

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

The following is a transcription of Shaykha Iman Badawi's talk on "Breaking the Barriers" [to Qur'ānic understanding] delivered for Yaqeen Institute (link below).

In it, she presents a partial commentary on Imām al-Ghazālī's "Book of Qur'ānic Adab" from *Ihyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn*.

<https://youtu.be/dQZ-W2x6WWs>

Part I. Personal Experience With the Qur'ān

- The subject matter of the Qur'ān is God, Himself, its objective is gnosis, and the process of gnosis is tasawwuf.
- Thus, every single spiritual reality finds its basis in the Qur'ān and Sunnah, not on a theoretical level but on a practical and experiential level.
- That is why true understanding cannot be achieved except through adherence.
- So, there is a circular relationship between understanding and spiritual experience. *Understanding teaches us how to practice. Then practice teaches us how to understand.* In this way, the believer continuously ascends to loftier levels of gnosis.
- I recall a time in my life when I felt that the Qur'ān was actively directing my heart, directing my life. Then, I came upon what I can only describe as a spiritual plateau.
- It was at that time that I began studying the *Ihyā'* in more depth and, almost instantly, I started to sense something new. I felt as if Imām al-Ghazālī were probing me. It was a bit unsettling, but I just kept praying to Allah to open the doors of understanding for me.
- Shortly after, I saw a vision. I saw myself, from a bird's eye view, inside a huge maze. There was a part of it that was lit and I had no difficulty traversing it, but then I came upon a part that was dark and so I stopped. There, I found Imām al-Ghazālī. He took my hand and began walking me through. The walls of the maze had doors. Each time we came upon one, he would instruct me to open it and, there, I would find a lamp. After many doors, I had accumulated so many lamps that the darkness of the maze lifted, and light filled the entire space. It was then, that Imām al-Ghazālī said to me, "Whoever knows himself, knows his Lord."

من عرف نفسه عرف ربه

- It was then that I realized that the maze was me and that the meaning of this statement at the beginning and end of the maze is entirely different.
- The true Qur’ānic journey isn’t one of the mind, it is an emigration of the spirit from the temporal world. [The Qur’ān is so high that only love can lift us to it.](#)
- If I were to give an advice on how to understand the Qur’ān better, I would say, love Allah better. He’ll love you back.

[Such are Allah’s Words,] “He loves them, and they love Him” Qur’ān (Mā’ida 5:54)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَنْ يَرْتَدَّ مِنْكُمْ عَنْ دِينِهِ فَسَوْفَ يَأْتِي اللَّهَ بِقَوْمٍ يُحِبُّهُمْ وَيُحِبُّونَهُ أَذِلَّةٍ عَلَى
 الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَعِزَّةٍ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ يُجَاهِدُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا يَخَافُونَ لَوْمَةَ لَائِمٍ ۗ ذَلِكَ فَضْلُ اللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ
 مَنْ يَشَاءُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ (54)

Part II. On the Outward and Inward Signs of God

With regard to understanding the Qur’ān, Imam al-Ghazālī distinguishes between two dimensions — *mulk* and *malakūt*. In the outward Dominion of God, known as *al-mulk*, we observe His Signs with the outward senses. Whereas, in the inward Dominion of God, known as *al-malakūt*, we observe His Signs with the inward senses.

Some are veiled even from the immediate sense perception of God’s signs, and this is due to the blinding influence of satan upon the heart. Atheism is the most severe incidence of this blindness. For those who do believe in God, though, observing His outward signs is the entry level, you could say, to recognizing His Magnificence. That’s why, in the Qur’ān, there are so many verses directing humanity to reflect upon the creation and, by extension, the Attributes of the Creator.

Beyond that is a deeper level, however, which requires a purification of the inner senses. Allah commands us to seek refuge in Him from satan before recitation for this very purpose. In so much as satanic forces have hold over the heart, will they pose an obstacle to its inner sight, and it is those eyes with which the deep inner meanings of the Qur’ān are grasped.

Now, Imām al-Ghazālī doesn’t speak of it explicitly, but it is implied that abstinence from [outward sin](#) is the key to grasping the outward signs of God (الآيات الكونية) Thus,

abstinence from **inward sin** is the key to opening the eyes of the heart to the inward signs of God, namely the verses of the Qur'ān. (الآيات القرآنية)

It's no wonder, then, why we fast during the month of the Qur'ān's revelation, because fasting is an inward act of worship that is entirely invisible to the creation. Unless someone tells you they're fasting, you'd never know. Likewise, the **purification of the heart is an intimately secret act** between God and His servant and so, those devotional secrets are what open the treasures of divine secrets. This leads us to another corollary conclusion, which is that **understanding of the Qur'ān's meanings is a hidden act**. It isn't the words we say or the reflections we write, but rather it is a light that God imbues in the heart which takes over one's being, directs the will, and grants openings of divine gnosis.

Like two lovers — their love isn't the photos they post on Instagram, which could easily be a façade, but rather those deeply intimate moments in which they are alone together. This is why seclusion (or *kehalwa*) has traditionally been a means of achieving high states of gnosis, Imām al-Ghazālī being one of the greatest examples in history of the sort. May Allah's choicest mercy be upon him.

This is also why Sufi poetry often personifies the divine spirit in the metaphor of the feminine, in reference to the intimate nature of divine connection.

Part III. On the Obstacles to Qur'ānic Understanding

There are three types of obstacles to understanding.

- (1) Sin-related
- (2) Adab-related
- (3) 'Ilm-related

Sin is an infraction of the sacred law. Ill adab is an impropriety in one's relationship with God. 'Ilm-related breaches are of a methodological nature.

Ta'assub is often translated as fanaticism or zealotry, but in essence it is the association of sacred knowledge to created things, whether it be personalities, a school of thought, positions of prestige, or otherwise. All of that is *ta'assub* and so it doesn't take too much to grasp why it's a barrier to understanding because, very simply, its bad adab. Sacred knowledge is attached only to Allah and His Messenger ﷺ and to

others only by secondary association. So, *ta'assub* is the second type of obstacle because it's a form of arrogance and intellectual blindness, whereas Qur'ānic understanding is predicated upon humility and intellectual integrity. [The Qur'ān frees the mind while ta'assub chains it.](#)

Part IV. On Spiritual Bid'ah and Stagnation

Imām al-Ghazālī mentions a fixation on tajwīd – of all things - as a barrier to understanding, and I think that anyone who's attempted to contemplate the meanings of the Qur'ān while reading or reciting has experienced this fact. Fluency and comprehension are two different skills, and they utilize different parts of the brain. So that's one point, but I think Imām al-Ghazālī is getting at a different point, which I've observed repeatedly on social media before Ramadan — that is the marketing of tajwīd classes as some sort of Ramadan prep. Now, Imām al-Ghazālī says that this is a trap of satan, because he's so hellbent — pun intended — on distancing people from God, that if he can't get you to commit a sin, then he'll try to prevent you from a good deed and if he can't prevent you from a good deed, then he'll bar you from a greater one.

So here, he is initiating a different sort of categorization. The three previously mentioned obstacles are types of actions. In the following section, Imām al-Ghazālī will distinguish the obstacles based on type of doer.

- من حيث الفعل
- من حيث الفاعل

This trap is for the obedient, not the sinful and it's more dangerous because it is the spiritual equivalent of a bid'ah in that a sinner, at least, knows that he's being blocked from goodness, so the door of repentance remains open for him. Whereas the one who is persuaded by satan to put two good deeds at odds with each other, and then to choose the lesser of the two, is completely deluded into thinking he's doing the right thing. That's why Imām al-Ghazālī says that satan gets a good laugh from this form of deception because it's understanding of the Qur'ān, not mere recitation, that liberates the believer from his influence. So, satan will leave you to recite so long as it doesn't lead to the ultimate goal.

This is why sacred knowledge is so key because worship can protect the heart from satanic influence, but without knowledge, the mind is still vulnerable to satanic slyness. [The magnificence of the Qur'ān is that it is both our worship and our knowledge.](#) While there are steps to gaining deep understanding of the Qur'ān, we

need to recognize the ultimate destination in our Qur'ānic journey and not linger at any station along the way. Tajwīd is just one station. Not the final goal.

Further, particularly in our times of widespread ignorance and misguidance, emphasis on any aspect of Qur'ānic study – even memorization – to the exclusion, or at the expense, of understanding and applying the Qur'ān would fall under the same Ghazalian categorization as tajwīd. We certainly need not give satan more entertainment. Social media has provided more than enough.

Part V. Final Advice

No one understood the Qur'ān better than the one upon whom it was revealed ﷺ.

So, the closer we are to his Sunnah, the closer we will be to understanding the Qur'ān.

And Allah - Most High - knows best.

اللهم صل على سيدنا محمد نور الأنوار و سر الأسرار وترىاق الأغيار ومفتاح باب اليسار سيدنا محمد المختار و آله
الأطهار وأصحابه الأخيار عدد نعم الله و افضاله