

## Process of Self-Development – Part II

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

### 3) Taking care of the Self

After wakefulness and self- knowledge, we need self-care.

The Qur'an states:

*O believers, look after yourselves, if you are on the right path, you will not be harmed.*

Sura al-Maida, no.5, verse 105

To look after oneself implies the need to be concerned about the progress of the self towards Allah. It means to become preoccupied with enhancing the self, and working on one's faults. Sometimes when people become conscious and sensitive to spiritual issues they become judgmental about other people. They can see faults in others quickly and use that to feel good about themselves. This can be very dangerous. A true believer should be occupied with his own problems.

The Prophet (s) said:

*Blessed is the one who is so busy thinking about his own deficiencies that he has no time to think about the deficiencies of others.*

At times we have an enormous problem within ourselves but we are not aware of it and yet we notice a tiny amount of that same problem when it is in someone else. There is a story in the Mathnawi by Rumi about four people who had an appointment with a king immediately after midday prayers. They wanted to be on time for the meeting and decided to say their prayers quickly and then go to meet the king. They started praying as soon as they reached the mosque. While they were saying their prayers, the one who calls for prayer (mu'adhhdhin) came into the mosque to climb the minaret. The men were now unsure and began to wonder if they had started their prayers too early or if that day the mu'adhhdhin had arrived late.

While praying, one of the men asked the mu'adhhdhin whether the time for prayers had already arrived. The second person asked the first why he had spoken while praying because whether the time had arrived or not, he had now made his prayers void by speaking. The third person pointed out that the second person had now also spoken. The fourth person considered himself very smart and said: 'Thanks be to God that I did not speak!' In this story we see that four people shared the same problem, but each could only see it in the others and not in themselves. They repeated the very same mistake for which they were criticizing the others.

Caring for the self and being concerned about its growth is crucial for self-development. The following are some important components of self-care.

#### a) Acquiring strong belief

The very first thing that we need to do is to acquire proper beliefs and a proper understanding of the world. In order to benefit from our time in this world we must have the correct perspective of life in this world. We should think of questions regarding where we came from and where we are going. The world must be seen for what it is, a temporary place for gathering

provision for another home. We cannot be deluded by the false and transient glitter of the world.

Sa'di, a famous Iranian poet who wrote *Gulistan* and *Bustan*, tells a beautiful story. Once a person went to do some business in another country. He realized that in that country the bells which would hang in the public bath-houses were very cheap to buy. He sold all his goods and with whatever money he had, he purchased a large number of bells. He transported all these bells back to his home town. He expected to make a huge profit on each bell. However, the problem was that there were only two or three bath-houses in his town and no-one wanted to buy the bells, even when he offered them at half price. He lost all his capital and became bankrupt because he did not know which were the right kind of goods that would be needed in his country.

Many people are like this person. They invest a lot in things of this world which will be of no value in the hereafter. We invest our time and efforts which is the most valuable 'capital' that we have been given, in things which, when we arrive in the hereafter, we will be told were pointless and thus we had wasted this 'capital'.

#### b) Fulfilling Obligations to Allah

Almighty Allah has sent us a code of laws to follow in this world. Obeying it would result in happiness in this world and in the hereafter, both for the individual as well as for society. The rules help a person realize his or her fullest potential as a human being. An important aspect of this code of laws is to stay away from sins and wrong doing. There is little benefit in doing good but not refraining from evil.

Rumi has a beautiful story to illustrate this truth. There was a farmer who would harvest his wheat and put it into his storeroom, hoping to fill it for the winter. To his astonishment, every time he went to the storeroom to fill it with more wheat he discovered that the level of the wheat was lower than before. The storeroom was never completely full. He was very surprised. The storeroom was always locked so no-one else had access to it.

One night he decided to stay awake inside his storeroom to find out what the problem was. After midnight he saw huge rats coming into the storeroom. They took all the wheat out of it. He realized that they were the real cause of the problem. Rumi tells us that we are like this. There are some rats in our hearts which take away the light of our good deeds. If there are no rats, then the inner light of years of praying and fasting, and of doing good deeds, would have transformed the soul. There is something that is extinguishing the light that should be there.

As human beings we may make mistakes. But a real believer is one who, if he makes a mistake, always feels sad and bitter about it, and then repents, and sincerely decides not to repeat the same mistake again.

Obedience to Allah is a pre-requisite for spirituality. Some people who are interested in spirituality think that the religious law (shari'ah) is only needed at the beginning and that afterwards we should be concerned just with the requirements of the spiritual journey (tariqah). We don't need to bother with the laws. They say that this is like someone who has reached the core and no longer needs the peel. But this is a mistaken concept. We always need

to observe the shari'ah. The Prophet (s) and Imams (a) followed the shari'ah and no one else can claim to be more pious than them.

There are two different ways of looking at shari'ah. One is to believe that the shari'ah is only for the beginner and that after we reach the higher levels we no longer need it. This is what some Sufis do. The second way is to say that the shari'a is always needed but that by only following shari'ah we will always remain at the lowest level.

If we want to go to the higher levels, in addition to the shari'ah we should try to go beyond the performance of mere rituals to discover the spirit contained within them. An example which might help is that of a person who is at primary school. If someone is at primary school and they feel satisfied with that, then their education will always remain incomplete. They need to go on to secondary school, to high school and then to university. But we cannot say that we will go to secondary school and once there we will forget about everything learnt at primary school. Or that when we go to university we will forget about everything learnt at high school. This will not work. Each stage is a part of the next.

If we maintain proper practice, little by little, the light of our deeds will enlighten our hearts. Even small good deeds can be built upon, as long as sins are not committed. The Prophet Muhammad (S) told Abu Dharr: *O Abu Dharr, with piety, you need to supplicate just the amount of salt you have on your food.*

On the other hand, if someone commits sins the performance of lots of good deeds will not help. We cannot compensate for sins with good deeds. The Qur'an says: *God only accepts from the pious people.* (Sura al-Maida, no.5, verse 27)

### c) Acquiring good qualities and removing negative ones

In addition to having proper beliefs, performing our obligations and refraining from sins, we need to beautify our inner selves. This is the journey towards perfection. We want to adorn our inner self so we can return to Allah with a beautiful soul.

This is the science of Akhlaq (morality) and is much more difficult than having proper beliefs or proper practice. Ingrained habits are difficult to recognize, leave alone change. Somehow it is like a cancer which needs difficult therapy. The first step is identification. Then a plan on how to enhance good qualities and remove negative ones. Small steps can be a path towards success in acquiring perfection.

There is an insightful story about the growth takes place in a believer's soul from the life of Ayatullah Mohammed Husayn Qarawi, the teacher of the late Ayatollah Khu'i. Once some people on a street in Najaf saw that he was smiling and happy and someone asked him why he was happy. The Ayatollah replied that his bag of vegetables had fallen down, and when he started collecting them he was not concerned that people were looking at him. This made him happy because he remembered another incident that had taken place in the early years of his study at the Hawza. At that time, he had an expensive tasbeeh as he was rich, and when it broke, he did not collect the beads because he didn't want people to look at him. Now he felt content that even though he was a great scholar, he did not feel ashamed that people were looking at him while he picked up vegetables. He felt that the sense of pride in him had decreased and that pleased him.

In works such as Mi'raj al-Sa'adah and Jami' al-Sa'adah the scholars outline different faculties of our soul and the corresponding virtues and vices of each. They write about the methods for obtaining the virtues and removing the vices.

d) Consistency in the process of self-development

Developing the self is a lifelong challenge which cannot be given a time limit. There is no time when it is over, and we can sit back and relax. While we are alive we are always fighting a battle with our lower self, so the higher self can triumph. There is no age of retirement or graduation. Whatever we manage to acquire, it is not guaranteed that it will stay with us till the end of our lives. And even if we manage to maintain it, the provision may not be enough for our eternal journey. An additional point to consider is that Allah is worthy of much more than we can ever offer, so we keep trying so long as we alive.

Inspiration and motivation is required to be consistent in the journey. Each person must look for ways to inspire themselves on a regular basis, so they do not fall behind.

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<https://www.al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol-10-no-4-winter-2010/glance-process-self-development-mohammad-ali-shomali/glance#1-wakefulness-or-attention-ones-self>