

Intention {niyyah}

The first essential element {*rukʿn*} of prayer is the intention {*niyyah*}.

Intention means that we have to know what we are doing, what we are reciting, and for whom and for what a certain movement is made.

The value of every deed lies in the intention and motive behind it; not merely in the deed itself. Thus, the quality of the actions of a person who stops on a red traffic light in order to maintain order and respect for the law is different from that of a person who carries out the same actions but out of fear of the traffic officer or of the fine that he might receive for violating traffic regulations. In all forms of worship, especially in prayer, intention occupies a special importance.

In principle, what makes an action a form of worship is the divine intention behind it. If such an intention is not present, even if the outward appearance of a deed is good and proper, it would not have the value of worship.

In this regard, the Holy Prophet of Islam (S) said:

إِنَّمَا الْأَعْمَالُ بِالنِّيَّاتِ.

“Verily, the action is (judged) by the intention (behind it).”^{[1](#)}

Yes, the criterion for an action to be judged materialistic or spiritual lies in the intention and motives behind it.

Sincere Intention

Sincere intention means that man acts for the sake of God only and in the depth of his being, God and His pleasure are his aims, without expecting reward, gratitude or admiration from others.^{[2](#)}

The loaves of bread that the *Ahl al-Bayt* of the Messenger of Allah (S) gave to the orphans, captives and poor on successive nights at the time of breaking fast {*iftar*} did not have much material value, but

since they were given sincerely, on this account God revealed a *surah*.[3](#)

And concerning it, ‘Attar an-Nayshaburi says:

گذشته زین جهان، وصف سنانش

گذشته زآن جهان، وصف سه ناناش

No one in this world can describe his sword. No one in the hereafter can describe his three loaves of bread.

We read in history that a certain person was slain in the battlefield and everybody said: “He is a martyr {*shahid*}.” But the Prophet (S) said: “He was killed in the way of a donkey {*qatil al-himar*}!” The people were astonished, but the Prophet (S) said: “His aim in going to the battlefield was not God; rather, when he saw that the enemy was riding a good donkey, he said to himself: ‘I will kill him and take his donkey as war booty {*ghanimah*}.’ But he did not succeed and that infidel killed him instead. So, he was killed in the way of a donkey {*qatil al-himar*}!”[4](#)

Making one’s intention sincere is indeed a difficult and taxing work. Sometimes, wicked thoughts penetrate the soul of man to such an extent that he himself is unaware of it. As such, it is narrated in the tradition that ostentation {*riya*} in matters of worship and polytheism {*shirk*} are more subtle and silent than the movement of a black ant on a black rock during a dark night.[5](#)

So many individuals imagine that their intention is nearness {*qurb*} to Allah, but during the ups and downs of their lives, it becomes obvious that their motive is not a hundred percent pure and sincere. In the words of ‘Allamah Shahid Mutahhari, intention means self-awareness, and thus, the value of worship lies on gnosis and awareness. We read in a tradition:

نِيَّةُ الْمُؤْمِنِ خَيْرٌ مِنْ عَمَلِهِ.

“The intention of the believer is more valuable than his action.”[6](#)

Just like the comparison between body and soul, the soul is better than the body and the humanity of man is related to his soul. In comparing intention and action, intention is better than the act itself because it is the spirit of the action.

Intention is so valuable that even if a person is unable to perform a good deed, God will reward him for he had the intention to do so.[7](#)

The motive for seeking nearness {qurb} to Allah

The motive for nearness {*qurb*} means seeking proximity to the Divine Station. When it is said, “So—and-so is near or close to a certain national official,” what is meant is not spatial, bodily and physical nearness, for if it were such, the office attendants are the closest or nearest to him. Rather, what is meant by this nearness is spiritual, emotional in status and nearness in intimacy.

Doing deeds seeking the pleasure of God does not mean that God would be influenced by our deeds and change His attitude or position toward us, and as such, He becomes the subject of events and change. Instead, “nearness to Allah” means exaltation of the spirit through the ladder of existence whose consequence is the acquisition of influence in the creation. That is, proximity to the Fountainhead of Creation and finding Him in one’s heart.

Just as there are differences in the levels of existence among inanimate objects, plants, animals, and human beings, there are also differences on the level of human beings with respect to proximity to the Fountainhead of Creation. Man could attain such nearness to God and be the nearest to Him so that he becomes the vicegerent of Allah on the earth.

Worship which is motivated by nearness {*qurb*} will make man more luminous and perfect and have more existential capacity {*zarfiyyat-e wujudi*}. All forms of worship, recommended prayers in particular, have significant roles in this affair, just as we read in a *hadith*:

لَا يَزَالُ الْعَبْدُ يَتَقَرَّبُ إِلَى النَّوَافِلِ.

That is, man can always get nearer to God through recommended prayers.⁸

Obligatory prayer is possibly done on account of fear of hell and the divine wrath, but the optional prayer is a sign of love and the secret of love to the Worshipped Being {*ma’bud*}.

The degrees of proximity {qurb}

The term “*darajat*” {degrees} has been mentioned frequently in the Qur’an and it has appeared with diverse interpretations—a fact which elicits subtle points. For some, the Qur’an states: “*For them, there are degrees.*”⁹ For others, however, it says: “*They (themselves) are degrees.*”¹⁰ It is like the case of great figures who even if they sit at the lower section of an assembly, that section can become “high”; they are themselves makers of degree and rank, and are not subject to degree and station.

This spiritual ranking is not exclusive to human beings; for, there is also hierarchy among the angels. The Qur’an thus says regarding Jibra’il (Archangel Gabriel) (‘a): “*One who is heard and trustworthy as well.*”¹¹

In any case, the degrees of human beings in obedience to God are not similar:

1. Sometimes man obeys {*muti*}, but not out of pleasure.
2. At some other times, he obeys {*muti*} as well as loves {*muhibb*}; that is, he obeys God based on love and affection.
3. There are also times when he attains perfect gnosis {*ma'rifah*} far higher than obedience {*ita'ah*} and love {*muhabbah*} and whatever he sees is only God. Hadrat 'Ali ('a) says:

مَا رَأَيْتُ شَيْئًا إِلَّا وَرَأَيْتُ اللَّهَ قَبْلَهُ وَبَعْدَهُ وَمَعَهُ

“I do not see anything except God, before it, after it and with it.” ¹²

We have to love God for the sake of God

It is said that in order to test the loyalty of his courtiers, Sultan Mahmud Ghaznawi set out with a caravan and placed an unlocked container of jewelry on a camel. Along the way, they reached a valley. He roused the camel and thus the container turned upside down and the jewels fell into the valley.

The Sultan said: “Whatever jewels one may get belongs to him.” Those who were around him left him, and they engaged themselves in amassing gold and silver. Meanwhile, it was observed that Ayyaz had abandoned the jewels and pursued the Sultan. The Sultan asked him: “Why did you not amass jewels?” In reply, Ayyaz said:

منم در قفای تو می تاختم

ز خدمت نعمت نپرداختم

For me, I prefer to cling to you and thus I did not serve the grace {ni'mah}.

Then, from this event Mawlawi concludes:

گر از دوست چشمت به احسان اوست

تو در بند خویشی نه در بند دوست

خلاف طریقت بود کاولیاء

تمنا کنند از خدا جز خدا

If you are hoping for the Friend's grace, you love yourself not the Friend.

It is contrary to the spiritual path {tariqah} of the awliya' to beseech God something other than God.

The Qur'an has strongly condemned those who call on God only for their own sakes and remember Him only in times of problems and at other times forget or even deny Him:

﴿ فَإِذَا رَكِبُوا فِي الْفُلِكِ دَعَوْا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ فَلَمَّا نَجَّاهُمْ إِلَى الْبَرِّ إِذَا هُمْ يُشْرِكُونَ ﴾

“When they board the ship, they invoke Allah putting exclusive faith in Him, but when He delivers them to land, behold, they ascribe partners {to Him}, being ungrateful for what We have given them!”¹³

At any rate, working for one's self is egotism; for the sake of the people is idol-worship; and working for the sake of God and His creatures is dualism; and making one's work and that of the creatures for the sake of God is worship of God.

We thus read in the litanies {munajat}:

إِلَهِي مَا عَبَدْتُكَ خَوْفًا مِنْ نَارِكَ وَلَا طَمَعًا فِي جَنَّتِكَ بَلْ وَجَدْتُكَ أَهْلًا لِلْعِبَادَةِ فَعَبَدْتُكَ.

“O God! My worship is not out of fear of hell or desire for Your paradise. Rather, it is because I found You worthy of being worshipped and thus I worshipped You.”¹⁴

Yes, only traders work to earn profits and only slaves work out of fear, but free and noble men worship Him to express their gratitude for the divine graces, just as has been narrated in the words of the Infallibles {ma'sumin}¹⁵ (‘a):

إِنَّ قَوْمًا عَبَدُوا اللَّهَ رَغْبَةً فَتِلْكَ عِبَادَةُ التُّجَّارِ وَإِنَّ قَوْمًا عَبَدُوا اللَّهَ رَهْبَةً فَتِلْكَ عِبَادَةُ الْعَبِيدِ وَإِنَّ قَوْمًا عَبَدُوا اللَّهَ شُكْرًا فَتِلْكَ عِبَادَةُ الْأَحْرَارِ.

“Indeed there is a group that worships Allah for gain; that is the worship of the trader. There is a group that worships Allah out of fear; that is the worship of the slave. And there is a group that worships Allah out of gratitude; that is the worship of the free.”¹⁶

In the language of Hafiz,¹⁷

در ضمیر ما نمی گنجد بغیر از دوست کس

هر دو عالم را به دشمن ده که ما را دوست بس

There is no one in our hearts (minds) but the Friend. Give the two worlds to the enemy as the Friend suffices for us.

In materialistic love, the person loves his object of love for himself, but in spiritual love the person dedicates himself to the Beloved. In the Supplication of Kumayl {*du'a' kumayl*},¹⁸ 'Ali ('a) says:

وَاجْعَلْ قَلْبِي بِحُبِّكَ مُتَمِّمًا

“O Lord! Make my heart enthralled by Your love!”

Attainment of the state of proximity {qurb}

Attainment of the divine proximity {*qurb-e ilahi*} and motive for nearness {*qurbah*} is achieved in two ways:

One is to recognize the grandeur and station of God and the other is to recognize the meanness and abjectness of other than Him.

The Qur'an always mentions the divine favors and graces to the servants (of God) so as to make man enamored by the love for God. Stating His Attributes, His creatures, His material and spiritual assistance and the many favors, great and small—all in all are meant to enhance our love for God.

On the other hand, there are many verses which indicate the weakness and meanness of other than God, saying: Anyone and anything other than God have neither honor nor power. Even if they combine together to create a fly, they would not be able to do so. Except Him who could answer the call of helpless and the indigent? How could it be proper to discuss others in association with God and regard them as equal to and partners of God?

A Recollection

One of the *maraji' at-taqlid*¹⁹ of the Shi'ah world was Ayatullah al-'Uzma Burujerdi. During days of mourning, he used to hold mourning ceremonies in his residence. In one of these assemblies, he was not feeling well. So, he was resting in his private room while listening to the speeches of the orators.

One of those present in the mourning assembly said: “Extend *salawah* (invocation of blessings to the

Prophet and his progeny (‘a)) for the sake of the health and safety of the Imam of the Time and Aqa Burujerdi!”

Suddenly, they found out that he was knocking the door with his staff. His near relatives came and asked: “Is there anything we can do for you?” This great *marja‘ at-taqlid* said: “Why did you mention my name along with the name of the Imam of the Time (‘a)? I do not have the worth for you to mention my name along with the name of the Imam and invoke blessings {*salawah*} on us both.”²⁰

This religious authority who was a deputy {*na’ib*} of the Imam of the Time (‘a) was not willing to let his name be mentioned along with the name of an infallible Imam, but many of us, on account of incorrect understanding and impoliteness, place the names of weak and thoroughly needy creatures along with the name of God, the Omnipotent, Absolute and Exalted, as if we regard them as equals.

Quality or quantity?

Islam has paid much attention to the manner of performing a task and the underlying motive and purpose behind it. The Qur’an praises the *better acts* and not the *amount of acts accomplished*, saying:

﴿لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا﴾

“That He may test you {to see} which of you is best in conduct.”²¹

While in a state of *ruku‘* {bowing down}, Hadrat ‘Ali (‘a) gave his ring to a beggar, and on account of this, a verse {*ayah*} of the Qur’an was revealed. Some people imagine that the reason behind the revelation of a verse because of a ring was that the ring was precious and thus they have said: “The value of the ring was equal to the tax and revenue of all of Shamat.”²²

This is while a ring with such a price could never be consistent with the simplicity {*zuhd*} of ‘Ali (‘a). It was equally incompatible with his sense of justice for him to have such a ring on his hand while some people were in a state of poverty and indigence. But the truth of the matter is that it was on account of the quality of the deed and not its quantity, and on account of the sincerity and intention for nearness {*qurbah*} and not the weight and magnitude of the ring’s value that the following verse was revealed:

﴿إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَهُمْ رَاكِعُونَ﴾

“Your guardian is only Allah, His Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the zakat while bowing down.”²³

A Recollection

Bahlul saw a group of people constructing a mosque and claiming that they were doing so for the sake of God. He inscribed on a stone: “The builder of this stone is Bahlul,” and placed it at the door of the mosque one night. The following day, when the workers saw the inscribed stone, they reported it to Harun ar-Rashid. So, he summoned Bahlul and asked him: “Why have you assumed ownership of a mosque I am constructing?”

Bahlul replied: “If you are really constructing the mosque for the sake of God, then let my name be inscribed therein (as the owner). Anyway, God knows who the real builder is. Besides, He will not commit any mistakes in giving the reward. If it is really for the sake of God, whether my name or your name is inscribed there does not matter.

In doing so, Bahlul let him understand that he had no intention for nearness {*qurbah*} (to Allah), but rather for desire and fame. For this reason, the Qur’an likens the deeds of the infidels {*kuffar*} to a mirage which seems to be water but it is not:

﴿وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَعْمَالُهُمْ كَسَرَابٍ بِقِيعَةٍ يَحْسَبُهُ الظَّمَانُ مَاءً﴾

“As for the faithless, their works are like a mirage in a plain, which the thirsty man supposes to be water.”²⁴

In principle, Islam regards an act as righteous if its four constitutive elements are good: the components of the action, the motive, means, and method.

The motive for nearness {*qurbah*} is necessary not only at the beginning of an act; rather, the intention for divine proximity should remain throughout the course of the action otherwise the act in its entirety becomes void.

If the motor of an airplane malfunctions for only a minute, the airplane will definitely come crashing down. Polytheism {*shirk*} or ostentation {*riya*} in the intention {*niyyah*}, though for only a moment, will extinguish the entire act and render it useless.

Another recollection

On a certain flight, the passengers of an airplane preparing for take-off were asked to disembark from the aircraft and the flight was delayed for many hours. I asked about the reason behind the delay. Someone said: “A cockroach had been seen in the aircraft!” I exclaimed: “All this delay is because of a cockroach?!”

It was said in reply: “Yes, because there have been many cases when a cockroach would gnaw through

a wire and the control system of the aircraft would malfunction and this could lead to a mishap.”

Many good deeds are supposed to lead to man’s ascension toward God, but because of a spiritual vice, not only do they not lead to his ascension; instead, they would lead to his fall.

The intention gives value to the deed

Let us assume that out of oppression and aggression, someone killed another and it became known later that the victim had been a criminal who was supposed to have been executed. In this case, what the killer had done was beneficial, however the people will not praise the murderer because his intention was killing an innocent person and not executing a corruptor on the earth {*mufsid fi’l-ard*}.

Thus, the usefulness of a work is not enough for it to be regarded as a righteous act. In fact, it is necessary for it to be accompanied by a pure intention as well.

In all instances, the Qur’an lays stress on the intention for nearness {*qurbah*} (to Allah) whether in the case of *khums*, *zakah* and other financial matters, or in the case of war and *jihad* against the enemy. The fact that the Qur’an emphasizes such phrases as “*In the way of Allah*,”^{[25](#)} “*For the sake of Allah*,”^{[26](#)} and “*Seeking the pleasure of Allah*”^{[27](#)} is an indication of the importance of the intention for nearness {*qurbah*} to Allah.

If those who are performing beneficial acts on behalf of the people by constructing schools, hospitals, roads, and dormitories have no divine intention, they have committed an injustice to themselves because they themselves will not benefit from those deeds although others will get much benefit from them.

That the Qur’an always mentions righteous deeds along with faith, saying:

“Those who have faith and do righteous deeds,”^{[28](#)}

or

“Whoever acts righteously, {whether} male or female, should he (or she) be faithful”^{[29](#)}

is because of the fact that the goodness of an act alone is not enough; rather, the goodness of the doer is also required.

Two historical accounts

1. Bilal al-Habashi, who was the caller to prayer {*mu’adhdhin*} of the Holy Prophet (S), would pronounce “sh” {*shin*} as “s” {*sin*} in the recital of the sentence, “*Ashhadu an la ilaha illa’llah*” as he had a defect in pronunciation. The people criticized it, but the Prophet (S) said: “The *sin* of Bilal is *shin* for God.”^{[30](#)}

Although outwardly his work was defective, since he had the motive for nearness {*qurbah*} and good

intentions, he received the reward.

2. ‘Abd Allah ibn Maktum was one of the sincere Companions of the Prophet (S) and a blind man. One day, this great Companion entered into an assembly where the Prophet (S) and some people were busy talking. As he could not see the other people in the assembly, he talked loudly. Being annoyed, one of those who were present in the assembly frowned at him.

In spite of the fact that frowning and smiling do not make any difference to a blind person as he cannot see, the Qur’an revealed a whole *surah* on account of that very frowning, and reproached the person who frowned in ten successive verses {*ayat*}:

عَبَسَ وَتَوَلَّى * أَنْ جَاءَهُ الْأَعْمَى * وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّهٗ يَزَكَّى * أَوْ يَذَّكَّرُ فَتَنْفَعَهُ الذِّكْرَى * أَمَّا مَنْ اسْتَعْجَلَ * فَأَنْتَ لَهُ ﴿١﴾
تَصَدَّى * وَمَا عَلَيْكَ أَلَّا يَزَكَّى * وَأَمَّا مَنْ جَاءَكَ يَسْعَى * وَهُوَ يَخْشَى * فَأَنْتَ عَنْهُ تَلَهَّى ﴿٢﴾

“He frowned and turned away when the blind man approached him. And how do you know, maybe he would purify himself, or take admonition, and the admonition would benefit him! But as for someone who is self-complacent, you attend to him, though you are not liable if he does not purify himself. But he who comes hurrying to you, while he fears {Allah}, you are neglectful of him.”³¹

So, the criterion of a deed is not its usefulness or harmfulness with which we would evaluate it and say: “If an action gives benefit to others, it is a righteous deed and if it renders harm then it is an impious act.” Instead, we have to assess the relationship of the action with the person himself—what were his motives in doing it? Or, how is the action per se if it renders neither benefit nor harm to others?

Yes, in the school {*maktab*} of the prophets (‘a), morality {*akhlaq*} has essential {*dhati*} value and not merely accidental {*aradi*} value. It is not like the morality of a person which is meant to attract customers, maximize the volume of production and gather people around him.

In the episode of the ‘*abasa* {he who frowned}, the criticism is anchored on this: Why did you frown at the blind man? Although the blind man cannot see you, frowning at a believer is in itself an abhorrent act.

In any case, the motive for nearness {*qurbah*} means that all actions must be done according to divine criteria and should not have dire political and social impact upon others.

The motive for nearness {*qurbah*} means that an act must be done for the sake of God regardless of its resultant joy or pain. In describing the true believer, the Qur’an states:

﴿يُجَاهِدُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا يَخَافُونَ لَوْمَةَ لَائِمٍ﴾

“(They) wage jihad in the way of Allah, not fearing the blame of any blamer.”³²

The motive for nearness {*qurbah*} means that one must say the truth and not be concerned about anything or anybody except Him, just as the Qur’an thus describes the divine propagators:

﴿الَّذِينَ يُبَلِّغُونَ رِسَالَاتِ اللَّهِ وَ يَخْشَوْنَهُ وَ لَا يَخْشَوْنَ أَحَدًا إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَ كَفَى بِاللَّهِ حَسِيبًا﴾

“Such as deliver the messages of Allah and fear Him, and fear no one except Allah, and Allah suffices as reckoner.”³³

A recollection

One day, I was engrossed in doing supplication {*du‘a*} and paying homage {*ziyarah*} in the holy shrine of Imam ar-Rida (‘a). One of the pilgrims {*za‘irin*} sat beside me and as he recognized me from my TV program every Friday night, he gave me a sum of money, saying: “Aqa Qara’ati! Give this money to the poor.” I said: “Like you, I have also come here for *ziyarah* and (here) in Mashhad I do not know of any poor people. You give it to the poor yourself.”

After sometime, he pleaded with me again and I also repeated my argument, and then I resumed supplication.

He repeated his plea for the third time. I was annoyed and said: “Today, with twenty tumans³⁴ you disturbed my concentration three times. Please do not disturb me. You yourself have to give this money to the poor.” He said: “Aqa Qara’ati! This is not twenty tumans; it is one thousand tumans.”

I was thinking that he wanted to give twenty tumans to the poor. I reflected for some time and my anger faded away. I said to him: “There is an institution here for helping the orphans.” He said: “It is up to you. You spend it as you deem it appropriate.” He gave the money to me and left.

I put down the book of supplication and started reflecting. If it is for the sake of God, what is the difference between twenty tumans and one thousand tumans? I realized that this scene was a test for me, reminding me that the motive for nearness {*qurbah*} had not yet become alive in me.

One of the signs of sincerity is that the volume of work, the individuals involved, the places, types of work, and situations make no difference for the person. His only concern is to seek the pleasure of God regardless of whether he benefits from it or not, or the people would know or not, support it or not.

Of course, humanitarianism and doing something for the people is nobler than egotism, but in the absence of a divine motive, it has no divine value.

In the words of Shahid Mutahhari, the motive for nearness {*qurbah*} is an essential condition {*shart-e*

dhati} and not a contractual and delegated condition; it is a creational {*takwini*} condition and not a ceremonial {*tashrifati*} one.[35](#)

If we say: The condition for reaching Mecca is traversing the way to the city, this is a natural and essential condition, and not a contractual one. Similarly, the condition to attain the station of nearness to Allah is to have the motive for nearness {*qurbah*} and this is an essential condition.

The effects and blessings of a pure intention

Through a cursory glance at the verses of the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions, we shall find out many effects and blessings of having a pure intention, some of which we shall mention concisely below:

1. Anyone who has a good intention shall have abundant provisions.[36](#) Perhaps this *hadith* means that because of his good intention, his behavior and treatment of people is somehow pleasant and naturally, more people will be attracted to his business and thus he will earn more income.

2. A good intention increases man's success and opportunity, makes his life pure and desirable, and wins him more friends.[37](#)

Divine favors for individuals depend on their having a good intention. The purer and more sincere their intention is, the more divine favors they will obtain.

3. It endows long life to man.

It is narrated in the traditions: If a person who just performed *Hajj* pilgrimage would intend and decide when he is returning home to go to *Hajj* again the following year, God will prolong his life on account of that good intention.[38](#)

4. A good intention compensates for one's past (sins). 'Ali ('a) says: If a sinner having a good intention repents, God will return to him whatever is taken from him as a remuneration (for his sins), and set right whatever problem he might have in his work.[39](#)

5. God will give the reward of a good deed to a person for intending to do a good act even if he actually fails to do so. By having a sincere intention, the unfulfilled works of a person shall be counted, as it has been narrated in the traditions: If a faithful person would say, 'If God had given amenities to me, I would have done this and that', and if this wish is sincere, God will grant him the reward of those deeds.[40](#)

Even if he sincerely wishes for martyrdom and prays to God for his martyrdom, God will grant him the station of a martyr though he departs from this world on his bed.[41](#) It is enough of a favor that God will give reward for a decision to do a good deed, but regarding an intention to commit a sin, He will not set a punishment for it unless it is actually done.[42](#)

6. A pure intention can make the most materialistic affairs of life a means for man's nearness {*qurb*} to

Allah. In the same manner, the most spiritual states such as prostration {*sujud*} and weeping, if they are motivated by ostentation {*riya*}, will turn into a means of drifting away from God.

We read in the traditions: Just as the body having a soul is firm, religion with a sincere intention is firm.⁴³ Having a pure heart and good intention are among the divine assets and treasures, and the better the intention the more the value this treasure will have.⁴⁴ Having a serious intention, decision and will power will multiply the physical ability of man.

Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) says: “On the Day of Resurrection, God will group the people according to the intentions they have.”⁴⁵

For one whose aim is the performance of a duty, it is not important for him the type of work and its outcome. As the Qur’an says,

﴿وَمَنْ يُقَاتِلْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَيُقْتَلْ أَوْ يَغْلِبْ فَسَوْفَ نُؤْتِيهِ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا﴾

“And whoever fights in the way of Allah, and then is slain or conquers, soon We shall give him a great reward.”⁴⁶

What is important is to struggle in the way of God, but as to whether its outcome is defeat or victory has no effect on the divine reward. In another place, the Qur’an states:

﴿وَمَنْ يَخْرُجْ مِنْ بَيْتِهِ مُهَاجِرًا إِلَى اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ثُمَّ يُدْرِكُهُ الْمَوْتُ فَقَدْ وَقَعَ أَجْرُهُ عَلَى اللَّهِ﴾

“And whoever leaves his home migrating toward Allah and His Apostle, and is then overtaken by death, his reward shall certainly fall on Allah.”⁴⁷

It can also be readily inferred from this verse that if a person leaves his home for the sake of God, even though he does not reach his destination, he would be rewarded. What is important is the intention behind the act and not the act itself. What is important is to take a step along the way and not reaching the destination.

The Messenger of Allah (S) said to Abu Dharr: “Decide to do a good deed though you might not succeed in doing so; for, it is this decision that will take you out from the circle of the neglectful.”⁴⁸

We read in another *hadith*: “Any deed which is accompanied by a divine intention is great even if that work is simple and trivial.”⁴⁹

On the contrary, the most important deeds, if they are not based on correct intentions, have no value. The Prophet (S) said: “Most of the martyrs of my *ummah* will depart from this world while lying on their beds while there are many who will be killed on the battlefield but God is aware of their intentions.”⁵⁰

During the Tabuk expedition, the Holy Prophet of Islam (S) said: “Indeed, those who are in Medina but wish to participate with us in the battlefield shall share in the spiritual reward on account of that intention.”[51](#)

Also, in another tradition we read: Anyone who goes to his bed with the intention of waking up to say the night supererogatory prayers, if he remains in his bed and is not able to wake up, God will treat his sleep as charity and his breathing as glorification (of God) *{tasbih}* and give him the reward of saying the night supererogatory prayers.[52](#)

It is not without reason that we have been admonished to have sacred aims even in eating and sleeping.[53](#) And if you love a person for the sake of God and imagine him as a good person, even if he is actually a dweller of hell, you are excused.[54](#)

The pre-eminence of intention {niyyah} over action {‘amal}

The pre-eminence the intention behind an action possesses over the action itself is that in the performance of action, sometimes ostentation *{riya’}* and showing off are at work, but in the intention—since it is an inner matter and has no outward appearance—there is no place for ostentation, showing off and the like. The other advantage of intention over action is that it is always possible in all places and requires no particular conditions, but performance of an action requires many prerequisites and contingencies.

In the traditions, there is a category known as “*man bala*” traditions. This group of traditions states: If somebody hears a tradition which states that such an act has a reward and he performs it, God will grant him that reward even if that tradition is not correct. It is because one who has done so did it with a good intention.

The degrees of intention

1. Sometimes, fear of divine wrath or desire for divine favor prompts man to perform an act. As the Qur’an says in this regard, “***And supplicate Him with fear and hope.***”[55](#)

And in another place, the Qur’an states: “***And they would supplicate Us with eagerness and awe.***”[56](#)

2. A higher degree of intention is that man performs an act on account of gratitude for His favors whether he earns reward or punishment from God. As Hadrat ‘Ali (‘a) says:

لَوْ لَمْ يَتَوَعَّدَ اللَّهُ عَلَى مَعْصِيَتِهِ لَكَانَ يَجِبُ أَلَّا يُعْصَى شُكْرًا لِنِعْمَتِهِ.

“Even if Allah had not warned of the chastisement of those disobedient to Him, it was obligatory by way of gratefulness for His favors that He should not be disobeyed.”[57](#)

3. An even higher degree of intention is that without desiring paradise and being afraid of hell, man worships God as he regards Him as the only Being worthy of worship and adoration.
4. The highest degree of intention is that the love for God drives man to perform an act. In this regard, ‘Ali (‘a) considers his love for death and meeting Allah as more intense than the fondness of an infant for the breast of its mother.⁵⁸ And Hadrat al-Qasim, son of Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba (‘a) says in Karbala’: “For me, death in the way of God is sweeter than honey.”

The role of intention on the penal issues

On the question of punishment, Islam also takes motive and intention into account.

Concerning murder, the penalty for a person who kills another intentionally is distinct from the penalty for one who kills another unintentionally. Each of these two cases has its own particular ruling.⁵⁹

With regard to swearing an oath, the Qur’an also says:

﴿لَا يُؤَاخِذُكُمُ اللَّهُ بِاللَّغْوِ فِي أَيْمَانِكُمْ﴾

“Allah shall not take you to task for what is unconsidered in your oaths.”⁶⁰

Therefore, if someone gives an oath but he has no serious intention and motive, his oath has no value.

Gnosis {ma‘rifah} as the preliminary step toward the intention for nearness {qurbah}

The best way of acquiring the motive for nearness {qurbah} to Allah and a pure intention is gnosis {ma‘rifah} and cognition.

- If we only knew, acquiring the endearment of people is in the hands of God.⁶¹
- If we only knew, honor and power are only through His hands.⁶²
- If we only knew, benefit and harm to us are not in the hands of others.⁶³
- If we only knew, work for the sake of God has sometimes double, ten times, or seventy times its reward. So, we should not work for the sake of other than Him.
- If we only knew, the elevation of social status does not mean glory because black smoke also goes up!
- If we only knew, the attention and opinion of the people to us have no value because if an elephant would pass by the street, everybody will also look at it!

- If we only knew, we would pay attention to the perils and ignominies of our ostentations!
- If we only knew, there will be a day for us when one's call will not reach the other and only those who have sound hearts shall attain deliverance.[64](#)
- And if we only knew what values we shall lose by having corrupt intentions, we would prepare ourselves for the sincere performance of work based on the motive of nearness {*qurbah*} to Allah.

The effects of corrupt intentions

Concluding the discussion on intention, we shall also cite the adverse effects of having corrupt intentions, just as we earlier stated the blessings of a sound intention.

1. Non-acceptance of supplication {*du'a*}. Imam as-Sajjad ('a) says: "A bad intention causes the non-acceptance of supplications."[65](#)

Having an ungodly intention not only removes the divine color and devotional nature of actions; it also entails perils.

Imam as-Sadiq ('a) says: "If somebody borrows a certain amount of money without the intention of returning it, it is equivalent to stealing."[66](#) Similarly, if in marriage the person has no intention of giving the dower {*mahriyyah*} to his wife, in the sight of God he is committing adultery {*zina*}.[67](#)

2. Deprivation of sustenance {*rizq*}. Imam as-Sadiq ('a) said: "So many believers have the intention of committing sin and God deprives them of sustenance {*rizq*}."

An actual example of this *hadith* is the story of a garden which has been narrated in the Qur'an:

In *Surah al-Qalam*, verses 16–30, there has been narrated the story of a people who owned a garden and who intended to harvest its yields in the dark so that the poor would remain unaware of their action and they would not have to give any of the fruits to them.

As the dawn came they went to the garden. They saw that the garden had been burned and turned into ashes. Initially, they imagined that they had lost the way, but the wisest among them said: "Did I not remind you not to have such an intention? You had the intention of depriving the poor. Now, God deprived you of it as well."

From this Qur'anic account, it can be understood that sometimes God gives a sort of penalty on account of our motive and intention.[68](#) Of course, this is not a general rule.

3. It causes wretchedness and misfortune. Hadrat 'Ali ('a) says: "A corrupt intention is a sign of wretchedness."[69](#)

4. The blessing of life and daily living is taken away. In another place, Hadrat ‘Ali (‘a) says:

عِنْدَ فَسَادِ النِّيَّةِ تَرْتَفِعُ الْبَرَكَهَ.

That is, God will take away the blessing from the person whose intention is not sound and he will not be able to make good use of divine favors.⁷⁰

It is narrated that it was said to someone: “On account of your good work, you have three acceptable supplications.” He was glad and said: “O God! Make my wife the most beautiful woman in the world.” His wife became very beautiful but his life became bitter because he realized that everyone was staring at his wife. He therefore made his second supplication: “O God! Make my wife the ugliest woman in the world.”

His supplication was granted but his life became intolerable with such an ugliness. So, he made his third and last acceptable supplication, saying: “O God! Let my wife return to her original condition.” His supplication was heard and his wife returned to her original state. He made his three accepted supplication but he earned no benefit at all. This is the meaning of taking away blessings from a person and as such, he cannot make good use of the facilities at his disposal.

¹. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 210.

². Surah al-Insan (or, ad-Dahr) 76:9: “We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We do not want any reward from you nor any thanks.”

³. Surah al-Insan (or, ad-Dahr) 76.

⁴. Muhajjah al-Bayda’, vol. 8, p. 104.

⁵. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 72, p. 93.

⁶. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 210.

⁷. Muhajjah al-Bayda’, vol. 8, p. 104.

⁸. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 75, p. 155.

⁹. Surah al-Anfal 8:4.

¹⁰. Surah Al ‘Imran 3:163.

¹¹. Surah at-Takwir 81:21.

¹². Tamashagah-e Raz, p. 114.

¹³. Surah al-‘Ankabut 29:65.

¹⁴. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 186.

¹⁵. Ma’sumin: those possessing the quality of ‘ismah; i.e., the Prophet, Fatimah, and the Twelve Imams (‘a). See A Brief History of the Fourteen Infallibles, 3rd ed. (Tehran: WOFIS, 2001).

<http://www.al-islam.org/brief-history-of-fourteen-infallibles> [1] {Trans.}

¹⁶. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 41, p. 14.

¹⁷. Khwajah Shams ad-Din Muhammad Hafiz Shirazi (ca. 1325–1391) was the fourteenth century Persian lyric bard and panegyrist, and commonly considered as the preeminent master of the ghazal form. {Trans.}

¹⁸. Du‘a Kumayl {Supplication of Kumayl}: The supplication taught by Imam ‘Ali (‘a) to one of his loyal companions and staunch supporters of Islam, Kumayl ibn Ziyad. Usually offered on every night preceding Friday {Laylat’ul-Jum‘ah} individually or in congregation after Isha’ prayers, this supplication envisages divine teachings and solid foundations of religion in order to enable everyone to follow the right path for becoming a worthy Muslim. The Arabic text, English

translation and commentary of this famous supplication are available online at <http://www.al-islam.org/kumayl> [2]. {Trans.}

19. Maraji' at-Taqlid (sing. Marja' at-Taqlid): literally means "Sources of Imitation". Maraji' are the 'ulama' who have reached the position of Marja'iyah {Religious Reference Authority} because they have possessed such characteristics as justice, piety, superior knowledge, awareness and being oblivious to worldly possessions. The average people refer to them to find answers to their religious problems, and to follow their religious decrees. {Trans.}

20. As narrated by Ayatullah Safi.

21. Surah Hud 11:7; Surah al-Mulk 67:2.

22. Sham or Shamat: up until five centuries ago, included Syria of today, Lebanon and parts of Jordan and Palestine. {Trans.}

23. Surah al-Ma'idah 5:55.

24. Surah an-Nur 24:39.

25. For example, Surah al-Baqarah 2:190.

26. For instance, Surah al-Insan (or, ad-Dahr) 76:9.

27. Surah al-Baqarah 2:207 and others.

28. For example, Surah at-Tin 95:6; Surah al-'Asr 103:3, and many others. {Trans.}

29. Surah an-Nahl 16:97.

30. Mustadrak al-Wasa'il, hadith 4696.

31. Surah al-'Abasa 80:1-10.

32. Surah al-Ma'idah 5:54.

33. Surah al-Ahzab 33:39.

34. Tuman: every tuman is equivalent to ten Iranian rials. {Trans.}

35. See Murtada Mutahhari, Wala-ha va Wilayat-ha, pp. 290-293.

For this book's English translation, see Murtada Mutahhari, Master and Mastership (Karachi: Islamic Seminary Publications, n.d.), chap. 7, "Wala of Control," available online at <http://www.al-islam.org/mastership> [3]. {Trans.}

36. Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 1, p. 39.

37. Ghurar al-Hikam.

38. Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 8, p. 107.

39. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 178: "By Allah, no people are deprived of the pleasures of life after enjoying them, except as a result of sins committed by them, because certainly Allah is not unjust to His creatures. Even then, when calamities descend upon people and pleasures depart from them, they turn towards Allah with the true intention and the feeling in their hearts, He will return everything that vanished from them and cure all their ills."

40. Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 1, p. 40.

41. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 201.

42. Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 1, p. 40.

43. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 78, p. 312.

44. Ghurar al-Hikam.

45. Qassar al-Jamal.

46. Surah an-Nisa' 4:74.

47. Surah an-Nisa' 4:100.

48. Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 1, p. 39.

49. Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 1, p. 87.

50. Muhajjah al-Bayda' vol. 8, p. 103.

51. Muhajjah al-Bayda' vol. 8, p. 104.

52. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 206.

53. Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 1, p. 35.

54. Muhajjah al-Bayda' vol. 4, p. 374.

55. Surah al-A'raf 7:56.

56. Surah al-Anbiya' 21:90.

- [57.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Saying 290.
- [58.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 5.
- [59.](#) Surah an-Nisa' 4:92-93: "Anyone who kills a believer by mistake should set free a believing slave, and pay blood-money to his (the victim's) family, unless they remit it in charity... Should anyone kill a believer intentionally, his requital shall be hell, to remain in it {forever}; Allah shall be wrathful at him and curse him and He shall prepare for him a great punishment."
- [60.](#) Surah al-Baqarah 2:225.
- [61.](#) Surah Ibrahim 14:37: "Our Lord! ...So make the hearts of a part of the people fond of them (Abraham's descendants), and provide them with fruits, that they may give thanks."
- [62.](#) Surah al-Baqarah 2:165.
- [63.](#) Munajat ash-Sha'baniyyah.
- [64.](#) Surah ash-Shu'ara' 26:88-89: "The day (Day of Resurrection) when neither wealth nor children will avail, except him who comes to Allah with a sound heart."
- [65.](#) Surah al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 375.
- [66.](#) Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 12, p. 86.
- [67.](#) Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah, vol. 15, p. 22.
- [68.](#) Someone thus narrated to me: "I met one of the disabled war veterans (during the 1980-88 Iraqi imposed war against Iran), who was sitting in a wheelchair. I approached and kissed him. As he smelled my perfume, he asked me to give him my perfume. I said: 'I will buy one for you and I will keep this one.' At any rate, I did not give it to him and we parted ways. An hour later, I went to the toilet and the bottle of perfume fell into the toilet bowl. All of a sudden, I realized that this was a penalty for my stinginess and right there, I wept for my (miserable) state." Yes, we will suppose to have so much regret and remorse on the Day of Resurrection since we have done nothing for God.
- [69.](#) Ghurar al-Hikam, hadith 1610.
- [70.](#) Ghurar al-Hikam, hadith 1615.

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