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The process of self-development has different stages. In what follows, I will try to study briefly the whole process and refer to its major stages.

1) Wakefulness or attention to one's self

The very first stage is wakefulness (yaqzah), that is, to awaken from the pre- occupation of worldly engagements and to remove negligence. To awaken is to remember to look after one's piety, life and spirituality. Many scholars such as Imam Khomeini in his book: Jihad-e Akhbar (the Major Jihad), which is a compilation of lectures given by him to Hawzah students, state that the first stage of self-purification is wakefulness. Indeed some mystics believe that this is only a preliminary stage and that the first stage comes after wakefulness. However, there is no doubt that this is the beginning. The departure point is to become awake. We may say that we are all 'awake', but this is a different kind of wakefulness. According to a hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (S) said:

الناس نيام فإذا ماتوا انتبهوا

"The people are asleep and only wake when they die".[1]

When they die, they wake and never go to sleep again. But then it is too late. Then they are like someone who wakes up when the train has gone, when the airplane has flown. At that time, there is no use or benefit in going to the airport because, although you are now awake, you have already missed

the flight. All you can do is to blame yourself and be regretful. You might say that you will catch the next flight but unfortunately there are no more flights. It is the end of the world, that was the last flight and we missed it because we were asleep.

So, let us be awake. If we become conscious only when we die, we cannot do anything, as there is no opportunity to come back. Allah (SWT) talks of the people who ask to be returned, so that they can do something good. He replies:

إِنَّهَا كَلِمَةٌ هُوَ قَائِلُهَا

"This is just some words that this person says" **(*Surah Muminoon 23:100*).**

If he is given a chance, he will not change, and even then, there is no opportunity; they just wait for the day of resurrection. Unfortunately, death has become so familiar or naturalised that we do not think we are going to die, and it will always happen to someone else. According to an Iranian poet, "we are like a group of sheep, taken one by one to the slaughter house; each is enjoying, not thinking that they will be next".

According to a hadith, the Tawrah of Moses says:

عجبت لمن ايقن بالموت كيف يفرح

"I am astonished that someone who is certain that he is going to die, can ever be happy".2

So we need to become alert and wake up before we die. Sometimes this happens through a significant event such as the loss of a relative, severe illness, or in meeting a pious person. However we should not wait for something to happen before changing; we can just change, as there is no guarantee that something will happen to us.

It is very easy to become awake: it just needs determination and for us to think about how important and significant this life, this journey to get closer to Allah (SWT), is to us. This is the only chance that we have to obtain provisions for our eternal journey. According to a hadith, Imam Ali (A.S.) said:

ان الليل والنهار يعملان فيك فاعمل فيهما

"Day and night are constantly affecting you so you should also try to affect them."3

This means that your life is passing by quickly. Every day and every night is making you older. In other words every day and every night is bringing you nearer to your end of life in this world so try to do

something.

There is a beautiful analogy regarding our situation. Life in this world is compared to a rope for a person who has gone into a deep well and is only holding onto that rope. If he loses this rope he will be finished. There are two mice, one white and one black, at the top of the well, gnawing on the rope. The time will come when the rope will definitely break. The mice are very determined and will not go away. This is our situation. The rope represents our life. The white mouse represents day and the black mouse represents night. Day and night are constantly 'gnawing' away at our life and sooner or later we will 'fall' and die.

So we must be awake and be very careful with this life, with this golden opportunity that has been given to us.

2) Knowing one's self

After becoming awake, we should try to find out what resources, opportunities and options are available to us. Now that we are awake, we want to do something. It is like someone who has no work or business and so has no source of income. Everyone tells him to be responsible and do something. He agrees that he should do something but does not know what to do. He cannot start from nothing.

First of all he should discover what kind of abilities and skills he has. He should know what options are available. For example, he should try to learn about the state of the business market. He should find out who has been successful so that he can take them as role models. He should also see who has become bankrupt so that he can learn lessons from their situation and avoid becoming like them.

This is what is called 'self-knowledge' (ma'rifat al-nafs) and is considered to be "the most beneficial knowledge". Why do we always tend to forget about ourselves and know about other things instead? For example, there are some people who may spend all their life studying a rare species of insects but will not spend even one hour sitting down, trying to find out what God has placed inside them.

Muslim mystics say that there are two worlds: an external one consisting of the beautiful natural world of humans, animals, plants and non-living beings created by God and also an internal world inside our very selves. And they say that this world inside us is the greater world. What God has placed inside us is far greater than the whole physical world outside ourselves. This is why we read in a beautiful divine saying (hadith-e qudsi):

لم يسعني سمائي ولا أرضي ووسعني قلب عبدي المؤمن

"Neither my heaven nor my earth could contain Me, it is only the heart of a believing person that has contained Me."[4]

From this hadith, we can understand that our heart must be even greater than all these stars and

planets, than this whole creation that we can see.

So, we need to know ourselves properly. We often underestimate the potential that we have for perfection. There is an endless possibility for perfection before us. Even the most holy people can still advance. There is always further for them to go because the distance between man and God is infinite and so there is always a possibility to go still higher. This is why we pray after tashahhud, "O God! Please accept the intercession of the Holy Prophet (S) for us and also elevate his level". This means that the Prophet (S) can go higher.

Many of us are too easily satisfied with our achievements. We need to be more determined and have greater expectations. If we are satisfied with small things, then we will lose out and maybe we will not even achieve those small things. It is said that once there was a religious scholar (‘alim) whose son had become a student of religion. The father asked his son what he wanted to become in the future. The son answered that he wanted to become like his father. The father replied that he felt very sorry for his son because he himself had wanted to become as much as possible like Imam Ja'far Sadiq, who was his role model, and yet his present situation was all that he had achieved. He told his son that if he only wanted to become like his father then he would not achieve anything. So, we should always have great ambitions and indeed God has created us with such a potentiality inside us.

So, we need to know ourselves, we should believe in our potential and be aware of the different things that can benefit or harm us.

3) Taking care of one’s self

After wakefulness and self- knowledge, we need self-care. It is not enough simply to know things; knowledge should serve us by being put into practice. For example, if you know that smoking kills but have no concern for your health and so continue to smoke, there is no benefit in that knowledge. In fact it just makes you more responsible and accountable because you know. Of course, this does not mean that we should avoid learning. To say we did not know is not a good enough excuse; we must learn and then put what we learn into practice. So we need to have self-care. The Qur’an states:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْفُسَكُمْ ۖ لَا يَضُرُّكُمْ مَنْ ضَلَّ إِذَا اهْتَدَيْتُمْ ۚ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

“O believers, look after yourselves, if you are on the right path, you will not be harmed”. (***Surah Maida 5:105***)

To look after oneself implies practicing one’s social responsibilities as well, since Islam is a religion that asks us to be actively engaged in social life: all with the spirit of wakefulness and consciousness, and knowing what can benefit and harm us.

However, there is something that often happens to people in this state. When they become conscious and sensitive to spiritual issues, then unfortunately instead of being concerned with their own piety, instead of being mostly busy with their own problems, they become judgmental about other people.

For example, they start thinking that this person is useless, that one is careless and another one is not really a believer. This is very dangerous. First of all and most of all a true believer should be busy with his own problems. We understand from hadiths that it is much better for us if we are busy sorting out our own problems and illnesses rather than thinking about others and being judgmental. For example, the Prophet Mohammad is quoted as saying:

طوبى لمن شغله عيبه عن عيوب غيره

Blessed is the one who is so busy thinking about his own deficiencies that he has no time to think about the deficiencies of others.[5]

Thus, we must start with criticising and assessing ourselves before looking at others. Sometimes we have an enormous problem within ourselves but we are not aware of it and yet we notice a tiny amount of that same problem when it is in someone else. For example, we may have eaten something like garlic and do not realise that our mouth smells and yet when we meet someone who smells in some way, we are so quick to think or say something about them.

There is a story in Mathnawi by Rumi that four people had an appointment with a king immediately after midday prayers. They were very concerned not to lose this opportunity to meet the king and did not want to be late. So they decided to say their prayers quickly and then go to meet the king. They started praying as soon as they reached the mosque.

However while they were saying their prayers, the one who calls for prayer (mu'adhdhin) came into the mosque to climb the minaret. They were now unsure and began to wonder whether they had started their prayers too early or whether that day the mu'adhdhin had arrived late.

So, whilst praying, one of them asked the mu'adhdhin whether the time for prayers had already arrived or not. The second person asked the first why he had spoken whilst praying because whether the time had arrived or not he had now made his prayers void by speaking. The third person pointed out that the second person had now also spoken by asking the first one why he had spoken. However the fourth person considered himself to be "very clever". He said: 'Thanks to God that I did not speak!'

So, in this story we see that four people shared the same problem but each could only see it in the other people and not in themselves. In fact they repeated the very same mistake for which they were criticizing the others.

Therefore it is so much better to be very concerned about ourselves rather than about other people.

Sometimes people think that this means they should be indifferent to what is happening around them, in their community or in society. This is not the case. But if we want to be more useful to our community and to society then we should first start with ourselves and then we can help others.

For example, we see that when giving instructions on a plane regarding the use of emergency oxygen masks, they always advise us to attend to ourselves first and then help those next to us. Otherwise, whilst we are trying to help the other person with their mask, we ourselves may collapse.

So, we should have self-care. But how should we care for ourselves? Should we only pray and recite the Qur'an? Should we just serve society by doing community work?

A) Acquiring appropriate beliefs and faith

The very first thing that we need to do is to acquire proper beliefs and a proper understanding of the world. If you want to be a good businessman you must know the market and the people who are in the same business. You need to know the present situation, future possibilities and the factors that work in that particular business.

If we want to be successful in this world we must know Who is the One who has control here. If we need to get permission to start a business we should know where to go to get that permission. In the same way, if we want to start a spiritual 'business' we should know from where to get permission. We should know what laws and regulations apply and should be observed. We should know what provisions are provided and what kind of loans and grants might be given to us.

Sa'di, a famous Iranian poet who wrote Golestan and Bustan, tells a beautiful story. He says that once a person went to do some business in another country. He realized that in that country the bell which they used to hang in the public bath-houses was very cheap to buy. For example, if the bell would have cost $100 in his country then in that country it cost only $1. So he sold all his goods and with whatever money he had, he purchased maybe a thousand bells. Then he expected to return to his country and generate $99 profit on each bell.

So he transported all these bells back to his home town. However the problem was that there were only two or three bath-houses in his town and so no-one wanted to buy the bells. No-one was interested, even when he offered them at half price. So he lost all his capital and became bankrupt because he did not know which were the right kind of goods that would be purchased in his country.

Many people are like this and invest in things in this world which will be of no value in the hereafter. We invest our life, which is the most valuable 'capital' that we have been given, in things which, when we arrive in the hereafter, we will be told were pointless and thus we had wasted this 'capital'.

Hence we need to have faith and to know the way in which our life in this world can secure our happiness in the next world. We must have correct beliefs and we should be especially careful to

understand the connection between our life in this world and our life in the hereafter. About one third of the Glorious Qur'an talks about the hereafter. There is so much emphasis on it to teach us that the eternal life is the thing for which we must really prepare ourselves.

Another useful parable can be found in hadiths. There is an example in the story of the person who worshipped day and night: one day an angel passed by, thinking that with such dedication, this person must have a very high status.

When the angel went close to him, he realised that the person did not have proper understanding of God, as he said "I wish you had a donkey so I could feed him in my field, as I have lots of grass here". This person saw God like a human being, who has a donkey. This kind of faith is not rewarding, and so aqidah is the first certainty that needs to be secured. We must make efforts to gain proper understanding of God the Creator, His position in this world, the belief in Unity, Prophethood, and Resurrection.

Therefore, first we should have correct beliefs, but not the kind of beliefs that we normally learn and can only repeat in a parrot-like fashion. It must be the kind of belief that we have completely absorbed into our very being so that if we say that there is only One God, then our whole body and soul would declare that we are monotheist.[6]

B) Performing acts of piety and refraining from sins and evil deeds

We should try to perform our obligations and observe all the requirements of our faith. Even if we have proper beliefs and perform all our obligations but do not stop committing sins, we will not succeed.

If someone washes his hands ten times a day but continues to touch things which are dirty and polluted, he will become dirty again. It is no use saying that he washed his hands ten times that day. Daily prayer is like a spiritual bath which makes us clean but if we do the same things again afterwards then we are just making ourselves dirty again.

There is a beautiful example of someone who has a carrier bag into which he puts some purchases in order to take them home. But there is a big hole in the bottom of the carrier bag and so whatever he puts into the bag falls out through the hole. He is surprised and wonders how it could be possible that he has filled the bag with at least ten times its capacity but it still remains empty. He wonders where everything is going. In a similar way, depending on our age, we have worshipped God for 10, 20, 30 or 40 years.

But where is the result of this worship? Why are we still the same kind of people? Why are we the same after the month of Ramadan as we were before it? It is because we do good things but in addition to this we also do bad things.

There is another useful example related by Rumi. There was a farmer who used to harvest his wheat and put it into his storeroom, hoping to fill it for the winter. But, to his astonishment, every time he went to the storeroom to fill it with more wheat he discovered that the level of the wheat would be lower than

before and thus the storeroom was never filled. So he was surprised, especially as the storeroom was always locked so that no-one else had access to it to take anything out. He would always carefully lock the door.

So he decided that one night he would have to stay awake inside his storeroom so that he could find out what was happening. So one night he indeed remained awake inside the storeroom, silently watching. After midnight he realized that there were some huge rats coming and taking all the wheat out of the storeroom.

Thus he realized that they were the real cause of the problem. So Rumi tells us that we are like this. There are some rats in our hearts which take away the light of our good deeds. If there are no rats, then where is the light of forty years of praying, the light of forty years of fasting, of going for Hajj, etc.? So we should be very careful not to do any sinful actions. We should not commit even one single sin.

Of course we are human beings and we may make mistakes, but a real believer is the one who, if he makes a mistake, firstly always feels sad and bitter about it and secondly he quickly repents and sincerely decides not to repeat the same mistake again. So, if we commit a sin we must repent as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, amongst some people who are interested in spirituality there are those who think that the religious law (shari'ah) is only needed at the beginning and that afterwards we should be concerned with the requirements of the spiritual journey (tariqah). Sometimes they say that this is like someone who has reached the core and so no longer needs the peel.

But this is a wrong idea because we always need to observe the shari'ah. The Holy Prophet and Imams of the Household of the Prophet (Peace be upon them all) always followed the shari'ah and there is no one who can claim to be more pious than them. There is no incident where the Holy Prophet (S) committed a sin and then said that it was alright for him to do so.

For example he never said that we should not tell lies but that it was allowed for him to do so. Or that we should not drink alcohol or gamble but that for him it was acceptable. Unfortunately nowadays we find that there are some so-called Muslims who follow people calling themselves masters or imams who do not themselves follow the requirements of piety and still their followers believe in them and think that they will never be affected by their unlawful deeds.

However, according to the school of Ahlul Bayt this matter is very clear. We should observe the shari'ah but this is not enough. There are two different ways of looking at shari'ah. One is to believe that the shari'ah is only for the beginner and that after we reach the higher levels we no longer need it. This is what some Sufis do. The second way is to say that the shari'a is always needed but that by only following shari'ah we will always remain at the lowest level.

If we want to go to the higher levels, in addition to the shari'ah we should try to go beyond the

performance of mere rituals to discover the spirit contained within them. An example which might help is that of a person who is at primary school. If someone is at primary school and they feel satisfied with that, then their education will always remain incomplete. They need to go on to secondary school, to high school and then to university. But we cannot say that we will go to secondary school and once there we will forget about everything learnt at primary school. Or that when we go to university we will forget about everything learnt at high school. This will not work.

It has to be noted that nothing can replace performance of the obligations and refraining from the sins. In Nahj al-Balaghah, Imam Ali says:

> لا تكن ممن يرجو الآخرة بغير عمل ويؤخر التوبة بطول الأمل

"Do not be one of the people who have hope for the hereafter without having good practice and who postpone repentance because he is too ambitious".7

If we maintain proper practice, little by little, the light of our deeds will enlighten our hearts. Even if you do little good things, it can be built upon, as long as you do not commit sins. The Prophet Muhammad (S) told Abu Dharr:

> يا أبا ذر يكفي من الدعاء مع البر ما يكفي الطعام من الملح يا أبا ذر مثل الذي يدعو بغير عمل كمثل الذي يرمي بغير وتر

"O Abu Dharr, with piety, you need to supplicate just the amount of salt you have on your food. O Abu Dharr, the example of the one who supplicates without practice is like the one who tries to shoot an arrow without rubber." 8

On the other hand, if someone commits sins the performance of lots of good deeds will not help. We cannot compensate for sins with good deeds. The Qur'an says:

> وَاتْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأَ ابْنَيْ آدَمَ بِالْحَقِّ إِذْ قَرَّبَا قُرْبَانًا فَتُقُبِّلَ مِنْ أَحَدِهِمَا وَلَمْ يُتَقَبَّلْ مِنَ الْآخَرِ قَالَ لَأَقْتُلَنَّكَ ۖ قَالَ إِنَّمَا يَتَقَبَّلُ اللَّهُ مِنَ الْمُتَّقِينَ

"God only accepts from the pious people". (***Surah Maida 5:27***)

C) Acquiring good characteristics and removing bad ones

In addition to having proper beliefs, performing our obligations and refraining from sins, we need to look into the qualities of our heart or spirit and find out what good qualities we lack so that we achieve them and what bad qualities we have so that we can remove them.

This is what we normally learn in the science of Akhlaq (morality) and is much more difficult than having proper beliefs or proper practice. We often have bad habits which are difficult to change or even to notice, because they have almost become part of us. In this situation we need to struggle and we need cure.

For example a person may be fearful. As soon as it gets dark, they become frightened. Sometimes the person may be very determined to overcome this fear but it is still very difficult and needs some kind of treatment. Somehow it is like a cancer which needs difficult therapy. Firstly we must identify our bad habits and then we should try to promise ourselves that we will not do anything according to that habit because if we act according to a bad habit it becomes stronger and stronger.

For example we may have a bad habit which we cannot remove immediately, but if we do not actually act according to that habit then gradually it becomes weaker and weaker. There are also specific solutions for particular bad habits depending on what kind of habits they are. So the general advice and solution is not to act according to a bad habit but also to apply specific solutions for the bad habits or qualities. For example if someone wants to stop smoking there are certain techniques to help break this habit which would not work for another habit.

Sometimes after decades you can become sure that you are good, and then you realise that you are bad. An example is someone who was always attending in the first row in the jamaat prayer, and after many years he realised it was not for the sake of Allah, since once when he came late and had to pray in the last row, he felt ashamed that people would think that he was not in the first row. He realised that it was for the praise of others that he was always early and in the first row.

On the contrary, one may refer to an incident about Ayatollah Shaykh Mohammed Husayn Isfahani Qarawi, the teacher of the late Ayatollah Khu'i. Once some people on a street in Najaf, saw that he was smiling and happy and someone asked him why he was happy. The Ayatollah replied that his bag of vegetables had fallen down, and when he started collecting them he was not concerned that people were looking at him.

This made him happy, because he remembered another incident that had taken place in the early years of his study at the Hawza. At that time he had an expensive tasbih as he was rich, and when it broke, he did not collect the beads since didn't want people to look at him. Now he felt content, that even though he was a great scholar, he did not feel bad that people were looking at him while he was picking up vegetables. At that point, he felt that there was no sense of pride in him.

In works such as Mi'raj al-Sa'adah and Jami' al-Sa'adah we learn different faculties of our soul and the corresponding virtues and vices of each. We also learn the methods for obtaining the virtues and removing the vices.

D) Continuing the process of self-development until one becomes a true servant who meets his Lord

We should continue this process. It is a lifelong challenge which cannot be given a time limit of one month or one year or ten years after which time we could feel that we have completed it and allow ourselves to relax.

On the contrary, as long as we remain in this world, up to the very last moment of our life, we must be careful. And we must not waste any opportunity. There is no age of retirement or graduation, because however much we manage to acquire, firstly it is not guaranteed that we will preserve them and secondly, even if we manage to maintain them, they will not constitute sufficient provision for our eternal journey.

The Qur'an states,

وَاعْبُدْ رَبَّكَ حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِيَكَ الْيَقِينُ

"And worship your Lord till certainty comes to you" (***Surah Hijr 15:99***).

Before we meet Him, there is no sense of relaxation, retirement, graduation or rest. InshaAllah when we meet Him, then we can rest. So we must continue this process until we meet Him and He is happy with us.

There is an interesting story illustrating our situation. There was a group of people who were going to be sent to a dark tunnel. They were told that when they entered the corridor it would be very dark and they would not be able to see anything.

They were told that they must go from one end of this tunnel to the other end and that on the floor there would be some stones which they could pick up and bring out. They were told that if they took the stones they would regret it, but that they would also regret it if they did not take the stones! Then they were sent into the corridor. Some people thought that it was not worth collecting the stones because they would regret doing so.

Some others thought, out of curiosity, that they might as well take some stones to see what they were, even if they might regret it later. Thus some collected stones whilst others did not and then they all came out of the corridor. When they were outside again, in daylight, those people who had collected stones realised that they were actually very expensive jewels.

Those people who had not taken any stones saw this and became very angry. They started to protest, asking why they had been told that they would regret collecting the stones. Then they were told that although those people who do not collect any stones regretted this, even those who did take some

regretted that they had not taken more and wished that they had collected more by filling their pockets as well.

So this is what we should do. We should make sure that our hands and pockets are overflowing with good characteristics and good deeds, get the benefit of them in this world and then take them to the hereafter.

Summary

There are various stages one must go through on the path of self-building. We must first awaken from our slumber of negligence and realise the reality of our existence: only then will we know ourselves and take care of our actions. This must be coupled with true beliefs and faith in the One God. Faith is not complete without good actions and so we must also refrain from forbidden acts.

Lastly, we must rid our soul of bad qualities and habits. Although the path is difficult to embark upon, Insha'Allah with Allah (SWT)'s grace we shall gain the tawfeeq to complete these stages and achieve proximity to Him with ease.

1. Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 50, p. 134.
2. Irshad al-Qulub, Vol. 1, p. 74.
3. Ghurar al-Hikam, No. 120.
4. Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 55, p. 39
5. For example, see Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 1, p. 205.
6. Being a good, kind and caring person is necessary but not sufficient to attain a place in heaven: we must also have faith. If people are good in their dealing with others, and have no faith, there is no chance to go to heaven: maybe they will not be sent to Hell, or their punishment will be reduced, but there is no way of attaining heaven. To believe in God, as the One and only Creator is a necessary and fundamental belief.
7. Nahj al-Balaghah, Wise Saying No. 146 (150).
8. Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 74, p. 85.

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