

Self Examination

From: *Provisions of the Journey Vol.1*, by Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi

O Abu Dharr! Hold yourself accountable before they hold you accountable, and in order for your accounting to be easy tomorrow.

Weigh yourself before they weigh you and be ready before you are presented in the presence of Allah on the Day of Resurrection before there is nothing which remains hidden from Him

In the *hadiths*, and amongst them in the *Nahj al-Balaghah* (the Peak of Eloquence), a lot of emphasis has been laid on self-examination of the soul and the scholars of morals believe that one of the initial stages of edification of the soul and spiritual way-faring and journeying is self-inspection of the inner being. In this *hadith* something more has been added that does not appear in the rest of the narrated *hadiths* and that is that self-examination in the world makes accounting in the Resurrection lighter and easier.

Self-examination Is an Unavoidable Need

The issue of self-inspection and examination of man's conduct is an unavoidable one. Every person has some accounting and inspection to do in his life; accounting is very important especially for those who do earn money and the businessmen whose occupation involves investments, money, profit and loss. Usually, every seller checks his account at least once a year, but in addition to this yearly accounting, he checks his accounts on a daily, weekly and monthly basis also so that at the end of the year his checking and balancing of accounts may be easier. If that businessman does not check and balance his accounts on a daily or weekly or monthly basis and allows his account books to increase, his work at the end of the year becomes hard and sometimes makes big mistakes as a result of heedlessness and inattention.

What is being asserted is that just like a trader who checks and balances his accounts with careful attention to know how much profit and loss he is making and does not bypass a single coin, a believer too ought to settle his accounts with Allah and in this regard he ought to be careful of the trickery of his soul and fear lest his soul deceive him by justifying sins and in this way not let him settle his accounts with accuracy. He ought to demand a convincing reply and hold himself as accountable as the divine agents will hold him accountable on the Day of Resurrection.

Principally, accounting for sin is more accurate if it occurs on time and is not left to accumulate and man gets a more accurate result and is confronted by less problems on the one hand and on the other hand if accounting for sins is delayed, with the passage of time we forget what sins we have committed and thus they accumulate. In addition, when we pay no heed to our sins, we do think about the alternative and also we do not believe the thickness of our sins.

If it were asked of me what sins I have committed and I were very honest, I would say a thousand sins despite that if I were more accurate in my accounting, I would gather that perhaps

in a day, week and month I commit more than a thousand! When all these sins are put together, a great astronomical figure is made. We are heedless and we imagine that because we have not committed theft and murder, the rest of the sins are not worthy of the name. Perhaps, if we were called sinners, we would protest and say, “What sin have we committed to be called wrong doers?” The nature of man’s soul is forgetfulness, especially in regard to that which is harmful for it.

Man does not like to attribute that which he does not like to himself. According to psychological research, man who is after committing every kind of crime and iniquity strives to justify his sins. Because of the pain which he endures as a result of committing that sin and for the reason that he seeks to get free from guilt of consciousness, he desires to evade the guilt of perpetrating sin and, in other words, he strives to show himself as not being at fault and endeavours to either forget his sin or lays the blame on other people, or the environment, or the world, or the Devil, or the structure of the society and/or other factors. In this way, he takes refuge in these defense mechanisms in order to defend himself.

Because man has self-love, in addition to wanting to be respectable in the society, he also desires to be proud of himself; he does not want to be ashamed of himself and perceive himself as incomplete. He wants to conceive himself as complete and honourable. For this reason, he expels from his memory that which is a cause of his incompleteness and decadence; because remembering them gives rise to his feeling low and light and this is opposed to the natural inclination and desire of man.

Taking this point into consideration, if in this regard there are no factors which remind man of those imperfections and defects and deviations, a bad end lies in wait for him and he will have to bear irreparable losses. It is for this reason that in the *hadiths* in the direction of mentioning factors which remind man of his bad deeds and effort to make up and compensate for them has been chosen as the best way and the scholars of ethics, taking these *hadiths* into consideration, have mentioned the three stages of ‘preconditioning’, ‘alertness’ and ‘accounting’ for people who plan to undertake edification of character and purification of the soul in such books as “*Mi’raj al-Sa’adah*”, “*Jami’ al-Sa’adah*” and “*Ihya’ al-Ulum*”.

Preconditioning [musharitah], watching over the soul [muraqibah] and self-examination [muhasibah]

a) Preconditioning [musharitah]

When man wakes up in the morning, he ought to pay heed to this fact that new capital has been placed in his hands: if we did not wake up from sleep and the soul left our bodies for ever, would our life not come to an end?

اللَّهُ يَتَوَفَّى الْأَنْفُسَ حِينَ مَوْتِهَا وَالَّتِي لَمْ تَمُتْ فِي مَنَامِهَا فَيُمْسِكُ الَّتِي قَضَىٰ عَلَيْهَا الْمَوْتَ وَيُرْسِلُ الْأُخْرَىٰ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

Allah takes the souls at the time of their death, and those that die not during their sleep; then He withholds those on whom He has passed the decree of death and sends the others back till an appointed term; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect.

Therefore, by sleeping, we pass through a stage of death and we lack any activity in the same way that the dead lack activity. Now, once we wake up again from sleep, a second life has been granted to us and new capital has been placed at our disposal. For this reason, we ought to thank Allah and address our souls in this way, “O soul! Allah has placed this invaluable capital at your disposal so that by means of it you may secure the prosperity of the hereafter. If you commit error, you will lose your capital and meet with loss and failure.”

We ought to set conditions with our souls and get it to promise and pledge not to come close to sin and not to do anything which will result in the anger and discontent of Allah. We ought to make our souls promise to use this invaluable capital in the way that is pleasing to Allah, the Exalted, and gives fruit to prosperity for man because the pleasure of Allah results in man’s prosperity and if Allah is not pleased, man cannot and does not attain prosperity. We ought to set conditions on our souls not to be lazy at discharging incumbent duties [*wajibat*] and divine duties and not to abstain from doing every good deed that is feasible for it.

It is better for this preconditioning [*musharitat*] to be done after the morning prayers and the supplications that follow it [*ta’qibat*]

b) Watching over the Soul [*muraqibah*]

After the stage of pre-conditioning [*musharitat*] comes the stage of watching over the soul [*muraqibah*]; this denotes that during the course of the day man ought to be careful to act according to what he has preconditioned on himself and be careful at every moment not to commit sin. He ought to see whether he is traversing the right path or the way of sin and error.

To put it another way, watching over the self is tantamount to piety [*taqwa*], because piety implies watching over divine values and protecting good works: it has been narrated in a *hadith* that piety is similar to a man who walks in the darkest of nights in a desert full of snakes and scorpions and it is possible for that every moment he may step either on a snake or scorpion and put an end to his life once bitten by them.

Now, in the same way that he takes utmost care and makes sound judgment so as not to be bitten by either a snake or scorpion, man has to also have perfect precaution and care to go free from the danger of the Devil and not be afflicted by the retribution of the hereafter. Therefore, piety denotes that man has to continually meditate about his deeds and perceive the consequences of his deeds.

Imam al-Sadiq (‘a) states:

“A man came to the Noble Prophet (S) and said, ‘O Prophet of Allah! Give me some advice.’ The Noble Prophet asked him three times, ‘Are you going to accept my advice if I give it to you?’

The man replied, ‘Yes O Prophet of Allah.’ The Noble Prophet (S) stated, ‘If you make up your mind to do something, think about its consequences. If the results of your decision are good, discharge that work and if its end were bad, abstain from it.’”

Keeping permanent watch over the self is attained as a result of knowledge of Allah and due to certitude that Allah, the Exalted, is aware of the inner secrets of man and nothing is hidden from Him. For this reason, there is no deed which man commits without needing watch over the soul at the time of doing it because man in his deeds is either in a state of obeying and worshipping Allah and/or in a state of committing sin and/or in a state of doing deeds that are permissible but not recommendable.

His watching over the self at the time of obedience and worship of Allah denotes that he ought to have purity of intention and striving in the direction of perfecting his deeds and observing the etiquettes of worship and protecting his deeds from decadence. His self-vigilance at the time of sinning implies repentance, feeling remorse, detaching his heart from misdeeds, feeling shame and resolving to make up for his wrong doing.

His watching over the self and being vigilant at the time of doing permissible but not recommendable deeds means that he observes correct conduct and always keeps in mind the Giver at the time of deriving benefit from the blessings of this world and being thankful for those gifts and bearing afflictions with the utmost of patience.

c) **Self-examination [muhasibah]**

Self-examination [*muhasibah*] is the third stage which the scholars of *hadith* have recommended for the edification of character and purification of the soul. Self-examination denotes examining his daily deeds at the end of the day and asking himself whether he has discharged the divine and incumbent duties which lie on his shoulders or not.

If after self-inspection he perceives that he has discharged his divine duties and his daily deeds were concordant with the legal criteria, he ought to be thankful to Allah for granting him the opportunity to perform his duties for the reason that discharging divine duties is dependent on the grace of Allah and man ought to be thankful for that term. Likewise, he ought to try on the other days to continue that same sound and correct path.

But if he has not discharged his divine duties, or he has performed them imperfectly and has been afflicted by error and deviation, he ought to endeavor to make up for them by discharging recommendable [*mustahabb*] and especially optional prayers and castigate himself and repent when he has not discharged his divine duties and has committed sin against Allah so that Allah may forgive his sins. Likewise, he ought to try to make up for his sins by doing good and praiseworthy deeds. This is that same self-examination which the Infallible and Pure *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) have recommended for their companions and scholars of ethics on the basis of the orders of the Infallible and Pure *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) have advised other people to be accountable for their deeds.