

Process of Self Development – Part 1

(Adapted from ‘A Glance at the Process of Self-Development’ by Dr. M.A. Shomali)

The process of self-development has different stages.

1) Wakefulness or attention to one’s self

The first stage is wakefulness (yaqzah). It is to awaken from the pre-occupation of worldly engagements and to remove negligence. To awaken is to remember to look after one’s piety, life and spirituality. Many scholars such as Imam Khumayni in his book: *Jihad al-Akbar* (the Major Jihad), state that the first stage of self-purification is wakefulness. Some mystics believe it is only a preliminary stage and the first stage comes after wakefulness. However, there is no doubt that this is the beginning. The departure point is to become awake. We may say that we are all ‘awake’, but this is a different kind of wakefulness.

According to a hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (S) said: *People are asleep and only wake up when they die*

When they die, they wake and never go to sleep again. But then it is too late. They are like a person who wakes up when the train has gone, or when the airplane has flown. At that time, there is no use or benefit in going to the airport because, although you are now awake, you have already missed the flight. All you can do is to blame yourself and regret. You might say that you will catch the next flight but unfortunately there are no more flights. It is the end of the world. That was the last flight.

Allah (SWT) talks of the people who ask to be returned, so that they can do something good. He says:

When death comes to one of them, he says, ‘My Lord! Take me back, that I may act righteously in what I have left behind.’ ‘By no means! These are mere words that he says.’ And before them is a barrier until the day they will be resurrected.

Sura al-Mu’minun, no.23, verses 99-100

Unfortunately, death has become so familiar or naturalised that we do not think we are going to die, and it will always happen to someone else. According to an Iranian poet, ‘we are like a group of sheep, taken one by one to the slaughter house; each is enjoying, not thinking that they will be next’.

Sometimes wakefulness happens through a significant event such as the loss of a relative, severe illness, or in meeting a pious person. However, we should not wait for something to happen before changing. We can make efforts to change, as there is no guarantee that something will happen to us. It is very easy to become awake: it just needs determination and for us to think about how important and significant this journey towards Allah is. This is the only chance that we have to obtain provisions for our eternal journey. According to a hadith, Imam Ali (A.S.) said:

Day and night are constantly affecting you, so you should also try to affect them.

There is a beautiful analogy regarding our situation. Life in this world is compared to a rope for a person who has gone into a deep well and is only holding onto that rope. If he loses this rope he will be finished. There are two mice, one white and one black, at the top of the well, gnawing on

the rope. The time will come when the rope will definitely break. The mice are very determined and will not go away. This is our situation. The rope represents our life. The white mouse represents day and the black mouse represents night. Day and night are constantly 'gnawing' away at our life and sooner or later we will 'fall' and die.

2) Assessing the self

After becoming awake, we should try to find out what resources, opportunities and options are available to us. Now that we are awake, we want to do something. It is like someone who has no work or business and so has no source of income. Everyone tells him to be responsible and do something. He agrees that he should do something but does not know what to do. He cannot start from nothing.

First of all, he should discover what kind of abilities and skills he has. He should know what options are available. For example, he should try to learn about the state of the business market. He should find out who has been successful so that he can take them as role models. He should also see who has become bankrupt so that he can learn lessons from their situation and avoid becoming like them. This is what is called 'self-knowledge' (ma'rifat al-nafs) and is considered to be 'the most beneficial knowledge'. Why do we always tend to forget about ourselves and know about other things instead? For example, there are some people who may spend all their life studying a rare species of insects but will not spend even one hour sitting down trying to find out what God has placed inside them.

Muslim mystics say that there are two worlds: an external one consisting of the beautiful natural world of humans, animals, plants and non-living beings created by God and also an internal world inside our very selves. And they say that this world inside us is the greater world. What God has placed inside us is far greater than the whole physical world outside ourselves. This is why we read in a beautiful Divine saying (Hadith-e Qudsi):

Neither my heaven nor my earth could contain Me, it is only the heart of a believing person that has contained Me.

We often underestimate the potential that we have for perfection. There is an endless possibility before us. Even the most holy people can still advance. There is always further for them to go because the distance between man and God is infinite. This is why we pray after Tashahhud, '*O God! Please accept the intercession of the Holy Prophet (S) for us and also elevate his level*'. This means that the Prophet (s) can go higher.

Many of us are too easily satisfied with our achievements. We need to be more determined and have greater expectations. If we are satisfied with small things, we will lose out and maybe we will not even achieve those small things. It is said that once there was a religious scholar ('alim) whose son had become a student of religion. The father asked his son what he wanted to become in the future. The son answered that he wanted to become like his father. The father replied that he felt very sorry for his son because he himself had wanted to become as much as possible like Imam Ja'far Sadiq, who was his role model, and yet his present situation was all that he had achieved. He told his son that if he only wanted to become like his father then he would not achieve anything. So, we should always have great ambitions and indeed God has created us with such a potentiality inside us.