

Practical Instructions for Spiritual Journey

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Mohammad Ali Shomali

In the previous part (Vol. 10, No. 4), we have already discussed some general principles, such as observing the shari'ah and taking care of our qualities and characteristics. However there are also certain practices which can strengthen us, increase our will-power and which can make us courageous and determined enough to continue the spiritual journey. These should then keep us on the right track.

There are five instructions given by all Muslim mystics which are indeed rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

1) Not to speak unless necessary

We should try not to speak too much. People may think that this is not very important but in fact it is very important indeed. We should try to speak only as much as it is necessary. Unfortunately there are many types of sins that are committed by people which are related to the tongue. Some scholars have counted up to seventy types of such sins. Once a person requested the Prophet Muhammad (S) to give him some advice:

The Prophet said: "Keep your tongue!" Again the man requested for advice. The Prophet said: "Keep your tongue!" For the third time the man asked for advice. The Holy Prophet said: "Ah, is there anything other than what people collect with their tongues that causes to collapse on their faces in the fire?"¹

One reason that speaking can be the cause of so many sins is because we always speak. We continually speak because it is easy for us. We do not need to make any effort; nor do we need any instruments, means, training or money; and for this reason we have less control over what we say. Nowadays, it is even easier to speak to each other, as many alternative methods of communication have become widely available, enabling people in different countries to communicate, and therefore leaving more opportunity for sin.

In early Islam, some people used to put some sand in their mouths in order to make it more difficult to speak. If they had ever thought of something to say, they would have had to first remove the sand. By the time they thought about doing this, they thought about the need for speaking and about what they were going to say, and realised it was better not to speak. This reduced the amount of unnecessary talk. This is not what I advise to do, and I only relay this story to emphasise my point that it is necessary to control what we say.

Even if what we say is not prohibited (haram) we should still not say it unless it is necessary.

Unnecessary talk is harmful to our spirituality. Our words not only make our minds preoccupied, but also

have great impact on our hearts. It is like when someone eats too much of a poisoned food. Not only would he have pain in his stomach because he cannot digest the food properly, but also he would become ill and feel sick. Our hearts become ill from saying things which are unnecessary. From a spiritual point of view, there is no single act or word, except that it either brings light or darkness. Unnecessary talk or speech is harmful and makes our heart dark.²

We should take this very seriously as it is of utmost importance. If we can say something in five sentences rather than ten, then we should do this. If we were about to say something and then we realise that it is not necessary to say it, then it is better not to speak.

People may say that they have to sit with their parents, family or friends and that they must be sociable. In these circumstances we should of course say something but we must watch carefully what we do say and speak for the sake of God. We can say to God that we are speaking in order to make our family or friends happy. 'To bring joy to the heart of a believer' is an act of worship. However, there is a huge difference between someone who says something to make others happy and a person who makes a mockery of others or who just wants to amuse himself or show off by saying too much.

So, we should watch our words carefully. There is a very interesting hadith from the Holy Prophet which indicates that he told a group of his companions:

'If it were not because of speaking too much and because of those bad thoughts which come to your heart, you would have been able to see what I see and hear what I hear.'³

This shows that, either we speak too much or we think about things which are not useful and therefore we cannot make any progress. It can be both easy and difficult not to speak. It can be easy because there is nothing to learn, there is nothing we have to buy and no special place is needed in order to implement this advice. We are not required to do anything. We are just told not to speak too much. So it seems that it is not difficult. But if we try, we will find that it is indeed very difficult. Sometimes we may feel as if we are going to explode because we want to say something very much. But if we practice, it becomes easier.

According to some hadiths, silence is a very good form of worship. For example, Imam Ali (AS) is quoted as saying:

Patience, silence and awaiting faraj (delivery; relief) are best types of worship.⁴

There is no worship like silence.⁵

Silence is the garden for contemplation.⁶

This is because when one is silent their mind starts to enjoy the beauty of the spiritual world. But if one speaks, their mind becomes busy with the physical world.

2) Not to eat more than necessary

In the same way as keeping silent, eating small portions affects the spirit in a powerful way, as it allows the spirit to grow. On the other hand, when we eat too much, even if our food is halal, it makes us busy and our spirit lazy. We will not be able to remain alert. In other words what we eat is food for our body, but fasting is food for our soul.

However there is a dilemma here because we need to feed both our body and our soul as they both need food and we must give each of them its due right. What should we do? We should eat only as much as is needed for our health and in this way we can make sure that we have done justice to both our body and soul. Eating too much harms both our body and spirit.

Fasting is very important and useful if we can do it, but even if we do not fast we can achieve a great deal by simply reducing the amount of food we eat. One practical way of implementing this is shown to us by Allamah Tabataba'i. Sometimes we get busy when we eat and then we forget how much we have eaten. The late Allamah was determined to put in his plate at the beginning of each meal exactly what he had wanted to eat, and then not touch anything else.

There are many hadiths on the merits of fasting or eating little. For example, in his well-known advice to 'al-Unwan al-Basri, Imam Sadiq (AS) said:

As for the three pieces of advice on self-discipline: firstly do not eat that which you have no appetite for, for this brings about idiocy and stupidity. Secondly do not eat unless you are hungry. And thirdly when you do eat, eat only that which is lawful (halal) and begin in the Name of Allah, and remember the tradition of the Prophet (S): "Man has never filled any vessel worse than his own stomach". So if you must fill, then allow one third of it for food, another third for drink, and keep the last third for air.⁷

3) Not to sleep too much

This is especially important so that we do not waste our time and lose the golden opportunity of performing night prayers. Excessive comfort of the body is poisonous for the spirit. We need just the right amount of food and rest in order to have a healthy body because our body must be healthy to serve us.⁸

But more than is necessary will be harmful for both our body and our spirit. God has created our body in such a way that when we look after our body we also end up looking after our spirit. We do not need to damage our body to become a pious person. If we eat too much we damage both our body and our spirit. If we sleep too much, do not take exercise and follow an inactive life-style, we will damage our body and our spirit. So it is very important not to sleep too much. In the Glorious Qur'an, God praises believers by saying:

Indeed the Godwary will be amid gardens and springs, receiving what their Lord has given them, for they had been virtuous aforetime. They used to sleep a little during the night, and at dawn they would plead for forgiveness, and there was a share in their wealth for the beggar and the deprived. (51: 15–19)

There are some people who do not sleep very much but the problem is that they do not know when it is the correct time to sleep. So they sleep at the time of the day which is best for worship and they are awake during the time which is least beneficial. For example, sometimes we sleep very late, after midnight, around 2 or 3am and then at the best time of the day for worship and contemplation we are un-conscious.

The part of the day which is most important is the time before dawn and after dawn till sun rises. Whoever has achieved something, it is because they have appreciated this time. Allamah Tabataba'i says that in the early days of his arrival in Najaf, his teacher, the late Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Qadi said to him: "If you want the dunya (this world), do tahajjud (night prayer); if you want the akhira (the hereafter), again do tahajjud".

4) To have private time to contemplate

We need some time to be alone, either during the day or more probably at night. It is good to promise ourselves that for at least ten or fifteen minutes each day we will just sit alone, for example on our prayer mat or in the garden, and think. This is enough to begin with. In time you will appreciate these private moments, such that you will wish your whole day to be spent in this way. This will lead to your life becoming stable, as investing this time creates a private space in your heart.

In this way you can be active in society, and at the same time have an inner-peace and clear vision of your actions, as if you were alone. This can happen if you spend some time physically alone. When you gain control over the soul, you can be socialising, working, etc., and still maintain control over your actions, and have remembrance of Allah (s.w.t).

But what should we think about during this private time?

We should think about divine attributes and actions. We should think about the things that we have done, about the things that we were supposed to do but did not and about the condition of our soul. We should decide if we are making any progress or not. If we have done something right then we should thank God for that. If we have done something wrong then we should try to remedy it. If we are not strong enough then we should fix some penalty on ourselves.

Sometimes people ask what they should do when they know that something is wrong and do not want to do it but they do it again and again anyway. For example, some people say that they do not have control over their anger and ask what they should do about this. They say that they are angry due to a

psychological problem which they can do nothing about and that is out of their control. However, we should understand that God has given self-control to all of us, but the problem is that we ourselves may not exercise this power. There is an interesting story about this.

Once there was a person who had been newly employed in an office. On his first day at the office he told his new colleagues that he wanted to explain something to them straightaway so that in the future they would not feel upset or offended. He told them that unfortunately he was an angry person and that when he became angry he might shout at them, insult them or say something bad to them but that they should not feel upset or angry about it. One person who was listening to this was very clever. He thanked the new employee for saying this and told him that it was good that he had mentioned it. He said that now the new employee had been honest with them, he too would be honest with him. He said that he was also an angry person and that if anyone said something bad to him he had the habit of throwing whatever was within reach at the face of that person and so he was glad that the new employee had mentioned this. After this the new employee never became angry, he was always careful and watched what he said. This shows we can have self-control if we really try.

Sometimes we are very angry and aggressive at home but at work we are very calm. Even if people say bad things to us, we keep our anger inside. So it is possible for us to have self-control but in reality we choose not to. What should we do about this?

One thing that we can do is to fix a penalty for ourselves. For example, we can decide that if we become angry then we will do something that is difficult for us. And we must keep this promise that we have made to ourselves. We could promise that if we become angry and say something wrong to our spouse, our children or our parents, then we will donate a certain amount of money to charity, or fast the next day or walk ten kilometres.

It should be something difficult. We will then see that we gain strength because our soul makes some kind of calculation that although it enjoys being angry and aggressive, it will also lose out due to the penalty that is imposed afterwards. So our soul will behave itself. This is called. "musharitah". Musharitah means to put some kind of condition on ourselves and to fix a penalty for breaking it.

On the other hand, we can reward ourselves if we do something good. For example, if we like sweets very much then we can tell ourselves that we will not eat sweets unless we get up for our night prayers. If we get up, then we can have sweets. Then we will find that our soul will help us in getting up for our prayers because it wants sweets. So this is a technique that can help us to strengthen our determination.

The only time that we can think about and plan these kinds of things is when we have some private time alone. If we are always busy we cannot think about such things. But if we spend fifteen or twenty minutes alone with ourselves then we can achieve all these things. It is hard to know why people are afraid of being alone. We can often notice this. We love ourselves so much but the most painful thing for

us is to be left to ourselves.

If we are put in a room and locked in for 24 hours to be alone with ourselves, even if we are told that we will have food and all other necessities but just that we will be all alone, we will ask why we are being confined, imprisoned and tortured. But what is wrong with this? We have not been shut in with a wild animal or a criminal. We have only been asked to be alone with ourselves. Why do we not want to be alone with ourselves? There must be some unhealthy issue behind this. Imam Ali b. Husayn al-Sajjad says:

If all the people of the east and west die and I am left alone with the Qur'an I will not feel lonely.⁹

But most people are so afraid of being alone that they constantly make themselves busy. And if no one else is around, they will switch on the television or mp3 player or radio to make some noise so that they feel that they are not alone. But this is very bad. Sometimes we must try to be alone, have some privacy, have some rest and relaxation and think about the things that are very important.

5) Constant remembrance of God

Forgetting God is the source for all spiritual problems and naturally remembrance of God is the cure. In the Du'a of Kumayl, we read:

My Lord! I seek approximation to You with Your remembrance...

O the One whose Name is medicine and whose remembrance is cure.

Thus, remembrance of God brings tranquillity and light into the heart:

Those who believe and whose hearts find tranquillity by the remembrance of God; now surely by God's remembrance hearts find tranquillity. (13:28)

Imam Ali (AS) says:

Certainly God, the Glorified, has made His remembrance the luminosity and shine of the hearts.¹⁰

Thus, it becomes clear why so much emphasis has been put on the remembrance of God. The Qur'an says:

Remember your Lord much and glorify Him in the evening and the morning. (3:41)

And remember the name of your Lord and devote yourself to Him with exclusive devotion. (73:8)

And remember your Lord within your heart beseechingly and reverentially, without being loud, morning and evening, and do not be among the heedless. (7:205)

In Islam, everything has a limit even fasting and hajj. The only exception is the remembrance of God which is always and under all circumstances good and needed.¹¹ Ahmad b. Fahd Hilli narrates from the Holy Prophet (S), that he said:

Be informed that the best of your acts near Allah (s.w.t), and the purest and highest of them in degree, and the best thing upon which the sun has shone is the remembrance of Allah Almighty. Verily he has informed you saying: "I am the companion of him who remembers Me.¹²

Constant remembrance of Allah (s.w.t) is both difficult and not difficult to do. It is not difficult because it does not cost us anything, we do not need to pay for it or go to a special place or do any physical exercise. So it should be very easy, as are all the other practices mentioned above, none of which costs us anything and so they are very cost effective methods when we consider the results which they can produce.

However, it is also very difficult to do because our soul always tries to indulge itself, to do what it wants and does not want to be disciplined. But if we discipline our soul then things become easy.

Remembrance of God is healing. The Names of God are medicine and if we take this medicine in order to remember God then we will be healed, but if we constantly repeat invocations like 'Allahu Akbar' again and again but do not remember God then we are just keeping our mouths busy with repetitions and this is not proper remembrance of God.

However if we use the Names of God to remember Him then this is the healing. It is very easy to do this. For example, we can be driving or walking or doing whatever we have to do and still be remembering God. The Qur'an speaks of the people who do not forget God even when they are involved in business and commerce. They always remember God. We may be cooking or washing, teaching or studying, but at the same time we must remember God. So we need to remember God and these invocations are means to help us to keep our concentration.

All the different dhikrs (like Allahu Akbar, Alhamdulillah and Subhanallah) are medicines but we must take these medicines correctly by remembering God, by trying to get close to that Attribute of God which we are mentioning and then we will feel that we are closer to God.

So this is the way in which we should remember God and if we taste the sweetness and beauty of true remembrance of God then we will never be pleased with anything else. We need to rid ourselves of all the bad things inside us and then we will start to really enjoy remembrance of God.

If we spend some private time alone then we can start to learn how to remember God during that private time and then expand this to the rest of our lives. In the beginning we may only remember God when we are on our prayer mat. But gradually we can try to remember God throughout the day. And then remembrance of God becomes constant.

A Practical Suggestion to Incorporate These Attitudes into Your Life

As we saw above, there are five important things that we need to observe: not to speak too much, not to eat too much, not to sleep too much, to have private time for contemplation (not to mix with people too much or keep ourselves too busy) and to remember Allah (s.w.t) constantly. These are five very easy things to do which do not cost anything. They are five powerful vitamins for our spiritual health and growth. If one maintains them for several weeks he will certainly start feeling the difference and will see the results.

One practical step is to keep a notebook and set out some objectives for yourself each day. Give a mark to yourself for each category. Whenever needed also make some comments. Then on a regular basis review your comments and evaluate your progress. Do this every day and compare your actions with the objectives. If all the actions are good, thank Allah (s.w.t) and continue.

If some areas are bad, try and improve. For the first few weeks, do not take any chances by delaying this process for any reason. Complete the chart in all circumstances. This brings discipline into to your life. If you feel as though you are achieving, you will feel more determined. If you feel there are areas in which you cannot improve, even though you try to, fix a penalty for yourself.

For example, if I notice that last week I kept getting angry, I should find an action which I find difficult to do, such as housework; then set myself the penalty: for example I might say "if I get angry again, I will do all the housework for 2 days". By the time I have undertaken the penalty a few times, I will learn to think before I get angry, and stop myself.

In the same way, to give an incentive for good actions, you can set yourself a reward. In this way you can increase your determination. Allah's (s.w.t) help will always be there for those who strive in Him:

As for those who strive in Us, We shall surely guide them in Our ways, and God is indeed with the virtuous. (29:69)

It is also very helpful to have close friends who have the same inclinations, with whom you can discuss your progress and problems. In this way, you can also advise each other. The Qur'an says:

Most surely man is in loss. Except those who believe and do good, and enjoy on each other truth, and enjoy on each other patience. (103: 2- 3)

Summary

In this article, we have reviewed the various practical ways in which we can perform self-building. By speaking little, eating little, sleeping little, keeping private time, and remembering Allah (s.w.t), we can

really begin to achieve closeness to Allah (s.w.t) through purification of the soul.

The techniques discussed above are neither strenuous nor costly; rather, they require patience and determination. We pray that Allah (s.w.t) grants this to us so that we may gain the true reward: proximity to Him (s.w.t). May God help us all!

1. Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 74, p. 161.

2. Some people may wonder why they do not feel darkness of the heart when they speak too much or even when they speak sinfully like backbiting (ghaybah). The answer is that sensibility of people is very different. There is a story in Mathnawi by Rumi that illustrates this fact. Rumi says that there was a person who brought a horse to a perfume market. The horse made the market dirty.

This made the perfume-sellers very upset, as previously the market had beautiful aromas filling every corner. They wanted to get the market cleaned, but no one could tolerate going near the bad smells. They decided to hire someone who was accustomed to these bad smells so they found a young man whose job was to clean and wash horses. They brought him to the market, but as soon as the perfume fragrances reached the man, he fainted as he could not tolerate the scents.

This is because his tolerance for scents had been transformed. In the same way, there are people who are used to dirt: physical or spiritual. Not only are they used to dirt, they are allergic to purity. So if we do not feel that something is bad, or we do not feel that our heart has been darkened, it is not because good things have no effect; rather, it is because our hearts have become desensitised.

This is similar to a person who has a cold, and cannot taste food properly. Furthermore, sometimes very delicious food tastes bitter to him: this is not because the food is bitter; but because he has a distorted sense of taste.

3. Cited from Sunni sources in Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, Vol. 5, p. 315.

4. Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 68, p. 97.

5. Ghurar al-Hikam wa Durar al-Kalim, Hadith no. 10471.

6. Ghurar al-Hikam wa Durar al-Kalim, Hadith no. 546.

7. Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 1, p. 226.

8. We can actually transform our eating and resting into acts of worship by making a good intention. For example, I can eat with the intention of becoming strong to serve Allah (s.w.t) and therefore my eating or even preparation of the food becomes an act of worship, for which I will be rewarded.

9. Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 46, p. 54.

10. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 219.

11. For example, see Al-Kafi, Vol. 2, pp. 498 & 499.

12. 'Uddat al-Da'i, p. 238.

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