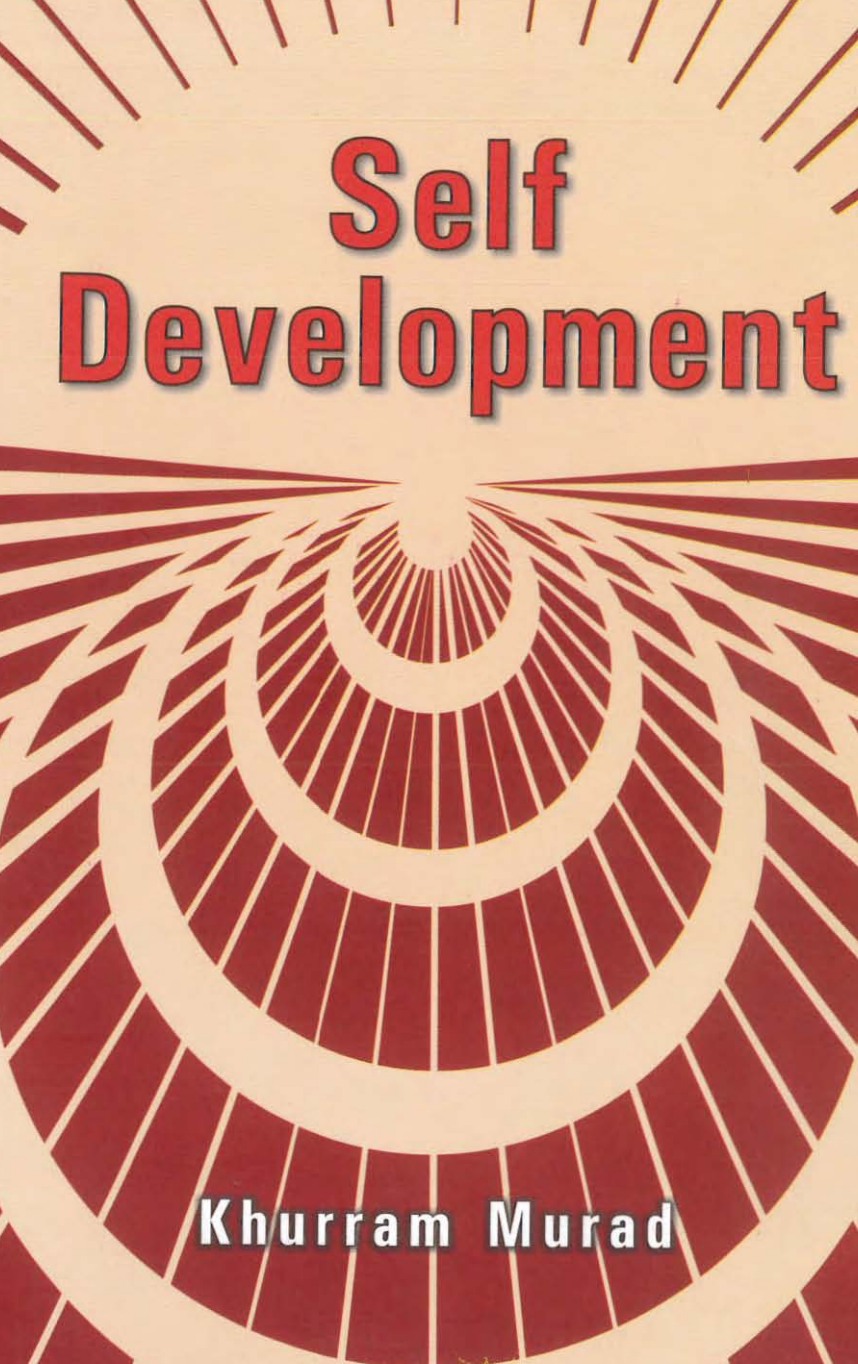
Self Development



Khurram Murad

INTENTION AND ACTION ARE ESSENTIAL

Self-development is necessary to gain success in both the worlds. One cannot enter Paradise without undergoing self-purification and self-development. Self-development is indeed the natural way to gain entry into Paradise, and perfectly practicable. However,

we must be mindful that we are fully responsible for our self-development. We should resolve to do what we intend and do everything in this regard. Without this there cannot be any self-development.

The first and foremost condition is one's intention and action. Allah looks for these and He has promised reward for them. There is no substitute for lack of intention, and if one fails to supply this, it cannot be compensated in any way. Nothing can replace one's intention and action. No one can do this work on another's behalf. For every individual is obliged in his personal capacity to attain self-development. If he does not practise what he learns or is not prepared to learn anything, no training can help him. His faith and good action alone can win Allah's forgiveness and mercy which will, in turn, admit him to Paradise. This constitutes the fundamental principle of self-development. It is self-evident and clear. Notwithstanding its manifest nature, it is regrettably ignored. It is clouded by wishful thinking and false pretexts. While disregarding this fundamental principle, one looks for false supports, which are illusory.

Law of retribution

On reflection one realizes that the fundamental principle related to self-development is in line with the purpose of our creation. It is the essence of the test to which we are put. Indeed, it is its essential precondition. We have been put to the test to see whether we do good deeds. We are therefore fully responsible for our actions.

As a matter of fact, man enjoys total authority over only his own action. This facilitates greatly the work of self-development.

For it is within our power to take any action. However, by the same token, we will be rewarded only on the basis of what we do. We entitle ourselves to Allah's mercy and forgiveness and entry into Paradise by dint of only our actions. Had we not been granted this authority over our actions, the test to which we are put would be devoid of meaning. As it is, no other can offer prayers on our behalf; no other can fast for us. Likewise, we cannot fulfill promises or serve fellow human beings, or strive for good on someone else's behalf. We cannot deserve reward or punishment for an action not performed by us. If someone compels us into committing a sin, while we are not inclined towards it, we will not face any punishment on this count. This applies even to uttering blasphemy under coercion, if one is firmly persuaded of faith. By the same token, if someone compels us into doing good, we are not entitled to any reward for it. No one can undergo self-development in our place in that it is our own obligation. If we do not make any effort for self-development, someone else's teachings cannot benefit us. Any effort for self-development from without may be likened to raining upon rocks. Needless to add, every river draws upon rainfall in proportion to its capacity while rainfall usually washes away from rocks. Allah lays down this fundamental principle thus: 'Man is rewarded for that good which he has earned, and he is punished for the evil which he has earned.' (al-Baqarah 2:286) This fundamental principle is elaborated elsewhere in the Qur'ān, with the affirmation that this eternal principle features in all the Scriptures: 'Or is he not informed of what is in the Scripture of Mūsā, and of Ibrāhīm, who fulfilled all that Allah ordered him to do: that no person burdened shall bear the burden of another. And that man can have nothing but what he does, good or bad. And that his deeds will be seen. Then

he will be recompensed with a full and best recompense.' (al-Najm 53:36-41) Admission to Paradise is accordingly contingent upon one's success in the test and one's effort and striving. It leaves no doubt whatever that there may be a way other than that of action for winning Paradise; there is not.

The Qur'ān repeatedly affirms that Paradise is the reward for one's actions, especially of the pious ones. It is for those who embrace faith and do good deeds. Man is exhorted to race towards Paradise. It should be the driving force and everyone should try to excel others. This message permeates the Qur'ān. One thus realizes that wishful thinking, attending lectures, joining the company of the righteous, or the favour done by any spiritual authority cannot take one to Paradise. Without one's own intention and action to that end, one cannot enter Paradise.

Nothing else will serve the purpose

It is an error to think that one can attain self-development without any effort or action. Mere study of books, or joining of study circles cannot substitute for one's own effort, nor can listening to moving speeches or participating in a training programme. The same holds for the ministrations of some spiritual master – his favours cannot rescue one unless one is committed and takes appropriate actions. The spiritual master cannot get anything for another than himself. Were Paradise attainable without one's own intention and action, the entire argument of test and trial would be meaningless. If the individual does not make up his own mind or take any action for his self-development, then even the Prophet's company and teachings cannot bring success for him. He will

still persist in error if he himself does not want to change. The Messengers were not granted such authority over others. The Qur'ān makes it plain: 'O Messenger! You cannot guide him whom you like.' (al-Qaṣaṣ 28:56) The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) was not granted any such authority. Nor was he entrusted with the job of forcing people, without their consent, to the way of guidance. People tainted with unbelief and hypocrisy joined the Prophet's sittings and left with the same impurities: 'They visit with unbelief and returned in the same condition.' (al-Mā'idah 5:61)

Satan's authority

If one is not inclined towards evil, Satan cannot force him to commit evil. Let us accept that Satan constantly accompanies man; he is so to speak, in man's bloodstream. He lies in ambush for man in unexpected places, constantly on the prowl. Yet he cannot compel man into doing evil. He is not granted any such authority. He cannot supersede man's authority over his action. Rather, on the Day of Judgement, he will declare: 'I had no authority over you except that I called you and you responded to me. So blame me not, but blame yourselves.' (Ibrāhīm 14:22).

Allah's help and support

Man cannot do anything without Allah's help and support. However, we must understand that divine help can rescue man only when he displays commitment and does good deeds, on his

way to Paradise. The Qur'ān declares this truth unequivocally, as is evident from the following passages: 'Allah guides to Himself whoever turns to Him.' (al-Shūrā 42:13). 'And whoever repents and does good deeds; then verily, he repents towards Allah with true repentance.' (al-Furqān 25:71); 'And verily I am indeed forgiving to him who repents, believes and does good deeds, and then remains constant in doing them.' (Ṭā Hā 20:82); 'Remember Me, I will remember you.' (al-Baqarah 2:152); 'Fulfill your covenant with Me, I will fulfill My covenant with you.' (al-Baqarah 2:40); 'If you are grateful, I will grant you more.' (Ibrāhīm 14:7)

If the person has the commitment and good deeds to his credit, he is promised glad tidings. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) pointed out that as one performs his obligations, it pleases Allah. When he does such deeds which are not obligatory yet are pleasing to Him, his sight, hearing and limbs act in accordance with Allah's will. Man is obliged to perform his religious duties. If he fails to do so, he cannot get what he is promised.

In another *ḥadīth* he says: 'Whoever approaches Allah a little, He advances towards him. Whoever walks to Allah, He hastens towards him.' (Muslim) This indicates Allah's immense mercy for man's self-development and guiding him to Paradise. Nonetheless, His mercy is reserved for him who approaches Him and takes some steps in this direction. As to him who is indifferent and careless, and fails to take any action, he cannot obviously draw upon His abundant mercy. The condition is that one should have the commitment and make the effort. Allah has promised to give generously.

Intention suffices

Let the misunderstanding be removed altogether that one can attain anything without intention and action. Let it also be realized that Allah does not look for perfection in man's actions. Man is not obliged to gain success in his efforts. For man does not exercise any such authority. He is expected only to strive to the extent it is possible for him. All reward is promised for his striving: 'And whoever desires the Hereafter and strives for it, with the necessary efforts due for it, while he is a believer, then such are the ones whose striving shall be favoured.' (al-Isrā' 17:19)

Contained in the above passage are many Qur'ānic teachings. It strikes at the root of the obstructions in the way of self-development. For a person is, at times, overcome by despondency that his efforts will not be accepted by Allah or that he falls too far short of the expected standards. At other times, he feels that his action is devoid of the requisite state of the heart. His prayer lacks concentration and attention; he does not cry while praying. Sometimes he is distraught over the absence of the desired results. Notwithstanding his offering prayers, he cannot give up obscene and forbidden things. He fasts yet is unable to attain piety. He is full of despair over his inability to attain success. Despite his best efforts for making the call, striving and sacrifices in the cause, his call is not welcomed by people. Faith is no longer ascendant and the Islamic state is not in place. He is demoralized further by weaknesses in his resolve. Notwithstanding all efforts for self-control he is filled with despair and despondency. However, we must remember well that none of the failings and

imperfections mentioned is a necessary condition for one's exclusion from Paradise. This realization can help one overcome despair, and save him from such despondency that he may give up his resolve and effort for self-development.

Intention

We have spoken frequently of intention in this context. It features also in the Qur'ān. One has full control over one's intention. It is one of the prerequisites for self-development, and is its basic ground and strength. However, we must make it clear that intention is not to be confused with wishing. This is a very common misperception. People are found saying: 'I do want to get up at *Fajr* time to offer the prayers but I just cannot get up.' This wishing to get up is not synonymous with the intention to get up. Think if one has to catch a plane in the early hours or has an important appointment that promises one some good – one is sure to get up early. One will make every effort to get up in time. This is an illustration of how we execute our intention for an ordinary commitment. The same care and attention should be exercised in regard to all the requisites of faith and self-development.

One's intention takes into account the value and importance of what is sought. One's level of devotion to that thing is also a deciding factor. Therefore it is a conscious step, reflecting one's resolve. In verse 20 of *al-Shūrā* the Qur'ān employs the term 'intention' in this sense, when it speaks of someone's intention for seeking Allah's pleasure or reward in the Hereafter.

The person may weaken in his intention. His resolve may be broken altogether; or he may work contrary to what he originally intended, or just forget. Nevertheless, on the whole, the first step in the pursuit of Allah's pleasure, the Hereafter, Paradise and self-development, is one's intention. It is needed for everything that one needs to do in the cause of faith and self-development. After regret for any failure and conscious return, the intention may be instantly taken up again. In the absence of intention even a major, sustained effort to train oneself may not be fruitful. Conversely, if one has the intention, a little guidance may yield rich dividends. Even if there is no proper training, sermon, exhortation and study, intention by itself serves as a most effective teacher and guardian. For it guides one to the straight way, helps one pursue it steadily and dissuades one from taking a false path.

Single-minded devotion is needed for intention. We cannot serve God and Mammon at the same time. We cannot set our eyes on both the worlds simultaneously. One who sails on two boats can never reach his destination. A weak intention will result only in failure and demoralization. We may gain firmness of intention, if we are persuaded of the immense value of the objective – Allah, Paradise – and self-development as the means for it. The more committed we are to this goal, the firmer our intention will be. Obviously, our commitment will be strong in proportion to our devotion to Allah and Paradise. It is therefore repeatedly emphasized that we should love Allah and His Messenger and struggle in His cause more than any other thing. This explains also the vivid portrayal of the bounties of Paradise in the Qur'ān. They are projected as a living reality in order to inspire us.

Let us reiterate the point that the development and growth of one's deeds and character can be attained only gradually. It is a time-consuming process. One can instantly make up one's mind to do it. However, by the same token, one can break one's intention in no time as well. This should not, however, be an excuse to become demoralized. For one can easily and instantly resume one's intention.

Striving

If the individual has the intention, it inevitably results in his taking some action. If he cannot achieve much, he should, at least, show his readiness to move forward, his keen desire and his turning his attention to his goal. Even if he seems unable to proceed further, he should, at least, have a keen desire to do so. His eyes should be firmly fixed on the goal and he should be fired by the intense desire to approach his goal. And whenever it is possible and feasible, he should take practical steps and move forward. The Qur'ān provides a graphic picture of man's striving in the following passages: 'I have turned my face towards Him, Who has created the heavens and the earth.' (al-An'ām 6:79); 'My Prayer, my sacrifice, my living, and my dying are for Allah, the Lord of the worlds.' (al-An'ām 6:162); 'When his Lord said to him, "Submit", he said, "I have submitted myself to the Lord of the universe".' (al-Baqarah 2:131); 'Hasten earnestly to the remembrance of Allah and leave off business.' (al-Jumu'ah 62:9)

Remember that one's efforts greatly facilitate the attainment of the goal. A spiritual figure told someone in a dream to put into his mouth whatever he sees first on waking up. As the man

set out, the first thing he saw was a mountain. He gave up, thinking that a mountain could not be put into the mouth. The spiritual figure appeared again and asked him to proceed nonetheless. The man climbed the mountain and at the top he came across a piece of a sweet, and put that in his mouth. Everything that we regard as demanding and strenuous regarding religious duties and the requisites of self-development, may be likened to the mountain in this parable.

The same lesson may be drawn from the incident recounted by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) about someone who had killed ninety-nine people. He approached a pious person to ask him whether there was a way to repent. The pious person declared that there was no way whatever. In a fit of anger the man killed that pious person as well. Then he approached a scholar and put the same question to him. The scholar affirmed that the man could still repent, but told him that he should leave that town and move to another town inhabited by pious persons. The man duly repented and started moving towards the other town. He died on the way. This led to an argument between the angels of mercy and punishment, both of whom claimed him. The matter was resolved by another angel, who suggested that the distance be measured to determine whether he was closer to the town of pious people, in which case the angel of mercy could take him, or the opposite, in which case the angel of punishment had his claim on him. He was found to have been closer to the town of the pious people, and was accordingly taken by the angel of mercy. A whole volume could be written on the lessons implicit in this story. Yet its message is loud and clear: if one's intention is sincere and strong and he makes the effort to do something, he is helped by Allah's mercy, enabling him to reach his destination.

Final word: We must make it plain that self-development is possible only through one's intention and effort. If we have the commitment, every piece of training will prove fruitful, as we will be reinforced by Allah's mercy. But if an individual does not provide for his self-development, no one can provide it for him. We should therefore resolve to proceed further on the way. Sincere resolve constitutes the first and also the last step.



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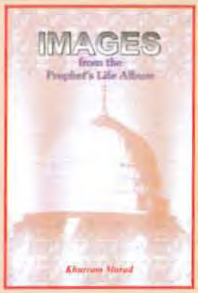
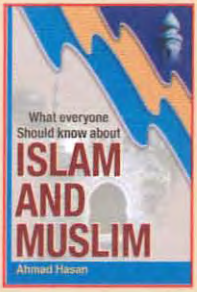
(1932-1996)

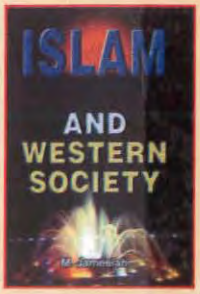
The Author of this book, Former Director General of the Islamic Foundation, UK (1978-86), he studied civil engineering at the Universities of Karachi and Minnesota, USA, and worked as a leading consulting engineer at Karachi, Dhaka, Tehran and Riyadh.

He was actively involved in the Islamic movement since 1948. He was President, Islami Jamiat Talaba, Pakistan (1951-52); a member of the Central Executive, Jama'at Islami, Pakistan (1963-96) and Amir of its Dhaka(1963-71) and Lahore (1987-89) branches. He became Na'ib Amir of Jama'at Islami, Pakistan in 1988 and retained the position till his death in December 1996. In July 1991, he became editor of the monthly journal, Tarjuman-ul-Quran and until his death strove to make it a platform for reflections on the thought and dynamics of the Islamic movement.









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