

Practical Steps towards Moral Purification. Part III: Intention and Purity of Intention¹

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Many scholars of ethics have begun their ethical discussions with “intention” and “purity of intention”. They have considered them as two distinctive concepts. However, when discussing them, a clear distinction has not been drawn between them and thus matters related to purity of intention have mentioned under the title of intention, therefore making it difficult to distinguish between these two concepts.

Therefore, in order to make a distinction between these two concepts, it could be said that “intention” is the complete resolve and strong determination to perform an action, whether it is performed for the sake of God or due to personal motivations.

It is evident that an action will only bear fruits when one performs it with great resolve. Studying, trading, farming, producing, conducting social and political activities and indeed every positive action in general, only bear fruits when they are not started with doubt and uncertainty. This is only possible if one works out a plan at the earliest opportunity, understands thoroughly its benefits, results, conditions and possible obstacles and then performs the action with strong determination, taking steady steps toward the goal.

Accordingly, for moral refinement and the spiritual journey, determination is needed. Weak-willed people rarely achieve their goals. As soon as they encounter a small obstacle, they lose their courage and momentum. As a matter of fact, weak determination weakens the powers of the one who possesses it, whereas strong determination

¹ Makarem Shirazi, Nāṣir et al., *Ethics in the Qur'an*, vol. 1: “Essential issues in Ethics” (excerpt from) ch. 12, (Qom: Imam ‘Ali (a) ibn Abi Talib Publication, 2008)

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mobilises all the powers and abilities of those who possesses it and motivates them towards achieving their goals.

This concept has been mentioned in the Noble Qur'an using the word "‘*azm*" ["will"] and great prophets (s) have been called "*Ulul ‘Azim*", because of their strong determination.³ God addressed the Prophet (s),

“And once you are resolved, put your trust in Allah.”
(3: 159)

Elsewhere, regarding the prophet Adam (a), God says,

“Certainly We had enjoined Adam earlier; but he forgot and We did not find any resolution in him.”
(20: 115)

This concept has also been mentioned in Islamic traditions. For example, there is a prayer for the month of Rajab, quoted from Imam Kāzīm (a), which says,

“I do know that the best provision for a traveller toward You is a strong will by which one could choose You; and my heart is praying to You with a strong will.”⁴

It is also quoted from Imam Ṣādiq (a),

“Allah’s (swt) help for [His] servants is to the extent of their intentions, whoever has a true intention will get complete help from God and whoever has a defective intention, Allah’s (swt) help for him will be less.”⁵

Elsewhere, Imam Sādiq (a) said,

³ [Meaning “most resolute”] “*Azm*” originally means ‘to cut something’ and therefore, since making an irreversible decision is similar to cutting something away, it has been called “‘*Azm*”.

⁴ Sayyid ibn Tawus, *Iqbal al-A‘mal*, (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, 1390 A.H.) 678 (Supplication for the month of Rajab)

⁵ Majlisi, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, (Beirut: Mu‘assasah al-Wafa‘, 1403 A.H.) vol. 67, 211, hadith no. 34

“If the intention is firm, the body will not be weak (to do challenging and difficult jobs to achieve goals on the way to reach the desired).”⁶

The above-mentioned hadith indicates how strong determination increases the power of the body and provides a person with strength and motivation.

Another meaning of “intention” refers to the different motivations possible for performing an identical action. For example, the intention of one person who fights in a jihad might be to collect the spoils of war or to demonstrate their superiority; whereas, on the other hand, another person’s intention might be to defend the truth and fight against oppression and mischief. In both cases, the action appears identical; i.e., participating in a war and fighting the enemies, but the two motivations mentioned above are very different from one another. For this reason, it is recommended that one clarifies and purifies one’s intention before taking any action.

Accordingly, travellers on the path towards God should take care regarding their intentions and be aware whether their goal is to purify themselves, obtain moral regeneration and achieve closeness to God, or on the contrary is obtaining miraculous powers and transcending ordinary human behaviour so that they could prove their superiority over others.

When it is analyzed in depth, the famous hadith stating, “actions are proved by intentions”, indicates the same concept. It is quoted from the Noble Prophet (s),

“The value of actions depends on the intentions and people benefit from their actions according to the quality of their intentions. Thus, those who travel for the sake of God and His Messenger (s), their travelling is to God and His Messenger (s), and those whose travelling is to achieve some worldly benefit or to marry a woman, their benefit will be according to the value of that for which they have travelled.”⁷

The following hadith from Imam ‘Ali (a) may also refer to this concept or to the previously mentioned concept:

⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 67, 205, hadith no. 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 67, 211. In footnotes of *Bihar al-Anwar*, it is written that all Muslim scholars are unanimous on the above-mentioned hadith and then is quoted from Bukhari in his *Sahih* in the book of al-Iman, 23.

“Allah’s blessings upon a person are as much as his intention.”⁸

According to the points discussed above, it may be concluded that to be successful in anything and attain the desired objectives (especially in important matters), firm intention and resolution and strong determination are needed; otherwise a human being’s efforts will either be fruitless or bear fewer fruits than expected.

Those who want to take steps along the path of self-purification are not excluded from this principle. They must start with strong determination and continue on their way relying on God.

Here the question arises regarding how the above-mentioned power of determination can be obtained. The answer to this question is clear: A strong will can be obtained by thinking about the intended outcome and the greatness of the goal and destination. If someone carefully analyses this, knows the goal well, and is aware of its importance, then one will make efforts with strong determination and firm resolution.

When someone understands that one’s value depends only on moral virtues and the goal of the creation of human beings is moral purification and closeness to God and knows that whenever one neglects this important goal one will begin to fail, then one’s efforts will be steadier.

In a sentence, the summary of the above is: Strong determination originates from comprehensive knowledge and being aware of the importance of the goal.

Purity

By “purity” we mean “purity of intention” meaning that one should only consider Allah’s (swt) contentment when making a decision.

There may be people who have strong determination for doing something but their goal is to obtain material benefits. However, a traveller on the path towards God is someone whose strong determination is coupled with purity of intention and originates from divine purposes.

⁸ Tamimi Amidi, *Tasnif-u Ghurar al-Hikam*, (Qom: Maktab al-‘Ilam al-Islami, c. 1366 A.H.S.) 92, hadith no. 1594.

On the one hand, in Qur'anic *ayāt* and Islamic traditions, almost nothing is considered as important as purity of intention. Purity of intention has been mentioned in many places in Qur'anic *ayāt* and in the infallible Imams' (a) speeches; and it is counted as the main factor for success in this world and the hereafter. In fact, in Islam, every act carried out without purity of intention is worthless.

On the other hand, purity of intention has been considered as among the most difficult of tasks and from Qur'anic *ayāt* and Islamic traditions we can understand that only devoted friends of God and His special servants can have absolutely pure intentions. Nevertheless, any level of purity of intention is desirable.

Firstly, it would be better to quote some *ayāt* about purity of intention that have special characteristics.

In many Qur'anic *ayāt* we read about “men of pure faith” or “purified people” who have been much admired and are described using various meaningful words. For example:

1. “Yet they were not commanded except to worship Allah, dedicating their faith to Him as men of pure faith, and to maintain the prayer and pay the *zakāt*. That is the upright religion.” (98: 5)

All divine commands originate from the One and the Pure for a particular reason.

Firstly, it is because religion is a comprehensive concept and involves all beliefs and deeds, both inside and outside a person. Secondly, it is because the pronoun “they” in the above mentioned *ayah* refers to the followers of all divine religions. Thirdly, it is because in this *ayah* dedicating pure faith to God, maintaining prayer and paying zakat are the only divine commands given by God to all of them.

2. Elsewhere, God addresses all Muslims saying,
“So supplicate Allah, putting exclusive faith in Him, though the faithless should be averse.” (40: 14)
3. In another place, God addresses the Noble Prophet (s), ordering him (s),
“Say, ‘Indeed I have been commanded to worship Allah (swt) with exclusive faith in Him.’” (39: 11)

From the above mentioned *ayāt* and many others it can be concluded that purity is the basis of religion, its strong foundation and firm pillar. Furthermore, there are more important expressions about the purified ones.⁹

- In *ayāt* 15: 39-40, we read that when Satan was expelled from God's presence, out of stubbornness he told God:

“... and I will surely pervert them all | except Your exclusive (purified) servants among them.”

These *ayāt* indicate that purified servants are so steadfast that even the alluring and obstinate Satan has given up all hope of misguiding them.

- In *ayāt* 37: 39, 40, the purified servants of God (swt) are given the promise of a huge reward about which no one is aware except God:

“and you will be requited only for what you used to do - [all] except Allah's exclusive servants”

- In *ayāt* 127 and 128 of the same *surah*, the status of purified servants is considered so high that they are exempted from being judged in the divine court (and they go directly to the Heaven!)

- According to *ayāt* 159 and 160 of the same *surah*, descriptions given by purified servants could be applied to God, which indicates depth of their knowledge.

“Clear is Allah of whatever they allege [about Him] - [all] except Allah's exclusive servants.”

- In *ayah* 12: 24, when God talks about His support for Prophet Joseph (a) against the almost irresistible temptations of Potiphar's wife, He (swt) states,

“So it was, that We might turn away from him all evil and indecency. He was indeed one of Our dedicated servants.”

There are various ideas about the difference between “men of pure faith” and “purified servants”, however, the best idea might be the one

⁹ The difference between “purified people” and “men of pure faith” will be discussed in another section.

we are going to discuss. According to this idea, “men of pure faith” are those who try to purify themselves from polytheism, non- divine objectives and vices. They continue on their way as far as they can. However, “purified servants” are those whose final impurities are removed by divine providence, so they are purified from any kind of impurities by the grace of God.

In fact, there are two kinds of impurity inside the human being:

The first kind is that which a human being would recognize and remove. If someone makes an attempt to remove this kind of impurity, they will be able to purify their intentions, beliefs and actions.

However, there is another kind of impurity which cannot be recognized by a human being, and even if they do recognize it, they will not be able to remove it. Regarding this there is a famous saying from the Noble Prophet (s) which says,

“Believing in other than God (and its influence on actions) is more hidden than the movement of a black ant on a black stone on a dark night.”¹⁰

In such cases, if the grace of God is not bestowed upon wayfarers upon the path towards God, they will not be able to traverse this arduous road and they will remain with impurities. However, it seems that God has decided to reward those who try to purify themselves to whatever extent they can manage to do so, by helping them to travel the rest of the way and to purify them completely solely by means of His grace.

If someone reaches such a stage, they will be protected from the temptations of devils and carnal desires. Then Satan will give up on that person and admit his inability to lead them astray.

This is when they will enjoy the bounties of the divine spiritual banquet without any limits and their descriptions of the affirmative and negative attributes of God will become true upon finding the Pure Unity. So, naturally they will enter Heaven without being judged on Judgment Day, because they have already settled their accounts in this world.

This concept has been mentioned by Imam ‘Ali (a) in some of his sermons. For example, once Imam (a) said,

¹⁰ Majlisi, *ibid.*, vol. 69, 93, hadith no. 2

“They purified themselves for the sake of God, so God has purified them”¹¹ and perfected them.

Based on the same reasoning, there is a hadith from the Noble Prophet (s) which says,

“Then, Allah (swt), the Almighty purified and selected Muhammad (s) from a pure and noble [family] tree for His prophetic mission ...”¹²

In addition, there is another hadith quoted from some infallible Imams (a),

“I found the children of Adam between Allah (swt) and Satan. If Allah (swt) likes them [because of their attempts at self-purification], He (swt) will purify them; otherwise, He (swt) will leave them alone with their enemy.”¹³

In brief, purity of intention, beliefs and conduct is among the most important steps and basic pillars of self-purification and the spiritual journey towards Allah (swt).

Purity in Islamic Traditions

There are many Islamic traditions in this regard. Some of them are as follows:

1. It is quoted from the Noble Prophet (s) that, “The heart of a Muslim shall never harbour untruthful feelings about three issues (which every Muslim must observe): purifying their actions for God, striving for the well-being of Muslims and compliance with the community of Muslims and being careful not to part from them.”¹⁴
2. In another hadith the Noble Prophet (s) quoted from God, saying, “Purity is among My secrets; I deposit it in the hearts of My servants whom I like.”¹⁵

¹¹ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon no. 87.

¹² Majlisi, *ibid.*, vol. 14, 520. hadith no. 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 55, hadith no. 96

¹⁴ Fayz Kashani, *Mahajjah al-Baydā'*, (Tehran: Maktabat al-Saduq, 1342 A.H.S.) vol. 8, 125. This hadith also has been mentioned in *Khisāl*, Shaykh Saduq, part 3, 167.

¹⁵ Fayz Kashani, *ibid.*, vol. 8, 125.

3. Once Imam ‘Ali (a) said, “Purity is the greatest station to which a human being might reach.”¹⁶
4. Elsewhere, he (a) said, “Purity is the highest level of faith.”¹⁷
5. In another very insightful saying from him (a) we read, “Competition of the wise and intellectual is for purity of deeds.”¹⁸
6. This issue is important to such an extent that the Noble Prophet (s) said, “The different levels of the believers are due to their different levels of purity.”¹⁹
7. Furthermore, Imam ‘Ali (a) considers purity as the highest level of certainty (yaqīn) and therefore says, “Purity is the highest level of certainty.”²⁰
8. Purity is so important that if it accompanies the practice of only a few good deeds, it might save the one who has it and thus the Noble Prophet (s) said, “Purify your heart, so that your few deeds would suffice.”²¹
9. Purity is so important that Imam ‘Ali (a) said, “Purity is the worship of those whom God has brought close to Himself.”²²
10. To conclude this eternal discussion, we mention another interesting hadith from Imam ‘Ali (a), “Blessed be the one who purifies their worship and prayer for the sake of God, does not occupy their heart with what their eyes see, does not forget remembrance of God because of what their ears hear and whose heart does not become sad because of blessings bestowed upon others.”²³

Essence of Purity

¹⁶ Tamimi, *ibid.*, 197, no. 3894.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 83, n. 1341

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 155, n. 2905

¹⁹ *Muhammadi* Rayshahri, *Mizān al-Hikmah*, (Qom: Maktab al-‘Ilam al-Islami, 1403 A.H.) vol. 3, 57, no.4745

²⁰ Tamimi, *ibid.*, 198, no. 3907

²¹ Majlisi, *ibid.*, vol. 70, 175, under hadith no. 15.

²² Tamimi, *ibid.*, 197, no. 3893.

²³ Majlisi, *ibid.*, vol. 81, 261, no. 59

Fayḍ Kāshānī in his *Mahajjat al-Bayḍā'* wrote,

“The essence of purity is being free from any kind of subtle or obvious forms of associating others with Allah (*swt*). We read in the Noble Qur’an, “There is indeed a moral for you in the cattle: We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies from between [intestinal] waste and blood, as pure milk, pleasant to those who drink.” (16: 66) Milk is pure when within it there is no blood, no excretion and no other impurities; pure and all clean. Pure intentions and deeds are similar to this. There should be no other motives other than divine motives for them.”²⁴

In Islamic traditions, there are subtle statements on the essence of purity and the signs of sincere people, some of which are as follows:

1. Once the Noble Prophet (s) said, “Any truth has an essence; no servant of God achieves the essence of purity unless they do not like to be praised for their divine deeds.”²⁵
2. In another hadith from the Noble Prophet (s) we read, “The signs of the sincere are four: their hearts are sound, their limbs are under their control, they offer limitless goodness and everyone is safe from their evil.”²⁶
3. Once Imam Bāqir (a) said, “No worshipper of Allah (*swt*) worships Him as He (*swt*) deserves unless they give up hope in all people and turn to Him. That is when God says, ‘They are purified for Me!’ So, He (*swt*) accepts them due to His grace.”²⁷
4. And finally, Imam Sādiq (a) described the essence of purity in one brief sentence, “Allah (*swt*) has bestowed no blessing upon a servant greater than the blessing of having no one with Allah (*swt*) in their heart.”²⁸

²⁴ Fayz Kashani, *ibid.*, vol. 8, 128 (with modifications).

²⁵ Majlisi, *ibid.*, vol. 69, 304, no. 51.

²⁶ Sho’be Harrani, *Tuhaf al-Uqul*, (Qom: Mu’assasah al-Nashr al-Islami, 1404 A.H.) 21.

²⁷ Majlisi, *ibid.*, vol. 67, 111, hadith no. 12

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 249, hadith no. 23

It has been explained that purity is of great importance and has a substantial role in one's spiritual journey and in attaining high levels of closeness to God. However, a question may arise regarding how purity can be obtained.

Undoubtedly, purity of intention originates from faith, certainty and deep knowledge of God. Someone's deeds are pure if they believe from their heart in the unity of divine acts, do not consider anyone except Him (swt) as effective throughout the universe, believe that everything belongs to Him and that they are at His command and know that if there are effective agents other than Him (swt) then they are also at His command. The deeds of such a person are pure because they do not know of any effective agent to work for other than God.

In Islamic traditions, this truth has been mentioned in brief and succinct statements. Imam 'Ali (a) is quoted as saying, "Purity is the fruit of certainty."²⁹

According to *ayah* 15: 99³⁰, worship is required for certainty.

In another hadith from Imam 'Ali (a) we read, "Purity is the fruit of worship."³¹

Furthermore, since certainty originates from knowledge and, as mentioned previously, purity originates from certainty, in another hadith from Imam 'Ali (a) we read, "The fruit of knowledge is purity of action."³²

In *Nahj al-Balāghah* the sources of purity are counted as:

"The foremost issue in religion is the acknowledgment of Him (*swt*), the perfection of acknowledging Him (*swt*) is to testify to Him (*swt*), the perfection of testifying to Him (*swt*) is to believe in His Oneness, the perfection of believing in His Oneness is to regard Him (*swt*) as Pure."³³

Obstacles to Purity

²⁹ Tamimi, *ibid.*, 197, no. 3897

³⁰ "and worship your Lord until certainty comes to you."

³¹ *Ibid.*, 197, no. 3895

³² *Ibid.*, 64, no. 799

³³ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon no. 1.

Fortunately, great scholars of ethics have clarified this issue. Some of them believe that there are both obvious and hidden obstacles to purity, some of which are very great and dangerous and some of which are smaller. Satan and carnal desires make attempts to poison a person's mind, remove their purity and sincerity and make their deeds impure due to hypocrisy.

Some stages of hypocrisy and impurity of intention are so evident that everyone could recognize them. For example, while a person is praying Satan tells them to recite your prayer slowly, at length and with humility so that people think that they are pious and never backbite them. This is an outright deceit of Satan!

Sometimes evil temptations are somewhat hidden and appear under the guise of obedience. For example, something is suggested to a person in the following way: "You are a prominent man and people look at you; if you enhance your prayer and deeds, they would follow you and you would take a share of their rewards." Sometimes an unaware person would succumb to such temptations and would fall into the vale of hypocrisy.

Sometimes Satan's temptations are even more complicated and underhand. For example, he tells a praying person that a sincere person is someone who does not worship God differently whether in public or in private and so someone whose worship in private is less than their worship in public is a hypocrite. In this way, he makes that person improve their praying in private so that they could do the same in public and reach their goals. This is a kind of hidden hypocrisy which might be ignored by many people and maybe even not understand by them. There are also further hidden stages.³⁴

Obstacles to purity are so numerous, varied and hidden that no one could remove them without the help of God. In Islamic traditions there are important warnings about obstacles to purity including the following.

Imam 'Ali (a) is quoted as saying, "How could someone purify themselves while their carnal desires rule over them?"³⁵

³⁴ Fayz Kashani, *ibid.*, vol. 8, 133.

³⁵ Tamimi, *ibid.*, 65, no. 832

In fact the most important obstacle to purity has been mentioned in the above hadith. It is carnal desires that pollute the fountainhead of purity.

In another hadith from Imam ‘Ali (a) we read, “Reduce your wishes so that your deeds become pure.”³⁶

It is worth noting that, with regards to this matter, sometimes a human being falls into doubts which are a deceit of Satan. Satan might tell them not to attend congregational prayers because their intention might become impure and therefore they should only say their prayers at home. Or he may tell them that when they say their prayers in the congregation, they should not carry out recommended religious actions and say their prayers very quickly in case they act hypocritically. There are so many people who have deprived themselves of many recommended actions due to such types of doubts.

Perhaps because of this reason, the Noble Qur’an invites people to both secret and open donation of charity and says,

“Those who give their wealth by night and day, secretly and openly, shall have their reward near their Lord, and they will have no fear, nor will they grieve.” (2: 274)

We bring this issue to a close by mentioning another point which is that preserving purity in private should not be a very great source of pride but if one can carry out pure actions in public, in front of people, it would indeed be honorable.

The Fruits of Purity

Since purity is the most precious gem to be found in the treasury of one’s heart and soul, it has very important fruits which have been mentioned in Islamic traditions by means of short and significant statements.

Thus we read in a famous hadith from the Prophet (s), “No servant of God would achieve purity without the springs of wisdom and knowledge then flowing from his heart and tongue.”³⁷

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 155, hadith no. 2906.

³⁷ Saduq, *‘Uyun Akhbār ar-Ridā*, (Tehran: Jahan, c.1390 A.H.)vol. 2, 69; Majlisi, *ibid.*, vol. 67, 242.

In another hadith from Imam ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib (a) we read, “When one’s purity is actualized, his eye of insight becomes luminous.”³⁸

In another hadith from him (a) we read, “The success of actions lies in purity of intentions.”³⁹

It is obvious that the purer someone’s intention, the more focus they have on the heart of their actions rather than on the appearance of them. In other words, perfection of the actions would be at a maximum level and in this way their success will be guaranteed.

However, on the contrary, if someone’s intention is not pure, they will care about the appearance of their action more than its heart and so their actions will be vain and fruitless and this would cause their failure.

In another hadith of Imam ‘Ali (a) we read that for the same reason mentioned above: “ Deeds become pure if the intentions become so.”⁴⁰

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³⁸ Tamimi, *ibid.*, 198, no. 3914

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 93, no. 1620

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