

Different Treatments of Spirituality

By Dr. Mohammad Ali Shomali

In this article we will study the ways the Qur'an and hadiths have treated the process of self-development and described man's effort and struggle to achieve piety and spirituality.

1) Spirituality as combat with the self:

According to this approach, self-building is an internal battle against the enemy within. In a very well-known and inspiring hadith, we read that once, in Medina, the Prophet Muhammad (s) saw a group of his companions who had won a battle approaching. The Holy Prophet said: *Well done! Welcome to those people who have completed the minor struggle and on whom the greater struggle is still incumbent.* The Apostle of God was asked: "What is the greater struggle?" He replied: "To fight one's own self." In another hadith Abu Dharr asked the Prophet Muhammad: "Which struggle is the best?" The Holy Prophet replied: *To struggle against one's own self and lusts.*

The likening of self-development to an internal battle is indeed rooted in the Qur'an itself. For example, the Qur'an says: *And whoever strives, he strives only for his own soul; most surely Allah is Self-sufficient, above (need of) the worlds.* (29:6) According to many exegetes of the Qur'an, this striving or struggle (jihad) which has been mentioned here is a spiritual jihad. There are two main pieces of evidence that they use to prove this. Firstly, the use of the word "himself": this is significant as in a war a soldier fights for a cause; it may be for the oppressed, for the dignity of Islam or for his country. However this verse mentions the cause as "himself." Secondly, previous to this verse Allah (SWT) says: "Whoever hopes to meet Allah, the term appointed by Allah will then most surely come; and He is the Hearing, the Knowing." (29:5) This concept of meeting Allah (SWT) is also a spiritual concept and so it is consistent with the following verse i.e. the verse 29:6 being about jihad for the self, as this too is a spiritual concept. Of course, this is not to suggest that this verse does not include the militant jihad, but that it also includes the spiritual jihad.

To fight an internal enemy is the greater struggle because it is more difficult. An internal civil war is more difficult to face than war against an external foreign enemy on one's borders. It is much more difficult to expel someone who has occupied our house than to repel someone who is only outside it. If our enemy is inside us then he knows all our secrets. He knows our weak points and our strong points and he knows exactly how to 'play' with us. An internal enemy is always with us and allows us no rest. We might be able to negotiate a cease-fire with an external enemy but with an internal enemy the fight goes on day and night, unceasingly. And unfortunately we love and admire this enemy because it is our own soul.

We should know that, despite all the challenges to be faced in this struggle, in the end it is not so difficult. God will guide and make it easy for those who sincerely want it. It is very important that when we know something we must put it into practice. If we put our knowledge into practice, then God will give us knowledge of the things that we do not know. If we put into practice the small things that we know, it will enlighten the path before us.

2. Spirituality as a medicine.

Another approach is to consider spirituality as a kind of medicine for our soul or spirit. Spiritual problems are described as illness and so we need to treat ourselves with special medicines. We are patients in need of a cure, in need of medicine. Just like our bodies, our souls may also become ill. Unfortunately the most difficult sort of illness is when we suffer deep inside. In twelve verses, the Qur'an talks about a group of people who suffer from "disease in their hearts". This disease may be increased by God because they do not want to be cured and insist on being ill. For example, we read: *In their hearts is a disease and God has increased their disease.* (2:10) The Qur'an also talks about hearts which are healthy and pure: *Do not disgrace me on the day when people are revived, the day on which neither money nor children can help, except the one who comes to Allah with a healthy (pure) heart.* (26:87-89) In Nah al-Balaghah, sermon 388, Imam Ali says: *One of the catastrophes that may happen to a person is poverty, but more difficult than poverty is illness. And more difficult than illness of the body is illness of the heart.'*

The concept of medicine is also a very important related topic. Imam Ali (A.S) says in his Sermon of the Pious: *They [the God conscious] are those who stand up and recite the Qur'an at night, and they try to make themselves sad. They try to take from the Qur'an the treatment as medicine for their illnesses..*

Imam Baqir (A.S) told Jabir b. Yazid al-Ju'fi:

And know that there is no knowledge like seeking health, and there is no health like the health of the soul. In the case of spiritual medicine, the most important point is that we must try to prevent illness from penetrating our souls, in the same way as we might try to maintain a distance from people who are ill, so that the disease does not affect us; by being close to them we endanger our own health. However, there are cures to our illnesses, as Allah (SWT) is the Most Forgiving. Furthermore, we need a guide who can show us what to do and how to prevent or cure our illnesses. One of the beautiful things Imam Ali (A.S) mentions about the Holy Prophet (SAW) is that he was a doctor, but he did not wait for the sick people; instead he went to them himself, taking the equipment with him. *The Prophet was like a roaming physician who has set ready his ointments and beated his instruments. He uses them wherever the need arises for curing blind hearts, deaf ears, and dumb tongues. He followed with his medicines the spots of negligence and places of perplexity.*

3. Spirituality as a journey.

In Islamic literature, spirituality is also described as a journey. We should think of ourselves as wayfarers. We have all embarked on a journey away from God and then we are going back to Him. We have all been created by God and this creation is a sort of separation from our origin. Before we were created we were not separate from God but now we are. However, God has given us the chance to return to Him. The Qur'an says: *Truly we belong to God and to Him we will return.* (2:156) When we depart, our destination is clear. But in order to reach our destination we must be very careful about our direction. If we are on the right path, we will certainly reach our destination. However, if we are on the wrong path, we will not reach our destination and may even go farther and farther away from it. We are not in a static or fixed position. Every day and every hour we are moving and getting either further from or closer to our destination. The Glorious Qur'an says: *O man, you are trying hard to reach your Lord and you will finally meet Him.*(84:6)

The spiritual journey consists of trying to increase our closeness and proximity to God. It should be noted that God is always close to us, but we are not necessarily close to Him. We can reach a position in which we can get closer and closer to God through self-purification, and, as suggested by the Glorious Qur'an, "meet" Him. Mystics normally speak of the possibility of losing our own

selfhood, limits and boundaries and then becoming identified with God. I am not commenting on this concept here, but in any case it seems obvious that we can get closer and closer to God to the extent that nothing will remain between us and Him and this is what we mean by returning to God. So this life is a journey and we cannot say that we do not want to go on this journey. We are all on this journey and it is up to us to gather enough provisions for ourselves. One of the main goals of self-building is to try to reduce this distance by wayfaring towards Allah (SWT). The path towards Him is infinite and full of challenges. However, for the people who embark on this journey, all the support and guidance are provided.

Conclusion: In this part we have discussed spirituality or the process of self-building as a kind of battle, medicine and as a journey. Allah (SWT) is encouraging and guiding us by demonstrating many analogies. He is showing us that there is always hope of reaching Him, and appeals to us in many different ways to encourage us to come closer to Him. He is the Most Merciful.

(Extracted from <http://messageofthaqalayn.com/39-different.pdf>)