

# IMAM GHAZALI ON *JIHAD AL-NAFS* - FIGHTING THE EGO

Translated from the 'Ihya' `Ulum al-Din' [The Revival of the Religious Sciences]:

## Meaning of *nafs*:

It has two meanings. First, it means the powers of anger and sexual appetite in a human being... and this is the usage mostly found among the people of *tasawwuf* [sufis], who take "*nafs*" as the comprehensive word for all the evil attributes of a person. That is why they say: **one must certainly do battle with the ego and break it**<sup>1</sup>, as is referred to in the hadith: "Your worst enemy is your *nafs* which lies between your flanks."<sup>2</sup>.

The second meaning of *nafs* is the soul, the human being in reality, his self and his person. However, it is described differently according to its different states. If it assumes calmness under command and has removed from itself the disturbance caused by the onslaught of passion, it is called "the satisfied soul" (*al-nafs al-mutma'inna*)...

In its first meaning the *nafs* does not envisage its return to God because it has kept itself far from Him: such a *nafs* is from the party of shaytan. However, when it does not achieve calmness, yet sets itself against the love of passions and objects to it, it is called "the self-accusing soul" (*al-nafs al-lawwama*), because it rebukes its owner for his neglect in the worship of his master... If it gives up all protest and surrenders itself in total obedience to the call of passions and shaytan, it is named "the soul that enjoins evil" (*al-nafs al-ammara bi al-su*)... which could be taken to refer to the ego in its first meaning.

## Soldiers of the heart

God has armed soldiers which He has placed in the hearts and the souls and others of His worlds, and none knows their true nature and actual number except He... [He proceeds to explain that the limbs of the body, the five senses, will, instinct, and the emotive and intellectual powers are among those soldiers.] Know that the two soldiers of anger and sexual passion can be guided by the heart completely... or on the other hand disobey and rebel against it completely, until they enslave it. Therein lies the death of the heart and the termination of its journey towards eternal happiness. The heart has other soldiers: knowledge (*'ilm*), wisdom (*hikma*) and reflection (*tafakkur*) whose help it seeks by right, for they are the Party of God against the other two who belong to the party of shaytan...

God says: "*Have you seen the one who chooseth for his god his own lust?*" (25:43) and "*He followed his own lust. Therefor his likeness is as the likeness of a dog; if thou attackest him he panteth with his tongue out, and if thou leavest him he panteth with his tongue out*" (7:176) and about the person who controlled the passion of his ego God says: "*But as for him who feared to stand before his Lord and restrained his soul from lust, Lo! The garden will be his home*" (79:40-41).

Know that the body is like a town and the intellect of the mature human being is like a king ruling that town. All the forces of the external and internal senses he can muster are like his soldiers and his aides. The ego that enjoins evil (*nafs ammara*), that is, lust and anger, is like an enemy that challenges him in his kingdom and strives to slaughter his people. The body thus becomes like a garrison-town or sea-outpost, and the soul like its custodian posted in it. If he fights against his enemies and defeats them and compels them to do what he likes, he will be praised when he returns to God's presence, as God said: "*Those who strive in the way of Allah*

with their wealth and lives. Allah hath conferred on those who strive with their wealth and lives a rank above the sedentary" (4:95).

## Inspiration and insinuation

The thoughts that stir one's desire are of two kinds... praiseworthy, and that is called "inspiration" (*ilham*), and blameworthy, and that is called "whispering" (*waswasa*)... The heart is owned mutually by a shaytan and an angel... The angel stands for a creature which God has created for the overflowing of benefit, the bestowal of knowledge, the unveiling of truth, the promise of reward, and the ordering of the good... The shaytan stands for a creature whose business is to be against all this... *Waswasa* against *ilham*, shaytan against angel, success (*tawfiq*) against disappointment (*khidhlan*).

The Prophet (s) said: "There are two impulses in the soul, one from an angel which calls towards good and confirms truth; whoever finds this let him know it is from God and praise Him. Another impulse comes from the enemy which leads to doubt and denies truth and forbids good; whoever finds this, let him seek refuge in God from the accursed devil." Then he recited the verse: "*The devil shows you fear of poverty and enjoins evil upon you*" (2:268)<sup>2</sup>

Hasan al-Basri said: "Two thoughts roam over the soul, one from God, one from the enemy. God shows mercy on a servant who settles at the thought that comes from Him. He embraces the thought that comes from God, while he fights against the one from his enemy. To illustrate the heart's mutual attraction between these two powers the Prophet (s) said: "The heart of a believer lies between two fingers of the Merciful"<sup>4</sup>... The fingers stand for upheaval and hesitation in the heart... If man follows the dictates of anger and appetite, the dominion of shaytan appears in him through idle passions [*hawa*] and his heart becomes the nesting-place and container of shaytan, who feeds on idle passions. If he does battle with his passions and does not let them dominate his nafs, imitating in this the character of the angels, at that time his heart becomes the resting-place of angels and they alight upon it...

The Prophet (s) said: "There is none among you in whom there is not a devil" They said: "Even in you, O Messenger of God?!" He said: "Even in me, but God helped me to overcome him and he has submitted to me, so he doesn't order anything except good"<sup>5</sup>... The mutual repelling of the soldiers of the angels and the devils is constant in the battle over the heart, until the heart is conquered by one of the two sides which sets up its nation and settles there... And most hearts have been seized by the soldiers of shaytan, who fill them with the whispers that call one to love this passing world and disregard the next.

## The Jihad against the nafs

The Prophet (s) said: "The fighter against unbelief is he who fights against his ego in obeying God"<sup>6</sup>... Sufyan al-Thawri said: "I never dealt with anything stronger against me than my own ego; it was one time with me, and one time against me"... Yahya ibn Mu`adh al-Razi said: "Fight against your ego with the four swords of training: eat little, sleep little, speak little, and be patient when people harm you... Then the ego will walk the paths of obedience, like a fleeing horseman in the field of battle."

This important topic was translated from the following parts of '**Ihya' `Ulum al-Din**' [The Revival of the Religious Sciences]:

- a) Definitions at the beginning of the book *Kitab sharh `aja'ib al-qalb* [Book of the Explanation of the Mysteries of the Heart]
- b) Section entitled: "The Soldiers of the Heart" in the same book
- c) Section entitled: "Shaytan's domination over the heart through whispering [*al-waswas*]" in

the same book

d)Section entitled: "Proofs..." from the book *Kitab riadat al-nafs wa tahdhib al-akhlaq wa mu`alajat amrad al-qalb* [Book of the training of the ego and the disciplining of manners and the healing of the heart's diseases]

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> (*la budda min mujahadat al-nafs wa kasriha*)

<sup>2</sup> Arabic: *A`da` aduwwuka nafsuka al-lati bayna janibayk*. Al-`Iraqi says it is in Bayhaqi on the authority of Ibn `Abbas and its chain of transmission contains Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn Ghazwan, one of the forgers.

<sup>3</sup> Tirmidhi: *hasan*; Nisa'i; `Iraqi did not weaken it.

<sup>4</sup> Muslim, Ahmad, Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah.

<sup>5</sup> Muslim

<sup>6</sup> Arabic: *al-mujahidu man jahada nafsahu fi ta`at Allah `azza wa jall* Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah, Ibn Hibban, Tabarani, Hakim, etc.