

Sura al-Asr



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Sura 103, called al-Asr, is one of the early Meccan Suras, named after the word *al-asr* in the first sentence after the *basmala* (the opening sentence for all Suras but one *bismillah erahman erahim*), meaning ‘epoch’.

As Michael Sells tells us, this Sura ‘offers a condensed version of the ethos of the early Meccan

revelations’.¹

Wal’ asr

Innal insaana lafee khusr

Il lal lazeena aamanu wa ‘amilus saali haati

wa tawa saw bil haqqi wa tawa saw bis sabr

I swear by the passage of time

that a human is surely in the state of loss

except for those who believe and do good deeds

and exhort one another to hold fast to the truth,

*and exhort one another to steadfastness.*²

In the opening verses, the Sura tells us that everything under the moon will perish, just as every passed second and every passed hour, once gone, is gone forever. Seen as a linear quality, time irrevocably goes on, leaving the past and everything that ever happened behind with every click of the clock.

Likewise, when the bells tolls and the time to spend in this earthly body has come to an end, our body dies. As the Bible tells us ‘For everything there is a season ... all go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.’³ In a similar vein, the Quran tells us that ‘all things are bound to perish except Himself. His is the judgment and to Him you shall be returned.’⁴

Life is like a Buddhist mandala. It takes an immense amount of work to make it as beautiful as possible, but once it is finished, the mandala is erased.

In another reality, the reality of our soul, we can experience time differently by actually *not* experiencing but transcending time (as in meditation), just as we can transcend death by ‘dying before we die’, but the fact remains that once we come out of such peak experiences, the clock hasn’t stopped ticking and our body hasn’t stopped ageing.

What happens after we die is a mystery that only mystics can tell us about, but whatever is true, it is clear that, if death is more than an unconscious state of sleep from which we don’t wake up, we cannot take anything material with us, as only our immaterial soul will continue its journey.

¹ Michael Sells: *Approaching the Qur’án. The early Revelations*. White Cloud Press, 1999, p. 117.

² The translations from the Quran are from Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, Goodwork Books 2013.

³ Ecclesiastes 3.

⁴ 28: 88. ‘Himself’ is usually translated as ‘His Face’.

As Inayat Khan tells us in *The Soul, Whence and Whither?*,⁵ the soul, free from its earthly prison and free from the bondage of time, will undertake the journey back to the Source, traveling through the world of clear understanding, offering us an unbiased view on our life on earth. In this realm of the djinns, we can see all our deeds in total clarity, free from emotional issues, softening circumstances and excuses.

After this purifying and purgatorial experience, the purged soul travels on to the world of the angels. As the soul mirrors its surroundings, there it adopts the atmosphere of the angels, bathing on love, harmony and beauty and enjoying the nearness of the One: everything returns to the Face of the One.

Iman



A key word in this Sura is the word translated as faith, *iman* (pronounced as *imān*). The traditional explanation of *iman* follows the famous *Hadith of Gabriel*. In this Hadith, the angel Gabriel questions the Prophet Muhammad on six articles of faith, namely to have faith in God, His angels, His books, His prophets, and the Day of Judgment.⁶

In the English language faith is equivalent to belief. We can believe in something or not and when we do, we can later find out our belief or faith was ungrounded. The Arabic *iman* refers to a faith in the Truth (the *wazifa haqq* that appears later in this Sura), so is not only an unshakable faith, it is a faith beyond belief or conviction, grounded in the Truth of being.

As Inayat Khan says, 'Belief is a thing, but faith is a living being.'⁷

As we explained in *Draw us closer*, Inayat Khan makes a strong statement not to mistake faith for believe. He distinguishes four levels, ranging from outer belief in what others say or in what is written in books, to the inner belief through reason. Real faith, the fourth and deepest level, is rooted deep in the heart. Only this last level can be seen as a translation of the Arabic *iman*.

This is a faith that 'He has engraved faith on their very hearts and has strengthened them with a spirit of His own.'⁸ The Latin 'credo' for 'I believe' expresses the same feeling, as the root of this Latin word is connected with the word for heart (*cor*).

The Prophet Muhammad defines faith by saying, 'Faith is a knowledge in the heart, a voicing with the tongue, and an activity with the limbs':⁹ faith is not a conviction, it also asks you to act upon it.

⁵ Lectures at the Suresnes Summer School, 1923, Volume I.

⁶ See *Unity and Diversity*, the chapter on Islam for more on this Hadith.

⁷ *The Sufi Message of Hazrat Inayat Khan, Volume IX*, p. 40.

⁸ Quran 58: 22.

⁹ S. Murata & W.C. Chittick: *The Vision of Islam*. I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1995, p. 37.

This acting is explained in the final three lines of the Sura, asking us to ‘work justice’, and to ‘council one another to truth and to patience.’¹⁰

Good deeds

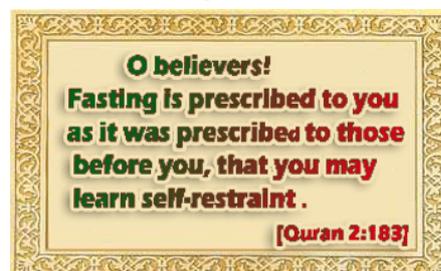


By its root, the word for good deeds (*salihati*) is connected with the second Pillar of Faith *salat*, the Islamic obligation to pray five times a day: to pray by definition is a good deed. But praying is not the only good deed. Just as the Jewish tradition has its *mitzvot*, which means obligations but also has the connection of performing non-obligatory good deeds, the Islamic tradition has *al-baqiyat al-ṣaliḥat*, lasting righteous deeds. In this expression, we can recognize the word *salihati* in combination with *baqa*, the everlasting effect as a result of surrendering (*fana*). We find this expression in two Suras, also from the Meccan period:

Wealth and children are an adornment of the life of this world. But deeds of lasting merits are better rewarded by your Lord and a far better source of hope (18: 46).

God increases his guidance to those who follow guidance; and lasting good works are better in the sight of your Lord and are most rewarding (19: 76).

Similar to many other sacred texts from different traditions, the Quran warns us in this Sura not to be attached to or to hoard and amass material wealth, as the only thing we can take with us on our next journey is what is imprinted upon our soul. This is a lesser-known aspect of *sawm*, the fourth Pillar of Faith that prescribes fasting. *Sawm* means abstaining and is broader than abstaining from food during the month of Ramadan. In Sura al-Baqara (the Cow), the Quran prescribes the rules for fasting, starting at 2: 183. The paragraph ends with:



Do not consume one another’s property by unjust means, nor offer it as a bribe to the authorities, so that you deliberately and wrongfully devour a part of other people’s wealth.¹¹

Our earthly heritage may last for some time for those who have come after us, but that too eventually will perish. All that in the end remains is the imprint you made on earth, your *karma* as the total of your deeds.¹²

When these deeds are in accordance with the purpose of your soul, they will add to the story of Creation and will be everlasting (*baqa*, as in of *al-baqiyat al-*

¹⁰ Translation Michael Sells.

¹¹ Quran 2: 188.

¹² This topic and the Day of Judgment is discussed more fully in *Attunement, Direction and Forgiving. Meditations on Sura al-Fatiha*.

ṣaliḥat). When not, they will burn away when the soul in its arc of ascend journeys through the sphere of *malakut*, the realm of pure knowledge.¹³

Truth



The last two lines offer two examples of these everlasting righteous deeds that accompany the soul on its journey back to the source. The social context is clear and in keeping with the third Pillar of Faith *zakat*, offering alms, for the Quran does not ask us to practice these good deeds for ourselves, but to help each other to find the straight path towards the Truth and towards Patience.

Truth (Arabic: *haqq*) is a wazifa, one of the Beautiful Names of the One. *Haqq* is used exclusively for the One (*al-Haqq*) and never for humankind, as in the end, there is only one Truth and one Reality, as expressed in the Islamic creed *la ilaha illa'llah* (the first Pillar of Faith).

As Inayat Khan says in his *The Unity of Religious Ideals*:

[S]piritual realization is called the truth. There are many facts but only one truth. The facts can be put into words but not the truth, for God is truth, the soul is truth, the real self of man is truth.¹⁴

In his Religious Gathekas, he connects love with truth:

The moment love is produced, that person does not need to go and find out where the Truth is, the Truth is born. For it is the loving one, the loving heart which is capable of understanding, of comprehending Truth.

The reason is that the Truth is not outside of self, it is within us.¹⁵

Patience



The last line asks us to help one another to be patient. The Arabic *sabur* for patience is the last wazifa of the list of ninety-nine and is considered to be of paramount importance in all Sufi handbooks. All agree it is also one of the hardest qualities to master.

Patience in relation to faith is like the head in relation to [the rest of] the body.

Patience is staying away from acts of disobedience, keeping quiet while sipping the agonies of misfortune, and showing contentment when poverty invades the arena of [your] livelihood.

Patience is giving up complaint.¹⁶

¹³ See the chapter *angels and different worlds* in *Unity and Diversity*.

¹⁴ Inayat Khan: *The Unity of Religious Ideals*. The Sufi Movement, Camelot Press, n.d. p. 276.

¹⁵ Religious Gatheka nr. 43. *Complete Works of Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan*, 1923 II, p. 816.

¹⁶ A.D. Knysh (transl.): *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism (the Risalat)*. Garnet Publishing, 2007, p. 197 – 198.

Patience means not to act on impulse or in a hastily manner. By the root it means to endure trials and tribulations without complaints, so it is one of the characteristics of the dervish who accepts everything as a gift of the One. The Persian poet 'Attar expressed this dervish quality in different stories.¹⁷

This form of contentment is one of the higher stations of the soul. As the Quran says, 'You who believe, seek help through patience and prayer, surely God is with the steadfast.'¹⁸

Music and Meditation

Here is an inspired melody with some of the key words of Sura al-Asr.

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of three staves. The lyrics are written below the notes, and chord symbols are placed above the staff lines. The lyrics are: Bis-mil-lah e-rah-man e-ra-him wa'l a-sr Ya I-man Al-lah Haqq Al-lah Ya I-man Al-lah Sa-bur Al-lah -

Words Trad. Arabic (Quran, Sura 103)

Melody W&A van der Zwan

Meditation after the chant

Focus on your breath.

Feel how with every inbreath you receive the gift of life and with every outbreath you give back to life.

You receive, you give.

Do this for a while.

Then concentrate on what you can give, what footprint you want to leave behind in this world on the physical, the psychological and the spiritual realm.

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¹⁷ See *The Sufi Path of Love and Understanding*, second edition, p. 166.

¹⁸ Quran 2: 153. See also i.a. 16: 127.