

The Benefits of Self-knowledge

One of the practical benefits of self-knowledge is to allow a person to become intimately familiar with his or her abilities and aptitudes. This is of immense help to a person in life, preventing one, for instance, from selecting a field of study or job inherently unsuitable to one's God-given abilities.

It also is of great value to a person to comprehend that he is not, theologically speaking, and self-existent. This is important, since it helps a person to understand that no matter how powerful or high one's station in life is, there are numerous events in life over which one has no control.

Of even more importance is the spiritual value of self-knowledge, in that one who has self-knowledge is much less likely to indulge in arrogance, undue pride, and other such destructive behaviours. One who is closely in touch with his own self and his Lord, is also much better equipped to improve those aspects of himself which can be improved, and do indeed need improvement. One can better appraise one's weaknesses and strengths, and be grateful for one's blessings.

Self-knowledge is a highly effective system of self-improvement; one can even say that is in some ways similar to the "bio-feedback" therapies many physicians in some Western Countries recommend to patients whose active participation in the healing process is needed, or to patients for whom modern medicine has not found a cure.

Another very important benefit of is that a faithful Muslim knows that he or she is an extremely precious creation of Allah, and does not see himself simply as yet another animal with some basic needs to satisfy and strive for. Here we are going to turn for a moment to a rather philosophical discussion to better understand this point.

Most people seem to instinctively realise that every being has a different level of perfection, closely matched to that being's inherent characteristics and purpose in the scheme of things in the universe. For instance, an ordinary shade tree which does not bear fruits compared with an apple tree which does the latter as well as the former, is considered of a lower status of perfection in the scheme of things. It is for this reason that an apple tree in an orchard, which grows enough leaves to provide ample shade but for some reason does not bear fruit, is most likely cut down and replaced with one that does. It has not lived

up to its potential, its level of perfection. In other words, although the tree remains useful in many respects, it has failed in that aspect that distinguishes it from the less perfect trees which do not bear fruits.

The same analogy works when comparing humans and animals. If a human being does not exhibit characteristics which rise above those shared with animals, i.e., eating, drinking, seeking comfort, shelter, pleasure, and the continuation of the race, then that human being has not reached his or her full potential, or perfection.

To summarise this point, one can logically claim that the second most important benefit is recognition of these innate, exclusive characteristics, allowing one to see clearly what they are. Such a human being will not allow himself to be corrupted and brought down to the level of animals, having understood his status in the scheme of things, and in the eyes of his Lord. Whoever discovers his true value will not commit any sins. If we truly understand what a precious being we are, our indescribably high potential, and the heights to which we can soar, then we will not allow ourselves to be shackled by sin, and held down.

Speaking of human beings that have risen to the heights of perfection, let us now see what that man of God and His servant Imam 'Ali (a.s.), says on the subject. The following two Hadiths are taken from Nahjul-Balghah:

“Whoever views himself with respect views his desires with disdain.”

In other words, the Imam is saying that once a person becomes aware of himself, understands how precious he or she is, and the worthy goals he can set for himself; his own desires appear light, insignificant, and unworthy to him. Thus, fighting temptation becomes easier, and this is one of the benefits of self-knowledge.

The second Hadith is from the letter that Imam 'Ali sent his son, Imam Hasan (a.s.), advising him on matters important to him. The words are like precious jewels, and we, the ordinary Muslims are more in need of hearing and remembering such advice than the Imam, to whom the letter was addressed:

“Keep yourself above every low thing even though it may take you to your desires, because what you will receive in return is nowhere near worth that which you will have to give of yourself. Do not let anything enslave you, for Allah created you free. “

In the Glorious Qur'an we find verses which point to the people who are totally lost: ***“Most assuredly man is in loss, except those who believe And do good, and enjoin each other to the truth and patience.”*** (103:1–3)

So, as we see in both the Glorious Qur'an and the Hadiths, great emphasis has been placed on the issue of self-knowledge and on the resultant freedom, which ensues. Since there are many good

interpretations written on the Glorious Qur'an, here we will try to provide a careful examination of the words of Imam Ah (a.s.) on the subject as well.

In the second Tradition, we find the word meaning deeds that are inherently ugly and demeaning. The Imam warns us of the grave danger of such deeds to one's soul, for they enslave the spirit and corrupt the soul. He warns us to be ever-vigilant against actions which, although pleasurable, comforting, or convenient are so demeaning that one loses much, much more spiritually than one gains in momentary pleasures or comforts.

In the last sentence of the second Hadith, the Imam tells his son and us that human freedom is such a precious, prized gift of the Almighty God, that any deed, however pleasurable or convenient, which leads to enslavement, is an extremely bad deal. The momentary pleasure passes and the grievous damage persists.

Now let us continue on to another major benefit of self-knowledge. Most people instinctively realise that there are two distinct features to their being: the material, worldly aspect, and the spiritual aspect. Most however, do not understand or believe that the latter is incomparably more important. But in Islam, spiritual affairs rule supreme. One can be an enormously productive member of the society in material terms, and yet be considered unworthy to be called a Muslim if one is corrupt; while the opposite is unthinkable in Islam. So it is no wonder that being aware of and guarding against diseases of the spirit is so stressed in Islam. This extends to all actions, however seemingly insignificant.

There is a pervasive misconception that some deeds do not adversely affect one's soul because they seem unimportant. But we are taught in Islam that every deed, every word one utters, has an effect on one's soul and spirit, reinforcing the faith and purifying the spirit, or undermining the faith and harming one's soul. Words spoken to guide a lost soul are valuable both to the speaker and to the person gone stray. They each benefit in different ways. So there must not be any doubt among faithful Muslims that in Islam, we are taught that every action, every word has consequences for our spiritual well-being, and must be not dismissed as insignificant and trivial.

When The Noble Prophet (S) sent Imam 'Ali (a.s.) to Yemen, he said: "O 'Ali! Do not fight with anyone until you invite him [to Islam] and I swear by Him that if Allah guides one person through you, it will be more precious than all over which the sun rises and sets."

To round up our discussion of this benefit, it may be said that we are clearly and unambiguously told that the most important dimension of our being is the soul, and our actions and thoughts directly affect this prized gift of God.

We might consider it a bit extreme when told that Islam also teaches us that thoughts also must be watched for their effect on the spirit. We are also taught that in most of the cases demeaning one's thoughts may be, so long as one does not act on them one is not severely taken to task by the Lord. But sinful deeds have roots in the spirit, Muslims are admonished against jurisprudence, and for mere

thoughts or narrowly defined one is not punished .

In Islam the immensely complex nature and nurture beings is subjected to two rather distinct set of rules:

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