

Principles of Self Development in Islam

(part 1 of 3)



Development carries the notion of enhancement of one's capabilities and potentials. It implies a forward movement from a given position to a position of greater achievement, opportunity and benefit. In order to develop, individually or collectively, it is necessary to define the goals one wishes to achieve, factors that influence development, and the process of achieving the desired goals for development. Each human being is born with some basic faculties. How these faculties are molded depends on inherent capacities, nurturing environment and other external influences.

Islam places a great deal of emphasis on 'self-development' where an individual takes the responsibility for understanding the purpose of human life, and for shaping that life in the best possible manner, for one's own benefit and the benefit of the society at large; Islam also provides comprehensive guidance to achieve this goal.

Human development consists of processes of growth and change that takes place from birth to the end of life. The development process is externally influenced from sensory inputs through the organs, and it is internally self-propelled from things which happen within the human body and mind. Our focus here is the development of the human mind, which takes place through sensory inputs and internal mental processes. This development includes learning through the senses and cognition that occurs when learning is abstracted into knowledge for subsequent use.

Islam identifies two sources which play the roles of nurturing or corrupting human development. Inspiration from divine guidance nurtures human development. Not paying attention to divine guidance and succumbing to conspiracies, arising from within or externally from one's environment, corrupts human development.

Human development may be looked at from different perspectives, both as a basic human interest and as formalized disciplines of studies such as psychology, science, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and so on. Contemporary studies on human development often engage in analysis and remedies when human development is impeded due to temperament, problems with identification or one's identity, parenting, society, chance, and other factors. Here, we will focus primarily on basic principles of human development-aiming at covering the factors that may impede proper development. Keeping in mind that people have varying human capacities, what should be done in order to ensure that they all develop into the best possible capabilities for achieving the desired goals? While there are many factors that are essential for human development, we will first highlight those that may be more fundamental. The foremost factors playing a seminal role are those of being aware of self, being ever mindful of doing the right thing, and to avoid acting on mere impulses.

How does one bring these factors into play? It is through a process called identification or 'constructing an identity' (i.e. finding principles that help develop the best possible human potential, and role models that vivify those principles). It may be viewed as an anchoring process which gives us a sense of belonging to something distinct and valuable. Rather than simply and haphazardly adopting the practices we notice around us, it may often be easier to look at a good role model and then simply emulate that person. However, finding good role models in our contemporary living environment may not be easy and at times confusing, particularly if these so-called role models are going through life changes themselves and the consequences of following their life style may only become known much later. Furthermore, one role model, no matter how good, may not be able to exemplify everything in life. Even if that were to be true, the principles that the role model exemplifies may not be obvious. Principles can only be derived through repeated observations and experimentation. History helps us here. We can look at several role models from history and we can look at lessons drawn from the history of civilizations. Coming back now to identification, the single most important factor in human development, we need to identify with some infallible source of guidance, the unquestionable principles for human development, and carefully select some role models. Most will accept God as the infallible source of guidance, the knowledge that God sent down to us on the good and bad in human civilization, and the Prophets who acted as role models for achieving excellence in human potential. Being mindful of God, therefore, gives one an identification of what is best for developing human potential. It prevents alienation. One can always find solace in the presence of God; literally converse with God in prosperity and adversity, keeping one's personality in harmonious balance, avoiding excesses on oneself or others in prosperity, and avoiding harm from stress in adversity. The other important factors that may emerge from this process of identification are being truthful and upright, and seeking individual and

collective well being in our affairs. In order to achieve these goals, the quest for knowledge that exists and participation in deriving new knowledge from what exists are essential pre-requisites.

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Purification from Corruption

We regularly wash our hands before touching food because our hands come in contact with so many objects that may collect harmful germs from others touching the same objects. We wash our clothes when they collect sweat and dirt from our own body and our surroundings. We bathe and shower to keep our bodies clean to ascertain that we are in good physical health. The same holds true for our minds, work must be done to ascertain that it remains in good health as well! So many things that we come in contact with can corrupt our minds. We may see a person drawing satisfaction from hitting and humiliating another. It leaves an impression on our minds and may later compel us do the same. We see people achieve success through lying and cheating, and our minds may perceive this as an acceptable behavior particularly if these cheaters and liars are being propagated as role models. A child may go through abuse from parents who are considered respectable in society and would be influenced to behave in that dysfunctional manner later on in life.

Both eyesight and hearing are indispensable for human learning and development. They can propel us to unimagined heights of human excellence. However, we must learn to use them properly. Otherwise what we see and hear can influence us to regress and live a sub-human existence.

How do we purify ourselves from the corrupting influences around us? We need to distinguish between what is desirable and what is undesirable in the light of certain guiding principles. We may call it the exercise of the mind, and similar to other forms of exercise, the exercise of the mind requires a well balanced approach.

The process of purification of the mind is known in Islam as *tazkiyyah*. A pre-requisite of engaging in *tazkiyyah* is to know that the human mind is prone to becoming corrupted. The corruption may be attributed to acquired elements within oneself, or to external influences, or both. However, the responsibility for

any undesirable behavior rests with the person who commits it and not the person or the environment that caused it. We all bear direct responsibility for our actions. The legal system will make us answerable if we break a law, and God will make us answerable if we defy divine guidance. One cannot use the excuse that the devil made me do it, or my boss made me do it, and so on. If we are caught speeding on a roadway, we cannot be absolved simply because others were speeding and did not get caught. God sees and hears everything. Just as the speeding regulations are meant to save us from hurting ourselves as well as others, the divine guidance is simply for our own benefit. The concept of answerability for one's actions is called *mas'uliyah*. Success in purification of the mind, soul, or psyche requires recognition that the world can pollute the mind, the soul can corrupt itself via instigation, and desires can conspire to overwhelm one's mind, and drive us into capriciousness or eccentricity. Consider the following statement from the Quran:

“Verily, the soul is inclined to evil.” (Quran 12:53)

Everyone is born with a soul that is pure, free of corruption or impurity. The natural instinct or disposition of every human soul is to do what is right. As one grows, the harmful messages through the eyes, hearing, touch, smell and other senses affect the purity of the human soul. Therefore, every human experience must be scrutinized for its potential corrupting influences. Reforming these corrupting influences, within the human mind, is called the process of purification or *tazkiyah*. The following statements in the Quran illuminate this concept:

“And [by] the soul and He who proportioned it. And inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness. He has succeeded who purifies it. And he has failed who instills it [with corruption].” (Quran 91:7-10)

“But as for him who feared standing before his Lord, and restrained himself from impure evil desires, and lusts. Verily, Paradise will be his abode.” (Quran 79:40-41)

Despite the best efforts that one may make at purification of the mind, deviations are still possible. We may make mistakes or commit sins. What happens then? A properly trained human mind possesses what is called a self-reproaching soul (*nafs-e-lawwama*). It will react by an admission that something has gone wrong; it will accept the failing with humility, and it will engage the mind to reform itself accordingly. On the other hand, someone who has a headstrong soul (*nafs-e-ammara*) will view such admissions as undignified, and over time they will be more prone to greater deviations in future. A wrongful act if recognized with a thoughtful commitment to avoid repetition is an act of self-purification and proper human development. On the contrary, a reckless disregard of such actions leads to further corruption of the soul and self-degeneration.

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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)