

THE FAMILY OF 'IMRAN

A COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER 3
SURAT AL-'IMRAN



KEYS TO THE QUR'AN

VOLUME TWO

SHAYKH FADHLALLA HAERI



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Book Description

This eBook is Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri's commentary on the third chapter of the Qur`an: *The Family of 'Imran*.

Surat 'Ale-'Imran is one of the most comprehensive and detailed chapters of the Qur`an. It demonstrates the meaning of hypocrisy, courage and belief, using the historical setting of the Battle of Uhud, one of the early Muslim campaigns, to show how people behave in different circumstances and justify their behavior.

This chapter unveils truth and insight regarding the human self, society, this world and the Next Life.

About the Author

Acknowledged as a master of self-knowledge and a spiritual philosopher, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri's role as a teacher grew naturally out of his own quest for self-fulfillment.

He travelled extensively on a spiritual quest which led to his eventual rediscovery of the pure and original Islamic heritage of his birth, and the discovery of the truth that reconciles the past with the present, the East with the West, the worldly with the spiritual – a link between the ancient wisdom teachings and our present time.

A descendant of five generations of well-known and revered spiritual leaders, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri has taught students throughout the world for over 30 years.

He is a gifted exponent of how the self relates to the soul, humankind's link with the Divine, and how consciousness can be groomed to reflect our higher nature.

The unifying scope of his perspective emphasizes practical, actionable knowledge that leads to self-transformation, and provides a natural bridge between seemingly different Eastern and Western approaches to spirituality, as well as offering a common ground of higher knowledge for various religions, sects and secular outlooks.

He is a prolific author of more than thirty books relating to the universal principles of Islam, the Qur'an, and its core purpose of enlightenment.

Acknowledgements

This series¹ began in 1981 as part of the teachings of the Holy Qur'an in the United States and Europe. Numerous people had helped and worked to realize the original editions of these commentaries.

Considerable editing and modifications were carried out by Muna H. Bilgrami. Aliya Haeri's dedication and loyalty was invaluable in coordinating and supervising both the first series as well as the present series. Contributors to the present edition include Batool Ispahany, Kays Abdul Karim Mohammed, Dr. Salah al-Habib, Luqman Ali, Hasan Jobanputra, Christopher Flint and Syed Muyhi al-Khateeb. Special thanks are due to Dr. Yaqub Zaki for reading through the texts and for his helpful suggestions. Without the encouragement and enthusiasm of Dr. Omar Hamza's love of the Qur'an, this present edition would not have been possible.

¹ In this eBook, we provide English translation of the Qur'anic *ayat* (verses; signs). Only the original Arabic text of the Qur'an is referred to as "The Qur'an". The Arabic text and diacritics have been removed because they do not render accurately in some eReaders.

Chapter 3: *Surat 'Ale-`Imran*: Introduction

The Qur'an was revealed in an instant, issuing forth from a realm beyond time. Its unfolding within the domain of time, however, occurred over a span of twenty-three years, for it was necessary for the message to be fully absorbed, integrated and applied existentially. The message was, and continues to be, that Allah is the Reality behind all that one witnesses. He is beyond description and beyond perception by the senses. He has Attributes, but nothing can be associated with Him. He can only be alluded to. We are therefore taught to talk about Allah only in terms of His Attributes, not of His Essence.

The Qur'an came as a complete revelation, as one unit in space, as one instant in time, like a bolt of lightning that hits the sleeper and stuns him into wakefulness. It descended as a stream of truth upon the heart of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, his family and his righteous Companions;² for the Muhammadan application of the truth of the Qur'an is the vital complement. To try to understand the Qur'an without the Prophet would have been comparable to an attempt to use a medical manual with no previous medical experience: the manual is of little use to one who has no training. To know the meaning of reality one must follow a particular path of application. Thus, Islam is based on both the Qur'an and the Prophetic way (*Sunnah*).

All the basic principles of knowledge are contained in this book. It is an existential guide for perpetual life. The message of the Qur'an is based on balance, on living a life which inevitably leads to a better future, materially and morally, both on an individual and a social level.

The purpose of the Qur'an is for its message to be absorbed by the hearts of men. If there is no impact, then the remedy is only palliative. Superficial use of the Qur'an may be likened to a person who, hearing that vitamins are useful for the body's health, takes some indiscriminately. The vitamins are likely to be of some benefit, but they would have been far more useful had he known his specific condition and the properties of the vitamins, how they interact and enhance

² It is customary, whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned, to invoke the peace and blessings of Allah upon him, his family and his righteous Companions.

each other as well as how they might occasionally counteract one another. With this knowledge he would have been able to benefit maximally by taking the correct type and dosage. We hope to approach and use the Qur'an in this way.

The ability to derive meaning and knowledge from the Qur'an depends upon having the correct approach, and a humble, pure intention to attain knowledge. The assumption that one already knows something can be a hindrance. Therefore, one must be bereft, recognizing one's poverty, ignorance, weakness and need for knowledge and transformation. To approach the Qur'an, the seeker must possess the right courtesy (*adab*) which will serve as a key to awaken the knowledge of the Qur'an already contained within the heart.

Drawing from the Qur'an, penetrating into it, integrating it into one's life and thus learning from it, require both outer and inner courtesy (*adab*). If we approach the Qur'an with courtesy and love, it will unfold to us its values.

To gain the blessings and mercy of Reality through this ultimate, complete and balanced book of wisdom, one must appreciate its historical context and the overall environmental and ecological situation at the time of its descent. This includes understanding the civilization and culture of the time and place of its revelation, and more specifically, the nature of the people and their nomadic values. The Arab nomads of the Prophet's time, like nomads in general, were highly sensitized to their environment, for they had little protection from it. Because of the extreme harshness of their environment, the Bedouin Arabs lived continually on the verge of moral danger; they had therefore developed extremely alert, agile and intuitive minds which were highly attuned to everything around them. Furthermore, the nomadic system of the Bedouin people was in constant conflict with the civic system of the city dwellers. Whenever the nomadic and sedentary cultures met, conflict as well as renewal occurred.

The qualities most highly valued in nomadic cultures were nobility, courage and generosity. The people of the desert were self-reliant and fiercely independent. They would not bow to another human being. The leader emerged naturally, and was recognized because of his qualities and character. In this system it was likely that the next leader would come from the present leader's clan or be related to him. In nomadic culture, the home, or tent, of the tribal chief was always

open, and yet it was customary for people not to go begging, so as not to demean themselves. Thus, generosity was naturally balanced with integrity, self-esteem and patience.

The Qur'an arose amidst the Arab culture and a simpler way of life than ours, but its universal message enlivened the hearts of diverse people, even during the Prophet's lifetime. It is helpful if we are aware of the environment in Mecca and Medina at the time of the Qur'anic revelation in order then to apply it to the social and cultural situation of our time, for the Qur'an is a guide book in an actual prescriptive sense.

The Muhammadan path, as it evolved over the course of time, is inextricably linked, step by step, to the revelation of the Qur'an. It began with the acknowledgement of the Oneness of God and it ended with the establishment of a very strong community in which individuals, having completely recognized the laws governing human relationships, interacted in a manner that allowed each one to develop spiritually to his or her full capacity. The righteous Companions followed their Prophet Muhammad and thereby became established in their knowledge of God.

The Prophet saw in everyone the highest possible potential to be awakened to the higher inner knowledges. He recognized in all situations, even those which appeared to other men as afflictive, nothing other than Allah's mercy and compassion. He had the ability to see the ignorance that veils the hearts of men and causes them to act incorrectly, and he acted with understanding towards them. He worked to purify men's hearts, to help them evolve towards awakening to the inner life.

The few Muslims who were with the Prophet in the beginning were constantly subjected to oppression and opposition. The Prophet, wanting to save his small group of original followers, recommended that many travel to a place of safety, since living in Mecca had become impossible; for as their numbers grew so did opposition to them. The atmosphere had become increasingly polarized and hostile. The Muhammadan light, translated into a code of conduct, had become a major threat to the tribal habits of a people who took fierce pride in their ancestral ways. Their factional loyalties often led them to resort to brute force, with total disregard for logic, reason and human values. This polarization in Mecca would lead inevitably to violence.

In contrast to the clans in Mecca, some of the people of Medina saw light and usefulness in the message of Islam. Whereas the people of Mecca regarded the Prophet as no more than the son of one of their own kind, and could not accept his prophethood, the people of Medina, an agrarian people who were settled and more receptive, welcomed the Prophet and his followers, who upon arrival immediately began to build a mosque and homes: they embarked upon creating a community. But with a community also came problems: 'Surely We have created man in affliction' (90:4).

The Family of `Imran (*Surat 'Ale `Imran*) was revealed mostly around the second or third year after the migration to Medina, although certain passages came somewhat later. Its dating has been deduced from the references to events which occurred at that time, namely the Battle of *Uhud*. A major part of the chapter deals with the topic of hypocrisy. If one looks into one's own heart, one will occasionally witness how deep and subtle hypocrisy can be. An important lesson in The Family of `Imran is how to break free from the evil of hypocrisy.

The Battle of *Uhud*, the second major battle between the young Muslim community and the Quraysh of Mecca, revealed a wide range of human weaknesses amongst the followers of the Messenger Muhammad. Curiously, the word *Uhud* is linguistically connected to *Ahad*, which is a Divine Attribute meaning 'the One'. *Uhud* thus could imply a comprehensive exposition of divine unity which takes place on the battlefield. In truth every moment is *Uhud*, but we generally escape to relative short-term safety, unaware that eventually we must face the enemy. 'With your Lord alone on that day shall be the place of rest' (75:12). There is no escape. 'Whither to fly?' (75:10); and, 'O man, surely you must strive hard toward your Lord until you meet Him' (84:6). By what power and grace can one possibly escape?

It is up to us to perceive the plot of the One (*Ahad*) which was exemplified during the era of the Prophet at the Battle of *Uhud*. We need to delve into its meaning and grasp its truth, for much of what appears to be real is nothing but illusion, and the more we pursue illusions the more we are confused. The truth is that everything emanates from one source and returns to it. Life in this world pushes, pulls, encourages and entices us towards that source. This is the meaning of Allah's mercy and the perfection of His natural laws. Multiple manifestations all emanate from One Essence.

To behave with propriety towards the Creator, we must behave with propriety towards ourselves. But in order to check and balance oneself until that fine point of deep propriety is reached, we need to attain a state of spontaneous awareness. For this it is necessary to follow the example of others who have reached the goal, like tuning a musical instrument to the correct pitch using a tuning fork.

To discover subtle hypocrisy one need only look into one's own heart. There, within the self, one will find all the contradictions of conflict and duality. Yet out of this torment one can reach enlightenment: a person who has not experienced internal conflict is unlikely to be awakened to the knowledge of, and adherence to, the source of harmony within.

The commentary on The Family of 'Imran contained within this volume differs from the traditional approach of Qur'anic commentators, for we intend to share its eternal values and its constant applicability within the deep realm of truth. Towards this end, much of the historical background which is widely available has not been included. However, where historical information is necessary to help illuminate the verse, it has been referred to.

We will examine the linguistic roots of numerous key terms so as to highlight their different facets as well as their specific meanings in the context in which they are used. We will allow ourselves to roam through the incredibly rich, delightful garden of communication and transformation; it is to be hoped within properly observed boundaries.

Chapter 3: *Surat 'Ale-'Imran*: Commentary

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

1. Alif Lam Mim

Just as creation appears to have a physical structure, so does the Qur'an. From non-existence the letters come into being by a stroke of the pen. The letters are the foundation of the words which make up its sentences and thus impart meaning, just as the variegated forms of creation are contained within various systems that also provide meaning. From the One comes an infinite number of creational possibilities which indicate their truly infinite and unfathomable Source.

2. Allah, [there is] no god but He, the Living, the Self-Subsisting by Whom all things subsist.

The chapter begins by affirming what is most important in creation, namely (*tawhid*), that is, unity, the Oneness of Allah. The Qur'an asserts that there is only one Creator from whom creation emerges. The most exalted definition and highest description of this Creator is that He has no other partner. There is no deity but Allah, the Absolute Creator.

Another description of Allah is that He is forever sentient or living. How can we experience life and death unless there is an immutable foundation, forever holding both in Its grasp. How is it that we are alive? We must be deriving life as well as all our other attributes (singular *sifah*) from a Reality which contains all these attributes. The reason that man seeks to prolong his life unnaturally is, in fact, because he is worshipping – albeit misguidedly – the Everlasting Who is within us. All attributes are from Allah, through whose grace everyone is constantly given the opportunity of knowledge and awakening. The Qur'an says, 'All that is in the heavens and the earth glorify Allah, the Sovereign King, the Sacred, the Mighty, the Wise' (62:1).

Every created entity in this existence is glorifying, worshipping and adoring the Attributes of Allah, the Controller of all. Everyone wants to possess these Attributes, because man desires Allah; yet we already have Allah, we are already in the embrace of Allah. There is no escape

from that One Reality; there is no escape from the laws of Allah which are the manifestation in creation of His Attributes.

It is up to us to experience His laws, not in a dualistic or fragmentary fashion, but as a totality, until we see nothing but Allah manifesting Himself through His different Attributes. If a particular event seems to be incongruous, we need only reflect upon its cause to understand it. If the event conforms to its context, then it has followed His laws. If we were to think, hear and see correctly and naturally, then everything around us would be coherent. Whatever appeared incomprehensible, once examined, would reveal its inner meaning.

Every cause has an effect, and every effect stems from a cause, except for the One-and-Only Source, Allah. Allah is Self-Subsisting, beyond cause and effect. Everything except Allah falls within laws that can be understood. All of creation emanates from a root, from a cause that encompasses and controls it all without being tarnished, touched or affected by it. This is the puzzle into which we are born, and we are given our entire lifetime to solve it. Its solution is its dissolution.

By submitting and dissolving the self into the truth that lies within, we unify our actions and intentions fully. Then we will find that every experience is covered by the mercy of Allah, thereby deepening our faith along the path. By this faith our certainty will be increased, and we will be led to the realization that this life is an emanation indicating its source and its natural return to it. Life then becomes an experience to be valued and respected, because one respects the Giver of the experience. Life is not acceptable unless it is put experientially into the right perspective. Life is only a training-ground where man may come to know the meaning of the words, 'Allah, there is no god but Him, the Living, the Self-Subsisting, by Whom all things subsist.'

3. He has truthfully revealed the Book to you, verifying that which came before; and He revealed the Torah and the Gospel.

In this verse the Prophet Muhammad and all who truly follow him are addressed by Allah. The Qur'an as revealed to Muhammad confirms the truth of the earlier books of the Torah and the

Gospels. The message of these divinely inspired Books is from the same One Source, but revealed at different times, for different civilizations or cultures. The books of Moses and Jesus were adequate for their time, and the teachings of Jesus superseded what remained of the oral Talmudic tradition.

The Qur'an of Muhammad supersedes all previous revealed teachings. It is the final message, as it encompasses the collective prophetic consciousness. The Arabic language of the Qur'an and the continuous chain of transmission of its teachings ensures its authenticity and safeguards it. Attempts to interpret the Qur'an and the Prophetic path in order to justify a personal prejudice, or wrongly to reinforce unjust actions, continue. Despite this, Islam remains preserved as it was originally and the behavior of Muslims can always be judged against it by whoever has been given its light.

4. Aforetime, a guidance for mankind, and He revealed the Discrimination. Surely, those who disbelieve in the revelations of Allah shall suffer a severe punishment. And Allah is Mighty, the Lord of Retribution.

The Qur'an has several names, two of which are 'The Book' (*al-Kitab*) and 'The Discrimination' (*al-Furqan*). The Book of Knowledge and understanding is based on discrimination, the differentiation between what is right and what is wrong. By reading this Book, we learn to differentiate between truth and falsehood, transience and permanence.

What is emphasized in this verse is that the knowledge of Allah is the highest priority. Whoever denies the signs of Allah, whoever denies the proof of the existence of the Creator, whoever denies the interconnectedness of everything in this creation, whoever denies the one power from which stem different manifestations and apparently opposing values or attributes, is in a state of affliction and pain, that is, 'severe punishment' (*'adhab shadid*). Ignorance underlies all pain. Once the reason behind the outcome of a given situation is known, immediate relief and comfort are found, though the difficulty of the situation may not yet be resolved. Through thorough knowledge of any situation, acceptance becomes possible, and with this acceptance positive, successful action can be undertaken.

Understanding and acceptance are aspects of discrimination, of recognizing what is what. If one fails to see the one thread behind the many woven patterns, the result is continual suffering, difficulty and affliction.

5. Surely nothing in the earth or in the heavens is hidden from Allah.

The Living, Self-Subsistent Reality (*al-Hayy al-Qayyum*) is also the All-Hearing, All-Seeing and All-Knowing Reality. Nothing is hidden from Allah. Where can one turn that Allah and His manifestations do not exist? Where can one hide from that which gives one life? Wherever one goes, one's life-support system is already there. How can one say that one has no knowledge of Allah – for where is it that Allah is not? The answer is truly that such a place does not exist. Anyone who recognizes this fact knows that wherever one turns there is the face of Allah. If man is at all times aware that Allah sees what is in his heart, he will naturally labor to purify his heart. He will seek to reveal what is in it so that it might thereby be rendered wholesome and pleasing to Allah, for there is nothing more purifying than revealing one's heart to someone who is willing to listen.

The hypocrisy (*nifaq*) of one who knows that nothing is hidden from Allah will evaporate by continual exposure to air and light. The Arabic verbal root from which the word for hypocrite springs means 'to tunnel'. Like a mole in a tunnel the hypocrite cannot be easily caught, because the tunnel has more than one exit hole. It is a secret underground tunnel which one may enter by one hole and come out through another. One is always justifying one's prejudices and veils – never catching the self out. By recognizing that Allah knows everything, the labyrinth is unearthed. A technique for reducing hypocrisy is to think of one's heart, one's inner thoughts and motivations as exposed. In truth, every cell within a man reflects his true intentions. Nothing in the heavens or on the earth is hidden from the Reality which encompasses them both, and yet is beyond them.

6. He shapes you in the womb as He pleases; there is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise.

Man himself is a form, a picture (*surah*), a representative of Reality. He is an example of Reality, because he encompasses within himself the meaning of everything that he experiences;

he is a microcosm of creation. If man did not contain within himself the potential to understand everything outside himself, how then could he understand the external world? There is within us a micro-world which enables us to reflect the macro-world outside. This is how He has 'shaped you in the womb'. The Arabic verbal root for 'wombs' (*arham*) means 'to be merciful or compassionate' (*rahima*). The womb with its function of propagation is a great manifestation and direct proof of Allah's ongoing mercy. The word for 'womb' also means 'relationship, kinship'. It is important for everyone to extend mercy and generosity to their family. The person who has embraced Islam, but whose family has not, should try to share his faith with his family, not by forcing it upon them, but by gentle words and guidance whenever possible. The enemy is not the family itself but the ignorance based on culture and habit that has been allowed to take hold over the family. It is actions that are evil, not people.

There are seven factors which affect the make-up of the individual. The first is to do with the character of one's parents: there is no doubt that one inherits physical and other characteristics from one's predecessors. Another factor is the act of conception itself; this relates to the love between the parents and the depth of their relationship. The third factor is the mother's diet and overall physical, mental, emotional and spiritual state while the child is developing in the womb. The fourth factor concerns the conditions at the moment of birth; the way in which this transition occurs is critical. To be born under the glaring lights of a hospital operating theatre, surrounded by unknown people who are preoccupied with their own problems, is not the best way to enter life. Traditionally, in the past, children were born at home, where the mother was at ease in her own environment, with her own people who treated her lovingly. The fifth factor is the child's treatment during the first two years, including the diet, love, attention and warmth that the mother gives it, the love that exists between both the parents and the baby. The sixth element is the child's upbringing, grooming and social environment. A child who is brought up in a criminal environment is more likely to take to crime, while one brought up in an environment of love, honesty and harmony is more likely to repeat aspects of the same pattern.

The seventh factor is the most important one: a person's power of will and clarity of objective in life. One may have inherited genetically certain weaknesses or physical handicaps or been born into a deprived or criminal environment. One may be aware of all this and yet have the strength and determination to go through life, overcoming the past and rising above those limitations.

Man is like a holographic image: he is potentially a reflection of Reality, if he chooses to be. A holograph is an image produced on a photosensitive plate through the use of a laser beam; a holographic image not only reflects the object from which it is made, but it also behaves as if it were the object itself. The degree to which man can reflect the highest Reality is as accurate as the degree of his willingness to submit, surrender and be committed to Allah.

7. He it is Who has revealed the Book to you in which are decisively clear verses, the basis of the Book; others are allegorical. Those whose hearts are distorted follow the part which is allegorical, seeking dissention, and seeking to give it [their own] interpretation; but none knows its interpretation except Allah. And those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord. None remind except those who have innermost understanding.

If the Qur'an is regarded as a whole, there is no obscurity in its allegories or doctrine. The Qur'an is a clear book in which there is no doubt; doubt exists only in the minds of men because of their veils of ignorance.

The word 'basis' (*umm*) also means 'mother', implying that these verses are the source or foundation of the Book. Mecca was called 'the mother of villages' (*umma al-qura*), because it was a trading center. A closely related word in the Qur'an means 'unlettered' (plural *ummiyin*), meaning those who have not had a book, in particular the people of Mecca before Islam. It also refers to the inability of most of the Arabs of that time to read and write. Unlettered also means not formally taught, for the Prophet, according to tradition, had not been taught to read or write at the time the revelations of the Qur'an began. It is known that the Prophet spoke numerous dialects and understood foreign languages, and encouraged the teaching of reading and writing. Many prisoners captured by the Muslims in battle were offered the opportunity of gaining their freedom by teaching the Muslims to read and write. It is said that in each of the nine mosques of Medina there was at all times someone available to teach people to read and write.

'Those whose hearts are distorted' deviate by turning away from Reality. Through knowledge one sees that there is no turning away from the path of Allah, for there is no other way. Man has come from Allah, he is sustained by the grace of Allah, and he is returning to that everlasting

Source. If the heart is not completely at one with Reality, it will remain confused. If the heart is not fused to that awareness then it becomes confused.

People who study the Qur'an without the correct courtesy of humility and openness of heart will not derive benefit. They see only what is doubtful, which increases their own confusion. They are seeking 'dissension', because they are subject to temptations which cause distraction. If man recognizes what has confused him, he is able to avoid it the next time he is confronted by a similar situation.

There is no dispute or doubt about the real way once one is fully on that path. The Prophetic life-transaction (*din*) is not open to discussion. Those who are true to Islam, who have surrendered to Reality, cannot be in discord. Dispute arises because of lack of accord, hence discord. A man who has submitted to Allah is in the hand of Allah, the hand of absolute justice. If someone has entered into an argument, it is because he did not possess full discernment or discrimination (*furqan*) in the situation. Islam is truly the house of peace based on love and justice. It is at peace with its inhabitants and at war with those in ignorance and those who deny Allah.

Those whose hearts are wandering will cause distraction, confusion and dissension 'by seeking to give it their own interpretation (*ta`wil*)'. They talk according to their own whims, 'but none knows its interpretation except Allah'. No one knows the roots of a thing except He who puts forth the roots and 'those who are firmly rooted in knowledge'. The ones who are firmly rooted in their trust in Allah will come to know more and more about the meanings of the manifestations of Reality. All power, actions and attributes come from the Lord and Sustainer. His mercy pervades all creation.

Knowledge and wisdom are but the beautiful and subtle veils of a higher reality. They produce a greater state of awareness and deeper understanding. The Prophet has said, 'The leaders of guidance are among my progeny (*Ahl al-Bayt*) and some of my Companions (*Sahabah*)'. He whose right actions are clear, whose tongue always speaks the truth, whose heart is straight, and who guards his stomach and his sexual urge is one who is firmly established in knowledge. These people were not confused or in doubt. Confusion is a result of one's ignorance of cause

and effect and the inconsistent relationship between intention and action. The confused person can only blame himself, seek knowledge and then take refuge in patience.

When Umm Salamah heard the Prophet repeat the supplication, 'O Lord Who turns the heart, establish my heart in Your way (*din*)', she asked, 'O Messenger of Allah, will the hearts turn again?' 'Yes,' he said, 'Allah has not created man from the children of Adam but that his heart is between His two fingers. If He wills He makes it straight and if He wills He makes it deviate.' Man cannot be arrogant about his faith (*iman*). One can never claim that one knows (for higher knowledge is limitless), or that one's knowledge is complete. Allah says, 'But none feels secure from Allah's plot [i.e. subtle ways], except those who are at a loss' (7:99). Man must be constantly vigilant and diligent. The worst situation is to gain a little knowledge and then to feel arrogantly secure.

All that we experience comes from 'our Lord' (*Rabbana*). The Lord is that entity which brings us up to our full potential. A related word from the same root word as Lord means 'upbringing, education, edification' (*tarbiyah*), but there is no equivalent word for 'lord' in the English language that can adequately convey the idea of nurturing, and the process of gaining wisdom and fulfillment through being fostered and guided by Allah's Attribute of Lordship.

'None remind except those who have innermost understanding.' The word for 'innermost understanding' (*lubb*) also means 'essence, core', or 'reasoning mind'. Sometimes it connotes an understanding connected to the heart, but in the case of this verse it has the further connotation of achievement. The ability to remind depends on the ability to remember, to recall the original sub-genetic information that man is dependent upon Allah, Who has created out of love. If man is continually concerned about external manifestations in the realm of duality, he cannot reflect upon the One Source. The inner meaning of all our activities is life relates to discovering this truth, through surrender and understanding.

In the Qur'an some verses are absolutely clear and some are allegorical, appearing to be obscure. Qur'anic commentators often conjecture as to whether certain verses are allegorical or not. When the Qur'an is examined as a whole there is no obscurity; there is metaphor and symbolism, but there is no obscurity: 'These are the verses of the Qur'an, the verses of a clear Book' (27:1). The

leaders of the Prophetic House related that ‘the understanding of the Qur’an is by the Qur’an, because parts of the Qur’an explain other parts’. The Qur’an is complete unto itself and contains the entirety of meaning within itself.

Allah tells us that the clear verses are the basis of the book. What is allegorical or obscure may be understood in the light of what is clarified elsewhere. As we stated earlier, the word for ‘basis’ also means ‘mother’ as well as ‘source, origin, foundation, essence, matrix’. A closely related word means ‘one who remains in the natural condition of his surroundings’. This word came to refer to the Arabs in particular, and because they did not read or write, it came by extension to mean ‘unlettered’. When this word was used in the Qur’an (7:157) to describe the Prophet Muhammad, the ordinary meaning was that he was not taught in any formal sense, but that he had a natural connection to life and its source, and had therefore a primal, natural ability to ‘read’. The Qur’anic description of ‘unlettered’ also emphasizes that the Prophet was not formally educated, but that his authority was based upon revealed knowledge.

One of the meanings of the Arabic word translated in this verse as ‘interpretation’ (*ta`wil*) is ‘opinion.’ If, for example, on a cloudy day someone comments that it is a good day, he probably means that in his opinion the day will be full of benefit. The listener, on the other hand, may interpret what he said as sarcastic, because the sky is obviously overcast. The first person might then say to the listener he has misinterpreted the speaker’s words, (*awwalta kalami*), implying that the listener has read into them what he wanted to hear. Personal opinions regarding the meanings of the Qur’an must be guarded against. Some of the verses do not allow for interpretation while others lend themselves to a great number of meanings, both broad as well as deep. There are many pitfalls in interpreting according to one’s own opinion.

An explicit example of a clear verse is, ‘O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, so that perhaps you may guard yourselves with fearful awareness’ (2:186). There is no doubt about the interpretation of this verse, nor room for different opinions about its meaning. An example of an allegorical verse is, ‘Looking toward their Lord’ (75:23). One may ask how this is possible, for Allah cannot be seen, as He established with Moses: ‘You will never see Me’ (7:143). The intellect allows one to understand that ‘seeing Allah’ refers to knowledge of Allah. The latter verse forces one to look deeply into

the meaning of 'looking towards' in the former verse thereby finding that it also means 'directing one's attention towards'. Prophetic traditions may also be used to reinforce the understanding of the Qur'an. In this case a famous sacred tradition relates, 'The eyes cannot see Me, but the heart of the believing slave sees Me.'

Many verses that use worldly or linguistic terms are inadvertently given a physical interpretation. For example, the word for 'throne' (*'arsh*) in the verse, 'Then He [Allah] established himself on the throne' (*Thumma istawa 'ala al-'arsh*, 10:3). The mind conjures up a giant-like being acting as puppeteer for the whole world, seated on an enormous throne. If we delve into the meaning of the Arabic word for 'throne' we will find that it means 'that upon which everything rests', indicating a foundation. Another example, mentioned many times in the Qur'an, is that Allah possesses all riches. Because man treasures his own insignificant trinkets, he may imagine an enormous treasure box, full of Allah's glittering treasures. In reality, however, Allah's treasures comprise the entire creation, comprising that which man comprehends as well as what he cannot comprehend.

There is a story related about an inquirer who asked Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq to explain a certain verse on three different occasions. Each time he received a different answer. Finally he queried the Imam about the differing interpretations and the Imam answered him thus: 'O Jabir, the Qur'an has an inner lining, and for that inner lining there is another inner lining, and for that inner there is another inner and yet another. O Jabir, there is nothing further from the intellect of man than the interpretation of the Qur'an.' Ja'far al-Sadiq's explanation illustrates that many verses can be interpreted from different angles and in subtle ways. While all of the interpretations are correct, at the same time care must be exercised so that one's opinion does not conceal a true reflection of the universality of the verse.

The entire Qur'an is a continuous exposition of the different facets of Reality. In a sense it is like man's life, the beginning, the middle and end of which may be very different, yet interconnected. Likewise, the lives of individuals may appear to be radically different, but if we look at this multiplicity as a manifestation of a reality that has unchanging boundaries, we find written therein decrees which cannot be changed, decrees such as birth and death. There is a limit to the freedom we can exercise because of the natural boundaries that have been determined.

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