

The Core of Action: Sincerity of Intention

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Abstract

According to Islamic traditions, actions are only by intentions; the intention of a believer is better than his action; and one's eternal abode is determined by one's intention. These can only be understood by a proper understanding of what is meant by intention. Intention is neither a verbal utterance nor a mental concept. Rather, intention is one's inner disposition and realisation from which one's actions stem.

As one practices to act sincerely for God, his whole being will gradually transform, to the point that he is only motivated by God's cause. That is the highest manifestation of monotheism, which is called sincerity. Part of being motivated by God is to respond to His promises and warnings. Therefore, acting in order to qualify for God's reward or to avoid His punishment is an application of sincere action for the sake of God.

Intention

The Qur'an has repeatedly emphasised that any good deed that we do – such as prayer, charity, offering, migration and jihad – should be done in God's way (*fi sabil Allah*) and sincerely for God's sake.

This condition is also stressed in the narrations. The first tradition in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī is: 'Acts are only by intentions, and for each person is only what he intends. Thus, whoever migrated toward God and His Messenger, then his migration is toward God and His Messenger; and whoever migrated to obtain this world or marry a woman, then his migration is toward what he migrated to.'¹

According to another famous hadith, one who does good deeds for show will be called on the Day of Resurrection, 'O disbeliever! O evil-doer! O traitor! O loser! Your act is lost and your reward is cancelled. You have no share today. Go and seek your reward from whom you acted for!'² In a sacred tradition (*al-hadith al-qudsi*) God says, 'I am the best of partners: whoever associates a partner with Me in his act, I will leave my share for my partner! I do not accept except what is done purely for Me.'³

Indeed intention (*niyyah*) is what gives value to one's action. A robot could be made to do much service, but what it does is only mechanical. Value, praise and reward are concepts that apply to when there is a pure and good intention behind an action. The same act by two individuals can have two completely opposite religious values due to their intentions, even though their acts are exactly the same outwardly.⁴ For example, when a believer enters a room, a person may stand up as an expression of honour, while another person may stand up as an expression of derision.

About eternal reward and punishment in the Hereafter, we read in hadith: 'The inhabitants of the Fire will stay there forever because their intention was to disobey God if they were to live forever; and the inhabitants of the Garden will stay there forever because their intention was to obey God if they were to live forever. Hence, both groups will stay in their abodes eternally because of their intentions.'⁵

'Allamah ʿAbāʿAbā'i explains, 'This hadith refers to the rooting of traits and the strengthening of characteristics in the soul, to the point that the soul's capacity for opposite traits is abolished.'⁶

Intention here means one's inner inclination or disinclination toward embracing and submitting to the truth. If one's whole being is transformed, such that his soul becomes congruent with Hell and inharmonious to Paradise, then his fitting abode will be Hell, to reside there for ages. Therefore, intention should be interpreted not as a mental concept or thought, but as an inner realisation and state of being.

Imam Ali referred to the same idea when he said, 'O people! Indeed what gathers people [in the same group and class] is their satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Indeed only one person killed the she-camel of Thamud, but God included all of them in His punishment because they included themselves by their satisfaction.'⁷

Satisfaction to the sin of others is itself a sin, but what makes it equal to the sinner's act in terms of degree, intensity and the deserved punishment, is if this satisfaction is indicative of the same inner realisation and inclination in the two individuals.

There are many hadiths that identify satisfaction as the reason for why future generations may be blamed or punished because of the acts of their forefathers, as seen in the Qur'an.⁸ Imam al-ʿAdiq said, 'On the Day of Resurrection, God will raise the people based on their intentions.'⁹

Sincerity

Sincerity (*ikhlaṣ*) is the pinnacle of monotheism and the highest stage of faith, especially when it advances from being the quality of one's action to being the quality of one's essence and being.

Sincerity is the state of not being motivated by anything other than God. It is based on the realisation – not just a mental realisation but a spiritual and existential one – that nothing other than God can benefit, harm, pay or take away. It is when one reaches a state of certainty about God's prevailing decree and His sure promises.

Thus, sincerity is the combination of God-reliance (*tawakkul*) and certitude (*yaqin*). That is what makes one not fear or hope anything or anyone other than God, and not act for the pleasure or satisfaction of anyone other than the One.

‘So whoever expects to encounter his Lord – let him act righteously, and not associate anyone with the worship of his Lord’ (Qur’an 18: 110).

However, as much as it is lofty and laudable, it is difficult and scarce:

“But most of them do not believe in Allah without ascribing partners to Him” (Qur’an 12: 106).

We sought everyone else, except our friend; / We failed to reach our journey’s end.

We’ve lost our capital and we are in debt; / All we have bought is sorrow and regret. [10](#)

There is a narration: ‘[All people are doomed except those who know;] and those who know are all doomed except for those who act; and those who act are all doomed except those who are sincere; and the sincere are of a lofty rank.’ [11](#) It is at this stage that Satan will not have the ability to deceive and mislead the person (15:39–40, 38:82–83) because there are no grounds in the person’s soul for Satan to appeal to. This is where the springs of wisdom gush forth from one’s heart and flow on his tongue, [12](#) for God becomes the tongue with which one speaks. [13](#)

Three Classes of Worshippers

There are several narrations that classify the worshippers into three groups: (a) the ‘merchants’, who serve God in temptation for His rewards and Paradise; (b) the ‘slaves’, who serve God in fear of His punishment and Hell; (c) the ‘free spirits’, who serve God out of their sense of gratitude and love for Him, because He deserves to be worshipped. These narrations implicitly or explicitly identify the third group as the loftiest in rank. [14](#)

It is common among many Muslims, including the scholars, to look down upon the worship of God in hope of Paradise or in fear of Hell, as low levels of worship. Some even deem such worship totally void, unacceptable and against the condition of sincere intention. However, these very narrations identify all three groups as worshippers of God, not as polytheists!

Of course, it is a very exalted rank if one acts for God only because He is worthy of it and out of love for Him, but this by no means diminishes the significance of hope and fear. God has recognised hope and fear as legitimate motivations for His worship and righteousness by revealing many verses that describe the rewards and punishments of the Hereafter. The reason why such acts of worship do not contradict sincerity is that these rewards and punishments are also set by God.

This can be deductively posited as follows: (a) These threats and promises derive their validity from

God, Who has set and declared them. (b) Acting upon these threats and promises indicates that the person has accepted and recognised their validity. (c) Hence, one who acts upon them is essentially acting for God, since he is following God's threats and promises.

Moreover, the worship of the lovers is not an alternative to the worship of the 'merchants' or the 'slaves'. Love is not a motivation comparable and parallel to the other motivations. Rather, worship out of love is a stage above and beyond worship out of hope and fear, not contrary or opposite to them.

The lovers' religion is different from all; / God Himself is the one whom they call. [15](#)

In other words, in order to achieve the stage where one worships God only because of Himself, one should start with taking these verses seriously and acting in accordance to these rewards and punishments. This will gradually open new horizons to the worshipper, whereby he experiences such beauty and magnificence that will transform his motivation and elevate his ambition.

Thinking of Thy nearness made me forget / Paradise and its hours: blond and brunette. [16](#)

Do not send me off / To Paradise from Thy door; To stay at Thy door / Is all that I look for. [17](#)

Those who respond to God's promises or threats – more than to the fact that He deserves to be worshipped – should not be considered as polytheists. Their objective in worship stems from their level of religious experience, realisation and cognition. If they get to experience and taste the beauty and truth of God Himself, then they will surely modify their aim and objective.

Otherwise, the fact that they are responding to God's promises and threats – instead of the promises and threats of others, such as the pleasures and pains of this world – is an indication of their sincerity to God. In fact, God has Himself invited His servants to trade and deal with Him (2:245, 9:111, 57:11, 61:10–13), for that is the most lucrative trade, as opposed to the transient gains in dealing with others or chasing this world.

They worship the kings, their armies and squads, / Because they refused to worship their God.

They seek the dogs because they're low; / A lion is higher for them to follow.

A mouse fears a cat; that is its foe; / Would a mouse fear a lion? The answer is no.

A lion is feared by a musk deer; / A mouse is not there to have that fear. [18](#)

Being motivated by an unseen promised reward or an unseen warned punishment is a truly exalted rank and an essential quality of a true believer. That is why one should not downgrade the worship of God out of either fear or temptation. No one has the right to belittle those who seek Paradise and those who are apprehensive of Hell, because God has praised them with the loftiest of extolments in His Book.

These derogatory remarks are especially detrimental for the majority of the people who have not

reached that level of faith and spiritual realisation to worship God only for Himself and without any eye on any gain or pain.

When the hope and fear of Hereafter are diminished and presented as lesser stages of religious service, they are simply dismissed and not taken seriously – but only to be replaced by the trivial hopes and fears of worldly matters.

The most accurate and effective way of presenting the different degrees of worshippers is what is observed in the Qur'an: to emphasise the importance of hope and fear as opposed to dismissing them.

The Buyer with the funds is One and only One; / But people are in doubt: everywhere they run.

Seeking buyers that are bankrupt themselves, / They lost the deal with the Buyer of their selves.

Seek a Buyer Who is searching for you; / In the past and future He is always with you.

Don't grab every buyer that you see in the street; / Against your Beloved why should you cheat?

Even if they buy, you'll not have a gain; / They don't have enough to pay for your brain.

You're blind and deaf due to your greed; / The path of Satan you seek and proceed.

The patients were the ones who found the Buyer; / They avoided the others, and fought their desires. [19](#)

It is narrated from Imams Ali, al-Sajjad and al-Ka'im – with slight variation – that 'Indeed there is no price for you except Paradise, so do not sell yourselves except for that.'[20](#) We also see that the supplications of the Infallibles demonstrate all three levels of worship, because their beings encompassed all levels of perfection. They were the most fearful people of God's punishment, the most hopeful in His mercy, and the most enamoured with His beauty.

This shows that these three motivations are not mutually exclusive, but they can be combined and incorporated together. It is narrated from the Prophet: 'He who knows God the most among you, would be the most fearful of God among you; and I am the most fearful of Him among you.'[21](#)

Hence, when the Qur'an and hadith emphasise sincerity, what is meant is acting for God as opposed to acting for other gods, not as opposed to being motivated by Paradise and Hell, because Paradise and Hell are God's rewards and punishments; they are not separable from Him.

Responding to the incentives that God has set is an extension and application of glorifying God and acting for His sake. At the same time, there are different modes and levels of serving God, according to one's knowledge and experience.

In a long narration, the Prophet described those whom he is eager to see for Abu Dharr as follows:

...They gather in one of the houses of God as if they are strangers. They are anxious due to fear of the Fire and love of Paradise. Who would know their status with God?... Ah! So eager I am toward them! They free themselves from the hardship and pleasure of this world in order to save themselves from eternal punishment and to enter Paradise, for God's pleasure.

O Abu Dharr! Each of them has the reward of seventy martyrs of Badr. O Abu Dharr! Each of them is more precious to God than everything that God has created on the face of earth... If one of them dies it is as if everyone in the sky above this world has died – due to his honour before God...

He prayed for them and called them God's friends (*awliya*'), and then added, 'If it were not for the appointed lifespan that God has written for them, their souls would not settle in their bodies due to fear of punishment and yearning for reward.'²²

Summary

Intention is the orientation of one's whole being. It is not separable from one's views and values, and that is why it is the source of one's actions and what gives value to one's deeds. Sincerity is the state of not being motivated by anything other than God's sake, pleasure, orders, rewards and punishments.

Imam Ali is quoted as saying: 'All action is scattered dust (*haba*') except for what is done purely for God.'²³

Finally, there is no duality between God and His promise of reward or punishment. Rather, acting in fear of Hell or in hope of Paradise is a ladder to gain higher levels of spiritual realisation and consciousness, such that one's aim and ambition goes even beyond that.

To Your lover and knower, / Life would be a pain; And his house and household / Will only be a strain.

*You'll give him both worlds, / And You'll drive him insane; But both worlds are vain / For the is insane in Your chain.*²⁴

I examined everyone: like you there's no one; / Having your love I feel that I've won.

*I dived in the sea but how could there be: / A pearl like you? I couldn't find or see.*²⁵

^{1.} Bukhari, 1/2, 3/119 and 7:231. Narrated with slight variations in Ibn Hanbal, Musnad, 1/25. Muslim, 6/48. Nasa'i, Sunan al-Nasa'i, 1/58–60, 6/158–159 and 7/13. Tirmidhi, 3/100, h 1698. Ibn Majah, 2/1413, h 4227. The narration – especially the first part of it – is also reported in the main Shia books of hadith, sometimes with slight differences: Tahdhib, 1/83, h 67, and 4/186, h 519. Amali, 618, h 1274. Nu'man ibn Muhammad, Da'a'im al-Islam, 1/156. Also see Mizan, 2/390 and 6:187.

^{2.} 'Ayyashi, 1/283, h 295. Thawab, 255. Raw'at al-Wa'in, 2/361. Suyu'i, 1/30.

^{3.} Barqi, 1/252, h 270–271. 'Ayyashi, 2/353, h 94–95. Kafi, 2/295, h 9. abarani, al-Mu'jam al-Kabir, 7/291. Warram, 2/234. Haythami, 10/221.

^{4.} Tasnim, 13/707–709.

^{5.} 'Ayyashi, 2/316, h 158. Kafi, 2/85, h 5. 'Ilal, 2/523, h 1.

- [6.](#) Mizan, 13/212.
- [7.](#) Thaqafi, al-Gharat, 2/398. Nu‘mani, al-Ghaybah, 27. Nahj, Sermon 201.
- [8.](#) Mahasin, 1/262. Wasail, 16/138ff.
- [9.](#) Mahasin, 1/262, h 325.
- [10.](#) Ali Akbar Nughani.
- [11.](#) Sulami, Haqa’iq al-Tafsir, 1/355. Warram, 2/118. ‘Ajluni, Kashf al-Khifa’, 2/312, h 2796.
- [12.](#) Kafi, 2/16, h 6. ‘Uyun, 2/69, h 321. ‘Uddat, 232. Suyu’i, al-Jami‘ al-‘aghir, 2/56, h 8361. Kanz, 3/24, h 5271.
- [13.](#) Bukhari, 7/190. Barqi, 1/291, h 443. Kafi, 2/352, h 7–8. Bayhaqi, al-Sunan al-Kubra, 3/346 and 10/219. Kanz, 7/770, h 21327.
- [14.](#) Kafi, 2/84, h 5. Tuhaf, 246. Nahj, Saying 237.
- [15.](#) Rumi, Mathnawi, vol. 2, line 1774.
- [16.](#) Hafi, ghazal 317.
- [17.](#) Ibid., ghazal 268.
- [18.](#) Rumi, Mathnawi, vol. 3, lines 3001, 3004–3005 and 3008.
- [19.](#) Ibid., vol. 5, lines 1463–1464, 1466–1468 and 1470–1471.
- [20.](#) Kafi, 1/19. Tuhaf, 389 and 391. Nahj, Saying 456. Ghurar, h 4633 and 4626.
- [21.](#) Razi, 32/252.
- [22.](#) Ibn Fahd al-Hilli, al-Tahsin fi ‘ifat al-‘Arifin, 23–26.
- [23.](#) Ghurar, 2896.
- [24.](#) Khwajah ‘Abdullah An‘ari
- [25.](#) Rumi, Divan-i Kabir, ghazal 770.

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