Merits of the Soul: Patience (Sabr)

A short article discussing the types of patience (sabr) and its merits, its relation to divine gnosis, and ways of attaining it.

Patience (Sabr)

...And be patient and persevering, for Allah is with those who patiently persevere. (Holy Qur'an, 8: 46)

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (a) said:

“Verily, Sabr is to faith what the head is to the body. The body perishes without the head, and so also when Sabr goes, faith also disappears.”[Al-Kulayni, al‑Kafi, vol. 2, bab al‑Sabr, p. 128, hadith # 2]

When Imam ‘Ali (a) was asked about faith (iman), he replied: “The structure of faith is supported by four pillars: Patience (Sabr), Conviction (yaqin), Justice (‘adl) and Struggle (jihad). Then he explained further: ‘Patience comprises of four attributes: Eagerness, fear, piety and anticipation (of death). So, whoever is eager for Paradise will ignore evil temptations; whoever fears the fire of Hell will abstain from sins; whoever practices piety will easily bear the difficulties and hardships of the life of this world and whoever anticipates death will hasten to perform good deeds.’”[Al‑Amidi, Ghurar ul Hikam wa Durar ul Kalim, hadith # 2897]

The definition of Sabr

- The famous scholar Nasir al‑Din al‑Tusi said: “Sabr means restraining the self from agitation when confronted with undesirables.”

- The great gnostic (‘arif) Khwajah `Abd Allah al‑Ansari said: “Sabr means restraining the self from complaint about hidden anguish.”
The Kinds and Degrees of Sabr

There are various degrees and levels of Sabr as indicated by the noble traditions and the reward and merit vary in accordance with degree and level.

- Imam 'Ali (a) said, "The Messenger of Allah (s) said: “Sabr is of three kinds: Sabr at the time of affliction, Sabr in regard to obedience, and Sabr in regard to disobedience (of Allah). And the third one is superior to the first two kinds.” [Al-Kulayni, al-Kafi, vol. 2, bab al-Sabr, hadith # 15]

- Imam ‘Ali (a) said: “Sabr is of two types: Sabr on what you dislike and Sabr on what you like.” [Mizan al-Hikmah, hadith # 10099]

Relationship of Sabr and Ma’rifah of God

- As long as a person feels inner anguish over the misfortunes and hardships of life, his ma’rifah (gnosis) of God remains deficient. When a person achieves contentment (rida) and satisfaction at the misfortunes and adverse conditions, his soul reaches a higher station of nearness to God. Sabr in regard to abstinence from sins and fulfilment of duties (ta’at) is related to deficient knowledge of the secrets of ‘ibadat (worship) and the hereafterly forms of acts of sin and obedience.

- When a person firmly believes that what he is going to obtain in the other world after death is a form of his own deeds performed in this worldly life, he will have no distress while going through hardships and hostile situations. Rather, such a person becomes happy with the difficulties encountered in the fulfilment of divine duties. His joy becomes more than the anguish of a normal person over such difficulties. His attachment to God increases during adverse circumstances. A manifestation of such a high station of rida was exemplified in the personalities of companions of Imam Husayn (a) in the event of Karbala.

- Imam Reza (a) said: (among the exhortations of Prophet (s) to Abu Dharr (ra): “…If you are able to act for the pleasure (rida) of Allah with firm conviction, than do so. And if this is not possible for you than practice Sabr on unpleasant matters as it will bring plenty of blessings.” [Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 82, p. 136, hadith # 21]

The outcome of Sabr

Sabr produces many good results that include soul’s training and discipline.

- If a person bears patiently with misfortunes and calamities for some time and seriously endures the hardships entailed during worship, rites and the bitterness arising from the renunciation of forbidden pleasures, and if all this is done for the sake of obedience to his Lord and Provider, it gradually becomes easy for him to bear with the hardships and difficulties. The soul of a patient person relinquishes its
earlier uncontrolled state and he develops an enduring luminous faculty that raises him over the station of Sabr to reach other higher spiritual stations. Practicing Sabr while enjoining good and forbidding evil (amr bil ma’ruf wa nahi ‘anil munkar) makes a person more steadfast and firm.

- Anguish, anxiety and untoward body movements at the time of financial loss, death, natural disasters etc., are the signs of soul’s weakness. They deprive one’s personality of stability and dignity, weaken the determination, and enfeeble the intellect. At such delicate moments, Sabr is key to the gates of felicity and deliverance. It strengthens the will and the power of resolution to overcome adverse circumstances, make rational decisions and act wisely.

- Sabr in regard to sins is the source of the self’s taqwa (fear of God). Sabr in regard to obedience (ta’at) is the source of intimacy with God and His love. And Sabr in misfortunes is the source of rida with divine destiny and decrees.

Higher Levels of Sabr

- Sabr fi Allah (Sabr in God): It means steadfastness while endeavouring to get rid of evil habits (eg. lying, slandering, greed) and ugly traits (eg. egoism, hypocrisy, envy) and practicing abstinence from the objects of love and attraction (eg. avoiding haram music, giving up sleep for night prayers, eating moderately) during self-purification. It is the denial of selfhood in the path of the Beloved (God). This stage belongs to the wayfarers (ahl al-suluk).

- Sabr ma’a Allah (Sabr with God): An ardent wayfarer in the path of God during his sincere ibadat and endeavours reaches the state of selflessness such that he from time to time witnesses intimacy with God. The light of His attributes and names illuminates his heart and vision. He has to be patient and safeguard himself from minor traces of self-love, pride, etc. during these phases in order to witness higher stages.

- Sabr `an Allah (Sabr from God): It pertains to the stations of lovers of God who after experiencing His intense love have to return to their own physical world and bear separation from Him. It is the hardest and the most difficult of the stations. This sublime level of Sabr is indicated by Imam ‘Ali (a) in the famous Du`a Kumayl “O my God, my Master and my Lord! Even if I were able to endure Thy chastisement, how shall I bear Thy separation?!"

- Sabr bi Allah (Sabr for God): It is the state of perfection experienced when one achieves the station of existing only with God (baqa’ bi Allah) and moulds himself with the norms of Allah (takhalluq bi akhlaq Allah). It is for those blessed with stability and steadfastness, and is attained after Sabr with God.

The reward of Sabr

- Imam al-Sadiq (a) said: “Whoever of the believers that bears patiently with a tribulation that
befalls him, has the reward of a thousand martyrs.”[Al-Kulayni, al-Kafi, vol. 2, bab al-Sabr, hadith # 17]

- Imam al-Sadiq (a) said: “When the believer enters his grave, salat is on his right hand, zakat on his left, virtue faces him, with Sabr taking him under its shelter. When the two angels encharged with questioning enter upon him, Sabr says to salat, zakat and virtue, ‘Take care of your companion, and if you fail to assist him I will take care of him myself.”[Ibid, hadith # 8]

An advice to attain Sabr

This world is a believer’s prison. Gather all the strength at your command and be patient and forbearing throughout its ups and downs. With courage and fortitude, stand against adversities and calamities.

Make yourself understand that the agitation and anguish inside you, aside from involving a great disgrace by themselves, are futile in confrontation with sufferings and calamities. Be happy with God and don’t complain in front of creatures about His irresistible decrees and inevitable ordainments. During the times of hardships, turn your heart's attention to the focal point of Absolute Perfection (God) and you will witness its effects in this world itself and your heart will attain such an expanse that it will become the realm of the manifestation of God's sovereignty.

Richness and contentment will then pervade your heart such that everything related to this world will become worthless in your eyes. Sabr, forbearance and restraint bring fair, plentiful rewards and have sublime and beautiful forms in the world of Barzakh (purgatory).

If you have faith in God and you believe that all the affairs lie in His mighty hands, you will not complain before God Almighty of the hardships of life and the adversities that strike you. Rather, you will accept them willingly, fulfil your duties and thank Him gratefully for His bounties. [Adopted from Al-Khomeini, Forty Hadith, chapter 16, ‘Sabr’]

Conclusion

Imam ‘Ali (a) said: “The one who practices Sabr will never be deprived of success, even though it may take a long time.” [Nahjul Balagha, saying # 153]

Topic Tags:

- Patience [3]
- Sabr [4]