

PRINCIPLES OF SELF DEVELOPMENT IN ISLAM (PART 1 OF 3)

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Description: Islam's perspective on self development. Part 1: Inspiration from divine guidance nurtures human development.

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Development carries the notion of enhancement of one's capabilities and potentials. It implies a forward movement from a given position to a position of greater achievement, opportunity and benefit. In order to develop, individually or collectively, it is necessary to define the goals one wishes to achieve, factors that influence development, and the process of achieving the desired goals for development. Each human being is born with some basic faculties. How these faculties are molded depends on inherent capacities, nurturing environment and other external influences.



Islam places a great deal of emphasis on 'self-development' where an individual takes the responsibility for understanding the purpose of human life, and for shaping that life in the best possible manner, for one's own benefit and the benefit of the society at large; Islam also provides comprehensive guidance to achieve this goal.

Human development consists of processes of growth and change that takes place from birth to the end of life. The development process is externally influenced from sensory inputs through the organs, and it is internally self-propelled from things which happen within the human body and mind. Our focus here is the development of the human mind, which takes place through sensory inputs and internal mental processes. This development includes learning through the senses and cognition that occurs when learning is abstracted into knowledge for subsequent use.

Islam identifies two sources which play the roles of nurturing or corrupting human development. Inspiration from divine guidance nurtures human development. Not paying attention to divine guidance and succumbing to conspiracies, arising from within or externally from one's environment, corrupts human development.

Human development may be looked at from different perspectives, both as a basic human interest and as formalized disciplines of studies such as psychology, science,

philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and so on. Contemporary studies on human development often engage in analysis and remedies when human development is impeded due to temperament, problems with identification or one's identity, parenting, society, chance, and other factors. Here, we will focus primarily on basic principles of human development-aiming at covering the factors that may impede proper development. Keeping in mind that people have varying human capacities, what should be done in order to ensure that they all develop into the best possible capabilities for achieving the desired goals? While there are many factors that are essential for human development, we will first highlight those that may be more fundamental. The foremost factors playing a seminal role are those of being aware of self, being ever mindful of doing the right thing, and to avoid acting on mere impulses.

How does one bring these factors into play? It is through a process called identification or 'constructing an identity' (i.e. finding principles that help develop the best possible human potential, and role models that vivify those principles). It may be viewed as an anchoring process which gives us a sense of belonging to something distinct and valuable. Rather than simply and haphazardly adopting the practices we notice around us, it may often be easier to look at a good role model and then simply emulate that person. However, finding good role models in our contemporary living environment may not be easy and at times confusing, particularly if these so-called role models are going through life changes themselves and the consequences of following their life style may only become known much later. Furthermore, one role model, no matter how good, may not be able to exemplify everything in life. Even if that were to be true, the principles that the role model exemplifies may not be obvious. Principles can only be derived through repeated observations and experimentation. History helps us here. We can look at several role models from history and we can look at lessons drawn from the history of civilizations. Coming back now to identification, the single most important factor in human development, we need to identify with some infallible source of guidance, the unquestionable principles for human development, and carefully select some role models. Most will accept God as the infallible source of guidance, the knowledge that God sent down to us on the good and bad in human civilization, and the Prophets who acted as role models for achieving excellence in human potential. Being mindful of God, therefore, gives one an identification of what is best for developing human potential. It prevents alienation. One can always find solace in the presence of God; literally converse with God in prosperity and adversity, keeping one's personality in harmonious balance, avoiding excesses on oneself or others in prosperity, and avoiding harm from stress in adversity. The other important factors that may emerge from this process of identification are being truthful and upright, and seeking individual and collective well being in our affairs. In order to achieve these goals, the quest for knowledge that exists and participation in deriving new knowledge from what exists are essential pre-requisites.

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