

Thankfulness

by Abdalhaqq Bewley

Praise be to Allah for the blessing of Islam. It is blessing enough. Truly the mere fact of being a Muslim in this darkest of times is in itself a gift beyond price. To be able to remember and invoke the Lord of existence when such a large percentage of humanity is floundering about in the pitch darkness of shirk and unbelief is already in itself a great victory. Shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Habib, may Allah cover him with mercy, used to say, "In this time of ours, if a man goes to sleep having prayed his five prayers for Allah, he has won."

Shaykh Ibn 'Ata'llah says in his Hikam, "It is enough reward for an action that He considered you worthy of performing it." So the sheer fact of being able to say, *la ilaha illa'llah Muhammadun Rasulu'llah* with sincerity and to act according to it - the great gift of guidance - is, on its own, a treasure beyond estimation; and if we add to it our existence itself, and the generous provision with which it is sustained, and the blessing of our families and companions, and the overwhelming beauty of the world and universe which we inhabit, and all the innumerable other blessings with which our lives are unceasingly filled minute by minute, we can only repeat the *ayat* in Allah's Book:

If you try to count up the number of the blessings of Allah, you will never be able to calculate it.

There is only one course open to us and that is to give thanks to Allah for them, even though that thanks itself is a further blessing, for as Allah Himself says,

If you are thankful I will give you increase.

So our giving thanks is itself a means to greater reward.

The question is how can we possibly thank Allah for all this. One answer is that it is quite impossible! One of the people of Allah of the past used to say, "O Allah, You know that I cannot possibly thank you sufficiently for all the gifts You have given me so I ask You to thank Yourself on my behalf!"

This may be the reality of the situation but, *al-hamdu lillah*, Allah has given us the means to thank Him and

moreover in His overwhelming generosity promised to reward us for doing it.

The people of knowledge have said that thankfulness should be expressed in three ways: with the heart, with the tongue and with the limbs.

Thankfulness of the heart consists in actually being consciously aware of the immeasurable gifts and blessings of Allah and in attributing them to Him and no one else. It lies in understanding that existence in all its varied manifestations is a continuous outpouring and overflowing from a compassionate and generous Creator. It is understanding the sixth pillar of Iman, Acknowledgement of the Decree, both its good and its bad, and understanding that, in reality, even its bad is a blessing. The Prophet, *salla'llahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, said, "How marvellous is the affair of the mumin! If good comes to him, he is thankful and Allah gives him increase and if bad comes to him he has *sabr*, acts with patience and fortitude and steadfastness, and Allah rewards him for that." And what is the reward of patience? The companionship of Allah *tabaraka wa ta'ala* Himself, for Allah says: "***Allah is with the steadfast.***"

And what could possibly be better than the companionship of Allah?

So it can be seen from this that thankfulness of the heart is, in fact, directly connected to the way the *mumin* sees and experiences existence. However knowing this and actually experiencing it are two very different matters. The problem is that we have been brought up and educated in a world where a quite opposite view of existence is the norm and, more than that, we have been actively indoctrinated into taking on that world view.

The *kafir* world view - it is worth noting that as well as meaning to reject Islam, the word *kafara* also means to be unthankful - clearly expressed and propagated by Descartes and his followers, and drummed into us from an early age, is that the human being is a mind trapped in a body looking out onto a basically hostile and untrustworthy world outside of himself which he must overpower and control. It is you against the world. If you don't get it, it will get you.

This view of existence was brilliantly portrayed by Cervantes in *Don Quixote*, who goes out into the world in search of conflict ready to take on all comers and if he can't find a human opponent, he has to conjure up adversaries out of windmills and trees. His identity can only find expression in conflict with the other.

This view of existence, which we have been taught as normal, was that formulated by the so-called "Enlightenment" and propagated under the name of liberal individualism. How different it is from the viewpoint of the *mumin* who sees himself not so much as observer but as observed, in the eye of his benevolent Creator, who desires nothing but good for him; everything outside himself is, therefore, rather than something threatening or hostile, simply the means for him to come closer to his Lord.

Another aspect of the *kafir* - ungrateful - view of existence is that, when difficulties or problems occur, the other is always to blame. The embattled identity must be defended at all costs against all comers. The blame for what happens is always outside the self. In the words of the Qur'an, they feel, "Every cry is against them." Existence is wrong - they are right - even in some instances, ironically, to the extent of self-destruction. People who cut off their nose to spite their face. For such a self any gratitude is difficult almost to the point of impossibility and, to the extent to which we see ourselves in this light, or rather darkness, thankfulness of the heart is correspondingly out of reach.

The *mumin*, on the other hand, if he experiences difficulties and problems, does not blame them on anything outside but rather attributes their cause to himself. Since existence is the compassionate outpouring of a benevolent Creator there can be nothing wrong with it. If he finds something a problem, then the source of the problem must lie in his own perception, not the thing itself. There are two extraordinary *ayats* in the Qur'an made all the more so by their proximity to each other which makes this clear. They occur close together in *Surat an-Nisa'* (4). The first is:

Say, "Everything comes from Allah."

The second:

Any good thing that happens to you comes from Allah. Any bad thing that happens to you comes from yourself.

So the *mumin*, if he sees any flaw in existence sees it as lying in himself, not in the other. For the person who experiences existence in this way, thankfulness for what comes to him from Allah is a natural and inevitable extension of his state.

There is a story which was told to us by Sidi Salih, may Allah have mercy on him, a Darqawi shaykh of the Middle Atlas in Morocco, which exemplifies these two ways of viewing existence very well.

Some *fuqara'* asked their shaykh to explain to them the difference between false knowledge and true knowledge. He said to them that rather than tell them about it he would demonstrate it to them so that they would really understand it. He told them that two men were shortly coming to visit him, one a highly respected scholar from Fes with extensive knowledge of different tafsirs of the Qur'an, an acknowledged authority on hadith and a mine of information regarding the details of fiqh, the other an imam from the mountains who had recently joined the tariqa. He said that when the two men arrived and came into the *zawiyya* and greeted the *fuqara*, they were not to answer them.

The first to arrive was the renowned scholar. He came in, stood inside entrance, and loudly and deliberately pronounced the greeting, '*Assalamu 'alaykum!*' -- No reply. The *fuqara'* continued talking among themselves. A second time the scholar called the greeting, this time a little irritably. Again no reply. Once more the scholar, now quite angry, almost shouted the greeting, by doing so completely belying its meaning. Upon receiving no reply a third time, he burst out angrily, "What is wrong with you people? Are you Muslims or not? Don't you know that the *Shari'ah* says you should always respond to someone who greets you. I thought your shaykh was a man of knowledge who taught his followers the *deen* but if you are any example to go by...! Your behaviour is only worthy of animals!" Upon this, the shaykh appeared, warmly greeted the scholar, accompanied the disgruntled man to his quarters and mollified him with courtesy and hospitality.

Soon after this the *imam* arrived, entered the *zawiyya* and seeing the *fuqara'* sitting in one corner, started across towards them, pronouncing the greeting as he did so with eagerness and warmth: '*Assalamu 'alaykum!*' No reply. The assembled *fuqara'* paid no attention to him, carrying on talking among themselves. A second time the imam greeted them, this time a little hesitantly. Again there was no reply. Once more he greeted them,

this time in quiet almost broken tones and again they ignored him completely. "O my brothers," he said almost in tears, "what have I done to offend you? Please tell me what it is, so that I can out it right and become worthy of your companionship."

At this point the shaykh appeared again and explained the situation to the Imam, who immediately thanked and praised Allah and joined the fuqara' who now embraced him warmly.

Then the shaykh turned to the *fuqara'* and addressed them, saying, "Do you now understand the difference between false knowledge and true knowledge?"

This is just a little about thankfulness of the heart, but the important thing to realize is that without it any outward expression of thanks can never be more than just that, a form devoid of any meaning whatsoever, a stillborn child. It is the essential secret ingredient.

In connection with this it is vital to grasp that good qualities, such as thankfulness, cannot be acquired, they must be uncovered in the being. *Ash-Shakur*, the Thankful, is one of the names of Allah, meaning, in His case, the One who rewards good actions with a reward out of all proportion to their worth. Human thankfulness is a faint reflection of this divine quality when it is uncovered in the human heart.

These qualities can be desired and striven for but never imposed by will. The result of trying to impose good character by force of will is that awful niceness adopted by Christians in the name of virtue - and, unfortunately, increasingly by Muslims under the influence of the same false concepts. The smile concealing a naked blade. Total inauthenticity. Good qualities can only be attained by understanding and rejecting the false view of existence that has been thrust upon us and by purifying the heart of those negative characteristics that stand in the way. And success is only by the power and mercy of Allah.

This being understood, it is clear that thankfulness, when its reality exists in the heart, must inevitably be expressed outwardly in the two ways mentioned previously, thankfulness of the tongue and thankfulness of the limbs.

It is with our tongues that we give clear expression to what is in our hearts, and genuine thankfulness to Allah

tabaraka wa ta'ala will automatically appear on our tongues. Its first expression is to directly thank Allah for His gifts to us - the gift of food, the gift of good health, all the blessings of life we daily receive. Our response to these things will be to directly thank the One to whom we owe them and the words, *al-hamdu lillah wa shukru lillah* will never be far from our tongues. But thanks with the tongue goes beyond this simple acknowledgement of blessing.

Thankfulness brings with it the desire to please the One from whom a gift has come and so part of thanking Allah with our tongues is to use them in a way that we know is pleasing to Him, such as learning and recitation of His own words in the Qur'an and much *dhikrullah*. Connected with this is the avoidance of those types of speech that are displeasing to Him such as profanities and idle gossip. A further aspect of thankfulness is the desire to tell others about the qualities and generosity of your benefactor and so the thankful tongue will be eager to talk about Allah and to teach others all it knows about Allah and also about His Messenger, for it is only through the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, that we have access to Allah and knowledge and experience of His qualities and attributes.

The essence of thankfulness of the limbs is in the example of the Prophet, *salla'llahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, who, upon being asked why he stood at night in prayer so that his feet became swollen, when all his past and future wrong actions had been forgiveness, replied, "Should I not be a thankful slave?" It is clear from this that thankfulness entails wearing out the body in the service of and submission to Allah. In practical terms this means first and foremost obedience to all the commands of Allah and avoidance of what He has prohibited and following the Sunna of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, and treading in the footsteps of his Companions, may Allah be pleased with all of them. They all wore themselves out in their scrupulous taking on of Allah's *deen* as its parameters become clear to them and in their implacable struggle to see it established in the world.

We are once more in a situation which is very similar to theirs in that there is now nowhere on the surface of the earth where the reality of Islam - that total life practice which the Prophet, *salla'llahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, transmitted to us from His Lord and which he and his Companions lived and died to establish - still exists.

Therefore our thankfulness to Allah *tabaraka wa ta'ala* for the greatest of His blessings that He has given us, that of guiding us to Islam, can only be expressed in our taking on to the utmost, the job of establishing Allah's *deen* in its totality in the world once more. This will undoubtedly mean a fight. There is no changing the *sunna* of Allah. Allah says: "***Fight them until the deen is purely Allah's.***" And the Prophet, *salla llahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, made it quite clear that the obligation of *Jihad* - fighting to establish and preserve Allah's *deen* - would go on until the Last Day.

At this point I should make clear the differences between this fight of the Muslims and the fight of the embattled *kafir* soul I spoke of earlier. The *kafir* confronted by his "hostile" world, fights to preserve his own identity or its extension in his family or nation or people. The enemy, out there, is seen as a personal threat. He is entrapped in his own self limiting view of existence. By definition the Muslim is forbidden to fight for himself. In fact, if anything, he is fighting to lose his identity. His enemy is not the men confronting him but the resistance to the Truth they represent. If they submit to the Truth they immediately cease to be his enemies and become his brothers. His fight is not of this world but beyond it.

I ask Allah *ta'ala* to fill our hearts with the reality of thankfulness to Him accompanied by the words and actions that flow from it.

O Allah assist us in remembering You and thanking You and worshipping You in the best way!