

SOME ASPECTS OF CHARACTER BUILDING

THE MUSLIM

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Vast indeed is the subject of character- building; it is lengthy as the whole life-time. What can only be done here is to emphasis certain aspects which may be worthy of consideration and deserve to be put into practice.

The subject of character and character- building is of concern to many disciplines: psychology, sociology, social anthropology — and religion regards it as its central issue. "Character" could be taken to mean that coherent pattern of thoughts, habits and conduct which imparts an element of unity, continuity and consistency to human behavior. It is because of this pattern of unity inherent in a character make-up, that one can forecast or predict what a particular person may do in a particular situation. Most, if not all, of the schools of psychology and, of course, people in education who deal with the subject, would perhaps agree with this tentative definition with which I want to begin this discussion.

In a Muslim who seeks to lead a life in accordance with the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, peace be upon him, there is present this particular pattern of thought and behavior,—a pattern in which certain things cannot be juxtaposed that are not germane to it, that are foreign to it. If one studies Hadith he will find the Prophet again and again saying that a Muslim cannot do this or that act, simply because of the fact that he is a Muslim. And if there is any one "central theme" of the Qur'an, it is the guiding of Man along the Right Path. This is what leads to character and character-building. Following the Qur'an will produce a particular pattern of life in the individual and in the society. What goes to make up this central theme of the Qur'an is beyond estimation. That this central theme is closely bound up with character-building is amply borne out by the fact that the mission of the Prophet, peace be upon him, has been described in the Qur'an by the word tazkiya. Tazkiya means literally the purification or the cleansing of all those things which are unwholesome and unwelcome and unwanted. At the same time it endows the human being with all those things which are essential for growth and development, for blossoming and flowering. The tazkiya of a person would mean the developing of his character, his thought, his behavior; it would mean the moulding of his entire flow of actions to free them from those evils, those unwholesome traits which are obnoxious, undesirable in the eyes of Allah, and to endow them with all those virtues which Allah wants to flourish in human life. Tazkiya, one might say, is a "short-hand" word for the entire concept of character-building. How central it is to the example and the mission of the Prophet, one can realise from the fact that the Prophet Ibrahim—peace be upon him—when he prayed, asked Allah to endow his progeny with prophet hood while he was laying the foundations of the Ka'aba. His prayer was:

"Our Lord, and raise up in their midst a messenger from among them who shall recite to them your signs, and shall instruct them in the Book and the Wisdom, and shall make them pure (yuzakkihim—from the same root as tazkiya). Truly you, only you, are the Mighty, the Wise."

And this prayer of the Prophet Ibrahim was accepted; the prophet he asked for was eventually sent to mankind, to the entire human race. He was Sayyidina Muhammad, peace be upon him. And note how the acceptance and the fulfillment of this prayer is stated as well:

"As also we have sent to you a messenger from among you who recites to you Our signs and makes you pure[yuzakkikum) and teaches you the Book and the Wisdom, and teaches you that which you did not know."

2:151

Exactly the same thing which was demanded is given, and tazkiya forms an essential part of it all. It is one of the most essential parts in the function of the Prophet.

And when we come to the problem of character-building in the individual, the same point of tazkiya is stressed. For each and every individual, the criterion which has been set in the Qur'an is:

"Prosperous indeed is he who has purified it (his soul) And unsuccessful is he who de- debases it." **91: 9-10**

Individual success depends then on purifying the soul. Even more than this, from the viewpoint of the da'wa or the message of Islam, this purification is important for the society and for humanity at large, but it starts with the individual. And here also we obtain the criterion from the Qur'an. Although Islam is nothing but *the* Truth, as far as the psychology of any movement, of any message is concerned, human beings will judge the veracity and correctness of that message in the light of the character of the people who present it. And this is not a false criterion. We find that in the Qur'an one of the arguments given by Allah in support of the veracity, the correctness, and the truthfulness of the Qur'an itself is the life of the Prophet:

"I have been living a life amongst you before (proclaiming this message). Will you then not understand?" **10:16**

Here the Prophet is made to appeal to the reason of would-be adherents asking them to judge the veracity of his message against the background of the life which he lived among them. For that life and that message both confirmed each other, both supported

each other. One is a witness to the other, one bears the other out. This is the relationship of character to the message and the leader: the very truthfulness of Islam.

Before I go on to deal with character-building itself, I would like to stress the importance of character building in our present situation. Of course its importance is paramount everywhere but in a society such as we find ourselves in to-day—I mean Western society—its importance increases immensely for the simple reason that the helping hand which is extended by the environment of eastern society, however deficient that may now be, we are deprived of here. I am reminded of an Indian poet who once said.

"Is drinking prohibited for me even in this city, while nobody knows me there?"

Such is the society in which we breathe. The forces of destruction are heavy and powerful. And one can defeat them only by instilling in oneself and one's society a more forceful response, a more forceful counter-effort, to keep things right on their moorings. So at the individual as well as at the collective level, the importance of character-building is enhanced by this situation. I am reminded of one who said that every challenge is also an opportunity. If this society is a great challenge to our faith, to our character, it also presents us with an opportunity to prove our worth.

I want now to expand on four points in order to clarify the nature of tazkiya and in the process to convey some idea of the vastness of the concept of morals in Islam.

The first point is that character-building, in the last analysis, is a highly personal process- Of course Islam assigns great importance to the collective spirit and, as shall be shown later on, this has a part to play in character- building. But ultimately, the process of character-building is a highly personal one. There is no machine, psychological, sociological or ideological, which could mould one automatically into a cast of good character. It is only through personal effort—the individual's own realization, own determination and own exertion that can produce this character. Perhaps one can get a clue to this from the fact that in the Qur'an God makes each individual accountable individually to Him for his entire life: accountability on the Day of Judgment will be individual. Definitely the *umma* has certain collective responsibilities to fulfill .certain collective functions to perform, but as far as the record of this life's career is concerned, it is the responsibility of the individual. This is so because the process and the nature of character-forming is such that it must be a personal process and a personal effort. So each of us will have to think out how best he can perform this function, this task. Of course, the society, the Islamic society does extend help. It assists. It co-operates. It makes things easy, but the process remains personal. As the saying goes, you can take the horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink. That process of drinking remains

personal. The best society you have can only take you to the water: it will not give you more than that. The Islamic Movement; what can it do? It can provide you with a congenial atmosphere and opportunities to move ahead in this direction, but no more than that; the very act of character-making will remain your personal effort. I am emphasizing this particularly, in the first instance to make each one of us realise just what responsibility in this respect rests upon him as an individual and secondly to bring into focus the fact that no matter how bad the situation, we can never shun character-making, as it is a personal process and a personal responsibility; we can never be free from it. So wherever we are this effort must remain.

Secondly, I would like to emphasize that character making is not a part-time or a piece-meal job. What it demands is a protracted effort. It is an unending, unceasing process, and there is no short-cut to it. It's not there for just a day, a week, a month, a year. Should I borrow from Shaw, and say that it is life sentence? That's why you find that Allah makes us realise:

"And do not die except that you are Muslims" **32:102**

The process is life-long, and what will count is not only whether throughout your life, through all its ups and downs, but also when you breathe your last you are a Muslim. So there is no end to this process. And you cannot get character from any short-cuts: there is no simple formula to have the solution. You cannot have it from any ready-made shop. It is an unceasing process, co-extensive with your life-span. This must be kept in view, because man is, as is said in the Qur'an, short-sighted. We get disappointed very easily. We lack patience. If we are not successful after a few efforts we lose heart; and if we are successful we become conceited. Both ways we are losers. That is why it must be kept in view that it is a life long process, unending and unceasing.

The third point is that this tazkiyah or this tarbiyah is an all-embracing process. Islam does not believe in that type of tasawwuf where you can purify your heart, make it transparent, and yet remain neck-deep in political, economic and social corruptions. Tazkiyah encompasses the entire life with all its aspects and dealings. I would put it rather in this way; the privacy of our thoughts and the social manifestations of our life—all of them must be in line with God's injunctions. So this is such an all-embracing process, that the types of character-building or tazkiyah given by certain schools of religion, break down when one judges them on the touchstone of the Islamic concept of tazkiyah. Ascetism, Buddhism, tasawwuf—they might develop a particular aspect of one's life; to produce a new man, whose morals, social dealings, financial affairs—are all very different from those of others. They are those of a God-fearing person. It is this all-comprehensive nature of tazkiyah which the Prophet performed. The Prophet taught us 'ibadat. The Prophet also taught us what our monetary dealings, our economic dealings, our political dealings should be. Even the political responsibilities assigned to a person have been called *amanat*, and we have been commanded to give them to those who are trustworthy. All this is part of *tazkiyah*. One finds that the first task of the Prophet, peace be upon him,

came in trade dealings with trade caravans in which he participated, and which carried the goods of the Lady Khadija. It is known that when someone described a certain person as being very pious, Umar ibn al-Khattab told him to hold his tongue. And then he asked, "Do you live with him? Is he your neighbor?" He said, "No". Umar said, "Have you had financial dealings with him?" He said, "No". Umar said, "Have you ever travelled with him?" If you don't live with him at least you might have travelled with him and seen him?" He said, "No". Then Umar said, "You have no right to say that he is pious, he is good, he is good. If he is just saying lengthy prayers in the mosque, that doesn't make him pious". This does not minimize in any way, or reduce the importance *ibadat*. The importance of *'ibadat* is immense. What I would like to bring home is that tarbiyah is an all-embracing process: It covers life in all its multifarious activities and this must be kept in view. And the last point in this connection which I would like to lay before you is that tazkiyah is a process which unfolds itself step by step. That is, if one wants to have everything simultaneously, immediately, in one gulp, one cannot have it. This is against the laws of nature. Thus one finds that the Prophet, peace be upon him, always had this in view. Whenever anybody embraced Islam, he would not ask him to do everything immediately. Instead, he was expected to fulfill his obligations step by step. This is one of the significant points in the gradual revelation of the Qur'an, that the society was able to respond simultaneously with it and a new society was created. In efforts towards character-building this has to be kept in view otherwise one is frustrated or one tries to attain the impossible. And that is why the concept of morals in Islam is very vast: it covers all aspects of human life.

The principles of Tazkiyah and tarbiyah we can derive from the study of the Qur'an the Sunnah and the Seerah of the Prophet. The first principle which we should state is that for character-building the basis is knowledge. In Qur'anic phraseology, Iman (faith) has been regarded as the starting point of everything and "good actions" without Iman is useless. So the starting point must be Iman. Iman means knowing your Lord, your Creator, and this Iman is incomplete if one does not try to know His Will, His rida, what He wants us to do. That is why the Prophet, peace be upon him, said that, "Seeking knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim". That is why the Prophetic career for the human race begins with.

"And He taught Adam the names, all of them" **2:31**

And the one who knows is regarded as the one who can see, who has eyes. And one who does not know has been made equal to the blind.

If one studies fiqh one will find out that everyone must now at least what is Islam and what is not Islam. This is the bare minimum of knowledge which is expected. Imam al- Ghazzali in JhyaUlumuddin (Revival of Religious Sciences) developed this systematically, scientifically and in a brilliant way. He stated that if a person has just embraced Islam, and after a few hours, the time for salat comes, what is fard (compulsory) for him is that he must at least within time find out

how the prayer is to be offered. Of course this term 'ilm (knowledge) is very vast. This would mean religious knowledge or the knowledge of fiqh and its demands from one at least the minimum demands. It also means that part of knowledge which is needed for the establishment, development and of human life and society. The minimum of the religion is the fard ul-'ayn, namely that which is compulsory on each and every individual and for which he is accountable. On the other hand the establishment and acquisition of knowledge, which is necessary for the development of crafts, of industry, of techniques for needs of society—that has been treated as fard-ul-kifaya, which is compulsory on the society as a whole. If only some of the people achieve that then the responsibility of all is discharged. Imam Ibn Taymiya, for example, says that this second part is in the nature of jihad, while the first is in the category of, for example, the prayer which is fard-ul-'ayn. Thus basically knowledge is the starting point. From the commonsense viewpoint also, character- building means that one must know those attributes which should be acquired in one's life—the sifat-ul-mahmuda—and those attributes which must be avoided—the sifat-ui-mazmuna. Without that of course one cannot become what Islam requires one to become.

The focus of knowledge as far as this exercise is concerned would be to find out what is right and what is wrong; what is virtue and what is vice, what is hasana and what is sayyia.

The first source of this knowledge is the Qur'an. The Qur'an can be studied from many angles, for example, —the approach of the scholar who likes to go into the depth of it. But from the viewpoint of the tazyah the Qur'an is simple, very simple. It is an open book available to everyone, and it unveils and unfolds itself according to the level of receptivity of the seeker. The simple attitude which should be adopted for tazkiyah is that while reading to ask the question: What does the Qur'an ask of you? In very simple terms, what are the things the Qur'an wants you to avoid and what to be adopted? From this viewpoint one does not need any tafsir (commentary) at all: each verse of the Qur'an is a very clear reference source. So if you read the Qur'an from this viewpoint you will find that the Qur'an acts like a living source of guidance to you as an individual, telling you in the first person: this you should do and this you should not do. This was the way the Sahaba (Companions of the Prophet) used to study the Qur'an. About Abdullah ibn Mas'ud it has been reported, according to one narration, that he read surat-ul-Baqara in eight years, according to another ten years, when one could read the whole of the Qur'an in one night. Why did he take so long? Because reading of the Qur'an means understanding it and following it, not just rushing through it.

The other source is the Sunnah. From the viewpoint of tazkiya, after the Qur'an you cannot find anything better than the Sunnah. In fact the Sunnah has a very personal message for us. The existence of it implies that the prophet, peace be upon him, was discharging the function of tazkiyah among the Sahaba and in the discharging of this function these were the words which he uttered and the actions he performed. One finds that sometimes it simply steals into one's heart; it has a personal warmth, it can transform one's life. I must confess that it needs much effort in

the life- pattern of Western society, to keep oneself in touch with the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

So the principle of character-building is knowledge. But knowledge on its own is not sufficient: it is definitely essential but not a sufficient source for character-building. The second principle is, for want of better words, "resolve and determination" which is very different from "wish and hope". We can entertain as many wishes as we want. It is not a bad thing but it will not enable us to live a life of virtue and piety. What is required for character-building is not a simple wish but a resolve, what in Qur'anic terminology can be called 'azm. I could define 'azm as resolve or determination which is coupled with an urge or an idea to follow it in practice, to undertake some plan for it and translate it into practice. Once our hope or desire becomes effective and significant, then it becomes 'azm. To illustrate, I would only recall the event during the Meccan period, when every kind of pressure was put on the Prophet to force him to abandon his mission, When his uncle, his last earthly support, asked him if he would not give up his mission, the Prophet answered, "Even if they put the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand I will not abandon my mission". This is 'azm. What is needed therefore is resolve and determination which may come from the bowels of hope and wish, but it must first come out, then only can it help one in character-building.

How then can one cultivate this resolve? It is a very tricky problem. One way I can suggest is to reflect upon the Qasas contained in the Qur'an. Therein you will find many stories (Qasas) told.

They are not there just for the purpose of story-telling. Read them, and one will find histories of the crises in the life of individuals and in the life of societies. And in such crises one can see how the righteous resolve to continue on their paths. Take for example the life of the Holy Prophet and the sulaha: how those individuals worked, the adverse circumstances in which they lived and the state of their resolve and determination! Reading these things inspires a person and enables him to cultivate in himself this type of resolve and determination.

It could be said that the volume of resolve and determination in one's life is, in a way, an index of one's living belief in the promises of Allah and the threat of His punishments. If our faith in these promises, the rewards which God has promised here and in the Hereafter, is the real faith, then the degree to which it is real indeed would express itself in the intensity of the resolve and determination, On the other hand, if our belief in the extent of the penalty and the retribution is strong it would express itself in firm resolve and determination. Another thing which helps this resolve is the company of good people. Whatever I have said so far relates to examples from the past, but examples from the present are always very impressive and helpful, and so good company helps a lot in the cultivation of resolve.

The third principle is al-'amal-ul-salih, without which there cannot be any 'azbiyah. Tazkiyah is not simply of ideas, but of life, behavior and conduct. We began with knowledge. Knowledge to be translated into practice needs a resolve and this resolve in fact leads to, or produces, al-'amal-ul-salih. But in fact if one reflects upon it deeper one will find that in this process that there is a matter which one must keep in view and that is the role of emotions or passions. In fact, one starts with knowledge. Then, one makes the resolve. But then, the pushing ahead of this resolve into practice is done by one's balance, one's emotions, by the motivation which expresses itself in that way. That is the place of the emotions in the life of the individual. And al-'amal-ul-salih can only be produced if these three pre-conditions are there-knowledge, determination, proper canalisation of emotion. The Qur'an is not pure logic: logic may overwhelm one but cannot generate those forces which change one's life and conduct, I have not heard of any philosopher whose philosophy might have changed individuals and societies from the viewpoint of character. As somebody has said, logic can convince but cannot convert.

But the Qur'an convinces and converts. So if one reflects upon the technique of presentation of the Qur'an, one finds that it captures one's minds and one's emotions and moves them simultaneously. It generates forces of action, and this through the canalisation of emotions and passions. When this knowledge and these emotions run counter to each other which will produce disgraceful action (i.e. al-'amal-ul-khabis.)

One of the greatest messages of the Qur'an is that it mellows the passions; it trains them, attunes them, canalises them, that is why even by just listening to the verses of the Qur'an alone would change the lives of many people. So if this motivational pattern must be changed if we wish to change our lives, the best way is to approach the Qur'an. There can be no substitute for it. If one goes deeper into the psychological analyses of these, one finds that much can be said, and all the studies about habit-forming and habit-disforming actually pertain to this aspect of the studies.

The fourth principle is that very great help can be derived from good company. This is why the Qur'an directs that Muslims should seek the company of salihin. This is why it is said that the Muslims must not make friends with those who involves Allah's displeasure, though this does not mean that one must shun all contact with them. Company can mean psychological company —the ideas you keep, the ambitions you nurture, the senses which you develop, the books that you read. All these are a form of company because they are company in solitude. Then of course, company means one's friends, the people with whom one moves about and spends one's time, and then it is the entire society. It is here that the Muslim community (ummah) comes in. It is here that the role of the Muslim society comes into play. For example salat has been made obligatory on us but we have also been asked to offer it in Jumaah so that a special climate will be created. The *adhan* is said aloud; the entire atmosphere is full of it, the air hums with this voice: we offer our prayers collectively. The most individual *ibadah* is perhaps fasting and there is no witness to it but Allah. But even this highly personal and individual *ibadah* has been made collectively obligatory in one month so that a special

atmosphere is created. Otherwise there is no witness to one's fasting, not even those with whom one has taken the *sahur* or *iftar* together. . but Allah. Such an individualistic thing has been given a social complexion.

The entire existence of the Muslim community, the *khairul-ummah* (the best community) depends on the right sort of company—good company. The Holy Prophet, peace be upon him, said that good company is the company of the essence of Allah. Such is the importance of good company.

Taking it from the merely theoretical plane to the practical plane it can be said that companionship, companionship of good persons is one of the aids in character-building, particularly while living in this Western society. That is why I always suggest to those brothers who ask my advise, to try to live in twos if they are bachelors for one may help the other to move ahead in the path of virtue. It is from such a viewpoint that FOSIS is a great *ni'mat*.. Each of its constituent is a great *barakah* from Allah. Thus it is a moral responsibility to protect, strengthen and develop it on the true Islamic lines so that the example it sets should enable one to move ahead on the path of virtue and *tazkiyah*.

Good company then is a basic principle for character-building. But I must emphasise with all the force at my command, that effort, endeavor and ceaseless striving are the soul of it, the very breath and soul of it. We cannot succeed unless we earnestly have *isti'anat* from Allah. It is God's help which enables us to achieve this uphill task. So the underlying principle in *tazkiyah* is *isti'anat billah* at every step: the greater the help one seeks from Allah, the more one will succeed in this endeavor.
