

Formative Conflict in Spiritual Cultivation: A Self- Knowledge Perspective

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Formative Conflict in Spiritual Cultivation: From Duty to Moral Excellence

In everyday life, human beings constantly encounter situations that create a deep conflict between their inner desires and external obligations. Suppose a person encounters someone who acts in an extremely unjust manner. At this point, the self instinctively tends to react harshly or confront the other person. At the same time, an inner prompting and a sense of religious duty urge the person to respond with forbearance, forgiveness, or silence. This is the point at which instinct clashes with fitrah—a moment many people regard as an obstacle to growth. In reality, however, this very conflict lies at the heart of the process of spiritual cultivation. Without these pressures and frictions, traits such as forbearance and forgiveness would never actualize in a person. Many of our moral and behavioral impasses stem from viewing the world as a peaceful environment free of challenges. In reality, the system of creation incorporates conflict so that human beings can realize their potential through life's trials.

The Ontological Foundations of Formative Conflict in the Material World

Contrary to some superficial assumptions, the material world is not a place of absolute peace and comfort. The material world is characterized by conflict and competing forces. According to transcendent theosophy and Quranic teachings, no movement in the realm of Nasut (the material realm) takes place without friction.¹ Conflict is a governing principle of the material world, and it serves a deeper purpose: Without opposition, no being would be compelled to strive for survival or perfection. In the human dimension, these conflicts provide the conditions in which latent capacities flourish through encounters with environmental and social challenges.

Therefore, this conflict is not merely an incidental or unpleasant feature of worldly life; it is intrinsic to it. Indeed, the capacities a human being needs to develop in order to return to God are cultivated by confronting and overcoming these conflicts. Without challenges, a human being remains static and powerless. To cultivate traits that reflect the divine attributes (*takhallaqu bi-akhlaq Allah*),² a person needs real-life situations in which those traits can be manifested. How can a person cultivate forgiveness without encountering someone who has wronged them? How can a person develop forbearance without facing situations that provoke anger? These oppositions are the fuel of the human journey toward perfection. The animal dimension of human existence is in constant tension with divine commands, and this tension helps cultivate the human being's supra-rational dimension.

The Role of Satan in the Geometry of Formative Conflict

In the geometry of perfection, Satan plays a strategic role. Carrying out any divine command is, in effect, entering into a battle against Satan.³ The word *mihrab*, used to refer to a place of prayer, conveys precisely this meaning. In other words, the term *mihrab* shares the same root as *harb* meaning war; therefore, we can state that the *mihrab* is a place of war with Satan. The existence of Satan can serve as a means of human growth and perfection, as confronting a powerful adversary can strengthen and develop a person.⁴ This does not mean that Satan is an end in himself. Rather, Satan acts as a catalyst, activating a person's inner faculties for the greatest jihad (*jihad al-akbar*), the struggle against the self.

Without these inner and outer enemies, a person's capacities for resistance would never become actualized. If every religious command could be fulfilled without difficulty or opposition, religious duty would lose its meaning. The challenges involved in fulfilling religious duties arise precisely from satanic influences and the impulses of the self that obstruct a person's movement toward God. Satan is thus one of the elements of formative conflict in spiritual

cultivation; he creates the conditions necessary for God's devoted servants to draw closer to Him.

The Rational Approach to Formative Conflict in Spiritual Cultivation

When a person lives in a world full of conflict, two basic approaches are possible. The first is a rational approach based on weighing the consequences of one's actions in the hereafter. The person recognizes that vices such as anger, envy, and arrogance can lead to severe punishment in the *Barzakh* and to the torments of the grave. At this stage, reason tells the person to master the self in order to avoid prolonged suffering in the hereafter. At this level, dealing with vices is like facing a predator. A rational person does not react emotionally or impulsively when confronted by a dangerous animal, knowing that such a reaction may provoke an attack. Instead, the person exercises patience and restraint to get through the dangerous situation. This is how formative conflict operates at the rational stage of spiritual cultivation: Despite the desire to react, the person exercises restraint because they understand the long-term consequences of vice. Such restraint helps protect a person from the impulses of the self and from moral harm.

The Loving Approach: The Most Exalted Model of Formative Conflict

Beyond rational calculation lies the approach of love. At this level, the person has reordered their hierarchy of love. When a person's love and hatred are guided by devotion to God, even the burdens of religious duty and the struggle to overcome vices can become sources of joy. Hence, in the realm of love, the very meaning of conflict changes. Just as a mother willingly endures the demands of caring for her child and even finds joy in doing so, a person who loves God embraces the difficulties of obedience.

At this stage, a person gives up vices such as oversensitivity and suspicion, not through inner compulsion but out of reverence for God and a sense of shame before Him.

A person who sees themselves as part of the heavenly family and regards Imam Ali (Peace be upon him) as their father and Lady Fatima al-Zahra (Peace be upon her) as their mother would never willingly dishonor them through immoral conduct.

In every such situation, the person remains conscious of the presence of heavenly witnesses. This outlook gives these challenges a new meaning. Conflict is no longer merely a battlefield; it becomes a test of loyalty in which love for God helps a person overcome obstacles.

Purifying the Heart of Resentment amid Conflict

One of the greatest challenges of life in the material world is the clash of interests and attachments, which can lead to injustice and violations of others' rights. The material world is marked by conflict, which can give rise to resentment and suspicion. The key point is that a believer must not allow the wrongs of others to poison their heart. Imam Reza (Peace be upon him), in a narration addressed to Abd al-Azim al-Hasani, states: "My followers should not waste the precious opportunities of their lives and their valuable time in hostility toward one another. I have pledged that, if anyone engages in such conduct, or becomes angry with and harms one of my friends and followers, I will pray to God to punish that person with the severest punishment in this world. In the hereafter, such people will also be among the losers."⁵

This profound saying shows how resentment and bitterness toward others can damage the soundness of heart. Amid conflict in the process of spiritual cultivation, a person has an opportunity to purify the heart by choosing to forgive those who have wronged them. Without forgiveness and inner purification, drawing closer to God becomes impossible. In other words, even amid intense social conflict, a person must guard against moral corruption. Human growth depends, in part, on not allowing the injustices of others to take root as resentment in the heart.

The Role of Family in Challenging Pride and Ego

Divine training often involves breaking the idol of the ego. At times, God places people in situations where their pride or sense of status is challenged. Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him and his family) said: “The most reluctant towards a learned man are his household and neighbors.”⁶ Due to the veil of habit, familiarity can obscure our true worth in the eyes of those closest to us. Such situations offer a valuable opportunity for anyone seeking spiritual growth to practice humility. In the process of formative conflict in spiritual cultivation, a person must learn not to insist on their public status within the privacy of family life. This attitude both nurtures the soul and prevents unnecessary frictions. Choosing to overlook such slights is itself an important exercise in freeing oneself from the grip of the false self.

The Course of Perfection amid Conflicts

Conflict is inherent in the system of creation and cannot be avoided. Yet this conflict serves a positive purpose, as it prepares the ground for the human being's journey back to the origin of existence. By accepting the fact that the world is a setting in which formative conflicts arise, a person no longer needs to fear hardship. The person recognizes that every calamity, injury, and conflict can provide an opportunity to embody the divine attributes.

This path begins with rational self-control and reaches its highest point in love for the sake of God. Along the way, regular worship refines the self and prepares the soul for spiritual ascent. Every step on this path helps free the soul from resentment, envy, and egoism. A person's true self is shaped through these encounters, not through an illusion of inner tranquility. Thus, one must welcome challenges and view conflict not as an obstacle but as a step toward drawing closer to God. This is the path of returning to Him, in the midst of the battlefield and at the heart of formative conflict in spiritual cultivation.

References

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 - ². Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar al-Jami‘a li-Durar Akhbar al-A‘imma al-Athar*. Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, 1983, vol. 58, p. 129.
 - ³. Quran, 15:39-40.
 - ⁴. “The Philosophy of the Birth of Satan and His Respite,” in *Tafseer-e Namoonā, commentary on Quran* 7:179, section 18.6, <https://www.tafseerenamoonā.net/surahs/7> (accessed October 13, 2026).
 - ⁵. Shaykh Mufid, *Al-Ikhtisas* (In Arabic), p. 241. See also: “Imam Reza’s Letter to Abd al-Azim al-Hasani,” Al-Shia, May 2, 2019, <https://fa.al-shia.org/نامه-امام-رضا-ع-به-عبدالعظيم-حسنی/>.
 - ⁶. *Nahj al-Fasahah: Height of Rhetoric*. Al-Islam.org, <https://al-islam.org/nahj-al-fasahah-height-rhetoric/t>.