

## Exercise and Self-Discipline

By Āyatullāh Mutahharī

What is certainly required [for spirituality] is exercise (*riyadah*), and it is directed towards three ends - the first is to clear the path of all but the Real; the second is to subjugate the 'commanding self' (*al-nafs al-ammarah*) to the 'contented self' (*al-nafs al-mutma'innah*); the third is to render the heart subtle for awareness.

After having commenced the journey [towards God] through intention, the next stage is that of exercise and preparedness. This preparedness is termed *riyadah*. Nowadays this term is generally misunderstood and it is taken to mean self-mortification. In some religions the principle of mortifying the self is hallowed. Perhaps the best examples of this are to be seen in the Yogis of India. In the terminology of Ibn Sina, however, the word is not used in this sense. The original meaning of this Arabic word is 'to exercise', or 'to break in a colt.' Thereafter the word was used for physical exercise, a sense which the word still bears today. The *urafa* borrowed this word, and in their terminology it is used to mean exercising the soul and preparing it for the illumination of the light of knowledge (*ma'rifah*). It is in this sense that the word is used in the passage above.

Ibn Sina declares this exercising and preparing of the soul to be directed towards three aims. The first of these is related to external matters and entails the removal of distractive occupations and the causes of negligence (*ghaflah*). The second is related to the balance of the inner forces and the removal of agitations from the soul, which he has described as the submission of the 'commanding self' to the 'contented self'. The third relates to qualitative changes in the soul, which he calls 'rending subtle of the heart'.

And the first [of the three aims of *riyadah*] is aided by true *zuhd* (i.e. *zuhd* removes the impediments and the hindering preoccupations, which cause neglect, from the path). The second is aided by several things: worship infused with (presence of heart, concentration and) reflection; melody that serves to strengthen the self through which the accompanying words have an effect on the heart (such as melodious reciting of the Quran, supplications and litanies, and the singing of mystic poetry); the instructive speech of a pure, eloquent speaker who speaks gently and effectively in the manner of a guide.

As for the third goal, it is aided by subtle thoughts (contemplating subtle and delicate ideas and meanings which lead to spiritual refinement) and a chaste love (a love that is spiritual and not physical and sensual) which is directed by the virtues of the beloved and not ruled over by sensuality.

Then, when *iradah* and *riyadah* reach a certain degree, flashes (*khalasat*) of the dawning light of the Real will descend upon him, delightful as they are, they are momentary like flashes of lightning appearing and instantly vanishing. These they call 'moments' (*awqat*), and these flashes increase in frequency with greater diligence in *riyadah*.

As he advances deeper into this, they descend upon him even when he is not exercising. Now often he will glance at something and his glance be deflected from it towards the Holy, bringing to his attention some aspect of the Divine, and a state of trance (*ghashyah*) descends upon him, in which, as if, he sees God in everything.

Perhaps it is at this stage that his states overwhelm him, disturbing his equanimity, a change that would be noticed by anyone near him.

Then, he reaches a point in his exercises when his 'moments' change into stable tranquility, the brief snatches become familiar and the flashes become a prolonged blaze. Then he achieves an enduring gnostic state which permanently accompanies him from which he derives an ecstatic delight. And when it departs him he becomes sad and bewildered.

This calls to mind a sentence spoken by Ali ibn Abi Talib (A) to his disciple Kumayl ibn Ziyad about the 'friends of God' (*awliya' al-Haqq*), who exist in every age:

Knowledge has led them to the reality of insight, and they are in contact with the spirit of certainty. They find easy what is regarded as rough by those who live in comfort and luxury. They are intimate with what terrifies the ignorant. They are in the company of people with their bodies, yet their souls are lodged in the highest realm. (*Nahj al-Balāgha*, Hikam, No. 147).