

Knowing the Self

Importance of self-knowledge

Self-knowledge is a highly effective system of self-improvement. Knowing yourself means understanding yourself, probing deeper than just the surface. It can be uncomfortable and that is why many people tend to ignore it. But without it life can never achieve its maximum possible perfection. Knowing yourself is a conscious effort that requires thought and planning.

The Holy Quran says; ***“O you who believe! Take care of yourselves; he who strays cannot hurt you when you are on the right path.” (5:105)*** In this verse Allah tells us to pay attention to ourselves. We must be careful about the well-being of our spirits and be aware of the diseases of our souls. Then those who are misled will not harm us. From this we understand that our first duty is to take care of ourselves spiritually.

Many Hadith tell us about the importance of knowing the self. Imam Ali (a) says; *The one who has attained inner knowledge of his own self has obtained the greatest victory indeed.* He also says; *How can one who is ignorant of his own self expect to know others?*¹

In Ancient Greece, the philosopher Socrates declared that the unexamined life was not worth living. When he was asked to sum up all philosophical commandments he replied: ‘Know yourself.’

Reaching possible perfection

Perfection is the maximum conditional use of all inner faculties (innate and acquired) to achieve the highest possible stage of development.

Every being has a different level of perfection, closely matched to that being's inherent characteristics and purpose in the scheme of things in the universe. For instance, an ordinary shade tree which does not bear fruits compared with an apple tree which does the latter as well as the former, is considered of a lower status of perfection in the scheme of things. It is for this reason that an apple tree in an orchard, which grows enough leaves to provide ample shade but for some reason does not bear fruit, is most likely cut down and replaced with one that does. It has not lived up to its potential, its level of perfection. In other words, although the tree remains useful in many respects, it has failed in that aspect that distinguishes it from the less perfect trees which do not bear fruits.

The same analogy works when comparing humans and animals. If a human being does not exhibit characteristics which rise above those shared with animals, i.e., eating, drinking, seeking comfort, shelter, pleasure, and the continuation of the race, then that human being has not reached his or her full potential, or perfection.²

¹ Hadith taken from *The Scale of Wisdom* by Muhammadi Rayshahri, pg 705

² From: <https://www.al-islam.org/self-knowledge-mohammad-ali-shomali>

Process of Self Knowledge

1) **Identify yourself.**

What are your:

- a) Strengths and Weaknesses
- b) Temperament – type of personality
- c) Goals in life – vision for yourself
- d) Interests – what you enjoy doing
- e) Discipline – control over yourself

2) **Work on your yourself**

- a) How can you enhance your strengths?
- b) What can you do to overcome your weaknesses?
- c) Plan steps to achieve your vision

3) **Inspire yourself with noble teachings**

- a) Verses of the Holy Quran – choose verses that you remind yourself of often.
- b) Hadith – inspire yourself with a daily hadith, a vitamin for your soul.
- c) Excerpts of duas – Makarimul Akhlaq, Munajaat of Sahifa Sajjadiyyah, Abu Hamza Thumali . .
- d) Books – religious and secular

4) **Persist** – the process is continuous. Don't give up after some time, or take it lightly. It is a serious matter of grave consequences.

5) **Take gradual steps** – Focus on small ways of understanding and watching yourself. Repeat them often and make changes accordingly.



Your cure is within you but you do not know
Your illness is from you but you do not see
You are the clear book through whose letters the hidden becomes manifest
You think that you are a small insignificant mass but within you unfolds an entire universe
You would not need what is outside of yourself if you would reflect on the self
but you do not reflect.
Imam Ali (a)³

³ See: <http://www.islamquest.net/en/archive/question/en22122>