



[Taqwa: A Force for Cohesion](#)

Submitting One's Being to the Will of the Almighty

Allah Swt says in the Holy Qur'an, talking about those who stand for *salat*, and pay the *zakat*, and who enter the Garden:

And stand for the salat and pay the zakat and whatever good you send forward for yourselves you shall find it with Allah. Truly, Allah sees what you do. And they say, "No one shall enter the Garden unless they be a Jew or a Christian." That's what they imagine. Say, "Bring proof of what you say if you are truthful." Rather, whosoever surrenders his essence to Allah and is a doer of goodness shall have his reward with Allah, and neither shall fear be upon him nor shall he grieve. (2:112)

Allah also says in Surah al-Muzammil, speaking about why Pharaoh rebelled against the messenger:

How then if you cover the truth will you protect yourselves on the Day which will turn the hair of children gray, and by which the heavens shall be split? His promise is fulfilled. Truly, this is the reminder, so let him choose to take the way to his Lord. (73:17)

The simple definition of *taqwa* is godliness. Some say, fear. Godliness is the result of *ibada*/ worship. In fact, it is considered that *ibada* is the main source of godliness. What is godliness? It is being devout and pious. All these qualities come from worship. A person who submits him or herself, their essence, totally to the will of Almighty, develops *taqwa*. As a servant, as a friend, as a lover of Allah, every messenger of every path told their followers to worship Allah, and to obey Allah in order to develop *taqwa*.

In other words, it's a very important quality to develop – godliness or god-likeness. In English we would say, being in the line of Allah Swt, or developing the Attributes of Allah Swt that are implanted in us.

The reality of Allah may be expressed through Allah's manifestation of human beings, but only to some degree of these qualities of human-being-ness. That's why the word *taqwa* comes from the word *itiqa* in Qur'an. One definition is to guard oneself against danger. Allah says, **“If you deny Allah, guard yourself against a Day that will make children's hair turn gray.”** Another definition is to fear some unexpected trouble or disruption; hence, you get this idea of fear. *Taqwa* is fear. To fear some unexpected trouble implies that perhaps there would be a way to expect it, or be prepared for unexpected things, to be prepared for disruption. It takes us back to *ibada*, to be able to worship, to be pious, and for our essence to be at peace. Then in a sense we could say we are prepared for the unexpected. Still another definition of that root word is to tremble with fear before Allah, and this is one most Muslims relate to, but not necessarily most Sufis.

Taqwa results from a kind of attentiveness. This [is a] type of fear of disobedience, or the kind of anxiety that comes if we have arrogance. All of a sudden we realize how arrogant we are, and we realize that arrogance is causing us to become distant from Allah, distant from happiness, distant from the truth, distance from one another, distant from the good company. In light of the concept of understanding the word *itiqa*, [we see] a person whose heart is filled with the glory and the beauty of Allah, who has anxiety, and is prepared for difficulty if he or she does follow and submit to the guidance of Allah. If their essence is in submission, that person is one who develops *taqwa*. Once, the Holy Prophet (sal) defined *taqwa* in these words:

A man who is passing through a thick forest of thorny bushes tries to protect himself from the thorns all around him. He endeavors to keep the thorny

bushes from him as much as possible. Sometimes he moves to one side, and sometimes to the other to guard himself against possible injury. This carefulness on the part of the man in the thorny forest to protect himself from the thorny bushes and trees is taqwa.

This is how one should lead their life in this world full of thorns, evil, and corruption. Prayer is prescribed to develop that protection, a kind of immunization if you will in the form of *taqwa* for the believer, to guide him or her from the onslaught of evil from within and from without. The best of people in the eyes of Allah is one who has *taqwa* in their heart. **“O mankind, We created you from a single pair, male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other. Verily, the most honored of you in the eyes of Allah is the one who is the most righteous of you and who has *taqwa*.”**

Who is this addressed to? It’s addressed to all human beings, not only to Muslims. Though in a perfect world, I guess we would say they would be synonymous. Obviously, if human beings descend from one set of parents, and the relationship remains within tribes, the races and nations have different names and different characteristics, physically and culturally. But in the eyes of Allah, they are all one. Among those who get the most honor are those who are the most righteous, the most pious, the most prepared, the most submitted. It also seems clear that any commandment of the Qur’an, whether relating to *ibada* or the struggles of life, or relating to the practical works of life of goodness and justice, is not isolated to but integrated with the whole teaching of Islam.

It’s a uniquely refined system of life we are following. It is one in which one finds (if you look at true Islamic tradition which is maybe a little difficult to find in the world we live in today) a very growing organic system that affects the structure and meaning of all aspects of people’s lives: of nature, of governance, of human relationships, and service to one another, even commerce. There is a natural affinity for cohesion, which gives us a

vision and a capacity to assimilate and to integrate many cultures, and systems, and disciplines without doing damage or injury to individuals or to the systems themselves. At least, that's the hope and idea. In fact, it is a very specific quality within Islam, when Islam is really practiced with intelligence and with an open heart that will keep the vitality, and beauty, and elegance of all the different aspects of life, and all the different cultures, and different individuals alive and attractive.

The key and the driving force behind this ability is *taqwa*, as we defined it today. It is a direction, as well as an adjustment or a correction. It's a force that gives us direction and adjusts our life, and provides for a livelihood that affects everyone, and a liveliness that affects people you come into contact with. *Taqwa* then molds nature and the attitude of community by creating in the individual's nature and character and within oneself this relationship. [It develops] an affinity with one another and with Allah, and develops a close relationship with the community by giving us all new direction and new purpose, refining our ideas, even our ideology, much higher than just petty materialistic objectives, selfish objectives. This relationship affects everything from the way we eat, to the way we speak, the institutions we build, how they operate, the expectations we have of one another, of our community and our work, as well as the fulfillment we have, the potential for fulfillment, if things run well and smoothly, and people communicate.

Have we not all said, "I just had a wonderful conversation with so and so?" I just had an inspiring idea. I just saw a good change that will make a difference. We have all said these things. Once the force of *taqwa* is created in us through our worship and our practices and our service, not only does society become balanced, but we have greater strength of character and will. It is a force that cannot be overcome and cannot be conquered. We become who we can be. Is there anyone here who doesn't want to become who they can be, no matter what the obstacles may seem? *Taqwa* maintains strength, like a reinforced wall maintains its strength when attacked from the outside. When the force of *taqwa* has worked its way into the hearts of each human being, and

made us fully conscious of our duties, our obligations, our capacities, our abilities—not only to Allah, but to one another—those human beings are transformed into new human beings.

We can say that the role of the Sufi, or the life of the Sufi or the Muslim is to be totally transformed to create a new being. The object is to see the beauty and wisdom of the Divine, and be able to carry the burdens and tests and trials, and be an example to others. It is to develop the power of the heart and mind and emotions, to infuse or direct that power toward society at large, as well as toward oneself, one's brothers and sisters, and one's families. It is to infuse them with *taqwa*, divineness, through actions, attitudes, ideas, and words that are examples of a higher set of standards, higher knowledge, and excellence.

The motivation of such an individual is so strong, and the purpose becomes so clear, and the attitude so selfless, that whoever comes into contact with one with *taqwa*, with ideas that have that sense of excellence, one may find many, many inspirations from them. They may find themselves changing, uplifted, inspired to take on tasks that would be hardships, or ideas that they never would have come into contact with or brought out from themselves. One finds oneself inspired when there is pain and suffering to stand against certain odds that one meets in life. That's one way. But to be inspired by excellence is another way, and by piety.

It was the force of this *taqwa* that inspired the early activities we did in this community itself, our early *samas* on Saturday nights. Hopefully, it will inspire others, too. It is this *taqwa* of generosity and peacefulness, this struggle we had that brought us together. It is stated that *taqwa* is an indispensable quality of believers who engage in practical works of goodness, and righteousness, and whom the Qur'an calls "doers of good." It is the people who observe *taqwa*, and love Allah, and have anxiety toward Allah and toward the future (in the sense of anxiousness that things go well), who do good works for the

love of Allah, for the love of humanity, and who struggle and strive to refrain from wrong actions, and repent when they are wrong. It is this state of *taqwa*, which appears at varying degrees of experience in the lives of all of us, that inspires us from within to do good for the sake of Allah, for the sake of the work, for the sake of those we serve, and for our own sake. It's not just action; it's a mental state and emotional balance. It's an intention, a focus of emotions. That's why Allah says:

Those who believe and do good deeds should not be called for whatever they ate in the past, when they observe taqwa and do good works of righteousness, for Allah loves those who do good works.

That's a formula, and we have proven it, and we need to continue to prove it. Let's try to understand, finally, that *taqwa* is more than some external show of piety, which has very little value to the world, but is accepted and accompanied by *ihsan*. *Taqwa* is found when a believer, a person who believes in Allah, performs their duties and keeps boundaries on their actions, and follows the way that has been given. In that state of attentiveness and submission, one can really, really become a *khalifa* of Allah Swt. One's life mission can become clear. One's capacities and capabilities can flourish. One can overcome their torpor, their fear. One can stop looking outward, and [instead] say, "*Change me, O Lord, not my circumstance.*"

Allah says he will not change the condition of a community or society until they change themselves. Once one's life mission is clear, then you have been given the greatest reward and blessing. Ultimately, it is belief in *taqwa*, in faith, in worship that results when this *taqwa* comes about and brings goodness, and good works, and good company, happiness, and contentment with where we are, and what we are doing, or what we can develop, and who we can serve, and our duties and responsibilities we embrace. Two of you just returned yesterday from embracing your duties and responsibilities to your parents. There was some pain and suffering, some disability, but the way you fulfilled

your responsibility, I dare say was different than your siblings' way of doing it – your insights, your emotional understanding, your spiritual understanding, I hope, *inshā'a-Llāh*. I think that's true.

Whether we are talking about *ibada*, *taqwa*, or *ihsan*, or other elements of Islam, each one contains a seed of practical goodness. Each one has its external manifestation. We look out at the world today and we see people career-building, going out, enjoying and doing whatever they do, drinking, dancing, carousing, sports. Of course, they are not blanket bad, but if they are not accompanied with some state of inner purpose, *taqwa*, how long will that last? Who among the people you are playing on the soccer field with or whatever your sport is, or your diversion, or hobby, will do what some of you did for your parents this week – changing the bedpan of your incontinent parent, or arguing for their benefit, even though it was painful? How many of those people would hold your hand as you pass? Or would they be out doing whatever it is the diversion is? Think about it. And you had better be sure of your answer.

If you are not sure, even if there is any doubt in your answer, then there is something you are missing. Look around. Who here would not hold your hand on your dying day? Who here will not pray for you? Who here will not take your responsibility? Who here would not try to pay your bills for you? It's all because of *taqwa*, and *ibada*. You may, if you are young, just dismiss that. It doesn't mean much. If you are older, it means a lot more. If you are wise, whether you are young or old, you will know how much it really does mean. That's why in Tasawwuf and Islam we promote wisdom / *hikma*, and understanding. Whatever you think you are missing, you'll have with piety. And whatever you think you are missing, if you go pursue it, you will always be missing something, will always be missing something, will always be missing something. It's always tomorrow, always the next thing, always the other thing. Oh, sure, there will be moments of emotion and happiness and distraction, but it's all about distraction. That

doesn't mean [one shouldn't take] a nice hike up to the Peaks of Otter, a bike ride on the trails, or a week at the beach. They are good.. *alhamdulillah*... a trip to Nashville, maybe go visit Gulshan in Kyrgyzstan. Fine. But who are you? Who is going, and who is returning? What are you giving, what are you receiving? What are you developing? Otherwise, it's all distraction. Then the day comes when someone is changing your bedpan, and lifting you out of bed. Who's it going to be? There is the seed; let it grow, *inshā'a-Llāh*.