

The Real Obstacle

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This discussion focuses on what might be called "the obstacle". Meaning, the obstacle which is in the way of Islaam developing here and elsewhere as it should develop. The intent behind this topic is to elaborate on some of the fundamental conditions that are necessary for the Muslim Ummah to achieve what Allaah has made them responsible to achieve in this life.

Among these fundamental principles is the principle of taqwaa. This is a term with which many people are familiar. Taqwaa is usually translated as the fear of Allaah, of having this quality. It comes from an Arabic verb, waqa'a yaqee, which means to protect oneself. A shield is a wiqaayah coming from the same verb, something to protect yourself with.

Taqwaa also becomes the basis by which people are considered superior to others in Islaam. Allaah subhaanahu wa ta`aalaa in the Qur'aan has informed us that he has favored some people over others. Sustenance is an example. In 16:81, Allaah says, "Allaah has favored some of you over others in sustenance." This is reality. That is, in this life people are not all equal. Allaah has favored some over others in a variety of different capacities. However these favors are part of the tests of this life.

They are not favors on the basis of which we should feel proud or we should feel superior because feelings of pride and superiority are cursed. They are something hated in Islaam. As the Prophet has said, "Whoever has a mustard seed worth of pride in his heart will never enter paradise." Pride is something which is particularly despised in Islaam. This is so to such an extent that if we were to identify, within the Islamic context, an original sin, that original sin would be pride.

Pride, of course, was the sin of Satan when he was commanded by Allaah to bow before Adam, along with the other angels, he refused to bow, and when Allaah asked him, not because Allaah did not know, but When Allaah asked him why he refused to bow to bring what was inside of him, Satan replied that "You made me from fire and made him from clay. I am better than him, because you made me from fire and you made him from clay."

Of course, when we look at issues of racism and nationalism, we see similar feelings. People feel they are better than others because they belong to a particular race, or because they belong to a particular nationality. These feelings obviously have no place in Islaam at all, feelings which are fundamentally opposed to the teachings of Islaam with regards to Allaah creating mankind from a single soul, dividing them into various tribes and nations, as Allaah explained, in order that human beings may know each other.

In that verse, Allaah goes on to identify what in fact is the basis under which certain people are considered superior to others, objectively, in the sight of Allaah . He said that the most noble of persons in the sight of Allaah are those who have greater taqwaa. Allaah has therefore defined that as being the factor which elevates people over others. As such, Allaah advises us that we should not wish for those things in which He has favored some over others.

Taqwaa is not something which Allaah favors some over others in the sense that he gives so and so taqwaa and He does not give so and so taqwa. Taqwaa is earned. He gives so and so much money and he gives so and so less money, but taqwaa is something which we earn by an act of faith. In the material world what Allaah has favours us with is grants which He gives, trusts which He puts in our hands and as such he has said, "Do not wish for what Allaah has favored some of you over others." [4:32]

That is, we should not wish for those things in which Allaah has favored some of us over others, because Allaah, knowing the capacities of people, has given them certain tests which are suitable for them. We may desire these things but if we had them they may be beyond our capacity so Allaah advises us not to wish for them. Of course, they may look as though they would be nice and good, however we can not predict what the end result will be for us. Allaah has destined for us to have what we have because that is what is suitable. The Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam has reinforced this in the hadeeth found in Bukhari and Muslim, in which he said "look at those below you and not those above you. It is better for you so that you do not deny Allaah's blessings upon you."

Look at those below you. This means, in the material world, Allaah favors some over others materially. Don't look at those who have been favored over you, because it will only create in your heart discontent and jealousy, which can destroy your own deeds. Good deeds that you intend to do can be destroyed by these feelings, so we are advised not to look to those above us who have been favored over us.

Instead we look to those below us, because no matter what circumstance we find ourselves in, there are always some people who are below us economically, in greater difficulty and hardship. By doing so, we will realize that, yes, we are not so badly off after all. Allaah has favored us in this way and that way and the other way, and in thinking so we will protect ourselves from Allaah's displeasure.

The Prophet Muhammad sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam had said on the final pilgrimage, as well as on other occasions when he spoke about the halal being clear and the haram being clear, pointing to his heart, that taqwaa is in the heart, fundamentally. Meaning that it is not something which one can measure. I cannot measure your level of taqwaa, you cannot measure my level of taqwaa. We may judge in general by the outer actions of people saying that well so and so does not seem to have very much taqwaa because they are doing a lot of things which are displeasing to Allaah and so and so seems to have more taqwaa because he or she seems to be doing a lot of things which are pleasing to Allaah.

However these are superficial judgments, we really don't know what is going on inside of a person. There was a particular incident which is recorded in Saheeh

Muslim, during the battle of Khaibar, `Umar was quoting the people as saying so and so is a martyr. People who had been killed were lying on the battlefield. `Umar was walking with the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam and saying as people were saying that this one is a martyr, that one is a martyr. He came across a person and said so and so is a martyr. The Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam said "By no means, I have seen him in hell in a cloak which he took from the spoils dishonestly." He then told `Umar ibn al Khattab, "Go `Umar announce to the people three times that only the true believers will enter paradise."

This hadeeth serves to clarify the point of who truly believes and who doesn't. Normally we would assume that the person who gives his life for the sake of Allaah, that this is an ultimate act of taqwaa, giving one's own life for the sake of Allaah in jihaad. However this individual was fighting not for the sake of Allaah, in fact he was fighting for the spoils of war and as such, when he had an opportunity to steal, to take more than his share from the spoils, he stole.

His act, though on the outside, led everyone, including `Umar ibn al Khattab, to judge the man to be a martyr possessing among the highest of levels of taqwaa, the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam said that he saw him in hell. This is to let us know that taqwaa is not something that we can ultimately judge from outside, it is something which is an internal factor.

When we look at the various practices and teachings of Islaam with regards to acts of worship, we find most of them, if not all, guiding people towards this state of taqwaa. For example, with regards to fasting, Allaah subhaanahu wa ta`aalaa is saying, "O you who believe, fasting has been prescribed for you as it was for those before you in order that you may be of those who have taqwa."

This concept of taqwaa, wherein one seeks to protect oneself from the wrath of Allaah by doing the things which are pleasing to Him, one can only do so if one is conscious of Allaah. This is why the term taqwaa is also expressed in English as God-consciousness. And when we look with regards to salaah, we find Allaah saying, "Establish the prayer for my remembrance." So salaah, and virtually all aspects of `ibadaah, serve to keep us in a state of consciousness of Allaah in that when a person is conscious of Him, aware that He is watching, then that person would not seek to do the things which would not be pleasing to Allaah. It is when we forget Allaah that Satan finds the opening, he is able to approach us, suggest evil and we fall into evil.

In the end, we are in that state of constant struggle between the remembrance of Allaah and the forgetfulness of Allaah. Remembrance of Allaah ensures righteousness, forgetfulness of Allaah opens the door for sin. Taqwa is therefore a concept having to do with the remembrance of Allaah, fearing Allaah, protecting ourselves from the wrath of Allaah. All of this is related to taqwaa and all of it represents the goal or the basic principle, which Islaam seeks to develop in us and which, ultimately, is the foundation of righteousness.

When a person develops these principles, or works towards them, their achievement earns one the status of being a friend of Allaah. Those are the friends of Allaah. In common belief a friend of Allaah is walee, or waliyullah, this is the term used by Allaah in the Qur'aan and the Prophet in his Sunnah. This term is, however, also

translated in common parlance as saint. But in fact from the Islaamic point of view, we have no saints. And the qualities or the things which distinguish the so-called saint in the common people's eyes is that such an individual performs miracles.

However from the Islaamic perspective the friend of Allaah is one who has developed taqwaa. As Allaah said in Soorah Yunus, 10:63, "Behold certainly no fear and no grief shall overcome the awliyaa' of Allaah, the friends of Allaah, those who believe and have taqwaa." These are the friends of Allaah.

The Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam has explained this in more detail. As is always the case when we go to the Qur'aan, we have to look to see what the Sunnah has to say on the various issues that are addressed in the Qur'aan. For it is really in the Sunnah that we find the details identified for us. And there we find a particular hadeeth reported in both al-Bukhari and Muslim, in which the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam quotes something to us from Allaah. This hadeeth is reported from Abu Hurairah and he quotes the Prophet Muhammad as saying, "Verily Allaah Almighty said, 'Whoever seeks to harm a friend of mine, I have declared a war upon him.'" This is the status of the walee of Allaah, the friend of Allaah, that whoever seeks to harm that individual, Allaah has declared war against that person. This is obviously a state which we all should seek, this is ultimate protection.

Allaah subhaanahu wa ta`aalaa goes on to explain through the words of the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam, in this hadeeth qudsi, meaning that it is not from the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam himself, he is actually conveying to us the words of Allaah. Allaah goes on to say that "My servant does not come closer to Me by anything more beloved to Me than the things which I have made compulsory for him." That is, to come closer to Allaah, to achieve the state of friendship, of being a friend of Allaah, the route to it is through the basic compulsory things which Allaah has set. Anyone who has not established this can never be a friend of Allaah. In other words, there are no shortcuts to taqwaa.

There are people who offer shortcuts. You do this, if you say that, and you will be there. But Allaah explains that the only route is through the compulsory things. He goes on to say that the slave, after doing the compulsory things, continues to come closer to Allaah by doing voluntary acts of worship until Allaah loves him.

Each and every one of the compulsory acts of worship has a voluntary aspect to it. The compulsory is supposed to engender in us, should develop in us a desire to do the voluntary, because the voluntary, when a person is completing voluntary aspects of worship, then their acts of worship are transformed from mere ritual into a way of life. They become part and parcel of a person's lifestyle.

Salaah is compulsory five times daily, but then we have what we call sunnah prayers before and after and also a variety of others. For example, the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam had said concerning salaatul istikhaarah that whenever we have an issue to deal with and have to make a decision, we should make two rak`aat and make this du`aa. Voluntary salaah for us to do include witr and tahajjud at night. All of these different voluntary acts, when made a part of our life, built out of the compulsory, allow salaah to take on a living quality. It is shifted from the level of ritual to the level of lifestyle.

Similarly with fasting, one fasts the month of Ramadaan because it is compulsory. The goal is not just that we fast Ramadaan every year, but that fasting becomes a way of life for us. The Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam encouraged us to fast six days in Shawwal. Combine that with Ramadaan and you get the reward of fasting the whole year. This still leaves us with the middle three days of every lunar month, the 13th, 14th, 15th; then he used to fast on Mondays and Thursdays, as he said, "Mondays and Thursdays the gates of paradise are open." These are some of the voluntary fasts that we are encouraged to complete. What we are trying to develop therefore, is a consistent attitude towards fasting, where fasting is something that we are doing on a regular basis. Fasting is developing self-restraint, personal control over desires, whether for food, or for sexual relations, or control over our tongues. All of this, this control is not something that we need only one month in a year, it is something that we need throughout the year. This does not become a reality until fasting becomes a way of life for us.

Similarly zakaah is compulsory on a yearly basis, once a year. However, again, zakaah is there to develop in us an attitude towards sadaqa, develop in us generosity, where it is something which is automatic. Whenever we have an opportunity to share with others, to help others, we reach out. This is a way of life, these are the aspects of taqwaa. We develop this through the implementation of the fundamental principles of Islaam and then build on top of them the voluntary acts of worship. Allaah then went on in the hadeeth quoted by the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam to say that when a person acts this way then Allaah will answer any prayer that he asks, and if such a person seeks Allaah's protection, Allaah will protect him.

If we seek the love of Allaah - and Allaah loves those who are His friends, as well as those who in general do good, but there is a special love for those who are His friends - then we have to attain and achieve that love through establishing the things which are compulsory for us. That's the bottom line.

And Allaah had said in the Qur'aan, clarifying this point, saying, "If you love Allaah, then follow me (the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam), and Allaah will love you." Following him is by doing the things which are compulsory, then building on top of it the recommended acts so that they become a way of life. Now once that becomes a reality, then in fact we will achieve happiness in this life. This is the bottom line to happiness, something that everybody struggles for.

Materialist society offers a variety of different paths to achieve happiness. However, in reality, we should be aware that the happiness achieved by material pastimes is limited - holidays, for instance, begin and end. The car runs for so many years and it breaks down. A house may be nice at one time, then it may become less attractive or inadequate.

The things which are associated with happiness in this life, material things, are passing things. Once you have them then you seek other material things because in fact this happiness is only a fulfillment of a physical desire. And when you fulfill a physical desire, there are other desires to replace it soon afterwards.

And even that physical desire, when you fulfill it, it is likely to increase itself in the same area. As the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam has said, "If a man were given

a valley of gold, he will desire another one." In the West we say, the grass is always greener on the other side, this is our desire. There is no end.

The Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam has said, our desire does not end until we are in the grave. We can never achieve happiness through fulfillment of material desires. Happiness only comes with taqwaa. As Allaah subhaanahu wa ta`aalaa says, "It is only with the remembrance of Allaah that the hearts find rest."

When a person achieves taqwaa, then his or her heart comes to rest, meaning that they are not driven constantly to want more. Whenever problems arise they are not in a state of confusion and fear and doubt because their hearts are at rest. They understand the vicissitudes of life, the ups and the downs, they understand that it is part of the test, that ultimately the whole of their life is reward, blessings. As the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam has said, the whole of a believer's life is good, and this is only the case of a true believer, if a good comes to him, he thanks Allaah and Allaah rewards him for that good, he doesn't forget Allaah with it. And if harm comes to him, a calamity strikes, he is patient and Allaah again rewards him for it.

The Prophet mentions the whole of life, because life is between these two, isn't it? Calamity and success. Difficulty and ease. As Allaah says in the Qur'aan, "With every difficulty comes ease". What happens is that both sides of the coin are tests, in the good times, when ease is there, it's a test. Do we become so happy with our success that we forget Allaah and our responsibility, or do we thank Allaah remembering that it is really from Allaah, even though yes, we strove, we tried, but ultimately achieving that was from Allaah, because we cannot guarantee the results of any of our acts. We can strive, we can decide, make decisions, we can move, but whether we are successful in our efforts or not this is according to the destiny of Allaah, what Allaah grants us. If we get something, this is a blessing of Allaah so remember that it is a blessing, thank Allaah and whatever good is in there we try to share with others.

In a time of difficulty, we realize yes, it is a result of some evil that we have done and whatever harm befalls us, whatever pain we feel, it is a purification for our sins, so it is about being patient. We patiently bear it knowing that it is not going to last forever, calamity, difficulty does not come to a person and just remains, but it is raised after some time, so if we are patient then Allaah rewards us even in the time of calamity. But as the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam said, patience is exercised at the time of calamity, not afterwards.

On one occasion when he said that statement, he had passed by a woman who was crying, tears, screaming, wailing. He asked the woman what the problem was and advised her to control herself. She didn't know who he was so she turned to him and said what do you know what has befallen me, it has not befallen you, you don't know. Maybe, in other words, if this happened to you, maybe you would be screaming just like me, maybe even worse. So the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam went on. This obviously was someone he could not communicate with at that moment. Then other people told her, that was the Prophet of Allaah. So she ran to him and said, "sorry, sorry...I shouldn't do this, I shouldn't have said this..." Patience is at the time of calamity. That is when patience is required.

Keeping this in mind, we need to approach our worship with renewed vigor. After we have been Muslims for a while or after we have returned to Islaam, sometimes it is very easy to fall back into a routine. When obligations are done routinely, again though we might be fulfilling the ritual, the real reward is lost because it is only when we do that ritual with full fervor, really from our heart, sincerely, that we are getting reward. Otherwise, just the physical movements of salaah, fajr, dhuhur and `asr, these remove the obligation of prayer but do not earn for us reward.

Without sincerity in our worship we don't grow, and we should constantly be seeking growth, because none of us has prayed the perfect prayer. This means that there is room for improvement, constantly. We know that there is so much more we can do, so we should strive to look back in our prayer and ask ourselves to what degree are we in fact praying as we should. The Prophet Muhammad sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam said, "Pray as you saw me praying," but he is not only talking about the physical movement, which is a part of it, he is also talking about the spiritual aspect of that prayer.

He is encouraging us to try to seek fundamentally that complete prayer. This is what we have to work for. And whenever we lose that desire to work for it, then we know that we are in trouble, we have slipped backwards, we have to constantly check ourselves and step up again.

The same is true with fasting, the first time we fasted in Ramadaan. Whether it is for those of us who have converted to Islaam or those of us who reverted by becoming aware of their Islaam again, we know that the first fast, based on a conscious choice, had a certain greatness and power that each subsequent fast seems to have lost. In fact we should be going from strength to strength. We should be striving to maintain that level. It is maintainable, not as a constant, there will always be ups and downs, that is how our faith is, our taqwaa. Taqwaa is not such that you reach a certain level and you are there 100% all the time. Taqwaa is going up and going down, it increases and decreases. We have to work for that increase, to keep it increasing. Fundamentally, what increases taqwaa are righteous deeds, and what decreases it are evil deeds.

That is the bottom line, there are no secrets in Islaam on how to increase taqwaa. There is no secret formula. It is very clear and well-known that righteous deeds increase taqwaa. To do a righteous deed is to consciously seek that which is pleasing to Allaah. We should constantly be seeking the pleasure of Allaah. Naturally that means increasing our awareness of Allaah. When we fall into evil, when we are weakening our faith, the wrongful act itself weakens our faith, because what is connected with it is forgetfulness of Allaah and what comes with that forgetfulness ultimately is misery, a state of misery.

As we have said, with the remembrance of Allaah comes true happiness, the happiness that can remain with us, happiness in the sense of contentedness which can remain with us through times of ease as well as times of difficulty.

What comes with forgetfulness of Allaah is a state of misery, it is a state where we are mostly concerned with material things, trying to fulfill our endless quest for them, trying to achieve happiness through them and being incapable of doing so.

This is why Allaah says in the Qur'aan, "Whoever turns away from my remembrance will find himself, or herself, in a miserable life". And the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam emphasized that by saying, "The slave or worshipper of the Dirham and Deenaar (in our context, the Dollar; the worshipper of money), will always be miserable." One who makes money the entire purpose of life will never be satisfied, he said the more they have they more they want. Also, when they attain so much they cannot use it because they are worried about people trying to steal it. Therefore, there is just a constant state of turmoil that a person gets caught up in. That's the state of those who have forgotten Allaah.

We must always therefore strive to establish the fundamentals. We cannot build closeness to Allaah without the fundamentals. If the fundamentals are not in order, then no matter what additional things we do, they will not bring us closer to Allaah. We cannot give precedence to secondary acts over the fundamental acts as in the case, for example, of salaah al fajr.

We have the practice among some people that if they come to the masjid and the jam`aah has begun, they will still seek to do the two rakah sunnah before joining the jama'ah, believing that this sunnah is a sunnah mu'akkadah - an emphasized sunnah that the prophet Muhammad sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam never left. It is true, he never left these sunnah, even when he was traveling, when he would drop all of the sunnah, he would always pray the two rakkah before fajr, emphasizing that it is very strongly recommended.

However if the compulsory prayer has begun then this is not the time to do those sunnah. The Prophet sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam had said whenever the compulsory prayer has been called for no other prayer is acceptable except that prescribed prayer. There is a principle drawn from that in Islaamic law, that you do not give precedence to sunnah over fard, voluntary over the compulsory.

We always have to build our base first and foremost, by concentrating on the compulsory. This is where our greatest emphasis should be. And the sunnah is in addition, to help us. If we look at sunnah practices they are there to help us with the compulsory. They help to fill the void created by laxity or deficiencies in our compulsory and at the same time give us more fervor and prepare us in the best manner for the compulsory. When we do sunnah before the fard, what are we doing is preparing ourselves to deal with the fard. This is why it is important to keep that sunnah there to help us, because if you jump straight into the fard coming out of a work situation, usually you are carrying all of your environment, all of your experiences there with you.

Whereas if you do sunnah first, you have to start bringing yourself into a correct frame of mind. This is worship. This is why we are instructed whenever we go to the masjid we should pray two rak`ahs before sitting down. When you sit down, your friend next to you, you start talking about this and that and the other - you forget you are in the masjid. By praying before sitting down, you put yourself in that proper frame of mind, help prepare yourself for the compulsory.

The two are there, side by side, but our primary emphasis should be on the compulsory. With all the various acts which we are trying to build on top of that, by

engaging in the voluntary, inshaa' Allaah we will achieve that status, that high status that Allaah has identified as being a "friend of Allaah". This is something worthy for each and everyone of us to seek.