



Self Development

Khurram Murad

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Ph.: (O) 23282550, 23284740,

Fax.: 23267510 (M) 98102 96541

E_mail : apd@bol.net.in, adam2@sify.com

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THE MEANING AND OBJECTIVE OF SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Self-development is both important and indispensable in human life. Everyone cherishes the hope of self-development. Why should this be so?

Its importance and desirability

We all labour in our lives in order to achieve our goals or ideals. There is joy in attaining these goals or ideals. Let us disregard at this juncture the nature of the goals – whether high or low, extensive or narrow, physical or spiritual, individual or collective, or good or evil. What is noteworthy is that special preparation is needed for each of them.

It is a different matter whether the goals are worthy of one's attention. The noteworthy point of our purpose is that as one develops an attachment to one's goal, one becomes ardent to achieve it, to succeed.

The Qur'ān employs the words *fawz* and *falāḥ* for success. If we reflect on the meaning of these Qur'ānic expressions, we will be better able to follow the Qur'ānic passages which invite man to real success and felicity. As we are drawn towards an ideal, we invest the necessary means and resources in the effort to attain it. We improve upon and adapt our means and resources in that pursuit and waste no opportunity to gain success.

Let us make another point at this juncture. A verbal declaration in speech or writing is not the measure of our commitment to an ideal. The true measure is whether we gather the necessary means and resources to realize it and how far we devote ourselves heart and soul to this pursuit.

Another noteworthy point is that if we are clear in our minds about our goal and are attached to it, it guides us, like a lighthouse or compass. At times, we do not need to draw upon any resources; the ideal dictates what resources are needed and how they are to be employed. It identifies the landmarks, shows the way, instructs in methodology and helps us to be oriented to it.

The ideal, once again, determines the means and resources needed and their use. For example, one who aspires to be a soldier does not need to gain literary skills. Rather, he should develop military skills. Literary skills are essential for one who wants to become a writer.

However, it is essential for realizing any ideal to have the right personality. The term 'personality' is used here in its broadest sense. Included in it are one's physical and mental faculties, other abilities and potentials, heart – feelings and emotions – and character –

conduct and morals. Self-development consists in developing the personality in such a way that we are enabled to realize the ideal.

Without self-development we cannot attain our ideal. We cannot gain what we want, fully or partially, without the requisite preparation. We may acquire this preparation through a well-laid-out training programme in an organized way. But we may also acquire it without deliberate effort if it is granted to us. We gain self-development both consciously and unconsciously.

There is another kind of training which is related to the body, especially the faculties and skills, of hearing, seeing and understanding. We may train our bodies consciously. But it is significant that whether we want it or not, such training is imparted to us – this is an aspect of the omnipotence and mercy of our Lord Who arranges for such training. It commences with our birth and lasts until our death. Without this training man cannot live a proper life or even play a meaningful role.

The other development is of our inner being, of our mind and heart, of our knowledge and action, of our emotions and feelings, of our morals, in sum, of our character and conduct. Although man is granted this partly by birth, he owes it in part also to his surroundings. On the whole, however, this development very much depends on our conscious efforts. However, these efforts represent at best only a requisite. For it is Allah, our real and true Lord Who provides it. For, without His help and patronage, man cannot achieve anything. Nothing in this universe can exist on its own. Everyone is dependent upon His will and dispensation. It goes without saying that no other development is more important than this.

By the mercy of Allah, we are blessed with mental, physical, academic and professional skills, as well as the necessary

gives us the potential for good conduct, unblemished character and the best morals. Of all things in the world, the most precious is excellent character and conduct. It is to be valued greatly. It endears us to others, earning their trust and affection. Nonetheless, we can gain nearness to our Lord and Paradise only by dint of sufficient effort and training. Given this, nothing could be more valuable than such effort; we should be totally committed to it, for it is the means for realizing our ideal.

The Qur'ān links one's success in both the worlds with self-purification and self-development. The Qur'ān proclaims that one who purifies himself attains success and felicity (al-A'lā 87:14; see also al-Shams 91:9). The Qur'ān promises him the eternal gardens of Paradise and exalted rank (Tā Hā 20:76).

The objective of self-development – Paradise

What should be our main goal to which all our efforts for self-development should be directed? This has to be decided at the outset so that we may develop a personality fitted to our ideal and the ways and means needed for it. For example, if one who is interested in gaining knowledge will enroll himself in academic institutions, sit at the feet of scholars, devote himself to books and writings and develop the abilities to articulate his viewpoint. By the same token, if his ideal is to attain spiritual growth, he will turn to centres of spiritual retreat and monasteries, do spiritual exercises and concentrate on meditation, etc. Likewise, if he aims to succeed in warfare he must disregard academic pursuits and spiritual exercises and focus his energy on military skills.

It goes without saying that our greatest ideal should be to enter Paradise and win Allah's pleasure in the eternal life of the Hereafter. In other words, we should strive to escape Allah's wrath and hellfire. We may be saved from hellfire and His wrath and thus may be admitted to Paradise, winning His pleasure. The latter is actually more important than Paradise, as is specified in the Qur'ān (al-Tawbah 9:72). However, there is no material difference between the two. One's desire for Paradise proceeds from his seeking Allah's pleasure. If Allah is pleased with someone, He will defend him against hellfire, admit him to Paradise and bless him with His pleasure. As to those who contend that they are keen only on winning His pleasure, having nothing to do with Paradise, they are ignorant of the meaning of divine pleasure. For the Qur'ān speaks of the true believers as those who sell their selves in order to win His pleasure (al-Baqarah 2:207). At another place, the Qur'ān declares: 'Allah has purchased from the believers their lives and wealth in exchange for Paradise for them.' (al-Tawbah 9:111)

Allah has explicitly instructed us that the goal of all our worldly activities should be to secure admission to Paradise in the abiding life of the Hereafter. Man is asked to choose between the life of this world or Paradise (al-Ḥadīd 57:20). All worldly things are deceptive and illusory, and we will leave everything behind at death. All that exists on earth is mortal and ephemeral. The abiding being is only of Allah, Most Glorious and Most Noble. All glittering worldly objects are subject to decay, just as the sun and the moon set. If we take this life as our objective, all our efforts will come to naught. The Qur'ān therefore directs: ' vie with one another in seeking the forgiveness of your Lord and towards Paradise, whose extent is equal to the heavens and the

earth. (al-Hāūd 57:21). At another place too the Qur'an urges man to race towards Paradise (Āl 'Imrān 3:133). Throughout one's life one should consistently race towards Paradise, without looking aside and without pausing. In other words, self-development should be wedded to the goal of winning this race. Success brings joy and colour to life. However, the greatest success is to enter Paradise. Allah says: 'All of you will get your recompense in full on the Day of Judgement. The successful one is he who escapes hellfire and is admitted to Paradise.' (Āl 'Imrān 3:185) The Qur'ān speaks of it as a great success. At sixteen places the Qur'ān refers to one's admission to Paradise as his great success, and in more than one hundred places the bounties of Paradise are described. In some passages one particular bounty is discussed at length and man is attracted towards it. The Qur'ān asks man to make the bounties of Paradise his goal. Admission to Paradise represents the highest success imaginable and man is urged to work for it. He is repeatedly exhorted to work for this cause (al-Şāffāt 37:61; al-Muţaffifīn 83:26). The bounties of Paradise are held out as a reward and man is directed to look to it as his ideal, which he will realize at the end of worldly life. 'O soul in tranquillity! Return to your Lord, well-pleased and well-pleasing! Enter then among My slaves, and enter My Paradise.' (al-Fajr 89: 27-30)

Single-minded devotion

The first step in self-development is to become devoted single-mindedly to Paradise, to resolve that it constitutes the goal of life

and that all efforts should be directed to attaining it. The objective of self-development should be to become deserving of this success. It is important to determine upon this with single-minded devotion. It is a life-long decision that should come after much reflection and that needs to be rehearsed throughout life. One cannot reach this decision unless one knows the way. In the absence of focus on the goal, one will only wander and stumble, unable to reach the destination. Regrettably, most of our problems related to self-development arise from duality of behaviour on this count. We should take a plunge in the direction of seeking to enter Paradise, with total, emotional and psychological commitment. If we take the first step on this path with commitment and devotion, it will work wonders.

Before that first step, it will be useful to do the ablution, and offer two *rak'ah* of prayers with utmost concentration and devotion, recalling the punishment of hell and the bounties of Paradise and thinking of the time when the angel of death will say: 'Your time is over. Now accompany me.' We should think of the moment when we will stand before Allah and our fate will be decided. With this preparation, we should resolve to do our best to enter Paradise. We should often and fervently supplicate Allah with this prayer though the wording of the supplication is discretionary – the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) used to make it in these words: 'O Allah! I seek from You Paradise and protection against every word and deed that may draw me closer to hellfire.' (Ibn Mājah); 'O Allah! I seek from You such faith as can never be taken away from me, and such bounties as can never end, and such pleasure as does not exhaust and exalted rank in Paradise.' (Ibn Abī Shaybah) One should seek the Prophet's company in Paradise.

conduct is a life-long activity, which may be carried out in stages. Though we may be momentarily affected by the temptations of greed and lust, we should strive to resist them, and restrain such appetites. One should, however, try to restrain his greed and lust.

Blessings and rewards

The decision to seek Paradise is necessary. For it will determine the ways and means, the methodology of the self-development we seek. That decision will serve as the criterion for choosing what to do and what to avoid, which qualities to develop and which to shun. We should decide all this in light of the question – what will draw us closer to Paradise and what will land us in hell. We need to have a very clear idea as to what pleases Allah and what angers Him. We may encounter difficulty in addressing some particular legal issues, but the commitment to enter Paradise will serve as our best teacher and guide.

It is that commitment which will inspire the effort of self-development. If a person is committed to his goal and resolves to achieve it, the commitment suffices to show him the way to appropriate self-development. The desire to seek the pleasure of Allah acts as the constant impetus and keeps one on the right track. There are historical precedents. Some persons came to Makka, embraced the faith, learnt some Qur'ānic *sūrah*s and returned, striking a deal regarding Paradise. These instances are best illustrated by the career of Ṭufail ibn 'Amr Dausī and Abū Dharr Ghifārī. They returned when the Prophet (peace and

blessings be upon him) had arrived in Madina. Throughout, they adhered to Islam and achieved increase of faith.

Once we take the decision, we should realize that all goals other than that of admission to Paradise are not real. Self-development is not itself the goal. The same holds true for excellent conduct and unblemished character, *da'wah* and *jihād* and ascendancy of Islam and establishing faith. All of these are but means for entering Paradise. The more righteous the believer is, the more committed he will be to the Hereafter. All other goals are short-lived. If we grasp this point fully, it will help us overcome many obstacles in the way of self-development. It will help us resolve many problems and strike at the roots of many distractions, and ease the labours for self-development. We will find it easier to fulfill the obligations not only of self-development but also of faith as a whole, since the prescribed religious duties must be discharged as a part of training and self-development. Faith is the way of self-development.

If an individual wants to achieve something but is unable to do so, or if he tries to renounce something but fails to do so, or if he wants to amend his person in a particular way but is disappointed, none of this should demoralize him. For these are not the objectives in themselves. Paradise is the only objective. It is the reward for every effort. We have the opportunity to seek repentance after every sin and forgiveness is intrinsically related to Paradise. If others reject our call to truth, if they are offensive, if we do not achieve any progress in the cause of faith even after years of striving – even then we should still keep on going with determination and courage. For our goal all along is Paradise itself.

This goal will content us in that we shall not be seeking perfection. We will not leave the project incomplete (or unattempted) on account of the imperfection in others. For perfection befits Allah alone. There are angels who cannot commit a sin, but Paradise is not their objective. Whenever the believer notes his own imperfection or failings, he should take refuge in Allah, seek His forgiveness and move in the direction of His forgiveness and Paradise.

Its all-embracing nature

We must avoid misunderstanding that taking Paradise as the goal rules out the need for self-development. Paradise is such a comprehensive goal that it takes into account every form of self-development. For example, honesty helps one enter Paradise. Likewise, being dutiful and discharging one's obligations efficiently paves the way for Paradise. If one is engaged in farming or business and fulfills the need of others, this too will contribute to one's admission to Paradise. Islam instructs that one should renounce all that is vain. Using our time properly will help one win Paradise. Likewise, offering prayers on time will also help in realizing his goal. Doing things on time and being true to one's word are virtues which make one deserving of Paradise. Indeed, fulfilling one's promise is a virtue of the highest degree for which one will be admitted to Paradise. Seen in this way, every form of self-development, not linked in any way to unlawful things is meant for entering Paradise. It is thus an all-embracing goal.

The first step: The first step to self-development is to make Paradise (and nothing else) one's goal, and to set one's eyes steadily on it. One should be concerned only with this goal and direct all efforts towards it. The decision should be deliberately taken after being firmly persuaded. Then, it needs to be engraved on the heart and mind. Then mind and tongue both continually refreshed with it.



SELF-DEVELOPMENT IS NATURAL AND MANAGEABLE

While it seems easy to have a will to enter Paradise – everyone must desire this – the self-development needed to attain Paradise seems to be a hard task. At times we may feel that it is impossible to lead life in a manner that may make us worthy of admission to Paradise; we may think it is beyond our capacity to lead such a life.

However, when we take the first step for self-development – by resolving consciously to seek Allah's pleasure and seeking Paradise as the only goal of life – we should do so in the firm conviction that self-development is natural and practicable, that it is possible for us to gain entry into Paradise, that it will be natural for us because we were meant for this way and this goal. This is a realization that we need to rehearse and refresh and reinforce all the time.

That it is natural and manageable does not mean that we will not have to experience hardship for self-development, or that we

will not have to strive and struggle on this path. We will indeed have to bear with difficulties, unpleasantness, suffering and hard stages. What is implied is that we will be provided with the courage and determination needed to withstand the hardships. For everything that is demanded of man is within his capacity.

Why is it natural? Our contention is not that self-development is easy, but that it is and should be seen to be natural. Let us try to grasp this seemingly difficult statement. Its naturalness is a necessary part of its being the very objective for which man has been created. It is part of Allah's lordship, mercy and justice.

Why has Allah granted life to man on this planet earth? Obviously so as to test man whether he follows the straight way or a false path, whether he acts gratefully or ungratefully towards Allah, whether he professes belief or indulges in unbelief, whether he obeys Allah or revolts against Him, whether he worships Allah alone or takes others as gods besides Him. Whatever be the mode of its expression, the bare fact is that Allah seeks to test man: 'He it is Who created death and life in order to test you as to who among you does best.' (al-Mulk 67:2), 'We showed him the way, whether he be grateful or ungrateful.' (al-Insān 76:3)

Since his life is a test, man is granted authority and freedom. That follows necessarily. It would be pointless to test a creature compelled to act in a particular manner. It does not befit Allah's mercy and justice that He would compel man to his choice of thought or action. Since man is being tested and is promised reward or punishment as a result of the test, he is provided with the necessary freedom and authority. The sun, the moon, the stars and the angels cannot disobey Allah in the least. However, they are not held responsible either, nor are they promised the reward of Paradise.

It is a unique test

Though the period of the test is very short, its resultant reward or punishment is eternal. What is with man is short-lived whereas what is with Allah is eternal (al-Nahl 16:96). Since the admission to Paradise is contingent upon self-development and since Paradise is the goal of life, Allah decided by His Lordship and mercy that the way to Paradise through self-development should be natural and accessible to everyone. One notes the manifestations of His Lordship and mercy in all walks of daily life. Air is essential for man's existence, we cannot survive long without it. Accordingly, it is in abundant supply everywhere, accessible to everyone and available without effort on our part. Likewise, water is essential for life, the need for it next only to air. Water too is everywhere and relatively accessible albeit not in the same easy abundance as air. In the same way, self-development, on which hinges one's success in eternal life, should also be natural and accessible to everyone, as air and water are.

Everyone is subject to testing and the goal of Paradise is placed before everyone. It would have been discordant with Allah's mercy and justice that, having subjected man to this test, having asked him to race towards it and having placed Paradise as a reward, He would have made the way to Paradise hard or inaccessible to everyone. We note that Allah has undertaken the responsibility of guiding man to the way to Paradise. Let us recall some of the relevant Qur'anic passages: 'It is upon Us to give guidance, and unto Us belong the Hereafter and this world.' (al-Layl 92:12-13) Significantly enough, the way to Paradise, the way of obedience to Him and of faith is described as easy: 'As for him who gives in charity and keeps his duty to Allah and fears Him, and believes

in good, We will make smooth for him the path of ease.’ (al-Layl 92:5-7) Also, ‘Allah intends for you ease, and He does not want to make things difficult for you.’ (al-Baqarah 2: 185) ‘Allah wishes to lighten the burden for you and man was created weak.’ (al-Nisā’ 4:28) In the same vein, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) declared that the way of faith, of Paradise, of self-development is easy. He repeatedly directed his Companions: ‘Make faith easy, not hard and difficult. Console people with glad tidings. Do not repel them by making things difficult for them.’ We should therefore believe and accept the tiding that it is a necessary part of the test to which we have been put that the way of self-development, faith and Paradise is natural and manageable.

Part of Allah’s mercy and justice

It runs counter to Allah’s mercy and justice that on the one hand He would have invited man to the goal of Paradise, (as stated in al-Baqarah 2:221; Yūnus 10:25) and asked man to race towards it (Āl ‘Imrān 3:133), and on the other that He would have made this way so difficult that no one could follow it. It does not befit His mercy that He would have put us to a test with the intention to fail us. Once, when the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) was asked by a woman whether a mother can hurl her baby into fire, it brought tears to his eyes and he remarked: ‘No! However, people take others as god besides Him.’ Allah says: ‘Why should Allah punish you if you have thanked Him and have believed in Him? And Allah is Ever-Appreciative and All-Knowing.’ (al-Nisā’ 4:147)

As the believer moves on the way of self-development, he should proceed with the conviction that it is an easy, a practicable way. Allah has not put man to the test in order to fail him. He is not intent in man's failure. He will not derive any benefit from punishing man. What is demanded of man is perfectly manageable. For man has been provided with all that is needed for him to pass the test successfully.

Aspects of ease

There are many aspects of the naturalness or ease of the way of self-development. We will however, focus only on three aspects, which are essential.

1. IT IS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE HUMAN NATURE

Since Allah has made the love for goodness and virtue innate in human beings, it is familiar to him. Man is naturally drawn towards good in that it is in line with his sensibility. Even a person of bad character is bound to appreciate such virtues as honesty, sympathy, good conduct, justice, integrity, truthfulness and being true to one's word. Everyone naturally detests murder, injustice, excess, bad manners and jealousy. It is normal to feel gratified on doing something good; it gives peace of mind. By the same token, it is normal to feel tormented on committing evil; it makes one feel debased. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) described virtue and vice in these terms to his Companions. It is a part of the essential human nature with which all humans are born. Therefore, the way of virtue and goodness is both straight

and easy. It tends to be hard in that we have distorted ourselves. If a twisted thing does not fit a given space, the fault is not with the space. If nothing grows on a rock, the rain is not to be blamed for it. If we adapt our heart and nature to virtues, it will be easy for us to follow this way. The Qur'ān teaches this insight that Allah has made it easy for man to follow this way (al-Layl 92:7). Likewise, it is easy to keep one's heart intact and sound. We will take up this point later.

2. LIFE AS A WHOLE IS A TRAINING GROUND

Another aspect is that Allah has made the whole of life and the whole universe our training ground. Obviously some duties have been prescribed such as prayers, *zakāh* and *hajj*. However, every incident, every experience, every mental condition, every bounty, every suffering, every calamity, every virtue, every evil and every encounter with other creatures in this universe has many lessons for man, provided one is willing to learn.

As to those who constantly draw these lessons, Allah describes them as those who remember Him, standing, sitting and reclining (Āl 'Imrān 3:191). It is promised that divine signs will be shown to them in the universe (Fuṣṣilat 41:53).

Those who are devoted to the book of Revelation, and the book of nature and life, and who are always drawing lessons from them do not stand in need of any special training course, although such courses can be helpful. However these can be really effective if they help man appreciate the whole of life as a training ground. With a little reflection we realize that every good deed we do is a means for self-development. We should regard it as a virtue, cherish it and thank Allah for having enabled us to do it, look

forward to its reward and derive contentment from that. We should seek divine light by doing good deeds. We should remember that virtue is an inclusive concept in the Islamic tradition – earning a livelihood and spending on oneself and one's family, doing business, planting trees and eating of their fruits and offering them to birds and animals – all these constitute virtue. Even if the fruits are taken by birds and animals or simply stolen, it will be credited to one's account as a good deed. Marital relations too constitute a good deed. Every good deed is a blessing for the doer.

Though committing sin is a major cause of despair, this too can be turned to good account. As the person realizes that he has committed a sin, he should weep and his heart should fill with sorrow and remorse. He should firmly believe that Allah alone can save him against its dire consequences. This should prompt him to turn wholly to Allah and weep. The whole sequence is immensely helpful in the process of self-development. I am not suggesting that one should commit sins. It is of course, essential to abhor and avoid sins. However, it is part of divine dispensation that man cannot escape from committing a sin. If he is drawn towards a sin and yet restrains himself out of fear of Allah, this constitutes a good deed. The more serious the sin the greater the virtue of controlling oneself. Allah says: 'But as for him who feared standing before his Lord, and restrained himself from impure desires and lust, Paradise will be his abode.' (al-Nāzi'āt 79:40-41)

The same holds true for divine bounties. Every divine favour is a means for man's testing and self-development. It holds true for every bounty in general, be it breathing, a morsel of food, a sip of water, defending the body, and all sustenance. The same

applies to divine gifts that are special to particular individuals. These should remind us of Allah Who has conferred these bounties, and our hearts should overflow with gratitude to Him. We should not attribute our expertise or skills to our own knowledge, nor ascribe them to others as being their gift. Rather, we should sincerely thank Allah, acknowledging Him as the true source of all good. This attitude serves as a remedy for moral and spiritual ailments. The more one thanks Allah, the more generously one is rewarded by Him. If someone thanks Allah for having enabled him to do good, it will help him to do more good acts, in turn enhancing his self-development.

The same is true for every suffering and calamity that may afflict a person. These too serve as means for self-development. We should recognize that all events are caused by Him without Whose leave even a leaf cannot move. Furthermore, He is Most Compassionate, Most Merciful and is caring and well-wishing to mankind. We must bear up in the face of loss and suffering. Perseverance is the master key to self-development. In the absence of calamities one cannot receive the supreme felicity of Allah's mercy.

3. IT IS PRACTICABLE

It does not befit Allah's mercy and justice that He would ask man to do something beyond his capacity or put man to a test that he cannot undergo. It runs counter to the fundamentals of justice. How can someone be tested in something of which he is ignorant or incapable, and then punished for failure? Having expressed this fundamental principle, the Qur'an draws attention to the following dispensation of Allah – it comes in the concluding part

of *Sūrah al-Baqarah* (2:286), which gives expression to many broad principles of faith – Allah does not burden a soul beyond its capacity; every soul is rewarded for that good that it has earned, and is punished for the evil that it has earned. The essential principle is stated at several places in the Qur'ān. If someone is made to utter a blasphemous statement, although he is firmly persuaded of faith, he will not be taken to task or reckoned a sinner for what he said or did under compulsion having no choice in the matter. Also, the failings that arise out of forgetfulness are pardoned by Allah. And thoughts that cross one's mind involuntarily and the temptations to sin are also not punishable. For man is too helpless with regard to these. On the contrary, if he is drawn towards a sin yet checks himself, he is given the glad tidings of divine reward. There is no accountability for the ever-changing state of the heart. As Islam spread, the obligation to keep night vigil was withdrawn. Since Allah knew that it would not be possible for all Muslims to discharge this duty, He pardoned them and directed that as much of the Qur'ān be recited as is possible.

Allah directs that one should fear Allah as He is to be feared (Āl 'Imrān 3:102). On hearing this verse the Companions trembled in nervousness and fear. For it is beyond man's capacity to fear Allah in the due measure. It was then clarified that the believer should fear Him as much as it is possible for him to do. Fearing Allah is another means of self-development. We can therefore safely infer that we should seek self-development to the limit of our capacity. We are not asked to do anything beyond our capacity. Whenever the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) took the oath of allegiance regarding obedience and *jihād*, he qualified the statement with 'to the extent possible'.

It is perfectly within one's capacity to discharge the duties prescribed by Allah or to refrain from what is forbidden by Him. It is not beyond man's power to observe the limits set by Him, whether these be related to acts of worship, *jihād*, eating and drinking, spending, morals, mutual dealings, keeping one's word, justice, doing good, maintaining the ties of kinship, or negative qualities like jealousy, spying, backbiting and thinking ill of others. If one is unable to follow these commands, or if one resorts to some pretext to evade them, no ruling by a jurist consult will avail. We cannot escape divine reckoning by offering an excuse to fellow human beings. The individual would do better to think whether he would be able to convince Allah with his false pretext – when Allah knows the manifest and the hidden. If he has a genuine ground for his inability, Allah will accept it. He will not be taken to task for a failing that he cannot help. Nor will it reflect poorly on his self-development. However, if it is unacceptable to Allah, no ruling will help him. Nor will others carry his burden. This line of thinking should facilitate for him the course of his self-development.

The believer should therefore, proceed on the way of self-development with a conviction that there is nothing that can prevent him from the way to Paradise, and nothing that can deter him from this way because it cannot be beyond his capacity. This conviction will help him overcome many difficulties in the way, and settle many of the doubts and complaints often made by those struggling for self-purification.

Voluntary and involuntary acts

The deciding factor is whether something is voluntary or involuntary. Some people claim often that they cannot control this or that habit or perform this or that duty or they cannot renounce some unlawful practice. Let them study closely whether it really is absolutely beyond their capacity. If Allah has asked man to do something, it must certainly be within man's power to do it. As already indicated, Allah does not demand anything of man which is beyond his capacity. One should not be unduly concerned about matters about which there are no divine commands, nor should these distract one from doing good.

Obstacles and misapprehensions

Despair is the biggest obstacle in the way of self-development, and its effect on the quality of effort. Man is vulnerable to all sorts of thoughts that cross his mind, including those about Allah and His Messengers and their teachings. At times, one is strongly drawn towards sin, and overwhelmed by loss of hope. However, man is not answerable for the thoughts crossing his mind; he can not prevent this happening. Such thoughts do not by themselves bar one from entering Paradise, and therefore one should not feel demoralized. Our obligation is only to strive to stop evil thoughts crossing our minds and instead, develop pious ideas. We should be content with this effort. However, in spite of determined intent, we are apt to weaken in our resolve. It is beyond man to have an unchallenged resolve. Allah puts man to test

continually in order to ascertain the firmness of his resolve. Failure in resolve will not by itself be punished nor entail divine wrath.

The difficulty is the sinning related to weakness of resolve. An individual may commit sin and do so repeatedly, notwithstanding repeated repentance. He may commit evil knowingly, in spite of his understanding of relevant divine commands. Human nature is only too susceptible to give in to the base desires of the self. Yet this should not make one despondent. It is not within man's power not to commit any sin at all or to avoid the repetition of sin despite repentance. Only the angels and Messengers are immune against sinning. Man has been granted freedom of choice and this inevitably provides him with a chance to commit sin. However, the same freedom may be exercised to gaining entry into Paradise. Allah makes it a point to link His forgiveness with admission to Paradise.

As the person's mind is troubled by evil thoughts, he suffers from despondency. Likewise, if he is unable to rise to the required standard, he is filled with despair. He is tormented by the fluctuations in his spiritual state. He must, nonetheless, realize that he does not have any control over the conditions of his thought. He is answerable only for his actions. Love and fear for Allah and total devotion to Him are, no doubt, ideals and he should draw upon every conceivable means to attain them. However, he will not be taken to task for the quantum or degree of his feelings and aspirations. On the basis of these, he will not be denied Paradise. Therefore, he should not permit himself to collapse into despair and despondency. Everyone looks for perfection even though it is not attainable. Indeed, perfection runs counter to being human, and so it is vain to pursue the unattainable. One can also be disappointed on observing lapses

and weaknesses in others and give up on one's own self-development. This response is the height of foolishness. One is not empowered to achieve self-development for others. No one can carry another's burden in this respect. One should rather, be concerned with one's own conduct and consistently follow the straight way while working for reform of oneself and of others.

Points to remember

Let us realize clearly that we should take Paradise as our goal and resolve to attain self-development. The first and foremost point is that the way of self-development, of faith and guidance, and of Paradise, is practicable and natural. Only if we regard it as something unnaturally arduous, does it appear difficult. Therefore, the above points should be always brought to mind; doing so sustains and improves morale. As we work with confidence we will not suffer from loss of hope. Allah is always there to help and support us.



INTENTION AND ACTION ARE ESSENTIAL

Self-development is necessary to gain success in both the worlds. One cannot enter Paradise without undergoing self-purification and self-development. Self-development is indeed the natural way to gain entry into Paradise, and perfectly practicable. However,

we must be mindful that we are fully responsible for our self-development. We should resolve to do what we intend and do everything in this regard. Without this there cannot be any self-development.

The first and foremost condition is one's intention and action. Allah looks for these and He has promised reward for them. There is no substitute for lack of intention, and if one fails to supply this, it cannot be compensated in any way. Nothing can replace one's intention and action. No one can do this work on another's behalf. For every individual is obliged in his personal capacity to attain self-development. If he does not practise what he learns or is not prepared to learn anything, no training can help him. His faith and good action alone can win Allah's forgiveness and mercy which will, in turn, admit him to Paradise. This constitutes the fundamental principle of self-development. It is self-evident and clear. Notwithstanding its manifest nature, it is regrettably ignored. It is clouded by wishful thinking and false pretexts. While disregarding this fundamental principle, one looks for false supports, which are illusory.

Law of retribution

On reflection one realizes that the fundamental principle related to self-development is in line with the purpose of our creation. It is the essence of the test to which we are put. Indeed, it is its essential precondition. We have been put to the test to see whether we do good deeds. We are therefore fully responsible for our actions.

As a matter of fact, man enjoys total authority over only his own action. This facilitates greatly the work of self-development.

For it is within our power to take any action. However, by the same token, we will be rewarded only on the basis of what we do. We entitle ourselves to Allah's mercy and forgiveness and entry into Paradise by dint of only our actions. Had we not been granted this authority over our actions, the test to which we are put would be devoid of meaning. As it is, no other can offer prayers on our behalf; no other can fast for us. Likewise, we cannot fulfill promises or serve fellow human beings, or strive for good on someone else's behalf. We cannot deserve reward or punishment for an action not performed by us. If someone compels us into committing a sin, while we are not inclined towards it, we will not face any punishment on this count. This applies even to uttering blasphemy under coercion, if one is firmly persuaded of faith. By the same token, if someone compels us into doing good, we are not entitled to any reward for it. No one can undergo self-development in our place in that it is our own obligation. If we do not make any effort for self-development, someone else's teachings cannot benefit us. Any effort for self-development from without may be likened to raining upon rocks. Needless to add, every river draws upon rainfall in proportion to its capacity while rainfall usually washes away from rocks. Allah lays down this fundamental principle thus: 'Man is rewarded for that good which he has earned, and he is punished for the evil which he has earned.' (al-Baqarah 2:286) This fundamental principle is elaborated elsewhere in the Qur'ān, with the affirmation that this eternal principle features in all the Scriptures: 'Or is he not informed of what is in the Scripture of Mūsā, and of Ibrāhīm, who fulfilled all that Allah ordered him to do: that no person burdened shall bear the burden of another. And that man can have nothing but what he does, good or bad. And that his deeds will be seen. Then

he will be recompensed with a full and best recompense.' (al-Najm 53:36-41) Admission to Paradise is accordingly contingent upon one's success in the test and one's effort and striving. It leaves no doubt whatever that there may be a way other than that of action for winning Paradise; there is not.

The Qur'ān repeatedly affirms that Paradise is the reward for one's actions, especially of the pious ones. It is for those who embrace faith and do good deeds. Man is exhorted to race towards Paradise. It should be the driving force and everyone should try to excel others. This message permeates the Qur'ān. One thus realizes that wishful thinking, attending lectures, joining the company of the righteous, or the favour done by any spiritual authority cannot take one to Paradise. Without one's own intention and action to that end, one cannot enter Paradise.

Nothing else will serve the purpose

It is an error to think that one can attain self-development without any effort or action. Mere study of books, or joining of study circles cannot substitute for one's own effort, nor can listening to moving speeches or participating in a training programme. The same holds for the ministrations of some spiritual master – his favours cannot rescue one unless one is committed and takes appropriate actions. The spiritual master cannot get anything for another than himself. Were Paradise attainable without one's own intention and action, the entire argument of test and trial would be meaningless. If the individual does not make up his own mind or take any action for his self-development, then even the Prophet's company and teachings cannot bring success for him. He will

still persist in error if he himself does not want to change. The Messengers were not granted such authority over others. The Qur'ān makes it plain: 'O Messenger! You cannot guide him whom you like.' (al-Qaṣaṣ 28:56) The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) was not granted any such authority. Nor was he entrusted with the job of forcing people, without their consent, to the way of guidance. People tainted with unbelief and hypocrisy joined the Prophet's sittings and left with the same impurities: 'They visit with unbelief and returned in the same condition.' (al-Mā'idah 5:61)

Satan's authority

If one is not inclined towards evil, Satan cannot force him to commit evil. Let us accept that Satan constantly accompanies man; he is so to speak, in man's bloodstream. He lies in ambush for man in unexpected places, constantly on the prowl. Yet he cannot compel man into doing evil. He is not granted any such authority. He cannot supersede man's authority over his action. Rather, on the Day of Judgement, he will declare: 'I had no authority over you except that I called you and you responded to me. So blame me not, but blame yourselves.' (Ibrāhīm 14:22).

Allah's help and support

Man cannot do anything without Allah's help and support. However, we must understand that divine help can rescue man only when he displays commitment and does good deeds, on his

way to Paradise. The Qur'ān declares this truth unequivocally, as is evident from the following passages: 'Allah guides to Himself whoever turns to Him.' (al-Shūrā 42:13). 'And whoever repents and does good deeds; then verily, he repents towards Allah with true repentance.' (al-Furqān 25:71); 'And verily I am indeed forgiving to him who repents, believes and does good deeds, and then remains constant in doing them.' (Tā Hā 20:82); 'Remember Me, I will remember you.' (al-Baqarah 2:152); 'Fulfill your covenant with Me, I will fulfill My covenant with you.' (al-Baqarah 2:40); 'If you are grateful, I will grant you more.' (Ibrāhīm 14:7)

If the person has the commitment and good deeds to his credit, he is promised glad tidings. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) pointed out that as one performs his obligations, it pleases Allah. When he does such deeds which are not obligatory yet are pleasing to Him, his sight, hearing and limbs act in accordance with Allah's will. Man is obliged to perform his religious duties. If he fails to do so, he cannot get what he is promised.

In another *ḥadīth* he says: 'Whoever approaches Allah a little, He advances towards him. Whoever walks to Allah, He hastens towards him.' (Muslim) This indicates Allah's immense mercy for man's self-development and guiding him to Paradise. Nonetheless, His mercy is reserved for him who approaches Him and takes some steps in this direction. As to him who is indifferent and careless, and fails to take any action, he cannot obviously draw upon His abundant mercy. The condition is that one should have the commitment and make the effort. Allah has promised to give generously.

Intention suffices

Let the misunderstanding be removed altogether that one can attain anything without intention and action. Let it also be realized that Allah does not look for perfection in man's actions. Man is not obliged to gain success in his efforts. For man does not exercise any such authority. He is expected only to strive to the extent it is possible for him. All reward is promised for his striving: 'And whoever desires the Hereafter and strives for it, with the necessary efforts due for it, while he is a believer, then such are the ones whose striving shall be favoured.' (al-Isrā' 17:19)

Contained in the above passage are many Qur'ānic teachings. It strikes at the root of the obstructions in the way of self-development. For a person is, at times, overcome by despondency that his efforts will not be accepted by Allah or that he falls too far short of the expected standards. At other times, he feels that his action is devoid of the requisite state of the heart. His prayer lacks concentration and attention; he does not cry while praying. Sometimes he is distraught over the absence of the desired results. Notwithstanding his offering prayers, he cannot give up obscene and forbidden things. He fasts yet is unable to attain piety. He is full of despair over his inability to attain success. Despite his best efforts for making the call, striving and sacrifices in the cause, his call is not welcomed by people. Faith is no longer ascendant and the Islamic state is not in place. He is demoralized further by weaknesses in his resolve. Notwithstanding all efforts for self-control he is filled with despair and despondency. However, we must remember well that none of the failings and

imperfections mentioned is a necessary condition for one's exclusion from Paradise. This realization can help one overcome despair, and save him from such despondency that he may give up his resolve and effort for self-development.

Intention

We have spoken frequently of intention in this context. It features also in the Qur'ān. One has full control over one's intention. It is one of the prerequisites for self-development, and is its basic ground and strength. However, we must make it clear that intention is not to be confused with wishing. This is a very common misperception. People are found saying: 'I do want to get up at *Fajr* time to offer the prayers but I just cannot get up.' This wishing to get up is not synonymous with the intention to get up. Think if one has to catch a plane in the early hours or has an important appointment that promises one some good – one is sure to get up early. One will make every effort to get up in time. This is an illustration of how we execute our intention for an ordinary commitment. The same care and attention should be exercised in regard to all the requisites of faith and self-development.

One's intention takes into account the value and importance of what is sought. One's level of devotion to that thing is also a deciding factor. Therefore it is a conscious step, reflecting one's resolve. In verse 20 of *al-Shūrā* the Qur'ān employs the term 'intention' in this sense, when it speaks of someone's intention for seeking Allah's pleasure or reward in the Hereafter.

The person may weaken in his intention. His resolve may be broken altogether; or he may work contrary to what he originally intended, or just forget. Nevertheless, on the whole, the first step in the pursuit of Allah's pleasure, the Hereafter, Paradise and self-development, is one's intention. It is needed for everything that one needs to do in the cause of faith and self-development. After regret for any failure and conscious return, the intention may be instantly taken up again. In the absence of intention even a major, sustained effort to train oneself may not be fruitful. Conversely, if one has the intention, a little guidance may yield rich dividends. Even if there is no proper training, sermon, exhortation and study, intention by itself serves as a most effective teacher and guardian. For it guides one to the straight way, helps one pursue it steadily and dissuades one from taking a false path.

Single-minded devotion is needed for intention. We cannot serve God and Mammon at the same time. We cannot set our eyes on both the worlds simultaneously. One who sails on two boats can never reach his destination. A weak intention will result only in failure and demoralization. We may gain firmness of intention, if we are persuaded of the immense value of the objective – Allah, Paradise – and self-development as the means for it. The more committed we are to this goal, the firmer our intention will be. Obviously, our commitment will be strong in proportion to our devotion to Allah and Paradise. It is therefore repeatedly emphasized that we should love Allah and His Messenger and struggle in His cause more than any other thing. This explains also the vivid portrayal of the bounties of Paradise in the Qur'ān. They are projected as a living reality in order to inspire us.

Let us reiterate the point that the development and growth of one's deeds and character can be attained only gradually. It is a time-consuming process. One can instantly make up one's mind to do it. However, by the same token, one can break one's intention in no time as well. This should not, however, be an excuse to become demoralized. For one can easily and instantly resume one's intention.

Striving

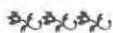
If the individual has the intention, it inevitably results in his taking some action. If he cannot achieve much, he should, at least, show his readiness to move forward, his keen desire and his turning his attention to his goal. Even if he seems unable to proceed further, he should, at least, have a keen desire to do so. His eyes should be firmly fixed on the goal and he should be fired by the intense desire to approach his goal. And whenever it is possible and feasible, he should take practical steps and move forward. The Qur'ān provides a graphic picture of man's striving in the following passages: 'I have turned my face towards Him, Who has created the heavens and the earth.' (al-An'ām 6:79); 'My Prayer, my sacrifice, my living, and my dying are for Allah, the Lord of the worlds.' (al-An'ām 6:162); 'When his Lord said to him, "Submit", he said, "I have submitted myself to the Lord of the universe".' (al-Baqarah 2:131); 'Hasten earnestly to the remembrance of Allah and leave off business.' (al-Jumu'ah 62:9)

Remember that one's efforts greatly facilitate the attainment of the goal. A spiritual figure told someone in a dream to put into his mouth whatever he sees first on waking up. As the man

set out, the first thing he saw was a mountain. He gave up, thinking that a mountain could not be put into the mouth. The spiritual figure appeared again and asked him to proceed nonetheless. The man climbed the mountain and at the top he came across a piece of a sweet, and put that in his mouth. Everything that we regard as demanding and strenuous regarding religious duties and the requisites of self-development, may be likened to the mountain in this parable.

The same lesson may be drawn from the incident recounted by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) about someone who had killed ninety-nine people. He approached a pious person to ask him whether there was a way to repent. The pious person declared that there was no way whatever. In a fit of anger the man killed that pious person as well. Then he approached a scholar and put the same question to him. The scholar affirmed that the man could still repent, but told him that he should leave that town and move to another town inhabited by pious persons. The man duly repented and started moving towards the other town. He died on the way. This led to an argument between the angels of mercy and punishment, both of whom claimed him. The matter was resolved by another angel, who suggested that the distance be measured to determine whether he was closer to the town of pious people, in which case the angel of mercy could take him, or the opposite, in which case the angel of punishment had his claim on him. He was found to have been closer to the town of the pious people, and was accordingly taken by the angel of mercy. A whole volume could be written on the lessons implicit in this story. Yet its message is loud and clear: if one's intention is sincere and strong and he makes the effort to do something, he is helped by Allah's mercy, enabling him to reach his destination.

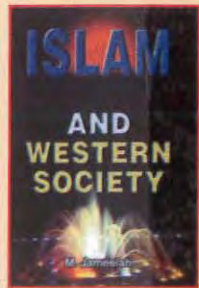
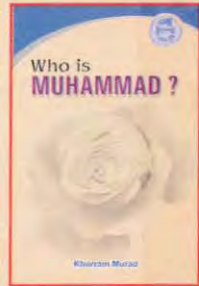
Final word: We must make it plain that self-development is possible only through one's intention and effort. If we have the commitment, every piece of training will prove fruitful, as we will be reinforced by Allah's mercy. But if an individual does not provide for his self-development, no one can provide it for him. We should therefore resolve to proceed further on the way. Sincere resolve constitutes the first and also the last step.



Khurram Murad **(1932-1996)**

The Author of this book, Former Director, General of the Islamic Foundation, UK (1978-86), he studied civil engineering at the Universities of Karachi and Minnesota, USA, and worked as a leading consulting engineer at Karachi, Dhaka, Tehran and Riyadh.

He was actively involved in the Islamic movement since 1948. He was President, Islami Jamiat Talaba, Pakistan (1951-52); a member of the Central Executive, Jama'at Islami, Pakistan (1963-96) and Amir of its Dhaka(1963-71) and Lahore (1987-89) branches. He became Na'ib Amir of Jama'at Islami, Pakistan in 1988 and retained the position till his death in December 1996. In July 1991, he became editor of the monthly journal, Tarjuman-ul-Quran and until his death strove to make it a platform for reflections on the thought and dynamics of the Islamic movement.



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