

Obstacles of the Path

Starting a spiritual journey upon the road of perfection and attaining higher spiritual positions is not an easy and simple task rather is extremely difficult and complicated. A devotee has to encounter plenty of obstacles in his path and must struggle to remove them, otherwise, he would never be able to reach his Desired destination.

1. First Obstacle: Incompetence

The greatest obstacle for undertaking gnostic journey and attaining God's Nearness by a wayfarer is the incompetency of his self. A heart contaminated and darkened by sinning cannot become a center for the illumination of Divine light. When a human heart as a result of sinning turns into a Satan's commands center then how come God's favorite angels may descend into it?

Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.) narrated a tradition from his father:

عن أبي عبدالله عليه السلام قال كان أبي يقول: ما من شيء أفسد للقلب من خطئه ان القلب لي الواقع الخطيئة فلا
تزال به حتى تغلب عليه فيصير اعلا اسفه.

"For a human being there is nothing worst than sin because it wages war against heart until taking over its control. This condition of heart is called inverted or upside down heart."[1](#)

The heart of a sinner is an inverted heart, which forces him to move in the wrong direction. Then how could he move in the direction of God's Nearness and could accept God's blessings and favors? Therefore, it is necessary for a wayfarer that before starting his journey to achieve self-purification and self-perfection, firstly he must try his best not to commit sins and only then he should engage himself into invocation and worship, otherwise his efforts and endeavor in invocation and worship will not result in his becoming near to God-Almighty.

2. Second Obstacle: Worldly Attachments

One of the greatest barrier is the attachments to worldly allurements such as desire of wealth and property, love of wife and children, attachment to house and other means of living, ambitions towards power and positions, attachments towards family, and even liking towards education and knowledge etc. are the types of attachments which prevent a human being from movement and migration towards God-Almighty.

A heart so much in love with perceptible things and is infatuated in them, how can detach itself so easily and may ascent towards the Upper-Heaven? A heart which is the command center for of worldly affairs, how could it become the illumination of Divine light. Apart from that in accordance to traditions the love of this world is the roots of all sins and transgressions, and a sinner can never ascent towards God's Nearness. Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.) has said:

عن أبي عبدالله عليه السلام قال: حب الدنيا راس كل خطيئة.

“The love of world is the root of all evils.”²

The Holy Prophet (S) has said:

قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله: أول ما عصى الله تبارك وتعالى بست خصال: حب الدنيا وحب الرياسة وحب الطعام وحب الراحة.

“The first thing through which transgression against God-Almighty was done consisted of six characteristics: Love of world, love of position, love of women, love of eating, love of sleeping, and love of comforts.”³

Jabir narrated that once he visited Imam al-Baqir (a.s.) who said:

عن جابر قال: دخلت على ابن جعفر عليه السلام فقال: يا جابر! والله اني لمح زؤن واني لمشفول القلب: قلت: جعلت فداك، وما شغلك وما حزن قلبك؟ فقال يا جابر! إنه من دخل قلبه صافي خالص دين الله شغل قلبه عما سواه، يا جابر!!.. ما الدنيا وما عسى أن تكون الدنيا؟ هل هي إلا طعام أكلته أو ثوب لبسته أو امرأة أصبتها؟ يا جابر! إن المؤمنين لم يطمئنوا إلى الدنيا ببقائهم فيها ولم يأمنوا قدومهم الآخرة يا جابر! الآخرة دار قرار والدنيا دار فناء وزوال، ولكن أهل الدنيا أهل غفلة، وكأن المؤمنين هم الفقهاء، أهل فكرة وعبرة لم يصمّهم عن ذكر الله جل اسمه ما سمعوا بأذانهم ولم يعمهم عن ذكر الله ما رأوا من الزينة بأعينهم ففازوا بثواب الآخرة، كما فازوا بذلك ..العلم

“Oh Jabir my heart is sad and full of grief 'May my soul be sacrificed upon you, what is the reason of

your grief ? I said. The Imam said: 'In whoever's heart the God's true and pure religion will enter, his heart would become detached to all external attachments (other than God's). "

"Oh Jabir! what is world and its worth? Is it any thing else other than the mouthful you eat, the piece of dress you use to cover your body and the women you take for marriage ?"

"Oh Jabir! The believers do not trust the world and its life and do not regards themselves as safe from their transfer into the Hereafter."

"Oh Jabir! The Hereafter is the permanent abode of eternity while the world is a place of temporary abode and place of dying but the worldly ones are negligent of this reality except the true believers who are the people who think, deliberate, and take lessons from the world.

Whatever, enters into their ears does not prevent them from God's Remembrance, and similarly possession of gold and wealth does not make them negligent from God's worshipping, thus, they are the ones who earn the rewards of Hereafter because of their being aware about the religion." [4](#)

The Holy Prophet (S) said:

قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله: لا يجد المؤمن حلاوة الايمان في قلبه حتى لا يبالى من اكل الدنيا.

"A person never tastes the sweetness of faith until and unless he becomes indifferent to whatever has been eaten by him." [5](#)

Therefore, it is necessary for a wayfarer to completely detach his heart from such attractions so that movement and migration towards the higher exalted positions become possible for him. He should thoroughly cleanse his heart from thoughts and anxieties of worldly affairs so that they could be replaced by God's Remembrance.

However, it must be reminded that whatever has been condemned is –infatuation and intense attachment to worldly affairs –and not worldly affairs in themselves. A wayfarer, like any other human being for continuation of life needs housing, clothing, food, and life partner and in order to fulfill these requirements he has no choice except to work.

For the continuation of human race and to leave his offspring one must marry and for the sake of social life he has no choice except to accept social responsibilities. It is because of these considerations that none of them have been condemned in the Islamic canon law (*sharia*).[6](#)

Instead if performed with the intention of God's Nearness (*qurb*), all of them are considered as worships bringing a person closer to God-Almighty. Because these things in themselves do not act as obstacles for movement, undertaking a gnostic journey, and engaging in God's Remembrance.

What acts as an obstacle for movement and invocation is infatuation and intense attachments to these affairs. If these affairs become the life's main aim and objective, thus, occupying his attention and thoughts completely in themselves then such a situation would result in his becoming negligent from God's Remembrance.

Therefore in Islam money worshipping, women worshipping, and power and education worshipping are condemned because they prevent a man from migration and movement towards God-Almighty but the money, women, education, and position in themselves are not condemned.

Did not the Holy Prophet (S) Commander of the Faithful, Imam 'Ali (a.s.), Imam al-Sajjad, and other Infallible Imams of Prophets (*Ahlul Bayt*) work, endeavor, and utilize the Divine bounties? This is one of the great advantage of Islam that for the World and Hereafter and their relevant affairs does not recognize any boundary and limitations.

3. Third Obstacle: Obedience of Passions

The Third obstacle is surrender to selfish whims, passions and carnal desires. Like the dark and thick smoke, self's whims and passions attack the heart's domain turning into a darkened heart, thus, lacking the decency for illumination of Divine light.

Whims and passion continuously pull the heart from one direction to another one, thus, never allowing him the opportunity to have a union with God-Almighty and developing some affection for Him. Day and night they try and endeavor to present their own passionate demands. Naturally, in this situation who has the courage to think about migration and ascension towards the Celestial Kingdom of God-Almighty.

God-Almighty has said in Holy Qur'an:

وَلَا تَتَّبِعِ الْهَوَى فَيُخْلِكَ عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ

"And follow not desire that it beguile thee from the way of God. (37:26)

The Commander of the Faithful Imam 'Ali (a.s.) said:

قال أمير المؤمنين عليه السلام: أشجع الناس من غالب هواه.

"The most brave person is the one who could dominate over the passions of his self." ⁷

4. Fourth Obstacle: Overeating

One of the main obstacles of the way for God's Remembrance and invocation is over-eating and being

a slave of the belly. A person who strives day and night to arrange good and delicious food and fills his belly with different sorts of tasty foods, how could such a person will have union with God-Almighty, develop affection, and establish secret communications with Him?

With a stomach full of food how could one may have a mood for worshipping and supplication? Some one who considers pleasure simply in eating and drinking, when would taste the sweetness of supplication with God-Almighty? It is because of these considerations that overeating has been condemned in Islam. Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.) said to Abu-Basir:

ابو بصير عن ابي عبدالله عليه السلام قال: يا ابا محمد! ان البطن ليطغى من اكله، واقرب ما يكون العبد من الله اذا خف بطنها وبغض ما يكون العبد إلى الله اذا امتلا بطنها.

“Stomach transgresses under the influence of over-eating. The most nearest situation between God-Almighty and his servant is –when the stomach is empty and the worst situation is –when his stomach is full.”⁸

Imam al-Sadiq also said:

عن ابي عبدالله عليه السلام قال: ان الله يبغض كثرة الاكل.

“God-Almighty considers over eating as something indecent.”⁹

The Holy Prophet (S) had said:

قال رسول الله (ص): لا تشيعوا فيطفى نور المعرفة من قلوبكم.

“Don't indulge in over-eating because it would quench the light of faith within your hearts.”¹⁰

Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.) had said in a narration:

قال الصادق عليه السلام: ليس شيء اضر لقلب المؤمن من كثرة الاكل وهي مورثة شينين: قسوة القلب وهيجان الشهوة، والجوع ادام للمؤمنين وغدا للروح وطعم للقلب وصحة للبدن.

“For the heart of a believer there is nothing worst than over-eating, because it will cause hard-heartedness and seduction, while hunger happens to be the most delicious dish for a believer's soul and heart, and health for his body.”¹¹

The Commander of the Faithful Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) has said:

قال امير المؤمنين عليه السلام: اذا اراد الله صلاح عبده الهمه قلة الكلام وقلة الطعام وقلة المنام

*“When God-Almighty intends to reform the believer's affair, He bestows upon him three blessings: less sleep, less appetite, and less speech.”*¹²

He also said:

قال على عليه السلام: نعم العون على اسر النفس وكسر عادتها التجويع

*“Hunger is the best help for controlling self and breaking up chronic habits.”*¹³

There is a tradition narrated by Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) that on the night of Ascent (*Mairaj*), God-Almighty said to the Holy Prophet (S):

قال على عليه السلام: قال الله تبارك وتعالى ليلة المراج: يا احمد! لو ذقت حلاوة الجوع الصمت والخلوة وما ورثوا منها. قال يا رب! ما ميراث الجوع؟ قال: الحكمة وحفظ القلب والتقرب الى والحزن الدائم وخفة بين الناس وقول الحق، ولا يبالى عاش بيسرا وبعسر.

*“Oh Ahmad! How sweet and beautiful are the hunger, silence, and seclusion? 'Oh God! What is the advantage of hunger?' Asked the Holy Prophet (S). 'Wisdom, heart's tranquility, nearness to Me, continuous grief, righteous talks, thriftiness, and in difference at the time of ease and hardships, are the characteristics acquired by My servant as a result of hunger, silence, and seclusion.' Replied God-Almighty.”*¹⁴

Of course, a wayfarer like other people for remaining alive and to have the required energy for worship requires food, but he should be careful to eat food just to fulfill his bodily requirements and should avoid over-eating strictly. Because, over-eating causes indigestion, lethargy and depression towards worship, hard heartedness, and negligence from God's Remembrance.

On the contrary moderation in eating and hunger result in one's feeling active and zealous for worship and attention towards God- Almighty. While, being hungry a human being is possessed with soul's purification, illumination and enjoyment which is not the case with a full stomach.

Therefore, it is extremely important that a wayfarer should eat only to the extent it is required for fulfillment of his bodily needs and especially should be hungry during invocation, worshipping, and supplication.

5. Fifth Obstacle: Unnecessary Talks

One of the obstacle which prevents a wayfarer from movement towards his ultimate desired goal, and intervene in achieving concentration and heart's presence, is useless and idle talks. God-Almighty has bestowed upon him the power of speech in order to fulfill his genuine needs. If he used it to the extent it was needed then he has utilized this great blessing correctly.

Apart from that because of excessive talking a persons thoughts became scattered and disturbed and therefore, cannot pay attention towards God-Almighty with heart's presence It is because of these considerations that too much talking and nonsense conversations have been severely condemned in traditions. For example: The Holy Prophet (S) had said: [15](#)

قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله: لا تكثروا الكلام بغير ذكر الله فان كثرة الكلام بغير ذكر الله طقوسا لقلب. ان ابعد الناس من الله القلب القاسي.

“Avoid speaking too much except while reciting invocations for God-Almighty, because, utterance of too many words other than God's Remembrance causes hard-heartedness and the most distant apart people from God-Almighty are the people with darkened heart.”

The Commander of the Faithful, Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) said:

قال على عليه السلام: اخزن لسانك وعد كلامك يقل كلامك الا بخير.

“Control your tongue and do count the words uttered by you in order to reduce your talk while engaging in an un-pious act.” [16](#)

The Holy Prophet (S) said:

قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله: الكلام ثلاثة: فراغ وسالم وشاحب. فاما الرابع فالذى يذكر الله، واما السالم فالذى يقول ما احب الله، واما الشاحب فالذى يخوض فى الناس.

“There are three kind of talks, namely: useful, good and nonsense. The useful talks consist of God's invocation, healthy talks are the ones which are loved by God, and nonsense talks are spreading, rumors, and talking about the people behind their back.” [17](#)

Also he said:

قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله: امسك لسانك فانها صدقة تصدق بها على نفسك، ثم قال: ولا يعرف حقيقه

الإيمان حتى يحزن من لسانه.

*“Control your tongue because it is the best gift which you may present to the self; then he further elaborated: a person never tastes the reality of belief but to strictly control his tongue.”*¹⁸

Imam al-Ridha ¹⁹ said:

قال ابو الحسن الرضا عليه السلام: من علامات الفقه الحلم والعلم والصمت. ان الصمت باب من أبواب الحكمة ان الصمت يكسب المحبة انه دليل على كل خير

*“There are three things which indicate symptoms of intelligence and religious knowledge of jurisprudence: Patience, learning, and silence. And among them silence is the gate of wisdom, causes love, and is responsible for each blessing.”*²⁰

The Commander of the Faithful Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) has said:

قال على عليه السلام: اذ اتم العقل نقص الكلام.

*“The more one achieves perfection of reason the less he talks.”*²¹

Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.) said:

عن ابى عبدالله عليه السلام قال: ما عبد الله بشيء افضل من الصمت والمشي الى بيته

*“There is no worship superior than silence and going on foot towards the House of God for Hajj pilgrimage.”*²²

The Holy Prophet (S) said to Abu Dharr:

قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله: عليك بطول الصمت فانه مطردة للشيطان وعون لك على امر دينك.

*“I recommend you to practice silence, because it would keep Satan away from you. It helps a lot for the protection of your religion.”*²³

Anyway, it is necessary for a wayfarer to control his tongue strictly, should be serious in his talks and should avoid over-talking. In worldly affairs he should limit himself to the extent it is absolutely necessary , and instead should engage his tongue in recital of invocations, incantations, and in discussions of useful and important academic and social matters. The most celebrated mystic of our

time, great professor ‘Allamah Tabatabai (RA)[24](#) said:

“I have witnessed the most precious effects of silence. Practice silence for forty days and nights speaking only when it is absolutely required, remaining engaged in meditations and invocations until attaining purity and enlightenment.”

6. Sixth Obstacle -Love for Self (Hubbe-Zat)

Once a wayfarer succeeds in removing all the obstacles from his path and somehow manages to pass through all stages, then he has to be confronted with the greatest barrier which is –love for self.

Suddenly, he discovers that all actions, and deeds even worships were done for the sake of love for self.

All his worshipping, asceticism, invocation, supplication, fasting, and prayer were performed for the sake of self and rewards of the Hereafter, resulting a net gain for his self. Such worships although will earn a person Paradise and eternal rewards but would not result in his ascent towards the most distinguished sublime spiritual positions of Invocations, Witnessing, and Countenance.

Without migrating from the positions of love for essence or love for self, a person would never be able to witness the unique and unparallel beauty of the Lord of Glory and Majesty, and so for he does not tear off all the veils including the veil of self, he would not be able to develop the required capability of witnessing God's illumination.

Therefore, it is necessary for a wayfarer that through asceticism and struggle he must arrange his exit from the limited boundaries of love of essence by converting it into love of God and, thus, performing all deeds for His pleasure only, If he eats food, it is because of the fact that his eternal beloved has desires so. for the sake of his remaining alive, and if he worships, it is because of the reason. that he had considered God-Almighty as worth of being worshipped.

Such a person seeks neither this world nor the next one instead he is the seeker of God-Almighty. He does not want even to have miracles or special discoveries and except the real Creator does not have any other desire and objective.

If he succeeds and passes through this crucial stage and even is able to give up his identity and personality than he may take up a giant step towards the threshold of Monotheism (*Tawhid*), thus, ascending towards the most sublime spiritual positions of Witnessing, Countenance, and entering inside the Celestial Kingdom as described by the Holy Qur'an:

“Firmly established in the favor of a Mighty King.” (54:55)

7. Seventh Obstacle: Indecisiveness

One of the great obstacle of the path and perhaps the most important one is the indecisiveness and lack of determination which prevents a person from starting his deeds. Satan and imperious-self in the beginning try their best to reflect matters relevant to gnostic journey and asceticism as insignificant and unnecessary. They endeavor to convince a person simply to engage in rituals without paying least attention towards heart's presence.

They would say: You don't have any other obligation except worshipping in a ritual manner. Why do you care about having heart's presence, attention, and invocation? If occasionally he though about these things, they will prevent him from his determination by utilizing hundred of tricks and treacheries, and sometimes they will reflect these matters before him as something so much difficult and complicated that he will become disappointed and hopeless.

But, a true devotee should resist the whispers of Satan and his imperious-self. By referring to Qur'anic-verses, traditions, and books of moral ethics and learning, he should make himself aware about the importance and need of spiritual migration, heart's presence, invocation, and witnessing the Supreme Reality.

Once he discovers its real worth and see his own eternal salvation in it –he should move seriously, ignoring all whispers of hopelessness and disappointments telling his self: although, it is difficult but since my future salvation depends upon it I should better take action quickly, as God-Almighty has promised in the Holy Qur'an:

“As for those who strive in us, We surely guide them to our paths.” (29:69)

Since, discussions regarding the explanation of first Method of attaining perfection and God's-Nearness became too lengthy, I apologize to my readers.

- [1. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 73, p-312.](#)
- [2. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 73, p-90](#)
- [3. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 73, p.94.](#)
- [4. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 73, p-36.](#)
- [5. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 73, p-49.](#)
- [6. Shariah, Divine law, a science which embraces every dimension of human conduct, including the political \[Tr\].](#)
- [7. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p-76.](#)
- [8. Wasail al-Shi'a, vol. 16, p-405.](#)
- [9. Wasail al-Shi'a, vol. 16, p-407.](#)
- [10. al-Mustadrak, vol. 3, p-81.](#)
- [11. al-Mustadarak, vol. 3, p-80.](#)
- [12. al-Mustadarak, vol. 3 p-81.](#)
- [13. al-Mustadarak, vol. 3 p-81.](#)
- [14. al-Mustadrak, vol. 3 p-82.](#)
- [15. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 71, p-281.](#)

16. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 71, p-281.
17. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 71, p-289.
18. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 71, p-298.
19. Imam 'Ali ibn Musa al-Ridha (a.s.): was born in Medina on Thursday, 11th Dhul qadah 148 A.H. He lived in a period when the Abbasids were faced with increasing difficulties because of Shiite revolts. After al-Mam'un the seventh Abbasid Caliph and a contemporary of Imam al-Ridha (a.s.) murdered his brother Amin and assumed office, he thought he would solve the problems by naming Imam as his own successor hoping thus, to insure him in worldly affairs and turn the devotion of his followers away from him.

After encouragement, urging, and finally threats, Imam accepted on condition that he be excused from dismissals, appointments, and other involvement in matters of state. Making the most of this circumstance, the Imam extended guidance to the people, imparting priceless elucidation of Islamic culture and spiritual truths, which have survived in numbers roughly equal to those reaching us from the Commander of the Faithful Imam 'Ali (a.s.), and in greater number than those of any other Imam.

Finally after al-Ma' mum realized his mistake, for Shi'ism began to spread even more rapidly he is said to have poisoned him; he died at the age of 55 in Mashhad, Khorasan on Tuesday, 17th Safar 203 A.H.. He is buried in Mashhad Iran.

20. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 71, p-290.
21. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 71, p-290.
22. Bihar of al-Anwar, vol. 71, p-278.
23. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 71, p-279.
24. 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai: Was born into a family of scholars in Tabriz in 1271 A.H. Solar/1892 A.D. He lost his mother when he was 5 years old and his father at the age of nine. He studied his primary education over there for six years. In the year 1297/1918 he entered the field of religious and Arabic studies and was occupied with readings of texts until 1304/1925.

In the year 1304/1425 he went to Najaf al-Ashraf for higher religious studies where he studied Jurisprudence, mathematics, and Philosophy under the most eminent personalities of that period such as Ayatullah Abul Hasan Esfahani, Ayatullah Hojjat Kuhkamani, and Sayyed Hosayn Badkubi, and after finishing his curriculum returned to his native Tabriz in the year 1345/1935.

In the year 1325/1946 he settled in Qum where he continued his religious studies, teaching, and research activities until his demise in the year 1360/1981. Allahmeh Tabatabai in his Autobiography writes:

"I forgot all that is fair and foul in the world and thought the sweet and bitter events equal. I withdrew from social contact with any except scholars; I cut back food and sleep and life's other necessities to the bare minimum and devoted the rest of my time and resources to scholarship and research."

I would often spend the night in study until sunrise (especially in spring and summer), and I would always research the next day's lesson in advance, making whatever exertions were called for to solve any problem that arose so that by class time I would already have a clear understanding of the Professor's topic." 'Allamah S.M. H. Tabatabai, Islamic Teachings, p-14.

'Allamah Tabatabai has written hundreds of the religious works, the famous among them is Commentary of the Holy Qur'an, (Tafsir al-Mizan) published in 20 volumes. In this work the Noble Qur'an is expounded in an unprecedented manner verse by verse. [Tr].