

Home > Awsaf al Ashraf – The Attributes of the Noble > On Wayfaring in the Quest of Perfection, and the States of the Wayfarer > Section Six: On Thankfulness

On Wayfaring in the Quest of Perfection, and the States of the Wayfarer

This chapter consists of six sections:

Section one: on solitude (*khalwah*)

Section two: on contemplation (*tafakkur*)

Section three: on fear (*khawf*)

Section four: on-hope (*raja'*)

Section five: on patience (*sabr*)

Section six: on thankfulness (*shukr*)

Section One: On Solitude

God, the Exalted, says:

وَذَرِ الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا دِينَهُمْ لَعِبًا وَلَهْوًا وَغَرَّتْهُمُ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا

“And leave alone those who take their religion for a pastime and a jest, and whom the life of the world has deceived ...” (6:70)

In the sciences of reality it has been established that every being that has the preparedness to receive Divine effusion (*fayd-e ilahi*) cannot be deprived of it when the preparedness exists and any obstacles are absent. However, one can seek the benefit of Divine effusion only when one knows two things.

First, one should have convinced belief and a faith free of doubt in the existence of that effusion. Secondly, he should know that the existence of this effusion in every being will lead to its perfection.

The knowledge of these two matters is at all times an essential part of preparedness for receiving that effusion.

Now that this preliminary fact is known, it may be stated that the seeker of perfection, after acquiring preparedness, is now obliged to remove the obstacles. The biggest of these obstacles are the unnecessary engagements that direct the soul's attention toward other-than-God and keep it from attending fully to its real goal.

These preoccupations pertain either to the external senses, or the inner perceptual faculties, or some of the vital faculties, or illusory thoughts (*afkar-e majazi*, as opposed to *waridat-e haqiqi*, mentioned hereafter).

As to the outer senses, their preoccupation lies in infatuation with viewing attractive forms and shapes, listening to harmonious sounds and [pursuing] other objects of smell, taste and touch.

As to the inner perceptual faculties, their preoccupation lies in imagining forms and states that absorb attention.

It may be an imaginary love, or enmity, an exaggerated delight or an underscored loss, an imagined order or disorder, or some memory of a past condition, or the thought of some object of desire, such as wealth and status.

As to the vital faculties their preoccupation may be caused by grief, fear, jealousy, or shame, anger or lust, or some treachery, an expected pleasure, or the hope of overpowering some enemy or avoiding something painful.

As to illusory thoughts, preoccupation with them lies in reflecting on insignificant matters, or devoting oneself to some non-beneficial science or anything preoccupation with which keeps one from one's desired goal.

Khalwah means the avoidance of all these obstacles. Hence one seeking *khalwah* should try to be free of inward and outward sensory preoccupations and to discipline his animal faculties, so that they don't divert him toward things which, being compatible with these faculties, prompt him to avoid that which is not attuned to them.

He should refrain totally from illusory thoughts, which are thoughts whose goal is attainment of good things of the life of the world and the Hereafter. The good things of worldly life are ephemeral, and as to the goods of the Hereafter, their goal is the attainment of lasting pleasures for the ego seeking them.

After removing the outer obstacles and freeing the inner self from preoccupation with anything other than

Allah, one should direct all his concern and his undivided intention to being watchful over the happenings of the Unseen' (*sawanih ghaybi*) and being vigilant over real intuitions (*waridat-e haqiqi*). That is called contemplation (*tafakkur*), which shall be dealt with in a separate section which follows.

Section Two: On Contemplation

God, the Exalted and the Glorious, says:

أَوَلَمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوا فِي أَنفُسِهِمْ ۚ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ

“Haven't they pondered within themselves? God created not the heavens and the earth, and that which is between them, except with the Truth... ?” (30:8)

Although many meanings have been ascribed to [the term] *tafakkur*, their essence is that contemplation is an inward journey of humanity from the preliminaries (*mabadi*) to the goals (*maqasid*). The same sense is ascribed to *nazar* in the terminology of scholars.

None can make the transition from deficiency to perfection without undertaking this journey, and hence it has been said that the most essential of obligations is contemplation and thought. The instances of encouragement given to contemplation in the [Qur'anic] Revelation are countless:

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

“And in that are signs for a people who think.” (13:3)

And it has been stated in hadith:

تفكر ساعة خير من عبادة سبعين سنة

An hour's contemplation is better than seventy years of worship. 1

One should know that the starting point from where this journey should commence are 'the horizons and the souls' (*afaqq wa anfus*; 41:53). It is a rational journey (*sayr-e istidlali*: lit. 'evidence-seeking journey') guided by the signs (*ayat*) pertaining to each of the two.

That is, the wisdom found in every particle of these two realms of being (*kawn*) guides to the greatness

and perfection of their Originator, until one witnesses the light of His creativity in every individual particle:

سُنُرِيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْأَفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ

“We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their selves until it is manifest unto them that it is the truth.” (41:53).

And after that is attaining to the witness of Divine Glory over everything else from among the creation:

أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ أَنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ

“. . . Does it not suffice that thy Lord is witness over all things?” (41:53)

so that its manifestation in every particle is disclosed.

As to the 'signs on the horizons,' they pertain to the knowledge of all existents apart from God as they really are, and the wisdom in each being, perceivable in accordance with human capacity, such as [is disclosed by] the science of astronomy, the [study of] the heavens, the stars and the motions and configurations of each of them, the measurements and dimension of bodies and their properties, the science of the lower world, the compositions and interactions of elements in respect of form and quality, the formation of dispositions, the composition of mineral, plant and animal constitutions and formations, the celestial and terrestrial spirits, the sources of motion of each of them and that which occurs in them and is caused by them of the contraries and opposites, as well as their specific and common properties, and the relevant sciences of numbers, quantities, and that which pertains to them.

As to the signs 'within the soul,' they pertain to the sciences of the bodies and the souls, known through the study of anatomy of simple tissues, such as bones, muscles, nerves, and veins and that which is beneficial for them, such composite organs as the main and subservient members and the auxiliaries of each of them, the bodily members and the study of the faculties and actions of each of them and their states, such as health and disease, the science of the soul and the character of its relation to the body, their actions and mutual interactions, the causes of deficiency and perfection of each of them and the factors responsible for their worldly or otherworldly felicity and wretchedness and all that which pertains to these. These constitute the preliminaries of this journey of contemplation.

As to the goal and destination of this journey—as will be known in later chapters and sections—it is the attainment of the ultimate degree of perfection.

Section Three: On Fear and Grief

God, the Glorious and the Exalted, says:

وَوَخَّافُونَ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ

“And fear Me if you are believers.” (3: 175)

The `ulama' have said: الحزن على ما فات والخوف مما لم يأت (Grief relates to that which is gone, and fear to that which has not yet come').

Hence grief is the inner pain felt on account of the occurrence of something undesirable that cannot be avoided or for the loss of an opportunity or something desirable which cannot be restituted.

Fear is the inward pain felt on account of some expected undesirable occurrence whose causes are probable, or due to expected loss of something desirable and sought after which cannot be restored.

Further, if the causes are certain to occur or very likely, it is called anxiety and involves greater pain. And if these causes are known to be unavoidable, the pain resulting therefrom is called `fear caused by melancholy'

The fear and grief felt by the wayfarers is not without benefit, because if the grief be on account of commission of sins, or due to lost opportunity, as a result of past negligence of worship (`ibadah) or cessation of wayfaring in the path of perfection, that could prompt one to resolve on penitence.

And if the fear be due to commission of sin, the incurring of loss, or failure to attain to the rank of the virtuous, that could result in the endeavour to acquire virtue and induce one to set out on the path of perfection.

ذَلِكَ يُخَوِّفُ اللَّهَ بِهِ عِبَادَهُ ۗ [يَا عِبَادِ فَاتَّقُونِ]

“That is wherewith God frightens His servants: [“O My servants, so fear you Me!”] (39: 16)

One who is free from fear and grief at this stage is one of the hardhearted:

فَوَيْلٌ لِلْقَاسِيَةِ قُلُوبُهُمْ مِّنْ ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ

“Then woe unto those whose hearts are hardened against remembrance of God. Such are in manifest error.” (39:22)

Any sense of security at this stage that removes this fear from the heart is destructive:

أَفَأَمِنُوا مَكْرَ اللَّهِ ؟ فَلَا يَأْمَنُ مَكْرَ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ

“Do they feel secure against God's devising? None feels secure against God's devising but the losers.” (7:99)

However, as to the perfect, they are free from this kind of fear and grief:

أَلَا إِنَّ أَوْلِيَاءَ اللَّهِ لَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

“Surely God's friends—no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow.” (10:62)

Although 'khawf' and 'khashiyyah' are synonymous lexically, in the terminology of this group (i.e. the gnostics) there is a difference between the two, 'khashiyyah' being reserved for those who know ('ulama'),

إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ

“Even so only those of His servants fear God who have knowledge.” (35:28)

and their paradise too is exclusive:

ذَلِكَ لِمَنْ خَشِيَ رَبَّهُ

“. . . that is for him who fears his Lord.” (98:8)

and they are devoid of any fear (khawf):

لَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

“ . . . **No fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow.**” (10:62)

Hence *khashiyyah* is a feeling of awe arising from consciousness of the awe-inspiring greatness of the Truth, Majestic and Exalted, and awareness of one's inadequacy and shortcoming in serving Him, or due to an imagined lapse in the etiquette of servanthood, or a breach in necessary obedience. That *khashiyyah* is a special kind of fear is indicated by [the following Qur'anic verse]:

وَيَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُمْ وَيَخَافُونَ سُوءَ الْحِسَابِ

“ . . . **and fear their Lord, and dread the evil [outcome of] reckoning.**” (13:21)

And *rahbah* is close to *khashiyyah*:

هُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لِلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِربِّهِمْ يَرْهَبُونَ

“ . . . **a guidance and mercy unto all those who hold their Lord in awe.**” (7:154)

And when the wayfarer attains to the station of *rida* (satisfaction), his fear is turned into security (*amn*) .

أُولَئِكَ لَهُمُ الْأَمْنُ وَهُمْ مُهْتَدُونَ

“ . . . **to them belongs the [true] security, and they are the guided.**” (6:82)

Then he is neither repelled by anything repulsive nor attracted by anything desirable, and this security is due to perfection. And if the aforementioned security he due to deficiency, the possessor of this security does not become free from *khashiyyah* until illuminated by the vision of Unity (*wahdah*), whereat there remains no trace of *khashiyyah*, for *khashiyyah* is associated with plurality (*takaththur*).

Section Four: On Hope

God, the Glorious and the Exalted, says:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا وَجَاهَدُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أُولَئِكَ يَرْجُونَ رَحْمَتَ اللَّهِ

“But the believers, and those who emigrate and struggle in God’s way—those have hope of God’s compassion . . .” (2:218)

Whenever something desirable is expected to be achieved in the future and the seeker considers the actualization of its causes as likely, there arises in his heart a feeling of delight, intermingled with expectation of success, from the idea of its acquisition; it is called hope.

And should one know for certain that the causes have materialized and that which is expected would of necessity occur in the future, it is called ‘waiting’ for the object sought after, and, to be sure, the delight in that case is greater.

And if the materialization of the means of attainment be not likely, it is called ‘wishing’ (*tamanna*).

And if the achievement of the means be known to be impossible and unlikely, should there still remain an expectation of achieving, that hope is either illusion or folly.

Fear and hope are opposites. In wayfaring, hope, like fear, has many benefits, for hope causes progress in the degrees of perfection and rapidity of movement on the path towards the goal:

...يَرْجُونَ تِجَارَةً لَّنْ تَبُورَ لِيُوفِّيَهُمْ أَجُورَهُمْ وَيَزِيدَهُمْ مِّنْ فَضْلِهِ...

“ . . . They look for a commerce that comes not to naught, that He may pay them in full their wages and enrich them of His bounty . . .” (35:29–30)

And hope is the cause of optimism in the forgiveness and pardon of the Creator, the Glorious and the Exalted, and trust in His mercy:

أُولَئِكَ يَرْجُونَ رَحْمَتَ اللَّهِ...

“ . . . those have hope of God’s compassion.” (2:218)

And in respect of attainment of the goal as a result of this expectation, He has said:

أنا عند ظن عبدي بي

I deal with My servant in accordance with what he expects of Me. 2

The absence of hope at this stage results in despair and loss of hope:

...إِنَّهُ لَا يَيْئَسُ مِنْ رَوْحِ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْكَافِرُونَ

“[Do not despair of God's mercy;] of God's mercy no one despairs, excepting the unbelievers.”
(12:87)

Iblis was eternally damned on account of this despair .

لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِنْ رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ

“. . . Do not despair of God's mercy.” (39:53)

However, when the wayfarer attains to the station of gnosis (*ma'rifah*) his hope disappears, for he knows that he deserved whatever has actualized and that which did not materialize wasn't deserved.

In view of this, should hope still remain, that is either due to ignorance of all that is deserved and not deserved, or an account of a grudge against the Cause of all causes (*musabbab al-asbab*) for depriving one from one's cherished goal.

From the previous section it was known that the wayfarer is not devoid of fear and hope as long as he is in the state of wayfaring:

...يَدْعُونَ رَبَّهُمْ خَوْفًا وَطَمَعًا

“. . . They call on their Lord in fear and hope ...” (32: 16)

Hope accompanies fear, and it is not possible for one side to preponderate over the other, for one who listens to the verses bearing the promise and the threat, while he scrutinizes the symptoms of deficiency and perfection, with the likelihood of one rather than the other, knows that the end of wayfaring might be either realization of the goal or failure and deprivation:

لو وزن خوف المؤمن ورجاؤه لاعتدلا.

Should the believer's fear and hope be weighed, they would be found to be equal. 3

Should hope be preponderant, it would imply a misplaced sense of security.

أَفَأَمِنُوا مَكْرَ اللَّهِ

“Do they feel secure against God's devising?” (7:99)

And if fear be preponderant, it would result in a despair leading up to perdition:

إِنَّهُ لَا يَيْئَسُ مِنْ رَوْحِ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْكَافِرُونَ

“... Verily of God's mercy no man despairs, excepting the people of the unbelievers.” (12:87)

Section Five: On Patience

God, the Glorious and the Exalted, says:

وَاصْبِرُوا ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ

“. . . and he patient; surely God is with the patient.” (8:46)

Sabr (patience) in the lexicon means restraining the soul from anxiety at the time of occurrence of something undesirable, and that consists of keeping the inner self from agitation and restraining one's tongue from complaint and the bodily members from untoward movements.

Patience is of three kinds:

First is the patience of the common people, and that involves restraining the soul in the path of forbearance and showing steadiness in enduring, so that one's apparent condition appears to be satisfactory to the mentally mature and ordinary people:

يَعْلَمُونَ ظَاهِرًا مِّنَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ عَنِ الْآخِرَةِ هُمْ غَافِلُونَ

“They know an outward part of the present life, but of the Hereafter they are heedless.” (30:7)

Second is the patience of the ascetics (*zuhhad*) and the devout (*‘ubbad*), the God-fearing and the forbearing, in expectation of an otherworldly reward:

إِنَّمَا يُوفَى الصَّابِرُونَ أَجْرَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

“Surely the patient will be paid their wages in full without reckoning.” (39:10)

Third is the patience of the gnostics (*‘urafa*), as some of them feel pleasure when something undesirable befalls them, for they think that the Worshipped One, may His remembrance be glorified, has singled them out of His servants to bear that affliction and that He has graced them with a fresh care:

...وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمُ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ
أُولَئِكَ عَلَيْهِمْ صَلَوَاتٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَرَحْمَةٌ

“. . . and give thou good tidings unto the patient who, when they are visited by an affliction, say, ‘Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return’; upon those rest blessings and mercy from their Lord,[and those –they are the truly guided]” (2: 155–157)

It is reported in traditions that Jabir ibn `Abd Allah al-Ansari, one of the eminent companions [of the Prophet (s)], was afflicted with weakness and decrepitude late in life. Muhammad ibn `Ali ibn al-Husayn, known as [al Imam] al-Baqir [may peace be upon him], went to pay him a visit and inquired concerning his state [of health].

Jabir replied, “My state is such that I prefer old age to youth, illness to health, and death to life!”

Muhammad [`a] said to him, “As for me, should He make me old, I would prefer old age; should He keep me young, I would prefer youth; should He make me ill, I would prefer illness; should He make me healthy, I would prefer health; should He make me to die, I would prefer death; and should He kelp me alive, I would prefer life:”

When Jabir heard this, he embraced Muhammad [‘a] on his face and said: “True was the Messenger of Allah [s] who said to me, `You shall see one of my sons who will be my namesake. He shall plough [the fields of] knowledge thoroughly as the oxen plough the earth” For this

(يبقر العلم بقرا كما يبقر الثور الارض)

reason he was called “*Baqir `ulum al-awwalin wa al-akharin*” (‘the plougher of [the fields of] the sciences of the ancients and the later generations’).

An understanding of these ranks [of patience] discloses that Jabir enjoyed the station of patience and Muhammad [‘a] the station of satisfaction (*rida*). *Rida*’ will be explained later on, God, the Exalted, willing.

Section Six: On Thankfulness

God, the Glorious and the Exalted, says:

وَسَنَجْزِي الشَّاكِرِينَ

“... ***And we shall reward the thankful.***” (3: 145)

“*Shukr*” in the lexicon is the approbation given to a benefactor (*mun'im*) for the sake of his favours (*niam*), and since most of the bounties, or rather all of them, are from God, the Exalted, the best of things is to engage in thanking Him.

Thanksgiving entails these things: First, the knowledge of the Benefactor's favours, which extend all the way from ‘the horizons’ to ‘the souls’.

Second, the feeling of delight on attaining those favours.

Third, making an effort, within the limits of possibility and one's capacity, to obtain the satisfaction of the Benefactor. That consists of: loving Him inwardly; praising Him, by word and deed, in a way that is worthy of Him; and endeavouring to conduct oneself vis-a-vis the Benefactor in a way commensurate with His station, through obedience and by confessing one's inability to do that.

God, the Exalted, says:

لَئِنْ شَكَرْتُمْ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ

“***If you are thankful, surely I will increase you ...***” (14:7)

And it is stated in a tradition: *الإيمان نصفان، نصف صبر ونصف شكر* (‘Faith consists of two halves: patience and thankfulness’). 4 That is because the wayfarer is never without a state which is either agreeable or disagreeable. He should be thankful for that which is agreeable and patient in bearing that which is

disagreeable. In the same way as impatience is the opposite of patience, ingratitude is the opposite of thankfulness. Infidelity (*kufr*) is a kind of ingratitude (*kufran*):

وَلَئِن كَفَرْتُمْ إِنَّ عَذَابِي لَشَدِيدٌ

“ . . . **but if you are thankless My chastisement is surely terrible.**” (14:7)

From this it is known that the station of thankfulness is above that of patience. And as gratitude cannot be expressed except with the heart, the tongue and the other members, each of them being a bounty from Him and the capacity to employ them an additional bounty, should one want to express gratitude for every bounty, one shall have to thank again for this bounty and this would entail an endless expression of gratitude.

Hence that which is better is to begin and end thanksgiving with the admission of inability. The confession of the inability to thank is the ultimate degree of gratitude, in the same way as the confession of the inability to praise Him is the ultimate degree of magnification. That is why it has been said:

لا أحصى ثناء عليك, انت كما أثنيت على نفسك وفوق ما يقول القائلون.

Thy praise cannot be encompassed; Thou art as Thou hast praised Thyself and above what the speakers say in praising Thee. 5

For the people of submission (*ahl al-taslim*), gratitude ceases, for gratitude depends on the [idea of] restituting and compensating the Benefactor, and one who has reached such a point in servitude as to consider himself noshing, how can he place himself before Someone Who is everything? Hence the ultimate point of gratitude is until where one considers oneself to be an existent and the Benefactor to be another existent.

1. Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-anwar, vol. 68, p. 327.

2. Ibid., vol. 68, p. 385.

3. Ibid., vol. 75, p. 259.

4. `Ali al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, Kanz al-'ummal, vol. 1, p. 36.

5. Ibn Majah, Sunan, vol_2, p. 1262, hadith 3841.

<https://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol11-no3-no4/awsaf-al-ashraf-attributes-noble-shaykh-khwaja-nasir-al-din-al-tusi-2>