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This article studies the ways the Qur'an and hadiths have treated the process of self-development and described man's effort and struggle to achieve piety and spirituality.

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Different Treatments Of Spirituality

Mohammad Ali Shomali

In the previous issue we studied different methodological attitudes among Muslim scholars towards spirituality. In this issue we will study the ways the Qur'an and hadiths have treated the process of self-development and described man's effort and struggle to achieve piety and spirituality.

1. Spirituality As Combat With The Self

According to this approach, self-building is an internal battle against the enemy within. In a very well-known and inspiring hadith, we read that once, in Medina, the Prophet Muhammad (S) saw a group of his companions who had won a battle approaching. The Holy Prophet said:

عن موسى بن جعفر عن ابيه ع قال قال أمير المؤمنين ع إن رسول الله ص بعث سرية فلما رجعوا قال مرحبا بقوم قضوا الجهاد الأصغر وبقي الجهاد الأكبر قيل يا رسول الله وما الجهاد الأكبر قال جهاد النفس

“Well done! Welcome to those people who have completed the minor struggle and on whom the greater struggle is still incumbent.” The Apostle of God was asked: “What is the greater struggle?” He replied: “To fight one’s own self.”¹

The companions had defeated their enemies in a severe battle and had been prepared to give up the dearest thing to them, their life, to defend Islam. They were astonished and wondered what could be greater than that. The Holy Prophet replied: ‘Jihad al-nafs.’ This means to fight one’s own self, to struggle with your own self.

In a well-known hadith Abu Dharr asked the Prophet Muhammad: ‘Which struggle is the best?’ The Holy Prophet replied:

ان يجاهد الرجل نفسه وهواه

“To struggle against one’s own self and lusts”².

The likening of self-development to an internal battle is indeed rooted in the Qur’an itself. For example, the Qur’an says:

وَمَنْ جَاهَدَ فَإِنَّمَا يُجَاهِدُ لِنَفْسِهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَغَنِيٌّ عَنِ الْعَالَمِينَ

“And whoever strives, he strives only for his own soul; most surely Allah is Self-sufficient, above (need of) the worlds” (Qur’an Surah Ankabut, 29:6)

According to many exegetes of the Qur’an, this striving or struggle (jihad) which has been mentioned here is a spiritual jihad. There are two main pieces of evidence that they use to prove this. Firstly, the use of the word “himself”: this is significant as in a war a soldier fights for a cause; it may be for the oppressed, for the dignity of Islam or for his country. However this verse mentions the cause as “himself.” Secondly, previous to this verse Allah (SWT) says:

مَنْ كَانَ يَرْجُوا لِقَاءَ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّ أَجَلَ اللَّهِ لَآتٍ ۖ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ

“Whoever hopes to meet Allah, the term appointed by Allah will then most surely come; and He is the Hearing, the Knowing” (Qur’an Surah Ankabut, 29:5)

This concept of meeting Allah (SWT) is also a spiritual concept and so it is consistent with the following verse i.e. the verse 29:6 being about jihad for the self, as this too is a spiritual concept. Of course, this is not to suggest that this verse does not include the militant jihad, but that it also includes the spiritual jihad.

The following verses also refer to the spiritual jihad, though they may also include the militant jihad, since the militant jihad also needs purification of the intention and the soul:

...وَجَاهِدُوا فِي اللَّهِ حَقَّ جِهَادِهِ

“And wage jihad for the sake of God, a jihad which is worthy of Him...” (Qur’an Surah Hajj, 22:78)

وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا ۗ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَمَعَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

“And (as for) those who strive hard for Us, We will most certainly guide them in Our ways; and Allah is most surely with the doers of good” (Qur’an Surah Ankabut, 29:69)

To fight an internal enemy is the greater struggle because it is more difficult. When an enemy is found inside it is more dangerous and more difficult to defeat. An internal civil war is more difficult to face than war against an external foreign enemy on one’s borders. It is much more difficult to expel someone who has occupied our house than to repel someone who is only outside it. If our enemy is inside us then he knows all our secrets. He knows our weak points and our strong points and he knows exactly how to ‘play’ with us.

An internal enemy is always with us and allows us no rest. We might be able to negotiate a cease-fire with an external enemy but with an internal enemy the fight goes on day and night, unceasingly. And, unfortunately, we love and admire this enemy because it is our own soul. He has done so many bad things to us and yet we still love him. So, this is a very difficult and complex battle. We should be really determined and fully alert. Indeed, God should have mercy upon us if we are to win this battle.

We should know that, despite all the challenges to be faced in this struggle, in the end it is not so difficult. God will guide and make it easy for those who sincerely want it. It is very important that when we know something we must put it into practice. If we put our knowledge into practice, then God will give us knowledge of the things that we do not know. If we put into practice the small things that we know, it will enlighten the path before us.

2. Spirituality As A Medicine

Another approach is to consider spirituality as a kind of medicine for our soul or spirit. Spiritual problems are described as illness and so we need to treat ourselves with special medicines. We are patients in need of a cure, in need of medicine. Just like our bodies, our souls may also become ill. Unfortunately, the most difficult sort of illness is when we suffer deep inside. In twelve verses, the Qur’an talks about a group of people who suffer from “disease in their hearts”. This disease may be increased by God because they do not want to be cured and insist on being ill. For example, we read:

فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ اللَّهُ مَرَضًا

“In their hearts is a disease and God has increased their disease” (Qur’an Surah Baqarah, 2:10)

The Qur’an also talks about hearts which are healthy and pure:

وَلَا تُخْزِنِي يَوْمَ يُبْعَثُونَ

“Do not disgrace me on the day when people are revived” (Qur’an Surah Shu’ara 26:87)

يَوْمَ لَا يَنْفَعُ مَالٌ وَلَا بَنُونَ

“The day on which neither money nor children can help” (Qur’an Surah Shu’ara 26:88)

إِلَّا مَنْ أَتَى اللَّهَ بِقَلْبٍ سَلِيمٍ

“Except the one who comes to Allah with a healthy (pure) heart” (Qur’an Surah Shu’ara 26:89)

This is the prayer of the Prophet Abraham (‘a). In Surah As-Saffat, God informs us that this request was granted:

وَإِنَّ مِنْ شِيعَتِهِ لِإِبْرَاهِيمَ

“Indeed, Abraham was among his [i.e. Noah’s] followers” (37:83)

إِذْ جَاءَ رَبَّهُ بِقَلْبٍ سَلِيمٍ

“When he came to his Lord with a healthy (pure) heart” (37:84)

Thus, we can understand that having a pure and healthy heart is so important that someone like Prophet Abraham, the father of all monotheistic religions, asks God for it. Indeed, this is the only thing which will be useful on the Day of Judgement when neither children nor money will benefit us. In Nah al-Balaghah, Imam Ali says:

أَلَا وَإِنَّ مِنَ الْبَلَاءِ الْفَاقَةَ وَأَشَدَّ مِنَ الْفَاقَةِ مَرَضُ الْبَدَنِ وَأَشَدَّ مِنْ مَرَضِ الْبَدَنِ مَرَضُ الْقَلْبِ

'One of the catastrophes that may happen to a person is poverty, but more difficult than poverty is illness. And more difficult than illness of the body is illness of the heart.'³

Therefore, the worst poverty is to suffer from a lack of piety. The concept of medicine is also a very important related topic. Imam Ali ('a) says in his Sermon of the Pious:

أما الليل فصافون أقدامهم تالين لأجزاء القرآن يرتلونها ترتيلا يحزنون به أنفسهم ويستثيرون به دواء دائهم

"[Pious people are] those who stand up and recite the Qur'an at night, and they try to make themselves sad. They try to take from the Qur'an the treatment as medicine for their illnesses."⁴

Imam Baqir ('a) told Jabir b. Yazid al-Ju'fi:

واعلم أنه لا علم كطلب السلامة ولا سلامة كسلامة القلب

"And know that there is no knowledge like seeking health, and there is no health like the health of the soul."⁵

In the case of spiritual medicine, the most important point is that we must try to prevent illness from penetrating our souls, in the same way as we might try to maintain a distance from people who are ill, so that the disease does not affect us; by being close to them we endanger our own health.

However, there are cures to our illnesses, as Allah (SWT) is the Most Forgiving. Furthermore, we need a guide who can show us what to do and how to prevent or cure our illnesses. One of the beautiful things Imam Ali ('a) mentions about the Holy Prophet (S) is that he was a doctor, but he did not wait for the sick people; instead, he went to them himself, taking the equipment with him.

طبيب دوار بطبه، قد أحكم مراهمه، وأحمى مواسمه، يضع ذلك حيث الحاجة إليه من قلوب عمي، وآذان صم،
والسنة بكم.. متبع بدوائه مواضع الغفلة، ومواطن الحيرة

The Prophet was like a roaming physician who has set ready his ointments and heated his instruments. He uses them wherever the need arises for curing blind hearts, deaf ears, and dumb tongues. He followed with his medicines the spots of negligence and places of perplexity⁶.

There were people who were deaf, blind, or those people who could not speak the truth, and the Holy Prophet (S) used the appropriate medicine to cure them. Imam Mahdi ('a) who is the Imam of our age has also a significant role; and if Allah (SWT) pleases we can receive guidance and healing from him ('a).

3. Spirituality As A Journey

In Islamic literature, spirituality is also described as a journey. We should think of ourselves as wayfarers. We have all embarked on a journey away from God and then we are going back to Him. We have all been created by God and this creation is a sort of separation from our origin. Before we were created, we were not separate from God but now we are. However, God has given us the chance to return to Him. The Qur'an says:

إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

“Truly we belong to God and to Him we will return” (Qur'an Surah Baqarah, 2: 156)

When we depart, our destination is clear. But in order to reach our destination we must be very careful about our direction. If we are on the right path, we will certainly reach our destination. However, if we are on the wrong path, we will not reach our destination and may even go farther and farther away from it. We are not in a static or fixed position. Every day and every hour we are moving and getting either further from or closer to our destination. The Glorious Qur'an says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّكَ كَادِحٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ كَدْحًا فَمُلَاقِيهِ

“O man, you are trying hard to reach your Lord and you will finally meet Him” (Qur'an Surah Inshiqaq, 84:6)

Having read this verse, some may think that there is nothing to worry about because we have all come from a good place and there is a good destination ahead. But our status when we meet God is of utmost importance. There are two states of reaching God: to reach Him while He is happy with us or to reach Him while He is angry with us. Human beings are among the very few creatures whose levels of perfection are not fixed, that is, they have been given the capacity to upgrade or degrade themselves.

Thus, the spiritual journey consists of trying to increase our closeness and proximity to God. It should be noted that God is always close to us, but we are not necessarily close to Him. We can reach a position in which we can get closer and closer to God through self-purification, and, as suggested by the Glorious Qur'an, “meet” Him. Mystics normally speak of the possibility of losing our own selfhood, limits and boundaries and then becoming identified with God. I am not commenting on this concept here, but, in any case, it seems obvious that we can get closer and closer to God to the extent that nothing will remain between us and Him and this is what we mean by returning to God.

So, this life is a journey and we cannot say that we do not want to go on this journey. We are all on this journey and it is up to us to gather enough provisions for ourselves. One of the main goals of self-

building is to try to reduce this distance by wayfaring towards Allah (SWT). The path towards Him is infinite and full of challenges. However, for the people who embark on this journey, all the support and guidance are provided. In this regard, Imam Sajjad ('a) says:

سبحانك ما اضيق الطرق على من لم تكن دليله وما اوضح الحق عند من هديته سبيله

“May you be glorified! What a narrow path it is for whom You do not guide, and what a clear path it is for whom you have guided!”⁷

Conclusion

In this part we have discussed spirituality or the process of self-building as a kind of battle, medicine and as a journey. Allah (SWT) is encouraging and guiding us by demonstrating many analogies.

He is showing us that there is always hope of reaching Him, and appeals to us in many different ways to encourage us to come closer to Him. He is the Most Merciful.

¹. Al-Kafi, Vol. 5, p. 12, no 3 and Al-Amali by al-Saduq, Session 71, p. 377, no 8. There is an addition to the above hadith, which can be found in Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 67, p. 62 and reads as follows:

ثم قال ص أفضل الجهاد من جاهد نفسه التي بين جنبيه

‘The best struggle is to fight one’s own self.’

². Nahjul Fasaha, 230, 397.

³. Nahj al-Balaghah, sermon 388.

⁴. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 193.

⁵. Tuhaf al-‘Uqul, p. 284.

⁶. See Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 108.

⁷. Mafatih al-Jinan, Munajat al-Muridin, The Whispered Prayer of the Devotees. Also, in Sahifa As-Sajjadiyah. Online at: <https://al-islam.org/sahifa-al-kamilah-al-sajjadiyya-imam-ali-zayn-al-ab...> [8]

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