

Core Curriculum

2 Foundations of Islam - Theology

2.9 **The Islamic Concept of the Nafs: Battling the Human Ego**

INTRODUCTION

Bismillāhir Rahmānir Rahīm, As-salāmu ‘Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh. Peace be upon you brothers and sisters.

Welcome back to the Muslim Converts Channel! In our last lesson, we talked about the Sharī‘a. We learnt that the Sharī‘a is a way of life. More specifically, it is way of reaching closeness to God through a life of servitude and surrender to Him. We do this by following his commands.

We also learnt that humans by nature are always in a state of servitude, either serving their delusions and attachments, or serving God Almighty. The goal of the Sharī‘a is to instil a specific discipline in the human soul whereby it can rechannel itself and surrender to God through the habit of obedience.

Obedying God is an internal struggle. On the one hand, we have the desire to want to do our own thing, but on the other, God is asking us to do what He wants. The platform and the grounds in which this struggle takes place is inside the human soul. Simply put, it is a struggle against the evil inclinations of the ego, or nafs as it is called in Islam. In this lesson, we will go over the types of nafs in Islam.

BODY OF TEXT

For unto him who shall have transgressed the bounds of what is right, and preferred the life of this world [over God and the good of his own

soul,] the Hellfire shall be his refuge. But unto him who shall have stood in fear of his Sustainer's presence, and held back his inner self from base desires, then indeed Paradise shall be his refuge (Chapter 72, verses 37-41).

So far in our current section we have had little trouble in translating Arabic terms to English. Today's discussion is about the concept of the nafs which is an Islamic term with NO equal meaning in the English language and may mean different things depending on the context.

In this lesson, we will be discussing the part of the nafs that commands to evil which is otherwise known as nafs al-ammārah in Arabic. According to Islam, the inner dimension of person is divided into two camps, the first is the spiritual self - commonly known as the fitrah - and the lower or base self which commands us to evil, commonly known as the nafs. The nafs that commands to evil is the realm that produces delusion and attachment to mental illusions. It is the center of our unruly desires, base thoughts and heedlessness.

These mental illusions include, among other things, the need for power, fame, excessive money, and worst of them all, pride and arrogance which most of the aforementioned desires stem from. Pride and arrogance are especially problematic for they are the grounds through which humans defy Allah.

Allah commands humans to do good and to obey Him for the sake of their own souls, but it is the pride and arrogance which the nafs produces that refuses to surrender to God and instead, surrenders unto its own whims or hawā as the Qur'an calls it.

So the battle against the nafs is a battle against inordinate and spiritually subversive desires. It is a battle against desires that support and facilitate a lifestyle of heedlessness (ghaflah) towards God.

Seeing how the nafs is the prime source of a human's downfall, it is the prime target of Shaytān who whispers in the human self and tries to compel it to do evil. The way one protects oneself from Shaytān is self-

control, that is, control of the nafs. God has given every human ability an inner gauge that helps us orient ourselves towards God.

A diseased self is where this inner gauge and will to control the nafs becomes corrupted. As one sins, darkness develops inside. As this darkness develops, it becomes harder to fight one's nafs. One must not despair however, for not only does God forgive but despite one's circumstances and mistakes, God has given us a way to win this battle.

How does one go about in winning this battle? Recall that the battle is between the nafs and the fitrah. Whichever one wins depends on which one we feed the most. If we spend our lives indulging in every whimsical and carnal desire, such as gluttony, drugs, cigarettes, or wanting to show off, we will simply make the evil nafs stronger.

As time goes by, it will be harder and harder to fix ourselves if we get into the habit of submitting to our selfish desires. Yet if we spend more time on spiritual activities, such as prayer, reading the Qur'an, and saying no to the whims of the nafs, then one strengthens the fitrah. As one repeats this over and over again, it becomes easier and easier to say no to the nafs.

If you haven't noticed already, the key factor that determines which side wins in the battle of the self is habit. Our habits are what determine the inherent strength of our fitrah or our nafs and hence why so much of Islam is about repetition. Acquiring healthy habits is the basis of purifying the self in Islam.

The Qur'an says:

The Day where neither wealth nor children will benefit anyone except for he who comes to Allah with a pure and sound heart. (Chapter 26 of the Qur'an, verses 88-89)

A subject that has often been repeated in our lessons is that of the pure heart or al-qalb al-salim. The pure heart is what truly determines success in the eternal life to come. The pure heart is a heart that is full

of God's remembrance and is empty of sin, pride and other spiritual pollutants. This comes about through feeding the soul with spiritually "nutritious food."

Doing it once or twice, or haphazardly is not enough. Long vigils of prayers here and there are not sufficient either. In fact, sometimes it can be spiritually detrimental. What does work is consistency whatever spiritual practice one does. That is the key to success in winning the battle against the nafs. Simply asking God's forgiveness is not enough. One must couple it with action!

Until Next Time, Thank you for watching. As-salāmu 'Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh