

## **THERAPEUTIC ETHICS: MANAGING ANGER, NEGATIVE THOUGHTS AND DEPRESSION ACCORDING TO AL-BALKHĪ**

Fatimah Abdullah<sup>1</sup>

### **Khulasah**

Pengawasan dan peningkatan diri atau jiwa amat penting dalam rangka kesejahteraan emosi dan rohani. Sebaliknya ketiadaan faktor tersebut akan mengakibatkan ketidakseimbangan emosi dan rohani. Apabila jiwa sihat maka semua fakultinya akan terselamat daripada tanda-tanda penyakit emosi dan rohani seperti marah, panik, kemurungan dan sebagainya. Kebahagiaan rohani adalah tanggung kepada kesihatan jiwa. Justeru untuk penjagaan jiwa kita perlu mempertahankannya dari gejala-gejala penyakit emosi dan rohani dan cuba mencari sumbernya yang bertunjangkan kepada kebahagiaan rohani bukan setakat emosi sahaja. Dalam menanggapi masalah ini Islam memberikan solusi yang pelbagai dan pendekatan yang berbentuk integrasi iaitu kognitif atau rasional pscho-physiology. Ini dapat dilihat dari amalan junjungan nabi Muhammad (s.a.w), para sahabat dan juga melalui sumbangan dari penulisan ulama' silam, seperti Abū Zayd al-Balkhī.

**Kata kunci:** Pengawasan dan kesejahteraan emosi rohani; kognitif; penyakit emosi dan rohani; kebahagiaan rohani; penjagaan jiwa dan ketidakseimbangan emosi dan rohani; penyakit jiwa; Abū Zayd Ahmed Ibn Sahl al-Balkhī

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor Dr. Fatimah Abdullah is currently teaching at the Department of Usuluddin and Comparative Religion Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences International Islamic University Malaysia.

### **Abstract**

Proper control and transformation of the human self or soul is essential for psycho-spiritual health. On the contrary, absence of control of the self and transformation results in psycho-spiritual imbalance. When the soul is healthy, all its faculties will be free from negative psychological symptomatic behaviour such as anger, panic, depression and the like. To promote the wellbeing of the soul, we need to manage our emotions. For, spiritual joy and happiness are basic states on which the health of the soul can be gauged. Thus, in order to properly sustain our soul, we should shield it from emotional and spiritual pathological habits and seek to root it in joyfulness conceived of as a spiritual state and not a skin-deep emotion. Islamic literature provides various and integrated approaches in managing emotions. Material on this issue can be found in Islamic traditions regarding the Prophet and his companions as well as in the contributions of Muslim scholars throughout the centuries. Islam as a way of life and a worldview offers its followers insights to treat the malaise of the soul in holistic, cognitive, rational and psycho-physiological ways. For instance, spiritual cognitive therapy can have a significant impact on the treatment of emotional and spiritual disorders. This article attempts to highlight the contributions of one of the great Muslim scholars, namely Abū Zayd Ahmed Ibn Sahl al-Balkhī (d. 322 AH), in treating the sickness of the soul as revealed by psychological symptoms such as anger, negative thoughts and depression as well as in managing psychological imbalance.

**Keywords:** Transformation of the human self; cognitive; psycho-spiritual health; psycho-spiritual imbalance; spiritual pathological habits; Abū Zayd Ahmed Ibn Sahl al-Balkhī

### **Introduction**

Islamic literature provides various and integrated approaches to managing emotions. We see examples of this in Islamic traditions about Prophet and his companions as well as in the contributions of Muslim scholars throughout the centuries. Islam as a way of life and a worldview offers its followers insights to treat the

malaise of the soul in holistic, cognitive, rational and psycho-physiological ways. For instance, spiritual cognitive therapy can have a significant impact on the treatment of emotional and spiritual disorders.

### **Psychological and Spiritual Health**

Abū Zayd Ahmed Ibn Sahl Al-Balkhī (d. 322 /934) was a Muslim physician and scholar. He was one of the disciples of al-Kindī, a famous medieval philosopher. Al-Balkhī represents the approach which combines *adāb* and *falsafah*<sup>2</sup>. As far as we know, his book *Maṣāliḥ al-Abdān wa al-Anfus* was the first to approach the subject of psycho-physical health. Long before the emergence of modern psychotherapy al-Balkhī used holistic and integrated therapeutic techniques, better known today as rational or cognitive, behavioral and spiritual therapy.<sup>3</sup> That is why he may be described as having been a 'proto-psychiatrist'.

Al-Balkhī, more than six centuries ago, realized that intense emotional reactions, such as anxiety and depression, can lead to physical illness.<sup>4</sup> We now know that such emotional disorders can lead not only to classic psychosomatic disorders like ulcers and migraine, but also to all sorts of physical disorders. The anatomical link between the brain and the body connects mental state with

---

<sup>2</sup> Yasin Mohamed, *The Path to Virtue: The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī*, Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Malik Badri. "Abū Zayd al-Balkhī: A Genius Whose Psychiatric Contributions Needed More Than Ten Centuries To Be Appreciated". *Malaysian Journal of Psychiatry*. Vol. 6, No.2. 1998, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

physical health. Or, said otherwise, a person's emotional centres play a critical role in his or her wellbeing, including his or her immune and cardiovascular systems. These biological ties explain why emotional imbalance, as expressed in sadness, frustration, anger, tension and acute anxiety, double the risk that people suffering from heart diseases experience a dangerous decrease in blood flow to the heart within hours of having had those feelings. Such decrease may, at times, even trigger a heart attack.<sup>5</sup>

When we are in the state of emotional distress, we are often trapped in a bad mood and lose spirit and determination. We experience a problem which in fact is a small one as though it was a huge obstacle in our way; for instance, a one-minute delay may feel like an hour. Unless we learn to understand and control our energy and to deal with daily disappointments and stressful situations, we will lose alertness and focus. Such a loss will affect our ability to notice anything or anyone else.<sup>6</sup>

If the soul becomes sick said al-Balkhī, the body may follow suit. If people stop finding joy in life, they may eventually develop a physical illness. This process is known as psychosomatic interaction. Moreover, people may actually live without physical complaints for years, while, in fact, they may have been suffering from psychological disorders all along. The human soul is comparable to the human body: they can both be healthy or unhealthy. When the soul is healthy, all of its faculties will be in balance (without psychological symptoms of imbalance such as

---

<sup>5</sup> Danial Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, Bantam Books: New York, 1997, p. 118-119.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid..

anger, panic, depression and the like). Therefore, we ought to secure our soul's health, as manifested in the tranquility of its faculties, or to regain it when lost. How can we preserve the calmness and tranquility of our soul? First of all, one should avoid stirring up sentiments that will upset any of its faculties. Al-Balkhī also suggested that people should store healthy and positive thoughts and feelings in their mind to help them tackle unexpected emotional outbursts just as they keep first-aid medicines at hand for unexpected physical emergencies.<sup>7</sup>

The root and core of most of the harmful emotional symptoms are distress and anxiety. For example, before someone experiences rage and anger, they first feel anxious and distressed about the situation that triggered the anger. The opposite state of this distress is happiness and joyfulness which is also the root-cause for all the positive emotional states that a person experiences such as tranquility, pleasure and delight.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while distress and happiness are the opposite poles of the root-causes of all pleasing and tormenting symptoms, distress and anxiety are the most powerful causes of psychological illness of the soul. Since joy and happiness are the main basis of its health, if we are keen about the sustenance of their soul, we should do our best to shield it from distress and to root it in joyfulness in the same way that somebody who is keen about their physical health will avoid what can cause disease and seek whatever can enhance their health.

---

<sup>7</sup> Al-Balkhī, Abū Zayd. (1984). *Maṣāliḥ al-Abdān wa al-Anfus*, Ed. Fuat Sezgin. Federal Republic of West Germany: Ernst Printers, Stuttgart, pp. 89-90.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 90. See also: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positive\\_psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positive_psychology).

Hence, al-Balkhī recommends that people protect the health of their soul by guarding it from *external factors* which can lead to unnecessary worries, disturbance, anger, panic, sadness and the like.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the author teaches that the soul should be protected from *internal factors*, such as negative thoughts. Negativity can lead to harmful worries and unsettling anxiety.

People can safeguard their spiritual health in two ways: one focused on their self-perception and the other on their reaction to exterior factors and the feelings which they give rise to in them.

First, when people feel peaceful, and the faculties of their soul are in a tranquil state, they should convince their heart (mind) that this worldly life has not been created to give people whatever their wish or desire without being subjected to anxieties and worries or harmful, unwelcome symptoms. They should realize (after this inner monologue) that this is the inherent nature of this life, and that this is what they may expect from it as they seek to develop their habits and regular ways of life. They ought not to ask for things which are not in keeping with the very nature of his world. This realism should constitute the basic tenet in all social relations with those above them, on a par with them or under them.

Second, people should learn, as much as they can, to ignore the annoying (anxiety-provoking) things that make up daily life. They should train themselves not to overreact to the minor incidents or things which they see or hear so that, by being able to cope with small things, they may also learn to bear those things and experiences

---

<sup>9</sup> *Maṣāliḥ al-Abdān wa al-Anfus*, p. 90.

which are more annoying and frustrating. In this, they would be like those who train themselves to (gradually) tolerate the painful effects of heat or cold, as well as other minor bodily pains, without showing impatience or edginess. They should act this way until this resilience becomes second nature to them. This method applies both the body and the soul.<sup>10</sup>

However, whoever opts for the second approach must be aware of the degree of their soul's forbearance in facing problems and difficulties. Not every person is strong or weak in the same way. Some can withstand great calamities without being stirred up, whereas others can be traumatized by or succumb to the slightest emotional provocation. Some people who push themselves too much can even develop bodily disorders because of their lack of flexibility. That is why it is of paramount importance that people come to know the nature of their soul and the degree to which it can cope with stress. According to al-Balkhī, people can decide what kinds of stressful situations they are ready to face and which ones they should better avoid only when they have arrived at true self-knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, so as the Islamic spiritual tradition has reminded Muslims repeatedly, people should bear in mind that the health of the soul and its tranquility are not a state which cannot be attained once and for all. Nor can it be preserved regardless of the context of everyday life. The very nature of human life makes it possible for a man or a

---

<sup>10</sup> Malik Badri. 2002 ed. *Maṣāliḥ al-Abdān wa al-Anfus*. Markaz al-Malik Fayṣal lil Buḥūth wa al-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyyah, Riyadh, p. 67. (for this foot-note I am referring to the edited version by Malik Badri).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

woman to keep his or her soul in perpetual tranquility and peace without experiencing anger, fear, distress or any other similar psychological states. This world is a place where anxiety and sadness are to be expected (al-Nahl 16: 43). It is only in the Hereafter that people will be perfectly happy (al-'A'lā, 87: 16, al-Layl, 92: 13, al-Duhā, 93: 4).

### **Negative Thoughts and Depression**

For al-Balkhī, distress and anxiety are the roots of many other harmful psychological states and illnesses of the soul. Several examples can be given to underscore this view. Rage and anger are often preceded by anxiousness and distress. In other words, anger is a reaction triggered by a certain emotional imbalance occasioned either by direct external factors (e.g. a provocation) or by internal thoughts (e.g. the recollection of a humiliating situation).

Worry could be described as a rehearsal of what might go wrong and how to deal with it. If preoccupation becomes chronic, as in the case of repetitive worries, the recurring negative thoughts may end up not only causing anxiety, but also bodily harm. As this symptom intensifies, the sickened soul will make the person feel that an event distant in space and time is about to happen. When fear sets in, the mind starts obsessing about how to handle the situation and ignoring anything else for the time being. In cases like that, people find themselves unable to use their mental faculties to deal with anything else. The imagined, eminent danger gets in the way of the enjoyment of the goodness at hand. When this happens, people fail to reconnect with others and other aspects of



life.<sup>12</sup> Their negative thoughts take over and become the focal point of their attention, which oftentimes produces a psycho-physiological short-circuit manifested in anger, sadness or fear.<sup>13</sup>

### **Pathological Emotional Habits**

Negative thoughts or faulty thinking leads to pathological emotional habits, such as anxiety, anger and sadness, which, in turn, cause many of the psychic disorders of the soul. Psychological symptoms do not necessarily have unconscious roots. They are learned habits, which can be treated by conditioning and even unlearned. In other words, the neurosis is itself a symptom.

People can get rid of their emotional disorders by concentrating on changing their inner thinking and wrong beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Some simple steps can help even the most chronic worriers to control their pathological habits.

As indicated above, what really causes the problem is not always what actually happens, but how people interpret their experiences. Thus, the same painful experience encountered by two different people can easily bring about two different responses in keeping with the way in which they regard themselves, others and their mutual relation.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> *Maṣāliḥ al-Abdān wa al-Anfus*, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> Aaron T. Beck, M.D. (1980). *Cognitive Therapy And The Emotional Disorder*, Penguin Books: New York, p. 122.

<sup>14</sup> Badri. M (2000) *Contemplation An Islamic Psycho-spiritual Study*, London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, p. 110.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

### **Keeping Healthy Thoughts and Feelings**

By following the rational cognitive treatment people can learn to furnish their mind with healthy thoughts and feelings as a 'vaccine' against unexpected emotional outbursts. Storing healthy thoughts and cognitions must be done when a person is in a tranquil and relaxed condition.

For al-Balkhī, losing one's perseverance is a greater catastrophe than the imaginary or real situations about which one may be depressed. People should train themselves or be trained to counteract negative thoughts which can lead to neurotic depression. Those who fail to do so will be more prone to become spiritually weak, thus running a greater risk to fail in life. However, those who are optimist and patient often reap success and achieve a deep feeling of fulfillment (al-Baqarah 2: 153 and Āli 'Imrān 3: 134).

### **One's Most Precious Thing: the Spiritual Self**

Al-Balkhī advises that one of the most important ways to enable people to strengthen or improve their mental health is by helping them to realize that their soul or self should be and, in fact, is their most precious 'possession' or maybe, better still, 'dimension'. Consequently, preserving and protecting the health of their soul or self should be one of their priorities in life. As a result, any loss which they may have to suffer in order to safeguard their mental and spiritual health will, henceforward, feel more bearable and situations which may predictably endanger their inner balance will probably lose (some of their initial) attractiveness.

At the same time, another useful technique discussed by al-Balkhī is showing people that any hardship or damaging loss that may have befallen them is either similar or less severe than what people have suffered or are suffering. Human beings often find solace in the realization that their predicaments are not (unfairly) unique, but, on the contrary, they are shared by many other people across the spectrum. Al-Balkhī stresses that people should, at all times, be helped to become aware that saddening or grievous incidents are part of this life.<sup>16</sup>

The above simple pieces of advice are meant to empower people to create an inner preparedness for misfortune as well as to foster thoughtful tranquility to keep negative thoughts under control, never allowing them to multiply in an unchecked manner (Yūnus, 10: 109; al-Naḥl, 16: 127 and 128; Ṭāḥā, 20: 130; Qāf, 50: 39; al-Ṭūr, 52: 48; Ṣād, 38: 17-22 and al-Qalam, 68: 48).

### **Another Perspective**

Another strategy in combatting mental distress, especially to reduce the effect of a calamity which has taken place, is by helping people realize that it could all have been much worse, more depressive and agonizing (saying of sayyidina Umar). This relativizing technique may help some individuals to be grateful to God for saving him from a possible greater catastrophe. However, what is even more important is that people understand that they have future to make up for whatever loss they may have suffered. The problem-solving mentality is much more beneficial to people than the victim-syndrome which paralyzes them and

---

<sup>16</sup> *Maṣāliḥ al-Abdān wa al-Anfus*, p. 83.

blocks their mental energy. If the people involved are religious, they can be reminded of the gifts which God has bestowed upon them and encouraged to use them to redress the losses undergone (Ibrāhīm 14: 7).

Furthermore, Ibn Ḥazm has suggested that people's imagination be used in order to increase their expectation of the future delight which they will be able to experience once their current problems have been partially or completely overcome.

Oftentimes, although not always, when people are invited to survey their experiences in light of a broader context, they realize that sorrowing and grieving mishaps are most of the time destined to be forgotten as the passing of days usually diminishes the sense of agony occasioned by misfortune. The realization that forgetfulness will plausibly take its normal course is bound to increase the patience with which people grapple with infelicitous situations.<sup>17</sup>

A similar approach is being employed today in behavioral therapy, albeit with more sophisticated and advanced techniques. The primary goal of spiritual and rational cognitive therapy in preventing depression is to confront, challenge, and modify maladaptive cognitive processes. However, the main focus of behavioral therapy, which is very important in preventing depression, is on self-control and social skills that can help patients bring about positive experiences in life. That is done, for instance, by applying techniques such as cognitive restructuring, self-

---

<sup>17</sup> Al-Munajjid, S.M. S. (2003). *Dealing with Worries and Stress*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). UK: Dār al-Sunnah, p. 58.

control therapy, scheduling pleasant events, and organizing relaxation and problem-solving training sessions.<sup>18</sup>

### **Anger Management**

Anger, like other emotions, may be considered a natural gift from God. It is essential for human survival. Physiologically, when we angry, our heartbeat and blood pressure go up; this is a direct effect of excessive adrenalin in our system. Our physic strength increases although spiritual strength decreases. Our intellect or power to reason is set on hold, and things we would not justify in a normal state become acceptable. The organs of our body, which we otherwise keep in check, suddenly escape our control. Thus, our tongue becomes abusive, and we utter words which can hurt people. Our hands and feet get out of control, and we can hurt others, humans, animals, ourselves or even things.

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) passed on various guidelines on emotion management. Without our love and respect for our Prophet, or even with it, we may have difficulties becoming motivated to really manage our anger or other negative emotions. The anger management approach, as practiced by the Prophet, is known today as the behavioral approach. It consists in diverting one's attention away from the cause of anger by embarking on strenuous physical activity with a view to letting out steam and relaxing one's muscles.

Anger is a type of emotion. Similarly to Miskawayh, al-Balkhī, too, regarded it as he most serious of the

---

<sup>18</sup> Malik Badri, "Counselling and psychotherapy from an Islamic perspective". *Psychological Studies*, 1: pp.166-165.

spiritual diseases.<sup>19</sup> It is not always reprehensible, since it has been planted in the soul to help the individual repel destructive things or situations. However, the degree of usefulness of anger is proportional to the moderation with which it is dealt with. Al-Balkhī realized that anger was the most frequent factor upsetting people in their everyday life, no matter whether the person involved was a commoner with limited authority or a king or sultan ruling over his subjects.

However widespread anger may be, it may also be said that it is more common and extreme among people who are naturally intolerant and hot tempered. In such cases, anger can become a chronic symptom overriding other aspects of a person's behavior. People of this kind seriously need to protect their soul against the ill effects of anger so that their life may be preserved from falling prey to stress and chronic unhappiness. By healing their soul from anger, people would also save themselves from the guilt and repentance which follows their uncontrollable outbursts. This applies to everybody whether they be powerful kings or average people with no extra powers.<sup>20</sup> The greater the authority one has over others, the greater the dangers of violent outbursts and tantrums.

Hence, nobody needs to train themselves to counteract anger more than kings and rulers. To heal their anger, people in authority may require both advice from an external person and consistent self-treatment.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ahmad ibn Muhammad, Miskawayh. (1968). *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, Edited by C.K.Zurayk, Beirut, American University of Beirut. Translated by C.K.Zurayk (1968). *The Refinement of Character*. Beirut, American University of Beirut, p. 58.

<sup>20</sup> *Maṣāliḥ al-Abdān wa al-Anfus*, p. 85.

As for the external line of attack, influential people should select and appoint the wisest from amongst his favorite companions to be his counselor, reminding him (of the harmful aspects of uncontrolled anger) and enlightening him about the righteousness of forgiveness and its worldly and supernatural rewards. He should also allow them to politely intercede in the cases of wrongdoers whom he may have brutally punished during his uncontrolled emotional outbursts. Merciful intercession can cool his rage just like cold water poured into a pot of steaming boiling water brings the boil to a halt. For this reason, sensible kings have always had wise advisors around them during special or public meetings.<sup>21</sup>

In regard to the internal line of attack, internal strategies are based on mental maneuvers, such as thoughts which people consciously repeat to themselves in order to counteract their anger-laden mind. For instance, people can take advantage of the times in which they are relaxed and tranquil to convince themselves that anger must and can be resisted (in all moderation) as soon as it flares up. If it is not opposed as soon as it appears, it will blow up into full-scale irrepressible rage. And after that, it can hardly be contained. In this, al-Balkhī's refined clinical sense led him to the most recent results of researches, which has counteracted the once accepted theory of catharsis in relieving anger. Previously, it used to be widely accepted that venting one's anger would help blow off steam and lessen violent feelings. Psychologists believe now that the application of this pressure-cooker hypothesis may actually increase anger instead of decreasing it. According

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

to the study conducted when people express their angry, aggressive feelings, they often get themselves so worked up that the situation may become worse than it was before.<sup>22</sup> This is analogous to a fire which starts small and can easily be put off at that stage but, if left unattended, it will burst into flames destroying whatever is burnable around it. And like the example of a horse that begins to run amok with its rider. If corrected as soon as it starts going wild, the horse will be managed and its performance will be as expected. However, if the horse is left to its own whims and emotions, it will get out of control. Keeping this thought in mind, when a person first feels that anger is creeping into his or her soul, he or she has the choice to prevent those feelings from reaching uncontrollable dimensions. If people keep working on their anger by consistently keeping it in check, they will most likely become accustomed to being in charge of their own mental energies.<sup>23</sup>

### **External and Internal Anger-Managing Strategies**

Al-Balkhī suggested that People with anger management issues need a counselor as well as internal self-treatment. Their counselor, advisor or even friends should remind them of the harmful aspects of uncontrolled anger, while they also enlighten them about the greatness of forgiveness and its benefits both in this life and the hereafter. They would certainly need their friends to politely intercede in their favor when they fear harsh

---

<sup>22</sup> Frances Wilks, *Intelligent Emotions*, United Kingdom: Arrow Book, 1999, p. 129.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.



reprisals from those whom they have offended. Of course, they should not view their friends' merciful intercession as an encouragement not to tackle their anger, but as cold water being poured into a pot of boiling water.<sup>24</sup>

### **Mercy tempers Anger**

People who are undergoing an anger management (self-) treatment should continually remind themselves of the great virtues of patience and forgiveness, essential characteristics of mercy. Without mercy, there is no forgiveness, and vice-versa.

A positive frame of mind is one of the noblest virtues to which human beings can aspire in their interpersonal relationships. Merciful people control their anger, suppress their rage, and pardon their offenders.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, those wishing to heal their soul of the illness of anger ought to ask themselves what is best for them: whether to enact forgiveness or to execute vengeance (thereby exposing their soul to the possibility of regret and remorse and the pain that accompanies them).

### **Mercy and Forgiveness**

Mercy is tied to compassion and closely linked with the act of forgiveness and pardon. The Islamic tradition defines mercy as the intent to bring good to others and caused them benefit. In other words, mercy makes a break with the past and fosters a new beginning where goodness and benefits can be achieved.

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

Rational therapy, as perceived by al-Bakhī, seeks to help people with anger issues to realize that quick severe vengeance and reprimand would be detrimental for their relationships. Anger between people in power and their subjects will most likely instill outward submission and obedience but surely not respect. In fact, these situations often breed deep-seated animosity and bitterness. However, gentle people who can overlook minor mistakes and forgive often inspire others to genuine love and mercy. In these cases, obedience and respect would come naturally and well up from within. The internal submission of love causes people to respect both their 'superiors and inferiors'. The external obedience of fear, on the contrary, leads to resentment and frustration.<sup>26</sup>

### **Putting One's Emotional Response on Hold**

Al-Bakhī stated that if somebody is angered by a subordinate whom he can freely punish or rebuke, they should never allow themselves to react with unmanageable rage. A sensible and smarter approach would be to delay their emotional response until their fury has calmed down and they are once again capable of fairly weighing up the offence. Without a calm spirit, any decision concerning the punishment of their subordinate would run the risk of being unfair and disproportionate.

Whoever can keep their cool and postpone judgment until they have regained inner peace would be virtuous on two accounts. First, they would be on the way to the attainment of patience and forgiveness as second nature. Second, they would be more successful in changing the behavior

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

of their subordinate by choosing a punishment which befits the offence committed. Fairness inspires respect, while injustice sows resentment and frustration.<sup>27</sup>

From a religious point of view, Muslims with anger issues may also be reminded that they should not be angry at what they do not own. Since everything belongs to Allāh, we are all His, including the people with whom we may be upset. Those who remember this will most likely be able to neutralize their angry feelings.

### **Self-Critical Tolerance and Forgiveness**

Another way for people in position of power to counteract anger and rage is to concentrate their negative feelings on the wrong deed of a subordinate or subject rather than on the offender.

While avoiding feelings of despise or scorn towards the offender, angry people should try and discover the causes and underlying motives behind mistakes or wrongdoings. Oftentimes, they will see that most offenses are either the result of irresistible lust or the inability to do one's duty because of some tempting desire. They should then realize that nobody (whether they be subordinates or bosses) is spared from similar forces or temptations. Realizations such as this can lead people to empathize with their offenders. Moreover, if they meditate regularly on this, they might even begin to show mercy and forgiveness towards the very people whom they would have otherwise punished (beyond proportion).

This should be the basic tenet in people's social relations with those who are above them, equal to them or

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

below them in terms of status. They should learn to become tolerant and relativize the annoying (anxiety-provoking) things which they experiences. They should train themselves not to overreact to the minor incidents or things which they hear or see. When people train themselves to bear with these little irritating experiences which occur in spite of them, they will (in time) become accustomed to tolerate things and resist becoming frustrated.<sup>28</sup> Forgiveness and tolerance are powerful and dynamic interpersonal forces which can enhance people's communication skills.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, people with anger issues, when upset by others, should genuinely ask themselves whether or not, in the past days, they committed the same kind of mistakes and careless behavior. They would probably find that they committed similar or, maybe, even greater faults out of lust or tempting desires. By recalling the punishment which they underwent, they may restrain from punishing somebody for similar faults. Thinking tactics like this may prove very useful in anger (self)-treatment.<sup>30</sup>

Forgiveness should not be one-sided. If we desire to be forgiven for our offenses, we should also learn to forgive others, especially, if we seek forgiveness from God. If we wish that God overlooks our weaknesses, we should learn to overlook the weaknesses of others.

Forgiveness is important for two reasons. First, it has repercussions for the after-life or the life hereafter. Muslims forgive with the hope of finding forgiveness.

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>29</sup> *Emotional Intelligence*, p. 164.

<sup>30</sup> *Maşāliḥ al-Abdān wa al-Anfus*, p. 86.

Seeking forgiveness is also a sign of existential humility, and forgiving others is a sign of magnanimity. Seeking forgiveness and forgiving others brings happiness in this world and augments the hope for attaining God's forgiveness. Second, forgiving improves relations among people by promoting a good reputation and fostering respect.<sup>31</sup>

We read in the Holy Text: 'The recompense for an injury is an injury equal to it (in degree); but if someone forgives and makes reconciliation, their reward is due from Allāh. For, indeed, (Allāh) does not love those who do wrong.' (*al-Shūrā*, 42:40). With its basic concern with the preservation of justice as well as its constant call to mercy, the Revelation and the Islamic Tradition has always sought to find the middle path between turning the other cheek and permitting impunity, and promoting never-ending revenge.

### **Thinking Positively about the Wrongdoer**

If angry people thoughtfully call to mind the sincere services which the offender rendered them in the past and his or her good characteristics, they will probably see that their negative feelings towards the wrongdoer will decrease.

Furthermore, angry people should avoid seeing their wrongdoer for as long as their feelings of rage override the tempering powers of their reason. Looking at the face of the offender before they have cooled down may stir up again the anger which might have started to lessen by then. It would be better for angry people to avoid seeing

---

<sup>31</sup> www.nursistudies.com, on *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Risale-i Nur Collection, The Twenty-First Flak*

those who upset them for a few days, since the passage of time can heal negative emotions. The intensity of anger can die down, and sadness can become less pungent. People would do well to use this cooling period to listen to guidance from a wise counselor and to nurture their mind with constructive thoughts and the other healing maneuvers bespoken above. These strategies might be enough, with the Grace of Allāh, to save angry people from harboring harmful feelings and possibly undertaking actions which they might regret later on.<sup>32</sup>

### **Counteracting Angry-laden Thoughts**

As indicated above, cognitive rational therapy is the treatment whereby people consciously work on overcoming their rage-prone character.

Angry-laden thoughts are essentially negative and must, therefore, be fought with their opposite: positive thoughts. One aspect of this mental maneuver is to take advantage of the times in which people are relaxed and tranquil to convince themselves that anger is a symptom which can be resisted (with tranquil thinking) as it shows itself.

Once anger becomes full-scale rage, it can hardly be contained anymore. It becomes like a fire which can easily be put out while it is small, but which can cause a lot of damage if it is allowed to continue unrestrained. Keeping this warning in mind, people can be made aware of the need to prevent their feelings of anger from turning into uncontainable rage. This type of awareness can become a

---

<sup>32</sup> *Maṣāliḥ al-Abdān wa al-Anfus*, p. 86.

useful tool in overcoming the dangers of a nervous or hot temperament.<sup>33</sup>

### **Contemplating about Bodily Disorders**

Another cognitive strategy is to think about bodily disorders which can be caused by anger and rage. Rising temperature, trembling, apprehension, arousal and general body disturbance are among the obvious symptoms. People who cannot control their anger may end up having bodily incurable disorders. In such a case, they would suffer more harm than the hurt they wanted to bring on the person who made them angry in the first place. Instead of getting even with their wrongdoers, angry people can actually injure themselves. If they bear this in mind when anger begins to creep into their soul, they might be more inclined to control themselves and their emotions.<sup>34</sup>

### **Conclusion**

At a time when the mutual influence of the corporeal and the spiritual was not always validated enough, al-Balkhī sought to educate people to accept their whole personality and to become agents in their own life. Contributions such as that of al-Balkhī can be of help in Islamic ethical training nowadays. Becoming a virtuous person is not about repressing one's emotions, but about seeking self-knowledge and training oneself by being mindful of what kind of thoughts one entertains and channeling one's

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>34</sup> Malik Badri, "Counselling and psychotherapy from an Islamic perspective", p. 166.

emotions. In short, thinkers such as al-Balkhī encouraged people to renounce a fatalistic worldview and embrace their role in their own destiny. Al-Balkhī has underlined the need to build and support positive emotions—such as mercy, love, forgiveness, generosity and courage—and to fight and thwart negative emotions leading to jealousy, anger, selfishness and cowardice. It is also interesting to realize that al-Balkhī did not understand patience and perseverance leading to passivity but, on the contrary, as ways to reinforce the self as a result of self-knowledge and self-control, which, seen as al-Balkhī presented it, was anything but repression.