



**Wisdom
of the
Islamic World**



**English transcript
to the
podcast**

Wisdom of the Islamic World

Introductory podcast to Islamic wisdom teachings

English Transcript

Zürich: METIS Podcast Transcriptions 2023

AM = Anna Morawietz

NG = Nadja Germann

AM: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, a podcast produced by METIS, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices. You can find us at www.metis.ethz.ch. This episode is dedicated to wisdom in the Islamic world. Currently, little is said about the Islamic world in terms of wisdom and the art of living. Why is that? What is “the Islamic world” anyway? And what does the Koran have to do with wisdom? We will explore these questions together with our guest, Nadja Germann. Nadja Germann is professor of Arabic philosophy at the Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg and I, Anna Morawietz, am looking forward to talking to her. Nice to have you here, Ms. Germann.

NG: Hello Ms. Morawietz, glad to be here.

AM: We'll start right off with the title of our podcast: “Introduction to the Wisdom of the Islamic World”. Now, you are a professor of Arabic philosophy. Did we choose the wrong title, or what's the difference?

NG: Yes, of course one might think that at first. But there is a close connection. And perhaps we should begin by taking a historical perspective. Islam originated in the Arabic-speaking world. And then as it spread, in the 7th, 8th century, Arabic became the scientific, academic,

administrative and communication language, etc. in the Islamic world. And in this respect, the language has always had a very important cultural significance. And it is of course – I think this is also an important factor – the language of the Koran. The Koran is an Arabic Koran, which it explicitly states several times, and that's why the religion is very strongly, very closely, linked to this language. Today, of course, it is much more diverse. The religion is still dominantly Arabic, but of course there are many different languages that are used in communication, in the media and so on.

AM: I assume you mean Persian, Turkish, but also Indonesian, and many other languages?

NG: Yes, exactly. So really wherever Islam is the predominant religion. Today that's almost half of the world, geographically speaking; the corresponding national languages. That's what is meant.

AM: That means, our title is not completely off. But then why are you a professor of Arabic philosophy and not a professor of the Islamic world, for example?

NG: Yes, I could be, and some of my team members would not put an emphasis on Arabic. In my case, I deal with Arabic-language texts or what has been written in the Arabic language; and I am also of the opinion that language shapes the universe of thought to a certain extent. And that's what I want to express. So, I can't speak for 'the Islamic world', as it were; I can speak for certain traditions within the Islamic world, and those – or some of which – that have been written in Arabic and still find expression today.

AM: And, as I just understood, there is also a temporal aspect – that this has differentiated over time in different languages. Which time period are you researching?

NG: That is indeed the case. So, in the beginning of Islamic culture – as I mentioned, Islam emerges in the 7th century - there is not much yet, simply because there is no written evidence. It was still an oral culture. And I'm working on the time when the written sources begin to appear. That is mainly in the 9th century, a few individual ones before that, but from the 9th century onwards, one notices that a transition to writing takes place in the

various fields of knowledge that I am interested in. I'm researching from the 9th until the 11th, 12th century. That's how far I've come.

AM: I suppose that will be the focus, the starting point of this podcast.

NG: We can do that, yes.

AM: Here, in large parts of Europe and North America, wisdom traditions and practices from the Far East – Confucius, Buddha, perhaps Laozi – are relatively well known. Also practices such as meditation have spread very widely. This is less the case for traditions of thought from the Islamic world. What is the reason for this?

NG: I think you can speculate a lot about that, of course. But I think it ultimately has to do, on the one hand, with the parameters, the consequences, the ways of looking at things that have developed very strongly in the European or Western tradition since the Enlightenment. Where you can see that certain traditions that were actually historically very important – like the Arabic-speaking tradition, or Arabic-speaking philosophy with its immense influence on our European thinking during the Middle Ages – have been pushed further and further out. So, if you look, for example, at philosophical historical accounts of the 19th century, then the 'Orientals', the 'Saracens' or whatever they are called, or the 'Mohammedans', appear only on the margins, if at all. And with connotations that are still effective today: Islam or the Muslims – or 'Mohammedans', as they were called at the time – they are fanatical, they are completely taken in by their religion. They don't really think rationally. It is a kind of rapture and religious dogma. This idea is very strong and then leads to the fact that, conversely, in the same period, i.e. since the Enlightenment, people have had contact with Far Eastern traditions, interestingly enough often through missionaries. This is perceived quite differently. This is then also discerned very clearly from this secular paradigm and then also taken as a source of inspiration. So think of Wolf, or think of Leibniz, or the like, where philosophers have probably been inspired by it. And that is still very much the case today.

AM: But the fact that the philosophy of the Islamic world has such a strong connotation of dogmatism is also surprising in that it has had such a strong influence on the European tradition. Or Aristotle, for example, would not have arrived in Europe at all. Can you perhaps elaborate on that a bit?

NG: I'd be happy to. That is indeed the case. So, if you look at the European Middle Ages, then you find from the 10th century onwards, it gradually begins that there, especially on the Iberian Peninsula, but also in southern Italy, you have Muslim populations. The Iberian Peninsula belongs to the Islamic world, is Islamic dominated, if you will; there are centers of scholarship there. Think of Toledo; the famous library of Toledo. And this was acknowledged, of course, and one realized that these were quite exciting things that weren't accessible. Like Aristotle. And then one began, quite specifically, to make translations. There is a lot of research on translations that took place in the Spanish area, that is, on the Iberian Peninsula.

AM: I think we should briefly go into the translation movement. Because the translation was first from Greek to Arabic, and then from Arabic back to Latin... Or how was that?

NG: Well, not really back. But that was sort of the path we took. So, strictly speaking - this is already in the 8th, 9th century, the time I was talking about earlier - Greek writings were first translated in the Islamic empire, which is mainly in the around today's Syria - partly it was already there, partly it had to be done - into Syriac, which is also a Semitic language, and then with the help of Syrians into Arabic. Interestingly, Christians made most of these translations - not all, but most - and thereby incorporated an interesting, own terminology into Arabic. This is quite interesting for the later linguistic development in the fields of philosophy, wisdom literature and so on. So, there is a transition into Arabic and, for example, a large part of what we know today as the Greek classics - Aristotle, a lot of the commentary literature on Aristotle, Neoplatonism, that is, Plotinus or Proclus - was translated into Arabic. Relatively little Plato, interestingly enough. And quite intensively used, too, by certain scholars. There were certain movements that were really into it and used these texts, also as a steppingstone for their own creative examination of philosophical questions. And these texts - that is, both the Arabic translations of the classical Greek texts,

especially Aristotle, and some of their commentators, but also the texts that emerged in the debate itself; keyword Avicenna, a very important name here, commentary tradition would be Ibn Rushd, the thinker known in Latin as Averroes, a very important name. These are the great thinkers who were also translated; be it their commentaries, as in the case of Averroes, or the further development of philosophy as an extension thereof; they were then translated into Latin, which was the language of science in Europe at that time, in the 12th and 13th centuries. And then they were taken up at the emerging universities, where they were read, discussed, debated, commented on as the main subject in the field of philosophy, where basically in Europe a kind of confrontation with the Greek heritage started and then developed as scholasticism.

AM: You just mentioned this idea that the Islamic world, Islamic philosophy is dogmatic, or perhaps not enlightened, because it is not secularized. I would be interested to know what the relationship between philosophy and religion is like in the Arab tradition or in the tradition of the Islamic world.

NG: This is a very complex topic. It depends very much on the currents that you look at. Let's take this group that I was just talking about, who were so very enthusiastic about the Greek tradition, called '*falsafa*', which by the way, is the common term for philosophy in Arabic today. At that time, it was the group that was occupied with the Greek texts. In addition, of course, there were others who also dealt with existential questions, with basic ethical questions, normative questions, and so on, who had other sources of reference. You must also keep in mind that when Islam came into being and spread, it didn't happen in a vacuum. These were areas with flourishing cultures. Just think of the Greek heritage – we've already mentioned that – think of the Persian tradition, or even indirectly the Indian tradition, often transmitted via Persian. So just to name a few traditions that we normally don't have on our radar. And all these traditions are there, and from all these traditions, of course, come suggestions, discussions, approaches. And from this hodgepodge, various, let's say, disciplines emerge; or schools, traditions, *falsafa* in this case, which dealt primarily with the Greek texts and built on that. But also those that dealt with the religious texts, or which accepted them as a framework and then also moved within this intellectual universe. And depending on how strongly religion plays a role – we will probably touch on this later,

Sufism – religion, the Koran or revelation is a given. Yes, it is referred to, and why not? Nevertheless, one can of course occupy oneself, unbelievably – as we would say today – rationally and philosophically with these fundamental questions. So, in this respect, I think one must make clear on the one hand, to look at the practices in the various traditions that exist within the Islamic world. There you can find an unbelievable amount of rationality and of course also what we would call philosophy today, and vice versa, maybe it would be helpful sometimes to reflect on our own idea of what Enlightenment achieved, i.e. to supposedly separate everything religious from everything secular, to question that critically and to realize that it is still quite intertwined today. For example, religious questions – just think of the question of church taxes. How is that possible, when we are completely secular... and the like. I think that our narrative plays a very important role here, without considering how things work in detail, when you look at the texts, or when you talk to people in this region today.

AM: So, on the one hand, we have a Western narrative of enlightenment, which is not quite adequate, based on what you have just said; and on the other hand, that it is ignored that the Islamic world does not only consist of a certain form or practice of religion, but has grown into a very diverse and pluralistic, cultural sphere.

NG: Exactly, and also expresses itself as a religion in many ways, to this day. We often think of Islam as very monolithic. Already since the 1st century there is a fundamental division into Shia and Sunna. Within these main branches of Islam, there are various subgroups. And all of them differ, fundamentally, in their world view or with regards to dogmatism, for example.

AM: Let's talk about a key concept of this podcast, namely wisdom. Is there a term in Arabic that captures wisdom?

NG: Well, nowadays it's the term '*ḥikma*', which is related to the Hebrew '*ḥokma*', which we translate as wisdom. But historically, or etymologically, there are a myriad of terms, and originally probably the most important term is '*ilm*', which we usually translate today as knowledge, sometimes more precisely as science. Science almost in the strict sense that we

understand something as science today, if it works according to certain standards, methods and the like. That is, as it is also practiced at the universities. This is very narrow, of course. In ancient Arabic times, as you can see in the Koran, this term appears a lot. It is perhaps the most central term, if you disregard certain basic religious terms. But also in the early centuries, which we want to focus on now, during this formation phase, if you will, it is a key term, which develops in different areas, each with the corresponding connotations that develop there. So that would perhaps be the key term at that time.

AM: And in which contexts - let's start with 'ilm, 'ilm: knowledge - in which contexts, or in which texts does this term appear?

NG: Well, actually – that's the exciting thing – it really does appear across the board, in all texts that deal with intellectual life in some way. And for me, that also includes the religion. As I mentioned before, it's a key concept in the Koran itself, the revelatory scripture of Islam. And it is then adopted or plays a similarly important role in all areas that somehow deal with religion, religious texts, religious traditions. But it also appears as a key term in such traditions inspired by other influences, such as *falsafa*, the Greek-inspired tradition. Here too, *'ilm*, knowledge, is a key term, which then, however, also has very clearly different connotations, because it very strongly incorporates the Greek heritage.

AM: Let's revisit the Koran for a moment. You said that knowledge is a very important concept in the Koran. What is the position of the Koran in relation to wisdom and knowledge? Or how does the Koran deal with these two concepts?

NG: One thing that is quite important, that you often don't know if you don't come from the Islamic culture yourself: The Koran describes itself as the revelation that has been transmitted to the people - in this case, to the Arab, Arabic-speaking people, the Arab people – in order to impart knowledge, wisdom, *'ilm* to them. Hence, it is a self-attested document of the transmission of knowledge, so to speak. And it describes the activity of God, respectively of his prophet, Muhammad, whom he uses as a spokesperson. So, it is like an instruction. It is a lesson that is given. And you can see that the foundation was laid very early on for the importance of knowledge, wisdom and the imparting of knowledge that has

shaped the understanding of education very early on and for a very long time – in various forms, shades, up until today. If you wonder, for example, why there was a very wide network of schools in the Islamic world so unbelievably early on - we're talking about the 9th and 10th centuries – if you compare that with Europe, you get a significant answer. This significance, this concept, this idea; it's all about knowledge. And that's what you have to strive for, if you're a believer, or a believing person. That's what you must try to acquire, to acquire and live accordingly. I think that is a very important component.

AM: And does that mean that knowledge is something human? Something that I can acquire as a human being and that I should strive for?

NG: Yes, exactly. It's something that I can attain. It's not something that I can invent, so to speak. This idea that we have very strongly today, to think up something new, to make an invention or such, doesn't play a key role here, but it is something that is already there, that is given. Imagine, if I take a religious perspective, that the world is believed to have been created by God. And God did not create it simply out of boredom, but, ultimately, with a divine plan. And as part of this, humans find themselves in an incomplete situation, which has the prospect to end, or better yet, to culminate, in something like a paradise, thus in an afterlife, in an imagined post-humous paradise. But to be able to realize this, one must acquire knowledge. So, the way to attain this bliss of paradise is knowledge acquisition. And that is interesting, because this is an aspect, for example, that will reappear in other, not primarily religiously coined approaches – like *falsafa*. There, without explicit reference to the Koran or to Islam, but similar in conception: that is, an otherworldly bliss that can be attained through knowledge, wisdom.

AM: How did the Koran come into being? Has it always existed in the form in which it is today, or has it changed over the last centuries?

NG: Well, the form that it has today, when you find it in book form, is actually the same it had very early in its foundation. Within a century or so it has taken this shape. And what is also very important, that within these 100 years – or maybe 150 – that within this period basically it was very meticulously determined, in which way – the Arabic script is a bit

ambiguous, because it does not contain vowels. And because of that, some characters, some written expressions, can be ambiguous. And only if you add the vowel signs, you unify it. And there, already in the first 100, 150 years, six readings were established that are still valid today. The deviations are not really a big issue now. But still, there are certain margins. And also the arrangement of the surahs – one could say the individual chapters – was fixed at that time. So roughly: From the longest surah to the shortest. So not a historical process, but a more or less length-dependent factor.

AM: So, have surahs been added or dropped, or have all the surahs that are in there now always been there, but they've been rearranged and interpreted differently?

NG: They were also ordered in this process. And also in this process, certain surahs were excluded that were identified as errors, as false, as not inspired by God; or mostly these were not surahs, but rather individual verses – the so-called 'satanic verses'. But basically the Koran as a text, has been fixed since the 8th century, more or less. What differs a lot, is the question: How does one read it? How can one understand it? How is one allowed to understand it? Who is entitled to interpret it at all? Who is not? These questions vary from school to school – I'm referring to religious schools. I'm not asking about what other intellectual groupings there are, but if you ask law schools, or theological schools, the answers differ somewhat, there is just as broad a spectrum as there are approaches within Islam.

AM: Are there certain linguistic peculiarities of the Koran that distinguish it from other texts?

NG: Yes and no. It's different in that respect – so what's the point of comparison? The point of comparison, if you really look at it historically, is actually ancient Arabic poetry. That is, so to speak, the linguistic medium, which took place verbally at the time. It is in fact the preeminent linguistic medium of the time. Something like a cultural memory was thereby passed down through generations. So, it's not always new poems that were invented, but it's a collection that transfers the heritage from generation to generation, so to speak. So ultimately, that would probably be the best point of comparison. If you now compare the Koran with ancient Arabic poetry, it is striking that it is not poetry per se. But that doesn't

mean that it doesn't contain clear poetic elements in many or some places. And that is certainly also –perhaps if you look at it from the perspective of our Western tradition – quite noticeable; this poetic quality that appears again and again in certain surahs, sometimes permeates surahs completely. But there are other moments as well. It presents itself as a text where, as a general rule, an 'I' or a 'we' speaks; God or the prophet on behalf of God, in that sense, and where that I or We addresses a 'you'. Hence, it is addressed to us, the readers. I as a reader am addressed by the voice that expresses itself in this text. These are, I think, the predominant characteristics of the Koran.

AM: In the Bible, there are certain sayings and proverbs that have become adapted and included in German everyday language, for example: : "Seine Hände in Unschuld waschen" ("to wash one's hands of something/ in innocence") or "im Dunkeln tappen"("to be in the dark"), or also such sayings as "Wer anderen eine Grube gräbt, fällt selbst hinein" ("harm set, harm get"). Are there comparable phenomena in the Arabic language in relation to the Koran as well?

NG: Yes, of course there are. Oftentimes – especially in the shorter surahs at the end, some of which are only two, sometimes even only one sentence long, so they are very short – they are used as very natural sayings. Sometimes also excerpts from surahs, for example a verse or so, or a short piece, so three, four verses from a surah form a unit, and are then often murmured or evoked on certain occasions, or just used as a proverb. Interestingly, perhaps also in relation to the context in which the Koran originated, this is often parallel to poetry, which still functions in a similar way as a point of reference and as a treasure trove of wisdom.

AM: Now, not all people have made contact with the Koran, or perhaps don't even know what you do with the Koran at all. Can you perhaps give a brief insight into various uses or perhaps also rules in which the Koran appears or plays an important role?

NG: Basically, the Koran is a text that can be read by anyone. There are also certain groups that make it their task to master it by heart. Of course, it plays a very important role as an object of use, if you like, for daily prayer. In Islam, you perform five prayers a day if you keep

to the rules. So, there are ultimately very many different applications. For example, it is also possible or practiced to sit down in the evening and read a surah, for self-education. And of course, this also plays a big role in the more – how shall we say – official contexts of the mosque, the Friday prayer.

AM: Now we have covered the term 'ilm, knowledge, and the Koran. There was another term for wisdom, namely 'hikmah'. Let's take a deeper dive into that, and the Koran will certainly come up again in the process, I assume. What are the ideal figures of wisdom in classical Islamic thought? Are there any examples?

NG: Yes, of course that is also diverse, just as the intellectual landscape is diverse. One such figure is, of course, the prophet himself. He is considered quite exemplary. Not only because he is the messenger of God, but also because his way of life is an example of the wisdom that was bestowed upon him.

AM: Is that linked to a certain way of life, or to a certain behavior, or what constitutes that life?

NG: It is perhaps difficult to pin down in concrete terms with regards to the prophet. Well, two factors definitely play a big role: One is – and this is, of course, because he is the prophet – he has an immense amount of knowledge. So, when you ask him: “Dear prophet, do I have to do it more like this or like that? Give me a hint.” Then the prophet would be able to do that. But there you can already see the second component coming into play: Life management; that is, actual, day-to-day behavior; questions that arise, so nicely put in English: “What's the right thing to do?”

AM: So a very practical wisdom or knowledge.

NG: Exactly. That's always an important component, which you can see in the Koran and throughout. So just theoretically accumulating knowledge in an ivory tower, so to speak, makes no sense. Somehow it is clear: “No”, but that means at the same time that I must also do something. So I see ethically, for example, how I have to behave correctly. Perhaps

beyond that, I also see how I have to contribute socially in order to be helpful to others. How I can or must or should get involved in the most diverse areas, also politically, ultimately - i.e. on the highest level of human interaction - in order to help people gain this kind of knowledge and to achieve happiness. So that is a very strong, practical component. And this, of course, has different connotations from school to school, also the relationship of the two. And there are also traditions – I have already mentioned Sufism, Islamic mysticism. Of course, it is a very broad field. But there are also gnostical directions that try to reach perfection through knowledge and insight. One gets the impression that practice, life practice, actually has more of a personal meaning; namely in the sense of advancing oneself best in knowledge, in insight. And that's where such moments come in – you mentioned this earlier when you were talking about Buddhism – like meditation. That's a certain practice, of course, but it's actually a very solitary practice that you do as an individual by yourself. And even if you're sitting there in a circle of other Sufis who are also meditating; you're still doing it for yourself, for yourself individually. And ultimately, the insight is very often thought of there as approaching God, not only thinking about him theoretically, but experiencing him properly. In other words, to really feel the primary cause that underlies all of us. There is often talk of *'dhawq'*, of tasting. This is a completely different conception than going out into the world and saying: "I must make sure to not only get my things done, but to see where there is need and also help there", which is a much more social aspect. Like for example in the *'adab'* tradition, the tradition that builds very much on the literary heritage.

AM: I can detect three different traditions here: Namely, you have mentioned falsafa several times now, also in the process, which seems to be a tradition. Then there is this Sufi tradition and just now you mentioned 'adab' again. And this also seems to be related to different ideas or ideal figures of a wise person.

NG: Yes, I think one could differentiate that in such an idealized way. I don't want to exclude other nuances, but from the literature that I have dealt with so far, these would be the ideal types, if I can use this term, that I would crystallize here. And *falsafa* is basically also a very theoretical matter; acquisition of knowledge, but – and this is the interesting thing – if you look at how *falsafa* has developed since its emergence in the 9th century, then up to the end

of my research period, so the 11th, 12th century, one notices quite clearly – and a key figure here would be al-Farabi, whom one has perhaps encountered in the West at some point, so here we are in the 10th century – one sees quite clearly, in fact very structurally, parallel to what I said earlier about the religious sphere, the idea: Yes, it is about personal bliss in an afterlife, but that is connected with the question of how we shape the here and now. So, suddenly, ethical, social, political questions come into play, and the question: How do we ideally build a community in which everyone can develop their own abilities and reach their own, otherworldly goal, whilst contributing to the community in the best possible way?

AM: That means that falsafa would be a tradition, where on the one hand worldly knowledge acquisition takes center stage, but that should then be carried over to society. So, outwardly directed. Then you mentioned Sufism, which centers around self-perfection. Can you perhaps also name a figure there?

NG: Yes, I would refer to al-Ghazali – in the 11th century, he died in 1111, it's easy to remember; so that's a century later than al-Farabi and *falsafa*, which I just mentioned – who, even if you simply look at the effectiveness of what he produced, laid very important foundations for the further, mystical tradition. And who also – this is a very interesting text, which is also available in German translation – wrote his autobiography, where you can basically follow his career. Of course, this is all overdone; a literary self-portrayal. But the interesting thing is that he also makes clear how he became a mystic, so to speak, and also, at least hints at, what practices he cultivated. And that is precisely what I would describe today with the modern term of meditation; in Arabic it is called '*dhikr*'. This is basically a practice that is still used today in various forms in mystical places; *dhikr* is actually remembering and means quite specifically that one speaks the name of God, murmurs to oneself - in other words, as a meditative practice. And we know certain other meditative practices of the Sufi orders, especially later in the Turkish empire, such as this whirling. These are some of the different practices. You don't have that in al-Ghazali yet. But this kind of thinking about oneself, about certain things that one mumbles or just tries to think through in one's head, where one concentrates on it, these concentration techniques that one also knows from Buddhism, that's what one finds here. But he really separated himself.

He didn't join other Sufi communities, but he secluded himself, left his family behind and concentrated entirely on meditation, on *dhikr*, on this inner development.

AM: And according to al-Ghazali, anyone can attain this self-perfection, or is wisdom limited to certain, particularly gifted people?

NG: It's hard to say. You get the impression when you read his various texts that it might be theoretically possible, but practically not. Because then he also differentiates when he thinks about people in general. Most people – that doesn't sound very exclusionary – they would just do their thing and wouldn't be preoccupied with intellectual questions and wouldn't be able to either. In the end, he joins the anthropology that comes from *falsafa*, that is, from the Greek heritage. So, the idea that people are more or less gifted and that there is actually only a minority that is intelligent enough to deal with theoretical issues. And he then distinguishes those who deal with theoretical questions. That is quite good. But then it's always just about the subject matter; one thinks about something. But true knowledge is, as I described earlier, this direct contact, where one really experiences the thing, really tastes it.

AM: So, this tasting, I think, describes very well that it is something that is very difficult to put into language or to describe. And then maybe it can't be taught at all, for example.

NG: Yes, exactly. That's what al-Ghazali says. He is of the opinion that I can't force what is. I can meditate as much as I want – if I don't have this gift of grace, so to speak, that the insight, the tasting, the touch becomes part of me, then I always remain stuck at this lower level. And in this respect, perhaps every human being could achieve this theoretically, but de facto, with this anthropology, they remain exceptional beings; prophets. And then there are –he has a Shiite background – there are the imams, who also stand out in a special way.

AM: You mentioned adab before. I am not very familiar with this term. Can you perhaps explain again what it relates to, and whether it is directed outward or inward?

NG: *Adab* is a term in Arabic today that simply means literature. In the period we're talking about here, which is this formative or classical period, it's a much broader term. For those who are familiar with ancient Roman culture, it's most comparable to *rhetorica*. It's a very comprehensive form of dealing with all kinds of knowledge issues – I really mean that. And that includes theoretical questions, as well as very practical questions. And this is a kind of education, an encyclopedic education that also takes place at schools and is of course always very much dependent on one's own initiative, but there are also schools for this. These are mainly attended by those who enter the higher civil service. I mentioned one example earlier: That is al-Jahiz. Here we are, so to speak, farthest back in the chronology, in the 9th century - he lived almost a century before al-Farabi. And he is in fact, he is seen as the – how shall we say – inventor, founder of *adab*. And the interesting thing about *adab* is that it is practiced by people who are in government service, who of course always have a certain political orientation, who don't sit in an ivory tower and think for themselves. So *adab* also has a very strong practical orientation. It is, as you can see with al-Jahiz, strongly rooted in theory. He has a very comprehensive world view, has been theologically active and was also quoted among theologians as a theologian, so to speak. So, you can see that there is really a very strong theoretical foundation. And on this theoretical foundation, on his metaphysics, one could say, he builds his considerations, how man, the wise man, should behave. It is this practical orientation that plays a role here. And the interesting thing, I think, which is incredibly exciting for us, is that he ultimately comes to the conclusion: this question and his answer to this question depends very specifically on the individual we are talking about. Because every person is born into completely different contexts, develops, lives in completely different contexts, situations, brings their own talents. So ultimately, the wisest form of living is when the individual manages to align their life according to the possibilities, the scope, the circumstances.

AM: That sounds very much like a theory that puts interaction in the foreground. Because one behaves in a certain environment. Does that mean that this is more of an outwardly directed tradition or a public tradition?

NG: That's how I would describe it, outwardly directed and, above all, a tradition based on communication. You just mentioned exchange, I think, or something similar as a term. And

that's a moment that's very important here. I had mentioned metaphysics on which he bases his reflections. And in his view, the whole world is a sign system. It's God's creation, not just art for art's sake, but God created a message with it. So everything that exists, the clouds, the mountains, the trees, we, the people, ultimately, God speaks to us via things. And via these things, he teaches us about our afterlife, this task that we have, amongst others. So there are these...let's say religious ideas are incorporated or captured by this – but the interesting thing is that man is a very interesting hermaphrodite being, because he stands at this intersection. He himself is a sign created by God, but he has this gift of language, which distinguishes him from other living beings and above all from the inanimate nature, with which he can enter into communication. And there are passages in the work of – I am thinking of one in the work of al-Jahiz – where he explicitly says: If people do not communicate any more, and that means, clearly, understandably, thus for the other also understandably, for the addressee understandably, communicate with each other about things, then things will pass, and cease to exist. So, it is basically a *'condicio sine qua non'* for the existence of this system of signs; that people maintain it and exchange information about it. So there the communicative act - and this is really meant in a comprehensive sense, to respond to and react to each other, to cooperate with each other, ultimately linguistically, to act – this moment ultimately becomes the key moment, not only for the existence of things as they are, but ultimately also for our self-perfection.

AM: So the wise person can communicate very well, or put things into words well, in relation to the addressee.

NG: Yes. Exactly, and to the situation. There's always this situational appropriateness. Something that, if we go back to the Greek tradition, we would perhaps associate with prudential behavior. So, the idea that we ultimately only exist in communication. So we are not *monads*. We are really *dyads* at least, if not *polyads*.

AM: Maybe we can get a little bit more specific about certain wisdom practices: You mentioned earlier the memorization of the Koran. That that is a practice that is associated with the Koran. Is it also perceived or conceived as a wisdom practice, or does that have a different context?

NG: Of course, that has a religious context as well. Now the question is, how much is one willing to include that in the concept of wisdom? I myself have no problems with that. Precisely because the idea is that in this way one realizes how the Koran presents itself as the message, namely to attain knowledge and wisdom. In this regard, I believe this to be a wisdom practice. Both this recitation of the Koran, whether in groups or individually, or also the reading, the immersion in the Koran, in the reading of the Koran, these would also be wisdom practices according in my opinion. Because ultimately, it's about triggering transformative processes in one's own experience and realizing and implementing them.

AM: I had asked at the very beginning why, or rather, I had noted that in the Western world figures of the Islamic tradition are not so well known. And that's not entirely true, because there is Rumi, for example, there is Hafez, perhaps also Khayyam. These are all poets who are well known and who go in the direction of mystical practices, Sufism. Are there other mystical wisdom practices that would be interesting for us?

NG: I think – now we're coming back to poetry – you've actually already addressed one of the core areas. I had referred earlier to the context of the emergence of the Koran, and that one has to take ancient Arabic poetry as a reference point here. Poetry, as I have tried to make clear, is more than just a form of entertainment among others, which is perhaps rather underestimated in our country today, or people sit down in the evening, read a few poems and are happy about how beautiful they are. It is really a culturally structural moment in the Arabic-speaking culture of this time, but also beyond. It continues even beyond this period of formation. And the interesting thing is – I mentioned this earlier – that even in the religious sphere, it is not only the Koran and the sayings of the prophet that are the point of reference, but also poetry. And it remains so in a way that one can see, for example, in such Sufi movements, that poetry becomes a medium of expression for one's own Sufi experience, where one speaks about what one no longer can speak about. And one also makes use of what has already been practiced for centuries in the Arabic language, that one deals with metaphors, with linguistic means in a way that is not simply rhetorically ornamental, but that teases out levels of meaning from the language that are completely lost in a purely referential use of the language. And you can see that very clearly here.

AM: And is it the writing of poetry itself that brings me into a mystical state, or what could be called a wisdom practice? Or is it the reading of poems? Or is it separable at all?

NG: I would say it's ultimately inseparable. We just have to distinguish that they are different roles. So you have – and this has been the case even in pre-Islamic times, in ancient Arabic poetry – the poets who first invented a poem. That's really where invention comes in. These poets were seen in a way as clairvoyants, almost like prophets. They somehow had a sense, a sensory perception that went beyond normal sensory perception. It is also interesting that the word for poetry: *'she'r'*, comes from the verb *'she'ra'*, meaning to feel, to sense. So, one feels something, one senses something. And you put that into words. And not just one-dimensional words, but words that carry an incredible amount of semantic connotations. And this idea continues. In this respect, the poet who first comes to a certain poem, a certain motif and its elaboration, is almost a kind of clairvoyant; not really a prophet, but still a kind of clairvoyant who is one level above normal people, on the level of knowledge. But what can the one who reads or recites this poetry do? Very much; culture remains strongly verbal, until today. So, a lot of poetry is recited. What one can have, is ultimately a share in this insight. One is addressed in a way – again this incredibly important role of language – on different registers at the same time, without being able to define it as a term, which is what we are always looking for in the West. You are addressed on so many levels at the same time, which communicate something to you and let you experience something that you cannot or could not express in your own words.

AM: And are there other methods of “tasting” than poetry? You spoke about dervishes before. Is that also part of it?

NG: Exactly. There are different practices that develop in different contexts that don't necessarily always have to do with each other. So even if this poetry is called Sufi poetry, it is not necessarily something that is received in a particular Sufi order at all. In fact, it's sometimes widely dismissed because it's too much about cognitive experience. And in certain Sufi movements, one really only wants to know the feeling in the sense of pure experience without activating the intellect, so to speak, formulated and understood.

However, in this spectrum of Sufi practices, one has moved from the meditative, which I called the murmuring earlier, these recitation and contemplation practices, to physical practices, such as the dervish dance, which we have briefly mentioned.

AM: So very briefly: Dervish dance, that's a dance in which you whirl rapidly.

NG: Exactly. And usually also in a group. So where different dancers whirl around and at the same time form a circle in the room. Such practices. That would be the dervish dance, or certain forms of dervish dance. So practices range from this to silent contemplation, which was briefly introduced with al-Ghazali, where a person individually contemplates alone, for himself, as we know it from other traditions. And then also poetry. Poetry as, perhaps in the best sense of the word, a source of inspiration.

AM: Unfortunately, we have already reached the end of our conversation. Thank you very much, Ms. Germann. It was very interesting.

This podcast was produced by Martin Münnich with the support of ETH-Zurich and the Udo Keller Foundation Forum Humanum in Hamburg. I would like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks and to browse the media offerings on the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices at metis.ethz.ch, for example by following the link below to access the booklets to the podcast.

Thank you for your time and goodbye!