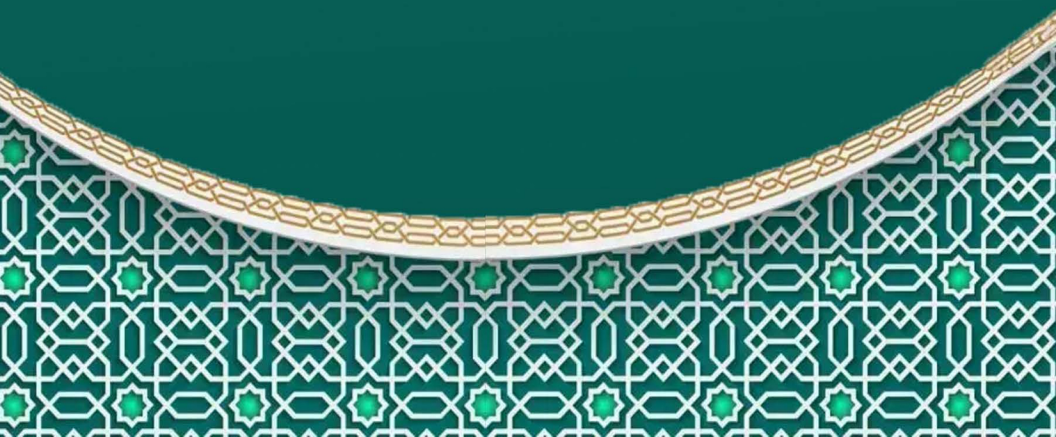


Faith

In the Light of Living Guidance

Part Two

Al-wa'iza Rashida Noormohamed-Hunzai



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**(These articles were written by Al-wa`iza
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The Qur'anic Concept of Light (Nur)

Bismillahi'r-Rahmani'r-Rahim

Allah's Nur

In the esoteric Ismaili Tariqah, both the **ibadat** of the soul, **bandagi**, and the **ibadat** of the intellect, which is concerned with knowledge, are important. Although the **ibadat** of the intellect is important for all mu'mins, it is particularly indispensable for those mu'mins who are committed to a personal search for spiritual enlightenment, because as Hazrat Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) says in a Farman made in Daressalaam in 1899: ***"The essence of religion is to abandon false ideas."***

Thus, in the spirit of acquiring correct concepts, the next seven articles relate to the concept of Nur or Light as presented in the Holy Qur'an. The term "Nur or Light," used forty-nine times in the Holy Qur'an, refers to an interrelated group of concepts, the highest of which is the concept of Allah. The first reflection is on the concept of the Nur/Light of Allah.

Surah Nur, verse 35 known as Ayat an-Nur, begins with the sentence: ***"Allahu nuru's-samawati wa'l ard"***, which means: ***"Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth."*** The word "light" in this ayat cannot be understood as a purely material thing, because then there would not be any darkness in the heavens and the earth. So, how do we understand that Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth?

According to Islamic teachings, nothing in creation is outside the light of Allah. In other words, everything in creation, from the highest and the noblest to the most humble and insignificant, is submerged in Allah's Light. The Light of Allah sustains and embraces every single thing. This concept is repeated very often in the Qur'an. For instance, in Surah 40, ayat 7 it is said that Allah's mercy (***rahmah***) and knowledge (***ilm***) encompass everything in His creation. From this ayat we can understand that Allah's Light or Nur is also His mercy and knowledge. Elsewhere in the Qur'an, Allah equates Light with Spirit (42:52).

However, since the creation is on many different levels, ranging from the mineral to vegetative to animal and human being, the experience of this Light in the form of mercy and knowledge is also on many different levels. Human beings are the noblest of Allah's creatures, and therefore, our experience of Light is higher than that of the other levels in creation. Within human beings, too, the experience varies depending on the struggle and commitment of different people.

According to the True Imams' teachings, we should strive to see the Light or Spirit of Allah in everything around us. We should not be satisfied merely with the external form, but constantly endeavour to see the Spirit in everything. Our ambition should be to live, move and always remain aware of the presence of Allah. First, we have to cultivate the habit and skill of seeing Allah's Light in all human beings and the creation. This will gradually lead to a feeling of unity with Allah's creation, and we

will be able to gain knowledge and wisdom from the external world and also from our personal existence. This, in turn, will contribute to deepening our spiritual search during ***ibadat***. As Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatu'llahi `alayhi*) says: **“Your aim should always be to reach the Spirit, not merely to obtain a feeling of pleasure through *ibadat*.”**

The Prophet's Nur

In the article above on Allah's Nur, we read that Allah's Light or Spirit is present everywhere in creation. The recognition and experience of this Light is the ultimate purpose of creation, and to help human beings to achieve this, Allah has provided a means in the person of His chosen Messengers. In Surah 5, ayat 15 of the Holy Qur'an, Allah says: ***“Indeed there has come to you from Allah a Light and a clear Book.”***

This Light from Allah has thus always been present. Hazrat Adam, the first Prophet, was this Light because it is said in the Holy Qur'an that Allah breathed His Spirit into him. Since the time of Hazrat Adam, many prophets have been sent by Allah throughout the history of humankind to guide us to a true recognition of His Light.

There are two important points to note in this special mercy of Allah. Firstly, that all the Prophets, regardless of their rank, function or place in history, were from Allah; therefore, they all possessed the same Nur. Secondly, this same Nur of Allah was not present at one time in history and absent at another time. Islam, being a religion of logic, requires that we believe and

accept that Allah's Nur is not like material light, which, in the case of a lantern, is at the mercy of wind or rain or in the case of electricity, liable to power failure. Material light can be extinguished, but the Light of Allah, which is His Spirit, mercy and knowledge, cannot be extinguished. The Holy Qur'an says in Surah 9, ayat 32, that many disbelievers will try to blow out the Light of Allah, but He will not allow them to do so.

In the Holy Qur'an in Surah 33, ayats 45-46, Allah also says that He sent Prophet Muhammad (*sallallahu `alayhi wa alihi wa sallam*) as a witness, a bringer of good news, a warner, an inviter unto Allah and as "***sirajam munira***", that is, "a lamp which gives light". Prophet Muhammad's role was to continue to give people the Light of Allah, to enable them to follow the Sirat al-mustaqim and reach the destination of the true recognition of Allah. It is important to note that in Ayat an-Nur, quoted in the first article, Allah says that He is the Light of the heavens and the earth, and His Light is like a niche in which there is a "***misbah***" or Lamp. Allah uses the word "***misbah*** or Lamp" for His Light and the description "***sirajam munira***" or luminous lamp for the Light of the Prophet Muhammad. It is in this sense of the unity of Allah's Light and the Prophet's Light that the Qur'an also describes the Holy Prophet as "***Rahmatul li'l `alamin***" which means "a mercy for all people".

As Mawlana Shah Karim (*sallallahu `alayhi*) said at the Seerat Conference in 1976: "... we have the knowledge that Islam is Allah's final message, the Qur'an His final Book and Muhammad His last Prophet. We are blessed that the answers

drawn from these sources guarantee that neither now, nor at any time in the future, will we be going astray.”

Prophet Muhammad was the embodiment of Allah’s special mercy to humankind. His task was to guide people to the truth of Allah. He was also the Final Prophet of Allah, who completed the Cycle of Prophethood or **Nubuwwah** and declared the historical onset of the Cycle of Imamat.

The Imam’s Nur

In Surah 36, Surah Ya-Sin, which is popularly known as the “Heart or **Qalb**” of the Holy Qur’an, ayat 12 ends with the statement: **“And We (i.e., Allah) have encompassed everything in the manifest Imam.”** This ayat conveys the meaning that the all-inclusive Light of Allah, manifest in the Holy Prophet Muhammad, was transferred to the Imam. Further, in the other ayats of the Qur’an already referred to above, Allah tells us that He has sent a Light and a clear Book and that His Light cannot be extinguished. This confirms that Allah’s Light has to remain forever amongst us, either in the form of a Prophet or an Imam.

Ayat an-Nur, referred to in the first two articles above, confirms this understanding, because there is in it the phrase **“Nurun `ala Nur”** or Light upon Light. Prophet Muhammad declared Imam Ali as his successor to continue the mission of guiding people to the true recognition of Allah. “Light upon Light” describes the uninterrupted continuity of guidance of the Light

of Allah, in the form of the chain of Imams from the progeny of the Holy Prophet.

Prophet Muhammad (*sallallahu `alayhi wa alihi wa sallam*), as the Final Prophet of Allah, conveyed the ***tanzil*** or the exoteric aspect of the Qur'an, the Book of Allah. He appointed the Imam to continue the ***ta'wil*** or esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an. It is important to note that although the Prophet and the Imam play different roles in guiding human beings, they carry the same Light, that is, it is "Light upon Light".

This concept becomes easy to understand by recalling the analogy which our 48th Imam, Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) used in a Farman, where he explained that there may be many different coloured bulbs, but their light is one. Similarly, although the Prophets and Imams in their respective times are different in their physical personalities, their spiritual reality or Light, which is the Light of Allah, is the same.

The function of the light of the Imam is to continue to give the ***ta'wil*** or the esoteric meaning of the Qur'an to his followers. The Preamble of the Ismaili Constitution includes the statement: "***The Imam's ta'lim lights the murids' path to spiritual enlightenment and vision.***" If we reflect carefully on these words, we will understand that the Imam of the time transmits the Light of Allah in the form of ***ta'lim*** or knowledge to his murids. When the murids act according to this knowledge, by following Imam-i zaman's Farmans or guidance, the path of spiritual search becomes clear, so they can acquire

and absorb true knowledge and become enlightened. We can thus conclude that the purpose of the Light of Allah in the Imam is to motivate us to develop the light within us.

Mu'mins' Nur

The previous article ended with the statement that the primary function of the Light of Imamat is to inspire and motivate mu'mins to develop their light. Hazrat Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) writes in his Memoirs that all human beings ***“carry in them a spark of the Divine light. Everyone should strive their best to see that this spark be not extinguished, but rather developed to that full Companionship-on-High ...”***.

In the Ismaili Tariqah, importance is given to this potential, which exists in each and every human being. Great Ismaili teachers have used different examples to raise our awareness about our potential capacities. For instance, Pir Nasir Khisraw teaches that the spark of Divine light within us is like a seed which, if given the right care and nourishment, could grow to a full-blown tree with the ability to produce many more seeds.

Such beliefs and teachings are the hallmark of the esoteric Ismaili Tariqah. They give hope and inspiration to the mu'mins. They give greater meaning and purpose to their physical lives on earth. They begin to understand the beauty of the Qur'anic statement: ***“Inna li'llahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un”***, which means “Indeed we are from Allah and our return is to Him.”

The special mercy and blessing Allah has sent us is in the form of the Light of Imamát. Imam-i zaman is always present to guide mu'mins so that they can provide that care and nourishment to their potential spiritual seed to develop it into a full-grown tree of spiritual progress and enlightenment. Hazir Imam's guidance ensures that the spark of Divine light is not extinguished within them. If they follow his Farmans, they can develop their spark to the level of his Light, which is the Light of Allah.

We have the example of Salman-i Farsi. Although he was born a fire-worshipper, he struggled and searched until he came to the Holy Prophet and embraced Islam. Having become a Muslim, he followed the Prophet's guidance so scrupulously that he made tremendous spiritual progress. He reached such an exalted spiritual rank that the Holy Prophet Muhammad declared: "Salman is from us, the ***ahl al-bayt***."

The Holy Qur'an confirms that it is possible for mu'mins to develop their spark of Divine light to the ultimate. In Surah 57, ayat 12, it is said: ***"On the day when you will see the mu'mins, men and women, their light running before them and on their right hands. Good news for you today, of Gardens (Paradise) underneath which rivers flow, where you will live forever. That is the supreme triumph."***

Oneness of Nur

The last four articles have reflected on how the Light of Allah encompasses and permeates everything in His creation. His

Light manifests at many different levels. In the Prophets and the Imams who are His **mazhar**, the Light is perfect, and at the level of human beings, the light is like a spark with the potential to develop to perfection. The rest of creation is also a manifestation of the Light of Allah, as Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah explains in his Memoirs: ***"... God supports and sustains all existence at every moment by His will and His thought."*** He also said: ***"Every individual, every molecule, every atom has its own spiritual relationship with the All-Powerful Soul of God. But men and women, being more highly developed, are immensely more advanced than the infinite number of other beings known to us."***

The most fundamental teaching of Islam is known as **Tawhid** or the Oneness of God, that is, the Light of Allah unifies everything in creation. Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah describes this as: ***"Islam's basic principle can only be defined as monorealism and not as monotheism."*** Monoreality means that the one Reality of Allah is multi-faceted in its innumerable manifestations.

To further understand this principle of Monorealism, an example from mathematics can help. The number one is a number as well as the source of all other numbers. All other numbers, be they small or in millions, are simply an aggregate of the number one. Another material example, which helps our understanding, is that of water. The source of water is the vast ocean, but its diverse manifestations are found in rivers, springs, snow caps, ice, water vapour, raindrops, clouds, as well as in the make-up of plants, animals and human beings. Such

examples help us to understand that the Light of Allah is one or a mono-reality, and everything in creation is a manifestation of that Light.

The teachings or **ta`lim** of the Imams regarding Monoreality are called **haqiqati** or true knowledge and should inspire confidence and a greater ambition in us, the murids of the Imam. Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatullahi `alayhi*), in his Farman of 1899 at Daressalaam, says: ***“My task is to show you the way to the Truth, so that you may achieve your real destiny, which is the state of fana fi’llah. To be fana fi’llah is to merge oneself in God.”*** The Preamble of the Ismaili Constitution also says: ***“The Imam’s Ta`lim lights the murids’ path to spiritual enlightenment and vision.”***

The esoteric Ismaili Tariqah places great importance on mu’mins spiritual development. The continuing presence of the Imam of the time provides all the guidance necessary to follow the path to reach the final destination and merge in the Divine Light. On 6th August, 1994, Mawlana Shah Karim (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) said: ***“Seek through the Light and the name of Hazrat Ali to come close to He Who is above all else.”***

Ism-i A`zam and Nur

Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) says in his Memoirs: ***“... Divine Grace has given man in his own heart the possibilities of illumination and of union with Reality.”*** We need to reflect on these profound words in the context of his statement that Islam’s basic principle can only be

defined as Monorealism and not as monotheism, which we read in the preceding article. These statements are full of the beauty of esoteric teachings. They inform of the dignity of human beings and the potential in them for spiritual growth. They give greater aspiration and hope to strive towards the spiritual status of merging in the Light of Allah.

For the Divine spark that is in each human being to develop to its fullest, it is necessary for there to be a bridge between it and the Light of Allah. This bridge or link is known as ***Ism-i A`zam*** in our esoteric Tariqah. ***Ism-i A`zam*** means the Supreme Name, and it is a grace which the Imam of the time confers on those murids who wish to enter into a personal search for spiritual enlightenment and vision.

The Holy Qur'an describes the importance of the knowledge of Allah's names. In Surah 2, ayat 31, Allah says: "***And He (Allah) taught Adam all the names, ...***", as a result of which he became a Prophet. Similarly, in the example of Hazrat Ibrahim, the Qur'an uses the term "***Kalimah***", which means "Word". In Surah 43, ayat 28, it is said: "***And he made it a word enduring among his progeny, so that they may return.***" According to our esoteric interpretation, the "word or ***Kalimah***" in this ayat means ***Ism-i A`zam***, which the Prophet Ibrahim taught his successor from his progeny. These two Qur'anic references show that the tradition of ***Ism-i A`zam*** is a tradition of the Prophets and their progeny, the Imams. In other words, only Prophets and Imams, being the ***mazhar*** or locus of manifestation of the Light of Allah, can give ***Ism-i A`zam***. Thus, when the Imam of the time blesses his murids with ***Ism-i***

A`zam or **Bol**, he provides a direct link with the source of Light. This link is the bridge between the potential of the murid's spark and the actual Light of Allah. It is this link which ensures that a mu'min can return to and merge with his origin, which is the Light of Allah. As Mawlana Shah Karim (salawatullahi `alayhi) said in the farman of 6th August, 1994: ***"Because the Bol is a link, it is a way to come closer and closer during your lifetime to that Light. And one day, there will only be that Light, there will be no physical context left in the life of each individual."***

In the writings of our great Da`is and philosophers, such as Sayyidna al-Mu'ayyad fi'd-Din ash-Shirazi, who lived during the Fatimid times, the Imam of the time is described as the living and speaking **Ism-i A`zam** or Supreme Name of Allah. In the light of the **ta'wil** or the inner, esoteric meaning of the Qur'an, Sayyidna al-Mu'ayyad says that Allah has two types of names: One type of Names is only verbal, that is, made up of letters, and the second type of names are living personalities, the Imams. It is for this reason that Mawlana Ja'far al-Sadiq (salawatullahi `alayhi) has said: ***"We are the beautiful names of Allah and His attributes."***

Thus, when the Imam, who is the living and speaking Name of Allah, gives an **Ism-i A`zam** to a fortunate mu'min, it is the greatest gift of light and spirituality.

Baitu'l Khayal and Nur

The practice of Baitu'l Khayal is a tradition of the esoteric Ismaili Tariqah. It is based on the **Ta'lim** of the Imam, which lights the murid's path to spiritual enlightenment and vision.

In a speech delivered on the occasion of his Platinum Jubilee in Cairo in 1955, Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) said: ***“But as I have explained in my Memoirs for the whole world to understand, there are two worlds - the world of material intelligence and the world of spiritual enlightenment. The world of spiritual enlightenment is fundamentally different from the world of material intellectualism, and it is the pride of the Ismailis that we firmly believe that the world of spiritual enlightenment has come as a truth from the inception of Islam with the Imamat ...”***.

It is very clear from these words that the practice of Baitu'l Khayal, which is the esoteric practice of our Tariqah and enables those who search to attain spiritual enlightenment, has always co-existed with the Imamat. Mawlana Shah Karim (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) says in the farman made in London on 6th August, 1994: ***“The second aspect of Baitu'l Khayal which is important is that it has been part of the Shia tradition right from the time of Hazrat Ali, not only to practise the faith regularly during the normal times, but also to participate individually in the search for spiritual elevation”***.

It is the role of the Imam to guide and direct the search for spiritual knowledge and experience of those murids who voluntarily undertake this practice. Baitu'l Khayal, under the guidance of Imam-i zaman, is practised every day in the early hours of the morning, which is popularly known as the **“Nurani Waqt”** or “luminous time”. **Ibadat** during this time consists of meditating on the **Ism-i A`zam** or **Bol**.

Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) explains in the very last paragraph of his Memoirs that ***“any lasting satisfaction, any contentment that we can achieve, is the result of forgetting self, of merging subject with object in a harmony that is of body, mind and spirit.”*** This state is possible only under the conditions provided for the practice of **Baitu'l Khayal**. The daily hour of meditational **ibadat** has the potential to help mu'mins to sufficiently eliminate all worldly matters and to focus on their eternal lives. It provides the enabling environment for mu'mins' souls to identify with Monoreality or Universal Unity.

The absolute importance of Nur for us is demonstrated by a Du`a, which Mawlana Ja`far al-Sadiq (*salawatullahi alayhi*) used to recite after every morning prayer: ***“O Allah! Make for me a light in my heart, and a light in my ear, and a light in my eye, and a light in my tongue, and a light in my hair, and a light in my skin, and a light in my flesh, and a light in my blood, and a light in my bones, and a light in my nerves, and a light in front of me, and a light behind me, and a light on my right side, and a light on my left side, and a light above me and a light below me.”***

Baitu'l Khayal is the discipline which helps a mu'min to transform into Nur, as it is only through ***ibadat*** that one can achieve what Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah describes in the final sentence of his Memoirs: ***“And in the highest realms of consciousness all who believe in a Higher Being are liberated from all the clogging and hampering bonds of the subjective self in prayer, in rapt meditation upon and in the face of the glorious radiance of eternity, in which all temporal and earthly consciousness is swallowed up and itself becomes the eternal.”***

Lessons from the Prophets' Stories in the Holy Qur'an

Bismillahi'r-Rahmani'r-Rahim

Hazrat Adam (*alayhi's-salam*)

In this next series of seven short articles, the focus of reflection will be the holy Qur'an. Throughout fourteen hundred years of the history of Islam, the Qur'an, which is also described as "*kitab-i mubin*" - the "manifest Book", has been studied from many different angles, by both Muslims and non-Muslims. The Ismaili Tariqah of Islam has a particular way of studying it. Ismailis believe that the Qur'an contains everything; therefore, amongst its many attributes, it is also:

"Qur'an tamam wasf-i kamal-i Muhammad ast".

This means that the whole Qur'an describes the spiritual perfection of the Prophet Muhammad (*sallallahu alayhi wa alihi wa sallam* = peace be upon him and his progeny). In other words, the Qur'an is a book of spirituality, which, when it is studied in the light of the *Imam-i mubin*, the manifest Imam (Surah 36, ayat 12), empowers those mu'mins who have undertaken a personal search to continue their struggle fortified with the knowledge of certainty (*'ilmu'l-yaqin*).

A substantial section of the Qur'an consists of stories of the Prophets of Allah. From an exoteric reading, all these stories appear to be very diverse. However, from the viewpoint of esoteric interpretation or *ta'wil*, it becomes clear that all the

stories of the Prophets convey the same lessons of spirituality. In other words, the same spiritual reality is clothed in a multiplicity of descriptions, which becomes a test of knowledge for the readers of the Qur'an.

Here, a brief study of the story of Hazrat Adam (*alayhi's-salam*) in the Qur'an is set out to draw some lessons relevant to the Ismaili practice of Baitu'l-Khayal.

The Qur'anic story of Hazrat Adam is extremely complex and a great trial for those who favour a literal interpretation of the Qur'an. Ismailis, however, are blessed by the *ta'wili* explanation given by their great *Da'is* in the light of the guidance of the Imams from the holy Prophet's progeny. One such explanation is that of Sayyidna Ja'far bin Mansur al-Yaman, whose writings convey that the meaning of the statement in Surah 2, ayat 31 that Allah taught Hazrat Adam all the names - "*allama Adama al-asma'a kullahah*" - before asking the angels to prostrate to him, is a reference to "*ism-i a'zam*". "*Asma*" is the plural of "*ism*". This is an extremely significant point, because firstly, we understand from this that the practice of Baitu'l-Khayal is co-existent with Divine guidance. Secondly, the Prophets of Allah have been the role models of this special practice of *ibadat* throughout history.

The holy Qur'an in Surah 7, ayat 23 also contains a prayer uttered by Hazrat Adam in which he says: "*Rabbanaa zalamnaa anfusanaa, wa il-lam taghfir lanaa wa tar-hamnaa la-nakuu-nanna minal khaa-siriin*". It means: "O our Lord! We have wronged ourselves (our souls). If You do not forgive us

and do not have mercy on us, we will surely be amongst the losers.” This prayer resonates with the attitude of humility, which down the centuries, is still the most important prerequisite of **ibadat** that, when mu’mins forget to do **ibadat** or fulfil the farmans of the Imam of the time, they hurt and wrong their own souls, which are the eternal part of their existence. The prayer also expresses deep hope in Allah’s forgiveness and mercy.

Bismillahi’r-Rahmani’r-Rahim

Hazrat Ibrahim (*alayhi’s-salam*)

This article reflects on the narrative of Hazrat Ibrahim (*alayhi’s-salam*) in the holy Qur’an. In Surah 2, ayat 124, Allah says: “***And (remember) when his Lord tried Ibrahim with some Words (Kalimat) and he fulfilled them, ...***”

The words of this ayat are very significant. Let us analyse the phrase: “his Lord (i.e. Allah) tried Ibrahim with some Words.” In the first article above, the phrase: “Allah taught Adam all the names” was discussed. On the surface, these two statements appear very different; however, in the **ta’lim** of the Ismaili Tariqah, both these phrases describe the same spiritual reality. In other words, “**asma**” or “names” has the same meaning as “Words” or “**Kalimat**”. This example illustrates well the point that, as a Book of spirituality, the Qur’an expresses the same reality through different and varying descriptions, as Allah says: “***And indeed We have displayed for humankind in this Qur’an every kind of similitude.***” (Surah 18, ayat 54).

Another interesting ayat, which is relevant and substantiates the above point, is ayat 171 in Surah 37, which reads: “And verily Our (Allah’s) Word has already gone forth for Our servants the Messengers (Prophets).” This clearly shows that every Prophet had received **`ism-i a`zam** and had practised **ibadat** in an exemplary manner and thus received the highest spiritual and intellectual reward in the form of Prophethood or Messengership.

One of the stories about Hazrat Ibrahim contains some wonderful lessons for the practice of Baitu’l Khayal. The story recounts how Hazrat Ibrahim first saw a star and he said to it: This is my Lord, but it set. Then he saw the moon and he said to it: This is my Lord, but it too disappeared. Then he saw the sun and he said to it: This is my Lord, but it too set, therefore he declared he was free from what others associate with Allah. If this story is taken literally, it raises difficult questions, such as could a great Prophet like Hazrat Ibrahim, who is described in the Qur’an as the perfect **muwahhid** (believer in One God), have practised idolatry before becoming a Prophet? Further, had he not seen the stars, moon and the sun all his life?

The answer is in understanding the **ta’wil** or esoteric meaning of this story. The Ismaili Tariqah teaches that spiritual progress as a result of practising the **ibadat** of **`ism-i a`zam**, is a process which has many levels of experience. In the beginning, the experience of light is compared to the light of a star, but as a mu’min progresses, the light becomes stronger and is compared to the light of the moon and then the sun. Finally,

the mu'min reaches a stage higher than this, as Mawlana Shah Karim (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) explained in his farman in London, on 6th August, 1994: ***“Because the Bol is a link, it is a way to come closer and closer during your lifetime to that Light. And one day, there will only be that Light, there will be no physical context left in the life of each individual.”***

The Qur'an is a treasure of Prophetic prayers. One such prayer of Hazrat Ibrahim is: ***“Our Lord! And make us obedient to You and of our descendants a nation obedient to You and show us our ways of worship so that we may return to You. Only You are the One to Whom we return and You are merciful”*** (Surah 2, ayat 128).

Bismillahi'r-Rahmani'r-Rahim

Hazrat Nuh (*alayhi's-salam*)

The description of Hazrat Nuh (*alayhi's-salam*)'s life in the holy Qur'an is familiar to many people, because some incidents such as the building of an ark by him have been popularised and become generally known. The exoteric story tells us that Hazrat Nuh prayed earnestly to Allah when he was persecuted by the infidels and idolaters. In response, Allah commanded him to build an ark and to invite his obedient followers to board it, together with a pair of every living creature on the earth. Then Allah sent a deluge and a flood which lasted for forty days, in which all the disbelievers were drowned.

According to Ismaili teachings, this Qur'anic story is a symbol, and it is insufficient and impossible to interpret it literally. In the **ta`lim** of the Ismaili Tariqah, symbols are a means to an end, and not an end in themselves. Let us take a couple of points to illustrate the impossibility of interpreting the story of Hazrat Nuh literally: It can be asked how big the ark was to accommodate pairs of all the living creatures on the earth? Further, it can also be queried why it was necessary to invite marine creatures on the ark, when they are quite comfortable in water, even when it is rising or flooding?

Thus, the Ismaili point of view is that this whole incident was primarily an inner and spiritual experience of Hazrat Nuh. It indicates a fundamental teaching of their Tariqah, which is that the **ibadat** of **'ism-i a`zam** is the greatest challenge, because it also brings the highest spiritual rewards. In the case of Hazrat Nuh, his sustained **ibadat**, despite great adversities, led to the transformation of his particular microcosm into the universal macrocosm. In other words, his soul through **ibadat** expanded to the ultimate and merged into its Origin. This principle is succinctly expressed in two verses of poetry from the **Diwan** of Mawlana Ali, where he says:

***“Do you think that you are a small body, yet the great
universe is contained in you;
You are the speaking Book, by whose letters the hidden is
revealed.”***

This esoteric Ismaili understanding is further substantiated by a well-known **Hadith** of Prophet Muhammad (*sallallahu alayhi*

wa alihi wa sallam). He says: “The example of my ***ahl al-bayt*** (that is, my progeny, the Imams) among you is like Nuh’s ark. He who embarks it is saved, and he who lags behind is drowned.” That is to say that the spiritual salvation and progress of mu’mins depend on strict adherence to and obedience of the farmans of the Imam of the time, who is described by Allah in the Qur’an as “***wa kulla shay’in ahsaynahu fi Imamim-mubin***”, meaning “Allah has encompassed everything in the manifest Imam” (Surah 36, ayat 12). And as we have seen, that is also the esoteric or spiritual meaning of Hazrat Nuh’s ark, that by merging in Allah, he had become everything.

Hazrat Nuh provides an example of the importance and benefit of obedience to Divine commands. His story is a strong impetus for mu’mins committed to Baitu’l-Khayal. His prayer to God at a time of great trial is recorded in Surah 54, ayat 10. It is: “***Anni maghlubun fantasir***”, which means “(O my Lord) I am overwhelmed (by difficulties and trials), so help me.” In the present context, where mu’mins are faced with the particular problems and challenges of their time, his prayer offers great hope and courage. It reminds them of Mawlana Shah Karim’s (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) farman in London on 6th August, 1994, where he says: “***Sometimes, there is a tendency, particularly in the Western world, to let the material life override everything else. That overriding is not good.***”

Bismillahi'r-Rahmani'r-Rahim

Hazrat Dawud (alayhi's- salam)

This piece of writing will focus on the description of Hazrat Dawud (*alayhi's- salam*) in the holy Qur'an. Hazrat Dawud was both a worldly king as well as a Prophet, and thus his story demonstrates two important things: Firstly, that Allah chose as His Prophets representatives from diverse backgrounds, ranging from materially ordinary people such as shepherds to some who were rulers of nations and thus very well to do.

Secondly, the physical kingdom of Hazrat Dawud alludes to his spiritual kingdom, which was far greater, more spacious and ever-lasting or eternal. His spiritual kingdom was a result of his **ibadat** and constant supplication in the Divine court. He used to do regular **giryah-u zari**, that is, shed tears and supplicate in the presence of Allah. The collection of his supplications is known as Zabur or Psalms, and although it is not like the Torah, Bible and the Qur'an in which Allah speaks directly, nevertheless, it is mentioned in the Qur'an as a revealed book, even though its words are those spoken by Hazrat Dawud.

Hazrat Dawud's words in the Zabur are extremely touching, full of humility and soul-stirring. His Psalms continue to be recited by the **Ahlu'l-kitab**, the Jews and the Christians. An example of his **giryah-u zari** is:

"Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing.

Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God,

*For you I pray.
To you I call, O Lord my Rock, do not turn a
deaf ear to me.
For if you remain silent,
I shall be like those who have gone down into
the pit.
Hear my cry for mercy, as I call you for help,
as I lift up my hands towards your Most Holy
Place.”*

Although Hazrat Dawud is best known for his ***giryah-u zari***, it is clear from the Qur’an that all the Prophets practised it. In Surah 19, ayat 58, Allah names Hazrat Adam, Hazrat Nuh and the progeny of Hazrat Ibrahim and says: ***“When the revelations of the Compassionate were recited to them, they fell down prostrating and weeping.”***

As mentioned earlier, Hazrat Dawud attained the supreme reward for his humility, supplication and ***ibadat*** in the form of a spiritual kingdom. His spiritual elevation can be estimated by what Allah says in the holy Qur’an about him in Surah 21, ayat 79: ***“And We (Allah) subdued the hills and the birds to praise (Allah) along with Dawud.”***

This is a very allegorical Divine statement. If we try to understand it at only a physical or ***zahiri*** level, then those who lived at the time of Hazrat Dawud should also have heard the hills and birds praise Allah along with him. However, there is no historical evidence of such incidents. In the Ismaili interpretation, they look to the esoteric, ***ta’wili*** point of view

and understand that this is the description of an inner spiritual experience of Hazrat Dawud. When he was reciting his **`ism-i a`zam** during **ibadat**, he had reached the stage where every particle of his being was joining in and participating in its recitation. In other words, his entire existence was reverberating and vibrating with the **zikr** or remembrance of the Supreme Name or **ism-i a`zam**.

Bismillahi'r-Rahmani'r-Rahim

Hazrat Musa (alayhi's-salam)

Hazrat Musa (alayhi's-salam) is one of the six great Prophets of Allah. These six great Prophets, namely Hazrat Adam, Hazrat Nuh, Hazrat Ibrahim, Hazrat Musa, Hazrat `Isa and Hazrat Muhammad, each started a new cycle of Prophethood.

Hazrat Musa is also the Prophet about whom there is greater detail in the holy Qur'an. For instance, in Surah Taha and Surah A`raaf, the greater part relates the story of Hazrat Musa. Another unique feature of his case study is that he also had to face and overcome a very powerful adversary in the Pharaoh of Egypt.

In this article, we will reflect on one aspect of his story only, which is the different levels of experience of light during the journey of spiritual search. At the beginning of his mission, according to Surah 20, ayat 10, Hazrat Musa saw a fire, sometimes described as a burning bush, and when he approached it, he heard the voice of Allah Who commanded

him to go to Egypt and free the Israelites from the tyranny of the Pharaoh.

When Hazrat Musa, accompanied by his brother Hazrat Harun completed their mission and were returning with the Israelites, Allah commanded him to spend forty nights of solitude on Mount Sinai. Therefore, Hazrat Musa left his brother in charge of his community and went alone to Mount Sinai to do **ibadat** for forty nights. In Surah 7, ayat 143, we read that Hazrat Musa prayed to Allah and beseeched Him: ***“My Lord! Show me (Yourself) that I may gaze upon You.”*** In other words, Hazrat Musa earnestly prayed for **Didar**. The ayat goes on to explain how, when Allah cast His **“tajallaa”** or manifestation on the mountain, it shattered into pieces and Hazrat Musa became totally overawed by this experience.

How do we understand these incidents from an esoteric point of view? The fire seen by Hazrat Musa at a distance and the **“tajallaa”** or manifestation of Allah on the mountain are two levels of luminous or **nurani** Didar, because the Qur’an itself explains in Surah 42, ayat 51: ***“And it is not vouchsafed to any mortal that Allah should speak to him unless (it be) by revelation or from behind a veil or He sends a messenger to reveal what He will by His leave. Lo! Allah is exalted, wise.”*** This ayat is an explanation of the three highest manifestations of Allah that the Prophets experienced. The highest of these is when Allah reveals Himself, as He did for Hazrat Musa on Mount Sinai. The second level is when Allah speaks from behind a veil, and the third is when He sends an angel like Hazrat Jibrail as a messenger with **wahy** or revelation.

The story of Hazrat Musa contains another significant lesson for us, which has been beautifully described by Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi in his Mathnawi as: ***“Kill the Pharaoh of your carnal soul, I will instantly make you Musa, the son of Imran.”*** That is to say that the story of Hazrat Musa has the potential of being understood from the perspective of individual mu’mins who, through personal search, are striving to seek spiritual enlightenment and vision. If they can overcome the Pharaonic tyranny of their carnal souls, they too can reach the ultimate height of spiritual experience which Hazrat Musa experienced. In the esoteric Ismaili Tariqah, the Imams from the holy Prophet’s progeny have always encouraged and guided them towards such an achievement, as Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatu’llahi `alayhi*) says in a farman: ***“My followers can be like Hazrat Musa and Hazrat `Isa.”***

To be like our Prophets is to achieve the final limit of nearness to Allah, or to be ***fana fi’llah***. All the Prophets are role models of this. They led lives of purity and righteousness; they struggled against tremendous odds; they turned to Allah in humility and prayer, and they never gave up hope in Allah’s mercy.

Bismillahi’r-Rahmani’r-Rahim

Hazrat Yunus (*alayhi’s-salam*)

“Laa ilaaha illaa anta subhaanaka innii kuntu minaz-zaalimiin” is the tasbeeh recited by Hazrat Yunus (*alayhi’s-*

salam). It is recorded in the holy Qur'an in Surah 21, called "The Prophets", at the end of ayat 87. The story of Hazrat Yunus is that on a sea journey, he was swallowed up by a large fish like a whale. He remained in the belly of the fish for forty days, during which time he recited the tasbih of ***"Laa ilaaha illaa anta subhaanaka innii kuntu minaz-zaalimiin"***. The tasbih means: ***"There is no God except You (O Allah!). You are above everything! I am from among the wrongdoers."*** The words of this prayer resonate with the supplications of Hazrat Adam, which were mentioned in the first article. At the end of the forty days, the fish spewed out Hazrat Yunus unharmed onto dry land.

The exoteric or ***zahiri*** story is very difficult to accept at face value. It gives rise to such questions as: How could a human being remain alive for forty days in the stomach of a fish? Further, how is it possible that the fish should, at the end of this period, eject him onto dry land and he should be completely unharmed? Therefore, Hazrat Yunus' story and the stories of all Prophets have to be understood through ***ta'wil*** or esoteric meaning.

In his farman of 1899 at Daressalaam, Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) said: ***"The meanings of the parables of the Prophets can be understood only by those who use their intellect and are wise. But those who do not will simply say these are only stories. The one who uses his intellect will understand the significance and nobility of a human being. Real human beings are those who can distinguish between good and evil. A person of intellect will***

realise that they are symbolic stories. It is for you to analyse and understand these symbolic stories. Do not assume that this is too difficult for you."

How do we understand the esoteric meaning of Hazrat Yunus' story? The stomach of the fish evokes a feeling of total constriction and restriction. It conveys the idea that Hazrat Yunus was suffering from 'the clogging and hampering bonds of the material self', and he was yearning and struggling to transform it into a higher soul to experience spiritual elevation. Hazrat Yunus was all too aware that the spiritual world transcends and surpasses the physical world, which is limited, temporary and in Qur'anic terminology, a shadow, whereas the life of the spirit is the real life.

There is a very powerful message in his story. It is that mu'mins should not make the mistake of considering their present physical existence the final goal of their lives. The physical world is a very small and limited place, though it may seem very vast to us. An analogy that can help to appreciate the superiority and value of the eternal spiritual life is that of a baby in its mother's womb. For the period of gestation, it may consider that the womb is its only domain, but when the baby emerges into the world, it realises how spacious the physical universe is. In the same way, if through ***ibadat*** mu'mins can transcend the barriers of time and space of the physical life, their souls can experience such spaciousness and spiritual realities that their Pirs have told them are impossible to describe in human language.

The second point to note in Hazrat Yunus' story is the fact that he remained in the stomach of the fish for forty days. In the articles above, this number has been mentioned in Hazrat Musa's description, that he went to Mount Sinai for forty days of ***ibadat*** by the command of Allah and also that Hazrat Nuh's flood lasted for forty days. The number forty also features in the stories of other Prophets. This has given rise in Islam to the concept of ***i'tikaf*** or ***arba'in***, which means rigorous spiritual exercises and discipline for forty consecutive days leading to spiritual purification and elevation.

Bismillahi'r-Rahmani'r-Rahim

Prophet Muhammad (*sallallahu alayhi wa alihi wa sallam*)

In this last article, it is appropriate that we reflect on the life of Prophet Muhammad (*sallallahu alayhi wa alihi wa sallam*), who was the final Prophet of Allah. In the holy Qur'an, Allah says about him in Surah 33, ayat 21: ***"Truly in the Messenger of Allah you have the best example for he who looks to Allah and the Last Day and remembers Allah abundantly."*** The Qur'an also describes Prophet Muhammad as ***"rahmatan li'l-alamn"***, meaning ***"a mercy for all people"***.

In what sense was the holy Prophet the best example and a mercy for all the people? From the esoteric viewpoint of the Ismaili Tariqah, his life and spiritual journey as described in the Qur'an is the most excellent role model, because it draws together the experiences of all the Prophets who preceded him in the chain of Divine guidance. The Qur'an describes how the

Prophet used to spend half the night, two-thirds of the night or the whole night in the *ibadat* of *ism-i a`zam* (see Surah 73). Further, it is well known from history that, like many of the Prophets before him, he too had to face many personal physical difficulties, as well as great opposition to his mission. We also know that he faced all his challenges with great courage, patience, unflinching faith and prayer. He displayed the purest humility in his supplications and *giryah-u zari*.

Over fourteen hundred years of history, the example of the holy Prophet remains fresh and relevant for seekers of spiritual enlightenment and Divine vision. Prophet Muhammad represented and integrated the primary aim of human life as exemplified by all the Prophets, which is to make a direct path to union with our Origin, the Light of Allah, by engaging in personal search.

The holy Qur'an mentions the extent of Prophet Muhammad's spiritual elevation or *mi`raj* in Surah 53, ayat 9 as: "***Fa-kaana qaaba qawsayni aw adnaa***", that is, during his ultimate spiritual experience, he was: "***a distance of two bow lengths or nearer***" to his Origin, Allah.

This series of short articles reflects on six other Prophets, all of whose stories, though exoterically speaking differ greatly, esoterically refer to their spiritual experiences. In other words, the holy Qur'an, when studied in the Light of Imamah, reveals a fundamental principle that all Prophets had attained spiritual perfection in their physical lives. Further, their stories are

recorded in the Qur'an to motivate mu'mins to follow their examples to achieve spiritual elevation and Didar.

In some of the earlier articles, certain prayers of the Prophets have also been highlighted. Here, the focus is on just two prayers of Prophet Muhammad, one mentioned in the Qur'an and the other in his Traditions. The Prophet used to pray: ***"Allahumma-ghfir li wa'r-rahmni wa al-hiqni bi'r-rafiqi'l-a'la"***, which means ***"O Allah, forgive me, have mercy on me and join me to the Companion-on-High"***, in other words, he used to pray for ***fana fi'llah*** or merging in the Divine Light.

Another prayer mentioned in the Qur'an in Surah 20, ayat 114 was taught to him by Allah Himself. It is: ***"Rabbi zidni `ilmaa"***, which means: ***"O my Lord! Increase me in knowledge."*** These prayers demonstrate the importance of beseeching forgiveness and maintaining utmost humility, and also of continuing to acquire knowledge to sustain and understand the stages of the spiritual journey to Divine vision.

How can the Men and Women of Faith (mu'mins) follow the examples of the Prophets and become Nur?

Bismillahi'r-Rahmani'r-Rahim

In Islam, prayers are categorised into two groups: obligatory, that is, enjoined on all the believers, and those which are additional or supererogatory and are voluntarily undertaken by the followers. Obligatory prayers are performed to gain salvation, whereas the additional supererogatory prayers achieve higher spiritual ranks, eventually leading to the ultimate stage of *fana fi'llah* or merging in the light of God. This understanding in Islam is beautifully conveyed in a Sacred Tradition or *Hadith-i Qudsi* where God says to our Holy Prophet:

“My servant always seeks My closeness through *nawafil* (that is, additional prayer) until I love him. And when I love him, I become his eyes with which he sees, his ears with which he hears, his hands with which he grasps and his feet with which he walks.”

In the context of this, particularly as an esoteric Tariqah of Islam, the Ismaili vision of the practice of faith is not limited only to those aspects which are obligatory on all, such as the Du'a we recite every day, our obedience to the farmans of the Imam of the Time and our commitment to Dasond (*sadaqah* or

zakat = religious due which purifies + promotes growth Surah 9, ayat 103). Mu'mins' vision extends beyond the obligatory, and they are encouraged individually to fulfil a personal search for light and spiritual happiness.

Esoteric also represents the Ismaili understanding of the status of the human soul. They believe that the human soul is from Allah and can grow, develop and attain self-realisation, and thus return to its origin, the light of Allah. Put another way, this means that they believe the life of the soul is eternal and thus a part of their physical life should be devoted to preparation for the eternal life of the soul or the life hereafter. Once again, this preparation is done as individuals, and time is devoted to reflection and higher *ibadat*, which is additional to the general rites and ceremonies of the Tariqah.

All the guidance of the Imams and the meanings of Ismaili devotional literature reinforce this fundamental belief of the Ismaili Tariqah that physical life is a precious gift from Allah and it must be lead with "a breadth of responsibility ... based on the belief in Islam that people must attend to both their spiritual development and their physical needs", as Mawlana Shah Karim (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) put it in a speech in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in May, 1995.

Esoteric also means to strive to seek the inner meaning, the hidden meaning of life, one's beliefs, the holy Book, the rites and ceremonies and the guidance received from the Imam of the time. This search for meaning is essentially the function of the intellect with which, Allah has endowed all human beings.

Thus, to be esoteric also involves the proper use of the human intellect to lead a life of balance between the material and the spiritual dimensions of life.

Esoteric also includes the aspect of the search for meaning by the partial human intellect in the light of the guidance and direction of the Perfect Intellect of the Imam of the time. The Imam as the *mazhar* of the light of Allah is described in Ismaili books as “*Kamilun fi dhatihi wa mukamillun li ghayrihi* = He is perfect in himself and makes others perfect.” The Preamble of the Ismaili Constitution affirms this in the statement: “The Imam’s *ta’lim* lights the murids’ path to spiritual enlightenment and vision.”

In the tradition of the Ismaili Tariqah, the Imam facilitates the personal search of his murids, who voluntarily seek to participate in *ibadat* or *bandagi* of the early morning. The search for spiritual enlightenment has come from the inception of Islam with the Imam, as Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) said in his Platinum Jubilee speech of 1953. Thus, an Ismaili’s intellectual engagement and individual participation in the search for spiritual light and happiness are intimately linked to our concept of the central position of the Imam in the Ismaili Tariqah. In other words, esoteric also conveys the notion of a personal link with the Imam of the time, that is, in addition to the permanent spiritual bond as signified by the *bay’at* (the oath of allegiance) to the Imam, which every Ismaili performs.

Let us reflect with sincere gratitude on how fortunate the Ismaili Jamat is. Not only does our faith encourage material progress and improvement, social development of self and others, but it also emphasises the spiritual dimension by encouraging balance and a holistic growth of body, soul and intellect; this life and the eternal life. This encouragement manifests in Imam-i zaman's guidance, which protects us from forgetfulness and negligence.

The profound and inspiring words of our Imams and the rousing and stirring words of our Pirs in the Ismaili devotional literature inspire and motivate mu'mins to engage in a personal search. Thus, none can be in any doubt regarding the status of the human soul and its God-given capacity for growth and actualisation to the ultimate where, as Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) put it: "... the glorious radiance of eternity, in which all temporal and earthly consciousness is swallowed up and itself becomes eternal." and as Mawlana Shah Karim (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) reminded us in his Silver Jubilee message: "It is only the life of the soul which is eternal."

We live in a world, the hallmark of which is the rapidity with which everything around us is changing. At no other time in recorded human history have there been so many discoveries and inventions, and the pace at which newer and faster technology is appearing is breathtaking. The Ismaili faith teaches that we should be grateful to Allah for giving human beings the capabilities of making such scientific progress to understand a little of His infinite creation. Such a rapidly

changing and advancing environment has brought to the fore a belief in Islam that human beings should learn from the cradle to the grave. In today's language, this age-old notion of Islam is described as lifelong learning.

All of us must ask the question: Does lifelong learning apply only to the physical dimension of our lives, or is it equally, if not more, applicable to the spiritual aspect, which, as we are constantly reminded, is the only lasting aspect of our lives? The answer in the esoteric Ismaili Tariqah is quite clear. It enjoins to engage in a constant struggle for both material progress and spiritual advancement. Only then can mu'mins claim to be leading a life of balance.

In the Holy Qur'an, in Surah 41, ayat 52, Allah declares: "We shall show them Our signs in the external (physical) world and within themselves, until it is manifest to them that He is the truth." Recently, many media programmes about science have discussed that the art of virtual reality has advanced so far that a physically blind person can enjoy the sense of sight. As followers of a **batini** or esoteric Tariqah, we must ask: What about spiritual science, that which can unlock the signs "within ourselves" as promised in the Divine words of the Qur'an? What about developing the inner eye, which can witness the signs within?

It is important to reflect on such intellectually challenging questions to understand why the Ismaili Tariqah places such great emphasis on personal search and the practice of **ibadat**

of the night and early morning under the guidance of the Imam of the Time.

The Ismaili Tariqah is an esoteric interpretation of Islam, where the Imam of the time from the Holy Prophet Muhammad's progeny guides those murids who voluntarily undertake a personal, individual search for spiritual enlightenment and happiness. This search is linked to our fundamental belief that the soul is the only part of us which is eternal. In this context of spirituality and eternity, the practice of Baitu'l Khayal carries with it the greatest significance in our Tariqah.

It is important to understand the significance of the special supplicatory tasbih, which is recited when special occasions called ***satadas*** are observed. The ***`ibadat*** of the early morning or the "small watches of the night" as the Holy Qur'an describes the time, is difficult and demanding from at least two perspectives.

Firstly, the regular practice of Baitu'l Khayal is demanding in the sense that it requires courage, strength and consistency to sustain a spiritual search regardless of where we live. In the particular context of the West, where time is at a premium and there is an overwhelming predominance of materialism, the practice acquires greater difficulty. Secondly, it is difficult from the point of view that the regular and continuous performance of ***`ibadat*** requires total humility and the ability to understand that it is related to the spiritual and the eternal and is not subject to our control or our command. Spiritual enlightenment is such that it is not taken or acquired. It is a

grace and a blessing which is given to us. Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatullahi `alayhi*), explaining this in his Memoirs, says:

"But as the joys of human love surpass all that riches and power may bring a man, so does that greater spiritual love and enlightenment, the fruit of that sublime experience of the direct vision of reality which is God's gift and grace, surpass all that the finest, truest human love can offer. For that gift we must ever pray."

In this article, one aspect of the **satada**, the **giryah-u zari** tasbih, which is specially recited during this occasion, will be considered. Collective **giryah-u zari** or supplications with absolute humility and yearning, impact and affect the members and are an essential aspect of the Baitu'l Khayal. This preparation facilitates the process of individual search for spiritual enlightenment and happiness. An analogy from nature helps to illustrate this point. We observe that when rain falls, the water simply runs off any hard or stony surfaces, whereas soft, absorbent soil receives the raindrops and becomes productive. In the same way, when we supplicate with deep humility, we prepare ourselves to receive and absorb Divine grace and blessing.

All of us are encouraged to engage in an individual search for light, a happiness which is far superior to anything we can achieve in our physical lives. Therefore, the effort, sacrifice and

attitude required are equally rigorous. In Surah 7, ayat 205, God addresses our Holy Prophet, and says:

"And do (O Muhammad) remember your Lord within yourself with humility and awe."

In the Ismaili Tariqah, with its emphasis on spiritual elevation and growth, there are several recurring esoteric practices throughout the year. These practices punctuate our daily mundane lives and serve to awaken our consciousness, and help us to intensify our personal search for spiritual light and happiness. **Satada** gives us a timely and necessary reminder not to allow the material aspect of our daily lives to override our spiritual dimension, which is the lasting and permanent part of our existence. Each **Satada** aims to add to our spiritual growth and progress by helping us to become more and more humble and open to receive Divine grace. We are motivated to make such ethics of faith a conscious part of our daily lives.

Thus, such esoteric practices act as links in a continuing chain or process which is dynamic and which leads to a progressive and incremental achievement on the path of spiritual search. Why is it important for us to engage in such a process? The answer is very concise in the Qur'an. In Surah al-Ankabut, in verse 64, Allah says:

"This life of the world is but a pastime and a game. Verily, the abode of the Hereafter is certainly the real life, if they but knew."

It is essential to understand this Qur'anic teaching in the light of the guidance of our Imams. The words "this life" mean the physical aspect of our existence, and the words "abode of the Hereafter" mean the life of the soul. In other words, to be esoteric means to strive to experience the life of the soul, through love, knowledge and **`ibadat**, during our physical life here. This is explained by Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (*salawatu'llahi `alayhi*) in his Memoirs as:

"Hafiz, indeed, has said that men like Jesus Christ, and Muslim mystics like Mansour and Bayezid and others, have possessed that spiritual power of the greater love; that any of us, if the Holy Spirit ever-present grants us that enlightenment, can, being thus blessed, have the power which Christ had, ..."

In 1899, Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah, in a Farman in Dar-es-Salaam, said:

"It is not that only Hazrat Ali's progeny can attain this status. Whoever is determined enough will be able to reach the goal. It can come in stages, through repeated efforts."

These teachings make it clear and understandable that the purpose of our life on this earth is to strive to experience spiritual reality or the higher life of the spirit while we live in the physical state. This is the example we also acquire from the lives of all our Prophets and Imams. This ideal of spiritual

attainment is taught and emphasised by our Tariqah, which gives us hope and courage to strive to attain this exalted status and not to be satisfied with a merely terrestrial existence.

One Hadith of our Holy Prophet Muhammad (*sallallahu alayhi wa alihi wa sallam*) gives us additional motivation and strength to struggle to attain this spiritual growth and progress. He said:

"No one who has passed beyond this world feels pain or regret or loss because of death, but he has a hundred regrets for what he let slip by."

Satadas are reminders for us not to let opportunities for spiritual progress slip by. They act to awaken us to our potential and to deter us from being negligent. They protect us from being drawn into the material existence and from forgetting the yearning of our soul to experience its origin or true reality.

***Baitu'l Khayal* “is central to the practice of our Tariqah”**

In August 1994, during his visit to the Jamat of the United Kingdom, Mawlana Shah Karim (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) made the following farman:

“Those of you living in the West, as most of you here are, will be aware, subjectively, of how material life has tended to monopolise more and more of your time. ... Sometimes, there is a tendency, particularly in the Western world, to let material life override everything else. That overriding is not good.”

The practice of Baitu'l Khayal reminds us of the importance of caring for our souls, the only eternal aspect of our existence. It motivates us to maintain a balance between our material and spiritual lives. It motivates us to acquire religious knowledge or **`ilm**, for which there is less and less time in our daily lives. The teachings of the Ismaili Tariqah have always emphasised theory and practice, or knowledge and action, or **`ilm** and **`amal**. There are many examples in nature to help us understand the significance of both knowledge and action. They are like the two wings of a bird, the two legs of a human being or the two oars of a rowing boat. In all these examples, one without the other would be a serious limitation. For instance, a boat with one oar would go round and round rather than going forward.

The following farman of Mawlana Shah Karim (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) made at Dar-es-Salaam on 7th October, 1988, encapsulates the significance of Baitu'l-Khayal:

“In Islam there are various tariqahs, there are the exoteric tariqahs and there are the esoteric tariqahs. Esoteric means essentially – and it’s a complex word, but I would try and simplify it – it means essentially “he who seeks the inner meaning, the hidden meaning, the meaning to which you accede through guidance, through direction. That means that every murid is encouraged to fulfil a personal search of light and of spiritual happiness and not only to practise the faith in its exoteric form.”

In this farman it is clear that the search for light also means the search for the inner hidden meaning – the meaning of Allah’s signs in nature, of the Holy Qur’an, of our rites and ceremonies, of our prayers, indeed of the purpose of life itself. This search in all its dimensions is guided by the Imam of the time, who is the manifestation of the Light of Allah, that is, the *mazhar* of Allah’s Light.

The Role of Human Senses in Personal Search

Bismillahi'r-Rahmani'r-Rahim

Sight

Let us reflect on the importance of our external physical senses, particularly the faculties of sight, hearing and speech. Our mind is like the capital city of our existence, which receives information and knowledge through its ambassadors, that is, our eyes, ears and tongue. These ambassadors interact with our physical and social environment and feedback the information acquired, which adds to our stock of material knowledge. However, we often tend to take our senses for granted and do not consider them a special gift from Allah. Therefore, Pir Nasir Khisraw says in a poem that instead of constantly asking Allah for more and more, we should first draw the maximum benefit from all the gifts and blessings He has already given us, such as our five senses.

No sensible person can deny the crucial significance of our external or physical senses. To enhance our **`ilm**, let us ask the following questions: Do we have internal or spiritual senses? What role do they play in **`ibadat** and the search for spiritual enlightenment? What is the relationship between the external and the internal senses?

For the answers to these questions, we have to turn to the Holy Qur'an and our Indo-Pak devotional literature, the Ginans. It is very clear in the Qur'an where, in several different places, Allah

talks of “**basirat**” or inner sight. For example, in Surah 47, ayat 24, Allah asks, “Are there locks on their hearts?”, in other words, are they spiritually blind? In our wonderful Ginanic tradition, in the Ginan “***Sakhi mahapad kerī vat***”, Pir Sadardin describes how in **`ibadat** he observed the Throne of Allah, that is, he experienced Nurani Didar. He further says that the Lord defies all verbal description and should be really seen and not just heard about. In the final verse of the Ginan, he says: “Truly I have seen the Lord with my own inner eyes.”

The esoteric teachings of our Tariqah thus tell us that we can experience the highest spiritual felicity during the **`ibadat** of Baitu’l Khayal, which is Didar. Didar comes from the Farsi word **didan**, which means “to see”. An important issue for mu’mins who practice the **bandagi** of Baitu’l Khayal should therefore be: What must be the condition of our eyes to witness the Divine Nur? All our Imams and Pirs teachings are that we must take every possible step to ensure the purity and piety of our eyes. Mu’mins cannot afford to allow their sight to be contaminated by greed, anger, lust, jealousy or bitterness. To avoid such unethical behaviour is to perform the **batini roza** or fast of the eyes. Our Imams have taught us that such fasting is all year round.

Hearing

Here, the focus of our reflections will be on our faculty of hearing. According to our religious literature, particularly the Holy Qur’an and the Ginans, our ears play as significant a role as our eyes in the search for spiritual enlightenment.

In the Qur'an, Allah mentions many times the subject of the blowing of the Trumpet or the **Sur-i Israfil**. Exoteric people limit the meaning of this and say that the Archangel Israfil will blow his trumpet on the Day of Resurrection or Judgement to summon all the people from their graves so that Allah may take an account of their deeds from them. In our esoteric Tariqah, the inner, hidden meaning of the sounding of the **Sur-i Israfil** is about a particular stage in the individual spiritual resurrection of a mu'min, who makes great progress on the path of spiritual search. In Ismaili esoteric teachings, mu'mins who advance in the **`ibadat** of Baitu'l Khayal, first experience a silent world of bright light. If they continue to make progress, the silent light transforms into luminosity with voice.

This is explained in many Ginans by our esteemed Pirs, who had undergone this individual spiritual resurrection. In verses of **Saloko Moto**, Pir Shams first emphasises the importance of mu'mins attending carefully to the call or teachings of the Pir. Mu'mins must first protect themselves from the five evils of back-biting, slander, unlawful relationships, self-destruction and killing. Pir Shams says that such pure hearts become the place of Divine Light, and the whole being of such mu'mins resounds with the sound of spiritual instruments. Such mu'mins do not need much sleep; instead, they receive knowledge through the **`ibadat** of the night. They physically live in the world, but are bound in such an intimate relationship with the Guide that they reflect his speech and other attributes. However, this event is so personal and so private to

that particular mu'min that the truth of his or her state is known to hardly anyone.

The experience related to the ears in **`ibadat** and spiritual progress is so sublime and full of wonder that we have to again pose the question: What should be the state of our ears to deserve such an exalted experience? The guidance or **ta`lim** of our Imams and Pirs is to protect our ears from all evil sounds, such as back-biting, gossip, slander, rumour-mongering, swearing and any unpleasant or impure conversation. Such a constant struggle to shield our hearing is considered the **batini roza** or fasting of the ears, which is all year round and throughout our lives.

Tongue or Speech

The third human faculty which is also very significant in the context of Baitu'l Khayal **`ibadat** is our speech or the tongue. As already mentioned in connection with our eyes and ears in the previous two articles, the importance of speech is constantly highlighted in the teachings of our Tariqah, especially in the Holy Qur'an and our Ginanic tradition.

In the **Moti Venti** of Pir Hasan Kabirdin in the forty-sixth verse, he cautions the believers to resist the error of back-biting and slandering, because this serious sin attracts shaitan or evil negative forces, and such a person finds himself far away from the mercy of the Imam. Further, in such a state, he will not be able to acquire spiritual knowledge. Without spiritual knowledge, human beings remain at the level of animals, and

they cannot fulfil the mission of self-actualisation and spiritual development, which is the real purpose of life. In the Holy Qur'an Allah uses strong and uncompromising language for those human beings who not only do not use the faculties of eyes, ears and tongue for good purposes, but use them for evil purposes. In Surah 17, ayat 97, Allah says:

“... We shall assemble them on the Day of Resurrection with faces hanging (in shame). Blind, deaf and dumb, their habitation will be Hell.”

In this verse, Allah does not refer to those people who are physically blind, deaf and dumb, because elsewhere in the Qur'an, Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate declares that those who have lived a life of such enormous physical challenges with courage and patience are going to be spared the Day of Judgement.

In selected verses of the Ginan ***“Darshan Shahka to paie”***, Sayyid Imam Shah reminds mu'mins that the heart in which the **nur** of Imam resides, cannot harbour even the smallest of lies or deceit. He advises us to discipline the tongue and thus overcome the five evils, such as lying, gossiping, slandering, back-biting and using bad language. He urges mu'mins to keep their hearts pure by controlling carnal desires and avoiding anger and arrogance. He further counsels mu'mins to speak the truth and always remain true and righteous. In the last two verses, he urges us to keep our thoughts on our faith and keep our hearts pure by remembering the name of Mawla

constantly. Such a pure heart is illuminated by the sacred name of Mawla and becomes the place of Didar.

In the **ta`lim** of our esoteric Tariqah, it is with the tongue that we say the exalted name of Imam-i zaman, and it is with the inner tongue or the tongue of our soul that we remember our **Ism-i a`zam** or **bol**, which is the most precious gift given to us individually by the Imam of the time. How can we therefore ever use the same tongue for anything base, evil and contrary to the farmans of Imam-i zaman?

How can we ensure that our eyes, ears and tongue remain constantly pure and righteous?

In the attempt to understand that Baitu'l Khayal is a central practice of the esoteric Ismaili Tariqah, it has been noted that its practice requires both **`ilm** and **`amal**, that is, knowledge and action. We have reflected in detail on the role of our eyes, ears and tongue in acquiring the inner meaning of our faith to progress in the search for spiritual enlightenment and happiness. We have understood how important it is to protect these three faculties from misuse, abuse and any other unethical behaviour, so that they do not create an obstacle in the path of spiritual progress. This is a matter of great concern to mu'mins who practise **`ibadat** and who wish to make preparations for their soul's "passage out of the physical life" into the eternal spiritual life. It is therefore crucial to ask: How can we ensure that our eyes, ears and tongue remain constantly pure and righteous?

The answer is clear and precise in our faith, Islam and in our **batini** Ismaili Tariqah where we are fortunate to have the continuous **nurani** guidance of the Imam of the time. Our faith teaches that all our senses are controlled by the mind, which is the centre of our existence. Further, we know that our mind is never empty or still: it is either occupied by positive thoughts or by negative or useless thoughts, which are the insinuations of our carnal soul. The holy Qur'an describes such thoughts as **waswasah** or the "whisperings of shaitan". In this context, the Divine guidance is that mu'mins should do constant **zikr** or remembrance of Allah, to prevent negative thoughts from entering or remaining in the mind. A useful analogy is of a very clean and pure house. Even if a fly ventures in from the outside, it will not linger because there is nothing for it to settle on. On the contrary, if a house is filthy, bacteria of all kinds are produced from within, let alone being invited in from the outside. In other words, by keeping our minds pure and positive through constantly remembering our faith, we can ensure that our eyes, ears, speech and other organs will always remain proper and pure.

A quick survey of Islamic teachings proves this point. Surah 3, ayat 191 mentions those mu'mins who remember Allah, sitting, standing or lying on their sides. In almost the same words in the GINAN "***Dur desh thi aayo vanjaro***", Pir Hasan Shah advises mu'mins: "***Sute bethe bhai rah chalante naam Sahebbi ko lijiye ji***", which means: "Remember Mawla sleeping, sitting or walking on your way." Throughout history, our Imams have given guidance about the importance of abundant and constant remembrance. Mawlana Mustansirbillah II

(*salawatullahi `alayhi*) writes in the book "**Pir Pandiyate Jawanmardi**" that a mu'min does constant **zikh**. Mawlana Shah Karim (*salawatullahi `alayhi*) reiterates this guidance in many of his farmans of the past four decades. In a farman made at Nairobi in 1986, he said: "**Remember to practise your faith, be regular in the practice of your faith and remember that thinking of Allah is not restricted in time. You may think of your faith when you go to the office, when you come back from the office, when you are in public meetings. Nobody asks you what you are thinking about. You are free to think about your faith any time that you are awake, any time during your lifetime.**" He has also many times said to the Jamat that whenever we have a moment, to remember "Ya Allah", "Ya Muhammad", "Ya Ali" or the name of any of our Imams. The great wisdom in this is that such mu'mins "**truly find peace and satisfaction in their hearts**" (Surah 13, ayats 27-28) through **zikh** as the Qur'an states, because all their senses and faculties are protected from the insinuations of the carnal soul and thus act ethically and properly. Further, the **`ibadat** of Baitu'l Khayal becomes free from the disturbance of **waswasah** or disturbing thoughts.

The **`ibadat** of **ism-i a`zam** of such mu'mins follows the pattern described in the Ginan composed by Sayyida Imam Begum: Concentrate on your **ism** or **bol**, which is recited so silently that no one around you can hear it. With this, she advises us to keep the understanding obtained from the Pir in our hearts. If mu'mins progress in **`ibadat** they can transcend the fear of birth and death. Such mu'mins partake in the life-giving nectar

which ensures eternal felicity in Paradise. She ends the Ginan by entreating Mawla to bless his slaves with **Nurani Didar**.

The Concept of `ilm or Knowledge in the Ismaili Tariqah

This article elaborates and reflects on the concept of `ilm or knowledge in the Ismaili Tariqah, because we have seen how important it is to have both `ilm and `amal or knowledge and `ibadat to progress in personal spiritual search. The Preamble of the Ismaili Constitution says: ***“The Imam’s ta`lim lights the murids’ path to spiritual enlightenment and vision.”*** How can this statement be understood?

Many Qur’anic ayats, verses of Ginans and farmans of our Imams have been referred to in these articles. Such religious guidance acts as `ilmu’l-**yaqin** or the knowledge of certainty for mu’mins who, when they follow it, eventually reach the stage of `aynu’l-**yaqin** or the eye of certainty. At this stage, they can see the spiritual realities with their own inner sight or the eyes of the heart.

An everyday example helps to understand the levels of `ilm in the Ismaili teachings. If a friend or family member travels to a far distant country and writes back describing an exotic fruit, this would be knowledge on the level of `ilmu’l-**yaqin**. When we can visit that country ourselves and see, touch and smell that particular fruit, it would be akin to reaching the stage of `aynu’l-**yaqin** or the eye of certainty. However, this is not the ultimate level of knowledge according to Ismaili teachings. The final stage is known as **Haqqu’l-yaqin** or the Truth of certainty.

In the example of the exotic fruit, at this final stage, when the fruit is eaten, it becomes part of one's existence.

In **`ibadat** a mu'min progresses from the **ta`lim** or **`ilmu'l-yaqin**, the knowledge of certainty, to the level of **`aynu'l-yaqin** or the eye of certainty. In other words, they actually witness the spiritual events which have been verbally explained in the Qur'an, Ginans, Farmans and other esoteric literature. Finally, the fortunate mu'min reaches the level of the Truth of certainty or **Haqqu'l-yaqin**. This is known as **fana fi'llah** or **asl mein wasil** or **mi`raj**. Pir describes this as "**Ham tum sanhiya ek hi hai**", which means "I and you, my Lord, are one." This is the stage of the merging of the mu'mins soul with the Nur of Allah.

In the **Brahm Prakash** of Pir Shams, we learn about how mu'mins receive knowledge in **`ibadat**. **`Ibadat** of **ism-i a`zam** is so crucial that without it, life is wasted, states Pir Shams. He says, "The one who possesses the insight gains the precious stone or diamond, but the blind one does not believe this." Pir Shams condemns the blind person, that is, the ignorant one who does not search for spiritual enlightenment. Similarly, in the Ginan "**Sakhi mahapad kerī vat**", Pir Sadardin describes several experiences during **`ibadat**, such as the manifestation of light, which appears like a shower of pearls. He says that at one stage the **bol** is recited in every pore of one's being. Further, when the concentration deepens to a certain point, the soul leaves the body. He says a mu'min has to pass through many stages, leaving the lower ones behind to reach the highest, such as the very Throne of Allah.

Why is it so important for us to heed the words of our Pirs and Imams, that is, why do we need **`ilmu'l-yaqin** or the knowledge of certainty? Knowledge of certainty is the **ta`lim**, which lights our paths to spiritual enlightenment and Didar. It empowers us, energises us and equips us with the appropriate tools and provisions for the spiritual journey. The understanding of the different levels of knowledge gives mu'mins the ambition and the strength of will to continue the spiritual search, knowing that there are higher levels to attain. Such knowledge assures us of our exalted status as human beings and makes us humbly aware and deeply grateful for the Divine blessings in the form of the Imam's **ta`lim**.

In the Ginan ***"Eji Satpanth vohori vira alaga na rahinye"***, Pir Shams advises mu'mins not to stray from the **Satpanth** or True Path and not to utter falsehoods with the lips which "drink the Nur of Mawla", that is, recite his holy name. He describes the condition of many human beings who have become so entangled in their material lives that they do not have even a moment to remember their Creator, Allah. Being self-centred and selfish, they cry "mine, it is mine", they are enchained by their egos, and they squander away their precious lives, because they fail to understand the true purpose and significance of human life. He says that a large segment of humanity is unaware of the real essence and fails to recognise the Imam of the time. He counsels the listeners to live their lives carefully, that is, maintain a balance, because human life is too valuable to be wasted.

Pir Shams advises mu'mins to do good deeds and act charitably. Ethical actions or **`amal** together with prayers earn merit or spiritual benefit, which is the only thing to accompany our souls on the eternal journey. The Ginan ends on the highest note of hope that the veils of ignorance and darkness will eventually be lifted and the eyes will behold the Light of Allah in His manifestation, His **mazhar**, who is Imam-i zaman. The holy Qur'an describes this glorious experience in Surah 75, ayat 22-23 as: ***"That day will some faces be resplendent, looking towards their Lord."***

As we read in the pages above, it is only when mu'mins understand what sublime knowledge, enlightenment and Didar are there to be experienced, that they will continue to strive and struggle for **`ilm** and **`amal** without being deflected or becoming despondent. Mawlana Rumi has written some down-to-earth advice in his Kulliyat-i Shams Tabrizi. He says: ***"If you are seeking the eternal kingdom, then (in addition to knowledge) try to crush your ego and erase your self-centredness, that is, strive always to accomplish good deeds."***

Let us strengthen our determination by making note of Mawlana Shah Karim (*salawatullahi `alayhi's*) **mubarak** words in London on 6th August, 1994:

"And remember that the bol is a symbol. It is an access point in your search, but it is a symbol. Seek through the Light and the name of Hazrat Ali to come close to He Who is above all else. ... Because the bol is a link, it is a way to come closer and closer during your lifetime to that Light. And one day, there will only be that Light, there will be no physical context left in

the life of each individual. Therefore, seek out that Light and practise regularly, and be discreet.”