

AL-IKHLĀŞ

By Amena Tanveer

The verb *khalasha* means to become pure, clear, free or safe, and *akhlaşa* is to purify something. So *ikhlaş* means purification – the purification of one's belief and intention, which leads to sincerity in worship. *Ikhlaş* can also indicate the purification of one's deeds from *riyaa'* (showing off), in complete obedience to Allah alone.



Every Muslim has to focus on knowing the true meaning and purpose of life. Then he must formulate an all-encompassing intention to utilize his moral, spiritual, mental, emotional and physical resources to purify his soul. A person making decisions based on this higher purpose, aspiring to attain Allah's approval is living and striving; otherwise he is just existing and wasting his efforts.

Say, "Shall we inform you of the greatest losers as to their deeds? They are those whose effort is lost in the life of this world, while they think that they are doing good in [their] work." (18:103-104). Ibn Katheer said, "This is general, referring to everyone who worships Allah in a way that is not acceptable, thinking he is correct in doing so and that his deeds will be accepted. But he is mistaken, and his deeds will be rejected."

Ikhlaş (sincerity) is a condition for Allah's acceptance of the righteous actions that are done in accordance with the Qur'ān and Sunnah. It is when the worshipper intends all of his deeds for the acceptance of Allah, for His rewards and His favours.

As Allah said: *And they were not commanded except to worship Allah, sincere to Him in religion.* (98:5)

The concept of *ikhlaş* is explained in several places in the Qur'ān

Indeed, We have sent down to you the Book, [O Muḥammad], in truth. So worship Allah, [being] sincere to Him in religion. (39:2)

Say, [O Muḥammad], "Indeed, I have been commanded to worship Allah, [being] sincere to Him in religion." (39:11)

Say, "I am only a man like you, to whom has been revealed that your god is one God. So whoever would hope for the meeting with his Lord – let him do righteous work and not associate in the worship of his Lord anyone." (18:110)

Ibn Taymiyyah said, "Without doubt, *ikhlaş* removes the cause for entering the Hellfire. So anyone who enters the Fire from those who said, '*Lā ilāha ill-Allah*' proves that he had not implemented the sincerity of *lā ilāha ill-Allah*, which would have prohibited him from the Fire. *Majmū' al-Fatāwā*, 10/261.

So sincerity is to single out Allah in one's intention – to obey and please Him alone. This means sincerity in our acts of worship, in our repentance, in our supplication, in our striving, in our trusting and relying on Allah, in our recitation of the Qur'ān, and in all our activities, dealings and relationships. In the words of the Qur'ān: *"And who is better in religion than one who submits himself to Allah and is a doer of good?" (4:125)*

Sincerity is known to Allah and cannot be judged by people, especially when it relates to intention. A Muslim is required to be constant in observation of his intention and always keep it pure. Of particular significance is our treatment of the weak members of society who cannot obtain their rights on their own, be it domestic help, subordinates at work, assistants, or even in family hierarchies where some are under the authority of others. Respect, honour and good treatment are of utmost importance in Islam. Hearts lacking sincerity are seen disregarding these matters.

Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisi wrote: "Indeed, all of mankind are destroyed except those with knowledge, and those with knowledge are destroyed except those who act upon it, and those who act are destroyed except those who are sincere in their action, and those who are sincere are in great danger of *shirk* in their action."

So we must first purify our deeds by avoiding *shirk* (i.e., doing an act of worship for other than Allah).

Allah addressed His Messenger (ﷺ), saying: *And it was already revealed to you and to those before you that if you should associate [anything with Me], your work would surely become worthless and you would surely be among the losers.* (39:65)

Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb reported, "I heard the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ), say, *"Deeds are only by intention, and every man shall have only what he intended. So one whose hijrah was to Allah and His Messenger – his hijrah was to Allah and His Messenger. But one whose hijrah was to achieve a worldly aim, or to a woman he would marry – then his hijrah was to that for which he emigrated."* (Al Bukhari and Muslim)

And there is a *ḥadīth qudsī* in which Allah says, *"I am the most self-sufficient of partners, needing no partnership; so if one does a deed for Me and for another [simultaneously], then I am disassociated from it, and it is [only] for the [other] partner."* (Muslim and Ibn Mājah)

Abu Umāmah related, "Once a man came to Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) and said, 'What do you think about a person who joins us in battle only to seek fame and wealth?' He replied, 'He receives nothing.' The man repeated the question three times, and each time Allah's Messenger said, 'He receives nothing.' Then he (ﷺ) said, *'Indeed, Allah does not accept an action unless it is done with ikhlāṣ, seeking nothing but His acceptance.'*" (An-Nasā'i - ḥadīth ḥasan)

This is confirmed further in the Prophet's saying, *"Possibly one who fasts gains nothing from his fast but hunger, and possibly one who stands in [night] prayer gains nothing from it but wakefulness."* (Ibn Mājah and al-Ḥākim – ṣaḥeeḥ)

Then we must purify our deeds by avoiding *riyaa'*. *Riyaa'* means show or display. It is doing acts of goodness and piety so that people will see or hear of them in order to win their praise and admiration, to gain position and status among them or to obtain some of the goals and objectives of this world. Thus, the Prophet (ﷺ) called it hidden *shirk*.

Ibn Rajab said, "No one shows his actions to creation except out of ignorance of the greatness of the Creator." And 'Alī bin Abi Ṭālib said, "You should be more concerned with the action being accepted than with performing the action itself."

Among the real dangers threatening a Muslim's relationship with Allah is a tendency to want others to know of his good deeds. If this desire is present while performing the deed, one's sincerity may well be questioned and the deed itself is greatly devalued and perhaps even annulled.

Ibn al-Qayyim said, "Sincerity is not combined in the heart with the love of praise by people and being admired by them or greed for what people possess, except as water is combined with fire." He also observed that any deed we do is predisposed to three defects:

- Consciousness that others are observing our action
- Seeking a compensation (benefit or reward) for an action
- Being pleased with the action

He said, "The level of the servant's sincerity in his intention, determination, aim and fervent desire will determine Allah's enabling its accomplishment and His support for him. Assistance from Allah depends upon the sincerity of His servants in their determination."

A lesser form of *riyaa'*, is to make the deed known after its completion, although it was initially done for Allah alone. This might reduce the reward of the deed in the Hereafter to a certain degree.

When asked how to obtain sincerity, Ibn al-Qayyim explained, "The method of putting an end to hunger for praise and facilitating the development of indifference to it is your certain knowledge that

there is no one who can adequately benefit you and praise you or disgrace you and condemn you but Allah."

Certain clarifications can serve as reassurance for a believer:

Abu Dharr reported that someone said to the Prophet (ﷺ), "Have you considered a man who does a good deed and people praise him for it?" He replied, *"That is an immediate sign of good tidings for the believer."* (Muslim)

When offered payment for a job initially done for the cause of Allah, the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, *"Whatever Allah has granted you from this wealth without your asking or seeking it – take it, and either keep it or give it in charity."* (Al-Bukhāri)

"When Allah blesses His servant with a blessing, He likes to see it upon him." (Aṭ-Ṭabarānī – ṣaḥeeḥ)
This demonstrates that good clothes can be worn as long as it is not done for show off or out of conceit, and do not entail extravagance and waste.

Giving up a good act due to fear of *riyaa'* is falling into the trap of Shayṭān.

When unable to corrupt the believer's intention and thereby invalidate his deeds, the Shayṭān may try to discourage him from doing some of them by suggesting to him that it is for show. If one suspects it could be partially true, he should check his intention, amend it when necessary and continue his work. A deed should not be abandoned due to the possibility of *riyaa'*.

Just check the intent and motive of an action. If it is correct, righteous and in agreement with what has been legislated, then it is fine. Rather, it is obligatory upon the Muslim to strive against this threat by making his heart humble before Allah and fearful of Him, preferring His praise and approval over that of humanity.

An act which is sincere will not allow us to expect gratitude or admiration. We cannot feel pride and self-importance, but should know that a deed done for Allah is for His acceptance only and for His reward alone. Hence, there should be no regret over being unappreciated or criticized by people in this world. The knowledge that He enabled it and allowed it and that He will reward it is sufficient.

Reflection and taking account of ourselves regularly is required to help us be more sincere. We must work to amend our faults so they don't pull us down and we should work to help others overcome theirs. All of us have been given certain strengths and weaknesses as individuals and believers, and it is for us to recognize our strengths as gifts from Allah, to use them appropriately for ourselves and for the benefit of others.

We cannot belittle anyone who does not fit into the worldly success model of achievement, outstanding performance, dynamic personality, and so on. This applies in the work-place, in offices, academic institutions, study groups, or any place where people gather to do decent work for survival in life while striving hard to be sincere believers. Avoiding excessive criticism as well as excessive praise will disable many of the strategies used by the Shayṭān to undermine sincerity.

Only with a sincere attitude can we make positive attempts and work hard to please our Creator. Thus, we will effectively remove from our minds the desire to seek the praise of others or recognition for work which should be done exclusively and completely for the approval of Allah. His appreciation, acceptance and reward must be the only objective.

The aim of achieving sincerity should give every believer the urge to strive hard. Awareness of this aim gives clarity to the mind, enlivens the heart, purifies the soul, controls desires and makes the living of this life rich, meaningful, purposeful and full of benefit, for it is the very essence of worship – serving His cause to obtain His pleasure.