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# The Stages of Self-refinement

## 1. Prevention

Observance of psychological hygiene and prevention of sins and obscene moral deeds are the best and easiest stages of self-refinement. At these stages the self is not yet quite contaminated with sins, still possesses his natural purity and enlightenment, and is better prepared for performance of good deeds and acquiring of good morals.

He has not yet blackened and darkened, Satan has not yet made his entry inside him, and has not accustomed to evil deeds. Because, of these factors he is better prepared for quitting sinful deeds.

Teenagers and young people, if, decide for purifying their souls and quitting sinful and moral absence deeds, it is relatively easier for them, because, they still are at the preventing stage which is easier than quitting a chronic habit. Therefore, the youth, teens, and even childhood years are the best period for self-refinement. Likewise, so far as a man has not tasted the pleasure of a particular sin, he is in a better position not to commit it.

Therefore, children, youths, and those people who not yet been contaminated with certain sinful deeds must appreciate this stage as something very important, guard themselves not to commit sin at all, and should maintain their state of purity and cleanness, because prevention is always better than cure.

They should better understand this important point that if they sinned and acquired obscene moral characteristics within their existence, than in that case they would have opened the gate for Satan's entry within their hearts, and onward, quitting a sin for them would become extremely difficult as compared to earlier.

Satan and imperious-self, therefore, always try to present sinning for once and twice, something as minor and insignificant, so that by this mean they could increase their influence and make the self addicted to sinning.

Therefore, a man who is seriously concerned about his salvation and welfare must seriously resists self's whims and passions and should not allow his self to commit a sin even for once. The Commander of the Faithful, Imam ' 'Ali (a.s.) said:

قال على عليه السلام: لاترحض لنفسك في شيء من سيء الاقوال والافعال.

*"Don't let your self allow to make an evil commitment or indulgence into evil deeds."*[1]

And said:

قال على عليه السلام: غالب الشوة قوة ضراوتها فانها ان قويت ملكوت واستقادتك ولم تقدر على مقاومتها.

*"Dominate the passions of your self, before he becomes stronger, because, once he becomes stronger, he will take-over your control pulling you in every direction as he pleases, and in that situation you will not be able to offer resistance against him."*[2]

And said:

قال على عليه السلام: العادة عدو متملك.

*"Habit is like an enemy who prefers his hegemony over you."*[3]

And said:

قال على عليه السلام: العادة طبع ثان.

*"Addiction becomes second nature for a man."*[4]

And said:

قال على عليه السلام: غالب الهوى مغالب لنصم خصمه وحاربه محاربة العدو عدوه لعلك تملكه.

*"Dominate your self's passions like an enemy dominates his enemy; wage a war against him like an enemy attacks his enemy; may be, through these means you might be able to dominate him."*[5]

And said:

قال امير المؤمنين عليه السلام: ترك الخطيية ايسر من طلب التوبه و كم من شهوة ساعة اورثت حزنا طويلا و

الموت فضح الدنيا فلم يترك لذي لب فرحا.

*"Not to commit sin is better than repentance, because, many a times, an hour of carnal pleasures results in perpetual anxiety and distress. Death is a mean for discovering the scandalous nature of this world, which does not leave any pleasure left for an intelligent and aware person."*[6]

Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.) said:

قال ابو عبدالله عليه السلام: اقصر نفسك عما يضرها من قبل ان تفارقك واسع فى فكاكها كما تسعى فى طلب معيشتك فان نفسك وهينة بعملك.

*"Before the soul departs from your body, do not allow your self to perform harmful deeds,. endeavor for achieving self's freedom the way you make efforts for earning your living. Because, the same self will be mortgaged against the deeds (on the Day of Judgement)."*[7]

God-Almighty has said in the Holy Qur'an.

وَأَمَّا مَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِ وَنَهَى النَّفْسَ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ فَإِنَّ الْجَنَّةَ هِيَ الْمَأْوَىٰ

***"But as for him who feared to stand before his Lord and restrained his soul from lust. Lo! the Garden will be his home.*** (***79:40-41***)

Any how, the path of prevention is the best as well as the easiest path, and therefore, as much as a man endeavors seriously in this path is worthy of merit. How blessed is a young man, who subdues his imperious-self, does not allow him to indulge in sinful deeds, and with a purified and refined self follows the straight path of human exaltation ascending towards God's Nearness, till the very end of his life.

## 2. Sudden Renunciation

If the self has already crossed the preservation stage by becoming contaminated with sins and moral vices, the alternative is to resort to cleansing, which consists of several methods. One of the best method of cleansing is the internal revolution and a complete sudden renunciation. A person who has become contaminated with sins and other moral vices may decide once to return towards God-Almighty through repentance -washing and purifying the heart from all sorts of sins and vices.

With a single bold definite decision, one force out devils from the heart by shutting the doors for their entry forever, thus, making the heart's dwelling readied for the descend of God's favorite angels and Divine illumination.

Having inflicted a devastating severe blow the imperious-self and Satan should be subdued thoroughly,

and the power to rule over the self must be taken into hands firmly and forever. There were many such lucky individuals who were blessed with Divine Favor of attaining self-refinement by means of internal revolution within their inner existence, and remained faithful to their commitment till the last breath of their lives.

This internal spiritual revolution or awakening (or being reborn) occurs in the lives of peoples sometimes hearing a short sentence of a preacher and scholar of moral ethics, hints given by a Divine Guide, happening of an unusual shattering tragedy, participation in a gathering of prayer and supplication, and listening to verses, traditions, and pondering for a few minutes. Sometimes, a minor incident like a sparking illuminates the heart's dwelling.

There were individuals who were blessed to receive Divine-Grace to attain self-refinement through internal spiritual revolution in their lives, and thus, joined the ranks of wayfarers journeying towards God-Almighty. Following are few examples:

Bashar Hafi, was one of the most famous pious and religious personalities of his period. In his biography it has been written: Earlier he was an aristocrat who was continuously busy in world amusements and sexual pleasures round the clock; his house was the center of carnal pleasures, drinking, dancing, and loud music. But later on repented and joined the ranks of most distinguished ascetic and pious persons. Following is the story of his repentance:

“One day, a maid came out side the door of his house for emptying the garbage can; coincidentally at the same time Imam al-Kadhim (a.s.) was passing by through the alley near his house and the sound of loud music reached to his ears. He asked the maid:

'Does the owner of this house is a free man or servant (of God)?'

'Of course! He is a free man as well as a master. ' Replied the maid.

'You are right, because if he was a servant -must have been afraid of his master and should not have been so bold in committing sins '. Replied the Imam.

“The maid returned back to the house. Her master, who was busy in drinking asked the maid:

'What is the reason of your delay?'

“The maid narrated for her master the encounter outside with an unidentified person and the details of questions and answers exchanged between them. 'What he said ultimately?' Asked the master. His last words were: 'You are right! Your master is a free man, because if he would have considered himself God's servant, then he would have been afraid of his Master and would not have shown such boldness in committing sins ,. Replied the maid.

“This short sentence of Imam al-Kadhim (a.s.) like a sharp arrow pierced Bashar's heart and like a fresh

illuminated and metamorphosed his inner existence. He left his drinking and came out, bare footed running fast in order to reach the un-identified person. Ultimately reaching near him, he said:

"'Oh my master! I beg God's as well as your pardon. Yes! I was and still am God's servant but had forgotten my servitude; because, of that acted so boldly in committing sins, but right now I have discovered my servitude, and want to repent for my past sins and omissions. Will God-Almighty accept my repentance ? I "'Yes! God-Almighty, will accept your repentance, will for give your past sins, and you must quit sinning for ever. I Replied the Imam.

"Bashar repented and become one of the most famous pious and saintly personality of his time, and in order to show his thank for this blessing used to walk bare-footed till the end of his life."[8]

Abu Basir narrated:

"One of the agent of a tyrant king used to live in my neighborhood, who used to acquire his living through illegal means and had turned his home into a center of carnal pleasures, dancing, drinking, and music. Naturally, living next door to him was annoying and painful for me, but there was no alternative except to bear, because my repeated advises have not produced any improvement in his behavior. Finally, one day, when I pressed him hard to change his life style, he replied:

"'I am a prisoner of Satan, because of my addiction to eating, drinking, and sinning, I cannot quite them. I am sick but can do nothing for treatment. You are a good neighbor for me, but I am a bad neighbor for you. I am helpless and have become a prisoner of self's whims and passions, and don't know how to get myself out of this situation. When, you visit Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.) in the near future, please plead may case with him, may be he will suggest a solution for my rescue.

Abu Basir continued: "I was deeply influenced with his words, and remained patient for a while till an opportunity aroused for me to go to Madina for seeing Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.). When I saw Imam (a.s.) I narrated the story of my neighbor for him. The Imam replied: 'When you returned back to Madina, your neighbor will come to see you, then you must tell him that Jafar bin Muhammad had said:

'Do not commit sins, so that I could guarantee Paradise for you.'

Abu Basir said:

"When I returned back to Kufa after completing the pilgrimage, people came to see me including my next door neighbor. After exchanging formalities of greetings and inquiring about my trip when he wanted to leave, I gave him a hint that I have to discuss something in private. When other people left my house, I said to him that I narrated his story to Imam (a.s.), and he replied:

'Upon your return to Kufa, that man will come to see you. Tell him that Jafar bin Muhammad said:

اخرج بما انت فيه وانا اضمن لك الجنة.

*'Quit sinning so that I could guarantee Paradise for you:'*

“This short message of Imam (a.s.) so much touched his heart that he started crying and said to me: 'Do you swear by God that Imam said these words for me ?

“I swore by God and assured him that these are the exact words of Imam for him. He replied: 'These words are enough for me. , “He said these words and left my house. For several days I did not hear any news about him. One day, he send a message for me to visit him at his home. I accepted his invitation and went to his house, he opened the door and hiding behind the door said:

'Oh Abu Basir! Every thing which I acquired through forbidden means have returned to their owners,. Right now, I possess absolutely nothing even a pair of clothing to cover myself and that is why I am standing behind the door. I have quitted all sins and have truly implemented the Imam's message in my life.

“Abu Basir said:

'I was indeed happy to learn about his repentance and changed condition, and wondered about the impact of Imam s short message upon him. I returned back to my home and arranged some clothing and some quantity of food and brought it for him. After a while he again called me and when I went to see him, found him sick.

He remained in this condition for quite some time, and during this period I frequently visited him to take care of his needs, but unfortunately treatment did not produce any improvement and his condition continued to deteriorate day by day till one day I found him in precarious condition hovering between life and death, while I was sitting on his side, and he was taking his last breaths, he suddenly opened his eyes and said:

'Oh Abu Basir! Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.) had fulfilled his promise. He said these words and left for his eternal abode.

“After sometimes I had the opportunity for going to Hijaz for Hajj Pilgrimage, and also to see Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.). When I was about to enter in his presence and my one foot was inside the hall while another one still in the yard, the Imam said: 'Oh Abu Basir! I have .fulfilled the promise for your neighbor and the Paradise which I had guaranteed for him, was bestowed upon him. ' “9

There were and still are such individuals, who with single definite bold decision and act of bravery, subdued the imperious-self and took over the command of their affairs in their own hands, and with the occurrence of a spiritual internal revolution polished and refined their hearts from all sort of impurities and vices. Therefore, the above stories indicate that following the above path is possible for all of us.

The Commander of the Faithful, Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) said:

قال على عليه السلام: غالبوا نفسكم على ترك العادات وجاهدوا اهوائكم تملكوها.

*“For quitting habits subdue the self: by struggling against his whims and passions; may be you will succeed in making him your prisoner.”*[10]

And said:

قال علي عليه السلام: افضل العبادة ترك العادة.

*“Best of the worships are achieving domination over habits.”*[11]

Imam al-Baqir (a.s.) said:

عن ابي جعفر عليه السلام قال: كل عين باكية يوم القيامة غير ثلاث: عين سهرت في سبيل الله و عين فاضت من خشية الله وعين غضت من محارم الله.

*“One the Day of Resurrection all eyes shall be crying except the following three kinds:*

*First: The eyes of some one who spent his nights awake in worshipping for the pleasure of God-Almighty.*

*Second: The eyes of some one who shed tears, because, of fear from God-Almighty.*

*Third: The eyes of some one who prevented them from looking forbidden things for the pleasure of God-Almighty.”*[12]

Imam al-Sadiq (a.s.) said:

عن ابي عبدالله (ع) قال: فيما ناجي الله عز و جل موسي (ع): يا موسي! ما تقرب الي المتقربون بمثل الورع عن محارمي. فاني ابيحهم جنات عدن لا اشرك معهم احدا.

*“God-Almighty said to Prophet Moses (a.s.) through revelation that nothing is more effective in attaining my nearness as avoidance of forbidden things. 'The Paradise of Eden' will be bestowed upon them, and no one else would be allowed to enter therein.”*[13]

Of course, it must be admitted that self-domination and total avoidance of sin is not an easy task, but still with foresight, self- awareness, decisiveness, and pondering it might not be so difficult, considering

the fact that one will be supported and strengthened with Divine Assistance as promised in the Holy Qur'an:

***"As for those who strive in Our (cause) -We will certainly guide them to our paths. For verily God is with those who do right.*** (***29:69***)

## 3. Gradual Renunciation

If we discovered that our inner existence does not have the courage and boldness required for quitting all sins at once, we may decide for gradual renunciation in stages. This procedure consists of beginning with quitting few sins at a time as a test of our will power, and the struggle should be continued till we become victorious over the self cutting the roots of those sins forever.

Later on, the same procedure should be repeated regarding some other sins and should be continued till the final victory is achieved.

Care should be taken that the sins quitted earlier should not be repeated at all. Obviously, renunciation of each sin makes the imperious-self and Satan weaker in the same proportion; the place of each devil, forced out shall be immediately replaced by the entry of God's angel, and similarly the amount of darkness removed from the heart's surface shall be replaced with whiteness and illumination in the same proportion.

The abstinence from sins should be continued, in this manner, till self-perfection and final victory in controlling the self's desires is achieved. It is possible that while practicing abstinence of few sins at a time, we might reach to the limit, where we feel to have the necessary will power and determination to quit all sins at a time like sudden at once renunciation, in which case this golden opportunity should be utilized taking the decision to refrain from all sins.

By forcing out the Satan, the imperious-self should be subdued by allocating the heart's dwelling for God-Almighty and his favorite angels. If we struggle and endeavor to achieve the above cherished goal, we will certainly be victorious. Self-struggle is exactly like waging a war against an enemy.

A worrier must continuously watch over his enemy's movement, evaluate his own strength compared with enemy's resources, must strive for strengthening his forces, and by utilization of suitable opportunities must attack his enemy inflicting devastating blows, thus, annihilating his soldiers completely or forcing them out of self's kingdom.

1. Ghirar al-Hukm, vol. 2, p-801.
2. Ghirar al-Hukm, p-511.
3. Ghirar al-Hukm, p-33.
4. Ghirar al-Hukm, p-26.
5. Ghirar al-Hukm, p-509.
6. al-Kafi, vol. 2, p-451.

7. al-Kafi, vol. 2, p-455.
8. Muntah al-Amal, vol. 2, p-126.
9. Muntaha al-Amal, vol. 2, p-86.
10. Ghirar al-Hukm, p-508.
11. Ghirar al-Hukm, p-176.
12. al-Kafi, vol. 2, p-80.
13. al-Kafi, vol. 2, p-80.

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