

## What Are the Dispositions of the Soul? How Does a Deed Become a Disposition?

### What Does It Mean for Something to Become a Disposition of the Soul, and Which Characteristics Can Transform into Dispositions of the Soul?

If you have glanced through books on ethics, you have likely come across the term "dispositions of the soul" (*Malakat Nafsani*) frequently.

"Malakat" is the plural of "*Malakah*," which means "ruler." At birth, the human soul is like a blank page, free from any attributes or characteristics. Over time, however, a person develops abilities and traits that, through conscious choice and repeated practice, become firmly established within them. In terminology, these ingrained characteristics of the soul are called "dispositions of the soul."

All dispositions of the soul act as a useful and effective tool at our disposal. For example, driving is very difficult for a beginner and requires a high level of focus and attention; moreover, it poses significant risks for passengers. However, once a person masters the skill of driving, they can drive while engaging in conversation, eating fruit, admiring the scenery along the road, and travel long distances in a short time without causing any accidents. The same principle applies to dispositions of the soul. For instance, maintaining presence of mind and presence of heart in prayer is much easier for disciplined people who have acquired the disposition of presence (*Hudhur*) or humility or reverence (*Khushu'*) compared to the average person. Dispositions of the soul can be divided into several broad categories:

#### **-Physical Dispositions:**

Some dispositions are "physical" and mostly manifest through bodily actions, such as proficiency in swimming or horseback riding.

**-Mental Dispositions:**

Other dispositions are "mental" abilities, such as the disposition of concentration or the power of analysis.

**-Soul and Heart Dispositions:**

Another category of dispositions, which is the focus of this article, consists of "soul" and "heart" attributes, which include positive dispositions such as generosity and forbearance, or negative dispositions such as stinginess and envy.

In most ethical books, it is recommended that we practice virtues such as patience, truthfulness, forgiveness, and generosity to the extent that they become dispositions for us. This means that we should always be obedient to the dispositions of patience, truthfulness, and generosity, allowing each of these traits to become the ruler of our existence. Certainly, there is a big difference between someone who tries to be truthful and someone for whom truthfulness has become a disposition. For example, when a person says, "I simply cannot hold grudges," it indicates that purity of the heart dominates their soul, and Satan cannot easily tempt them into resentment. The same applies to negative traits. Someone who cannot control their gaze has allowed lustful wandering of the eyes to become a dominant disposition over their soul. Now, the question that might arise is: "How do our actions become dispositions for us?"

To answer this question, it is necessary to first discuss the concept of deed and its connection to assets, and to examine whether every deed leads to the acquisition of a trait or asset.

### **The Connection Between Deeds and Assets**

In previous lessons, we discussed that the world is a place of action, and we have come to perform actions. Deeds are what lead to "becoming"; that is, the acquisition of perfection and assets happens through deeds. We must align ourselves with the conditions of Heaven and grow stronger. If our deeds—whether they involve spousal relationships, raising children, studying, serving others, acts of worship, or even holy endeavors like striving in the path of God (*Jihad*) and martyrdom—do not lead to greater intimacy with and similarity to the Almighty, are merely absorbed by our material nature and our heart receives nothing. Without action, no matter how much knowledge we acquire, it only burdens the heart and distances us from the right path of becoming similar to God. It is important to note that deeds are distinct from knowledge: Knowledge is information, while the deed is the utilization of that information. The quality of our life in the *Barzakh* and the way we are resurrected on the Day of Judgment, and our life thereafter are all the products of our deeds and the results of our decisions, relationships, behaviors, and thoughts.

The product of our deeds is stored in our hearts and souls because our heart is our only true asset. Just as a fetus cannot be born healthy without the formation and development of its organs in the mother's womb, our heart and soul cannot achieve growth and health without action. Without action, no disposition or power is

created within us. In order to achieve the purpose of creation and to become similar to Allah, we must transform our knowledge into assets, and action is the stage that turns knowledge into asset. No one becomes a skilled driver merely by reading a driving manual unless they sit behind the wheel and endure its fear and anxiety.

If we wish to achieve a goal in any of the inanimate, vegetative, animalistic, intellectual, or human dimensions, we must engage in practice within the appropriate gym and turn the information into assets so that our soul gains strength. Allah, as our mentor (*Rabb*), has placed various gyms for us, such as marriage, spousal relationships, and parenting, so that through testing, practice, and action in these fields, we may acquire divine names and attributes and become similar to Him. Those who avoid these training grounds out of laziness will not experience "becoming."

### **The Stages of Transforming Deeds into Dispositions of the Soul**

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of our existence in this world is "becoming" and acquiring assets. Acquiring assets mean that all the virtuous qualities become dispositions for us and the path to achieve these dispositions is through effort, practice, and repetition. A sound heart, which we must attain for a healthy birth into the hereafter, is not achieved overnight. The requirement for "becoming" and acquiring assets is consistent action and perseverance. Every deed we do leaves an impression on our heart, and with repetition, the effect of that action becomes more enduring. Our long-term dispositions of the soul—such as generosity, forgiveness, selflessness, good manners, and positive thinking—are all the products of practice and the repetition of actions.

Fundamentally, developing any disposition within the soul takes time. No attribute appears or disappears within us at once. Just as our physical growth does not happen overnight, our spiritual growth and the acquisition of divine attributes also do not occur suddenly or overnight. To acquire the disposition of calligraphy, one must write extensively; to gain the disposition of driving, one must practice driving. As the saying goes, "practice makes perfect." To attain the attribute of courage or the skill of eloquence, wishing or praying is not enough, but rather it requires practical action. Each time we perform an action, we take a step closer to acquiring that disposition. Every action, no matter how small, contributes to empowering our soul <sup>1</sup>. A single night of prayer and supplication undoubtedly brings us closer to God, but the spiritual radiance of that act can only be truly understood if it is repeated consistently. Therefore, one should not expect a single act of night worship to conquer the universe or elevate them to the station of absolute certainty (*Yaqīn*).

This principle also applies to negative dispositions of the soul. Every broken promise is a step toward dishonor, and every act of deliberate gluttony gradually distorts our inner self, making it become similar to an animal. Every time we give in to anger or behave inappropriately, it strengthens the predatory side of us, gradually transforming us into more wolf-like individuals.

Have you ever had any experience in creating good long-term dispositions of the soul or eliminating bad traits within your soul? We look forward to hearing your valuable insights and experiences.

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<sup>1</sup>. Imam Ali (Peace be upon him) states: "Whoever acts will increase in strength, and whoever neglects their actions will grow weaker and more sluggish."