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PURIFICATION OF THE SOUL By Shaykh Zulfiqar Ahmed (db)

Those will prosper who purify themselves (87:14)

Some Introductory Vocabulary

The exact meaning of the word *falāh* in Arabic is “to expose what is hidden.” Thus a farmer is known as *fallāh* because he exposes the hidden beauty within a seed by planting it in the ground. Likewise, a person who cannot close his mouth due to a birth defect is known as *rajulun aflāha*, the man whose mouth is open. The *falāh* in the word *istilāh* refers to “the opening of the doors of success,” such success after which there can be no faltering or disgrace. This meaning of *falāh* also applies in the same fashion to joy, where *istilāh* gives so much joy after which there is no sorrow.

Understanding this, the blessed verse of the Holy Quran is saying that only those who are pure or purify themselves can achieve this *falāh*. Man is to purify the negative base desires of his *nafs*, or inner soul, if he is to achieve this contentment.

Cleansing and Purification

Allah ﷻ has borne man into a struggle of good and evil by creating within him both righteous and evil desires. Examples of good desires are to become an obedient servant of Allah ﷻ and to work righteously. Likewise, an example of evil desires is the endless pursuit of worldly status and self-satisfaction, which are only indications of greed and arrogance that breed more of the same. Allah ﷻ wishes man to develop his righteous characteristics and hence purify his *nafs* by eliminating his evil desires.

Two words that mean to cleanse are *tasfia* and *tazkia*. The root word of *tasfia* is *safa* – “to clean,” whereas *tazkia* comes from the Arabic verb meaning “to purify.” A mirror that has accumulated a layer of dust has only to be wiped with a dust cloth and some polish to sparkle like new and it will be cleaned. The dust is only superficial and hence easily wiped away: this is an example of *tasfia*.

On the contrary, a cloth that has become filthy needs to be thoroughly washed and wrung because the filth has settled into its fibers and become ingrained. This thorough process of washing to make sure that no filth remains is an example of *tazkia*. The inherent difference is that dirt does not penetrate the object in the former and thus can easily be cleaned, but does penetrate and becomes a part of the object in the latter case of *tazkia*.

In terms of tasawwuf, *tasfia* is sufficient for the heart whereas the *nafs* requires *tazkia*. Sin forms a layer on the heart like rust does on steel but does not penetrate like the evil and

selfish desires that seep in and transform the *nafs*. Rust only requires a superficial application of rust remover for the steel to sparkle again, and likewise the heart needs the constant application of *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah ﷻ) and repentance to keep it sparkling. The *nafs* is more stubborn and in the majority of cases needs strong *tazkia* to root out evil desires.

The word *falah* is so potent that it has been connected to only three major actions in the Holy Quran. The first of these is *tauba*, or repentance. Allah ﷻ says:

O you Believers! Turn you all together towards Allah [in repentance] so that you may attain Bliss (honor) (24:31)

The second action to attain this honor is *tazkia* as has already been discussed above, and the third of these is *salat* (prayer). Allah ﷻ says of this sacred action:

The Believers must (attain success), those who humble themselves in their prayers (23:1-2)

The Holy Quran was revealed and organized with exact structure and logical order, and the same order applies to the *falah* connection in the three above-mentioned actions. The scholars of the Holy Book have explained that *tauba* has been mentioned first because man can only start on the journey of *falah* by first seeking repentance. The second step in this journey is to struggle hard to purify the soul of the evils that plague it, hence *tazkia* of the *nafs*. Only after completing these two steps is he ready to stand in *salat* in which he can witness the true majesty of Allah ﷻ and thereby attain the best *falah*.

A Precise Order

This paradigm and order has been set by Allah ﷻ and cannot be reversed by man. The first step towards anything has to be repentance (*tauba*) and cannot be by-passed. Man wants success and acceptance in his prayer but is not prepared to repent of his sins. One cannot get to the top of the ladder without stepping on the first rung. Hence if one wants to attain the final and best *falah* he is required to repent of his sins, struggle against his base desires to purify his *nafs*, and then worship with such sincerity and devotion that he witnesses the glory of his Lord with his full attention.

Unfortunately today we are merely physically present in our prayer but mentally are in our place of business or at the shopping mall. Allah ﷻ does not need our worship but He certainly does not want prayers in which we are anything less than attentive to Him. The Messenger ﷺ of Allah said that man should pray as if he is seeing Allah ﷻ, and this is the true worship sought from us. Every man and woman is desirous of *falah*, and one of the reasons our Prophet ﷺ was sent was to instruct us in how to acquire it.

Four Objectives

The Holy Quran outlines four major objectives of the Prophet's ﷺ mission, of which *tazkia* of the people is one. Hadrat Ibrahim ؑ supplicated to Allah ﷻ at the completion of *Bait Ullah* to send a prophet and worshipper now that the House was built. Allah ﷻ accepted the supplication and sent the Prophet ﷺ, who later said, "I have been sent in acceptance of my grandfather Ibrahim's ؑ supplication."

The aforementioned objectives of the Prophet's ﷺ mission as outlined in the Holy Quran are the very same that Hadrat Ibrahim ؑ had specified in his original supplication, only that Allah ﷻ switched the order of importance. Hadrat Ibrahim ؑ had mentioned *tazkia* as his fourth criterion, whereas Allah ﷻ mentions it as the second objective.

This significant change in the order of *tazkia* is a strong message for us. The Holy Quran is such an amazing Book that every word and its positioning has potent ramifications and subtle flow as if diamonds and pearls have been strung together. Likewise the change in positioning of the word *tazkia* from fourth to second also has important meanings for mankind.

Detail in the Holy Quran

Allah ﷻ says regarding the creation of humankind that He created them with hearing (*sami'am*) and sight (*basira*). Hearing has always been mentioned before sight wherever the creation of man is mentioned in the Holy Quran, something that also has a logical and fascinating scientific reasoning.

The first organs of a baby's body to develop when it is still inside the mother's womb are the ears. The eyes are created after the ears and this sequence has a further fascinating reason. The fluid in the middle ear is the balance mechanism by which the body determines if it is upright or not. The eyes alone cannot determine whether the head is at a right angle or not because the eyes cannot see the head. It is by way of this balancing mechanism that the brain can tell at which angle the body is and should be. Allah ﷻ created the ears first because the first task was to keep the body upright, after which the eyes were created. There was no science in the desert fourteen hundred years ago but Allah ﷻ told mankind then that He created the ears first and then the eyes. This is yet more dazzling proof of the minute placement of every word in the Holy Quran.

In constructing a house, builders first lay foundations and lay the roof and fit the doors as the very last steps. Allah ﷻ has detailed a like account in the Holy Quran regarding the creation of the universe by discussing the earth's creation first.

Is it that ye deny Him Who created the earth in two days? (41:9)

Staying with this paradigm, the sky is mentioned after the earth:

Then turned He to the heavens (2:29)

In interesting contrast, demolition of a house begins the other way around. The lights and other electrical fittings are taken down first in preparation and then the roof and walls are demolished.

The lights of our universe are the stars, the moon and the sun. In beautiful illustration of this example Allah ﷻ mentions their destruction first when describing the end of the universe on the Day of Judgment.

When the sun is folded up, when the stars fall (81:1-2)

The roof is next to fall after the lights have been taken down.

When the sky is rent asunder (84:1)

The earth is next in line when the sky has been torn down.

And when the Earth is flattened out (84:3)

These are just a few illustrations outlining the beauty and specific structure that Allah ﷻ has given in the Holy Quran. There is logical reasoning behind each word and its placement.

The Dream

Hadrat Yusuf ؑ saw a dream in which the sun, moon, and stars were prostrating before him. However, the placement of the words seems out of order to the untrained eye because the stars are mentioned first followed by the sun and then the moon.

I did see eleven stars and the sun and the moon (12:4)

This order neither follows the traditional ordering of large to small in which the sun would be mentioned first and the stars last, nor does it follow an ordering of small to large where the stars would be mentioned first and then the moon and the sun. However, this unique placement also has fascinating logic behind it because the dream likewise had structure to it.

The eleven stars symbolize Hadrat Yusuf's ؑ eleven brothers, whilst the sun and the moon symbolize his father and mother respectively. When finally reunited, the brothers met him first, followed by his father and then his mother. In equally remarkable fashion, the brothers prostrated first, followed by their father Hadrat Yaqub ؑ and finally their mother.

These prostrations were to take place years later, yet the dream already indicated the order in which they would take place. Hence when a student of the Holy Quran studies this incredible Book this specific order reveals itself like diamonds.

Likewise Allah ﷻ switched the position of the word *tazkia* from fourth to second from its position in Hadrat Ibrahim's supplication to its place in the Holy Quran, and this too is equally potent in reasoning. The mere fact that the word was positioned higher in numbering indicates the extreme importance of purifying our inner soul of the filth of evil desires.

Spiritual Diseases

People are very familiar with physical ailments such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Similarly people have spiritual ailments such as hatred, greed, lust and the like that are much more dangerous than any physical disease can ever be. Allah ﷻ has referred to these spiritual ills as diseases in the Holy Quran and hence *tazkia* is absolutely mandatory on everyone.

In their hearts is a disease (2:10)

Likewise the women of the believers were ordered to veil themselves so that the person with a disease of the heart would not be tempted and fall to lust. Hence, looking at unfamiliar women with lustful eyes is an indication of a disease within the heart because the gaze is yet impure. *Tazkia* is mandatory to purify our hearts of these spiritual diseases, and this is the main reason why we need to surrender ourselves to the care of a trained shaykh who can cleanse us of these.

In this world no one can say that he will read all there is to know about his disease from books and then formulate his own prescription and cure. Even the most knowledgeable doctors often take the opinion of superiors in certain situations, especially when they themselves might be ill because they acknowledge that a third opinion should always be sought. Hence where there are doctors for physical ailments there are also doctors for the spiritual diseases mentioned above.

Spiritual doctors are called *mashaikh*, righteous people who have spent time with their elders who were close to Allah ﷻ so that they could learn and perfect their roles as guides and healers. A profession or art cannot be learnt from books and it is a foregone conclusion that one must sit in the company of a teacher to learn the specific skill effectively.

Moreover, no one can claim to become a doctor merely by studying the books of medicine even though all the necessary knowledge may be present there. Medical students are put through rigorous schedules under their teachers and, even after passing, are not allowed to prescribe until they complete their residency supervised by more experienced personnel. Only after successful completion of residency are they certified to treat patients. Hence these doctors passed through a predetermined system where they first had to learn medical knowledge under teachers, and then had to perform practically under the supervision of trained doctors already in practice before they were deemed ready to be able to treat people on their own.

The training of spiritual doctors follows the same course in which students start by learning religious knowledge of the Holy Quran and hadith from trained scholars. After this stage the student stays in the company of the *mashaikh* who train and test him further to determine his value and skills. The student is then endorsed after this long association with his elders just like the resident is endorsed after his long residency. Only now if his elder *mashaikh* deem him ready is he certified to teach *dhikr* and become a spiritual healer of people.

In order to heal people of these spiritual ailments the *mashaikh* do not prescribe rigorous treatments or impossible tasks. The Messenger ﷺ of Allah said that *dhikr* is the cure of the heart. Hence the *mashaikh* teach different *dhikr* for different kinds of diseases and Allah ﷻ cures the heart through the blessing of that particular *dhikr*. This is known as *tazkia-e-nafs*.

For effective *tazkia* a person needs to find a suitable shaykh in the world and sit in his company. A doctor cannot help if the patient does not reveal his disease, and likewise the person needs to be candid with the shaykh regarding his hidden diseases no matter how shameful. He then needs to *use* the spiritual prescription that the shaykh gives him so that all his inner evils are eventually cleansed. This is the easiest option to *tazkia* but there is still another option if this is not taken advantage of.

Allah ﷻ has promised Paradise for the believers, but a condition is that only those can enter who have achieved *tazkia* and purified their hearts.

Gardens of Eternity beneath which rivers flow...such is the reward of those who purify themselves [of evil] (20:76)

If a believer dies without having achieved *tazkia* in this life then Allah ﷻ will begin his *tazkia* as soon as he enters the grave to prepare him for Paradise.

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