

## **Key Concepts in Islamic Spirituality: Love, Thankfulness and Humbleness**

### **Mohammad Ali Shomali**

Love, thankfulness and humbleness are three very important or perhaps even the most important concepts in Islamic spirituality. In this paper, they will be discussed briefly. These three concepts are chosen not only because they are theoretically important, but also because they are practically rewarding. If we want to grow spiritually, we can easily do this by developing these qualities in our lives.

#### Love

According to Islamic hadiths supported by rational arguments, the entire reason for having faith or lacking faith is based on love for Allah (SWT), and for whatever is related to Him (SWT). For example, we read in hadiths that once the Prophet (S) asked his companions: “What is the strongest handhold in Islam?” The companions gave different answers: some said prayers, others said fasting and others hajj. After they gave their answers, they said: “The Prophet and Allah know best”. So the Prophet answered: “To love for the sake of Allah and to dislike for the sake of Allah.”

One might wonder why Islam focuses both on love for the sake of Allah (SWT) and dislike for the sake of Allah (SWT). One might question the need for disliking and say that we should only have love in our hearts. However, Islam is a rational religion, and it is rationally understandable that when we love something we must necessarily dislike its opposite. How can we love the honest without disliking the dishonest? Or love truth without disliking falsehood? If you love a virtue, you cannot help but dislike the vice. Similarly, if you love Allah (SWT), you automatically dislike His enemies. Of course, a believer should not have any personal dislike for anyone. If we dislike someone, it is because of their bad qualities. We might love someone as the servant of Allah (SWT), but we cannot love the bad qualities in him. This is the rational implication of loving good things.

If we want to improve ourselves, we should try to increase our love for Allah (SWT) and those who are close to Him, and increase our love for the acts which are loved by Allah (SWT). This can be achieved by gaining more knowledge and then reflecting on it. One interesting and practical way of improving ourselves is by reading biographies of people who have loved Allah (SWT) immensely and developed a close relationship with Him (SWT). Their life-stories reveal many hidden secrets about their lives, which can help and inspire us to be more inclined to their way of living. This is a naturally inspiring process.

#### Thankfulness

The virtue of thankfulness is very much related to love for Allah (SWT). If you are thankful you will certainly love Allah because of all His favours and if you love Allah you will believe in Him and obey him. Thus, thankfulness is the core of imān (faith). It may not be accidental that in Arabic the terms used to signify ungratefulness and disbelief are identical, that is, kufr. Here are some verses of the Qur'an where a contrast is made between thankfulness and unthankfulness:

*If you are ungrateful (takfur-u), indeed Allah has no need of you, though He does not approve ingratitude (al-kufr) for His servants; and if you give thanks He approves that for you. No bearer shall bear another's burden; then to your Lord will be your return, whereat He will inform you concerning what you used to do. Indeed He knows best what is in the breasts. (39:7)*

So when he saw it set near him, he said, 'This is by the grace of my Lord, to test me if I will give thanks or be ungrateful (akfur). And whoever gives thanks, gives thanks only for his own sake. And whoever is ungrateful (kafar) [should know that] my Lord is indeed all-sufficient, all-generous.' (27:40)

Imagine a teacher who has a thankful student. That student appreciates the teacher and knows the teacher is doing a good job of helping him. Furthermore, the student declares that he is thankful, and then puts into practice what the teacher has taught him. The teacher would love to teach this student whatever he knows, as the teacher would not feel that his knowledge is being wasted. This is the example of a thankful servant who in his heart appreciates, with his tongue declares, and with his body, practices. Allah (SWT) will give such a person more and more and He has no limits. The more He gives, the more you receive.

In the Dua of Iftitāh we recite: *O the one that abundance of giving does not increase Him save generosity and bounteousness!* One might wonder how it is possible that Allah's (SWT) generosity increases by giving. When Allah (SWT) gives you something and you are thankful and can maintain that state, your capacity to receive increases. There is no limit for divine generosity except our limited capacity. The more Allah (SWT) gives, the more capacity we have to receive, and so His Generosity accelerates into this infinite Mercy.

The concept of thankfulness has been explored by many Muslim scholars who have made various useful distinctions between the various types of thankfulness. According to Khājah Abdullah Ansari in his book *Manāzil al-Sā'irīn* (The Stations of the Wayfarers), there are three main types of thankfulness:

- Thankfulness from the heart: knowing that something is a gift from Allah;
  - Thankfulness with words: declaring that you are thankful for divine bounties;
  - Thankfulness in practice: doing something with your hands, feet, eyes, etc., as acts of worship.
- This is practical thankfulness.

Lastly, Khajeh Abdullah Ansari studies the notion of thankfulness and asserts that being thankful has different levels:

- Some levels are shared by ordinary people: they understand that there are some gifts from Allah that we are thankful for, and try to be pleased and praise Him.
- On higher levels, people are not only thankful for what they consider to be gifts that Allah has given them, but for whatever happens to them. Even a bad thing that occurs to a believer is not caused by a lack of love from Allah (SWT), and so a believer is thankful for that.
- Some people are very concerned with Allah's presence: they feel no ease or pain as they do not have any time to think about whether they are in the state of ease or pain. This is the power of love. Similarly, if you are watching an interesting film, you might forget that you are hungry. Or if we are in the company of someone we love, we may forget the time and do not want the meeting to end. People who love Allah (SWT) to this extent are completely distracted and absorbed by His Essence. Khajeh Abdullah Ansari calls it the thankfulness of the elite.

### Humbleness

Another key concept in Islamic spirituality is ultimate humbleness or spiritual poverty. This means to strengthen our understanding of the need for Allah and achieve a sense of complete reliance on Him. This means that even saying, “Allah has been very kind to me” or that “Allah has been very generous to me” is not enough. Who are we without Allah’s favour and grace? We are nothing! It is not that Allah has been generous to something independent of Himself. We are nothing else than what He has created. All good things come from Him; in the best scenario we are just recipients, contingent creations of Allah, not independent from Him in any way.

Imam Husayn (A) prays to Allah: What can I bring when I want to come to you?...Can I come with my ears, my eyes, my tongue, my hands, my feet? Is not this the case that all of these are your blessings that you have given me? Elsewhere Imam Husayn (A) says O My Lord! I am poor in my richness so how can I not be poor in my poverty?

Whatever I have is a sign of my need, a sign of my dependence. What about that which I do not have? Suppose that there is a person who has taken a loan, say, of one million dollars from a bank and another person who has taken one hundred thousand dollars. Which one is richer, and which one is not? It seems obvious that the one who has taken more money is more indebted and more responsible and must have more concerns and worries. Whatever Allah gives us puts us more in debt. There are many many things that we do not have and even those things that we have do not belong to us so how can we feel proud and free from needs.

According to the Qur’an, we are all needy. The Qur’an says: *O mankind! You are the ones who stand in need of Allah, and Allah—He is the All-sufficient, the All-laudable.* (35:15) We are all needy and it is only Allah who is rich and free of need. Many people do not understand this. Whoever is the most humble, Allah will raise him more than anyone else. As we find in a hadith, ‘whoever tries to be humble for Allah’s sake, Allah will elevate him.’ In a divine saying (Hadith Qudsi) we find that Allah told Moses (A) the reason why He made him a Prophet is that He looked into the hearts of all people and saw that Moses was the most humble one.

Reflecting on his life, one can see in the Prophet Muhammad (S) the perfect example of humbleness. Indeed, the reason why the Prophet Muhammad was chosen to be the ‘Seal of the Prophets’ and was given the final message of Allah lies mostly in the fact that he was a true servant of Allah and the most humble person before Allah and His people. At least nine times a day in their prayers Muslims bear witness that the Prophet Muhammad was a servant of Allah and His Apostle. This means that among all his qualities there are two that are exceptional: first, he managed to be a servant of Allah and second, he was rewarded by being appointed as the Apostle of Allah.

---

Extracted from:

<http://messageofthaqalayn.com/42-key%20concepts.pdf>