

Intention (niyyah)

Since intention (*niyyah*) is the criterion of value in every act including worship, it is the first obligatory act in prayer. Considering its importance, a separate and lengthy chapter has been included for the examination of its dimensions, with the hope that by doing so, we would succeed in giving more value to all devotional acts.

Intention (niyyah) as the criterion of value

The element that gives importance to a person's action is his intention, motive or objective. So, in the verses of the Qur'an, the phrase "in the way of Allah" (*fi sabilillah*) is often used (seventy times), and thus a warning for people to ensure that their actions and intentions be in the way of God, and not for the sake of other than God or their own carnal desires.

Like a dangerous road in which many signboards have been set up, servitude of God is also like a way which has many precipices; and all of these emphasizes is a warning for avoiding deviations. This is particularly true with respect to devotional acts which without the purest of intentions, lose all hope of seeking nearness to God.

Intention is the pillar of worship. If an action is done without intention, or has an ungodly intention behind it, it will be invalid (*batil*).

Intention is the pillar of worship and the essence and foundation of action. The most sacred acts are spoiled because of the mixed intentions behind them, while the simplest acts gain in value on account of the purely good intentions behind them. Anyone who strives in the way of God will also be guided by God toward His path:

وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا

"As for those who strive in Us, We shall surely guide them in Our ways."¹

Intention is the indispensable prerequisite for the acceptance of a deed. Imam as-Sadiq (as) quotes a statement of God, the Exalted:

لَمْ أَقْبَلْ إِلَّا مَا كَانَ خَالِصًا لِي

“I do not accept anyone except the one who is sincere to Me.” [2](#)

Intention magnifies a small deed. Imam as-Sadiq (as) said:

مَنْ أَرَادَ اللَّهُ بِالْقَلِيلِ مِنْ عَمَلِهِ أَظْهَرَهُ اللَّهُ أَكْثَرَ مِمَّا أَرَادَ، وَ مَنْ أَرَادَ النَّاسَ بِالْكَثِيرِ مِنْ عَمَلِهِ أَبَى اللَّهُ إِلَّا أَنْ يُقَلِّلَهُ فِي عَيْنِ مَنْ سَمِعَهُ.

“Anyone who performs a small act for the sake of God, God will make it bigger than he wishes in the sight of others. And anyone who performs a great act for the sake of people, God will make it trivial in the sight of others.”³

Yes, honor (*‘izzah*) and disgrace (*dhillah*) are in the hands of God, and it is He who draws hearts toward a person. So, one must work for Him to set works right. For the sake of God, Hadhrat Ibrahim (as) left his wife and son in the scorching desert of Makka. He then asked God to draw the hearts of people toward them.⁴ The Holy Qur’an also states:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ سَيَجْعَلُ لَهُمُ الرَّحْمَنُ وُدًّا

“Indeed those who have faith and do righteous deeds—the All-beneficent will endear them (to His creation).”⁵

This is one of God's worldly rewards. Of course, God-given love is different from the fleeting and false popularity among people. So many famous people are forgotten after their death, and so many unknown persons remain alive in the hearts of so many people!

So, popularity must also be sought through God, as He is the Transformer of Hearts (*muqallib al-qulub*) and the hearts of people are in His hands. If someone works sincerely for the sake of God, God will compensate his sincerity in a manner beyond his expectations.⁶ Imam as-Sadiq (as) said:

أَلْقَلْبُ حَرَمُ اللَّهِ وَلَا تُسْكِنُوا حَرَمَ اللَّهِ غَيْرَ اللَّهِ

“The heart is the sanctuary of Allah; so do not allow anyone to dwell therein except Allah.”⁷

Examples of sincerity (ikhlas)

Regarding an attribute of the pious (*muttaqin*) ‘Ali (as) said:

إِذَا زَكِّيَ أَحَدُهُمْ خَافَ مِمَّا يُقَالُ لَهُ.

“When anyone of them is spoken of highly, he is afraid of what is said about him.”⁸

The righteous men are afraid that the people’s attention toward them may obstruct their attention to God, and this is what is referred to by “*alladhina yasudduna ‘an sabilillah*”.

One night, an interview with a 16 year–old war veteran was shown on Iranian TV. The interviewer asked: “What is your occupation?” Answer: “Detonation of land mines.” Question: “How many mines have you detonated so far?” Answer: “By the grace of God, many.” Question: “Do you know exactly how many?” Answer: “I am afraid to tell lest Satan inflict me with self–admiration (*‘ujb*) and arrogance (*ghurur*) and make my friends, who have detonated a smaller number of mines, feel belittled.” Allah is the greatest (*Allahu akbar*)!

Another example: It has been narrated that one of the students of the late Ayatullah Sayyid ‘Abd al–Hadi ash–Shirazi raised an objection about a lesson. Although the teacher calmly replied to it, he refused to accept it. After the class session, the student stayed back to talk to the teacher and reiterate his objection.

The late Shirazi satisfied him with 14 logical reasons. The other students, who observed the logical strength of the teacher’s argument, asked: “Having all these solid reasons, why did you hesitate during the class session?”

Ayatullah Shirazi responded: “I was afraid that if I would enumerate them, the morale of your classmate would be arbitrarily affected and I would suffer from self–admiration and arrogance. I deemed it appropriate to let him raise his objection freely so that the courage to question should remain intact in him.”

This demonstrates greatness of soul and purity of intention. In spite of all those services, some do not talk about themselves while others, whenever they donate garbage can for the streets and alleys, inscribe their names on it so that people know what they have contributed. Divine saints act and worship God for His sake and expect nothing but His pleasure.

Each of their acts has the divine color (*sibghah*), which is everlasting.⁹ And which color can be better than divine color, which can never be erased, nor affected by heat and cold, poverty and wealth, anonymity and popularity?

Imam ‘Ali (as) said:

أَخْلَصْ لِّلّهِ عَمَلَكَ وَ عِلْمَكَ وَ بُغْضَكَ وَ أَخْذَكَ وَ تَرْكَكَ وَ كَلَامَكَ وَ صُمْتَكَ

“Purify your work, knowledge, anger, acceptance, refusal, speech and silence for the sake of Allah.”^{[10](#)}

By means of this, deeds and their effects shall remain, and whatever has the divine reflection and visage is everlasting: “*Everything is to perish except His Face.*”^{[11](#)}

And whatever is colored with ostentation and self–glorification will fade and nothing will be left for the individual.

Sincerity in worship (‘ibadah)

All acts of worship must be done with the intention of seeking nearness (*qurbah*) (to Allah) and if a part of them is for the sake of other than God, they all become invalid. For example, if one of the obligatory acts in prayer is done for the sake of other than God, the entire prayer becomes invalid.

If one of the supererogatory acts is also done ostentatiously, or the time of worship (performance at its first and best period), or its place (in the first row or in the mosque) is for the sake of other than God, the prayer is invalid. During winter, standing beside a heater so as to keep one’s body warm as well as to pray, invalidates the prayer.

God accepts an act which is pure and sincere in terms of its location and time requirements, quality and peculiarity, and in which no partner is associated with Him:

“And not associate anyone with the worship of his Lord.”^{[12](#)}

It is stated in a *hadith*, thus: “If a warrior goes to war for the sake of bigotry (*ta’assub*), acquisition of war booties, or show of strength and bravery, and the like, his struggle has no value.”^{[13](#)}

Sincerity, or freedom from ostentation is crucial for acceptance. In a *hadith* Imam al-’Askari^{[14](#)} (as) said: “The penetration of polytheism (*shirk*) in the works of man is more subtle than the movement of an ant on a dark night on a black rock.”^{[15](#)}

There are many succinct aphorisms on sincerity by ‘Ali (as). Here are just some of them:

“Pure intention is the ideal end and final aim.”

“Sincerity is righteousness.”

“Faith means purification of one’s work.”

“Purity is the highest stage of faith.”

“All efforts are naught except that which has sincerity.”

“The fruit of knowledge is purity of action.”

“The acceptance and exaltation of deeds depends on sincerity.”

“If intentions are pure, actions acquire loftiness and exaltation.”

“He who is sincere (in his work) shall realize his aspirations.”^{[16](#)}

And there are still many *hadiths* that indicate the sublime status that sincerity and pure intention give to actions and deeds in this world and in the hereafter.

Worldly effects of intention

Apart from otherworldly rewards and spiritual benefits, sincerity also has some worldly effects, which we shall examine below:

1. Management of the society

If the administrators of society conduct their affairs with goodness of intention and sincerity, better results can be achieved and justice can be observed. ‘Ali (as) said to Malik al-Ashtar:^{[17](#)} “For the implementation of social justice, seek assistance from the people with good intentions.”^{[18](#)} The spirit of sincere benevolence is the strongest foundation for the implementation of justice.

2. Improvement of economic conditions

Kind-hearted, benevolent and sincere individuals are more successful even in economic and occupational affairs, and their sincerity supports social prestige, customer attraction and people’s trust in dealing with them. Perhaps, this statement of ‘Ali (as) is related to this issue, “The sustenance of every person is commensurate with his intention.”^{[19](#)}

3. Good social relations

Good-natured and well-intentioned persons are held in high esteem by people, and even if they commit a mistake, their lives will not become bitter and the people will still love them because of their sincerity and goodness of intention. ‘Ali (as) has said: “Anyone who has good intentions has a greater chance of success, while his life is purer, and it is necessary to befriend him.”^{[20](#)}

This is the amazing effect of righteous intention. On the contrary, if intentions are wicked and mischievous, their consequences will affect the person himself, and in addition to otherworldly consequences, social calamities will also follow. ‘Ali (as) says: “When the intention is corrupt, affliction will come.”^{[21](#)}

Firm intentions and good motives will get important work done even from those who are considered

incapable. If the motive is strong and divine, there will be no apathy, hesitation, or despair. For this reason, depression and cowardice cannot be observed in any of the divine saints, even in their old age, because their hearts and souls were replete with pure, divine intentions, seeking help from God in all predicaments and crises, against all enemies and powers. An illustrious example is the Imam of the *ummah* (may his soul be sanctified) who with a tranquil heart in constant remembrance of God forced the superpowers to surrender.

On the day of '*Ashura*', in spite of facing the martyrdoms of his beloved ones and foreseeing the inhuman treatment of his family, the more Imam al-Husayn (as) became isolated, the more his countenance became illuminated with the fire of love, totally relying on God and saying: "That which makes these severities easy for me is that I can see everything in the Presence of God, and He watches and bears witness."

Imam 'Ali (as) has said: "When intention is strong and firm, the body will not become weary."²² Perhaps, this refers to the psychological and emotional effects of intention in man's conduct and behavior.

Intention as an action ('amal)

The decision to do good deeds and to have good intentions releases man from a state of indifference, and it has a value equal to the act itself, in addition to the divine reward for it.

The Messenger of Allah (S) said to Abu Dharr: "Resolve to perform noble deeds. Even if you fail in doing so, at least you will not be included among the negligent."²³

And Imam as-Sadiq (as) said: "A good deed will be recorded in favor of anyone who decides to do something good but fails to do so."²⁴

Concerning the aspiration to attain martyrdom, the Prophet of Islam (S) said: "Anyone who, out of sincerity and uprightness, prays for martyrdom, God will include him in the company of martyrs on the Day of Resurrection even if he dies in bed."²⁵

Intention as compensation for deficiencies

Since the knowledge, power and faculties of man are limited, he cannot acquire all he wants. But intention fills the gap between "man's endless needs" and his "limited faculties". For example, if someone intends and wishes to guide all the misguided people around him and strives hard to do so but fails, he will be rewarded for the said intention.

On the other hand, bad intentions go beyond time and place circumstances, and affect the doer of evil deeds. If a person accepts the corruption, sin and tyranny of others and is pleased with them, he shares their sins.

The Holy Qur'an attributes the killing of the she-camel of Hadhrat Salih (as), that was a divine miracle, to all those who opposed him.²⁶ Although all of them did not have a hand in the said crime, they were pleased with the act.

So, to be pleased with a good or evil act carries man beyond time and space and lets him share in its reward or consequence. And this fact has been mentioned in numerous traditions.

Ways of acquiring sincerity

Some of the ways of acquiring sincerity in intention and action are as follows:

1. Attention to values

Those who sell their commodity cheaply, do not realize its worth because they fail to identify the commodity as iron or gold, silk or cotton; they do not recognize the customer; and they are unaware of the commodity's current market price. The Glorious Qur'an has guided man in all three areas so that he does not sell his valuable commodity at a throw-away price:

“Commodity”: The Qur'an regards man as the vicegerent (*khalifah*) of God as well as the essence and aim of creation—the highest status.

“Customer”: It is God Himself who buys man's excellent deeds²⁷ and He offers the best bargains compared to other customers:

1. He pays the most (in return for the Paradise);
2. He accepts small deeds;²⁸
3. He rewards good intentions; and
4. He conceals wicked and corrupt acts and manifests good deeds.²⁹

“Price”: The price of man is paradise and divine pleasure, and anyone who sells himself for less, actually incurs a loss. And in the words of the Qur'an, the sinners have lost and gambled themselves away (*khasaru anfusihim*).

The Qur'an has always mentioned those who are going astray with the description, “*famara bihat tijaratuhum*,” i.e. their business has acquired no gain.

Imam 'Ali (as) also said:

لَيْسَ الْمَتَجَرُّ أَنْ تَرَى الدُّنْيَا لِنَفْسِكَ ثَمَنًا.

“What a bad business it is that you would regard the world as your price and rate!”^{[30](#)}

If man is aware of his price, he will not work for the sake of other than God.

2. Reflecting on creation

Reflecting on creation enhances our cognition of the grandeur and power of God, and as a result, we direct our deeds toward Him with greater sincerity and purity of intention.

3. Attention to the Attributes of God

Learning, reciting and remembering the Attributes of God, the Exalted, keeps our focus in the right direction, detaches us from all besides Him, and gradually elevates us. For example, examining closely the Names and Attributes of God in the *Jawshan Kabir* Supplication can be a truly great purifying experience.

4. Attention to His blessings

Recognizing the blessings of God and paying attention to them draw man toward God and make his heart the sanctuary of His love.^{[31](#)} For this reason, In Islamic supplications and litanies of the Infallibles (as) these favors have been repeatedly mentioned and recollected.

For instance, in the *Abu Hamzah ath-Thumali* Supplication, Imam as-Sajjad (as) enumerates the blessings one by one:

O God! I was small but You made me big;

I was contemptible but You gave me honor;

I was ignorant but You made me aware;

I was hungry but You fed me;

I was naked but You covered me;

I was misguided but You guided me;

I was indigent but You made me free of want;

I was sick but You healed me;

I committed sin but You concealed it.

And the list is endless. Imam al-Husayn (as) also embarks on mentioning the blessings of God in the *Du'a' al-'Arafah* so that the love of God remains alive in his heart, and all his work is purely for His sake

and pleasure.

5. Attention to the sure gain

Those who strive for the sake of the world and other than God may or may not attain their objective. The gain and outcome of the works of those who strive in the way of God and the hereafter, however, are certain. The Glorious Qur'an states:

وَمَنْ أَرَادَ الْآخِرَةَ وَسَعَىٰ لَهَا سَعْيَهَا وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ كَانَ سَعْيُهُمْ مَّشْكُورًا

“Whoever desires the Hereafter and strives for it with an effort worthy of it, should he be faithful—the endeavor of such will be well-appreciated.”³²

Then the effort and worship in the way of God surely gives result.

6. Attention to worthlessness of the world

Those who have worldly and other-than-God objectives value the world more than its actual worth. There are expressions in the Holy Qur'an which mention the worthlessness, deceptive nature, transitory and arrogance-generating quality of the world, such as, “*mata'u'l-ghurur*,” “*la'ibun wa lahwun*,” “*zahrat al-hayat ad-dunya'*” and “*mata'u'd-dunya qalilun*”.

Such are the expressions of the Creator of the universe who knows the nature of the world better than anybody else. He, who is not seduced and charmed by the world and does not desire it, is the one who will attain purity.

7. Attention to impotence of created beings

Absolute power belongs to God Almighty and none other than Him. Therefore, anyone who is created by God is not worthy of being the focus of attention or worship.

In the expression of the Glorious Qur'an, the false deities are incapable of creating even a single fly.³³ And concerning the impotence of mankind, it states:

وَمَنْ أَرَادَ الْآخِرَةَ وَسَعَىٰ لَهَا سَعْيَهَا وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ كَانَ سَعْيُهُمْ مَّشْكُورًا

“Whoever desires the Hereafter and strives for it with an effort worthy of it, should he be faithful—the endeavor of such will be well-appreciated.”³⁴

In another place, it poses these questions:

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمُ اللَّيْلَ سَرْمَدًا إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ مَنْ إِلَهٌ غَيْرُ اللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُم بِضِيَاءٍ ۚ أَفَلَا تَسْمَعُونَ قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمُ النَّهَارَ سَرْمَدًا إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ مَنْ إِلَهٌ غَيْرُ اللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُم بِلَيْلٍ تَسْكُنُونَ فِيهِ ۚ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ

“Say, ‘Tell me, if Allah were to make the night perpetual over you until the Day of Resurrection, what god other than Allah could bring you light? Will you not then listen?’ Say, ‘Tell me, if Allah were to make the day perpetual over you until the Day of Resurrection, what god other than Allah could bring you night wherein you could rest? Will you not then perceive?’”^{[35](#)}

Even those who have been associated with God as His partners can do nothing in the world and in the hereafter. Those who are worshipping deities other than God on the Day of Resurrection they will regret pleasing those who were impotent and powerless.

In addition, pleasing the One and Only God who is “easy to be pleased” (*sari’ ar-Ridha’*) is easier than pleasing numerous deities and countless objects of worship which involve many difficulties.

8. Learning from the experiences of others

Many of those who focused their attention on other than God, met a painful and dismal fate. Taking one look at their fate can teach man the futility of worshipping anyone other than God.

The son of Nuh (Noah) (as) who turned his back on God and relied on the mountain’s height to be saved from the flood was helplessly drowned in the great deluge.^{[36](#)}

Qarun (Korah) did not pay heed to the sincere invitation of Hadhrat Musa (Moses) (as) and took pride in his abundant wealth, but he was miserably swallowed by the earth and none of his supporters was able to rescue him:

“So We caused the earth to swallow him and his dwelling place. Then he had no host to help him against Allah, nor was he of those who can save themselves.”^{[37](#)}

Many rich and affluent garden owners went away and left behind all the things they had accumulated. All their wealth was of no avail.

“How many gardens and springs did they leave behind! Fields and splendid places, and the bounties wherein they rejoiced!”^{[38](#)}

God exposed and unveiled the true nature of so many who deceptively showed themselves for sometime to be sincere and pious:

“And Allah brought forth that which you were hiding.”^{[39](#)}

Those who want to dupe the people and deceive God by means of ostentation and pretension, the divine scheme will encompass them and they will be exposed. There are numerous examples of such people.

Their end is instructive for anyone who wishes to keep aloof from pretension and deception.

9. Attention to final end of hypocrites in the hereafter

The Holy Qur'an regards the fire of hell as meant for pretentious worshippers who are actually careless about their prayers.⁴⁰

It is stated in a *hadith* that on the Day of Resurrection, the dissembler will be called by four names: unbeliever (*kafir*), impious (*fajir*), traitor (*ghadir*), and loser (*khasir*).

He will be called *kafir* because in terms of belief, he has not taken God into account.

He will be named *fajir* since flouting God's commands is going beyond the purpose of creation.

He will be labeled *ghadir* for being deceptive.

He will be branded *khasir*, for the outcome of his whole lifetime was nothing.

Then, it shall be said to them: "Your deeds were invalid and thus have no corresponding rewards. Today, get your rewards from those for the sake of whose pleasure you were working."⁴¹

Therefore, attention to the regret of dissemblers in the hereafter, brings man nearer to sincerity.

Sound intentions

Purity of intention and the motive of seeking nearness (*qurbah*) to God can assume various forms. Of course, some forms are more valuable than others. Some of these forms are as follows:

1. Fear of the Divine Station and Court

Doing good and avoiding evil is sometimes due to fear of hell and hardships on the Day of Resurrection. Regarding the Commander of the Faithful and Hadhrat Fatimah's (as) sincere act of feeding the helpless, the orphan and the prisoner, the Glorious Qur'an states:

إِنَّا نَخَافُ مِنْ رَبِّنَا يَوْمًا عَبُوسًا قَمْطَرِيرًا

"Indeed we fear from our Lord a day, frowning and fateful."⁴²

2. Hope for reward

Divine reward is also a sound intention for worship. The Holy Qur'an has also mentioned in hundreds of verses the pleasures of paradise as a reward for the righteous ones. In numerous traditions, otherworldly rewards for righteous deeds have also been mentioned, and these rewards generate motives in man.

3. Gratitude for blessings

Gratitude for the infinite blessings of God is also one of the righteous intentions in worship. ‘Ali (as) has said:

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

“Even if Allah had not warned of chastisement those disobedient to Him, it was obligatory by way of gratitude for his favors that He should not be disobeyed.”^{[43](#)}

4. Modesty (haya’)

Sometimes, the motive for the performance or abandonment of an act is to avoid feeling ashamed before God. When man believes in the Presence of God in the universe and recognizes Him as Witness over him, he will not cheat and commit sins out of respect for God. It is stated in a *hadith*, thus:

أَعْبُدُ اللَّهَ كَأَنَّكَ تَرَاهُ، فَإِنْ لَمْ تَكُن تَرَاهُ فَإِنَّهُ يَرَاكَ.

“Worship God as if you can see Him. Even if you cannot see Him, He can surely see you.”^{[44](#)}

5. Love of God

Those worshippers whose worship is motivated by love and affection and who believe that God is worthy of being worshipped are few and far between. The Commander of the Faithful (as) said, as recorded in *Nahj al-Balaghah*: “A group of people worship God out of desire for reward; this is the worship of traders. Another group worships God out of fear; this is the worship of slaves. Yet another group worships God out of gratitude; this is the worship of free men.”^{[45](#)} About himself he stated in litanies (*munajat*): “O God! I found You worthy of worship and I worshipped You.”

On the Day of Resurrection, human beings will be raised up according to their intentions. The Messenger of Allah (S) has said: “Verily, the people will be resurrected on the basis of their intentions.”^{[46](#)}

The University of Wisdom (hikmah)

Sincerity (*ikhlas*) is a quality the practice of which results in wisdom (*hikmah*) par excellence within a period of forty days, after which an unbelievable stage of insight (*basirah*) and certainty (*yaqin*) will be:

مَنْ أَخْلَصَ الْعِبَادَةَ لِلَّهِ أَرْبَعِينَ صَبَاحًا ظَهَرَتْ يَنَابِيعُ الْحِكْمَةِ مِنْ قَلْبِهِ عَلَى لِسَانِهِ.

“He who sincerely worships Allah for forty days, springs of wisdom shall flow from his heart to his tongue.”[47](#)

The root of sincerity

The fact that one is suffering from ostentation means that one has not yet attained the stage of certainty (*yaqin*) and faith.

Imam ‘Ali (as) said: “Sincerity is the product of certainty.”[48](#)

It is possible for man to have knowledge of God, the hereafter, spiritual reward, etc. but as long as knowledge has not reached the stage of certainty and faith, it will not have the necessary effect. Everybody knows that the dead are incapable of doing anything, but in spite of this knowledge, so many are afraid of a corpse.

Although a pretender is possibly aware of God, the Day of Resurrection, accountability and the book of deeds, since, his awareness has not reached the stage of certainty he will go away from sincerity. This certainty is also available through worship. The Holy Qur’an states:

وَاعْبُدْ رَبَّكَ حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِيَكَ الْيَقِينُ

“And worship your Lord until certainty (or death) comes to you.”[49](#)

If we are certain that the universe has the Presence of God; that honor and disgrace are in His hand; and that the world and its manifestations are trivial, fleeting and deceptive assets, we will be drawn toward sincerity in action.

Signs of sincerity

There are so many who regard themselves as “sincere” in intention and action, but if they examine themselves closely, they will find ungodly intentions in their actions. Therefore, we shall point out some signs of sincerity on the basis of the Qur’an and *hadith*:

1. Not expecting anything from others

A pertinent example which the Glorious Qur’an mentions is Hadhrat ‘Ali and Fatimah’s (as) act of feeding the needy. Imam al-Hasan and Imam al-Husayn (as) fell ill during childhood. The Prophet (S) and a group of the companions went to pay him a visit and recommended to ‘Ali (as) to make a vow (*nadhr*) for their sons’ recovery. ‘Ali and Fatimah (as) vowed to fast for three consecutive days if their children recovered.

Their two children recovered by the Grace of God. In fulfillment of their vow, ‘Ali and Fatimah (as) fasted.

These two personages could hardly find bread to bake at home. At the time of breaking the fast (*iftar*) on the first day, a blind man came and knocked at their door. They gave him their food, and broke their fast with water.

The same happened on the second and third day. The couple, who had fasted for three days without any food visited the Prophet while turning pale. *Surah ad-Dahr* (or *al-Insan*) was revealed about them which points out this sincere act:

إِنَّمَا نَطْعِمُكُمْ لَوَجْهِ اللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنْكُمْ جَزَاءً وَلَا شُكُورًا

“(Saying,) ‘We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We do not want any reward from you nor any thanks.’”[50](#)

They offered food out of sincerity and solely for the sake of God; feeding the poor was routine with them; they gave the food they liked; they were never tired of guests or beggars nor did they get them annoyed with; and they also did not expect any token of gratitude from them.

It is possible for man to do something sometimes without any monetary benefit, but he would like to advertise what he has done in the community.

Sometimes, a person says that he is not expecting any compensation but his heart actually yearns for it.

Sometimes, if one's good deeds and activities are not acknowledged, he feels discouraged and annoyed, and if a gesture of gratitude is not rendered, he will nurse a grudge.

These are signs of the absence of sincerity. Sincere is he, in whose performance of duty, criticism and appreciation of the people have no effect, and he fulfills his duty whether the people know it and express appreciation for it, or remain uninformed of it.

2. Focusing on duty, not title

Another sign of sincerity is that one is looking for an action which is necessary, an obligation undone, though it does not entail money, title and fame, and will not increase his welfare, income and social standing; for example, rendering service in deprived regions or small and far-off villages and areas with bad climate, or engage in necessary works which do not have much social prestige but are obligatory.

Once, during my youth, I had classes with children and adolescents. Along the way, if youngsters joined me, I would feel some sense of pride, but if kids followed me, I would feel somewhat embarrassed. I used to pass by a small marketplace. One day, an illiterate old man came out of a store and said to me: “Are you teaching for the sake of God?” I was sure that I was, since I was not receiving money for it, so I confidently replied: “Yes.”

He said: “If you are really teaching for the sake of God, then be aware that the God of children and that of adolescents and youngsters is one and the same, and if they call you “teacher of children” and “children story-teller” you should not be annoyed.”

The statement of that old man was divine enlightenment for me. It taught me that the Lord of the rich and famous and that of the poor and needy is one and the same. I sincerely wish we all reach such a stage where we consider it equally prestigious to participate in the assembly of the famous and that of the unknown; to study alongside popular personages and unsung individuals; to render service in prestigious centers or common centers; to teach at the simple and elementary level or at a higher level of learning; where we expect honor from God alone and not through money, fame, material assets, hats, and position!

3. Having no regrets

Anyone who works for God and does not expect anything from others will never feel regret if his deeds do not achieve the ideal goal because working for the sake of God leads to rewards, irrespective of their worldly outcome.

If you visit a believer or a sick person for the sake of God, and not find him at home, you are not supposed to regret going because you gained your own reward for it.

If we feel regret everyday for paying respects, entertaining others, rendering services, and offering assistance, we ought to reconsider our “motive of seeking nearness to God”.

4. Treating receptivity and heedlessness as one

In the performance of duty, it should not matter to those sincere whether the people welcome them or treat them with how are no importance. For them, criticism and appreciation are the same. If a person is elated by the reception of the people and discouraged by their heedlessness, it shows a lack of sincerity in him.

Of course, one may justify that being elated is for the reason that the people are gathered in truth, while being discouraged is for the fact that the people are lukewarm with respect to religion and faith. But beyond this justification, one must examine what is in one's heart.

The Commander of the Faithful (as) has said: “The pretender has three signs. If alone, he is languid and indolent. If he is with the people, he has enthusiasm (in worship and action). If he is appreciated by them he works more, but if he is neglected, he works less.”^{[51](#)}

May God relieve us from this sort of dangerous sickness and not make us like those physicians who die of the same ailment of which they are specialists! And may it not happen in spite of writing about sincerity, we depart from this world drenched in pretension (*riya*) and polytheism (*shirk*)!

5. Consistency of motive and action

A sincere person is devoted to divine duty and obligation, and not deterred by conditions and circumstances. He performs his duty constantly and persistently, and does not get tired of repeating it thousands of times. Physical weakness or old age may decrease his labor, but his fervor and motive remain unchanged.

6. Lack of wealth and position does not hinder

For a sincere person, wealth and position are not hindrances in the performance of his duty. He sacrifices his desires and needs, and if necessary, even his life in the fulfillment of his duty. If attachment to wealth, position, relatives, and friends becomes a hindrance to his performance, sincerity will depart. The Holy Qur'an states:

“If your fathers and your sons, your brethren, your spouses, and your kinsfolk, the possessions that you have, the business you fear may suffer, and the dwellings you are fond of, are dearer to you than Allah and His Apostle and to waging jihad in His way, then wait until Allah issues His edict.”⁵²

The sincere person is not a captive of place, time, spouse, residence and his self. He only strives to please God.

It has been narrated that a rider and his horse arrived at a stream. The man did everything, he even whipped the animal but the horse would not step into the water. The man stepped into the water and pulled the horse's bridle but the horse still refused. A sage who was present there said: “Mount the horse and muddy the water with your stick and spade and then the horse will cross.” He did so and the horse crossed the stream without any problem.

The rider asked the reason for the wise man's advice. The wise man replied: “As the horse could see its reflection in the limpid water of the stream, it was not willing to step on its face. But since the water was disturbed, the horse crossed the stream!”

Yes, those who are self-centered and inclined toward wealth, position, children and occupation for themselves cannot be sincere, because in the path of sincerity everything must be sacrificed.

7. Oneness of the apparent and the hidden

Under certain circumstances or in the presence of certain people, a person may do certain things that are contrary to his inner and personal state. This is a type of ostentation. 'Ali (as) said: “One who is as honest in his secret activities as in overt deeds and whose words and actions suit, is the person who has faithfully discharged the duty laid down upon him by the Lord, has honestly handed over the things entrusted to him, and has sincerely obeyed Allah only to achieve His favors and blessings.”⁵³

The sincere person discharges his duty in the way of God without taking into account the satisfaction and pleasure of anyone in particular, and he is also not afraid of any censure:

يُجَاهِدُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا يَخَافُونَ لَوْمَةَ لَائِمٍ

“Wage jihad in the way of Allah, not fearing the blame of any blamer.”⁵⁴

8. Without factional bigotry

Sincerity leads man to strive untiringly all the time and in, at all places. Without sincerity, however, factional bigotry and partisanship take over. His attachment and prejudice with a certain group might tend to make him active and enthusiastic, however if he becomes respect to biased against, that group he may loses his zeal, and may even retire and seclude himself, or worse, oppose and sabotage it.

A sincere person is not confined and limited to a certain group and does not practice factional bigotry. If he identifies a certain group to be linked with falsehood, he will keep away from it. He keeps himself aloof from group-worship and polytheistic prejudice presented as tribalism, regionalism and factionalism (which are incompatible with the spirit of sincerity).

The Holy Qur'an declares:

وَقَالَتِ الْيَهُودُ لَيْسَتْ الْنَصَارَى عَلَى شَيْءٍ وَقَالَتِ النَّصَارَى لَيْسَتْ الْيَهُودُ عَلَى شَيْءٍ

“The Jews say, ‘The Christians stand on nothing,’ and the Christians say, ‘The Jews stand on nothing’.”⁵⁵

Of course, if a party, group or organization is on the path of truth, it must be supported. It means that one's falsehood must not be seen as “truth” while the truth of others must not be reckoned as “falsehood”.

9. Pursuit of important works undone

If there is sincerity and dedication in work, a person will look for necessary and undone works whose absence is felt and nobody has done them as they do not entail fame and money, or are not regarded as important.

Glass, cabinet and curtain are as important for a building, as they are for a bathroom and toilet.

In a table spread, food, meat and others are needed and so is salt. Sincere persons have no inhibition in doing undone works, whether they are small or great, and they believe that sometimes, God blesses and gives great impact to sincerely performed, small good deeds.

When ‘Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn at-Tabataba’i arrived in Qum from the Islamic seminary (*hawzah ‘ilmiyyah*) in Najaf (in Iraq), he observed that there were a lot of classes on jurisprudence and its principles (*fiqh wa usul al-fiqh*), but there was no mention of any lessons in exegesis (*tafsir*) of the Qur’an or philosophy.

Therefore, he started teaching these two branches of knowledge. Although, out of good intention, some individuals protested, saying that doing so is incompatible with the prestige of the future religious authority (*marja’ at-taqlid*), he continued teaching *tafsir* and philosophy and considered them expedient and necessary for the Islamic seminary, and he wrote the monumental, *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an*.

Yes, divine grace depends on the sincerity of individuals and not on the title of the position that they occupy.

10. Desisting from error

The fact that one persists in error shows his lack of sincerity. If a sincere person realizes that there is a better way, he will desist from the wrong way, or entrust the work to the better worker.

There are so many who are in error for sometime, but when the error is pointed out to them, they are not willing to change for they regard doing so as a sort of defeat. While, persistence in error is an ever more serious defeat. Sincere individuals have a sublime spirit and a great capacity to accept truth, and their magnanimity deters them from yielding to all kinds of dishonorable egoistic actions.

Outcome of sincerity

Man’s sincere connection with God is accompanied by the luminosity of disposition, purity of inner self and insight, which guide him in the twists and turns of life as well as impasses and predicaments.

Imam ‘Ali (as) said: “When sincerity enters the heart, it is accompanied by glow and perspicacity.”⁵⁶

This is the same “*furqan*” (criterion) that the Holy Qur’an regards as a result of God-wariness (*taqwa*):

إِنْ تَتَّقُوا اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ فُرْقَانًا

“If you are wary of Allah, He shall appoint a criterion⁵⁷ for you.”⁵⁸

It also argues that if you are conscious of God, He will bestow a light on you which will light your way:

وَيَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ نُورًا تَمْشُونَ بِهِ

“And give you a light to walk by.”⁵⁹

Sincerity, God-wariness and keeping away from carnal desire have an outcome that enhances the clear-sightedness of man and leads him from the darkness of polytheism, ignorance (*jahl*) and capricious desire to the atmosphere of light, monotheism and knowledge. He who has sincerity will attain felicity and success.⁶⁰

Sincerity has extraordinary value and at the same time, it is so difficult. In the supplications at dawn during the month of Ramadhan, Imam as-Sajjad (as) prays to God to remove hypocrisy (*nifaq*) from the heart, and ostentation (*riya'*) from the act.

In the *Du'a' al-'Arafah*, Imam al-Husayn (as) also beseeches God to bestow sincerity in action.

Sincerity in the context of society

Ideal and valuable sincerity must be in the context of society, among the people, and accompanied by social responsibilities and activities. Some erroneously identify sincerity with isolation and seclusion, away from people. God brings about pure and wholesome milk from food and blood.⁶¹ The sincere person must also keep himself pure in the midst of an impure and corrupt environment, and free his actions from ostentation, and succeed. Such sincerity is valuable and important.

The sincere person (*mukhlis*) sets himself at the disposal of God, makes his heart the sanctuary of this love, and allows divine motives to guide all his actions and behavior, and in doing so, he attains honor and nobility.

¹. Surah 'Ankabut 29:69.

². Rawdhah al-Muttaqin, vol. 12, p. 141.

³. Rawdhah al-Muttaqin, vol. 12, p. 142.

⁴. 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."

⁵. Surah Maryam 19:96.

⁶. Imam Khomeini (may his soul be sanctified) staged an uprising for the sake of God, was banished and endured so many sufferings prior to the victory of the Islamic Revolution. God also drew the hearts of millions of people toward him. When he came back to Iran after more than a decade of banishment, millions of people welcomed him, and when he passed away, ten million people participated in his burial ceremony. Within forty days the people built his shrine and courtyard, and from the furthest points in the country they came to Tehran on foot, to pay homage to him.

⁷. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 25.

⁸. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 193.

⁹. Surah al-Baqarah 2: 138: "The baptism of Allah (sibghat Allah), and who baptizes better than Allah? And Him do we worship."

¹⁰. Fihrist Ghurar al-Hikam, under the word "ikhlas" (sincerity or purity).

¹¹. Surah al-Qasas 28:88.

¹². Surah al-Kahf 18: 110.

¹³. Muhajjah al-Baydha', vol. 6, p. 171.

¹⁴. Imam Hasan al-'Askari (845–872 CE): the eleventh Imam from the Prophet's Progeny, spent most of his life in the prisons of the 'Abbasid caliphs, al-Muhtadi, al-Mu'taz and al-Mu'tamid. Imam al-'Askari was at times incarcerated and at others kept in close confinement in his home in Samirra under the watchful eye of the caliph. It is for this reason that he and

his father are known as the 'askarayn because their house was constantly surrounded by the soldiers (Arabic='askarun) of the 'Abbasid government. (Trans.)

[15.](#) Tuhaf al-'Uqul, p. 487.

[16.](#) These hadiths are taken from Fihrist Ghurar al-Hikam, under the word "ikhlas" (sincerity or purity).

[17.](#) Malik al-Ashtar: more fully, Malik ibn Harith from Nakha' and famous as al-Ashtar, was among the prominent commanders of Imam 'Ali's army and the governor appointed to Egypt by Imam 'Ali. He accompanied the Imam in the Battles of Jamal and Siffin. On his way to Egypt, he was killed through the conspiracy of Mu'awiyah. For the text of the Imam's famous instructions to him before setting forth to Egypt, see Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter 53. A complete translation is contained in William C. Chittick, A Shi'ite Anthology (Albany, N.Y., 1980), pp. 68-82.

[18.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter 53.

[19.](#) Fihrist Ghurar al-Hikam, p. 398.

[20.](#) Fihrist Ghurar al-Hikam, p. 399, under the word "niyyah" (intention).

[21.](#) Fihrist Ghurar al-Hikam, p. 398, under the word "niyyah" (intention).

[22.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 205.

[23.](#) Muhajjah al-Baydha', vol. 5, p. 75.

[24.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 199.

[25.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 201.

[26.](#) Surah al-A'raf 7:77: "So they hamstrung the She-camel and defied the command of their Lord, and they said, O Salih, bring us what you threaten us with, if you are one of the apostles." (Trans.)

[27.](#) It refers to Surah at-Tawbah (or al-Bara'ah) 9:111: "Indeed Allah has brought from the faithful their souls and their possessions for paradise to be theirs: they fight in the way of Allah, kill, and the are killed. A promise binding upon Him in the Torah and the Evangel and the Qur'an. And who is truer to his promise than Allah? So rejoice in the bargain you have made with Him, and that is the great success."

[28.](#) Surah az-Zilzal 99:7: "So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it."

[29.](#) For example, we recite in a supplication: "O He who shows good and conceals evil!"

[30.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 32.

[31.](#) Surah al-Baqarah 2:164: "Those who believe are stauncher in their love for Allah."

[32.](#) Surah al-Isra' (or Bani Isra'il) 17:19.

[33.](#) Surah al-Hajj 22:73: "Lo! Those on whom ye call beside Allah will never create a fly though they combine together for the purpose."

[34.](#) Surah al-Mulk 67:30.

[35.](#) Surah al-Qasas 28:71-72.

[36.](#) Surah Hud 11:42-43: "Noah called out his son, who stood aloof, 'O my son! Board with us, and do not be with the faithless!' He said, 'I shall take refuge on a mountain; it will protect me from the flood.' He said, 'There is none today who can protect from Allah's edict, except someone upon whom He has mercy.' Then the waves came between them, and he was among those who were drowned." (Trans.)

[37.](#) Surah al-Qasas 28:81.

[38.](#) Surah ad-Dukhan 44:25-27.

[39.](#) Surah al-Baqarah 2:72.

[40.](#) Surah al-Ma'un 107:4-6: "Ah, woe unto worshippers who are heedless of their prayer; who would be seen (at worship)."

[41.](#) Safinah al-Bahar, vol. 1, p. 499.

[42.](#) Surah al-Insan (or, ad-Dahr) 76:10.

[43.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Saying 237.

[44.](#) Misbah ash-Shari'ah, p. 8. (Trans.)

[45.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Saying 290.

[46.](#) Muhajjah al-Baydha', vol. 5, p. 77.

[47.](#) Jami' as-Sa'adat, vol. 2, p. 77; Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 53, p. 326.

- [48.](#) Fihrist Ghurar al-Hikam.
- [49.](#) Surah al-Hijr 15:99.
- [50.](#) Surah al-Insan (or, ad-Dahr) 76:9.
- [51.](#) Muhajjah al-Baydha', vol. 6, p. 144.
- [52.](#) Surah at-Tawbah (or, Bara'ah) 9:23.
- [53.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter 26.
- [54.](#) Surah al-Ma'idah 5:54.
- [55.](#) Surah al-Baqarah 2:113.
- [56.](#) Fihrist Ghurar al-Hikam, p. 93, under the word "khuls".
- [57.](#) That is, a knowledge which will enable you to distinguish between truth and falsehood. (Qur'an Translator)
- [58.](#) Surah al-Anfal 8:29.
- [59.](#) Surah al-Hadid 57:28.
- [60.](#) Fihrist Ghurar al-Hikam, p. 92.
- [61.](#) Surah an-Nahl 16:66: "And lo! In the cattle there is a lesson for you. We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, from betwixt the refuse and the blood, pure milk palatable to the drinkers."

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