

# Happiness and Closeness to God - Part I: Meaning and Description

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## Abstract

Defining the term happiness, the author seeks to clarify its nature by reviewing the positions adopted by a number of scholars. Subsequently, he draws on some Qur'anic verses to show that, from the Islamic viewpoint, happiness substantively consists in nearness to God. Nearness to God comes in different degrees and gradations. The station of nearness to God can be achieved by good acts and intentions. God pays attention to His creatures in two ways, according to which there are two sorts of nearness to God: general and special. The former is given to everything, and the latter is given to human beings only if they obey God in pursuing good.

**Keywords:** *happiness, final goal, general nearness, special nearness, desirability of nearness to God.*

## Introduction

Will is inseparable from human nature. Human beings inevitably have free will, and have to exert their will in certain cases. Does this amount of volition mean that any action done by anyone is appropriate? The answer to this question lies in the goal a person pursues in his voluntary actions. Cutting an innocent person's vein to murder him and rob his property is an evil act, while doing similar cutting in order to perform surgery and to rescue him from a disease is a humane, praiseworthy act. Thus, the intentions behind voluntary actions are the key to their evaluation.

But, are all of our intentions of one type? Do they have the same importance? Are they equally necessary? Obviously not! Consider this example: one draws a miniature on the wall and then he is asked why he has done that. He replies, "I do this following my father's advice. Moreover, I earn money by selling them." This answer indicates two reasons for his artistic work: his father's advice and earning money. It can be understood from his answer that either of these reasons has been a sufficient cause for his action. Such causes are called "interchangeable causes." Now, if we go to the same person and ask him, "Why do you follow your father's advice?" He would possibly say, "Because I love him," or "Because God has asked us to." We can further ask such questions until we reach the final cause. In fact, we do all our actions to reach certain objectives, which often prepare the ground for other objectives. The first and nearest cause is called *qarib* (meaning "proximate"), middle causes are called *mutawassit* (meaning "intermediate"), and the final cause is called *ba'id* (meaning "remote").

People call the furthest and most important causes of their actions *sa'ada* (happiness), *rastgari* (salvation), *kamal* (perfection), and so forth.

### The Word “SA’ADA”

It is said that, the word “*sa’ada*” signifies one’s absolute happiness and perfection, inherent in the nature of a person or a result of his good actions. Sa’ada is the opposite of *shaqawa*, which indicates a state of pain, misery, and despair over being deprived of happiness and perfection (Mustafavi 1368 Sh, 5:128).

According to *Qamus al-Qur’an*, “*Sa’d* and sa’ada mean happiness while *shaqawa* means misery. Raghīb says, “*Sa’d* and sa’ada refer to the godly acts which help the human being achieve the good. Its opposite is *shaqawa*” (Qurayshi Bana’i 1412 AH, 2:267). A similar meaning has been accepted by other lexicologists as well, and there is not so much disagreement on this.<sup>3</sup>

### Nature of Sa’ada

Regarding the question of what sa’ada is, different explanations have been given. Most philosophers of the past, such as Farabi and Averroes, considered sa’ada to be the connection of human soul to the Active Intellect. Another group of philosophers, including Avicenna, emphasize more the epistemological aspect of sa’ada. According to these philosophers, sa’ada is understanding intellectual realities. Some other scholars regard sa’ada having different levels, and some others define it as the union with divine beings or with high levels of being.<sup>4</sup> However, Imam Khomeini considers sa’ada and *shaqawa* as two existentially opposite states—that is, misery is not merely lack of

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see Fayyumi (1404 AH, 2:277).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Husayni (1389 Sh, 63).

happiness; rather, it is a state of existential suffering and pain,<sup>5</sup> the origin of which is lack of perfection (Khomeini 1385 Sh, 3:449).

### **Happiness in Islam**

According to what was mentioned above, it can clearly be understood that happiness is in fact the ultimate end of an ethical school. It is such an important end that all one's resources deserve to be dedicated to it.

A point to mention here is that every school of ethics is based on a worldview, and it is our worldview that determines the extension of happiness. For instance, a materialist hedonist may contend that happiness is nothing other than the pleasures of this world and that one can endure tremendous pain only for a natural greater pleasure. A conventionalist may maintain that happiness is to depart from the natural state for a maximum mutual understanding among allied members of a society without regard for future generations, the other world, other people, the environment, and so forth. But Muslims believe in existence of God, the systematic connection between the different parts of the world, the prophets and messengers, and the afterlife. In the Islamic system of ethics, a human being has a body and a soul, and his unquenchable desire for power, beauty, knowledge, love, wealth, popularity, security, authority, welfare, pleasure, and so forth demonstrates the fact that this world, with all its limitations, cannot be human beings' final destination and their happiness would not be reached in this world.

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<sup>5</sup> Avicenna is among those philosophers who considers pleasure and pain as existential issues; cf. Soleymani (1389 Sh, 20).

Therefore, Islam introduces a kind of happiness which is not limited to this world and extends to the next world. Let us now review some verses of the Qur'an which have addressed the issue of happiness:

### **Some Verses of the Qur'an on the Theme of Happiness**

Indeed I have rewarded them today for their patience. They are indeed the triumphant. (23:111)

In this verse, happiness (indicated by the word “triumphant”) is regarded as the result of human voluntary behavior and also a divine reward for the patient people.

Whoever obeys Allah and His Apostle, and fears Allah and is wary of Him—it is they who will be the triumphant. (24:52)

In this verse, happiness (referred to by the word “triumphant”) is tied with following the instructions and commandments of God and His Messenger (s).<sup>6</sup>

Allah will say, ‘This day truthfulness shall benefit the truthful. For them there will be gardens with streams running in them, to remain in them forever. Allah is

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<sup>6</sup> The following verses also indicate the same idea: “These are Allah’s bounds, and whoever obeys Allah and His Apostle, He shall admit him to gardens with streams running in them, to remain in them [forever]. That is the great success.” (4:13); “As for those who have faith and do righteous deeds, their Lord will admit them into His mercy. That is the manifest success!” (45:30); “The day when He will gather you for the Day of Gathering, that will be a day of dispossession. And whoever has faith in Allah and acts righteously, He shall absolve him of his misdeeds and admit him into gardens with streams running in them, to remain in them forever. That is the great success.” (64:9); “Indeed those who have faith and do righteous deeds, —for them will be gardens with streams running in them. That is the supreme success” (85:11).

pleased with them and they are pleased with Him. That is the great success.’ (5:119)

In the above verse, happy people are described as those who are content with God and with whom God is content.

And what will show you what is Illiyun? It is a written record, witnessed by those brought near [to Allah]. Indeed the pious shall be amid bliss, observing, [as they recline] on couches. You will perceive in their faces the freshness of bliss as they are served with a sealed wine, whose seal is musk—for such let the viers vie—and whose seasoning is from Tasnim, a spring where those brought near [to Allah] drink. (83:19-28)

This verse reveals that some dwellers of Paradise receive special drinks and blessings and they are called *muqarrabun* (those who are brought near to Allah). In other verses, God mentions their superiority in a more explicit way. For example, we read in the surah al-Waqi’ah:

Then, if he be of those brought near, then ease, abundance, and a garden of bliss. And if he be of the People of the Right Hand, then ‘Peace be on you,’ [a greeting] from the People of the Right Hand! But if he be of the impugners, the astray ones, then a treat of boiling water. (56:88-93)

God mentions that people on the Day of Judgment will be in two groups: happy and wretched (Qur’an 11:105), and also says that happy people are in two groups: *muqarrabun* (those brought near to God) and *ashab al-yamin* (the people of the right hand) (Qur’an 56:88-93). The

*muqarrabun* are at the highest position of perfection and happiness.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the highest level of happiness belongs to those who are nearest to God. But, what does being near to God mean?

### Getting Near to God

Being near God is neither just an abstract concept, nor some physical proximity; rather, it is a immaterial and spiritual reality. Studying the following examples can help one better understand this issue:

Imagine a movie director who loves the acting of an actor and always gives him the first role in his movies. Here, we say that this actor is very close to the director, even though this kind of closeness is never physical. There may even be times when the director is in a place very far from the actor, but he still remains close to the director, because of the special place he has in the director's heart and mind.

Suppose, as another example, that a popular scholar has returned from a long journey, so his students rush to his house to visit him. He greatly respects and loves a special student, and he has brought him souvenirs, but he cannot find him among his visitors. Suddenly his student comes and rushes to come close to his teacher, but it is not morally right to push people aside to reach the teacher. So the student sits far from his teacher. Now, although the student has sit far from the teacher, we can still say that he is the closest person in the room to the teacher.

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<sup>7</sup> Referring to verses of the glorious Qur'an, Ayatollah Javadi Amuli mentions different levels for the *muqarrabun*, the highest of whom are the *sabiqun* [the foremost ones] (Javadi Amuli 1362 Sh, 15).

## **Nearness to God as a Matter of Degree**

Spiritual nearness is not a mathematic concept so that everyone would be near to or far from a person in the same way. For instance, in the above-mentioned example, although the scholar is very fond of his special student, he is not indifferent towards his other students. Although the special student is close to the teacher, the other students are also close to him to some degree.

Nearness to God comes in different degrees and gradations (Alikhani 1389 Sh, 109), such as a spectrum of the color blue, which is called blue ranging from the very light shade of blue to the darkest one.

Therefore, people can be near to God or to each other, while they are not at the same level. This concept is referred to as the gradational feature of nearness to God.

## **Reciprocal Nature of Nearness**

Closeness is a reciprocal reality, so God is also close to us. However, since this closeness is neither physical nor material, the same distance would not exist between God and a person. If object A is thirty cm away from object B, then object B is of course 30 cm away from object A. However, in the distance between God and us, which is not a physical distance, we may be very far from God, but God is always very close to us—closer to us than our “jugular vein” (Qur’an 50:16). To illustrate this, consider the example of a father who loves his child so much and always cares for him; he becomes happy with his child’s happiness and sad when he sees his child’s sadness. However, the son does not like his father and does not care for him. Here, we can say that the father is close to the son, whereas the son is far from his father. The same is true

about God and human beings. God loves human beings, but so many people are ignorant about God and have completely forgotten Him.

### **Types of God's Nearness to Us**

According to the previous discussions, closeness has different types, including the closeness of God to human beings and the closeness of human beings to God. But is God's closeness to all human beings the same? The answer is that God has two types of closeness to human beings: general closeness and special closeness.

God's general closeness is an all-covering care or attention, which not only includes all human beings—whether believer or disbeliever and whether good or bad—but also includes all creatures. If God turns away His attention from any being for one moment, it will be non-existent. To understand this better, let us imagine a family of four members including a father, a mother, a daughter, and a son, living in a big house near a river. Next, let us imagine a book we have read recently and the things we have learned from it. Now, you see that the minute you turned away your attention from the imagination of that family and thought of the book, they became non-existent. Your attention to your imaginations was necessary for their existence. In other words, your closeness to them was necessary so that they continue their existence. God's general closeness to all beings is somehow similar to your connection with your imaginations.

Thus, God's closeness and attention to creatures is the secret of their existence. This is called the general closeness, which is an existential closeness (Mesbah Yazdi 1391 Sh, 11). But, does not God have special love for some of His creatures? Are they all close to God in the same way? The answer is that it depends on human beings' closeness to God. It was previously mentioned that humans can also become close to

God. This closeness can be actualized through the kind of actions a person does. It is one's thoughts, interests, and deeds which draw him close to or away from God. The more one can get close to God, the more he would be blessed by God's attention and favors. This special attention is referred to as the special *qurb*.

However, it should be noted that the title of *muqarrabun* does not refer to all levels of *qurb*. This title refers to a special group of people who are at highest levels of special *qurb* (Qur'an 56:10-11). Thus, although many people try to get closer to God, only some are brought near to Him; so they are called *muqarrabun* in the Qur'anic terminology (Qur'an 56:10-11).

### **Nearness: a Valuable End Desirable to God and Human Beings**

Is it only we, who love to receive the blessings and favors of God, that seek such nearness to Him, or is such nearness favored by God Himself as well? Is He like a king, who does not enjoy associating with ordinary people but his servants always try to somehow converse with him and get close to him?

The truth is that God loves such a relation and intimacy with His servants much more than what servants would imagine. God has done everything for His servants to get close to Him. He has put His love in their hearts. He has given them the ability to understand their real happiness by their intellects. He has sent them guides who sacrificed all they had to give directions to people. It may not be very accurate, but God wants people to be close to Him more than they want to be close to Him, and He cares about their perfection and happiness more than they care themselves.

## Conclusion

Happiness is the common desire of all people and the purpose they have been created for. Human beings are equipped with all the required means and facilities to reach happiness. Their happiness is not limited to this world, but extends to the next. The necessary condition of happiness consists in closeness to God. The more one gets close to God, the higher levels of happiness he will achieve. And for one to get close to God is for one to obey Him in performing good deeds and avoiding sins and evil.

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