

Repentance

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Introduction

Picture parents who suddenly see their child's disobedience and wrongdoings despite all the efforts they have made for his education and progress. Undoubtedly, their hearts would break from such disobedience, but they would try to draw the fruit of their life close to themselves and keep him away from the wrong path he has taken. They would become so happy whenever they see the smallest sign of change or regret in their child and would warmly embrace him expressing their love and support.

Likewise, God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, also dislikes His creatures' disobedience and wrongdoings, as their disobedience diverts them from the path that their original disposition (*fitra*) has drawn for them and prevents the development of their God-given potentials. Thus, according to Islamic traditions, when God sees the signs of His servant's return, He is more pleased than a passenger who

finds his lost vehicle or provision in a desert at night (Kulayni 1407 AH, 2:435).

About the importance of repentance, suffice it to mention that returning to God is in fact returning to one's self. The self, lost in the darkness of sins and left undiscovered, is redeemed through repentance, and the penitent person regains his pure nature by coming back to the path towards perfection and by returning from the wrong path which was taking him further and further from their own self.

Definition of Repentance

The word for repentance in Arabic is *tawbah*; it is derived from the root *t-w-b*, meaning "to return." As a technical term in ethics and mysticism, *tawbah* means "the return of the servant to his Lord." However, sometimes this concept is attributed to God, in which case it must be translated as "to accept the repentance of the servant"; in other words, just as the servant leaves his sins and returns to his Lord, God also turns to him with mercy and compassion and accepts his repentance.¹ There are several instances of this latter usage of *tawbah* in the Quran and Islamic traditions; for instance, Quran 9:117 reads, "Certainly Allah turned clemently to the Prophet and the Emigrants."

Naraqī interpreted *tawbah* as "refraining from verbal, practical, or mental sins; purification of the soul from the impurity of sins; returning from "distance" to "proximity" [of God]; abandoning sins at present and being determined to abandon them in future; and try to make up for their past derelictions (Naraqī, *Jami' al-Sa'adat* 1431 AH, 569).

¹ The *tawbah* of God could also mean inspiring and leading the servant towards repentance. See Javadi Amuli (2008, 3:444) and Tabataba'i (1417AH, 4:237).

Ghazali regarded “burning” as the essence of *tawbah*: “Goodness and evil are fully mixed in human essence, which nothing can purify except the fire of regret or that of Hell. Therefore, being burnt is necessary for purifying man’s essence from satanic impurities. Now, it is upon you to choose the lesser disaster and the less severe fire before your free will [i.e. your chance to compensate] is taken from you (Fayd Kashani n.d., 7:4).

Istighfar (“seeking forgiveness”) and *inabah* (“return”) are among the close concepts to *tawbah*. About the difference between *inabah* and *tawbah*, it is said that *tawbah* is having the feeling of contrition for something bad done in the past, and *inabah* is the decision to abandon the sins in future. It has also been said that *inabah* is the perfection of *tawbah* and includes *ibtihal* (“invocation”) to God after repentance from the committed sins.¹

Istighfar also has some differences with *tawbah*. *Istighfar* literally means “to seek forgiveness” and can be fulfilled through supplication, repentance or obedience, while *tawbah* is being contrite about the sins of the past and having the decision to refrain from them forever.

Awwab, derived from the root ‘*w-b*, means “a servant who repeatedly returns to God” or “one who repents.” The words *awwab* and *tawwab* have very similar applications and, in most cases, are used interchangeably.

Repenting from sins and returning to the Right Path has four essential steps. Imam Ali (a) said,

¹ Naraqī regards *inabah* as the final level of *tawbah*, interpreting it as turning to God from anything other than God Himself. See (Naraqī 1388 Sh, 383).

Tawbah is based on four pillars: contrition of the heart, asking for forgiveness by the tongue, performing [good deeds] by the limbs, and serious determination not to return to the past sins. (Majlisi 1403AH, 75:81)

Thus, verbal repentance is not enough; one must first feel contrite about his sins, then verbally express his regret and his decision to refrain from sins, and afterwards the limbs of the body have to embark on doing good deeds. As a result, the person would not be the same person, never returning to his evil manners and wrongdoings.

Repentance in the Quran and HADITHS

Now, let us discuss about repentance based on Quranic verses and *hadiths*.

The Quran teaches us that those who sincerely return to God and repent will be embraced by God's infinite mercy and love:

Those who, when they commit an indecent act or wrong themselves, remember Allah, and plead [Allah's] forgiveness for their sins —and who forgives sins except Allah?— and who do not persist in what they have committed while they know. (Quran 3:135)

Elsewhere, God reminds us of His limitless mercy and forgiveness for His servants:

Plead with your Lord for forgiveness, then turn to Him penitently.

“My Lord is indeed all-merciful, all-affectionate.
(Quran 11:90)

Disobedience of servants does not harm God; rather, it is they who will be harmed by sins. Thus, God invites them to repent for their own

good and reminds them of the fact that their never limits His absolute power:

If you repent, that is better for you; but if you turn your backs [on Allah], know that you cannot thwart Allah. (Quran 9:3)

True repentance takes place when one makes up for his previous wrongdoings. Therefore, the Quran mentions repentance and righteous deeds together:

... barring those who repent, believe, and act righteously. Such will enter paradise, and they will not be wronged in the least. (Quran 19:60)

And whoever repents and acts righteously indeed turns to Allah with due penitence)." (Quran 25:71)

In a *hadith* from Imam Baqir (a), containing a conversation between the Imam (a) and Muhammad B. Muslim, the infinite mercy of God for His penitent servants has been emphasized:

[The Imam (a)] said, "O Muhammad ibn Muslim! The believer's sins, when he repents, are forgiven. Thus, he must resume his [good] deeds after repentance and forgiveness. By God, this privilege is not but for the people of faith." I said, "What if returned [to his sins] after his *tawbah* and *istighfar* and [wanted to] repent again?" He (a) said, "O Muhammad ibn Muslim! Do you think a believer repents from his sins, but God does not accept his repentance?" I said, "But he did that several times, committing sins then repenting and asking God for forgiveness!" He (a) said, "Whenever a believer returns to God through *istighfar* and *tawbah*, God turns to him with forgiveness. Truly God is Forgiving and

Merciful; He accepts repentance and forgives misdeeds. Never cause the believers to despair of God's mercy." (Kulayni 1407 AH, 2:434)

Since God wants the happiness of His servants, He keeps the door of repentance open to them. It is reported that the noble Prophet (s) said,

If one repents one year before he dies, God will accept his repentance." Then he (s) said, "One year is too much; if one repents one month before he dies, God will accept his repentance." Then he (s) said, "One month is too much; if one repents one week before he dies, God will accept his repentance." Then he (s) said, "One week is too much; if one repents one day before he dies, God will accept his repentance." Then he (s) said, "One day is even too much; if one repents just before he sees [the angel of death], God will accept his repentance. (Ibid., 2:440)

The role and importance of hope in repentance can be learned about by exploring the Quranic verses regarding repentance. In most cases, God gives the hope-inspiring news of forgiveness to His sinful servants. The noble Prophet (s) said,

Gabriel reported that God said, "O my servant! If you know Me, worship Me, have hope in Me, and ascribe no partners to Me, I will forgive whatever you have done; if you come to me with sins and wrongdoings as great as the earth, I will meet you with equally great forgiveness; and I will forgive you and will not mind." (Daylami 1412 AH, 1:107)

Thus, sins darken the heart, and if one does not remove this darkness by repentance, it will ruin eternal life. In this regard, Imam Baqir (a)

informing us of an adverse consequence for those who do not repent, has reportedly said,

Nothing is more harmful to the heart than sins. Indeed, the heart keeps committing sins until it is overcome and completely inverted by the sins. (Kulayni 1407 AH, 2:268)

According to Imam Baqir (a), as a consequence of committing sins, the heart, which is naturally inclined towards God, will be overturned and become earthly an, as the Quran mentions, will end up denying and deriding God's signs:

Then the fate of those who committed misdeeds was that they denied the signs of Allah and they used to deride them. (Quran 30:10)

Therefore, keeping hope for God's forgiveness, one must repent and return to the Right Path before his heart becomes too dark. It is mentioned in a *hadith* that

when a servant commits a sin, a dark point appears in his heart. If he repents and asks for forgiveness, his heart will be cleared from that dark point, but if he does not repent and does not ask for forgiveness, sins will add up and their darkness will accumulate until it completely covers the heart, and, being covered by many sins, the heart will die. Thus, God says, "No indeed! Rather their hearts have been sullied by what they have been earning" [Quran 83:14]. (Daylami 1412 AH, 1:46)

Thus, postponing repentance is perilous, and one must repent as soon as he finds out about his wrongdoing. Delaying repentance allows the roots of sins to spread and become so strong that eradicating them

will become impossible. In *hadiths*, postponing repentance is called *taswif* and is prohibited. Imam Ali (a) says, “Avoid committing sins and postponing repentance, because doing so will make your punishment intensified,” and also, “One who postpones repentance is under great threat of imminent coming of the death” (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 194).

In Islamic sources, *tawbah nasuh* (“sincere repentance”) is greatly emphasized. This term has been derived from Quran 66:8, which enjoins the believers to turn to God in “sincere repentance.” The exegetes have suggested different interpretations for this verse based on their understanding of the word *nasuh*. According to one interpretation, *nasuh* is derived from the root *n-s-h*, which means sincerity, and, thus, *tawbah nasuh* means the kind of sincere repentance that keeps away the repentant person from his sins forever. It is mentioned that in a sincere repentance, the person feels so contrite about his past sins that he will never repeat them.

Repentance in the Views of Islamic Scholars

The late Ayatollah Mutahhari beautifully explains why repentance is not accepted from those who repent when they see their death:

Repentance is not just a regret and return; returning from one’s wrong way under any circumstances is not counted as repentance. True repentance takes place when an internal revolution happens inside a person, when all the holy forces hidden in his soul rise against the evil forces and against his misdeeds and take control of his soul. This is the true meaning of repentance. Repentance means internal revolution in one’s soul. When the time of death comes and the person sees the divine punishment ahead of himself, obviously he will declare faith. However, such a declaration is not a sign of a holy internal revolution. About Pharaoh, the Quran says, “When overtaken by drowning, he

called out, ‘I believe that there is no god except Him in whom the Children of Israel believe, and I am one of those who submit [to Him]!’ [Quran 10:90] During his life in this world, Pharaoh kept transgressing; he never accepted any proofs or advices; he challenged Moses by the magicians; when the magicians believed in God, he increased his transgression; and he followed Moses and the Israelites to kill them. However, when such a person was about to drown, when he saw his death and realized that there was no way out, he said: “I believe that there is no god except Him in whom the Children of Israel believe”. At that time, his repentance was not accepted. Why? If it had been a true repentance, God would have accepted it, but it was not a true repentance. Repentance means a holy internal revolution. That was not such a revolution ... He did not rise against himself; his *fitra* was not revived; he just expressed his submission out of distress. That is why he is told: “What! Now?!” [10:91] Why did not he say this just an hour ago when he was free? If he had said that then, it would have shown that a holy revolution had happened to him, but now saying this only shows his distress and misery. (Mutahhari 2008, 23:555-6)

A Story about Repentance

Imam Kazim (a) was passing through Bagdad’s bazaar, when he heard the sound of music from a house he was passing by. Suddenly, a maid came out of the house to put the garbage out. The Imam (a) asked her, “Is the owner of this house a free man or a slave?” Surprised by this question, the maid answered, “Of course he is a free man! The owner of this house is Bushr, one of the most famous men of the city!” The Imam (a) replied, “Indeed, He is a free man; if he was a slave, there would not be such a loud music and overindulgence!” When she went back inside, Bushr asked her why she had been late. When she told him the story, Bushr realized that the man was none but Imam Kazim

(a), so he rushed out of the door without putting his shoes on and started searching for the Imam (a). When he found the Imam (a), he fell at Imam's (a) feet and said, "O My master! From this moment on, I really want to be a slave [i.e. a servant of God]. I have come to repent and ask you to pray for me." He then repented and came back to his house and threw away all his party supplies and, to keep the remembrance of his repentance, he never again put on shoes and would always walk in the streets of Bagdad with bare feet. Hence, he was called Bushr Hafi (i.e. "Bushr the barefoot") (Mutahhari 2008, 23:570-1).

Another story about repentance is narrated by Ali ibn Hamzah, a companion of Imam Sadiq (a), who says,

I had a young friend who was a writer in Umayyad government. Once, he told me, "Please make an appointment for me to see Imam Sadiq (a)!" I made an appointment for him and the Imam (a) accepted to see him. When he met the Imam (a), my friend said, "May I be made your ransom! I had a position in the Umayyad ministry of treasury and became so rich, and I was lax in accumulating my wealth [i.e. I was not careful about acquiring it through permissible ways]." The Imam (a) replied, "If the Umayyads had not have people who collected taxes for them and accompanied them in wars and gatherings, they would not have been able to violate our rights." The young man asked, "Is there a way for me to repent?" The Imam (a) answered, "Yes! Return people's properties to their owners, if you know them; if you do not know the owners, give those properties to charity on their owners' behalf. I guarantee that, if you do this, you will enter Paradise." The young man looked down and thought for some moments and then said, "I will do so!"

Ali ibn Hamzah continues,

I went with the young man to the mosque of Kufa, where he gave back the properties of people to their known owners and gave whatever else he had, even his own clothes, to charity. I collected some money from my other friends for him and bought him some clothes and provisions. Some months later, he became ill. One day, when I went to visit him, he was breathing his last. He opened his eyes just before he passed away and said, "O Ali! The Imam (a) fulfilled his promise to me!" He said this and died. We washed his body and buried him. Later, we went to visit the Imam (a). As soon as he (a) met us, he said, O Ali! By Allah, we fulfilled our promise to your friend!" I said, "Yes—May I be made your ransom!—he told me about it, when he was dying!" (Majlisi 1403 AH, 47:383)

How to Repent

As mentioned above, repentance depends on two blessings from God: inspiring the servant to repent and accepting his repentance. However, one may have committed different types of sins, and, there are different requirements for each type that needs to be fulfilled in order for one's repentance to be accepted. The following is a short explanation about the three types of sins and the way to repent from them. Afterwards, some strategies towards strengthening the feeling of repentance will be discussed.

A) Making Injustice to the Self

The Quran tells us about people who do injustice to themselves: "Yet some of them are those who wrong themselves" (Quran 35:32). This refers to the sins that harm the person who commits them. Since in

this type of sins only the sinner is harmed, repenting from them is relatively easy: one just needs to regret his wrongdoings, firmly decide not to return to them, and ask God for forgiveness.

B) Rights of God

All the blessings of God for us are meant to keep us away from ignorance and error and to help us succeed in our path towards perfection. Unfortunately, however, we usually misuse these blessings, disobey God's commandments, and violate religious rulings.

To repent from this type of sins, one has to correct his beliefs, then if he has failed to fulfill any religious duties, he needs to make up for them. For instance, according to the manuals of Islamic law, a person who has broken his fast in the month of Ramadan has to free a slave, fast for two months, or provide food for sixty poor people. If one is unable to do this, one has to provide as much food as he can, and if he is totally unable to do any of this, he just needs to repent and say "*astaghfirullah*" (I ask God for forgiveness).

C) Rights of People

The third type of sins are those which affect other people as well; for example, oppressing others, violating someone's rights, backbiting, slander, misappropriating people's properties, etc.

Such sins are not forgiven unless the sinner is forgiven by those whose rights have been violated. Imam Ali (a) has well explained these three types of sins:

Know that injustice is of three kinds: the injustice that will not be forgiven, that which will not be left unquestioned about, and that which will be forgiven without being questioned about. The injustice that will not be forgiven is ascribing partners to God. God

has said, “Indeed Allah does not forgive that any partner should be ascribed to Him” [Quran, 4:48,116]; the injustice that will be forgiven is the injustice of a person to himself through minor sins; and the injustice that will not be left unquestioned about is the injustice of a person to others.” (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 176)

In order to repent from the injustice one has committed against other people, one has to seek their forgiveness; if that is not possible, one has to donate to charity on their behalf and ask God to content them on the Day of Judgment. This, of course, depends on God’s will, but it is hoped that God will have mercy on His helpless penitent servants when they sincerely return to Him and will content the rights owners by His blessings (Naraqı 1388 Sh, 377).

It is necessary to mention that one type of sin which is very difficult to repent from is spreading a wrong belief or practice. This type of sin is forgiven only if one brings back to the Right Path those whom he has misled, and this can be extremely difficult and in many cases impossible. Thus, such sins must really be kept away from. It is mentioned in *hadiths* that the sins and errors of anyone who follow such wrong beliefs or practices will be written for the one who has spread those beliefs and practices as well. The reason why the personal repentance of such a person will not be accepted is that he did not go astray individually but led other people astray as well, and a real return to God does not take place in this case unless all those who have gone astray from God’s path return to Him (Tabataba’i 1417 AH, 4:397).

However, it seems that even the one who commits the above-mentioned sin must not lose his hope in the acceptance of his repentance; he must try his best to eradicate all the ill effects of his sin

and never stop trying with the excuse that his repentance would not be accepted, because he may be forgiven by God due to his efforts. The Prophet (s) considered the repentance of such a person accepted, if he truly repents and makes up for his past (Majlisi 1403AH, 2:22).

The following are some strategies for durability and effectiveness of repentance:

1. Keeping away from sinful environments and sinful gatherings

The repentant person is vulnerable after repentance; he is like a patient in his convalescence period who is in a high risk of reinfection in infectious environments or like a recovering addict who is in danger of relapse in risky places. Therefore, a penitent person needs to be careful about his friends and resolutely keep away from those who have pushed him towards sin in the past.

2. Remembering God

Remembering God whenever one finds sinful temptations. The Quran teaches us that “the hearts find rest in Allah’s remembrance!” (Quran 13:28)

3. Reflecting on evil consequences of sins

One should always remind himself of the tragic consequences of the sins he has repented from, so that the temptations do not get the opportunity to arise due to ignorance and forgetfulness.

4. Learning about the story and the downfall of sinners

Learning and reflecting on the stories of those who suffered dire troubles because of their sins and, on the other hand, on the delightful stories of those who sincerely repented from their dark past is greatly helpful for staying away from sin.

Adopting a Good lifestyle

Having a productive daily schedule, including a time for work, worship, and healthy entertainments is very important for the penitent, since being idle and having too much free time paves the ground for temptations and sins.

5. Repenting swiftly

If one is blessed by God with the opportunity for repentance, he must appreciate this opportunity and not waste it by delaying the repentance.

Attributes of the Real Repentant

The noble Prophet (s) has mentioned four attributes for a real repentant:

The repentant has four attributes: sincerity of action for God, refraining from the false, adhering to the truth, and a passion for doing good.” (Harrani 1983, 20)

He (s) is also reported to have pointed out some of the attributes of a true repentant in another hadith:

The repentant who is devoid of the signs of repentance is not a [real]: he must content his foes [whose rights he has violated], repeat his [void] prayers, practice humbleness among people, and keep himself away from carnal desires.” (Shu‘ayri n.d., 87)

Individual and Social Fruits of Repentance

Repentance has many individual fruits, some of which we will mention below:

1. The most important individual fruit of repentance is achieving the contentment and friendship of God: “Indeed Allah loves the penitent and He loves those who keep clean” (Quran 2:222).
2. Purity of the soul and forgiveness for the sins are two important fruits of repentance. After enjoining us to repent, the Quran says,

O you who have faith! Repent to Allah with sincere repentance! Maybe your Lord will absolve you of your misdeeds. (66:8)

It is understood from *hadiths* that the sins of a true repentant disappear in such a way that even the angels responsible to keep the records of the actions forget them. Also, the body limbs are ordered to conceal the sins. On the Day of Judgment, no one and nothing will testify against the one who has truly repented (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:431).

3. Repentance not only conceals the sins but also changes them to good deeds. The noble Quran say,

... those who repent, attain faith, and act righteously; for such, Allah will replace their misdeeds with good deeds, and Allah is all-forgiving, all-merciful. (25:70)
4. The angels pray for those who repent, asking God to forgive their sins and admit them to Paradise with their families.
5. Repentance is an opportunity for making up for misdeeds and dereliction of duties. Repentance is the opportunity which is not given to those who ask God on the Day of Judgment to return to this world to make up for their misdeeds:

Were you to see when the guilty hang their heads before their Lord [confessing], “Our Lord! We have seen and heard. Send us back so that we may act

righteously. Indeed we are [now] convinced.” (Quran 32:12)

Accordingly, Imam Ali (a) said, “The fruit of repentance is regaining losses of the soul” (Tamimi Amadi 1366 Sh, 195).

6. Repentance eradicates disappointment and despair and brings back the hope for growth and perfection. The Quran states,

Say [that Allah declares,] “O My servants who have committed excesses against their own souls, do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed Allah will forgive all sins. Indeed He is the All-forgiving, the All-merciful.” (39:53)

Thus a believer must never lose his hope in God’s mercy, as the Quran declares,

“Indeed no one despairs of Allah’s mercy except the faithless lot” (12:87).

Now, let us discuss some of the social fruits of repentance:

7. Repentance brings both spiritual and material blessings to the society. Quoting Prophet Hud (a), the Quran says,

O my people! Plead with your Lord for forgiveness, then turn to Him penitently: He will send copious rains for you from the sky, and add power to your [present] power. So do not turn your backs [on Him] as guilty ones. (11:52)

8. When a person repents and stays away from sin, he will be embraced by society. Based on Islamic teachings, a repentant must never be criticized for what he has done in the past (Makarim Shirazi 1374 Sh, 3:310).

Conclusion

No one, except the Infallibles, is immune to the forces of carnal desires and Satan. Thus, committing a sin must not be regarded as the end of the road. Repentance is the way to God's mercy and forgiveness and leads to salvation and eternal happiness. A penitent makes a new start, rebuilds his ruined self, and becomes a respected member of society.

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