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Outcomes of the Spiritual Journey

Mohammad Ali Shomali

It is clear that the ultimate aim of the spiritual journey is to get as close to Allah (SWT) as much as possible. However, the notion of closeness (qurb) to God may appear to some as abstract, especially for those who are not trained in philosophy. This paper attempts to shed light on the notion of closeness to Allah (SWT) by describing what happens to those who are undergoing the spiritual journey towards Him. All the ideas mentioned henceforth are derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah and therefore are hoped to be welcomed by all Muslims from different schools of Islam.

Reflection on these outcomes can encourage everyone to embark on this journey and, if they have already done so, to continue following this luminous path. It can also serve as a test for the wayfarers to assess how much progress they have made. Insha-Allah, in an upcoming issue, we will study the notion of closeness to God as a subject on its own and explain what it means to become close to God (qarib) and who the muqarrabin (the people that are brought even closer) are.

Outcomes of the spiritual journey

1. Complete support

One of the outcomes of living a life of piety and having a pure and pious heart is that we will be given complete support by Allah (SWT). He will listen to us, will give us what we want, and will be our ears, eyes and hands. In the well-known divine saying (hadith-i qudis) of qurb-i nawafil, we read:

None of My servants can seek proximity to Me by that which is dearer to Me than things that I have made obligatory on him. Then, with the performance of nawafil (the recommended acts), he continuously attains proximity to Me, so that I love him. When I love him, I will be the ear with which he hears, the eyes with which he sees, and the hand with which he strikes. If he calls Me, I will answer his call, and if he makes a request, I will grant it[1].

2. Perfect knowledge

There are many hadiths which indicate that one of the results of having attained spiritual nearness to God is to be endowed with great knowledge of the realities of the world, including many mysteries that can never be known through ordinary methods of learning and teaching. On the topic of the servant who has attained proximity to God, Prophet Muhammad (S) reports Allah (SWT) as saying:

I will love him when he loves Me and I will make him loved by My creation, and I will open up his inward eyes to My glory and grandeur, and I will not hide from him [the knowledge of] the select of My creation. So in the darkness of night and in the light of day, I will tell him secrets, so that his conversations with creatures and with his companions will be cut off. I will make him hear My words and the words of My angels and I will reveal to him the secret I have hidden from My creation.2

3. Exclusive devotion to God

To be cut off from everything other than God (tabattul or inqita‘) means to be free from reliance on anything other than God, and to see everything as His sign and as a manifestation of His power and grace. The true servants of God live within society while remaining totally mindful of God, and they remember Him continuously. The Qur’an praises a group of people

“whom neither business nor trading distract from remembering God, keeping up prayer, and giving alms” (24:37).

In the well-known Whisper of Sha‘ban (al- Munajat al-Sha‘baniyyah), Imam Ali (A) and other members of the household of the Prophet called upon God, saying:

My God! Make me completely cut off from all else but You, and enlighten the vision of our hearts with the radiance of looking at You, until the vision of our hearts penetrates the veils of light and reaches the Source of Grandeur and set our spirit to be suspended at the glory of Your sanctity3.

In this supplication, the Imam (A) is asking Allah (SWT) to enable him to be related only to Him and to be detached from anything that stops us from being in His presence.

Unfortunately there are many actions that can hinder our devotion, which could be apparently good or bad. Of course, bad actions and sins can keep us away from Allah’s remembrance, but good actions can also become corrupted, for example, by arrogance and pride. Therefore, we should not let anything become a barrier or a veil between us and Allah (SWT), the Source of Light and Grandeur, whether it be our sins and attachment to the material life or our good actions and characteristics. If we are not careful, even good actions and qualities can preoccupy our mind and heart, therefore diverting our attention away from God. It is interesting that Imam Ali (A) asks to “penetrate the veils of light.” According to Ayatollah Khomeini, “the veils of light” refers to those veils which are in and of themselves light, but prevent us from beholding the main light, which is God.

This is why knowledge, which is so highly regarded in Islam and everyone is required to seek it, can become “the greatest veil” (al-hijab al-akbar). It is like someone who has a pair of glasses to help him read, but instead of using it to read, he simply holds it in his hand, enjoys looking at it, or plays with it. Of course, the knowledge which comes after the purification of one’s soul is different. According to hadiths, this type of knowledge is a light that God projects into the heart of the one with whom He is pleased (a-‘ilm-u nur-un yaqdhif-uhu’llah fi qalb-i man yasha).

The following story, narrated in the biography of Allamah Sayyid Mohammad Husayn Tabataba’i, relates to this point. Once Allamah was given an instruction for a specific practice by his spiritual teacher, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Qadi Tabataba’i, and was advised that “when you are doing this special practice you may start seeing angels, but you should continue with your practice and should not be distracted.”

Once Allamah was conducting his worship and he saw an angel coming towards him. He immediately remembered what his teacher had told him and continued worshipping. Then the angel went around him as if he wanted to start a conversation with Allamah, but he did not pay any attention, so the angel sadly left him. Allamah remarked that he would never forget the sadness of that angel, but this is the way a true servant devotes himself to His Lord. We should not let anything get in the way of our focused devotion.

4. Entrance into the realm of light

The above hadiths and many others refer to the fact that one of the results of progress on the spiritual journey is the elimination of darkness and entrance into the realm of light. The realm of light is a reality mentioned in the Qur’an and hadith:

Allah is the guardian of those who believe. He brings them out of the darkness into the light (***2:257***)

With it Allah guides him who will follow His pleasure into the ways of safety and brings them out of utter darkness into light by His will and guides them to the right path. (5:16)

Light is also requested in many supplications, such as in the prayer which should be recited after the Ziyarah of Aal-i Yasin:

O Allah, surely I ask You to send blessings upon Muhammad (S), the prophet of Your mercy and the word of Your light.
And fill my heart with the light of certainty And my chest with light of faith.
And my thinking with the light of intentions.
And my determination with the light of knowledge. And my power with the light of action.
And my tongue with the light of truthfulness.
And my religion with the light of understanding from You.
And my vision with brightness.

And my hearing with the light of wisdom.
And my love with the light of friendship for Muhammad (S) and his progeny. Peace be upon (all of) them! Until I meet You, while certainly I discharged Your promise and Your covenant. So You cover me with Your mercy, O Master! O Praiseworthy.[4]

In the realm of light, everything is clear and the true reality of everything is known. One of the main challenges we face is to understand everything the way it really is, and to treat each thing appropriately.

5. Immense love for God

One of the strongest ways to strengthen our relationship with Allah (SWT) is through love for Him. Once one has tasted this love, there is no other substitute. The Imams (A) were consumed with love for Allah (SWT). Imam Ali b. Husayn (A) says:

Nothing will cool my burning thirst but reaching You, quench my ardour but meeting You, damp my yearning but gazing upon Your face, settle my settling place without closeness to you.[5]

The mystic is not the one who just loves God; rather he is the one who loves God alone, because his love or dislike for anything else is only for the sake of God. He wills and desires only what his Beloved wills and desires. He has no will or desire other than His. The mystic's love for God permeates his love for anything else[6]. Imam Sadiq (A) says:

The pure heart is the one that meets the Lord while it is free from anyone else[7].

6. Witnessing God in everything

The real mystic is the one who witnesses God in everything. Allah (SWT) constantly shows Himself to us in different ways, and if our hearts are pure, we can witness Allah (SWT) through all things. In Dua of 'Arafah, Imam Husayn (A) says:

O my God! Through the variety of Your signs (in the world of being) and the changes in states and conditions, I realised that the purpose is to make Yourself known to me in everything, so that I would not ignore You in anything [8].

Imam Ali (A) says:

I saw nothing except that I saw God before it, with it, and after it[9].

It is obvious that the vision in question, for God, the Almighty, is infinitely exalted beyond the range of the physical eye. God cannot be seen by the physical eye, neither in this world nor in the hereafter.

Being busy usually means that we forget Allah (SWT) and become consumed with our dealings. However, for Imam Ali (A), it meant that he remembered Allah (SWT) all the time: before, during and

after each thing; as Allah (SWT) is the Creator, Preserver, and the one who will remain after all things.

One who has reached a high stage in the spiritual journey will find God in everything. For example, even if someone tells us something bad or our enemy tells us something, we can still manage to find a good message inside that which only we are able to de-code and understand. Other people may listen to the same thing but they do not get any message from it. However, we will understand the message from Allah (SWT) even in the words of our enemy.

7. Internal peace

Whenever a man gets close to Allah (SWT), all other things appear light and small to him. He feels that he is under Allah's protection, and nothing can harm him. He understands that he does not suffer any pain or difficulty except that they are to his own benefit, and that he will be rewarded by God ***"without measure"*** (***39: 10***).

There are many people in the world who have comfortable lives, but they suffer from a lack of peace and tranquillity, to the extent that some of them resort to alcoholic drinks or narcotic drugs to decrease their spiritual pain and self-consciousness. However, nothing short of reaching God can satisfy human beings. The Qur'an says:

Surely! With the remembrance of God hearts come to rest. (***13:28***)

One reason why nothing can disturb people who are mindful of God is that they are not afraid of losing anything. Everything becomes easy for them, since they have appreciated Allah's (SWT) greatness, nothing else is important in their view. For example, if you are on a beach next to the ocean, you would not pay any attention to a small glass of water. Describing the pious (al-muttaqin), Imam Ali (A) says:

The greatness of the Creator is seated in their hearts and so everything else appears small in their eyes.[10]

Conclusion

The outcomes of the spiritual journey are too many to describe in this short paper. The journey rewards those who travel on its path with exclusive devotion, entrance into the realm of light, immense love for Allah (SWT), being able to witness Allah (SWT) in everything, and internal peace. Once we take a step towards Allah (SWT), He will reward us with these invaluable blessings, which will make it easier for us to travel farther.

1. Al-Kafi, vol. 2, pp. 352 & 353.
2. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 77, pp. 28 & 29.
3. Mafatih al-Jinan.
4. Mafatih al-Jinan.
5. The Psalms of Islam, pp. 251 & 252.

6. For a detailed account of love, see Love in Christianity and Islam (2005, 2nd edition) by Mahnaz Heydarpoor.
7. Al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 16.
8. Mafatih al-Jinan.
9. Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, Al-Asfar, vol. 1, p. 117, vol. 4, p. 479 and vol. 5, p. 27.
10. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 191.

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