

On the Removal of Obstacles and Hindrances from the Wayfarer's Path

This chapter consists of six sections:

Section one: on repentance (*tawbah*).

Section two: on abstinence (*zuhd*).

Section three: on poverty (*Faqr*).

Section four: on self-discipline (*riyadah*).

Section five: on self-scrutiny and watchfulness (*muhasabah and muraqabah*).

Section six: on Godfearing (*taqwa*).

Section One: On Repentance

God, the Blessed and the Exalted, has said:

...وَتُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

“And repent you unto God together, O believers, in order that you may succeed.” (24:31)

The meaning of *tawbah* is turning away from sin. One must first know what is sin in order to turn away from it. It should be known that the actions of people are of five kinds:

First, those which must be done and which it is not proper to omit.

Second, those which must not be done and which it is not proper to do.

Third, those are better done than omitted.

Fourth, those which are better omitted than done.

Fifth, those doing or not doing which is equal.

Sin consists of not doing acts of the first kind and committing acts of the second kind, and it is a duty of all sane people to repent on committing all acts of this kind.

And here that which is meant are not only acts of speech and those performed by bodily members but also all acts of thinking, speaking, and acting that are subject to the power and will of every sane person.

As to the omission of acts of the third kind and commission of acts of the fourth, they represent a breach of etiquette (*tark-e awla*), which is reprehensible for the Infallible Ones (*ma'sumun*, i.e. the prophets and their *awsiya*'), and their repentance is for commission of *tark-e awla*.

For the wayfarers, it is sin to attend to other than God, the Exalted, Who is their cherished goal, and they should repent on perpetrating it.

Hence repentance is of three kinds: the common repentance of the generality of people, the special (*khass*) repentance of the infallible ones, and the exclusive (*akhass*) repentance of the people of the path. The repentance of the sinners of the ummah pertains to the first category.

The repentance of Adam, may peace be upon him, and other prophets belongs to the second category. And the repentance of our Messenger, may God bless him and his Household, belongs to the third category, in regard to which he said:

وإنه ليغان على قلبه وإنني لأستغفر الله في كل يوم سبعين مرة

Indeed, physical nature casts its shadow upon my heart and I seek God's forgiveness seventy times in a day. 1

As to the repentance of the common people, it depends on two conditions.

The first condition is the knowledge of the various categories of action, as to which action is conducive to the attainment of perfection and which action results in deficiency and loss.

And this perfection varies with different persons; for some it is deliverance from punishment, and for some it is achievement of reward, and for some it is attainment of the Creator's good pleasure and nearness to Him.

The deficiency and loss also varies likewise; either it is liability to punishment, or deprivation from reward, or the displeasure of the Creator and farness from Him, the latter being the state of the accursed.

The second condition is awareness of the benefit that lies in attaining perfection and the good pleasure of God, the Exalted, and the harm in incurring loss and earning His displeasure.

Hence every sensible person who fulfils these two conditions would not sin and would repent should he perpetrate any.

Further, repentance consists of three things, (1) one of which relates to the past, (2) another to the present, and (3) a third to the future.

As to that which relates to the past, it consists of two things. (a) **First**, remorse for the sin committed by him in the past and regret for it, a regret that is as complete as possible. This kind entails the two other things and that is why it has been said that **الندم توبة** `Remorse is repentance`. 2

(b) The **second** thing is to compensate for the past conduct, and this has three aspects.

(i) One of them relates to God, the Exalted, Whom one has disobeyed.

(ii) The second relates to one's own self, which was subjected by one to harm and the displeasure of God, the Exalted.

(iii) The **third** relates to the other person who has been harmed by one's word or deed, and as long as the other person is not restituted his rights, repentance does not materialize. The restitution of his right can be made either by apologizing or by accepting retributive action, or by doing something which will obtain his satisfaction.

This means actually restituting his right or compensating him, or someone who represents him, for that breached right, or accepting his retributive action, or that of someone who represents him, and bearing the punishment that has been prescribed for that offense.

If the other person is one who has been killed, obtaining the satisfaction of his heirs is also part of the condition, for it is impossible to obtain the satisfaction of that man. If all the other requisites of repentance have been realized one may hope to be absolved in the Hereafter by God, the Exalted, with His all-inclusive mercy.

(ii) As to the rights of one's own self, that has to be compensated for by accepting the prescribed punishment in the world or the Hereafter.

(i) As to the Godward aspect of the matter, its requisites can hopefully be achieved by turning to God with lamentation and tears, and by devoting oneself to worship and austerities after obtaining the

satisfaction of the victim and restituting the rights of one's own self.

(2) As to the aspect of repentance that relates to the present, it consists of two things. One of them is to refrain from perpetrating the sin in which one has been engaged for the sake of attaining nearness to God. The second is to make the other victim of the sin secure from one's misconduct and to compensate him for the harm that has been inflicted upon him.

(3) As to the aspect relating to the future, that also consists of two things. One of them is to make a firm resolution not to commit it again, so much so that one would not commit a like sin, either voluntarily or under duress, even if one were to be killed or burnt.

The second is to remain steadfast in that resolve; for it happens that one who resolves on something is not secure against relapse. With the means of pledges and atonements, or some other of the various deterrents to resumption of sin, one should try to remain steadfast in one's resolution. And as long as one is hesitant and there is likelihood of resumption, steadfastness has not been realized.

And in all these matters one's intention should be the attainment of nearness to God and obedience of His commands so that one becomes one of those concerning whom it has been said:

التائب من الذنب كمن لا ذنب له

One who repents for a sin is like one who has not sinned. 3

These are the requisites of the common repentance from sins, and it is about this group that it has been said:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا تَوْبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ تَوْبَةً نَّصُوحًا عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَن يُكَفِّرَ عَنْكُمْ
سَيِّئَاتِكُمْ...

“O you who believe! Turn unto God in sincere repentance. It may be that your Lord will remit from you your evil deeds . . . ” (66:8)

And also:

إِنَّمَا التَّوْبَةُ عَلَى اللَّهِ لِلَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ السُّوءَ بِجَهَالَةٍ ثُمَّ يَتُوبُونَ مِنْ قَرِيبٍ فَأُولَٰئِكَ
يَتُوبُ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ...

“Forgiveness is only incumbent on God towards those who do evil in ignorance (and) then turn quickly (in repentance) to God. These are they toward whom God relents . . .” (4: 17)

And as to the special kind of repentance, which is for commission of *tark-e awla*, its requisites can be understood from that which has been mentioned in this regard. In this relation it has been said:

لَقَدْ تَابَ اللَّهُ عَلَى النَّبِيِّ وَالْمُهَاجِرِينَ وَالْأَنْصَارِ الَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوهُ فِي سَاعَةِ الْعُسْرَةِ...

“God has accepted the repentance of the Prophet, and the Muhajirun and the Ansar who followed him in the hour of hardship ...” (9: 117)

As to the exclusive repentance (of the wayfarers), it relates to two things. One of them is repentance for the wayfarer's paying heed to anything other than the cherished goal, and that is *why* it has been said:

اليمين والشمال مضلتان

Deviance it is (to turn) to the right and the left. 4

the second thing relates to repentance for retreating to a previous stage from which one must have gone forward, or for halting in the present stage, or considering that stage with satisfaction with the aim of halting in .All these are sins for this group, and that is why it has been said:

حسنة الأبرار سيئات المقربين

The merits of the virtuous are vices for the saintly.

They ought to repent for this sin, seek God's forgiveness abstain from persistence, be remorseful for past lapses, and plead in the presence of the Creator, the Exalted, the Holy, and the Pure.

من تاب وأخلص سره لله فإله له

Whoever repents and purifies his soul for the sake of God, God shall be his.

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ التَّوَّابِينَ وَيُحِبُّ الْمُتَطَهِّرِينَ

“Indeed God loves the repentant and those who take care for purity.” (2:222)

Section Two: On Zuhd

God, the Exalted, says

وَلَا تَمُدَّنَّ عَيْنَيْكَ إِلَىٰ مَا مَتَّعْنَا بِهِ أَزْوَاجًا مِّنْهُمْ زَهْرَةَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا لِنَفْتِنَهُمْ فِيهِ ۗ وَرِزْقُ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَىٰ

“Stretch not thine eyes to that We have given pairs of them to enjoy—the flower of the present life, that We may try them therein; and thy Lord's provision is better and more enduring.” (20: 131)

Zuhd is the absence of desire and the *zahid* is someone who is not fond of such mundane things as food and drink, dress and housing, other objects of appetite and pleasure, property and status, good name, proximity to rulers and influence, and every other thing that would depart from him at the time of death.

This absence of love for mundane matters is neither because of incapacity or ignorance about them, nor for any purpose or reward. Someone who has this quality is a *zahid* in the above mentioned sense.

However, a real *zahid* is one whose *zuhd*, as described, is not accompanied even with the hope of deliverance from the chastisement of hell or the reward of paradise, but solely for the sake of restraining his soul after knowing the benefits and consequences of each of these things mentioned.

His *zuhd* is habitual and is without any trace of greed, hope or expectation, worldly or otherworldly. This quality becomes habitual by means of restraining the soul from seeking pleasures, and by making it accustomed to austerities so that indifference to desire becomes firmly established in it.

In one of the anecdotes of the ascetics it is related that there was a man who had been selling the stew of sheep's head and *paludah* (a sweet beverage made of starch jelly) for thirty years without ever tasting any of them.

Asked the reason for this austerity, he replied, “When my soul desired these two things, I told it that it would never get any of them if it were to touch any of them. I did that so that it would not incline towards any pleasure whatsoever.”

One who adopts *zuhd* in the world with the hope of deliverance or reward in the Hereafter is like one who, out of his base disposition, abstains from eating food for days despite great hunger in order to eat

to his fill at an expected feast. Or he is like a tradesman who does barter to make a profit out of his merchandise.

In wayfaring, the benefit of *zuhd* lies in the curtailment of preoccupations, so that the wayfarer is saved from being preoccupied with anything that would keep him from reaching his goal.

Section Three: On Poverty (Faqr)

God, the Exalted, has said:

لَيْسَ عَلَى الضُّعَفَاءِ وَلَا عَلَى الْمَرْضَى وَلَا عَلَى الَّذِينَ لَا يَجِدُونَ مَا يُنْفِقُونَ حَرَجٌ

“Not unto the weak nor unto the sick nor unto those who can find naught to spend is any fault (if they are true to God and His Messenger) . . .” (9:91)

The *faqir* is someone without means or someone who has less than his minimum needs. However, in this context '*faqir*' is one who has no love of property and mundane things, and if he were to obtain any he is not keen to keep it.

That is not out of ignorance or incapacity or some handicap or negligence, nor for coveting some other advantage.

It is not for the sake of status, for earning a name for being good and generous, nor for fear of the tortures of hell or hope of the rewards of the Hereafter, but due to the need to be free from diversions, which is necessary for attentive wayfaring on the path of Reality and concentrating on the Divine, so that anything that is apart from God, the Exalted, does not become an obstacle in his way. And, in fact, this poverty is a branch of *zuhd*.

The Prophet, may God bless him and his Household, once said (to his Companions)

أَلَا أُخْبِرُكُمْ عَنْ مَلُوكِ الْجَنَّةِ؟

“Do you want me to tell you concerning the princes of the people of paradise?”

They replied, “Yes.” Whereupon he said,

كل ضعيف مستضعف أغبر أشعت ذي طمرين لا يؤبه له أقسم على الله لأبره

They are the weakest (of their society dusty, with disheveled hair, putting on two worn out pieces of clothing for dress, but who, nevertheless, were they to swear by God (to do something) would fulfill their oath. 5

And when the Prophet himself was told, “If you wish, We shall fill the Baths and Makkah for you with gold,” he replied,

لا, بل أجوع يوماً فأسألك وأشبع يوماً فأشكرك

No. Rather would I prefer to pray to Thee when I am hungry and to thank Thee when I satisfy my hunger.

Section Four: On Self-Discipline (Riyadah)

God, the Exalted and the Glorious, has said:

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

“But as for him who fears the Station of his Lord and forbids the soul its caprice, surely Paradise shall be the refuge.” (79:40–41)

'Riyadah' literally means the breaking in of a horse or mule by restraining it from carrying out its undesirable inclinations and habituating it to obey its master and to carry out his purposes.

In the present context, *riyadah* means restraining the animal soul from following its instincts of Desire and Irascibility and that which is associated with them, and deterring the rational soul from obeying animal instincts and restraining it from vicious dispositions and conduct, such as greed, acquisitiveness, ambition, and their associated characteristics such as cunning, deceit, fraud, backbiting, prejudice, anger, hatred, envy, and vice, and that which takes an evil or some other form, and habituating the human soul to such conduct as would lead it to the perfection it is capable of.

That which follows the faculty of Desire is called the 'bestial' (*bahimi*) soul; that which follow the Irascible faculty is called 'predatory' (*sabu'i*), and that which is habituated to vicious dispositions is called 'satanic,' and these are together referred to as the 'inciting soul' in the Qur'anic revelation (*ammaratun bi al-su'*,

mentioned in 12:53), that is, a soul that incites one to evil should these vices have become permanent in it.

But if they have not become permanent, it would sometimes incline to evil and sometimes to good, and when it inclines to good it would feel remorse and blame itself. Such a soul is called the 'blaming soul' (*al-nafs al-lawwamah*).

A soul that is submissive to the intellect and habituated to seeking what is good is named the 'contented soul' (*al-nafs al-mutma'innah*).

The purpose of self-discipline is threefold: First, the removal of obstacles, including outward and inward preoccupations, from the way towards God. Second, the subjugation of the animal soul to the practical intellect, which motivates the quest for perfection.

And third, habituating the human soul to remaining steady in the condition that prepares it for the reception of Divine effusion, so that it may attain to the perfection that is possible for it.

Section Five: On Self-Scrutiny (Muhasabah) and Watchfulness (Muraqabah)

God, the Exalted, has said:

...وَأِنْ تَبَدُّوا مَا فِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَوْ تَخْفَوْهُ يُحَاسِبِكُمْ بِهِ اللَّهُ...

“Whether you make known what is in your souls or hide it, God will bring you to account for it.”
(2:284)

Muhasabah means taking account, and *muraqabah* means being watchful. In the present context it means taking account of one's acts of obedience and sinfulness to see which of them are more. If the acts of obedience are more, he should see where these remaining acts of obedience stand in relation to the bounties bestowed upon him by God, the Exalted.

In this regard, first he should consider his own existence and the numerous benefits that relate to the creation of his bodily members. The scholars of anatomy have compiled numerous books describing them to the extent of their understanding, although what they have understood is not even a drop out of an ocean.

He has placed in man's being several benefits relating to his faculties of growth and movement and fashioned numerous subtleties of creation in his soul, which is capable of knowledge and apprehends the intelligibles with its essence, perceives the perceptible, and governs the body's functions and organs.

He has ordained his sustenance from the beginning of creation and fashioned the means of his growth and development all the way from the highest to the lowest planes.

Hence, if one were to compare his extra acts of obedience with these above-mentioned bounties and other innumerable bounties besides them, concerning which He has stated:

وَإِنْ تَعُدُّوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ لَا تَحْصُوهَا

“. . . **and if you count the bounty of God, you shall not be able to reckon it . . .**” (14:34)

he would come to realize his own nonfeasance under all circumstances.

And if his acts of obedience and sins be equal, he should know that he hasn't performed any act of service in return for these bounties and his nonfeasance is all the more evident.

And should the extent of his sins be preponderant, woe to him! Woe to him!

Hence whenever the seeker of perfection takes this account of himself, nothing except obedience will come out of him and he would consider himself at default even if he were to do nothing but obey, and this is why it has been said:

حاسبوا أنفسكم قبل أن تحاسبوا

Take any account of yourselves before you are called to give account. 6

And if one does not take one's own account and continues to remain in sinfulness, he will encounter the day when he will be subjected to reckoning in accordance with (the Qur'anic statement):

وَإِنْ كَانَ مِثْقَالَ حَبَّةٍ مِنْ خَرْدَلٍ أَتَيْنَا بِهَا ۖ وَكَفَىٰ بِنَا حَاسِبِينَ

“(And We set a just balance for the Day of Resurrection so that no soul is wronged in aught).
Though it be of the weight of a grain of mustard seed, We shall bring it. And We suffice as reckoners” (21:47)

and face painful chastisement and great loss when

...وَلَا يُقْبَلُ مِنْهَا شَفَاعَةٌ وَلَا يُؤْخَذُ مِنْهَا عَدْلٌ...

“ . . . *nor will intercession be accepted from it, nor will compensation be received from it* ...”(2:48)

May God save us from that.

As to *muraqabah*, that consists of being watchful over one's outward and inner being so that one does not perpetrate anything that would annul his good works. That is, one should constantly be watchful over one's states so that one does not fall into sin, open or secret, and so that any preoccupation, significant or trivial, does not keep him from journeying on the path of Truth. He should always keep this verse in his mind:

وَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ فَاحْذَرُوهُ

“ . . . *know that God knows what is in your souls, so beware of Him*” (2:235)

until he reaches his sought destination. And God grants success to any of His servants that He wishes, and He is All-Subtle and All-knowing.

Section Six: On Godfearing (Taqwa)

God, the Glorious and the Almighty, has said:

إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ اتَّقَاكُمْ

“*Verily, the more honoured amongst you in God's sight is the one who is more Godfearing amongst you.*” (49: 13)

Taqwa' means refraining from sin with the fear of God's displeasure and drifting away from Him. In the same way as a sick person seeking health, in order to achieve health and cure his disease, has to refrain from what is harmful for him and would exacerbate his sickness, so also a deficient being in the quest of perfection should avoid everything that is contrary to perfection or an obstacle in its way, or which would divert its attention from wayfaring on the path of perfection, in order that that which is essential or conducive to wayfaring be beneficial and effective:

وَمَنْ يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ مَخْرَجًا وَيَرْزُقْهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَحْتَسِبُ

“And whosoever fears God, God will appoint a way out for him, and will provide for him from whence he has no expectation.” (65:3)

in reality, *taqwa* consists of three things: one is fear, the second is avoidance of sins, and the third is the desire for attaining nearness to God.

Each of these three will be fully explained in its proper place in this brief treatise. That which has been said in the (Qur'anic) Revelation and the traditions concerning *taqwa* and in the praise of the *muttaqun* (Godfearing) far exceeds what can be mentioned in this brief discourse. And the end of all goals is the love of the Exalted Maker.

بَلَىٰ مَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِعَهْدِهِ وَاتَّقَىٰ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَّقِينَ

“Nay, but (the chosen of God) is he who fulfils his pledge and fears God; indeed, God loves the God fearing.” (3:76)

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1. Sahih Muslim, iv, 2075.
 2. Al-Majlisi, al-Bihar, lxxiv, 159.
 3. Al- Kulayni, Usul al-Kafi, ii, 435.
 4. Nahj al-balaghah, khutbah 16, p. 50, ed. by Muhammad `Abduh.
 5. Sunan Ibn Majah, ii, 1378; Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal, v, 407.
 6. Al-Majlisi, al-Bihar, lxxvii, 73.

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