

Practical Steps towards Moral Purification Part II: Preconditioning, Self-vigilance, Self-evaluation, Preproach and Chastisement

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ABSTRACT: After the subject of repentance discussed as the first practical step towards the spiritual journey in the former relevant article, in this survey some other preliminary stages of the same type will be thoroughly studied. Preconditioning, self-vigilance, evaluation of the soul, reproach and chastisement are held by the author to be stages that a wayfarer ought to go through in order to be able to purify his soul. Drawing upon the Qur’anic verses and specially hadiths, the author profoundly explains those concepts and other related issues in detail.

KEYWORDS: spiritual journey, preconditioning, self-vigilance, evaluation of the soul, chastisement.

In the previous part, we studied different aspects of repentance as the first practical step towards moral purification. In this part, we will first mention some of the benefits of repentance and then study four other steps to be taken for more purification i.e. preconditioning, self-vigilance, self-evaluation and self-reproach and self-punishment.

¹ Makārem Shirazi, Nāṣir et al., *Ethics in the Qur’an*, vol. 1: “Essential issues in Ethics” (excerpt from) ch. 12, (Imam Ali (a) ibn Abi Talib Publication: Qum, 2008). Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi is a Grand Ayatollah and a Shiite marja’ living in Qum. The twelfth chapter of the first volume of *Ethics in the Qur’an* deals with “Practical Steps towards Moral Purification”. This article is the second part of the translation of this chapter, the first part of which was published in the previous issue of the journal.

Benefits of repentance:

Repentance has many benefits. Referring to the Qur'an and hadiths, we refer to some of them in what follows.

1. It obliterates and removes the sins one commits, as mentioned in the *ayah*:

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

“O you who believe! Turn to Allah a sincere turning; maybe your Lord will remove from you your evils.” (66:8)

2. It causes Divine bounties and rewards to come toward you from the earth and the heaven, as promised in the Glorious Qur'an:

﴿فَقُلْتُ اسْتَغْفِرُوا رَبَّكُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ غَفَّارًا يُرْسِلِ السَّمَاءَ عَلَيْكُمْ مِدْرَارًا وَيُمْدِدْكُمْ بِأَمْوَالٍ وَيَبِينْ وَيَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ جَنَّاتٍ وَيَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ أَنْهَارًا﴾

“Then I said, ask forgiveness of your Lord, surely he is the most forgiving: he will send down upon you the cloud, pouring down abundance of rain and help you with wealth and sons, and make for you gardens, and make for you rivers.” (71: 10-12)

3. Repentance, beside removing and abolishing sins, turns the sins into good deeds, as the glorious God has said:

﴿إِلَّا مَنْ تَابَ وَآمَنَ وَعَمِلَ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا فَأُولَٰئِكَ يُبَدِّلُ اللَّهُ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ حَسَنَاتٍ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا﴾

“Except him who repents and believes and does a good deed; so these are they of whom Allah changes the evil deeds to good ones; and Allah is forgiving, merciful.” (25: 70)

4. Sincere repentance erases all traces of sin. Imam al-Ṣādiq (a) is quoted as saying: After sincere repentance God will make the angels in charge of recording one's deeds to consign one's sins to oblivion. He also orders the bodily limbs that testify about one's worldly deeds in the hereafter to

conceal one's sins there. The earth, which is a witness of our deeds, too, will be inspired not to show one's sins. So far as when he enters the scene of resurrection nobody and nothing witnesses against him.¹

5. True penitents are recipients of His favour and kindness to such an extent that the empyrean angels ask their forgiveness, too, and make requests of God to enter them and their families into paradise and the gardens of Eden.

According to a tradition, the glorious God has given true penitents three virtues, one of which would suffice to save any of the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth.

The first virtue is mentioned in this *ayah*:

﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ التَّوَّابِينَ وَيُحِبُّ الْمُتَطَهِّرِينَ﴾

“Surely Allah loves those who turn much (to Him), and he loves those who purify themselves.”

The second one is mentioned in these *ayahs*:

﴿الَّذِينَ يُحْمَلُونَ الْعَرْشَ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُ يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا رَبَّنَا وَسِعْتَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ رَحْمَةً وَعِلْمًا فَاغْفِرْ لِلَّذِينَ تَابُوا وَاتَّبَعُوا سَبِيلَكَ وَقِهِمْ عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ رَبَّنَا وَأَدْخِلْهُمْ جَنَّاتِ عَدْنٍ الَّتِي وَعَدْتَهُمْ وَمَنْ صَلَحَ مِنْ آبَائِهِمْ وَأَزْوَاجِهِمْ وَذُرِّيَّاتِهِمْ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ وَقِهِمُ السَّيِّئَاتِ وَمَنْ تَقِ السَّيِّئَاتِ يَوْمَئِذٍ فَقَدْ رَحِمْتَهُ وَذَلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ﴾

“Those who bear the power and those around him celebrate the praise of their Lord and believe in him and ask protection for those who believe: our Lord! Thou embracest all things in mercy and knowledge, therefore grant protection to those who turn (to Thee) and follow Thy way, and save them from the punishment of the hell: our Lord! and make them enter the gardens of perpetuity which Thou hast promised to them and those of their fathers, their wives and their offspring who do good, surely Thou are the Mighty, the Wise, and keep them from evil deeds,

¹ Kulayni, Muhammad ibn Ya'qub, *Uṣūl al-Kāfī*, vol. 2, 430, (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1388 A.H.) (*Sūrah al-Tawbah*, number 1).

and whom thou keepest from evil deeds this day, indeed thou hast mercy on him, and that is the mighty achievement.” (40: 7-)

And the third virtue is mentioned in these *ayahs*:

﴿وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَدْعُونَ مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا آخَرَ وَلَا يَقْتُلُونَ النَّفْسَ الَّتِي حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَلَا يَزْنُونَ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ يَلْقَ أَثَامًا يُضَاعَفْ لَهُ الْعَذَابُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ وَيَجْزِيهِ فِيهِ مُهَازِنًا لَا مَن تَابَ وَآمَنَ وَعَمِلَ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا فَأُولَئِكَ يُبَدِّلُ اللَّهُ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ حَسَنَاتٍ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا ۝﴾

And they who do not call upon another god with Allah and do not slay the soul, which Allah has forbidden except in the requirements of justice, and (who) do not commit fornication and he who does this shall find a requital of sin; the punishment shall be doubled to him on the day of resurrection, and he shall abide therein in abasement; except him who repents and believes and does a good deed; so these are they of whom Allah changes the evil deeds to good ones; and Allah is forgiving, merciful.¹ (25:68-70)

Now we come to the end of discussions about the first step toward purification, i.e., repentance, however there are plenty of points in this regard that must be discussed separately.

Unless the mirror of the heart is purified of rust and the soul of man is washed by the water of repentance and the light of repentance expels the darkness of sin from the heart, the process of purification and wayfaring toward God and approaching the level of divine nearness and to be laden with the light of guidance and unutterable mystical delights is impossible.

Repentance is the first stage, which is a more important and more influential stage than the others. To pass this stage is impossible save by firm will and resolution and by seeking the grace of God.

Second step: preconditioning (MUSHĀRATAH)

In the previous parts, the steps of the spiritual journey were mentioned briefly, some of which are common among great scholars and wayfarers of

¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 432.

this journey. In the next part, we are going to explain these stages in detail using Qur'anic *ayahs* and traditions.

Scholars of ethics say that the first step of the spiritual journey, after repentance, is “preconditioning” which is: one tells himself what he should do and what he should not do. This must be done daily. It is advised to do it after the morning prayer when one is luminous due to the light of this important prayer. One should address the self and remind oneself that one has nothing but the precious asset of one's life. If this is lost, one loses all that one is.” He should remind himself of this Qur'anic *ayah*:

“By time! Indeed man is in loss” (103:1, 2)

One should tell himself: “If I lose this asset, I will be in great loss; unless I obtain a more precious thing instead.” This something is mentioned in the following *ayah*:

“Except those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and enjoin one another to [follow] the truth and enjoin one another to patience.” (103: 3)

He should tell himself:

Suppose you died and experienced traumatic events and bitter realities during and after death, and then you seriously regretted your sins and implored Allah (*swt*):

“My Lord! Take me back that I may act righteously in what I have left behind” (23: 99, 100)

And also suppose that you are not answered by “By no means” (23: 100) and your request is fulfilled and you turn back to this world. Now, what are you going to do to expiate the sins you committed in the past?

Then, warn your soul to be careful about the limbs: eyes, ears, tongue, hands, feet and genitals. Tell your soul that they are your servants and are to obey your commands. Do you know that hell has seven doors through each of which enters one group of people? Do you know that each door might be for a group who has committed a sin with one of these seven limbs? If you would like the doors of hell to be closed and the doors of heaven to be opened to you, then control these limbs precisely!

And also advise the self to be careful about its limbs lest they be used for disobedience to Allah's (*swt*). From some prayers of Imam Sajjād (a) in *Al-Sahīfah al-Sajjādīyah*, one can understand that he (a) had a great regard for “preconditioning”. In prayer no. 31, known as the prayer of “Repentance”, he (a) says to Allah (*swt*):

“To Thee, my Lord, belongs my stipulation that I will not return to what is disliked by Thee, my guarantee that I will not go back to what Thou blamest, and my covenant that I will stay away from acts of disobedience to Thee.”

In the Qur'an, we see that friends of the Noble Prophet (s) had given pledges to Allah (*swt*) about important things, which were a kind of preconditioning:

“Among the faithful are men who fulfill what they have pledged to Allah (swt). Of them are some who have fulfilled their pledge, and of them are some who still wait, and they have not changed in the least.”¹ (33: 23)

Others pledged to Allah (*swt*) but they broke their pledges. In the same *surah* of the noble Qur'an, we read:

“Though they had certainly pledged to Allah (*swt*) before that they would not turn their backs [to flee], and pledges given to Allah (*swt*) are accountable.” (33: 15)

It is narrated that Imam 'Ali (a) said:

“One who does not amend the defects of his soul, his desires will overcome him; and for one who is in decline, death is better!”²

Thus, “preconditioning” is of the important steps towards self-purification without which black clouds of negligence and pride cast their dark shadows over the hearts and souls of people.

Third step: [attentive] self-vigilance (MURĀQABAḤ)

¹ Majlisī, Muhammad Bāqir, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, (Tehran: al-Maktabat al-Islāmiyyah, 1397 A.H.) vol. 67, 64.

² *Ibid.*

In Arabic, *murāqibah* (vigilance) is derived from the word “*raqabah*” meaning “neck”. Since when one keeps vigil, he may crane his neck to watch everything carefully; this word [*murāqibah*] began to mean vigilance and observation. This word has been used by scholars of ethics for “self-vigilance” which is a stage coming after “preconditioning”. When one promises to himself to obey Allah’s (*swt*) commands and to avoid sins, he should be vigilant; because if he neglects, he might break all his pledges.

Of course, prior to watching himself, angels watch his deeds; as, we read in the Qur’an:

“Indeed, there are over you watchers.” (82: 10)

In this Qur’anic *ayah*, according to contextual evidences in the following *ayahs*, watchers are those who watch and observe people’s deeds:

“Who know whatever you do.” (82: 12)

And also in (55: 18) we read:

“He says no word but that there is a ready observer beside him.”

And above all, the All-knowing and the All-mighty Allah always watches us. In (4: 1) we read:

“Indeed, Allah is watchful over you.”

There is the same concept in (33: 52):

“And Allah is watchful over all things.”

And in (96: 14):

“Does he not know that Allah sees?”

And in (34: 21):

“And your Lord is watchful over all things.”

However, travellers towards Allah who step on the way of piety and self-purification are careful about their deeds prior to the angels. In other words, this kind of vigilance springs from inside, not outside. Thus, its influence is significant and its role is very important. Certainly, minding “outside vigilance” strengthens the pillars of “inside vigilance”.

In fact, a human being in this world resembles a person passing an untidy market keeping some precious gems in his pocket. He wants to buy the best goods for himself while thieves and impostors surround him. If such a person is heedless of his precious gems even for a second, his property might be plundered and so that he is left alone and miserable.

Similarly, in this world, devil-like jinns and mean people have surrounded human beings, and on the other hand, their desires draw them to do whatever they want. If human beings do not entrust themselves to Allah and do not control their deeds, their faith and piety will be plundered and they will leave this world empty-handed.

There are many instances in the noble Qur'an and hadiths referring to self-vigilance; among which are:

1. "Dose he not know that Allah sees?" (96: 14)

This *ayah* indicates that Allah observes people's deeds and also he himself should be vigilant about what he does.

Elsewhere in the noble Qur'an, the faithful ones are addressed:

"O you who have faith! Be wary of Allah, and let every soul consider what it sends ahead for tomorrow, and be wary of Allah. Allah is indeed well aware of what you do." (59: 18)

Actually the sentence of "and let every soul consider what it sends ahead for tomorrow" implies the concept of vigilance.

The same meaning, but in a more limited form, is mentioned in another place in the Qur'an:

"So let man observe his food [that how he provides it]"¹ (80: 24)

2. It is quoted that the Noble Prophet (s) described "doing good" in the Qur'anic *ayah* of "Surely Allah enjoins the doing of justice and the doing of good (to others)" (16: 90) as:

¹ The phrase in the brackets is a commentary on this *ayah*. Another commentary which has some evidences in other *ayahs* of this *surah* suggests that the meaning of this *ayah* is to look at food to discover points regarding unity [of Allah] and signs of the greatness of creation. However, these two commentaries are not incompatible.

“Doing good is to worship Allah in such a way as if you see Him, and He (swt) sees you even though you do not see Him”¹

Evidently, knowing the fact that Allah (swt) watches us and observes our deeds all the time and everywhere, alerts us to be careful about our deeds.

3. It is quoted from Imam Ali (a) that:

“It is necessary for the human being to control himself and observe his heart and his tongue!”²

4. It is quoted from Imam Sādiq (a) that:

“Whoever does not protect his heart against negligence, his soul against vain desires and his intellect against ignorance, his name will be among the mindful ones, and those who protect their deeds against infection to desire-orientation, and protect their faith from unorthodoxy and protect their finances from being mixed with *haram* [prohibited money], he will be among the righteous ones.”³

5. There is a divine saying (Hadith Qudsī) in which Allah (swt) states:

“Woe to one who despairs of My mercy, and woe to one who disobeys Me and does not regard My presence.”⁴

6. Imam Ali (a) in sermon no. 76 [in *Nahj al-Balāghah*] stated: “May Allah bless him who finds Allah (swt) watching him and turns away from his sins, fights with his desires and rejects his [vain] ambitions.”⁵

7. We read in *Nahj al-Balāghah*:

¹ Muttaqī Hindī, ‘Ali ibn Ḥisām, *Kanz al-Ummāl*, vol. 3, 22, (Beirut: Mu’assisat al-Risālah, 1981) hadith no. 5254; Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 25, 204.

² Tamīmī ‘Amīdī, ‘Abd al-Waḥīd ibn Muhammad, *Taṣnīf Ghurar al-Ḥikam*, (Qum: Maktab al-A‘lām al-Islāmī, 1365 A.H.S.).

³ Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 67, 68.

⁴ Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfī*, vol. 2, 67.

⁵ Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 74, 349.

“O Servants of Allah! Fear Allah, like the fearing of a wise man who only thinks (of the hereafter) ..., and on this day, he is mindful of the next.”¹

Self-vigilance, considering Allah and being mindful of the Hereafter, which have been mentioned in the above hadiths, have the same meaning, i.e., one should be cautious of his deeds and control and observe them all the time and everywhere.

In brief, after “preconditioning” i.e. pledging to themselves and to Allah (*sawt*) to obey Him and purify their souls; travellers upon the path towards Allah should constantly be careful about their deeds, lest they break their divine pledge. Just like a creditor who demands his money from his partners, they must demand their souls to fulfill their pledges. Evidently, any kind of negligence leads to huge losses, in the same way that if one neglects his material benefits, he would lose his properties especially when he encounters deceivers and impostors.

Fourth step: Evaluation of the soul (MUḤĀSABAḤ)

The fourth step which has been mentioned by scholars of ethics is “evaluation of the soul”. In this stage, one should evaluate himself at the end of every year or every month or every week or every day and see what wrongs and rights he has done. Very much like a merchant who calculates his earnings at regular intervals (every year, month, week or day) and provides a balance sheet, one should check his profits and losses for spiritual matters.

It is evident that evaluation, whether in worldly matters or spiritual matters, has either of these two important advantages: If evaluation shows a big profit, it means that the procedure has been correct and should be followed afterwards. But if evaluation shows a considerable loss, it means that there are dangers and crises and maybe there are thieves and traitors in the firm or simply some people may have made mistakes; in any case, one should rectify the conditions.

There are Qur’anic *ayats* and hadiths in which this concept has been mentioned.

¹ Raḍī, Sharif, comp. *Nahj al-Balāghah*, sermon no. 83 (sermon of *Gharrāʾ*)

Many Qur'anic *ayahs* make people think about the order which exists in creation. For example in the noble Qur'an we read:

“He (*swt*) raised the sky and set up the balance, declaring ‘Do not infringe the balance!’” (55: 7, 8)

Elsewhere, we read:

“And everything is by [precise] measure with Him.” (13: 8)

And also:

“There is not a thing but that its sources are with Us, and We do not send it down except in a known measure.” (15: 21)

On the other hand, many Qur'anic *ayahs* have notified people of the precise accounting of the Judgment Day. As an example, in (31: 16) *Luqman*, the wise man, tells his son:

“O my son! Even if it should be the weight of a mustard seed, and [even though] it should be in a rock, or in the heavens, or in the earth, Allah will produce it. Indeed Allah is All-Attentive, All-Aware.”

And also Allah (*swt*) states that:

“And whether you disclose what is in your hearts or hide it, Allah (*swt*) will bring you to account for it.” (2: 284)

The importance of this issue is to the extent that one of the names of the Day of Resurrection is “Day of Reckoning”:

“Indeed those who stray from the way of Allah (*swt*) there is a severe punishment for them because of their forgetting the Day of Reckoning.” (38: 26)

Reckoning on the Judgment Day is so clear that everyone is his own reckoner that day; when everyone will be addressed:

“Read your book! Today your soul suffices as your own reckoner.” (17: 14)

Considering the fact that everything in this world and the hereafter has order, how could one neglect his deeds in this world? Certainly, everyone

will be judged tomorrow, so it is recommended that everyone assesses himself in this world.

Therefore, all above mentioned Qur'anic *ayats* and many others warn human beings not to neglect assessing themselves in this world before they are assessed in the hereafter.

In Islamic traditions the issue is brought up in more detail:

1. In a famous hadith from the Noble Prophet (s) we read:

“Assess yourselves before you are assessed and weigh yourselves before you are weighed and prepare yourselves for the great stage (the Day of Resurrection).”¹

2. In another hadith, we read that the Noble Prophet (s) told Abū Dhar:

“Assess yourself before you are assessed, because it would make assessing you easier on the Day of Judgment, and weigh yourself before you are weighed ...”²

3. Imam Ali (a) once said:

“It would be very good if everyone had a special private time when nothing would occupy his mind and he would evaluate his deeds and find out what harm he has made to himself in that night or day.”³

In this hadith, the issue of everyday self-assessment is mentioned at any time when one is free from all concerns and this is counted among the best practices to observe.

4. The same concept has been mentioned in another hadith in some other ways from Imam Ṣādiq (a):

“It is necessary for every Muslim who acknowledges us [Imams (a)] to review his deeds every night and day and be his own reckoner. If he remembers a good deed, he must try to do it

¹ Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 67, 73.

² *Ibid.*, vol. 74, p. 73.

³ Nūrī Ṭabarsī, Husayn, *Mustadrak al-Wasā'il*, vol. 12, (Beirut: Mu'assisat Āl al-Bayt li Ihya' al-Turāth, 1988) no. 154.

again and if he remembers a bad deed, he must ask forgiveness lest he would be disgraced on the Day of Resurrection.”¹

5. The same concept has been quoted from Imam Kādim (a) in another way:

“O Hishām! One who does not assess himself every day is not one of us! If he [does so and finds out that he] has done a good deed, he should ask Allah (*swt*) to help him do it again (and he should thank Allah) and if he has done a bad deed, he should turn back to Allah (*swt*) and repent for it.”²

There are many hadiths in this regard. Those who are interested in them could refer to *Mustadrak al-Wasā'il*, *Kitāb al-Jihād* and *Abwāb al-Jihād al-Nafs*.³

The above mentioned hadiths clearly indicate that self-assessment has a great importance in Islam and those who neglect it are not true followers of the Imams (s)!

In these hadiths, the philosophy of self-assessment is clearly explained. According to these hadiths, self-assessment brings great rewards and prevents a person from committing bad deeds and it will make amends for them. So, self-assessment prevents people from being dragged into the whirlpool of destruction or being drawn into the sea of negligence.

The question arises as to why should we not deal with spiritual and worldly matters at least equally? For our worldly matters, we have records, accounts, balance sheets, ledger books, etc. but for our spiritual matters we are not willing to even calculate in the mind; while spiritual matters are more important and indeed they are not comparable with material matters! For this reason, in a wise saying from the Noble Prophet (s), we read: “One would not be counted among the faithful, unless he is strict about self-

¹ Harrānī, Ali ibn Shu‘bih, *Tuḥaf al-Uqūl*, (Qum: Mu’assisat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1404 A.H.) p. 221.

² Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-Wasā'il*, vol. 12, 153.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. 12, p 152-156; the same concept is quoted in *Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, chapter: accounting of deeds, hadith no. 2.

assessment even more than two partners [in their job] about each other and a master towards his servant!”¹

The importance of this issue is to the extent that some great scholars have written books on this subject, including *Muḥāsabat al-Nafs* (inward accounting), Sayyid ibn Ṭāwūs Ḥillī (d. 664 A.H), *Muḥāsabat al-Nafs*, Kafī (a scholar of 9th century A.H) and *Muḥāsabat al-Nafs*, Sayyid Ali Mar‘ashī (d. 1080 A.H).²

Here, some points are worthy to be mentioned:

1. The best way for one’s self-assessment is the way once Imam Ali (a) explained after he (a) quoted this hadith from the Noble Prophet (s): “The wisest of people is one who assesses himself”. Someone asked Imam (a): “O’ the Commander of the Faithful! How should one assess himself?”

Imam Ali (a) explained:

“When the night comes, one addresses his soul and says: Today passed and will never come back and you will be asked by Allah (*swt*): how did you spend it? What did you do in it? Did you think of Me (*swt*) and praise Me? Did you perform your duties towards your (religious) brother? Did you dispel his gloom? Did you support his wife and children in his absence? Did you perform your duties towards the remaining members of his family after his death? Did you prevent others from backbiting him, using your own honour? Did you help a Muslim? What (good) deeds did you do?

Then, he thinks about what he has done during the day; if he remembered a good deed, he would thank Allah (*swt*) for that opportunity, and if he remembered a bad deed, he would ask Allah (*swt*) to forgive him and would decide not to commit it again. Then, he would negate the effects of that sin by reciting “Allāhumma Ṣalli ‘alā Muhammad wa āli Muhammad” [which means “O God, bless Muhammad and his descendants”] and by

¹ Sayyid ibn Ṭāwūs, *Muḥāsabat an-Nafs*, Sayyid ibn Ṭāwūs, 14; Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 67, 72, hadith no. 22.

² Āqā Buzurg Tehrani, *Al-Dharī‘ah ilā Taṣānīf al-Shī‘a*, vol. 20 (Tehran: Kitābkhāneh Islāmīyyeh, 1970), p. 122.

reminding his soul of his allegiance to Imam Ali (a) and cursing Imam's (a) enemies and those who trampled his rights [of caliphate]. As soon as he carries out this (comprehensive) assessment, Allah (*swt*) would address him: "For the sake of your friendship with My friends and your hostility with My enemies (and the comprehensive assessment you carried out) I will not be severe on you and I will forgive you."¹

This is the best way of self-assessment!

2. What are the fruits of self-assessment?

Considering what was discussed in the previous parts, the answer to this question would be clear. But it is highly appropriate that we find out the way this issue is expressed in hadiths and traditions:

It is quoted from Imam Ali (a) that:

"Whoever takes account of his self realizes his defects and sins, so he would repent of them and would correct his faults."²

Another hadith from Imam Ali (a) is:

"Whoever takes account of his self will be happy [in the hereafter]."³

Also another hadith states:

"The fruit of self-assessment is self-purification."⁴

Some scholars of ethics say that taking account of oneself is like taking account of his partner [in business]. When one accounts for his profit and loss, if he has made a profit he gets his share from his partner and thanks him; if he has made a loss, he considers his partner responsible for the loss and makes him compensate for it.

¹ Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 89, 250.

² Tamīmī 'Amidī, *Taṣnīf Ghurar al-Ḥikam*, p. 236, hadith no. 4748.

³ Nūrī, *Mustadrak*, vol. 12, 154.

⁴ Tamīmī 'Amidī, *Taṣnīf Ghurar al-Ḥikam*, p. 236, hadith no. 4736.

The most important possession of a human being, that being his lifetime (controlled by his self), is like this. It would have the profit of good deeds or losses of sins. The term of this commerce is everyday and his partner is the commanding [lower] soul.

First, one should check his religious duties; if they have been carried out, he should thank Allah (*swt*) and urge himself to continue in the same manner. But if a religious duty is left undone, he should recompense for it; and if he has fulfilled his religious duties incompletely, he must make his self compensate them through supererogatory prayers. If he has committed a sin, he should reprimand his self and make himself repent for it; just like a merchant who takes account of his partner and he does not ignore even the tiniest amounts in the account, in order to prevent any loss; thus, one should be very careful because a human's partner in this trade is his commanding soul, which is deceitful, artful, cunning, ...!

In fact, one should judge his actions in this world like the angels judging people in the hereafter. He should even count thoughts passed by his mind, his standing and sitting, his eating and drinking, his sleeping and silence. For example, he should ask himself why he remained silent such and such a time? Why he spoke about such and such things? (One would better assess himself every day or every hour, otherwise he might catch the wrong scent). If one throws a pebble in the yard of his house for each sin he commits in his lifetime, not so long, the yard will be full of pebbles. The problem is that the human being often neglects counting his sins, while two angels who record his deeds do count all of them; and above all, Allah (*swt*) keeps account of them as we read in (58: 6):

“Allah (*swt*) has kept account of it, while they forgot it.”¹

To end this part, it would be good to mention another hadith about the way people will be assessed on the Day of Judgment in order to find the way of self-assessment in this world:

The Noble Prophet (s) stated: “No one will be allowed to take one step on the Day of Resurrection before he is asked about four matters: how he has spent his age and his youth, how he has gained his property and how he has

¹ Fayḍ Kāshānī, Mullā Muḥsin, *Maḥajjat al-Bayḍā'*, vol. 8, (Tehran: Maktabat al-Ṣadūq, 1342 A.H.S.) p. 167 (with modifications)

spent it, and also [he will be asked] about his heart in regards to us, the household of the Prophet (s): [whether he has done justice to us.]”¹

Fifth step: reproach and chastisement (MU‘ĀTABAH & MU‘ĀQABAH)

The fifth step following “self-assessment” is reproaching and chastising the self for his sins; because if one counts his deeds but does not react appropriately, the result will be negative and it will lead to undue daring and boldness of the self.

Similar to the case when one takes account of his employees, his workmen and his partners and finds inaccuracy in their accounts, reacts to them and punishes them (from light punishments like blaming to other more severe punishments); those who want to purify themselves must react to their selves in a similar way. Otherwise, accounting could give a contrary result and lead to undue daring and boldness.

The importance of the matter is to the extent that in the noble Qur’an, Allah (*swt*) swears by the self-blaming soul:

“Nay, I swear by the self-blaming soul.”² (75: 2)

We all know that self-blaming soul is one’s vigilant conscience which blames its owner when he commits wrong and that is a kind of self-punishment.

It is evident that chastising the soul for its wrongs and sins has different levels which begin with blaming and end in more severe punishments such as depriving the self from some pleasures of life for a limited period of time.

In the Qur’an, we read an interesting example of three Muslims who did not participate in the Battle of Tabūk. When the Noble Prophet (s) turned back from the battle, he ordered Muslims to break off their relationships with

¹ Şadūq, , Muhammad ibn ‘Ali, *Al-Khiṣāl*, (Qum: Jāmi‘eh-ye Mudarrisīn, 1362 A.H.S.) p. 253.

² Qur’anic exegetes believe that “Nay” in the above mentioned *ayah* is additional and it is for emphasis. Also, it is important to note that “self-blaming soul” has been interpreted differently. Some believe that it refers to infidels and sinners who blame themselves on the Day of Resurrection, while some believe that it refers to those who deserve to be blamed in this world although they themselves do not blame themselves. However, apparently the above mentioned meaning (conscience) is more precise, since Allah (*swt*) has sworn by it which shows its high importance.

them. After a while, “the earth with its expanse became narrow for them.” They repented and left each other to chastise themselves. For a while, they lived in a state of complete isolation praying for forgiveness. Finally, Allah (*swt*) accepted their repentance and sent down the following Qur’anic *ayah*:

“And to the three who were left behind. When the earth became narrow for them with [all] its expanse, and their own souls weighed heavy on them, and they knew that there was no refuge from Allah (*swt*) except in Him, then He turned clemently toward them so that they might be penitent. Indeed Allah (*swt*) is the All-clement, the All-merciful.” (9: 118)

The sentence: “their own souls weighed heavy on them” might imply “chastisement of the soul” for which they left each other and lived in a state of self-composed isolation. So, Allah (*swt*) accepted their repentance.

A story about “Abū Lubābah Anṣārī”, a companion of the Noble Prophet (s), has been related as the occasion of revelation of this Qur’anic *ayah*:

“[There are] others who have confessed to their sins, having mixed up righteous conduct with other that was evil. Maybe Allah (*swt*) will accept their repentance. Indeed Allah (*swt*) is All-forgiving, All-merciful.” (9: 102)

The story is that Abū Lubābah Anṣārī refused to participate in the Battle of Tabūk without a plausible excuse. After a while, he deeply regretted and went to the Noble Prophet’s (s) mosque and tied himself to a pillar, today known as “Abū Lubābah” or “Repentance” Pillar. He swore that he would not untie himself unless the Noble Prophet (s) comes and unties him i.e. Allah (*swt*) accepts his repentance. He was in this state for a while until the above mentioned Qur’anic *ayah* was sent down and declared that his repentance was accepted.

It is clear that Abū Lubābah’s act was a kind of “chastisement” and self-punishment for his wrong and it indicates that this stage of self-purification existed at the time of the Noble Prophet (s) and amongst his friends.

Also the sentence of “having mixed up righteous conduct with other that was evil” might imply the same concept.

Also the matter of chastisement has been mentioned in Islamic traditions:

1. Imam Ali (a) describes the attributes of the pious in *Nahj al-Balāghah* and says:

“If his self refuses to perform a duty which it does not like, he would not grant its request towards what it likes.”¹

It means that he chastises his self with depriving it of what it likes such as sleeping, food, etc. so that it would be punished and would not disobey him again.

2. In another hadith in *Ghurur al-Hikam* we read:

“Whenever your self becomes unyielding to you (and disobeys the order of God), you must become unyielding to it (and ignore its requests) to make it surrender to you!”²

3. Also it is quoted from Imam Ali (a):

“Whoever reproaches his self, has rectified it and whoever approves his self has killed himself.”³

4. Somewhere else, he (a) stated:

“The cure for the(refractory) self is ignoring its requests and withholding pleasures from it.”⁴

There are a lot of examples of companions of the Noble Prophet (s), great scholars and devout believers who would chastise themselves when they committed a sin and they would do something to avoid committing sins again. For example, it is narrated that a companion of the Noble Prophet (s) called Tha‘labah, who was among the Anṣār (Assisters), had bond of brotherhood with one of the Muhājirīn (Emigrants) called Sa‘īd ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. Once Sa‘īd, along with the Noble Prophet (s), participated in a battle while Tha‘labah stayed in Medina. Tha‘labah promised Sa‘īd that he would take care of his family, therefore he would bring water and firewood for them and would try to solve their problems.

¹ Raḍī, Sharif, comp. *Nahj al-Balāghah*, sermon no. 193.

² Tamīmī ‘Amīdī, *Taṣnīf Ghurur al-Hikam*, p. 239, Hadith no. 4820.

³ *Ibid.*, Hadith no. 4834.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 235, hadith no. 4718.

One day, when Sa'īd's wife was talking with Tha'labah, standing behind a curtain, for a moment Sa'īd felt lust for her and drew back the curtain. When he saw Sa'īd's pretty wife, he tried to hold her close. Sa'īd's wife cried: "What are you doing Tha'labah? Is it fair that you have bad intentions about your faithful brother's wife while he is fighting for the sake of Allah (swt)?"

Her words deeply moved him. As if he had awakened from a deep sleep, he gave a cry and left the house. He went out of the town and began to cry and say: "O' my God! You are known as forgiving and I am known as sinful!"

In this way, he made his self suffer from privation and hardship as the chastisement for its sin. Then, he went to the Noble Prophet (s) and offered his repentance. After that, the following Qur'anic *ayah* was sent down about him declaring that his repentance was accepted:

"And those who, when they commit an indecent act or wrong themselves, remember Allah (swt) and plead [Allah's] forgiveness for their sins and who forgives sins except Allah (swt)? And who do not persist in what they have committed while they know."
(3: 135)¹

2. It is said that whenever the great Shī'a scholar and jurist, Āyatullah Burūjirdī (May God bless him), got angry and unintendedly talked roughly with his students, notwithstanding he was like a father scolding his sons, he immediately would regret his act and try to win over them by apologizing and he would take a vow to fast the next day; and in this way he would chastise himself for this little wrong.

3. A great scholar of ethics quoted from a religious speaker on the pulpit that: "I always express greeting to Imam Hussein (a) before my speech and I always hear his response. If I once do not hear the response, I would not make my speech! This spiritual blessing was granted to me after an interesting happening. One day, I entered an important session and saw that a famous speaker was giving a speech from the pulpit. I thought to myself that I would make a rousing speech to defeat him after he finished his speech! [But then I thought to myself and found my mistake and] because I had this evil thought, I [punished myself and] decided not to preach for

¹ This story has been narrated in detail in different books such as *Khazānat al-Jawābir*, 32. Also Fakhr Rāzī has written its summary in his commentary (*Tafsīr Kabīr*, Fakhr Rāzī, vol. 9, 9)

forty days. When I did so (chastise myself for a bad thought) I was bestowed with this blessing and afterwards I hear Imam's (a) response to my greeting."¹

In brief, vigilance and after that self-assessment would be effective only when they are followed by "chastisement" and appropriate punishments of the commanding soul for vain desires and ambitions; otherwise their effect would be little.

We do not want to justify acts of ascetics and some perverted Sufis or stories like those written by Ghazālī in *Iḥyā' al-'Ulūm*. We do not approve that one is allowed to hurt himself or give himself foolish punishments to make amends for his sins. By "chastisement" we mean deprivations like those mentioned above, such as fasting, depriving the self of what it desires, depriving the self of some pleasures of life, and so on.

It is quoted from Narāqī in his *Mi'rāj al-Sa'ādah*:

"If one commits wrong, he should punish himself, for example, he should undertake to perform a difficult act of worship or donate what he loves; or if one eats unlawful food or the food he is in doubt to be *ḥalal*, he should starve himself; if he backbites a Muslim, he should praise him [in public] instead or resign himself to be quiet for a while or say prayers to Allah; if he considers a poor person as unworthy and insults him, he should give him a large amount of money; and for other sins he should try to make amends for them."²

¹ Another example is the famous story of Ali ibn Yaqtīn and Ibrāhīm Jamāl.

² Narāqī, Mullā Aḥmad, *Mi'rāj al-Sa'ādah*, new edition, 703 (with little modifications).

