

Merits of the Soul: Contemplation – Tafakkur

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Article

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“They know only some appearance of the life of the world, and are heedless of the Hereafter”
(Qur'an, 30:7)

“Have they not contemplated upon themselves” (Qur'an, 30:8)

It is reported from Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (a) that he said: “Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (a) used to say: ‘Arouse your heart to contemplation; keep your side clear off the night; and be heedful towards your Lord.’”

[Al Kulayni, *Usul al-Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 54]

The Glorious Qur'an and Prophetic traditions emphasize great merit, rewards and benefits of regular contemplation. It is the key to the doors of *ma'rifah* (gnosis) and the treasure chests of knowledge and excellence. It is the necessary and the surest first step on the path of genuine humanness. It arouses one to be pay attention to his existence in this world and hereafter, rediscover his relationship with God and Universe, fulfil his duties towards God and His creatures, seek repentance for his sins, develop rational thinking and adopt realistic attitude.

Definition of Tafakkur

- Famous gnostic, Khwajah 'Abd Allah al-Ansari [ra] defines *tafakkur* as: **Contemplation is the inquisitive groping of the inner vision for attaining the coveted end.** [al-Ansari, *Manazil al-sa'irin*, vol. 1, p. 57]

Various levels and types of Tafakkur

- Contemplation about God, His Names, His Attributes and His Perfections: This leads to the knowledge of His existence and His irradiations (*tajalliyat*) and His Sovereignty (*wilayah*) over everything. This contemplation is in fact a journey from God to creation and it is the most superior level of contemplation that yields the sublimest knowledge, and the firmest proofs (*burhan*). Thinking about the Essence of all the Causes [God] imparts

knowledge about Him and the understanding of all other dependent causes. This leads to the revelations on the hearts of the Truthful, and it is for this reason that it is called the Proof of the Truthful (*burhan al-siddiqin*). In reality they observe God's attributes and His secrets all the time. This type of contemplation is mostly attributed to Prophets [s], friends of God (*awliya*), and true believers (*mu'minin*).

- Contemplation on the subtleties and nature of creation, its perfection and refinement: This is reverse of the *burhan al-siddiqin*, the first type of contemplation mentioned above, because in this, the contemplator reflects upon the attributes of creation to acquire knowledge about the Wise Creator and the Perfect Source of all the creations. The knowledge thus acquired is a proof (*burhan*) for ordinary people and serves to guide them towards God. Hence, the contemplation of the subtleties and the marvels of creation and the firmness and finesse of the system of creation belongs to the category of beneficial knowledge. It is the most meritorious of the actions of the heart (seat of intellect) and superior to all worships, since its result is the noblest of all results.
- Contemplation over the state of human body and soul: For example, scientific knowledge and common observation show that all the human organs weaken, deteriorate and decline after the age of thirty or thirty-five years. However, at the same time, that is at the age of thirty and forty and after that, the spiritual faculties and intellectual perceptions become more refined and gain in growth and strength. This shows that many of the spiritual qualities are not entirely dependent on physical aspects of human body.

Heart (Qalb) as the seat of Tafakkur

- The word 'Heart' has different meaning and interpretations. For example, for physicians it is a tiny piece of flesh, whose contractions and expansions cause the flow of blood through arteries and veins.
- The philosophers (*hukama*) use it for a certain seat of the soul (*nafs*) while the 'urafa (gnostics) assign to it various grades (*maratib*) and stages (*maqamat*).

- In the Holy Qur'an and hadiths, it has been used both in its general as well as its particular senses in different places. For example, in the verse ***"They have hearts wherewith they understand not, and they have eyes wherewith they see not."*** (7: 179) refers to heart as a seat of understanding and contemplation.

Merits of Tafakkur

Contemplation is the key to the doors of *ma'rifah* and to the treasure chests of knowledge and excellence. It is the necessary and the surest first step on the path of genuine humanness. It has been highly commended and glorified by the Glorious Qur'an and in traditions.

- Imam al-Sadiq (a) said: **"The best form of worship is to contemplate about God and His Power."** [Al Kulayni, *Usul al Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 54]
- Imam Ali (a) said: **"Contemplation over the hidden realms (*malakut*) of earth and heavens is the worship of sincere servants."** [*Mizan al-Hikmah*, hadith # 16216]
- Imam al-Sadiq (a) said: **"An hour of contemplation is better than a year's worship."** [*Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 7, p. 326]
- Imam Ali (a) said: **"Never keep yourself away from contemplation as it will increase your wisdom and give you warning that will keep you away from sins."** [*Mizan al-Hikmah*, hadith # 16194]
- Imam Ali (a) said: **"Best worship is to contemplate over the blessings of God."** [*Mizan al-Hikmah*, hadith # 16215]
- Imam ar-Ridha (a) said: **"Contemplation is your mirror that shows you your good and evil deeds."** [*Bihar al-Anwar*, vol.71, p.375]

Night vigil as one of the best kinds of Tafakkur

Islamic traditions highly praise the merits and sublime benefits of night vigil. Biographies of the Imams of guidance (a), and those of great sages and eminent scholars, indicate that they not only assiduously observed night vigil, but also attached great importance to the practice of staying awake until the late hours of night, aside from the aim of worship.

- The Messenger of God (s) said: **“Two *rak’ah* of prayer performed in the middle of night are dearer to me than the entire world and everything therein.”** [Al-Shaykh al-Saduq, *‘Ilal al-shara’i*, p.138]
- Imam al-Sadiq (a) said: **“For every good deed that a slave of God performs, the reward for it is specified in the Qur’an, except for the midnight prayer, which commands an unusually high reward on account of its great worth. God says in the Qur’an:**

Their sides shun their beds as they call on their Lord in fear and hope; and they expend of what We have provided them. (32: 16).

No soul knows what delight is laid up for them secretly, as a recompense for that they were doing (32: 17).” [‘Ilal al-shara’i, p.23]

- Imam Ali (a) said: **“Keeping night vigil to remember God is the bounty for *awliya* and garden of the virtuous.”** [Mizan al-Hikmah, hadith # 8956]

Adopting habit of Tafakkur on daily basis

An intelligent human being realizes the fragility of his existence and reflects about the end of his life before death overtakes him. Training oneself gradually to think about the Creator and his own role in this world and his duties towards Him, himself, his family, friends and others make a person more responsible.

- One must therefore assign a fixed time during 24 hours, preferably late in night or before *fajr* (dawn) and engage in a self-dialogue about the time he passed during last day. For example, he can ask himself following questions and contemplate over the answers he

gets: Did he consider himself as a passenger in this world? Was he a better person than before? Did he do his duties in the best possible manner? Did he commit any sin? Did he unjustly hurt or oppressed any creature of God? How can he repent for the sin he has committed? Could he avoid wasting his time? Could he do a good deed next time better than before? Can he make his tomorrow better?

- During one's daily life, one must develop a habit of pondering over the marvellous creations of God. For example, size, distance, nature and revolution of earth around sun making life of human beings and other creatures and plants possible. How is it possible to have fixed day and night and different seasons of year all the time? How is it possible to create a Universe of such an unimaginable size with galaxies billions of light years apart? How is it possible to create an atom with so many even tinier organized subatomic particles of different fixed sizes and charges? Who did all the accurate calculations before the creation of the tiniest to the largest physical structures of this vast Universe? Can one really comprehend knowledge and power of the Creator?
- The best and most inspiring creation of God is the human being himself. Almost every day scientific research discovers so many secrets of divine wisdom and design in various cells, tissues and organs of human body. For example, just think as to how is it possible for a perfect human body to develop from a single cell into a highly complex system of nearly 80 trillion cells performing different functions that are perfectly coordinated to give him a normal life. And at the same time this complex system is so vulnerable to make it severely sick with the tiniest living creature such as virus. Who has then creatively designed both these creatures? Who has also given human beings power of intellect, memory, analysis, creativity, curiosity and other cognitive abilities to search for the cause and cure of diseases?
- How is it possible that billions of human beings, together with hundreds of thousands of different species of animals, plants, and other creatures are born? How they grow and die at the time all over the earth?

Conclusion

Imam Ali (a) said: **“No worship is equal to contemplation over the designed creation of God.”** [*Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 71, p. 324]

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