

# JOURNEY TO THE UNSEEN WORLD

FUNDAMENTALS OF ISLAM

LEVEL 4

## LESSON 1: THE SOUL

### Objectives >>>

#### Students should:

- Understand and be reminded of the nature of the soul and that it exists
- Understand some of the proofs for the existence of the soul
- Learn about the different stages the self goes through in its development
- Learn more about the trials of death (the pangs of death) and the trials of the grave.
- Understand the idea that we need to be conscious of what we take with us on the journey after death
- Realise the importance of observance (al-Muraqabah) and the methods with which this can be done
- Understand that observance should always be coupled with consequences or conditions on the self or action (mu'ataba)
- That observance must lead to supervision which is ensuring that we protect our good actions till the Day of Judgement
- Understand the characteristics of Barzakh
- Understand the importance of supervising our actions

In this lesson we shall begin to discuss the last of the five fundamental beliefs of Islam: the **Resurrection (al-Ma'ād)**. We would have no access to the details of this knowledge were it not for the Qur'ān and the Holy Prophet (saw). While some of the general concepts can be proven by the intellect, the details must be obtained through the scripture. In Islam, unlike in other faiths, the emphasis on Resurrection in Islam is so great that over 25% or 1640 ayāt<sup>i</sup> of the Qur'ān refer to this. It is a fundamental part of the belief in the Unity of God<sup>ii</sup>, the selection of prophets<sup>iii</sup>, self-purification<sup>iv</sup>, staying on the right path<sup>v</sup>, piety, worshipping, peace of mind, bravery, justice etc. A denial of this fact can lead mankind to social and economic crimes<sup>vi</sup>, a sinful life<sup>vii</sup>, immoral behaviour etc.

Before discussing any of the above topics in more detail, it is important that we acknowledge that Allah, the Most Wise, has created us with a body (the physical existence) and a soul (the spiritual existence). We have to understand our soul as this is what will lead us to understanding Allah. We also believe that some of our journey in the afterlife is carried out through the soul (Barzakh). The soul will then be reunited with the body during resurrection. Imam 'Ali (as) says:

### Memorisation Task

من عرف نفسه عرف ربه

*“One who attains inner knowledge of his soul attains inner knowledge of his Lord”<sup>viii</sup>*

## **WHAT IS THE SOUL AND HOW DO WE KNOW IT EXISTS?**

The soul makes 'me' me, such that if we were to think of ourselves without distraction, that would be the soul.

A further proof of the existence of the soul is the mere fact that the body we have is like a vessel in which our soul is housed. This can be explained in one of many ways:

1. Scientifically we know that the physical body we have now is not what we had or will have in the future because most of the cells in our body are constantly dying and regenerating (every 7-9 years). Despite this, we can still identify ourselves as 'me'!
2. Similarly, when we refer to our limbs we say "my arm" or "my leg" and even though they are part of the body they are not 'me'. Instinctively we know that our body parts in themselves do not have an identity of their own<sup>ix</sup>. Just in the same way we refer to the 'body' of a deceased because we instinctively know that upon death, the soul is separated from the body and therefore we cannot refer to the dead body as a person!
3. Other phenomenon such as real dreams, near death experiences, and interactions between soul-mates further highlight this instinctive proof of the soul.

### **SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT**

Just as we grow physically through our life and become bigger and more mature over time, we are also supposed to develop spiritually. Our spiritual development is even more important than our physical development. The soul goes through a number of stages in order to develop and reach its perfection.

According to our belief, the soul has three degrees from the most base to the most perfect

#### **1. The Evil-Commanding Soul (al nafsul al ammārah)**

This is often referred to as the desire. It is the soul that commands one to sin. It is the inner Satan that prompts man to perform evil. Imam 'Ali (as) says:

*"the carnal, seducing soul flatters as a hypocrite flatters, and simulates the characteristics of an agreeing friend and as soon as it tricks and overcomes man, it overpowers him as an enemy overpowers, and controls him like a controlling tyrant and hence drives man towards his ruin"<sup>x</sup>*

This soul is therefore characterised by:

- A flattering character- Always putting self before others, above others (ego)
- Invites to sin at every opportunity
- Makes one have long-reaching drawn-out hopes for this world- and leads to procrastination
- When a difficulty is encountered it causes one to complain and freak out
- When ease and blessings are encountered it causes one to be mean, stingy and greedy<sup>xi</sup>
- Finally it stops one from repenting or listening to the 'blaming soul'

#### **2. The blaming soul (al nafsul al lawwāmāh)**

The reproaching (blaming) soul- often called the conscience; it is the soul that is the court that is constantly judging. It makes us regret our actions and makes us feel guilty and when it is overpowered makes us uncomfortable. This is the soul that helps us reach the most perfect station as it keep us 'uncomfortable' when we commit a sin and 'at peace' when we do good actions.

#### **3. The tranquil soul (al nafsul al muṭma'innah)**

Once the struggle between the above two facets of our soul is over and the 'good guy wins' the soul becomes at rest. The ultimate reward for having achieved this is that Allah accommodates the person in paradise! Allah says in the holy Qur'ān:

*"O soul that art at rest! Return to your Lord, well-pleased (with him), well-pleasing (Him), So enter among My servants, And enter into My garden."* (89:27-30)

There are two major qualities this soul possesses:

- Raḍīyah- Completely satisfied with the will of Allah. Therefore never complaining, content with the will of God.
- Marḍīyah: Allah is pleased with this soul

## HOW DO WE TAME OUR COMMANDING SOUL?

Before we begin this section, it has to be noted that the aim of a Muslim is not to kill his desires but to control or tame them, so that instead of the desires controlling the person, the person controls their desires. For example, instead of my desire telling me what and when to eat, I tell it when and what to eat. Imam 'Ali (as) says:

*“Rule your souls by continuously struggling with them.”<sup>xii</sup>*

As alluded to earlier, the most effective way of taming the soul is to struggle with oneself (or in other words-the commanding soul). This struggle (or Jihād) is considered the greatest struggle of all.

Allah tells us in the Holy Qur'ān:

*“And the soul and Him Who made it perfect, Then He inspired it to understand what is right and wrong for it; He will indeed be successful who purifies it, And he will indeed fail who corrupts it.” (91:7-10)*

*Imam 'Ali (as) says, “One who does not refine his soul will be disgraced by bad habits”<sup>xiii</sup>.*

Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (a) said in regards to a particularly difficult battle fought during the life of the Prophet:

*“The Prophet (saw) of God dispatched a contingent of the army (to the battlefield). Upon their (successful) return, he (s) said: ‘Blessed are those who have performed the minor jihād and have yet to perform the major jihād.’ When asked, ‘What is the major jihād?’ the Prophet (saw) replied: ‘The jihād of the self (struggle against self)’<sup>xiv</sup>*

This struggle is considered as the major struggle (*al-jihād al-akbar*) as it is much more difficult than fighting in the battlefield, for in the struggle against the self, one has to constantly battle enemies that are hosted inside his own existence and this struggle lasts a life time. It is for this reason that it was only when Imam 'Ali was struck with a fatal blow that he declared victory in this world! The one who succeeds in this struggle can rise above and beyond the level of angels, and one who fails in this struggle will descend to a level lower than the level of animals, and may even be grouped among the legions of the devil.

## Review Questions

**Q1. 'al nafasul al ammārah' is:**

- Our desire
- Our conscience
- Our tranquil soul

**Q2. The greatest struggle in the life of a human is:**

- Fighting in a war
- Fighting a disease
- Fighting against the desires of his self

**Q3. Imam 'Ali (as) says that we should tame or rule ourselves by:**

- Listening to our self (our desire)
- Killing all our desires
- Constantly struggling with our self (our desire)

## LESSON 2: DEATH

Death is an inescapable reality. Regardless of whether we are believers or not, each of us accepts death as a fact of our existence. Since it is inescapable, we begin to ask questions. What is death? What does Islam say about death? Is it destruction, annihilation, and non-existence or is it a change, a development and a shifting from one world to another? In this lesson, we will have an understanding of our main beliefs about death and the importance of preparing ourselves for this journey.

### WHAT IS DEATH?

Death, in essence, is the separation of the soul from the body. Death occurs when the soul leaves the body. The body dies and remains in this material world and decomposes, while the soul moves on to the next stage of its existence.

Therefore, death is not 'anti-life', rather just like life, 'death' is something which is created. Allah, the Exalted says in the Qur'ān:

*“Blessed be He... who has created death and life, so that He might test you which of you is most righteous in action” (67:1-2)*

Death is a continuation of the life of the soul, a transition from one abode, this temporary world, to an eternal life. As Imam Ḥasan (as) had said:

*“(Death is) the greatest happiness which comes to the believers, when they migrate from the house of misery to the eternal bliss; and (it is) the greatest disaster which befalls the unbelievers, when they go from their paradise (i.e. this world) to the Fire which will never be extinguished and will never burn itself out”<sup>xv</sup>*

## REASONS FOR DEATH

There are many reasons why death was made a must for every living creature, whether it is plants, animals or even human beings.

- One of the basic rules of creation is that it is not possible for life in the physical world to continue forever. This is because, for one creature to live, another must die. For example, for a lion to live a gazelle must die or for a goat to live it must eat grass and so on.

However, when it comes to human beings, there is a lot more importance given because there is more meaning and knowledge behind death.

- Death is a movement from one world to another, a world in which we are judged and rewarded for our choices.
- Human beings were not created to live in this world forever, we came here only to learn and death in one way is like our graduation from school.

## STAGES OF DEATH

Each stage of death is a reflection of our actions and belief.

For the believer, when the Angel of death arrives, he tells him not to worry:

*“By Allah, I am kinder to you than your father. Now, open your eyes and look.”*

Then his spiritual eyes are opened and he sees (in his vision) the faces of the Messenger of Allah (s) and the Imams and is given the good tidings that he would be their companion. He then hears a call:

*“O thou tranquil soul, return to Your Lord, well pleased, well pleasing (to Him): enter You amongst My servants, and enter My paradise.” (89:27-30)*

## THE STUPOR OF DEATH (SAKRATUL MAWT)

*“And the stupor of death will come in truth; that is what you were trying to escape.” (Qur’an: 50:19)*

This is the stage of Sakratul Mawt and is extremely difficult for the soul. This refers to the last moments of life, when death is about to befall man. This is the most critical time as our faith will be put to the test.

Every night, Imam ‘Ali (as) would cry out to the people of Kufah three times:

*“Prepare yourselves, for you have been called to depart, and one cannot return to this life once they have been called to depart and take the provision of piety as your transport”<sup>xvi</sup>*

## REMEMBRANCE OF DEATH

We will learn in later lessons that whatever happens to us after our death is a direct result of what we did in this world. Whatever happiness or suffering our soul will experience in its next life is a consequence of what we do here. Therefore, it becomes imperative that we constantly remember death. Through remembering that this may occur at any moment we begin to be more aware of our actions. Imam ‘Ali (as) says to his son Imam al-Hasan (as):

*“Enliven your heart by preaching...make it humble by remembering death, make it believe in mortality...recall what befell those who came before you...You will find that they departed and lodged in a lonely house...”<sup>xvii</sup>*

We should we remember the mysteries and suddenness of death:

1. Location: *“...and no one knows in what land he shall die; surely Allah is Knowing, Aware...” (31:34)*
2. Time: *“What! do the people of the towns then feel secure from Our punishment coming to them by night while they sleep? What! do the people of the towns feel secure from Our punishment coming to them in the morning while they play?” (7:97-98)*
3. State: *“...therefore die not unless you are Muslims” (2:132)*

## OBSERVANCE OF OUR ACTIONS

When we remember death, we will become more aware of the importance of our actions, and that we need to improve ourselves as soon as possible, because death can come at any moment.

A lot of us observe our actions, but only for a little period of time, then we forget about it and go back to our old ways. What we have to remember is that it is not how we were three years ago that matters, it is where we are when we die. So if we were very pious a few years ago, but now have lost our faith, we will be coming to Allah (SWT) as a disbeliever, not the way we were three or four years ago. So we must ensure that we are keeping up our good deeds regularly. This can happen when we remember that death is not a stranger that will come knocking at our doors when we are 90. It is a reality that can happen at any time! If you go to the cemetery you can see how many young people have died unexpectedly.

There was once a man who after hearing the message of the Prophet (saw) began to accept the religion, however the fact that Islam forbade the drinking of alcohol bothered him. So he said to himself that he will remain drinking alcohol for another year and then he will believe in Islam. He died before that year and met his Lord as a disbeliever and a drinker of wine. We must make sure that since death may come at any time, we are in such a state that we are greeted pleasantly by the angel of death when he collects our souls.

## STEPS OF OBSERVANCE AND ACCOUNTING

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَلْتَنْظُرْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ  
 ۖ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ {18} وَلَا  
 تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ نَسُوا اللَّهَ فَأَنْسَاهُمْ أَنفُسَهُمْ ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ  
 الْفَاسِقُونَ {19}

*“O you who believe! be careful of (your duty to) Allah, and let every soul consider what it has sent on for the morrow, and be careful of (your duty to) Allah; surely Allah is Aware of what you do. And be not like those who became oblivious of Allah, so He made them oblivious of their own souls: these it is that are the transgressors.” (59:18-19)*

Imagine you are a student in class and each term your teacher comes to check that you have completed all the tasks that they have set for you throughout the term. If you have carefully kept an account of all of the tasks given, those completed and those not completed, then when your teacher announces that she wants to check if

you have kept your work up to date, you wouldn't have anything to worry about. On the other hand, the student who has not kept his work up to date, will panic when the teacher comes around to check everyone's work. Death is like this, because it can come at any time.

This is the same for our deeds and actions. From the age of responsibility until our death all of our actions are being taken into account. After twenty or thirty years, we don't remember everything that we have done, so we may have lost count of our sins. We have to be very careful about this.

The Prophet (saw) says in his will to his close companion Abu Dhar:

*“Oh Abu Dhar no one can be from the pious people unless he keeps an account of his actions, what you have done, eaten and said today.”*

Imam Musa Al-Kāḍim (as) said:

*“One who does not examine and evaluate himself every day is not one of us. (A person who examines himself), if he does a good deed, he beseeches God to increase him (in virtues) and if he has perpetrated a vice, he seeks God's forgiveness for it and is penitent before Him.” xviii*

The Imam is reminding us of the etiquette of a follower of the Ahlul Bayt (as). When he is taking account of his actions, he does not get overjoyed over his actions, rather he asks Allah (SWT) to bless him with more.

## Review Questions

### Q1. Death is:

- Annihilation
- Anti-life
- The beginning of another life

### Q2. Which of the following is true?

- We should start preparing for death when we are old or ill
- We should expect death at any time
- We should not worry about death at a young age and get depressed

### Q3. Death is:

- Something unnatural and strange
- A natural part of the world we live in
- Neither of the above

## LESSON 3: BARZAKH

By now we should already be familiar with some of main concepts of death. To begin this lesson, we will go through some of the points from the previous lesson, which shall briefly be followed by a short discussion on Barzakh, its philosophy and some of its characteristics, and we will then conclude the lesson with a discussion on one of the most effective and practical methods to prepare for it.

### REVISION

The dissociation between the body and the soul is called death. As soon as we die, the soul enters the stage of Barzakh which literally means a 'barrier' between two things. In other words it means that Allah (SWT) has placed a curtain or an intermediary stage between this world and the Hereafter.

Barzakh is followed by the day of resurrection. Everyone who has died so far, good or evil, old or young is currently in Barzakh. They are either enjoying a taste of paradise or suffering temporary punishment, and all of them are 'waiting' for the day of judgement.

In previous years, we have discussed the characteristics of the life in Barzakh, including:

- The pressure of the grave, which is a special punishment for specific sins
- Being able to hear the people still alive in this world without being able to reply
- Being questioned about our actions
- Being able to visit loved ones in this world

### CHARACTERISTICS OF BARZAKH

#### QUESTIONS

Questioning in the world of Barzakh is for those who purely believe in God as well as those who purely disbelieve in Him. The rest will be questioned in the Hereafter. People will be asked about their Creator, Prophet, Imam, religion, Scripture, life, youth, and wealth.

Imam Sadiq (a.s): "A deceased will be asked in his grave about five things: His Salaat, his Zakaat, his Hajj, his fasting, and his love and obedience to Ahlul-Bayt. Then the Welaya says to the other four from the side of the grave: Whatever you are short of I will complete it (for him)."<sup>xix</sup>

When man is buried in the grave, two angels will confront him/her asking the dead person about his/her belief and all what s/he has done. It should be noted that, grave, in this terminology does not merely mean a pit in which a dead body is buried. Grave in Islamic literature is another expression for Barzakh. Imam Sadiq (a.s) said:

*"The Barzakh is 'grave' and it is the reward or punishment between this world and the Hereafter."*

Also, questions and answers are not a matter of the tongue. We will be questioned of the reality of our belief and the answers come from the inner voice. In other words, a mere knowledge will be of no use, if it is not combined with belief and action.

### PRESSURE OF THE GRAVE

This is a type of punishment which varies for different people. It means the soul of a dead person will be under a type of pressure as a means of torturing to cleanse the soul. According to a Prophetic saying maltreatment of the family as well as abusing the blessing of God will result in the pressure of grave. Also, it is quoted from the Prophet (saw) that consistently performing good actions will make man free from the pressure of the grave. Thus, the pressure of grave does not include all the dead.

### VISITATION OF THE SOULS AND BENEFITING FROM THE LIVING ONES

Depending on the status of the souls, they may be able to visit their families. If it is the soul of a believer, s/he will be shown only the good actions of his or her family, whereas, a soul of a non-believer will be shown the bad actions of his or her family. This is another type of reward or punishment in Barzakh.

It is narrated from the Holy Prophet (saw) that the departed souls visit their homes every Friday and call out:

*"O people of my house! May Allah bless you! Have mercy on us! Whatever we have done in this world, we are facing its consequences now while the fruits of our hard work (in the world) are being enjoyed by others. Favour us by giving on our behalf a dirham, or bread, or clothes (to the needy), so that Allah may reward you with heavenly attire".*

It is very important that we should not forget our dead, for they have no power to perform good deed, and they totally rely on their children, brothers and relatives. They eagerly await the favours. Particularly pray for them in the Midnight prayers and after every prayer and never forget to pray for your parents.

## HEARING WITHOUT REPLY

The dead during their status in Barzakh can hear when we communicate with them although they are unable to respond, or we cannot hear their response. Several cases of the prophets and Imams talking to the dead have been recorded. Two such cases are briefly given below:

After the battle of Badr, the Prophet of Islam (saw) addressed the dead soldiers from the troops of Quraysh and spoke to them. Similarly, Imam 'Ali (as) sat down next to the corpse of Ka'b ibn Sāra and Ṭalḥa after the battle of Camel and said to him:

*"Surely, I found the promise of my Lord to be true, so did you find the promise of your Lord true too?"*

## WHY DO WE NEED TO SUPERVISE OURSELVES?

Supervision means that a person is constantly attentive to Allah (SWT) and believes that He is watching over him. As a result only those things that please Him are allowed into the soul and those things that result in His displeasure are dispelled. Sight, hearing, taste, smell and thoughts which are all considered windows that lead to the soul are carefully guarded and opened or closed at the person's will. The driving force behind this supervision is the belief that Allah (SWT) who is the most important observer is watching and recording every action and thought.

Such people 'see' Allah and He sees them, they cannot but obey Him. Prophet Yusuf paid no attention to Zulaykha when she tried to seduce him because he saw Allah (SWT) with the eyes of his heart.

To remind us that He is watching and that there is never 'privacy' for us, Allah (SWT) says in the Qur'ān:

### Memorisation Task:

مَا يَلْفِظُ مِنْ قَوْلٍ إِلَّا لَدَيْهِ رَقِيبٌ عَتِيدٌ

*"He utters not a word but there is by him a watcher at hand."*  
(50:18)

Imam 'Ali (as) says:

*"Know that for you there are some spies from your own organs. Every breath of yours is recorded. The darkness of the night does not hinder them. No matter how many locks you have placed, there is no security against them"*

The short stories below will help to understand that none of our actions pass unless they are recorded:

A man once was visited by a deceased relative in his dream pleading to him to act kindly (on his behalf) towards those who worked for him. On inquiring as to why the sudden and urgent need, the deceased said that he had he been very harsh with those working under him during his life and that he is now experiencing unbearable noise in the grave for which relief can only be achieved if all the bad is compensated by good towards them.

In a similar story, a pious deceased man comes to his daughter in her dream. She sees him suffering in the grave and wonders why such a pious man undergoes through so much. Her father then tells her that when he was young, every Friday morning he used to steal fruits from a neighbour's house – something that was considered fun and that he is now being punished for it.

This is the state in Barzakh. We will receive compensation for every good deed and punished for every bad.

## Review Questions

### Q1. Good people in Barzakh:

- See the bad things that happen to their families in this world
- See only the good things that happen to their families in this world
- Cannot see anything in this world

### Q2. The souls in Barzakh:

- Can hear what is said to them in this world
- Cannot hear what is said to them in this world

### Q3. Which of the following actions is mentioned in many narrations to lead to a person being punished with the pressure of the grave?

- Lying
- Backbiting
- Being ill-mannered with one's family

- <sup>i</sup> Sheikh Mansour Leghaei – Journey to the Unseen World lesson 1
- <sup>ii</sup> Repeated 30 times in the Quran is the concept of belief in Allah resulting in a belief in the hereafter
- <sup>iii</sup> Holy Quran 38:46-47
- <sup>iv</sup> Holy Quran 79:39-41
- <sup>v</sup> Holy Quran 38:26
- <sup>vi</sup> Holy Quran 83:1-5 (if time permits, the teacher can possibly discuss the concept of the Gyges Ring ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ring\\_of\\_Gyges](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ring_of_Gyges)) (or the Harry potters 'cloak of invisibility')- Whereby if one is not caught one can get away with anything or whether a typical person would be moral if he did not have to fear the consequences of his actions
- <sup>vii</sup> Holy Quran 75:5-6
- <sup>viii</sup> (*MizĀn ul ġikmah*- tradition 4065)
- <sup>ix</sup> Sayyid Mohammed Naqvi – Lecture 2 <http://www.azadari.com/mnaqvi.htm>
- <sup>x</sup> Scale of Wisdom- Tradition 6191
- <sup>xi</sup> Holy Quran 28:26-78 Qarun was such
- <sup>xii</sup> Scale of Wisdom – tradition 6195
- <sup>xiii</sup> Scale of wisdom – tradition 6199
- <sup>xiv</sup> Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 19, p. 182, hadith no. 31 (from an article [http://www.al-islam.org/nutshell/merits\\_soul/](http://www.al-islam.org/nutshell/merits_soul/))
- <sup>xv</sup> (Quoted in the book: Day of Judgement, by Allamah Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, pg. 22, no reference was given)
- <sup>xvi</sup> Imam Ali (as), Mishkatul Anwar, no. 1772
- <sup>xvii</sup> Tuhaful Uqool, Imam Ali's advice to Imam Hasan, Chapter on Imam Ali
- <sup>xviii</sup> (Al-Kafi, Vol. 2, Kitab al-Iman wal kufr, bab muhasabat al-a'mal, Hadith no. 2)
- <sup>xix</sup> [al-Kaafi 3:241)