

The Hidden Path to Closeness to God: How to Be Loved by God and the *Ahl al-Bayt*

How Do We Attain Closeness to God? A Re-examination of the *Ma'rifa*-Based Foundations of Closeness to God in Shia Thought

Since the dawn of history, humanity has faced a fundamental question: How can the existential distance between our finite selves and the Infinite Creator be reduced? The quest for an answer has birthed countless spiritual traditions. However, misidentifying the path to perfection has often led many mystical practices to trap the seeker in personal delusions rather than drawing them closer to the truth.

In Islamic philosophy, the concept of “closeness to God” holds a unique position as one of the most foundational teachings of human existence. This is because the ultimate goal of a life of faith is nothing less than attaining a station of closeness and harmony with the Lord. Despite its significance, a misunderstanding of the essence of closeness to God has sometimes reduced it to mere outward rituals or fleeting emotions.

In this article, drawing on Quranic and *hadith*-based principles and the *ma'rifa*-based insights of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them), we will examine the authentic meaning of closeness to God, the criteria for attaining it, and the factors that enable human ascent to higher levels of closeness. This understanding extends

beyond moral conduct and devotional practices to include the inner structure of values, the hierarchy of love, and the fundamental orientation of human concern.

The *Ma'rifa*-Based Definition of Closeness to God: Harmony with and Likeness to God

The first step in understanding closeness to God is to distinguish between two types of closeness: spatial closeness and existential closeness. It is self-evident that God transcends space, time, and physical limitations. Therefore, viewing closeness as nothing more than physical nearness is inherently meaningless. The Quranic verse, “And He is with you wherever you are” [1], reminds us that the Divine Presence is not confined to a specific location.

Consequently, closeness to God can only be understood as “existential harmony.” This means that through spiritual growth, a human being cultivates virtues and attributes that align with Divine Names and Attributes. Embodying qualities such as knowledge, justice, compassion, wisdom, mercy, and truthfulness serves as the primary manifestation of this harmony. As these attributes become more firmly rooted in a person, they take firmer steps toward closeness to God. From this perspective, worship is not merely the fulfillment of an obligation; rather, it is an educative tool meant to move the human being from formal ritual practice toward existential likeness to God. An act of worship that lacks this educational impact fails to create harmony with God. Therefore, closeness to God is a gradual and dynamic process that finds its path through sincerity of intention, the refinement of ethics, and inner purification.

The Criterion for Closeness to God: Aligning with the Goals and Concerns of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace Be Upon Them)

According to the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them), the measure of one's closeness to God is not determined solely by outward behaviors. Instead, the true criterion is the extent to which an individual participates in fulfilling the goals and concerns of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them). Just as in a worldly family, a devoted child who strives for the well-being of their parents is more beloved to them, in the heavenly family, closeness is determined by how closely one aligns themselves with the divine mission of the Infallible ones.

The Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them) are the mines of mercy, compassion, love, and guidance. When they witness a person taking steps toward establishing Divine Rule on earth, they bestow their pleasure upon them. The pleasure of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them) is a principal means of attaining God's pleasure and, as a result, one of the deepest paths toward closeness to God.

In Shia thought, closeness to God does not mean ethical similarity that lacks a tangible link to the life and divine mission of the Infallible ones. True likeness occurs only when an individual elevates their limited, personal concerns to the universal and supra-rational concerns of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them). Therefore, the ultimate criterion for closeness is the degree of heart-felt and practical compatibility with their sacred objectives.

The Key Factor in Achieving Closeness to God: Regulating the Heart's Hierarchy of Love and Values

Attaining the highest degrees of closeness to God requires a profound restructuring of the heart's hierarchy of love. Our hearts possess a hierarchy of loves and priorities. However, most individuals remain preoccupied with sensory, imaginal, or estimative concerns, and sometimes even intellectual pursuits that lack divine orientation. To seek true closeness to God, we must align our values, affections, and concerns with the values, sufferings, responsibilities, and lifestyle of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them). This structural shift within the heart paves the way for an individual's transformation from a passive, limited person into a purposeful, universal, and benevolent one aligned with Divine concerns.

In fact, closeness to God becomes real when love for the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them) becomes the top priority of one's heart, and the individual consciously decides to adopt the goals of the Ahl al-Bayt as their own. Such a person is no longer confined by personal desires or illusory fears. Instead, a passion for guidance, the salvation of humanity, and the spiritual growth of society comes alive within them. This form of value-based harmony represents one of the deepest expressions of closeness to God, for it not only transforms the individual but also makes them a bearer of divine responsibility.

The Role of the Infallibles: The Only Path to Authentic Closeness to God

From the Shia perspective, attaining closeness to God is not possible without a perfect and flawless role model. The Infallible ones are manifestations of the divine will. That is, they represent a practical and observable embodiment of divine

attributes. Since infallibility preserves them from error, negligence, and lapse, following them remains the only reliable path for avoiding deviation in the course of spiritual growth.

Owing to our cognitive and moral limitations, we may perform good deeds with flawed intentions or develop incomplete understandings of religion. The Infallibles thus serve as the criterion and measure for evaluating the soundness of intentions, orientations, and actions. Accordingly, any movement along the path of human growth must be structured under their guidance.

The life conduct (*sira*) of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them) demonstrates how they manifest divine concerns in social, personal, and moral life. Adherence to this life conduct makes possible true likeness, which is the very essence of similarity to God. From this perspective, the relationship with the Infallibles is not merely *ma'rifa*-based, but fundamentally existential. This relationship aligns the individual with them, making the person share in their concerns and purpose.

From the perspective of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them), acts of worship are not the ultimate goal. Rather, they are tools for achieving existential harmony and regulating the human value system. Each act of worship must have the capacity to foster compatibility with divine attributes, otherwise, it is ineffective. Worship advances us on the path of closeness to God only when guided by the Infallibles, accompanied by sincere intention and divine concern, and when it shapes the existential structure of the human being toward likeness to God.

Closeness to God is neither a simple ethical concept nor a mere emotional experience. Rather, it is an existential and *ma'rifa*-based notion defined through harmony with and similarity to God. The criterion for this harmony is not only the

performance of acts of worship, but also the practical alignment of a person with the aims and concerns of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them) because they are the divine standard for assessing love and closeness.

A person seeking the highest degrees of closeness to God must reorganize their heart's hierarchy of love, placing the affection for and concerns of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them) above everything else they value inside. Moreover, by following the Infallibles and practicing obligatory and voluntary acts of worship, one must actualize their existential potential to embody divine attributes.

Thus, closeness to God is not the end of a path, but the beginning of an endless ascent, sustained by harmony, love, responsibility, and likeness to the Absolute Truth.

References

[1]. Holy Quran, 57:4