Tawba&Istighfar (Repentance & Asking Forgiveness)



They are also the ones who, when they have committed a shameful deed or wronged themselves (through any kind of sinful act), immediately remember God and implore Him to forgive their sins – for who will forgive sins save God? – and do not persist knowingly in whatever (evil) they have committed.[[1]](#endnote-2)



Pray God for forgiveness. Assuredly God is All-Forgiving, All-Compassionate.[[2]](#endnote-3)

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Abu Hurayra, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “By the One in whose hand my life is, if you had not sinned, Allah would have removed you and brought other people who did commit wrong actions and asked for the forgiveness of Allah the Almighty so that He could forgive them.”[[3]](#endnote-4)

Anasibn Malik al-Ansari, may Allah be pleased with him, the servant of the Messenger of Allah, reported that the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “Allah is happier about the repentance of one His servants than one of you would be about finding your camel which had strayed away from you in the middle of the desert.”[[4]](#endnote-5)

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**TAWBA (REPENTANCE), INABA (SINCERE PENITENCE), AND AWBA (TURNING TO GOD IN CONTRITION)[[5]](#endnote-6)**

**I HAVE REPENTED AND TURNED TO GOD SO SINCERELY THAT I WILL NOT BREAK [THE VOW OF REPENTANCE] UNTIL MY SOUL LEAVES MY BODY. ( RUMI)**

Tawba (repentance) means that one feels regret and, filled with remorse for his or her sins, turns to God with the intention of obeying Him. According to truth-seeking scholars, repentance signifies a sincere effort to no longer oppose the Divine Essence in one’s feelings, thoughts, intentions, and acts, and to comply sincerely with His commands and prohibitions. Repentance does not mean being disgusted with what is bad or prohibited and thus no longer engaging in it; rather, it means remaining aloof from whatever God hates and prohibits, even if it seems agreeable to sense and reason.

Repentance is usually modified by the adjective nasuh (as in Tahrim 66:8), literally meaning pure, sincere, reforming, improving, and repairing. Tawbanasuh-sincere, reforming, and improving repentance-means a pure, sincere repentance that perfectly reforms and improves the one who feels it. One who feels such a sincere, heartfelt, and true remorse for the sin committed seeks to abandon it, thereby setting a good example for others. The Qur’an points to this when it mentions true repentance: O you who believe! Turn to God in true, sincere repentance (Tahrim 66:8).

There are three categories of repentance:

• The repentance of those who cannot discern Divine truths. Such people are uneasy about their disobedience to God and, conscious of the sinfulness clouding their hearts, turn toward God in repentance saying, for example: I have fallen or committed a sin. Forgive me, or I ask for God’s forgiveness.

• Those half-awakened to Divine truths beyond veils of material existence who feel an inward pang of sinfulness and remorse right after thinking or doing anything incompatible with the consciousness of always being in God’s presence, or after every instance of heedlessness that envelops their hearts, and who immediately take refuge with the Mercy and Favor of God. Such people are described in the following Tradition:

“One who sincerely repents of his sin is as if he had never committed it. When God loves one of His servants, his sins do not harm him.” Then he recited the verse: “Assuredly, God loves the oft-repentant and those who always seek to purify themselves.” When asked about the sign of repentance, he declared: “It is heartfelt remorse.”(1)

• Those who live such a careful life that, as declared in a Tradition: “My eyes sleep but my heart does not,”2 their hearts are awake. Such people immediately discard whatever intervenes between God and their hearts and other innermost faculties, and regain the consciousness of their relation to the Light of Lights. They always manifest the meaning of: How excellent a servant! Truly he was ever turning in contrition (to his Lord) (Sad 38:44).

Repentance means regaining one’s essential purity after every spiritual defilement, and engaging in frequent self-renewal. The stages of repentance are:

• Feeling sincere remorse and regret

• Being frightened whenever one remembers past sins

• Trying to eradicate injustice and support justice and what is right

• Reviewing one’s responsibilities and performing previously neglected obligations

• Reforming oneself by removing spiritual defects caused by deviation and error

• Regretting and lamenting the times when one did not mention or remember God,or thank Him and reflect on His works. Such people are always apprehensive and alert in order that their thoughts and feelings are not tainted by things that intervene between themselves and God. (This last quality is particular to people distinguished by their nearness to God.)

If one does not feel remorse, regret, and disgust for errors committed, whether great or small; if one is not fearful or apprehensive of falling back into sin at any time; and if one does not take shelter in sincere servanthood to God in order to be freed from the deviation and error into which one has fallen by moving away from God, any resulting repentance will be no more than a lie.

On sincere penitence, the famous Sufi master MawlanaJalaladdin Rumi says:

I have repented and turned to God so sincerely that I will not break [the vow of repentance] until my soul leaves my body.

In fact, who other than an ass steps toward perdition after having suffered so much trouble (on account of his sins)?

Repentance is an oath of virtue, and holding steadfastly to it requires strong willpower. The lord of the penitents, upon him be peace and blessings, says that one who repents sincerely and holds steadfastly to it has achieved the rank of a martyr, while the repentance of those who cannot free themselves from their sins and deviations, although they repeatedly repent, mocks the “door” toward which the truly repentant ones turn in utmost sincerity and resolution.

One who continues to sin after proclaiming a fear of Hell, who does not engage in righteous deeds despite self-proclaimed desires for Paradise, and who is indifferent to the Prophet’s way and practices despite assertions of love for the Prophet cannot be taken seriously. This is also the case with one who claims to be sincere and purehearted, but spends his or her life oscillating between sin and repentance.

An initiate’s first station is repentance, while the second is inaba (sincere penitence). In common usage, inaba also refers to the ceremony that is held when one submits to a spiritual guide (as a murshid). While repentance requires the training of feelings, thoughts, and acts in order to move from opposition to acceptance and obedience, sincere penitence demands a critique of the authenticity, sincerity, and sufficiency of that acceptance and obedience. Repentance is a progression or journeying toward God-that is, seeking to do what is pleasing to God and refraining from what is forbidden by Him. Sincere penitence is an ascension through the stations of journeying in God-in other words, striving to live an upright life in self-annihilation and absorption in God so that one may seek His pleasure in all actions and thoughts.

Awba (turning to God in contrition) is an ascension through the stations of journeying from God-that is, being responsible for guiding others after having embodied the Islamic way of belief, thought, and conduct. In other words, taking refuge in God in fear of dying as a non-Muslim and deserving eternal punishment is repentance; annihilating one’s self in God in the hope of preserving one’s spiritual rank is sincere penitence; and closing one’s self to any desires, ambitions, or aims other than God’s good pleasure is turning to Him in utmost contrition.

The first is the state of all believers, and is expressed in: Repent to God, O believers! (Nur 24:31). The second is an attribute of saints and the foremost in belief and moral conduct who have been brought near God. Its beginning is seen in: Turn to your Lord repentant (Zumar 39:54), and its end is stated in: He comes with a contrite heart (Qaf 50:33). The third is for the Prophets and Messengers, all of whom are appreciated and praised by God in the words: How excellent a servant! Truly he was ever turning in contrition (to his Lord) (Sad 38:44).

The words of repentance uttered by those who are always conscious of being in the presence of God express the individual’s sincere penitence or their turning to God in contrition. This is how the words of the best of creation, upon him be peace and blessings, should be understood when he said: I ask God’s forgiveness seventy (or one hundred, according to another narration or version) times a day.

Repentance is the act or manner of those trying to live an upright life while remaining unaware of God’s constant super-vision of His servants and what nearness to Him really means. Those who live in awareness of God’s nearness regard it as heedlessness to turn to God as ordinary people do, for He directs them as He wishes, constantly supervises them, and is nearer to them than anything else. Their station is not that of the people of the Unity of Being-ecstatic saints who view the creation while living in a state of being completely annihilated in God and therefore accept God as the only truly existent being. Rather, it is the station of the people of the Unity of the Witnessed- scholarly saints who accept that the truly existent one is He Who is witnessed or discerned beyond the creation. More than that, it is the station of those progressing in the light of Prophet Muhammad’s practice, upon him be peace and blessings.

It is merely an assertion and a groundless claim when those who have not attained this station, and thus live [merely] on the outer surface of their existence, talk of awba and inaba, and especially of the final points of these two stations.

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[Asking Forgiveness](http://www.fethullahgulenchair.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1096:asking-forgiveness&catid=111:the-broken-jug&Itemid=296)[[6]](#endnote-7)

**Question: In this contemporary age when sins have spread like an epidemic, what does *istighfar*** **(asking forgiveness) promise for believers? Would you talk about particular segments of time that may be preferable for seeking God’s forgiveness?**

**Answer:** Every child is born with the pure primordial nature, as stated by the Messenger of God.1 The essential idea in man’s responsibilities in this world is preserving this original nature until the time of death. All of the good acts that can lead one to eternal bliss are apt to protect this original nature, whereas all of the forbidden acts that might lead one to destruction are apt to corrupt it. While believers should build up sound sets and barriers against destructive sins on the one hand, they should constantly seek ways of preserving their original nature in untainted form. Every sin committed is a deformation with respect to human nature. Restoring one’s original nature after such deformation is only possible through*istighfar*—asking the forgiveness of God Almighty. Sometimes a heart contaminated by sins may come to the point of inability to fulfill its function.2 Thus, freedom from sins, which take one nearer to unbelief, and clearing up the stains sins leave on the heart are only possible through seeking God’s forgiveness and protection from sins.3

**Preventive Medicine**

Indeed, believers must adopt a resolved stance from the very beginning and not step toward even the pettiest kind of sins. They need to strive for an auspicious atmosphere to keep them clean from sins and avoid dangerous grounds, just like one escapes from (the venomous bites of) snakes and scorpions. Such resolution and alertness can be achieved only by those with a believing heart and profound conscience that feel as if he or she is falling into Hell with every sin. If one does not feel disgusted at a sin, then it is possible to judge that that person’s heart has already lost its vitality. A heart that does not feel upset and react against one’s wrongdoings or a heart that does not cause the person to lose sleep in remorse resembles a dead body. For this reason, a true believer’s heart reacts against sin. And the foremost reaction to be shown is*istighfar*—seeking God’s forgiveness and protection from wrongdoings.

As a believer says “*Astaghfiru’llah*” (I seek the forgiveness of God), he or she actually says—with the immense meaning of the Arabic present tense (*mudhari*)—that I seek Your forgiveness all the time as I am now asking and will always ask forgiveness from You. In this way the repentant one renders the wish for forgiveness of a past sin as a petition that includes an entire future. In fact, the All-Forgiving God may accept a single repentance and demand for forgiveness as forgiving of all sins of that person. However, what befalls on us is not sufficing with a single petition but continuing to ask forgiveness for a lifetime and bearing the remorse within. One must think how shameful it is to have committed the sin despite being shown the right guidance, what an insolence it is to dismiss a promise like Paradise and indulge in sin, always feel due shame within, and thus constantly make*istighfar*, to the degree of asking forgiveness ten thousand times for a single sin. Sometimes one should be unsatisfied even with that much, and say “*alfu-alfi* (a million times)*Astaghfiru’llah*,” trying to feel it within a million times over.

**The Elixir That Cuts Out the Root of Inclination toward Evil**

1. *Istighfar*restores the damaged human nature, it cuts out the root of inclination toward evil as well. A person who continuously purifies oneself by*istighfar*eliminates a ground of sins at the same time and no virus to invite others remains in the heart. In addition, God Almighty may curtail the feelings of inclination toward evil in a person who makes*istighfar*

Bediüzzaman interprets this verse with a different approach and states that a person’s abilities for evil can transform into ability for goodness, as a consequence of repentance and asking forgiveness. Accordingly, when a person shows loyalty to God by turning to Him repentantly, He may respond as, “Now that you have turned to Me, I will change your potential for evil into potential for goodness.”

**Important Time Segments for*Istighfar***

It is a tradition of the Prophet, upon whom be peace and blessings, to ask forgiveness three times right after performing the obligatory (*fard*) Prayers.5 The following two points can explain the wisdom of asking God’s forgiveness right after carrying out this act of worship—which is most loveable to God—with the prostrations during which the worshipper is expected to ascend to the nearest proximity to his or her Lord: firstly, people’s inability to maintain full concentration at the Prayer, failing to sense standing in the Divine presence but still roaming through their own world and running after their own pursuits. Such attitude constitutes a kind of disrespect toward God, especially during the Prayer, which is, indeed, the believer’s ascent to the proximity of God. If one is immersed in personal considerations instead of seeking the meanings the Prophet felt during his Ascension, that person needs to make*istighfar* for such a light hearted attitude.

Secondly, as the Prayer signifies a (lofty spiritual) state in which requests from God are more likely to be accepted, supplications made right after the Prayers have a different value. Therefore, the Messenger of God recommended using this opportunity and asking forgiveness three times. In this respect, the five prescribed Prayers are important grounds and opportunities for seeking God’s forgiveness and protection from sins.

A Qur’anic verse points out an important segment of time for making*istighfar*: “*They used to sleep but little by night (almost never missing the Tahajjud Prayer). And in the hour of early dawn (sahar), they would implore God’s forgiveness*” (adh-Dhariyat 51:17–18). This verse expresses appreciation for the believers who get up during the final hours of the night and make*istighfar*, who open up to God imploringly, and who prostrate and nearly forget to rise back up from the prostration position; it announces this appreciation to all dwellers of heavens, spiritual beings, and to all believers. As certain praiseworthy qualities of believers are related by the Qur’an or the Prophet, others who do not yet have those desirable qualities are encouraged to acquire them. Therefore, it is extremely important to rise during the final hours of the night when others are sound asleep and offer servitude to God by two units of*Tahajjud* Prayer, at the least.

Also, there are times when the heart is softened, when one feels the weight of sins on the conscience and overflows with emotion… they must be taken as great opportunities for*istighfar*. We can call them times for breezes of proximity to God. Additionally, turning to God repentantly right after one commits a mistake or sin will mean taking the opportunity of “the first moment of realization that one has stepped into mistake and sin,” for such moments are among the time periods when*istighfar* is most acceptable. Sins resemble whirlpools and they pull the individual into them like an addiction. It is difficult to rid oneself of sins after a person is immersed in them. If somebody in such a situation does not give the willpower its due and make resolved efforts to be freed from swamp of evils, that sinner may begin to wish for the non-existence of the Divine commandments that forbid those evils, and this wish might lead to one’s ultimate spiritual downfall by losing faith completely. This has been the general pattern for those who fall. This is why it is so important to step back from sin immediately, fearing to come to a point of no return.

Let me conclude with one final point. Even though the times we mentioned above are important opportunities for*istighfar*, it is not necessary to allocate a special time for seeking God’s forgiveness and protection from sins; indeed,  limiting*istighfar* to those segments of time is wrong. One can and should ask forgiveness from God at any time during night and day, taking every moment of life as an opportunity for it. Whenever possible, one can draw to a corner, sit on bent knees, or prostrate oneself, and turn to God repentantly and ask forgiveness. One can open up to God through*istighfar* while walking somewhere, driving, or waiting for someone; one should make use of every available moment in this respect. Death can come any time, and meeting death with lips mumbling*istighfar* is a very important means in terms of walking to the realms beyond in a purified state.

*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Janaiz, 80, 9 2. This does not refer to the marvelous blessing of the physical heart in the chest that pumps blood throughout human body, but to its spiritual counterpart. (Ed.)*Sunan at-Tirmidhi*, Tafsir al-Surah, (83) 1*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Tawhid, 22*Sahih Muslim*, Masajid, 135

**References**

1. **3:135/The Quran with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English by Ali Unal**  [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. **4:106/The Quran with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English by Ali Unal** [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. **Sahih Muslim, Tawbah, 11** [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. **Sahih al-Bukhari, Da’awat, 4; Sahih Muslim, Tawbah, 1** [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. **M. FethullahGulen , THE FOUNTAIN MAGAZINE, Issue 57 / January - March 2007**  [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. **M.FETHULLAH GULEN, THE BROKEN JUG** [↑](#endnote-ref-7)