

Penitence in Islam; From the Qur'anic Perspective

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Abstract:

God, according to Islam, has created the human being as possessing reason and free will, and made him superior to other creatures. He informed him, through messengers, of the commands and the principles He demanded to be followed. He declared that those who act in accordance with commands and principles will be rewarded by Himself and those who acted to the contrary will be punished. Through their ability to do good and evil, human beings can commit some of the evil actions prohibited by God. In fact, human history has shown that the human being has done more vicious and evil things that are treated as sin according to religion than he did good actions. The Qur'an invites the human being, in the cases where his relation with God is harmed by sin, to return to God and to forsake and desist from his wrongdoings, and calls this *tawbah*. Due to this significance of *tawbah*, there are many verses in the Qur'an which invite all those who plunged into the sin to return to God by repenting what they have done. According to Islam, God, who has endless compassion and mercy, wishes to forgive His servants, and has pledged to forgive the sins no matter how numerous they are, and even further, to forgive the sins of those who have not repented, with the exception of committing the *shirk*.

Key words:

penitence, repentance, *tawbah*, sin.

God, according to Islam, as an universal religion, has created the humanbeing possessing reason and free will, and excelled him over other creatures. He made him His representative on the earth, and informed him, through the messengers, of the commands and the principles He demanded to be followed. He declared that, will be rewarded by Himself, those who act in accordance with commands and principles and will be punished those who acted on the contrary. After all these informations He granted freedom

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to humanbeing in believing or disbelieving, and in living or not living in accordance with His will.

According to Islam, Humanbeing is Responsible of his Actions

This freedom of belief and action granted by Islam to humanbeing has constituted the essence of his test in his worldly life. The humanbeing, with the knowledge received through the messengers and sacred books, has obtained the right of choice of making free decisions and whether choosing or not choosing to live in accordance with the demands of God. In this atmosphere of freedom, he will believe if he wishes, and he will disbelieve if he wills so doing.¹ Again likewise, he will put forward his actions freely, if he wishes, in accordance with His will or contrary if he so wishes. The potential of displaying these diverse actions has been placed solely in him. Because God, has created him with the aptitude of distinguishing the good and evil and to perform any one of these he wished.² With this position the humanbeing, is a being netiher totally good, like an angel, nor completely evil, like the satan. He is a being who has the aptitude of doing good and evil and accomodating both faculties potentially in himself, and able to be reminiscent of the angel and the satan in his actions.

Alongside with, according to the Qur'an, the assignment of the aptitude to the humanbeing to distinguish the good from the evil, he has been warned to choose the good.³ The reason of this divine admonishment is that he should not be held irresponsible of what he does, and to be accounted with what he has done.⁴ Thereof, the choice of the self, in doing whatever he does during his entire life, towards His will, has a vital importance for his earthly and nextworldly bliss. It is expected from the humanbeing, in order to obtain this bliss and acquire the contentment of God, to do good and fine actions. However, humanbeing is not doing, all the times, only the good, but at the same time, with the potential of being able to do good and evil, he commits, alongside with the good, some of the evil actions prohibited by God. In fact, the human history has put forward that the humanbeing, as much as his good actions, has done, even more than it, the things vicious and evil which are treated as sin according to the religion. There arises some inevitable disruptions in the relations between God and the humanbeing who cannot avoid the defects and faults. Because the humanbeing, due to his ofttimes mistakes he deteriorates his relations with God, he even sometimes cuts off this relationship.

Qur'an invites the humanbeing, in the cases when his relation with God is cut off even ruptured completely, to return to God again and to forsake and lay aside his wrong actions. This call, includes those who have

¹ Al- Kahf, 29.

² Al-Balad, 10; Ash-Shams, 8.

³ Al-Insan, 3; Al-Layl, 12-14.

⁴ Al-Mu'minûn, 115; Qiy'amah, 36.

broken up their entire relation of belief with God and plunged into the disbelief, and, at the same time, the sinful ones who though believed in God but plunged into the error and behaved contrary to God's will. In Islamic terminology, the return of human being to God, and his forsake of the sin he performed by feeling penitence, has been expressed as "tawbah".

Etymology of Tawbah

The origin of the term "tawbah" is derivative of Arabic predicate "tvb". This term literally means "to return", to remorse, to quit of something and leaving the committed sin and returning to God.⁵ As a terminology, *tawbah* is; to leave a guilt by knowing it as a sin, due to his sin of that to beg forgiveness from God, followingly, to incline towards a life suited to God's contentment and to decide not to commit any sin any longer.⁶

In religious literature, there arises another term mentioned alongside with *tawbah* and has parallel objective, this term is *istighfâr*. The word *istighfâr* is Arabic and derived from the predicate of "ghfr" which means to cover. The usages in the forms of "to make *istighfâr*" and to demand "*maghfira*" means to demand from God to cover and to conceal the sins.⁷ In this position the *istighfâr* is in the meaning of suplication and it has been used for the forgiveness of one's faults and defects in his servitude and worships. Compared to the *tawbah*, the *istighfâr* has some narrower meaning, and with this peculiarity it differs from *tawbah*. For in *tawbah*, one returns to God from his sin, in so doing, he bears the determination of not to plunge into the sin again. Likewise in *tawbah*, while the action of leaving the sin and returning to God has precedence, in *istighfâr* the objective and desire of being forgiven is in the forerun. Yet in the *tawbah*, beside the begging for forgiveness of the sin, there are some other elements such as the determination of returning to God and leaving the sin. Judging by this feature of *istighfar*, it includes only one of the objectives of *tawbah*. Another dimension of *istighfar* that differs from *tawbah* is that it is possible to demand *istighfar* for others. As a matter of fact, many verses available in the Qur'an depicting that the Messenger and the angel and righteous

⁵ Ibn Manzur, *Lisân al-'Arab*, Beirut, I/336; Louis Ma'luf, *Al-Munjid*, Beirut 1949, 63; Abû al-Husayn b. Fâris b. Ahmad b. Zakariyya, *Al-Mu'jam Maqâyis al-Lughah*, Tahqîq 'Abd al-Salâm Mahmûd Hârûn, Cairo, 1366, I/357. This word is used to indicate penitence and return to God without a preposition (*harf al-jarr*) (An-Nisa, 18; Hûd, 112; An-Nahl, 119; Maryam, 60; Al-Furqan, 70-71; Al-Mujadala, 13) or with proposition (*harf al-jarr*) *ilâ* (Al-Baqara, 54; Al-Maida, 74; An-Nisa, 18; Hûd, 90; An-Noor, 31; Al-Furkan, 71). The same word is used to indicate God's forgiving with preposition (*harf al-jarr*) *alâ* (Baqara, 34, 54, 160; Al-Maida, 39, 71; Al-Tawbah, 117-118; Al-Ahzâb, 73; Al-Muzammil, 20). The word "tawwâb" means one who makes *tawbah* continuously and this word has also meaning of forgiving of sins. In this sense, it is one of the names of God.

⁶ Al- Ghazali, *Ihya' ulum al-dîn*, "Revival of Religious Sciences", Trans. Ahmet Serdaroglu, Istanbul 1975, IV/9; Cihat Tunç, "Tövbe Hakkında Bazı Meseleler", Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi (Hereafter *AUIFD*), Ankara 1981, XXIV/394.

⁷ Ibn Manzur, II/1000; Ma'luf, 583; Abû al-Husayn b. Fâris, IV/385.

persons have made *istighfar* for others to be forgiven.⁸ However to make *tawbah* for someone else deemed impossible.

Though this theoretic difference between *tawbah* and *istighfâr*, practically there is no distinct difference between these two terms, concerning their meaning. Although the difference in their essence, there is a parallelism mostly in their usage. Because some of the verses in the Qur'an and the word of *istighfar* in other Islamic literature, has been used together with *tawbah* oftentimes and displaying an apparition of synonymous with it. In fact in the Qur'an is "Whoever commits an evil and oppressed his self, then demand forgiveness from God; he finds God as forgiving and showing mercy."⁹ This and similar verses¹⁰ depicting that there is a great parallelism in meaning between *tawbah* and *istighfar*. Likewise, as in the hadith of the Prophet of, "There is no small sin with obstinacy, and there is no great sin with *istighfar*,"¹¹ the words of *tawbah* and *istighfar* have been used in identical meaning. All of these clearly denoting that the terms of *tawbah* and *istighfar* meaning to quit to commit sin and to demand forgiveness of God due to the sin committed.

God is Forgiving And He Wants to Forgive His Servants

The man who is innocent by birth, according to Islam, may commit actions opposite to God's contentment by plunging into the sin, due to his potential to do both the good and the evil. In fact the hadith of the Prophet of, "All the sons of Adam is prone to make mistakes; the best of the errants are those who repent,"¹² depicts that the human being is unable to avoid the sin completely and he is prey to plunge into the sin. This hadith, at the same time, demonstrates that the sole way for avoidance the sin and the purification is *tawbah*.

Due to this significance of *tawbah*, many verses have been recorded in the Qur'an and they invite all those who plunged into the sin to return to God by quitting of what they have done.¹³ All the verses related to *tawbah*, therewithal, put forward that God has not left those who fell into the sin tête-à-tête with their sins, and He grants them another chance to be a good servant and a good human by purifying themselves from the sins. If there had not God given a chance to His servants who plunged into the sin to remorse of what they have done and to leave them and again to be a good

⁸ Al- A'raf, 151; Yusuf (Joseph), 97-98; Ibrahim (Abraham), 41; Al-Shu'arâ, 86; Al-Hashr, 10; Nooh (Noah), 28.

⁹ An-Nisa, 110.

¹⁰ Al-i Imran, 135; An-Nisa, 64, 106; An-Noor, 62.

¹¹ Ishmael b. Mohammad al-'Ajluni, *Kashf al-Khafâ va Muzilu'l Ilbas Anma Ishtahera mine'l-Ahadisi ala Alsineti'n-Nas*, Beirut 1352 Hijri, II/364.

¹² Ibn Maja, Abu Abdullah Mohammad bin Yazeed el Khazvîni, *Sunan*, Istanbul 1981, Az-Zuhd, 30; Tirmidhi, Abu İsa Mohammad bin İsa, *Sunan*, Istanbul 1981, Qiyamah, 49; Darîmi, Ebu Mohammad Abdullah bin Abdurrahman, *Sunan*, Istanbul 1981, Rîqaq, 18; Ahmad bin Hanbal, Abu Abdullah, *Musnad*, Istanbul 1982, III/198.

¹³ The matter of *tawbah* is mentioned in 69 verses of 25 surah in different contexts. The word *tawbah* and its derivations are occurred 80 times in the Qur'an.

servant, almost all the human, would have lost the chance totally to draw away from the evil he has done and to be a good human again. This situation would cause him to be stuck to greater sins and to spend his life by plunging into the viciousnesses in this world, and in the next world to be miserable totally. Nonetheless God almighty for He knew the ability of His servants to commit sin He vouchsafed the tawbah and He expressed how great is this beneficence, as such: "If there had not been God's grace and mercy on you, and if there had He not accepted the tawbas and been owner of sovereignty and wisdom (what would you have done?)."¹⁴

For being God owner of endless compassion and mercy towards His servants, He vouchsafed to the humanbeing the tawbah as a means leaving the evil things and purifying themselves from the sins, and He has set forth that He has the endless compassion and mercy towards His servants and He wanted to forgive them. As for that God almighty said in the verse 26 of Surah An-Nisa: "God wishes to explain for you... and to forgive you..." And in the immediately after this verse has been said that, "God wishes to accept your repentance."¹⁵ In the first one of these successive verses, the wish of God to forgive His servants has been mentioned, in the latter one His desire to accept the tawbas has been stated. These verses has propounded that the desire of God's forgiveness and the tawbah of the servant are two elements complementary of each other, and there is a firm relation between the wish of God to forgive and the tawbah of His servants. This stance has set forth that God, the possessor of endless compassion and mercy yearned to absolve His servants plunged into the sin, for that, He made the tawbah as a means and it is necessary for the sinful servants to beg forgiveness from Him. Neither an intermediary nor a special ceremony and another preparation is needed for a person to obtain the divine absolution by making tawbah. The inclination of oneself towards God with the tenacity to leave with a real penitence of what he has done, has been accounted sufficient for the absolution. Nevertheless, some peculiar peculiarities ought to be present in the tawbah.

The Peculiarities of Tawbah

There is no any kind of obstacle and precondition in the tawbah which is a worship performed by an individual as inclined to God, without any intermediary. Nonetheless the scholars of Islam, based on the commentary of the verses, declared that some peculiarities must be present in the tawbah. These required peculiarities are for providing the tawbah to be suited to God's approval and contentment. Because tawbah is a behavior of the servant he made for himself and eventually desired to attain the divine absolution. To perform this action which made by the individual with the objective of escaping from the sin he committed and to procure God's contentment in the best form, and to actualize other matters that God

¹⁴ An-Noor, 10.

¹⁵ An-Nisa, 27.

commanded to be fulfilled alongside with tawbah will increase the value of the tawbah made, before God, and the chance to be acceptable. In fact in the Qur'an are a kind of verses to direct the religious scholar on their comments on tawbah topic and to be base for the prerequisites they defined. In these verses, the topics such as; making tawbah and accepting the fault,¹⁶ correcting the manner and the behaviors,¹⁷ doing good deeds¹⁸ and to become well-behaved¹⁹ have been mentioned and they have been enumerated as the peculiarities ought to be present in the tawbah. It has been ascertained, with this and similar verses and at a result of the interpretation of some hadiths, that the tawbah ought to have some conditions.

The first condition to be present in the tawbah is the feeling of penitence. Penitence is the essential part of tawbah and it is considered as a matter identical to tawbah. Hence, the Prophet has stated the significance of the penitence in the tawbah by saying that, "Penitence is a tawbah."²⁰ It has been accepted that feeling a whole-hearted and a sincere penitence is to be the essence of the tawbah. It has been stated that a tawbah without penitence is an insincere and ostensible conduct.²¹

The second conditions to be present in tawbah is the immediate relinquish of the sin. In fact God, with the statement of "When they do an evil or when they oppress their selves, they wish the absolution of their sins, by remembering God. They do not persist knowingly on what they do,"²² has enunciated that those who beg absolution from God by becoming aware of their sins, will not and should not persist on the sin. If a person, though his total penitence, does not leave his sin and carry on committing it, this manner has been understood as not a tawbah, but a short period remorse. In the permanent penitence in the real meaning is the determination of leaving the sin and not returning to it again which is the main objective of tawbah.²³ A penitence that does not provide the abandonment of the sin is not but to destroy his sensitivity towards the sin and to roll him in the swamp of the sin.²⁴ Determination of not returning to the same sin again to be present in the tawbah made. The hadith of Prophet Muhammad, "Tawbah is quitting the sin and not returning it again,"²⁵ demonstrates that not returning to the sin is an crucial matter in the tawbah. The one who thinks to commit the same sin in the future, his penitence at that moment proves that he has no ample sincerity in his

¹⁶ Al-Baqara, 160; At-Tawbah, 102.

¹⁷ An-Nisa, 146; Al-Ma'ida, 39; Al-An'am, 54; An-Nahl, 119.

¹⁸ Al-Furqan, 71; Al-Qasas, 67.

¹⁹ Âl-i İmran, 89; An-Noor, 5.

²⁰ İbni Maja, Az-Zuhd, 30; Ahmad bin Hanbal, I/376, 423, 433.

²¹ Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, *Salvation Through Repentance (An Islamic View)*, Riyadh 1990, 37.

²² Âl-i İmran, 135.

²³ Tunç, AUIFD., XXIV/395.

²⁴ Philips, 32-33.

²⁵ Ahmad bin Hanbal, I / 446.

penitence. Thereof, it has been acknowledged as essential in the tawbah the determination of not returning to the same sin again, alongside with penitence and leaving the sin.²⁶

The aforementioned conditions have been acknowledged as the stipulations to be present in the tawbah occurred for the sins committed towards one's himself or God. If one committed this sin towards another person, in this sin there is the right of man at the same time. In this case, it has been acknowledged that for the tawbah, primarily payment of the right of the person and obtaining his consent is the third matter in the tawbah. Fulfilment of this stipulation depends on the recompense of the rendered injustice, to retrieve the right if there is usurpation and to atone the oppressed person.²⁷ The hadith of the Prophet puts forward that the tawbah made without recompensing the right of the others, is worthless. He, by talking about a person who due to a long distance journey his beard and hair was in disorder, by raising his hands up to the sky entreating as, "O my Lord! O my Lord!" said, "How God is to accept the invocation of a person whose food is unlawful and his drink is unlawful and his clothes are unlawful and his whole nourishment is unlawful?"²⁸ From this hadith too, it has been understood that in the cases where the right of man is involved, the recompense of this right is the essential element of the tawbah.

Amongst the Islamic sholars al-Ghazali by taking aforementioned conditions into consideration, stated that tawbah comprises of knowledge, manner and action. To him, thanks to the knowledge a person comprehends that what he has done is a sin and this sin alienates him from God. When he comprehends this, a state of deep penitence arises due to the contravention to the desire of God. This state of the person transforms into an action related to the past, the future and at that moment. The first step of this action is the abandonment of the sin. The determination of not committing sin in the future follows this. The relation of the action with the past is to recompense of the sins committed in the past.²⁹

H. Ali too expressed some views on tawbah that it should contain some matters. Some day, when he saw in the masjid a bedouin who was making tawbah hastily, told him that only oral and hastily tawbah is not a real tawbah. To him the real tawbah can only come into effect by feeling penitence, fulfilling the religious obligations, recompensing the goods he usurped from others, quitting to make injustice, being determined for not returning to the sin, and to subdue the self that rampaged with the sin and to provide to feel joy with that.³⁰ The elements H. Ali requested to be present in the tawbah comprise the essentials of a sincere and real tawbah.

²⁶ Katar, Mehmet, *Penitence in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (PhD dissertation), Andaç Press, 2nd edition, Ankara, 2003, 158-159.

²⁷ Philips, 36.

²⁸ Muslim, Az-Zakah, 65; Tirmidhi, Tafseer Surah 2/36.

²⁹ Al-Ghazali, IV/9.

³⁰ Tunç, AUIFD., XXIV/400.

A tawbah consisting of these peculiarities is going to be the real tawbah in the meaning that God demanded and suited for the approval.

The Approval of Tawbah

Tawbah is an activity between the servant and God and has dimension related to both the servant and God. The servant actualizes the tawbah's dimension related to him by quitting the sins he committed and making tawbah in response to the call of God. The other dimension of tawbah is being formed by God's approval of the servant's tawbah. In this approval, though the servant has no authority, approval of his tawbah is in his close concern at the utmost scale. Because the servant actualizes the tawbah to get away of the burden of the sin and to reach God's contentment. Consequently, it is a normal state, at the end of the tawbah he made, to wonder whether he reached his aim or not. This, at the same time, is a significant factor affecting the attitudes and the styles of the behaviours concerning the matter of whether to make tawbah or not by those who plunged into the sin. Because due to its nature, the humanbeing dedicates the necessary strife for the attainment of what he hopes to achieve his objective. He does not attempt easily for the deed that there is no sufficient incitement about the objective he wanted to achieve and the result is completely uncertain. Since God almighty knew the nature of His servants, He has not left them in the hopeless and uncertain situation, and He set forth that He will accept the tawbah of the tawbah maker. One can find many verses in the Qur'an which indicate this fact. In these verses has been declared that God loves His servants,³¹ He is so compassionate to them,³² for this reason He bestowed the tawbah for His servants who plunged into the sin³³ and due to their tawbas He wishes to forgive them.³⁴

Prophet Muhammad, as he explained the statements in the Qur'an related to this love of God towards His servants and His wish to forgive their mistakes, he stated that God is so content from His servants' tawbas, and he defined the pleasure of God He felt due to His servant's tawbah, as such: "The pleasure of God due to the tawbah of His servant is more than the joy felt by who lost his camel in the desert and he searched for it, but at the end he got so tired (in a despair situation) and wrapped himself in his clothes and slept, in this situation he heard the voice of his camel and by pulling out his cover on him and finding his camel."³⁵ This hadith, puts forward stunningly the dimension of the joy of God felt from the tawbah of His sinful servants, and gives a clear hint of God's attitude about the approval of their repentance. He, in the Qur'an, depicted Himself as

³¹ Hud, 90.

³² Al-Baqara, 128; Âl-i İmran, 89; Al-Ma'ida, 39; At-Tawbah, 104, 117; Al-Ahzab, 73.

³³ At-Tawbah, 117; An-Noor, 10.

³⁴ An-Nisa, 26-27.

³⁵ İbn Maja, Az-Zuhd, 30; Tirmidhi, Qiyamah, 49; Darimi, Rıqaq, 19; Ahmad bin Hanbal, I / 383, II / 316, 500, 524, 534; also see. Bukhari, Da'vât, 4; Muslim, Tawbah, 1-8.

forgiving the sins and accepting the tawbas.³⁶ God, proved that He acted in accordance with this attribute by mentioning the past individuals and peoples whose tawbas He accepted. In fact He accepted the tawbah of Adam,³⁷ and of the Israelites during the Moses's time,³⁸ and of Ansar and Muhajirun.³⁹ His approval of the tawbas is not limited with some individuals and peoples lived in the past. Because God is the acceptor of the tawbas all the times.⁴⁰ As concerning this, Hz. Muhammad said: "God stretches out His hand at night tawbah to be made by those who commit sin at day time, and stretches out His hand at day time tawbah to be made by those who commit sin at night." This continues as such until the sun rises from the west (until the Resurrection)."⁴¹ With this hadith Muhammad stated that God is the acceptor of the tawbas all the time. Al-Ghazali stated that the paraphrase of, "stretching out the hand" in this hadith, means "to demand" and to demand something means more meaning than accepting it. To him, to accept something without a demand is possible, if a demanded thing is given, it means that it has already been accepted. In this case, God has accepted the tawbah made by those whofrom He demanded it, that is He accepted the tawbah of the tawbah maker.⁴²

Under the light of aforementioned statements, it has been understood that God has forgiven all the sins of those who made tawbah for their sins and acted accordingly. According to Islam, this is not different no matter how great is the size of the sins they committed. Because the grace of God is greater than anything. Hence, it is ought not to be despair from God's compassion and mercy. In fact God clearly stated that His servants should not be despair of Him and He will forgive any kind of sins, and He says: "Say: "O my Servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah: for Allah forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."⁴³ In a hadith Abu Hurayra narrated from prophet Muhammad, the greatness of God's grace has been stated, and set forth that His mercy is more than His wrath.⁴⁴

God, whose grace is greater than anything else, due to His compassion and mercy, does not refuse His servants who demands forgiveness by stretching out their hands, and without any consideration of the multitude and the size of the sins, He is forgiving them. In order to express that the maltitude and the size of the sins, are not an obstacle for the tawbah to be accepted, prophet Muhammad says: "Even if you commit

³⁶ Al- Bakara, 37, 54, 128; An-Nisa, 64; Al-Ma'ida, 34, 74; At-Tawbah, 104, 118; An-Noor, 10; Al-Ahzab, 24, 73; Al Mu'min, 3; Ash-Shura, 25; Al-Hujurat, 12; An-Nasr, 3.

³⁷ Al-Baqara, 37; Ta-Ha, 122.

³⁸ Al- Baqara, 54; Al-Ma'ida, 71.

³⁹ At-Tawbah, 117.

⁴⁰ Al- Baqara, 160.

⁴¹ Muslim, Tawbah, 31; Ahmad bin Hanbal, IV/404.

⁴² Al-Ghazali, IV/28.

⁴³ Az-Zumer, 53.

⁴⁴ Muslim, Tawbah, 15-16.

sins reaching to the sky and thenafter you made tawbah, yet God accepts your sins."⁴⁵

According to Islam, when God accepted the tawbah and forgave His servant, he becomes like a person who has not committed any sin until then. The Prophet has stated this as saying: "Whoever makes tawbah, becomes like the one who has never committed any sin."⁴⁶ Even further than that, God almighty, if He wishes, He transformes into the merits his past sins stemmed from some of his mistakes. In fact God, in the Qur'an, He not only forgives the sins of His servant who made tawbah, at the same time, He will transform his past sins into the merits. He states as such: "Those who make tawbah, believe and do beneficial deeds; here God will transform their evil deeds into the goodnesses. God is most-forgiving and most-pardoning."⁴⁷ As will be understood from this verse God, by accepting His servants' tawbah forgives them, even further than that, He transformes their past sins into the merit. This stance demonstrates the extent of God's mercy and His benevolence towards those who make tawbah. Furthermore, the servant's repetition of the sin, though he repented several times, does not constitute as an obstacle for God's mercy and forgiveness. Just as the Prophet said in one of his hadiths, "Certainly, when a servant committed a sin, he says, "O my Lord! I committed a sin; forgive it!" His Lord says: "My servant has committed a sin and he knew that he has a pardoning and punishing Lord," (and He forgives him) thenafter he commits another sin again (and as he said previously) and says to his Lord: "O my Lord! Certainly I committed a sin; forgive my sin!" His Lord says to him: "My servant knew that he has pardoning and punishing Lord," and He forgives him. This person again commits a sin (and as previous times), "O my Lord! I have committed a sin, forgive me!" His Lord says to him: "My servant knew that he has a pardoning and punishing Lord," and thenafter says to him: "Do whatever you wish, I have forgiven you."⁴⁸ This hadith, asserted that the tawbah of a person who sincerely repented, thenafter for not controlling himself, if he commits the same sin again and again, he can make tawbah each time, there is no limitation in that, and the gate of tawbah is always open. Consequently, if one plunges into the same sin after his repentance, he can repent again each time and can hope the pardoning of God. And God forgives, if He wishes, even if this mistake has been repeated several times by His servant.

As Islam bestowed the possibility of unlimited tawbah, it has not stipulated a special time for it. But it has been admonished that the tawbah of the committed sins should not be delayed. In fact in the Qur'an, the approval of the tawbah has been associated with making tawbah immediately after the sin. Qur'an says: "For God, those ones's repentance

⁴⁵ Ibn Maja, Az-Zuhd, 30.

⁴⁶ Ibn Maja, Az-Zuhd, 30.

⁴⁷ Al-Furqan, 70.

⁴⁸ Muslim, Tawbah, 29-30.

is acceptable; they repent immediately after the sin they committed ignorantly. Here God accepts their tawbah... Otherwise there is no tawbah for those who make the evils repeatedly and eventually when the death comes, say, "I made tawbah," and those who died as a nonbeliever (their tawbah is not acceptable).."⁴⁹ What is understood from these verses is that God almighty desires the immediate repentance of those who commit sin. Because He never desire His servants to commit sin persistently. In fact Qur'an clearly states that a good Muslim never persist in the sin,⁵⁰ and it has been understood that it is essential that when a person commits a sin he should leave the sin and demand forgiveness from God.

The ideal in the tawbah is to repent immediately after committing the sin. However, this does not mean that one cannot repent in a later time, contrary, one can repent in any time of his life. There is no room in Islam that there is a time which repentance is impossible. Hence, one has the possibility of repentance in any time until his death. In fact, Zamakhshari, an exegete of Qur'an, interpreted the aforestated phrase of the verse of, "They repent immediately after the sin," as the repentance of a sinful person before the death comes.⁵¹ This interpretation of Zamakhshari reflects also the general conception of Islam. According to this conception, although tawbah immediately after the sin has been a preferred behavior, it is possible to make tawbah, however delayed, in any part of the life. In a hadith of the Prophet, while it has been stated that God will accept His servant's repentance made one day prior to his death, even a half day before, even a latemorning span before his death, at the end of the same hadith, it has been stated that the tawbah made just before the soul comes up to the throat, will be accepted by God.⁵² It is understood from this hadith that to make tawbah at any time before the death has been seen as possible. However, since the death may come at any time, it is ought to make tawbah straightaway and to be purified from the sins by responding to the call of God.

According to Islam, the purification from the sins and the tawbah of those who want to make tawbah by responding to the call of God has been accepted and these persons, by attaining God's pardoning, become a good servant. The state of those who die without making tawbah depends on God. If God wishes, He pardones and wipes out their sins, if He wishes, He punishes them due to their sins. Even in such case too, God, for He is the possessor of endless compassion and mercy, may forgive His sinful servants. Thereof, should not despair of His mercy.⁵³ Because God has set forth, by declaring that His mercy is unlimitedly bountiful, and only the

⁴⁹ En-Nisa, 17-18.

⁵⁰ Āl-i Imran, 135.

⁵¹ Al-Zamakhshari, Carullah Mahmood b. Omar, *Al-Kashshaaf an Hakaik-i Gavamidi't - Tanzeel*, Beirut, I/488-489.

⁵² Ibn Maja, Az-Zuhd, 30; al-Tirmidhi, Da'vât, 99; Ahmad ibn Hanbal, II/132, 153; V/174.

⁵³ Az-Zumar, 53.

stray ones can despair of His mercy,⁵⁴ none of the believers should be despaired of His forgiveness. In this case, it has been understood that as God purifying from the sins by accepting His servants's repentance, even though have not repented, He will forgive His servants' sins too, committed towards Him. The only sin that God will not forgive is the shirk (polytheism); that is to associate other gods with HIm. This situation has been clearly explained in the Qur'an, and it has been stated that God will not forgive the shirk, but He will forgive other sins of whom He wishes.⁵⁵ It has been expressed that the Hell is the abode for those who committed the sin of the shirk and died before repentance.⁵⁶

Under the light of aforestated verses, it has been understood that God is the owner of endless compassion and mercy, wishes to forgive His servants, thereof He bestowed them the tawbah, and pledged the forgiveness of the sins no matter how plentiful they are, even further than that, to forgive the sins of those who have not repented, other than the shirk.

⁵⁴ Yusuf (Joseph), 87; Al-Hijr, 56.

⁵⁵ An-Nisa, 48, 116; Katar, *Penitence...*, 172

⁵⁶ Al-Ma'ida, 72.