



Islam, Iman, Ihsan: Climbing the Spiritual Mountain

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Abstract

This paper presents the three levels of religious practice in Islam as expressed in the famous ḥadith of Gabriel: 1) *Islām* (outward submission to the will of Allah), 2) *Īmān* (faith), and 3) *Iḥsān* (spiritual excellence). Texts from the Qur’an, Sunnah, and classical scholarly works are cited to distinguish these three levels of religion (*dīn*) from each other. The purpose of this knowledge is to lay out the big picture before the worshipper, the highest religious goals in Islam, what the author refers to as the “spiritual mountain.” This includes a broad awareness of the Islamic disciplines: *Qur’an*, *Tafsīr*, *Tajwīd*, *Ḥadith*, *Sīrah*, *‘Aqīdah*, *Sharī‘ah*, *Fiqh*, and purification of the soul or spirituality. The prophetic method of self-improvement and habit formation will lastly be presented as the primary means to achieve stronger faith and spiritual excellence.

Introduction

Human beings were created with an internal drive to seek out purpose and to live for something greater than themselves. Many people have the misfortune of living for the sake of something in the world, devoting their lives to the transient, worshipping created objects instead of the Creator. They do not acknowledge where they came from, why they are here, and where they will end up after their inevitable death. Lost and without guidance, they stumble through life until the Reality confronts them.

But many of them want direction in their lives and conviction in the knowledge of the Hereafter. They only need to be shown the path, the universal and primordial religion revealed to the Prophets and Messengers, *Islam*, peaceful surrender to the Will of the Creator.

In Islam, we have a clear conception of why we were created, what constitutes righteous living, and what happens after death. Moreover, Islam is not simply a set of rules and beliefs, but also contains the seeds of constant self-improvement. We

have been taught how to grow closer and closer to the Creator, to become excellent worshippers and moral leaders, to the point that our individual will and the eternal Will of the Creator become perfectly aligned. This is known to us as the station of *Iḥsān*, religious excellence, the very top of the spiritual mountain.

The three levels of our religion were revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ in the famous hadith about his encounter with the Angel Gabriel, upon him be peace. Gabriel came to the Prophet ﷺ while he was surrounded by his companions and he said, “O Muḥammad, tell me about Islam.” The Prophet ﷺ said:

Islam is to testify there is no true god but Allah and Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allah, to establish prayer, to give charity, to fast the month of Ramadan, and to perform the Hajj pilgrimage to the House if one can find a way.

Gabriel said, “You have spoken truthfully,” and then he said, “Tell me about faith.” The Prophet ﷺ said:

Faith is to believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, the Last Day, and to believe in the Divine Decree (*al-qadr*), both its good and its evil.

Gabriel said, “You have spoken truthfully, so tell me about excellence.” The Prophet ﷺ said:

Excellence is to worship Allah as if you see Him, for though you do not see Him, He surely sees you.¹

This narration lays out the journey before us, from religious infancy to spiritual maturity: surrender, faith, and excellence. When each of these terms is used in isolation, they refer to the totality of faith. When they are contrasted, they each have a specific meaning. Imām Ibn Taymiyyah explains the hadith, writing:

The hadith of Gabriel clarifies that Islam is built upon five pillars, which is Islam itself. It is not based upon anything other than its foundation. Rather, the Prophet ﷺ designated three degrees of the

¹ Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* ([Bayrūt]: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyah, 1955), 1:36 #8, *kitāb al-Imān bab ma’rifah al-Imān wal-Islām wal-Qadr wa ‘alamat al-sa’ah*.

religion. The pinnacle is excellence (*al-iḥsān*), its middle is faith (*al-īmān*), and its base is Islam. Thus, every good-doer (*muḥsin*) is a believer and every believer is Muslim, but not every believer is a good-doer and not every Muslim is a believer.²

As believers, our ultimate goal should be to practice much more than the basics. Rather, we should aspire to climb the figurative mountain, to graduate from the lowest levels to the highest levels of faith, in pursuit of the loftiest station in Paradise, *Jannat al-Firdaws*.

Yet the journey to the Hereafter must always begin at the beginning. None of us exit the womb praying five times a day or knowing our creed. We all have to take that first step. Every Muslim must start with the basics and move forward into faith. Allah has likened faith development to the development of a seed that becomes a large tree producing fruit.

Allah said:

Have you not seen how Allah strikes the parable of a good word as a good tree, its roots firmly planted and its branches reaching to the sky? It produces its fruit at all times, by the permission of its Lord. Allah strikes parables for people, that perhaps they will reflect.³

When we first declare our testimony of faith (*shahādah*), knowing its meaning and truly believing in it, the seed of faith is planted in our hearts. Thus begins our trek along the straight path, advancing forward as if climbing a mountain upon which we know is an eternal treasure and an everlasting home. As Abū Sulaymān رحمه الله said, “Blessed is the one who takes a single step desiring nothing but Allah Almighty.”⁴

² Ibn Taymīyah, *Al-Īmān li-Ibn Taymīyah* (‘Ammān: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1996), 1:8; see also an alternative translation in *Book of Faith: Kitāb al-Imān* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2009), 20.

³ Sūrat Ibrāhīm 14:24-25.

⁴ Ibn Qudāmah, *Mukhtaṣar Minhāj al-Qāṣidīn* (Dimashq: Maktabat Dār al-Bayān, 1978), 1:365.

Islam: Following the basics

The very first priority for a new Muslim, or a newly awakened Muslim, is to learn the basic practices of Islam—its five pillars—starting most importantly with understanding the meaning of the declaration of faith (“There is no God but Allah, and Muḥammad is His Messenger”) and the six articles of faith. After this theological foundation is established, it is essential to begin performing the daily prayers and the rest of the pillars of Islam as applicable. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said:

Islam is built upon five: to worship Allah and to disbelieve in what is worshipped besides him, to establish prayer, to give charity, to perform Hajj pilgrimage to the house, and to fast the month of Ramadan.⁵

Everything else in Islam is built upon the five pillars. No Muslim can advance spiritually unless they adhere to these basic religious practices. Imām Ibn Rajab comments on this tradition, writing:

The purpose is to strike a parable of Islam as a building supported on these five pillars. The building cannot stand without them, while the remaining attributes of Islam perfect the building. If any of the secondary attributes are missing, the house will be lacking although it is standing. It will not fall by lacking those attributes, in contrast to these five pillars.⁶

The parable of the five pillars is a concrete way for us to understand priorities in an Islamic framework. The scholars have divided all outward actions into five categories: obligatory (*farḍ* or *wājib*), recommended (*mustaḥabb* or *mandūb*), permissible (*ḥalāl* or *mubāḥ*), discouraged (*makrūh*), and forbidden (*ḥarām*). It makes sense that our first order of business is to practice the obligations and avoid the prohibitions (which is like setting the foundation of the house), then move on to

⁵ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 1:11 #8.

⁶ Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi’ al-‘Ulūm wal-Ḥikam* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 1:145; see also an alternative translation in *The Compendium of Knowledge and Wisdom* (London: Turath Publishing, 2007), 61.

practicing recommended acts and avoiding discouraged acts, which is like decorating the house or adding fixtures.

Adhering to the pillars of Islam does not necessarily make one a believer in good standing with Allah. Islam provides us guidance on both outward and inward deeds, rituals and spirituality. When some nomad Arabs came to the Prophet ﷺ, they declared themselves to be believers, but Allah knew that their hearts had not yet internalized the faith.

Allah said:

The bedouins say, ‘We have faith.’ Say, ‘You do not have faith, but rather say we have surrendered in Islam,’ for faith has not entered your hearts. If you obey Allah and His Messenger, He will not diminish anything from your deeds. Verily, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.⁷

On one occasion, the Prophet ﷺ was distributing charity and Sa‘d ibn Abī Waqqāṣ said to him, “O Messenger of Allah, give it to this man, for he is a believer.” The Prophet said, “Or merely a Muslim.” Sa‘d said it three times and the Prophet repeated it three times, “Or merely a Muslim.”⁸ The Prophet ﷺ also addressed a group of Muslims, saying:

O you who have faith with their tongues but faith has not entered their hearts! Do not backbite the Muslims or seek out their faults. Whoever seeks their faults, Allah will seek his faults. And if Allah seeks his faults, He will expose him even in the privacy of his house.⁹

As clarified in these traditions and many others, the outward components of Islam are only the beginning of our journey to the Hereafter. Not only must our limbs submit to the will of the Creator; our hearts must submit to Him as well. A man once asked, “O Messenger of Allah, what is Islam?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “That

⁷ Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt 49:14.

⁸ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:132 #150, *kitab al-Iman bab ta'alluf qalbi man yakhafu 'ala imanihi*.

⁹ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Ṣaydā, Lubnān: al-Maktabah al-Aṣrīyah, 1980), 4:270 #4880, *kitab al-Adab bab fi al-ghaybah*; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

you surrender your heart to Allah and that Muslims are safe from your tongue and hand.”¹⁰

The greatest Muslims in our history were not content with limiting their spiritual potential to outward deeds. In fact, the first of the righteous Caliphs was distinguished not by his external worship, but because of something inside him. According to Bakr ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Muzanī, “Abū Bakr, may Allah be pleased with him, was not better than people because of an abundance of fasting and prayer. Rather, he was only favored over them because of something that settled in his heart.”¹¹

It is the true and actualized faith, internalized and fully absorbed, that propels a Muslim to the peak of righteousness in this world and the highest parts of Paradise in the Hereafter.

Faith (*Īmān*): Actualizing our Islam

Having understood what Islam requires of us in matters of ritual worship, our next step is to understand faith as it was revealed to us in the Qur’an and Sunnah and as it was understood by our righteous predecessors. Faith is based upon belief in the six articles of Faith, but this is not blind belief, as many people incorrectly assume. Readers may need to set aside any preconceived notions that the English word ‘faith’ might imply. Rather, faith in Islam is an *action*. As Allah said, “Give glad tidings to those who have faith and do righteous deeds, that they will have gardens beneath which rivers flow.”¹² The phrase “those who have faith and do righteous deeds” occurs over and over throughout the Qur’an. Faith is inseparable from the deeds of the heart and the deeds of the body, as the Prophet ﷺ said, “Allah does

¹⁰ Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 28:251 #17027; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnā’ūṭ in the commentary.

¹¹ al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Nawādir al-Uṣūl fī Ma’rifat Aḥādīth al-Rasūl* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Jīl, 1992), 1:148-149..

¹² Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:25.

not look at your appearance or wealth, but rather he looks at your hearts and actions.”¹³

For this reason, the scholars defined *iman* in terms of both inward and outward action. Ibn Taymiyyah explains the definition for us, “It is understood that *īmān* is [actually] affirmation and not simply belief (*al-taṣdīq*). Affirmation includes both the heart's statement, which is belief, and the heart's action, which is compliance.”

¹⁴ The statement of the heart means to really believe in what you profess with your tongue, and the actions of the heart are the internal mechanisms of worship, such as one's ultimate fear, love, hope, reliance, and penitence. In another place, Ibn Taymiyyah writes that faith “is not merely belief in His existence and His attributes, as is shared by the believer and unbeliever alike.”¹⁵ Even Satan believes in Allah's existence, but that does not make him a believer. It was only after he arrogantly disobeyed his Creator that “he became one of the unbelievers.”¹⁶ It was not the sin per se that made him an unbeliever, as we are all sinners, but rather it was his stubborn and remorseless refusal to repent and obey the commands of his Lord.

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sa’dī gives us an even more detailed definition of faith:

As for the definition of faith and its explanation, it is resolute belief and total acknowledgment of everything Allah and His Messenger commanded to have faith in, complying both outwardly and inwardly. It is belief in the heart and its acceptance, including actions of the heart and actions of the body... For this reason, the Imams among the righteous predecessors would say: Faith is a statement of the heart and the tongue, and the actions of the heart, the tongue, and the limbs.¹⁷

¹³ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:1986 #2564.

¹⁴ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū’ al-Fatāwā* (al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah: Majma’ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibā’at al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, 1995), 7:638.

¹⁵ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū’ al-Fatāwā*, 7:558.

¹⁶ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:34.

¹⁷ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Nāṣir al-Sa’dī, *Al-Tawḍīḥ wal-Bayān li-Shajarat al-Īmān* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2002), 1:41-42.

Hence, faith is fulfilled through internal and external actions, in our hearts and minds as well as our limbs. From this perspective, faith is not a static category, but rather the strength of one's faith fluctuates according to the nature of our deeds. As Allah said, "When a *sūrah* is revealed, those among them say, 'Which of you had his faith increased by this?' As for those who believe, it increased their faith and they rejoice in it."¹⁸ When new verses of the Qur'an were revealed, the companions of the Prophet ﷺ would memorize them, contemplate over them, and put them into action. The book of Allah would increase their faith.

As such, the parable of faith is that of a piece of clothing, which one wears or takes off at any given time. The Prophet ﷺ said, "Verily, the faith of one of you will wear out within him, just as a shirt becomes worn out, so ask Allah to renew faith in your hearts."¹⁹ And 'Abdullāh ibn Rawāḥah رضي الله عنه said, "The parable of faith is that of a shirt. You may not be wearing it and then you put it on, or you may be wearing it and then you take it off."²⁰ Faith must be constantly renewed by actions such as prayer, fasting, seeking Islamic knowledge, and remembrance. This is why Mu'ādh ibn Jabal رضي الله عنه used to say to his companions, "Come and sit with us. We will have faith for a while."²¹ That is, they would perform the actions of faith together as a means to increase their faith.

From another perspective, there are aspects of faith that do not change, because Allah Himself is Eternal and Unchanging. Most importantly, Allah is One and there is no object worthy of worship except for Him. Ibn Abī al-'Izz, a commentator on the popular classical creed of Imām al-Taḥāwī, defines monotheism (*al-tawhīd*) in Islam:

Monotheism is the beginning and end of the matter, meaning the oneness of divinity. Monotheism has three components. First, knowledge of the divine attributes. Second, the oneness of Lordship and clarity that Allah alone has created all things. Third, the oneness

¹⁸ Sūrat al-Tawbah 9:124.

¹⁹ al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, *Al-Mustadrak 'alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 1990), 1:45 #5; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* ([Dimashq]: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1969), 1:330 #1590.

²⁰ Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī bi-Sharḥ al-Bukhārī* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1959), 12:61.

²¹ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:10.

of divinity, that Allah, Glorified and Exalted, deserves to be worshipped alone, without any partners.²²

In other words, there are three aspects to monotheism: the Oneness of Names and Attributes (*tawḥīd al-asmā' wa-al-sifāt*), the Oneness of Lordship (*tawḥīd al-rubūbiyyah*), and the Oneness of Divinity (*tawḥīd al-ilāhiyyah*). These are not mutually exclusive categories; they overlap. To affirm the name *Allah* (“the God”) is to affirm His Divinity. To affirm the name *al-Khāliq* (“the Creator”) is to affirm His Lordship, and so on. From the all-encompassing principle of monotheism, the scholars have delineated the most important beliefs in the discipline known as *‘Aqīdah*, creedal theology.

As aspiring believers, then, we come to know Allah by studying His Names and Attributes as they are revealed in the Qur’an. In a particularly meaningful passage, Allah reveals several of His Names to us:

He is Allah, besides whom there is no God, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Pure, the Faithful, the Overseer, the Almighty, the Compeller, the Superior. Glory be to Allah above what they associate with Him.

He is Allah, the Creator, the Inventor, the Fashioner; unto Him belong the Best Names. Whatever is in the heavens and on the earth glorifies Him, for He is the Almighty, the Wise.²³

And the Prophet ﷺ said, “Allah has ninety-nine names and whoever preserves them will enter Paradise.”²⁴ By these Names, we recognize our Creator and worship Him correctly. Shaykh al-Sa’dī comments on this tradition, writing, “Whoever memorizes them, understands their meanings, believes in them, and worships Allah by them, he (or she) will enter Paradise.”²⁵ Studying these Names, learning them by heart, and observing their manifestations in the world is an essential method of increasing our faith. Great scholars, like Imām al-Ghazālī,

²² al-Ṭaḥāwī, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, and ‘Alī ibn ‘Alī Ibn Abī al-‘Izz, *Sharḥ Al-‘Aqīdah al-Ṭaḥāwīyah* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1997), 1:24.

²³ Sūrat al-Ḥashr 59:23-24.

²⁴ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9:118 #7392; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2062 #2677.

²⁵ al-Sa’dī, *Al-Tawḍīḥ wal-Bayān li-Shajarat al-Īmān*, 1:71-72.

would produce treatises on the Names of Allah, explaining not only their meanings but also how to act upon them.²⁶

Our faith in the Creator must include the means by which He has communicated His will to us: faith in the Messengers and their Books. Prophet Muḥammad صلى الله عليه وسلم is the last in a long line of Prophets, including well-known figures such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, peace be upon them all. However, as the Books of earlier Prophets were obfuscated, lost to history, or changed by their latter followers, Prophet Muḥammad صلى الله عليه وسلم is distinguished among them as the bearer of the Noble Qur'an, the literal words of Allah.

The importance of the Qur'an in Islam cannot be overstated. It is the direct connection between the worshipper and the Creator, a divine discourse speaking to you, the reader, from the Lord of the universe. It is a prophetic miracle in its substantive content, which laid the foundation for a great world civilization. It is also a linguistic miracle in that the very method of reciting the Qur'an, known as *al-tajwīd*, has the ability to stir hearts and increase faith; the miracle of the Qur'an can be *experienced* by all who study it. Even if believers do not yet have the knowledge to experience the Qur'an, they should know that its miraculous nature is an article of faith for a very good reason.

Imām al-Taḥāwī رحمه الله writes in his famous creed:

The Qur'an is the word of Allah. It originated from Him, without ascribing a modality to its speech. It was revealed to His Messenger by divine inspiration. The believers affirm all of that as the truth. They have conviction that it is the word of Allah Almighty in reality, not created like the word of creatures.²⁷

New, or newly awakened, Muslims who do not know the Qur'anic language have yet to experience the miracle, but this is also how the companions of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم learned Islam. First, they learned faith, then they learned the Qur'an. Jundub

²⁶ See for example Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī, *Al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fī Sharḥ Asmā' Allah al-Ḥusnā* (Qubruş: al-Jaffān wal-Jābī, 1987); translated into English as *Al-Ghazali on the Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1999).

²⁷ al-Taḥāwī and Ibn Abī al-'Izz, *Sharḥ Al-'Aqīdah al-Taḥāwīyah*, 1:172.

ibn ‘Abdullah رضي الله عنه said, “We learned faith before we learned the Qur’an, then we learned the Qur’an and it strengthened our faith.”²⁸ One must first connect their heart to the Creator, then connect their heart to His words.

Reciting the Qur’an, in both its outward form (*al-tajwīd*) and inward meanings (*al-tafsīr*), is how a believer can take his or her faith to the next level, as Allah said, “Do they not ponder over the Qur’an? If it had come from another besides Allah, they would have found many contradictions in it.”²⁹ The beauty of its enlightening words, the wisdom of its rulings, the natural simplicity of its theology, everything about the Qur’an provides a spiritual experience like no other.

We were not present when the sea was parted for Moses عليه السلام, nor when the dead were raised for Jesus عليه السلام, but each one of us can study the Qur’an and experience this miracle firsthand. As such, the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said, “There were none among the prophets but that he was given unique signs to instill faith in humanity. Verily, I have been given the revelation that Allah has inspired in me, so I hope to have the most followers on the Day of Resurrection.”³⁰ The miracle of the Qur’an is timeless and accessible, unlike the miracles of all other Prophets.

Furthermore, Allah challenges all of creation to bring forth a book that matches the Qur’an. Allah said, “If you are in doubt about what We have revealed to Our servant, produce one *sūrah* like it and call upon your witnesses besides Allah if you are truthful.”³¹ But the fact is that no one can produce anything like the Qur’an. No one else can match its style, its influence on history and civilization, its settling in the hearts of millions of believers, who strive to memorize its every utterance.

Complementing the miracle of the Qur’an is the authentic prophetic tradition, the Sunnah, the sayings and deeds of Prophet Muḥammad صلى الله عليه وسلم. Allah said, “It is He who has sent a Messenger to the unlettered from among themselves, reciting to

²⁸ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Bayrūt: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1975), 1:23 #61; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by al-Albānī in the commentary.

²⁹ Sūrat al-Nisā’ 4:82.

³⁰ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 6:182 #4981,

³¹ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:23.

them His verses, purifying them, and teaching them the Book and the Wisdom.”³² According to the great exegete among the *tābi‘īn*, Qatādah ibn Di‘āmah, the “Wisdom” in this verse, and others like it, means the prophetic tradition, the Sunnah.³³ The Sunnah is contained in rigorously preserved oral traditions (*ḥadīth* or plural *aḥādīth*).³⁴ Believers learn the practical application of the Qur’an, such as the details of prayer, everyday habits, and morality from the Sunnah, as put by the wife of the Prophet, ‘Āishah, “Have you not read the Qur’an? The character of the Prophet of Allah was the Qur’an.”³⁵

The two source-texts of divine revelation, the Qur’an and Sunnah, together make up the *Sharī‘ah*, the religious path. The term *Sharī‘ah* has been misunderstood, confused, and abused by anti-Islam media and even by some Muslims. As with all technical terminology, we need to precisely define what we mean by the word *Sharī‘ah* from its usage in Islam’s source-texts. Allah said, “Thus We have placed you upon an ordained path (*sharī‘ah*), so follow it and do not follow the whims of those without knowledge.”³⁶ Al-Ṭabarī explained the linguistic meaning of *Sharī‘ah* in this verse as a way (*ṭarīqah*), a tradition (*sunnah*), and a method (*minhāj*).³⁷ The technical definition of the term by later scholars is comprehensive, consisting of three branches inclusive of the entire religion: rules (*āḥkām*), beliefs (*‘aqāid*), and morals (*akhlāq*).³⁸ Moreover, the moral foundations of the *Sharī‘ah* are the virtues and values of mercy (*raḥmah*), integrity (*istiqāmah*), God-consciousness (*taqwā*), gratitude (*shukr*), patience (*ṣabr*), honesty (*ṣidq*), justice (*‘adl*), temperance (*‘iffah*), fidelity (*wafā’*), and tolerance (*samāḥah*).³⁹ The religion in its fullest sense is contrasted in the verse with whims and base desires (*ahwā’*). That is, true faith is about conforming our personal desires to the

³² Sūrat al-Jumu‘ah 62:2.

³³ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’an* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2000), 23:373.

³⁴ For more information on the authentication of Hadith, see Muntasir Zaman, “Can We Trust Hadith Literature? Understanding the Processes of Transmission and Preservation.” *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*. October 30, 2018.

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/muntasir-zaman/can-we-trust-hadith-literature-understanding-the-process-of-transmission-and-preservation>

³⁵ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:512 #746.

³⁶ Sūrat al-Jāthiyah 45:18.

³⁷ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’an*, 22:70 verse 45:18.

³⁸ *Al-Mawsū‘at al-Fiqhīyah* (al-Kuwayt: Dawlat al-Kuwayt, Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-al-Shu‘ūn al-Islāmīyah, 1986), 1:16.

³⁹ *Ma‘lamat Zāyid lil-Qawā‘id al-Fiqhīyah wa Uṣūlīyah* (Abu Dhabi: Zayed Charitable Foundation, 2013), 3:49.

Sharī‘ah, not changing the *Sharī‘ah* to fit our personal desires, as the Prophet ﷺ said, “None of you has true faith until his desires comply with what I have brought.”⁴⁰ With this broader picture in mind, a believer is ready to study the *Sharī‘ah* with the hope of being blessed by its guidance.

However, it is encouraged for believers to study the *Sharī‘ah*, Islam’s source-texts, within the theoretical framework of one of the interpretive schools established by the four Imāms: Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik, Al-Shāfi‘ī, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. The early scholar Ibn Wahb would say, “Were it not for Mālik and Al-Layth (two Imāms of *fiqh*), I would have been ruined. I used to think that everything narrated about the Prophet ﷺ should be acted upon.”⁴¹ This concern still holds true today, since many of the anti-Islam arguments that permeate the internet are nothing more than citing Qur’anic verses and hadith out of context. And since *fiqh* is essential for interpreting hadith, many scholars recommended studying *fiqh* according to one of the orthodox schools, while others maintain that one does not need to limit oneself to one school as long as their practice of the Sunnah draws upon the inherited guidance of *fiqh*.

The authentic hadith and the Sunnah (plural *Sunan*) they express also fit into a broader narrative known as the *Sīrah*, the prophetic biography. Believers keen to increase their faith ought to study the Prophet’s ﷺ biography, the social context within which he preached the message of One God, the hardships he and his followers overcame, and the magnanimity they showed to their enemies. Even many non-Muslims who investigate the life of the Prophet ﷺ with curiosity and fairness cannot help but be amazed by his faith.

Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian leader best-known for his successful nonviolent campaign to achieve independence from British imperial rule, was an admirer of Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. Gandhi wrote in one of his letters:

I wanted to know the best of the life of one who holds today an undisputed sway over the hearts of millions of mankind... I became

⁴⁰ Ibn Abī ‘Āṣim, *Al-Sunnah li-Ibn Abī ‘Āṣim* (Bayrūt: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1980), 1:12 #15; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Nawawī in *Sharḥ al-Arba‘īn al-Nawawīyah* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Rayyān, 2003), 1:135 #41.

⁴¹ al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā’* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006), 7:211.

more than ever convinced that it was not the sword that won a place for Islam in those days in the scheme of life. It was the rigid simplicity, the utter self-effacement of the Prophet, the scrupulous regard for pledges, his intense devotion to his friends and followers, his intrepidity, his fearlessness, his absolute trust in God and in his own mission. These, and not the sword, carried everything before them and surmounted every obstacle. When I closed the second volume (of the Prophet’s biography), I was sorry there was not more for me to read of that great life.⁴²

Indeed, the biography of the Prophet ﷺ is yet another sign for the believers. The classical jurist Ibn Hazm used to say, “If there were no other miracles besides his biography, it would be enough.”⁴³

Another important practice to increase our faith, and this is especially important for those who cannot yet read the Qur’an, is to ponder over the wonders of creation and witness the miracles of the Creator in nature. Allah said:

Verily, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the alternation of night and day are signs for those who understand, who remember Allah standing, sitting, or lying on their sides and reflect deeply upon the creation of the heavens and the earth, saying, ‘Our Lord, You have not created all this without purpose. Glory be to You, so save us from the Hellfire.’⁴⁴

Believers who think about their own existence can only logically conclude that the creation has a Creator, who created it for a wise purpose. When asked to justify belief in God, the early Muslims, like the Qur’an, found evidence in the many signs in creation. Imām al-Shafī’i رحمه الله, for instance, was asked about the existence of the Creator and he replied, “The leaves of a berry bush all have one taste. Worms eat it and produce silk. Bees eat it and produce honey. Goats, camels, and cows eat it and produce droppings and dung. Deer eat it and produce musk.

⁴² Mahatma Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi, India: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1960), 29:133.

<https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhi-literature/mahatma-gandhi-collected-works-volume-29.pdf>

⁴³ Ibn Ḥazm, *Al-Fiṣal fī al-Milal wal-Ahwā’ wal-Niḥal* (Miṣr: Maṭba’at Muḥammad ‘Ali Ṣabīḥ wa Awlādūh, 1928), 2:73.

⁴⁴ Sūrat Āli ‘Imrān 3:190-191.

Yet, all of these come from one thing.”⁴⁵ If one really thinks about this particular natural miracle—that many different creatures eat the same plant but produce different substances useful to humankind—the necessary conclusion is that it was made to be this way.⁴⁶

Once we have established our relationship with our Creator, His Messenger, and His Book, we then need to turn our attention towards how the believers are described in the Qur’an and Sunnah, and act accordingly. Allah said:

Righteousness is not that you turn your faces east or west, rather righteousness is in one who has faith in Allah and the Last Day, the Angels, the Book, and the Prophets, who give out their wealth, despite their love for it, to relatives, the orphans, the needy, the wayfarers, those who ask, and for freeing slaves, who establish prayer, give in charity, and keep the promises they make, the patient in poverty, hardship, and times of danger. Such as these have been truthful and are Godfearing.⁴⁷

These verses and many others describe the believers by various virtues and good deeds, such as praying, giving charity, being patient, and restraining their anger. Speaking on the verses of this type, Shaykh al-Sa’dī writes:

Whoever fulfills these characteristics is a true believer. Included in that are the establishment of obligations, both outwardly and inwardly, and avoidance of what is forbidden and discouraged... These verses are explicit in that faith includes theological beliefs, morals, outward and inward actions. Based on this, it increases by the increases in these characteristics and their actualization, and it decreases when they are decreased.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’an al-‘Azīm*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 1998), 1:106 verse 2:21.

⁴⁶ For more information on this topic, see Justin Parrott, “The Case for Allah’s Existence in the Qur’an and Sunnah.” *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*. February 27, 2017.

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/justin-parrott/the-case-for-Allahs-existence-in-the-Qur’an-and-sunnah>

⁴⁷ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:177.

⁴⁸ al-Sa’dī, *Al-Tawḍīḥ wal-Bayān li-Shajarat al-Īmān*, 1:52.

As proven in many verses and traditions, faith is inseparable from moral character, dignified manners, and good behavior towards others.⁴⁹ The topic of morals (*al-akhlāq*) and manners (*al-ādāb*) greatly concerned the early Muslims, who compiled hundreds of prophetic traditions about it and authored extended treatises on it. The classical scholar Ibn al-Qayyim went so far as to say, “The religion itself is good character, so whoever surpasses you in good character has surpassed you in religion.”⁵⁰ In this statement are the two dimensions of the religion: good behavior towards Allah (including correct theological beliefs, sincere and correct acts of worship), and good behavior to the creation (including giving charity, being kind, and showing mercy). Both of these aspects—the rights of Allah (*huqūq Allah*) and the rights of His servants (*huqūq al-’ibād*)—are intrinsically linked. Whoever is deficient in one aspect will be deficient in the other.

The summation of how our behavior should be towards our fellow human beings and creatures is found in the theological maxim, “The recompense for deeds is of the same type” (*al-jazā’ min jins al-’amal*). Put differently, Allah will treat you how you treat others. In this regard, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Love for people what you love for yourself and you will be a believer. Behave well with your neighbors and you will be a Muslim.”⁵¹ A true believer imagines himself in the shoes of his neighbors; he naturally empathizes with them and shows compassion for them. This is known as the “ethics of reciprocity,” a concept deeply rooted in Islamic texts.⁵²

Ibn al-Qayyim expresses the essence of this principle, writing:

The recompense of a deed resembles its type of good and evil.
Whoever covers the faults of a Muslim, Allah covers his faults.
Whoever eases one in difficulty, Allah will make it easy for him in the

⁴⁹ For more information on this topic, see Justin Parrott, “Can a ‘Good Muslim’ Be a ‘Bad Person’? Aligning Faith and Character.” *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*. July 3, 2019.

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/justin-parrott/can-a-good-muslim-be-a-bad-person-aligning-faith-and-character>

⁵⁰ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Madārij al-Sālikīn Bayna Manāzil Īyāka Na’budu wa Īyāka Nasta’in* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-’Arabī, 1996), 2:294.

⁵¹ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 2:1410 #4217; declared authentic (*ṣahīh*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

⁵² For more information on this topic, see Justin Parrott, “The Golden Rule in Islam: Ethics of Reciprocity in Islamic Traditions.” MRes dissertation for the *University of Wales*. Spring 2018.

https://archive.nyu.edu/bitstream/2451/43458/2/The%20Golden%20Rule%20in%20Islam_FINAL.pdf

world and the Hereafter. Whoever relieves a believer of hardship in the world, Allah will relieve his hardship on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever cancels a sale someone later regretted, Allah will cancel his slips on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever seeks out the faults of his brother, Allah will seek out his faults. Whoever harms a Muslim, Allah will harm him. Whoever is harsh, Allah is harsh with him. Whoever abandons a Muslim in a situation in which he needs support, Allah will abandon him in a situation in which he needs support. Whoever is tolerant, Allah is tolerant with him. The Most Merciful will show mercy to the merciful. Indeed, Allah only has mercy on His merciful servants. Whoever spends in charity, He will spend on him. Whoever is miserly, He will withhold from him. Whoever forgoes one of his rights, Allah will forgo one of His rights over him. Whoever overlooks the mistakes of people, Allah will overlook his mistakes. Whoever is keen to find fault, Allah is keen to find fault in him. This is the law of Allah, His decree, and His revelation. His reward and punishment are entirely based upon this principle.⁵³

Shaykh al-Sa‘dī concurs, writing, “The recompense is commensurate with the deeds. As one is good to the servants of Allah and approaches them with benevolence—as much as one can—Allah will be good to him with all types of good.”⁵⁴

To recap, faith is defined as both conviction and action. It increases or decreases depending on our deeds. Believers can increase their faith by studying the Qur’an, studying the Sunnah, reading the biography of the Prophet ﷺ, and reflecting deeply on the miracles of nature. Believers must also try to live up to the description of the believers in the Qur’an and Sunnah, upholding justice, showing compassion, and generally behaving with the same moral standard that they expect from other believers.

⁵³ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *I‘lām al-Muwaqqi‘īn ‘an Rabb al-‘ālamīn* (Bayrut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1991), 1:150.

⁵⁴ al-Sa‘dī, *Al-Tawḍīḥ wal-Bayān li-Shajarat al-Īmān*, 1:78-79.

The next level of faith, *Iḥsān*, involves achieving excellence in all characteristics of the faith: worshipping Allah sincerely and correctly, seeking knowledge, purifying the heart from spiritual diseases, and treating others how we like to be treated.

Excellence (*Iḥsān*): Doing our best in Islam

Having grasped the major components of faith—the six articles, the Qur’an, the Sunnah, the *Sīrah*, the *Fiqh*, and moral values—the believer can clearly view the path ahead, the figurative mountain to be climbed. The top of this mountain was described by the Prophet ﷺ as worshipping Allah as if you can see Him in front of you. Mu‘ādh ibn Jabal once asked, “O Messenger of Allah, instruct me.” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Worship Allah as if you can see Him and prepare yourself for death.”⁵⁵ In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ taught Mu‘ādh to say this supplication, “O Allah, help me to remember You, to give thanks to You, and to worship You in the best manner.”⁵⁶

Worshipping Allah as if you see Him means to strive for excellence in worship and in all of our deeds. Imām al-Nawawī explains the meaning of this phrase, writing:

This statement is among the comprehensive sayings (*jawāmi‘ al-kalim*) brought by the Prophet ﷺ. If one of us is able to worship as if he sees his Lord, Glorified and Exalted is He, he would never abandon any good thing he can do, such as being humble, reverent, behaving well, and taking care to combine outward and inward aspects completely, in the best possible manner.⁵⁷

We all tend to be more modest and shy to do wrong in public, rather than in private. It is easier to disobey your parents when they are not looking over you, or to disobey a teacher when their back is turned. In a similar way, we feel more shame in doing wrong when we have the conviction that Allah is watching our every deed, even what we do in the innermost part of our being, our hearts. But

⁵⁵ Ibn Abī Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Ṣamt wa Ādāb al-Lisān* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1990), 1:56 #22; declared fair due to external evidence (*ḥasan li ḡhayrihi*) by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Targhīb wal-Tarhīb* 3:92 #2870.

⁵⁶ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 2:86 #1522; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

⁵⁷ al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alá Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1972), 1:157-158.

unlike our parents or teachers, Allah is always aware of what we are doing and is more deserving of our obedience, as the Prophet ﷺ said, “Allah is more worthy of your modesty than people.”⁵⁸

Islam teaches us to perform all of our good deeds—prayer, charity, fasting, or any beneficial activity we do—as best as we possibly can, as if Allah were right in front of us. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, Allah has prescribed excellence in everything. If you have to kill, kill in the best manner. If you have to slaughter, slaughter in the best manner. Let one of you sharpen his knife, so his animal is spared of suffering.”⁵⁹ In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said, “If you make a judgment, be just. If you have to kill, kill in the best manner. Verily, Allah Almighty is Excellent and He loves excellence.”⁶⁰ Of course, doing our best means both outwardly and inwardly.

From the external perspective, we are often presented with a range of options in a given situation. In *fiqh* terms, we may have a choice between doing something that is recommended or merely permissible. In this regard, Allah said, “Give glad tidings to My servants who listen to the word and follow the best of it.”⁶¹ For instance, when we are wronged, we can choose between legal retaliation or forgiveness for the offender. Al-Samarqandī comments on this verse, writing, “It is said that they listen to the Qur’an and they follow the best in it, such as in the choice between retaliation and pardon, one chooses to pardon, as in His saying, ‘If you are patient, it is better for the patient.’”⁶² There are many recommended *sunan* actions we can choose to practice or not, just as one could choose to decorate his house (his faith founded upon the five pillars of Islam) or not. Moreover, sometimes we are presented with two benefits or two harms, in which we need to consider the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils. Ibn Taymiyyah said, “The intelligent one is not one who knows good and evil, but rather only one who

⁵⁸ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islāmī, 1998), 4:407 #2794; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

⁵⁹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 3:1948 #1955.

⁶⁰ al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Muʿjam al-Awsaṭ* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥaramayn, 1995), 6:40 #5745; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* 1:147 #494.

⁶¹ Sūrat al-Zumar 39:17-18.

⁶² al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr al-Samarqandī al-Musammá Baḥr al-ʿUlūm* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1993), 3:181 verse 39:18; Sūrat al-Naḥl 16:126.

can recognize the better of two goods or the worse of two evils.”⁶³ In this way, identifying and implementing the better action within an appropriate framework of *fiqh* is part of striving for excellence in our worship and deeds.

From the internal perspective, we must purify our hearts from all kinds of spiritual diseases, such as hypocrisy, arrogance, worldliness, envy, and malice. Allah tells us that no one will be safe on the Day of Judgment except for “one who comes to Allah with a pure heart.”⁶⁴ The heart (in the spiritual sense, not the physical heart) is the basis for all other voluntary actions. If the heart is truly pure of sinful dispositions, the rest of our deeds will be correct. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, in the body is a piece of flesh which, if sound, the entire body is sound, and if corrupt, the entire body is corrupt. Truly, it is the heart.”⁶⁵

To illustrate what a pure heart is like, Al-Tha‘labī shares one of the wise sayings of the righteous predecessors, “A man does not reach the peak of righteousness (*sinām al-taqwā*) until it is such that, were he to place what is in his heart on a plate and go around the market with it, he would not be ashamed of anything on it.”⁶⁶ Imagine how ashamed we would feel if other people could peer into our hearts and find every one of our spiritual flaws. If we carry any dark secrets within us, then we still have room to improve until we reach the top of the mountain.

However, it is important to acknowledge that excellence, or *iḥsān*, does not necessarily mean perfection. We were not created to be perfect, as the Prophet ﷺ said, “All of the children of Adam are sinners, and the best sinners are those who repent.”⁶⁷ We will make mistakes and we will commit sins, but part of excellence is to fulfill the conditions of sincere repentance. For this reason, Allah tells us to “be mindful of Allah as much as you are able.”⁶⁸ And the Prophet ﷺ said, “When I prohibit something, avoid it. When I command you to do something,

⁶³ Ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū’ al-Fatāwā*, 20:54.

⁶⁴ Sūrat al-Shu‘arā’ 26:89.

⁶⁵ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:20 #52.

⁶⁶ al-Tha‘labī. *Al-Kashf wal-Bayān ‘an Tafṣīr al-Qur’an* (Bayrut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2002), 1:144.

⁶⁷ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:240 #2499; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* 2:831 #4515.

⁶⁸ Sūrat al-Taghābun 64:16.

do it as much as you are able.”⁶⁹ Each of us has strengths and weaknesses, which means *iḥsān* may not look exactly the same for each and every believer. We have all inherited different means, so excellence is to do our very best with what we have.

How do we get there? Systematic spiritual advancement

The ultimate goal is to bring all the inward and outward components of faith together in the best possible manner, according to the means provided to us by Allah. How can we advance to higher states of faith in a systematic way? The prophetic method was revealed in the Messenger of Allah’s ﷺ description of the “allies” of Allah.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

Allah Almighty said: My servant does not grow closer to Me with anything more beloved to Me than the duties I have imposed upon him. My servant continues to grow closer to Me with extra good works until I love him. When I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask something from Me, I would surely give it to him. Were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant it to him.⁷⁰

This tradition describes the process by which faith is strengthened and states of excellence are attained. The correct place to start improving is by fulfilling our obligations (*al-farāʾiḍ*) to Allah and His creatures as best as we can—prayer, charity, fasting, performing the Hajj pilgrimage if possible, and respecting the basic limits of permission and prohibitions (*halāl* and *harām*). Once we have established these duties—the pillars of Islam—we can begin adding extra good works (*al-nawāfil*), which correspond to the *fiqh* categories of Sunnah and

⁶⁹ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9:94 #7288.

⁷⁰ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:105 #6502.

recommendation. In this way, we establish good habits and, slowly but surely, add more good habits to our routine.

Many times the companions would come to the Prophet ﷺ and ask him about extra good works they could incorporate into their daily lives. For example, Abū Hurayrah said:

My dear friend, the Prophet ﷺ, advised me to do three deeds and I will never abandon them until I die: to fast three days of every month, to perform the forenoon prayer, and to sleep after performing the *witr* prayer.⁷¹

Abū Hurayrah was told to work these three practices into his routine. On another occasion, Abū Bakr رضي الله عنه the first of the righteous Caliphs, said, “O Messenger of Allah, command me with something to say in the mornings and evenings.” The Prophet ﷺ said:

Say, ‘O Allah, the Knower of the unseen and the witnessed, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, the Lord of everything and its Owner, I testify that there is no God but You. I seek refuge in You from the evil of my soul and from the evil of Satan and his idolatry.’ Say this in the morning, evening, and when you lie down to sleep.⁷²

In this case, Abū Bakr رضي الله عنه was given a specific supplication (*du‘ā*) to say every day and night. The key to self-improvement is to pick one good habit—it could be as simple as an extra supplication—and stick with it until it becomes routine. ‘Āishah describes how the Prophet ﷺ developed his consistent good habits, “If the Messenger of Allah ﷺ took up a practice, he would be determined to do it regularly. If he slept through his night prayer or he was ill, he would pray twelve units of prayer in the day.”⁷³ So even if, for whatever reason, he was unable to complete his habit of night prayer, he would make up for it during the day.

When a good habit is firmly established, then one can add another small good habit to his or her practice. Quality in worship, or charity, is more important than

⁷¹ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 2:58 #1178.

⁷² al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 5:334 #3392; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

⁷³ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:515 #141.

quantity. That is why the Prophet ﷺ said, “Take up good deeds only as much as you are able, for the best deeds are those done regularly even if they are small.”⁷⁴ It is also why the Prophet ﷺ would prescribe various recommended actions to his companions. In his wisdom, he knew what they were capable of doing, so he did not prescribe the same routine to everyone who asked him. Rather, he discouraged Muslims from taking on more practices than they could reasonably sustain, saying, “Verily, the religion is easy and no one burdens himself in religion but that it overwhelms him.”⁷⁵ And he said to ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Amr, “O ‘Abdullah, do not be like a man who would stand for prayer at night but later abandoned his night prayer.”⁷⁶ By this slow, but steady, incremental method, a believer grows closer to Allah and the state of excellence.

Building up outward habits, however, must be accompanied by efforts to purify our hearts and souls of spiritual diseases. This requires mindful introspection, which for many can be uncomfortable since none of us likes to think of ourselves as flawed or “bad” people. But we need to overcome this barrier of the ego, to seek out our own personal faults so that they can be systematically corrected. ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb رضي الله عنه used to say, “May Allah have mercy on the one who shows me my faults.”⁷⁷ And Iyās ibn Mu‘āwiyah رحمه الله said, “No man fails to recognize the defects in his own soul but that he is the greatest of fools.” It was said, “O Abū Wāthilah, what is your defect?” Iyās said, “Speaking too much.”⁷⁸ Believers need to be aware of their own soul’s capacity to incline to evil, to wage *jihād* against it (*jihād al-naḥs*), as well as to know the methods by which Satan deludes believers into an arrogant sense of self-righteousness.⁷⁹

Great scholars like Imām al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-Qayyim wrote at length on specific techniques that can be used to target spiritual flaws and ultimately excise them from the heart. Envy (*al-ḥasad*), for example, is the malicious feeling of wanting to

⁷⁴ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 2:1417 #4240; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

⁷⁵ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:16 #39.

⁷⁶ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 2:54 #1152.

⁷⁷ al-Dārimī, *Sunan al-Dārimī* (al-Riyāḍ: Dār al-Mughnī, 2000), 1:506 #675.

⁷⁸ Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 10:34.

⁷⁹ For more information on this topic, see Zohair Abdul-Rahman and Justin Parrott, “Devil in the Details: An Analysis of the Dark Side of the Self.” Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research. January 24, 2019.

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/zohair/devil-in-the-details-an-analysis-of-the-dark-side-of-the-self>

see someone deprived of goodness. The Prophet ﷺ warned us, saying, “Envy and hatred are the razors. I do not say they shave hair, but rather they shave the religion.”⁸⁰ That is, this spiritual disease has the potential to wipe out our good deeds if we do not bring it under control. According to Al-Ghazālī, the cure for envy is to do the exact opposite of what it suggests:

For everything that envy judges one should say or do, one should oblige oneself to do its opposite. If envy compels one to disparage the envied, one should oblige one’s tongue to praise him and commend him. If envy compels one to be arrogant against him, one should require oneself to be humble before him and apologize to him... These are the cures for envy and they are very beneficial, although they are very bitter for the heart. Rather, the benefit is in bitter medicine.⁸¹

And this is the price of Paradise, to consume bitter medicine in pursuit of excellence. Every spiritual disease involves a cure that at first is bitter, but in time will lead to the sweetness of faith in this life and the next, as the Prophet ﷺ said, “The sweetness of the world is bitterness in the Hereafter, and the bitterness of the world is sweetness in the Hereafter.”⁸²

Conclusion

The three levels of religion in Islam begin with its outward components, followed by improving upon its inward components, and reaching its peak when the inward and outward states of the worshipper are fully actualized. These three levels are not mutually exclusive; they overlap in important ways. A new Muslim at the beginning of their faith-journey still needs to work on their spiritual interior until they achieve purity of heart, or excellence, as much as they can. In this state of

⁸⁰ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:245 #2510; declared very good (*jayyid*) by Al-Haythamī in *Majma’ al-Zawā’id wa Manba’ al-Fawā’id* (al-Qāhirah: Maktabat al-Qudsī, 1933), 8:30 #12732.

⁸¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma’rifah, 1980), 3:199.

⁸² Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, 37:533 #22899; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by al-Albānī in *Silsilat al-Aḥādīth al-Ṣaḥīḥah* (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma’ārif, 1996), 4:431. Al-Albānī also mentions that it was authenticated by al-Ḥākim and al-Dhahabī agreed with him.

spiritual excellence, one's free will coincides with the Will of Allah, such that one becomes the tool through which Allah sends His blessings and mercy to His creatures. The worshipper achieves this state by knowledge and implementation of Islam's source-texts and its primary scholarly disciplines (*Qur'an*, *Tafsīr*, *Tajwīd*, *Ḥadīth*, *Sīrah*, *ʿAqīdah*, *Sharīʿah*, *Fiqh*, and purification of the soul or spirituality).

Like climbing a mountain, the worshipper starts at the bottom or lowest level, then improves by gradually adding acts of worship and good habits to their daily routines, and using introspection to pinpoint the diseases in their heart (such as arrogance, greed, malice, and envy) and applying the cures to such diseases as prescribed by the scholars.

Success comes from Allah, and Allah knows best.