

How Do Excess and Neglect in Nourishing Our Soul's Faculties Weaken Us?

The Danger of Excess and Neglect in the Nourishment of the Soul's Faculties

Excess and neglect refer to engaging in an activity either more or less than the balanced amount, either by overindulging in it or failing to address it adequately. We have heard a lot about the harms of excess and neglect. In any field, they can be harmful and cause many problems. One of the most common is excess and neglect in physical nourishment. Usually, when we talk about nourishment, we often subconsciously think of physical nourishment. Hearing terms like overeating, undereating, overweight, and underweight also subconsciously directs our minds in this direction. But this is only a small part of nourishment which relates to our senses.

From a humanological perspective, nourishment has a much broader scope and a more comprehensive definition. It is not just about feeding our stomachs. Rather, each faculty of the soul needs its own kind of food. Actually, excess and neglect in nourishing the faculties of the soul become our Achilles' heel in our journey towards perfection. Of course, it is not just about how much we feed our faculties, but also about making sure that what we give them is *Halal*¹ and pure.

Just as contaminated food can infect and sicken the body after entering the stomach, contaminated nourishment of other faculties can also weaken and sicken the soul. So if we examine ourselves wisely, we will realize that imbalance in the

¹. Permissible according to Islamic Law

nourishment of our faculties and our disregard for the purity of their nourishment are the cause of our stagnation and stops on our spiritual path and journey towards God. The importance of these two issues is so great that if we ignore them, our other efforts will also be fruitless. Similar to a runner on a treadmill, despite years of dedication and effort in pursuing religiosity, we will find ourselves unable to progress even a single step.

In the previous section, we became acquainted with the perceptive faculties of the soul and learned the function of each one. Now that our understanding of the human being and his relationship with the universe is more complete, it is a good idea to revisit this topic once again. This time, let us examine it from the perspective of nourishing the soul's faculties and the problems that arise from imbalance in this area.

A Review of the Functions of the Soul's Faculties and Their Interconnection

Before discussing the nourishment of the soul's faculties as well as the excess and neglect we face in this area, let us review our previous knowledge to better understand this topic. As we mentioned, the main dimension of our being is our soul or heart. The soul is an immaterial entity and cannot directly interact with the material world. So it needs a tool to act as an intermediary and establish a connection between it and the world. This tool is the body. Essentially, our body is the carrier of our soul. Our soul, through our body, gains knowledge of the world and connects with it, ultimately developing through this very process.

The body and soul connect through five faculties called perceptive faculties. Each of these faculties has a duty and forms part of our knowledge about the world. Our

five senses are the first to interact with the world. Then come imagination, estimation, and intellect. Humans and animals share in sensation, imagination, and estimation. The intellect is something humans and angels both have in common. Therefore, we are not called humans by having any of these faculties. What makes us human and the best of creations is our supra-rational faculty or heart, that is, the same unique essence that God has deemed only human beings worthy of being entrusted with, among all His creations. Of course, this categorization of faculties does not mean that they are separate and independent of each other. Rather, they all represent different levels of a single truth, which is the soul, heart, or human dimension of our existence. Therefore, like different components of a system, they are interconnected, and healthy or unhealthy nourishment of each one affects the entire system. Ultimately, the output of all these faculties manifests itself in the heart. But how do these faculties interact with one another?

Effects of Faculties on Each Other

You might have heard the saying “I am a better person when I have less on my plate.” This is not a proverb but a fact. Overeating, known as gluttony, directly affects the functioning of the intellectual faculty and disrupts its performance. The same is true for other faculties. Those who excessively feed their imaginal and estimative faculties by watching too many movies, listening to music all the time, spending long hours on social media, reading fictional and crime novels, following news of incidents, prying into people’s lives, constantly monitoring others’ behavior, and so on, gradually become dominated by imaginal and estimative faculties. This dominance overshadows the intellect and leads the individual to

make mistakes in distinguishing between good and bad. Our difficulty concentrating on analytical reading or maintaining focus during prayer stems from the overactive imaginal and estimative faculties.

Generally, overindulgence and imbalance in any faculty disrupt the spiritual balance of a person. This can lead him astray from the Straight Path by providing the ground for committing sins. To better understand this imbalance, imagine someone with a head twice the size of his body, or one leg significantly heavier than the other! It is clear that such a person can never experience a normal life and would face difficulties doing even simple tasks like walking. The same goes for the spiritual realm. The difference is that in the spiritual realm, it is not so easy to identify imbalance, and it requires an indicator or criterion. In the spiritual dimension, we need a criterion that acts like litmus paper. When our soul is exposed to it, based on the reaction that occurs, we can precisely figure out our state.² Our true Beloved has introduced this criterion in verse 24 of *Surah At-Tawbah*.

A Criterion Showing the Balance of Faculties

According to verse 24 of *Surah At-Tawbah*, not everyone with a human appearance can be considered human. Many individuals possess striking physical features and bodies, yet inwardly, they are similar to stones, wood, plants, or animals. What makes a person a human being is not his outward perfections, but prioritizing the beloveds in his heart. According to this verse, the only person worthy of the title of a true human is someone whose heart's first, second, and third beloveds are Allah,

². Ayatollah Haeri Shirazi

the Household of Prophet Muhammad (PBUT), and *jihad*. As soon as this prioritization is disrupted and one of the sensory, imaginal, estimative, or even intellectual beloveds takes the place of these three in the heart, a person loses his human dignity. In the journey towards the hereafter, none of the sensory, imaginal, estimative, or intellectual activities alone have true authenticity. Rather, they are all preliminaries to the development of the heart.

By looking at his heart, everyone can precisely determine who or what his true beloveds or life priorities are. The heart is honest and never lies to its owner. Therefore, it is necessary for all of us to at least once a day examine ourselves in the mirror of this verse and evaluate our inner beauty and ugliness. This is also the meaning of self-reckoning that religious scholars have emphasized so much. Self-reckoning reveals the current state of our heart. If, during self-reckoning, we realize that the prioritization of our beloveds has been disrupted and another love besides the three main beloveds has preoccupied us, it is clear that something is wrong. It means one of our sensory, imaginal, estimative, or intellectual faculties has received more nourishment than it needs and has violated the right of the human dimension.

The question now arises: What must we do? Must we stop our sensory, imaginal, and estimative activities? Definitely not! We must not stop any of these activities, and there must not be any limits on enjoying them. The real issue is about excess and neglect. Basically, it is not enjoying animalistic or intellectual beloveds that is harmful, but rather excess and neglect in their nourishment. In this case, neglect is just as harmful as excess. That is why Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of permissible pleasures and even consider them a prerequisite for spiritual and

supra-rational activities. They stress that if these activities are eliminated, a person's journey towards human perfection will really slow down.

In this lesson, we discussed the importance of balance in nourishing the faculties of the soul and listed the harms of excess and neglect in this regard. Both excess and neglect in nourishing the faculties distance us from God and the purpose of creation. It is necessary to check our hearts at least once a day and evaluate the purity of the things it loves. If the heart inclines towards a beloved other than the True Beloved, it loses its balance and exchanges inner joy and vitality with feelings of emptiness, lack of motivation, and boredom.

Keep in mind, a believer's happiness is unwavering;³ therefore, feelings of sadness or depression indicate a deficiency in faith.

³. *Mizan al-Hikmah*, vol. 2, p. 880, *hadith* 5536