From Mind to Heart: Can Faith Be Acquired Through Imitation?

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The Relationship Between Faith, Vitality, the Heart, Inner Peace, and Love

Belief in eternal life and the transformative effects of faith draw our attention more than ever to its importance. Once a person resolves to develop genuine faith and chooses a God-centered way of life, they begin to experience various ups and downs. These challenges arise from the conflict between our *fitrah* and our animal, physical dimension, guiding us toward the purpose of our creation. Yet this blessed choice also brings remarkable changes to our lives. Anyone who pursues this path will inevitably encounter the effects of embracing faith. As they advance through the different stages of faith, they experience the profound joy of growing in beneficence as well as lasting happiness and peace. But this raises some essential questions:

How can we attain genuine faith?

Can we become people of faith by imitating others?

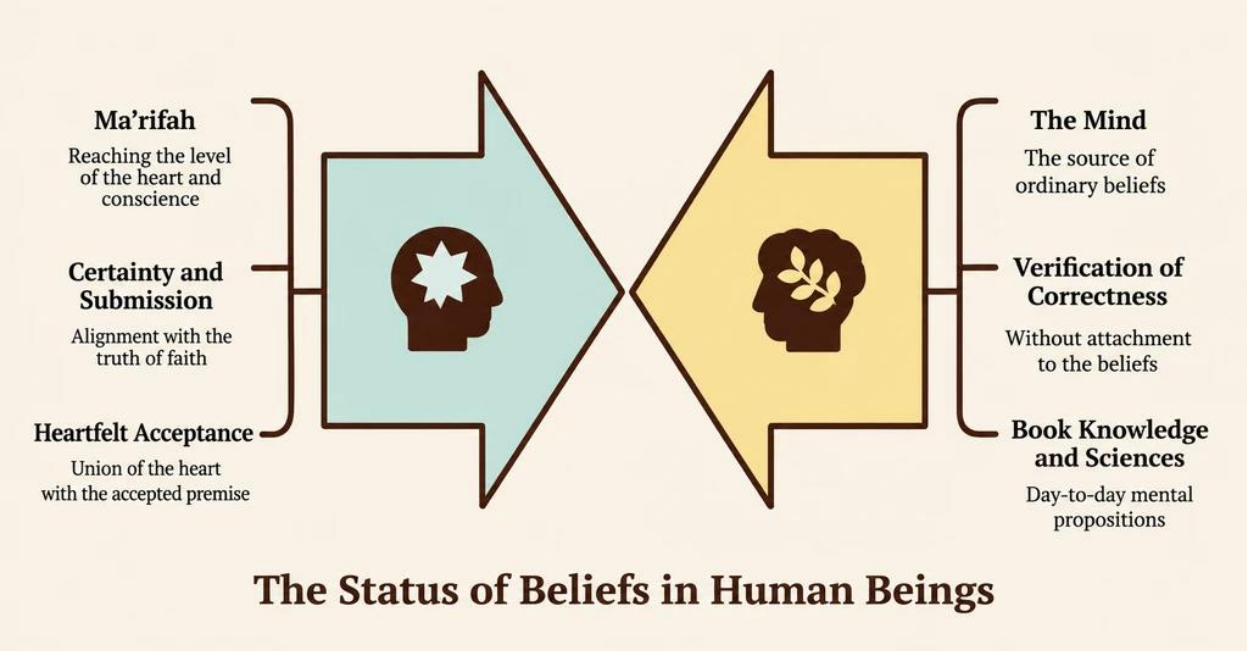
What distinguishes ordinary beliefs from the convictions we hold in our hearts?

This article briefly explores the essence of faith, how to attain and strengthen it, and the most significant effects and outcomes of embracing it.

Faith Is Not Acquired Through Imitation

To understand how to attain faith, we must first define it precisely. Imam Khomeini (May God have mercy on him) describes the essence of faith as "a yearning of the heart," accompanied by certainty and humility, "an inner experience which if not genuine, does not become faith."[1] Actually, when we intellectually accept a truth, let it into our hearts, accept it completely, and become inwardly united with it, we have attained faith. The heart, therefore, is the center of faith.

Ordinary beliefs, by contrast, originate in the mind. We may acknowledge them as true without developing any deep personal attachment to them. Many everyday intellectual matters fall into this category, including information we acquire through books and various fields of study.



The Quran records: "The Bedouins say, 'We have faith.' Say, 'You do not have faith yet; rather, say, 'We have submitted,' for faith has not yet entered your hearts.'"[2] At best, they recognized Islam as divinely revealed and accepted Muhammad as God's Messenger, agreeing to obey his

authority. Yet outward compliance with religious commands and the heart's wholehearted acceptance of faith remain two entirely distinct realities.

This verse clearly shows that our beliefs initially originate in the mind. By analyzing external evidence and indications, we reach a conclusion about whether the issue is logically true or false. Over time, however, we may develop such certainty about some matters that they become heartfelt convictions. At that point, we follow and defend them not merely on the basis of logical analysis or conventional evaluation, but through inner awareness of the heart and spiritual witnessing. We also take a stand against opposing beliefs.

Nevertheless, preserving and strengthening faith is an ongoing process. A person of faith must continually work to deepen and reinforce its roots in the heart. For this reason, God addresses the believers, saying: "O you who have faith, have faith."[3] Many other Quranic verses likewise use the present tense when speaking of believing, emphasizing that faith is a continuous process.

We can therefore clearly see that what we may imitate from others is our set of intellectual beliefs, not our heartfelt faith. Although our faith and inner convictions can change—and it can be influenced through self-suggestion and repetition—no one can directly enter our inner world and add to or remove items from our personal convictions and beliefs. In essence, faith and heartfelt conviction are intuitive matters. No one can force us to believe something sincerely in our hearts. Many people support particular slogans simply because their families, friends, or political allies support them. Their lifestyles are shaped by the customs and expectations of their families, relatives, professional circles, and other social groups. Such beliefs and the lifestyles built upon them may be imitative. Yet through self-suggestion and repetition, even these imitated ideas may eventually awaken personal interest and stir deep emotions and feelings in the heart. At that point,

the resulting response is no longer imitation, because the individual has no direct control over its emergence. Rather, it is an inner transformation that takes place unconsciously in the human heart. A compelling example of the difference between imitative beliefs and heartfelt faith can be found in the events of Ashura. The heroic battle declarations voiced by Imam Hussain's companions were entirely spontaneous. Each companion expressed their own reasoning independently of other fellow fighters because their words arose from heartfelt passion and complete faith in the cause they defended.[4] By contrast, the soldiers in Umar ibn Sa'd's army showed little inclination to compose such individual heroic battle declarations. Their slogans were collective and repetitive. When Imam Hussain (Peace be upon him) asked them, "Why do you deem shedding my blood is permissible?" they offered only one answer: "We fight you out of hatred for your father, Ali."[5]

How Do Beliefs Develop into True Faith?

In general, our intellectual beliefs and everything that flows from them—including our decisions, relationships, thoughts, and behaviors—gradually take root in the heart through repetition and consistency over time. For this reason, Imam Khomeini, the contemporary spiritual mystic, repeatedly emphasized that a person cannot make progress without self-suggestion.[6] What advances us through the different stages of human life is not an abundance of information or scientific expertise, but heartfelt convictions and a deep personal attachment to them. This process continues until our beliefs become part of our very being and serve as an inner motivation to sacrifice for them, even to the point of giving up our lives, possessions, families, and more.

If we accept that the heart, rather than the mind, constitutes the true essence of human existence, it becomes clear that our journey toward fulfilling the purpose of creation is a journey of the heart, not the mind. The mind and all its contents merely prepare the way for the heart's transformation.

That is why God identifies a sound heart as a person's true asset in eternal life: "The day when neither wealth nor children will avail, except him who comes to Allah with a sound heart."[7] When religious beliefs move beyond the mind and tongue and take root in the heart, intellectual reasoning and verbal expression acquire emotional passion and heartfelt conviction. At this stage, we can expect the first signs of faith to emerge in the personality of a person who truly believes. The most important personality traits that result from faith include the following:

Inner Peace

Inner peace is the most fundamental expression of human bliss in this world. Without it, no blessing is truly enjoyable—not physical health, abundant wealth, power and status, reputation and fame, or honor and popularity. Throughout history, including the present day, many people have enjoyed the outward signs of bliss yet felt such profound dissatisfaction that they turned to alcohol, drugs, unrestrained sexual gratification, or, at the very least, excessive eating and sleeping. These individuals often pretend to be happy, but their facial expressions reveal feelings of misery, frustration, and fulfillment. What is missing from their lives is inner peace.

Love

A person who sees unity amid the apparent multiplicity of the world and recognizes that nothing and no one is separate from God cannot help but love the world around them. Great divine figures have expressed this truth in various ways throughout their works. Saadi Shirazi, one of the greatest figures in classical Persian literature, for example, writes in his famous poem:

"I am cheerful in this lush world of His;
I love it because it all comes from Him."[8]

Or, in the words of the celebrated poet Hafez:

"I am the one famous in the city for practicing love;

I am the one whose eye is not sullied by seeing evil."[9]

"Seeing evil" means to attribute flaws and shortcomings to God's creations and to complain about them. To see beauty and love means to perceive all creation as a manifestation of the perfection and beauty of God, the Most Glorious. That is, we recognize them as arising from our own inner flaws and shortcomings, rather than attributing imperfections to His immaculate essence. As God Almighty says: "Whatever good befalls you is from Allah; and whatever ill befalls you is from yourself."[10]

Therefore, the stronger a person's faith becomes, the deeper their love for God's creation grows, for all created beings are diverse manifestations of the Beloved. This is reflected in the following narration by Prophet Muhammad: "The more a servant's faith increases, the more his love for his wife increases."[11] At the forefront of these beautiful manifestations of divine grace are the Prophet Muhammad and his Household (Peace be upon them), who serve as the means through which existence is bestowed upon the whole universe. This is why we read in the *Ziyarat Aal Yasin*: "There is no beloved except him and his Household."

In a world dominated by ethnic nationalism and racial and class prejudice—attitudes that have shaped human minds and hearts from ancient times to the present—the Prophet Muhammad and his Household (Peace be upon them) taught us that love must extend beyond people of our own background. Our love should embrace all people of faith, regardless of race or social class, and extend to all of God's creation, including friends and enemies, believers and nonbelievers, and the beautiful and the unattractive. This is one of the most beautiful expressions of faith, one that non-divine schools of thought cannot fully comprehend. Imam Musa al-Kazim (Peace be upon him)

stated: “Showing affection toward people is half of wisdom.”[12] This quality is one of the most reliable measures of a person's genuine faith, regardless of how many *dhikrs* they recite or acts of worship they perform. It is clear that anyone who encounters such a person feels safe and at peace in their presence. As the Messenger of God explained: “Shall I tell you why the believer is called a believer? Because people trust him with regard to their lives and their property.”[13] The Arabic word for faith is *īmān*, which derives from the root *amn*, meaning “safety” or “security.”

Can we imagine such a loving person remaining indifferent to the hardships of fellow human beings and doing nothing to help them? In light of this, the Prophet's statement becomes entirely understandable: “Whoever begins the morning without concern for the affairs of the Muslims is not a Muslim.”[14]

Throughout earthly life, human beings struggle in an inner conflict between their true identity and their illusory identity. Their true essence is the divine spirit breathed into their material bodies,[15] while their illusory identity consists of their worldly, material dimensions, encompassing their inanimate, vegetative, animal, and even angelic stages of existence. The entire mission of human life in this world is to free oneself from transient, material attachments and become devoted to the true, eternal dimension of one's being. To allow the divine breath and the true self to manifest fully, the devoted lover of God brings the material and lower aspects of the self under control. As the poet writes,

“I asked, ‘How long must this separation last?’ He replied, ‘As long as you exist.’”[16]

The “you” in this verse refers to the false, material self that veils the human soul. As long as this illusory self dominates a person's being, they will suffer from separation from the Beloved. Ultimately, this journey leads to a spiritual station that mystics call "*fana*", or annihilation of the self in God. It represents the devoted servant's arrival at the ultimate destination and melting into

the embrace of Divine Mercy. At this stage, the servant's entire identity and personality become God-centered. Within themselves and the world around them, they perceive nothing apart from God and His divine manifestations. In his celebrated refrain poem, Hatif Esfahani captures the ultimate truth that mystics seek to express through their poetry, parables, and allusions:

“He is alone, beside Him there is none;

No God there is but He, and He is One.”[17]

At this stage, a person's innermost thoughts, vision, words, and actions become divine, guided by God's will and seeking His pleasure. They embody the spirit of this beautiful supplication: “O Lord! Make me one of those people whom You call and they answer You; You look at them, they fall unconscious at Your Majesty; and You talk to them secretly and they act openly”[18]

The station of the prophets and the purified Imams (Peace be upon them) represents the highest manifestation of '*fana*.’ In their words and deeds, they perceive nothing apart from the Divine will and providence. During worship, they devote their entire being to meeting the true Beloved. As the following saying explains: “The best of people is the one who falls in love with worship, embraces it, loves it with their heart, and engages in it with their body.”[19] The saying (from Ayatollah Qazi Tabatabaei) that “the Quran is the believer's wine.”[20]expresses the same idea: the believer's spiritual intoxication and joy arise from companionship and intimate communion with the True Beloved.

Vitality

God Himself is the source of peace, joy, power, and vitality. Faith is the first step toward drawing closer to God, acquiring His attributes, and becoming more like Him. Consequently, the stronger a person's faith becomes, the more their peace and vitality should naturally increase, as they

achieve more harmony with the ultimate Source of happiness, peace, and absolute goodness. For this reason, Imam Ali states: "The believer is far removed from laziness, and his vigor is constant."[21]

Furthermore, belief in eternal life and the human being's role as the center of existence naturally foster self-confidence, dignity, vitality, and vigor. A person of faith understands the purpose of their creation and views earthly life as a mission to build their eternal life. As they draw closer to their ultimate purpose and advance along the path to bliss, they experience joy and fulfillment. By contrast, a person without faith who considers this world the entirety of existence and denies their divine role may see life as meaningless and without purpose. When difficulties arise while trying to improve this seemingly meaningless life, they can easily fall into despair, exhaustion, and depression. Even if such a person succeeds in building a life of material comfort, the limited and often troublesome nature of worldly possessions and pleasures prevents them from fulfilling their deeper needs. This can intensify feelings of emptiness and depression and, in some cases, push a person to the brink of suicide.

How Does a Lack of Faith Lead to Anxiety?

The opposite of faith is fear and anxiety, which arise when an uncontrolled mind becomes consumed by persistent worries, thoughts, and imagined concerns about the past and future. A person without faith must rely entirely on themselves, struggling to stay afloat in a jungle-like world. They see themselves as lonely, abandoned, and lost amid a world of multiplicity, where everyone seeks to maximize their own gain. In this world, the strong view the weak as prey, and human beings become wolves to one another, as Hobbes states "To speak impartially, both sayings are very true: that man to man is a kind of God; and that man to man is an arrant wolf."[22]

A lack of faith leaves them with no choice but to rely on their own minds and judgment, even though they recognize their inherent limitations and inability to achieve their desired goals. Every day, they witness their predictions about the future prove wrong. At any moment, an unforeseen event could occur and disrupt all their calculations. They have repeatedly learned that even the most carefully devised plans do not necessarily succeed. This uncertainty causes their fear and anxiety.

They constantly feel threatened by other people and uncontrollable events, forcing them into a hostile struggle against the world and everyone in it to obtain what they want. Even when they achieve success, they may express happiness but remain inwardly anxious, fearing that they will not succeed again or that they will lose the benefits of their current achievements. A person without faith is like someone offered every kind of delicious food on the condition that they consume it with an intensely bitter juice—so bitter that they can no longer appreciate the food's aroma or flavor. Inner unrest is the bitter poison that a person without faith is compelled to taste alongside every pleasure. Such a person wanders helplessly through the storms of life's uncontrollable events. In the Quran's imagery—"as though he had fallen from a height, then [his corpse] is devoured by vultures, or [his remains are] blown away by the wind far and wide"[23]—they resemble defenseless prey suspended between heaven and earth, besieged by birds of prey swooping in from every direction and snatching them away from one another.

How Does Faith Bring Inner Peace?

A person grounded in monotheism and faith does not see themselves as a small, powerless fragment of existence, but as God's representative and a manifestation of Him in the material world. They are not merely a helpless victim struggling to survive in the jungle-like world; they

are the crown jewel of creation, viewing the world as under their dominion by God's command. In short, a person of genuine faith sees themselves as a ruler over the world, entrusted by God with its care and governance. Imam Ali (Peace be upon him) addresses humanity in a poem: "Do you suppose that you are only a small body, while the macrocosm is placed within you?"[24]

Understanding how divinely inspired mystics perceive themselves and the world around them offers profound lessons for reflection. Their lives demonstrate that they viewed failures and calamities as manifestations of their inner selves and as divine guidance toward spiritual purification. These friends of God regarded external events as reflections of the light and darkness within themselves and as instruments of divine guidance. Consequently, they were neither carried away by worldly pleasures nor overwhelmed by sorrow and anxiety when faced with hardships. Instead, they consistently maintained inner peace and happiness. This is why God repeatedly identifies His true friends by this defining characteristic: "Behold! The friends of Allah will indeed have no fear nor will they grieve."[25] God also explicitly identifies faith, accompanied by righteous deeds, as the foundation of peace and happiness: "...those who have faith in Allah and the Last Day and act righteously—they will have no fear, nor will they grieve."[26] Inner peace and happiness are therefore two essential and enduring indicators of the strength of a person's faith.

Conclusion

Genuine faith is a matter of the heart and spiritual witnessing. It cannot be acquired through imitation or transferred directly into another person's heart. Imitation produces intellectual beliefs that may gradually develop into heartfelt convictions through self-suggestion and repetition. For this reason, preserving and strengthening faith is an ongoing process, as the Quran itself repeatedly emphasizes. The fruits of this inner journey, however, are remarkable. A person of genuine faith

has a sound and peaceful heart, and loves all of God's creation. A believer is the one from whom the people's lives and wealth are safe.

Because they become aligned with the ultimate Source of goodness and joy, they enjoy lasting vitality. By contrast, a person without faith, who places the entire burden of meaning and the future on their own limited mind, lives in persistent fear, anxiety, and a sense of emptiness, unable to find fulfillment even in outward pleasures. Inner peace and happiness are therefore enduring measures of faith. A heart filled with faith and righteous deeds is one which, as the Quran promises, has no fear nor will they grieve.

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