



Spiritual Quest

**A Biannual Journal of
Ethics and Spirituality**

Vol. 8 | No. 2 | Summer & Autumn 2018

Self-Construction: Part II•

Alireza Maktabdar

Abstract



This article, which is the second in a series, continues the topic of self-construction according to Islamic ethics. It looks at the nature of a person's characteristics and whether a person's characteristics are mutable or fixed. Particular attention is given to the concepts of oblivion towards the divine versus wakefulness as well as obstacles towards moral or spiritual growth, and the role of one's intrinsic nature in that. It also explores the concepts of asceticism and the Islamic ideal of servitude towards God. It concludes with an overview of how human beings might attain spiritual and ethical perfection.

Keywords

Islamic ethics, soul, Islamic mysticism, asceticism, Shi'ism.

* Translated by Yasser Pouresmaeil

4. The existing condition

Although the human soul is in its essence pure and immaterial, it comes to suffer from certain limits after its attachment to, and dependence on, the body and its presence in the material realm. Since the soul arranges the body in order to meet its needs and provide its sustenance, it begins to find affection for its exterior physical environment and comes to forget its original home. Thus, it will be lowered from an immaterial sacred entity to an entity engulfed in matter and material phenomena.

In this entertaining atmosphere, the soul begins to be infected by moral vices such as stinginess, jealousy, greed, pretence, arrogance, lust, anger, grudge, deception, and so on, all of which seem to help it gain material benefits and formal pleasures and develop its life in this world. The deep affection for and habituation to matter, generated in the soul as a result of its engagement with material pleasures, makes it oblivious to the truth and the ultimate purpose of creation. Indulgence in the material affairs of this world and excessive concern with the fulfilment of one's physical needs give rise to fundamental changes in one's insights and tendencies.

From the perspective of a person who indulges in lusts and personal desires, there is no such reality as an afterlife beyond the material and there is no spirituality for which one should condemn physical pleasures. Thus, according to this deviated perspective, one's tendencies in life should be directed at material pleasures.

In the course of achieving more material pleasures, such a person comes to have wrong and blameworthy moral characteristics, each of which can deprive the soul of true happiness and perfection. Indulgence in inferior and transient physical pleasures prevent a person from apprehending enduring and superior spiritual pleasures that can prepare him for human perfection. Thus, in order to achieve true perfection, a person on the path of self-construction

should enjoy material pleasures as far as they do not distract him from his true perfection and, beyond that, he should concern himself with thoughts and behaviours that bring him close to the superior perfection. The first step towards this goal is to be freed from the oblivion resulting from indulgence in inferior material pleasures and to provide requirements for his journey towards the ultimate destination; that is, adjacency to God with new insight and foresight.

4.1. Oblivion¹

A person who is oblivious to God will not be prepared for meeting with, and proximity to, Him, because in order to arrive at this stage, one needs knowledge and consciousness. Thus, oblivion is considered as an obstacle and wakefulness is considered as a necessary condition for the refinement of the soul and the spiritual journey. One requisite for the spiritual journey is to take one's imperfection into account so as to have a desire to become perfected and to consider oneself as a traveller who needs provisions and a guide. Obviously, if one is oblivious to and ignorant of being a traveller, one will never depart.

In religious terms, those who do not embark upon spiritual journeys count as asleep or drunk. A drunk is a person whose intelligence is darkened by wine. Wine is not, nevertheless, the only thing that intoxicates a person. A person might be intoxicated by youth, wealth, and rank. Imam 'Ali said: "There are four types of drunkenness: the drunkenness of youth and the drunkenness of wealth and the drunkenness of sleep and the drunkenness of reign." (Harrani (Ibn Shu'bah) 1404 AH: p. 124)

1. Oblivion or negligence (*'ghaflah'*) is the lack of knowledge of knowledge, that is, not knowing that one knows, which is contrasted to knowing that one knows; see Tabataba'i 1417 AH: , vol. 1, p. 330. In another part of the book, Tabataba'i says that oblivion refers to one's unawareness of what is present to him or before him; see *ibid.*, p. 91.

Thus, people intoxicated by rank and wealth are sleepers who have left behind the caravan of spiritual travellers and failed to engage in self-construction and self-refinement.

What is required for such wakefulness is the avoidance of sins and their intoxication. In fact, sinfulness and its intoxication lead to a deep sleep in which one fails to go on a spiritual journey in order to achieve divine proximity. Thus, the departing point of a journey towards human perfection is to abandon sins, which gives rise to the human wakefulness and alerts him to hazards of the path towards divine proximity. When the voice of prophets reaches someone, it will awaken him even if he is asleep, and indeed, prophets have come to awaken people. However, if one is deep in sleep as a result of sins, then he will not be awakened even by the voice of prophets. Thus, God tells the Prophet Muhammad: 'But you cannot make hear those in graves' (Qur'an 35:22). When the person wakes up, however, he will understand that he should move, and if he does not move and stays in the same state for two more months, he will suffer a great loss and will not attain divine proximity.

Oblivion to God and his signs is incompatible with the refinement of the soul and self-construction. Imam al-Sadiq (A) said: 'Avoid oblivion because it harms your life.' (Ibn Babawayh (Saduq) 1406: p.203) Thus, people should avoid oblivion in order to protect their lives. Concerning one's own interests and harms, one should examine all issues and rulings. There are many things one could be oblivious to, including oblivion to the remembrance of God, oblivion to His commands and prohibitions, oblivion to the goal of creation, and so on. All these can be summarized in oblivion to one's own self and the existential value of oneself. True losers are those who are oblivious to their existence, subjecting their souls to destruction and harm and failing to achieve the perfection they deserve: 'Indeed, the losers are the ones who will lose themselves and their families on the Day of Resurrection. Unquestionably, that is the manifest loss' (Qur'an 39:15).

4.1.1. A philosophical analysis of factors leading to oblivion

We can discuss factors leading to and precluding oblivion, either by way of philosophical analyses or by drawing on transmitted evidence; that is, Qur'anic verses and hadiths. Regardless of what Qur'anic verses and hadiths say on the matter, we intuitively find that, in general, the main factor leading to oblivion to something is attention to other things. When a person pays more attention to something, he will thereby be distracted from other things. More reflection on dimensions of oblivion reveals that preoccupation with things that seem more important or engagement in more sensible phenomena usually prevents one from attending to less sensible and less important things. What determines the importance of issues is the value one assigns to those issues. If one retains his truth-seeking character, then he will try to assign real values to issues.

In order to assign real values to different issues, one is required to have sufficient knowledge of such values. Such knowledge can be obtained via an appropriate worldview. Thus, worldviews have a prominent role in one's oblivion or alertness. People with materialistic worldviews for whom everything is exhausted in the matter are oblivious to the true perfection and are engaged in worthless issues that not only are unhelpful for their journey towards perfection, but also prevent them from attaining perfection. For example, a materialistic worldview in which the existence of God is denied cannot provide us with a picture of the real value of humans, the world, and God. If such a worldview assigns unreal values to things such as wealth, power, ambition, lust, and material pleasures, then it cannot find room for moral values, such as patience, asceticism, humbleness, self-restraint, and spiritual pleasures, because these moral values are somewhat at odds with desiderata of such a worldview. If one does not assign a value to such moral values, then those moral values will become unimportant to him. And if these moral values are deemed

unimportant by him, then he will not usually be preoccupied with them because people do not spend time and energy on unimportant things. And if one is never preoccupied with these moral values or is only rarely preoccupied with them, then he will be oblivious to them.

This simple example shows how a wrong worldview can make a person oblivious to moral values, such as asceticism, humbleness, self-restraint, and spiritual pleasures. Now contrary to this example, let us suppose that a person believes in a right, religious, divine worldview. Such a worldview provides a perfect portrait of the place of humans, the world, and God, and assigns real values to each of these. God is central to this worldview, and proximity to God is deemed the most important human goal. The facilities the humans are provided with in the world should be exploited for the purpose of achieving this goal. Since divine proximity as the most valuable human goal requires moral values such as asceticism, humbleness, self-restraint, and philanthropy, such values will find their place in one's view and will be sufficiently attended to.

In this case, since these moral values are in conflict with things such as wealth, power, ambition, and fame, one will seek to avoid them. It should be noted, however, that people are always attentive to certain things and oblivious to others. Thus, oblivion is not prohibited in itself.

4.1.2. Causes of oblivion according to transmitted evidence

Numerous causes of oblivion are mentioned in Qur'anic verses and hadiths, some of which will be pointed out in what follows.

1. Attachment to manifestations of the material life

The Qur'an says: 'O you who have believed, let not your wealth

and your children divert you from remembrance of Allah. And whoever does that - then those are the losers' (63:9). Wealth and children are divine endowments as long as they help one achieve happiness. However, if attachment to them obstructs one's journey towards God and makes him oblivious to God, they will constitute obstacles to divine proximity.

2. Indulgence in blessings

To benefit from divine blessings in the way of His satisfaction, one needs to have a capacity to persist on the remembrance of God despite indulgence in His blessings. However, if profusion of blessings leads to oblivion of God, one will be deprived of divine proximity and will be destroyed. In complaints about such people, angels say to God: 'Exalted are You! It was not for us to take besides You any allies. But You provided comforts for them and their fathers until they forgot the message and became a people ruined' (Qur'an 25:18).

3. Ignorance and negligence

Ignorance of the place of God, inattentiveness to resurrection, unawareness of the worthlessness of wealth and ranks, and lack of alertness to temptations of Satan and devilish people are main factors of oblivion. Imam 'Ali says: 'He who knows the times will not be oblivious to preparations.' (Kulayni 1362 SH: vol. 8, p. 23) Ignorance of any of these leads to 'oblivion' and its horrible consequences.

4. Ambitions

Another factor leading to oblivion is ambition; that is, unachievable dreams or wishes, because such dreams preoccupy a person and make him oblivious to what is required for divine proximity. In a sermon known as Dibaj, Imam 'Ali says: 'O servants of God! Beware

that ambitions take away reasons and break their promises and lead to oblivion and cause grief.' (Harrani (Ibn Shu'bah) 1404 AH: p. 152)

4.2. Wakefulness

When a person believes in Islam, becomes faithful, is committed to religious limits and rulings, knows Islamic beliefs, acts upon religious obligations, and avoids what is forbidden, he finds a potential or disposition within himself for wakefulness from all his wide-ranging oblivion. Such wakefulness collapses everything that was already there, breaks down the foundations of delusions, threatens one's earlier existence, and undermines the tenets of life in this world. Deep reflection on Qur'anic verses such as 30:7 (in Surah al-Rum) and 29:67 (in Surah al-'Ankabut) reveals that life in this world is based on a peculiar sort of ignorance and oblivion, and if such ignorance or oblivion is obviated, and the person achieves a state of wakefulness, the foundations of such a life will be undermined, its delusion will disappear, the truth will show itself, and the person will seek the truth, with divine life. This is known as *yaqazah* (wakefulness) or *intibah* (alertness).

Qur'anic verses seek to wake up believers who have gained the potential for wakefulness because of their belief in Islam and commitment to religious rulings. These verses try to alert believers to their perilous position in the world and to the higher goal of their creation. Thus, verses such as 4:136 (in Surah al-Nisa') order believers to believe again: 'O you who have believed, believe in Allah and His Messenger and the Book that He sent down upon His Messenger and the Scripture which He sent down before.' Such a command to believers from God is shocking; it is as if people have not fully turned away from falsities towards the truth, and still suffer from oblivion and ignorance, and it is as if Islam, faith, and its rulings did not alert people to the truth and did not save them from ignorance and misguidance. In another

verse, God commands believers to piety: ‘O you who have believed, fear Allah and believe in His Messenger; He will [then] give you a double portion of His mercy and make for you a light by which you will walk and forgive you; and Allah is Forgiving and Merciful’ (57:28). Imam ‘Ali says that primitive Islam or faith and hardships a believer faces because of his faith are not helpful unless one is wakeful: ‘Asceticism does not pay off except in a wakeful soul.’ (Tamimi al-Amudi 1366 SH: p.238)

It should be noted that this wakefulness or alertness should not be thought to originate from the person himself. Instead, when the veils of oblivion go away and one comes to his senses, a light from God shines on one’s existence and attracts the person to it. Thus, the origin of the wakefulness of a believer is God. It is God’s remembrance of a person that reminds him of God. In other words, God remembers the person first, and then the person remembers God. Hence, the main cause of a person’s wakefulness is God Himself.¹ And factors, such as joining those who call to the path of truth, righteous actions, and commitment to shariah rulings, ground a believer’s wakefulness only as caused by the genuine ground, which is God.

According to Khwajah ‘Abdullah al-Ansari, the first station of the mystical journey is ‘wakefulness.’ He cites the Qur’anic verse, ‘I only advise you of one [thing] - that you stand for Allah, [seeking truth] in pairs and individually’ (34:46) and then says: ‘To stand for God is to wake up from oblivion and ignorance and indolence, and this is the first illumination of a living servant’s heart with the light of alertness’ (al-Ansari 1417 AH: p. 36). In addition to providing the meaning of wakefulness, this remark hints at the

1. This is why Amir al-Mu’minin ‘Ali (peace be upon him) addresses God as follows: ‘O God! I do not have the power to move myself away from Your disobedience except when You wake me up, and then I will be as You wanted me to be.’ See Majlisi n.d.: vol. 91, p. 98.

fact that wakefulness originally comes from God.

It is noteworthy that God's light of wakefulness is directed at everyone. However, people's hearts might not have the potential to admit such light, perhaps because of veils and obstructions they have created in their hearts with their own hands. God's endowments are offered to everyone, but not everyone has the potential to receive them, and those who fail to receive them have oppressed themselves. Thus, one needs to supplicate God and ask Him, and reflect on Qur'anic verses as well as God's signs in the creation in order to try to remove obstacles from his heart so that the light of wakefulness shines on it and the ground is paved for a journey towards divine proximity.

A person who obtains wakefulness comes to have a different view of life. On this view, every second of one's life is the most precious thing one has at his disposal, which can be used to attain higher perfections. The mystical traveller is obligated to prize his time or, in better words, to seize the moment. He should know that one is provided with an opportunity in this world to return to his original home, and should be aware that the journey towards God is long, hazardous, and full of obstacles that should be put behind. He should know that, for this journey, time is always short. Thus, every moment on this journey should be seized. One is not allowed to lose even a single moment; otherwise, he will regret it.

To have a better understanding of the notion of wakefulness, let us briefly refer to two relevant anecdotes.

1. Fudayl ibn 'Ayyad was a well-known bandit. He masterfully robbed caravans and plundered people's money and property. However, he fell in love with a girl. Thus, he decided to sneak into the girl's house overnight and have a union with her. After he had climbed the wall of her house but before he entered the house, he heard a pleasant voice coming from the neighbouring house. When he listened more carefully, he realized that a man was reciting the Qur'an. The man recited this verse: 'Has the time not come for

those who have believed that their hearts should become humbly submissive at the remembrance of Allah.’ Upon hearing this verse, a considerable upheaval occurred in Fudayl’s heart, and he spontaneously said: ‘O God! The time has come!’ He immediately climbed down the wall and changed his mind about the sin he was about to commit. This reminder led to Fudayl’s wakefulness, saved him from darkness, and helped him quit robbery and sins.

2. Bishr al-Hafi was a wealthy, self-indulgent, and sinful man. One night he had a wine-drinking and dancing party in his house. One of his servants went outside the house for some errand. A solemn and dignified passer-by asked the servant: ‘Is the owner of this house a servant [slave] or a freeman?’ The servant astonishingly replied: ‘What a question! Of course, he is free. He has a great wealth and many slaves and concubines. How could he be not a freeman?’ The passer-by said: ‘Oh, you are right! If he were a servant [of God], he would not do these things.’ He said this and then went away. The servant went back inside. Bishr asked him what took him so long, and he told him about his conversation with the passer-by. The passer-by’s words set such a fire to Bishr’s heart that he ran outside the house barefooted and caught up with the passer-by, and cried. He repented forever and became a righteous servant of God and a prominent mystic. The passer-by was Imam Musa al-Kazim (A).

5. From the undesired existing condition to the desired non-existent condition

After wakefulness from oblivion and alertness to the spiritual journey, one should try to depart from the existing condition he is embroiled in towards the desired condition favoured by God. Since the attainment of the ultimate perfection, human dignity, and divine proximity require one’s volitional acts, the meaning of movement on such a spiritual journey will become obvious. However, it should be

noted that it is not the case that every volitional act with any quality or on any foundation will lead to divine proximity. Only actions done from servitude, sincerity, and love can perfectly enable a person to obtain proximity to God. Thus, an action without faith is like a body without a soul, and deeds done without servitude (or piety) are not acceptable to God. Thus, faith and righteous actions that are displayed in terms of divine morality can be characterized as general factors leading to divine proximity, which help a person move from the existing condition to the desired condition. The belief in a Transcendent Origin who had a specific goal for the creation of the world leads one to do internal and external acts that fit the goal of creation. These acts are known as righteous acts, which lead to the satisfaction of God, and thus make the person come closer to the goal of his creation, which is proximity to God.

In contrast to grounds of divine proximity, there are general facts that lead to distance from God, including love of this world, following Satan, and submission to personal desires. The Qur'an says about Balaam, a Jewish clergy during the time of the Prophet Moses who tended towards the Pharaoh: 'And recite to them, [O Muhammad], the news of him to whom we gave [knowledge of] Our signs, but he detached himself from them; so Satan pursued him, and he became of the deviators. And if We had willed, we could have elevated him thereby, but he adhered [instead] to the earth and followed his own desire' (7:175-176).

6. The possibility of training one's soul

Having achieved wakefulness, one needs to train his soul in order to move from the undesired existing condition to the desired non-existent condition, or put alternatively, in order to balance and optimize one's psychological condition. Is it possible to train one's soul and is it possible to change one's moral character? This issue has long been a matter of controversy.

Earlier scholars disagree over whether or not one's moral character can change. Some of them believe that no moral character or habit is innate, and thus, all habits or characters can change. Others believe, nonetheless, that all habits are innate, and thus, no character or habit can change. There is, however, a third view according to which some moral habits or characters can never change, while some of them can change since they arose from external factors (Mujtabawi 1388: p. 41). Having said that, the predominant view is that moral characters can change, and thus, the soul is trainable. Below were review arguments for the trainability of the soul.

Farabi recounts the views of two prominent philosophers – Plato and Aristotle – concerning the changeability of moral characters as follows: some people believe that there is a disagreement between these two philosophers, where Aristotle believes that moral characters are unchangeable habits, and Plato believes that there are two types of moral characters: natural¹ and acquired, and it is the former that is unchangeable (Farabi 1405 AH: p. 95).

It is noteworthy that Aristotle talks only about the possibility of change, without specifying whether the change is easy or hard. However, Plato suggests that there are two types of moral characters, one of which is natural and hard to change, and the other is acquired, and thus easy to change. Thus, Plato claims that it is hard to change a naturalized moral character, like a bent tree which is hard to straighten, although it is not impossible. With this analogy, Plato wants to suggest that it is hard to change the

1. Natural moral characters are those sedimented within the human and cannot be changed, and acquired moral characters are those acquired after another character. Thus, any new moral character is acquired, and the older character counts as natural; see Farabi *1405 AH*: p. 97. With this illustration, the difference between this type of moral characters and natural moral characters as meant by philosophers will be clear.

manners of a person who has been habituated to a particular moral character for years (Mujtabawi 1388 AH: p. 97).

Proponents of the changeability of moral characteristics have offered arguments for their claim, some of which will be surveyed in what follows:

Ghazali quotes a hadith from the Prophet and then provides an argument accordingly: ‘Make your morals good.’ To command people to improve or better their morals depends on the possibility of changing one’s moral character, because if human moral character were unchangeable, it would not be subject to any commands or orders, and all sermons, bequests, encouragements, and warnings would be fruitless, because human actions are consequences of one’s moral character. Moreover, since it is possible to change the habits of non-human animals, and wild animals such as dogs and horses can be domesticated by training, why should it be impossible for humans to refine their morals and change their characters despite their rationality (Ghazali n.d.: vol. 8, p. 101)?

Another argument for the changeability of morals is the rise of prophets and the descent of divine scriptures, and in general, their mission for the guidance and training of humans. This is the most telling evidence for the possibility of training and fostering moral virtues and eliminating moral vices. This is evidenced by Qur’anic verses such as ‘It is He who has sent among the unlettered a Messenger from themselves reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom - although they were before in clear error’ (62:2) and a well-known hadith in which the Prophet of Islam introduces the goal of his prophethood to be the perfection of moral virtues. (Tabrisi 1414 AH: p. 8) Moreover, Qur’anic verses such as 91:9-10 (in Surah al-Shams)¹ which explicitly

1. ‘He has succeeded who purifies it [the soul], and he has failed who instills it [with corruption].’

encourage the refinement of morals evince the possibility of moral change. The term ‘instil’ in these verses shows that the human nature is innately pure and pious, and corruption and moral vices are accidental and can thus be obviated. Moreover, there are many hadiths encouraging people to acquire a good moral character.

Another argument for the changeability of moral character is that everyone is obligated to adhere to certain religious rulings until death. Now if it were impossible for moral character to change, these obligations would be obligations to perform the impossible, and a command to perform the impossible cannot issue forth from an absolutely wise entity. Thus, constant religious obligations in life are evidence for the possibility of moral change, and it cannot be said that it is impossible to change a moral habit (*Jawadi Amuli 1378 SH*: pp. 89-90).

There are other arguments for the changeability of human moral character, some of which we refer to in what follows:

- (1) The training of children by their parents is evidence of the common-sense view that it is possible to train children with good moral character.
- (2) The existence of pedagogical institutions within different societies is evidence that they consider humans to be changeable; otherwise, it would be unnecessary to provide them with education.
- (3) When we reflect upon our selves, we find that we used to have certain moral characteristics but now no longer have them or they have faded, or we find that we now have a moral characteristic that we did not have before, and now we can do things in light of the new moral character that we could not do before.

6.1. Methods of training the soul in Islam

Given the principle of moral changeability, different methods of

training are introduced in the Qur'an and hadiths from the Infallibles (A). Of these, we will discuss aversion towards this world (*zuhd*), asceticism, and servitudinal love of God,¹ the latter of which might be the most important and interesting possible method of fostering moral characteristics.

(a) Aversion from this world (*zuhd*)

Zuhd literally means to turn away from something or to rest content with the least amount of something (Raghib Isfahani 1412 AH: p. 384; Ibn Manzur 1414 AH: vol. 3, p. 196). In the jargon of Muslim ethicists, *zuhd* is aversion of this world in one's heart and actions, except to the amount that one needs (Naraqī 1431 AH: p. 308).

In an answer to a question about the nature of *zuhd*, Imam 'Ali says: 'All *zuhd* is encapsulated in two words of the Qur'an, when the Exalted God says, "In order that you not despair over what has eluded you and not exult [in pride] over what He has given you" [57:23].' (*Nahj al-Balaghah*, p. 554)

Attachment to this world and its manifestations is the root of many moral sins, such as lying, backbiting, defaming others, violating people's rights, greed, and other moral errors.² Those attached to deceptive manifestations of this world are prepared to tell lies, defame others, and violate their rights in order to have this-worldly achievements. Consequences of such attachments include

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1. In his *al-Mizan*, 'Allamah Tabataba'i points out three methods of moral refinement: the method of philosophers which is based on this-worldly benefits of moral virtues and public praise of people who have such virtues; the method of prophets which is based on afterlife benefits of moral virtues, and the Qur'anic method based on servitudinal love of God; see Tabataba'i 1374 SH: vol. 1, pp. 354-360.
 2. The Prophet said: 'Love of this world is the head of all wrongdoings'; see Daylami 1412 AH: vol. 1, p. 21.

internal unrest and constant anxiety. Thus, the Prophet of Islam traces the physical and psychological serenity of people with *zuhd* to their aversion of this world: 'In this world, the heart and the body of a *zahid* are calm.' (Daylami 1412 AH: vol. 1, p. 18) When there is attachment to this world, the short life of this world that should be seized as a precious and unrepeatable opportunity to attain divine proximity will be spent with greed and oppression towards others, and not only will one fail to flourish and actualize his pure potentials, but he will instead destroy them and lose his dignity and esteem by following Satan and his personal desires. Islam emphasizes that in order for souls to be trained, they need to be freed from such attachments, recommending everyone to avoid any attachment to the deceptive manifestation of this world and avoid staining their precious position by greed. Islam characterizes aversion to this world as the best human moral character that helps one for religious purposes.¹ One can morally train his soul by ignoring many unnecessary things in this world that are not only unhelpful for the goal of his creation, but are rather obstacles thereto.

It should be noted, however, that *zuhd* in Islam is fundamentally different from the notion of monasticism in Christianity. Monasticism is to fully turn one's back on this world, to abandon society, and to seclude, while *zuhd* is to abandon what is forbidden in this world and rest content with what is permitted by God in the required amount, while staying within the society and among people. In fact, *zuhd* does not consist of not having; it consists of not being attached. The Prophet of Islam has explicitly forbidden monasticism in Islam: 'My people are not allowed to adopt monasticism and abandon what is legitimate in this world.' (Ibn Babawayh (Saduq) 1406 AH: vol. 1, p. 138.) Thus, when he was told that a group of his companions had turned their back on

1. 'One of the most helpful morals for the religion is aversion from this world,' see *Kulayni 1362 SH*: vol. 2, p. 128.

everything in this world, secluded themselves from people, and had begun to worship in seclusion, he strongly reprehended them and told them that as their prophet, he did not live like this.¹ Moreover, comprehensive teachings of Islam concerning social, economic, political, and moral matters are based on respect for life in this world, rather than turning one's back on it.

What is more, monasticism and abandonment of this world are incompatible with Islam's optimistic view of creation and the world. Contrary to some religions and philosophies, Islam never has a pessimistic view of the world, and it does not divide the world of creation into beautiful and ugly, light and dark, right and wrong, true and untrue, well-placed and misplaced. With their optimistic view of the world, Muslims take it as a ladder towards perfection, which cannot be obtained in seclusion from society. Although they are not attached to the world, they can foster moral virtues such as humbleness and empathy in constructive interaction with others, and ascend to the stage of divine proximity. Empathy with others and sacrifice, as a result of *zuhd*, play a significant role in one's moral transcendence.

(b) Asceticism

Asceticism is a very effective method of training the soul, acquiring moral virtues, and removing moral vices. In Arabic, the word for

1. 'Three women went to the Messenger of God, and one of them told him, 'My husband does not eat meat,' the other said, 'My husband does not smell perfumes,' and the other said, 'My husband does not approach women.' The Messenger of God went out, while dragging his robe on the ground and then went on the *minbar*, praised God, and then said, 'What has happened to groups of my companion that they do not eat meat and do not smell perfumes and do not approach women? Know that I eat meat and I smell perfumes and I approach women, so whoever turns away from my tradition is not from me'; see Kulayni 1362 SH: vol. 5, p. 496.

asceticism is *riyadah* which is defined as ‘taming a wild animal by prohibiting it from undesired movements it intends, and habituating it to the obedience of its owner in whatever he asks it to do of his desires’, and with regard to ethics, *riyadah* is ‘to prohibit one’s animal soul from being subjugated by lust and anger and what is relevant to these, and to prohibit one’s rational soul from complying with animal faculties and from moral vices and actions such as greed over wealth and ambition and what is relevant to them, such as deception, tricks, gossip, and so on, and to habituate the human soul to acting in a way that leads him to forms of perfection that are possible for him’ (al-Tusi 1368 AH: pp. 30-31).

Al-Hujwiri says, ‘Asceticism or struggle is to act contrary to personal desires, and unless one practices asceticism it will not be helpful, and if the soul is punished, the truth will be revealed to it’ (Fadli 1386 SH: vol. 8, p. 423).

From a religious outlook, in order to achieve perfection and divine proximity, one needs to tolerate suffering, fight his desires, and try his best, since it is extremely difficult to fight one’s own self in order to achieve perfection; this is called *riyadah* (asceticism or taming). We are obligated to tame our soul; if our soul desires something forbidden, then it is as if the horse one is riding wants to go astray, in which case its bridle should be taken and it should be forced to go the right way. If one refuses to satisfy the desires of his animal soul and resists its inferior requests, the soul will be habituated and can be patient in the face of hardships. Thus, one’s attachment to inferior this-worldly things will fade away and one will finally arrive at a stage to which no personal desires or Satanic temptations can find a way.

It should be noted, however, that not all kinds of asceticism are acceptable in the view of the Qur’an and Ahl al-Bayt (the Household of the Prophet). One might practice asceticism in order to achieve certain spiritual powers and an ability to do extraordinary things that are incompatible with human dignity and

self-esteem, or one might harm his bodily health. These kinds of asceticism are not supported by Islam. They not only fail to help foster the spiritual dimensions of humans or achievement of true perfection, but also have negative and distorted effects. Thus, asceticism can be divided into legitimate (supported by the religion) and illegitimate, and we have the former in mind here. From an Islamic viewpoint, asceticism is acceptable as long as it helps a person to achieve the goals of his true perfection. This is why Muslim ethicists have enumerated goals for asceticism the fulfilment of which is a condition of the legitimacy of asceticism. These goals include: (1) prevention of internal and external preoccupations that obstruct one's reunion with God, (2) compelling one's animal soul to comply with practical reason so as to achieve perfection, and (3) the soul's achievement of the stability and robustness required for the reception of divine grace so as to attain the perfection it is possible for it to attain (al-Tusi 1368 SH: p. 31).

(C) The method of servitudinal love of God

Love is a desire for something due to perceiving a perfection one sees therein in such a way that motivates the person to make efforts in order to come close to that thing (Fayd Kashani 1418 AH: vol. 1, p. 145). When a person sees his imperfect and flawed existence as opposed to his creator's perfect existence, he finds a passion and love for God and tries to come close to God and find a higher position before Him by doing righteous actions, exemplifying divine attributes, and servitude. This is known as servitudinal love of God which is rooted in one's servitude and worships and is originated from his monotheistic knowledge of God; a kind of love that satisfies all human desires and imperfections. 'Allamah Tabataba'i believes that the most important method of moral training suggested by the Qur'an is that of servitudinal love. In fact, Islam is based on such love. Servitudinal love is to favour God over the servant, to favour

God's happiness over one's own happiness, to relinquish one's rights for the sake of God's rights, and to restrain one's anger because of God's anger (Tabataba'i 1417 AH: vol. 1, p. 360).

A servant's love for God is followed by God's love for the servant, and when one arrives at this stage, he cannot think of anything except his beloved. By compliance with one's obligations as a servant, such a person exhibits his love for the beloved and does not want anything but the happiness of his beloved. In a sacred hadith, God says: 'Whenever preoccupation with Me dominates a servant of Mine, I remember his desires and pleasures, and whenever I remember his desire and pleasures, he comes to love Me, and I come to love him' (Muhammadi Rayshahri 1362 SH: vol. 4, p. 1853). Thus, as a result of love for God, God will also love the person and will purify him for Himself. Such a person will indubitably comply with divine commands because of his love for Him and will abandon what is disliked by Him, and this is the refinement of the soul. In other words, the best Qur'anic method of moral training, according to 'Allamah Tabataba'i, is by way of the attraction of love and servitude.

It should be noted, however, that a servant's love for God is always interposed between two instances of love on the part of God, just as a servant's repentance is always interposed between two acts of repentance by God.¹ God gives everyone the love for His beauty and perfection, and then some people who obtain knowledge of His beauty and perfection come to love Him.² Afterwards, the servant will be loved by God because of performing his obligations and exemplifying attributes favoured by God, until he arrives at the stage of divine proximity. Given the

1. See the essay on repentance (*tawbah*).

2. In fact, true love is always from God, and the servant cannot do anything but an expression of love, which is in turn a reflection of God's love for the servant.

above remarks, it can be concluded that a servant's love for God is, on the one hand, caused by his knowledge of his creator, and on the other, is a cause for his compliance with divine commands.

'Servitudinal love' is a method of strengthening one's will in the way of acquiring virtues and abandoning vices, which then leads to moral training. There are three kinds of worship or servitude (each of which has its own effect): first, worship out of fear from God's anger and punishment in the afterlife, which leads one to asceticism; that is, the abandonment of this-worldly pleasures in order to achieve salvation in the afterlife. Second, worship in hope for Heaven and blessings in the afterlife, which leads the person to do good actions. Third, worship out of love: to purify one's heart from any attachment to everything other than God; to go beyond the ornaments and manifestations of this world, such as one's children, spouse, wealth, rank, and even one's own dreams; to make one's heart a home for God only – that is, the love for God will conquer one's heart stage by stage until the person only does what God likes and abandons what God does not like. Thus, the person will be happy at God's happiness and will be angry at God's anger (Tabataba'i 1417 AH: pp. 160-161).

Some scholars have accounted for the role of love in moral training as follows: love motivates a person to collapse the enclosure of selfishness or egoism. Imam 'Ali said: 'Love for God is a fire that burns everything that it touches.' (Majlisi n.d.: vol. 67, p. 21.) Once a lover leaves his own 'self,' his spirit will be expanded, and he will give up wrong moral characteristics. Love turns an indolent person into an energetic person, turns a silly person into an intelligent person, turns a stingy person into a generous person, and turns an impatient person into a patient person (Mutahhari 1387 SH: vol. 16, p. 245).

The Qur'an refers to ways of attaining love for God, including reflection on and knowledge of God, constant remembrance of God's blessings and one's responsibility towards God (Tabataba'i

1417 AH: vol. 16, p. 136), abandonment of love for everything and everyone other than God,¹ acting in the way of God's happiness (Tabataba'i 1417 AH: vol. 16, p. 136), and love for God's friends or saints (Tabataba'i 1417 AH: vol. 16, pp. 6-7).

7. Capacities and possibilities

What capacities and possibilities do humans have at their disposal in order to achieve divine perfection and proximity? Do they have the power to elevate themselves from the bottom of the animal realm up to the realm of angels? Are they truly precious creatures who can reveal their true place in light of moral progress and spiritual journey? Or are they just animals like other animals whose natures are exhausted by nutrition, sleep, anger, and lust, and remain captivated by their instincts forever?

As pointed out earlier, humans have two dimensions: body and soul, where the latter is the original, fundamental human dimension. These dimensions have capacities and possibilities of their own, the actualization of which helps humans to attain their perfection.

1. Physical dispositions. Although the human body is much smaller than that of many other animals, he can develop bodily dispositions so as to resist those animals. Human physical potentials grow from childhood and arrive at a peak in youth. Thus, the best period to exploit and foster such potentials and possibilities is that of adolescence and youth. During middle and old age, it is difficult to foster these potentials and capacities.

2. Spiritual dispositions. In this dimension, humans have capacities such as intellection and reasoning, sensations and emotions, will, moral conscience, worship, and the like. In their

1. 'The heart is God's sanctuary; so do not accommodate anyone but God in the sanctuary of God', Majlisi n.d.: vol. 67, p. 25.

rational dispositions, humans are equal to angels. God gave superiority to humans over other animals by giving them a rational capacity just like that of angels. With this rational power, humans can conquer other beings within the material world. The reason or intellect is a capacity that, if properly fostered, can elevate the person to the highest degrees of perfection, even superior to that of the angels.

Emotions are divine lights within humans, with which they are distinguished from other entities. The human emotion is the origin of his moral superiority, with which one can achieve perfection, provided that he avoids the harms of excess and negligence. In fact, people should not be so indifferent to emotions that they suffer from remorse and frustration as in the Western world today, as they should not excessively rely on emotions. Kindness is a moral virtue as long as it is not intermixed with unhealthy sensations and is done out of compliance with the reason and religion. Thus, the expression of one's emotions should not be contrary to the religion, and religious commands that are inseparably tied to individual and social interests should be preferred to transient emotions and wrong expediencies.

Free will is another capacity humans are endowed with. Humans can achieve degrees of perfection with their free will so as to achieve the ultimate perfection which is divine proximity, as they might abandon their capacities and potentials and thus fail to achieve their ultimate perfection.

8. Obstacles to training the soul

Although self-refinement is possible and necessary, it is nevertheless difficult. Thus, it is referred to in the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet and Imams as 'jihad' (fight or strive). The Qur'an says: 'And those who strive [do jihad] for Us – We will surely guide them to Our ways' (29:69). Prominent exegetes

believe that 'jihad' in this verse refers to the fight against the self: self-refinement and self-construction. Given difficulties implied by jihad, it can be seen that the refinement of the soul is a complicated, difficult process, in the way of which one faces many problems and obstacles that should be known. There are three main factors that make self-construction difficult.

8.1. Self-love

Self-refinement is a fight against one's own self. In fights against others, a person crushes the enemy out of anger and due to grudges, and there is no mercy within him to weaken his aggressiveness against the enemy. However, in one's fight against his own self, a person has insufficient anger and grudges against his own self, whereas these are required for a fight. To the contrary, one's self-love prevents him from fighting against himself or from seeing his own flaws. People may see something a virtue when it is in themselves whereas they see it a flaw in others, and thus, they do not think of eradicating such vices from their own selves.

8.2. Habituation to one's nature

Humans grow according to their nature, and their natural faculties flourish prior to their human faculties. Thus, it is much easier for a person to act upon his natural faculties; to move against such faculties is like climbing up, and to move in their direction is like sliding down. When one slides down, since the movement occurs due to gravity, one does not need an external force. To the contrary, preventing such movement requires the exertion of energy. However, one lacks such a supporting force when climbing up, and thus, he needs an external force. In other words, humans grow according to their nature, enjoy it, and are habituated to it, and thus they desire it just as a child desires its mother. However, people have

not savoured spirituality, have no memory thereof, and are not habituated to it. Thus, they should fight themselves in order to develop a desire towards spirituality. To fight against one's own self is to fight against blameworthy characteristics that are in conflict with human dignity. By captivating one's devilish desires that prevent him from achieving perfection and happiness, one attains self-construction and divine proximity.

8.3. Habits

Moral vices are instilled within the human throughout time, are solidified with vicious actions, and form the human secondary nature. To change a moral character is not like changing one's clothes or residence. It is to change one's own self. Thus, in the terminology of religious scholars and mystics, the refinement of the soul, which requires changes in one's attributes and habits, is also referred to as self-breaking.

There is a hadith that says: 'If you hear that a mountain has been moved, believe it; but if you hear that someone has changed his moral character do not believe it, because his previous character will be back soon.' (*Nahj al-Fasahah*, p. 195) This is not intended to discourage people from self-correction and self-refinement; it just emphasizes the difficulty of the task. The previous moral character comes back because it found a locus within the human soul, and unless the locus is filled with something else, it is not unusual for it to return. A person who engages in self-construction tries to replace his blameworthy habits with praiseworthy habits, albeit with difficulty, and thus, tries to elevate himself to the peak of humanness.

9. How the soul acquires virtues or vices

The main factor leading to the solidification of a moral character within a person is the repetition of behaviours that correspond that character. It is usually difficult to repeat these behaviours, particularly at the beginning and more particularly when it comes to the acquisition of virtues. For one's natural character supposedly lacks attributes that correspond to the behaviour in question, and thus, the person tries to acquire the attribute contrary to his actual nature and through practice and repetition until he does not undergo any hardships when he engages in these behaviours. Instead, there will finally be a point at which one does actions related to the virtue in question with full desire and even pleasure, since the virtue has become part of his nature. The process through which a behaviour turns into an instilled attribute within the soul, with respect to both virtues and vices, is gradual, and thus, it demands repetition and continuity. In this process, each bodily behaviour leaves an effect on one's heart, which is a stage of the soul, and these effects will gradually reinforce, and finally solidify, a fixed structure within the human soul. Interestingly, even the slightest of actions leave effects on one's heart. Thus, there are hadiths in which it is prohibited to belittle minor worships or minor sins.¹

The more virtues are engrained within human nature, the more gorgeous, more beautiful, and closer to happiness will be the human soul, and the more vices it suffers from, the closer it will be to eternal misery (Fayd Kashani n.d.: pp. 59 and 63).

1. Religious rulings and manners are based on such a view; that is, any action that leaves in fact an undesired effect on the heart is announced as forbidden or disliked, to the extent of its effect, and any action that leaves a desired effect counts as obligatory or supererogatory, so that the soul can gradually exemplify divine attributes via commitment to such actions and omissions. Here, two well-known hadiths of the 'Black Point' and 'White Point' can be pointed out.

From this, it becomes clear that mere issuance of an action from someone does not indicate that he exemplifies the moral attribute corresponding to the action, because the action might be purely accidental and without an internal ground. For example, one might donate his money, but not because the attribute of generosity is ingrained in his soul, but because he wants to be praised by others. In fact, the ground of this act is a vice (Ghazali n.d.: vol. 8, p. 97).

At the time of bodily death and upon entrance in the world of purgatory (or *barzakh*), one will see the reality of his soul and the moral habits he has acquired during his life in the material world. This is when every person sees what he has made of himself. Divine saints can detect the reality of every person prior to their death and in this world as well.

Conclusion

Humans in this world are like raw materials that can be transformed or moulded into anything within the limits of their capacities and potentials. Humans are created to achieve the peak of perfection and happiness, rather than falling into inferiority and imperfection. They can exploit the possibilities they are endowed with by God in order to engage in self-construction and elevate the stages of their existence so as to attain the position of divine proximity and in order to come to have a divine existence. Different factors can help people to achieve the position of divine proximity, including (1) proper *knowledge* of one's own self, God, and the world, (2) deep concern and servitudinal love for God and His allies, (3) persistence in achieving the goal, (4) doing good things and love for others, and (5) exemplification of praiseworthy morals, and the like. In an Islamic outlook, humans are not supposed to be material earthly entities who devote everything they have to this world and their material concerns

during their sojourn in this world. Instead, they are heavenly entities who can find their original home beyond this world through a rational and moral life under appropriate conditions (e.g. when the five above conditions are present) in the fulfilment of which they themselves have a key role. If they manage to inhabit their original home, then they can experience the spiritual pleasure of genuine happiness in the adjacency of God and His allies and attain their ultimate goal.

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