

Annihilating the Self

The spiritual traveler watching his own lower self and the Divine Names and Attributes gradually advances till ultimately, he reaches the stage of total *fana* (self-annihilation) that is passing away from his own perishable will and then the station of *baqa* (abiding in the everlasting Will of Allah). It is at this stage that the secret of eternal life is revealed to him.

We can infer this doctrine from the Holy Qur'an also if we ponder over certain verses of it.

Think not of those who are slain in the way of Allah, as dead. Nay, they are living. With their Lord they have provisions (Sura Aale Imran, no.3, verse 169).

Everything will perish save His Countenance (Sura al-Qasas, no.28, verse 88).

That which you have is wasted away, and that which is with Allah remains. (Sura al-Nahl, no.16, verse 96).

These verses put together show that the countenance of Allah are those "who are living and who have provisions with their Lord." According to the text of Qur'an they never perish. Certain other verses indicate that the countenance of Allah signifies Divine names which are imperishable. In one of its verses the Qur'an itself has interpreted the Countenance as the Divine names and characterizes the Countenance of Allah as of glory and honor:

Everyone who is living will pass away, and there will remain the countenance of your Lord of glory and honor (Sura al-Rahman, no.55, verse 27).

All the commentators of the Qur'an agree that in this verse the phrase 'of glory and honor' qualifies the countenance, and it means the countenance of glory and honor. As we know, the countenance of everything is that which manifests it. The manifestations of Allah are His Names and Attributes. It is through them that the creation looks at Allah, or in other words, knows Him.

With this explanation we come to the conclusion that every existing thing perishes and wastes away except the glorious and beautiful names of Allah. This also shows that the gnostics to whom the verse, 'Nay, they are living and have their provisions with their Lord' applies, are the manifestations of the glorious and beautiful Names of Allah.

From the above it is also clear what the Holy Imams meant when they said: 'We are the Names of Allah'. What these words denote is the state of passing away in Allah, abiding permanently with His countenance and being a manifestation of His glorious and beautiful Names and Attributes.

It must be kept in mind that the blessings of the last stage of gnosis can be obtained only when a spiritual traveler's ceaseless devotion reaches the stage of self-annihilation so that he may be called to have been slain in the way of Allah and may become eligible for the reward reserved for martyrs. Just as in the battlefield the sword cuts off the connection between the body and soul of a martyr, similarly a spiritual traveler snaps off the connection between his body and soul by fighting against his appetitive soul. For this purpose, he acquires the help of his spiritual power instead of using his physical force.

In the beginning of his spiritual journey a devotee should lead an ascetic life and should constantly contemplate on the worthlessness of the vanities of the world and thus should break off his relation to the world of plurality. When he would cease to be interested in the world, no material gain will ever please him nor will any material loss grieve him.

*So that you grieve not for what you have missed and exult not for what you have been given.
(Sura al-Hadid, no.57, verse 23)*

Indifference to the happiness and sorrow does not mean that the spiritual traveler does not feel happy even about the bounties of Allah or does not grieve at anything which may distress Him, for happiness about Allah's favors is not the result of his love for worldly trivialities such as wealth, rank, honor, fame etc. He loves the bounties of Allah because he finds himself overwhelmed by His mercy.

After passing this stage the devotee feels that he still loves himself ardently. Whatever spiritual effort and exercises he makes is the result of his self-love. Man is selfish by nature. He is always ready to sacrifice everything else for his own self. He would be willing to destroy anything for the sake of his own survival. It is difficult for him to do away with this natural instinct and to overcome his selfishness.

But so long as he does not do so, he cannot expect the divine light to manifest itself in his heart. In other words, unless a spiritual traveler annihilates his individual self he cannot establish his connection with Allah. Therefore, it is necessary for him first to weaken and ultimately to smash the spirit of selfishness so that whatever he may do, is done purely for the sake of Allah and his sense of self-love may turn into love for Him.

For this purpose, ceaseless effort is necessary.

The spiritual traveler gradually begins to lose interest in himself and ultimately forgets himself totally. Now he sees nothing except the eternal everlasting beauty of his True Beloved.

It must be borne in mind that it is essential for the spiritual traveler to gain complete victory over the evil of licentious desires, love for wealth, fame and power, pride and conceit. It is not possible to attain perfection if any trace of self-love is left, that is why it has been observed that many a distinguished man even after years long spiritual exercise and ceaseless acts of devotion could not attain perfection in gnosis and was defeated in his battle against his phenomenal self.

The reason was that his heart was not fully purified, and petty desires still lurked in some corner of his heart, though he was under the impression that all his evil qualities had been uprooted. The result was that at the time of test the suppressed desires once again raised their head and began to thrive, with the result that the poor devotee fell on evil times.

Success against the lower self depends on the favor of Allah and cannot be achieved without His help.

Extracted from: <https://www.al-islam.org/light-within-me-mutahhari-tabatabai-khomeini/part-21-stages-spiritual-journey-allamah-muhammad>