

Taqwa

Part II

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ABSTRACT: In part I of this article, Ayatollah Mutahhari elaborated on the definition, meaning, value, and effect of taqwa, or Godwariness, and self-restraint, as emphasized in the Qur'an and *Nahj al-Balāghah*. He demonstrated that 1) fear of God is, in fact, fear of His justice, 2) piety is more than merely performing religious duties, 3) taqwa is a freedom rather than a restriction, and 4) true perfection lies in a person's freedom to do wrong and yet he or she refrains from doing so. In this article, Mutahhari offers an additional description of taqwa: it gives a person insight, or the ability to make correct decisions, and the strength to overcome difficulties. In order to achieve these qualities, a person must rid himself or herself of vain desires which hinder one's ability to clearly reason and reach a virtuous state as a result.

¹ This paper is based on a lecture delivered by Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari in on October 21, 1960 in Farsi, published in *Dah Gofār*.

As stated in Part I of this article, the term *taqwa* refers to Godwariness and self-restraint. As the term *muttaqi* is usually understood as one who “fears God,” it is important to note that this fear is interpreted as fearing God’s punishment rather than fearing His qualities. The two effects of *taqwa* mentioned in the holy Qur’an are 1) providing a person with insight and 2) giving one the strength to overcome difficulties.

The relationship between *taqwa* and insight

To understand the relationship between *taqwa* and insight, it is necessary to discuss it from a scientific and philosophical perspective. The question arises as to how it is possible for *taqwa*, an ethical virtue relating to one’s conduct, to have an effect on one’s wisdom, reason, and judgment. There has been disagreement as to whether having *taqwa* is the only way to achieve a high level of wisdom.

Taqwa and practical wisdom

For the most part, Muslim philosophers, as well as their Greek predecessors, agreed that the rational part in human beings is divided into two categories: practical and theoretical. That is, reasoning produces these two kinds of thought productions that greatly differ from one another. The wisdom created by *taqwa* is practical, not theoretical. Theoretical reason is responsible for knowing the eternal aspects of the universe. It is the basis for natural and mathematical sciences, as well as divine philosophy. The role of the intellect in these sciences is to judge facts. To gather a fact, a piece of information is gathered and judged based on its verity. However, practical intellect is a person’s ability to make decisions, i.e., what would be the right thing to do. Practical reason is the basis for life sciences and moral principles. According to early scholars, it is the basis for ethics, the management of houses, and politics of cities.

However, practical intellect is also a basis for life sciences and moral principles. Practical intellect is a person's ability to make decisions. Practical intellect is the one which creates the concepts of goodness and badness, virtue and vice, the necessary and unnecessary, and rules and regulations. The way in which a human being makes choices in his life is related to the manner in which he works and makes decisions. Taqwa causes one to use his intellect effectively which brings about wisdom. With taqwa, one can better recognize a problem and its solution; he is more capable of making good life decisions. Taqwa has no connection with theoretical intellect nor does it affect one's theoretical intellect. In other words, taqwa does not improve mathematical skills or an aptitude for natural sciences. This also applies to divine philosophy, unless it has a philosophical aspect and it proceeds with logic and reasoning to organize premises and reach a conclusion.

Taqwa, purity, and spiritual striving (*jihād*) have effects on the other kind of divine sciences in which theoretical intellect, philosophy, logic, and reasoning do not exist and the order of premises and the way of thinking is not from result to premises and not from premises to result. The idea that taqwa results in wisdom and insight is not related to theoretical intellect. Perhaps the reason why some scholars do not accept this matter is that they associate this matter to theoretical intellect. But this applies to practical intellect and it can be stated that before any reasoning, experience proves this matter. In fact, taqwa affects insight and intellect; it does not mean that intellect is like a light and taqwa is its oil or the system of intellect is like an electric plant that at a time it produces some kilowatt electricity and when taqwa enters, it adds some more kilowatt electricity to the electricity produced by the plant.

Taqwa helps intellect

There are different types of friends and enemies. Imam Ali (a) states:

Your friends are three and your enemies are also three. Your friends are: your friend, your friend's friend and your enemy's enemy. And your enemies are: your enemy, your friend's enemy and your enemy's friend.¹

In the same way that in a militant fight, the enemy's enemy acts in a sense as a friend, since he restricts one's enemy and keeps him busy and therefore not able to plan or harm too much, in the spiritual battle inside us, taqwa serves intellect by fighting against enemies of the intellect. One's spiritual forces influence each other. They may sometimes weaken or neutralize the effects of each other and there may sometimes strengthen each other. In the past and the present, attention has been paid to contrast that exists between different forces of human being.

The effect of taqwa on one's insight

Excessive desires and biased and obstinate feelings is a spiritual condition that has a negative effect on a person's practical reasoning. Because the domain of practical intellect is related to one's action, it is the same domain of feelings, tendencies, and passions. If these issues exceed the norm and a person becomes controlled by them instead of dominating them, they will command against the intellect, shouting against the call of conscience. For those who ignore this call, they will not hear the call of intellect and will blow dust and thick smoke against its light, rendering the light unable to radiate. For example, we are sitting in here, talking and hearing and seeing, a situation in which one speaks and the others are silent; it is like the lights are shining and the atmosphere is clear. But if everyone were to speak loudly while the speaker is talking, it would be obvious that even the speaker himself is not able to hear his own voice. And if this place were to be filled with dust and smoke, no one would be

¹ *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Maxim no. 295

able to see each other. This point has been elucidated in several poems. For example, in his *Bustān*, Sa‘di writes:

*Truth is a spotless house
Lust and desire, the blown dust
Do not you see where the dust is blown?
No one can see, though he has a good sight.*

Hafiz states:

*Neither veil nor screen hath the beauty of the true
beloved.*

*But lay aside the dust of the path (of thy existence) so that
glance thou canst make.*

Rumi also stated:

*When self-interest appears, virtue becomes hidden:
a hundred veils rise from the heart to the eye.¹*

Sa‘di, Hafiz, and Rumi all portray lust, desire, and self-interest as dangerous hindrances to one’s ability to achieve a virtuous state and seeing the beauty of Allah.

In another example, consider a young student returning from school thinking it necessary to do his homework. To do so, he has to spend several hours reading, writing, and thinking, knowing too well that the result of being inconsiderate and lazy is failure, remaining uninformed, and the cause of many other misfortunes. We know that his hard work is the result of the call of his intellect. There might be a call of passion against that call of intellect, that feeling of ogling and debauchery in his heart that prevents him from being calm. If this call increases, the young man can no longer hear the call of his intellect, blocking him

¹ *Mathnawi* by Rumi, tr. by R. A. Nicholson, Book I, Story III. The Dewish King, his Vazir, and the Christians. [1930]

from attending to the light of his nature as he tells himself, “Let’s have a good time now and later I will think about what will happen next.” Thus, if such desires exist in one’s mind and heart, they will weaken and neutralize the effect of his intellect and in other words, these desires become the enemies of human being’s intellect. The poets influenced by the infallibles (a), as well as the infallibles themselves, have all warned people against this call. Imam Ali (a) states about pride and self-admiration:

A man’s vanity for himself is one the enemies of his intelligence.¹

The Imam (a) also states:

Most of the deficiency of intelligence occurs due to the flash of greed.²

Imam Sadiq (a) states:

Vain desires are the enemy of reason”³.

Sa’di also states with regards to this:

*Avarice blocks the eyesight of the intelligent
Greed traps every living thing.*⁴

The holy Prophet (s) states:

The greatest enemy of you is your tempting self and unquenchable desires which are closer [than anything] to you of all and is placed between your sides.⁵

¹ *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Maxim no. 212.

² *Ibid*, Maxim no. 219.

³ *Misbāh al-Shari’a*, ch. 38, p. 223.

⁴ Sa’di, *Gūlestān*,

⁵ *Bihar al-Anwar*

‘The tempting self and unquenchable desires’ are the great enemies of a human being because they are the enemy of one’s intellect. The Prophet (s) regards the tempting self and its desires as enemies because “the real friend of everyone is his intellect.”¹ We can defend our self against every enemy using the power of intellect; however, if an enemy is able to steal one’s intellect, it would be most dangerous. Using the abovementioned hadith in his poem, Ṣā’ib Tabrizi says, “How can we spread a restful bed for a good sleep / when we have an enemy like heart in our sides?”

Thus, one’s spiritual conditions and powers have adverse effects on each other because of the contrast that exists between the two. They almost neutralize the effects of each other; in other words, desires and intellect envy each other. Thus, the effect of taqwa in strengthening the intellect and increasing insight becomes clear.

Undoubtedly, traits such as anger, lust, greed, envy, obstinacy, bigotry, selfishness and alike make a person deaf and blind. The one who has insatiable desires is blind and deaf. Is it possible to doubt about this matter that one of the natural states of a human being is that he does not see his defect in himself and he sees it in others while he is suffering from it more than the other? Is the reason of this blindness toward one’s own defect other than selfishness? If there is any doubt that pious people, who struggle in moralities and overcome selfishness and greed and other vices of the self, can better understand their defects? And is there any knowledge for a human being more useful than he recognizes himself, his defects and the way to correct them? If we can succeed in subduing the tempting self then we can manage to find out the way of salvation. We would gain a clear insight as a result of having an intellect that is able to reveal our virtues and flaws. We would also be able to better solve our problems with ease, realizing that the hindrance to the call of our intellect were our

¹ *Ibid.*

inordinate desires. Thus, we would understand better, see more clearly, and our intellect would reveal things better to us.

The difference between intelligence and intellect

There are those who are both smart and intelligent in scientific issues though may not exactly know how to lead their lives. On the other hand, those with average intelligence may know how to make better choices. Thus, people have two kinds of mental abilities: intelligence and intellect. Some people are more sharp-witted; others are wiser. But the fact is that we do not have two faculties: intelligence and intellect. There are quick-witted people who are confused in practical matters because of enemies of their intellect have become inordinate. Such people have confused souls, though they do not have any defect in their intellect.

At the beginning, I mentioned that taqwa, moral struggle and the purity of the soul do not have any [direct] effect on what theoretical intellect is concerned with. Even philosophical theosophy is not associated with these moral concepts. I also mentioned that taqwa and moral striving have an effect on acquiring divine knowledge in another way. Imam 'Ali (a) describes the state of a believer who strives against his own desires:

He [the believer] kept his mind alive and killed [the desires of] his heart till his body became thin, his bulk turned light, and an effulgence of extreme brightness shone for him. It lighted the way for him and took him on the [right] path. Different doors led him to the door of safety and the place of [his permanent] stay. His feet, balancing his body, became fixed in the position of safety and comfort, because he kept his heart [in good acts] and pleased Allah.¹

¹ *Nahj al-Balāghah* sermon no.218

Allah (swt) guides those who strive to seek His pleasure:

With it Allah guides those who follow [the course of] His pleasure to the ways of peace, and brings them out from darkness into light by His will, and guides them to a straight path. (5:16)

Taqwa and the refinement of feelings and emotions

Taqwa affects one's feelings and emotions. It makes feelings tenderer. It is not impossible for a pious person to have the same feelings as the feelings of one who is drowned in bad deeds and vices. A pious person who refrains from impurities, bad deeds, hypocrisy, and flattery and instead keeps his self pure to preserve his dignity and high-mindedness and pays attention only to real issues at stake and not to forms will certainly have more excellent and more delicate feelings and have better reactions to spiritual beauties. He sees the world with a different insight and better feels the intellectual beauty in the world. Sometimes we face the question as to why there are no great poets like the ones in the past. Why is there no similar delicacy in the words of other poets as with the words of Sa'di and Hafez? That is in the contrary with the fact that all things like science and ideas and the world have advanced in all aspects. I hope the contemporary poets do not feel offended by my words. This is just my impression and many others. The reason lies in the fact that in addition to natural talent and thoughtful creativity, poets also need a special kind of delicacy and sensitivity in their selves which are achieved when one pays more attention to taqwa, that is, he has self-determination and broad-mindedness and is not a captive of desires and anger. But if some people insist on introducing earlier poets, who have a clear conscience, as evil persons like themselves it is another issue.

In any case, an evil person with a contaminated heart cannot understand the grace of God; even if he has a high level of intelligence, he would not be able to create the gracious and

delicate meanings similar to those which exist in some people's words.

Taqwa and overcoming difficulties

The question which arises here is: what is the relationship between taqwa, a spiritual and moral characteristic, and overcoming difficulties? This relates to another effect of taqwa which is stated in the holy Qur'an:

...And whoever is wary of Allah, He shall make away out for him. (65:2)

...And whoever is wary of Allah, He shall grant him ease in his affairs. (65:4)

Imam Ali (a) states:

Therefore, whoever entertains fear of Allah, troubles remain away from him after having been near, affairs become sweet after their bitterness; waves (of troubles) recede from him after having crowded over him, difficulties become easy for him after occurring.¹

Two kinds of difficulties

As an introduction, it must be stated that there are two kinds of difficulties human beings face. The first type consists of problems beyond one's ability to control, i.e. those caused by natural disasters. The second type consists of problems a person can control and learn how to overcome them. These are social and moral difficulties. Concerning the first type, I cannot comment on whether the Qur'an states anything about saving human beings from these kinds of difficulties or not. However, there is no problem for the existence of such a law as a divine guarantee in

¹ *Ibid.* Sermon no. 198

the world, such as responding the prayer. But with regards to the second difficulty, there is a sentence in *Nahj al-Balāghah* which we can consider as an interpretation for this matter. Imam Ali (a) says:

You should know that whoever fears God, He would make for him a way to get out of troubles and (grant him) a light (to help him) out of darkness.¹

Tribulations are moral and social difficulties. Problems caused by natural disasters are less than those caused by moral and social problems. Most difficulties people face with are due to immoral actions that make a person's life bitter and full of adversity, taking away any kind of happiness in this world and in the hereafter.

Considering that the main cause of one's difficulties is one's self and that everyone shapes his destiny through his own decisions, Sa'di says:

No one would do to his enemy

*What a fool, for his desires, does to himself.*²

Through my own experiences as well as observing that of others, I have come to the conclusion that most of the difficulties we face are created by ourselves, not by others. Having taqwa prevents moral and social problems. God gives those who are Godwary a unique perception:

When those who are Godwary are touched by a visitation of Satan, they remember and, behold, they perceive. (201:7)

¹ *Ibid.* Sermon no. 183.

² Sa'di, *Advices*, Ghazals no. 33

Because taqwa increases insight, it will produce the second effect as well which is saving people from perilous situations and difficulties. Difficulties arise in the darkness of sins and desires. When the light of taqwa is felt, one can distinguish good from the evil, preventing him from experiencing difficulties. If he is involved in a problem, he can find a better way to solve these difficulties through the light of taqwa. In addition to these effects, taqwa prevents a person from wasting his powers in forbidden ways and diversions. It is clear that a strong and determined person can make decisions and rescue himself better than the others. Both light and power help in being rescued.

Toward the end of the chapter *Joseph* in the Qur'an, after Joseph became the ruler of Egypt and his brothers came to Egypt from Canaan to take grains during the famine, they did not recognize him. However, Joseph was aware of who they were although he did not identify himself. The first time his brothers came, Joseph used excuses to keep Bendamin, his full-blooded brother, with himself. The second time his brothers came, they begged and implored Joseph to give them grains. The holy Qur'an portrays their deplorable condition in the following verse:

Then, when they entered into his presence, they said: 'O Emir! Distress has befallen our family, and us, and we have brought [just] a meagre sum. Yet grant us the full measure, and be charitable to us! Indeed Allah rewards the charitable.' (88:12)

Thus, Joseph decided to introduce himself to them:

He said, 'Have you realized what you did to Joseph and his brother, when you were senseless?' (89:12)

He asked if they could remember what they did to Joseph and his brother. The question surprised them:

They said: 'Are you really Joseph?' He said, 'I am Joseph, and this is my brother. Certainly Allah has

shown us favour. Indeed if one is Godwary and patient Allah does not waste the reward of the virtuous.' (90:12)

This is the fruit of taqwa and purity. Joseph became a slave but had kept taqwa. One of the most distinguished and prettiest women of Egypt made an attempt to seduce him, an anonymous young man, although he kept himself under the protection of taqwa when he said, "My Lord! Prison is dearer to me than to what they invite me." (33:12)

The taqwa Joseph kept in that condition made him the ruler of Egypt. Taqwa, patience, and piety will not be lost in this world; it takes people from the lowest to the highest level of honour and dignity as stated in the holy Qur'an: "...Indeed if one is Godwary and patient God does not waste the reward of the virtuous (90:12).

This, it seems that the holy Qur'an summarizes the result of the story of Joseph in one sentence: "Taqwa is an endurable fruit that saves people from difficulties and take them from the base to the top level of dignity as it is stated in the holy Qur'an that: "...And whoever is wary of Allah, He shall make away out for him" (65:2). There is no defeat for the pious who consistently protect themselves.

One cannot help but admire the words and sermons of Imam Husayn (a) when addressing his respected family and assuring them with absolute faith and confidence. My God! What high morale, faith, and confidence and where did he gain such certainty from? According to some historical sources, when he (a) said goodbye to his family for the second time addressed them:

You must be ready to endure difficulties and be aware that God protects and supports you and He will save you and give you a good destiny, inflict different kinds of punishment on your enemies and

grant you blessing and grace for [enduring] these hardships. Do not ever complain and say that which decreases your value.

The faith of Imam Husain (a) in a final victory by which he inspired his family originated from the words of the holy Qur'an: "...And whoever is wary of God, He shall make away out for him." (65:2) This kind of confidence and faith was the same as the pious Joseph who said with happiness and satisfaction: "... Indeed if one is Godwary and patient God does not waste the reward of the virtuous" (90:12) and later he reaped the fruit of taqwa. But Imam Husayn (a) knew the result before the story came to the end. The clear words of Imam Husayn (a) hit the heart of his family like spears. They endured difficulties such as being held captives, but under the protection of patience and taqwa, the result of their deeds became what Imam Husayn (a) had promised them and God had guaranteed it in the Qur'an. After Imam Husayn's (a) martyrdom, Lady Zaynab (a) confidently rephrases her brother's statements in the face of their brutal enemy:

Use any trick you want and try hard, but I swear by God that you cannot abandon our names, make our popularity wane and disrespect us and disfigure the revelation of God in our family. Shame, disgrace, and scandal are the only things which remain with you in this world.

Indeed, during the tragedy of Karbala, Imam Husayn (a) and Lady Zainab (a) portrayed their perfection in Godwariness, and this trait led them to withstand the suffering and pain of losing their loved ones and having their rights trampled on.

Those living a life led by firm principles increase their willpower and have a spiritual and rational personality. Having taqwa, or keeping one's self from that which leads one to sins while being wary of God, helps them reach those goals. It gives a person a

sense of deep morality, freeing him or her from slavery of all types, whether it be his own evil-prompting thoughts or servitude in society. It also leads them feel contented, confident, clear-sighted, and tranquil. Not only does it help the individual, but it helps society as a whole, as the destruction of taqwa is the source of social problems. Therefore, taqwa is regarded as one of the pillars of one's life, personal or social, without which one is unstable.