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Collective Study

Importance and Need

Your journey through the Qur'ān requires that you seek and join a community of quest and study. No doubt you will read the Qur'ān individually, but your benefits will multiply if you also join in fellowship with other believers and seekers after the Qur'ān. In companionship, the states of the heart may be intensified, and many minds joined together may understand meanings better and more correctly. And, only by joining with others can you live fully the lives inspired by the Qur'ān and discharge the mission that reading it enjoins upon you. By acting and fulfilling that mission you will deserve to be admitted to the fullest possible blessings of the Qur'ān.

Significantly, the Quranic address is almost always collective. And the Prophet, blessings and peace be on him, from the moment he received the revelation of the Qur'ān, set out to create a community with the Qur'ān at the centre of its life, and spent every moment of his life in this effort. The instruction to 'read' was followed, in time, by the command to 'arise and warn'. The instruction to continue to 'read what has been revealed to you in the Book of your Lord' is immediately followed, contextually, with the instruction to 'bind yourself with those who call upon their Lord at morning and evening, desiring His countenance, and let not your eyes turn away from them' (al-Kahf 18: 27–8). These Quranic teachings clearly and forcefully establish the link between

its reading and the need for a strong, closely-knit community rooted in that reading.

Again, no Prayer can be complete without reading the Qur'ān, nor, if it is obligatory and there is no genuine excuse, without fellowship with others (*Jamā'ah*). What is the purpose of reading the Qur'ān in Prayer if not to hear it, understand it and ponder over it? Thus five times a day this purpose should be accomplished in collective endeavour.

The duty to communicate the message of the Qur'ān to the whole of mankind also entails that the Qur'ān should be read and explained corporately. The word *tilāwah*, when used with the Arabic preposition *'alā*, means to communicate, to propagate, to spread, to teach. To do the *tilāwah* in this way is one of the basic functions of the Prophethood, and, therefore, of his Ummah (al-Baqarah 2: 129, 151). In Surah al-Jumu'ah (62), failing to understand and live by Divine guidance is emphasized in the context of failing to stay with the Friday Prayer for which every worldly activity must be given up.

The Qur'ān also hints at the reading of the Qur'ān in families and homes in the following verse: 'And remember that which is recited in your houses of the revelations of God and the Wisdom' (al-Aḥzāb 33: 34).

Those who gather together to read and study the Qur'ān are blessed because upon them descend the angels with God's abundant mercy, as the Prophet, blessings and peace be on him, said:

> Whenever people gather in one of the houses of Allah for reading the Qur'ān and teaching it to one another, peace descends upon them, mercy covers them, angels spread their wings over them, and Allah mentions them to those around Him (*Muslim*).

So you should not be content with reading and studying the Qur'ān alone, but should set out to find other seekers and invite them that you may do so together.

Forms of Collective Study

Collective study may take two forms.

One: Where a small group gathers to study and deliberate upon the Qur'ān so that each participant takes an active part in the process, though some among them may be more knowledgeable than others and one will lead the study. This we shall call *Ḥalaqah,* (after the above Hadith), or Study Circle.

Two: Where a group, small or large, gathers to study the Qur'ān by actively listening to the exposition given by a knowledgeable person. The participants only raise questions. This we shall call '*Dars*', lesson or lecture.

You should know how a Study Circle should be conducted and how to prepare and deliver a Dars. Here we can discuss only very broad guidelines. Again, it is important to remember that there can be no standard, fixed procedures. Each person or group will have to develop his or their own method, and each situation will have to be treated on its own. The guidelines given below are only suggestions which you should adapt to your requirements and capabilities.

Four Basic Rules

Four rules are basic to the success of any collective study.

One: You must always make all the preparations necessary to fulfil your responsibility. Do not take your task lightly, do not postpone your preparation till the eleventh hour, do not consider a quick glance enough, never say anything about the Qur'ān without having given it full consideration. It is always better to make note of what you have studied and what you want to say.

Two: Whether you are a novice or you already possess some knowledge, whether you have to give Dars or participate in discussion in a circle, undertake a study on your own

of the selected part, broadly in line with the procedure described earlier.

Three: Always keep your *niyyah* right, that is, understand and live the Qur'ān in order to seek Allah's pleasure.

Four: Do not study together merely for pleasure, intellectual curiosity, or argument and discussion. Your studying the Qur'ān together must result in your obeying the Qur'ān together and fulfilling the mission it entrusts to you.

Study Circle

The following guidelines should help in making the group study effective.

Participants

One: The number of participants should be 3–10; with no great divergence in the levels of their knowledge and intelligence. Anything less will make it a dialogue, anything more may hinder the active participation of everyone.

Two: The stress should always remain on the message, context and what guidance and lessons are to be drawn. Never get entangled in fine points which have no relevance to real life.

Three: All members should be fully aware of their aims, limitations and procedures.

Four: All members should have the necessary commitment to their task and realize that time, attention and hard work will be required. It is especially important that regular preparation and attendance are observed.

Five: All members should know how to find their way through the Qur'ān. A study of this book may be of some use.

Six: The group members should not sit as strangers, but as brothers in faith in the Qur'ān, committed to understanding and obeying it.

How to Conduct a Study Circle

One: One member should, first, make a presentation of the results of his study.

Two: The rest should then join in, further elaborating, correcting, modifying, raising questions, or providing answers.

Three: If all the members are required to study, then you may either designate beforehand who will do the presentation; this will result in better standards of presentation. Or, call upon anyone present to do the presentation; this will keep everyone alert and working hard.

Four: It will always be useful if at least one member of the circle is more knowledgeable and has access to sources. He would, then, during the discussion, overcome any deficiencies and shortcomings in the original presentation He may also set and steer the tone and direction of discussion.

Five: If one member who is learned in the Qur'ān participates, he should not intervene from the beginning. Rather he should let the participants say what they want to say, and only then, gently correct them if they are wrong, or add to their knowledge. His method should be suggestive and interrogative rather than discursive.

Six: Towards the end, one member, preferably the leader or teacher, should always sum up the broad message of the passage, its main themes, and its call to action.

Dars

The following guidelines may help to make a Dars effective.

Preparation

One: Have a fair idea about the audience: such as, their level of knowledge and intelligence, their state of Iman, their concerns and worries, and their needs and requirements.

Two: Select the passage in keeping with the state of your audience, rather than what you find yourself eager to expound.

Three: The nature and level of your style, language, exposition should correspond to the nature of your audience.

Four: Pray to Allah to help you in bringing the true message of the Qur'ān to your listeners.

Five: Study the passage and write down your notes: what do you want to say? In what order? How? How do you begin? How do you end?

Six: Give due regard to the time at your disposal. Never exceed your time. You may have a lot of good points and be very eager to pour them all out. But, remember, your listeners have a very limited capacity to retain. They may admire your learning and erudition, but may not learn very much from it.

Long passages can always be dealt with in a short duration and short passages can be dwelt upon for a long duration. It all depends on what you think you have to communicate from the passage under study.

Seven: Give full attention as to what clear message or messages, out of all that you may say, you would like to leave with the listeners for them to retain, reflect and act upon.

This must conform with the central idea of the passage, not with your own desires.

How to Deliver

One: You must have only two aims:

Firstly, to seek Allah's pleasure by doing your duty in making others hear His words.

Secondly, to communicate the message of the Qur'ān clearly and effectively.

Two: Remember that it lies in the hands of Allah to make your communication effective in reaching your listeners' hearts and minds.

But this does not absolve you from your responsibility for doing your best to prepare as best you can, to deliver as effectively as you can, to bring the message of the Qur'ān in a manner as makes it living and dynamic for them, to make it relevant to their concerns, to make it bear upon their situation.

Your delivery may not be of high oratorial or rhetorical standards, it may be very ordinary – but it is your *niyyat* and effort that count.

Three: You may first read the whole text and give its translation, and then take up the exposition, with or without reading each verse and its translation again. Or, you may give a brief introduction and start by taking up one verse after another, or a group of verses. What procedure you adopt will depend on the time at your disposal and the situation.

Remember that it is not essential to read the whole passage and its translation in the beginning, especially if time is short. You may spend the time better in preparing the listeners for what they are going to hear.

Four: As far as the individual verses or groups of verses are concerned, you may use a mixture of various approaches. If the verse is clear and short, you may first read it and then

elaborate. You may turn to the theme before and after your exposition.

What you must ensure is that your listeners get a sense of cohesive unity – each statement should be seen to flow from the preceding one and lead to the next.

Five: At the end, you must sum up the contents, and emphasize the message. You may also, if you have time, even read the whole text again, or only the translation. Reading the text or translation towards the end serves to bring your listeners in direct contact with the Qur'ān after they have understood what it means in light of your exposition.

Six: Always be on guard that it is the Qur'ān which must speak, and not *you*. The Qur'ān has been effective, without any exposition, for those who knew the language and the Messenger. It still is. You may hinder the Qur'ān from speaking not only by inserting your own views too much, but also by your very lengthy and elaborate explanations. By the time you finish your long discourse, your listeners may very well forget what the Quranic text said.

So, *firstly*, keep your explanations as short as possible; and, *secondly*, if they have to be long as may be necessary in some instances, you should refer back to the text as often as possible. You should create no distance between the listeners and the text of the Qur'ān, not only in meaning, but also in hearing.

Seven: Model your own exposition on the pattern and style of the Qur'ān. This may be the most effective means of ensuring the success of the occasion.

Initially you may find it difficult, but gradually – as you move nearer to the Qur'ān, read it often, memorize it – it will become part of your own style.

You must remember certain characteristics of the Quranic style. *Firstly,* that it appeals to both reason and feeling, intellect and soul as one whole. *Secondly,* that it is short, precise, direct, personal, and evocative. *Thirdly,* that it confronts its listeners

with choices and decisions and inspires them to heed and act. *Fourthly,* that its language is as powerful as the message, which penetrates deep inside you. *Fifthly,* that its argument is always what its listeners are able to understand, that it is always drawn from their everyday experience, that it always finds an echo inside them. Above all, that it is not abstract, logical, speculative.

Eight: Do not make overly abstract statements, nor conceptualize and systematize at the cost of the Qur'ān's dynamic impact. Concepts and systematic presentation are vital to the presentation of the Qur'ān's message, but so long as they are made in simple and ordinary language and within the grasp of the audience. Calls to action; summons to commit, must be essential ingredients of your Dars. Whether it is nature or history, injunction or statement, dialogue or address – each should result in some call to respond, to come forward, to decide and to act.

Nine: Do not use the Qur'ān as a pretext to propound your views, instead make yourself an exponent of the word of God.

Ten: Let the Qur'ān make its way to your listeners' hearts, let it reside there, let it stir impulses of recognition, love, gratitude and awe: this should be the thrust of your Dars.

Eleven: Always remain attentive to the response of your audience. You can always cut an argument short or give up what you may consider valuable to impart, if you feel that it does not interest them or arouse them. You can always introduce new points, styles, and emphasis, depending on what you feel are the demands of the situation.