Today’s khutba is the fourth one in the series of khutbas delivered previously on the subject of Islam, *iman*, and *ihsan*, and will focus mainly on the topic of *ihsan*. What does the word *ihsan* mean? It means perfection or excellence. It is derived from the Arabic root letters *ha*-seen-*noon* (ح س ن). It conveys two meanings: (1) to do something good to someone else, and (2) to do something at the level of perfection or *itqan*. According to a hadith, “Allah loves to see one's job done at the level of *itqan* (perfection).” Some people have the misconception that *ihsan* is restricted to the modes of worship. As a matter of fact, *ihsan* implies doing anything *fee sabilil-shallah* in the best possible way.

The part of Hadith Jibril relating to *ihsan* says, “Then he (the man) said, ‘Inform me about *ihsan*. The Messenger of Allah (SAW) answered, ‘It is that you should worship (*Ta’buda*) Allah (ُتَعْبِدُ اللَّهُ) as though you could see Him, for though you cannot see Him yet He sees you.’” Generally *’ibadah* is translated as worship, but its meaning is far more comprehensive and includes both worshipping Allah as well as obeying Him. It is derived from the root letters *’ain*-baa-daal (ع ب د) from which we have the word *’abd*, which means a slave. *Ihsan*, therefore, is to become a humble slave of Allah, submit completely to His will, and do everything commanded by Him in the best possible way with intense love, devotion, and conviction as if one is seeing Him. Since Allah is beyond time and space (transcendent), one cannot see Him physically. The expression “As though you could see Him” would therefore imply that one is constantly thinking about Allah. One is constantly conscious of Allah, and one is not living in heedlessness (*ghaflah*) any more.

There is a hadith that describes the feelings of a companion of the Prophet (SAW) in the state of *ihsan*. It is narrated that the Prophet (SAW) met Awf bin Malik (RA) and said, “How have you become O Awf Bin Malik?” He answered, “I have become a true believer.” The Messenger of Allah (SAW) said, “There is a reality to everything, what is the reality of what you are saying.” He answered, “O messenger of Allah, I freed myself from the *duniya* (I let go of the *duniya*). I stay awake the whole night in worship and see myself enduring thirst by observing fasts during the day. And it is as if I see the throne of Allah and it is as if I see the dwellers of Paradise visiting each other, and it is as if I see the dwellers of Hell screaming.” Then the Prophet (SAW) said, “I know exactly what you are talking about.” This shows the reality of one’s deep faith in Allah.

There are three narrations of the part relating to *ihsan* in Hadith Jibril: (1) “to do *’ibadah* of Allah as if you are seeing Him,” (2) “to fear Allah as if you are seeing Him,” and (3) “to work for Allah as if you are seeing Him.” All these three stages are beautifully summed up in the *ayah*, “Say, ‘My prayers and sacrifice, my life and death, are all for God, the Lord of all the Worlds’” (al-An’am, 6:162). *Ihsan* is a comprehensive term of the Qur’an and the hadith. It does not only refer to elevating oneself spiritually, but has to do with obeying Allah’s commands and struggling for His cause with full devotion.

Unfortunately the term *ihsan* from the perspective of *deen* has been supplanted by the institution of Suf-
ism. The word Sufism or Sufi is not to be found in the primary sources of Islam. It has crept into the body of ‘Islamic terms’ from an unknown foreign source. It is said that Sufi originally referred to an ascetic who clad himself in a garment made of suf or coarse wool as an indication of having renounced the world and of having devoted himself to the remembrance (zikr) of Allah. For some, the term Sufi is associated with the Greek term sophia (knowledge; wisdom) or sophis (wise; learned). Apparently, the Islamic Jurists (fuqaha’) have concentrated on Islam. The theologians (mutakallimun) have concentrated on iman, and in contemporary times the Sufis have concentrated on the ihsan perspective of our deen.

Sufism strives to reach the level of ihsan through three steps: (1) To cleanse and purify oneself internally by constantly seeking Allah’s forgiveness; (2) To be constantly engaged in the remembrance (zikr) of Allah, and (3) To abundantly send salutations (durood & salam) on the Prophet (SAW). Ihsan for the sahaba was not restricted to the theory and practice of the Sufi orders. The iman in their hearts was like mountains; yet their efforts were not limited to only lifting themselves up spiritually. They led normal and balanced lives. They laughed when it was an occasion to laugh. It is reported that the Prophet (SAW) laughed till one could see the back of his molars.

Ihsan for the sahaba was a balance between deen and duniya. They underwent a process of self-purification both during the Meccan period as well as during the Medinan period, the former through passive resistance when faced with persecution, and the latter through active resistance when required to confront the enemy. It was struggle (jihad) all through. Jihad in the path of Allah is an integral part of our deen and has to be carried on till the end of times. It is absolutely wrong to construe jihad as terrorism in the name of religion. The times we are living in requires jihad to be done with the Qur’an. This was the jihad which the Prophet (SAW) did during the Meccan period, and this is what we need to do now. “So do not yield to those who deny the truth, but strive with the utmost strenuousness by means of this (the message of the Qur’an) (al-Furqan, 25:52). There is another ayah that links jihad fee sabillillah with ihsan. “We will surely guide in Our ways those who strive hard for Our cause, God is surely with the righteous” (al-‘Ankabut, 29:69). Ihsan, therefore, is not simply to isolate oneself and engage oneself in strenuous exercises of zikr. Allah (SWT) will not be made supreme, here, in this world through this way. It is only possible through incessant jihad. No wonder that within a short span of about ten years after the Prophet’s demise, the sahaba through their jihad were able to bring the two super powers of their times—the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Empire to their knees. Indeed, the companions of the Prophet (SAW) were knights by day and monks by night.

It is clear from ayah 93 of Surat al-Ma’idah that one keeps going higher and higher in one’s consciousness of Allah till one attains the level of ihsan. “Those who believe and do good deeds will not be blamed for what they may have consumed (in the past) as long as they are mindful of God (have taqwa), believe and do good deeds, and continue to be mindful of God (having even more taqwa) and believe, and grow ever more mindful of God (having even more taqwa) and perfect their faith (Ihsan): God loves the Muhsineen (those who strive to perfect their faith)” (al-Ma’idah, 5:93). The driving force to go up from one level to the next higher level is the taqwa of Allah. For one to qualify to be among the muhsineen, and to be loved by Allah, one has to love Allah at the level of ihsan.

We learn from a hadith that human beings are like metals of silver and gold. This is interpreted to mean that their worth is based on the level of their taqwa of Allah. Analogically, the three levels of faith—Islam, iman, and ihsan could be compared with three coins made of copper, silver, and gold respectively. The gold coin has more worth than the silver coin, and the silver coin is more precious than the copper coin.

A muhsin or one who reaches the level of ihsan has absolute reliance (tawakkul) on Allah, and understands that nothing happens to him, good or bad, except with the will of Allah. The muhsin comes to the conclusion, as the Qur’an says, “God! There is no god but He, so let the faithful put their trust in Him” (al-Taqhabun, 64:13). A muhsin is the one whose heart resonates with the sound of la ilaha illallah (There is no god except Allah). Such people truly enjoy the tranquility of mind and heart, regardless of what is happening to them or around them. This phenomenon is explained in ayah 112 of Surat al-Baqarah, which says, “Indeed, those who submit themselves to God and is a muhsin shall be rewarded by their Lord: they shall have no fear,
nor shall they grieve” (al-Baqarah, 2:112). There is an ayah in Surat Luqman which explains this situation from another perspective. “And whosoever surrenders himself completely to God, while he is a muhsin, then he has taken hold of the strongest bond. And to God all matters will return” (Luqman, 31:22).

The muhsineen are described as those who follow the way (millah) of Ibrahim (AS). “Who is better in faith than one who submits himself wholly to God, and is a muhsin, and follows the religion of Ibrahim, the upright in faith, whom God chose for a friend?” (al-Nisa’, 4:125). Allah (SWT) made Ibrahim (AS) His friend while certifying that he was not among the polytheists. Today, although there is no shirk among Muslims in terms of idol worship, but it will not be wrong to say that many if not most Muslims have made ‘materialism’ their idol.

In Hadith Jibril, the Prophet (SAW) explained the concept of ihsan in a way that is comprehensible. Allah knows the capacities and capabilities of each one of us. We are told to have the taqwa of Allah as much as we possibly can. “So be mindful of God as best as you can; and listen, and obey; and spend in charity; it is for your own good. Those who guard themselves against their own greed will surely prosper” (al-Taghabun, 64:16).

Edited by Dr. Munawar Haque
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