Spiritual journeying in the Words of Shi'a Mystics

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Al-Islam.org

Message of Thaqalayn Vol. 14, no. 4, Winter 2014

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Publisher(s):

Ahlul Bayt World Assembly [4]

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Category:

Scholars [6]
Spirituality [7]

Journal:

Vol. 14, no. 4, Winter 2014 [8]

In the Islamic mysticism and ethics, 'wakefulness' (yaqzah) is the first stage of journey to God and the first phase of spiritual journey.This text explores the way to wakefulness with the word and examples of great Shi'a Mystics.

Topic Tags:

Yaqzah [9]
Mysticism [10]
Spiritual Wayfaring [11]

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Abstract

In the Islamic mysticism and ethics, 'wakefulness' (yaqzah) is the first stage of journey to God and the first phase of spiritual journey. This is to awaken a person from negligence to pay heed to the path a person takes in life. One's inattention to this significant matter and the continuation of his negligence leads to not remembering God and the hereafter, consequently leading him to attachment to this world,

committing sins and being drawn away from the status he was created for.

Hence, the seekers of salvation must awaken from the slumber of negligence through self-development. The best means of achieving this goal is the instructions given to us by great Shi'a mystic scholars who spent their lives achieving perfection and embarking on the spiritual journey to God.

Introduction

Man has been created by God in the best form (95:4). Through granting him the faculties of reasoning, understanding, and thinking, God has made him distinct from other creatures in the world. This unique status of man and his potential for knowing all Divine names not only pave the way for his being the vicegerent of God on the earth, but also indicate the ultimate objective of his being created, determining his way to perfection from Earth to Heaven.

However, treading this path is a very difficult task involving considerable risks; hence, it is impossible to undertake it without direct Divine guidance. As the Persian poet, Hafiz, beautifully versified, "Do not take this path without being accompanied by someone like Prophet Khidr – it is dark, be fearful of going astray." Accordingly, God's mercy to His servants and His extensive guidance and compassion require that man is not left alone to himself in the darkness of this world and that he benefits from the special divine guidance so as to nurture his innate talents to attain divine virtues through this guidance.

Undoubtedly, God's first favour to the seeker of both perfection and salvation is to awaken him and to inform him of his situation. As long as man does not know who he is, where he is from, and where he will go, he will be unmotivated to tread the path of perfection and embark on self- purification and self-development.

This paper includes several guidelines by prominent Shi'a mystics for seekers of salvation on how to embark on the journey to God. It is hoped that not only do these enlightening words awaken souls and consciences whose nature have been created in such a way that they seek God and perfection, but they also recommend some guidelines on how to begin the spiritual journey to God through self-purification.

Wakefulness (Yaqzah)

According to Islamic mysticism and ethics, wakefulness (yaqzah) is the starting point of the spiritual journey. The literal meaning of yaqzah is 'to wake up[1].' It technically refers to a state in which man wakes from negligence, pays attention to the path he is treading in his life, safeguards himself against his enemies like Satan[2], and tries not to forget his aim[3]. Only as a result of such wakefulness can he achieve his ultimate objective, that is, nearness to God[4].

In Islamic morality and mysticism, negligence is considered an obstacle to self-purification, and the spiritual journey and wakefulness is a prerequisite for them. The first step in the spiritual journey and

self-purification is a person's awareness of his imperfection, and shrewdly understands that he is a traveller in this world with a long distance ahead to reach the ultimate objective of human perfection; thus, he needs provisions and a means of travelling. No doubt, if somebody is neglectful of his being a traveller, he will not progress spiritually[5].

The following hadith by Imam Ali indicates the important role of waking up from the slumber of negligence: "The spiritual journey and asceticism do not benefit anybody except for those with a wakeful soul[6]." The Imam also warns people about neglecting God and committing sins, stating that they are negative consequences of negligence:

O' Man! What has made you neglect your Generous Lord, and what has made you dare to commit sins? What has made you conceited before your Lord, and what factor has aroused your interest in ruining yourself? Isn't there any cure for your ailment, and are you not going to wake up from this slumber of negligence[7]?

Hence, considering the significance of the starting point of the spiritual journey, wayfarers try to take the first step carefully all the time. In the course of their spiritual journey, this first step protects them from carnal and satanic dangers and helps them reach their destination.

Ayatullah Amini quoted Allamah Tabataba'i's starting point for this journey:

On my way from Tabriz to Najaf to continue my Islamic studies, I kept thinking about what to study, under supervision of which master, and using which method so that God may be satisfied with me. As soon as I reached Najaf, I went to the Holy shrine of Imam Ali and told him, 'O' My master! I have come to you to further my Islamic studies, but I do not know which method and plan to adopt, so I ask you to guide me to what is most advisable[8].

Upon entering the material world, man has been deprived of the invisible world and its truths and has sunk into the material world. Thus, living in this world resembles a deep sleep throughout one's lifetime, as Imam Ali said, "This world resembles sleep, and the hereafter is akin to wakefulness[9]."

In this hadith, people in the hereafter and on the Day of Judgment are completely awake; however, in this world, people are for the most part neglectful, forgetting their primary aim and destination. The hereafter is not tainted with negligence and unconsciousness because that is the world where all the truths become manifest and people will have complete wakefulness and attention to God. As Prophet Muhammad said,

"The people are asleep and wake when they die[10]." Thus, people must be awakened.

For some people, fear of Hellfire and its inconceivable punishments help them wake up; in others, it is eagerness for Heaven and its blessings. However, there are also people who are so fond of God that their eagerness to meet Him is sufficient to wake them up from negligence and reach "wakefulness."

That is why those who are near to Him read in the supplication of “Sha’baniyyah”, telling God, “O’ My Lord! You have wakened me up to Your love from the slumber of negligence.”

However, what paves the way for wakefulness and a correct understanding of one’s status in the universe is self-purification and piety. Fear of Hellfire, eagerness for Heaven, and love for God are good incentives to detach one’s self from this material world to move toward perfection, but these factors work only for those who enjoy piety and self-restraint to some degree and have taken steps to purge vices from their souls.

Interestingly, it is said about Mulla Sadra[11] that when students from all over Iran flocked to Shiraz to attend his classes, he did not accept students who sought fame or who were known to be committing sins or and interested in accumulating wealth through their studies[12].

Thus, the first step towards achieving perfection and acquiring knowledge and gnosis is to wake up from the slumber of negligence; and this is achieved through disengaging from this world and its ornaments. As long as man is preoccupied with this world and is attached to it, seeking wealth and fame, he cannot develop intellectually and spiritually.

The late Imam Khomeini considered self-purification as the first step towards wakefulness, saying, “Before you lose the opportunity, you should wake up and seek to purge your soul and reform in the first stage[13].”

Given the above introduction, we will scrutinize some guidelines proposed by mystics as they are the outcomes of their practices and experiences as well as the souvenirs they have given us from their spiritual journey.

Instructions on wakefulness

Shi‘a mystics – on the basis of their specific mystic and spiritual inclinations – have given special instructions and introduced “wakefulness” as the beginning point of journey to perfection. Despite various mystic inclinations, all these recommendations emanate from the effect of the Divine attributes of Majesty and Beauty on their soul and lead to a single objective. A short account of the instructions of Shi’a scholars who sought perfection will be given in the following:

1. Akhund Mulla Husayn Quli Hamadani

1. Akhund Mulla Husayn Quli Hamadani[14]

The virtuous mystic, Akhund Mulla Husayn Quli Hamadani, was a prominent mystics and an indirect master of Mirza Jawad Aqa Maleki Tabrizi.

According to his mystical views, the Holy Qur’an is the way to God and a guide to the right path, and the

Imams are the objective path to the Noble Qur'an. He considered Islamic law (shari'ah) the means of meeting God, and regarded the type of asceticism that is not based on shari'ah as ignorance and corruption. He considered the purity of heart as the basis and teaching (ta'lim) as its offshoot. Hence, according to him, knowledge is not a matter of excessive learning; rather, keeping vigil and practicing asceticism are the best ways to acquire true knowledge and gnosis.

For Hamadani, the path to mysticism and love for God is to know the wonderful aspects of the soul. He said, "Man's soul is the manual for the spiritual journey."

In his mystical ideology, the mystic, albeit among people, should remember God and refrain from the factors that make this world dominate him and block his spiritual intuition, including garrulousness, voraciousness, excessive sleep, and improper associations.

Given the above discussion and bases of mystical thoughts of Hamadani, he considered avoiding sins the starting point of achieving perfection, saying, ***"Restraining from committing sins is the first step of the mystic because only the pure soul can absorb the truths. This is the very secret of the verse, 'None shall touch it but those who are pure*** [***in heart***]***'*** (***56:79***)***.""***

2. Ayatullah Sayyid Ali Qadi

Hajj Mirza Tabrizi, also known as "Qadi" was a great mystic. In his letter to Allamah Tabataba'i, he introduced the path of gnosis as the best way to salvation and perfection, saying, "As long as man's soul does not pass the world of ideas (or imagination; J b (b), he cannot enter the world of intellect, and until one does not enter the world of intellect, he cannot attain the true gnosis and achieve the desired purpose [namely, nearness to God]."

Then he gave some basic instructions on how to purify one's soul during the beginning of the spiritual journey:

A person should eat and sleep much less than normal so that his animal nature weakens and his spirituality strengthens. As for eating, first he should eat only twice a day and should not eat anything between these two main meals. Second, during the main meals, he should eat one hour after he feels hungry and should not satiate his appetite. Likewise, besides observing the etiquettes of eating, he should not eat much meat.

If possible, he should fast on the first three days of every month. As for reducing the hours of sleep, the mystic should sleep only six hours a day, try to control his tongue, and avoid associating with negligent people. As to staying vigilant, it should last three hours in the winter and an hour and a half in the summer. In the state of prostration, he should continuously recite the Yunusiyyah Dhikr: "There is no god but You: glory to You: I was indeed a wrong– doer!" The more he repeats this invocation, the more effective it is. It is recommended to be recited at least four hundred times.

On strengthening one's spirituality, first, he should constantly feel sorrowful for not having reached the desired objective [that is, nearness to God]; and second, he should not give up remembering God and thinking about God and spiritual matters as much as possible because these two resemble two wings that fly within the sky of gnosis[15].

3. Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i

The late Allamah Tabataba'i considered self-examination and mystic contemplation as important in the beginning of the spiritual journey, as they are the first steps in self-purification:

Every morning when you get up, intend to take God's satisfaction into account no matter what happens. This way, you will consider the hereafter in all that you do. This state of mind should be kept until bedtime. At bedtime, ponder on your daily actions, considering them one by one for five minutes; thank God for whatever deed that brought about His satisfaction, and ask for His forgiveness for whatever deed that angered Him. Keep taking this action every night. Although this method may be difficult and bitter to you, it is the key to salvation. Every night, if possible, recite the following Qur'anic chapters: Hadid, Hashr, Jum'ah, and Taghabun, and if not, recite only Hashr[16].

4. Ayatullah Muhammad Taqi Bahjat

Like his masters, Ayatullah Bahjat saw abandoning and refraining from sins to be the first and most important step toward self-purification in the spiritual journey to God. According him, acting upon whatever one already knows paves the way for practical spiritual development and receiving more knowledge from God. In a letter to all seekers of guidance, he wrote:

I ask those who want to be taught, 'Have you acted upon whatever you heard before?' Do you know that if a person practices what he knows, God will teach him what he does not know? If man does not practice what he knows, can he expect his knowledge to increase? No dhikr is superior to practical dhikr, and no practical dhikr is superior to abandoning sins in terms of beliefs and actions.

Generally, it seems that abandoning sins is impossible except through constant mystical contemplation. If one possesses the virtues of the pious and follows the prophets and their successors in both beliefs and actions, takes actions or stop taking any measure in accordance with their commands, does not think about anything other than God when performing acts of worship, performs prayers with presence of heart, follows the Imam of the Age in doubtful matters – disagrees with whatever and whoever the Imam of the Age disagrees with and agrees with whatever and whoever the Imam of the Age agrees with, curses whoever he curses and has mercy on whoever he has mercy on, albeit briefly, such a person does not lack any virtue and does not have any sin and evil[17].

Likewise, a student of Islamic sciences came to him and asked, "Can we act upon instructions either given by such great mystics as the late Bidabadi or those found in the mystical books?" He responded:

The late Bidabadi and other prominent scholars made great efforts in the way of Islam, but each guided people to God through a specific path. My advice to you is one thing which comes down to a few words: Refrain from sinning. However, do not assume that refraining from sins is a simple task to do; sometimes it is very difficult. After refraining from sins, other instructions will naturally be known to you[18].

5. Imam Khomeini

What is considerably noticeable in the mystical thoughts of Imam Khomeini is his placing importance on young age as a starting point for self-development and self-purification. According to him, the older a person becomes, the firmer and more deep-rooted false beliefs and evil deeds become, and the more difficult it is to rectify them. In addition, unlike young age, man's willpower, like other mental powers, weakens with old age, making the spiritual struggle harder. Addressing those who neglect to remember God, he wrote:

Lo' the negligent! Wake up and prepare for the journey to the hereafter because the call is made, 'It is the time of the journey!' Until you have not lost your youth, try to do good deeds, purify your hearts, unlock the locks of the heart, and remove the veils [that prevent light enter the heart] because young people are closer to God and Heaven, and they can succeed in self-purification while the aged cannot.

If worldly chains and Satanic traps are neglected during young age, they will become more deep- rooted and stronger. The deceits of Satan and one's Commanding Soul (al-nafs al-ammarah, the soul which is not purified and commands to do bad things) are so dangerous that one cannot guarantee he can be reformed during old age; he cannot postpone self-purification and repentance until the old age when corruption within the self becomes massive and the willpower to purge one's soul becomes weak or even non-existent[19].

Moreover, as for basic duties of the wayfarer to God, he also regarded mystical self-monitoring (al-muraqabah) and self-examination (al- muhasabah) as necessary for purifying one's self and being immune from the Commanding Soul and Satan:

It is obligatory for the one who treads the path of the hereafter to make every possible effort to protect his knowledge and practice from the Commanding Soul and Satan, to inspect and ponder on his actions and intentions carefully, to determine the departure point and destination of his spiritual journey, to prepare spiritual food for his soul, and not to disregard Satanic deceptions and traps…[For this purpose,] first, he should pay careful attention to himself, like a kind physician and a compassionate nurse, and should inspect the defects of his spiritual journey; second, he should not disregard seeking refuge in God in private through supplication and invocation[20].

6. Allamah Mohammad Baqir Majlisi

In a spiritual advice, he referred to the following points about how to prepare for and pave the way for a successful spiritual journey:

One should avoid useless words [like speaking about something other than God], and abandon eating delicious foods, drinking tasty beverages, wearing elegant clothes, [excessive sexual] associating with wives, and living in luxury houses. He should also refrain from associating with those who are not the Friends of God and should not sleep much. Likewise, the friends of God benefited from constant recitation of: 'O' the Living, the Self-subsisting! O' the One except Whom there is no god!'; I also experienced this dhikr, although I mostly say: 'O' God!'. Of course, what matters is that remembrance of God must accompany thorough mystic contemplation. If this deed is continued for forty days, the doors of wisdom, gnosis, and love for God will open21."

Conclusion

The above discussion was an inquiry about the first step towards perfection and self-purification. Great religious scholars and Shi'a mystics considered "wakefulness" – waking up from the slumber of negligence – as the first step toward moral perfection. Due to being preoccupied with the natural world and constantly dealing with this world and matters related to it, man neglects his reality, departure point, and destination.

This negligence prevents him from thinking about the right path. Hence, it is imperative that the seeker of perfection and the hereafter follow the examples of great religious scholars through acting upon the instructions given by them, eventually becoming determined to tread the path of salvation and begin his journey to the perfection he deserves.

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