

## Self-knowledge for Self-development

AYATOLLAH MOHAMMAD TAGHI MISBAH YAZDI

Translated by Karim Aghili

**Abstract:** This book entitled *Self-Knowledge for Self-Development* was originally written in Persian by Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi, one of the foremost scholars of Islam in present-day Iran. He is the author of numerous books and articles in Arabic and Persian.

As the author writes in the introduction, the subject-matter of this book is man as a being capable of becoming perfect. The goal and use of this discussion is to know real perfection and the path to attain it. The method for approaching this subject-matter is to examine one's inner intuitive perceptions in order to recognize the inner human desires and inclinations for the attainment of perfection as well as the favourable factors and conditions that can aid in achieving it.

The author resorts to certain intuitive perceptions and simple rational demonstrations in order to prove his points. He divides perfection into real and relative. That which acts as an instrument for achieving a higher degree of perfection is called relative perfection. Then, he goes on to discuss how to move towards real perfection under the

appropriate conditions. The conclusion which he finally draws from his discussions is that the nearness (*qurb*) to God is the real perfection. Using the relevant Quranic verses and traditions, he shows how this real perfection can be achieved.

## **A Concise Discussion on Self-Knowledge for Self-Development**

### **Introduction**

Man is the subject-matter of different sciences, such as psychology, sociology, history, ethics, medicine, and so forth from various perspectives. In this book, we aim to discuss man in view of the fact that he is a perfectible being. We will deal with the ultimate form of perfection and the way it can be achieved. We will seek to know how to maximally benefit from the [human] inner abilities and external possibilities in order to achieve perfection and true felicity. We will reflect on our own being in order to learn about our human innate potentialities and recognize the inclinations which direct us towards the higher human ideals, connect us to others, and enable us to make ourselves more powerful and prepared for development and perfection, if we use and strengthen them. It is hoped that in this way, we will take a step towards our own perfection and towards contributing to that of others.

The method for approaching this subject consists in examining our inner intuitive perceptions in order to recognize the desires and inclinations placed within us for perfection and to identify the favourable factors and conditions that can aid in attaining it. In order to deal with these issues, we will try to focus on certain intuitive perceptions and simple rational demonstrations in order to discover that which is unknown to us by proceeding from the most clear and certain known data as well as by resorting to some complex rational

(*'aqli*) and transmitted (*naqli*) demonstrations (*burhan*) where necessary.

### **The Necessity of Self-Knowledge**

It is perfectly normal for a being that is naturally endowed with self-love to engage in self-reflection and contemplation and to try to recognize its own potential perfections and the ways to attain them. Consequently, there will be no need for any complicated rational or transmitted proofs in order to understand the necessity of self-knowledge. That is why neglecting this fact and absorption in that which can by no means play a role in man's perfection and happiness is something unnatural and aberrant. Thus, what must be done is to seek the causes of such negligence and to discover how to be safe against, or saved from, it. Basically, all human efforts, be they theoretical or practical, are aimed at pleasures, interests, and benefits. As a consequence, knowing man's self, his beginning and end, and the perfection he can achieve should be prioritized over any other issue. Without knowing man's true nature and worth, all other discussions and efforts will be futile and pointless.

The reason why the revealed religions, religious leaders, and ethicists insist upon self-knowledge is exactly to draw attention to this very innate and rational truth.

The Holy Qur'an regards forgetting one's self as the consequence of forgetting God:

And do not be like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own selves. (59:19).

Elsewhere it says,

Take care of your own souls. He who strays cannot hurt you if you are guided (5:105).

Regarding the signs of God, the Qur'an says, "Soon We shall show them our signs on the horizons [i.e., in the universe] and within their own souls until it becomes clear to them that He is the Real" (41:53)<sup>1</sup> the holy Quran attaches special importance to the signs within the soul, and with such expression as '..., and in your own souls [as well]. Will you not then perceive?' (51:21), it reproaches those who do not strive for self-knowledge and who do not behold the divine signs within themselves.

The Prophet (s) has also attached special importance to self-knowledge and characterized it as the path to the knowledge of God: "He who knows his self knows his Lord" (Majlisi 1403AH, 2:32).

In this regard, a large number of traditions have been related from Imam Ali (a), the Commander of the Faithful. The late Amidi has related about thirty traditions in his *Ghurar al-hikam*. Among them are the following:

- Self-knowledge is the most beneficial form of knowledge. (Tamimi al-Amidi 1366 Sh, 232)
- I am surprised at one who seeks what he has lost, while he has lost his own self and does not search for it. (Ibid., 233)
- I wonder how a person who does not know his own self can know his Lord. (Ibid.)
- The ultimate goal of knowledge is for a person to know himself. (Ibid., 232)
- The greatest triumph is achieved by one who achieves self-knowledge. (Ibid.)

The Imam (a) is also related to have said,

The more knowledge man acquires, the more he becomes attentive to himself and the more he strives

towards disciplining and improving his self  
(Muhaddith Nuri 1408AH, 2:310).

### **The Necessary Explanations**

As we will be using certain technical terms, we need to clarify their meanings in order to preclude any misunderstanding:

1. As has already been pointed out, what is meant by self-knowledge is to know man as a being who possesses the potentialities and capacities for the attainment of human perfection. Therefore, that anyone possesses a certain degree of *knowledge by presence* (“*ilm huduri*,” i.e., direct and immediate knowledge of himself) does not mean that we do not need to discuss self-knowledge here. Also, here we do not intend to deal with the perfect form of knowledge by presence which is attained in the midst of the spiritual path and through which man directly and immediately witnesses his own [inner] reality, because this form of knowledge by presence is one of the outcomes of self-development, not a preliminary form of intuitive knowledge [possessed by anyone who embarks on the path of self-development]. Likewise, knowing about the bodily organs and their functions, which concerns physiology, is not relevant to our discussion here. However, although knowing about the inner faculties within man as discussed in psychology are of no relevance here, some issues in psychology may be used as presuppositions of our discussion.

2. Self-development, and self-improvement in general, means to give shape and direction to our vital activities, not to limit or stop them. In other words, the purpose of this discussion is to learn how to organize and direct our theoretical and practical efforts so that they effectively contribute to our real perfection. Thus, the discussion underway does not imply denying the extra-mental realities or the value of knowing about them or any form of idealistic tendency that has a negative connotation; neither do the pragmatist tendencies,

which are based on the primacy of practices useful for material and worldly life and which are one of the manifestations of humanism, can shed light on the crux of this discussion. Rather, we will see that they are incongruous with what we are concerned with here, unless some of such ideas are interpreted as being based on a transcendent and vast world, while [on the contrary] the founders and advocates of such schools of thought have their own particular interpretations.

3. What is meant by introspection and self-examination here is to know the main goal, namely ultimate perfection, and also the path towards true felicity and development through reflecting on one's being, inner capacities, and desires. However, it does not mean that one should ignore one's existential ties with others and deny the possibilities provided for perfection and development through social life and co-operation. Therefore, the positive connotations of these terms that are meant here. They should not be confused with such terms as individualism, introversion, self-conceit, egotism, and the like, which are used in psychology, ethics, and elsewhere with their negative connotations.

4. There is a group of other words that have different technical meanings in different disciplines. It is even possible that certain terms may have various meanings within various schools of one discipline, such as wisdom, soul, intuition, sense, perception, imagination, faculty, power, instinct, and so forth. In such cases, restricting oneself to certain specific terms will get both the speaker and the listener into trouble. For this purpose, to specify the intended meaning, one must rely on the verbal contexts. And those who are familiar with only specific scientific or philosophical terms should not restrict themselves to the domain of those terms in order to avoid any misunderstanding.

## **Perfection**

Although the meaning of perfection is clear, we have to give some explanations so that no mistakes will be made in certain instances.

Doubtless, perfection is an existential quality with which a being could be characterized. However, when we compare an entity with other things, we find that some can be characterized with perfection, while some others not only cannot be characterized with any perfection, but rather such a privation might occasionally give rise to their deficiency and to the diminishment of their existential value. Furthermore, some others basically do not have the capacity to possess certain types of perfection.

For instance, whereas becoming sweet is a perfection for some fruits, such as pears and melons, being sour is a perfection for some others. The other example which can be given is that the acquisition of knowledge is a perfection for man, while stones and wood lack the capacity for that perfection. The reason is that each being is limited to its own quiddity, and going outside of this limit will be conducive to turning into another species, which will be essentially different from it. Quidditative changes may occur for instance through a change in the molecular structure or through the conversion of matter into energy.

In any case, each quiddity is naturally compatible with certain characteristics and has the capacity for the same perfections. However, the emergence of a new quiddity does not always require the disappearance of the prior perfections. Many entities have the capacity to possess many actualities one after another while preserving their prior perfections. For instance, besides the presence of a number of mineral properties within a plant, it also has its vegetative nature over and above its mineral characteristics, as is the case with animals and human beings.

In such types of beings, their prior perfections may, to a certain extent, prepare the ground for the emergence of a higher perfection. However, this is not necessarily so. In many cases, the attainment of a perfection appropriate for the final [specific] form is conditional on the restriction of the prior perfections, just as a great deal of foliage interferes with a fruit tree's bearing sufficient fruit, or being exceedingly fat prevents a horse from reaching its proper perfection, which is proper jumping and speed.

Therefore, the real perfection of every being consists characteristics which its last actuality demands. The other perfections [i.e., the prior ones] can act as the preparatory conditions for the final perfection to the extent that they contribute to a being's attainment of that perfection.

### **The Chain of Perfections**

When we compare a tree with a stone or a pile of soil, we realize that the tree actually possesses certain specific capacities that are not seen in the stone or the pile of dirt. Despite their similarity in their atoms and molecules, the effects which emerge from the tree cannot appear from the stone or soil.

We can explain this fact by saying that there is an actual perfection in the tree (i.e., its vegetative form) that is the source of the emergence of the acts and effects peculiar to plants. At the same time, plants potentially possess certain perfections that minerals [i.e., inanimate objects] are incapable of attaining; for instance, the sapling of a fruit tree has the capacity to bear loads of sweet fruit, while no such capacity is found in a stone or wood.

It is evident that the plant, in virtue of possessing the actuality and potentiality as mentioned above, does not lose its physical qualities and natural faculties but retains its vegetative functions and moves

towards its development through using them. Therefore, it can be concluded that in order to achieve its perfections, a plant employs its natural powers, which are necessary also for its survival.

Likewise, an animal, in addition to its senses and voluntary motion, possesses certain vegetative faculties, which are imbedded in its animal form and employed by the animal in order to achieve its proper perfections.

Similarly, man possesses natural, vegetative, and animal faculties, in addition to those which emanate from his human-ness (*al-insaniyyah*). He employs all his inferior faculties to the benefit of his human perfection. Thus, he needs them all to the extent that they can effectively aid in his attaining his human perfections. However, in the same way that excessive foliage is not beneficial to an apple tree, unconditional use of the vegetative and animal faculties cannot be considered to be useful to him either.

The conclusions that can be drawn from the above discussion are as follows:

1. Physical beings can be classified according to their existential perfections. Among the beings with which we are familiar, inanimate objects occupy a lower state, while animals respectively lie in an intermediate position and human beings lie at a higher level. Obviously, in this classification, what is taken into account are the type and value [or qualitative characteristics] of perfection, not its volume or amount [or quantitative characteristics]. Therefore, it is wrong to say that if man is more perfect than other animals, he should be able to eat more than a cow can or run faster than a deer does; just as it is not correct to say that if a tree is superior to stone or soil, then it should be heavier than the Himalayas.

2. Each physical being with a higher degree of existence also possesses the inferior faculties and employs them in the path to its perfection.

3. Employing the inferior faculties should be only to the extent that can be useful for the attainment of higher perfections; otherwise, it will lead to the stagnation of the movement towards perfection, or it may even lead to decline and fall.

4. Based on the previous discussion, it can be concluded that the real perfection of every being is what its last actuality entails, although this very perfection consists of various degrees—just as bearing apples is the perfection of an apple tree, but it may have various degrees. The other perfections that are quidditatively different from that perfection—and naturally in a lower level—are not regarded as the perfection of the being in question; they can only be deemed as preliminary or instrumental. Thus, perfection can be divided into principal and instrumental or real and relative, and the principal perfection itself can be considered to consist of various degrees.

5. In order to determine the extent to which the inferior powers can be put to use, it will be necessary to take into consideration the real and principal perfection. In other words, the lower existential faculties can be regarded as the instrumental or preliminary perfection for a being if they contribute to the attainment of its real perfection. Here, once again, emphasis is placed on the necessity of knowing man's real perfection.

### **The Causes and Conditions of Achieving Perfection**

A being's movement towards its perfection consists of gradual changes that it undergoes, leading to the actualization of its potentiality for attaining an existential quality (perfection). These changes occur through the faculties deposited within the innate nature of a

perfectible being and through the external conditions and possibilities.

For instance, when a grain of wheat is planted and water, oxygen, heat, light, and the other necessary conditions are provided, it breaks open and grows a stem and leaves and produces [a large number of] spikes. Finally, each spike will yield about seven hundred grains. The changes that occur in the grain from the very beginning leading to its yielding of seven hundred grains are together called the movement towards perfection. The faculties that exist in the aforesaid grain and through which it absorbs the required materials, discharges the waste materials, and turns the absorbed materials into similar grains through specific actions and reactions are the agents [or causes] of development, while water, wind, light, and other external requirements are its conditions.

In many cases, it is through experiment that a being's development, which entails discovering the limits of its existence of and the extent of its perfection as well as the causes and conditions of its development, can be measured, but the possibility of measuring through other ways cannot be negated.

Certain questions may arise at this point: Do all beings go through those changes, or is it possible for a being to be totally unchangeable? Are all changes—be they essential, accidental, qualitative, or relative—real, or is it that relative changes are to be excluded from real changes? Are all real changes conducive to the attainment of perfection, or could they result in losing some of the existential qualities [possessed by that thing]? These are all appropriate questions, but they are beyond the scope of the present discussion.

### **Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Movement**

As regards the previous example of a grain of wheat, [it should be said that] the changes that cause one grain to be multiplied into many

grains is not related to cognitive perception and discernment. The same is true with the changes that occur in an egg until it hatches, with the difference that the process of the development of a chick into a full-grown chicken depends on the perceptions without which the chick cannot attain its proper perfection. If the chick did not feel hungry, thirsty, cold, or warm, and if it could not distinguish the grain and water from stone or wood, and if the cold water and fire were the same for it, not only would it not grow but also it would not be able to survive. Thus, it can be concluded that movements towards perfection can be divided into two general types: perceptual and natural, or cognitive and non-cognitive.

### **Instinctive and Non-Instinctive Perception**

The perceptions required for movements towards perfection are at times naturally and inherently present, even though an entity itself may not be fully aware of them, such as the instinctive perceptions of animals. At times, the perceptions required are acquired gradually and by learning, and one who acquires them is aware of them, such as the types of knowledge acquired by man.

At this point, some questions may also arise which should be answered elsewhere, such as the following: Are plants devoid of all types of perception, or is it possible that some of them may have some types of perception? Are all animal perceptions instinctive or do some animals also partake of acquired perceptions? Supposing that animals possess acquired perceptions, is there any intrinsic difference between their perceptions and human acquired perceptions?

### **Voluntary and Involuntary Movement**

At times, movement towards perfection occurs spontaneously and involuntarily as soon as the required conditions are met. At times, it

depends on exercising free will, as we clearly perceive in the case of our voluntary actions.

It is evident that with regard to voluntary actions, the extent of development and perfection depends on the will and choice of that which moves (*al-mutabarrik*) [towards perfection]. In other words, the inability to reach the desired perfection is not due to any defects of the innate faculties or to the absence of the favourable conditions and external possibilities. Rather, it depends on one's will and choice as well. As making choices is not possible without knowledge and awareness, making good choices is conditional on sound knowledge and discernment. The wider the range of knowledge, the greater the possibility of properly using it for voluntary perfection will be, as voluntary acts are more freely done when the extent of knowledge and external options are vaster .

Thus, it becomes clear why it is necessary to know the goal and the path to reach it: as has been already pointed out, free choice depends on knowledge and awareness, and man's development and perfection totally or, at least, partially, is voluntary. Of course, we will deal with the origin of will and with the factors that affect it.

Another question also arises here: Apart from man, are there any other beings that have free choice? Supposing that there are such beings, are there any beings among them more perfect than man or not?

However, it is clear that giving a positive or negative answer to such questions will have no effect on our present discussion.

### **Knowing Perfection before Achieving It**

It is evident that knowing man's real perfection through immediate consciousness and intuitive knowledge is possible only for those who have reached it. But as the attainment of voluntary perfections depends on knowledge and awareness, it is necessary that these

perfections be somehow known beforehand to us, so that we desire, and voluntarily acquire, them. If the way to know them had been confined to experiencing them, it would have never been possible to attain them. Therefore, the knowledge required beforehand is not of the type of intuitive knowledge; rather, it is the very subjective knowledge and the so-called acquired knowledge obtained through demonstration and logical arguments or from the incontrovertibly transmitted principles. Basically, this discussion is meant for those who seek to know perfection and to find its path; one who has reached true perfection is not in need of such discussions.

Therefore, it will be totally inappropriate to expect to know the reality of human perfection before reaching it in such a manner that we know the objects of our intuitive perceptions. So, there will be no choice but to gain a subjective rather than intuitive knowledge of it through reasoning and to specify its characteristics by way of reason (*'aql*) and tradition (*naql*). Of course, we will endeavor to choose the premises of reasoning from the simplest and clearest facts, so that both the conclusions may be clearer, more convincing, and more widely used. Meanwhile, however, we will also resort to some of the transmitted proofs or more complex rational demonstrations.