

With the Name of Allah, Most Merciful, Ever Merciful.

ON THE STATEMENT, “He who knows himself, knows his Lord.”

From the Fatawa of Shaykh-ul-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah, vol. 16 (Tafsir, Part 3), pp. 348-350 in the section on the Tafsir of Surat al-‘Alaq (That Which Clings, no. 96).

This forgetfulness – Man’s forgetting his self and what is within his self – is due to his forgetting his Lord and His Revelation. The Exalted says, “Do not be like those who forgot Allah, so He caused them to forget themselves. They are the rebellious transgressors!” (al-Hashr, the Banishment, 59:19) The Exalted further said about the hypocrites, “They have forgotten Allah, so He has forgotten them!” (al-Tawbah, Repentance, 9:67); and He said, “Thus did Our Signs come to you, but you forgot them – thus today will you be forgotten!” (Ta Ha, 20:126)

His statement, “Do not be like those who forgot Allah, so He caused them to forget themselves,” necessitates that [their] forgetting of Allah was the cause of their forgetting themselves, and that when they forgot Allah, He punished them by making them forget themselves.”

Their forgetting themselves means their turning away, heedlessness and non-recognition of what they previously knew of the situation of their own selves. It also means that they leave the matters which benefit their own souls, since they do not remember themselves in a way which benefits or reforms them; were they to remember Allah (dhikr), they would remember themselves.

This is opposite to the statement, “He who knows himself, knows his Lord,” which some people narrate from the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, but this is not from the words of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace; it is not in any of the collections of Hadith, and no chain of transmitters is known for it.

It is narrated, if it is authentic, in one of the previous scriptures, “O Man! Know thy self: thou wilt know thy Lord.” These words, whether their meaning is correct or corrupt, cannot be used as proof in argument, for they have not been established as the words of an infallible authority. However, if the words are explained with a correct meaning, the correctness of that meaning is known, whether or not these words indicate it.

The established statement is what is in the Qur’an, which is His saying, “Do not be like those who forgot Allah, so He caused them to forget themselves,” which indicates that forgetting the Lord surely entails forgetting the self. Therefore, whoever remembers Allah and does not forget Him, remembers himself. Were he to forget himself – whether he remembers Allah or forgets Him – his forgetting himself is not a cause of him forgetting His Lord. Hence, since the ayat indicates that Man’s forgetting himself is due to his forgetting his Lord, it follows that the one who remembers his Lord does not suffer this forgetting of his own self.

Remembrance means recollection of what was known before. Hence, whoever remembers what he knew of his Lord, remembers what he knew of his own self, for he

was born upon the Natural State (al-Fitrah), which includes Gnosis, Love and Tawhid of his Lord. Thus, if he does not forget his Lord whom he knew, but rather remembers Him in the way which entails Love and Gnosis, and Tawhid of Him, he remembers his self, perceiving what was there beforehand of the Gnosis of Allah, and His Love and Tawhid.

ON THE STATEMENT, “He who knows himself, knows his Lord.”

From al-Hawi li l-Fatawi of Imam al-Suyuti, Dar al-Kutub al-‘Arabi, Beirut, vol. 2 pp. 451-5.

With the Name of Allah, Most Merciful, Ever Merciful. All Praise belongs to Allah. Peace be upon His Chosen Slaves. There have been many questions about the meaning of the hadith which has become widespread on people’s tongues, “He who knows himself, knows his Lord.” A totally incorrect meaning could be understood from it ... so I have written these pages to clarify the situation and remove obscurities. There are two aspects to this discussion:

Firstly: [Its authenticity.] This hadith is not authentic. Al-Nawawi was asked about it in his fatawa; he answered, “It is not established.” Ibn Taymiyyah said: [The original manuscript is blank here.] Al-Zarkashi said that Ibn al-Sam’ani said that it is the saying of Yahya b. Mu’adh al-Razi.¹

Secondly: Its meaning. Al-Nawawi said that it means that he who knows himself to have weakness and poverty and servitude to Allah, knows his Lord to have Power, Lordship, Absolute Perfection and Exalted Attributes.

Shaykh Taj al-Din Ibn ‘Ata’illah [of Alexandria] said in Lata’if al-Minan: I heard our shaykh Abu ‘l-‘Abbas of Murcia saying, “There are two interpretations of this hadith. The first is that he who knows his self with its humiliation, incapacity and poverty, knows Allah with His Might, Power and Independence. Hence, knowledge of the self comes first; gnosis of Allah is afterwards. The second is that someone’s knowing himself indicates that he must have known Allah beforehand. The first is the state of the travellers; the second is that of the ecstatic.”

Abu Talib of Makkah said in Qut al-Qulub, “It means that when you recognise your attributes in dealing with creation, that you dislike criticism of your actions and people finding fault with what you do, you recognise the attributes of your Creator: that He also dislikes that, so be content with His Decree and behave towards Him as you would like others to behave towards you.”

Shaykh ‘Izz al-Din [b. ‘Abd al-Salam] said, “One of the secrets of this hadith has become apparent to me, and it must be unveiled and described clearly. It is that Allah, Glorified and Exalted, has placed this Spirit (Ruh) in a physical body as a subtle divine force in a human skeleton, as an indication of His Oneness and Lordship. There are ten ways in which this conclusion can be inferred:

¹ Abu Zakariyya Yahya b. Muadh al-Razi (d. 258/871), one of the Salaf revered by the Sufis. See e.g. al-Hujwiri, *The Kashf al-Mahjub*, trans. R.A. Nicholson, pp. 122-3; al-Attar, *Tadhkirat al-Auliya’*, extracts trans. A.J. Arberry, Penguin, pp. 179-182.

1. Since this human form needs the spirit to cause movement and manage all its matters, we know that the world must have a Prime Mover and Disposer of all Matters.
2. Since the disposer of the body, i.e. the spirit, is one, we know that the Prime Mover of the world must be One, having no partner in His Disposing and Decree. Further, there cannot be a partner in His Dominion. Cf. Qur'an, "If there were, in the heavens and the earth, other gods besides Allah, there would have been confusion in both!" (21:22); "Say: if there had been gods with Him – as they say – behold, they would certainly have sought out a way to the Lord of the Throne!" (17:42); "No son did Allah beget, nor is there any god along with Him: (if there were many gods) behold, each god would have taken away what he had created, and some would have lorded it over others!" (23:91).
3. Since the body cannot move without the will of the spirit and its causing movement, we know that Allah wills everything that happens in the universe. No mover moves in good or evil without His Decree, Will and Pre-estimation.
4. Since nothing moves in the body without the spirit knowing and feeling it, for none of the movements and cessations of the body are unknown to the spirit, we know that not even an atom's weight in the earth or heaven escapes Him.
5. No part of the body is closer to the spirit than any other part, but the spirit is close to every part of the body. Similarly, no part of creation is closer to Him or further away from Him than any other part, but He is near to every thing.
6. Since the spirit existed before the body, and will exist once the body has disintegrated, we know that Allah Exalted existed before His creation and will exist after His creation. He has always existed. He will always exist. He is Sanctified above ceasing to exist.
7. Since the "how-ness" of the spirit in the body is unknown, we know that He is Sanctified above "how-ness."
8. Since the "whereabouts" of the spirit in the body is unknown, we know that He is beyond "how-ness" and "where-ness", and cannot be described with "how" and "where." Just as the spirit exists throughout the body, with no part of the body being without spirit, similarly The Truth, Glorified and Exalted, exists in every place; no place is without Him. He is beyond space and time.
9. Since the spirit in the body cannot be seen with the eyes, nor represented in an image, we know that sight cannot overtake Him, nor can He be represented in images. He cannot be compared to suns and moons. "There is nothing like unto Him. He is All-Hearing, All-Seeing." (42:11)

10. Since the spirit cannot feel or touch, we know that He is beyond feeling, body, sensation and touch.

Hence, this is the meaning of the Prophet's statement, "He who knows himself, knows his Lord," so Felicity for whoever attains gnosis and acknowledge's his own sins." [End of quote from Shaykh 'Izz al-Din b. 'Abd al-Salam.]

There is another explanation for this hadith: you know that your attributes are the opposite of your Lord's attributes. Hence, whoever knows his self to be vanishing, knows his Lord to be eternal. He who knows his self to be harsh and prone to mistakes, knows his Lord to be Fulfilling in Promise, Generous. He who knows his self to be as it is, knows his Lord to be as He is. Know that you have no way of [totally] knowing yourself as you are, so can there be any way for you to know Him as He is? It is as though his statement, "He who knows himself, knows his Lord," makes an impossibility conditional on an impossibility, for it is impossible for you to know your self, in quality and quantity. If you are unable to describe yourself, which is contained between your sides, with how and where, nor does it have form and neither is it visible, then how can it be possible for your servanthood to describe the Lordship with how and where, when He is beyond how and where. I say:

Say to the one who understands what I say	A brief statement, for explanation would be lengthy!
It is a concealed secret, way below it	Are the necks of real men smitten, by Allah!
You do not know yourself, nor	Who you are, nor how to arrive!
No! You do not know attributes deposited	Within you, intellects are dazed in their subtleties!
Where within you is the Spirit in its substance	Do you see it, do you see how it roams?
These breaths, can you enumerate them?	No! Nor do you know when they will cease upon you!
Where are your intellect and understanding	When sleep overcomes? Answer me, O ignorant one!
You eat bread, you do not know	How it moves within you, or how you urinate!
How can you know the One who settled over the Throne?	Do not say, "How did He settle, how did he descend?"
"How did He appear, how will He be seen?"	By my life, that is nothing but vain talk!
For Him there is no How or Where	He is the Lord of "How", and "How" is in flux!
He is above "Above", He has no Above-ness	He is in all places, He ceases not to exist!
Majestic in Essence, Attributes and Highness	Exalted is His Power over anything I can say!

Al-Qunawi said in his commentary on the Ta'arruf: Some of the people have said about this hadith that it comes under the impossible, because the door to knowing the self has been barred by the Lawgiver, by His statement, "Say: The Spirit is from the matters of my Lord!" (17:85) He has thus alerted us to the fact that since Man is incapable of fully understanding his self, which is created and is the closest of [created] things to him, then he is even more incapable of knowing his Creator. In fact, he is incapable of understanding the reality of his own speech and senses, such as hearing, sight, and smell, for people have well-known disagreements about the nature of these physical phenomena which surround Man. How then is the situation with regards to knowing the Great, the Most Exalted? [End of quote from Qunawi]

We have thus mentioned several views on the meaning of this narration, and Allah knows best.

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