

The Ontology of Solitude and Spiritual Watchfulness: A Path to the True Self

Contents

Solitude and Spiritual Watchfulness: A Modern Existential Necessity	2
Ontology and the Place of Solitude and Spiritual Watchfulness.....	2
How Solitude and Spiritual Watchfulness Refine Intention	3
Directing and Fulfilling Desires Through Solitude and Spiritual Watchfulness.....	4
An Existential Turning Point: Solitude as Reckoning Before the Judgment Day.....	5
Continuing on the Path of Truth	5
References	7

Solitude and Spiritual Watchfulness: A Modern Existential Necessity

Today, people are caught up in their multiple social roles and mental preoccupations, while facing a constant stream of competing demands. Consider, for example, someone who has achieved great success in their professional and academic life. They enjoy social standing, have a stable family life, and have achieved academic success. Yet beneath this outward success lies a sense of inner turmoil. This instability does not stem from a lack of material resources, but from a failure to connect with the existential center of gravity. When human actions lack a clear existential direction, they can trap a person in a cycle of neglecting the true self rather than bringing them closer to perfection. To escape this condition and recover the true self, a person needs solitude and spiritual watchfulness. These are not merely ethical recommendations but existential necessities that help the sound heart return to God, its true Owner.

Ontology and the Place of Solitude and Spiritual Watchfulness

In every dimension of life, from individual actions to social interactions, a person must regard the true self as their only authentic asset. Any action or choice has existential value only when it is aligned with the needs of the true self. As a being destined to return to the Origin in a healthy and sound state, the human being needs a model that can transform every dimension of life into light. In this context, solitude and spiritual watchfulness are not secondary activities but central elements in managing life and regulating this relationship with the true self.

Many existential failures stem from the tendency to regard oneself as an independent entity within the universe and to organize one's desires around one's own limited abilities. Such a person fails to recognize that proper management of life requires every relationship, every social role, and every achievement ultimately to serve the true self. This benefit extends beyond the individual.

When a person properly regulates their own existence, the resulting goodness and blessings also extend to their spouse, children, and others in their life. Thus, an authentic life is built on transforming all assets into light. This transformation can occur only when a person sets aside time for solitude and existential growth.

How Solitude and Spiritual Watchfulness Refine Intention

Within the hierarchy of existence, there is a dimension called the supra-rational—the fifth layer of existence—which governs the other dimensions. Its function is to direct and regulate inclinations. The key point, however, is that this dimension must be nourished and strengthened through an ongoing relationship with the beloved so that it can regulate the other dimensions of existence. Without this connection, worship, religious scholarship, social service, and even moral virtues may not only fail to bring a person closer to perfection but also draw them away from the truth. A careful analysis of solitude and spiritual watchfulness shows that this process serves as an antidote to the rebellion of the other dimensions of existence.

Even when performing good deeds, a person who neglects solitude and fails to strengthen the supra-rational dimension through closeness to Allah and seeking refuge in Him and the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon him) remains vulnerable to self-admiration, hypocrisy, and arrogance—tendencies that can quietly influence a person's actions and ultimately lead them toward Hell. The emphasis that the friends of God place on regularly reciting Du'a Tawassul and Du'a Istighatha reflects this fundamental reality: Without direct divine assistance, a person may be creating their own Hell, even at the height of their virtue. By contrast, someone who reaches this level of solitude and spiritual watchfulness does not become discontented when faced with hardships, illness, or the loss of loved ones. By activating the supra-rational, they see everything as a gift from God and

attain profound peace through reflecting on the words, “Indeed, we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we shall return.”¹ This same spiritual station was exemplified by Imam Sadiq (Peace be upon him) when he mourned the loss of his child and said, “Glorious is the One who kills our children and we do not increase for Him except love”²—a love that no suffering can diminish.

Directing and Fulfilling Desires Through Solitude and Spiritual Watchfulness

Watchfulness means continuously monitoring the existential self to ensure that it does not overstep the limits set by God or regard itself as superior within the order of existence. Negligence means failing to organize one’s desires carefully and prioritizing one’s beloveds incorrectly. A negligent person has disrupted the proper place of Allah, the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them), and jihad within the geometry of the heart. By emphasizing that “they enjoin one another to the truth and they enjoin one another to patience,”³ the Quran provides a framework for individual and collective growth. Within this framework, a person must order their life so that Allah, the Ahl al-Bayt, and striving in the way of God occupy the highest place among their deepest commitments.⁴ This hierarchy is vital in the context of accountability in the Hereafter. If a person's intellectual pursuits, marital life, and other social activities are not oriented toward these three beloveds, they may find themselves unable to justify how they have lived when called to account. The practice of solitude and spiritual watchfulness provides a means of regulating the geometry of one’s desires.

The conduct of spiritually accomplished scholars, such as Mulla Hadi Sabzavari, provides a concrete example of this kind of self-discipline. During a stay in Kerman, he worked alongside the caretaker of the Masumiyya seminary without revealing his scholarly identity. For a time, the students assumed that he was one of the school's servants ⁵. This is an example of solitude and

spiritual watchfulness in which a person, in order to protect the true self, sacrifices false desires such as fame and admiration.

An Existential Turning Point: Solitude as Reckoning Before the Judgment Day

One important insight in the Shi'i tradition of self-knowledge is that, contrary to common assumptions, solitude and spiritual watchfulness are not a form of isolation or an escape from life. Rather, they involve consciously preparing for one's encounter with eternity. Without watchfulness, people spend much of their time and energy on matters for which they will never be held accountable in the Hereafter. Imam Ali (Peace be upon him) expresses this principle as follows: "Hold yourself to account for your [own] soul for indeed other souls have someone else who will hold them to account."⁶ This awakening occurs when a person realizes that many of their daily efforts, when disconnected from the three beloveds, have ultimately been futile. For this reason, Imam Sajjad (Peace be upon him), at the height of his supplication, redirects all human actions toward what one will be held accountable for tomorrow, saying: "Employ me in that about which You will ask me tomorrow, and let me pass my days in that for which You have created me."⁷ On this basis, watchfulness helps a person stop wasting the capital of their lifetime on fruitless pursuits and transform work, knowledge, and family life into enduring assets that can be defended in the court of the Hereafter.

Continuing on the Path of Truth

When a person activates the supra-rational dimension and reaches the deeper layers of existence through *Istighatha* (urgent prayer), leniency toward others becomes more than an ethical practice; it becomes an existential quality.

They do not treat others harshly because they see themselves alongside Allah and the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace be upon them). It is solitude and spiritual watchfulness that enable a person to recognize heedlessness at every moment and once again align their desires with the truth.

The ultimate goal is not merely to perform individual acts of worship but to cultivate a way of life in which every action ultimately serves the true self. Solitude and spiritual watchfulness ensure that, even amid intense social and jihad-related activities, a person's intentions continually return to the true self and the Owner of their existence. A person who reaches this level of stability remains unshaken even under the most difficult circumstances; instead, they turn every experience into an opportunity for further growth. Ultimately, eternal well-being and success in the Hereafter are impossible without the sustained practice of solitude and spiritual watchfulness.

Finally, the sound heart's return to its true Owner is a complex journey that requires the careful ordering of one's attachments. If a person fails to order their deepest attachments around Allah, the Ahl al-Bayt, and jihad, they risk becoming trapped in a web of desires of their own making. This is the ultimate purpose of solitude and spiritual watchfulness: to clarify the path to salvation amid the most turbulent conditions of human life.

References

- ¹. Quran, 2:156.
- ². Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 47, part 1, available at: <https://hubeali.com/read/bihar-al-anwaar-volume-47-part-1>.
- ³. Quran, 103:3.
- ⁴. Quran, 9:24.
- ⁵. Morteza Motahhari, *Sharh-e Mabsut-e Manzumeh*, Introduction, Vol. 1. Tehran: Hekmat Publications, 2009, p. 32. [In Persian].
- ⁶. Abd al-Wahid Amidi, *Ghurar al-Hikam wa Durar al-Kalim*, no. 9944, <https://alkarbala.org/team/uploads/Ghurar%20al-Hikam%20wa%20Durar%20al-Kalim%20-%20Abi%20al-Fath%20al-Amidi.pdf>.
- ⁷. Zayn al-Abidin, *The Psalms of Islam: Al-Sahifat al-Kamilat al-Sajjadiyya*, translated with an introduction and annotations by William C. Chittick. London: The Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1988, Supplication 20, "His Supplication on Noble Moral Traits."