

## Tawba (Repentance), Inaba (Sincere Penitence), and Awba (Turning to God in Contrition)

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Repentance (tawba) means that one feels regret and, filled with remorse for his or her sins, turns to God with the intention to obey Him. According to truth-seeking scholars, repentance signifies a sincere effort to no longer oppose the Divine Essence in one's feelings, thoughts, intentions, and acts, and to comply sincerely with His commands and prohibitions. Repentance does not mean being disgusted with what is bad or prohibited and thus no longer engaging in it; rather, it means remaining aloof from whatever God hates and prohibits, even if it seems agreeable to sense and reason.

Repentance is usually used with *nasuh*, literally meaning pure, sincere, reforming, improving, and repairing. Tawba *nasuh* sincere and reforming repentance means a pure, sincere repentance that perfectly reforms and improves the one who feels it. One who feels such a sincere, heartfelt, and true remorse for the sin committed seeks to abandon it, thereby setting a good example for others. The Qur'an points to this when it mentions true repentance: O you who believe! Turn to God in true, sincere repentance (66:8).

There are three categories of repentance:

- The repentance of those who cannot discern Divine truths. Such people are uneasy about their disobedience to God and, conscious of the sinfulness clouding their hearts, turn toward God in repentance saying, for example: I have fallen or committed a sin. Forgive me, or I ask for God's forgiveness.

- Those half-awakened to Divine truths beyond veils of material existence who feel an inward pang of sinfulness and remorse right after thinking or doing anything incompatible with the consciousness of always being in God's presence, or after every instance of heedlessness enveloping their hearts, and who immediately take refuge with the Mercy and Favor of God. Such people are described in the following Tradition:

God's Messenger, upon him be peace and blessings, declared: One who sincerely repents of his sin is as if he had never committed it. When God loves one of His servants, his sins do not harm him. Then he recited the verse: Assuredly, God loves the oftrepentant and those who always seek to purify themselves. When asked about the sign of repentance, he declared: It is heartfelt remorse. [1]

- Those who live such a careful life that, as declared in a Tradition: My eyes sleep but my heart does not, [2] their hearts are awake. Such people immediately discard whatever intervenes between God and their hearts and other innermost faculties, and regain the consciousness of their relation to the Light of Lights. They always manifest the meaning of: How excellent a servant! Truly he was ever turning in contrition (to his Lord) (38:44).

Repentance means regaining one's essential purity after every spiritual defilement, and engaging in frequent self-renewal. [The stages of] repentance are:

- Feeling sincere remorse and regret
- Being frightened whenever one remembers past sins
- Trying to eradicate injustice and support justice and right
- Reviewing one's responsibilities and performing obligations previously neglected
- Reforming oneself by removing spiritual defects caused by deviation and error
- Regretting and lamenting the times when one did not mention or remember God, or thank Him and reflect on His works.

Such people are always apprehensive and alert so that their thoughts and feelings are not tainted by things that intervene between themselves and God. (This last quality is particular to people distinguished by their nearness to God.) If one does not feel remorse, regret, and disgust for errors committed, whether great or small; if one is not fearful or apprehensive of falling back into sin at any time; and if one does not take shelter in sincere servanthood to God in order to be freed from deviation and error into which one has fallen by moving away from God, any resulting repentance will be no more than a lie.

On sincere repentance, Mawlana Jalal al-Din al-Rumi says:

I have repented and turned to God so sincerely that I will not break [the vow of penitence] until my soul leaves my body. In fact, who other than an ass steps toward perdition after having suffered so much trouble (on account of his sins)? Repentance is an oath of virtue, and holding steadfastly to it requires strong willpower. The lord of the penitents, upon him be peace and blessings, says that one who repents sincerely and holds steadfastly to it has achieved the rank of a martyr, while the repentance of those who cannot free themselves from their sins and deviations, although they repent repeatedly, mocks the door toward which the truly repentant ones turn in utmost sincerity and resolution.

One who continues to sin after proclaiming a fear of Hell, who does not engage in righteous deeds despite self-proclaimed desires for Paradise, and who is indifferent to the Prophet's way and practices despite assertions of love for the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, cannot be taken seriously. This is also the case with one who claims to be sincere and pure-hearted, but spends his or her life oscillating between sin and repentance.

An initiate's first station is repentance, while the second is *inaba* (sincere penitence). In common usage, *inaba* also refers to the ceremony held when one submits to a spiritual guide (as a *murshid*). While repentance requires the training of feelings, thoughts, and acts in order to move them from opposition to acceptance and obedience, sincere penitence demands a critique of the authenticity, sincerity, and sufficiency of that acceptance and obedience. Repentance is a progressing or journeying toward God that is, seeking to do what is pleasing to God and refraining from what is forbidden by Him. Sincere penitence is an ascension through the stations of journeying in God in other words, striving to live an upright life in self-annihilation and absorption in God so that one may seek His pleasure in all actions and thoughts.

Awba (turning to God in contrition) is an ascension through the stations of journeying from God meaning being responsible for guiding others after having embodied the Islamic way of belief, thought, and conduct. In other words, taking refuge with God in fear of dying as a non-Muslim and deserving eternal punishment is repentance; annihilating one's self in God in the hope of preserving one's spiritual rank is sincere penitence; and closing one's self to any desires, ambitions, or aims other than God's pleasure is turning to Him in utmost contrition.

The first is the state of all believers, and is expressed in: Repent to God, O believers! (24:31). The second is an attribute of saints and the foremost in belief and good conduct who have been brought near unto God. Its beginning is seen in: Turn to your Lord repentant (39:54), and its end is stated in: He comes with a contrite heart (50:33). The third is for the Prophets and Messengers, all of whom are appreciated and praised by God in the words: How excellent a servant! Truly he was ever turning in contrition (to his Lord) (38:44).

The words of repentance uttered by those who are always conscious of being in the presence of God express the individual's sincere penitence or turning to God in contrition. This is how the words of the best of creation, upon him be peace and blessings, should be understood when he said: I ask God's forgiveness seventy (or one hundred, according to another narration or version) times a day.

Repentance is the act or manner of those trying to live an upright life while remaining unaware of God's constant supervision of His servants and what nearness to Him really means. Those who live in awareness of God's nearness regard it as heedlessness to turn to God as ordinary people do, for He directs them as He wishes, constantly supervises them, and is nearer to them than anything else. Their station is not that of the people of the Unity of Being ecstatic saints who view the creation while living in a state of being completely annihilated in God and therefore accept God as the only truly existent being. Rather, it is the station of the people of the Unity of the Witnessed scholarly saints who accept that the truly existent one is He Who is witnessed or discerned beyond the creation. More than that, it is the station of those progressing in the light of the Prophet Muhammad's practice, upon him be peace and blessings.

It is merely an assertion and a groundless claim when those who have not attained this station, and thus live [merely] on the outer surface of their existence, talk of awba and inaba, and especially of the final points of these two stations.

[1] Abu al-Qasim 'Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri, *Al-Risalat al Qushayriya fi 'Ulum al-Tasawwuf* (Cairo, 1972), 91.

[2] Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, "Tahajjud," in *Al-Jami' al-Sahih*, 4 vols. (Beirut, n.d.), 16; Abu al-Husayn Muslim ibn Hajjaj al-Qushayri Muslim, "Musafirin," in *Sahih al-Muslim*, 5 vols. (Beirut, 1956), 125.