# Horizons of Spiritual Knowledge

*Question:* The poet Niyazi Mısri states,

With fasting, Prayers, and pilgrimage

It’s not over O ascetic!

Spiritual knowledge is what is needed

in order to be a perfected soul (insan al-kamil),

and thus draws attention to the importance of spiritual knowledge. In addition to fulfilling the essential religious duties, what other ways are there in order to gain spiritual knowledge?

*Answer:*Although different religious responsibilities constitute the foundations of worship, the secret key to opening the door to essentials of faith and worship is the proclamation of faith. In this respect, it is a blessed phrase which holds both the beginning and the end. In other words, the proclamation of faith is both the start and the ultimate point. Without that, neither belief in angels, Divine books, and Prophets, nor belief in the Hereafter and Divine Destiny and Decree bear any meaning. In the same way, acts of worship gain value and meaning by entering through the door they open. As it is related in the famous *hadith* about Gabriel, faith (*iman*) comes first. Then comes Islam, and in the end the believer reaches *ihsan* (perfect goodness, acting and praying as if seeing God, and knowing that He sees you though you do not see Him). Namely, faith is the essence and starting point of religion, its consequence and ultimate fruit is perfect goodness.

**Acts of worship crowned with consciousness**

As for spiritual knowledge, it is a concept to be contemplated within considerations of perfect goodness. For this reason, a person who wishes to reach horizons of spiritual knowledge must have sound faith first, then do good deeds, and then make it into a “culture of conscience” in the long run. The most important way to attain spiritual knowledge is to observe worship in a meticulous and conscious way. If there is no consciousness in worship, it will not be possible to attain spiritual knowledge. And for a person who fails to attain spiritual knowledge, it is not possible to attain love of God and the Prophet in the true sense. It should not be forgotten that since these are concentric depths, one is reached only by passing from the other. When the issue is seen from this perspective, the poem cited at the beginning makes very good sense: *“With fasting, Prayers, and pilgrimage/ It’s not over O ascetic!/ Spiritual knowledge is what is needed/ in order to be a perfected soul.”* Because, for individuals devoid of consciousness of being seen by God (*ihsan*) and the light of spiritual knowledge, acts of worship they do may not amount to anything beyond a repeated formality and practice of culture. They observe the fast because everybody does; they perform the Prayers because their parents did; they go to Hajj because others do. Therefore, since such acts of worship do not go beyond the physical act, one fails to capture their spirit and meaning. In order to express this situation, the Most Noble Messenger of God stated that there are many people who fast but they have no share of the fast except for hunger, and there are many people who get up for the Prayer, but they have no share of the Prayer except for drowsiness.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus, the value of worship depends on the spiritual depth it holds. For example, the Prayer can be offered with such a deep spiritual consciousness that the worshipper feels to be in the Divine presence. This can be to such a degree that even while moving the hands and feet, it is as if he or she is touching the covers of the Divine throne. Such worshippers shake with the idea that any unmannerly move of the hands and legs can be disrespectful in the Divine presence. Nevertheless, God Almighty relates the situation of the Glorious Messenger of God at the Prayers:

“He Who sees you when you rise (in the Prayer, and in readiness to carry out Our commands), as well as your strenuous efforts in prostration among those who prostrate.” (26:218–219).

Believers who cannot attain such a level of worship must at least willfully believe that God Almighty always sees them and try to fulfill every movement during the Prayer with such consciousness. Acts such as keeping hands and feet in the proper position, knowing where to turn one’s gaze at the Prayer, and knowing what considerations to have at prostration are indications that the consciousness of being in Divine presence is reflected in the worshipper’s manners.

In order to attain spiritual knowledge, acts of worship must definitely be crowned with consciousness. For example, a person at the Prayer must be in full consciousness of worship from the beginning to end. As for making the intention for the Prayer, it is not correct to reduce it to uttering certain words ceremonially, *“Here, I intend to perform the Prayer…”* True intention is felt in the worshipper’s heart. That is, erasing everything other than God from one’s entire soul and thoughts, having a deep feeling of being in the Divine presence in complete obedience, and even forgetting one’s own self to the degree of completely being erased. Indeed, one should not even be aware of that self-erasing, and he or she should try to keep up this mood throughout the Prayer. From time to time, one might be exposed to certain negative breezes during the Prayers. But at each time, he should use his willpower effectively in order to overcome them. In addition, one must know the meaning of the verses and prayers recited during the Prayer, be aware of the truths that they should evoke in one’s heart, and keep these truths up consciously until the end of the Prayer. These efforts made for the sake of conscious worship are important and reliable references for spiritual knowledge.

**Wonders worked by keeping a steady course**

In addition to having a serious, resolved, and conscious relationship with God Almighty, keeping a steady course in this regard is of utmost significance in terms of spiritual knowledge. God’s treatment of you will be in proportion with the quality and continuity of your relationship with Him. As the Prophet, who was at the peak of horizons of spiritual knowledge stated, the most loveable of deeds to God is the one constantly observed, even if it is of little amount.[[2]](#footnote-2) It should not be forgotten that what pierces marbles is not drops of water, but the constancy of the drops. Even though water is a liquid, it is this constancy that makes a hole through marble. In this respect, a person’s constant observance of worship in patience, steadfastness, determination, and resolution is very important in terms of opening up to knowledge of God (*marifa*). Therefore, I think that the consideration of Imam Abu Hanifa that the blessed Night of Qadr could be hidden in all nights of the year, reflects a very fine understanding of this fact. God Almighty could have hidden it among any night of the year. Of course, it is laudable to spend the final nights of Ramadan in worship, with an intention to benefit from this blessed night, but that is a different issue.

What really matters is taking every night as such a blessed one to spend in worship, in accordance with the approach of this great imam. With this intention and consideration, one must get up every night and offer the Tahajjud (Late Night) Prayer, at least as an effort of having a blessed light in the grave, and thereby revealing one being true hearted to God Almighty. What value can be found in being a guest of one’s bed, while it is possible to be a guest of God! Ibrahim Haqqi voices this idea beautifully:

O eyes! What is sleep? Come, wake at nights!
Watch comets lighting up the sky at nights
Look and watch those wonders in the sky of the world;
Find your Maker and host Him at nights.

**The mysterious key to all kinds of goodness: Modesty**

As a way to reach spiritual knowledge, it is also possible to follow the steps of spiritual journeying. In the same way, it is possible to take the alternative path of *“impotence, poverty, joyful zeal, and thankfulness”* that Bediüzzaman derived from the Qur’an as a remarkable discipline to reach the horizons of spiritual knowledge. In other words, individuals can attain a state of spiritual alertness and relevant enthusiasm by constantly reminding themselves that they cannot really do anything without the help of God, that they live like kings although nothing really belongs to them in essence, and thus everything that they own comes from the Absolute Owner of everything.

Reading the Qur’an with reflection is also one of the important means on the path to knowledge of God. Setting sail to the special profundities of the Qur’an from the perspectives of great scholars such as Hamdi Yazır of Elmalı, Qadi al-Baydawi, Ebussuud Efendi, or Al-Alusi and feeling the revelation as it is freshly being revealed are factors making a person take wing toward the horizons of spiritual knowledge and helping him to maintain his spiritual alertness.

In order to experience in one’s conscience the opening of mysteries with respect to knowledge of God, it is essential to live in modesty, humility, and self-nullification. As one of great figures of spirituality Yusuf ibn al-Husayn al-Razi expressed, the mysterious key to all kinds of goodness is modesty, and the key to all kinds of evil is arrogance and selfishness. Even if arrogant and selfish people prostrate for a lifetime, they still will not reach the point they expect. Indeed, as decreed in a *hadith qudsi*, greatness absolutely belongs to God Almighty and if someone attempts to compete with Him in this respect, He seizes that person and throws him into Hell.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As this discussion shows, so many means can be tried in terms of attaining to the horizons of spiritual knowledge, as the paths leading to God are as many as the breaths of creatures.

1. Sunan ibn Majah, Siyam, 21; Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Al-Musnad, 2/373 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sahih al-Bukhari, Riqaq, 18; Sahih Muslim, Salatu’l-musafirin, 218 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sahih Muslim, Birr, 136; Sunan Abu Dawud, Libas, 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)