The reality of *tawbah* (repentance) can be understood from a *hadith*, which says, “Every son of Adam is a sinner, and the best of sinners are those who repent.” While *tawbah* generally means seeking forgiveness from Allah (SWT), it literally means “to return” implying returning back to Allah (SWT) by seeking His forgiveness for our sins; by pledging to Him that we would refrain from all sins, and that we would take to the straight path.

A slave (*'abd*) of Allah repents from all sins—minor as well as major. *Alhamdulillah*, it is by the Grace of Allah (SWT) that Muslims are exempted from the major sin of ‘the manifest shirk’ (*al-shirk al-jali*), an example of which is ascribing sons or daughters to Allah (SWT). However, Muslims do fall into the trap of ‘the hidden shirk’ (*al-shirk al-khafi*), which may be done without even being aware of it. An example of this is “*Riya,*” which means to perform acts or to show off in order to gain praise or fame. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said, “The one who prays and wants people to see him has committed shirk. The one who fasts and wants people to know about his fasting has committed shirk. The one who gives charity (*sadaqah*) and wants people to know about his charity has committed shirk.” Indeed one has to be aware of all types of shirk, refrain from them and repent to Allah (SWT) for committing any type of shirk, knowingly or unknowingly.

*Tawbah* is not a lip-service or merely uttering words on the tongue for seeking Allah’s forgiveness (*istighfar*). It has to do with changing one’s attitude so that one is sincerely remorseful of one’s sinful activities, whether they are toward violation of the rights of Allah (SWT) or toward any wrongful action infringing upon the rights of other fellow humans. Allah (SWT) is eager to pardon those of His servants (*'ibad*) who understand that they are imperfect and that they are not immune from sinning; yet their attitude is that they will do their best to be guided by the divine guidance. We have in Surat al-Nisa’, “*Allah desires to make things clear to you and to guide you to the correct practices of those before you and to turn towards you. Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise*” (al-Nisa’, 4:26). And we have in Surat al-Baqarah, “*O people, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, so that you may be mindful [of Him]*” (al-Baqarah, 2:21). Allah (SWT) knows our attitude whether we are sincere in returning back to Him or not. If we are truly sincere in returning back to Him, He (SWT) will guide us and protect us.

We are stuck between two forces—one that is compelling us to return to Allah (SWT) and to repent to Him, and the other that is goading us toward all that is evil and forbidden. In other words, we are in a tug of war between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Allah (SWT) warns us of this situation when He says, “*Allah wishes to turn towards you, but those who follow their lusts want you to go far astray*” (al-Nisa’, 4:27). The followers of Satan among the humans and jinns take us far away from the straight path so that we are driven far away from the truth. We learn from a *hadith* that “Satan flows inside man like blood.” This is why people continue to become prey to the whisperings of Satan within them and begin to slavishly follow their base desires. This is why people continue to sin by day and by night.

It is Allah's mercy upon His slaves that He has left the door of repentance open. It is narrated that the Prophet (SAW) said, “Allah (SWT) holds out His Hand during the night to receive the repentance of the one who has committed wrong during the day and holds out His Hand during the day to receive the repentance of the
one who has committed wrong during the night. This saying of the Prophet should impel believers to repent to Allah (SWT) and to seek His forgiveness for sins committed by them by day or by night. Despite the magnitude of our sins, we must never lose hope in Allah’s mercy, because Allah tells us in Surat al-Zumar, “Say: O My servants who transgressed against themselves, do not despair of God’s mercy. For God forgives all sins. He is the Forgiver, the Merciful.” (al-Zumar, 39:53).

Repentance in itself is not sufficient unless one revives and renews one’s faith with Allah (SWT), and begins to act in that direction. About such people Allah (SWT) says, “But those who repent, who believe, who do righteous deeds, will enter Paradise” (Maryam, 19:60). Hence, repentance has to be accompanied with revitalization of faith, and renewal of contract with Allah (SWT) that one will act to the best of one’s ability. Such are the people about whom Allah (SWT) says, “Allah will change the evil deeds of such people into good ones. He is most forgiving, most merciful” (al-Furqan, 25:70).

There is a hadith qudsi through which we learn that we should never despair from the mercy of Allah (SWT). The meaning of the hadith is: “O son of Adam, so long as you call upon Me and ask of Me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of Me, I would forgive you. O son of Adam, were you to come to Me with sins nearly as great as the earth and were you then to face Me, ascribing no partner to Me, I would bring you forgiveness nearly as great as it.” We can now understand how eager Allah (SWT) is to forgive His servants.

Allah (SWT) loves those of His servants who repent and who purify themselves. “Allah loves those who turn back from wrongdoing and He loves those who purify themselves” (al-Baqarah, 2:222). The Prophet (SAW) is reported to have said, “Allah the Mighty and Majestic accepts the repentance of His servant as long as long as his death-rattle (gharghara) has not begun.” We learn from the Qur’an that Firaun’s repentance was not accepted as he believed in Allah (SWT) and repented to Him only when he was on the verge of death. Referring to this incident, the Qur’an says, “But as he was drowning he cried, ‘I believe there is no God except the one the Children of Israel believe in. I submit to Him. ‘Now? When you had always been a rebel, and a wrong-doer” (Yunus, 10:90-91).

There are two types of tawbah—the individual tawbah and the collective tawbah. Every individual is accountable for his or her actions before Allah (SWT). A true believer (mu’min) will hasten to seek forgiveness from the sins he or she committed against Allah (SWT). If the ‘abd is sincere, Allah (SWT) will accept his repentance and forgive his or her sins. However, a sincere ‘abd must also see to it that whatever injustice he or she may have done against other people must be settled with them by returning their rights to them or seeking their forgiveness; otherwise they will have a claim against that ‘abd over those rights on the Day of Judgment.

We also need to return back to Allah (SWT) collectively. Indeed, we have neglected our collective duties toward thedeen of Allah (SWT). First of all, the Muslim ummah does not have a caliph (khilafah), whose voice would be representative of the voice of the ummah. At best, we are a multitude of scattered Muslims, disunited and disband, and an easy prey that is ready to be devoured by hungry wolves. We have neglected our collective duty of enjoining virtues and forbidding evil (al-Amr bi al-Ma’ruf and al-Nahy ‘an al-Munkar). It is our duty to collectively struggle for the establishment of a just social order based on divine injunctions. “Let there be a community among you who call to the good, and enjoin the right, and forbid the wrong. They are the ones who have success” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:104).

It is not suggested that there should be only one jama’ah working for establishment of justice, and for promoting good, and forbidding evil. This is not feasible till such time that the ummah is guided on the basis of khilafah. Muslims should work with any jama’ah which is working to fulfill the collective obligations of the Muslim ummah. In doing so, the Qur’an advises the believers not to fear the censure of others, whosoever they may be. “Strive in the Way of Allah and do not fear the blame of anyone’s reproach” (al-Ma’idah, 5:54).

A sincere repentance according to the scholars has certain conditions: (1) to acknowledge the sin; (2) to seek Allah’s forgiveness frequently; (3) to regret for the sin committed (4) to stop doing the sinful act immediately; (5) to be determined to never go back to that sin again; and (6) to give back the right to whom it is due if the sin involves infringing upon the rights of a person. If any of these conditions are not met, then the repentance will not be perfect. It is only the pure sincere repentance that is acceptable by Allah (SWT). “O you who believe; turn to God in sincere repentance” (al-Tahrim, 66:8).

We can appreciate the merits of tawbah when we realize that the angels closest to Allah (SWT) calling
on Him to forgive the believers who turn to Him in sincere repentance. “Those [angels] who carry the Throne and those who surround it celebrate the praise of their Lord and have faith in Him. They beg forgiveness for the believers: ‘Our Lord, You embrace all things in mercy and knowledge, so forgive those who turn to You (in repentance) and follow Your path. Save them from the pains of Hell” (Ghafir, 40:7).

Let us sincerely repent to Allah (SWT) for our sins—major and minor, intentional or unintentional, open or secret. Indeed He accepts sincere repentance. He is the most forgiving; the most merciful.

Edited by Dr. Munawar Haque
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