

‘Iyādat al-Marīḍ, or “The Etiquette of Visiting the Sick” in Hadith-Narrations

‘Iyādat al-marīḍ, or “visiting the sick,” is an important Islamic moral commandment. It is the right of a Muslim, who is ill and bedridden, for other Muslims to make an effort to visit him and provide comfort. This right exists because the Muslim community consists of members bound by faith, devotion, and commitment to each other’s well-being. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ urges the Muslims to fulfill this commandment, stating:

A Muslim has five rights upon his fellow Muslim: that he should greet him when they meet, answer him when called, visit him when he is sick, accompany his bier when he dies, and love for him what he loves for himself.^[1]

This narration highlights the mutual devotion that exists between members of the Muslim community, including visiting each other when one member of the community falls ill. It is reported that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ used to inquire about his companions if one of them was absent from the congregation for more than three days, and the Messenger would visit him if he was sick.^[2]

Often, our conception of illness or sickness is related to being bedridden or even terminally ill. This is, of course, false. The hadith literature does not indicate that the commandment to visit a sick Muslim applies only when he or she is terminally ill. Rather it encourages Muslims to visit each other when a person might be bedridden or absent from the physical congregation of the Muslim community. For our purposes, these illnesses may include the common cold, the flu, or any other condition which prevents a Muslim from being physically present in the masjid or the community center.

The social and spiritual rewards for visiting the sick are tremendous. It strengthens the mutual bonds between community members, provides space for displaying devotion and commitment to the faith, and offers Muslims an opportunity to remember God. Visiting the sick is compared to visiting Allah Himself. A narration from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ states that on the Day of Judgment, Allah will address his servant and say:

“O my servant! I was sick and you did not visit me!” The servant will reply: “O Allah! How could I have visited you in your sickness? You are the Lord of the realms!” God will reply: “Did you not realize that my servant, so-and-so, was ill, and you did not visit him? Did you not know that if you had visited him you would have found Me with him?”^[3]

This tradition is indeed exceptional. It places the sick person in the direct company of God, and compares the company of the sick person to the presence of God. It also provides the Muslim an opportunity to directly visit Allah by visiting the sick person. The paradigm is unique and differs from the common perception of a visit: the visitor becomes the one seeking God and benefiting from His

company, while the sick person as the host is the one near whose bedside Allah is found for all those who choose to visit Him. Like a masjid, the sick person is temporarily turned into a Divine space, a sacred presence, and one who provides others with the opportunity to visit God.

The sick person also has the opportunity to gain rewards from God. He or she is to act in a dignified manner, avoid complaining about his or her medical condition, and be content with what Allah has decreed for him. A narration in *al-Kāfi* states:

Whoever is sick for three days and does not complain to his visitors, his flesh and blood will be replaced with something better.^[4]

Avoiding complaining about a sickness with which Allah has decided to test a believer is an opportunity to show strength, fortitude, and patience. The sick person's physical state will be improved, and his or her body will be bettered, *if* he or she can remain patient in the face of sickness, which may include pain, discomfort, and disability.

The hadith-narrations also mention a particular etiquette for visiting the sick, a propriety that should exist between the visitor and the sick person. Here, we will examine a few of these prescribed behaviors: First, the visit should be kept short (*takhfīf al-julūs*). A short visit ensures that the sick person has sufficient time for rest, and the visitor is not intruding on the path toward recovery. It also creates an opportunity for a short, but meaningful, conversation between the visitor and the sick person; a visit of limited duration must create and find meaning during the social exchange. A hadith attributed to Imam 'Alī ibn abī Ṭālib ('a) specifically stipulates a brief visit.^[5]

The second etiquette is for the visitor to abandon any expectation of being hosted and treated as a guest in the house of the sick believer. A visitor cannot expect the usual exchange of food, snacks, or even a meal that usually accompanies a social visit. The visitor should bear in mind the physical, and possibly financial, constraints the illness has placed upon the person being visited. This also creates an opportunity for members of the Muslim community to exchange something that is intangible, immaterial, and beyond the usual constraints of social interaction. They exchange comfort and presence; the sick person offers his or her own presence as a gift to the visitor.^[6] The third etiquette is for the visitor to bring gifts to the sick person. A narration states that a sick person should not be visited empty-handed; small gifts such as apples, quinces, pears, or perfumes should be taken by the visitor to the sick person.^[7] These gifts fulfill the expectations of the sick person that God is providing for them through the visitor, increasing the sick person's sense of comfort and relief.

The fourth etiquette is showing empathy for the condition of the patient. This behavior qualifies any discussions of death, sickness, and suffering, and tempers it with kindness, gentleness, and emotional and spiritual presence. It assures the visitors that they are present and care for their fellow believers at times of illness, creating an expectation of reciprocity and general awareness. It also provides the sick person with comfort and relief. A report from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ states:

When you visit a sick person, remove his or her anxiety about dying, as this might provide relief to the Soul.^[8]

Such behavior certainly acts to reduce anxiety, decrease discomfort, and improve some of the feelings the sick person may be experiencing.

The fifth, and perhaps final display of *akhlāq*, is performing a prayer for the sick person. This provides the visitor with the opportunity to pray and seek the fulfillment of their desires in close proximity to God's presence. The visitor is invited to supplicate to God for the healing of the sick person as well as for his or her own personal needs. A narration in *Biḥār al-Anwār* mentions a particular *du'ā'* for the sick from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ:

O Allah! Heal him (the sick person) with your healing, cure him with your medicine, and save him from your affliction!

This supplication reveals that the entirety of the sick person's experience originates in God's will and is aimed—as far as we can determine—at bringing the sick person and his visitor in closer proximity to Allah. The illness and its cure, the malady and its medicine, and the affliction and its abatement emerge from God and return back to Him. Illness presents a cumulative and total experience in the Muslim community which reveals one of the manifestations of the verse:

Say, All is from Allah. What is the matter with these people that they hardly understand any tiding?^[9]

At the moment of supplication, the sick believer's prayers are also answered, and he or she is invited to pray for the visitors, their families, and the community in general.

As is apparent from a brief examination of these verses, visiting the sick members of the Muslim community is a duty for all believers, contains great opportunities for spiritual connection and growth, and is a moment of supplication and devotion to the Divine Presence. The encounter between the sick person and his or her visitor calls for a particular etiquette, which eschews superficial manners of behavior and social expectation; it provides a spiritual space and enriches certain metaphysical realities which the Muslim community should be aware of.

^[1] Abul-Qāsim Pāyanda, *Nahj al-Fasaha* (Tehran: Sāziman-i Intishārāt-i Jāwidān, 1992), 634.

^[2] Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabātabā'ī, *Sunan al-Nabi: A Collection of Narrations on the Conduct and Customs of the Noble Prophet Muhammad* (Kitchener, Ont: Islamic Publishing House, 2007), 27.

[3] Pāyanda, Abul-Qāsim, *Nahj al-Faṣāhah*, 311.

[4] *Usūl al-Kāfī*, vol.3, p.115, h1.

[5] *Ibid*, vol. 3, p.118, h6.

[6] Al-Muḥaddith al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-Wasā'il*, vol. 2 (Qum: Mu'assasah Āl al-Bayt l-Ihya al-Turāth), 154.

[7] *Uṣūl al-Kāfī*, vol.3, p.118, h3.

[8] Al-Karājikī, Muḥammad ibn 'Alī, *Kanz al-Fawā'id*, vol. 1 (Qum: Intishārāt Dār al-Dhakā'ir), 379.

[9] Quran, 4:78 (Arberry translation).