

A person is silhouetted against a bright sunset sky, standing on a dark cliff edge. The sky is filled with warm, golden light and scattered clouds. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

THE Tranquil SOUL

*Practical Steps for Achieving
Happiness and Success*

ABBAS AL HUMAID

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Practical Steps for Achieving Happiness and Success

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OTHER PUBLICATIONS BY THIS AUTHOR:

1. Islamic Strategy – How to Participate in the Development of the Muslim Nation
2. How to Plan Your Career - Develop your Business Portfolio
3. The Journey of a Toiler (Novel)
4. Introduction to Shi'a Islam



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Prologue

The complexity of contemporary life, its rapid tempo, its ever-accelerating rate of change, its relentless and intense orientation towards materialism, sex, lust and sensual temptations and the falling apart of social and familial life have led to the widespread increase of psychiatric illnesses across the world.

According to Lutfi Abdil Aziz al Sharbini¹, figures released by the World Health Organization indicate an enormous increase in psychiatric illnesses across the world due to a number of interacting factors. Such illnesses are affecting large numbers of people at various stages of life and from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and they are leading to the deterioration and suffering of individuals, families, and communities.

In this regard, al Sharbini mentions that these psychiatric illnesses affect more than one half of the world; one third of people have anxiety, 7% depression, 1% schizophrenia, 3%

¹ http://www.almostshar.com/web/Subject_Desc.php?Subject_Id=1055&Cat_Id=5, (14 June 2016)

obsessive compulsive disorder, and the rate of suicide due to depression is approaching 800 thousand cases per year.

In view of this grim situation, self-help books and activities for combating anxiety and depression seem wholly inadequate for improving outcomes and helping people, despite the huge sales of this kind of literature and its popularity among people.

Writers of these books offer the best advice they know to help people. Sometimes they succeed, and people find them useful for treating their problems and altering their fates; but these writers, at the end of the day, remain people, and are limited in their knowledge of human beings.

Using simple logic, you know that if you purchased a car and then did not maintain it properly - the way the manufacturer recommended in the manual - then you, not the manufacturer, would be the reason for any problem that arose in the car. Even in such a case, you would rush the car to the manufacturer's garage to fix the problem and follow their advice.

If you went around asking other users of the same make of car and following their advice, despite it being contrary to the recommendations of the manufacturer, then you would be regarded by wise people as an imbalanced person and would

end up bearing full responsibility for the damages in the car as a result.

By the same token, Allah created us; He knows our make-up and knows what will bring happiness or misery to our lives, not just in this life, but in all of the coming worlds. **“And We have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein”** (50:16). He, glory be to Him, did not leave us to guess our way out: **“Does man think that he will be left neglected?”** (75:36). He left us a guidebook that outlines the way we should maintain ourselves: **“This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and have approved for you Islam as religion.”** (5:3). On top of that, He warned us of the consequences of not following His guidebook and brought to our attention that as a result, we would be afflicted with innumerable problems both as individuals and societies: **“So whoever Allah wants to guide - He expands his breast to [contain] Islam; and whoever He wants to misguide - He makes his breast tight and constricted as though he were climbing into the sky. Thus does Allah place defilement upon those who do not believe,”** (6:125), and also said **“And whoever turns away from My remembrance - indeed, he will have a depressed life, and We will gather him on the Day of Resurrection blind”** (20:124).

Yet, despite all these warnings from our creator, we seek refuge in people just like us, who do not know how even we came to this world and who created us. In fact, some of them believe we came to existence by chance and that nature is in control of the universe. Would it not be strange to ask these people how we are supposed to take care of ourselves? **“And if you obey most of those upon the earth, they will mislead you from the way of Allah. They follow not except assumption, and they are not but falsifying”** (6:116).

When I started facing challenges in life, I was not familiar with any of these self-help books. I faced these challenges, as I reflected in my novel *The Spiral Life*, with “what my humble understanding can comprehend of the wonderful values, concepts, and practices of Islam that are embedded in the Islamic texts and embodied in our Islamic doctrines... These concepts and techniques have enabled me to enjoy happiness and peace of mind in a life that is like a raging ocean, with increasingly violent waves.”

When, later on, I read some of these self-help books, I found they contain a small fraction of the techniques and concepts we have in the Islamic literature. What’s more, some of the techniques and values in the self-help books are in contradiction to what Allah called for: **“Does He who created not know, while He is the Subtle, the Acquainted?”** (64:14).

The aim of this book is to present the divine Islamic concepts, values and techniques that, when practiced and realized, can help us live happily and safely both in this life and the afterlife.

Before we start, to avoid any misunderstanding, I would like to stress that Islam does not prohibit enjoyment of life; on the contrary, Islam encourages us to live fully: **“It is He who made the earth tame for you - so walk among its slopes and eat of His provision - and to Him is the resurrection”** (67:15). Aversion to life will deprive us of the opportunity to improve and integrate ourselves: **“O you who have believed, respond to Allah and to the Messenger when he calls you to that which gives you life”** (8:24). Allah calls upon us to enjoy the good things in life: **“Say, “Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has produced for His servants and the good [lawful] things of provision?” Say, “They are for those who believe during the worldly life [but] exclusively for them on the Day of Resurrection”** (7:32). He calls upon us to live life in reality and not according to the illusions of our lust and covetous desires, those that look deceptively beautiful due to the act of Satan.

It is good to entertain ourselves every now and then, in our spare time, and to share the joy of PlayStation and similar pursuits with our friends; however, if the game takes over and we cannot stop playing, resulting in us neglecting our duties or

work, then this is a pathological state and a sort of loss against which Allah warned us.

To get the best out of this book, I recommend that you begin by reading my novel *The Spiral Life*, though a few sections from that novel are quoted here without any reference being made.

Who Are You?

Let me ask you - do you know who you are, or what are you? You are a human being, but do you realize what does it means to be a human being? The human being is the greatest creature ever to exist; it is the center of the universe. Allah made humans His successors because of the qualities of free will and awareness that humans enjoy. The human being has attributes that make them unique in this status - attributes that were not even granted to the angels, despite their desire for them. Allah made the angels and all other creatures submissive to humans to help them in their path towards Allah: **“And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority." They said, "Will You place upon it one that causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?" Allah said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know," (2:30).** You are the human being that Allah honored and for whom He made all the angels kneel. The sin of Satan was that he refused to kneel for man and envied him for his God-given status. He was egotistical, and hence deserved his everlasting damnation: **“[So mention] when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I am going to**

create a human being from clay (71). So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My [created] soul, then fall down to him in prostration (72). So the angels prostrated - all of them entirely (73). Except Iblees; he was arrogant and became among the disbelievers (74),” (38:71-74).

You are not just any individual; you are the chosen one out of trillions of sperm and ova that competed to the death to make you up. You are THE ONE.

But wait a minute; inherently, you are nothing. You are nothing but deficiency, insufficiency and nihility, and whatever glory you have is given to you by virtue of your relation to Allah and you being His effect and creature. It is because He is your God, Lord, and Owner, and because you can get in touch with Him directly whenever and wherever you are, and because He is in perpetual contact with you and is nearer to you than the veins in your neck.

Your esteem is not inevitable; rather, it is tied to your choices and decisions in life. You can increase it, or you can degrade your status to become the meanest of all, equal to Satan in his lowliness and meanness - or even meaner.

Everything is linked to two axes, the first measuring your view of life and existence - the way you think and what you believe - and the second measuring the responses you make in life.

These two axes interact to a great degree, but your creed and doctrines remain the backbone that determines your fate: **“To Him ascends good speech, and righteous work raises it...”** (35:10). We shall examine these axes in more details in the coming chapters.

What Is Your Cosmic View?

Probably the main reason you are reading this book is that you are searching for ways to attain happiness and tranquility in your life. The question we are asking here is: Are these the goals of human beings according to the divine manual created for man? Or are they no more than part of the greater goal we are to pursue and for which we are created, much like pursuing Paradise? When you want to buy a car, for example, you may look for safety, luxury, and spatial capacity, but these do not represent your ultimate goal in acquiring the car, which is to commute from one point to another. If you lived in a desert area, you would likely turn down even the safest, most luxurious and spacious car if it was not also a four-wheel drive.

“To be a successful man or woman,” is a response uttered by some of us when we think about our goal in life – and this is relatively true. It is also true that the pursuit of success and achievement is the driver for human motion; however, if we take a moment to reflect on the meaning of success, we find that success has no independent meaning, but is always measured in relation to a specific goal we wish to achieve.

Illusions and inherited false notions portray life to us in an incorrect way - and that's before we even consider Satan, who misses no opportunity to suggest to us erroneous notions and illusions as standards of success.

In her bestseller *Thrive*, Arianna Huffington highlights the two classic measures of success in today's society: money and power. Based on her personal experience, she believes we need a third metric to define success - one that also takes into account our wellbeing, our ability to draw on our intuition and inner wisdom, our sense of wonder and our capacity for compassion and giving.

However, are money and power real measures of success? Would this not mean that most of the great people throughout history - those who managed to affect the fate of humanity, including the geniuses and prophets - would be losers according to this scale? On the other hand, what about those who have no financial wealth, but who are more happy and tranquil than many of the world's most wealthy and powerful people?

Even the notion of happiness, about whose desirability for human beings no two people would disagree, has been contaminated by fallacious ideas and notions. One might be tempted to think it is all relative; happiness may be money to

one person, fame to another, knowledge to a third person and capacity to give and compassion to a fourth. But is it really like this? Is success relative; different from one person to the next? Or is there a realistic, rigid and existential truth that determines how happiness can be achieved by humans, whoever that human is, much like the truth that a thirsty person cannot quench their thirst with anything other than water, and a hungry man cannot reach satiety without eating?

The horrifying spread of psychological turmoil in mankind and the scarcity of happy people are clearly indicative of the fact that realizing happiness is not a relative matter, but an external and real truth. The fact that we are oblivious to this truth is what brings about the haphazardness that we live in and the wide spread of psychiatric illnesses.

Allah, the creator of man, life, and the universe, tells us decisively in the Quran that success and happiness consist in one external fact, namely heading straight on the path of Allah, and that anything else is merely an absolute loss and failure. Contemplate the words of Allah in the following verse: **“And whoever obeys Allah and His Messenger has certainly attained a great attainment,”** (33:71), and, **“Every soul will taste death, and you will only be given your [full] compensation on the Day of Resurrection. So he who is drawn away from the Fire and admitted to Paradise has**

attained [his desire]. And what is the life of this world except the enjoyment of delusion,..." (3:185). In contrast to that, listen to His words in the following verse: **"By the afternoon, (1) Indeed, mankind is in loss, (2) Except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to patience,...(3)"** (103:1-3). It's not just about happiness and success in the afterworld, but also in this life. Consider the following verse, **"And whoever turns away from My remembrance - indeed, he will have a depressed life, and We will gather him on the Day of Resurrection blind."** (20:124), and **"So whoever Allah wants to guide - He expands his chest to [believe in] Islam; and whoever He wants to misguide - He makes his chest tight and constricted as though he were climbing into the sky. Thus does Allah place defilement upon those who do not believe,..."** (6:125).

Uprightness in the path of Allah is only a means to an end, the end being the goal of creation, and all forms of benevolence and happiness, including Paradise, are just byproducts and manifestations of this goal. This ultimate goal is to get as close to Allah as possible: **"Indeed to Allah we belong and indeed to Him we will return,"** (2:156). He talks about the goal of creation in the following verse: **"Then did you think that We created you uselessly and that to Us you**

would not be returned?" (23:115). The notion of “proximity to Allah” represents the strategic vision of man in this life; it is very hard to measure it objectively. This would require us to shed light on this strategic vision, which would in turn enable us to outline our objective goals in life in the context of this vision.

Perhaps most of the Muslim readers of this book will not reject this strategic vision - not theoretically, at least - but our established convictions and mental maps will have us believe otherwise. As Huffington said in *Thrive*: “Over time, our society’s notion of success has been reduced to money and power.” This becomes especially true when we see clearly that those with money and power have all the pleasures that we do not, the pleasures that enable them to be happier, so far as we can understand it.

This established conviction controls our views and responses in life and hence the magnitude of our happiness or misery. For this reason, it is of paramount importance to first discuss the extent of overlap between the delusions that give rise to our mental patterns of behavior and the various layers of surrounding reality, before we go onto further discussion and analysis of the strategic vision of proximity to Allah.

Realism in Life

Illusion and Reality

The truth about many of our pressing needs in life is that they are just illusions or distorted facts, whether these be related to desires, emotions or reactions.

This deceptive appearance is the work of the evil-enjoining self and the seduction of Satan, and that is why Allah commanded us to consider Satan an enemy: “[Satan] said, **“My Lord, because You have put me in error, I will surely make [disobedience] attractive to them on earth, and I will mislead them all,...”** (15:39), and also in **“Whom Allah has cursed. For he had said, “I will surely take from among Your servants a specific portion (118) And I will mislead them, and I will arouse in them [sinful] desires, and I will command them so they will slit the ears of cattle, and I will command them so they will change the creation of Allah .” And whoever takes Satan as an ally instead of Allah has certainly sustained a clear loss (119) Satan promises them and arouses desire in them. But Satan does not promise them except delusion (120)”** (4:118-120).

When we see kids make desperate efforts to win a videogame and treat it like a real life or death matter, we feel it is childish and ridiculous - but then, we glorify rich people who make desperate efforts to increase their wealth in much the same way.

This illusion is the driver that makes us desperate to grow our wealth, because practically, we do not have that money; the bank does, and hence, that money has no more value than the scores a child earns in a videogame.

It is illusion that makes us feel great when we bump into a celebrity or public figure. It is illusion that makes us wear expensive brands to show off and express our self-worth: **“They are not but [mere] names you have named them - you and your forefathers - for which Allah has sent down no authority. They follow not except assumption and what [their] souls desire, and there has already come to them from their Lord guidance,...”** (53:23).

In fact, even our perceptions of our desires are distorted by illusion. A man’s perception of sexual desire, for instance, is greatly amplified by the image he holds deeply in his mind of sex as a symbol of manhood and virility and because we as humans submit to the notion that sex gives one unimaginable and unparalleled pleasure.

This is what Satan wants us to succumb to, and this is what Allah warns us against: “Say, [O Muhammad], “Shall we [believers] inform you of the greatest losers as to [their] deeds? (103) [They are] those whose effort is lost in worldly life, while they think that they are doing well in work (104)” (18:103-104), and “Know that the life of this world is but amusement and diversion and adornment and boasting to one another and competition in increase of wealth and children - like the example of a rain whose [resulting] plant growth pleases the tillers; then it dries and you see it turned yellow; then it becomes [scattered] debris. And in the Hereafter is severe punishment and forgiveness from Allah and approval. And what is the worldly life except the enjoyment of delusion (20)” (57:20).

The importance of realizing this truth lies in the fact that reality will continue to be reality and that illusion will not become real just because we imagine it to be so. You can keep thinking that fire is cold for as long as you want, but it will remain hot, and if you place your hand in it, it will burn you, no matter what you believe.

Levels of Reality:

Our perception and knowledge of reality enables us to handle it in a wise and balanced way and to maximize our benefits and joy in life and minimize pain and suffering.

However, reality does not exist at a single level; rather, it comes in multiple levels and layers. In order to maximize our happiness and joy in life, we have to be able to get a grasp on these levels and deal with them properly.

To better understand this concept, imagine you are relaxing on your bed, in your room, in a ship full of tourists in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Your bed and blanket are the closest forms of material reality to you at this moment and at this particular level of reality, your comfort is determined by the softness and coziness of your bed and blanket.

Your second material level of reality is your room: Its spaciousness, luxury and tidiness determine your happiness at this level. If your room smelled bad, your cozy mattress would not help alleviate your discomfort in this regard.

Your third material level of reality is the ship, the fourth the ocean, the Earth the fifth, and so on. Now imagine your ship is the Titanic, the greatest and most luxurious kind of ship at

that time, and you feel happy and safe, especially with the delusional idea that it is unsinkable. I bet all the happiness you would feel at being aboard such a ship would not equal a fraction of the pain and suffering you would have gone through if you were among the great majority who died in the frigid cold water of the ocean when it hit the iceberg. The ship's crew was not aware of the iceberg because it was at the fourth level of reality, the ocean, and because of the commonly held delusion that the ship was unsinkable. If the crew had been attentive and had not submitted to the grandiose delusion of the unsinkable ship, they may have been able to spot the iceberg in time and avoid the collision. The crew needed to break free of the illusion and see reality in order to save all those innocent souls and maintain their happiness.

Let us imagine that this is what indeed happened and that the Titanic moved on in due course without hitting the iceberg. Is it not possible that the ship would have met a tsunami due to subsurface explosions or due to comets falling nearby (events at the fifth level of reality)?

We cannot perceive this level of reality and prepare for it easily, but that does not change anything; it surrounds us and, like it or not, affects us directly. Let us now expand on the layers of reality around us. The sixth level would be the solar

system, the seventh level the Milky Way galaxy, and the eighth level the entire universe. All these levels are ones we cannot do anything about, and therefore we ignore them.

The next level of reality (formed of several levels, but for the purpose of discussion, we will regard it as one level in this book) surrounds the whole universe, but affects us directly and perpetually during our lives in a huge way. We also affect it more than anything else around us. It is closer to us than our first level of material reality. We call this level “*aalam al Ghaib*” (“The realm of the unseen/unknown”).

The unseen realms to which we will eventually move include the “al Barzakh” and “hereafter” realms, and they are real and existing worlds that surround us. We shape our fate in them directly through our will and interactions in this life. We are soon to meet those worlds, a fact we cannot ignore or afford to forget unless we are simply fools.

Imagine that someone takes a plane to another country and purposefully does not bring their passport. This will be foolish because they will not even be admitted to the plane, let alone their destination.

Similarly, we are headed towards the heavens and shall soon find ourselves at the gates. If we are not carrying with us our “passports”, we will not be allowed in.

There is a reality that is realer still than all of that, one of which no place or time is void, and which is closer to us than we are to ourselves. That reality is Allah: “...and **We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein,...**” (50:16).

Allah is reality, reality is Allah. We are merely his manifestations and creatures, so how could we be blind to his presence? Reflect on this part of the supplication of imam Hussain on the day of *Arafat*: “**How can You be figured out through that whose existence relies on You? Can anything other than You hold a (kind of) manifestation that You lack? and thus it may act as an appearance for You? When have You ever been absent so that You may need something to point to You? When have You ever been far-off so that traces may lead to You?**”

Our lack of attention to this fact causes us to overlook the value of the most beautiful and greatest things available to us and deprives us from enjoying their pleasure and savoring their greatness, and that is why we unwittingly move away from them. How else could we overlook the magnificence and grandness of having real (not illusory) contact with the absolute power, beauty, and greatness of Allah? How could our ongoing communication with Allah and the communication of Allah with us not give us happiness, power and tranquility? Allah is existence itself; He is the beauty, the

grandeur; He is capable of everything, and He created us and everything else, and He loves us very much: **“Blind be the eye that cannot see You watching it and losing is a servant’s deal that does not dedicate a share to the love for You.”** How could we not enjoy and savor the magnificence of the relationship with the greatest apostle Mohammed ^(PBUH) and his household, whom Allah has made the path to Him?⁹

Our realization and understanding of this reality, and our interaction with it on the basis of it being real, is what changes our lives totally in this life and the hereafter and gives it a special meaning and flavor beyond any imagination. This is what the greatest apostle called for in his supplications: **“O Allah, do not make this life the greatest of our concerns, nor the pinnacle of our knowledge,...”**; similarly, in the saying of imam Ali: **“Work for your life as if you will live forever, and work for your hereafter as if you will die tomorrow.”** The way to Allah is nothing other than our capacity to perceive this reality and understand it and deal with it on the basis that it is real. The prophet said, **“That who knows himself, knows his God².”**

The most effective mechanism for developing our capacity to perceive reality is habitual thinking and contemplation, whether on the cosmos and existence, the social and

² *Al Bihar*, 2/32.

humanitarian relations around you or on your emotions, reactions, behavior and whatever decisions you may come to.

Since most of the reality around us is of the *Ghaib*-type (unseen/unknown), and since the knowledge of man is limited - **“And mankind have not been given of knowledge except a little”** (17:85) - we are unable to perceive reality without the help of the great Quran and the supplications narrated by credible sources from among the apostles and the *Imams* of *Ahl al-Bâit*.

Before we go back to discussing our goal in life, I want to highlight the following great verses from the chapter *al Qasas*, which discuss the concept of reality very expressively in their narration of the tale of Qarun: “So he came out before his people in his adornment. Those who desired the worldly life said, "Oh, would that we had like what was given to Qarun. Indeed, he is one of great fortune. But those who had been given knowledge said, "Woe to you! The reward of Allah is better for he who believes and does righteousness. And none are granted it except the patient. And We caused the earth to swallow him and his home. And there was for him no company to aid him other than Allah, nor was he of those who [could] defend themselves. And those who had wished for his position the previous day began to say, "Oh, how Allah extends provision to whom He wills of His servants and

restricts it! If not that Allah had conferred favor on us, He would have caused it to swallow us. Oh, how the disbelievers do not succeed! That home of the Hereafter We assign to those who do not desire exaltedness upon the earth or corruption. And the [best] outcome is for the righteous” (28:79-83).

What Are Our Goals in Life?

Strategic goals help us realize our strategic vision; therefore, to determine our strategic goals in life, we need to look deeper in the divine strategic vision of being close to Allah.

There is no doubt that being close to Allah means real, true, existential proximity and not illusory or analytic proximity. In other words, what matters is the proximity of our servitude to Allah or the extent of our perception and our interaction - in terms of behavior, knowledge, psychology - consciously and subconsciously - with our servitude to Allah. The ultimate goal is to reach a level of servitude and *fana'a* [annihilation]³ of self in the presence of Allah and His love where we see nothing other than the presence of Allah in everything. Imam Ali said, **“I never saw anything without seeing Allah before, after, with, and in it⁴.”**

Servitude to Allah means being liberated from all sort of restrictive chains and from all sorts of darkness and negative feelings, like frustration, fear, anxiety and weakness. It means

³ A Sufi term for a state that involves a breaking down of the individual ego and a recognition of the fundamental unity of God, creation, and the individual self [Translator].

⁴ *Tafseer Mawahib al Wahib* 2/36

breaking free of your worship to yourself so that nothing in the world, big or small, affects you and you remain in total submission to Allah alone. Ponder upon this verse from the Quran: **“Allah is the ally of those who believe. He brings them out from darkness into the light. And those who disbelieve - their allies are Taghut. They take them out of the light into darkness”** (2:257). Allah is the light of the heavens and Earth.

This *al Fana'a* is what imam Ali is talking about in the *al Shabania* supplication: **“O my God, grant me absolute devotion to You”** - but beware: The aim is not to achieve this while you are in seclusion, but while you are living among people and interacting with life to the fullest extent. You will go pass all the challenges life throws at you, while at the same time keeping your focus on Allah and your servitude to Him. It is the delicate balance between feeling positive and social and savoring your bond with Allah.

In *Mustadrak al Sahihain*, *al Khatib al Baghdadi*, and *al Fakhr al Razi*, the Prophet described the **“duel of Ali bin Abi Talib ^(PBUH) with Amro bin Abd Wid on the day of al Khandaq as The best of the worship works of my nation to the day of judgement.”** The Prophet considered the killing of Amro bin Abd Wid by Imam Ali on the day of al Khandaq the best work of worship from the entire Islamic nation, an honor not afforded to Ali's prayers or fasting.

Also contemplate the fact that the deed of Ali that was glorified by Allah in the Quran was his act of giving during his prayers: **“Your ally is none but Allah and [therefore] His Messenger and those who have believed - those who establish prayer and give zakah, and they bow [in worship]”** (5:55). His devotion to Allah during his prayers did not stop him from being aware of the presence of a poor man asking for alms or from giving him his ring, a great act that Allah mentioned in the Quran and linked to the concept of *wilaya* (stewardship) so that we could follow his lead in life and learn the meaning of full devotion to Allah.

The idea is to live a state of full devotion as we eat, sleep, read, work, play, have fun with friends and practice every detail of our lives - and yet none of that should block us from connecting with Allah, and vice versa. There is not opposition between the two states. They are not against each other; rather, one is in line with the other.

It is much like the feelings of a soccer player during the World Cup finals; he enjoys the game and tries to score goals at the same time. The image of the cup keeps him at his peak, inspires him with strength and focus and enhances his performance. There is no conflict between playing soccer and enjoying it at heart, and working hard to win the cup in the tournament.

The same logic applies when you devote yourself fully to Allah and annihilate yourself in Him such that you do not see anything other than Him and that all you aspire for is to win His love and satisfaction. This provides you with an unprecedented divine motivation to live life positively, with total freedom to merge with the worship of Allah.

Allah wants us to enjoy the *mubah* pleasures of life: **“Say, ‘Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has produced for His servants and the good [lawful] things of provision?’ Say, “They are for those who believe during the worldly life [but] exclusively for them on the Day of Resurrection” (7:32).** Not only that, but He urged us to seek it actively: **“It is He who made the earth tame for you - so walk among its slopes and eat of His provision - and to Him is the resurrection” (67:15),** but in moderation and positivity: **“...and eat and drink, but be not excessive. Indeed, He likes not those who commit excess” (7:31).** Our struggle against earthly pleasures embodies our evolution, connectedness with and proximity to Allah: **“O mankind, indeed you are laboring toward your Lord with [great] exertion and will meet Him” (84:6).** The challenge is not to be captivated or attached to our desires and pleasures in life.

It is not just life that Allah wants us to enjoy without being incarcerated by its pleasures, but our own selves. Though

Allah wants us to love and like ourselves, He does not want us to become attached to ourselves. In other words, Allah wants us to be annihilated in Him and to have no entity other than the total realization of our servitude to Him: **“And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me”** (51:56)

How can we develop ourselves to achieve this level of total devotion to Allah?

Beginning with this understanding of the concept of proximity to Allah, we can see that our proximity to Allah is the product of two different but well-connected elements: First, the level of our devotion to Allah, and second, the level of our conscious and unconscious perception of this servitude intellectually, emotionally and behaviorally. If we say that a person’s devotion to Allah is estimated to be one thousand (of whatever units), and their perception of this lies at 60%, then their total perceived servitude is six hundred units. But what is the meaning of the “level of devotion to Allah”? Servitude to Allah is absolute and equal to our existence in every aspect. Servitude to Allah is the same as the existence that is emanated from Allah, and hence our servitude and devotion to Allah is greater and more intense than that of a jellyfish, for example, or any other creature. The closer our existence comes to perfection, and the more good attributes we gain (like knowledge, wisdom, and will), and the more we show

our capabilities and God-given powers, the more manifestations we have of our servitude to Allah, even if we do not realize this.

It is for this reason that when we work on the development of our faculties, skills and capacities and on gaining noble attributes such as generosity, courage, wisdom, purity of self and perseverance, then our servitude to Allah increases by the same order of magnitude. Conversely, if we lose these faculties, knowledge, intuition, courage and clarity of feeling, then we are moving away from Allah: “[He] who created death and life to test you [as to] which of you is best in deed” (67:2).

The second element, our perception of our servitude to Allah (which is one of the most important faculties and existential attributes of mankind), is dependent on how much we practise it in life through submitting to Allah’s commands and doctrines and on how positively we interact with it in life.

Realizing these two elements is the goal we must strive for in life in order to achieve success, transcendence and happiness - not only in this life, but in all the other realms in existence.

We shall discuss these two goals in the rest of the book. We will learn how to achieve them not only in a way that accords with the busy daily life of the toiling individual, but also in a

The Tranquil Soul

way that enables us to achieve happiness and tranquility of the self.

How Are We Formed?

Before discussing how we can practice the two elements of servitude to Allah, it is important to understand how we ourselves are formed.

Contemplate the following verse in the Quran: “[So mention] when your Lord said to the angels, “Indeed, I am going to create a human being from clay (71) So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My soul, then fall down to him in prostration (72)” (38:71-72). When we come to this life, we have two dimensions: A corporeal animal dimension, and a spiritual dimension. Skin color, hair, height, other bodily attributes, intelligence, ability to have fun, courage, all other psychologic and spiritual attributes and the latent capabilities of each dimension are inherited and determined by a set of genes in the sperm and ovum that make up the very first cell in our body.

It is not only the latent attributes and potential with which we come to this life; we also come with a set of ingrained standards and unified values, which include knowing Allah, having a state of attachment to Him, loving Him and servitude to Him. This is what we call *Fitra*.

Our physical attributes are difficult or impossible to change, but our spiritual and psychological attributes - which form the basis for our motion in the realm of *Dunya* (this life) - and our latent potential and ingrained values and standards (“*al Fitra*”) are unfixed and are constantly changing, growing or withering according to our motion, will, knowledge, and the doctrines we believe in. They change in accordance with our view of life and the simple daily behavior we undertake, such as studying, working, playing, sleeping and interacting with friends, family, society and the rest of the cosmos. They change as we think and feel and live every detail of our lives in the manner of an alphabet of our psychological attributes: Knowledge, will, perseverance, wisdom, love, piety, beauty, magnanimity, courage, and certainty, to name just a few from the long list. We may not be able to list all of these attributes because the realm of *Dunya* is of a predominantly material nature, one that is not sufficient to reflect and make apparent all of our spiritual attributes. However, the most important of these attributes, the first and the last, is our perception of our servitude to Allah. We come to this life bearing needs that arise from these two dimensions, the body and the spirit. We need to eat, drink, wear clothes, have fun, love, think, learn, feel pride and so on. We interact with *al-Dunya* and its components and constituent parts in pursuit of fulfilling these needs; we study, learn, search, work, make things, struggle,

and fulfill our needs. At the same time, we develop new needs and requirements and remain in perpetual pursuit of fulfilling these requirements, all the way from cradle to grave.

In order to make a living and live your life without the humiliation of unfulfilled needs, you must study for a long number of years, then work long hours; and in each of these stages - school, college, and work - you will face a variety of situations on a daily basis and will have to make many decisions. This process will determine your attributes and faculties and eventually form what you perceive to be “you”.

You have a certain level of courage that you inherit from your parents, and then you build on it during your life. If you are used to adopting weak and fearful stances, then you are enforce and establish cowardliness and fear in yourself until it becomes part of you. Conversely, if you make a conscious decision to act courageously, you consolidate this attribute in yourself and it becomes part of you. If, however, you have a mixture of behavior, being cowardly on some occasions and courageous on others, then you are add and subtract from your “courage balance” accordingly.

The great apostle said, **“Honesty leads to righteousness and righteousness leads to Paradise. A man remains honest until he is recorded as an honest man with Allah. Lying leads to**

sinfulness and sinfulness leads to the Fire. A man keeps lying until he is recorded as a liar with Allah.” The same process applies to all other spiritual attributes, like knowledge, will, piety, certainty, wisdom, and forbearance.

Path to Allah

In the supplication of *Abi Hamza al Thamali*, Imam Ali Zain Al Abidin said, “O’ Allah! I find the roads of wishes to You wide open,” “And I know that You are for those who ask You in the position of answer,” “And truly traveling to You is short in duration, and You do not veil Yourself from Your creatures unless their own misdeeds would block them from You.”

The path to Allah never ends; the more you walk, the more you feel there is more and that you are just beginning. You might feel you have not even begun, but with time, you will gradually begin to feel quietness and tranquillity permeating your depths. The noise of the events of *Dunya* will start to fade away and your Self will begin to give you its best. Then, you will feel happiness, strength, love, peace and tranquility exploding from within, and this is the moment when you will see nothing but Allah. You won’t even think about the happiness you are feeling; you would happily trade it for one glance of love and satisfaction from Allah to you. All this starts to take place at the very beginning of your path to Allah, let alone once you have traveled some distance along it. I am not

the right person to talk about the path of Allah, but I will try to describe him as much as my humble and deficient knowledge permits. Before that, however, I will make use of this example from the realm of *Dunya*.

Maybe the level of comfort and pleasure a person gets from one thousand dollars a month is ten times more than what they get from one hundred bucks a month, but if they keep on increasing their income steadily, they will, at a certain level of income, reach a plateau of comfort and pleasure after which any further increase will add only a negligible amount of comfort or pleasure. In other words, a person who earns half a million dollars a month will enjoy it the same as if they were earning fifty thousand. This applies to the pleasures of *Dunya*, but not to the pleasure of getting close to Allah. In this regard, there is no threshold for pleasure after which love and pleasure plateaus. In fact, the margin by which pleasure increases with increasing proximity to Allah continues to increase rather than diminish. Those who attain a given level of proximity to Allah will enjoy greater comfort and pleasure than those who have attained a more distant level of proximity, regardless of how close the former become.

Like it or not, there is no human - Muslim or otherwise - and no extant being that does not walk on this path, whether ascending or descending. Movement towards Allah is an

existential reality, and hence when we say “the path to Allah”, we mean our movement towards Him and our gaining proximity to him and to His satisfaction.

The ascending path to Allah continues to infinity, but there are certain milestones along this path. Whenever we reach one of these milestones, we feel a certain qualitative development take place internally, and our cosmic view changes accordingly. According to my humble knowledge, this never-ending path to Allah, including its various milestones or levels, can be divided into two main stages. The first stage of the path involves quantitative and qualitative motion towards Allah. We struggle and gain knowledge, ethics, capacities and faculties, become ascetic in the realm of *Dunya*, make our best efforts to abide by our religion, intuit Allah, bond with Allah’s allies, righteous people and scholars, and work with everything we have to gain the satisfaction of Allah until He becomes the pinnacle of desire in our lives.

At this stage, and with the passage of time, we gradually begin to feel quiet and tranquil inside and the noise and uproar of the *Dunya* starts to fade away. Our Selves begin to give their best performance and we feel internal happiness, strength, love, and peace. We do not see anything other than Allah, we do not think about the happiness we are feeling; we would willingly trade it for just one glance of love and satisfaction from

Allah. He will grant us that, but at a level we can comprehend and handle. This divine glance attracts us to Him; nothing about the glories or miseries of the *Dunya* will ever mean anything to us anymore. We will feel tormented by every moment in our lives that we waste by not working for the satisfaction of the beloved; but this torment is the most beautiful and noble feeling we can feel in the realm of the *Dunya*.

When this state becomes part of us and we no longer see paradise or hell, happiness or misery - that is, all we see is His generous presence - then we have passed the first stage and are commencing the second, the stage of ascension ("*Orooj*") to Allah, where there is no quantitative motion towards Allah, but only a qualitative motion towards Allah, in the heart. In this stage, prophets and infallibles vary: **"Those messengers - some of them We caused to exceed others. Among them were those to whom Allah spoke, and He raised some of them in degree"** (2:253). In this stage, there is no struggle the way we understand the word in the *Dunya*, because nothing else occupies our hearts and minds other than Allah, and our motion towards Allah is determined by the strength of our passion to Him and our capacity to let in His attraction to you.

Recall the saying of the Prophet when he described the fight of Imam Ali on the day of Khandaq - he said it was the best of

the deeds of his entire nation in regards to the Day of Judgement. The act of fighting itself was, so to speak, an “ordinary” thing that could be done by many others, but what made it unique and better than the deeds of an entire nation in regards to the Day of Judgement was the intent and depth of passion for Allah in this one single act.

Common Misconceptions

Regrettably, our current culture involves many common misconceptions that hinder the motion of man towards Allah. For this reason, we must turn away from all the negative thoughts and obsessions that Satan tries to seed in our minds.

Several methods can be used to treat these common misconceptions and Satanic delusions. These include the use of self-suggestion, contemplation on the Quran and the *Shari‘a* scripts.

What follows are some of the common misconceptions:

A Pure, Believing Environment Is Essential

There is a notion that *“the path to Allah is only possible in the pure and devoted culture that is free of sinful temptations; cultures that thrive in the religious schools. Trying to move towards Allah in the societies like our usual ones is almost impossible. Our usual environments are full of glamor and pleasures of Dunya. Our lusts, desires, and delusions tie us up, control our practices and behavior, emotions, reactions*

and depict our mental maps and imaginations. Even if, in a moment of clarity and awareness, we tried to take over our internal desires, the overall social system and our familial requirements will press hard and we will submit to it. The most you can aspire for is to be forgiven by Allah and get into paradise.”

This negative thinking is a declaration of defeat and failure, even before we begin to try. Our subconscious mind submits to this conviction and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, with inevitable eventual failure.

Not only is this belief untrue, it is the total opposite of the truth. Those who grow up in ordinary environments, like us, have greater immunity and are healthier than those who are born and raised in spiritually disinfected environments. Ordinary environments are those that are typical for the growth of mankind and mankind's motion towards Allah. It is in our nature that when we want to achieve something and we face difficulties and obstacles, we are motivated to do better to reach our goals. When we are helpless, we do not become hopeless; rather, we dive inside and mobilize our latent capacities to overcome the challenge.

Do you know what? This interaction and ongoing struggle is the path to Allah. We transcend and rise above it, towards

Him, without even being aware of it: **“O mankind, indeed you are laboring toward your Lord with [great] exertion and will meet it”** (84:6). The idea here is that it is not your feeling of devotion to Allah that determines your proximity to Him, even though it is one of the most important criteria. It is not your insufficiency, it is not your distance from the Dunya; rather, it is your level of wisdom, maturity, knowledge, willpower, and perseverance. It is your nobility, the development of your capacities and your appreciation of beauty. The problem is that the day-to-day culture we feed on and breathe in depicts an image of the devotee who seeks to be close to Allah as monks and scholars, which creates barriers between us and those levels.

I am not saying here that the ambience of the *Hawza*⁵ is not inspiring. What I mean is that dealing with this life, encountering all the bitter and sweet realities it contains and facing its challenges is the fastest way to Allah, if we keep Allah in our sights and work with that goal in mind.

Moreover, whenever we face a challenge or a problem in this ordinary environment, we seek the help of Allah. This is a powerful act of servitude, one that binds us tightly to Allah.

⁵ A religious seminary

In order to maximize the benefits we reap from these challenges and this turmoil, we are required to change our paradigm, our way of thinking about these challenges. Instead of regarding them as obstacles, temptations, and barriers to Allah, let us see them as means and tools for getting closer to Allah; as components of a constitutional program that Allah has created for us to facilitate our march towards Him. Therefore, the road to Allah is not pursued by avoiding these situations, but by positively interacting with them.

Worship of the Free

This misconception consists in the fact that *“humans generally worship Allah and abide by religious doctrines either because they fear punishment (the worship of slaves), or because they desire the award (the worship of the merchants). It is very rare to have among us someone who worships Allah just because he loves Him, which Imam Ali calls (the worship of the free).”*

Perhaps this misconception is even more common than the first one - and its negative effects on the subconscious mind are similar. The fact is that most of us worship Allah because we love Him. The reason we love the great Prophet, the imams of *Ahl al-Bâit* and the allies of Allah is that they are the

people of Allah. The reason for this is our basic make-up and intuition as humans; the love of Allah penetrates our deepest veins, and we cannot help but appreciate the divine beauty and majesty that is reflected in the great Prophet and the imams of *Ahl al-Bâit*. Indeed, the love of Allah is established deep within ourselves, permeates our hearts and controls our feelings, emotions and behavior - despite the misconceptions named at the beginning of this section, which have the potential to interfere negatively with our path to Allah.

Our sizable involvement in material lies and luxurious behavior might form a sort of barrier to this intuitional love and engulf it in thick layers. All we must do, then, is to gradually and gently remove these layers.

The Path to Allah and Our Sins

Another common misconception is that we cannot walk the path to Allah until we stop sinning. Perhaps this incorrect belief prevents the great majority of us from even thinking about the path to Allah, for we know we have many wrongdoings.

However, it is not true. Some wrongdoings and a few instances of bad behavior here and there do not hinder us on

our path to Allah, so long as our general status is aligned in the direction of virtue and servitude.

We can gradually ascend on the path of connectedness and get closer to Him at higher levels even despite the weakness and flaccidity that overwhelms us in regard to certain things, and the weakness of our worship. The Apostle said, **“The Servant [of Allah] may reach, by virtue of his good manners, the great levels of afterlife, and honored states, [despite him] being weak in worship⁶.”**

A person may be afflicted with a tendency for lying or gossiping, God forbid, or may have some other moral issues. These, no doubt, will limit this person’s pace of motion towards Allah, but it will by no means stop them completely. In fact, it may sometimes even push them towards Allah more strongly, thanks to the pain they feel in their consciousness after doing something wrong and then feeling motivated to do better and ask for forgiveness and mercy from Allah.

There are many narrated quotes from Ahl al-Bâit which say that a believer in the state of suffering, with feelings of guilt and the desire to seek repentance from Allah, is better than when they are in the state of *Ojob* (self-admiration) for not having committed any sins. Al Imam al Sadiq said, **“Allah**

⁶ Narrated by al Dhiya'a al Maqdisi in *al Ahadeeth al Mukhtara*.

knew that committing [some] wrongdoings are better for the believer than being in the state of *Ojob* [self-admiration], and if it was not for that, no believer would have been afflicted by any sin ever⁷.”

In another *hadeeth*, “the companions of the apostle said ‘O Messenger of Allah, we fear on ourselves the hypocrisy,’ to which he asked ‘why do you fear that?’ they said ‘when we are with you, you remind us and motivate us, and we forget the [temptations of] life and feel ascetic in it as if we are looking to the realm of the afterlife, paradise and hell. When we leave you and go to our homes and mingle with our families and kids, we forget that state as if we never learned a thing from you. Would you not be concerned that we are becoming hypocrite? The apostle replied ‘No, these are the steps of Satan. He tempts you in this life. By Allah, if you continue on this state you described yourself in, the angles shall shake your hands, and you would walk on water. If you were not having sins and then seek repentance for it, Allah would have created other creatures who do commit sins and repent for it and then Allah forgives them. The believer is tested [by sins] and recurrent on asking forgiveness. Have you not heard the words of Allah in the Quran “Indeed, Allah loves those who are constantly repentant and loves those who purify

⁷ *Al Kafi* 2/313.

themselves," and, "seek forgiveness of your Lord and repent to Him⁸."

The fact is that the more we move towards Allah and get closer to Him, the stronger we get and the more pure, determined, and understanding we become, which makes us more capable of getting rid of our sins and negativities, even though we might not know it.

When we are short of willpower, proximity to Allah and motion towards Him is what we require in order to get rid of our weaknesses. Note this verse: "**...and establish prayer, Indeed, prayer prohibits immorality and wrongdoing**" (29:45).

Yes, there are higher levels of proximity to Allah that we cannot reach before we are purified from our wrongdoings, but these levels are not even imaginable at our day-to-day level of faith. Moreover, once we reach the doorstep of those levels, we will already have had travelled a considerable way towards getting rid of our sins in a natural and spontaneous way.

⁸ *Tafseer al Ayashi* 1/109.

*Īndikâk*⁹ in the Divine Being

Sometimes we succumb to the misconception that in order to get closer to Allah, we have to achieve the state that Imam Ali described in the following *hadeeth*: **“I never saw anything without seeing Allah before and after it, with and in it.”** This is the culmination of human path to Allah and is the ultimate destination towards Him. However, this stage is reached only through the Great Prophet and *Āhl al-Bâit*.

The negative effect of this misconception is that we begin our path to Allah with the certain feeling that we will fail. We may have a (subconscious) belief that reaching this level is improper in terms of our reverence for Imam Ali and hence, our subconscious mind works automatically to prevent us from getting to this goal in the first place. This way of thinking is wrong. Imam Ali did not say this to show his pride, but to guide us and give us a target to work for. This level of faith and certitude comes at the end of the first stage of the path towards Allah and the beginning of the second stage, where a differentiation is made between the righteous ones and the others. I am not saying that this stage is easy to reach; rather, it

⁹ *Īndikak* means “to be rendered indistinguishable in the essence”. Since we do not have a one-word term for it in English, we shall use the Arabic “*Īndikak*”. The adjective for to describe an entity that has undergone *Īndikak* is *mundak* (male) or *mundaka* (female) or *mundakoon* (plural).

is tough, and requires many sacrifices and a lot of effort, but it is certainly possible. How it could not be possible when Allah created us for this particular purpose: **“And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me”** (51:56).

Reaching this stage is possible, not only because Allah created man with the capacity to do this and to intuitively love Him, but also because Allah draws us to Him out of His love for us. What forms a barrier between man and Allah is the love of Dunya and the weakness of our certitude. If we overcome these two elements - which is not too difficult - then we find ourselves automatically moving towards Allah, because the divine beauty is exposed to us and overwhelms us so that we can see nothing else. Imam Sajjad said in the supplication of *Abi Hamza al Thamali*, **“And truly traveling to You is short in duration, and You do not veil Yourself from Your creatures, unless their own misdeeds would block them from You”**. Also note what Imam Hussain said in the supplication of the day of Arafa: **“Can anything other than You hold a (kind of) manifestation that You lack, and thus it may act as an appearance for You? When have You ever been absent so that You may need something to point to You? When have You ever been far-off so that traces may lead to You?”** Consider how the Dunya, with everything it has, can shield the heart of a believer from Allah. How could that heart be

preoccupied with anything other than the illumination and beauty of Allah, for even a moment? It is not unusual for a believer to reach the level of faith where they do not feel preoccupied; rather, it would be unusual for them not to!

The nice thing about the issue is that the more a person feels their proximity to Allah, the more they feel distance from Allah, and the greater their feelings of guilt. The reason is that a person who is marching towards Allah has fixed their sights on Allah. Despite the fact that Allah is everywhere and no place is void of Him, the distance between us and Him on the path of love is endless and eternal. The closer we get to Him and the more certitude we attain, the further away we feel ourselves to be - and hence, the more our feelings of guilt and shortcoming will be. This is the reason we sometimes describe the behavior of the “*awliya Allah*” (people close to Allah and his Allies) as repentant and guilt-laden.

Principles of the Path to Allah

First Principle: The Motivation to March towards Allah: 'Loving Allah'

In “How Are We Formed?”, we said that we come to this world with needs that emerge from the dimension of the spirit and the dimension of the body. We need to eat, drink, wear clothes, have fun, love, learn, feel proud and so on. These are the needs that stimulate our drive and mobilize our behaviour for the purpose of fulfilling these requirements. This drive plays a paramount role in the life of every one of us, because it determines the shape of our behavior and the outcomes of our activities in life. The strength of this internal drive determines our perseverance for achieving this goal and our power for overcoming obstacles. When we have strong motivation and face difficulties in the way of achieving our goal, we can dive deep inside and innovate the best solution for reaching it, no matter how tough it may seem initially.

One of the greatest intuitive motives we have is loving Allah and galvanizing ourselves to serve and worship Him. It is because of our inadequate ability to discern what is real in the

immediate material world, our animal desires and lusts and the temptations of Satan that we may not be able to feel this motive clearly enough. However, this motive is reflected in our psyche in various forms, like our love of perfection, strength, kindness and beauty and our love for the allies of Allah, because of their proximity to Allah.

Nonetheless, these alternative manifestations of our spiritual motives may tend towards the materialistic side, like the love of money, status and authority. This is because we are used to the materialistic paradigm, and filter our feelings to suit this paradigm. Those with a noble psyche, no matter which religion they believe in, remain attached to the spiritual motive and only moderately attached to the material ones.

This highlights the importance of our ability to discern what is real in our lives. The level of our knowledge about Allah, our realization of the fact that He is the source of perfection, power, existence, and generosity and the understanding that we and the whole universe are characterized by nothing but inherent insufficiency¹⁰ determine the strength of our drive and motivation to move towards Allah. They also aid in the gradual removal of materialistic barriers (like the love of money and status) and spiritual barriers (like the love of

¹⁰ "O mankind, you are those in need of Allah, while Allah is the Free of need, the Praiseworthy" (35:15).

perfection and beauty) so that there remains nothing but the love of Allah and the desire to get closer to Him. This is how the statement of Imam Ali - **“I never saw anything without seeing Allah before and after it, with and in it”** - applies to us.

In one of his sermons, Imam Ali said, **“The foremost in religion is the acknowledgement of Him, the perfection of acknowledging Him is to testify Him, and the perfection of testifying Him is to believe in His Oneness, the perfection of believing in His Oneness is the devotion to Him.”**

The first principle on the path to Allah is to sense and feel the love of Allah in our hearts, to sense His majesty and beauty and to feel as much of a longing for Him as possible. The more passion we have to get closer to Him, the better our results will be.

This knowledge and longing can be attained by seeking knowledge, practicing meditation, and living life with positive attitudes that align with the Islamic way¹¹.

I would like to emphasize that the motivation to move towards Allah does not contradict or compete with the rest of the motives we have in practicing life. Rather, they work

¹¹ More about that in the chapter *Practical Steps in the Path to Allah* later in the book.

synergistically; one leads to the other, and one is accomplished with the help of the other.

Second Principle: Faith and Trust in Allah

Motion towards Allah is not a passive process in one direction, but an interactive one that starts with Allah. He initiates it with love and attraction. In the supplication of Abi Hamza, the Imam says, **“I knew of You by You, and You directed me to You and called me to You, and without You I would not have known what You are.”** When we respond by working to get closer to Him, Allah guides us more and more: **“And those who strive for Us - We will surely guide them to Our ways. And indeed, Allah is with the doers of good”** (29:69).

If a person’s love of Allah is what largely determines their practices in regards to Allah¹², then our devotion to Allah determines how much Allah will draw and guide us to Him. Our faith in Allah largely determines our willingness and capacity to let in this guidance and pull from Allah. This pull may sometimes take the form of ordeals and calamities for which we may not understand the reasons: **“And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of**

¹² “Say, [O Muhammad], ‘If you should love Allah , then follow me, [so] Allah will love you’” (3:31)

wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient (155) Who, when disaster strikes them, say, ‘Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return’ (156) Those are the ones upon whom are blessings from their Lord and mercy. And it is those who are the [rightly] guided (157)” (2:155-157)

Knowledge and certitude play major roles in boosting our faith in Allah; however, our current general knowledge of Allah is sufficient to make us trust Him, especially if we focus and maintain our composure during the crises we encounter from time to time. Our realization of the reality of *Ghaib* (the unseen/unknown) and the certainty that Allah is close to us and will answer our prayers provides us with serenity and peace.

I remember that when I was a young child, I had a great fear of monsters, zombies, and *jinn*, especially at night. I often woke up from sleep feeling terrified. My mother used to recite *Surat al Hamd* once and *Surat al Ikhlas* three times, then blow gently on my skin. This made every cell of my body feel safe, since because of this, I believed that Allah was with me and would protect me.

This taught me that Allah was close to me, and I believed firmly that He was with me and never lost sight of me, not

even for a moment. **“Say, "Never will we be struck except by what Allah has decreed for us; He is our protector." And upon Allah let the believers rely”** (9:51). As a result, I ridded myself of the problem of fear early in my adolescence. So what changed after that, when I grew older? Did Allah change? Of course not. It was me who grew older and began to rely more and more on my own power and abilities - and hence, forgot about the protection of Allah. I became oblivious to the perpetual kindness of Allah, depriving myself of this serenity amidst the darkness of fear and anxiety. **“How can anyone other than You be hoped whilst You have never stopped Your bounties? How can anyone other than You be besought whilst You have never changed Your habit of ceaseless bestowal?¹³”**.

We must trust Allah and believe Him when He says He is with us and that He loves us and wants us to live happy and well. He is perfection, beauty and absolute power. We must ignore all of the temptations offered by Satan, who tries to make us skeptical about Allah, the God who created us and who does not need our worship. He created the cosmos for our happiness. Do not submit to these tempting whispers, no matter how logical and reasonable they may seem.

¹³ From the supplication of Imam Hussain on the day of *Arafat*

Would you ever believe - no matter what the evidence in front of you - that your mother, who raised you and gave you everything she had since the earliest days of your life, was trying to purposefully mistreat you? How, then, could you believe these whispers about Allah, who is more caring to you than your mother? **“How should I have hope in other than You, when the good - all of it - is in Your hand? How should I expect from others, when for You are the creation and the command? Should I cut off my hope for You, when You have shown me of Your bounty that for which I have not asked? Would You make me have need for my like whilst I hold fast to Your cord?¹⁴”**

We have to trust that Allah will not let us down and that He will always be with us, to help us to follow the correct path for strength and connectedness. He wants this for us more than we want it for ourselves. This guidance and pull may often, however, manifest itself in the form of tests, suffering and misfortunes.

Allah, the Subtle and the Acquainted, may see a benefit for us in depriving us of some of what we deserve according to the standards of this life, *Dunya*, and hence He deprives us of it. On the other hand, He may see a benefit for us in giving us what we do not deserve, again according to the standards of

¹⁴ *Munajat* (whispered prayer) *al Rajeen* (of the Hopeful), *Imam al Sajjad*.

Dunya, and hence he gives it to us as a form of compassion: **“Does He who created not know, while He is the Subtle, the Acquainted?”** (67:14).

In all of these cases, and no matter how much we suffer or doors are shut in our faces, for rational or irrational reasons, we must keep our faith in Allah and know for certain that He will not abandon us, because **“Your Lord has decreed upon Himself mercy”** (6:54).

Faith in Allah is the basis and spirit of the concept of *Tawakkul*¹⁵. It does *not* mean hoping to get our desired outcome without making the necessary effort or plans. Faith in Allah is what keeps us poised and composed. It protects us from fear and stress and enables us to move along in life with knowledge, wisdom and a positive attitude.

Third Principle: Balance

Imagine someone working on bodybuilding but exercising only the biceps. After a while, his figure will look very awkward, with muscular arms and flabby body. The same applies to the development of man. In order to grow and improve in a balanced way, we must work on all aspects of our being. Yes, there are a few things that are more likable than

¹⁵ The concept of reliance on God or trusting in God's plan [Translator]

others, but that does not mean we can ignore something in favor of something else: **“And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance (7) That you not transgress within the balance” (55:7-8).**

Unfortunately, the trait of balance is not very prevalent in our reality. People might tend to focus on studying, but ignore cleansing their souls and their role in social reform. Some others might focus on social work and ignore taking care of their families. Some others might emphasize career development and do little in other aspects of their life. We might focus our efforts on one aspect of life because of our personal preference for that aspect, which is fine, but we cannot expect Allah to reward us in the same as someone who does the same thing purely for the sake of Allah. On the other hand, we come to this world with needs that emerge from both dimensions, the body and the soul. We need to eat, drink, wear clothes, have fun, love, think, learn and be proud. In order to move towards Allah, we must fulfill all of these requirements in a balanced way. Allah denounced monasticism: **“... and monasticism, which they innovated; We did not prescribe it for them...” (57:27); “Say, “Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has produced for His servants and the good [lawful] things of provision?” Say, “They are for those who believe during the worldly life [but]**

exclusively for them on the Day of Resurrection" (7:32). You will definitely not be able to practice all of these activities on a daily basis, and you are not required to. What you are required to do, as much as you can, is to practice your various day-to-day activities - including entertainment and self-development - at a pace that fits your nature, capabilities, and circumstances.

Imam Moosa al-Kadhimi said, **“Make sure your time is divided to four types of activities: time to pray in solitude to Allah, time to make a living, time to socialize with your trusted brothers, who know your shortcomings and are honest with you, and time to enjoy in things not prohibited by Allah. It is with the help of this last kind that you get to be able to do the other three kinds.”**¹⁶

Fourth Principle: Devotion to Allah

Aside from acts of worship to Allah, you can practice your various daily activities with any intention and goal as your drive, and as long as that intention and goal is worthy, Allah will reward you for it and you will get closer to Him. However, this reward (*thawab*) and proximity (*qurb*) would be

¹⁶ *Tuhaf al Oqool*, p409.

incomparable to what you could achieve if your intention and goal for the same action was purely attaining the love of Allah.

Sincerity of intention for Allah is the single most important factor in the bestowal of divine mercy upon us. For this reason, the smallest of deeds with sincere intention is rewarded far more than a huge deed that is done with impure intention. The Prophet said, “The intention of the believer is better than his deed.”¹⁷

Fifth Principle: Being Gentle on Self

The Great Apostle said, **“Kindness is not to be found in anything but that it adds to its beauty and it is not withdrawn from anything but it makes it defective”¹⁸.** On your way to Allah, you may hear about some of the *Karamat*¹⁹ (thaumaturgic acts) of some of the saints and be tempted to exhaust yourself in acts of worship and doing good. This is a categorical mistake that may have a strong backlash; in fact, you may revert to your original state. The great Prophet said, **“Rest yourselves from time to time. If the hearts get tired they become blind,”** while Imam Ali said, **“Hearts are imbued with passion and the power of advancing and**

¹⁷ *Osool al Kafi*, Volume 2, Book of Ēman and Kūfir/2

¹⁸ *Al Kafi*, 2:119/6, book of *al Rifq* [Gentleness].

¹⁹ The ability to perform supernatural wonders by Muslim saints. (Wiki) [Translator].

retreating. Therefore, approach them for action at the time of their passionateness and when they are in a mood for advancing, because if hearts are forced [to do a thing] they will be blinded.²⁰” Failure to consider the principle of a gentle approach may mean you have not comprehended the process of movement towards Allah. This motion occurs through practicing various daily activities in a simple, gentle, positive, passionate, and open-minded manner according to the doctrines of Shari‘a and driven by the love of Allah.

The Apostle said, “O Ali, this religion is deep, so enter into it gently. Do not make the worship of your Lord hated by yourself, for the one who has fatigued his mount and is unable to continue his journey – that is, the one who is excessive - has neither a riding animal nor can he travel.. Therefore act as one who hopes to die in old age, but be cautious with the caution of one who is afraid that he will die tomorrow.”²¹”

²⁰ *Nahj al Balaqha* [Path of Eloquence], saying 193.

²¹ *Usool al Kafi*, p351.

Practical Steps to Allah

The previous few chapters were about a set of special concepts relating to our movement towards Allah. Now, we come back to our question: How can we improve ourselves such that we achieve the level of full devotion to Allah? Allah has outlined the methodology that will enable us achieve this goal through living our normal daily lives in line with the Islamic doctrines and in a balanced way. All our human values and morals will be balanced when we attain the goal of Allah's pleasure and love. **"It is He who made the earth tame for you - so walk among its slopes and eat of His provision - and to Him is the resurrection"** (67:15).

Islamic *Shari'a* can be considered a sort of training program that Allah has approved for the development of individuals and society. It helps us transcend to Allah in a smooth and natural motion, in harmony with our natural *Fitra* (inbuilt instinct to do good) and cosmic laws: **"This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and have approved for you Islam as religion"** (5:3).

For the purpose of our movement towards Allah, Islam has outlined four interlinking categories of activities. Balanced

practice of these activities - in line with Islamic doctrines and *Fitra* - leads us closer and closer to Allah until such time as we reach the phase of pure devotion to Allah. These categories are: (1) Fulfillment of our physical and psychological needs; (2) Development of our knowledge and capacities; (3) Self-denial for the sake of Allah through the culture of generosity and virtue for humanity; and (4) Remembrance and worship of Allah.

Stipulating *Shari‘a* in the form of these four categories was only the first step; Allah also established numerous mechanisms and practices to guide us through these four categories. Even before that, He created us and the cosmos in a way that would spontaneously lead us to Him, unless we, as humans, willingly chose to deviate from the path of divine grace.

The number of potential applications of this general outline and the number of roads leading to Allah are as numerous as the breaths of all the people in the world. Every individual is uniquely made up of fortes and weaknesses, potential and inherited traits, and each of us has a different environment and challenges to face. Different personality traits imply different practices for leading each of us to Allah - **“and to do righteousness of which You approve”** (27:19) and (46:15).

What I want to stress here, though, is that although the path to Allah requires self-discipline, it is enjoyable and pleasurable. We have already noted that many of us suffer anxiety, undue fear, sadness, depression, frustration and despair. The path to Allah helps us to get rid of adverse emotions and fills us up with energy, power, and happiness in this life and the hereafter.

Movement towards Allah is much like physical exercise; at the beginning, you feel it is very difficult, but you soon get used to it and start to enjoy it. Exhausting as it may be, you feel you cannot do without it. See the supplication by Imam Ali Zain al Abideen: **“My God, who can have tasted the sweetness of Thy love, then wanted another in place of Thee? Who can have become intimate with Thy nearness, then sought removal from Thee?”** Just as physical exercise helps us to maintain our health and strengthen our bodies, movement towards Allah helps us to maintain our souls and minds, gets rid of psychological and mental “aches” and fills us with happiness and bliss.

The good thing is that we, as Muslims, are already doing a big part of the work by practicing prayer, fasting, alms and religious rituals. All we need is a little bit of additional awareness, and we can double our outcomes.

But back to the question: How can we improve ourselves such that we embody pure devotion to Allah? From the chapter “What Are Our Goals In Life?”, we recall that in order to enhance ourselves to the level of full devotion to Allah, we need to work on two elements: First, the level of our servitude to Allah (as in our faculties, skills, capacities, and existential attributes), and second, the level of our awareness and perception of this servitude, consciously and subconsciously, intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally.

In the following, we shall discuss how we can use these two elements in a way that is not only compatible with the busy daily life of a hard-working person, but also improves their performance and helps them achieve happiness and tranquility.

First Element: Enhancing Our Capacities

1. Enhancing Our Capacities and Faculties

Our ability to adopt humane values and faculties, the greatest of which is our awareness of our servitude to Allah, depends on the extent of the availability of three elements in you: desire, practice and psychological nature. The last of these encompasses your capabilities, skills, mental maps and concepts, and the extent to which they are healthy and positive.

Your psychological nature is a constantly changing entity. It is the sum of all your responses and reactions to all the stimuli to which you are exposed to in life, no matter how small and no matter whether you know about them or not. This is the lens through which any person looks at the world and interacts with it in daily life. We may look at the sea and see beauty and good; we may listen to its waves and hear mesmerizing music, unleashing our fantasies. Conversely, we may see a mysterious scary giant that fills us with fear and a sense of alarm, and hear a mourning sobbing grief for all those who have drowned and vanished in its depths. Yet we may also see and hear other sentiments, depending on our mental inventory. The view of a sunset may cause us discomfort and unease, or it may fill us with a sense of serenity, restfulness and beauty. We may hear a familiar ringtone on someone else's phone and immediately recall feelings of sadness, because this was the ringtone on your phone when you first heard bad news; on the other hand, if it was the ringtone on your phone when you got a call bearing great news, it may evoke joy and delight. It all depends on your preconceived mental maps and concepts.

Your psychological make-up determines your responses to various stimuli in daily life. This does not mean you cannot willfully change your reactions. The bottom line is that if your

psychological make-up has enough clarity, willpower, and passion for benevolence, and it is in harmony with *Fitra*, and there are no obstacles to you doing so, you can attain human values and attributes by mere desire and passion for a particular value or attribute and awareness of its presence. With practice, it will take deeper root within you.

Rehearsal and repetition of any value or attribute - positive or negative - promotes its attainment, even if it is not something you want. The more an attribute is desired, the stronger it takes root in you and the more it becomes an inseparable part of you. For this reason, Islam - through the holy Quran, supplications and the various acts of worship that we perform - works on correcting our mental concepts and maps and rendering them positive and healthy and characterized by monotheistic servitude to Allah. It helps us to denounce all kinds of negative emotions, like fear, weakness and anxiety. Islam places an emphasis on streamlining our daily individual and social practices based on these conceptions of monotheistic servitude to Allah.

The three elements mentioned above arise from living daily life with positivity and passing through the challenges life throws at us. Our quest for the legitimate pleasures of life, like wealth, family, comfortable homes, and material and moral comforts in line with *Fitra* and the doctrines of the Islamic

Shari‘a is what produces the interplay between the three elements. It is by living life positively that we grow, learn, become wiser, transcend morally and spiritually, love Allah, love His attributes (beauty and majesty) and feel our servitude towards Him due to the *Fitra* that is inbuilt in us. We become more positive in life and devote ourselves to Allah with actions of worship at the level of daily life. As a result, we undertake our responsibilities towards our families, places of work, societies, ourselves, and humanity with positive attitudes. We have more love for other humans and even for inanimate things in the world; we grow in transcendence, clarity, and willing for beauty and morals. We spontaneously rid ourselves of impurities and get to know Allah better. Our passion for Allah and His beauty becomes more intense, so that we do not see anything anywhere other than Him, and through Him we see everything else. We realize that we are part of His manifestations and reflections on existence and that He loves and takes care of each one of us. Using our willpower and perseverance, this state of being becomes second nature, and this in turn helps us to become what we like and want to be - or, to be more precise, what Allah wants us to be.

Asceticism, reclusion from life, and full-time devotion to prayer and fasting deprives us of the opportunity to transcend

and purify our souls, and hence the opportunity to attain proximity to Allah.

The test is to struggle in life and utilize our capabilities to make a *halal* living (that is, according to the laws of Islamic *Shari'a*) so that we can enjoy our lives, provide for our families, provide our kids with the best education, live in big and comfy houses and drive the type of vehicles we like, but all without a state of opulence. We should not be captive to these pleasures to such an extent that if we lose them, we will be devastated. On the other hand, we should not lose our drive to improve our material wealth and achieve our worldly ambitions. This state of balance can be mastered through practice, and this is the reason why Allah created Earth and life - to serve as a “training pitch” for us.

2. Knowledge

Knowledge is the greatest of the existential attributes and capabilities that form a human being and distinguish them from all other creatures. The development of knowledge is the way to achieving happiness and proximity to Allah. Besides purifying the self, improving human knowledge is the cornerstone of the mission of the prophets: **“Just as We have sent among you a messenger from yourselves reciting to you Our verses and purifying you and teaching you the Book and wisdom and teaching you that which you did not know”**

(2:151). The greatest knowledge of all is to know Allah, the correct notion of monotheism, ourselves and the reality of our devotional servitude to Allah. However, the knowledge we are talking about is not the same as orthodox theoretical knowledge, but is a completely intuitive knowledge that overwhelms our subconscious mind and penetrates our depths and flows with our blood. *Ibleēs* was knowledgeable at the theoretical level, yet he was disobedient to Allah. Imam Ali said, **“The foremost in religion is the acknowledgement of Him, the perfection of acknowledging Him is to testify Him, and the perfection of testifying Him is to believe in His Oneness, the perfection of believing in His Oneness is the devotion to Him.”**²² This emphasizes the role of knowledge on the path to Allah and in every movement we make in life.

Imam Ali, in a brief commandment to his companion Kumail, said, **“In any movement [you have], you need knowledge”**²³; also, **“Allah shall have mercy on a Man who knew where he came from, in what he is living, and where he is heading to.”**²⁴ Imam al Sadiq said, **“That who works without insight is like that who walks without a map; walking faster only makes him more off track.”**²⁵

²² *Nahj al Balagha*, 1st sermon.

²³ *Tuhaf al Oqool*, p119.

²⁴ *Al Wali*, 1/116.

²⁵ *Al Kafi*, 1/43

This is why the first verse revealed started with the word “Iqra’ [Read]”, perhaps to stress the fact that the path to Allah starts with knowledge.

Theoretical knowledge forms the theoretical template provided by our mental concepts and maps. The more faith couples with this knowledge, the deeper it takes root in our minds and souls. Together with contemplation and reflection, theoretical knowledge is what we need in order to perceive reality. This point was discussed earlier in the book. It is of great importance to emphasize that the knowledge we are talking about is not merely regarding religious matters; it is all knowledge that expands our horizons and enables us to understand ourselves and our environment. This includes almost every discipline of knowledge we have come across. Yes; knowledge about Allah, the doctrines of the religion, the soul and jurisprudence is the greatest of all, since it is the basis for our path to Allah - yet, we do not need to be specialists in these areas. From a theoretical perspective, it is sufficient to know enough to enable us to see the way to Allah clearly. The establishment and rooting of this knowledge deep inside us and our subconscious mind is an outcome of how we practice meditation and contemplation and live our lives in a positive and practical way in line with this theoretical knowledge.

Our bookshelves contain many books that can help with this theoretical knowledge. I recommend having and reading at least some of them.

I also recommend reciting the Holy Quran on a regular basis, contemplating its meaning as much as possible and going through one of its well-known exegeses. I would particularly recommend the *al Mizân* or *al Amthal* exegesis, both of which are available on the web and easily downloadable on a mobile phone.

Finally, I recommend pursuing the practices that form the cornerstone of propositional knowledge; that is, thinking and contemplation, whether regarding yourself and your thoughts, feelings, and fluctuations, or regarding the social circles around you and the events taking place in them and the interdependence between these events, or on the whole cosmos and the whole of creation, or on Allah and his Unity and His majestic and beautiful attributes. **“We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. But is it not sufficient concerning your Lord that He is, over all things, a Witness?”** (41:53). Note that you do not need a time completely dedicated to thinking and contemplation; you can do it in the small bits of spare time you have, in between your other tasks. This should help you feel more comfortable and

content and will help you become more mature in terms of your practice in life and making correct decisions.

3. Loving the Allies of Allah and Following Their Lead

Loving the great Apostle ^(pbuh) and his household ^(pbuh) is one of the most important values in Islam, like the knowledge and willpower that helps us get closer to Allah and realize our happiness and contentment. Loving them makes us want to embody the values and principles they embodied and defended. It is the nature of man to emulate and follow the lead of those whom he loves and adores, or regards as role models. Our interaction with and sympathy for their defense of their principles and their embodiment of these principles - despite the price they paid for it with their lives - subconsciously ingrains these principles deep in our psyche and shapes our views on life in line with these principles. To the extent we love the Great Apostle ^(pbuh) and his household ^(pbuh) and interact with their memory, we transcend to Allah. In a narration in the Sahīh al Tirmidī it is said that, **“He who loves me, these two and their father and mother will be with me on the same rank on the Day of Resurrection.”** Muslims agreed that Allah made it compulsory to love Ahl al Bâit (the Prophet’s Household). Religious texts were unanimous on this issue. Also in the holy Quran: **“Say, [O Muhammad], I do not ask you for this message any payment [but] only good**

will through kinship." In another verse, **"Say, "Whatever payment I might have asked of you - it is yours. My payment is only from Allah"** (34:47). This love brings man closer to Allah: **"Say, 'I do not ask of you for it any payment - only that whoever wills might take to his Lord a way'"** (25:57).

We need to live with the love of the great Apostle ^(pbuh) and his household ^(pbuh) in our daily life and transform this sentiment into actions or deeds. This will augment our feelings of love and will increase our love for Allah.

One of the ways to strengthen our affection towards the Great Apostle ^(pbuh) and his household ^(pbuh) is to recite *Salwat*²⁶ on the Prophet and Ahl al-Bâit in our spare time and during our regular prayers. Allah made these *Salawat* part of the mandatory daily prayers, so that without invocation to praise the Prophet, the prayers are invalid. **"Indeed, Allah confers blessing upon the Prophet, and His angels [ask Him to do so]. O you who have believed, ask [Allah to confer] blessing upon him and ask [Allah to grant him] peace"** (33:56). We can also augment this love by recurring commemoration of the Prophet and the Imams at social events. This includes remembering their stories and the epic sacrifices they made for the good of humanity and for the sake of establishing

²⁶ An invocation to praise the Prophet Mohammed and his household.

divine values on Earth. The greatest of these heroic stories is the epic of *‘Ashūra*, a never-ending humanitarian tale and a one-of-a-kind in human history. We can also commemorate the Prophet and Imams by visiting their shrines and mausoleums and feeling the values they defended with their lives.

4. Your Career Path - Approaching Allah

Understanding the way our existence and capacities evolve, we realize that the better we live and practice our daily activities, the more decisions we need to take and the more challenges we have to overcome; hence, the better our chances of getting closer to Allah. **“Every soul will taste death. And We test you with evil and with good as trial; and to Us you will be returned”** (21:35). Career path development and pursuit of a career in the modern world is one of the most beautiful things to happen to man in this regard. Our path to developing our careers provides a beautiful, interactive and practical platform for practicing life in positivity and effectivity. It is characterized by huge motivation-driven momentum and by numerous goals for developing multiple aspects of the self. There are clear performance indicators and an automatic and largely effective system of material rewards and punishment. The distinguishing feature of our professional and careers in this era is that they, for the most part, are no longer manual in

nature, but rather intellectual and mental (or a combination of mental and manual), and hence they have a large impact on us and on our knowledge and views of life. For most people, professional life is the most important axis; we spend most of our time at work, it consumes more than half of our conscious day, it shapes the silhouette of the rest of the day and it helps to mold our social, cultural, material and educational life.

Whether you end up as a worker in a factory, a simple employee with limited income (one that barely suffices to pay for your daily necessities), a chief executive officer for a company (or group of prestigious companies), an owner of a private business or any other position is no longer an inherited perk or a fluke of luck. *You* determine your path in life, and all you need is ambitious, effective and realistic planning and a will to make it happen. Hence, it is very important that you plan your career carefully; it will directly affect the rest of your life and your family's life, but even more importantly than that, it will affect your path to Allah. Ambitious and realistic planning for your career helps you to achieve happiness, success and stability in your work, your social and familial life and your life in general. Life is a chain composed of numerous links. For those who want to read more about practical steps in career development, I would

recommend the book *Your Career Path, An Approach to Developing Your Business Portfolio*.

5. Carrying the message of goodness for all people

“By afternoon, Indeed, mankind is in loss, Except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to patience” (103:1-3).

On the divine scale, a “good believer” will be considered a loser if they are cocooned and self-centered. It is a condition of being a successful person that we care about the human communities around us and help them find the right path - “advisement on truth and patience”. Though everything Allah says is undoubtedly true and correct, Allah used a number of linguistic tools to emphasize his point, not to mention dedicating a full *surah* to it. This tells us about the importance and significance of the issue.

According to the divine concepts, a successful person is one who carries the message and mission of Allah to everyone around them. **“You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and prohibit what is vice and believe in Allah” (3:110).** Bearing the message of goodness and righteousness for mankind releases one from the trap of the self-centered state. By caring about the others, a

person breaks free of the cocoon of ego and spontaneously embodies the values of good and virtue.

Islamic methodology does not stop at the individual engaging in the external reformation and development of society, but aims to begin this reform from within the individual as the first step. For this reason, Islam calls upon us to solidify the personal and practical allegiance of man to all noble human values and things and to denounce all kinds of corruption and injustice, even if it comes from the people closest to us. **“You will not find a people who believe in Allah and the Last Day having affection for those who oppose Allah and His Messenger, even if they were their fathers or their sons or their brothers or their kindred”** (58:22). The practice of reform in Islam is not a negative or violent process as we are used to seeing in some Muslim countries and societies. It is a positive and constructive process, filled with love and the desire to bring good to others. **“So by mercy from Allah, [O Muhammad], you were lenient with them. And if you had been rude [in speech] and harsh in heart, they would have disbanded from about you”** (3:159). Also, **“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best”** (16:125).

Here, I would like to stop for a moment and recall a notion I mentioned at the beginning of the book about popular self-

help books in this part of the world. I said I found that some of their techniques and values are contrary to what Allah called for. As an example of that, I want to quote from *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*: “There are three components to the Law of Least Effort three things you can do to put this principle of do less and accomplish more into action. The first component is acceptance. Acceptance simply means that you make a commitment: Today I will accept people, situations, circumstances, and events as they occur. This means I will know that this moment is as it should be, because the whole universe is as it should be. This moment the one you are experiencing right now is the culmination of all the moments you have experienced in the past. This moment is as it is because the entire universe is as it is. When you struggle against this moment, you are actually struggling against the entire universe. Instead, you can make the decision that today you will not struggle against the whole universe by struggling against this moment. This means that your acceptance of this moment is total and complete. You accept things as they are, not as you wish they were in this moment. This is important to understand. You can wish for things in the future to be different, but in this moment you have to accept things as they are. Make a commitment to follow the path of no resistance. This is the path through which nature’s

intelligence unfolds spontaneously, without friction or effort. When you have the exquisite combination of acceptance, responsibility, and defenselessness, you will experience life flowing with effortless ease²⁷. ” **What this book is calling for is to surrender to reality as it is and not trying to change it, which is contrary to what Allah commanded us to do by enjoining what is right, prohibiting what is wrong and working to reform and change to good. “And when a community among them said, "Why do you advise [or warn] a people whom Allah is [about] to destroy or to punish with a severe punishment?" they [the advisors] said, "To be absolved before your Lord and perhaps they may fear Him. And when they forgot that by which they had been reminded, We saved those who had forbidden evil and seized those who wronged, with a wretched punishment, because they were defiantly disobeying” (7:164-165). This verse tells us that a people were good in their individual lives, but that they accepted their defective reality as it was - in line with the advice given in the aforementioned book - and abandoned the notion of prohibiting vice. As a result of this, they ended up suffering a great punishment, and their individual goodness did not help them. “And fear a trial which will not strike those who have wronged among you**

²⁷ Deepak Chopra, *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, pp21-22

exclusively, and know that Allah is severe in penalty” (8:25) -
so are we going to believe Allah, or someone else?

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the message of good we bear for all people is greater than just enjoining good and prohibiting vice. It is greater than the call to Islam (though that is very much desired) and includes all aspects of good and benevolence for mankind. It also includes fighting all kinds of darkness, such as ignorance, backwardness, slavery, poverty, disease, and corruption. to learn more about the goals of the Islamic message to humanity, I recommend the book [*The Islamic Strategy*](#).

6. Giving and Altruism

Our pursuit of fulfilling our bodily needs (like eating and mating) and of developing our capabilities enforces our love of the self and self-centrism. Allah, on the other hand, does not want us to fall prey to this trap; he wants us to avoid becoming our own barrier to Him, as happened with Satan. Therefore, Allah commands us to give and be altruistic, **“but give [them] preference over themselves, even though they are in privation. And whoever is protected from the stinginess of his soul - it is those who will be the successful” (59:9).**

Imam al Şadiq said, **“Fulfilling the need of a believer is more beloved to Allah than performing twenty times the pilgrimage,**

on each of which, he spends one thousand [dīnar]”²⁸. When we go for pilgrimage, we partake in a great act of worship for several days and get very close to Allah. On the other hand, relieving a believer of his problem or need - which does not take more than few minutes - is worthier and more valuable to Allah than those twenty rounds of pilgrimage.

Giving and altruism plays a very big role in bringing happiness to humans and transcending them towards Allah. It plays a key role in helping us break free of our self-centrism and annihilate in the love of Allah. **“And spend [in the way of Allah]; it is better for your selves. And whoever is protected from the stinginess of his soul - it is those who will be the successful”** (64:16).

There are many effective charity bodies that work to spend money wisely and improve the channels via which charity work occurs, and all we have to do is transfer money to their bank accounts. Though this mechanism is convenient, it does not allow us to enjoy and feel the process of giving; therefore, I suggest that aside from this main contribution to charity, we do another beautiful thing to help purify us. This notion is derived from the following verse: **“O you who have believed, when you [wish to] privately consult the Messenger, present before your consultation a charity. That is better for you and**

²⁸ *al Kafi* 2/193 Arabic Ed.

purer. But if you find not [the means] - then indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful” (58:12). This command was overruled by Allah later on. What I am suggesting is to commit to helping one poor family with whose circumstances you are familiar. You agree with the head of that family that you will gather contributions on their behalf and then hand it over to them - once a month, for example.

As you struggle in your daily life, you might come across challenges or problems. You should pray to Allah for help and relief, and it would be a good idea if every time you did so, you took an amount of money and allocated it for charity. You might keep it in a different section of your purse or wallet, or you might keep it in a drawer or another safe place to help you how much you are saving. Later on, you will collect the money and hand it over to those in need. Conversely, whenever something good happens in your life, you should express your gratitude to Allah through the same process. It does not matter if the amount of money you set aside is big or small; Allah appreciates the alms (*Sadaqat*) even if they are small in amount. **“Allah does not charge a soul except [with that within] its capacity”** (2:286). The idea is that you link the challenges and successes in your life with Allah and giving for the sake of His love, which will help, gradually,

to purify your psyche and transcend you towards Allah, even if you do not feel it.

There is another type of spending that does not cost you anything, yet it has a great effect, and that is the good word. The great Apostle, in his commandment to Abu Dhar, said, "O Abu Dhar, the good word is alms²⁹."

In the midst of our contemporary reality and its many conflicts, challenges, and psychological ailments, people - all people - are in dire need of a good word from an honest and loving heart to help them feel comfortable and serene. Though you may not directly solve anybody's problems with your niceties, these honest, nice words will find their way to the heart of the other person and give them a sort of comfort and power, and probably the insight to overcome the original problem. **"Have you not considered how Allah presents an example, [making] a good word like a good tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches [high] in the sky? (24) It produces its fruit all the time, by permission of its Lord. And Allah presents examples for the people that perhaps they will be reminded (25) And the example of a bad word is like a bad tree, uprooted from the surface of the earth, not having any stability (26)" (14:24-26).**

²⁹ *Wasael al Shi'a*, 5/233.

If you are a specialist in a service that people need, you may decide to allocate part of your time to free consultations, particularly for those who cannot afford to pay for them in the private sector. It would be even better if you were able to do that in the mosque, so that your services and help are linked to Allah.

The toughest thing about the “good word paradigm” is to get used to responding to bad words with good words. If someone insults you with bad words, you should respond by being good to them: **“And those who are patient, seeking the countenance of their Lord, and establish prayer and spend from what We have provided for them secretly and publicly and prevent evil with good - those will have the good consequence of [this] home”** (13:22). This is a process of self-discipline and breaking free of the control and dominance of evil so that you can transcend towards Allah.

Consider how Allah describes those who are able to achieve this: **“And not equal are the good deed and the bad. Repel [evil] by that [deed] which is better; and thereupon the one whom between you and him is enmity [will become] as though he was a devoted friend (34) But none is granted it except those who are patient, and none is granted it except one having a great portion [of good]”** (41:34-35)

Second Element: enhance our absolute and full Servitude to Allah

The only way to enhance our absolute and full servitude to Allah is to live with the vision of monotheism for Allah and with full submission to Him and remembrance of our servitude to Him in every moment. But how can we do that practically, in the midst of this busy life?

1. Feeling your Own Greatness

Before I begin to answer this question, I would like to refer to a common misconception in our contemporary globalized culture, one which constitutes one of the most difficult obstacles and barriers to our motion towards Allah and our perception of our servitude to Allah. We must first get it straight in our minds theoretically before we can gradually begin to rectify it practically.

Many, if not most of the motivational self-help books recommend that people feel and affirm their own greatness. They consider this notion a cornerstone for the positive thinking that precedes human happiness. This, however, is a huge mistake. In and of themselves, the creatures of this Earth are nothing but need and poverty. They derive their greatness and magnificence from their relationship with Allah as His slaves and creatures; from Him, as our Lord and creator, they

receive their abundance and pure existence. Satan's feeling of greatness in comparison to humans is what caused him fall to such a level of degradation. "[Allah] said, 'What prevented you from prostrating when I commanded you?' [Satan] said, 'I am better than him. You created me from fire and created him from clay (12) [Allah] said, 'Descend from Paradise, for it is not for you to be arrogant therein. So get out; indeed, you are of the debased (13)' (7:12-13).

Human history tells us about many great people who fell to rock bottom when they became dominated by a feeling of their own greatness. It is for this reason that Islam always commands us to sense our smallness when thinking of ourselves "per se" and to sense our greatness when we think of ourselves as servants of Allah. We can see this notion in the supplication of Imam Ali: "**O' Allah! I am honored for being Your slave, and I am proud of having You as my Lord. You are just as I like, so make me just as You like³⁰.**" Also reflect on this part of the supplication of Imam al Sajjad: "**Raise me not a single degree before the people without lowering me its like in myself and bring about no outward exaltation for me without an inward abasement in myself to the same measure!³¹**"

³⁰ *Al Khisal*, 2/420.

³¹ *Makarim al Akhlaq* supplication

2. Sensing our Servitude to Allah

The challenges and obstacles of life do not make any distinction between believers and non-believers. These challenges and obstacles take a toll on a person and consume their mood, energy and time; they may distance a person from Allah and their remembrance of Allah. They may even occupy a person's mind while they are praying, and compete with their worship. Some of us manage, with the help of Allah, to use his will to mitigate the burdens of the *Dunya* and to dedicate our time to worshipping Allah. Unfortunately, in this case, there is a danger of reaching a state where we avoid social and humanitarian activities.

The great majority of us find ourselves caught up in the unrelenting struggle of life, not because of greed for its pleasures, but because of our need to make a dignified living; hence, we barely find time for ourselves and for our families, let alone for Allah. If we pray, we do it as part of fulfilling a duty, and we might be absent-minded during the prayer. If we try, in a moment of wakefulness and determination, to remove ourselves from this confusion and daily grind, we will find ourselves tethered by social conventions and requirements. Worse than that, we will find ourselves captive to our own illusions and misconceptions. The price we pay for engaging in life is exorbitant, and we pay it in the form of psychological

stress, tension, irritability, anxiety, depression and a myriad of other ailments, many of which manifest themselves in the form of bodily pains and illnesses, others in social abnormalities and familial disharmony; the list goes on.

So, what is the solution? How do we get rid of these various psychological stressors and diseases? How do we remain in touch with our servitude and connection to Allah at every waking moment?

The same solution applies for both issues. It lies in becoming accustomed to bonding with Allah, remembering Him and sensing your servitude to Him as you live amongst others and pass through every challenge and joy that life holds. You interact with life, push it, be pushed by it and engage in its struggles while simultaneously managing to innovate and excel - but through all that, you remain quiet, serene, and comfortable. You feel undaunted by what is happening around you. All you see is your God and your servitude to Him. This serenity does not stop you from engaging with life; on the contrary, it immerses you with positivity. **“Those who have believed and whose hearts are assured by the remembrance of Allah. Unquestionably, by the remembrance of Allah hearts are assured” (13:28).**

This seems a nice notion, but to many of us, it is more like a vague prescription of medications; it is not useful because we do not know how to formulate it. How, practically, can we live and be involved in the painful and wearisome concerns and struggles of life - with all its conspiracies and intrigues - while at the same time maintaining a state of bondage to Allah and feeling serene, tranquil and even unparalleled bliss?

The answer is that when we say the phrase “remembrance of Allah,” we do not mean the literal word “Allah,” but the remembrance of Allah the Exalted, of everything that one can fathom of the unity of Allah, to the extent that we can comprehend it. Remember and sense that Allah is your God, your owner, the owner of every particle in this universe, and that everything is under his grip; nothing is occult to Him, and if He wants anything, He need only to say it and it will be so.

Remember and sense that you are but his servant and creature that He, exalted, loves, and that He is more merciful to you than your own mother, and that whatever happens to you, He knows about it and it is in your interest.

Remember that you are in a state of perpetual, direct and uninterrupted contact with Him. It is you who is oblivious to this contact. You can talk to Allah and say what you want, when you want, how you want; you can tell Him all your

secrets and whispers, and He will hear you and place the whole universe at your service.

Our remembrance and perception of and faith in these facts, even if without a specific linguistic framework, allows them to gradually permeate our depths and rid us of our delusions, misconceptions and existing mental maps. The more these principles and divine values take root within us, the more composed and serene we will feel, no matter what is happening around us.

I hope that this issue is now very clear; however, one question remains: How do we establish these divine values in ourselves from a practical perspective? We do not need to innovate solutions; Allah did not leave us neglected. **“Does man think that he will be left neglected?”** (75:36). He legislated and set forth solutions to ensure that we achieve success and tranquility. All we need to do is pay attention.

Generally, solutions exist at two levels; or rather, we can say there are two sets of practices designated by Allah for us:

2.1 The Set of Mandatory Practices [*Wajibat*]:

This is made up of the rituals of worship and the mandatory recital material, including the five daily prayers. This is more than enough to make man happy and tranquil in life, but it

must be practiced with a special state of awareness, cognition and meditation.

We are not required to pray with the same level of submission as the saints, nor are we required to understand the meaning of everything we say in our prayers, but when we pray, we must sense, at least a little, that we are before Allah and that He has called us to Himself. Then we must remember all the divine values related to His mercy and majesty. Try to hover in the sky of your love of Allah. Remember that His love is rooted in our intuition and it is He who did that. Do not be shy; allow this beautiful love to show up in your conscious mind, and savor it. Talk to Allah from the depths of your heart and say what you want. Describe what you want, for He can hear and see you and is with you, and He will never forget you, even if you are oblivious to Him. Do not be tough on yourself and do not coerce yourself to do this. Take things easy and walk in baby steps, or your Self may rebel. Your mind may wander astray towards the world of *Dunya* and its conflicts and pleasures. This is okay and expected and happens to most people; therefore, do not be put off. Satan works hard to use these feelings of guilt to distract you from the remembrance of Allah: **“Satan has overcome them and made them forget the remembrance of Allah”** (58:19). Therefore, if you become distracted, you should regain your

composure and sense the greatness of Allah and His love and mercy.

While you are praying, you may find a few smart thoughts come to mind about the tough problems you are facing in your life. They may stay in your mind while you are praying and distract you from the prayer. At the end of the prayer, Satan will make you feel guilty and will convince you that the *Dunya* is controlling you and that you have no real hope of getting closer to Allah. Satan will play many dirty tricks on you, so be smarter than him and consider those smart thoughts that you had during the prayer as inspiration from Allah. Be prostrate in gratitude [*Sujūd*] to Allah, and that will punish Satan.

You may start to think of all your errands while you are praying, and that may make you want to pray faster and get it over with so you can get on with your business; but no matter how important the thing you are planning to do after the prayer, you should not rush it. Leave the *Dunya* and all its business at the doorstep of the room, and remove it from your mind the way you remove your shoes: **“O you who have believed, let not your wealth and your children divert you from remembrance of Allah. And whoever does that - then those are the losers”** (63:9). Give yourself time to enjoy

prayer, but do not force yourself to pray slowly, just allow yourself the time you need to pray.

Deal with every act of worship in the same manner, with contemplation and gentleness, so that its content, notions, and goals sink in. Do not forget that the One who legislated them, Allah, is the same One who created man and who knows him and his interests best: **“Indeed, prayer prohibits immorality and wrongdoing”** (29:45).

2.2 The Set of Encouraged Practices (*Mustahabât*)

This set comprises the optional acts of worship (*Mustahabât*), including the night prayer (*Ṣalat al Layl*). Allah, our creator, knows that some of us are more readily prepared to achieve more, and it is for those that He legislated this set of acts of worship. It is next to impossible to do everything in this group, but you can choose whatever suits your capabilities, circumstances, requirements and perseverance.

I am definitely not the right person to act as an expert on these acts of worship, but I can describe some of the simpler acts that might suit those with big responsibilities and busy schedules. While these activities do not require much time or effort, they are nonetheless effective. The busier a person is, the more valuable these activities become.

- **Prostration to Allah for a minute or two at bedtime**

Prostrate in silence, so that you can sense your servitude to Allah and His Divinity in your eyes to as great a degree as possible, and there is no other truth other than your struggle towards Him. Sense the greatness of that and savor it; it will make you very happy. You will not achieve this outcome the first time, but with continuous practice, it will become natural. Make sure it is the last thing you do before you sleep, so that it permeates your inner layers while you are sleeping and is the first thing you wake up to. If you start to feel comfortable in prostration, you can step up the “dose” a little by adopting the position for a bit longer or prostrating again first thing in the morning when you wake up.

- **Continuous remembrance of Allah**

“O you who have believed, remember Allah with much remembrance (41) And exalt Him morning and afternoon (42) It is He who confers blessing upon you, and His angels [ask Him to do so] that He may bring you out from darkness into the light. And ever is He, to the believers, Merciful (43)” (33:41-43).

Amidst your busy life, you will face many challenges, frustrations, triumphs, and surprises. A myriad of feelings and sentiments will churn in your heart, and you will be in dire need of someone to whom you can talk and ventilate your

stresses. Sometimes, you will not be able to find a shoulder to cry on or an ear to whisper to. Seize the opportunity to talk to Allah and ask His help: **“Remember Allah like your [previous] remembrance of your fathers or with [much] greater remembrance”** (2:200). Despite the busy-ness of your days, you have a lot of gaps in your schedule, mostly in between doing other things - when you walk from your office to the meeting room, when you drive from work to home, while you are waiting to see your boss or a client. Do not let these times elapse in vain; utilize them in talking to Allah, because you need it. The more problems you have in life, the more you have to talk about: **“And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me - indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me. So let them respond to Me [by obedience] and believe in Me that they may be [rightly] guided”** (2:186). Initially, it may feel a little unnatural, since we are not used to talking to Allah in casual way, but soon it will feel spontaneous and smooth and you will begin enjoy it. This will fortify you with strength and composure.

- **Reciting the Quran daily, even if just for a few minutes**

Recite whatever you can from the Holy Quran, even if it is only two or three verses. Do it when it suits you, but at least

make sure your mind is clear, for instance after the dawn (*fajr*) prayers. If it seems difficult, then use the Quran channel on the radio to hear it being recited as you drive from home to work. One of our issues is that we are used to listen to recitals of the holy Quran or to reading it while our minds are wandering in other worlds. Break this habit with simple will by paying total attention to the Quran, even if for just a few minutes each day. Read or listen to recitals of the Quran with your heart, think about its meanings and notions, and try to feel it. Let these notions permeate your consciousness and then filter through to your subconscious. Do not fight it; just submit to it. If you come across a verse that talks about a notion that you cannot verify in your life, believe the Quran and disbelieve yourself, for Allah does not say anything except the truth. For instance, when Allah says, **“Call upon Me; I will respond to you”** (40:60), do not complicate matters; rather, trust that if you call upon Allah, then He will respond to you, even if you cannot see that response. It is much like when your child mistakes a mirage for water, but you know better and tell him to disbelieve his eyes and take your word for it. If this state of “rightness” can apply to you, and you are a fallible human, then it is definitely true for Allah, the one who never errs. It was no arbitrary matter when Allah asked us to say, “Allah the almighty has spoken the truth,” after we finish reciting the Quran. I suggest you get used to reciting the

Quran from your mobile phone at every chance you have; in the waiting areas, when the traffic light is on red, and so on. I suggest you install the *al Mizan* app (an exegesis of the Quran) on your mobile phone and use it as often as you can.

▪ **Daily self-appraisal for 5 to 10 minutes**

Daily self-appraisal is one of the most important techniques for helping improve oneself and bring happiness and contentment. Imam Ali said, “Not one of us is he, who does not evaluate himself every day. If he has done good, he should ask Allah to increase that; and if he has done an evil act, then he should ask Allah`s forgiveness ³².” By self-appraisal and holding ourselves to account, we do not mean self-flagellation and reprimand, but an objective review and quiet self-assessment that is done by all of us each night at bedtime. The goal is to identify our weaknesses and strengths and assess our deeds and achievements in order to plan for the day ahead. Imam Ali said, “**In any movement [you have], you need knowledge ³³.**”

The best thing about this is that you can do it during your *munajat* (whispering supplication to Allah), which helps you unload the negative energy that accumulates in your heart as a result of day-to-day activities. It also helps replenish your

³² *Rasa`el al Shahīd al Thanī*, p151

³³ *Tuhaf al Oqool*, p119.

positive energy and fill you with joy and bliss. As you prostrate before sleep, or while you are sitting before the prostration, you can tell Allah all the beautiful things you did during the day. You will feel like a small boy or girl, proudly telling their father about their good day. Then, you can tell Him about all that you felt uncomfortable doing or not doing in the day, even if it was not a mistake. Apologize and resolve to do better next time. These are some of the simple and quick techniques you can carry out for this purpose, but there are many more available for those who desire to reach higher levels of integrity and happiness. Perhaps the greatest of these is the night prayer (*Ṣalat al Layl*): **“And from [part of] the night, pray with it as additional [worship] for you; it is expected that your Lord will resurrect you to a praised station” (17:79).**

- **Make the most of sacred places and times**

Remember how we mentioned the principle of gentleness with the self as one of the principles of the path towards Allah? Imam Redha said, **“Hearts are imbued with passion and the power of advancing and retreating. Therefore, approach them for action at the time of their passionateness and when they are in a mood for advancing, because if hearts are forced [to do a thing] they will be blinded.”** This is applicable in other places than the sacred places and at times other than the sacred times. The most important of these

times are the day of *Arafa*, the two *Eids*, the month of *Ramadhan* and the nights of *Qadr*; and hence we have to make the most of these at the time, even if we are suffering a “retreating heart”. The holiness of these days and places is existential (*takwīnī*) as opposed to legislative (*tashrī’ī*) -but what does this mean? It is exactly like the coldness of the poles of the Earth. If you are at the poles, you will feel cold, and this has nothing to do with any man-made rule or convention. It is what it is. Prayer, remembrance of Allah and good deeds are augmented by a magnitude of hundreds of thousands at the sacred times and in the sacred places, even if you feel more devotional on ordinary days. Think about these days and places like a special card in the deck. With this in mind, you’d feel very sorry to miss the opportunity they offer.

It is important to realize that it is not only prayers and supplications that bring us closer to Allah, but all the optional desirable activities in Shari‘a (*Mustahaba*], including playing with our children, seeking knowledge, visiting or serving kin (*Ṣilat al Rahem*: maintenance of family ties), even if we do these without the intention of worship. Once again, these deeds are rewarded much more when performed in holy places or at holy times. Yet, we can still augment the reward of these activities by an order of hundreds of thousands using a simple technique, which is to do them whilst bearing in mind

the intention of getting closer to Allah. For instance, if you visit the grave of a loved one, you can reiterate in your mind that you are doing it for the love of Allah. Satan will try to convince you that this is not true, and that the real reason for visiting your relative on the day of Eid is that you are used to the routine and because social ties require you do so, even if you actually do not want to. You may feel that this is true, but you should never pay attention to it; instead, you should continue to “deceive” yourself in that you are doing it for Allah; in fact, you should over-emphasize this as much as possible. Do you know why? By doing so, you will soon realign your feelings so that it is true and you are no longer pretending. Now, if you really want to take maximum advantage of these sacred times and places (so that they serve as a quantum leap towards Allah), and because it will give you unparalleled internal strength and serenity, try also to convince yourself as much as possible during “ordinary” days and times as well. Every hour or every ninety minutes, for one minute, try to sense and savor your servitude to Allah and feel your bondage with Him. Remind yourself of His omnipresence and omnipotence.

Feel that He is directly in charge of you at every moment of your life, that his attention never lapses for a second, and that he immerses you in love and tender care.

Sense everything emerging from your servitude to Him and savor these feelings. Let them spontaneously permeate your layers, one by one. When you do this, you will start to feel the warmth of this unique bond with your God; you will enjoy it and might try to recreate it over and over, living the moment in perpetuity. From a practical perspective, if you decide to do this during the sacred days or in the holy places, you can use your mobile phone to alert and remind you once every hour to rekindle the feeling.

Epilogue

The path to Allah rids us of all sorts of weakness, psychological disease and ignorance, and guides us to happiness, strength, serenity, and freedom. In short, it takes us from darkness to light.

Following anything other than Allah, no matter who or what that is, and no matter how beautiful it seems, will only lead to darkness, pain and suffering. **“Allah is the ally of those who believe. He brings them out from darkneses into the light. And those who disbelieve - their allies are Taghut. They take them out of the light into darkneses. Those are the companions of the Fire; they will abide eternally therein”** (2:257). Allah calls us to that which is good, to the Paradise. Will we respond to His invitation to that which makes us alive? - **“O you who have believed, respond to Allah and to the Messenger when he calls you to that which gives you life”** (8:24) - or will we be like Thamūd? **“And as for Thamūd, We guided them, but they preferred blindness over guidance, so the thunderbolt of humiliating punishment seized them for what they used to earn”** (41:17).

Allah invites us to Him because He loves us and is merciful on us. He tells us He is close to us and asks us to believe in Him: **“And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me - indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me. So let them respond to Me [by obedience] and believe in Me that they may be [rightly] guided”** (2:186). He us to tempts us to take His path: **“Whoever desires the reward of this world - then with Allah is the reward of this world and the Hereafter. And ever is Allah Hearing and Seeing”** (4:134), and warns us against Satan: **“Satan promises them and arouses desire in them. But Satan does not promise them except delusion”** (4:120). However, Allah does not deprive us of the freedom of choice, because reason and free will are the basis of humanity: **“There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it”** (2:256).

Let us be aware that Allah established His arguments and clarified His path, so if we decide to let delusions and lusts take over us and tether us to the pit of darkness, then this will be our choice and we will bear full responsibility for it. **“And say, “The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills - let him**

believe; and whoever wills - let him disbelieve.” Indeed, We have prepared for the wrongdoers a fire whose walls will surround them. And if they call for relief, they will be relieved with water like murky oil, which scalds [their] faces. Wretched is the drink, and evil is the resting place” (18:29). And let us know that misery resulting from straying from the path of Allah is not limited to the *Aakhirah* [hereafter]; it includes the *Dunya* also. “And whoever turns away from My remembrance - indeed, he will have a depressed life, and We will gather him on the Day of Resurrection blind” (20:124).

“SO, I HAVE NEVER SEEN SUCH A NOBLE MASTER MORE ACCOMMODATING TO SUCH A DISSATISFIED SERVANT THAN YOU ARE TO ME. O LORD! YOU GIVE AN INVITATION BUT I TURN DOWN YOU BECOME FAMILIAR WITH ME BUT I DO NOT CARE FOR YOU, AND YOU SHOW AFFECTION TO ME BUT I DO NOT CORRESPOND TO YOU, AS IF YOU ARE OVERREACHING ME! YET, ALL THAT HAVE NOT STOPPED YOU FROM HAVING MERCY UPON ME, DOING FAVORS TO ME, AND BLESSING ME OUT OF YOUR MAGNANIMITY AND GENEROSITY.”

The supplication of *al-Iftitah*