**THE ETHICS OF DECENT BEHAVIOR IN ISLAM (ADAB-I MUASHARAT IN ISLAM)**



33.21. Assuredly you have in God's Messenger an excellent example to follow for whoever looks forward to God and the Last Day, and remembers and mentions God much.(1)



68.4. You are surely of a sublime character, and do act by a sublime pattern of conduct.(2)



95.4. Surely We have created human of the best stature, as the perfect pattern of creation;(3)

When Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, was performing *salat*, after saying the opening *takbir* he would sometimes recite the prayer that has the following meaning: “My prayer, my worship, my living and my dying are for God, the Lord of the worlds. No associate has He, I have thus been commanded. And I am the first and foremost of those who submit to Him. O God, guide me to the best deeds and the best morality. There is none other than You who can lead me to the best. Save me from evil deeds and conduct; there is none other than You who can save us from immorality.”

Before examining the ethics of decent behavior (*adab al-muasharat*) in depth, the concepts of *adab* and *muasharat* first should be examined separately.

**THE WORD *ADAB***

The Arabic root “*adb*” means “feast or invitation”7; the word “*adab*,” which is derived from this root, carries the meanings of “decency,” “politeness,” “reverence,” and “high regard,”8 as well as “refined manners that have been socially adopted.”9

*Adab,* then, refers to all guidelines about words and deeds that are considered proper, mannerly, ethical, and morally correct in Islam. In this respect, *adab* indicates the minimum level of good or moral behavior that people should follow. In his book *Al-Tarifat* Sayyid Sharif writes that *adab* “is the knowledge that saves one from erring.” Ibn Hajar said that “*Adab* is to say  and  do  that which is commendable and of merit; that is, to possess good moral character. In the same way that there are people who interpret *adab* as meaning ‘acting in good and appropriate ways,’ or ‘acting respectfully towards elders and treating the young with kindness and compassion’ there are also scholars who believe the word originated from *madaba,* a word that means *banquet.*’”10

There is no direct reference to the word *adab* or its derivatives in the Qur’an. However, the related word *da’b*, which means *way, path, manner,* or *custom*, is used, for instance in the verse, “*(Their way is) as the way of Pharaoh’s folk and those before them*” (Anfal  8:54).  Similarly,  *daab,* which  appears  in  the  verse,  “*You shall sow for seven years as usual*,” (Yusuf 12:47) means *as usual*. In yet another verse, the related word *daibayn* is used to mean *constant*: “*And He has made the sun and the moon constant in their courses*…” (Ibrahim 14:33). However, the word *adab* does appear in Prophetic traditions*.* In the hadith*,* “My Lord trained me and gave me *adab* and He gave me the best training,”11 *adab* is used to mean training or education.

When Junayd al-Baghdadi set out on his pilgrimage*,* he saw that the disciples of Abu Hafs in Baghdad were extremely mannerly and polite. He said to the scholar, “You have taught your followers *adab* that is befitting of courtiers.” Abu Hafs replied, “No, their inner *adab* is reflected in their outward  actions,”  implying that their behavior arose from their heart.12 This is striking, as it underlines the importance of maintaining good social relationships with everyone. In fact, some have said that *adab* is an outward sign that reveals the greatness of a person’s character. It is for this reason that one of the most important responsibilities of parents is to give their children *adab* and moral training. *Adab* is like a garment for the soul, or the inner strength of the spirit that saves one from erring or doing inappropriate things.

The term *adab* in Islamic jurisprudence refers to “behavior befitting the example of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him.” Accordingly, the term *adab* implies “avoidance of anything that is contrary to the S*unna* or the practice of the Prophet.” In a broader sense, *adab* is to act in accordance with the commands and admonitions of God and His Messenger. Religiously, *adab* falls into the category of *sunna ghayr mu’akkada*, that is, actions which the Prophet performed at times; therefore, the execution of such actions is to be rewarded, but the abandonment of them is not reproachable. *Adab* is also used interchangeably for recommended (*mustahab*) acts, supererogatory acts, or virtuous acts. Acts that are defined as part of *adab* are divinely rewarded, praiseworthy manners that were recommended and encouraged by the Prophet.

The best *adab,* the best morals, those which will never become outdated, are those taught in the Qur’an and applied in the life of Prophet Muhammad, the Best of Creation. God, Who created the universe in the most perfect order and the human “*of the best stature as the perfect pattern of creation*” (Tin 95:4), has created humankind to act as His vicegerents on earth. He has given humankind superiority over all other creatures and made them His representatives on earth. Through His Messengers God has shown humankind the path to felicity, and, by making His commandments known to us, He has taught us to discern good from bad and right from wrong. God has created all things perfectly, and has instructed humanity in the ways of goodness that we should follow. This is why the *adab* and morality which God taught us will always be the best and most correct. The person who has lived these morals the best is Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. In a Qur’anic verse God says of the Prophet, “*You are surely of a sublime character and do act by a sublime pattern of conduct*” (68:4). God’s Messenger said of himself “I was sent to perfect good character.”13 He exhorted his community to  apply  the  morality and ethics in the Qur’an which he put into practice.

As with everything, our example in good morals is Prophet Muhammad, the Best of Creation: “*Assuredly you have in God’s Messenger an excellent example to follow for whoever looks forward to God and the Last Day, and remembers and mentions God much*”  (Ahzab 33:21). God’s Messenger called on us to pursue morality, and he said, “Two qualities are never coupled in a believer: Stinginess and corrupt morality.”14 Another time, he said to Muadh ibn Jabal, “O Muadh, be of good morals toward people!”15

The Messenger of God taught that good morality will weigh heaviest in the scales for a believer on the Day of Judgment; those with an evil disposition will be condemned. He also told another Companion that people with good morality would be dealt with (rewarded) as if they had worshipped and fasted constantly.16

When Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, was performing *salat*, after saying the opening *takbir* he would sometimes recite the prayer that has the following meaning: “My prayer, my worship, my living and my dying are for God, the Lord of the worlds. No associate has He, I have thus been commanded. And I am the first and foremost of those who submit to Him. O God, guide me to the best deeds and the best morality. There is none other than You who can lead me to the best. Save me from evil deeds and conduct; there is none other than You who can save us from immorality.”17

When the Prophet was asked what it was that caused most people to be sent to Hell, he replied, “The mouth and the genitals.” When they asked him what brought most people to Heaven, he said, “*Taqwa* (God-consciousness and fear of God) and good morals!”18

Here it may be helpful to go into detail about the term *taqwa.*

Generally, this word is used in one of two ways:

The first broad meaning is “to beware of and avoid everything which is harmful for the eternal life of one’s soul,” or, more importantly, “to eschew associating partners to God*,* which is the cause of spending eternity in Hell.” The highest point of *taqwa* is to keep oneself pure of anything that could put a distance between one’s soul and God, to turn to God with one’s entire being, and to take refuge in God with one’s whole spirit. A Qur’anic verse indicates this state: “*O you who have attained faith! Be conscious of God with all the consciousness that is due to Him*…” (Al Imran 3:102).

The second specific meaning is absolutely and unequivocally “to guard oneself against any sin which may be cause for the abandonment of good deeds or which may lead one away from salvation.” The verse, “*Those who avoid the major sins and indecent, shameful deeds, only falling into small fault,—surely your Lord is of extensive forgiveness*” (Najm 53:32), focuses on this meaning of *taqwa—*that is the avoidance of major sins.

Raghib al-Isfahani says, “*Taqwa* is to keep one’s soul from sin; this is begun by avoiding that which is forbidden, and completed by avoiding that which is questionable. According to the hadith*,* ‘The permissible is clear, and the forbidden is clear, but there are questionable things in between.’”19

Here we must briefly touch upon the subject of “small sins.” The aforementioned verse of Sura Najm does not mean that believers can be lax about “small sins.” Said ibn Jubayr reportedly said, “When the following Qur’anic verse was revealed: ‘*They give*

*to the poor, orphans and slaves solely for God’s pleasure, even when they*

*themselves are in need*’ (Insan 76:8), some Muslims thought that because they had given only a little they would not be rewarded; others thought, ‘God will reserve Hellfire for great sins,’ and they did not think that they would be punished for smaller sins, like lying, looking at forbidden things, or gossiping.  For  this  reason, God sent down another verse, ‘*And so, he who shall have done an at-*

*om’s weight of good, shall behold it; and he who shall have done an at-*

*om’s weight of evil, shall behold it*’  (Zilzal  99:7–8). Through these verses God  taught Muslims  that ‘A little  will soon bring  more,’ thus encouraging them to give without thinking that small offerings do not count; on the other hand, they were given the idea that ‘small sins soon increase and lead to greater sins,’ thus helping them to avoid all sins.”20

According to Islamic teachings, a small sin can be as serious as a large one if the following errors occur:

1. Persistence in small sins.
2. Considering small sins lightly, attaching no importance to them.
3. Making oneself feel better about small sins by comparing them to bigger ones.
4. Boasting of one’s past sins in front of other people.
5. The commitment of small sins by a knowledgeable person who is acting as a guide for others; these must be counted as serious sins.

What should be kept in mind is that whatever God has forbidden should not be approached, refuge from both small  and great sins should be sought in God, whatever is given as a sin in the Qur’an should be accepted as a sin, and if one commits a sin, it should not be persisted in. Indeed, Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “When we repent and regret a ‘great sin,’ it is no longer ‘great,’ but when we persist in a ‘small sin’ it does not remain ‘small.’”21

To return to our main topic, let us examine the following hadith of the Prophet: “A believer who has good morals may surpass one who spends nights in prayer and days in fasting.”22 He also informed Abu Hurayra, in response to a question, that one may enter Heaven with fear of God and the possession of good morals. More than once the Prophet said that a person of good morals will be rewarded with a home in the upper levels of Heaven; such a person will be the closest to the Prophets on the Day of Resurrection and he will be the most loved by them.23

The sayings and personal actions of the Prophet regarding his guidelines for good *adab* and morals have been classified and collected into books like *The Book of Adab* and *Bab al-Adab*.24 In addition, Imam al-Bukhari compiled some deeds and sayings of the Prophet in his book *Al-Adab al-Mufrad*.

*Adab* means acting with good manners, ethics and morals in all interactions and dealings with people. The behavior that we find in the life of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, even actions in minor matters, like greeting people, smiling, and keeping nails trimmed, were also part of the lives of other Prophets before him.

The *adab* and moral code established by the hadiths of the Prophet are applicable to everyone. Therefore, every person who is involved in teaching or training others in *adab* must first put into practice these commands and prohibitions, then strive to impart the same good ethics to those under their care. God says in the Qur’an, “*O you who believe! Guard yourselves and your families*

*(through the enabling discipline of Islamic faith and worship) against a Fire whose fuel is human beings and stones*…” (Talaq 66:6). Here it is meant that God wants us to practice the morality He has prescribed, both by training our spirits and by training the children for whom we have a responsibility. This will at the same time be a protection for us from the fire of Hell.

Everyone has responsibility for those under their care and supervision with regard to their rights, education, and learning. God’s Messenger spoke of the importance of the education of children by their parents thus: “Every child is born in the natural state of innate predisposition for goodness and submission to One God*.* Afterward, the mother and father teach a child another religion. Indeed, even animal young are born complete (with all they need for life). Have you ever seen among these innocent newborn animals one with a cut-off arm, lip, leg, foot, nose?”25 Abu Hurayra, the transmitter of this hadith*,* then continued with this verse: “*And so, set your face steadfastly toward the (one ever-true) faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has instilled into man*…” (Rum 30:30).

The verse and hadith above point to the fact that the natural state of the human being is pure and that the best and purest morality one can follow is Islam. But incorrect education can make a child become alienated from their inborn natural purity and grow into a disbeliever or someone with bad morals. This is why the enironment and parental  influence on children is emphasized  so strongly.26 God creates each individual with purity, and the mother and father of each child have the duty to bring out and preserve that nature by teaching *adab.* The best and most lasting gift parents can give their children is a good moral training. A child who receives this training and grows to be a good person will also become a source of continual reward for the parents; even after they are dead and can no longer perform good deeds, the child’s good deeds will be reflected on them and be recorded in their Book of Deeds by God.

**THE WORD *MUASHARAT* (SOCIAL ETIQUETTE)**

The word *muasharat* has several meanings: to mix or become involved, to be a friend, to live together.27 The religion of Islam puts great importance on positive social relations between human beings—spending time together and talking to one another—and their shared community. After this brief introduction to the *adab al-muasharat* (ethics of decent behavior in Islam) we will examine good character traits in the light of Qur’anic verses and hadith.(4)

**References**

**(1)33:21.The Quran with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English by Ali Unal**

**(2)68:4.The Quran with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English by Ali Unal**

**(3)95:4.The Quran with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English by Ali Unal**

**(4) Gulcu, Dr. Musa Kazim. “Good Character” Tughra Books Press. February 2009.**