

Our Responsibilities during the Period of Occultation of the Present Imam



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This text presents based on Hadith the two main duties of the Shi'a Muslims during the Occultation of our Present Imam (atfsh).

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Our Responsibilities during the Period of Occultation of the Present Imam By Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi
15th Sha'ban 1404 17th May 1984 3360 Sexsmith Road – Richmond British Columbia – Canada – V6X
2H8

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As we are approaching the 15th of Sha'ban, the Shi'ahs all over the world are preparing themselves for celebrating the birth anniversary of our Present Imam, Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi (upon whom be peace). On the occasion of his birthday, we gather together in mosques and religious centres where speakers and scholars are invited to talk about the Present Imam; people felicitate each other and are presented with sweets, etc.

But the question is, do our responsibilities in regard to the Present Imam came to an end after this celebration of the 15th of Sha'ban? No, not at all. The responsibilities which the Shi'ahs have during the period of occultation (ghaybah) have been explained by the Imams of Ahlu 'l –Bayt in many *ahadith*.

After considering the various sayings of our Imams, we can conclude that there are two main responsibilities of the Shi'ahs during the period of the occultation of the Present Imam. These two responsibilities are:

1. Knowledge of the Present Imam.

2. Awaiting hopefully for his victorious appearance. In this short article I intend, with the help of Allah, to elaborate these two responsibilities.

After submitting ourselves to Allah and believing in the messengership of Muhammad (upon whom be peace), our first duty is to know the Imam of our time. This matter can be studied from three aspects:

- a) The reality of knowing the Imam.
- b) The importance of knowing the Imam from hadith's point of view.
- c) Why knowledge of the Imam is necessary?

The Reality of Knowing The imam

Knowledge (ma'rifah) means to be acquainted with someone or something. For example, the "knowledge" of the Prophet means studying his biography, understanding his claim of prophethood, his aims, and his teachings, etc. To know the history of a person, his ideas and teachings means to have "knowledge" of him.

The first duty of the Shi'ahs, according to the *ahadith* of the Imams, is to know the Imam of their time. What does this mean? Does it mean only to know that; Our Imam was born on the 15th of Sha'ban, 255 A.H.; there were four representatives of the Imam during the lesser occultation (al-ghaybaha al-sughrah). These four representatives were: 'Uthman ibn Sa'id al-'Amri, from 260/875-6 to 265/879; Muhammad ibn 'Uthman al-'Amri, from his father's death until his own in 305/917; al-Husayn ibn Rawhan-Nawbakhti, from then until 326/937-8; and finally 'Ali bin Muhammad as-Samari, until his death in 329/940-1; the greater occultation (al-ghaybah al-kubra) began in 329 A.H./940 A.D.?

Does our duty about knowing the Imam of our time end at these historical informations? Surely not; the reality of the knowledge of the Imam is not just the knowing of these historical facts. Even the non-Shi'ahs are aware of these facts.

So what is the knowledge of the Imam? To fulfill our responsibility in regard to the knowledge of the Present Imam, we have to study the following matters:

1. The need for an Imam and a "proof" (hujjah) of God. In other words, the significance of the divine guidance which takes the form of imamat after the finality of nubuwwah (prophethood) and risalah (messengership).
2. The reality of imamat and wilayah. That is, the nature of the relationship of an Imam with the Prophet and Allah; and the relationship of the Shi'ahs with the Imam.

3. The evidence of the birth of our twelfth Imam.
4. The proofs that the Present Imam is the son of Imam Hasan al-‘Askari.
5. The important events of the lesser occultation.
6. The causes of occultation.
7. Is it possible for a man to live for over thousand years?
8. The teachings and message of the Present Imam for his Shi‘ahs.
9. The signs which are to appear before the appearance of Imam Mahdi.
10. Studying the *ahadith* describing the appearance of Imam Mahdi.
11. Is the Imam aware of, and in connect with, his people?
12. If his presence is felt in the Shi‘ah community, then what is the nature of his presence?
13. The proofs of the imamat of our twelfth Imam.
14. Is it possible for an Imam to guide his community while he is in occultation?

These are some of the important matters which must be studied by the Shi‘ahs.

The Knowledge of The imam from hadith’s point of view

The Prophet and the Imams of Ahlu ‘l-Bayt have very clearly explained the importance of knowing the Imam of the time. From these sayings we can understand that survival of our faith is based on our knowledge of the Imam of the time. If one lacks the knowledge of the Imam of his time, all his deeds will be valueless.

Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be peace) said, “One who dies and he does not believe in (lit. “have”) an Imam, his death will be the death of an unbeliever (jahiliyyah).”¹

Imam Ja‘far a☪-☪adiq (upon whom be peace) said, “One who dies and he does not believe in an Imam, his death will be the death of an unbeliever. The people will not be excused unless they know their Imam.”²

Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (upon whom be peace) said, “Everyone who worships Allah, the Almighty and Great, and goes to a great length for it but does not believe in an Imam appointed by Allah, then his efforts are unacceptable, he is astray and lost. Allah rejects his deeds ... And if he dies in this state, he has died the death of unbelievers and hypocrites. And ... you should know that the unjust leaders and their followers are far from the religion of Allah.”³

Imam Hasan al-‘Askari (upon whom be peace) said, “One who believes in the Imams who came after the Messenger of Allah and does not believe in my son (Muhammad al-Mahdi), he is like the one who believes in all the prophets and messengers (of Allah) and then rejects the prophethood of (Muhammad, the last) Messenger of Allah.”⁴

The importance of knowing the Imam of the time can very clearly be understood from these *ahadith*. From the Islamic point of view, if a person believes in Allah, has faith in Muhammad and the Qur’an but does not know the Imam of his own time, his faith is of no value. And surely this knowledge about the Imam does not only cover the historical informations about him.

Why Knowledge of the Imam is Necessary?

One of the basic principles of Islam is “love of God” and “love of the Messenger of Allah”. That is, our belief in Allah and His Messenger must have the scent of “love” (*hubb*). Even the Qur’an uses the words “faith and belief” (*iman*) and “love” (*hubb*) interchangeable words. Islam expects its followers to base their faith on love. This can be seen in the following verses of the Qur’an:

... those who believe, they are stronger in love for Allah... (2: 165)

Say (O Muhammad): If you love Allah, then follow me, Allah will love you and forgive you your faults, and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. (3:31)

Say: If your fathers, your sons, your brethren, your spouses, your kinsfolk, the property which you have acquired, the trade (whose slackness you fear) and the houses which you like—are more dearer (“beloved”) to you than Allah, his messenger and striving in His way, then wait till Allah brings about His decision (about you on the day of judgement); and Allah does not guide the transgressing people. (9:24)

Similarly, all the Shi‘ah *‘ulama’* agree that in case of *imamat* also, besides believing in the Imam, we must also love him. And so, we find that the principle of “*tawalla*” has found an important place in the Shi‘ah beliefs. Just to believe that Amiru ’l-mu‘minin ‘Ali and the other Imams were the most superior, most knowledgeable, most courageous, etc, in their time is not enough; a Shi‘ah is one who, besides believing in these things, also loves his Imams.

But the question is, can a person love someone without knowing him? No. Love comes after knowledge of that particular person or thing.

At this point, we can conclude that the real Shi‘ah is one who believes in the Present Imam and also loves him. And as love cannot exist without knowing the Imam, so a Shi‘ah has an obligation to know the Imam of his time as much as he can. Without knowledge, one cannot love his Imam; and without loving the Imams, the Prophet and Allah, the faith of that person will be imperfect.

This love of the Imam is so important even in the view of Allah, that He has named it as a “reward for the messengership of Muhammad”:

Say (O Muhammad): ‘I do not ask of you any reward for it (messenger ship) but love for my near relatives’ ...” (42:23)

Which Type of Knowledge Can Create Love?

There are two ways of acquiring knowledge about a person or a thing:

a) knowledge based on research and study (*tahqiq*) and b) the knowledge based on following the others (taqlid).

Tahqiq means a person himself acquires the knowledge by studying until he reaches to the level of certainty and conviction; whereas taqlid means a person blindly follows someone else in that matter. He himself does not study. He just believes in that particular matter because he trusts someone who told him to believe so.

From the Shi’ite point of view, in the matters of belief, it is obligatory for every Muslim to accept them and believe in them only after achieving conviction of their truth. To blindly follow others in matters of belief (like *tawhid*, *nubuwwah*, *imamat*, *qiyamat*) is forbidden. The faith of a person who is a Muslim just because of the influence of the family or the society does not stand on strong foundation, neither will it be valuable. He would not be able to defend himself against the propaganda of the anti-Islamic forces.

We see that many Muslims who were religious in their own country, when they come to the West their religious foundation is destroyed. The main cause behind this destruction of faith is not Islam, it is the “blind following” of these Muslims.

In their own homelands, they were Muslim just because of their society and family; and as soon as they leave the society and the family, the foundation of their “religious beliefs” is lost, and so they are easily exposed to the germs of *kufir* in the Western countries.

If their religious foundation had been on *tahqiq*, the Western or the Eastern society makes no difference for them; and they would be immuned from the germs of *kufir*. The Qur’an clearly condemns blind following in the matters of belief:

And when it is said to them, “Come now to what Allah has sent down, and the Messengers,” they say, “Enough for us is what we found our fathers doing”. What, even if their fathers had knowledge of naught and were not (rightly-guided?) (5: 104)

And certainly We have created for hell many of the jinn and the men; (because) they have minds (lit. “hearts”) (but) with which they do not understand, and they have eyes (but) with which they

do not see, and they have ears (but) with which they do not hear; they are as cattle, nay, they are worst; they are heedless ones. (7: 179)

The last verse clearly shows that those who follow others blindly in the matters of belief (and do not use their own power of perception) are worst, in the view of Allah, than even the animals.

Imamat is also a part of the matters of belief (*uḥuluḍ-dīn*) and so, even in this matter the Shi'ahs have to follow the same method of believing only after achieving certainty and conviction about the truth of the Imams.

It is absolutely necessary for the Shi'ahs of our time to seek knowledge of our Present Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi (upon whom be peace) so that their faith may rest on strong foundations; not on shaky foundations of blind following. It is this faith, springing from knowledge, which can create love in the hearts of the faithfuls.

1. Ha'iri, Shaykh 'Ali Yazdi; *Ilzamu 'n-Na'ib fi lthbatiHujjati '1-Ga'ib*, p. 5
2. aḥ-ḥafi, Luḥfullah; *Muntakhabu '1-Athar*, (part 10, chapter 5, hadith No. 5) p. 514.
3. Shaykh Kulayni, *Uḥulu '1-Kafi*, (kitabu '1-hujjah, babma'rifati '1-imam, hadith 8).
4. Khazzaz al-Qummi, *Kifayatu '1-Athar*, p. 291.

The second main duty during the period of occultation is known as *intidhar*; which means “waiting (for the appearance of the Imam)”. We shall study this matter from two aspects:

1. The importance of *intidhar* from *hadith's* point of view.
2. The reality of *intidhar*.

The importance of Intidhar

In the *ahadith* of the Imams, *intidhar* (hopefully waiting for the victorious appearance of the Imam) has been mentioned as the second main duty of the Shi'ahs. *Intidhar* in its real sense is such a sacred deed that it has been named as “*ibadat*” in the following *ahadith*:

1. “One who waits for the appearance of Imam Mahdi is like a martyr who was braided in own blood in the way of Allah.”¹
2. “The one who dies among you while he is waiting for the appearance of Imam Mahdi, he is like the one who is in the tent of the Imam Mahdi...nay, rather like the one who has fought with the Imam ... rather, like the one who was martyred while fighting with the Prophet.”²

There are many other *ahadith* which convey the same idea with a little difference in the expression. But what does this “waiting” mean which has been elevated to the degree of an *ibadat* like *jihad*?

The Reality of Intidhar

Does *intidhar* mean just to wait without doing anything to reform and improve our society? No. The *intidhar* which is elevated to the level of jihad and shahadat, is the *intidhar* which follows love of the Imam. It is similar to the waiting of a lover for his beloved.

When someone from our family or friends goes to study or work in another country, we long to see him and we “wait” for his return. But this waiting does not mean that we do not have any connection with him during his absence. We try to do everything possible to make his stay in the foreign country happy.

When we know that he is going to come back, we begin to prepare the facilities for him so that he would be happy during his stay at home. The true sense in “waiting for the appearance of the Present Imam” also has a similar meaning. “Waiting for the Imam” does not mean that we should just let the affairs of ourselves, our family, our community and society go on from bad to worst, hoping that the Imam would come and reform all the corruption and disorder.

If our “waiting” is based on true belief in, and knowledge of, the Imam, we will try our best to reform our behaviours, our way of living, our way of thinking, etc, hoping that when the Imam appears, he shall be pleased to see us.

Going back to the example given above, before our family-member or friend returns back from where he is working or studying, we stay in contact with him by the means of correspondence and telephone. In the same way, during the period of the occultation of the Present Imam, there exists a “postal system” between the Shi‘ahs and their Imam.

Of course, in this “postal system” only we write the letters; nay, rather our actions and deeds write the letter on our behalf. To understand this more clearly, read the following: According to our *ahadith*, every Thursday night, the scrolls of deeds of all the human beings are presented to the Present Imam. The cause of our Imam’s happiness and pride or sorrow and grief (whatever the case may be), are the scrolls of deeds of the Shi‘ahs.

When he looks at the scrolls of deeds of the Shi‘ahs and finds that most of them are full of wrong and un-Islamic deeds, his sorrow and grief knows no bound.

So, in other words, these scrolls of deeds are our weekly letters which we send to our Imam during the period of the occultation. If we want to keep the Imam happy and proud, we should write good news in our letters to him; and that means we have to be careful in our daily lives and see that whatever we do is not against the laws of the shari‘ah.

In conclusion, we can say that the one who is truly waiting for the Imam (*muntadhir*) is one who feels the presence of his Imam all the times, and tries to live in such a way which would make the Imam happy.

At the end of this article, I would like to present the translation of an invocation (*du‘a’*) which has reached to us from our Present Imam, Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi (may Allah speed his appearance). By reading this *du‘a’*, every member of the Islamic community can understand what the Imam expects from him.

O Allah!

Bless us with

success in obeying (You);

farness from sins;

sincerity in intention;

cognition of (our) limits;

bless us with guidance and steadfastness; guide our tongues to rightness and wisdom;

fill up our hearts with knowledge and cognition;

purify our bellies from haram and doubtful (foods);

restrain our hands from injustice and theft;

lower our eyes from immorality and breach of faith;

close our ears to nonsense talks and backbitings.

(O Allah!) Bless

our *‘ulama’* with piety and preaching;

the students with the spirit of hard working and interest;

the audience (of the preacher) with the power to follow;

the sick Muslims with cure and repose;

the dead Muslims with mercy and forgiveness;

the old with prestige and patience;

the young with obedience and repentance;

the women with modesty and chastity;

the rich with humbleness and generosity;

the poor with patience and satisfaction;

the mujahidin with help and victory;

the prisoners with freedom and comfort;

the rulers with justice and compassion;

the citizens with equity and good way of life;

and bless the pilgrims with means of travel and expenses;

and accept their *hajj* and *umrah* which You have made obligatory on them;

(accept our prayers) with Your grace and mercy,

O the most Merciful of the mercifuls.³

Suggested Reading

The following books on the Present Imam (upon whom be peace) are recommended for the general readers:

1. An Inquiry Concerning al-Mahdi

by Sayyid Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr, published by WOFIS,

P. O. Box 2245, Tehran, Iran.

2. The Revolution of Imam Mahdi

By Murtadha Mutaharri,

3. Kitab al-Irshad

(The last chapter of)

by Shaykh al-Mufid,

4. The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam

By Jassim M. Hussain,

The last three books are available from Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an,

P. O. Box 1115,

80-08 51st Avenue

Elmhurst, New York 11373, U. S. A.

1. Shaykh al-ʿAduq, Kamalu 'd-Din wa Tamamu 'n-Ni'mah, p. 336.

2. 'Allamah Majlisi, Biharul 'Anwar, vol. 53, p. 126.

3. On the authority of Shaykh al-Kaf'ami as mentioned in Mafatihul 'Ilm, by Shaykh 'Abbas al-Qummi, (Arabic translation by Muhammad Radha an-Nuri), Beirut, p. 116.

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