

Embellishment of Humans: The Holistic View of Personality Development in the Qur'an

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Abstract

Creation of humanity sans a grand purpose would be tantamount to declare the purposelessness of the whole creation. Human beings at the micro level serve and fulfill the aim of the creation at the macro level. The balance and order which the cosmos exhibits is governed by the laws set in place by God Himself. It is human beings, however, who on and off set asunder this balance and order by spreading corruption on earth by misusing the freedom of will which too has been bestowed on humanity by God. The Qur'an, as the guidebook of God for humanity, sets forth such principles the observance of which would make the humans responsible as well as reasonable beings meant for the amelioration of the whole existence. This process of making human beings wholesome and responsible is profusely explained by the Qur'an. Since human personality emerges early and continues to change in meaningful ways throughout the lifespan, the Qur'an provides not only lessons for its development but also gives instructions for the amelioration of each stage so as to make it useful not only for itself but also for the whole humanity. However, the Qur'an considers the whole human life as an integral whole which together with the creation which is made subservient to humanity marks the unity of whole existence. It is amidst this existence that human personality emerges, unfolds and develops and Qur'an provides guidelines thereto. Such a developed and embellished human being lives a harmonious life and reaches the threshold of the next life with peace. This paper endeavours to present this holistic view of the development of human personality in light of the Qur'an.

Key words: Behaviour, Development, Spirit, Reason, Self

Introduction

Something is developed so that it could fit in the scheme and plan which it is made for. Grandeur and loftiness of the object/thing always determines the amount of care and exertion to be put in the development and enrichment of the thing concerned. It doesn't, however, mean that the thing to be developed could in essence be meant for something else and the process of development would mould it for an entirely different purpose. Rather, the process of development enables something to perform its function in a better and meaningful way.

As such, there are **three components** attached to the concept of development. These are: **essence** of something, **purpose** of something and the **process of development** or advancement which enables something to reach to the purpose which it is meant for.

Now, personality development stands for the strengthening of a person's characteristics, behaviour, conduct, thoughts, feelings and sentiments in a meaningful way so that s/he lives the life in a noble way.

Purpose of Human Existence

The Qur'anic design of personality development is holistic in the way that it gives a blueprint for the advancement of human personality which in essence has been made "in the best of mould" and has been "honoured" by God in different ways. So, human beings are potentially capable of fitting into the scheme and purpose of God's creation with human beings as the supreme entity in it: "Blessed is He in Whose hand is the Kingdom: He has power over all things; He created death and life so that He might *test you*, and find out which of you is *best in conduct*."

As such, whole human existence has been divided into two periods: pre-death period and post-death period. The former period is the span of trial, and the latter period is the "time for receiving the rewards or punishments merited by one's actions during one's lifetime."

Personality Development: Purification and Growth

With man as the locus of personality development and test of human beings as the purpose behind the creation, Qur'an gives a thorough and well-knit programme of personality development explained under the Qur'anic concept of *tazkiyyah* (purification/sanctification): "By the soul and how He formed it, then inspired it to understand what was right and wrong for it. He who *purifies* it will indeed *succeed*, and he who *corrupts* it is sure to *fail*."

It is pertinent to note here that sanctification (*tazkiyyah*) of human behaviour and conduct is not the only dimension of the Qur'anic scheme of personality development. The Qur'anic concepts of *taqwa*, *khushu'*, *ikhlas*, *ihsan*, etc. also explain its different aspects. Even there are intellectual stages of personality development which are explained by the terms like *ta'aqqul*, *tafakkur*, *tadabbur*, *lub*, *hikmah*, etc. in the Qur'an. However, these are all practical and theoretical stages which a believer attains after s/he goes through the due process of *tazkiyyah* or conduct embellishment as is enshrined in the Qur'an.

Prophets ('AS): The Sanctifiers

From Adam ('AS) to Muhammad (SA'AS), this project of the sanctification of human behaviour was given to all the Prophets ('AS) of God and this job was finally entrusted to the Prophet Muhammad (SA'AS) for its culmination. This endeavour of the Prophets ('AS) of God has been duly highlighted by the Qur'an for its preservation for posterity with the Qur'an itself as the "guardian –cover, vault" over the teachings of the previous Prophets ('AS). This conformity in the mission of the Prophets ('AS) of God as the teachers of humanity has been brought to fore by the Qur'an in unequivocal terms, such as: "Verily, this Brotherhood of yours is a single Brotherhood, and I am your Lord and Cherisher: therefore serve Me (and no other)."

Human beings have been given all the necessary faculties to receive the instruction/teaching/knowledge required for the modification and advancement of behaviour and conduct. Qur'an, in this regard, says: "God brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers while you knew nothing, and gave you hearing and sight and hearts, so that you may be grateful."

However, ordinarily the feelings of gratitude do not emerge on the part of man and, as such, these faculties, in spite of being sound and healthy, fail to perform the job which these are actually meant for:

But such feelings emerge only when a man utilizes his God-given capacities in the right manner. His eyes, ears and heart should not be so attracted to worldly, ephemeral glamour that these may stop one from penetrating the realms of the unseen.

And, when the faculties meant for a certain purpose are utilized for the very opposite purpose, these are bound to stagnate: “Have these people not travelled through the land to make their hearts understand and let their ears hear; the truth is that it is not the eyes that are blind but the hearts that are in the bosoms that are blinded.”

Qur’an: The Code of Embellishment

So, the remedy and cure for such stagnation is the Qur’an itself: “O mankind! There has come to you an admonition from your Lord, a cure for what is in the hearts, and a guide and a blessing to true believers.” The Prophet (SA‘AS) has explained the point as: “Indeed the hearts rust as iron rusts when it gets wet. (It was) said: What is the cure (of this condition) O Prophet of God? (The Prophet) said: Frequent remembrance of death and recitation of the Qur’an.”

As such, reformation and development of the individual revolves around the Qur’an. However, mere recitation of the Qur’an is not enough to get the desired results. There is always the need of an instructor and teacher. This instructor of morals has indeed been the Prophet (SA‘AS) of God. This is what has been laid down in the following Qur’anic verse: “We have sent down the Reminder to you, to enable you to make clear to mankind what has been sent down to them, so that they may reflect upon it.”

Prophet Muhammad (SA‘AS): The Guide to Personality Development

Clearly, the Reminder could have been sent through an angel as well. However, an angel could not have become a model for human beings. God could have also sent a bound book. This again would not have sufficed to bring about the reformation of the human beings which the Prophet (SA‘AS) actually did. Had the Book/Reminder been sent with an angel, mankind would have got confused. The plea or reservation of the non-believers for a man having been sent as a messenger was declared useless with the rebuttal that had the earth been inhabited by angels, God would indeed have sent an angel as a messenger whom the fellow angels would have followed and obeyed. So, the Reminder together with the Messenger has been called a “Clear Evidence”:

*The deniers of truth from among the People of the Book and the polytheists would not desist from disbelief until they received **clear evidence** – a messenger from God, reciting to them pure scriptures, containing upright scriptures, containing upright precepts.*

As such, the Prophet (SA‘AS) reciting the Revelation containing upright scriptures and precepts is actually the “**clear evidence**” which doesn’t need any further proof for being together the

“**Reminder (Zikr)**” for the believers. Therefore, the Qur’an and the person of the Prophet (SA‘AS) function as an organic whole, inseparable from and complimentary to each other. To this effect, the Qur’an says: “God has sent down to you a **Reminder** –a messenger who conveys to you God’s messages, so that he might lead those, who believe and do good deeds, out of darkness into light.”

Stage-wise Development

Through the medium of the Qur’anic verses the Prophet (SA‘AS) continuously reorient and reshape the conduct of the believers. For every stage of human life teaching and instruction is given which is most appropriate for the particular stage. This stage-wise instruction is very much necessary because man, by his very nature, exhibits different traits in different stages of his life: “Never forget that the life of this world is only a game and a passing delight, a show, and a mutual boasting and trying to outrival each other in riches and children.”

Stage one is simply childhood when life is just game and play. This sense of play, however, is laden with innocence without any sensual feeling. **Stage two** is filled with delight when human being, as a teen ager, starts experiencing sensuality. This stage needs watch and care in the developmental programme. **Stage three** comes with another burden for the human being. S/he starts showing off the glittering things and tries to possess more and more such objects. So, this stage needs extra check. **Stage four**, normally from 35 to 40 years of age, boastfulness in human attitude. Here, the individual doesn’t merely show off his/her possessions. Rather, it is a stage where a race starts to satisfy the material appetite. If not checked, it may lead to complete arrogance and corruption in the land on the part of the individual. In **stage five** human beings start outrivaling each other in the accumulation of material means. By hook or crook the individual in this stage wants to be on top in every respect.

These appetites related to different stages of human life are in no way abominable in essence. These are only to be checked, balanced, reoriented, reshaped, remodelled and moulded for the purpose which these are meant for. These cannot be eradicated altogether. Al-Ghazzali has explained this point in a unique way:

[It has been argued that] passion, anger, greed, etc. can be uprooted. This is a mistaken belief. The object of these is to bring them under control and not to uproot these natural propensities. These are necessary for man. Had he not greed for food, he would have been ruined. The object is to use it with moderation without going to extremes.

Now, it is the process of sanctification or embellishment (*tazkiyyah*) which the Prophet (SA‘AS) had been entrusted with which modifies and develops these characteristics of the human beings. This function of the Prophet (SA‘AS) has been elaborated not less than four times in the Qur’an notwithstanding the fact that whole Qur’an actually documents this endeavour of the Prophet (SA‘AS) as such. One of these four verses reads: “Thus We have sent among you a Messenger of your own to recite Our revelations to you, *purify* you and teach you the Book and wisdom, and to teach you what you did not know.”

As ‘education’ stands for the ‘modification of behaviour’ of the taught, *tazkiyyah* is a process and programme which gives all round development to the individual through the Qur’an. This process of sanctification, according to Sayyid Maududi, includes correct understanding of Islam, sound faith, harmony between word and deed and devoting one’s life to the utmost struggle for the establishment of Islam as a way of life on the individual level. Collectively, it should include the components of mutual love, mutual consultation, organization and critique and introspection. Shah Wali Allah, by and large, stresses the importance of personal sanctification although not neglecting the collective goals of *tazkiyyah*.

Seekers of Purification and Growth

The medium of this purification, however, is nothing but the Qur’an. One cannot think of this process embellishment of human conduct without the Qur’anic injunctions such as:

Recite to them the tale of the man to whom We gave Our signs, but who then cast them to one side and Satan overtook him. And he became one of those who went astray –if it had been Our will, We could have used these signs to exalt him, but instead he clung to the earth and followed his own desires– he was like a dog that pants whether you chase it away or leave it alone. Such are those who reject Our signs. Tell them this story so that they may reflect.

It is also very important that a person himself should be very much serious and concerned about the amelioration of his position or conduct. Otherwise no instruction can be beneficial for him. This has been laid down in these Qur’anic verses:

He frowned and turned away when the blind man approached him, for how can you know that he might seek to purify himself, or take heed and derive benefit from [Our] warning? As for him who was indifferent, you eagerly attended to him –though you are not to be blamed if he could not purify himself– but as for one who comes to you, eagerly and in awe of God you pay him no heed. Indeed, this [Qur’an] is an admonition.

Addressed to the Prophet (SA‘AS), these verses indicate that ‘the strong and influential’ persons who reject the faith and don’t bother about their purification are worthless before God. However, a person who fears the Lord and seeks guidance and is concerned about his purification is valuable before the Lord irrespective of his physical and social status.

Devotions: The Means of Development

Although the instruction received by an individual through the Qur’anic verses purify him and make him enough “knowledgeable to bear witness of the oneness of God,” but other devotional practices take the embellishment and sanctification of his morals to further heights. Take, for example, the case of *Zakah* (poor-due, alms). It is interesting to note here that the very meaning of the word *zakah* carries the sense of sanctification with it:

In Islam one does not pay a “tribute” to the chief of the city for his personal luxury and vanity, but one pays his dues, as a right connected with the

collectively, and more particularly in favour of the needy; and this for the purpose of “growing” and “purifying” one’s self, as is the etymological sense of the term zakat.

Thus, it has been the job of the Prophet (SA‘AS) to cleanse the morals of people by the exaction of *zakah*, as says the Qur’an: “Take alms out of their wealth to **cleanse** them and **purify** them, and pray for them; your prayer will be a comfort to them. God is all hearing, all knowing.”

No wonder then that as soon as the Prophet (SA‘AS) fraternized his companions at Madinah after the Hijrah, different prominent companions who had been successful businessmen at Makkah instead of becoming a liability on the Ansar (Helpers) re-established themselves as great tradesmen in the markets of Madinah thereby uprooting the Jewish monopoly of the Madinan markets. The Prophet (SA‘AS) established different new markets which worked as alternative platforms to end the Jewish exploitative system of trade and commerce. This was the comprehensive project of reformation of morals in which honest and competitive business dealings became the means of development of an individual.

Now, by spending one’s hard-earned wealth on the welfare of the society, one continues to traverse the path of behaviour sanctification and spirit elevation. And it is by “spending one’s cherished possessions for the cause of God that one can attain (the station of) righteousness.” This has been explained by Shah Wali Allah as:

Sometimes the lower self comprehends that the love of wealth and being miserly with it harms a person and turns him from his course, so that he suffers from this very greatly. He is not able to prevent this except by practicing giving away whatever he loves best. For if he does not give, the love (of wealth) and miserliness will remain as they are.

This has been beautifully laid down in this tradition of the Prophet (SA‘AS):

A man came to the Prophet (SA‘AS) and said, “O Allah’s Messenger which charity is the most superior in reward?” He replied, “The charity which you practise while you are healthy, niggardly and afraid of poverty and wish to be become wealthy. Do not delay it to the time of approaching death and then say, “Give so much to such and such, and so much to such and such.” And it has already belonged to such and such (his heirs).”

One or the other aspect of sanctification of human behaviour is attached with all the devotional practices commanded by God in the Qur’an. *Saum* or Fasting meant for creating *taqwa* (God-wariness) in the believers in reality is another mode of cleansing the human conduct:

Fasting is a great good deed which strengthens the angelic (side) and weakens the animalistic. There is nothing like it for polishing the face of the spirit and subjugating the physical nature..... When a person tries to subjugate the lower soul and eliminate its bad qualities, his act will take on a sanctified form in the World of Images.

So, an individual should be enough conscious that s/he is being sanctified continuously through every act commanded by God. *Taqwa* (God-wariness) should be the target in wearing clothes, in making provision for a journey and also in the sacrifice of an animal.

Thus by developing all his faculties in the divine pattern man would be able to sabotage the evil designs of Satan who has vowed to “mislead (the mankind) them all” and has been thus declared as the “sworn enemy” of man.

Although man himself has to be an active agent in the process of sanctification, the amelioration and embellishment of his morals and conduct is still the bounty and gift of God bestowed only on the sincere servants of God:

O you who believe, do not follow in the footsteps of Satan, and whoever follow in the footsteps of Satan should know that he enjoins only indecency and evil. But for the grace of God and His mercy upon you, not one of you would ever be purified; but God purifies whom He pleases. God is all hearing and all knowing.

Conclusion

It is this system of purification by dint of which man rises above or overcomes the machinations of (the evil-commanding soul) *nafs al-ammarah* and pays heed to the advice of (the self-accusing soul) *nafs al-lawwamah* and attains the noble state of (the well-pleased soul) *nafs al-mutma'innah* and he returns to his “Lord well pleased, and pleasing to Him.” This would be he saved because of returning to “God with a sound heart” without casting himself to the “lowest of the low” level.

Therefore, this developed and advanced human being is given “a good life” here, in this world and he also lays a good provision “for the future” life of the hereafter. Still God Himself gives a **final touch** of “*purification*” to such servants for being true to their covenant with God about His Lordship and His being alone worthy of worship.

Development of human personality vis-a-vis his morals as well as reason is thus needed for the fulfilment of his position as the vicegerent of God on earth. His embellishment through *tazkiyyah* leads him to the real worship of the Lord and sanctification of whole human situation. Only a purified soul can fit in the scheme of God to lay the foundations, carry out the construction and take to its culmination the edifice of human conduct. An underdeveloped, impure soul can never unfold the hidden potential ingrained in the human personality.