Nature-Oriented and Self-Oriented Contemplation: Ways to God Gnosis

Reza Berenjkar

Full Professor, the University of Tehran

Feb.2017

***Abstract**: Knowing God is only possible by the help of God; God has introduced Himself to logic and reason through signs and through His creations. The main approaches to know God are divided into two parts of a. nature-oriented, b. self-oriented. Human being can find God by contemplation on the phenomena of the worlds and the order ruling it which is nature-oriented way to know God; and also by contemplation on himself/herself, his inability and need to a source of Power which are resulted in God gnosis.*

***Key words**: God gnosis, nature-oriented, self-oriented*

The goal of this article is to explain ways to know God from infallibles' point of view. But before that it is proper to explain general idea of infallibles concerning these two ways of knowing God and their classifications.

Appearance of God to logic and heart

We know that in various verses of holy Quran, God attributes people's guidance to Himself:

إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا لَلْهُدَى

***"Indeed, Guidance is Ours"** (99: 12)*

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

yourselves, provided that you give it desiring the Face of Allah. And whatever good you spend shall be repaid to you in full, you shall not be harmed." *(2: 73,120,272)*

وَلَا تُؤْمِنُوا إِلَّا لِمَنْ تَبِعَ دِينَكُمْ قُلْ إِنَّ الْهُدَى هُدَى اللَّهِ أَنْ يُؤْتَى أَحَدٌ مِثْلَ مَا أُوتِيتُمْ أَوْ يُحَاجُّوكُمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّكُمْ قُلْ إِنَّ الْفَضْلَ بِيَدِ اللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

"Believe none except those who follow your own religion.' Say: 'The true guidance is the Guidance of Allah that anyone should be given the like of what you have been given, or dispute with you before your Lord. 'Say: 'Bounty is in the Hand of Allah. 'He gives it to whomsoever He will. Allah is the Embracer, the Knower." *(3:73)*

قُلْ أَنَدْعُو مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا يَنْفَعُنَا وَلَا يَضُرُّنَا وَنُرَدُّ عَلَى أَعْقَابِنَا بَعْدَ إِذْ هَدَانَا اللَّهُ كَالَّذِي اسْتَهْوَتْهُ الشَّيَاطِينُ فِي الْأَرْضِ حَيْرَانَ لَهُ أَصْحَابٌ يَدْعُونَهُ إِلَى الْهُدَى ائْتِنَا قُلْ إِنَّ هُدَى اللَّهِ هُوَ الْهُدَى وَأُمِرْنَا لِنُسْلِمَ لِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

"Say: 'Are we to call, other than Allah, what can neither help nor harm us? Are we to turn on our heels after Allah has guided us like him, who, being bewitched by devils, blunders aimlessly in the earth, although his friends call him to the guidance, (saying) 'Come to us! 'Say: 'The guidance of Allah is the Guidance. We are commanded to submit to the Lord of the Worlds" *(6:71)*

يَمُنُّونَ عَلَيْكَ أَنْ أَسْلَمُوا قُلْ لَا تَمُنُّوا عَلَيَّ إِسْلَامَكُمْ بَلِ اللَّهُ يَمُنُّ عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْ هَدَاكُمْ لِلْإِيمَانِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

"They regard it as a favor to you that they have submitted! Say: 'Do not regard your submission as a favor to me, rather, it is Allah who bestows upon you a favor by guiding you to belief, if you are truthful." *(49/17)*

فَقُلْنَا اضْرِبُوهُ بِبَعْضِهَا كَذَلِكَ يُحْيِي اللَّهُ الْمَوْتَى وَيُرِيكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

"We said: 'Strike him with a piece of it. Like this, Allah restores the dead to life and shows you His signs in order that you will understand."

وَلَنْ تَرْضَى عَنْكَ الْيَهُودُ وَلَا النَّصَارَى حَتَّى تَتَّبِعَ مِلَّتَهُمْ قُلْ إِنَّ هُدَى اللَّهِ هُوَ الْهُدَى وَلَئِنِ اتَّبَعْتَ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ بَعْدَ الَّذِي جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ مَا لَكَ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ

"You will please neither the Jews nor the Nazarenes unless you follow their creed. Say: 'The guidance of Allah is the guidance. ' And if after all the knowledge you have been given you yield to their desires, you shall not have, other than Allah, either a guide or a helper."

لَيْسَ عَلَيْكَ هُدَاهُمْ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَمَا تُنْفِقُوا مِنْ خَيْرٍ فَلِأَنْفُسِكُمْ وَمَا تُنْفِقُونَ إِلَّا ابْتِغَاءَ وَجْهِ اللَّهِ وَمَا تُنْفِقُوا مِنْ خَيْرٍ يُوَفَّ إِلَيْكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تُظْلَمُونَ

"It is not for you (Prophet Muhammad to cause) their guidance. Allah guides whom He will. Whatever good you spend is for

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

"You cannot guide whom you please; it is Allah who guides whom He will. He knows well those who are guided."*(28: 56)*

قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَى كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَى

"Our Lord, ' he replied, 'is He Who gave everything its creation and then guided it." *(20: 50)*

In holy Quran also, God introduces His Book as

شَهْرُ رَمَضَانَ الَّذِي أُنْزِلَ فِيهِ الْقُرْآنُ هُدًى لِلنَّاسِ وَبَيِّنَاتٍ مِنَ الْهُدَى وَالْفُرْقَانِ فَمَنْ شَهِدَ مِنْكُمُ الشَّهْرَ فَلْيَصُمْهُ وَمَنْ كَانَ مَرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ بِكُمُ الْيُسْرَ وَلَا يُرِيدُ بِكُمُ الْعُسْرَ وَلِتُكْمِلُوا الْعِدَّةَ وَلِتُكَبِّرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَى مَا هَدَاكُمْ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

"***The month of Ramadan is the month in which the Quran was sent down, a guidance for people, and clear verses of guidance and the criterion. Therefore, whoever of you witnesses the month, let him fast. But he who is ill, or on a journey shall (fast) a similar number (of days) later on. Allah wants ease for you and does not want hardship for you. And that you fulfill the number of days and exalt Allah who has guided you in order that you be thankful***" *(2: 185)*

وَيَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَجِئْنَا بِكَ شَهِيدًا عَلَى هَؤُلَاءِ وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ تِبْيَانًا لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً وَبُشْرَى لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مَثَلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ مُبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

"Allah is the Lighter of the heavens and the earth. The example of His Light is like a tube, in which there is a wick. The wick is in a lamp and the lamp is as a glittering planet kindled from a Blessed Tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West. Its oil would almost shine forth though no fire touched it. Light upon light; Allah guides to His Light whom He will. Allah strikes parables for people. Allah has knowledge of all things."

أَوْ كَظُلُمَاتٍ فِي بَحْرٍ لُجِّيٍّ يَغْشَاهُ مَوْجٌ مِنْ فَوْقِهِ مَوْجٌ مِنْ فَوْقِهِ سَحَابٌ ظُلُمَاتٌ بَعْضُهَا فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ إِذَا أَخْرَجَ يَدَهُ لَمْ يَكَدْ يَرَاهَا وَمَنْ لَمْ يَجْعَلِ اللَّهُ لَهُ نُورًا فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ نُورٍ

"Or, they are like darkness upon a deep sea covered with a wave above which is another wave, above which are clouds, darkness piled one upon the other; when he stretches out his hand he can scarcely see it. Indeed, to whomsoever Allah assigns no light, he shall have no light."

(24: 35, 40)

إِنَّكَ لَا تَهْدِي مَنْ أَحْبَبْتَ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

"And on that Day We shall raise up from every nation a witness from their own against them, and We shall bring you (Prophet Muhammad) as a witness against those. And We have sent down to you the Book making everything clear, as a guidance, and mercy, and glad tidings to those who submit."

قُلْ نَزَّلَهُ رُوحُ الْقُدُسِ مِنْ رَبِّكَ بِالْحَقِّ لِيُثَبِّتَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَهُدًى وَبُشْرَى لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ

"Say: 'The Holy Spirit (Gabriel) brought it down from your Lord in truth to confirm those who believe, and to give guidance and glad tidings to those who surrender." *(16: 89,102)*

وَلَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ مُوسَى بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ ثُمَّ اتَّخَذْتُمُ الْعِجْلَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ وَأَنْتُمْ ظَالِمُونَ

"Moses came to you with clear signs, then you took to yourselves the calf after him and you were harmdoers."*(2:92)*

هُدًى وَبُشْرَى لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ

"A guidance and glad tidings to believers" *(27:2)*

وَإِنَّهُ لَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ

"It is a guidance and a mercy to believers."*(2:77)*

ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِلْمُتَّقِينَ

"That is the (Holy) Book, where there is no doubt. It is a guidance for the cautious (of evil and Hell)." *(2:2)*

Infallible imams to explain this asserted the fact that "knowing God is only possible through His bounty and Will."

"Knowing God is not possible unless by Him"[1].

"Knowing God is not the duty assigned to human beings. It is on God to know Himself to them and it is on people to accept Him when He makes Himself be known."[2]

Because of this, infallibles always asked God to make Himself Known to them.[3]

It is God's Sunnah (method) to appear Himself through different ways to human beings to make them know Him. From gist of infallibles' words, it can be realized that all these ways are led into two distinct and clear ways. One of them is "the reflection of God on hearts" which is called "the true and Fitrah gnosis of God" and it traced back to a world before this world; and the second way is " His reflection on logics" of human beings.

Imam Ridha – in a meeting held by Ma'mun and his friends to test his holiness- answering the question of introducing God said,

بصنع الله يستدل عليه و بالقول يعتقد معرفته و بالفطرة تثبت حجته... بالعقول يعتقد التصديق بالله

"He is reasoned (to exist) due to His precise creations and actions; His recognition is confirmed by logic and His Proof is proved by Fitrah." [4]

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

Imam Ali said in this regard,

"Praise belongs to God Who becomes apparent to His creatures through His creations and to hearts through His Proofs."[5]

The meaning of these traditions – if we put them besides other traditions and verses of Quran – is " God reflects on logics through His creatures." Therefore, logic is a tool to confirm presence of a creator. In fact, logics confirm presence of God and human beings come to believe in Him. On the other hand, the main proof on God's presence is through His direct reflection on the soul of human beings which is stable in Fitrah. Without this knowledge, human beings cannot even use their logic to reason. Therefore, knowing by heart is the essence and base of logical cognition.

General guidance, special guidance and the role of free will in them

The discussion about reflection of God on hearts and logics is about the general guidance of God, i.e. the first level of going towards God. Human beings at this level, can reach a kind of God's recognition which after that he is unable to deny God by his heart and logic. If human beings at this level turn his back to what they realize and be ungrateful, they will stop on the way to perfection (and if God does not invite and absorbs Him), he even may forget that very early remembrance of God.

If human beings after the first level of guidance surround to His majesty and stay in His way, other reflections and realizations of His majesty will lighten their hearts and the signs of knowing God will be more in them. This strength of knowing God in him is in fact "special guidance of God" because naturally happens to those who are believers.

The result is guidance of human beings towards God by God; but free will of human beings also play a role in accepting or rejecting this blessing of God. Therefore, Quran emphasizes that "guidance" is an act of God. Then human beings' free will is influential in accepting this guidance;

فَإِنْ حَاجُّوكَ فَقُلْ أَسْلَمْتُ وَجْهِيَ لِلَّهِ وَمَنِ اتَّبَعَنِ وَقُلْ لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ وَالْأُمِّيِّينَ أَأَسْلَمْتُمْ فَإِنْ أَسْلَمُوا فَقَدِ اهْتَدَوْا وَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْكَ الْبَلَاغُ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِالْعِبَادِ

"If they argue with you, say: 'I have submitted my face to Allah and so have those who follow me.' To those who have received the Book (Jews and Nazarenes) and to the ignorant, ask: 'Have you submitted yourselves to Allah? 'If they became Muslims they were guided, if they turn away, then your only duty is to warn them. Allah is watching over all His worshipers." *(3: 20)*

As we have seen, free will, directly in acceptance of general guidance and indirectly in accepting special guidance, has a role.

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

Logic approaches to gnosis of God from words of infallibles

As we have seen from infallibles point of view, God Almighty, appear Himself to logics of human beings. Of course, in this regard, common sense is meant which all human beings enjoy it, and not logic which only elites or genius have and is used in mathematics or philosophy.

In another word, here, by logic, we mean the criterion for being dutiful and extent of it, by which human beings come to adolescence, ready to be addressed by God; therefore, Qurānic discussions and traditions of infallibles are understandable to all.

The result of these ways and reasons is to persuade common logic and to accept and confirm God and some of His attributes. The ways of knowing God by logic can be divided into two main groups of nature-oriented and self-oriented. Here, first we study nature-oriented ways and then self-oriented. Finally a comparison between them has been made.

Ways of nature-oriented study

1. Creatures in the world

In holy Quran, when it is spoken about signs and reasons of God, different creations are meant.

إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ لَآيَاتٍ لِأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ

"Surely, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the alternation of night and day, there are signs for those with minds." [6]

Imam Ali stated style of Prophets in knowing God like this:

"When people asked them (prophets) about God, they did not describe Him by size or His attributes, but they praised Him for His Acts and Signs (His creations) ."[7]

Imam Ali ordered people to obey Quran and infallibles and said,

"He does not inform people of quality of His attributes, and He does not prohibit people of knowing Him as necessary as it is, and He does not cover people's eyes. He is the One Whom signs in the world of creation are a proof on His existence and heart of an infidel person even asserts this fact."[8]

Or

"Is there a building without a builder, or a murdering without a murderer possible? "[9]

We see that according to Imam Ali, God, does not give ability to logic to realize the quality of Him and His attributes but does not avoid the essential knowledge about Him. Imam Sadiq said,

"Presence of things and beings is a proof to the presence of a creator. Isn't it like this when you see a high building, you realize it

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

should have a builder even though you couldn't see him?"[10]

Therefore, according to infallible imams, human beings could realize there is a builder behind this magnificent building of the world, though he could not see builder. Human beings have no direct knowledge about Him and can not explain His essence. The only thing he can say is "there is a Magnificent, Powerful being Who makes this world."

This first approach to know God includes an important point to which traditions referred. In this approach, God is proved to be the only creator. But no more information about Him can be reached. As Imam Sadiq said, we realize there is a builder, but we can not see Him. This issue is present in all logic-based approaches to know God.

Now, two other ways of nature-oriented approach are explained which are in fact the detailed explanation of the first one.

2. Order in Creation

Human beings by contemplating on the world around, see the precise immaculate order. At this moment, they understand this order can not be happened accidentally. As imam 'Ali said,

"This is God who appears Himself to logics by His codes in creations."[11]

Imam Sadiq said in this regard,

"The first and foremost reason of existence of a Creator is order in the world which is among its elements as it should be."[12]

3. Creation of things and Beings

Imam 'Ali said,

"God by His creation proves His-being-the-First (qadim) and also predicates His existence."[13]

This is a logical rule which says a creation needs a creature and a creator should be ***qadim*** needless of a creator per.se.

The important issue in this reason is the features and characteristics of being a creator and being a creation. Imam Ridha said in this regard,

"You (we) were not at the beginning, then you (we) came into existence, while you (we) know no one similar to you (us) had made you (us) and you yourself (we ourselves) could not make you (ourselves)."[14]

Imam Baqir said in this regard,

"Whatever that can be divided into consisting elements or can be decreased or increased is a creature and is a proof of existence of his/her/its creator."[15]

If we take a look at everything in the world, we realize that it is changeable, and is fatal. This very thing or being is perishable, is a creation, and needs to be created and be saved.[16]

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

The result of noticing nature is to recognize existence of God Who has Power, Wisdom and is the First. As we have read in the tradition of Imam Sadiq, and in other traditions, we can not see God with eyes; but as by seeing a magnificent building, we can think of a professional architect even if we don't see him, we can realize existence of God.

From one hand, we can not deny God and on the other hand we can not see Him directly. Therefore, we are in wonder of what He is. Wonder happens when some aspects of an issue are clear and some aspects are not; it means human beings know something and does not know enough to imagine and figure out.

By contemplating on the world, this wonder will not be decreased but it is increased. By paying attention to things, we realize that a Creator should not be similar to His creations. It means if it was supposed to be similar to His creations, He could not be a Creator; He was equal to His creations and He has the same level with them.

Therefore, all attributes of creations become known to human beings when they contemplate on the world around. And these attributes are eradicated from being existed in God. Therefore the difference between essence-bound attributes in all attributes between creations and creators become clear. As infallibles pointed out,

"Therefore, whatever is in creatures, will not be seen in Creator."[17]

"God in His attributes is different from His creatures."[18]

"God is not what can be understood by minds and logics."[19]

The above mentioned issue is what pointed out by infallibles as " Ikhraj az Haddeyn" which means separating God from the realm of denial or similes (denial of finding similarities are the utmost ability of logic); this results in wonder in essence of God and at the same time the need to know Him directly by heart.

Knowing God through ourselves and comparing it with nature-bound approach

Self-bound (self-oriented) approach means thinking and contemplating on self, finding poverty, and dependence of soul to his creator. The condition to go through this path is to put aside mundane desires and attachments to be able to return to ourselves and find God.

Knowing self can be helpful in knowing God in different ways. But one of these ways is more important than others and is highlighted by traditions. For example,

Imam 'Ali was asked what is the reason for existence of a creator? He answered,

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

"Three things, change in feelings and spirit, weakening body members, fading free will"[20]

In another place, he said,

"I know God through violation of whatever I resolved severely for, solution of unsolvable affairs, and God-change in whatever I determined for"[21]

In a reply to this question of how did you know your God? He said,

"Whenever I made up my mind to get something done, something happened to abolish it, whenever I was severely determined to do something, Qada stood up against me. So I knew there is another determiner rather than me.[22]

The content of this tradition is repeated by other wordings in other traditions.

For example, Abi al-'Uja, the well-known thinker of imam Sadiq time, who had not believe in religious issues.

Ibn Abi al-'Uja asked imam Sadiq, why God does not talk to people directly, in this way, they will accept Him sooner?

Imam answered, how is it hidden from you the One Whose Power is apparent in you? You were not and came into existence, you were little and weak, you grew up and become powerful, then you lost your power again and became weak but again found your health,… you were angry but found satisfaction, then again you got angry and again became calm, you were sad and got happy, after happiness again got sad and again became happy, …you were hopeless but became hopeful and after this you lost your hope but again became hopeful…"

Ibn Abi al-'Uja said, imam Sadiq kept counting the effects of God's Power in me to the point that denial was impossible and I though God would appear among him and me.[23]

In summary, if human beings put mundane desires aside can return to their own selves. Then they could feel their extreme need. At this moment, human beings can see their changing state and dependence. Then they feel their dependence to someone else. As imam 'Ali said, "the determiner is someone else"

These two approaches have some commonalities: human beings in both, by paying attention to Act of God and God's creatures, from one hand can see the existence of a creator and determiner and a change maker. On the other hand, they cannot get any direct understanding and knowledge about this creator. Therefore, they will be placed in a way of wonder and will ask creator of everything to show Himself to them.

These two approaches have some differences. In returning to self, human beings can feel his extreme need more, therefore, confess to existing of a creator and determiner with more assurance. Of

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

course in many cases, after this attention, God donates His direct recognition to the heart of human beings.

End Notes:

[1] Saduq, Tuhid, p.143; Kulayni, Usul Kafi, vol.1, pp.85, 86; Sahifah Sajjadiyah, prayer 1.

[2] Usul Kafi, vol.1, p.164

[3] Bihar Al-Anwar, vol.94, p96

[4] Saduq, 'Uyun Akhbar al- Ridha, pp.151, 152; Tuhid, pp.35, 40.

[5] Nahjul Balaghah, sermon 108

[6] Ale 'Imran, 190; Baqarah, 164; Jathiyah 2-4; Yunes, 6, 100, 101.

[7] Usul Kafi, vol.1, p.141

[8] Nahjul Balaghah, sermon, 49

[9] ibid, sermon 185

[10] Usul Kafi, vol.1, p.81; Tuhid Saduq, p.243

[11] Usul Kafi, vol.1, p.141; Nahjul Balaghah, sermon 182

[12] Bihar Al-Anwar, vol.3,p.61

[13] Nahjul Balaghah, sermon 85

[14] 'Uyun Akhbar Ridha, vol.1, p.134; Tuhid Saduq, p,293

[15] Usul Kafi, vol.1, p.116

[16] Usul Kafi, vol.1,p.77; al-Ihtijaj Tabarsi, vol.2, p.79

[17] Tuhid Saduq, p.40

[18] ibid, p.69

[19] ibid, p.108

[20] Jame' al-Akhbar, p.9

[21] Nahjul Balaghah, Hikmah 250

[22] Tuhid Saduq, p.288

[23] Usul Kafi, vol.1, p.75

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]