

SELF-DEVELOPMENT IN THE HOLY QUR'AN: THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF METACOGNITION^(*)

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ABSTRACT

The existing literature on Islamic self-development does not highlight the important role of metacognition in the self-development process. In this article, we argue that metacognition is the first step towards the specific type of self-development stressed in the Holy Qur'an. Therefore, we develop a simple guide to self-development based on the Qur'an with metacognition as the initial step. Firstly, the chapters and/or verses in the Qur'an related to self-development was identified. Secondly, the important words from these verses were studied using a dictionary of the Holy Qur'an. Then this information was used to derive a simple guide to self-development. The article also compares the Qur'anic concept of self-development with that of meditation in Buddhism. Interestingly, we find that there are certain similarities as well as differences between the two schools of thought. In particular, the Qur'an emphasizes an active engagement with negative thoughts, emotions, and mental processes as well as a deliberate attempt at cultivating specific positive traits and mental processes. In contrast, the meditation techniques in Buddhism are more passive and does not emphasize the active internal struggle (*jihād al-nafs*) that the Holy Qur'an emphasizes. Future research can scientifically test and compare the effects of metacognition on spiritual-development and/or self-development.

Keywords: *Self-development; Quran; Islam; Metacognition; Meditation*

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Change is the only constant” – Heraclitus

The quotation highlights an important universal truth – everything undergoes change. Mainly, there are two types of change; either a change is positive (growth) or it is negative (decay). Self-development implies a positive change or growth of our mind, personality, actions, reactions, and even our diet and health. The Qur’an uses the word zakāt to refer to self-development in quite a few places. For example, surah Ash-Shams, surah Al-A‘lā, and verse 4 of surah Al-Mu‘minun use zakāt in the context of growth and purification of the nafs which can mean self, soul and/or mind³.

In surah Ash-Shams, the Holy Qur’an places great, if not the greatest, weight on the concept of individual self-development. In this surah, the Creator and Governor of all existence, Allah (SWT), takes oath for eleven consecutive times before stating, “He is indeed successful who causeth it (the self/soul) to grow.” Interestingly, this is the highest number of consecutive oaths occurring in the Qur’an. M. Zakyi Ibrahim argues that oaths in the Qur’an usually point to the benefit, utility, and/or virtue of an object⁴. This implies that the Qur’an is highlighting self-development as one of the most virtuous and beneficial endeavors which a human being can undertake.

Although there are articles on the concept of Islamic self-development, none of them are based exclusively on the Holy Qur’an and none highlight the important role of metacognition, a concept of psychology, in the Islamic self-development process. For example, Mohamed Safiullah discusses the development of the self based on the Qur’an, hadith, and works of other prominent scholars⁵. In our view, this approach can dilute the divine wisdom and insights of the Qur’an and ultimately make it difficult for a non-specialized reader to apply and benefit from the literature. Some authors acknowledge that metacognition and human morality are connected⁶, but they do not discuss the precise role of metacognition

³ Omar, A.M. (2010). *Dictionary of the Holy Quran*. Noor Foundation – International Inc. <http://islamusa.org/dictionary.pdf>

⁴ Ibrahim, M. (2009). Oaths in the Qur’ān: Bint al-Shāṭi"s Literary Contribution. *Islamic Studies*, 48(4), 475-498. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20839181>

⁵ Safiullah, M. (2015). The Soul and Its Attributes. *Afkar*, 16: 93-118. <https://mojem.um.edu.my/index.php/afkar/article/view/5676/3421>

⁶ Yusoff, A.B.M, Rahim, M.H.B.A, Hamid, A.A.B.A, Ahmed, F.B. (2021). And Metacognitives Morals: The Qur’an As A Guide. *Turkish Journal of Computer*

in an individual's moral development process. In addition, English articles in Islamic self-development is limited in the modern literature. Hence, in this article we seek to develop a simple guide to self-development based on chapters (surahs) and/or verses (ayat) of the Qur'an which any English reader will be able to apply. We also show the important role of metacognition in the specific type of self-development stressed in the Holy Qur'an.

Few scholars have studied the relations between Islam and Buddhism⁷. Hence, in this article, we also explore the similarities and differences of the Islamic concept of self-development and the Buddhist concept of meditation. The ideas of these two different traditions can complement each other in many areas and benefit the adherents of the respective faiths.

Against the above backdrop, in this article we seek:

- 1) To identify the specific verses and/or chapters related to individual self-development occurring in the Qur'an.
- 2) To extract a simple methodology for self-development based on these verses and/or chapters.
- 3) Highlight the important role of metacognition in the Qur'anic self development process.
- 4) To find out how the methodology developed in this paper relate to methodologies of self-development in Buddhism.

1. Methodology

After a reading of the translation and commentary of the Qur'an by Muhammad Asad (1980), the chapters and/or verses related to self-development were identified. Then the important words in these verses were studied using a dictionary of the Holy Qur'an. Ibn Kathir, translated by Mubarakpuri, argues: "the best method is to explain the Quran with the Quran itself. What is mentioned in general terms in one place in the Holy Quran, is usually explained

and *Mathematics Education*, 12(4), 659-664.

<https://turcomat.org/index.php/turkbilmata/article/view/550/355>

⁷Yusuf, I. (2013). Islam and Buddhism. In Catherine Cornell (Ed.). *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (ch. 22).

<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118529911.ch22>

in another place”⁸. In this paper, we have followed this method to aid our understanding and explanation of the verses of the Holy Qur’an⁹; that is, we have tried to understand and explain individual verses with respect to other related verses when needed. Based on the information of the verses and the deeper meanings of individual words, a simple guide to self-development in was developed in which we highlight the important role of metacognition in the concept self-development in the Qur’an.

All the Qur’anic verses quoted in this paper is from the translation by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall to maintain consistency and avoid any selection bias.

2. Findings and Discussion

- Metacognition

The very last chapter of the Holy Qur’an, surah An-Naas, guides the individual reader to look inwards – into her/his own individual mind or consciousness – and become particularly aware of the negative thoughts and emotions occurring in the mind. In philosophy and psychology, being aware of one’s own thoughts, emotions, and mental processes is called meta-cognition¹⁰. In other words, it is being conscious of consciousness or “thinking about one’s own thinking”¹¹. The Qur’an, implicitly, promotes meta-cognition in several places: “We verily created man and We know what his soul whispereth to him...” (50:16), “(I seek refuge) from the evil of the sneaking whisperer, who whispereth in the hearts of mankind” (114:4-5), “And if a whisper from the devil reach thee (O Muhammad) then seek refuge in Allah. Lo! He is the Hearer, the Knower” (41: 36). Particularly, in these verses, the Qur’an guides us towards metacognition of

⁸ bn Kathir, Tafsir Ibn Kathir, trans. Saifur R. Mubarakpuri (Darussalam Publishers, 2003), 29.

<https://www.kalamullah.com/Books/Tafsir%20Ibn%20Kathir%20-%20Volume%2001-10%20-%20English.pdf>

⁹ Iqbal, N. (2021). Covid-19 Pandemic: Perspective of the Holy Quran. *Journal of Asian and African Social Science and Humanities*, 7(1), 16–25.

<https://www.aarcentre.com/ojs3/index.php/jaash/article/view/230>

¹⁰ APA Dictionary of Psychology. (2020).

<https://dictionary.apa.org/metacognition>

¹¹ Chick, N. (2013). Metacognition. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/metacognition/>

the negative thoughts, emotions, and mental processes occurring in our own individual minds.

Arguably, this is the first step towards any self-development process. To understand this argument, let us imagine someone who is suffering from a problem of excessive anger and/or envy. The very first step towards curing this problem is self-awareness and acknowledgment of the negative emotion and/or mental process in one's own mind which is only possible when one looks inwards and becomes aware of her/his own thoughts, emotions, intentions, etc. However, if a person cannot achieve this basic level of self-awareness of his/her own mind and behavior, then the person cannot even realize he/she has a problem. Hence, self-development and/or self-correction cannot occur. The Qur'an speaks of these people as having diseases in their hearts, but "they know not" (2:13).

- The Battle Within

The negative thoughts and/or emotions occurring in our minds are referred to as waswās in the Qur'an in verse 20 of surah 7, in verse 120 of surah 20, and in verse 5 of surah 114 of the Qur'an. In these verses the Qur'an informs us that the source of the negative thoughts, emotions, and thought processes is Satan which, in turn, refers to a reality beyond the reach of human perception¹². It should be noted that Satan has been given respite until the Day of Judgement according to verse 46 of chapter 15; Muhammad Asad, argues that the respite given to Iblis or Satan is part of Allah's divine plan to test human beings¹³ which, in turn, can refine individual human beings¹⁴. For example, Froma Walsh argues trials and tribulations can make human beings more resilient¹⁵. Hence, as part of Allah's (SWT) divine plan, Satan will strive to lead human-beings astray as mentioned frequently in the Qur'an. The waswās – negative thoughts, emotions, and impulses – are one of the devices of Satan with which he will strive to lead human beings towards hell – a place of ultimate suffering and despair. Thus, the Qur'an

¹² Asad, M. (1980). *The Message of the Quran*.

<http://muhammadasad.com/Message-of-Quran.pdf>, Appendix I, pg. 1315.

¹³ Asad, M. (1980). *The Message of the Quran*.

<http://Muhammadasad.com/Message-of-Quran.pdf>, footnote 26, pg. 33.

¹⁴ Khan, N.A. (2019). *When Life Gets Hard Bayyinah Institute* [Video].

YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rr3L1-yrqWs>, (13:43 to 14:30)

¹⁵ Walsh, F. (2012). Normal family processes: Growing diversity and complexity. In Walsh, Froma (ed.). *Family resilience: Strengths forged through adversity* (pp. 399-427). New York: The Guilford Press.

instructs us to consider Satan as our enemy which implies that we take the waswās occurring in our minds as a weapon of the enemy and thus strive our best to guard/shield ourselves from the enemy and his weapon. Of course, our shield is none other than Allah and hence Qur'an teaches us to pray: "My Lord! I seek refuge in Thee from suggestions of the evil ones" (23: 97).

There is another very important implication of the above Qur'anic narrative; since Allah Himself has given respite and permission to Satan to try to lead human beings astray through waswās and other means, individual human beings are not blameworthy for the negative thoughts and emotions occurring in their own minds. In fact, we should accept the phenomenon of negative thoughts and emotions occurring in our minds as a part of Allah's (SWT) divine plan to test human beings. For example, in verse 2 of surah 67, the Qur'an informs us that this earthly life is a test. Therefore, one should approach the inner-struggle against the waswās as a challenge or test from Allah (SWT) and the performance or result of this test will determine the quality of the eternal next life.

Although an individual will not be blamed for the negative thoughts occurring in one's mind, he/she will be held accountable for acting on them and for not actively striving against them. For example, verse 20 of surah 9 highlights the great virtue of jihād al-nafs which is the internal spiritual struggle against the lower self¹⁶. It is of vital importance to become aware of negative thoughts, emotions, and mental processes at the initial, incipient stage, and strive and struggle against them. Whenever an individual becomes conscious of negative thoughts and emotions, he/she is instructed in Qur'an to remember Allah, seek refuge in Him (41:36), engage in an inner struggle, try to think/see clearly, and watch/guard against such thoughts (7:201). For example, whenever a baseless negative assumption about someone occurs in our mind for which we do not have any evidence, we should realize that it is a waswās from Satan and immediately remember Allah, seek refuge in Him, and try to see the matter clearly (that is, in this example, there is no evidence for the negative thought or assumption occurring in our mind). The Qur'an also informs us, in verse 53 of chapter 12, that the mind has a natural tendency to incline towards the evil thoughts entering our minds. Hence, the Qur'an instructs us to actively struggle against the negative thoughts occurring in our own minds and restrain our souls from inclining towards them. The Qur'anic principle – of simultaneously asking

¹⁶ Afsaruddin, A. (2020). *Jihad*. Encyclopedia Britannica.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/jihad>

for and relying on divine help as well as giving one's best effort – also applies in this inner struggle for self-development.

Since it is a part of the divine plan that each and every human being will be subject to the waswās until one's last breath, we will only be held accountable by Allah (SWT) if we consciously choose to respond to the waswās and make no attempt to struggle against them. Proof of this argument is found in verse 22 of chapter 14 which informs us that on the Day of Judgment, Satan will inform mankind, "...And I had no power over you save that I called unto you and ye obeyed me. So blame not, but blame yourselves. I cannot help you, nor can ye help me, Lo! I disbelieved in that which ye before ascribed to me. Lo! for wrong-doers is a painful doom."

- A Battle Strategy

As already discussed, after one consciously develops the habit of becoming aware and identifying the negative mental processes occurring in one's individual mind, the next step is to develop the habit of immediately remembering and seeking refuge in Allah (SWT) using the prayer Allah (SWT) Himself has taught in verses 97-98 of surah 23, "And say: My Lord! I seek refuge in Thee from suggestions of the evil ones. And I seek refuge in Thee, my Lord, lest they be present with me (or overcome me)." One can also frequently recite chapter 114 in ritual prayers (salah) which is a special prayer for seeking refuge in Allah (SWT) from waswās. For the du'as or prayers to be effective, one must feel the neediness implied in the wordings of the prayer as well as realize one's utter and total dependence on Allah's (SWT) mercy and help in all matters and, particularly, in this inner struggle.

Generally, sincere and earnest prayers seeking Allah's (SWT) divine help should be accompanied by one's own efforts and actions as implied in verse 24 of surah 17 and verse 10 of surah 18. In verse 24 of surah 17, we are taught to lower our wing of humility on our parents (the action) and pray for our parents (the prayer). Similarly, in verse 10 of surah 18, some persecuted youths seek physical refuge in cave (the action) and then pray for Allah's (SWT) help (the prayer). Therefore, seeking Allah's (SWT) help against the waswās should also be accompanied by action and effort. The nature of this effort vis-à-vis the waswās occurring in our minds is alluded to in verse 201 of surah 7. In this verse, remembrance of Allah (SWT) is followed by the word *mubširūnais* which is derived from *ba-sad-ra* which, among others, means watching, guarding, understanding, and seeing clearly. Therefore, after remembering and seeking refuge in Allah (SWT), one must try to understand that the negative thoughts is from Satan, and one must

watch-out and guard against the negative thoughts. the word *mubşirūnais* also implies that when our mind is clouded by negative thoughts we should try to see clearly. For example, one may ask oneself: is there any evidence or basis for the thought?

Verse 12 of surah 24 suggests another strategy for dealing with negative thoughts and emotions; one can counter negative thoughts with positive ones. This verse informs us that if we hear a slander about someone (which will inevitably cause negative assumptions, about the person being slandered, to build up in our individual minds), then we must think better of the person being slandered. Similarly, when anger emerges into our conscious mind, we are instructed to overlook, forgive, and not let the anger consume us. It should be noted that these verses imply that we should not merely repress negative thoughts and emotions, rather we should counter them with positive, rational thoughts and emotions.

- Buddhism and Islam

Interestingly, there are certain similarities between the method of self-development discussed in this article and the ideas of meditation in Buddhism. In fact, the Islamic and Buddhist concepts of self-development can complement each other. There are two common methods of meditation: focused attention meditation, and open monitoring meditation¹⁷. In focused attention meditation, the aim is to focus your attention on an object, such as breath and the other method, open monitoring meditation, is about “nonreactive monitoring” of the content of the consciousness.

Interestingly, the open monitoring meditation is very similar to the first step of the self-development process (metacognition) in this article. Open monitoring meditation can help us become aware of *waswās* – negative thoughts, emotions, and mental processes. However, whereas the open monitoring meditation advocates passive monitoring of the contents of the consciousness, Qur’an on the other hand emphasizes a more active approach. For example, verse 205 of chapter 7 instructs us to cultivate the feelings of awe, humility, and reverence in our ritual prayers and/or whenever we remember Allah (SWT). As another example of this, the Qur’an urges its readers to cultivate the characteristic of gratitude and *sabr* and weed out ingratitude and arrogance.

¹⁷ Lutz, A., Slagter, H.A., Dunne, J.D., & Davidson, R.J. (2008). Attention regulation and monitoring in meditation, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12 (4), 63-169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2008.01.005>

Interestingly, the concept of focused attention meditation also occurs in the Qur'an. For example, the Qur'an instructs the believer to listen to the Qur'an mindfully. During ritual prayers, large portions of the Qur'an are recited and hence it is similar to practicing focused attention meditation where the focus is on the words and verses being recited during the ritual prayer.

Verses 14 and 15 of chapter 87, connects remembrance of Allah (SWT) and ritual prayer (salah) to the growth of the self or soul. This indicates that praying mindfully with humility and reverence can facilitate the self-development process and can help in the cultivation of the characteristics praised by Allah (SWT) in the Qur'an and shed the condemned characteristics, such as arrogance, greed, miserliness, etc.

- Heart of the Matter

Being aware of one's intentions is particularly important in Islamic teaching and this is connected to the very first step of the self-development process (metacognition) developed in this article. For example, in chapter 107 of the Qur'an we are warned to be not like those who pray to be seen and praised by human beings. Hence, it is of utmost importance to be aware of the intention that drives and accompanies our actions and endeavors. If one undertakes the self-development process, or any other good deed, only for worldly benefits, such as recognition and fame, then the endeavor may lead to some success in this world, but it will not be given any weight on the Day we meet Allah (SWT) as indicated in verse 23 of chapter 25. However, if one undertakes a good deed or endeavor to please Allah (SWT), become close to Him, and seeking the reward of the afterlife then the process can lead to success and fruition in this world and the next. Similarly, the process of self-development should also be motivated by the intention to please Allah (SWT) and become close to Him.

- The Role of Istiğfār

Scientific research indicates that istiğfār (seeking divine forgiveness) improves mental well-being¹⁸. In the following discussion we show the important role of istiğfār in the self-development process: It is inevitable that human beings will occasionally slip and the self-development process will be hindered. After

¹⁸ Uyun, Q., Kurniawan, I.N. (2018). Taubat (Repentance) and Istighfar (Seek Forgiveness from Allah) Therapy to Improve Subjective Well-Being of Master Students: A Preliminary Study. *Advanced Science Letters*, 24(7), 5422-5425(4). <https://doi.org/10.1166/asl.2018.11748>

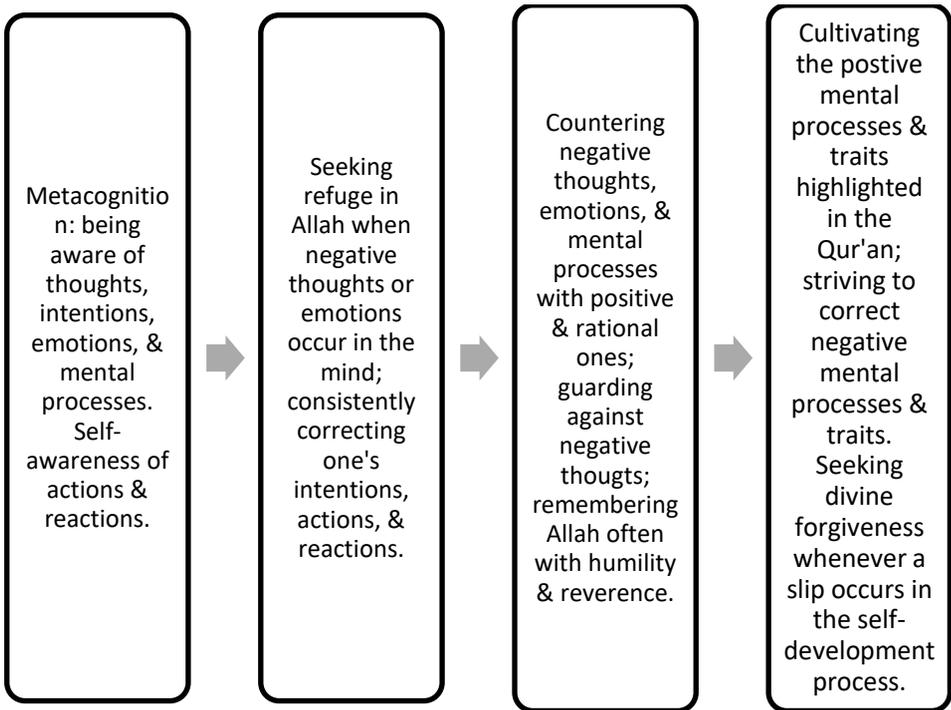
committing a sin, one might feel hopeless and give up on the self-development process. For example, an individual trying to overcome an addiction to pornography, finds herself/himself constantly relapsing. In such cases, one must seek Allah's forgiveness (*istiğfār*) at the earliest instance possible with the firm determination to not commit the same sin again. No matter how many times an individual commits a sin and/or slips in the self-development process, the individual must keep on seeking forgiveness and should never give up on Allah's mercy – "...despair not of the Spirit (mercy) of Allah. Lo! none despaireth of the Spirit (mercy) of Allah save disbelieving folk" (12: 87). Of course, a person may also seek professional help and/or the help of another believer as implied in surah 103. However, most importantly, a believer should remember Allah's help is the determining factor in all matters.

- The Right Environment

The Qur'an emphasizes that human beings need to encourage one another in the endeavor of inner struggle. For example, in surah Al-'Aşr, the believers are asked to encourage each other towards Şabr which, among other things, implies controlling and restraining the self¹⁹. The self-development process can become easier if one surrounds oneself with those who take the instructions of the Qur'an seriously and by avoiding and/or abandoning those who do not take the message of the Qur'an seriously. The Qur'an warns of the companion because of whom one can end up failing in this life and the next.

The following diagram summarizes the guide to self-development derived from the Holy Qur'an in this article:

¹⁹ Tanveer, A. (2017). What sabr or patience really means. *muslimink*.
<https://www.muslimink.com/islam/faith/what-sabr-really-means/>



- Epilogue

The ultimate gift of this self-development process, if done with the right intention, is the pleasure of Allah (SWT) and eternal paradise as well as success in this world. The Qur'an mentions in verse 89 of chapter 26 that the Day we meet Allah (SWT) only those whose come with a pure heart will be successful. Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) is described as having a pure heart and is also given the title of a 'friend of Allah'. Therefore, this implies that to become close and beloved to Allah (SWT) one must actively try to cultivate a pure heart and mind which is free from pride, arrogance, ingratitude, tendency to show-off, negative judgement, etc. This article has tried to outline a simple methodology towards cultivating a pure mind and heart which the Qur'an emphasizes so greatly.

3. Conclusion

Mindfulness-based therapies based on Buddhist practices have become very popular in contemporary psychology²⁰ and also in the self-development

²⁰ Hofmann, S. G., Grossman, P., & Hinton, D. E. (2011). Loving-kindness and compassion meditation: potential for psychological interventions. *Clinical psychology*

literature. Modern psychology can also explore and adapt therapies based on the holy Qur'an. This paper has produced a simple guide to self-development in English, exclusively based in the Holy Qur'an, which psychologists, counsellors, and every ordinary human being will be able to apply.

The existing literature on Islamic self-development does not precisely identify the important role of metacognition in the process of Islamic self-development. This article has highlighted and explained the vital role of metacognition in individual development. However, due to limitation of resources we could not scientifically test the guide to self-development developed in this paper. Future research can further explore the link between metacognition and self-development and scientifically test whether metacognition can facilitate self-development.

It should be noted that the process of self-development is a lifelong endeavor. The Qur'an places great weight upon self-development and highlights it as a precursor to success in this world and the eternal next. However, certain verses of the Qur'an also indicate that it may not be possible to eliminate the occurrence of negative thoughts and emotions; they are a part of Allah's divine plan to test human beings. Nonetheless, it is imperative that we are constantly striving against negative thoughts, emotions, mental processes, and behaviors. Like all good habits, this also takes time to develop, but it also gets easier with time, practice, and patience as promised in the Holy Qur'an – "And We shall ease thy way unto the state of ease" (87:8).

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