

TAKING ONESELF TO ACCOUNT

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Self-criticism and appraisal leads to self-elevation

It is necessary for an individual to pause at the end of each day in order to check himself and run through his achievements: What has he done in the course of the day? Why has he done it?

What has he omitted? Why has he omitted it?

How excellent it would be if this self-criticism were to take place before one retires to bed.

This period of self-criticism and appraisal should certainly be counted among man's moments of progress; it is a moment when man impartially sits as a judge over himself and reviews his yearnings and inclinations, his instincts and motivations. It is a moment when the believer appoints, out of his conviction, a policeman to watch over himself, an investigator to probe him, and a judge to condemn or acquit him. In this way he progresses from the state of "the soul that incites to evil" to the state of "the self-reproaching soul" which reproaches its owner whenever he plunges into sin, or falls short of expectation.

In a hadith narrated by Al-Munthiri it was said: "It behooves any sane person to have four periods of time" and one of the four periods is "a period in which he engages in self-criticism."

The Commander of the Faithful, `Umar ibn Al-Khattab said: "Criticise and appraise yourselves before you are criticised and appraised on the Day of Judgment, and weigh out your deeds, before they are weighed out for you." Almighty Allah says;

(On that Day will men proceed in companies sorted out, to be shown the deeds that they (had done). Then shall anyone who has done an atom's weight of good, see it! And anyone who has done an atom's weight of evil, shall see it.) (Az-Zalzalah 99: 6-8)

`Umar himself, may Allah be pleased with him, used to whip his foot at night and say to himself: "Tell me, what have you done today?!"

Maimun bin Mahran, a famous Companion of the Prophet, used to say: "A pious person scrupulously examines and appraises himself more than a partner does with his partner!"

Al-Hasan Al-Basry said: "A believer polices his own Self; he criticises and appraises it for the sake of Allah. The Final Appraisal (Hisab) may turn out to be mild on some people simply because they were wont to appraise themselves in this life; and the Final Appraisal on the Day of Resurrection may turn out to be rigorous on a people who took this life with levity, and thought they would not be called to account".

On-Going Self-Appraisal, Before and After an Event

Then he described how this self-criticism and appraisal operates in practice: "A fascinating thought (or idea) suddenly comes to the mind of a believer. He says to himself: 'By Allah this is fascinating, I need it! But no, never. Get lost! I am prohibited from executing you!'" (This is self-criticism and appraisal before the event).

And: "A believer may inadvertently do something. He would then turn to himself and say: 'What do you mean by this? By Allah, I cannot find an excuse for this. I shall never repeat it, insha'Allah!'" (This is self-criticism and appraisal after the event).

If a Believer fails to observe this brief period of soul-searching daily, then he should at least try to do so once every few days, or once a week. In this way, he draws up his life balance sheet, depicting to him his (spiritual) assets and liabilities.

A Believer should also have a longer period of this practice at the end of each month, and an even longer period at the end of the year, when he bids farewell to one year and prepares for and welcomes another.

This is the time to critically review the past and plan for the future. This is the (spiritual) equivalent of his final accounts for the year.

One blame worthy innovation initiated by the West and unfortunately imitated by some Muslims, is the annual birthday celebration, where people are invited to a party and served with delicious food and drink.

At times, people obsequiously yield to meaningless rituals and imitative practices for which Allah has sent down no authority. For example, they light a number of candles, each one representing a year in the lifetime of the celebrant. Having lit the candles, the celebrant then histrionically proceeds to blow them out. Gifts are presented and pleasantries exchanged on the occasion.

Rather than this blind, useless imitation, it is better for an intelligent and sensible person to seize this occasion, which marks the expiry of one year of his lifetime, to reconsider and reflect upon his life. At the end of every year, a careful trader applies the brakes in order to measure his performance over the past year, and establish his financial position at the end of it. He wants to know his profit or loss, and his assets and liabilities; i.e. his claims and the claims against him. An intelligent, sensible person ought to do likewise, in respect of his life. More than that, he should beseech Allah to bless his life, make his day better than yesterday, and his tomorrow better than today.

It is worthier for an intelligent and sensible person to call himself to account for one whole year of his life that has expired, in respect of which Allah, the Exalted, will question him. A year is not a short time. It is a period of twelve months; a month is on average thirty days; each day has twenty-four hours, each hour sixty minutes, and each minute sixty seconds. And every second should be counted as a blessing, a favor upon him from Allah and a trust from Allah in his hands.

It is worthier for this intelligent and sensible person to commiserate with himself over the turning of a page in the book of his life. Each day that passes is, as it were, a leaf that has withered and fallen from the tree of his life. May Allah have mercy on Al-Hasan Al-Basri who said: "O son of Adam! You are but a bundle of days. As each day passes away, a portion of you vanishes away!"

Abu `Ali ad-Daqqaq used to chant the following lines:

"Each day that passes, a portion of me it takes away,
On the heart, a bitter taste it leaves, and then glides away."

Another poet says:

"Man rejoices as long as the nights continue to pass by,
Yet, he too, as they vanish gradually perishes away. "

Yet another poet says:

"We take delight in every day that we have lived,
Yet each day that passes is a portion (gone) of a lifetime."

This is the view that every intelligent and sensible person ought to take. However, intelligent and sensible people are few in this world.

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