

The Significance of Self-control and Self-purification

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A short text on the topic of the importance of self-discipline and purification of the soul in the light of the Qur'an and traditions as a means of attaining proximity to Allah, the Most High.

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The Significance of Self-control and Self-purification

Mohammad Ali Shomali

It is a common idea amongst all religious and spiritual traditions that human beings should have some kind of self-control. Although we enjoy free will, we need to exercise our free will in a responsible way. In the same way that we expect others to respect our dignity and interests, we should respect dignity and interests of others. We should also safeguard our own dignity and long term interests.

Thus, we cannot simply go after our whims and desires and do whatever we want. We need to have self-control and self-discipline which leads to self-purification. If we purify our hearts we will no longer need to resist our temptations and control ourselves against lower desires and lusts, since a purified person desires nothing except what is good and moral for himself and others. In what follows, we will study the necessity of self-control and self-purification.

Self-control

On the necessity of self-control, the Glorious Qur'an says:

وَأَمَّا مَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِ وَنَهَى النَّفْسَ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ فَإِنَّ الْجَنَّةَ هِيَ الْمَأْوَىٰ

And as for him who fears to stand in the presence of his Lord and forbids his own soul from its whims and caprices then surely Paradise is the abode. (79:40 & 41)

يَا دَاوُدُ إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاكَ خَلِيفَةً فِي الْأَرْضِ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَ النَّاسِ بِالْحَقِّ وَلَا تَتَّبِعِ الْهَوَىٰ فَيُضِلَّكَ عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَضِلُّونَ عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ بِمَا نَسُوا يَوْمَ الْحِسَابِ

O David! ...do not follow the whims of your own soul for they will lead you astray from God's path. (38:26)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلَّهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَوْ

الْوَالِدِينَ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ إِنْ يَكُنْ غَنِيًّا أَوْ فَقِيرًا فَاللَّهُ أَوْلَىٰ بِهِمَا فَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا الْهَوَىٰ أَنْ
تَعْدِلُوا وَإِنْ تَلُؤْا أَوْ تُعْرِضُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا

O you who have faith! Be maintainers of justice and witnesses for the sake of God, even if it should be against yourselves or [your] parents and near relatives, and whether it be [someone] rich or poor, for God has a greater right over them. So do not follow [your] desires, lest you should be unfair, and if you distort [the testimony] or disregard [it], God is indeed well aware of what you do. (4: 135)

Here we find two pieces of advice. Firstly, to observe God's Will, to fear Him and to try to obey Him. And secondly, to forbid our soul from doing what is wrong and harmful to us. This becomes only possible when we have some kind of self-control.

In Nahj al-Balaghah, there is a very beautiful and insightful description of an un-named brother. Imam Ali (a.s.) is quoted as saying:

كَانَ لِي فِيْمَا مَضَىٰ أَخٌ فِي اللَّهِ وَكَانَ يُعْظِمُهُ فِي عَيْنِي صِغَرُ الدُّنْيَا فِي عَيْنِهِ ... وَ
كَانَ إِذَا بَدَهُهُ أَمْرَانِ يَنْظُرُ [يَنْظُرُ] أَيُّهُمَا أَقْرَبُ إِلَى الْهَوَىٰ [فَخَالَفَهُ] فَيُخَالَفُهُ

In the past I had a brother-in-faith, and he was prestigious in my view because the world was insignificant in his eyes... If two things confronted him he would see which was more akin to his whims and he would do the other. 1

We see that one of the brother-in-faith's qualities was that when faced with two options, (for example whether to go to one place or another, one meeting or another or to engage in one business or another), that is, when he was at a 'crossroads' and wanted to choose which way to turn, he would look at his own soul/heart, trying to discover which course of action was dearer to his self, his own personal interest and then he would do the other one.

For example, one might have the option to either watch TV or to help someone with his work. The soul which is not trained may encourage us to go and watch TV, saying that it is a waste of time to help the other person. But instead it is better to spend the time helping the other person.

Of course, we may not always be able to find out what is the right course of action by just following this instruction. But it is important to at least try to find out what our selfish desire wants us to do. God has given us the ability to distinguish between what our egoism or greediness wants from us and those things which are in our 'real' interests.

When we work for our 'real' interest we also secure the interests of other people. God has created us in a way that when we really serve ourselves, then we serve all human beings. But if we try to be 'clever' and only serve ourselves, then we not only damage ourselves but also others. There are lots of ways to damage ourselves and others. But it is not possible to truly serve oneself and not serve others.

There is also another method which we can use when we want to make a decision and have two or three options to consider and do not know what to do. In such cases, it is useful to try to imagine that a person who is very pious, and whose actions you trust and accept, is in your place. Then try to decide what that person would do if he were in your place.

Since you have information about the way that person normally makes his decisions and about his intentions and good will, by keeping that person in mind you may be able to understand what to do. For example, you could imagine a pious scholar or pious relative, not necessarily an infallible or saint. You could then think about what they might do and this would give you some kind of insight.

So, it is a basic fact that we must have self-control. If we believe that we should just do what we want by satisfying and gratifying ourselves, then there is no point in talking about spiritual direction.

Of course, Islam tells us that self-control is just a beginning; it is for those people who are at the start of the journey. What we need to do is to transform our soul from one which has an interest in lower desires into a soul which instead has a yearning for good things. Then our soul itself becomes a helper and an assistant to us. But this is a matter of training and purifying the soul.

There is a beautiful story in the Mathnawi by Rumi which shows how the heart can be transformed in either a good way or a bad way. Rumi says that once there was a perfume market where every person who wanted to sell perfumes had a shop.

As a result, whoever entered this bazaar would only sense the beautiful fragrance of perfumes. Everyone enjoyed it, especially the perfume sellers who of course are the best people to appreciate perfume due to their refined sense of smell, whereas we become confused after smelling too many different fragrances. But one day someone went to the bazaar with a horse and the horse dirtied the passageway of the bazaar.

The people became very angry because they could not tolerate the bad smell but no-one had the strength to take the dirt outside. It was like torture for them. So someone suggested that they had better bring someone there whose job was to clean horses' stables.

They went to ask a young man to help them. He said that of course he would be able to do this as this was his job and what he always did. But when he entered the bazaar, before even reaching the dirty place, as soon as he smelt the fragrance of perfume he became unconscious because he was used to bad smells and so could not tolerate good fragrances.

In a similar way, on one hand, we find people who enjoy praying, who enjoy having some private time with God. And, on the other hand, we find people who become angry when they see you praying and it causes them pain. And when they see you go to the mosque or the church, they feel troubled by this.

There is a hadith which says that a believer in the mosque is like a fish in water but when a hypocrite is in the mosque he feels like he is in prison and always wants to escape. So these are the different states of the soul that we can reach through self-training and self-purification.

Self-purification

In the Glorious Qur'an, God emphasises the purification and purity of the human soul as follows:

وَالشَّمْسِ وَضُحَاهَا وَالْقَمَرِ إِذَا تَلَاها وَالنَّهَارِ إِذَا جَلَّاهَا وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَاهَا وَالسَّمَاءِ وَمَا بَنَاهَا وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا طَحَاهَا وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا

I swear by the sun and its brilliance and the moon when it follows the sun and the day when it makes manifest the sun (and her beauty) and the night when it covers the sun and the heaven and Him who made it and the earth and Him who extended it and the soul and Him who made it perfect, then He inspired it to understand what is right and wrong for it. He will indeed be successful who purifies it and he will indeed fail whoever pollutes and corrupts it. (91: 1-10)

So, after swearing eleven times, after so much emphasis, God declares that the person who purifies his soul will be successful and whoever pollutes and corrupts his soul will fail. On the Day of Judgement there will be two groups of people: those who are prosperous and happy because they purified their soul and those who are in an unfortunate position because they were careless and negligent of their soul.

Purification of the soul is a prerequisite for closeness to God. Indeed, the whole point of morality and spirituality is to purify one's soul. It is only then that the soul starts shining, receiving and reflecting utmost radiation and light from God.

If we want to meet God, Who is the Most Pure, then we need to achieve purity. It is impossible to be polluted and then try to go towards God. If we want to go somewhere where the people are smart, well-dressed and beautiful, then we too need to make ourselves clean and tidy, we should put on good clothes and thus make ourselves somehow compatible with them. Otherwise they will say that we will spoil their gathering and damage their reputation.

One of the main tasks of all the Prophets (a.s.) and a major aim behind all their endeavours in teaching the divine message was to help people to purify their souls. Referring to the mission of the Prophet

Muhammad (s.a.w.), the Glorious Qur'an says:

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ
الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ

He is the one who has sent amongst illiterate people an apostle from among themselves who recites to them His verses and purifies them and teaches them the Book and the wisdom. (62:2)

لَقَدْ مَنَّ اللَّهُ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِذْ بَعَثَ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَ
يُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ

Certainly God conferred a great favour upon the believers when He raised among them a Messenger from among themselves, reciting to them His verses and purifying them, and teaching them the Book and the wisdom, although before that they were surely in manifest error. (3: 164)

كَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِيكُمْ رَسُولًا مِنْكُمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِنَا وَيُزَكِّيكُمْ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَ
الْحِكْمَةَ وَيُعَلِّمُكُم مِمَّا لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ

As We sent to you an Apostle from among yourselves, who recites to you Our signs, and purifies you, and teaches you the Book and wisdom, and teaches you what you did not know. (2: 151)

Thus we see that one of the tasks of the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.), in addition to reciting the Qur'an and teaching the Qur'an and wisdom, was to help us to purify our souls. Indeed, the appointment of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) for such tasks was an answer to the prayer of Abraham (a.s.) and Ishmael (a.s.) after they raised the foundations of the House (ka'bah):

وَإِذْ يَرْفَعُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ الْقَوَاعِدَ مِنَ الْبَيْتِ وَإِسْمَاعِيلُ رَبَّنَا تَقَبَّلْ مِنَّا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ
الْعَلِيمُ رَبَّنَا وَاجْعَلْنَا مُسْلِمَيْنِ لَكَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِنَا أُمَّةً مُسْلِمَةً لَكَ وَأَرِنَا مَنَاسِكَنَا وَ
تُبَّ عَلَيْنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيمُ رَبَّنَا وَابْعَثْ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ
آيَاتِكَ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

Our Lord! Accept from us; surely You are the Hearing, the Knowing....Our Lord! And raise up in them a Messenger from among them who shall recite to them Your verses and teach them the Book and the wisdom, and purify them; surely You are the Mighty, the Wise. (2: 127-129)

Just imagine how wise Abraham was! How lovely his supplication was! In three places in the Qur'an, God says that He has sent the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) to do the same thing that Abraham (a.s.) and Ishmael (a.s.) had wanted: to recite for the people the verses of the divine Book, to teach them the divine Book and wisdom and to purify their souls.

Of course, it must be God Himself who inspired them to pray in this way. God is so merciful that He first invites us to call Him, then He inspires us what to ask and then he answers our call and prayer.

Thus purification of the people was an important task for the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) and, indeed, all the Prophets (a.s.). These verses clearly show the great significance of the task of purification of the soul. It is noteworthy that in the prayer of Abraham and Ishmael the request of teaching the Book and wisdom is mentioned before the purification, but in all the three places that God describes the mission of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.), purification precedes teaching the Book and wisdom. This indicates the priority and great importance of purification. This also suggests that a prerequisite for learning the Book and wisdom is to be pure.

There are a number of sources of impurity. A major or the major source of impurity is the attachment to the materialistic life and worldly affairs to the extent that the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) is quoted as saying:

حُبُّ الدُّنْيَا رَأْسُ كُلِّ خَطِيئَةٍ أَلَا تَرَى كَيْفَ أَحَبَّ مَا أَبْغَضَهُ اللَّهُ وَ أَيْ خَطَاٍ أَشَدُّ
جُرْمًا مِنْ هَذَا

The attachment to this world is the source for every wrong. Beware how the one who is attached to this world has loved what God dislikes. What wrong can be a greater crime than this??

The materialistic world (dunya) is the least important and valuable thing in the sight of God. To be attached to it and make it one's ultimate end in one's life is a grave mistake and impurity. Therefore, one of the major treatments of this problem and a crucial means of purification of the soul is to ask people to give alms. In some twenty verses of the Qur'an, giving alms (al-zakat) is mentioned right after establishing prayer (iqamat a-salat). For example, Allah (swt) says in the Qur'an:

وَمَا أُمِرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ حُنَفَاءَ وَيُقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُوا
الزَّكَاةَ وَ ذَلِكَ دِينُ الْقِيَمَةِ

And they were not commanded except to worship God, dedicating their faith to Him as men of pure faith, and to maintain the prayer, and pay the zakat. That is the upright religion. (98:5)

Zakat is derived from the same root as tazkiyah (purification) i.e. za-ka-wa which means growth and purity. It has been suggested³ that the reason for calling alms “zakat” lies in the fact that paying zakat purifies one's money and possessions. It is also true that paying alms causes growth (nam⁴) and blessing (barakah) in one's money and sustenance.

It seems more reasonable to suggest that the main reason for calling alms “zakat” is that it helps in purifying the soul by getting rid of the love for this world. This is why God says to the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.):

خُذْ مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ صَدَقَةً تُطَهِّرُهُمْ وَتُزَكِّيهِمْ بِهَا وَصَلِّ عَلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ صَلَاتَكَ سَكَنٌ لَهُمْ
وَ اللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

Take charity from their possessions to cleanse them and purify them thereby, and bless them. Indeed your blessing is a comfort to them, and God is all-hearing, all-knowing. (9: 103)

In this verse, instead of the term zakat, sadaqah (charity) is used. However, the same point is there: Giving money for the sake of God helps in purification of the giver.⁴ Elsewhere the Qur'an says:

الَّذِي يُؤْتِي مَالَهُ يَتَزَكَّىٰ وَ مَا لِأَحَدٍ عِنْدَهُ مِنْ نِعْمَةٍ تُجْزَىٰ إِلَّا ابْتِغَاءَ وَجْهِ رَبِّهِ الْأَعْلَىٰ
وَ لَسَوْفَ يَرْضَىٰ

he who gives his wealth to purify himself and does not expect any reward from anyone, but seeks only the pleasure of his Lord, the Most Exalted, and, surely, soon he will be well-pleased. (92: 18-21)

Thus when someone spends some money for the sake of God on things such as giving to the needy people or building places for common good such as Mosques, seminaries, schools and hospitals both giver and receiver benefit. However, the main beneficiary is the giver who is giving some money which is the least valuable thing in the sight of God and instead achieves purity and pleasure of God.

إِنَّمَا تُنذِرُ الَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُم بِالْغَيْبِ وَ أَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَ مَنْ تَزَكَّىٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَتَزَكَّىٰ
لِنَفْسِهِ وَ إِلَى اللَّهِ الْمَصِيرُ

... You can only warn those who fear their Lord in secret, and maintain the prayer. Whoever seeks purification for himself, seeks purification only for his own sake, and to God is the return. (35: 18)

Conclusion

It is a basic fact that we must have self-control. There can be no spirituality without self-discipline. We cannot develop ourselves by simply doing what we wish and satisfying and gratifying our soul.

Of course, Islam tells us that self-control is just a beginning. What we need to do is to transform our soul from one which has an interest in lower desires into a soul which instead has a yearning for good things.

By training and purifying our souls, our soul itself becomes a helper and an assistant to us. A major task of the Prophets and in particular the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) was to help people to purify themselves.

The reason for such a great emphasis on self-purification is the fact that God is the Most Pure and the Most Perfect and it is only by purification of the soul that we can achieve our ambition of getting close to Him. One major way of purification is to get rid of attachment to the materialistic life by giving out one's own money for the sake of God.

1. Wise Sayings, No. 289

2. Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 67, p. 309.

3. Lisan al-'Arab, Vol. 14, p. 358

4. This in addition to the great emphasis that the Qur'an puts on giving alms shows that it is not just a linguistic point or an accident that paying zakat as a religious requirement and tazkiyah (purification of the people) as a major task of the Prophet are so closely linked to each other.

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