

Thankfulness (SHUKR)

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Abstract

Deep gratitude towards God, from the monotheistic perspective, requires one to know that God is the real owner of all things. Therefore, if one exists, owns properties, and has knowledge, power, health, beauty, good reputation, nice friends, and so forth, it is in fact God that has granted them to him. In what follows, the author first defines thankfulness, then examines its nature from different points of view: Qur'anic, hadith, scholarly, individual, and social. In addition, he discusses how one can cultivate the virtue of thankfulness in his soul, and how this virtue can be identified in a person.

Keywords: *thankfulness, God as the Provider, blessing, developing thankfulness.*

Introduction

Thankfulness is a natural inclination that every human being perceives towards the provider of a blessing or favor. This causes the individual to show his appreciation towards the provider by expressing respect and praise, and to behave in a manner that reflects the kindness that was shown. The Creator of the worlds has given the cosmos and whatever that exists in it to be at the disposal of human beings so that they derive benefit from them in the path that God has drawn out for them: attaining a worthy and appropriate perfection. The intellect and the Islamic law instruct man to observe the rules of gratitude for all blessings and bounties. Every balanced individual will criticize those who are unthankful and encourage the expression of appreciation for the blessings that are granted.

Lexical and Technical Definitions of SHUKR

Shukr means remembering a blessing and expressing thankfulness for it. Some have said that it is transposed from *Ka-Sha-Ra* which means to uncover. *Dabbah shakur* (grateful animal) is an animal that becomes fatter when given enough water and food. *Ayn shakra* means a spring that is full of water. Accordingly, *shukr* means that the human existence is filled with the remembrance of the provider of blessings (Raghib Isfahani 1412 AH, 461).

According to the author of *al-Tabqiq*, all the definitions mentioned for this word have root in one common meaning and that is expressing gratitude and respect in return for a physical or spiritual blessing. Its antonym is *kufuran*, which means to conceal the blessing or be ungrateful for the provider's blessings (Mustafawi 1402 AH, 6:98).

In Allamah Tabataba'i's view, to be thankful to God is to remember Him when using His blessings. When we remember Him, we are reminded that the blessings should be used the way He wants. It should be known that everything is a blessing of God, and He did not create any blessing except that it should be used in His servitude. (Tabataba'i 1374 Sh, 4:58).

Hamd and *madh* are also two terms whose meanings are very close to *shukr*. Raghīb says that *Hamd* of God means praising Him for the virtues He possesses. *Hamd* is more exclusive than *madh* and more comprehensive than *shukr*. *Madh* is done in face of voluntary and involuntary characteristics. For example, *madh* can be used for one's height and physical beauty, which are involuntary, and also for generosity, altruism, and knowledge (which are voluntary), but *hamd* is only done for voluntary actions. *Shukr* is only for the blessings and generosity shown to a person; every *shukr* is *hamd*, but not every *hamd* is *shukr*. And every *hamd* is *madh*, but every *madh* is not *hamd* (Raghīb Isfahani 1412 AH, 256; Qurshi 1412 AH, 2:172).

It has been mentioned that one of the meanings of *shukr* is to use the blessings of God in what pleases Him. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to know things that are dear to God. There are two possible means to discover those things that result in God's pleasure:

- 1) Sharia, which shows us the deeds that please God (*wajibat* and *mustahabbat*) and the ones that displease Him (*muharramat* and *makruhbat*). It is particularly important to learn *ahkam* (divine laws), because the one who is not aware of the *ahkam* cannot be adequately thankful for divine blessings. Therefore, in order to please God and refrain from those actions which are disliked by God, and do *shukr* in action, one has to learn the *ahkam*.

2) Intellect, which, if utilized, a portion of the wisdom behind the creation of some creatures and their right functions can be realized. Whoever uses a thing for the purpose it was created for has been grateful for that blessing. But since the intellect is incapable of recognizing the wisdom behind everything, we need to seek assistance from revelation (*wahy*).

So, as an example, the purpose of a person having hands is to acquire benefit and to repel detriment, not to harm others. One of the functions of gold and money is to be able to engage in transactions and trade among people in a convenient manner. These are things applicable for all types of currencies; it should not be used for hoarding and stowing away. So when a person uses these blessings in an appropriate manner for the purpose they were created for, he has been practically thankful. If not, he has been unthankful and rejected the blessing. This pertains to all of the blessings that God has given to humans. By having this point in mind, humans can evaluate all of their actions and understand which of their actions are *shukr* and which are *kufran* (ungratefulness).

The Degrees of Shukr

Shukr, similar to many other ethical attributes like *sabr* (patience), has degrees and levels.

- 1) *Shukr* of the heart, which is the recollection of the blessing
- 2) *Shukr* of the tongue, which is appreciation and praise for the one who has provided the blessing
- 3) *Shukr* of all the body parts, which is using them in the right way

The last degree of *shukr* is the most essential level of *shukr* to God. Of course, the *shukr* of the heart and tongue is especially important, but *shukr* should also be exemplified in action. So it is not enough to merely say, “Thanks be to God” or “*Al-hamdulillah*” (All praise belongs to God); this is a phrase for expressing *shukr*, not *shukr* itself. Just like “*astaghfirullah*” is a phrase for repentance and not the repentance itself. Accordingly, *shukr* begins in the soul, and after realizing that all one possesses are the favors and bounties of the All-Generous God, one should feel appreciation towards the Provider and then manifest this in action. When Prophet Solomon wanted to thank God for the great blessings that he had, he asked God to grant him opportunities to engage in more righteous actions:

Inspire me to give thanks for Your blessing with which
You have blessed me and my parents, and that I may
do righteous deeds which may please You, and admit
me, by Your mercy, among Your righteous servants.
(Qur’an 27:19)

This important issue is also indicated in the fifteenth verse of Chapter al-Ahqaf (Qur’an 46:15).

SHUKR in the Verses of the Qur’an and Traditions

The word “*shukr*” and its derivatives have been used several times in the Qur’an. These verses address the issue of thankfulness and behest the people to be thankful for the blessings and their Provider and warn them against ungratefulness:

- O House of David, act thankfully, and few of My servants are grateful. (34:13)
- Indeed God is gracious to mankind, but most people do not give thanks. (2:243)

- Remember Me, and I will remember you, and thank Me, and do not be ungrateful to Me. (2:152)
- Why should God punish you if you give thanks and be faithful? And God is appreciative (*shakir*), all-knowing. (4:147)

Some verses of the Qur'an explicitly indicate that being grateful for God's blessings will increase the blessings, and being ungrateful results in deprivation and punishment:

And when your Lord proclaimed, "If you are grateful, I will surely enhance you [in blessing], but if you are ungrateful, My punishment is indeed severe." (14:7)

According to the Qur'an, those who have wisdom and insight are grateful; they realize the significance of both the blessing and the Provider. We read in surah Luqman, verse 12:

Certainly We gave Luqman wisdom, saying, "Give thanks to God; and whoever gives thanks, gives thanks only for his own sake. And whoever is ungrateful [let him know that] God is indeed all-sufficient, all-laudable." (Qur'an 31:12)

Faithful people who have true beliefs are wise; they realize the significance of the blessing and thankfulness. There is no difference for them if they received a blessing directly from the Provider or through intermediary channels. They are thankful for the blessing; they thank the Provider and the channels through which they received the blessing. In surah Luqman, verse 14, God commands us to be thankful to our parents:

We have enjoined man concerning his parents: His mother carried him through weakness upon weakness

and his weaning takes two years. Give thanks to Me and to your parents. To Me is the return. (Qur'an 31:14)

In the conduct of the Infallibles, *shukr* has a special place. An example is of the Prophet (s) when he spent a long time praying at night, so 'A'ishah asked him, "Why do you exhaust yourself when God has forgiven all your sins?" The Prophet (s) replied, "Should I not be a grateful servant?" (Kulayni 1407 AH, 2:95).

In another tradition, the Prophet (s) was travelling on a camel and unexpectedly disembarked from it. He prostrated five times and when he re-embarked on the camel, his companions asked him, "O Prophet of God! We have seen you do something that you have never done!" He replied, "Yes, Gabriel came to me and informed me with good news from God, the Glorified and Magnificent, so I prostrated for every piece of information" (Kulayni 1407 AH, 2:98).

However much a servant of God realizes the blessings, he will be more grateful, to the extent that he will give thanks even for his ability of thanksgiving. It is found in a tradition that God revealed to David (a) to be thankful and give thanks proportionally to the extent of the blessing. David (s) replied: "O God, how can I be thankful to you proportionately, when the thanksgiving itself requires further thanksgiving?" He was told: "Now, you have thanked me proportionately" (Daylami 1412 AH, 1:122).

In another tradition, Imam Ali (a) says: "Whenever one thanks God, it is incumbent to give further thanks, for [God] has given him an opportunity to thank Him" (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 278).

SHUKR from the Standpoint of a Muslim Scholar

Fayd Kashani identifies *shukr* as one of the stages for the wayfarers of spirituality. He enumerates three levels for it: *'ilm* (knowledge), *hal* (state), and *'amal* (action). When commentating on *hal*, he brings forth a beautiful illustration to further explain the previous matter:

The second level is *hal*, ensuing from *ma'rifat* (recognition), which is to display joyful gratitude towards the Provider coupled with humility and modesty. This in itself is *shukr*, just as *ma'rifat* is in itself *shukr*. It will completely remain *shukr* as long as it fulfills the condition, which is to display joyful gratitude towards the Provider, not to the actual blessing itself. Due to the difficulty in understanding this matter, we will bring forth an example. A king who has the intention of travelling bestows a horse upon someone and thinks that the recipient will be happy for three reasons:

- 1) He is happy about the horse itself. It is a commodity, profitable, and a form of transport. It is pleasing to one's desires and hopes, as well as expensive. It is clear that this form of happiness does not relate to the king. Rather, it is engrossed in the horse. The amount of happiness is equivalent to the happiness of finding the horse in the desert.
- 2) He is happy for possessing the horse, but not for the horse itself. Rather, because it is a sign of attention and care of the king for him. In this case, if the horse was found in the desert or someone else other than the king granted him the horse, he would not be equally happy.
- 3) He becomes happy because he can take the horse and be in service of the king by tolerating the

difficulties of traveling. This service of his will allow him to become closer to the king and perhaps promoted to a ministry. He is not satisfied with the current care of the king and his bestowal of the horse upon him. He wants to reach a position in which the king does not grant a thing to anyone except through him being the intermediary. He does not want the ministry for the sake of the ministry but rather so he can continuously see the king and become closer to him. If he is given a choice for closeness to the king without the ministry or for the ministry without the king, he will choose the former.

The term "*shukr*" does not apply to the first state. The one who is in this state is confined only to the happiness brought by the horse. This is the state of all those who are happy for the blessing that God has granted them in that it is for their amusement and enjoyment. These people are very far from expressing their gratitude.

The second state implies that he is doing *shukr*, since he is happy because of the provider, not because of the blessing itself. Now he knows which thing will cause the king to reward the people. This is an example of the state of those who are pious. They worship and thank God out of fear for His punishment and in hope of receiving His reward.

The perfect *shukr* is in the third form of happiness, because it is the state of a servant who is happy because God's blessing is a means of proximity to Him ... He does not want the blessing because it is pleasing to his desires. Rather, he wants to accompany the king, continuously interact with him, and become closer to him. How different is the one who loves the king for the horse from the one who loves the horse for the king! How different is the one who loves God for

bestowal of blessings from the one who wants the blessing of God so it could be a further means of proximity to God! (Fayd Kashani 1372 Sh, 7:182-87)

A Parable about Thankfulness

In a hadith from Imam Rida (a), it is narrated that there was a man among the Israelites who saw a dream and was told that he could choose the first or the second half of his life to live in wealth and opulence, and the man chose the first half. From that moment, he was given abundance and the number of his blessings multiplied. He would assist his wife and the indigent among his family. Whenever God gave him blessings, he donated to charity and provided aid to others. He saw in a dream that he was told: “The first half of your life in prosperity has ended.” The man replied: “God granted blessing upon me and I was thankful; He has promised that if you are thankful, He will surely enhance you [in blessing].” He was told: “Yes, the second-half of your life will also pass in prosperity because you have been grateful” (Tabarsi 1965, 30).

Developing and Strengthening Thankfulness in the Soul

Before we explain how to attain this moral virtue, we must first become aware of those things which result in ungratefulness to God. Several things may make humans oblivious to the necessity of thanking God, and lead them to ungratefulness.

- 1) Lack of awareness in individuals to the crucial point that all blessings granted to them are from God
- 2) A disregard of blessings, like health, which God has granted abundantly for humans

3) Being ignorant of the reality behind *shukr* and thinking that it is merely limited to the tongue by saying “*al-hamdu lillah*” (All praise belongs to God).

4) Being controlled by the worldly desires which prevent humans from being thankful

All of these things result in humans becoming ungrateful to the blessings of God. If the person is subsequently deprived of his blessings, he will know their value; and if he regains them, he will thank God. For example, if a person with sight becomes blind and then recovers his vision, he will value that blessing and be grateful for it. Although his sight was a blessing from the beginning, he did not know its value and did not give thanks for it. This is the state of human ignorance: a blessing needs to be taken away and then re-granted, so that one appreciates the blessings he has. But one should be thankful now when the blessing is at his disposal. A person should see himself immersed in God’s blessings and not be oblivious of thanking Him.

The teachers of ethics have dispensed several methods for developing this virtue.

First, a person must know God and His blessings and know that every blessing is from Him. The easiest method for recognizing blessings is to reflect upon creation and those things that exist in it. A person should think how God has prepared the necessary tools for securing the needs of every creature and how the essential sources are created in its surroundings.

Second, a person must be aware that there are a multitude of blessings which he has but is not aware of them. For example: air, water, eyes, ears, intellect, and other bodily organs are all blessings of God. Due to

the continuous access to these blessings, one does not usually count them as blessings. Ghazali narrates that a man complained to a sage about his indigence. The sage told him: “Would you like to exchange your eye for 10,000 dirhams?” He replied in the negative. The sage then asked the same question with regard to the man’s brain, ears, foot, and hands. And the man again said that he wouldn’t exchange any of them for 10,000 dirhams. Then the sage said: “God has placed 50,000 dirhams in you, why are you complaining?” (Dawudi 1390 Sh, 89)

Furthermore, a person should combat Satan and his unlawful desires, which want the divine blessings to be used in a way that God is not pleased with. This is a necessary step toward attaining the virtue of thankfulness.

Lastly, a person must accustom the tongue to be constantly occupied with expressing thanks to God in order to achieve virtue of gratefulness.

Indications of SHUKR

1) Among the indications that a person is thankful for God’s blessings is that a person will only undertake those actions that are loved by Him and will refrain from those which are disliked by Him. Naraqī, after explaining *shukr* as recognizing the blessings of God, appreciating them, and using them in the right way, elaborates on the three levels of *shukr*:

In regard to the third degree, undertaking those actions pleasing to God is a result of identifying the Provider. It means to execute those actions that are desired and beloved to God relating to the heart, tongue, and the other organs. As to the heart, it means to have a pure intention and sympathy for all creation. As to the tongue, it means to express his gratefulness

through praising God. As to the bodily organs, it means to utilize God's blessings only in His worship and refraining from anything that results in His disobedience (Naraqī 1388 Sh, 433-34).

The thanksgiving of a grateful person should be apparent inwardly, outwardly, and in his behavior, as Imam Ali (a) has said: "The thanksgiving of a believer is manifested in his actions" (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 279).

2) Appreciation or valuing the blessings that God has bestowed is another indication. This has been emphasized in the Qur'an when God says, "And as for your Lord's blessing, proclaim it" (Qur'an 93:11). Allamah Tabataba'i says that the word "*tabdith*" (proclaiming), when used for the blessings of God, means to recall them through the tongue or actions, and that is being grateful for the blessings (Tabataba'i 1374 Sh, 20:525). Accordingly, thanksgiving for a blessing is sometimes through the tongue and phrases that portray one's gratefulness and humbleness. At times, it is through actions such as engaging in charity and donating. Therefore, proclaiming the blessings of God is among the signs of thankfulness. By not doing this, one is not being thankful. Imam Kazim (a) said: "Proclaiming the blessings is thankfulness and it is ungratefulness to fail to do it" (Hurr al-'Amili 1409 AH, 7:40).

3) Showing one's lack of need towards other creatures is another sign of being thankful to God. Imam Ali (a) says: "To exhibit one's needlessness is a form of *shukr*" (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 279). A grateful servant does not conceal his richness, and a needy person does not act in a way to reveal his destituteness; they both donate according to their capacity. Their conduct is based on the verse "as for your Lord's blessing, proclaim it" (Qur'an 93:11), which is a type of thankfulness.

4) Another sign of valuing the blessings of God is to fulfill the needs of others. Imam Ali (a) said, “The best form of *shukr* for a blessing is to donate it” (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 279). He also said: “No one is able to be thankful for a blessing in a way better than donating it” (Ibid.).

5) Praising God constantly is another sign of being thankful. Imam Ali (a) says: “Thanking your God is in lengthening His praise” (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 279).

Individual and Social Results of SHUKR

Undoubtedly, every type of *shukr* has multiple results and functions in human life. Mentioning the results and functions of *shukr* indicates its importance, and can serve as a means to encourage and promote it among people. Here, several results and functions of *shukr* will be mentioned.

It should also be mentioned that from the Qur’anic perspective, *shukr* of human beings does not benefit God, just as their worship does not benefit Him, because God is not in need of the praise or worship of the creation. According to the Qur’an, righteous deeds are all for humans to benefit from in traversing the path to perfection. The fortieth verse of surah al-Naml and the twelfth verse of surah Luqman assert that the *shukr* of people returns back to them: “And whoever gives thanks, gives thanks only for his own sake” (Qur’an 27:40; 31:12).

1) An Increase of Blessings

If a person is thankful for the blessings of God, the divine wont is to increase his blessings. If one acts contrary to this and does not appreciate the blessings, not only will it cause the blessings to be taken away, but a punishment will await him: “If you are grateful, I will surely

enhance you [in blessing], but if you are ungrateful, My punishment is indeed severe” (Qur’an 14:7).

It is also worth mentioning that an increase in blessing should not cause a person to become arrogant, forget God, and overlook thanksgiving, because it may result in *istidraj*, which means that an ungrateful, sinning person will slowly and gradually be led to destruction through those blessings. Imam Husayn (a) says regarding *istidraj*: “It is when God gives ample blessings to a person and takes away the opportunity of thanksgiving [due to his obliviousness and lack of appreciation]” (Hakimi 1380 Sh, 3:412). Imam Sadiq (a) was also asked about the meaning of *istidraj* and he replied: “It is when a servant sins and God continues to bless him with a blessing; this blessing prevents him from seeking forgiveness for the sin he committed (Ibid., 413). In order for a person to guard himself from this great danger, whenever he commits a sin and shows ungratefulness, he should immediately repent and seek forgiveness.

2) Promoting Love among People and Fostering a Noble Culture

It is necessary for us to know that it is not only God whom we must thank. A person should also be thankful to the intermediate causes of blessings as well. It is mentioned in hadiths that “the one who is not grateful for the kindness of people has not been grateful to God either” (Majlisi 1403 AH, 68:44). Appreciation and thanksgiving promote affection, love, and amity. They also contribute to the development of a noble culture, which results in God’s pleasure. In Islamic teachings, it has been advised to thank those who act kindly; and to do further acts of kindness to those who are thankful.

Imam Sadiq (a) has reportedly said,

It is written in the Torah: “Be thankful to the one who gives you a blessing; and to the one who has been thankful to you, do further acts of kindness. This is because blessings continue as long as they are appreciated, and they will not remain if thanks are not given. *Shukr* and thanksgiving result in an increase of blessings and safety from changes and vicissitudes.” (Kulayni 1407 AH, 2:94)

3) Growth in Productivity and Efficiency

Appreciating the works of your spouse, child, teacher, colleague, and everyone else striving in the community will give rise to cheerfulness, productivity, and efficiency in their works. Imam Ali (a) says: “Your appreciation of the one who is pleased with you will result in further pleasure and devotion” (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 279). He also said: Your thanksgiving to the one who is angry with you will result in reconciliation, inclination and affection towards you (Ibid., 280).

We should not always complain and criticize. Rather, we should interact with each other with kindness and appreciate the merits and good actions of our wives, friends, and employees. By doing so, we will encourage further goodness.

Conclusion

Being grateful for God’s blessing upon us is a matter that the intellect and the revelation find to be necessary and desirable. Every person who has a sound *fitrah* (primordial nature) will be thankful to God for His blessings and favors and also to the intermediate causes of blessings.

Being unthankful and failing to appreciate God's unlimited blessings⁸ indicate the spiritual sickness of the heart. If one's *fitrah* and heart are not corrupted, reflecting on the blessings is sufficient for one to manifest his thankfulness in his heart and actions.

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⁸ "If you enumerate God's blessings, you will not be able to count them" (Qur'an 14:34).

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