



The Spiritual Psychology of Worship

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Introduction

Many young Muslims have grown up dreading acts of worship, viewing them as cumbersome tasks devoid of any meaning or fulfillment. 58% of respondents to a Yaqeen Institute survey of Muslims from the United States admitted that religious beliefs and practices not making sense to them contributed to feelings of doubt.¹ Even those who are certain in their Islam may feel empty in their five daily prayers (*ṣalāh*), recitation of scripture (*tilāwah*), or engaging in remembrance (*dhikr*). While the Qur'an describes worship as the meaning of life,² many still see it as a dry chore that they would rather not engage in. These attitudes and feelings are behind common questions like, "Why does God ask us to worship him?" This question was dealt with systematically by Shaykh M. Elshinawy in a previously published article from Yaqeen Institute.³ One of the main conclusions of the article was that we are the ones in need of, and stand to benefit from, worshiping God, not the other way around. Therefore, God asks us to worship Him out of mercy to us, knowing that we are in need of it for our welfare in this world and the next. To Allah belongs the highest example, but this would be akin to a doctor who asks her patients to follow her prescription purely for their benefit, not hers. She asks that the patient obey her not out of narcissism but compassion. We aim to explore this idea in more detail and demonstrate why worshiping Allah is so beneficial to the human being and how it is, in reality, the greatest experience of life.

What is *ʿibādah*?

Before we begin discussing the greatness of worship, we must state what we mean by the term itself. In this article, we are particularly examining the Islamic concept of worship, called *ʿibādah*. We will use the terms *worship* and *ʿibādah* interchangeably throughout the article. However, the word *worship* in English may carry negative connotations for some that are not necessarily part of the concept of

¹ Youssef Chouhoud, "What Causes Muslims to Doubt Islam? A Quantitative Analysis," *Yaqeen*, February 13, 2018, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/youssef-chouhoud/what-causes-muslims-to-doubt-islam-a-quantitative-analysis/>.

² Qur'an 51:56.

³ Mohammad Elshinawy, "Why Does God Ask People to Worship Him?," *Yaqeen*, December 26, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/mohammad-elshinawy/why-does-god-ask-people-to-worship-him/>.

‘ibādah in Islam. It is imperative for the reader to discard any preconceived notions, biases, and feelings with respect to the word *worship* and approach the concept with a clear mind.

Linguistic definition

‘Ibādah comes from the root (‘*ayn bā’ dāl*), which means to serve, worship, adore, venerate, and deify.⁴ It also carries the meaning of humbly submitting one’s self.⁵ *Ṭā’ah* which carries the meanings of loyalty, commitment, and obedience is another important concept within the definition of *‘ibādah*.⁶ al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502 AH) defines *‘ibādah* as “the pinnacle and purest form of humility.”⁷ In his treatise on love, Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH) describes worship as the pinnacle of love and humility: “So the love found in worship is the purest form of love, and thus by Divine Right only due to God.”⁸ While we often look to the outward expressions of worship, all the meanings that *‘ibādah* carries are tied to the inward states underlying those physical expressions. Love, humility, veneration, and adoration are actions of the heart that form the basis of worship.

Technical definition

The technical definition refers to what *‘ibādah* specifically entails within an Islamic context. So, in addition to the linguistic meanings that inform us of the core aspects of worship, there are additional ideas and concepts from the Islamic tradition that mold the term into its uniquely Islamic form. In the Islamic theological tradition, *‘ibādah* is defined in different ways. Many have defined it as submission to Allah with love and reverence, seeking nearness to Him by doing what He has commanded.⁹ Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728 AH) defines *‘ibādah* as “a term that encompasses everything that Allah loves and is pleased with from inward and outward actions and words.”¹⁰

⁴ Hans Wehr, *Arabic to English Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Urbana: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 685.

⁵ Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dar as-Sadr, 1993), 2776.

⁶ Ibn Manzūr, 2776.

⁷ al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt al-fāḥ al-Qur’ān* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2009), 542.

⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Rawḍat al-muḥibbīn* (Jeddah: Dār ‘Ālam al-Fawā’id, 2010), 83.

⁹ K. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, *Manhaj ahl al-sunnah* (Taz, Yemen: Maktaba al-Ghurābā’ al-Atharīyah, 1995), 55.

¹⁰ Ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā* (Mansoura, Egypt: Dār al-Wafā’, 2005), 10:91.

Ibn ‘Uthaymīn (d. 1421 AH) said *‘ibādah* is “to submit to Allah with love and veneration by fulfilling His commands and refraining from His prohibitions.”¹¹

Ibn al-Qayyim said, “One can only call themselves a worshipper (of God) when they do not despair in His mercy and when they turn to Him repentantly, following the best of what has been revealed to them from their Lord. Only then do they become truly loyal and obedient worshippers of the Divine.”¹²

There are a few key common ideas that are embedded within each of these definitions:

- 1) Worship is the ultimate expression of love
- 2) Worship involves a combination of veneration, adoration, submission, and humility
- 3) Worship is used to draw near to Allah ﷻ
- 4) Worship involves loyalty, commitment, and obedience regarding commands and prohibitions.

The neuroscience of worship

Worship is often misconstrued as being exclusively within the purview of religious ideology and practice. People think that not ascribing to organized religion or not believing in God necessarily implies not worshipping anything. However, modern neuroscience and psychology tell us that worship is a human universal and seems to be hardwired into our biology. There has been a growing body of literature that supports the notion that the brain seems to have unique areas associated with spiritual seeking of the Divine. Rhawn Joseph, a neuropsychologist, argues that the structure and function of the brain predispose us to believe in God.¹³ He describes ‘God neurons’ and ‘God neurotransmitters’ that are dispersed throughout the limbic system, the emotional center of the brain.¹⁴ Leading neuroscientist Andrew Newberg states, “The human brain is uniquely constructed to perceive and generate

¹¹ ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, *Manhaj ahl al-sunnah*, 58.

¹² Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij al-sālikīn* (Beirut: Dar Kitab al-Arabi, 2003), 1:127.

¹³ René J. Muller, “Neurotheology: Are We Hardwired for God?,” *Psychiatric Times* 25, no. 6 (2008), 24.

¹⁴ Muller, “Neurotheology.”

spiritual entities.”¹⁵ Hence, according to this research, just as human beings are driven by their biology to speak, eat, and procreate, they are also driven to engage in the spiritual pursuit of worship. This is consistent with the Islamic concept of the *fiṭrah*, the natural disposition that Allah ﷻ has placed in human beings.

So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the *fiṭrah* of Allah upon which He has created [all] people. No change should there be in the creation of Allah. That is the correct way of life, but most of the people do not know. (Qur'an 30:30)

One may find such conclusions troubling given the growing population of atheists and agnostics. The fallacy in this rebuttal lies in a misunderstanding of the term *worship*. While many assume worship exists solely in relation to supernatural entities, the Qur'an provides a more functional view of this basic human motivation: “Have you not seen the one who takes his own desires as a god?” (Qur'an 25:43).

While hardly anyone would claim their desires as divine from a theological perspective, they can functionally operate as divine from a phenomenological perspective. To borrow terminology from developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, a person's ‘ultimate existential concern’ represents their true deity.¹⁶ An individual's ultimate concern is what an individual loves the most, their highest ambition in life. Everyone, even an atheist, must have something that they love most, which is, in fact, their ‘god’ that is worshipped. While we often think of worship as purely associated with rituals, we must recognize that, from an Islamic perspective, worship penetrates deep into the heart of the human being and encompasses everything about one's ultimate concern including beliefs, feelings, and actions. Therefore, worship represents the entire journey toward one's ultimate concern in life. Defining worship as such broadens it from the domain of ritual into the domain of living.

¹⁵ Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), 4.

¹⁶ Hetty Zock and T. H. Zock, *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern: Erik H. Erikson's Contribution to the Psychology of Religion*, vol. 1 (New York: Rodopi, 2004), 15.

The psychology of worship

Ibn al-Qayyim dissects the idea that humans are hardwired for worship to its first principles, enabling us to understand the cognitive mechanism behind the genesis of deity in the mind of a human being.¹⁷ The first point he explains is that human beings are by nature dependent creatures and must find what will bring them benefit so they can actively pursue it and what will bring them harm so they can actively avoid it. He asserts that pleasure and pain are the motivating factors that drive human beings toward benefit and away from harm. The second point he explains follows from the first. Since human beings are fundamentally motivated to find benefit and avoid harm, they must construct a belief system that informs them of the sources of benefit and harm. It is not enough that a person populates their mind with a multitude of possible sources. Some sources are dependent on others. For example, food is a source of benefit but it is dependent on all the work put in from the farm to the kitchen and everything in between. As a person follows the chain of benefit or, conversely, the chain of harm they will inevitably arrive at the ultimate source of all benefit and harm. While the source should be God Almighty, the Owner of Might, the One who determines all things and the One who has power over everything, people may insert other ideas. For instance, a person could internalize that wealth is the ultimate source of benefit and harm. Another person may think it is fame, status, or gratifying one's desires. Whatever a person conceptualizes as the Ultimate Source of Benefit and Harm becomes their deity. For its sake they live and for its sake they strive. They submit to whatever needs to be done to accomplish their goals.

Hence, the dilemma of humanity is not whether to worship or not worship. Everyone necessarily is engaged in worship by virtue of their natural state of dependency. They must submit to whatever they perceive has the power to harm or benefit them or else they face the consequences. The true existential dilemma that faces every human being is what is *worthy* of their worship. What exactly can and will fulfill their needs?

¹⁷ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ighāthat al-lahfān* (Jeddah: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 2011), 39.

A common motif in the Qur'an is the description of the worthiness of divinity in terms of real power to benefit and harm. It is a way of challenging those that deify other than Him,

Say: Do you worship other than Allah what cannot benefit you at all and what cannot harm you? (Qur'an 21:66)

And they worship beside Allah what cannot harm them nor benefit them (Qur'an 10:18)

And they worship what does not benefit them or harm them (Qur'an 25:55).

The Qur'anic message to humanity is to align their ultimate concern with whatever is in charge of their ultimate destiny, which is Allah alone. Thus, there is nothing worthy of worship except Allah.

The will to worship

While Nietzsche conceptualized all of reality as 'Will to Power,'¹⁸ the Islamic alternative could be characterized as 'Will to Worship.' People are driven by their deepest desires, which are determined by what they love most in life. The movement toward a person's ultimate concern is the impulse of life that is actualized throughout the cosmos. That is the will to worship. The Qur'an asserts that, in fact, everything in existence is engaged in worship.

Do you not see that whoever is in the heavens and whoever is in the earth and the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees, the animals and most of humanity prostrate to Allah? (Qur'an 22:18)

The seven heavens and the earth and whatever is in them glorify Him. And there is not a thing that exists except that it exalts [Allah] with His praise, but you do not understand their way of exaltation. (Qur'an 17:44)

Every human being has an underlying value system that propels them on their journey of life to that which they value most. This represents their god, functionally at least. It is that for which a person is willing to bear the pain of

¹⁸ Ciano Aydin, "Nietzsche on Reality as Will to Power: Toward an 'Organization—Struggle' Model," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 33 (2007): 25–48.

existence. It is what a person submits to, sacrificing their time, energy, and resources. This is the attitude of worship. It drives people to submit to the ups and downs of the road that leads to what they seek in life. It consumes a person's thoughts, emotions, and actions as they relentlessly pursue what they think will bring them happiness and save them from misery. As we can see, pursuing one's ultimate concern includes the same four elements found in the definition of *'ibādah*: love, submission, seeking nearness, and obedience.

The all-encompassing nature of worship is why, in Islam, the mundane can be transformed into *'ibādah* if done for the intention of reaching a Muslim's Ultimate Concern, Allah. Eating, drinking, and procreating are experiences that are elevated to worship when done with the attitude of seeking the pleasure of Allah.

The Prophet ﷺ said, "Verily, Allah is pleased with a servant who praises him when he eats, or praises him when he drinks."¹⁹

In another narration, we learn how encompassing charity can be,

Some of the companions came to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, and they said, "O Messenger of Allah, the rich have taken all the rewards. They pray as we pray, they fast as we fast, and they give charity from their extra wealth." The Prophet said, "Has not Allah made for you ways to give charity? In every glorification of Allah is charity, in every declaration of His greatness is charity, in every praise of Him is charity, in every declaration of His Oneness is charity, enjoining good is charity and forbidding evil is charity, and in a man's intimate relations with his wife is charity." They said, "O Messenger of Allah, is there a reward for one who satisfies his passions?" The Prophet said, "You see that if he were to satisfy his passions with the unlawful, it would be a burden of sin upon him? Likewise, if he were to satisfy himself with the lawful, he will have a reward."²⁰

Enjoying the simplest of blessings with gratitude and bearing even the lightest hardships with patience transforms the banal into the sacred. Even the slightest thorn prick can be a spiritual experience as taught to us by the Prophet ﷺ.²¹ As

¹⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2734.

²⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1006.

²¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2572.

evidenced through the vast compilations of invocations²² in the Islamic tradition, there is a prayer to be uttered for all occasions in life including relieving oneself²³ and being intimate with one's spouse.²⁴

This is what makes Islamic spirituality so unique and universal in its appeal. While other spiritual traditions are often life-negating, Islam is explicitly life-affirming. Devoting oneself to Allah in worship does not mean being celibate or shunning the pleasures of the world. Rather it means one lives life to its fullest, elevating the seemingly trivial to the most ultimate of concerns. 'Allāmah Iqbal describes this feature of Islam in distinction to Christianity,

Both demand the affirmation of the spiritual self in man, with this difference only that Islam, recognizing the contact of the ideal with the real, says 'yes' to the world of matter and points the way to master it with a view to discover a basis for a realistic regulation of life.²⁵

Controlling one's lowly desires is indeed a crucial part of the Islamic way of life:

As for the one who feared the position of his Lord and restrains his desires, then indeed paradise will be his refuge. (Qur'an 79:40)

However, the method by which this is done is not by repressing these urges, but by directing them toward productive pursuits. For example, we are not meant to repress sexual urges, but to express them within lawful relationships, which produces life, love, and compassion. Similarly, while the aggressive instinct can lead us to oppress others for our self-interest, it can be used for the sake of standing for justice and resistance to oppression.

The theology of worship

A distinction needs to be made here between two conceptual categories of divinity. Islamic theology describes two aspects of *tawḥīd* (Islamic monotheism) that

²² The interested reader can refer to *al-Adhkār* by Imām al-Nawawī (d. 676 AH), *al-Kalim al-Ṭayyib* by Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728 AH), or the recent *Ḥiṣn al-Muslim* (Fortress of a Muslim) by Sa'īd al-Qaḥṭānī (d. 1439 AH).

²³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6322.

²⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5156.

²⁵ Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (New Delhi: Kitab Bahvan, 2000), 16.

operate on different levels of the human experience. The first is in the domain of the objective, *tawḥīd ‘ilmī* (monotheism of knowledge), and the second is in the domain of the subjective, *tawḥīd ‘amalī* (monotheism of action). The first category refers to what a person believes about the Divine, in an objective sense. So for instance, believing the Divine is One, Eternal, The Most Merciful, The Creator of all would fall under *tawḥīd ‘ilmī*. The second category refers to how a person relates to God subjectively in terms of their actions, both inward and outward. For instance, It describes whether a person worships God alone or alongside other partners. These partners in worship can be explicit (which would fall under *tawḥīd ‘ilmī*) or implicit in one’s actions and only fall under *tawḥīd ‘amalī*.

In other words, while many may theologically profess belief in Allah as the Creator of all, and the only One deserving of worship, psychologically their ultimate concern may actually be something else. This paradox is referred to as *shirk khafī* (hidden idolatry). This form of *shirk* has been described as more subtle than the crawling of an ant.²⁶ Perhaps, a person’s ultimate concern is their wealth, status, fame, or personal pleasure and they use religion as a means to reach these gods. They do not engage in religious piety out of genuine love, veneration, and reverence for God but rather to achieve worldly benefits.

There is a spectrum of how explicit this *nifāq* (hypocrisy) is, ranging from minor to major. The more minor forms mean the more subtle the hidden agenda to the point that a person may not even be consciously aware of their ulterior motives. This is why Islam places a heavy emphasis on engaging in *murāqabah* (being aware of God’s presence) and *muḥāsabah* (taking oneself to account).²⁷

On the other end of the spectrum are true hypocrites who hold no love, reverence, or respect in their hearts at all for Allah and His Messenger. The Qur’an describes their state,

²⁶ *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, no. 715. al-Albānī (d. 1420 AH) has classified this narration as *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic) (*Ṣaḥīḥ Adab al-Mufrad*, no. 551).

²⁷ The interested reader should refer to: Justin Parrott, “How to be a Mindful Muslim: An Exercise in Islamic Meditation,” *Yaqeen*, November 21, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/justin-parrott/how-to-be-a-mindful-muslim-an-exercise-in-islamic-meditation/>.

Verily the hypocrites try to deceive Allah but He is the One that deceives them. When they stand to pray *ṣalāh*, they stand with laziness so that people can see them and they do not remember Allah except a little. (Qur'an 4:142)

The experience of worship

In this section, we explore the sacred emotions that illuminate the experience of worship and provide worshippers with an endless source of meaning and fulfillment. The Qur'an alludes to three core emotions that fuel the light of worship in the heart of believers.

They are the ones that call out, searching for the nearest path to their Guardian Lord, hoping in His Mercy and fearing His punishment. No doubt the punishment of your Guardian Lord is something to seriously dread. (Qur'an 17:57)

In this verse: 1) seeking nearness to God, 2) hoping in His Mercy, and 3) fearing His punishment are connected together. We can label these emotions 1) love, 2) hope, and 3) fear, respectively. Ibn al-Qayyim gives a beautiful analogy of how these three emotions come together in the heart of a worshipper.

The heart in its journey to Allah is like a bird. Love is the head while fear and hope are the two wings. When the head and both wings are sound, then the bird can take flight. If the head is removed, the bird is dead. If one of the wings is missing, then it is easy prey for every predator.²⁸

The experience of *ibādah* emerges from a heart that possesses these three essential sacred emotions. It is an experience described as nothing short of paradise in this word. Ibn al-Qayyim said, "For certainly, there is no true blessing, pleasure, joy, or wholeness without knowing Allah and loving Him, finding peace in His remembrance, rejoicing in being close to Him, longing to meet Him. This is the paradise of this world."²⁹

Ibn al-Qayyim also said,

²⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij al-sālikīn* (Mansoura, Egypt: Maktabat Fayyād, 2013), 426.

²⁹ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij al-sālikīn* (Mansoura, Egypt: Maktabat Fayyād, 2013), 372.

The lover is in the ocean of happiness and is never separated from it until the point he is drowning in this ocean. And just as a person who has drowned cannot be separated from the water, the lover cannot be separated from his happiness...The delight of love in this world is a small preview of the pleasures of paradise in the next world, and it is the paradise of this world. The happiness of the lover is continuous even if he is struck with waves of pain from time to time. If those preoccupied with other than God knew what the people of love possessed, their hearts would break with regret.³⁰

Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571 AH) reported: Ibrāhīm ibn Ad’ham (d. 165 AH), may Allah have mercy on him, said, “If the kings and their sons knew what we experience of spiritual pleasure and happiness, they would fight us for it with their swords.”³¹

These descriptions convey the depth and expansion that true *‘ibādah* brings to the heart of a Muslim. The intensity of this experience is determined by the strength of the foundational sacred emotions found in a person’s heart. Love, hope, and fear are the drivers of worship and so the experience will only be as meaningful as the emotions underneath. We will briefly explore each of these elemental spiritual states of *‘ibādah*, so we can appreciate how we can excel in our worship.

Love

We start with the most important and necessary but also the most difficult to express and understand. Love is one of the mysteries of human existence and has inspired art, wisdom, and poetry throughout the ages. Since the dawn of civilization, human beings have attempted to portray and express the bewildering and yet inescapable feeling that is love. Contained within this feeling is a dormant energy of immense power, capable of driving human beings to overcome insurmountable odds. When true love is felt, nothing can stand between a person and their beloved. It is the source of enduring strength that is necessary to bear the pain of existence.

As Ibn al-Qayyim aptly explained,

³⁰ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij al-sālikīn* (Mansoura, Egypt: Maktabat Fayyād, 2013), 1105.

³¹ Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 4475.

No one can define love with a definition more clear than itself...And no one can describe love with a description more clear than love itself. Humanity is only capable of speaking about its causes, means, signs, indicators, consequences, and rulings. Their definitions only revolve around the above six.³²

Essentially, Ibn al-Qayyim is saying that when people attempt to define love, they end up merely describing different aspects related to it, such as what causes it or what are the signs that a person is in love. Love itself is never able to be linguistically defined.

Love, as Ibn al-Qayyim explained, is the head of a person's spiritual pursuit. Love is to the heart what blood is to the body. It is this emotion that provides fuel for every act of the soul, just as blood is the fuel for every organ in the body. A person's ultimate beloved defines them as a person. The true purpose and meaning of a person's life is their beloved. Love determines the intensity and context of all other emotional experiences. In other words, all other emotions are defined by love. As Ibn Taymīyah points out this even extends to hatred,

Love and desire are the root of hatred and anger, and its cause...The act of hatred in the world is only done when something opposes the beloved. If there was not something that was loved, there would be no hatred. Hatred and anger of human beings is from what opposes and goes against the beloved.³³

Love is the organizing principle of all other emotional experiences. It determines their quality, intensity, and context. Ibn Taymīyah explains that even hatred cannot exist without the context of love. Why else would someone feel so strongly against something, unless it threatened what they loved?

As for the other emotions, they are also intimately connected. A person fears losing their beloved, hopes to be close to their beloved, longs for their beloved, is grieved over what they have missed from their beloved, and happy about experiencing their beloved. Love determines other love as well. A person will love anything that their

³² Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, 861.

³³ Ibn Taymīyah, *Qā'idah fī al-maḥabbah* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1987), 8.

beloved loves and anything that brings them closer to their beloved. As we can see, love is the foundational feeling and all other emotions are branches of its tree. This is why the objective of a believer is to empty their heart of ultimate love for anything other than Allah.

And from among humankind are those who take partners beside Allah, loving them with a love that is only due to Allah. And those who believe have even stronger love for Allah. (Qur'an 2:165)

Love for others besides Allah becomes a seed that plants another tree in the heart. Negative emotional experiences, insecurities, pathological grief, and crippling anxiety are the consequence of love for other than Allah. Every negative emotion can be traced back to a root source, which is a foundational love for something else. This can be love of other people, which means a person has overinvested and developed an insecure maladaptive attachment. It could also be love of one's own comfort and pleasure, which means a person's ego is in control of their heart, not their spirit. Whatever it is, anything besides Allah will ultimately bring us pain and suffering in this world and the next.

Ibn Hāzīm explains that attachment to anything in this world inevitably ends in grief,

This is because at the end of all your aspirations in this world is the eventuality of grief—either your ambitions are taken away from you or you are forced to give up your goals. There is no escape from these two ends except in striving towards God.³⁴

When we attach our hearts to anything that is temporary, then it naturally produces insecurity, unhealthy fear, and anxiety as we cannot escape the reality that our beloved will leave us. Since our love determines the meaning of our life, this can become an existential crisis. The Prophet ﷺ warned us of becoming worshippers of the dollar,

³⁴ Ibn Hāzīm, *al-Akhlāq wa al-siyar* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Hāzīm, 1990), 76.

Wretched is the slave of gold, silver, fine clothes, and garments. If he is given he is pleased, but if he is not given he is displeased.³⁵

When we only have the tree of pure love for Allah, our emotional experiences are all positive. The branches tower to the sky and the roots remain firm and secure.

Have you not seen that Allah has made an example of the good word like a good tree? Its roots are firmly grounded and its branches tower to the sky. (Qur'an 14:24)

While the believer still experiences fear and grief, it is in relation to Allah, which turns them into positive and productive feelings. All misdeeds and circumstances are redeemable and reconcilable. If a person fears distance from God, it pushes them to turn to Him. If a person is grieved over their sins, it pushes them to repent to Him. If a person is angry for His Sake, it pushes them to courageously bring about positive change in their surroundings. If a person loves, they are able to do so purely without the taint of self-interest which characterizes all relationships that don't extend from a love for Allah. They are able to love a person for who they are, a creation of Allah ﷻ, rather than what needs they fulfill.

All of this is contrasted with a person fearing losing wealth or a loved one—neither of which is under their control. Grief over losing something or someone can never bring them back. Anger due to pride or ego can never be contended with except maladaptively. This type of love can never fill the hole in a person's heart without feelings of disappointment, hurt, and betrayal.

Love is the foundation of worship as it is the feeling that connects a person to their ultimate concern in life. It is the binding force that breaks through the thickest of walls and pierces through the hardest of steel to reach the thing they love most. From the seed of love all other emotions are felt. Without it there is no human being, only an empty vessel.

Hope

³⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6071.

We now turn to one of the wings of worship, hope. Love is the head that directs the heart in the direction of what it desires most. Hope is what carries a person to that destination. Without hope, a person would not have the strength to tread the path to their beloved. They would stay stranded, afraid to set sail for fear of the uncertainty of the horizon.

For the believer, the heart is oriented toward Allah beyond the heavens. How daring an objective for a creature full of flaws, weaknesses, and limitations? What is it about the believer that makes him believe he can possibly be in the presence of *al-Quddūs* (The Pure), while his heart is covered with impurities? How can he reach *al-‘Alī* (The Most High), while he is in the lowest of abodes? How can he reach *al-Nūr* (The Light), when he can barely take the heat and illumination of the sun? How is he worthy to be in the presence of *al-Ḥamīd* (The Praiseworthy), while he is engulfed in sin and heedlessness? The only answer is hope. Hope in the vastness of Allah’s Mercy is the propeller that drives a person on the path toward Him. It would take a miracle for a human being to even imagine being in the presence of Allah. And yet, this miracle is witnessed every day through only Allah’s Grace. Simple acts of prayer and remembrance can elevate the spirit to the Throne of God, as it lies in prostration before *al-Raḥmān* (the Most Merciful).

This hope in Allah extends to all domains of our life. The sinner hopes in Allah’s Mercy. The poor person hopes in Allah’s Providence. The sick person hopes in Allah’s Cure. The oppressed person hopes in Allah’s Justice. The broken person hopes in Allah’s Strength. The lonely person hopes in Allah’s Love. The confused person hopes in Allah’s Guidance. The depressed and anxious hope in Allah’s Plan. Whatever our need in life, we hope that Allah will fulfill it.

“The future will be better for you than your past” (Qur’an 93:4) if you continue on your journey toward your beloved Allah and most ultimate of concerns. Hope carries a person into the future with an unshakeable confidence, rooted in their faith in Allah’s Grace and Might. His immense Mercy means He wants good for us, and His Might means there is no barrier to Him providing from His endless treasures.

At this point, we must clarify the important difference between hope, the wing of worship, and wishful thinking, an impulse from the devil. Hope inspires action, whereas wishful thinking is passive, inspiring only laziness and complacency. When a person believes they can reach their goal, they will increase in their efforts to reach it. Hope in Allah alone doesn't mean a person dismisses the means Allah has placed in the world. This important clarification occurred in the time of the Prophet ﷺ.

Anas bin Mālik narrates that a man said, “O Messenger of Allah ﷺ shall I tie it (the camel) and rely upon Allah ﷻ or should I leave it loose and rely upon Allah ﷻ?” He said, “Tie it and rely upon Allah ﷻ.”³⁶

‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb narrates, I heard the Messenger of Allah ﷺ saying: “If you all depend on Allah with due reliance, He would certainly give you provision as He gives it to birds who go forth hungry in the morning and return with full bellies at dusk.”³⁷

If a person doesn't think they are smart enough or capable enough to accomplish a task, they are less likely to even attempt it. But if a person believes they can do it, they will approach the means to the objective with zeal and enthusiasm. This is how hope in Allah inspires action. When you believe that the outcome of whatever you are undertaking is in the Hands of Allah, you trust that your efforts will be fruitful and so you expend even more energy.

In contrast, wishful thinking is not rooted in any sincere hope in Allah. Rather, it comes from laziness and a wish for things to come to a person without having to put in effort. This ignores the means Allah has ordained for things in this world and opposes the prophetic example of proactive reliance on Allah.

Another important distinction to be made is the difference between hope in Allah and hope in oneself. Hope in Allah allows us to open ourselves up to new possibilities and to be comfortable with the uncertainty of the future.

Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī narrates that The Prophet ﷺ said, “There is no Muslim that calls out to Allah ﷻ with a prayer that does not contain any

³⁶ *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2517.

³⁷ *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2344.

wrong or breaking of familial ties except Allah ﷻ gives him one of three. Either what he asked for is hastened to him, or it is saved for the hereafter, or a calamity of similar magnitude is diverted from him.”³⁸

Abū Hurayrah narrated that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Call upon Allah ﷻ while being certain of being answered, and know that Allah ﷻ does not respond to a supplication from the heart of one heedless and occupied.”³⁹

The certainty of Allah’s response and the strength of a person’s hope does not replace the uncertainty of the future. The future remains uncertain, but the believer has internalized that it is solely determined by Allah, and prefers His decision. While a person may want something in particular, hope in Allah enables them to be open to their fears and know that whatever the outcome, it was best for them.

The power of hope is what grounds us and makes us believe there is light at the end of the tunnel. No matter how bleak a person’s situation, the wing of hope tells them that the ultimate end will be theirs if they only have faith. A person who is inspired by hope in Allah raises his head from the dark abyss that lies beneath him and to the rising sun on the horizon. The pain and misery of this world is only temporary; the believer hopes for felicity and everlasting pleasure in the next. The believer hopes only in the Mercy of God and never lets go of that rope.

In contrast, popular psychology and mainstream self-help cliches encourage people to ‘believe in themselves’ and go through life with an attitude of self-sufficiency. These platitudes are dangerous as they instill false hope and confidence in a person who has no tangible reason to believe he or she is capable of changing their condition. Allah ﷻ warns the human being, “But Alas, humanity has certainly transgressed, that he sees himself as self-sufficient” (Quran, 96:6-7) He also informs us of our fundamental reality of dependency and destitution, “O

³⁸ *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, no. 10749; al-Mundhirī, *al-Targhīb wa at-tarhīb* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 2003), 2:389; Shu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt, *Takhrīj al-Musnad* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1999), 17:214; others have declared the chain to be authentic.

³⁹ *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3479; Imām Nawawī, *al-Adhkār* (Cairo: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1990), 492; others have pointed out a slight weakness in the chain. It contains Šāliḥ ibn Bashīr, who was one of the ascetics of Baṣrah, but was known to be weak in hadith. However, contemporary hadith scholars such as al-Mubārakpūrī (*Tuḥfat al-Aḥwadhī* [Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 2001], 8:477) and al-Albānī (*Šaḥīḥ al-Targhīb* [Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 2000], 1653) have said it has corroborating evidence that makes it a fair hadith due to corroboration (*ḥasan li-ghayrihi*).

humankind, you are all impoverished before Allah ﷻ, and He is the Self-Sufficient, Full of Praise”(Quran, 35:15). True independence is only achieved with absolute dependence on the One who is truly Self-Sufficient, *al-Hayy al-Qayyūm* (The Perfectly Living, The Sustainer of All). Only through hope and reliance upon Allah ﷻ can a person be justifiably confident and have good reason to believe in an optimistic future.

Fear

Fear is one of the most powerful human emotions and is the driving force behind so many of our thoughts, worries, and behaviors. Ibn Ḥazm said,

I searched for a common goal amongst humankind, to which all would agree to strive for excellence. I have not found anything other than the vanquishing of anxiety.⁴⁰

Many view fear as a negative emotion and are often turned off from religious preaching that inspires fear through reminders of death and the hellfire. However, it must be realized that fear is a positive emotion if it motivates us to stay away from harm and to pursue what is beneficial. Fear is only harmful if it is taken to an extreme and results in a crippling paralysis. Otherwise, fear is a necessary wing of *‘ibādah* that sustains the flight of the heart in this world toward Allah. Fear of Allah is one of the greatest assets to a believer that gives them the strength to refrain from temptation and desire. Fear of Allah gives a person strength to maintain their values in the face of incredible resistance in this world. It enables a person to live for what they believe in and stand up for what’s right despite external pressures that may force them into hiding. If a person doesn’t fear Allah, then they will fear the people and things of this world. Fear of poverty, failure, people’s judgment, or the aggression of others can shackle a person’s heart and drive them wherever the fear goes. The shackles stop the heart from pursuing what it truly loves and wants in life. But when the light of *taqwá* (fearing Allah) comes to a person’s heart, the flame burns all other fears to a crisp. The shackles are

⁴⁰ Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Akhlaq wa al-siyar* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1990), 76.

broken, and the heart becomes free to pursue whatever it truly desires. These are desires from the spirit, not from the ego.

The key to only fearing Allah is to only love Allah. Love determines our fears. We fear being separated from what we want and love in life. When we love Allah, we fear being separated from Him. For a lover of Allah, the worst of punishments is being veiled from Him in the next life (Qur'an 83:15).

Separation from Allah is also feared as it brings about punishment of our bodies and souls in this life and the next. A believer knows that those close to Allah will experience His Mercy and those far from Him will be left with His Justice. Pure Justice means punishment and destruction for us all.

And if Allah ﷻ were to take humanity to account based on their oppression, He would not leave upon the earth a single creature. (Qur'an 16:61)

The verse states that if we are delivered pure justice, then we will be met with the Wrath of God. While many find this image negative, it is actually quite positive. The Wrath of God is perfect, unlike the flawed anger of human beings that leads them to transgress. The Anger of God is pure justice.

We can love and hope for closeness to Allah but the motivation of human beings fluctuates. What will push through the resistance within ourselves due to laziness and weakness? And what will overcome the resistance outside in the forms of aggression and tyranny? Fear is the most basic of instincts that activates the strongest mechanism for survival in human beings. Fear of Allah can activate within us a strength that can keep us soaring to the sky on the journey to Allah. Thus, fear of Allah ﷻ means we run *to* Him, not away from Him.

Balancing love, hope, and fear

The head turns to what it loves most, with a strong desire to reach what may seem impossible. The wing of hope endows the lover with the belief that what is sought is attainable. The wing of fear pushes the lover away from what the beloved despises and toward what is loved. In times of failure, hope carries the lover. In times of ease, fear keeps the lover from being complacent and indulgent. This is

the heart of true worship that encompasses a person's entire life's journey. And for a creature as lofty and noble as the human being, endowed with intellect, consciousness, conscience, and a spirit, there is none worthy of this pursuit except Allah.

The structure of worship

As we have continuously pointed out throughout this article, *ibādah* engages all faculties and encompasses all domains of human life. The scholars of Islam categorize the activities of worship as it pertains to the various faculties of the human being. Worship can manifest on the tongue, limbs, and heart through the expression of language or movement.

Ibn al-Qayyim explained that this results in four distinct dimensions of worship: 1) language of the heart; 2) movement of the heart; 3) language of the tongue; and 4) movement of the body.⁴¹ The language of the heart refers to its beliefs. The movement of the heart refers to sacred emotions such as love, reliance (*tawakkul*), fear, and hope. The language of the tongue refers to communicating the message of Islam to others, declaring God's praise. The movement of the body includes active processes that range from the *ṣalāh*, *ṭawāf*, *sa'y*, *ḥajj* to the simple act of removing something harmful from the road. Any movement of the limbs is worship when the heart behind it is oriented toward Allah.

Worship involves a body and a spirit. Both are necessary. The body has been molded by the *sharī'ah* and is found in the commands and prohibitions of Allah that dictate how we should worship Him. The spirit is the inward essence that brings life to the outward structure found in the *sharī'ah*. Without an outward structure, there is no body to bring to life. Without a spirit, there is nothing to bring the body to life. Both are necessary for true and authentic worship. The scholars describe these two conditions as 1) sincerity (spirit) and 2) following the *sunnah* (prophetic tradition) (body).

⁴¹ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij al-sālikīn* (Mansoura, Egypt: Maktabat al-Fayyāḍ, 2013), 95.

Fuḍayl ibn ‘Iyāḍ (d. 187 AH) said, “Indeed, if deeds are sincere and incorrect, they will not be accepted. If deeds are correct and insincere, they will not be accepted, but rather they are only accepted if they are both sincere and correct. Sincere means they are done for Allah alone and correct means they are done according to the Sunnah.”⁴²

The five pillars of living your best life

Ibādah encompasses one’s entire life’s journey. All of the seemingly separate parts of our lives are actually being mobilized to a central concern that is the god we choose to worship. The quality and value of a person’s life is only as strong as their ultimate concern. Therefore, living your best life is about choosing the right god to worship. The testimony of faith is a declaration that a person has chosen to worship Allah above all other false gods who have no power to benefit or harm.

In the pursuit of the divine, a person opens their spirit to the endless potential of growth and illumination. The path to God is filled with wondrous marvels of the heavenly realm that reveal themselves to the seeker. The movement on this path only occurs with growth of character and spirit. Abū Ismā‘īl al-Harawī (d. 481 AH), one of the spiritual masters of Islam, outlines 100 stations on the journey to God that fill a person’s life with meaning, fulfillment, and joy. Humility, love, compassion, altruism, joy, contentment, gratitude, and hope are some of the stations a person traverses as they commit to the worship of Allah. These qualities, when genuinely reached, come with spiritual states that bring immeasurable pleasure and delight to the soul. The seeker on the path is unconcerned by the petty nuisances that make up the banality of the worldly life. They are filled with love for Allah so their worship of Him overpowers any insignificant worries and concerns that plague the minds of so many attached to the world.

When we look to the five pillars of Islam, we see that they are all acts of worship that represent the different domains of our life. The pillars serve as the foundation that are meant to extend until our entire life is defined by *lā ilāha illā Allāh* (There is none worthy of worship except Allah).

⁴² Ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā* (Medina: Majma‘ al-Malik Fahd, 2004), 28:177.

The *shahādah* is the root and foundation of all knowledge. Only through a belief in one God is the world rendered meaningful and comprehensible.⁴³ Hence, our entire pursuit of knowledge in this world is meant to be an extension of the strength of our *shahādah*.

The *ṣalāh* is the foundational practice that defines how we relate to Allah. It serves as the bedrock upon which all other acts of remembrance and connection with God are built. The *ṣalāh* expands our spirituality.

While the *ṣalāh* is about relating to the Creator, *zakāh* is about relating to the creation. Generosity and altruism are the ways we are taught to deal with others. *Zakāh* serves as the foundation and can expand to charity of all kinds. Any benefit a person can confer to any of the creation of God, whether human, animal, or plant, is an act of charity.

Abū Dharr narrates that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Your smiling in the face of your brother is charity, commanding good and forbidding evil is charity, your giving directions to a man lost in the land is charity for you. Your seeing for a man with bad sight is a charity for you, your removal of a rock, a thorn, or a bone from the road is charity for you. Your pouring what remains from your bucket into the bucket of your brother is charity for you.”

⁴⁴

Ṣawm is how we relate to our ego. It teaches us to discipline our cravings and desires to ensure they are in line with our values. It is an act of spiritual training that we are meant to extend outside of Ramadan into the entire year. The purification and refinement of character is rooted in this foundational practice of *ṣawm*.

⁴³ For a detailed explanation of this idea, refer to Zohair Abdul-Rahman and Nazir Khan, “In Pursuit of Conviction II: Humanity Needs God,” *Yaqeen*, October 11, 2019,

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/zohair/in-pursuit-of-conviction-ii-humanity-needs-god/>.

⁴⁴ *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 1956.

Lastly, the *hajj* is a culmination of everything and a symbol of life and death itself. It represents the entire individual and collective pursuit toward the pleasure of Allah.⁴⁵

Taken together, the five pillars of Islam are the foundations of our knowledge (*shahādah*), relationship with Allah (*ṣalāh*), relationship with the creation (*zakāh*), relationship with our *nafs* (*ṣawm*) and life and death (*hajj*). As a person increases in their love for Allah, their desire to reach him increases. This expands these domains so that they encompass all aspects of a person's life, from their careers, to family, even to recreation. A person's wealth is earned as worship to Allah, extending from the *zakāh*. A person's recreation is done as a means of rest to fortify the gains from disciplining the soul, extending from the *ṣawm*. A person does not require music or meditation to achieve spiritual awakening, as their *ṣalāh* and remembering Allah ﷻ leaves no room for anything else in the heart. A person witnesses Allah ﷻ in every sign they encounter in creation and all knowledge they attain, extending from their *shahādah*. Their worship defines their entire life until they are able to say,

Say: My prayers, my sacrifice, my living and my dying are all for Allah, the Lord of the Worlds, He has no partners, and that is what I have been commanded to and I am the first of those who submit. (Qur'an 6:162)

⁴⁵ For a detailed explanation behind the significance of the rituals of hajj, refer to Ibrahim Hindy and Nazir Khan, "Living Abraham's Legacy: Relevance of Rites and Rituals in the Modern Age," *Yaqeen*, August 13, 2018, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/ibrahim-hindy/living-abrahams-legacy-relevance-of-rites-and-rituals-in-the-modern-age/>.