enunciate the letters distinctly and to read the words slowly in order that attention is turned to its meaning. The instruction to read the Quran slowly, so that it moves the heart, is found not only in Hadith but is also clearly given in the Quran.”

He then goes on to say that to read the Quran hurriedly and to finish it at high speed is clearly opposed to this instruction of the Quran. Then in Bukhari we are referred to another verse of the Quran on this subject which is the following:

“And it is a Quran We have made distinct, so that you may read it to people by slow degrees and We have revealed it in portions” — 17: 106.

Here it is said that the revelation of the Quran to the Holy Prophet came in portions so that it could be read to people slowly, and not all at once.

Finishing the Quran

Now, when a person believes that he will receive Divine reward and blessings by *finishing* the Quran, or some assigned part of it, then he will wish to complete its reading as quickly as possible. He will never abide by the instruction, as explained above, to read it slowly and thoughtfully because he believes that *the quicker he finishes it, the earlier he will get his reward*. His sole aim and object is *to reach the end*, for that is where he believes that his reward lies. Therefore, to stop and ponder over its words is a *hindrance* to his objective. It is thus clearly seen that those whose aim is merely and only to finish the Quran, they read it in a manner which is directly opposed to how it should be read according to the Quran itself and the Holy Prophet Muhammad.

It is recorded in a Hadith report that a man asked the Holy Prophet, in how many days should he finish the Quran? The Holy Prophet replied, In one month. The man said, I am able to do it sooner. The Holy Prophet said, Then do it in twenty days. The man repeated that he was able to do it in shorter time. The Holy Prophet said, Then do it in fifteen days. And so it went on till the Holy Prophet came down to five days, and would not reduce it any further. In another report the Holy Prophet said: “He who completes the Quran in less than three days, he has not understood it.”⁴ So the Holy Prophet himself fixed a limit of three days or of five days (according to different reports) before which the Quran should not be finished, and he clearly gave the reason that if you finish it in a shorter time then you have not understood it.

The Holy Quran itself has put it quite beautifully:

“Recite out of the Quran that which is easy for you.” — 73: 20.

In other words, reciting of the Quran should not be undertaken as a burdensome task, subjecting one to hard labour, but one should read as much as one finds easy to do.

⁴ For both these reports, see *Tirmidhi*, Book on Recitation of the Quran.

Reading the Quran for the dead

One of the rituals that people have invented for obtaining blessing from the Holy Quran is to recite it for a deceased person, with the belief that the dead person will be rewarded as a result of the Quran being read for his “sake”, and that the benefit of the recitation “reaches” the dead person. Now if we consider it rationally, it is the *living* who need to receive the Quran because only the living can learn from it and act upon it. The poor fellow who has died cannot now change his life to bring it more in accord with the teachings of the Quran.

It is, moreover, curious that very few Muslims are concerned about taking the message of the Quran to the *living*, but millions of Muslims are everyday reciting the Quran to make its benefit reach the *dead*.

The second point is that if it were true that we can bring benefit to the dead by reciting the Quran for their sake then the Holy Prophet Muhammad and his Companions would undoubtedly have engaged in this practice. However, we find no sign or trace of it in the history of the Holy Prophet’s time or that of his Companions. Their relations, and near and dear ones, died but it is nowhere to be found that, upon someone’s death, the Holy Prophet or his Companions finished the Quran for the deceased. The Holy Prophet himself died, leaving behind wives, a daughter, near relations and a large number of Companions, who were admittedly the greatest Muslims of all time. Yet none of them are recorded as having recited or completed the Quran for his sake. Similarly, the events of the deaths of Abu Bakr, Umar and other famous persons are reported in Hadith, but there is no mention that anyone finished the Quran for their souls.

Once when Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad had visited the grave of a prominent disciple, Maulvi Abdul Karim, and said prayers for him, he was asked some questions, to which he replied. We quote the questions and replies below:

Question: Which prayers should be said at the grave?

Answer: One should pray for the deceased that God may forgive his faults and sins committed in this world, and one should also pray for those whom he leaves behind.

Question: In the prayer, which verse of the Quran should be read?

Answer: These are just formalities. You should pray in your own language which you know well, and in which you can express your emotions, and pray for the deceased.

Question: Can [the benefit of] acts of charity and the reading of the Holy Quran reach the deceased?

Answer: The benefit of acts of charity done in the name of the deceased does reach the dead person. But to give them benefit by reciting the Quran for them is not established from the Holy Prophet Muhammad or the Companions. Instead, you should pray for the dead. To give in charity in the name of the deceased, and to pray for them, is established from the example of 124,000 prophets. But that charity is better which the deceased gave with his own hands because that way he proves his faith.”⁵

Here Hazrat Mirza *sahib* has explained succinctly what may or may not be done for the dead. It is only prayer for their forgiveness, said from the heart, preferably in one’s own language, and the giving of charity that is taught by Islam.

Giving of charity on behalf of the dead

As regards the giving of charity, what Hazrat Mirza *sahib* has said in the above extract is that the real and substantial spiritual benefit that a deceased receives is from the charity or good works done by him or her in life. The benefit received by the deceased when those after him give in charity on his behalf is, in fact, only a consequence and reflection of the deeds which the deceased performed during his life.

The Quran tells believers:

“And spend (on good works) out of what We have given you before death comes to one of you, and he says: My Lord, why did You not grant me respite for a little while (longer), so that I should have given in charity and been among the doers of good deeds? But Allah does not respite a soul, when its term comes. And Allah is Aware of what you do.” — 63: 10–11.

This shows that, after death, a person will express regret if he did not avail the opportunity to spend in charity during his life, and wish that he had been granted longer life. If it were possible for his heirs to earn reward for him by spending on his behalf, he would not be expressing this wish but praying that they spend for him.

The principle of giving in charity for the dead is based on a hadith according to which a man put to the Holy Prophet Muhammad that his mother had died suddenly and that if she could speak now she would give in charity. So his question was that if he gave in charity on her behalf, would it benefit her? The Holy Prophet replied, Yes. We learn from this that if a person does good in life, and dies without completing some good deed which he or she intended to perform, then if that good work is completed on his or her behalf by someone else, the deceased too receives some credit (apart, of course, from the person who actually does it).

⁵ *Malfuzat*, 1984 edition, v. 8, p. 405; new edition, v. 5, p. 1–2.

Commenting on this and similar other hadith reports, Maulana Muhammad Ali writes:

“These hadith reports show that the deceased can benefit to some extent from the deeds of others, but it must be remembered that, as these reports clearly tell us, this is in case of such a close connection between the two that the doer of the deeds becomes a substitute for the deceased. In such matters we are not entitled to broaden the scope of the teaching of the Shariah so as to invent an entirely new principle.” — *Bayan-ul-Quran*, note under verse 53 : 39.

Similarly, in his Urdu translation and commentary of Bukhari, entitled *Fazl-ul-Bari*, Maulana Muhammad Ali writes regarding the above-mentioned hadith report that we cannot create from its words a general principle of the dead receiving benefit from charity on their behalf, and we must not exceed the limit of the statement in the hadith. In this instance, the deceased had intended while alive to give in charity, but death did not spare her. So under these circumstances, if the son fulfils her intention then she also receives some benefit for the doing of the act.

Other rituals at time of death

Among the other practices commonly carried out following a death are the ceremonies held on the third day (*qul* reading) and the fortieth day (*chelum*), where parts of the Quran are read for the benefit of the deceased (besides other baseless rituals). Hazrat Mirza *sahib* was asked the question: “Does the deceased receive the reward of the reading of the *qul*?” He replied:

“There is no basis in the Shariah for the *qul* reading. What benefits the deceased are charity, prayer and the asking of forgiveness. However, the *mullahs* certainly receive reward from this ceremony. So if they are considered as the dead — and, in fact, the *mullahs* are spiritually dead — then we do agree [that the dead receive the reward]! We wonder how these people entertain such expectations. Religion has come to us from the Holy Prophet, and it contains no trace of any such thing. The Companions too died. Were *qul* readings held for any of them? This is an innovation (*bid'ah*) which, like other innovations, came into being centuries later.”⁶

Maulana Muhammad Ali writes:

“There is no authority of the Holy Prophet for the *Qul* ceremony on the third day, or for the ceremonies connected with the tenth and fortieth days after

⁶ *Malfuzat*, 1984 edition, v. 6, p. 390; new edition, v. 3, p. 605.

death. Nor can they be considered as acts of charity, for they are not for the benefit of the poor.” — *A Manual of Hadith*, ch. xv, note 22.

Customs versus example of Prophet Muhammad

The argument which Hazrat Mirza *sahib* has advanced against these rituals is that no sign or trace of them is to be found in the lives of the Holy Prophet and his Companions. It was an important part of Hazrat Mirza’s mission of the reforms of Muslims to urge them to give up such customs and practices and instead follow the example of the Holy Prophet in their lives. As a result, the great elders and stalwarts of our Movement followed the *sunna* of the Holy Prophet in their lives and were sternly opposed to these customs which were prevailing among the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent.

Regarding following customs *vis-à-vis* the real example of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, Hazrat Mirza *sahib* once referred to the verse of the Holy Quran:

“Say: If you love Allah, then follow me [i.e. Prophet Muhammad]. Allah will love you and forgive you your sins.” — 3 : 31.

and said:

“This is the one and only way of pleasing Allah: that you follow the Holy Prophet truly. We see that people are trapped in all sorts of customs. When someone dies, all kinds of innovations and customs are practiced, whereas they should just pray for the deceased. By following customs, it is not only that they are going against the Holy Prophet Muhammad but it is also an insult to him because the word of the Holy Prophet is not considered to be sufficient. If they had considered it to be sufficient, they would not have needed to invent customs of their own.”⁷

Prayers from Quran and Hadith

Another teaching of Islam which Muslims generally had reduced to a mere ritual is the use of the prayers that are taught in the Holy Quran and in the Holy Prophet’s hadith reports (*masnūn du‘ā*). It is believed that by merely repeating the set words, while neither knowing the meaning nor saying them with feeling from the heart, the prayer will be answered. Regarding these prayers, Hazrat Mirza *sahib* said:

“For prayers, find words that melt the heart. It is not right to go after the *masnūn du‘ā* prayers so as to repeat them like *mantras*, while not recognizing the substance. It is essential to follow the *sunna*, but to create feeling in the

⁷ *Malfuzat*, 1984 edition, v. 5, p. 440; new edition, v. 3, p. 316.

heart is also in accordance with the *sunna*. ...The one who worships words is forsaken by God. You should go after the essence. You must say the *masnūn du'ā* prayers for blessing, but try to reach their essence and reality.”⁸

From: www.ahmadiyya.org/islam/intro.htm

⁸ *Malfuzat*, 1984 edition, v. 2, page 338; new edition, v. 1, p. 538.