

The Importance of the Islamic Concept of Having Self-restraint (Taqwa)

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The Term Taqwa

"Is he who founds his building on God wariness and [the pursuit of Allah's] pleasure better off or he who founds his building on the brink of a collapsing bank which collapses with him into the fire of hell? And Allah does not guide the wrongdoing lot." (9:109)

Taqwa is the Islamic concept of having self-restraint. It is used 251 times in the Holy Qur'an as either a noun or a verb. The term taqwa comes from the Arabic root "wa-qa-ya" which means "protection" or "support." Taqwa is not meant to mean "fear" or "avoidance", but because having fear is a prerequisite to protecting oneself from something and to avoid it, it may sometimes refer to having fear.

Also, since protection from something requires a feeling of fear alongside it, it may in some cases metaphorically refer to "avoidance" or "fear". Both meanings are accurate although there is no evidence to confirm that this metaphorically means "fear" or "restraint."

While it is widely believed that the commands ittaqu'llah means "fear Allah" and ittaqunnar means "fear fire," these commands actually refer to protecting oneself from Allah's punishment and the harm of fire. Moreover, those who practice self-control by refraining from acting upon desires that require patience and a resolute attitude are called muttaqeen, which is an Arabic term for "those who practice taqwa."

It is important to note that taqwa is not about performing religious obligations such as prayer and fasting: it is about living a pious life. A person possessing taqwa abandons living an animalistic life and chooses to live a moral one. Though there are other definitions of it, such as social and political taqwa, religious taqwa has a more superior and elevated status. It is only on the basis of religion that a person can create a well-grounded taqwa in himself. As stated in the Qur'an:

Is he who founds his building on God wariness and [the pursuit of Allah's] pleasure better-off or he who founds his building on the brink of a collapsing bank... (9:109)

In his Al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur'an, Rāghib says that the meaning of the word wa-qa-ya is to protect something against everything which may damage it and taqwā means to put the soul under protection against whatever threatens it. However, sometimes according to the rule of using the cause instead of the effect and vice versa, the words fear and taqwā are used

interchangeably. In religious law, taqwā means keeping one's self from whatever leads him to commit sins so that he refrains from prohibited acts. Rāghib explicitly says that taqwā simply means to protect oneself. He also says that this word can be translated as fear and does not denote that in the example of ittaqu'llah the metaphoric meaning is intended. And as we said, there is no reason to affirm that in such sentences any metaphor is used. The strange thing is that this word is translated as restraint (parhizkari) in Farsi.

It has never been seen that any linguist ever claims that this word is used in this meaning. As it was mentioned before, Rāghib translated this word as fear but did not use it as restraint. It is not certain where, when, and why this word became translated as piety in Farsi. I suppose that only Farsi-speaking people get the meaning of restraint from the word taqwā. No Arabic-speaking person understands this word in this way. There is no doubt that in practice, the prerequisite of having taqwā and self-protection for something is to avoid it, but it does not mean that the word "taqwā" has this meaning

Fear of God

It is necessary to understand that it is not expected for one to harbour negative thoughts of God when fearing Him. God is not meant to be viewed as an abominable or frightening entity. Rather, God is absolute perfection and the best source for a human being to love. The concept of human beings having to fear God actually refers to fearing the rule of divine justice. This notion is seen in the following supplication

يا من لا يرجى الا فضله ، و لا يخاف الا عدله

*O Who is not hoped but for His favour, and is not feared but His justice.*¹

:The notion of fearing His justice is seen in another supplication

جللت ان يخاف منك الا العدل، و ان يرجى منك الا الاحسان و الفضل

*You are too great to be feared but Your justice, and to hoped but for Your beneficence and favour.*²

Justice in itself is not a vile entity. Fearing justice actually alludes to fearing oneself because of his past wrongs or a person fears that he may break the limit and violate other people's rights

in the future.

As for the issue of fear and hope where a believer must always be hopeful and optimistic while simultaneously fearful and worried, it means that he must always be fearful of transgressing in following his unquenchable desires so that they never take the rein of his affairs from his reasoning and his faith, while at the same time he must be hopeful and confident in God, and to rely on God who will always help him. Imam Ali ibn Husayn (a) states in the well-known Du'a of :Abu Hamzah Thūmālī

إذا رأيت مولاي ذنوبي فزعت و إذا رأيت كرمك طمعت

*O My Lord! When I look at the sins I have committed, I become fearful and when I look at Your generosity, I harbour hope.*³

The meaning of Taqwa

Taqwa is the prerequisite for a person who wants to live his life by certain principles, whether they are religious or not, and he is to have a clear direction in order to move towards a specific goal. In doing so, he is to protect himself against transitional desires inconsistent with his goals and principles.

Thus, taqwa in a broader sense is a requirement for everyone who wants to be a true human being, live under control of reason, and follow certain principles. In religious context, taqwa is the quality of those who protect themselves from all that is considered by religion as wrong and sinful. In stating this, there are two kinds of taqwa: the first is just to avoid facing situations, in which sins may take place and this is the quality of the weak people and leads to seclusion and isolation, while the second is to face challenges and remain persistent and this is the quality of those who are strong in their faith and can play an active role in society.

According to the first type, a person protects himself from sins by refraining from a situation that leads to committing one. This is similar to a person who avoids an infested environment to protect his health.

According to the second type, a person creates a state and power in his soul that gives him a spiritual and moral security. That is, if he does find himself in a situation where the means and causes of sin are around him, that spiritual state protects him and prevents him from committing sins. This is similar to a person who creates a medical immunity in his body so that the microbes of the diseases have no effect on his health.

Now, laymen consider taqwā to be the first type. For those who are said to have taqwā, it usually means that he is a cautious man who secludes himself in an isolated corner and refrains from the causes of sin. It has been understood this way because the word taqwā has always been translated for us as abstinence.

Moreover, abstinence from sin has been gradually construed as avoiding the grounds for sins; later on the meaning changed into isolation and avoiding society. Thus, when this word is heard in ordinary conversation, a state of avoidance and reluctance comes to mind.

Though the prerequisite of leading a reasonable life is to follow specific principles, it is not wise to avoid social life in doing so. The key to living the right way is to create a state of immunity in our soul that eventually protects us. Sa'dī, in his famous book of poetry Gulistan, says:

*I beheld an illustrious man in a mountain region
Who had contentedly retired from the world into a Cave
Why, said I, comest thou not into the city
For once to relax the bonds of thy heart?
He replied: 'Fairy –faced maidens are there.
When clay is plentiful, elephants will stumble.'*⁴

In the above poem, the man who secluded himself in the mountains refrains from returning to the city because of the “fairy-faced maidens” who may eventually cause him to “stumble.” This is the first kind of “taqwa”. However, it is not to a person’s advantage to keep himself away from a slippery surface to refrain from slipping. Better than that is to know how to walk on it without losing his balance. Baba Taher says:

*Beneath the tyranny of eyes and heart I cry,
For, all the eyes see, the heart stores up:
I'll fashion me a pointed sword of steel,
Put out mine eyes, and so set free my heart.*

Undoubtedly, our heart will be captivated by everything our eyes fall upon. However, blinding ourselves is not our only option. A better way is to create a power in our heart so that our eyes do not captivate our heart. If we want to make a dagger with an iron point to release our heart from our eyes, we need another dagger for our ears because everything our ears hear, our heart turns to it.

The same goes for the senses of tasting, touching, and smelling. In this case, a human being becomes like a lion without a tail, belly, and head which Mulawi (Jalal al-Dim Rumi) described .in his story in Mathnawi

Pragmatic Enforcement

In some books on spirituality, reference is made to some people who used some practical method to force themselves to abide by divine law. For example, they used to put pebbles in their mouths to control their tongue from over-speaking or engaging in idle and/or prohibited talk. Usually this type of approach is taken to represent the perfect example of piety. However, imposing pragmatic obligations on oneself in order to refrain from committing sins does not necessarily mean one has perfected himself. If we succeed in doing so and abstain from committing sins, indeed, we have refrained from committing sins, yet our soul has not changed. It is simply inactive because it has no means to commit wrong. Thus, true perfection lies in a person's freedom to do wrong and yet he chooses to refrain from sinning without practically imposing anything on himself. These kinds of preventions may be considered perfection only when they are seen as preliminaries to primary stages of creating the attribute of piety. That is because piety can be created after a course of opposing practices against wrong acts. But the real essence of piety is far from these practices. It is the great and potent holy state of the soul that supports and protects human beings. One has to struggle to achieve the true essence of piety.

Taqwa in Nahj al-Balaghah

The word "taqwa" is emphasized in the compilation of sermons and sayings of Imam Ali (a) collectively known as Nahj al-Balaghah, and it has always been used to mean the habit of strengthening and taming the evil-prompting soul with its unquenchable desires. In this book, Imam Ali (a) is quoted to have said

إن تقوى الله حمت أولياء الله محارمه و الزمت قلوبهم مخافته حتى اسهرت ليلهم و اظمأت هواجرهم

*Certainly fear of Allah has saved the lovers of Allah from the unlawful and has given His dread to their hearts till their nights are passed in wakefulness and their noons in thirst.*⁵

In this passage, Imam Ali (a) clearly explains the meaning of "taqwa" as a spiritual state which saves people from committing sins and considers fear of God as one of its results. Thus, taqwa does not mean "to fear" but one of the consequences of it is that it makes the hearts wary of Allah. As stated in the beginning, ittaqu'llah does not mean the command to "fear God".

In another hadith, Imam 'Ali (a) says

ذمتى بما أقول رهينه و انا به زعيم. ان من صرحت له العبر عما بين يديه من المثلثات حجزته التقوى عن تقحم الشبهات . . . الا و ان الخطايا خيل شمس حمل عليها اهلها و خلعت لجمها فتقحمت بهم فى النار الا و ان التقوى مطايا ذلل حمل عليها اهلها و اعطوا ازمته فاوردتهم الجنة

The responsibility for what I say is guaranteed and I am answerable for it. He to whom experiences have clearly shown the past exemplary punishments (given by Allah to peoples) is prevented by piety from falling into doubts...

*Beware that sins are like unruly horses on whom their riders have been placed and their reins have been let loose so that they would jump with them in Hell. Beware that piety is like trained horses on which the riders have been placed with the reins in their hands so that they would take the riders to Heaven.*⁶

In this sermon, the definition of taqwa is to control or to dominate the soul. A person who is not strong enough to disobey his desires and surrenders his control to his soul is likened to an unskilled rider on an unruly horse who lacks willpower.

The prerequisite of taqwa and self-control is increasing one's willpower and having a spiritual and rational personality, like a wise horseman who skilfully rides his horse, and his horse, in turn, quickly obeys him. The person who is riding the unruly horse of desires, lust, avarice, and ambition is dependent on these vices and lets his reins of will slip away from his hands would not be controlled by wisdom and insight.

As for the one reliant upon taqwa, it is like he is riding the horse of self-control and holds the reins of will. He handles himself in all directions. In this regard, Imam Ali (a) says

فان التقوى فى اليوم الحرز و الجنة و فى غد الطريق الى الجنة

*Certainly, for today piety is a protection and a shield, and for tomorrow (the Day of Judgment) it is the road to Paradise.*⁷

:The Imam (a) expands on piety by presenting a very moving example

ان التقوى دار حصن عزيز و الفجور دار حصن ذليل لا يمنع اهله و لا يحرز من لجأ اليه

*Know, O creatures of Allah, that piety is a strong house of protection while impiety is a weak house which does not protect its people, and does not give security to him who takes refuge therein.*⁸

Here, piety (taqwa) is likened to a strong house of protection.

In yet another well-known sermon, titled “The Pious” (al-Muttaqīn), Imam Ali (a) responds to the request of Hammām ibn Shuray who had asked him (a) to describe who the pious are, so much so that he could clearly visualize them.

At first, Imam Ali (a) gave a brief answer; however, Hammām was not contented and insisted the Imam (a) expand on it. Thus, the Imam (a) answered giving more than one hundred spiritual characteristics and mental and moral qualities of the pious. According to historians, as soon as the Imam (a) ended his speech, Hammām was so impressed that he cried out and passed away.

Thus, it is clear that taqwa is a spiritual state which is like a fortress, amulet, or a trained horse for the soul. In short, taqwa is a spiritual power

Taqwa: Freedom or Restriction?

Taqwa is not a restriction; it is a protection. Even if we call taqwa a restriction, then this restriction is truly a protection. Just as it is erroneous to call a house a restriction even though it is built with walls, rooms, solid doors, and windows to keep its inhabitants safe from harmful weather and to keep its furniture and equipment in safe areas, taqwa, like a house, is a protection. We can call something a restriction when it deprives us of a gift or happiness, but something that averts dangers from us and protects us against them is a safety, not a restriction.

In the Qur’an, taqwa is defined as a garment in that it protects the body from the cold and hot weather in the same way a house protects people. In the Qur’an, after mentioning the clothing for body, it is stated:

O' Children of Adam! We have certainly sent down to you garments to cover your nakedness and for adornment. Yet the garment of piety—that is the best. That is [one] of God’s signs, so that they may take admonition. (7:26)

:In providing guidelines for having taqwa, Imam Ali (a) states in one of his sermons

الا فصولونها و تصونوا بها

you should take care of it and take care of yourselves through it....⁹...

:Furthermore, Imam Ali (a) holds that piety is a great cause of freedom. He states

فان تقوى الله مفتاح سداد و ذخيره معاد و عتق من كل ملكه و نجاه من كل هلكه بها ينجح الطالب و ينجو

*Certainly, piety is the key to guidance, provision for the next world, freedom from all types of slavery, and deliverance from all ruin. With its help the seeker succeeds and he who makes for safety escapes and achieves his aims.*¹⁰

Taqwa helps one to reach his goals and protects him against his enemies. In the first place, taqwa gives human beings freedom in moral and spiritual issues, frees him from the chains of slavery of long desires, and gives him a relief from the sufferings of greed, envy, lust, and anger. It also indirectly gives him social freedom. long desires, and gives him a relief from the sufferings of greed, envy, lust, and anger. It also indirectly gives him social freedom. long desires, and gives him a relief from the sufferings of greed, envy, lust, and anger. It also indirectly gives him social freedom.

Servitude and slavery in society are the results of spiritual slavery. One who is a slave and obedient to wealth and position cannot live free socially. Hence, it is true to say that taqwa gives human beings "freedom from all types of slavery." Thus, not only does taqwa not have a chain or restriction, but it is in fact freedom itself.

Protecting one's Taqwa

Thinking of taqwa as a fortress and protector might make some people proud and ignorant and they would suppose that a person who has taqwa never makes a mistake. This may result in never noticing the great risks for taqwa. But the fact is that, although taqwa is a perfect state, it involves some danger as well.

It is not impossible for a person to live under the protection of taqwa and at the same time, he himself protects taqwa too. Imam Ali (a) has referred to both kinds of protection in the following sentence: "You should take care of it and take care of yourselves through it!" Thus, we must protect taqwa and it should protect us. Also, we must seek proximity to God through :taqwa and also ask God to provide us with it. Imam Ali (a) also stated

اوصيكم عباد الله بتقوى الله فانها حق الله عليكم و الموجه على الله حقكم و ان تستعينوا عليها بالله و تستعينوا بها على الله

*I advise you, O' creatures of Allah, that you should have fear of Allah because it is a right of Allah over you and it creates your right over Allah, and that you should seek Allah's help in it, and its help in (meeting) Allah.*¹¹

However, the dangers that weaken taqwa must be taken into consideration. It is seen in religious rulings that taqwa is known as a guaranteed protection and immunity against many sins, but there are some limits for the other sins which are more appealing. For instance, it is not stated in religious rulings that being alone in a place where there is a tool used for robbery, drinking wine, or homicide, is forbidden. Or it is not forbidden to be alone in a house at night, in which there are no obstacles for a person if he wants to drink wine. Faith and taqwa will guarantee him protection. But as for the sexual instinct which is stronger and more provocative, taqwa does not guarantee it and it is forbidden to be alone with the opposite sex because the sexual instinct is a danger that can destroy taqwa even though taqwa is so strong. There is a verse in a famous poem of Hafiz that whenever I come to it, the issue I have mentioned comes to my mind, as if Hafiz wanted to state this spiritual fact in the very sweet way of his own:

*Of coins, is it that they examination take
So that, after their own work, all the cloister-holders take?
In my sight, the counsel is that all work, friends
Should let go; and, the curl of the tress of a friend take.
The tip of the Saki's tress, happily the companions take:
If the sky permits them, a little rest they take.¹²*

Then he says:

*To lovely ones, boast not of the strength of thy arm of chastity.¹³
For, among this tribe, with a single mounted one, a fortress, they take.¹⁴*

In the above verse, taqwa is likened to a fence, just as Imam Ali (a) had described. Then, it is said that the power of "the lovely ones" is much more than this fortress and no one can cast it in their teeth. In this corps, even a single rider can conquer a fence, and collective attack is not needed.

The Value and Effect of Taqwa

In addition to the dramatic effects of taqwa in the afterlife and the fact that it is the only way of salvation for human beings from everlasting wretchedness, taqwa has many other values and effects in this worldly life. Imam Ali (a), who emphasized taqwa in his instructions and urged people towards it in a very outstanding way, has referred to numerous outcomes of taqwa. For example, he stated

عتق من كل ملكه و نجاه من كل هلكه

*Freedom from all types of slavery, and deliverance from all ruin.*¹⁵

:Or elsewhere, he stated

فَإِنَّ تَقْوَى اللَّهِ دَوَاءٌ دَاءِ قُلُوبِكُمْ وَ بَصَرٌ عَمَى أَفْئِدَتِكُمْ وَ شِفَاءٌ مَرَضِ أَجْسَادِكُمْ وَ صَلَاحٌ فَسَادِ صُدُورِكُمْ وَ طَهُورٌ دَنَسِ أَنْفُسِكُمْ وَ جِلَاءٌ عَشَا أَبْصَارِكُمْ وَ أَمْنٌ فَرَعٍ جَأَشِكُمْ وَ ضِيَاءٌ سَوَادِ ظُلْمَتِكُمْ

*Certainly, fear of Allah (taqwa) is the medicine for your hearts, sight for the blindness of your spirits, the cure for the ailments of your bodies, the rectifier of the evils of your breasts, the purifier of the pollution of your minds, the light of the darkness of your eyes, the consolation for the fear of your heart, and the brightness for the gloom of your ignorance.*¹⁶

In fact, Imam Ali (a) holds that taqwa is beneficial for all the difficulties and hardships of human beings. In fact, if we do not merely consider the negative aspect for taqwa and think of it in the same way as Imam Ali (a) did, we must agree that taqwa is one of the pillars of a person's life, whether in one's personal or social life, and that the basis of life would be unstable without it.

The value of something becomes clearer when it is known whether or not something else could replace it. Taqwa is one of the necessary components of life because nothing, whether it be power, money, or law-making, can replace it.

Among our daily problems is the existence of too many rulings and regulations which continually change. Laws and regulations are created for special issues and then they are changed and new ones are made. However, laws are not enough to reform the society. Of course, there is no doubt that law itself is also a fact of life. Aside from general divine laws, people need a series of civil laws. But societies are not entirely reformed by them. Restrictions are introduced by the law; thus, people should have a kind of power to see the value of these restrictions and to accept them. This faculty is called taqwa. It is said that the law should be respected. This is true, but if the principles of taqwa are not applied, can we still expect people to observe all the laws and regulations all the time?

For instance there are some problems in our life which are officially discussed and in the media people are asked to suggest their solutions for them. The increasing number of people getting a divorce, the revision of the election system, and traffic regulations are some of them. Though I may not know all the reasons for the increase in the number of divorce, I do know that losing taqwa is a major reason.

If people did not lose taqwa and were not so unrestrained, we would not have such a high number of divorces. In the past, people had more difficulties and needs in their lives, but due to their commitment to religious and moral values, there were less cases of divorce. Certainly, the problems we see in family life today are more than in the past. Taqwa and faith can solve many of them.

Today, we have lost them and although our resources today are better than in the past, we face more problems. Considering the rise in the divorce rate, we can try to decrease it using the force of increasing the restrictions of the law for men and women, using the force of the regulations, the administration of justice, executive power of the government, and by changing regulations and laws. However, all of these options will not solve the main problem.

Regarding the issue of elections, we see that some people insist on the view that problems in elections have arisen from flaws in the election law that have been created during last fifty years and are not compatible with today's needs. I am not going to defend the present election law. It certainly has defects. But do people act even according to the current law? Is the current law the cause of corruption?

Or is corruption happening because people do not act even according to current law, and no one considers any limit for himself or gives others any rights. Would the current law allow anyone to enter a city and forcefully tell them "I am your representative whether you accept it or not?" while people of that city have never seen or heard of his name before? Such corruptions cannot be stopped by simply developing or changing the law. It is only possible when there is a kind of awareness, faith, and taqwa among the people.

Finally, regarding the lack of commitment toward traffic laws and speeding, does the problem exist because of existing regulations or because of something else?

Nowadays, we are frequently facing many social issues. People ask why the divorce rate is rising and why people commit crimes such as robbery and murder. Why has cheating become common? Why has prostitution become common?

It is the weakness of faith and the destruction of the fortress of taqwa that cause such corruptions. It is very strange that there are people who speak and write about these questions frequently, but they themselves cut down the roots of these concerns from the souls of the people and lead them into moral anarchy, into destruction of foundation of taqwa, and into impairing the immunity of taqwa because they essentially do not believe in it. If there is no faith and taqwa - we take refuge with God - people become more vulnerable and may even consider .stealing, cheating, and committing crimes as acceptable acts

Taqwa and Health

As said above, Imam Ali (a) has stated about taqwa:

*Certainly, fear of Allah (taqwa) is ... the cure for the ailments of your bodies...*¹⁷

It might be asked what is the relationship between taqwa (a spiritual issue) and physical health? Of course, taqwa is not a tablet and medicine, but if taqwa does not exist, a physician is not good enough to heal the ailment of someone who is in need of taqwa. A person who has taqwa is satisfied with his limits and his rights, feels calm and confident, and has inner peace. This results in a healthier heart; tensions will not cause him to suffer from stomach ulcers and from pain in his intestines. He will not become weak and infirm because of being liberal in sexual relations. The well-being of his body, social life, and spirit all depend on .taqwa

Taqwa and Insight

Taqwa leads to clear-sightedness and insight as it is stated in the holy Qur'an:

...If you are wary of Allah, He shall appoint a criterion for you... (8:29)

This verse illustrates that insightfulness is among the important effects of taqwa and we can say that this has paved the way for the mystic journey

Taqwa and Deliverance

The other effect of taqwa is that the one who has it can get himself out of predicaments and hardships. The Qur'an says: ...And whoever is wary of Allah, He shall make a way out for him and provide for him from whence he does not reckon. And whoever puts his trust in Allah, He will suffice him. Indeed (Allah carries through His command. Certainly Allah has set a measure for everything. (65: 2-3

Notes

1. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 92, p. 439.
2. Ibid, vol. 99, p. 55.
3. Al-Misbah by al-Kaf 'ami, p.588.
4. Gulistan, Sa'di, Ch.V, Story no. 17, trans. by Sir Edwin Arnold.
5. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 114.
6. Ibid, Sermon 16.

7. Ibid. Sermon 189.
8. Ibid. Sermon 155.
9. Ibid. Sermon 233.
10. Ibid. Sermon 228.
11. Ibid. Sermon 190.
12. Ghazal of Hafez Shirazi. Original translation by Henry Wilberforce Clarke (1840-1905) [vol. II, p. 387, Ghazal no. 209 (253), 1891.] Part 2 (version 1.03) Compiled and Corrected by Dr. Behrouz Homayoun Far, Ghazal no. 185, p.172. An online version can be found at:
<http://www2.enel.ucalgary.ca/People/far/hobbies/iran/hafez.html>.
13. Hafiz uses the term “parhiz” which means here taqwa
قوت بازوی پرهیز به خوبان مفروش که در این خیل حصاری به سواری گیرند
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid. Sermon 228.
16. Ibid. Sermon 197.
17. Ibid.