



# How to be a Mindful Muslim: An Exercise in Islamic Meditation

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## Introduction

*In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful*

Modern life involves a daily bustle of noise, distraction, and information overload. Our senses are constantly stimulated from every direction to the point that a simple moment of quiet stillness seems impossible for some of us. This continuous agitation hinders us from getting the most out of each moment, subtracting from the quality of our prayers and our ability to remember Allah.

We all know that we need more presence in prayer, more control over our wandering minds and desires. But what exactly can we do achieve this? How can we become more mindful in all aspects of our lives, spiritual and temporal? That is where the practice of *exercising mindfulness*, in the Islamic context of *muraqabah*, can help train our minds to become more disciplined and can thereby enhance our regular worship and daily activities.

This article examines the virtues of *mindfulness* and *silence* in the Islamic tradition. It properly conceptualizes meditation in Islam and presents a practical exercise for daily mindfulness that can help us cultivate *muraqabah* with Allah and our inner self.

## The Virtue of Mindfulness

Mindfulness linguistically is defined as “the quality or state of being conscious or aware of something,” and more specifically, “A mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique.”<sup>1</sup> In the context of modern psychology, mindfulness is “a tool we can use to examine conceptual frameworks.”<sup>2</sup> By watching closely how we think and

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<sup>1</sup> “Mindfulness,” Oxford English Dictionary: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mindfulness>.

<sup>2</sup> Smalley, Susan L, and Diana Winston. *Fully Present: The Science, Art, and Practice of Mindfulness*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Lifelong, 2010), 10.

feel, we gain the ability to alter our conceptual frameworks, or thought patterns, for our own benefit. When we are in a state of unmindfulness, we react to thoughts and emotions in knee-jerk fashion and let them lead us wherever they wish. By contrast, cultivating a state of mindfulness gives us the ability to follow or not follow our thoughts as we choose.

Put differently, mindfulness is a form of *metacognition* (“awareness of one’s awareness”), a self-awareness of what is really going on inside one’s mind and heart. It is a phenomenon that has attracted the attention of psychologists and health professionals, resulting in hundreds of scientific papers, studies, and books on mindfulness every year. Cultivating mindfulness, even in a non-religious or neutral context, has been demonstrated to provide measurable health and wellness benefits. According to the American Psychological Association, numerous peer-reviewed studies show that mindfulness practices (such as relaxation or meditation) help to reduce stress, boost memory, enhance focus and concentration, decrease emotional reactivity, and improve personal relationships. Mindfulness practices also promote empathy and compassion and are effectively used in clinical cognitive therapy.<sup>3</sup> The burgeoning field of mindfulness, in science and spiritual practice, is an exciting development that deserves critical investigation.

In the Islamic context, mindfulness is the virtue of *muraqabah*, a word which is derived from the root meaning “to watch, observe, regard attentively.”<sup>4</sup> Already we can see the close etymological and linguistic proximity between “mindfulness” and *muraqabah*. As a technical spiritual term, it is defined as “the constant knowledge of the servant and conviction in the supervision of the Truth, glory be to Him, over one’s outward and inward states.”<sup>5</sup> That is, a Muslim in a state of *muraqabah* is in continuous full knowledge that Allah is Aware of him or her, inwardly and outwardly. It is a complete state of vigilant self-awareness in one’s relationship with Allah in heart, mind, and body. The basis of *muraqabah* is our knowledge that

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<sup>3</sup> “What are the benefits of mindfulness,” American Psychological Association: <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/07-08/ce-corner.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> Wehr, Hans, and J M. Cowan. *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic: (Arabic-English)*. (Ithaca, N.Y: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 408.

<sup>5</sup> al-Tuwayjirī, Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm. *Mawsū’at Fiqh Al-Qulūb*. (‘Ammān: Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawlīyah, 2006), 2:1997.

Allah is always watching us at all times and, as a consequence, we develop greater attention and care for our own actions, thoughts, feelings, and inner states of being. As Allah said, “Remember that God knows what is in your souls, so be mindful of Him.”<sup>6</sup>

Ibn Al-Qayyim and Al-Ghazali both have chapters in their books about the merits and realities of *muraqabah*.<sup>7</sup> And it is not simply a recommended character trait, but rather it is the realization of *the supreme character trait*, spiritual excellence (*al-ihsan*). As the Prophet ﷺ defined in the famous *hadith* of Gabriel, spiritual excellence “is to worship Allah as if you see Him, for if you do not see Him, He certainly sees you.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, spiritual excellence is to be completely aware and mindful of Allah at all times—the very peak of faith. According to Sheikh Al-Tuwayjiri,

*Spiritual excellence is the essence of faith, its spirit, and its perfection by perfecting presence (al-hudur) with Allah Almighty, and mindfulness of Him (muraqabatihi), encompassing fear of Him, love of Him, knowledge of Him, turning to Him, and sincerity to Him.*<sup>9</sup>

The fruit of *muraqabah*, aside from the reward of eternal Paradise in the Hereafter, is a state of tranquil calm leading to contentment in this life, “The means leading to stillness (*al-sakinah*) are produced by the servant’s acquisition of *muraqabah* for his Lord, glorious and exalted is He, to the point that it is as if he can see Him.” All positive spiritual and mental states derive from it, “for *muraqabah* is the foundation of all the deeds of the heart.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:235; Abdel Haleem, M. A. *The Qur’an: English translation and parallel Arabic text*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 39.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr. *Madārij Al-Sālikīn Bayna Manāzil Īyāka Na’budu Wa Īyāka Nasta’in*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 1996), 2:64-66; Ghazzālī, Abū Ḥāmid. *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm Al-Dīn*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma’rifah, 1980), 4:397-398.

<sup>8</sup> al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 1:19 #50.

<sup>9</sup> al-Tuwayjiri, *Mawsū’at Fiqh Al-Qulūb*, 1:785.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 2:1329.

*Muraqabah* is actually the fulfillment of worshiping Allah according to a proper understanding of the beautiful names that convey His perfect knowledge. Ibn Al-Qayyim concludes his chapter on *muraqabah*, writing,

*Muraqabah is to be devoted to the names of the Watcher (Al-Raqib), the Guardian (Al-Hafith), the Knowing (Al-'Alim), the Hearing (Al-Sami'), the Seeing (Al-Basir). Thus, whoever understands these names and is devoted to fulfilling them will acquire muraqabah.*<sup>11</sup>

*Muraqabah* necessarily includes mindfulness of one's own intentions, thoughts, emotions, and other inner states. Al-Murta'ish said, "*Muraqabah* is observation of one's innermost being (*al-sirr*), to be aware of the hidden with every moment and utterance."<sup>12</sup> In every word we speak and in every thought that we choose to pursue, we should be aware of our thought patterns and emotional states in order to react to our inner experiences in the best manner. As put by Ibn al-Qayyim, maintenance of inward *muraqabah* is "by guarding thoughts, intentions, and inward movements... This is the reality of the pure heart (*al-qalb al-salim*), by which no one is saved but by coming to Allah with it. This itself is the reality of the inner refinement (*tajrid*) of the righteous, the devoted, and the God-conscious. Every inner refinement besides this is deficient."<sup>13</sup>

To summarize, according to Sheikh 'Abd al-Qadr al-Jilani, *muraqabah* is realized in four aspects:

1. Knowledge of Allah Almighty.
2. Knowledge of the enemy of Allah, Iblis (Satan).
3. Knowledge of your soul's capacity to suggest evil.
4. Knowledge of deeds to be done for the sake of Allah.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Madārij Al-Sālikīn*, 2:66.

<sup>12</sup> al-Qushayrī, 'Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin. *Al-Risālah Al-Qushayrīyah*. (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1995), 1:331.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Madārij Al-Sālikīn*, 2:68.

<sup>14</sup> al-Jīlānī, 'Abd al-Qādir. *Al-Ghanīyah Li-Ṭālibī Ṭarīq Al-Haqq*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 1997), 2:309-310.

It is this third aspect—awareness of one’s own heart and mind—that exercising mindfulness within an Islamic framework can help us achieve, “To know which things characterize (the self), what it wants, what it calls to, and what it commands.”<sup>15</sup> This type of exercise is a method of training the mind to identify the way thoughts and feelings behave inside us, with the aim of exerting more control over them and thereby enriching our mental and spiritual well-being.

Non-religious or neutral mindfulness practices advocated by therapeutic psychologists focus on this third aspect, without grounding it in a theological worldview, to give it a wider appeal to the diversity of their patient populations and to pluralistic society at large. Sometimes these are practices that originated in Buddhist or Hindu traditions but have been secularized from their religious ontological premises. This non-religious approach, by itself, still produces health and wellness benefits in people’s lives. It will sharpen the mind, no doubt, but the mind is a tool that can be used for good and evil. Neutral mindfulness practices can be potentially utilized for evil by people ungrounded in an ethical worldview. Mental clarity gained from mindfulness may be used by a predator aiming to deceive or harm others. Of course, such would be an abuse of mindfulness; all the more reason to approach the topic critically according to Islam’s guidance.

For Muslims, mindfulness of the inner life is simply one aspect—albeit a critical and often neglected one—within the greater framework of *muraqabah*. Altogether, Islamic mindfulness involves a comprehensive awareness of the basics of Islamic creed, law, ethics, and of one’s own subtle psychological make-up.

To begin putting these insights into practice, we still need know why it is so important to learn to enjoy *simply being present in silence*, without distraction or noise from the world, our own words, or our inner monologues.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 2:213.

## The Virtue of Silence and Seclusion

The famous proverb says, “Silence is golden.”<sup>16</sup> The righteous predecessors understood that silence (*al-samt*) was the preferred default state of being, according to the saying of the Prophet ﷺ, “Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him speak goodness or remain silent.”<sup>17</sup> Whatever words come out of our mouth should be true and beneficial; otherwise we should remain quiet. If we have nothing good to say, we should not say anything at all. Certainly, there are times when we definitely should speak up, to support a good cause or to oppose an evil deed. The Prophet ﷺ said, “May Allah have mercy on a person who spoke rightly and was rewarded, or who was quiet and remained safe.”<sup>18</sup> Speech that is neutral, neither benefitting nor harming, is still permissible, but for spiritual and moral reasons it is better to become accustomed to silence.

Silence has an important effect on our hearts and character, because a habit of bad or frivolous speech results in an impure heart. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The faith of a servant is not upright until his heart is upright, and his heart is not upright until his tongue is upright.”<sup>19</sup> The heart and tongue are inextricably linked, so to guard our speech is to also guard our hearts. Towards this end, learning to not just tolerate, but enjoy, silence is an aspect of positive character development. The Prophet ﷺ said to Abu Dharr (ra), “You must have good character and observe long periods of silence (*tuli al-samt*). By the one in whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, no one can behave with deeds more beloved to Allah than these two.”<sup>20</sup> Silence is also a means to help us defeat the devil and his satanic whisperings which come in the form of evil thoughts. The Prophet ﷺ said, “You must observe long periods of silence, for it will drive away Satan and help you in the

<sup>16</sup> Carlyle, Thomas. *Sartor Resartus*. (London: Electric Book Co, 2001), 262.

<sup>17</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:100 #6475.

<sup>18</sup> al-Bayhaqī, Ahmad ibn al-Ḥusayn. *Shu'ab Al-Īmān*. (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Rushd lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī', 2003), 7:17 #4585; declared fair (*hasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Jāmi' Al-Ṣaḡhūr Wa Ziyādatihi* ([Dimashq]: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1969), 1:657 #3492.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal, Ahmad. *Musnad Al-Imām Ahmad Ibn Hanbal*. (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 20:343 #13048; declared fair (*hasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Targhīb Wal-Tarhīb* (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 2000), 2:680 #2554.

<sup>20</sup> al-Ṭabarānī, Sulaymān ibn Ahmad. *Al-Mu'jam Al-Awsaṭ*. (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥaramayn, 1995), 7:140 #7103; declared good (*jayyid*) by Al-Mundhiri in *Al-Targhīb Wal-Tarhīb* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1996), 3:274 #4022.



matter of your religion.”<sup>21</sup> And Abu Sa’eed Al-Khudri (ra) said, “You must be silent except in the truth, for by it you will defeat Satan.”<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, silent reflection is the sign of a wise person, with the Prophet ﷺ as the leading example. Simak said to Jabir ibn Samrah (ra), “Have you sat with the Messenger of Allah ﷺ?” Jabir said, “Yes, he would observe silence for long periods of time and laugh little.”<sup>23</sup> Abu al-Darda’ (ra) said, “Silence is a form of wisdom, yet few people practice it.” Wahb ibn Munabbih said, “The doctors agreed that the head of medicine is diet, and the wise ones agreed that the head of wisdom is silence.”<sup>24</sup> Silence of this nature is a skill to be acquired, as Abu al-Dhayyal said, “Learn to be silent.”<sup>25</sup> Developing a talent and love for silence is likewise an integral part of enhancing our prayers and acts of worship. Sufyan al-Thawri said, “It is said that observing long periods of silence is the key to worship.”<sup>26</sup> Our practice of silent mindfulness will necessarily lead to the enhancement of our prayers and other acts of worship.

Silence is related to *muraqabah* in that observing silence in seclusion for a regular period of time cultivates *presence*, the mind’s quiet awareness of here and now. Abu Bakr al-Farisi was asked about the silence of one’s innermost being (*samt al-sirr*) and he said, “It is to abandon preoccupation with the past and the future.”<sup>27</sup> When in silent reflection or mindfulness exercise, we have time to simply be *present in the moment* without worrying about what is past or future or elsewhere in creation. It is an opportunity to nourish presence before Allah (*al-hudur*), the same type of presence that we are required to have in ritual prayer. Certainly there is an appropriate time to think about the past or the future—to learn from our mistakes, to plan action, to live daily life, to reflect on our fate. The point of

<sup>21</sup> al-Bayhaqī, *Shu’ab Al-Īmān*, 7:21 #4592; declared good (*jayyid*) by Al-‘Ajlūnī in *Kashf Al-Khafā’ Wa Muzīl Al-Ilbās* (al-Qāhirah: Maktabat al-Qudsī, 1932), 2:258 #25251.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Abī Dunyā, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad. *Kitāb Al-Ṣamt Wa Ādāb Al-Lisān*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1990), 1:85 #91.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal, Aḥmad. *Musnad Al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 34:405 #20809; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Ibn Taymiyyah in *Al-Jawāb Al-Ṣaḥīḥ Li-Man Baddala Dīn Al-Masīḥ* (al-Riyāḍ: Dār al-‘Āshimāh, 1999), 5:474.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Abī Dunyā, *Kitāb Al-Ṣamt Wa Ādāb Al-Lisān*, 1:278 #619.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, Yūsuf ibn ‘Abd Allāh. *Jāmi’ Bayān Al-‘Ilm Wa-Faḍlih*. (al-Dammām: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1994), 1:552 #920.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Abī Dunyā, *Kitāb Al-Ṣamt Wa Ādāb Al-Lisān*, 1:222 #433.

<sup>27</sup> *Al-Risālah Al-Qushayrīyah*, 1:247.

learning to be present in silence is to limit our thoughts on the past or future only to what is necessary and beneficial.

Seclusion for worship is the close companion of silence; they go hand-in-hand. Those who make a regular habit of quietly worshiping and remembering Allah alone are among the most rewarded in the Hereafter. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Those in seclusion (*al-mufarridun*) have raced ahead.” They said, “O Messenger of Allah, who are those in seclusion?” The Prophet said, “They are men and women who remember Allah often.”<sup>28</sup> Al-Munawi explains this *hadith*, saying, “Those in seclusion are those who seek solitude and they withdraw from people to be alone and free to worship, as if one sets himself apart to be devoted to Allah.”<sup>29</sup> Seclusion, properly practiced, is ultimately a cure for bad feelings in the heart, as Ibn al-Qayyim said, “In the heart are disorders that cannot be remedied but by responding to Allah, in it is a desolate feeling that cannot be removed but by intimacy with Him in solitude (*khalwah*).”<sup>30</sup>

Imagine for a moment how much better our life situation would be if we could sit silently alone in our room, *content with simply being in front of Allah*. No need for smartphones, or games, or television, or electronics, or addictions, or distractions. Would you be calmer, happier, and more satisfied? Blaise Pascal, the French theologian and scientist, remarked,

*I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber. A man who has enough to live on, if he knew how to stay with pleasure at home, would not leave it to go to sea or to besiege a town.*<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Muslim, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. ([Bayrūt]: Dār Ihyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyah, 1955), 4:2062 #2676.

<sup>29</sup> al-Munāwī, ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf ibn Tāj, and Jalāl al-Dīn Suyūṭī. *Fayḍ Al-Qadīr; Sharḥ Al-Jāmi‘ Al-Ṣaghīr*. (Miṣr [Cairo]: al-Maktabah al-Tijārīyah al-Kubrā, 1938), 4:92 #4651.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr. *Madārij Al-Sālikīn Bayna Manāzil Īyāka Na’budu Wa Īyāka Nasta’in*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 1996), 3:156.

<sup>31</sup> Pascal, Blaise. *Pensees*. (South Bend: Infomotions, Inc, 2000), 27 #139.

Indeed, were every person disciplined enough to enjoy the inner life without an incessant desire for external stimulation, the world would be a much better place for us all.

Therefore, how can we learn to enjoy silence and thereby increase our mindfulness of Allah and our own inner states of being? Islam has a profound, and perhaps forgotten, tradition of meditation designed to help us do so.

## Meditation in Islam

Meditation is defined as “continued or extended thought, reflection... devout religious contemplation or spiritual introspection,” being derived from the Latin *meditatio* (“thinking over”).<sup>32</sup> As a general term, meditation linguistically refers to any and all deliberate and directed mental activities. In therapeutic or spiritual practice, different kinds of meditation have been scientifically proven to achieve mindfulness and its associated wellness in everyday life. According to the *Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology*, “Meditation, regardless of the particular form, is engaged to lead to post-meditative mindfulness.”<sup>33</sup> Meditation can be done in many ways and for many purposes. For some, it is simply a means of calming relaxation and stress relief, a way of slowing down their thoughts. Others meditate by intensely contemplating an idea or focusing their attention on God or something else.

Some Muslims are understandably hesitant or skeptical about the word “meditation,” because there are so many different types of meditation, some of which are specifically associated with religious beliefs and practices that contradict Islam. The fact of the matter, however, is that our righteous predecessors practiced several forms of meditation, in the purely linguistic sense of the word, and through these meditations they achieved advanced spiritual states and enhanced their acts of worship, prayer, and remembrance. The key to reviving their practices is to

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<sup>32</sup> “Meditation,” Dictionary.com: <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/meditation>.

<sup>33</sup> Langer, Ellen. “Mindfulness.” *The Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology*, edited by Shane J. Lopez, Wiley, 1st edition, 2009.

examine closely how they conceptualized meditation and to emulate their practices within the framework of Islamic creed, worship, ethics, and etiquette. We can even incorporate modern insights from psychology and mindfulness practitioners as long as we remain grounded in Islamic tradition, as the Prophet ﷺ said, “Wisdom is the lost property of the believer, so wherever he finds it then he has a right to it.”<sup>34</sup>

Ritual prayer (*salah*) in modern times has been enhanced and aided by audio equipment, while in the classical period the science of architecture was utilized to enhance and aid the acoustics of reciting the Quran. None of these are blameworthy religious innovations (*bid'ah*) because they do nothing to alter Islamic creed, worship, or ethics. In a similar manner, modern insights into mindfulness, and specifically mindfulness exercises, can be helpful tools to enhance prayer and spirituality.

Ibn Al-Qayyim has provided one of the best and most concise explanations of the many meanings of “meditation” in Islam. He states that an integral part of our preparation for the Hereafter is by “reflecting (*tafakkur*), remembering (*tadhakkur*), examining (*nathr*), meditating (*ta'amul*), contemplating (*i'tibar*), deliberating (*tadabbur*), and pondering (*istibsar*).” Each of these words represents different shades of mental activity that can be considered forms of meditation. There is considerable overlap in meaning among all of them, but there are subtle differences as well. Ibn Al-Qayyim continues:

*It is called 'reflection' because in that is the utilization of thought and its procurement during it. It is called 'remembrance' because it is the fetching of knowledge which must be considered after being distracted or absent from it... It is called 'meditation' because it is repeatedly examining again and again until it becomes evident and uncovered in one's heart. It is called 'contemplation'—taking lessons—because one takes a lesson from it to apply elsewhere... It is called 'deliberation'*

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<sup>34</sup> al-Tirmidhī, Muḥammad ibn 'Īsá. *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islāmī, 1998), 4:348 #2687; declared to have supporting evidence (*shawāhid*) by Ibn Al-Qayyim in *Miftāḥ Dār Al-Sa'ādah Wa Manshūr Wilāyat Al-'Ilm Wal-Idārah* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 2002), 1:75.

*because it is examining the conclusion of matters, their endings and consequences, and deliberating on them.*<sup>35</sup>

All of these types of Islamic meditation involve some form of remembering or awareness of Allah, the purpose of which is to purify the heart of evil feelings and the mind from evil thoughts. Every human soul is like a mirror that is polished by mindfulness or tarnished by unmindfulness. Al-Ghazali writes:

*The heart is in the position of a mirror that is surrounded by influential matters and these traits proceed to the heart. As for praiseworthy traits that we have mentioned, they will polish the mirror of the heart and increase it in brilliance, light, and radiance until the clarity of truth shines from within it and the reality of the matter sought in religion is unveiled.*<sup>36</sup>

By cultivating the remembrance and *muraqabah* of Allah through various mental exercises and activities, we effectively “polish” our hearts and unveil the virtuous nature of the soul (*al-nafs al-rabbaniyyah*), which is the pure spiritual state that Allah has created us to dwell in.<sup>37</sup> Abu al-Darda (ra) said, “Verily, everything has a polish and the polish of the heart is the remembrance of Allah Almighty.”<sup>38</sup> And Ibn al-Qayyim writes,

*The heart is tarnished by two matters: unmindfulness (al-ghaflah) and sin. And it is polished by two matters: seeking forgiveness and the remembrance of Allah.*<sup>39</sup>

For example, reflecting upon the blessings of Allah is an excellent act of worship and mental activity (meditation) that produces gratitude in the heart and expels ingratitude from it. Umar ibn Abdul Aziz said, “Speaking in remembrance of Allah Almighty is good, and thinking about the blessings of Allah is the best act of

<sup>35</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Miftāḥ Dār Al-Sa’ādah*, 1:182.

<sup>36</sup> al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm Al-Dīn*, 3:12

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 3:11.

<sup>38</sup> al-Bayhaqī, *Shu’ab Al-Īmān*, 2:63 #520.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, Muḥammad. *Al-Wābil Al-Ṣayyib Min Al-Kalim Al-Tayyib*. (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1999), 1:40.

worship.”<sup>40</sup> Remembering Allah with outward words is a virtue, to be sure, but thinking of our blessings is even better because it necessarily occurs inwardly; we are not always fully mindful of the audible words we speak, even when they are good words.

In addition, thinking about the Hereafter in a balanced and informed manner ought to lead to positive psychological outcomes, contentment with one’s place in the world and rejection of materialism. Abu Sulaiman said,

*Thought upon the world is a veil over the Hereafter and a punishment for people. Thought upon the Hereafter produces wisdom and life in the heart. Whoever looks to the world as his protector will come to accept its delusions.*<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, thinking about the world and its displeasures more often than is necessary will lead to unhappiness and an impure heart.

A person cannot think about Allah and the world at the same time; it is one or the other. Too much unnecessary thought upon the world weakens our overall mindfulness, particularly by diminishing the hope in Allah that encourages us to do good deeds and the fear of Allah that compels us to avoid sins. Al-Nasrabadhi said, “Hope motivates you to acts of obedience and fear distances you from acts of disobedience, and *muraqabah* leads to pathways of truth.”<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, we should make a quiet time for reflection upon Allah and the Hereafter every day, as a means of increasing our mindfulness of His presence, gratitude for His many favors, and to prepare for the life to come.

Reading the Quran itself, which has been named “the Remembrance” (*Al-Dhikr*), is one of the most powerful and rewarding forms of meditation, as Allah said, “This

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<sup>40</sup> Ibn Kathīr, Ismā’īl ibn ‘Umar. *Tafsīr Al-Qurān Al-‘Azīm*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 1998), 2:162 verse 3:190.

<sup>41</sup> Abū Nu‘aym, Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Iṣbahānī. *Ḥilyat Al-Awliyā’ Wa Ṭabaqāt Al-Aṣfiyā’*. (Miṣr: Maṭba‘at al-Sa’ādah, 1974), 9:278.

<sup>42</sup> al-Qushayrī, *Al-Risālah Al-Qushayrīyah*, 1:331.

is a blessed Scripture, which We have sent down to you, so that people may think about its messages and those with understanding take heed.”<sup>43</sup>

Al-Ghazali recommends for us to engage in four distinct daily spiritual practices (*al-watha'if al-arba'ah*): supplication (*dua'*), remembrance (*dhikr*), recitation of the Quran (*qira'at*), and contemplation (*fikr*).<sup>44</sup> The variety in these acts of worship will prevent a worshiper from becoming too bored with a single act, while also nourishing the heart and mind in different and complementary ways. Just as a balanced diet relies upon different food groups for nutrition, a balanced spiritual life depends upon different acts of worship and meditations for complete sustenance.

One of the spiritual practices described by Al-Ghazali is quite similar to modern mindfulness practices, but within an Islamic theological worldview. For him it was simply another form of *dhikr*. The worshiper should sit in seclusion, empty their heart of all concerns, and “not scatter his thoughts with the recitation of the Quran, nor pondering over its explanation, nor with books of *hadith*, nor anything else; rather, he strives to let no thought enter his mind besides Allah the Exalted.” The worshiper does so to instill “presence of the heart” until “his heart is diligent in remembrance.” Consequently, Al-Ghazali continues:

*If his intentions are true, his concerns are in order, and his diligence is improved, then he will not gravitate to his base desires and will not be preoccupied with idle thoughts related to the world. The reality of the Truth will shine in his heart.*<sup>45</sup>

Each form of Islamic meditation has its place and function, and often they overlap and blend together. For the purposes of attaining mindful self-awareness, as discussed, we are interested in the act of inward *ta'amul*, to continuously examine and observe our inner life in silent seclusion until the realities of our mental and emotional states (“conceptual frameworks”) become clear to us. This is a specific technique for cultivating awareness of our inner states, to notice our thoughts

<sup>43</sup> Sūrat Ṣād 38:29; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 456.

<sup>44</sup> al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm Al-Dīn*, 1:337.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:19.

bubbling to the surface at their very inception rather than being taken away on a train of thought before we even know what happened.

To become more mindful of what is happening within us, we need to understand how our thoughts progress through stages into actions. According to Al-Suyuti, the first stage of a thought is *al-hajis*, a sudden and fleeting thought that comes and goes before one can consider it. We may not even notice it was there at all. The second stage is *al-khatir*, a thought that we give attention and consideration. At this stage we have a choice to continue down this train of thought or to ignore it. The third stage is *hadith al-nafs*, our inner dialogue or “talking of the self” as we pursue the thought and seriously consider acting upon it. The final stages are *al-ham* and *al-‘azm*, the decision and determination to put the thought into action.<sup>46</sup> Of course, when thoughts are good, we can and should pursue them. The trouble comes from bad thoughts. How do we learn to ignore them, especially when they feel at times so powerful and overwhelming?

Mindfulness exercise in this context is not about suppressing thoughts, but rather simply becoming aware of them and learning to let them pass. As we become more cognizant of our thoughts, we begin to perceive a distance between ourselves and our thoughts. We disassociate and disidentify ourselves from our thoughts; our involuntary thoughts are just “happenings” (*hadath*) and do not necessarily reflect who we are. Initial thoughts (*al-hajis*) can originate involuntarily from the self, as Allah said, “We created man—We know what his soul whispers to him.”<sup>47</sup> Thoughts also originate from an external source, the whisperings (*al-waswasah*) of a devil or an angel. The Prophet ﷺ said:

*Verily, Satan has influence with the son of Adam and the angel has influence. As for the influence of Satan, he promises evil and denies the truth. As for the influence of the angel, he promises goodness and affirms the truth. Whoever finds this goodness, let him know that it is*

<sup>46</sup> al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn. *Al-Ashbah Wal-Naza'ir Fi Qawa'id Wa Furu' Fiqh Al-Shafi'iyah*. (Bayrūt: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1990), 1:33.

<sup>47</sup> Sūrat Qāf 50:16; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 520.



*from Allah and let him praise Allah. Whoever finds something else, let him seek refuge in Allah from the accursed Satan.*<sup>48</sup>

Then the Prophet ﷺ recited the verse, “Satan threatens you with the prospect of poverty and commands you to do foul deeds; God promises you His forgiveness and abundance.”<sup>49</sup> No matter where thoughts originate, involuntarily from the subconscious self or externally from angelic or satanic suggestions, mindfulness teaches us to better perceive the zone between us and thoughts as they happen and before they progress into voluntary, conscious thoughts.

We are not bad people for having bad thoughts; we all have bad thoughts no matter how righteous we are. It is harmful and counterproductive to burden ourselves with guilt because we experience bad thoughts. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, Allah has pardoned my nation for their bad thoughts within themselves as long as they do not speak of them or act upon them.”<sup>50</sup> We are only held accountable for our thoughts if we consciously choose to act upon them. By training ourselves to become more aware of thoughts, this gives us some space between ourselves and our thoughts so that we have time to react properly, to ignore what is bad and to pursue what is good.

Consider bad thoughts from Satan or your ego as if they were a dog who is ultimately under the control of Allah. Ibn Taymiyyah said, “If the shepherd’s dog troubles you, do not busy yourself warring and defending against it. You must appeal to the shepherd to direct the dog away from you.”<sup>51</sup> Do not try to combat evil thoughts by engaging them or trying to suppress them. Instead, turn your attention back to mindfulness and remembrance, as Allah said, “If Satan should prompt you to do something, seek refuge with God.”<sup>52</sup> This is why exerting great effort to suppress a bad thought—and thereby giving it more attention than it deserves—often ends up backfiring and making things worse. We end up talking to

<sup>48</sup> al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 5:69 #2988; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Aḥmad Shākir in *’Umdat Al-Taḥfīr ’an Ibn Kathīr* (Miṣr: Dār al-Wafā’, 2005), 1:325 verse 2:268.

<sup>49</sup> Surat al-Baqarah 2:268; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, 46.

<sup>50</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:116 #127.

<sup>51</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, Muḥammad. *Asrār Al-Ṣalāh Wal-Farq Wal-Muwāzanah Bayna Dhawq Al-Ṣalāh Wal-Samā’*. (Bayrūt: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2003), 76.

<sup>52</sup> Sūrat al-‘A’rāf 7:200; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, 177.

ourselves about the evil thought (“I’m so bad for thinking that!” “I shouldn’t think like that!”) which then feeds right back into it and gives it oxygen to keep it alive.

For another point of view, consider your mind as if it were a still pond and your thoughts are ripples and waves in this pond. We cultivate mindfulness by becoming aware of the ripples and learning to ignore them or engage them at will. A bad thought is like a ripple in a pond. If you touch it, or engage it, it only makes the waves stronger. You cannot beat back the waves with a club; you must learn to let them float away. Through silent mindfulness exercise, we let the waves and ripples simply dissipate. Notice them, acknowledge them, and let them pass on their own as you direct yourself back towards *muraqabah* with Allah. This is the practice of mindfulness exercise, in a nutshell.

Mindfulness exercise is not about experiencing spiritual ecstasy, even though sometimes the practice leads to pleasurable feelings. Many people attempt to meditate or engage in mindfulness practices only because they want to feel a spiritual high, but the feeling is not the point. It is about practice—training (*riyadah*)—in the same way we exercise our bodies; sometimes exercise feels good, an added bonus for sure, but the main purpose is to accumulate health and strength. Similarly, mindfulness exercise is a means of accumulating mental strength and, in conjunction with an Islamic framework, spiritual strength.

Mindfulness exercise is not about supplanting our regular primary acts of worship either. Among other benefits, it functions as a type of preparation for the main acts of worship, similar to how some Muslims prepare for Ramadan by eating less on non-fasting days.<sup>53</sup> Think of mindfulness exercise like basketball practice and ritual prayer (*salah*) like the basketball game; we strengthen our *muraqabah* through exercise and practice so that when we put *muraqabah* into action, in *salah*, we are in top mental and spiritual shape. The *salah* is the performance, the mindfulness exercise is the rehearsal.

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<sup>53</sup> “Ramadan Prep Guide for Busy People | Part 1: Training Season,” MuslimMatters.org: <http://muslimmatters.org/2015/05/18/ramadan-prep-guide-for-the-busy-professional-part-1-training-season/>.

In the following section, we present an easy way to practice daily mindfulness exercise in an Islamic context. To be sure, there is no specific prescribed method of mindfulness exercise in Islam like there is for the daily ritual prayers. This exercise is a voluntary activity that complements the obligatory acts of worship, although it incorporates acts of worship including remembrances (*dhikr*) and supplications (*dua*). Regular practitioners will find that they can build upon their exercise, to adapt and customize it to their particular preferences, in the same way individuals can use common fitness principles to design their own personal routine in the gym. Every human soul and situation is different—there is no one-size-fits-all way to engage in mindfulness exercise—so each person has to discover what works best for them.

## Mindfulness Exercise in Islam

To begin, choose a time of the day when you can be in a quiet place alone. Some Muslims prefer the time before the dawn prayer (*fajr*) or another prayer, before or after work, at lunch break, or even before bed. A quick exercise right before prayer is particularly beneficial as mental preparation for prayer. It is good to pick a regular time for daily exercise, but it can be done at any time of the day to suit your schedule. It can also be done for as long as you want, an hour or even five minutes a day. Beginners who want to advance their practice should commit to at least five minutes every day, to solidify it as a long-term habit, and gradually increase it over time as they see fit. As you begin to see the cumulative positive effects of the practice, and learn to enjoy silence and stillness and simply being present, you may eventually want to do the exercise for longer.

Next, choose a posture that you find comfortable. You can sit up in a chair, on a comfy cushion, or even laying on your side or back in bed, as Allah praises those “who remember God standing, sitting, and lying down.”<sup>54</sup> The aim is to find a posture that is relaxing and comfortable, but not so relaxing that you will fall asleep. As a side note, meditative remembrance of Allah in another context—when

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<sup>54</sup> Sūrat Āli ‘Imrān 3:191; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, 76.

laying down for sleep—can help ease us into sleep. Ibn Al-Qayyim writes, “The Prophet ﷺ would sleep when it was warranted, upon his right side and remembering Allah until sleep overtook his eyes.”<sup>55</sup>

Now, begin by focusing awareness on your natural breathing. Progressively relax the muscle tension throughout your body: your arms, your legs, your core, your jaw. You can close your eyes or simply lower them. As you start with relaxed breathing, feel for a sense of your state of heart and mind in this moment. What are you feeling? What are you thinking? Is your mind racing or calm? Try to settle your mind by bringing awareness to your natural, relaxed breathing, simply feeling the life and energy Allah gave you throughout your body. Feel a deep sense of gratitude to Allah for your breath, your living and being in this moment.

As you settle into stillness within your inner space, begin to perceive the feeling of *muraqabah* with Allah. Know and *feel* that He is watching you, “He is with you wherever you are.”<sup>56</sup> He knows everything going on inside you right now and at all times. Focus on the feeling of *muraqabah* in this state of inner silence (*samt al-sirr*). Try to stop talking to yourself (*hadith al-nafs*) or pursuing trains of thought. Silence your inner dialogue as much as you can and simply focus on being present with Allah in the moment.

When your mind starts to wander off—and it surely will—you want to bring your awareness back to the center of your being, and to your presence in this moment before Allah, by quietly reciting remembrances of Allah. The Prophet ﷺ would use supplications to bring him back into a state of *muraqabah* if he had become distracted. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, at times there is fog over my heart, so I seek the forgiveness of Allah one hundred times in a day.”<sup>57</sup> Al-Nawawi explains this *hadith*, saying, “It is said that it means he had periods of inattention and unawareness of the remembrance of Allah, which was his normal state of affairs. When he had a period of inattention, he would consider that a sin and seek

<sup>55</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, Muḥammad. *Al-Ṭibb Al-Nabawī*. (Bayrūt: Dār wa Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1986), 1:179.

<sup>56</sup> Sūrat al-Ḥadīd 57:4; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 539.

<sup>57</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2075 #2702.

forgiveness for it.”<sup>58</sup> Even the Prophet ﷺ would sometimes experience short periods of forgetfulness, so he would seek the forgiveness of Allah (he would say “*astaghfirullah*”) as a way to bring himself back into the state of *muraqabah*. If that was his condition, then how much more can we expect our own minds to wander?

In this exercise, the supplication or remembrance acts as an “anchor” for your *muraqabah*. An anchor is a phrase that you say inwardly when your mind wanders, which helps bring your mind back to the center of being and awareness. It is not necessarily an object of intensely focused concentration, repeated over and over again. Rather, it is a calming phrase that your mind will come to associate with the state of *muraqabah*, both inside and outside of the exercise. It is best to pick an anchor from one of the numerous authentic supplications in the *Sunnah*, “Two words are beloved to the Most Merciful, light on the tongue but heavy on the scale: Glory and praise to Allah (*subhan Allahi wa bi hamdih*), and glory to Allah Almighty (*subhan Allahi al-‘Athim*).”<sup>59</sup> And again, “The best remembrance is to declare there is no God but Allah (*la ilhaha illa Allah*), and the best supplication is to declare all praise is due to Allah (*al-hamdulillah*).”<sup>60</sup> Seeking the forgiveness of Allah (*al-istighfar*) was one of the Prophet’s ﷺ anchors, so nothing could be better. Your anchor could also be just one of the beautiful names of Allah that elicit remembrance and awareness in your heart, or you could use all of the above in combination.

As you are present in this moment before Allah, the mind will wander off again and again into unmindfulness and distraction due to emerging thoughts. That is okay, there is nothing wrong with that; in fact, it is completely normal. But every time you use your anchor (remembrance or supplication) to come back into a state of *muraqabah*, it is like doing a mental push-up or a sit-up. Through continued practice you will strengthen your mental and spiritual muscles. Do not blame or censure yourself when your mind wanders off, just bring it gently back to silent

<sup>58</sup> al-Nawawī, Yahyá ibn Sharaf. *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alá Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1972), 17:23 #2702.

<sup>59</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9:162 #7563.

<sup>60</sup> al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 5:325 #3383; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Tirmidhī in his comments.

awareness with your anchor. This is the act of *ta'amul*, repeatedly bringing yourself back into the state of *muraqabah*, with Allah and with your inner self, until it becomes a natural and comfortable habit to be in this state.

Sometimes our minds race and race during the exercise, wandering off again and again until we feel that we have not achieved anything from our exercise. That would be a mistaken notion. The best mindfulness exercise session is the one you completed, period. No matter how long your mind spent in unmindfulness, every time you brought it back to *muraqabah* it became stronger and stronger. And every time you mentioned the name of Allah inside you or silently nurtured gratitude for His giving you life and energy and breath, it was written down by angels in the record of your good deeds and it polished away some of the rusted spots over your heart.

## Fruits of Mindfulness Exercise

If you make this simple practice a regular habit, you will see positive results that accumulate over time. You will notice that having presence in prayer becomes easier and more natural than before. You will be able to better relieve stress and attain calming relaxation, better focus your attention when needed, have an easier time dealing with life's difficult moments, and experience more compassion with others. Your anchor (remembrance or supplication) in the exercise can be used at any time to bring you back into a state of *muraqabah*, wherever you are and whatever you are doing. Of course, while the practice of mindfulness exercise will become pleasurable, we should never emphasize it to the neglect of other excellent acts of worship like voluntary prayers, fasting, or reciting the Quran.

One of the most important results of the practice will be in the way we gain a measure of control over our thoughts and emotions. As we have been noticing thoughts appear at their inception during our exercise, at other times we will more easily notice bad thoughts as they emerge. This gives us a space of time to react to them before we start following a bad train of thought and acting on it without even

realizing what happened. We can now view bad thoughts as ripples in a pond, bound to dissipate as long as we are aware of them when they bubble up from the subconscious mind (or from Satan) and let them pass without engaging them or talking to ourselves about them. When we have good thoughts, we will be quicker to notice them and therefore nurture them as we wish. We do not want to disassociate ourselves from thoughts altogether, as is taught by some mindfulness practitioners, but rather only to better direct thoughts as we choose.

A similar mechanism applies to feelings and emotions as well. As we become accustomed to noticing subtle internal changes, we become more aware of the distance between a feeling and a reaction to it. For example, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Do not get angry.”<sup>61</sup> But we all inevitably feel angry and have angry thoughts at some point. As Ibn Hajar explains, scholars have said the meaning of the *hadith* is “to avoid the causes of anger and do not expose yourself to what incites it... do not act upon what anger commands you.”<sup>62</sup> As we become more aware of our feelings, we become more aware of our negative triggers in order to avoid them, as well as putting a buffer zone between us and our feelings that gives us time to react in the right manner, such as remembering to seek refuge in Allah when angry instead of reflexively shouting at others or doing something rash that we will regret later.

Furthermore, we will inevitably experience desires and urges to commit sins. This is part of the trials of life. When we cultivate *muraqabah*, we can be aware of such desires as they begin to germinate. We can acknowledge them without guilt; they are natural and unavoidable. Having bad desires does not make us bad people. But the more mindful we become of our inner states, the better we will become at disassociating ourselves from our lower desires and instead acting upon our virtuous, higher desires. The habit of referring back to our anchor (remembrance or supplication) gives us just enough breathing room to confidently say “no” to the self’s or the devil’s evil suggestions.

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<sup>61</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:28 #6116.

<sup>62</sup> Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī. *Fath al-Bārī bi-Sharḥ al-Bukhārī*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Maʿrifah, 1959), 10:520.

## Conclusion

Mindfulness in Islam (*al-muraqabah*) is a conscious state of comprehensive awareness of Allah and our inner states in relation to Him. In its complete form, it is the highest spiritual state attainable—the perfect realization of excellence in faith (*al-ihsan*). Modern science has demonstrated the efficacy of mindfulness exercises in procuring a number of health and wellness benefits, even in a non-religious context. These insights can be critically synthesized with Islam’s traditional concepts of meditation to produce practical contemporary techniques that cultivate Islamic mindfulness, enhance worship, and enrich our quality of life.

*Success comes from Allah, and Allah knows best.*