Tazkiyat un-Nafs

Transcript of the Friday Sermon delivered by Dr Munawar Haque at AMDA Masjid on February 21, 2014

In today’s khutba, I want to share with you some thoughts on the concept of Tazkiyat un-Nafs or purification of the soul, which is the basis for development and improvement of the personality. Tazkiyat un-Nafs is a long, pro-active, and uphill task. It is not a quick-fix formula. It is not something that can be achieved over night. It can be a difficult process especially at the start.

Literally, the term Tazkiyah encompasses two meanings: one is to purify while the other is to improve and develop towards the height of perfection. Technically, it conveys the sense of checking oneself from erroneous tendencies and beliefs and turning them to the path of virtue and piety.

Misunderstanding of the concept of Tazkiyah becomes evident when people look for quick methods of becoming more spiritual. Tazkiyah is not accidental. It must be based on the good and sincere intention to please Allah and draw near to Him. The process of Tazkiyah can’t be sustained if done for any other reason.

One of the most important tasks for which our beloved Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was sent was to purify the souls of people. Speaking of this mission, Allah says,

हूँ अंि दी बुि च फ अर य मेि आने र ्सूलाँ मिि नेि यि हो उल् यि हैं

अ्याईं वि हैं वि हैं वि हैं अल्लाहु ्ल्लाहु ्ल्लाहु ्ल्लाहु ्ल्लाहु अल्लाहु

“He who has raised among the unlettered people a messenger from among themselves who recites His revelations to them, and purifies them, and teaches them the Book and wisdom, for they had formerly been clearly misguided” (al-Jumu’ah, 62:2).

Indeed, the success of a person has been linked with the purity of his soul.

قِدْ أَفْلَحْ مِنْ رَّكَاهَا وَقِدْ خَابَ مِنْ دَسَاهَا

“He who purifies it (i.e., the soul) will indeed be successful. And he who corrupts it is sure to fail” (al-Shams, 91:9-10).
This illustrates that Allah created the human soul with both evil and good inclinations, and endowed man with the ability to distinguish between the two. Falah or eternal success is achieved by choosing good instead of evil and striving to make it prevail. The person undertaking Tazkiyah must be true to himself, to others, and to Allah. All human effort at Tazkiyah should always be accompanied by supplication for Allah's intervention without which human effort will bear no fruit. Allah says,

أَلَََل أَر تَ لَِلَ الذِئِينَ يُزَكُّونَ أنفسهم بِاللله يُزَكِّي مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَلًََلَ يُظَالِمُونَ فَتِيلًا

“Have you not seen those who consider themselves pure? It is indeed Allah who purifies whoever He pleases and none shall be wronged by as much as a hairs breadth” (al-Nisa’, 4:49).

On the other hand, it is wrong for a human to make no effort and passively expect Allah to intervene. Humans must play their role before expecting Allah's help. The human can do a lot to refine the soul.

Useful knowledge is one of the primary means to purify the soul. Any knowledge that brings man closer to Allah, increases man's consciousness of Allah, and guides man to do good deed is useful knowledge. The Prophet (SAW) used to make a du’a:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِِّّ أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ عِلَامٍ لَّا يَنْفَعُ وَمِنَ قَلْبٍ لَا يَحْشَعُ وَمِنْ نَفْسٍ لَا يَشَبَّعُ وَمِنْ دَعْوَةٍ لَا يُسَتَّجِبُ بَلَاهُ

"O Allah! I seek your refuge from knowledge that is not useful, from a heart that does not humble, from a soul that is not satisfied and from a supplication that is not granted."

Ibn Rajab Al-Hanbali said: "A sign of the people of knowledge is that they are humble, they hate reverence and people's high remarks of them, they do not look down on people, they are always seeking the Hereafter taking from this world only what they need, and they are constantly worshipping Allah. The more knowledge they have, the more fearful, the more humble, and the more submissive to Allah they become." We have in Surat Fatir,
“Only those of His servants who possess knowledge fear Allah” (Fatir, 35:28).

Some of the effects of useful knowledge in purifying the soul are: (1) correct and firm belief, fulfillment of acts of worship, (2) avoiding the forbidden, (3) being conscious of the Creator, and (4) constant meditation about the creation. So, we should all help one another to acquire useful knowledge through learning and teaching. This way, Tazkiyah or soul purification is collective and continuous until we meet Allah (SWT).

Purification of the soul is based upon two principles: (1) Iman and (2) Righteous actions. Corruption in Iman and corruption in righteous actions corrupts the soul. Iman is in general related to things of the unseen. The unseen that we believe in is something that which the mind cannot perceive. For example, we can’t perceive the nature of angels, and we can’t perceive the qualities of how paradise and hell are. We can’t see Allah and the mind can’t perceive the nature of Allah. The only way we know something about Allah is through the Qur’an and authentic Sunnah. Likewise, righteous actions, which Allah loves and rewards us for, and evil actions that Allah dislikes and may punish us for can only be known by knowing what Allah and the Prophet (SAW) have commanded and what they have prohibited. Therefore purification of the soul is to be undertaken within this Prophetic paradigm of Iman and righteous action. Islam is a practical religion. Good actions help in the achievement of Tazkiyah because they wipe out sins. The Qur’an says,

إِنَّ الحُسَنَاتِ يُذَهِّبْ أَلْسِنَاتِ

“Good actions drive away bad actions” (Hud, 11:114).

May Allah make us among those who strive to purify our souls through Iman and righteous actions.

As to the conceptualization of the human soul, there are, according to Imam al-Ghazali four aspects of a man that signify his spiritual identity. These are the nafs, the aql, the rooh, and the qalb. All of these are intertwined and influence man in his behavior.

The nafs is like the ego that gives rise to reactions to the environment that has been acquired through the lifespan. It may be reflective of an animalistic side of the individual at its lowest untrained level. The nafs has been likened to an animal, that if it is untrained, it may not be very pleasant. However, if one were to train an animal it can be of service to its master. From the Islamic perspective, the nafs is not intrinsically bad. If it learns good habits, then it will be of service to the individual. Only if it learns bad ones, it can be a barrier to one’s growth. The three types of nafs are the nafs-al-ammarah or the unruly animal self that dictates evil, the nafs-al-lawwamah or the self-reproaching soul, and the nafs al-mutma’innah or the satisfied soul.
The aql is the rational faculty of man. It is home to logic, reason, and acquired intellectual beliefs. The rooh is the spirit of man that, if kept healthy, allows one to live a meaningful and wholesome life. Finally, the qalb is the heart, also called the soul. The heart is where the effects of the other three elements manifest. The heart may also be home to spiritual diseases such as arrogance, jealousy, greed, and stinginess, which are results of the evil inclinations of the nafs. To remove these sicknesses of the heart, one must work toward modifying the inclinations of the nafs toward good, restructuring and acquiring positive thoughts in the aql, and feeding the spirit through remembrance of Allah.

The person who strives towards ihsan begins with the challenge of freeing himself from the influence of shaytan and the nafs-al-ammarah, which commands one to sensual pleasures and lusts and pulls the heart (qalb) in a downward direction. It is the resting place of evil and the source of blameworthy morals and bad actions. In its primitive stage the nafs incites us to commit evil. The Qur’an talks about Yusuf (AS) as saying,

وَمَا أُبَرِّئُ نَفْسِي إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَآَمَّةً بِالسُوءِ إِلَّا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّيُّ رَبِّي

“I do not pretend to be blameless, for man’s very soul incites him to evil unless my Lord shows mercy: He is most forgiving, most merciful” (Yusuf, 12:53).

The sense of the word lawwamah is that of resisting wrongdoing and asking Allah's forgiveness after we become conscious of wrongdoing. The original reference to this state is found in Surat al-Qiyamah.

وَلَّا أُقَسِّمُ بِالنَّفْسِ اللَّوَّامَةِ

“And I swear by the self-reproaching soul” (al-Qiyamah, 75:2).

At this stage, we begin to understand the negative effects of our habitual self-centered approach to the world, even though we do not yet have the ability to change. Our misdeeds now begin to become hateful to us. We enter a cycle of going wrong, regretting our mistakes, going wrong again, and seeking Allah’s forgiveness for our lapses.

The Qur’an explains how one can achieve the state of the nafs al-mutma’innah or the satisfied soul in Surat al-Ra’id.
"Those who have iman and whose hearts find peace in the remembrance of Allah. Only in the remembrance of Allah can the heart find peace” (al-Ra’d, 13:28).

The aim of Tazkiyah and moral development is to attain falah or success, thus realizing the nafs al-mutma’inna. On this level one is firm in one's faith and leaves bad manners behind. The soul becomes at peace. It remains pleased with Allah and satisfied with His decrees. In Surat al-Fajr, Allah addresses the peaceful soul in the following words:

“O soul at peace, return to your Lord well pleased and pleasing (to Him); join My servants; and enter My Paradise” (al-Fajr, 89: 27-30).

If man travels the path of purification, Allah will aid and guide him. As the Qur'an maintains in Surat al-Ankabut,

"We will surely guide in Our ways those who strive hard for Our cause, Truly, Allah is with the righteous” (al-Ankabut, 29:69).

May Allah (SWT) make us among such people who strive to purify themselves; both outwardly and inwardly; physically and spiritually. Allahumma Ameen.