

From Struggle to the Joy of Servitude: Decoding the Love-Based Movement Model

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The Love-Based Movement Model: A Century-Long Journey in a Single Night

Human behavior reveals a persistent gap between imposed obligations and inner motivation. To better understand this distinction, consider a football fan who eagerly spends hours analyzing matches, studying the history of their favorite team, and keeping up with its training sessions. No external force compels this person to study; rather, their love for the subject guides their perceptions and actions. Their self (*nafs*) becomes so absorbed in what they love that other temptations lose their hold, allowing them to pursue their goal without distraction. The fundamental question, then, is this: How can we move beyond the exhausting struggle against the self and adopt the epistemological framework of the love-based paradigm to progress toward perfection as quickly as possible?

The Challenges of Struggling Against the Self on the Spiritual Journey

A failure to understand one's true self and mistaking the false self for the true self can turn religion into a constant struggle against oneself. In this state, true servitude has not yet been attained, and worship remains a struggle, driven either by fear of the punishment of Hell or by the desire to attain the rewards of Heaven. Although this approach can serve as a deterrent in the early stages of religious commitment, from the perspective of self-knowledge, it directs a person's existential energy toward managing crises and resisting temptations rather than achieving essential transformation.

In critiquing this approach, it is important to recognize that reproaching the self is merely a strategy for managing periods of heedlessness. When a person becomes caught up in struggling against the self, their entire mental capacity is devoted to the struggle rather than to the beloved. Instead of

driving personal growth, this concentrated energy becomes a barrier that slows spiritual journey. By contrast, the love-based movement model begins when a person has correctly understood and embraced the true essence of their own existence. In this state, servitude shifts from the realm of adversarial obligation to that of positive attraction to the beloved. When the desire for the infinite is fulfilled through love for Allah, there is no longer any room for other temptations to take hold. To apply the love-driven paradigm in one's life, the first step is to change how one views religious acts and obligations. In conventional approaches that focus exclusively on controlling the self, these practices are often seen as burdensome obligations. From the perspective of love, however, every righteous deed is a means, not an obstacle.

Let us consider this logically: If someone longs to connect with the beloved and encounters a means of reaching their ultimate destination, would they resist it? Certainly not. They would welcome it eagerly. Likewise, within the love-based movement model, religious obligations are not restrictions or constraints for someone motivated by love. Rather, they are precisely the means through which that person draws closer to their true beloved: Allah.

The Role of Following in the Epistemological System

In revealed texts, the connection between love and following is a fundamental principle. In the Quran Allah says: “Say, ‘If you love Allah, then follow me; Allah will love you.’”¹ In this verse, following the messenger is presented not as an imposed command, but as the natural outcome of love. In the Love-driven paradigm, following is not a demanding act of will, but an emotional necessity. Someone who claims to love God cannot disobey His commands, for they are the very path to union with Him.

Within the love-driven model, following the Sharia and the Prophetic tradition is, in fact, a matter of clearing the way for spiritual flight. When a person becomes absorbed in love, the self no longer inclines toward scattered temptations. This is much like someone whose passion for their profession leads them to devote all their time to their work, so that other distractions, such as taking breaks at inappropriate times or engaging in unnecessary entertainment, lose their appeal. This loving focus makes it possible to accomplish in a single night what might otherwise take a hundred years, because inner friction has been reduced to a minimum. The practical application of the love-based model rests on this principle: focusing as fully as possible on the Beloved, with every righteous deed representing another step on this ladder of ascent.

Historical and Experiential Evidence

The significance of the love-based movement model can be seen in key events in *Shia* history and even in contemporary lived experience. The event of Ashura offers the clearest example of this principle in practice. In those critical circumstances, Imam Hussain's companions were not struggling against the self; they were defending the Beloved. What kept them steadfast on the afternoon of Ashura was neither fear of Hell nor the hope of attaining Heaven, but the sweetness of union with the Beloved.² Their entire selves were so absorbed in Imam Hussain that even physical wounds could not prevent them from continuing on their path.

This pattern was also clearly manifested during the Sacred Defense (the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War). The fighters who, despite severe injuries, remained eager to return to the battlefield were exemplary examples of those who had devoted themselves entirely to the love of Allah and jihad. From the perspective of an approach based on reproaching the self, such behavior might seem irrational, since self-preservation is one of the self's most basic instincts. Within the love-driven

paradigm, however, this behavior is entirely logical: In the presence of the Beloved, one's own life loses its relative importance. For those endowed with *ma'rifa*, the heart of a believer is God's sanctuary. Once this sanctuary is filled with love for God, no room remains for anyone else.

The Structure of the System of Worship

To put this perspective into practice in one's life, one's approach to worship must be restructured. In the conventional approach, worship is a duty; in the new framework, it is a meeting with the Beloved. This shift in perspective brings about significant changes in the structure of a believer's life.

1. Obligatory Acts of Worship: In this model, prayer and fasting are not merely obligations to be fulfilled; they are opportunities for private communion with the Beloved. A person who prays out of love experiences a quality of presence entirely different from that of someone who prays out of fear of punishment.

2. Recommended Acts of Worship: From the perspective of reproaching the self, recommended acts of worship are an additional burden. In the love-based movement model, however, they are means of drawing closer to God. Just as a lover seizes every opportunity to meet the Beloved, a believer makes use of supererogatory prayers to remain in the presence of the Beloved.

3. Avoiding Sin: In this model, refraining from sin stems not from fear, but from a lack of incompatibility. A lover refrains from sin not because they are afraid, but because sin is incompatible with the essence of the Beloved. This difference in motivation ensures steadfastness. The existential implications of the love-based paradigm extend far beyond changes in outward behavior. This model transforms the inward state of human existence. While performing righteous deeds, a person acting out of love experiences a pleasure that no worldly temptation can rival. This

pleasure is the driving force that transforms the spiritual journey from an exhausting, duty-bound struggle into a joyful journey of love.

Drawing on divine teachings and the example of the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them), the love-based movement model offers a comprehensive approach in which the self (*nafs*), rather than serving as an obstacle, becomes the vehicle for spiritual flight. This is the essence of religious commitment: Instead of moving forward under the lash of self-reproach, a person accomplishes in a single night what might otherwise take a hundred years, propelled by the irresistible attraction of love.

References

¹. Quran, 3:31.

². Mohammad Ali Shomali, “The Virtues of Imam Husayn (a) and His Companions,” *Message of Thaqalayn*, vol. 13, no. 3, Autumn 2012, Published by Ahlul Bayt World Assembly. <https://al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol-13-no-3-autumn-2012/virtues-imam-husayn-companions-shomali/virtues-imam-husayn>.