Methods of Moral Education in the Teachings of Shia Imams

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ABSTRACT

Human is created with a disposition to demonstrate his talents and walk the way of salvation through education. Thus, the prophets were sent to teach moral values, lead human toward light through education and discover his inner treasure. As the true interpreters of Quran, Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq used specific methods to this end, which can be used as models for the education authorities to follow. The present study introduces the methods of moral education including (1) preparatory methods, (2) methods of boosting knowledge, (3) methods of fostering moral habits, and (4) methods of correcting moral corruption, which were extracted from historical and narrative sources.

INTRODUCTION

Preparatory methods:

Introduction and statement of the problem Nothing happens in the world of possibilities without a prior cause so that philosophers emphasize that nothing can happen unless the causes and prompts are at work. Preparation for events is so important that even God, who is omnipotent, obeyed by all creatures and is not held accountable for His deeds (Surat Al-'Anbya', 21), does preparations once an event requires it in order to create the competence in His creatures. Thus, during the creation of Adam, God speaks unto the angels and answers their questions in order to prepare them to prostrate to Adam (Surat Al-Baqarah, 30).

Before Adam was created, God informed the angles of his resolution in order to prevent them from disobedience and rebellion (Javadi Amoli, 2008, Vol. 3, p.234). God has also made preparations in order to develop the competence in Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) to receive revelations and guide the society.

Imam Ali (Peace be Upon Him) says, ‘as soon as the prophet was weaned, God ordered Gabriel, His main agent, to educate the prophet in the ways of truth, morality and humanity’ (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 192).

Considering the importance of preparations, Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq have used methods of moral education in order to prepare the grounds for achieving moral education goals. The preparations are made based on internal and external dispositions:

A) Internal disposition:

1. Relieving thought and soul from moral detriments is the first step in making preparations, eliminating moral corruption and bad habits and wiping the heart. Unless internal purification is made, the heart cannot accommodate good epithets, moral values and brilliant thought.

   The lone of heart is not forum to aliens,
   Evil goes out to let the angle in (Hafiz, Sonnet 413).

   Imam Sadiq was asked about the Quranic verse ‘Except him who comes to Allah with a heart free [from evil]’. Imam answered that a free heart is one that has no love except for God once he meets Him (Koleyni, 2008, Vol. 3, p.46). Penitence is considered as the most important step to this end since the glimmering of values in human life has two prerequisites: the existence of the pertinence and the repulsion of hurdles. The pertinent values do reside inside human; however, hurdles may obscure the activation of pertinent values. Sins are one of these hurdles that once penetrate into the heart of human, they prevent the acceptance of divine as a value (Surat ASH-SHUARA, 198-201). Sins downgrade human from his high standing as the Khalif of God (Surat Al-Baqara, 30) and reduce him to bestial levels (Surat Al-Araf, 179). Thus, in the teachings of Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq, penitence is considered as the cleaner of soul. Imam Baqir (Peace be Upon Him) says,
‘one should wipe past sins by deep regret and seeking forgiveness’ (Mohammadi Reyshahri, 2006, Vol.2, p.126). Imam Sadiq (Peace be Upon Him) says, ‘one who repents is like one who has never committed a sin’ (Al-Namazi Al-Shahroodi, 1998).

Respecting the person:
Respect refers to the cherishing and glorification. It is an underlying rule in social and human interactions so that it is considered as a touchstone for any kind of social rules. Thus, the educational system of Islam hinges on this inherent human virtue bestowed upon him by God (Surat Al-Isra, 70). Respecting the person brings about advantages such as avoiding vulgarity and corruption. Imam Sadiq and Imam Baqir said, ‘no one is afflicted with vanity unless he feels an internal meanness’ (Al-Namazi Al-Shahroodi, Vol. 14, p.9).

Prayer:
Prayer and worship of God is one of the methods of eliminating the vices. Imam Sadiq said, ‘Pray a lot as it is the key to God’s mercy and fulfillment of needs. You will not attain what is with God except by praying’ (Mohammadi Reyshahri et al., 2011, Vol. 4, p.26).

B) External disposition:
1. Setting an appropriate educational ground is particularly important in Islam. Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq consider the requisites for creating a healthy educational ground to be as follows:

1-1) Choosing a good spouse:
In choosing a good spouse, which is one of the two major pillars of family, one should notice personal characteristics and moral virtues because children are affected by these characteristics. Imam Baqir (Peace be Upon Him) said, ‘a man went to the prophet and asked him about marriage. The prophet answered, yes! Get married to pious women, and God bless you!’ (Al-Koleyni, 1988, Vol. 5). Ibrahim Karkhi told Imam Sadiq (Peace be Upon Him), ‘my agreeable wife died and I am going to get married. Imam said unto him: look where you would place your personality and whom you would share your property, religion and trust with’ (Al-Majlesi, 1983, Vol. 100, p. 234).

1-2) Choosing a good name:
Name has an important role in human personality development or humiliation. Thus, in the teachings of Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq, having a good name is asserted as one of the vested rights of children. Imam Sadiq said, children have three rights for their father to fulfill: to choose them a good mother, to choose them good names and to try to raise them well’ (Al-Sayed Mohsen Al-Amin, Vol. 1, p. 970). Besides, Imams used to encourage those who were named after the Imams. Jabr reports Imam who asked a little child, ‘what is your name? He said: Mohammad. What is your nickname?, Imam Asked. The child said: Ali. Imam said: this nickname builds a castle around you to which Satan finds no way’ (Al-Najafi, 2002, Vol. 12, p. 224).

1-3) Good nutrition
Unfortunately, good nutrition has been neglected in non-Islamic educational schools as they do not address the issues of Halal (permitted) and Haram (taboo) food. However, in Quranic and Islamic teachings, other categories of food are also addressed such as abominated food and suspicious food in addition to Halal and Haram as the main categories. However, the teachings of Ahl al-Bayt (the descendants of the prophet) pay great attention to nutrition as preparing the grounds for trainability. Imam Sadiq observes that the attempts made for preparing Halal nutrition is one of the best attempts. Abi Basir says someone said to Imam Baqir, ‘I have poor conduct and scarcely go on fast but I hope I will not eat unless the Halal. Imam said: what attempt is more appreciable than the clean eating and abstention from illegitimate sexual relations’ (Ibn abi Faras, Vol. 2, p. 204).

2. Cleansing of the environment:
One of the main factors affecting human development and evolution is environment. Although environmental conditions are not the main cause of good and evil in human, they may not be overlooked as an important preparatory factor.

Approaches to cleansing the environment:
2-1) Revival of the duty for enjoining good and forbidding wrong:
In the teachings of Imam Sadiq and Imam Baqir, enjoining good and forbidding wrong is thought to realize all divine values and repel all corruptions. Imam Baqir (Peace be Upon Him) says, ‘enjoining good and forbidding wrong is a main obligation on which other obligations are founded … it helps realize other
obligations, secure the roads, legitimate the income, return usurpations, cultivate the lands, claim rights from enemies, and makes the affairs easy’ (Ibn Abi Jomhoor, 1985, Vol. 3, p.67; Ibn Abi Faras, n.d., Vol. 3, p.139).

2-2) Changing the situation:
Since different local, social and temporal conditions exert different effects on human, Ahl al-Bayt used to avoid unhealthy environments. Haroon bin Jaham says he was with Imam Sadiq when he met with Masoor in Al-Hirah. There was a feast. Imam Sadiq was invited, too. Imam was at the table when one of the guests asked for water. He was given a cup of wine. As soon as the man got the wine, Imam Sadiq left the table. They asked Imam why he left. Imam said, the prophet observed that accrued is one who sits at a table where wine is served (Koleyni, 2008, Vol. 12, p. 287).

2-3) Avoiding the companion and friendship of unrighteous people:
No doubt, there is mutual influence among people. This influence is such that the companions sometimes coalesce to the same creed. Thus, the prophet warned that people believe in the religion of their friends and should thus exercise care in making friends (Toosi, 1993, Vol. 2, p. 95). Surprisingly, Imam Ali considers that such influence is unconscious (Ibn Abi Al-Hadid, 1997, Vol. 20, p. 274). Imam Sadiq says, ‘it is not suitable for a Muslim to befriend a dissolute, idiot and liar individual’ (Koleyni, 2008, Vol. 4, p. 124).

3. Creating a moral atmosphere in the society:
A moral atmosphere in the society refers to the elevation of moral values so much so that everybody feels a commitment to the values without exercising force. The conduct of Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq suggests that they made their best to establish Islamic moral values and create an ethical atmosphere in their society. Rabi Shami says, ‘I met Imam Sadiq… He said: Oh Shia followers of Muhammad and his family! One who has no self-control at rage, misbehaves his companions, makes a bad friend and misbehaves his neighbors is not one of us’ (Koleyni, 2009, Vol. 2, p. 682).

4. Affection and beneficence:
Love and affection for others is like a magnet that attracts people so much as the holy Quran reads so that it can turn an enemy into a friend (Surat FUSILAT, 34). The life of Shia Imams is fraught with instances of affection to other people. Amr bin Dinar and Obeidallah bin Obeid, two followers of Imam Baqir, Said that when they met with Imam Baqir, they were provided by him with supplies and clothes. Imam used to tell them he had provided the provisions before they met him (Majlesi, 1983, Vol. 43, p. 3).

Methods of boosting knowledge (nurturing ethical awareness and insights):
Human is a thoughtful and conscious creature. Thus, knowledge and understanding play an important role in framing his tendencies and behavior. Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq emphasized the improvement of moral knowledge and awareness. They have introduced methods to this end as follows.

2-1) Teaching moral doctrines:
2-1-1) Teaching moral examples and choices:
Identification of moral examples is the prerequisite of exercising morality. Thus, Shia Imams introduced such examples in different occasions. An instance is the letter sent by Imam Sadiq to a group of his followers where he writes, ‘be good-tempered and gentle, maintain your composure and modesty and avoid whatever the righteous ones avoid…” (Al-Harani, 2008, p. 262-264). Similarly, Imam Baqir teaches Jabir to know the characteristics of true Shia followers as different from alleged followers (Koleyni, 2008, Vol. 3, p. 189).

2-1-2) Teaching moral codes and standards:
Moral teachings cover a broad range of human behaviors. People should adapt to moral teachings in different aspects of life and behave in accordance with moral codes in whatever time, location and behavior. Imam Baqir says, ‘talk to people in the most elegant words you would like them to talk to you’ (Harani, 2008, p. 534). Imam Baqir tells Jabir that the touchstone of moral behaviors is their accordance to Quran: ‘assay yourself with Quran’ (Harani, 2008, p. 500).

2-1-3) Introducing the approaches to gaining virtue:
Knowing the examples and criteria of virtues is not enough to internalize them; rather, one needs to learn how to gain or lose virtue. Through recommendations to their followers, Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq introduced the ways to gain moral insights. Examples are the recommendations made to Jabir bin Ja‘afi by Imam Baqir and to the Jondab’s son by Imam Sadiq. Imam Baqir advises Jabir, ‘…use your knowledge to avoid harms, use your existing knowledge to do heartfelt and candid actions and keep vigil and pray heartfelt to avoid the great negligence’ (Harani, 2002, Vol. 1, p. 266).
2-2) Expressing the outcomes of moral and immoral behaviors:

Human is inherently business-oriented and seeks knowledge to gain benefits and avoid loss. When people understand the positive or negative outcomes of their behavior, they tend to behave toward their benefits. In order to prevent people from lavishness and invite them toward moderate consumption, Imam Sadiq says, ‘need is the legacy of lavishness and richness is the legacy of moderation’ (Al-Saduq, Vol. 3, p. 174). Imam Baqir addresses the benefits of meeting the relatives in order to internalize social intimacy among relatives (Koleyni, 2008, Vol. 3, p. 391).

2-3) Relating moral tales:

Stories have long served as a tool to boost knowledge and moral insights. Besides ordering the prophet to narrate people the stories that may make them think, God directly relates stories of past prophets in Quran. Thus, Ahl al-Bayt, particularly Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq, used moral tales to teach moral values. One of the Shia followers reports, ‘words went round about some people at the presence of Imam Sadiq. I told Imam: we abhor them because they do not care about what we do. Imam said: are they our followers and do not care about what you do and you abhor them? I answered: Yes, we do. Imam said: if so, we have advantages of which you are deficient. Should we abhor you? Thus, befriend them and do not abhor them. I give you an example. A [Muslim] man had a Christian neighbor. He invited his neighbor to Islam, presented a nice picture of Islam and the Christian was converted to Islam…’ (Koleyni, 2008, Vol. 3, p. 110).

Methods of fostering moral habits:
3-1) Encouraging and warning:

Encouraging and warning are the methods used in Quran and by the prophet and Ahl al-Bayt. For example, Imam Sadiq reminds of the mundane and spiritual benefits of serving the brothers in faith in order to encourage the Muslims to serve their co-religionists: ‘God would endorse thousands of thousands of bonuses and forgives the relatives of one who tries to fulfill his Muslim brothers’ needs’ (Koleyni, 2009, Vol. 3, p. 505). Other examples are the Hadith reported in the chapters entitled ‘Attempt to fulfill the needs of the pious’ and ‘Bringing happiness to the pious’ in the book Osul al-Kafi.

3-2) Flickering emotions:

Human is an emotional being with ingrained emotional tendencies. Human may rush toward goodness and keep away from evil once his inner emotions are flickered. Imam Sadiq and Imam Baqir used this method to direct people toward goodness and virtue. Mohammad bin Jomhoor says, ‘one of the Persians was indebted to the ruling administration. When a ruler named Najjashi succeeded to the throne in the region, the Persian man heard of him that he was a follower of Ahl al-Bayt. The Persian man went to Imam Sadiq in Medina and said: ‘I hear that Najjashi is one of your followers, I would appreciate it if you wrote to him about me.’ Imam Sadiq wrote to Najjashi: ‘In the name of God the compassionate the merciful! Make your brother happy. May God make you happy!’ Imam flickers Najjashi’s emotions by calling the Persian his brother. He reminds Najjashi of the outcomes of serving a brother in faith by writing ‘May God make you happy!’ Upon receiving the letter, Najjashi done very appropriately. When Imam was told about Najjashi’s reaction, he became happy and said, ‘his behavior made the God happy’ (Koleyni, 2008, Al-Iman va Al-Kofr).

3-3) Being committed to positive behaviors:

One who is inclined to set himself free of all restrictions typically does not favor restricting behaviors. Thus, methods should be used in moral education to prepare the human for accepting the restrictions induced by moral behaviors. Imam Sadiq said, ‘if you are not patient, you should impose patience upon yourself’ (Koleyni, 2008, Vol. 3, p. 291).

Methods of correcting moral corruption:

Methods of boosting knowledge and of fostering moral habits can be considered as preventive methods. However, since most people are afflicted by vices and corruption despite all-out preventive efforts, they need to undergo corrective measures. Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq used the following methods for correcting moral corruption.

4-1) Admonition:

Quran observes that admonition is beneficial to the pious: ‘remind and advise the pious as it is beneficial to them/55’.

Aba Basir, one of the students of Imam Sadiq, says, ‘I was teaching Quran to a woman in Kufa. One day, I started joking with her. When I met with Imam Baqir in Medina, he blamed me and said: God would disregard
one who commits a sin in privacy. What did you tell the woman?, Imam asked. I was ashamed, hid my face and repented. Imam said: do not repeat that [joking with the woman].

4-2) Promising salvation:
Sometimes, people suffering moral corruption feel frustrated and find no way to salvation. Consequently, they show no interest to distance from vices and corruption. In such cases, Ahl al-Bayt set to save them from the abyss of sins and to keep hope alive in them. Mu'awiyah bin Vahab quotes Imam Sadiq who said, ‘who guarantees four things to me? And I guarantee him a house in paradise! He must donate [from his properties] and not be worried of the poor, preach saying hello in the world, leave quarrel and disputes even though he is right, and be fair to people’ (Koleyni, 2008, Vol. 3, p. 370).

4-3) Sermonizing:
Quran considers sermon as one of the effective methods of moral education (Surat An-Nahl, 125). Imam Sadiq and Imam Baqir used sermon as a corrective method. Imam Baqir says, ‘show toleration to the hypocrites in language and have sincere love for the pious and socialize nicely once you meet the Jews’ (Al-Harani, 2008).

4-4) Strict approach:
Sometimes, none of the mellow methods of correction would work. Under such circumstances, Ahl al-Bayt tended to use strict methods. Ishaq bin Ammar says, ‘I went to Imam Sadiq and he looked at me with anger in his face. I asked: what has made you change your idea about me? He answered: the same thing that has changed your idea about your brothers in faith. Oh Ishaq! I hear you have hired a guard at home to repel the poor Shia. I said: my lord! I am afraid of fame. Imam said: Aren’t you afraid of the disasters sent by God?’ (Al-Najafi, 2002, Vol. 1, p. 52).

4-5) Exerting social pressure:
As human is a social being who cannot fare alone outside the society, Ahl al-Bayt used social pressures to correct the individuals once they noticed that no method should save them from a corruption. Imam Baqir says, ‘a man went to the prophet (Peace be Upon Him) and complained about his neighbor’s harassment. The prophet told him: wait! He came back once again. The prophet said: wait! He turned back for the third time. The prophet said: when people are going to the Friday Prayer, scatter your stuff and furniture on the street for them to see. If they asked you what you were doing, you should answer that your neighbor harassed you. The man did the same. His neighbor came out to him and said: move your stuff back to home and I swear to God I will not hurt you anymore’ (Koleyni, 2008, Vol. 4, p. 760).

Conclusion:
Among the Shia Imams, Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq are two figures who found opportunities to express divine teachings. This opportunity helped them replenish the society with Quranic teachings. They extended moral teachings through various educational methods such as the preparatory method in both internal and external domains, methods of boosting knowledge, methods of fostering moral habits and methods of correcting moral corruption. It is thus recommended that the authorities in charge of cultural issues use the effective methods used by Shia Imams in order to nurture morality in the society.

REFERENCES