

Practical Steps towards Moral Purification

Part I: Repentance

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In this series of papers, we discuss some points that prepare the ground for development of moral virtues and bring human beings step by step closer to God. This discussion is greatly important in ethics and includes many issues. In this part, we study repentance as the very first step towards moral purification.

First step: Repentance

Many scholars of ethics have mentioned “repentance” as the first step of moral refinement and the journey toward Allah. They mean a kind of repentance which cleans the heart from pollution, changes its dark spots into bright spots and disburdens the heavy load of sins from the back of the human being in order to make him able to follow the way of Allah.

In the beginning of seventh volume of *Al-Mahajjat al-Bayḍā'*, which is in fact the leading chapter of moral discussions, Fayḍ Kāshānī says:

Repentance of sins and turning toward the Concealer of the defects and the Knower of the unseen is the place of departure for the wayfarer, the provision of the arrived, the first step of disciples, the key of lovers, the exordium of chosen ones and the chosen of close ones!

Then he mentions the fact that people normally make mistakes, and referring to the mistake of Adam (which was actually abandoning the prior not a sin), he says:

It is better if Adam's children follow him when committing mistakes, because only angels are the purely good ones, and the readiness for evil without repentance is the attribute of devils, while returning to the good after evil is the nature of human beings. One, who returns to the good after he has committed sins and has done evil, is truly a human being! In fact, repentance forms the basis of the religion, because religion calls human beings to abandon evil and return to the good. Regarding this fact, it is necessary for repentance to be placed on the top of the issues related to redemptive actions and qualities.²

In other words, it frequently happens that human being makes mistakes especially in the beginning of learning and the spiritual path towards Allah. Then, if the doors of repentance were closed behind him then he may be totally disappointed and stopped from following the path forever. Therefore, "repentance" is mentioned as a main principle in Islam and it calls all sinners to enter through the gate of this divine mercy to redeem themselves and compensate for their mistakes. This fact has been stated most beautifully in the words of Imam Sajjād (a) in the Supplication of the Penitent:

الهي انت الذي فتحت لعبدك بابا الي عفوك
سميته التوبة فقلت توبوا الي الله توبة نصوحا،
فما عذر من اغفل دخول الباب بعد فتحه

O, my God! You are the One Who opened a door of forgiveness to Your servant and called it “the repentance.” Then, You called: “Return towards Allah with sincere repentance!” Now what is the excuse of those who are oblivious to enter the door when it is open?³

A remarkable point is that the Almighty God has an extraordinary interest in the repentance of His servants, because it is the beginning of all man's prosperities. Imam al-Baqir (a) is quoted as saying:

ان الله تعالى اشد فرحا بتوبة عبده من رجل اضل
راحلته و زاده في ليلة ظلماء فوجدها

The Almighty God is more pleased with His servant's repentance than one who finds his riding animal and provisions after losing them in a (dangerous) desert at a dark night.⁴

This phrase, adorned with some metonymies and fineness, shows that repentance is in fact both the riding animal and the provisions for the journey, by which man passes the sombre valley of disobedience and approaches the destination of light, blessing and high human qualities.

However, there are many subjects in this topic the most important of which are as following:

- 1- The real meaning of repentance
- 2- The necessity of repentance

- 3- The generality of repentance
- 4- The elements of repentance
- 5- The acceptance of repentance is rational or traditional
- 6- Partial repentance
- 7- The continuation of repentance
- 8- The levels of repentance
- 9- The effects and blessings of repentance.

1- The real meaning of repentance

Literally *tawbah* means returning. When it is attributed to a sinner it means returning from sin. In the Qur'an and Islamic Traditions it has been attributed to God repeatedly. In these cases it means returning to the mercy which was taken back from the sinner because of committing sin. When a sinful person returns toward the way of worshipping and servitude of God the mercy of God returns to him as well, and it is for the very fact that one of the Divine Attributes is *Tawwāb* (which means He is the most returning to His mercy and the most accepting of repentance).

In fact in Arabic the word *tawbah* is a homonymous word which can be used both for God and for servants. When it is attributed to the servant it must come along with the transitive-verb-making word "*ilā*" and means repenting, but when it is attributed to God it becomes transitive with the word "*alā*" and means returning to the mercy.⁵

Concerning the reality of "Repentance", the author of *al-Mahjjat al-Baydā* has mentioned that it has three elements: the first is "knowledge", the second is "the present" and the third is "action", each one is regarded as the cause of the other.

The meaning of “knowledge” is to understand the harms and losses which are caused by sins and create the veil between the beloved God and his servants. When human understands this point properly, he worries about missing his beloved and since he knows that it was his own actions which led him to this deprivation he regrets and feels with remorse, and this regret causes him to decide for (reforming) the past, the present and future.

As for the present he leaves that sinful action, and as for the future he decides to leave sins which deprive him of his beloved, and concerning the past he tries to compensate his negligence.

In fact the light of knowledge and certainty brings about the heart state which is the origin of the regret which in turn leads to those triple positions about the past, the present and future.⁶

This is what which some thinkers introduced as the spiritual revolution and they used to say repentance is a kind of revolution in the human's soul and spirit compelling him to review his programs.

2- The necessity of repentance

All Muslim scholars are unanimous in the necessity of repenting because in the Qur'an God has frequently commanded his servants to repent. For instance God has commanded:

يا ايها الذين آمنوا توبوا الي الله توبة نصوحا
عسي ربكم ان يكفر عنكم سيئاتكم و يدخلكم
جنات تجري من تحتها الانهار

O you who have faith! Repent to God with sincere repentance! Maybe your Lord will absolve you of your misdeeds and admit you into gardens with streams running in them....(66:8)

Appointed to guide misguided nations, all prophets as the first step of their commission called people to repent because without repentance and washing the table of heart from the trace of sins there is no room for monotheism and virtues.

The first words of Hud, the great prophet of God, were this:

و يا قوم استغفروا ربكم ثم توبوا اليه

and, O my people! Ask forgiveness of your Lord,
then turn to Him and repent (11: 52)

The other great apostle, Sālih (a), also makes the same words as the basis of his mission and says:

فاستغفروه ثم توبوا اليه

Therefore, ask forgiveness of Him, then turn to
Him; and repent! (11: 61)

Also the prophet Shu'ayb (a) called his nation by the same manner and said:

واستغفروا ربكم ثم توبوا اليه ان ربي رحيم ودود

And ask forgiveness of your Lord, then turn to Him
and repent; surely my Lord is merciful, loving-kind
(11: 90)

Likewise in Islamic Traditions the urgent necessity of repentance has been emphasized, such as:

1. Advising his son Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba (a), Imam Ali (a) said:

وان قارفت سيئة فعجل محوها بالتوبة

And if you committed any sin, then remove it with repentance immediately!⁷

It is noteworthy however that Imams are immaculate and don't commit any sin, so this advice is given to encourage others.

2. In another tradition the noble Prophet of Islam (s) is quoted as told Ibn Mas'ūd:

يا بن مسعود لا تقدم الذنب و لا تؤخر التوبة، ولكن
قدم التوبة و اخر الذنب

O, Ibn Mas'ūd! Don't commit sins and [if you commit a sin] don't delay its repentance; rather, you should repent beforehand and delay sins (and leave them).⁸

3. We recite in another tradition from Imam Ali (a):

مسوف نفسه بالتوبة من هجوم الاجل علي
اعظم الخطر

Whoever delays repentance, while death is rushing to him, he is in a dangerous position (he may die without repenting)!⁹

4- Imam Ridā (a) has quoted from his grand father, the messenger of God,(s) as saying:

ليس شي ء احب الي الله من مؤمن تائب او
مؤمنة تائبة

There is no more pleasant thing to God than a repenting faithful; man or woman.¹⁰

This phrase may be regarded as a reason for the necessity of repentance, because it calls repentance as the most pleasant things in the eyes of God.

Moreover, we have a clear rational reason for the necessity of repentance. Human wisdom decisively judges that to remove the divine chastisement—whether decisively or contingently—we must provide a means and given that repentance is the best means of deliverance, reason considers it necessary; how sinners can protect themselves from the divine punishment, while they have not repented!

Aye! Repentance is obligatory according to some definite Quranic verses, Islamic traditions, and according to rational reason as well. Furthermore all Muslim scholars unanimously agreed upon the necessity of repentance.

Therefore, all the four sources (*al-adillah al-arba'ah* i.e. the Qur'an, the Sunnah, reason and consensus) indicate that repentance is obligatory, and that it must be done immediately. In the Principles of Jurisprudence (*Usul al-Fiqh*) it is proved that all imperatives must be done immediately unless we find a proof against it.

3- The generality of repentance

“Repentance” is not exclusive to special sin or sins, and does not include particular person or persons, and it does not have any limited time, and is not conditioned to a certain age, year, time or place as well. Therefore, repentance must be done with regard to all sins and it is the duty of all persons in any time and place, and of course in case all conditions of repentance are heeded it will be accepted by God.

However, as Qur'an says, repentance just in one case would not be accepted. If a person were on the threshold of his Purgatory

and saw his death signs and divine punishment his repentance would not be accepted. (like the Pharaoh's repentance when he saw the divine punishment and was drowning in the midst of Nile waves.) The doors of repentance at this time are closed because he in such situations repents compulsorily not voluntarily and by his will. The Glorious Qur'an says:

و ليست التوبة للذين يعملون السيئات حتي اذا
حضر احدهم الموت قال اني تبت الآن و لا الذين
يموتون و هم كفار اولئك اعتدنا لهم عذابا اليما

And repentance is not accepted of those who do evil deeds, until when death comes to one of them, he says: surely now I repent; also repentance is of no Benefit for those who die while they are unbelievers (and repent in the interval world); These are they for whom we have prepared a painful chastisement. (4:18)

When Pharaoh and his soldiers entered the dried passage of the river and then suddenly the waters fell down and Pharaoh was drowning he according to Qur'an said:

امنت انه لا اله الا الذي امننت به بنواسرائيل و انا
من المسلمين

He said: I believe that there is no god but He in Whom the children of Israel believe and I am of those who submit. (10:90)

But immediately he was replied:

آلآن و قد عصيت قبل و كنت من المفسدين

[He was told,] 'What! Now? When you have been disobedient heretofore and were among the agents of corruption?! (10:91)

We also read about some past nations:

فلما راوا باسنا قالوا آمنا بالله وحده و كفرنا بما
كنا به مشركين

But when they saw [the sign of] Our torment they said: we believe in Allah the only God and we deny what we used to associate with Him (40:84)

But the Glorious Qur'an says:

فلم يك ينفعهم ايمانهم لما راوا باسنا سنة الله
التي قد خلت في عباده و خسر هنالك الكافرون

But their belief was not going to profit them when they had seen Our torment; (this is) Allah's divine line of conduct in dealing with his servants, and the disbelievers are utterly the losers. (40:85)

And for the same reason, in the case of the Islamic punishments, repentance of a criminal person after he was arrested and caught in the hand of justice is not accepted; because this kind of repentance is normally performed under compulsion and out of fear and it doesn't show any change in his stance.

So, there is only one case, in which repentance is not acceptable and that is when it has been done under compulsion and force. However some have thought that repentance is not accepted in other three cases too:

First in the case of polytheism and idolatry because the Glorious Qur'an says:

ان الله لا يغفر ان يشرك به و يغفر مادون ذلك
لمن يشاء

Indeed God does not forgive that any partner should be ascribed to Him, but He forgives anything besides that to whomever He wishes. And whoever ascribes partners to God has indeed fabricated [a lie] in great sinfulness. (4:48)

But this idea is not true, because in this verse God has not spoken of repentance, he just talked about “forgiveness without repentance.” Surely those who repented of polytheism in the beginning of Islam and became Muslim, their repentance were accepted. Likewise all polytheists who repent now and believe in Islam, their repentance in the consensus of Muslim scholars will be accepted, but if the polytheist does not repent and dies in polytheism state he will not be forgiven by God, yet if he embraces Islam and passes away with faith and believing in the oneness of God, he may subject to the divine forgiveness even though he had committed some sins, and this is the true concept of the aforementioned verse.

In brief, the divine forgiveness doesn't include polytheists and just includes the believers, but repentance removes all sins even polytheism.

The Second and the third cases respectively are: repentance should be done immediately after committing sin or as soon as possible not after a long time, and also you can repent only of sins done upon the ignorance not with contumacy, stubbornness and obstinately. So delayed repentance or repentance of sins done in the basis of contumacy is not acceptable, because both cases are mentioned in the Glories Qur'an:

انما التوبة علي الله للذين يعملون السوء بجهالة
ثم يتوبون من قريب فاولئك يتوب الله عليهم و
كان الله عليما حكيما

[Acceptance of] repentance by God is only for those who commit evil out of ignorance, then repent promptly. It is such whose repentance God will accept, and God is Ever Knowing, Wise (4:17)

But it should be noted that many exegetists have said that this verse is about perfect repentance, because undoubtedly if some people commit sins obstinately and then give up their obstinacy and pride and ask God's forgiveness, their repentance will be accepted. In the history of Islam there are many examples of those who at first were in the line of obstinate and stubborn enemies but then they converted into the sincere friends.

Also it is certain that if a person was committing sins for long years and then regretted and repented and truly compensated it, his repentance would be accepted.

Prophet (s) in a well-known tradition has said:

Whoever repents a year before his death, God accepts his repentance, then he said: a year is too much, whoever repents a month before his death, God accepts his repentance, then he added: a month is also too much, whoever repents a Friday before his death, his repentance will be accepted by God, again he added: One Friday is much, whoever repents a day before his death, God accepts his repentance, again he said: a day is also much! Whoever repents one hour before his death, God accepts his repentance, and then added: One hour is also much! he who repents

before the agony of death (the last moment of his life when he has yet freedom), God accepts his repentance!¹¹

Of course the acceptable repentance near the death should be done truly with all its conditions; for instance, if he has wasted the rights of some persons he should instantly ask an honest person to pay their rights and then repents.

There are also many Qur'anic references that indicate the generality of repentance and include all sins, among them are:

قل يا عبادي الذين اسرفوا علي انفسهم
لاتقنطوا من رحمة الله ان الله يغفر الذنوب جميعا
انه هو الغفور الرحيم

Say: O my servants! Who have acted extravagantly against their own souls, do not despair of the mercy of Allah; surely Allah forgives the faults altogether; surely He is the Forgiving the Merciful. (39: 53)

In another verse God has said:

فمن تاب من بعد ظلمه و اصلح فان الله يتوب
عليه ان الله غفور رحيم

But whoever repents after his evildoing and amends, then verily Allah will turn to him (mercifully); surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. (5: 39)

This verse is ranked after the verse that states the fixed penalty of thieves but it is not restricted to this case and has a common concept which includes all sins.

Elsewhere God says:

انه من عمل منكم سوء بجهالة ثم تاب من بعده
و اصلح فانه غفور رحيم

Surly, if any one of you does wrong out of ignorance, then turns repentant after that and amends himself, then He is Forgiving, Merciful. (6:54)

God has mentioned in this verse that repentance of all kinds of sins is possible.

In one more case God has said:

والَّذِينَ إِذَا فَعَلُوا فَاحِشَةً أَوْ ظَلَمُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ ذَكَرُوا
اللَّهَ فَأَسْتَغْفَرُوا لِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَنْ يَغْفِرَ الذُّنُوبَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ
وَلَمْ يَصِرُوا عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلُوا وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ

And [the good-doers are] those who when they commit a sinful deed or do injustice to their souls remember Allah and ask forgiveness for their faults-- and who can forgive the faults but Allah, and (the good-doers) do not knowingly persist in what they have done (3: 135)

Here also given that the oppression includes all kinds of sins, because sins are either oppressing others or oppressing self, and considering that God has promised to accept repentance of all the sins in this verse, the generality of repentance as to all kinds of sins will be proved.

In another verse addressing all believers God says:

وتوبوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جميعاً أَيُّهَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ
تَفْلِحُونَ

And turn to Allah all of you with repentance, O believers! So that you may be successful. (24: 31)

The word “all of you” in this verse indicate that all sinners are called to repent. If repentance was not general and inclusive this calling would be incorrect.

Finally this is considerable that in some aforesaid verses God has taken the extravagance into consideration and in some of them the oppression, and in another cases bad action, but He has widely promised to forgive all of them after repentance so if a person commits any kind of bad action, any oppression and cruelty, and any extravagance and then repents God will accept.

In this regard many traditions in Shi'ite and Sunnite books are quoted as saying that the doors of repentance are open up to the last moment of life; until man has not yet seen the death sighs with his own eyes. These traditions can be found in these sources: *Bihār al-Anwār*,¹² *Usūl al-Kāfi*,¹³ *Al-Durr al-Manthūr*,¹⁴ *Kanz al-'Ummāl*,¹⁵ *Al-Tafsir al-Kabir* by Fakhr al-Din al-Radi,¹⁶ *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*,¹⁷ *Rūh al-Bayān*,¹⁸ *Rūh al-Ma'āni*¹⁹ and other books, and it could be said that these kinds of traditions are frequently and successively narrated (*mutawātir*) traditions.

4- The principles of repentance

As mentioned above, the real meaning of repentance is to turn back from disobedience to the obedience of God, which arises from the regret and remorse over previous deeds. The result of this regret and knowing that sins are obstacles between him and his real beloved is that he decides not to commit sins in the future and to compensate for the past, i.e. to remove as much as possible the bad internal and external effects of previous sins and if there is any missed but compensable rights, compensate them. For the very reason, in the Quran repentance is frequently associated with amending and compensation.

1. Pointing to the concealing of divine signs which is a great sin and its severe punishment, God says:

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ تَابُوا وَأَصْلَحُوا وَبَيَّنُوا فَاُولَئِكَ أَتُوبُ عَلَيْهِمْ
وَأَنَا التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيمُ

Except for those who repent and amend and explain (the truth), those it is to whom I turn (mercifully); and I am the All-clement, the All-merciful. (2:160)

2. And after mentioning the issue of apostasy (to disbelieve after believing) and its severe punishment, He adds:

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ تَابُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ وَأَصْلَحُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ
غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

Except those who repent after that and amend, then surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. (3:89)

3. Also after talking about hypocrites and their inauspicious end, He says:

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ تَابُوا وَأَصْلَحُوا وَاعْتَصَمُوا بِاللَّهِ وَأَخْلَصُوا
دِينَهُمْ لِلَّهِ

Except those who repent and amend and cling to Allah and dedicate their religion solely to Allah. (4:146)

4. And mentioning the severe punishment of those who accuse chaste people of adultery in the world and Hereafter, He adds:

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ تَابُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ وَأَصْلَحُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ
غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

Except those who repent after this and act aright,
for surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. (24:5)

5. And finally as a general rule concerning all sins God says:

ثُمَّ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لِلَّذِينَ عَمَلُوا السُّوءَ بِجَهَالَةٍ ثُمَّ تَابُوا مِنْ
بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ وَأَصْلَحُوا إِنَّ رَبَّكَ مِنْ بَعْدِهَا لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

then your Lord, with respect to those who do evil
out of ignorance, then repent after that and make
amends, most surely your Lord after that is
Forgiving, Merciful. (16:119)

وَإِنِّي لَغَفَّارٌ لِمَنْ تَابَ وَآمَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا ثُمَّ
اهْتَدَى

And most surely I am most Forgiving to him who
repents and believes and does righteous deeds,
and turns to the straight path. (20:82)

Here besides returning and good deed (i.e. compensating for
past) which are two basic principles of repentance, faith and
guidance are pointed to as well. Sins in fact reduce the light of
faith and deviate man from the way of guidance, so after
repentance he should renew his faith and return to the
guidance.

أَنَّهُ مِنْ عَمَلٍ مِنْكُمْ سُوءًا بِجَهَالَةٍ ثُمَّ تَابَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ
وَأَصْلَحَ فَإِنَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

(So) He will be Forgiving, Merciful to any one of
you who commits evil out of ignorance, then
repents and amends. (6:54)

Now from the whole aforementioned verses we can recognize
clearly the logic of Qur'an concerning of repentance. The true

repentance is not only to ask verbally forgiveness from God and even it is not to regret from the past deeds and decide to leave sins in the future, rather in addition to them a real penitent should wash his soul and compensate as much as possible the faults happened in the past and corruptions grown up in the soul of man and amend bad results that sin has left in the society. This is the real repentance, not only to say verbally I seek forgiveness from God!

Another important point here is that the word “amend” (*islāh*) in aforesaid verses has, like other Qur’anic expressions, a comprehensive and inclusive meaning which includes all kinds of making up for the past, among others:

I. The penitent should give back the trampled rights of the people to them if they are alive, otherwise to their heirs.

II. If he has disgraced somebody by backbiting or insolence, he should ask his forgiveness, and if he has passed away he should do some good deeds in return for the squandered prestige to satisfy his soul.

III. He also should discharge the obligations missed (if any), and pay its penalty if it has (like breaking the fast intentionally or violating any contract or vow).

IV. Considering that sins will darken heart, he should worship and serve God so much that the darkness of heart is replaced by the light of obedience of God.

The most comprehensive interpretation of “amend” is what Imam Ali has mentioned in *Nahj al-Balāghah* about the real meaning of repentance. Once a person said before his highness: I seek the forgiveness of God! As if Imam knew from the style of his speech or from the context that his saying is false and superficial not true, therefore, he (a) provoked and said:

أتدري ما الاستغفار؟ الاستغفار درجة العليين

Do you know what is the meaning of “*istighfār*” (asking forgiveness)? “*Istighfār*” is the rank of people of high position!»

Then he added:

وهو اسم واقع علي ستة معان: اولها الندم علي ما مضي والثاني العزم علي ترك العود اليه ابدًا و الثالث ان توءدي الي المخلوقين حقوقهم حتي تلقي الله املس ليس عليك تبعة و الرابع ان تعمد الي كل فريضة عليك ضيعتها فتؤدي حقها و الخامس ان تعمد الي اللحم الذي نبت علي السحت فتذيبه بالاحزان حتي تلتصق الجلد بالعظم وينشا بينهما لحم جديد والسادس ان تذيق الجسم الم الطاعة كما اذقته حلاوة المعصية فعند ذلك تقول استغفر الله

It is a word that stands on six steps: the first is to feel remorse over the past. And the second is to make a firm determination never to return to it. And the third is to discharge all the rights of people that you have violated them, so that you may meet Allah quite clean with nothing to account for. And the fourth is to perform every missed obligation with its correct conditions (and pay its penalty or discharge it/ make its “*qadā*”). And the fifth is to aim at the fleashes that grown up on your body as a result of unlawful earning, so that you may melt them by grieving till the skin touches the bones and a new flesh grows between them. And the sixth is to make the body taste the pain of obedience as you previously made it taste the sweetness of disobedience, and after passing

such occasions say: "I seek the forgiveness of God"!²⁰

The same content has been quoted from Imam Ail in another tradition by Kumayl ibn Ziyad as saying:

يا اميرالمؤمنين العبد يصيب الذنب فيستغفرالله
منه فما حد الاستغفار؟

O the Commander of Believers! A man commits the sin and then asks the forgiveness of God. What is the meaning of forgiveness?

Imam replied: "O Ibn Ziyad! It means to repent." Kumayl says: "I said: Is it enough?" He replied: "No." I asked: "Then how is it?" He replied: "When a man commits a sin he, as the exordium of his movement toward real repentance, asks forgiveness from God." I asked: "What is that movement?" He replied: "Lips and tongue start to rotate and by this penitent makes his tongue and words to follow the reality of repentance." I asked: "What is that reality?" He said: "to believe in ugliness and obscenity of sin heartily and decide to never revert to sin that he asked God its forgiveness." Kumayl says: I asked: "if he follows this practice is he accounted as penitents?" He (a) replied: "No." Kumayl says: I asked: "Then wherefore?" Imam said: "because you have not yet reached the basis of repentance!" Kumayl asked: "What is the basis of forgiveness?" Imam said: "To return toward repentance from the sin that you have asked its forgiveness and this is the first grade of worshippers." Then Imam said: "forsaking sin and asking forgiveness is a word that has six levels." Then he (a) mentioned the same above six levels with tiny differences.²¹

It might be said: If repentance is what Imam Ali (a) has depicted, then it is hard to find such penitents. But it should be noted that

some of the aforementioned conditions are conditions of a complete repentance, like those of five and six, but the first four are necessary conditions. In the words of some scholars, the first and the second levels are principal characters of repentance and the third and fourth are required conditions, and the fifth and sixth levels are conditions of perfect repentance.²²

In another tradition the Prophet (s) is quoted as saying:

اما علامة التائب فاربعة: النصيحة لله في عمله و
ترك الباطل ولزوم الحق و الحرص علي الخير

The signs of repentant are four: sympathetic attitude toward religion and God's servants, forsaking wrong, following right, and trying hard to perform good deeds.²³

This point is also considerable that if his sin causes others to go astray such as negative propaganda, introducing heretical ideas, whether by speech or by writing, in the religion of God and etc. he can compensate his sin only in the case that he makes all people got astray by his sin turn back to the right path as much as he can, otherwise his repentance is not acceptable.

And upon this point it becomes clear that how hard and heavy is the repentance of those who distort Qur'anic verses or create heretical ideas in religion or cause people got astray. It is not a true job that a person leads people to go stray by public speech or through journals and medias and writing books and articles, and then sits in his privacy and asks forgiveness from God. Certainly such repentance is never accepted.

Also those who accuse someone publicly of telling lies or unchastity and the like and then come to him/her privately and ask his/her pardon or repent in their privacy in his/her absence, undoubtedly their repentance would not accepted as well,

unless he/she forgives them or they tack back their words publicly. For this point, we read in many traditions that those who accuse people and unjustly attribute wrong deeds to them, if they want to repent they should take back their words and deny themselves, besides being subject to its lawful punishment.²⁴ In an authentic hadith, Imam Sadiq (a) was asked whether the testimony of one who has been given legal punishment would be acceptable if he repents? Imam (a) answered:

إذا تاب و توبته ان يرجع مما قال و يكذب نفسه
عند الامام و عند المسلمين، فاذا فعل فان علي
الامام ان يقبل شهادته بعد ذلك

(Yes) when he repents; but his repentance must be thus: he must apologize for whatever he said and deny his sayings before Imam and Muslims. If he does so Imam must accept his testimony..²⁵

In another tradition we read:

اوحى الله عزوجل الي نبي من الانبياء قل لفلان
وعزتي لو دعوتني حتي تنقطع اوصالك، ما
استجيب لك، حتي ترد من مات الي مادعوته
اليه فيرجع عنه!

The Almighty God revealed to one of his apostles that tell such and such person that I swear by My honour if you call me so much that your body joints were separated, I do not respond to your calling (and I do not accept your repentance), unless you bring to life those dead persons misled by your call and speech and make them go back to the right track!²⁶

This hadith clearly shows that how extended and broad is amending and compensation without which repentance would be superficial and temporary.

The final point here is that those who are content only with asking forgiveness toward the large number of sins without observing the principles and conditions of repentance, it seem that they are ridiculing themselves or deriding repentance and forgiveness. Referring to this point, Imam Baqir (a) is quoted as saying:

التائب من الذنب كمن لا ذنب له، و المقيم علي
الذنب و هو مستغفر منه كالمستهزء

He who repents of his sins (with complete conditions) is like one who has not any sin, but he who commits sins repeatedly while asking forgiveness [without determination to never revert to sins] is like one who is deriding.»²⁷

5- Is the acceptance of repentance rational or revealed?

All Muslim scholars are of the consensus that if repentance is accompanied with all its conditions, it should be accepted by God. The Qur'anic verses and traditions also denote this point clearly, but there are some controversies over the issue of the necessity of acceptance based on reason or revealed sources.

Some believe that the elimination of divine penalty and punishment after repentance is by His mercy and favour. So it is completely possible that Almighty God decides not to forgive his servant's sin after repentance, in the same way that is also current among people that once someone oppresses a person then asks his pardon, he may forgive or not forgive him. Others believe that the removal of divine penalty after repentance is necessary; they even believe that to reject a guilty person after

asking forgiveness is ugly and disagreeable and certainly this is not permissible for God.

Here we may adopt a third theory; that is, the necessity of accepting repentance is based on common sense and is reasonable, i.e., although reason does not count accepting repentance as an obligatory and definite action, but the manner of wise people is such that if someone commits a mistake, and then asks forgiveness, and compensates all bad results of his action, as if nothing has been missed, for example if he has disgraced someone, but now he has compensated for it; if trampled a right, he has compensated for it completely, and if he hurt someone's heart, he has obtained his satisfaction by different ways; in such conditions, all reasonable people of the world are used to accept his repentance and pardon him, and if somebody doesn't accept it, they regard him as revengeful and below human and moral standards. Undoubtedly, in such cases the Almighty and Needless God deserves more than others to accept the repentance and apology of those who repent and to relinquish their punishment.

It is possible to step even further and regard the necessity of accepting repentance as a matter required by reason based on the rational principle called the rule of "the obscenity of violating the purpose."

Explanation: We know that the Almighty God is needless of his servant's worships, religious obligations and commands are His favours designed for the perfection and training of servants; prayer, fast and other worships bring up our soul and life and make us closer to the Almighty God day by day. Other obligations and forbidden things have also their own effect in our perfection. For instance, concerning the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), God has said: "It is the duty of people to visit the House of Allah to enjoy its material and spiritual advantages." (22: 28) In

other Qur'anic verses, prayer is counted as a cause that prevents indecency and evil (29: 45), fasting as the cause of piety (2:183), and giving alms as cause of the purification of individuals and society of moral vices and deviations. (9:103)

In Islamic traditions the faith is counted as the source of purging polytheism, and prayer as the cause of getting rid of pride and hajj as a motive for Muslims to be unified, and holy war as a source for glory of Islam, and etc.²⁸

Thus, all obligations and duties are means of human happiness and mediums in his course toward perfection, happiness and perfection, which is the main aim of human creation and the way of approaching devotion and closeness to God: "And I have not created the jinn and the men, except that they should worship me." (51:56)

Now, we can say that the necessity of repentance and its acceptance is certainly a way toward perfection, because man is not innocent and occasionally makes some mistakes, and if the way of coming back is blocked, then he will be deprived of perfection certainly. But if it was announced that after any mistake you can go back to Allah and compensate whatever you have missed and destroyed in the past and God will accept your repentance; then he is closer to the happiness and perfection, and is very far from deviation and mistakes as well.

To conclude, the non-acceptance of repentance will cause the violation of aim, because the aim of binding people to duties and worships is spiritual training and perfection but to reject repentance will harm this aim, and the Almighty God never violates his aim and motive. In short, repentance has a philosophy and reason related closely with human perfection; if the doors of repentance are blocked, the motive of perfection are perished; even worse, man may go back to his past situation,

because he imagines that there is no possibility of salvation for him so he may say why he should give up other sins and exactly for this very reason that all human teachers, religious or nonreligious, keep the way of repentance and coming back open to the under training people so that the motive flames of improvement and compensation and movement toward the perfection would no be cooled and died in them.

And thus, the acceptance of real repentance is undeniably definite and proven not only by verses and traditions but by the reason and common sense as well.

6- Separation in repentance/partial repentance

Can a person repent for a sin while he commits other sins; for instance, a person commits both drinking alcohol and backbiting, then he decides to leave drinking forever while having no decision to leave backbiting? We may say that repentance should be general and include all sins and a sinner must repent for all sins, because every sin is a sign of opposition to God and violates the sanctity of the real Lord; so, whoever regrets this act should leave all sin and not distinguish between sins, and not repent for one sin while persisting in doing another one. However, the right view is that partial repentance is valid (as a great moral scholar like Naraqī has also mentioned in his *Mi'rāj al-Sa'ādah* and he has quoted a word from his father in agreement with it, as well).

The secret of the reasonability of this view is that man may be afraid of a certain sin more than another and may be more aware of its bad results, or he may think that a sin is more ugly in the eyes of God and its punishment is more intensive; therefore, he repents for that sin while he commits other sins of lesser ugliness or slighter punishment or sins about the losses and harms of which he knows less. And it is remarkable that most of

penitents repent in this way, i.e., they repent for specific sins while probably committing other sins and nonetheless it is never heard that the Noble Prophet (s). or one of the infallible Imams (a) or a Muslim thinker have taken these kinds of repentance as invalid.

There are also some clear hints to the correctness of partial repentance in various verses of the Glorious Qur'an. For instance, about usury God says: "And if you repent, then you shall have your capital" (2: 279). And about apostates who abandoned their faith, He says: "(As for) these, their requital is that there shall be upon them the curse of Allah and the angels and all mankind ...except those who repent after that and make amend, surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (3:87-89). And about combatants against Allah and his apostle and those who corrupt the society after pointing to their strict punishment, He says: "Except those who repent before you have them in your power; and know that Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (5:34). And about those who are guilty of indecency and adultery, after indicating their punishment, He says: "Then if they repent and amend, turn aside from them; surely Allah is Oft-returning (to mercy), the Merciful" (4:16). Also in another verse, pointing to some sins like polytheism, murdering and adultery and stating their severe punishments, He says: "Except him who repents and believes and act righteously; for such Allah will replace their sins with excellences; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (25:70).

Of course some of these verses speak about worldly punishments and their forgiveness by repentance, but it is clear that there is no difference for our purpose between worldly and otherworldly punishments. If such repentance in worldly punishments is accepted certainly it will be accepted about otherworldly punishments, too.

As a result, there is no objection to selecting some sins in repentance due to various reasons (different degrees of knowledge, different motives and different views about the measure of ugliness and indecency of sins), however such repentance would not be a perfect one. A full repentance is that of all sins without making any differentiation among them.

7- The continuance of repentance

Repentance should be firm and permanent. On one hand, whenever a mistake is due to "temptations of the commanding soul," one should immediately repent and thus make himself enter into the occasion of the "reproaching soul" and continue until one reaches "the peaceful soul" and eradicates the roots of temptations. And on the other hand, he should take care completely not to violate his repentance and continue his promise to God that he forsakes sins in future. In other words, if after repentance the motives of sin remain in the depths of the heart and soul, he should try to fight against them and start to struggle with the soul; and thus he will be both in the rank of penitents and warriors for the faith.

Some moral scholars have pursued a discussion here about who is better: a man who repents and fights against the inner origins of sin yet existing in his heart or a person who pulls out the roots of sin from his heart?²⁹ It is not that much important which one is better; the important thing is the instructions that should be observed by the penitent in order to not revert to sin. Some of these instructions are thus:

1. To be secluded from the occasions of sin and not participate in sinful company, because the penitent is vulnerable at the beginning like a patient which has just been rescued from illness and if he steps in the polluted areas he may be affected again; like an addict who has given up narcotic substances, but

whenever he comes back to the polluted areas, he will be polluted immediately.

2. He must review his friends and companions. If he had friends who encouraged him to sin he should strongly avoid them.

3. Whenever he feels temptations and motives of sin, he should remember God, because: “the remembrance of God is the source of rest of hearts” (13: 28).

4. Constantly think about the damaging results of sin one has given up and set them before one’s eyes, lest due to negligence and forgetting these fatal results the sinful motives grow again and temptations attack his heart.

5. He should ponder the stories of predecessors and those who were caught in painful sufferings because of various sins, and think about their ends, and even study the circumstances of infallible prophets and messengers who sometimes were caught in painful situations because of previous lapses [prior to being appointed prophets by God], for example, to see what caused Adam, despite his high position, to be driven off Paradise, or Jonah to be the case of God's anger and imprisoned in the belly of whale or for what reason Jacob, the great Messenger of God, suffered the tragic pain of separation from his son for years. Studying these cases certainly decreases temptations of sin and makes repentance permanent and stable.

6. Think of punishments and penalties assigned for each sin, and take this probability seriously that in case of repetition of sin after repentance the punishment may be more intense. And also consider divine kindnesses and favours prepared for penitents, some of which are applied to him, and always suggest to himself to try to protect these graces and favours, and not to miss easily this prominent position that God has bestowed!

7. He should fill his time, day and night, with proper programs: plan to have an honourable life, plan to serve and worship God and plan for healthy hobbies, because unemployment and leisure is a very bad situation which lays the ground for evil temptations. One of the scholars was asked to interpret this hadith: "The repentant are the beloved of God."³⁰ He Said: "the repentant is anyone to him this verse applies: '(Believers) are penitents, worshippers, celebrators of Allah's praise, travellers³¹ (who always traverse to divine services) who bow, who prostrate in prayer, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, and keep Allah's bounds, - and give good news to the faithful.'" (9: 112).

8 – The levels of repentance

Ethicists have mentioned some different levels and degrees for repentance and penitents. From one viewpoint, penitents could be divided into four groups:

The first group are those who repent for their sins, but after a while they violate their repentance and revert to sin without feeling any regret and remorse about their deeds. They are in fact at the level of the commanding soul (*al-nafs al-ammārah*) and their fate is quite vague and risky, because they may die in the state of repentance and reach a good end, but it is also possible that they die when they have violated their repentance and will be faced with a regrettable and painful end.

The second group are those who repent for their sins and continue the way of serving and obeying God, but sometimes passions prevail over them and lead them to some sins so they violate their repentance because they are not yet strong to stand against passions, however they are yet remorseful and sorry for violating repentance and continuously say to themselves: we wish we did not commit such sin, and God

willing we will repent soon. These persons are at the level of the commanding soul, as well, but there is more hope for their salvation.

The third group are penitents who avoid big sins after repentance, and determinately perform essential worships, but sometimes they might be polluted with some sins, without premeditation to break their repentance. They regret soon and begin to blame their selves and decide to repent and keep distance from causes of sin. This group is in the high level of blaming soul and they could approach the peaceful soul and reach salvation very likely.

The fourth group are penitents who, after repentance, choose the way of obedience and servitude of God firmly and resist strongly any temptations for committing sins. It is true that they are not innocents and sometimes they may think about sins and mistakes, but in practice they avoid them, because their intellect and faith are so powerful that prevail over carnal desires and control them. This group is endowed with peaceful soul that has been addressed in Qur'an, with a noble and glorious title:

يا ايها النفس المطمئنة ارجعي الي ربك راضية
مرضية فادخلي في عبادي و ادخلي جنتي

O tranquil soul! Return to your Lord well pleased and pleasing. Then put on the honourable dress of servitude of God: "enter among My servants and [then] enter My paradise." (89:27-30)

From another perspective, repentance can be classified as follows:

I. Repentance for disbelief and returning to faith.

II. Repentance for weak and imitative faith in search of certain and strong faith.

III. Repentance for capital and mortal sins.

IV. Repentance for venial sins.

V. Repentance for evil thoughts, even though they may remain unrealized.

In other words each group of servants have their specific repentance; the repentance of prophets is of inner anxieties (and for occasional inattention to God). The repentance of selected people is for breathing without remembrance of God.³² And the repentance of Godly saints is for some unbecoming thoughts that have occurred to them. And the repentance of special people is of being occupied with anything other than God. And finally the repentance of the vulgar is for ordinary sins, and each one of them has a level of knowledge and awareness at the beginning and at the end of repentance.³³

9 - Results and blessings of repentance

If repentance is real and true, and arises out of the depths of the heart with all its conditions, certainly it will be accepted by God, and its blessings and results will come to view. Penitent persons always think about compensating for the past, regret disobediences and sins, and are remorseful. The true penitents keep themselves away from bad company and shun temptations. Penitents see themselves ashamed before God, and always are in search of His satisfaction.

With the above mentioned signs, the true penitents may be properly distinguished from those who pretend to be repentant. Commenting on the meaning of word "*nasūh*" in the verse (66:8), exegetes have offered different views. Some say that it

means a repentance that advise and encourage people to do such repentance, because its results have appeared in penitent. Or it means that it advise the repentant to eradicate sins, and never revert to them. Some scholars have interpreted it as a sincere and pure repentance, while some others have taken this word to be derived from *nisāhat* which means sewing. According to this etymology it means that this repentance will sew the cords of religion and faith that were broken by sins. Or it means that this kind of repentance will make penitent those who have been separated from God's saints to return to their gathering.³⁴

¹ This paper is a translation of *Akhlāq dar Qur'an*, vol. 1, ch. 12 by Ayatollah Nasir Makarim Shirazi (Qum: Imam Ali Publications, 2009).

² *Al-Mahjah al-Baydā'*, vol. 7, pp. 6, 7, (excerpted).

³ The fifteen fervent supplications of Imam Sajjād (a), the first fervent supplication, *Bihār al-Anwar*, vol. 94, p. 142.

⁴ *Al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, Tawbah (repentance) chapter, p. 435, tradition no. 8.

⁵ Tafsir Fakhr Razi (*al-Tafsir al-Kabir*), and *Tafsir al-Safi*, under the *ayah* 37 of chapter 2.

⁶ *Al-Mahjrat al-Baydā'*, vol. 7, p.5.

⁷ *Bihār al-Anwar*, vol. 74, p. 208.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 104.

⁹ *Mustadrak al-Wasā'il*, vol. 17, p. 130.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 175.

¹¹ *Al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 441.

¹² *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 6, p.19, and vol. 2, p. 440.

¹³ *Al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 440.

- ¹⁴ *Al-Durr al-Manthur*, vol. 2, p. 131.
- ¹⁵ *Kanz al-'Ummāl*, tradition no. 10187 and 10264.
- ¹⁶ *Al-Tafsir al-Kabir* by Fakhr al-Din Razi, vol. 10, p.7, under the above mentioned verse.
- ¹⁷ Tafsir al-Qurtabi, vol. 3, p. 1662 under the above mentioned verse.
- ¹⁸ *Ruh al-Bayān*, vol. 2, p. 178, under the above mentioned verse.
- ¹⁹ *Ruh al-Ma'āni*, vol. 4, p.233.
- ²⁰ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, part of sayings, word: 417.
- ²¹ *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 6, p. 27.
- ²² *Guftār Ma'anavi*, Ayatullah Mutahhari, p. 139.
- ²³ *Tuhaf al-'Uqul*, p. 32
- ²⁴ According to Islamic jurisprudence some sins are removed through the infliction of their penalties, such as adultery, but for some sins, in addition to their penalties, the sinner should do some thing more to be forgiven, like what the author mentioned above.
- ²⁵ *Wasāil al-Shi'a*, vol. 18, p. 283 (tradition no. 1, chapter 37 from the chapters of witnesses).
- ²⁶ *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 69, 219.
- ²⁷ *Usūl al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, (*sura Al-Tawbah*, tradition no. 10) p. 435.
- ²⁸ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, the part of sayings, excerpted from the word n. 252.
- ²⁹ *Al-Mahjāt al-Baydā*, vol. 7, p. 75.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 187.
- ³¹ Or those who fast/wayfarers.
- ³² Allamah Majlisi interprets "breathing" in the same meaning mentioned here, but according to some dictionaries it is used sometimes in the meaning of long talking.
- ³³ *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 6, p. 31.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 17.