

Stages of the Mystics and Stations of the Spiritual Journey, Part IV: Patience, Gratitude and Iradah

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Eleventh: Patience

The stage of *sabr* (“patience”) comes after the stage of hope. The traveller of the spiritual journey and the follower of the path of purification must have this virtue and abstain from *Jaza‘* (“impatience”), which causes deviation from the right path.

Below we will explain the types and levels of patience, which is defined as being “self-restrained” in the face of difficulties, not complaining and not allowing oneself to do wrong.

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Types and levels of patience

There are three types of patience: patience for obedience, patience for avoiding sins, and patience in the face of calamities.

Patience for obedience: Since performing obligatory and recommended deeds can be thought to be difficult, we are enjoined to have patience for them. The spiritual journey to God has its . For instance, it is difficult for the youth to wake up early and perform *fajr* prayer. These difficulties of obedience require perseverance and patience.

Patience for avoiding sins: Since “committing sins” is accompanied with carnal desires, it is usually difficult, especially for the youth, to avoid them. Hence, staying away from them requires patience.

Patience in the face of calamities: Being patient in the face of calamities and difficulties of life is another aspect of patience which is necessary to develop in the spiritual journey to God.

Patience has, moreover, three levels: patience of common people who are at the beginning of their spiritual journey, patience of those who are in the midway, and patience of those who have arrived at the destination.

The lowest level of patience is to avoid complaining about the difficulties (whether difficulties of obedience, of avoiding sin, or of calamities) and restraining oneself from illegitimate and forbidden actions. Those who are at this level are unhappy in their hearts when faced with these difficulties, but they do not complain and do not surrender to sin.

Higher level of patience is the patience of those who endure the difficulties of obedience, of avoiding sins, and of calamities in order to be saved from the Hellfire and enter Paradise. This intention for patience is analogous to the intention that slaves and merchants have in their works. Those who are in this level are not sad in their hearts, they do not complain, or commit sins, but their intention is self-centred and not completely sincere.

The highest level of patience is that of the Friends of God, who look beyond just being released from the Hellfire or entering Paradise and seek nothing but God's contentment.

About the people of the second level, God says in the Qur'an,

“Indeed the patient will be paid in full their reward without any reckoning” (Qur'an 39: 10).

From this verse, we can understand that the aim of this group of people was to be rewarded. About the patience of the Friends of God, however, the Qur'an says,

“Give good news to the patient. Those who, when an affliction visits them, say, “Indeed, we belong to Allah, and to Him do we indeed return.” It is they who receive the blessings of their Lord and [His] mercy, and it is they who are the [rightly] guided. (Qur'an 2: 155-157)

God's Friends are patient because they do not consider themselves as the owners of what they have. They regard themselves and what they possess as all belonging to God and know that he takes back His belongings whenever He wills. Thus, they do not get attached to what they have and do not grieve over what they lose. God gives such

people glad tidings and embraces them with His special blessings, though God's general blessings covers all the faithful:

It is He who blesses you, and so do His angels, that
He may bring you out from darkness into light”
(Qur'an 33: 43).“

Although the above-mentioned verse about the patience of God's Friends mentions their patience in the face of calamities, it is not limited to this type of patience. These people also bear the difficulties of obedience and of avoiding sins because they believe,

“we belong to Allah, and to Him do we indeed
return” (Qur'an 2:156).

JAZA‘

The state of *Jaza‘* is the opposite of patience. Most of us have *jaza‘* to some degree when we lose our patience in the face of difficult situations. This is not, however, the case with the Friends of God, who are free from this imperfection. Imam Sadiq (a) have reportedly said, “And when the command of God Almighty is revealed, we are content with His decree and submit to His command. It is not for us to dislike what God likes for us” (Shaykh al-Saduq 1992, 1:187).

This is the station of “contentment” which is at a higher level than the station of patience.

Twelfth: Gratitude

Shukr (“gratitude”), the opposite of *kufran* (“ungratefulness”), is being aware of, and grateful for, the fact that the whole world, including our existence and what we have are all favors and blessings of God for us; such awareness and gratefulness leads to a proper use of those favors

and blessings. Gratitude is necessary for purification of the soul in the spiritual journey toward God.

Levels and Types of Gratitude

There are three types of gratitude. Some people give thanks to God for His favors and blessings, but their intention is to be saved from punishment in the Hereafter or to enter Paradise. About such people, God says,

Remember My blessing which I bestowed upon you
(Qur'an 2:40); "If you are grateful, I will surely
enhance you [in blessing]" (Qur'an 14:7).

But other people, however, are grateful to God at a higher level. They regard whatever there is as God's blessings and believe in Him as their only Master and Lord. They would say, as the poet, Hafiz Shirazi, has said, "At every tray, whereat I sate, God, the Provider, was" (Hafiz 1891, 1:344). They do not give gratitude to God to be saved from hellfire or to enter paradise, but are grateful to Him because of their profound knowledge that God is the one who deserves gratitude.

Some people are grateful for material blessings only, without much realization or appreciation for intellectual or spiritual favors of God. There are other people who appreciate both material and non-material blessings of God, but realize the greater value of His spiritual and intellectual blessings. They thank God for His material blessings but know that this kind of blessing is not exclusive to humans and is shared by animals as well. Thus, they are more grateful for God's non-material blessings, such as knowledge, morality, justice, love, and altruism.

There is a third group of people, however, who realize that even the spiritual and intellectual blessings of God are not exclusive to human beings but are shared by angels. In their viewpoint, as “vicegerents of God,” their greatest gratitude should be reserved for God’s greatest blessings. But they cannot find a blessing—material or non-material—greater than God Himself, the Bestower of all blessings. So their attention shifts from the blessings to the Bestower of blessings. It is these people who can truly say, “O Best Known of all the known, O Best of all to be worshipped, O Greatest of those to whom thanks are due, O Best remembered of all who are remembered” (Qummi n.d., 98). Thus, nothing makes them content, except for God and closeness to Him.

Worldly love, sometimes, makes lovers so impatient that nothing can calm them, except reaching their beloved. How, then, could those who have perceived the beauty of God not be overtaken by His love? How could anything—except reaching God—calm them? “It is strange how the lover can sleep!” (Majlisi 1982, 67:160).

For such people, God Himself is the utmost blessing. They are most grateful for God Himself. They strive to know Him more and keep His love in their hearts with an ever-increasing thirst for meeting Him.

It is to these people that the verse

“If you are grateful, I will surely enhance you”
(Qur’an 14: 7)

can truly apply: in contrast to those who give gratitude for “God’s blessings,” these people give gratitude for “God” Himself; therefore, God enhances their own “selves,” not just the blessings that they have,

as He does for the first group. Thus, God would elevate those who thank Him for Himself to higher stations: if they are among “those who do righteous deeds”, they will join “the righteous”; if they are among “the righteous,” they can become one of the “the most perfect ones.”

People who express their gratitude to God for His blessings, but with the intention of being saved from Hellfire and entering Paradise, are in reality ungrateful, because what they really appreciate is the blessings bestowed upon them, not the One who bestows those blessings. This is commercial gratitude, given to receive more in return.

Highest Level of Gratitude

The highest level of gratitude is confessing to our inability to thank God as He deserves. Giving thanks to God as He deserves is impossible, because every time we thank God, we have to give further thanks to Him for two things: first, for our tongue, heart, or other organs with which we expressed our gratitude; second, for our *tawfiq* (“success”) to use those organs in the right way and for being able to give thanks. Therefore, each thanksgiving is itself a blessing for which further gratitude becomes necessary.

Imam Sajjād (a) implores God with the following words:

“So how can I achieve thanksgiving? For my thanking Thee requires thanksgiving. Whenever I say, “To Thee belongs praise!”, it becomes thereby incumbent upon me to say, “To Thee belongs praise!” (*al-Sahifa al-Sajjādiyya*, 15)

He is also reported to have said, “We have not worshipped Thee with the worship Thou deservest!” (*al-Sahifa al-Sajjādiyya*, 3).

In this regard, Sa’di, the great Persian poet, says,

Whose hand and tongue is capable
To fulfil the obligations of thanks to him? (Sa’di n.d.)

Of course, these sayings do not mean that we should stop giving thanks to God. What they mean is, after acknowledging God’s blessings, utilizing them in the right way, and expressing our gratitude for them, we have to be aware that we can never thank God as He deserves.

The holy Qur’an further emphasizes this inability:

“If all the trees on the earth were pens, and the sea replenished with seven more seas [were ink], the words of Allah would not be spent. Indeed Allah is All-Mighty, All-Wise” (Qur’an 31:27);

“[I]f you enumerate Allah’s blessings, you will not be able to count them” (Qur’an 14:34).

Thirteen: IRADAH

Elements of IRADAH

Iradah (“will/desire”) is one of the stages—or, according to some scholars, the first stage—of the spiritual journey to God. *Iradah* develops when (1) the willing disciple (*murid*) knows what he desires, (2) what is desired is a perfection for the *murid*, and (3) the *murid* lacks the desired object. This is because *iradah*, in its essence, is “seeking the

lost”. One does not seek what is already in one’s possession. Such a thing could be the object of one’s love, but not one’s *iradah*.

When a traveller begins his spiritual journey but faces obstacles that keep him separated from the object of his *iradah*, a painful sense of longing develops in his heart. The greater the longing becomes, the more difficult the patience will be. When the traveller finds signs from the One he longs for, love develops in his heart. Thus, in the order of the stations of the journey, *iradah* is the first, longing is the second, and love is the third station.

Types of IRADAH

There are two types of *iradah*: the *iradah* that prepares the ground for the journey and the one that becomes the source of generation [of perfections].

When the traveller desires the destination in the middle of the way, his *iradah* paves the way for continuation of his journey, but when he arrives at the destination and reaches the origin of all perfections, his desire becomes a source of generation. This is why the people of Paradise gain all blessings by their will; they do not need to move their limbs or embark on journeys to achieve their goal:

There they will have whatever they wish, and with Us there is yet more” (Qur’an 50:35).

In this, they somehow resemble their Lord:

“All His command, when He wills something, is to say to it ‘Be,’ and it is” (Qur’an 36:82).

Levels of IRADAH

Iradah has different levels, depending on the state of the *murid*.

1. If the *murid* is in the beginning levels, his *iradah* is for acquiring God's blessings, like ordinary people who wish for and strive to achieve God's blessings in this world.
2. Although desiring God's blessings is not bad, a *murid* at a higher level desires not to desire anything. The People of Knowledge have said, "Being in no need of something when you do not possess it is better than not being in need of it when you have it." Those who have reached this level find their comfort in the "Paradise of the *Liqā'* ["meeting with God"]," not in God's blessings; they wish not to ask for anything but for God Himself. They do not want anything to distract them from their Lord.

At the highest level, however, are those who do not even say, "I want not to desire anything," but say, "who are we to want or not want?" They are the people whose want and desires is absorbed in the will of God.

Different Faces of the Seekers of This World

The Glorious Qur'an divides people into two groups: seekers of this world and seekers of the Hereafter; for instance, we read,

"Some of you desire this world, and some of you desire the Hereafter" (Qur'an 3:152)

and in another verse,

"Whoever desires the tillage of the Hereafter, We will enhance for him his tillage, and whoever desires the

tillage of the world, We will give it to him ...”
(Qur’an 42:20).

But Imam Ali (a), the Commander of the Faithful, further divides the seekers of the Hereafter into three groups: those who aim at being saved from Hellfire, those who long for Paradise, and those who only seek God. Compared to the third group, the first two groups are in reality materialists, even though they are faithful and religious. This is because everything other than God—even entering Heaven and being saved from Hellfire—is worldly, in its broad sense. This delicate meaning can be understood from the following verse, which enjoins the Prophet (s) to be with those who seek God, not with those who seek this world:

Content yourself with the company of those who supplicate their Lord morning and evening, desiring His Face, and do not lose sight of them, desiring the glitter of the life of this world. (Qur’an 18:28)

In this verse, people are divided into two groups: those who desire God’s “Face” and those who desire this world (*dunyā*). We can infer from this contrast that desiring anything other than God—including Paradise or being saved from Hellfire—is a worldly desire.

According to the Qur’an,

“Everyone on it [i.e., the earth] is ephemeral, yet lasting is the Face of your Lord, Majestic and Munificent” (Qur’an 55:26, 27).

Therefore, those who seek the “Face” of God are in fact seeking what is everlasting, whereas the others are seeking things that are transient in essence, if not in time.

Continuity of IRADAH

It is mentioned by Kh^waja Nasir al-Din al-Tusi and other scholars—May Allah send His blessings upon them—that *iradah* ends upon reaching the beloved. The reality is, however, that *iradah*, like other virtues acquired on the spiritual journey to God, does not vanish upon reaching the destination; rather, it will be perfected. When the *iradah* reaches its perfection, it becomes a source of generation, as we mentioned earlier.

Human beings are either ascending or descending. Like ascent, descent is also a motion that requires *iradah*. The discussion above was about the *iradah* of ascending, not descending. This *iradah* seeks God Most High, His attributes of perfection and beauty, and His beautiful names:

“To Him ascends the good word, and He elevates
righteous conduct” (Qur’an 35:10).

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