

Turning to God: Lesson 1

Spirituality: Methods and
Approaches

Introduction

- The purification of the soul (تزكية النفس) is a central theme in the Islamic tradition
- The Holy Quran, in several verses, asserts that one of the main tasks of all prophets is to assist people with the purification of their souls.
- The primary aim of all divine teachings is to facilitate this process

Introduction

- God created the human being to experience eternal happiness and unlimited pleasure.
- This can only be achieved by achieving nearness to God
- Purification of the soul is a prerequisite to attaining Divine proximity

Introduction

- Three main verses refer to the mission of the Holy Prophet (saw):

• هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِّنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ

- *“It is He who has sent among the unlettered a Messenger from themselves reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom...” Quran 62:2*

Introduction

• لَقَدْ مَنَّ اللَّهُ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِذْ بَعَثَ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِّنْ أَنفُسِهِمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ

- *“Certainly did God confer [great] favor upon the believers when He sent among them a Messenger from themselves, reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom...” Quran 3:164*

Introduction

• كَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِيكُمْ رَسُولًا مِّنكُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِنَا وَيُزَكِّيكُمْ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ
الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ

- *“Just as We have sent among you a messenger from yourselves reciting to you Our verses and purifying you and teaching you the Book and wisdom...” Quran 2:151*

Introduction

- Thus, we see that one of the main duties of the Holy Prophet (saw) in addition to reciting the Quran and teaching the Quran and wisdom, was to help us purify our souls.
- The appointment of Prophet Muhammad (saw) for such tasks was the answer to the prayer of Ibrahim and Ismail after they raised the foundations of the House.

Introduction

• رَبَّنَا وَأَبْعَثْ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِّنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِكَ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

“Our Lord, and send among them a messenger from themselves who will recite to them Your verses and teach them the Book and wisdom and purify them. Indeed, You are the Exalted in Might, the Wise.” Quran 2:129

Introduction

- When they ask God to send the final messenger, He places the duties of the Holy Prophet in the following order:
 - 1. Recitation- تلاوة
 - 2. Education- تعليم
 - 3. Purification- تزكية

Introduction

- God answers the prayer of Ibrahim and Ismail but He corrects the order. Purification of the soul is given precedence to teaching the Book and wisdom. Thus, In the three verses where God lists the duties of the Prophet, the order is as such
 - 1. Recitation - تلاوة
 - 2. Purification- تزكية
 - 3. Education - تعليم

Methods and Approaches

- There are three main methodologies that Muslim scholars have employed in studying spirituality:
 - 1. The Philosophical Approach
 - 2. The Mystical Approach
 - 3. The Scriptural Approach

The Philosophical Approach

- Many Muslim scholars have adopted the approach of ancient Greek philosophers, namely Aristotle, when speaking about the human soul.
- According to this view, the human soul possesses three different faculties which govern human action. Spirituality is all about balancing these three faculties

The Philosophical Approach

- **1. The faculty of reason (القوة العقلية)**
- This is the faculty responsible for knowledge. It enables us to understand the world around us and draw conclusions from what we experience.
- If this faculty functions properly, one can attain true wisdom

The Philosophical Approach

- This does not mean that one should strive for an excess of this faculty as it may lead to extreme skepticism, rather one must seek to maintain a healthy balance
- If a person is not rational enough, they will be naive and easily deceived.
- Excessive use of this faculty = Skepticism
- Minimal use of this faculty = Naivety

The Philosophical Approach

- **2. The faculty of anger (القوة الغضبية)**
- This is the faculty that regulates our anger and temper. Without this faculty, we would lack the instinct to defend ourselves and others from danger
- Excessive use of this faculty results in perpetual rage.
- Deficient usage results in cowardice

The Philosophical Approach

- Philosophers contend that the virtue of bravery is attained by striking a balance between these two extremes
- Therefore, a spiritually refined person is one who knows when to exercise the faculty of anger and to what extent.

The Philosophical Approach

- **3. The faculty of desire (القوة الشهوية)**
- This faculty is responsible mainly for our appetite for sex but also includes other bodily desires like food, drink, and sleep.
- If the faculty for sex did not exist within the human being, it would result in the extinction of the human race

The Philosophical Approach

- This faculty must be brought into balance for a person to attain the virtues of chastity and modesty.
- Therefore, if one were to strike a balance in all three faculties they would attain wisdom, bravery, and chastity. A person who enjoys these 3 qualities is considered just and has perfected all aspects of the human soul.

The Philosophical Approach

- Advantages of the philosophical approach:
 - Provides a rational framework to the question of self purification and thus transcends any specific religious tradition

The Philosophical Approach

- Disadvantages of the philosophical approach:
 - It is too abstract and lacks an inspirational element needed to engage and motivate the masses.
 - Most people are not able to identify the balance between the two extremes. People need practical instructions to help them attain these virtues

The Mystical Approach

- Some mystics consider the process of self building as a journey towards God which covers three main stages:
 - 1. Purging تخلية
 - 2. Adornment تحلية
 - 3. Illumination تجلية
- The soul and the parable of the house

The Mystical Approach

- Advantages of the mystical approach:
 - It provides a general framework that many would find intuitive and relatable.
 - It is inspiring, employs attractive rhetoric which may motivate the masses to partake in self purification

The Mystical Approach

- Disadvantages of the mystical approach
 - It does not provide a practical step by step plan to those who wish to embark on this journey towards God
 - What qualities should be purged and how?
 - What qualities are considered to be an adornment and how does one develop these traits?

The Scriptural Approach

- According to this view, the most effective approach to self development is to refer to the Quran, Holy Prophet (saw) and his Ahlul Bayt (a.s)
- The Quran provides the general principles of self refinement and the Holy Prophet (saw) and his Ahlul Bayt (a.s) exemplified the lofty virtues we should aspire to emulate.

The Scriptural Approach

- Historically, those who have advocated for this approach felt no need to refer to develop a philosophical framework. Instead, they listed the qualities that the Quran considered praiseworthy as well as the qualities that were condemned.
- Upon identifying a vice like greed, for example, they would refer to hadith to provide a treatment for this spiritual disease.

Synthesizing the 3 Approaches

- Some scholars have argued that one need not restrict themselves to one single approach.
- We ultimately need a moral system based on the Quran and the Sunnah that also addresses the philosophical and rational questions surrounding morality and self building.
- It is also useful to build off of the experiences of those who have spent a lifetime engaging in self purification. The literature of mystics is an important resource provided we ensure their instructions are compatible with the Quran and Sunnah.

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

- A perusal of the verses of the Quran and the traditions of the Holy Prophet reveal 3 main descriptions of spirituality
- **1. Spirituality as a struggle against the self**
- In a well-known and inspiring hadith, the Holy Prophet (saw) welcomes a group of his companions who had returned from battle.

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

إن رسول الله – صلى الله عليه وآله – بعث سرية، فلما رجعوا قال: مرحباً
بقوم قضوا الجهاد الأصغر، وبقي عليهم 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 still remains. The Messenger of God was asked, ‘What is the greater struggle.’ He replied: ‘The struggle against the self’.”

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

- Why is the struggle against the soul greater than risking one's life in the battlefield against the enemies of God?

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

- **2. Spirituality as medicine**
- The physical body requires adequate nourishment, sleep, clothing etc to function at an optimal level. The body will become susceptible to weakness, illness and disease if it is neglected.
- Similarly, the soul can also experience illness and disease if it is untended.

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

- In 12 places the Quran speaks of people who suffer from “diseases in their hearts”.

فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ اللَّهُ مَرَضًا

“In their hearts is a disease and God has increased their disease.” Quran 2:10

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

- The Quran also speaks of hearts which are healthy and pure.

وَلَا تُخْزِنِي يَوْمَ يُبْعَثُونَ يَوْمَ لَا يَنْفَعُ مَالٌ وَلَا بَنُونَ إِلَّا مَنْ أَتَى اللَّهَ بِقَلْبٍ
سَلِيمٍ

“Do not disgrace me on the day when people are revived, the day in which neither wealth nor children can help, except those who come to God with a sound heart.” Quran 26:87-89

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

- This is was the prayer of Prophet Ibrahim (a.s). Achieving a pure heart is of such importance that Ibrahim makes dua for it.

وَإِنَّ مِنْ شِيعَتِهِ لِإِبْرَاهِيمَ إِذْ جَاءَ رَبَّهُ بِقَلْبٍ سَلِيمٍ

“And surely from among his followers is Ibrahim, when he came to His Lord with a sound heart.”

Quran 37:83-84

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

ألا وإن من البلاء الفاقة، وأشد من الفاقة مرض البدن، وأشد من مرض
البدن مرض القلب

“Verily, one the misfortunes [that may afflict a person] is poverty, but more difficult than poverty is sickness. And more difficult than sickness of the body is sickness of the heart.” -
Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (a.s)

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

- Physical health impacts our earthly life whereas our spiritual health has a bearing on your eternal life.
- It is imperative that we adopt a preventative approach to our spiritual health.
- We must actively protect our souls from illness by avoiding sin and distancing ourselves from those who are spirituality polluted

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

- If the soul becomes ill, there are cures that are available. God's mercy is too vast to leave human beings without a way to rectify and cure the hearts.
- Divine mercy dictates that we need a guide to show us how to prevent illness from reaching the soul and how to cure the soul once it becomes ill.

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

طَبِيبٌ دَوَّارٌ بَطْبُهُ قَدْ أَحْكَمَ مَرَاهِمَهُ وَأَحْمَى مَوَاسِمَهُ يَضَعُ ذَلِكَ حَيْثُ
الْحَاجَةُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ قُلُوبٍ عُمِيٍّ وَأَذَانٍ صُمٍّ وَاللِّسَانَةِ بُكْمٍ مُتَتَّبِعٍ بِدَوَائِهِ مَوَاضِعَ
الْغَفْلَةِ وَمَوَاطِنَ الْحَيْرَةِ

“The Prophet (saw) 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 this medicine the spots of negligence and places of perplexity.” - Imam Ali

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

- **3. Spirituality as a journey**
- Think of yourself as a wayfarer
- We have all embarked on a journey away from God and then we are returning back to Him.
- We have all been created by God and this creation is a sort of separation from our origin.

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

“Truly we belong to God and to Him we shall return.” Quran 2:156

- Before we were created we were not separate from God but now we are. However, God has given us an opportunity to return to Him.

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

- When we embark on this journey, our destination is clear but in order to reach the destination we must ensure we are moving in the right direction.
- Every human being, at every moment is on this journey. Every day and every hour we are either moving closer to God or moving away from Him

Spirituality in the Quran and Sunnah

يَا أَيُّهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّكَ كَادِحٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ كَدْحًا فَمُلَاقِيهِ

“O mankind, indeed you are laboring toward your Lord with [great] exertion and will meet it.”

Quran 84:6