

PRINCIPLES OF SELF DEVELOPMENT IN ISLAM (PART 3 OF 3)

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Description: Islam's perspective on self development. Part 3: Being mindful of God and reflecting on our actions leads to improving ourselves.


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System of Self Development

Understanding these principles are  generally within the reach of most people, but putting those principles into practice requires courage, and a systemic routine.

Consider the following excerpt from a Tradition (hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, about one of the things that happened to him during his Night Journey. He said: "...Allah enjoined fifty prayers on my followers when I returned with this order of Allah, I passed by Moses who asked me, 'What has Allah enjoined on your followers?' I replied, 'He has enjoined fifty prayers on them.' Moses said, 'Go back to your Lord (and appeal for reduction) for your followers will not be able to bear it.' (So I went back to Allah and requested for reduction) and He reduced it to half. When I passed by Moses again and informed him about it, he said, 'Go back to your Lord as your followers will not be able to bear it.' So I returned to Allah and requested for further reduction and half of it was reduced. I again passed by Moses and he said to me: 'Return to your Lord, for your followers will not be able to bear it. So I returned to Allah and He said, 'These are five prayers and they are all (equal to) fifty (in reward) for My Word does not change'."

The prayer we offer to God is an act of His remembrance and the guidance that He has revealed for shaping our lives. We engage in this formal act of worship five times a day. What about the rest of the time? This requires us to reflect on the moral of the above saying of the Prophet. Perhaps an ideal number to stand formally before God would have been fifty times a day as the Prophet was informed first. But this would have been too much of a burden to carry for most human beings, as the Prophet Moses interjected, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. While the formal number of times we pray is five, the rest of the period must be filled, to the best of our ability, in continuous remembrance of God and reflections on our actions in the light of that guidance. The beauty of Islam is that it is not a set of rituals that are performed in a certain method; it is more than that! Islam is a way of life; all that we do in it should be done to please Allah alone. So mundane actions such as eating, drinking, exercise and

sleep take on a spiritual dimension and are rewarded by God!

We need to be mindful of Allah at all times, regardless of the time and place, and to take heed of His guidance in all our affairs. We need to be thoughtful, rather than impulsive, before we speak, and before we act. We need to reflect on what we may have uttered and done. The process of purification of the mind in Islam is dubbed as the most difficult form of human struggle. It must be pursued with vigor, patience and perseverance, with belief in what God has revealed, and actions that manifest that belief at all times, in adversity as well as prosperity.

Many of us were told during our childhood to maintain a diary and to record in it the various things that happened during the day. The wisdom of that advice lies less in creating a legacy and more in reflecting, as we normally would do when we record things, and to sort out things that may be desirable from those that may be undesirable. There is a need to regularly recall imprints made on our mind by what we may see, hear, feel, and do, and re-establish our connection to what is desirable. This way we can avoid impulsive behavior based on what we may encounter in our environment. It is impossible to sort out things as we encounter them, particularly when they occur in rapid succession, or in theatrics that spellbound us momentarily. We must take the time to re-examine those things in slow motion and without the momentary influences and background noises. We all need moments of quiet reflection and solitude, trying to make sense out of our affairs in the light of divine guidance.

One may ask as whether there are some special words that one can utter for engaging in remembrance of God and reflecting on our thoughts and actions. While there are no bounds on what one can say and utter, here are some examples of what one can say:

...There is no true god (deity) but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. (*La e'laha il'la Allah Muhammad Rasool Allah*)

This simple expression provides the pinnacle for human development. Reminding ourselves that there is no true deity but God provides the best possible framework for human development since what God (Allah) tells us to do is for our own good, and there is no need for us to succumb to any power contrary to what God tells us.

Another statement one can say is:

...All praise be to Allah (*Al-hamdu-lillah*)

La ilaha illa Allah guides us to do the right things. Whatever good comes to us is from Allah. *La ilaha illa Allah* is the anchor for doing the right thing, and *Al-hamdu-lillah* (all praise be to God) is a recognition, with all humility, that we are grateful for God's numerous blessings upon us. These expressions should serve as reminders for us to purify our minds and souls to please God alone.

Examples of other expressions for remembrance of God for self-development are:

'How Perfect is God' (*Subhanallah*) and 'God is the Greatest' (*Allah Akbar*).

Conclusions

Finally, here is an assurance of the rewards promised to us by God in this world and Hereafter:

“He has certainly succeeded who purifies himself. And mentions the name of his Lord and prays.” (Quran 87:14-15)

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