

## Quick...Think of a Word that Rhymes with Dzikr!



*La ilaha illallah Muhammadu'r-rasulullah* ≈ There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God.  
From the Gate of Salutation, Topkapi Palace, Istanbul  
[Wikimedia: Gryffindor]

Finding a rhyming word for "*dzikr*" was going to be difficult since I wasn't even sure how to pronounce it. It turns out that spelling it isn't straight-forward either since I've seen it transliterated as "*zikr*," "*dhikr*," and "*thikr*." Luckily, these pesky little issues did nothing to dampen my curiosity about what, exactly, a *dzikr* was. Truth told, pronunciation problems have never been much of a deterrent for me. I once had a lovely conversation with a train conductor – in Italian. We talked about all sorts of things – Pompeii, Corsica, our upcoming travel plans, etc. We might have talked forever, but the entire interaction came to a screeching halt when one of my traveling companions rudely pointed out that I don't speak Italian!

So...I was headed to a *dzikr* (which rhymes with "*picker*," by the way). As a proud citizen of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I resorted to my usual quick-fix solution for all of life's questions. I "googled" it. The first thing that popped up was a Wikipedia page for *Dhikr*. That's how they spelled it anyway. As Wikipedia pages go, it was fairly short, and quite honestly, rather unsatisfying. It basically defined a *dhikr* as an Islamic devotional act in which short phrases are recited repeatedly either silently or aloud. Sometimes, it noted, recitations are counted using a string of prayer beads. Then it gave a list of some of the phrases that might be used.

This didn't tell me anything I needed to know! I needed practical information. Shoes – on or off? Music – yes or no? Dancing – encouraged or frowned upon? Prayer beads – required or optional? I didn't even know if the *dzikr* I was planning to attend was the "out loud" kind or the "silent" kind! I moved on to my second source of spiritual information: You Tube. The first thing that popped up was a nine-minute video. The title of the video was an Arabic phrase that I happen to be quite familiar with: *la ilaha illa'llah* (also spelled various ways). I can assure you that being familiar with this phrase does not make me special in any way. All Muslims, including children, know the phrase, best translated as "There is no god but God." It's somewhat analogous to the Shema Yisrael for Jewish people (*Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad* Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One). Anyway, the video looked promising, and it wasn't too long, so I clicked on it.

It wasn't really a video at all since the only image displayed was the phrase written in calligraphy; however, the sound track was immensely helpful. The phrase was simply repeated over and over again. In this particular video, drums emerged in the background to accompany the chanting. The tempo increased. A wind instrument then added its sonorous tones. After a bit of time, the chanting increased in volume and began to move even faster. Then, the leader began chanting a different phrase as *la ilaha illa'llah* continued to sound in the background. Then, the voices quieted, and the tempo decreased. It actually reminded me somewhat of kirtan, but it was more word-like and less song-like. In any event, it seemed manageable.

Armed with my rudimentary understanding and piecemeal expectations, I headed to one of the weekly *dzikrs* held here in Asheville. I personally know Shemsuddin, the leader, and I like to wing it when it comes to new rituals, so I was about as prepared as I was going to get. When I arrived (stressed out because I had trouble finding the place), Shem told me to take off my shoes, so that answered that question. He also said we would begin by sitting in a circle. I retrieved a yoga blanket from the basket in the corner of the room while taking in my surroundings. I saw no instruments, so it appeared we would be chanting without music. Also, Shemsuddin (Shem, for short) was holding prayer beads, but the other participants weren't, so I was off the hook on that one, too.

We began with *al-Fatiha* (The Opening) which is the first *sura* (chapter) in the Qur'an. Here's the translation I recite:

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.  
Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds;  
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;  
Master of the Day of Judgment.  
You do we worship, and Your aid we seek.  
Show us the straight way.  
The way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath,  
and who do not go astray.

Next, Shem offered the invocation, penned by Inayat Khan, a musician from India who is credited with bringing Sufism (Islamic mysticism) to the West. I knew Shem was part of that tradition, so this invocation made perfect sense:

Toward the One, the Perfection of Love, Harmony and Beauty, the Only Being: United with All  
the Illuminated Souls, Who Form the Embodiment of the Master, the Spirit of Guidance.

Clearly, this was shaping up to be an "out-loud" *dzikr*, which was quite a relief since I obviously needed direction. After a few preliminary phrases, the chanting began in earnest. Soon, we were standing, holding hands, and swaying.

We chanted for over an hour. I must admit that I had one eye on the clock for the first 30 minutes or so. Some you know this is a bad habit of mine. After that, however, I felt like the group, as a whole, was hovering just above the floor. In a distant part of my brain, I knew that we were separate individuals, but I could no longer feel the space between us. I could feel the pressure of others' arms around me or the warmth of their hands in mine. At times, I could feel their breath on my shoulders and neck. As often happens during powerful ritual, personal boundaries dissolved, and time was no longer linear. Shem was also part of our circle. In retrospect, I recognized certain points in time when he was leading us – shifting our energy – but in the moment, it felt like it was happening all on its own.

I discovered later that this is exactly what a *dzikr* leader is supposed to do. Shem, who was taught by Asha Greer, shared the importance of making the group a single organism. "Personality does not have the bandwidth to facilitate a meaningful practice," he explained. "The Word, however, does." The idea is that the group is the *murshid* (teacher), and one job of the leader is to ensure that no one is falling out of the group. "The *dzikr* phrases create a stable energetic, allowing the experience of the teachings to be assimilated," he continued. "Like a rock, that reveals its constituent elements only upon close examination, the subtle power of this living stream is astonishing."

Talking to Shem about leading *dzikrs* helped me better understand the mysticism that is part and parcel of the Sufi tradition, but his path began as something rather less than mystical – a girlfriend who enjoyed the Dances of Universal Peace. These Dances were created by Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, a disciple of Inayat Khan and one of the founders of North American Sufism. During the Dances, sacred phrases from the world's various religions are chanted or sung to promote oneness with one another and with the divine. One evening, as Shem and his girlfriend prepared to participate in a Dance, the leader asked if anyone knew how to play the guitar. Shem raised his hand, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Eventually, Shem learned all the Dances and became part of the band. By then, he was living in Charlottesville, VA, where over 100 people would participate in Dances each month. He also played for other Dance leaders in cities up and down the Eastern seaboard. In 2004, he was encouraged to learn how to lead the Dances himself.

The caretaker of the Dances of Universal Peace is Ruhaniat International, a Sufi order started by Murshid Samuel Lewis shortly before he died in 1971. Leadership of the Dances is transmitted individually through a mentor/pupil relationship, but there is a deep understanding that these transmissions are part of a living stream. The phrases used in the Dances remain the same, but the melodies and the movements naturally change over time. And that's the way it should be.

Eventually, Shem felt spiritually ready to learn how to lead *dzikrs*, and Asha Greer became his mentor – part of his own living stream. As it turns out, the *dzikrs* Shem leads are fairly traditional in the sense that they rely almost entirely on the spoken word. Traditional/spoken *dzikrs* are not the usual format

for the Ruhaniat International Order. Their *dzikrs* tend to be decidedly musical, which makes sense since their rather brief history centers on the instrumental and movement-oriented Dances of Universal Peace. Either way, however, the core of the mystical tradition remains. As if to highlight that point, Shem reflected briefly on the logistics of leading a *dzikr*, “All the introductory bits are intended to create an ache as we wend ourselves toward this lover that we call the Divine.” The Divine as Lover is a common metaphor among mystics, as any fan of the poets Hafiz or Rumi will attest.

Although mystical experiences are essentially impossible to articulate, *dzikrs* are grounded in the idea that each of us is meant to live in full harmony with all that is sacred. We suffer because we have become separated from our Oneness, but the Infinite can be rediscovered through the spoken word and the breath. *Dzikrs*, like other holy practices, allow us to walk – however briefly – in the blissful light of our true natures. We glimpse what it’s like to live totally congruent with all other souls. The phrases, repeated in unison and in community, allow us to reconnect with our Divine center. As Shem so beautifully put it, “Nothing rivals the sound of *la ilaha illallah* in my heart. And that’s what I want to share with others.” I’m so grateful I got to be one of those "others."

*Many thanks to Shemsuddin Stewart Millard for taking the time to provide much needed background information and for sharing his spiritual path. He offers his Unity Dzikrs every Thursday evening and his Dances of Universal Peace every third Saturday in Asheville, NC.*

## **Sources**

Yusuf Ali, A. *The Qur’an. Trans. Istanbul, Turkey: ASIR MEDIA, 2002. Print.*

[Sufi Ruhaniat International](#)

## **A Couple of Additional Links**

[The You Tube video I watched](#)

[My previous post on Kirtan](#)