

Stations of the Spiritual Journey

Part I: Faith & Persistence

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Verticality of the Spiritual Journey

The spiritual journey of a servant towards his Lord is an ascending and vertical journey and not a horizontal one [like travelling on the land]. And here, “vertical” is meant as a feature of divine geometry, not natural geometry. So it means a promotion to a higher position. Therefore, certain provisions are required to help the human being in his journey to the higher position. The spiritual journey is considered as an ascending and upward journey in the Qur’an where it states:

...Allah will raise those of you who have faith and those who have been given knowledge in rank....
(58:11)

Since whoever makes the upward journey becomes rising and such a journey is referred to as “an elevation” or “an ascent” as it is mentioned in the following verse:

...To Him ascends the good word, and He elevates righteous conduct... (35:10)

It is understood from the two expressions of “elevation” and “ascent” that the spiritual journey is upward and seeks a level [as target]; not horizontal and seeking a location, because a journey towards a place, although towards a better place, is still horizontal and onward, not upward. However, God refers to the elevation of ones like Prophet Enoch (a) who have passed the mentioned journey as:

And We raised him to a station exalted. (19:57)

This is a high position, not an apparent and visible place. God the Almighty describes himself as One exalted in ranks:

Exalted is His Rank, the Lord of the Throne... (40:15)

Thus, the journey towards God means to have a journey towards high ranks where faithful people enjoy higher ranks. Consequently, “a good word” (14:24) which refers to the true knowledge and sincere belief becomes mixed with the soul of a faithful knower. The ascent of the true belief depends on the ascent of the faithful knower.

Various views on the plan of the spiritual journey

Like conventional ethics (*akhlāq*), to which there are different approaches, there are different approaches to the spiritual journey. Hadith scholars, whose knowledge of Islam is based on narrations, explain issues of morals and conduct with regard to certain interpretations of the Qur’an and hadiths of the Ahl al-Bayt (a). Theologians explain ethics and practical conduct based on the theological method. Philosophers study ethics and practical conduct based on a certain philosophical method. Mystics, who see the world as the manifestation of divine names, explain ethics and practical conduct differently. But if a philosopher wants to express mystical concepts in technical terms which are neither far from the Qur’an and hadiths nor

separated from intellectual reasons he should follow the example of Khwajah Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī. In his book, *Awṣāf al-Ashrāf*, Ṭūsī presents six chapters and six principles for each chapter to describe the stages of the spiritual journey, except for the last chapter, which is about annihilation in God, and its ranks and stages are unlimited and boundless. Below, the stages of the mystics' journey are explained in the same order as in *Awṣāf al-Ashrāf*.

Assuming any moral virtue is an internal and upward course, and similar to a physical journey [on earth], it has a route and a distance that can be measured and has different stations. Travellers of such a course have recounted their itinerary as a guide to the spiritual journey and in fact, these rituals which have originally been called *Zād al-Musāfir* [Provisions of the Traveller] are the contributions of those wayfarers who have arrived the destination, and the best souvenir that they have brought is that they have reported their experiences throughout the journey to those who want to embark on the same journey so that they know how to better prepare themselves for each station. The one who passes this way for the first time, moves ahead with no sign on the way and sees himself in different stages, so he recounts what he finds as signs and stages; therefore, the way is made easier for others to pass; e.g., a climber, who conquers a mountain peak for the first time, passes the rugged path of it and puts a sign wherever he sees a proper place for stepping, so that others could pass the way using the signs and conquer the peak.

Having had no human education, the prophets (a) and Imams (a) have been the first travellers of the spiritual journey who have passed this way with difficulty without any human teacher; and they have opened closed doors and have marked them. Mystics are indeed their disciples.

Now, we will explain the stages of the spiritual journey regarding the order mentioned in *Awṣāf al-Ashrāf* by Khwajah Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī.² We will also refer to the areas, in which we disagree with his account of the sequence of the stations.

First: Faith³

The wayfarer must be a believer in God, Resurrection, revelation and a path which he must follow in order to enter heaven. As the basic condition for making provisions, faith has stages. However, mere verbal faith, like what a person says when asleep, has no value or effect, and such a faith would not be considered as any provision. Thus, God (swt) says in the Glorious Qur'an:

The Bedouins say, "We have faith." Say, "You do not have faith yet; rather say, 'We have embraced Islam,' for faith has not yet entered into your hearts" (49:14)

So, verbal faith has no benefit and it is ineffective in morals and the spiritual journey and is out of our discussion. So, the most primary phase of faith is the imitated faith in the heart that one achieves through following particular religious nobles or others in whom he trusts and he becomes confident that the world has an origin called God, an end called the hereafter, leaders, called the divine prophets (a), and a book that is the Qur'an.

The noble Qur'an regards pure faith as the required condition for success in the spiritual journey:

Those who have faith and do not taint their faith with injustice for such there shall be safety, and they are the [rightly] guided. (6:82)

Injustice is of two kinds: one against inheritance, property or chastity and the other kind is against the beliefs which is considered by the Qur'an as "the great injustice":

“...Do not ascribe any partners to Allah; polytheism is indeed a great injustice!” (31:13)

Polytheism is that one ascribes what is exclusively God's, like perfection and beauty to anyone or anything other than God, or to ascribe what is exclusively others' rather than God, like defects and imperfections to God. For example, if someone relies on one other than God in his needs or in reaching perfections, in fact, he is a polytheist and has polluted his faith with injustice and thus he will not benefit from Allah's provided security.

However, God has mentioned levels for faith and the first condition of the health of one's faith is performing good deeds. Therefore, normally in the Qur'an good deeds are brought together with faith:

Those who have faith and do righteous deeds—happy are they and good is their [ultimate] destination. (13:29)

Higher than this is a stage where human being reaches the station prior to certitude and higher than that is where he is admitted to the station of absolute certitude and reaches witnessing, like the faith of the noble Prophet (s), his descendants (a) and their special disciples. About them, God (swt) says:

The faithful are only those whose hearts tremble [with awe] when Allah is mentioned, and when His signs are recited to them, they increase their faith, and who put their trust in their Lord. (8:2)

And such fondness occurs after that fear, and in fact, that fear prepares the grounds for this fondness. The fear in one's heart is rooted in the fact that he knows that everything relies on the Lord of the worlds, and he is not sure about his accomplishments and fears that God may inflict something upon him in this world or the hereafter or both because of the wrong he has committed. He also fears that he may suffer hellfire or become deprived of heaven if he does something wrong. One who is not sure about himself would be fearless only if he believed that there is no God in this world, or there is God but that it does not interfere in this world, or there is an origin but it does not interfere in this world's affairs directly; while, all three possibilities are false.

When the names of God are mentioned or He is remembered, a faithful person feels fear but later he sees that God helps him to move on the straight path and therefore he will be grateful to God, for he is blessed and does not go astray and because of this gratefulness, his heart becomes peaceful and calm. The Glorious Qur'an says:

Allah has sent down the best of discourses, a scripture [composed] of similar motifs, whereat quiver the skins of those who fear their Lord, then their skins and hearts soften to Allah's remembrance. (39:23)

However, these are the preliminary and intermediate levels of fear and the higher stage is when one fears to forget remembering God: "...were I able to bear Your chastisement, how could I bear separation from You?"⁴

The faithful person's tranquillity of heart and body

According to above-mentioned points, a faithful person neither has doubts in his heart nor is he suffering from physical stress and turmoil. However, he would be doubtful about the accuracy

of his deeds since he knows that the Evaluator is the All Clear-sighted. Such a person is fearful in the process of askesis (*riyādah*) while he has no doubt about the Day of Judgement and Divine justice.

A wayfarer first tries to fight against his low desires and does not commit sins. The following verse is regarding this fact: "As for those who strive in us, We shall guide them in our ways..." (29:69). The mentioned fact is called "general askesis". At a higher stage, concerning this worldly status, he would try to prevent any bad attributes from entering his heart. So he must not only avoid committing any wrong deeds but also takes on no bad attributes; and this is called "special askesis". At the higher stage, which is called "special askesis", the disciple strives not only to commit no wrong act and to take on no bad attributes but also he sees nothing but God. Thus, according to "...their hearts tremble with awe that they are going to return to their Lord." (23:60) askesis causes fear just at the beginning, but later the next state in the following verse is created: "...then their skins and hearts soften to Allah's remembrance..." (39:23) According to this verse, remembering Allah makes their hearts and bodies tranquil.

Imam Sajjād and other Imams (a) were fearful when beginning the prayer. Then they would recite special supplications and hear the unseen messages that made their hearts tranquil. So, remembering God is the cause of fear at the beginning and the cause of confidence at the end.

However, sometimes a person would pray and remember God, but his heart does not tremble. In such a case, he must not trick himself and think about himself according to the following verse: "Look! The hearts find rest in Allah's remembrance!" (13:28) and think that he is reached to final stages of remembering God! Because, this is actually ignorance, not confidence! When a

person is oblivious to the consequences of something, he would not be worried and afraid of anything, thus, his calmness is false. But, if he is mindful of God and observes his duties, although he might fear first, gradually he becomes reconciled and recognizes the mercy of Allah and that gives him a real confidence.

Faith, the Safe Fortress

If one knows that he is imperfect and needy and satisfying his needs are neither in his own competence nor in others' and if he knows that the whole universe has had an originator who knows the needs of needy ones and He can fulfill them, that person would begin the spiritual journey to take refuge in the secure house (*dār al-amn*) [of God]. All the consequences of the human being's narrow-mindedness or prejudice are either due to his lack of self-knowledge, lack of knowledge about his inability, or he knows that he is unable about many things but he thinks that others, himself or social relationships can fulfill his needs and therefore he does not take refuge in that secure house [of God].

Faith is one's going to the safe fortress. Thus, in the hadith of *Silsilah al-Dhahab*, Imam Riḍā (a) quoted from his noble fathers that they also had quoted from God's messengers: "[Confessing to] Oneness is My strong fortress, and whoever enters this fortress is secure from the divine punishment."⁵

With respect to the world of creation, all creatures are monotheist and submissive to God, but with respect to the world of legislation, some become believers and obedient and some non-believers and disobedient. In creation, no being is distracted from the straight path: "...There is no living being but He holds it by its forelock. Indeed my Lord is on a straight path." (11:56) At that time, God has the control of any living being and that is on the straight path. The system of creation goes on the straight path, but sometimes the dust of self-seeking or other-

seeking covers one's attention towards self-knowledge and that causes him to be oblivious of his needs: "Indeed man becomes rebellious [when he considers himself without need." (96:6-7) or he knows his needs but he thinks that he can fulfill them independently. Such a person would think like Korah who said: "I have indeed been given [all] this because of the knowledge that I have. (28:78)" Ideas like this are Korah-like, saying: "I have made efforts and reached this financial or scientific position." A person saying so would rely on himself instead of the secure fortress of Oneness. That is despite the fact that he could not be a support for himself because of his needs. Faith requires that one should find himself and others to be needy, and thus to take refuge in the base of power and to settle in the secure house to feel security when he would be secure from the evil within and traumatic occurrences without.

Faith mixed with polytheism

About those who do not retain absolute faith, God (swt) notifies them that their faith is mixed with polytheism: "And most of them do not believe in Allah without ascribing partners to Him." (12:106) About how most faithful people may be in fact polytheist, Imam Şādiq (a) states: "that one says: 'my problem would not be solved if it were not for a person's help!' is not compatible with having an absolute faith."⁶ Thus, if one says: "firstly, in God I trust for solving my problem and then I count on you for that!" this is a kind of polytheism, because God is the One succeeded by no second one! "He is the First and He is the Last" (57:3) and He is the Independent who is with no other independent; and whatever exists in all the worlds of possibility is a channel of His grace.

A thirsty person would be only in need of the headspring and would not be thankful of rivers and little streams; since it is the headspring which gives him the water and not the rivers. In the

same way, life is granted by God (swt) who is the origin of flow of grace. Therefore, one must not say that if it were not for such a person or such a thing, I would be destroyed; but he must say that if it were not for the grace of God, I would be destroyed. Thus, having absolute faith is the first stage. Therefore, to those who have become Muslim but have not gained an unshakable faith, God addresses them: "O' you who have faith! Have faith in Allah and His Apostle..." (4:136) which means: "You who have faith in appearance! Have faith in the heart too! And if your faith is absolute, preserve it! If your faith is weak, strengthen it!

Polytheism: the Root of all sins

The Glorious Qur'an takes polytheism as the origin of all vices and considers faith in God and pure belief in the unity of God as the origin of all virtues; i.e., the origins of those sins mentioned in the Qur'an and hadiths are pride, hypocrisy, self-conceit and arrogance...etc. which all lead one to egocentrism and this is in fact polytheism.

Imam Şādiq (a) states: "The noble Prophet (s) had a camel which could get ahead of other camels [in the race]. Once, an Arab's camel got ahead of the Prophet's camel in the race and Muslims became sad." According to this narration, the Prophet (s) stated:

My camel was fast and could get ahead of others but boasted and lost the race!⁷

There is the same rule in the universe. If any creature transgresses its limits, it will be punished. It is mentioned in some hadiths: "If a mountain does injustice toward another mountain, God will make the unjust mountain fall."⁸ This is a general rule that oppression is not stable whether among stones, plants, animals or human beings; because it is against the system of creation. What the Prophet (s) said about his

camel is a general rule; i.e. if anyone shows arrogance, he becomes debased, regardless of the fact that he will be punished anyway. If the roots of sins, i.e., pride, arrogance, hypocrisy and the like are investigated, their origin will be found in polytheism. It means that such a person would obey his own desires instead of obeying God.

In fact a sinner claims divinity because by committing sins intentionally and consciously, such a person means: "I disregard the rule while I know it is a command by God, but I prioritize my desire over God's will." The common feature of all sins is seeking lower desires:

Have you seen him who has taken his desire to be his god...? (45:23)

A sinner's god is his desires and vice versa. Such a person would not taste faith. Imam Ali (a) states:

No servant would find the truth of faith unless he stops lying and fibbing.⁹

Because, lying means that I consider my words more important than God's command while He has forbidden it. Accordingly, the root of all sins is polytheism in will.

Polytheism in morality

A syllogism is made from two verses of the Qur'an whose first premise is the verse "And most of them do not believe in Allah without ascribing partners to Him." (12:106) and its second premise is the verse "the polytheists are indeed unclean" (9:28). Some Islamic jurists deduce from this proposition the ruling that "polytheists are physically unclean"; regardless of that, the premises denote the uncleanness of polytheists' hearts. Although wrong doers among the believers are not like those

commonly called as polytheists, i.e., they do not have the same belief or state of heart and they are assumed clean physically in Islamic rulings, but they are not clean regarding morals and theology. The malignity of their hearts is the cause of their uncleanness and an unclean person would have no way to the Qur'an. That is why most of the believers are unable to gain a profound understanding of the Qur'an.

Separation of the believers from polytheism

The Qur'an regards believers' souls as pure and immaculate from any darkness. It takes faith to be a clear and living truth and faithful people as children of such a truth. It states: "The faithful are indeed brothers. Therefore make peace between your brothers..." (49:12)

This is due to the fact that faithful people are lit by one light and that is their faith, i.e., faith is like the father to faithful people as children, so faithful people are brothers to each other and equal. This fact of faith relates faithful people to each other. On the other hand, one who has the spirit of faith within himself is closely related to God.

Imam Sadiq (a) stated: "If the curtain is pulled aside from the eyes of people and their divine eyes open, they would see the connection of a faithful person with Allah and they would become humble in front of a faithful person."¹⁰

Also Imam Sadiq (a) stated: "Allah (swt) created faithful ones from His own glorious light. So, if one offends a faithful person because of being faithful, he will be dropped out of Allah's guardianship."¹¹

If the relationship of guardianship between someone and God breaks, then he will come under Satan's governance. If someone

offends a faithful person, it is as if he has offended God or has risen to war with Him.

Imam Baqir (a) states: "The noble Prophet (s) asked God during his ascension: 'How is a faithful person's status before You?' God (swt) stated: 'If someone offends a faithful person, he has raised war against Me!'"¹²

Accordingly, rising to war against God which is mentioned about usurers: "...then be informed of a war from Allah..." (2:279) is not exclusive to usury. Great sins are generally the same; so disrespecting a believer is like rising to war against God.

Imam Baqir (a) states: "The believer is not polluted by anything."¹³ Vices and darkness do not approach a believer. Someone who denies the origin or believes in different origins rather than God, Almighty, is polluted and dark, but a believer would consider no independent being with God. Thus, the Qur'an excludes believers from what it calls polytheism.

Believers: children of light and mercy

Imam Ridā (a) stated: "Believers' father is the light and their mother is the mercy."¹⁴ Light illuminates and corresponds with theoretical knowledge and reason. Mercy corresponds with practical reason because of its connection with issues such as compassion, pardon, favour and honesty. Human beings' essence is made of the two mentioned elements, i.e. theoretical and practical reasons. A believer sees through the eyes of faith, which are faultless, because theoretical reason governs and practical reason is governed. When emotions are governed by thoughts they will lot cause illusions or mistakes. Therefore, light is considered as the father and mercy as the mother of a believer.

The Glorious Qur'an states: "...and be aware of God and God teaches you..." (2:282) The Qur'an uses the concept of learning alongside being wary of God and does not separate them and this suggests the connection between the two mentioned concepts. This means that God-wary men and women would be taught by God and the mentioned verse is a preparatory statement to explain the condition and the result of such connection: "...If you are wary of Allah, He shall appoint a criterion for you..." (8:29)

The mentioned hadith from Imam Ridā (a) continues: "Be wary of the faithful person's penetrating vision (*firāsāt*), as he sees everything in the light of Allah who has created him."

The power of recognition of the truth from the false is given to faithful people who see things using it, and that it does not make a mistake. Therefore, God sees faithful people and they see God; and such people make no mistake, and we should be cautious about a faithful person's penetrating vision because they see things with the light of God and consequently they have insight to people's thoughts and hearts. They are farsighted and also sharp-sighted and therefore they cannot be deceived.

Second: Steadfastness

The second stage of spiritual journey is steadfastness (*thabāt*). Sometimes due to one's state of heart, he would feel attracted to an issue and just after a little while that attraction disappears; or an idea guides one person to God and he decides to pick the way but he does not have stability and persistence and different causes make him disappointed about his decision. Therefore, only having faith is not enough for the spiritual journey, and the traveller [of spiritual journey] must reach the stage of persistence and faith. Accordingly, God mentions steadfastness

as a key attribute of the wayfarer toward God in the Glorious Qur'an:

Allah fortifies those who have faith with an immutable word in the life of this world and in the Hereafter... (14:27)

Indeed We shall help Our apostles and those who have faith in the life of the world and on the day when the witnesses rise up (40:51)

Thus, faithful people will be unflinching in their devotion on the day people walk with unsteady steps on the bridge of *sirāt*, the day when people yield to temptations. At the time of wiping our feet during the ablution, we are recommended to say the following supplication in order to be practically trained and rise to high positions:

O Lord! Keep me firm on the Bridge (to Paradise) on the Day when the feet will slip, and help me in my efforts to do things which will please You, O' Glorious and Mighty!¹⁵

Although the above supplication in asking for persistence and resolution and avoiding slipping refers to the Day to Resurrection, the statement of supplication is unrestricted and can refer to this world, as well. Accordingly, godly men in the battlefields¹⁶ would implore God to have steady feet and they would say: "Our Lord, pour patience upon us, make our feet steady, and assist us against the faithless lot." (2:250) They would ask in this way because persistence and resolution in war is a virtue and resource for a soldier whether in "minor jihad" (militant struggle) or in "major jihad" (spiritual struggle). Of course, minor jihad does not last long and sometimes ends with a peace treaty with the enemy and fighting parties may even become friends later. The Qur'an says:

It may be that God will bring about between you and those with whom you are at enmity affection, and God is all-powerful, and God is all-forgiving, all-merciful. (60:7)

Do not be vindictive towards your enemies! Treat them justly, because later there may be a peace treaty between you, but in “major jihad”, such an assumption is impossible because Satan will never become our friend. Satan is “the manifest enemy” and continues his existence through his animosity towards human beings and does his best to misguide human beings. Satan is always at war with human beings and does not leave them whether dreaming or awake. His agents always seek the opportunity to attack him when negligent. Sometimes, one might have good dreams and finds spiritual awakening through that, but Satan tempts him and darkens his dream as well.

An unsteady person is “like someone seduced by the devils and bewildered on the earth...” (6:71) i.e., he would sometimes go toward the truth and sometimes toward the false and it is obvious that the sum of truth and falsehood is falsehood due to: “Look! [only] exclusive faith is worthy of Allah!” (39:3) One who is sometimes a wrongdoer and sometimes righteous is a wrongdoer overall; accordingly, the sum of the good and the bad is bad, also the sum of the beautiful and the ugly is ugly; because beauty rejects ugliness and truth rejects falsehood. Thus, travellers toward God must be resolute and have steady feet.

Nothing shakes us if we have steady feet. Ups and downs do not uproot us and the glamor of the natural world does not distract us. Neither would reception of a blessing make us so elated and intoxicated that we forget our duties, nor would losing a blessing make us so disconsolate that we ignore our duties as referred to in the Glorious Qur’an:

So that you may not grieve for what escapes you, nor
exult for what comes your way... (57:23)

By “having steady feet,” we mean having fidelity in one’s entire conduct and not just in walking. Accordingly, when someone is regarded as having steady feet, it means that he will be firm and steady in his thinking, in his speech, etc., but because normally travelling needs feet, then being steady is mostly attributed to feet and it is said that travellers towards God must have steady feet.

¹ This is a translation of *Marāhil-e Akhlāq dar Qur’an*, Section Three, Chs. One and Two by Ayatollah Abdullah Javadi Amuli (2000: Qum, Isra' Publications).

² In the first chapter of his book Ṭūsī has mentioned six factors as the departure of a moral journey: faith, steadfastness, intention, probity, repentance, and sincerity. Ṭūsī regarded the six mentioned features as the preparation and fundamentals of the spiritual journey and not the journey itself.

³ Ṭūsī regarded faith as the first phase of the spiritual journey and this can be criticized; since faith is defined as the settlement of human being in a secure place, but the point is that he would not seek such a place unless he felt vulnerable and knew that there was a secure place. Therefore, the beginning point of the spiritual journey towards Allah is knowledge and not faith, but it can be said that because knowledge is a presupposed principle, Ṭūsī started from faith.

⁴ Supplication of Kumayl.

⁵ *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 49, p. 127.

⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 148.

⁷ Barqī, *Al-Maḥāsīn*, vol. 1, p. 213; *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 60, p. 14.

⁸ *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 72, p. 276.

⁹ *Ibid.* vol. 69, p. 262.

¹⁰ Barqī, *Al-Maḥāsīn*, vol. 1, p. 224.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Usūl al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 352.

¹³ Barqī, *Al-Maḥāsīn*, vol. 1, p. 225.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 223; *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 64, p. 75.

¹⁵ *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 77, p. 320.

¹⁶ Referring to the war between Iran and Iraq 1980-1988.