

## SUFISTIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF TEWBE “REPENTANCE” FOR SELF-TRANSFORMATION\*

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### Abstract

Tewbe is repentance and turning to God Almighty from our mistakes. It is to turn ourselves towards the breeze of God’s grace and mercy, from the burning fire of deprivation in us. Repentance is to turn to Lord by undoing the persistent knot of misdeed of our hearts, and to follow God’s law. Tewbe, in another sense, is to regret mischief and sin and to turn God. Turning from infidelity to faith is the tewbe of the blasphemous, turning from misdeeds to good deeds is of the sinner, turning from bad habits to virtue is of the good people, turning to God from everything other than God (masiva) is of the prophets and saints”<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the main aim with regards to tewbe is to turn towards Allah and His love, from all the other loves.

Keywords: Repentance, heart, soul, spiritual and divine love, self-transformation.

### Kendini Dönüştürmek İçin Tevbenin Tasavvufî ve Psikolojik Etkileri

#### Öz

Tevbe, pişmanlık ve hatadan Allah Teâlâ’ya dönmektir. İçimizdeki günah ateşinden ilahi rahmetin ve affın serinliğine yönelme ve dönmedir. “Tevbe, kalbin içinde bulunan kötülük hususunda ısrar düğümünü çözüp Hakk’a dönmek ve Rabbin hukukunu gözetmektir. Bir baksa açıdan tövbe, kötü ve günah işlere pişman olup Hakk’a yönelmedir. Küfürden imana dönmek kâfirlerin, kötü işlerden iyi işlere dönmek günahkârların, kötü huylardan iyi ahlaka dönmek iyilik sahiplerinin, Hak dışındaki her şeyden (masiva) Hakk’a dönmek nebi ve velilerin tevbesidir”<sup>2</sup>. Aslında tevbe hususunda ana hedef, Allah dışındaki her şeyden ve bütün geçici asklardan Allah Teâlâ’ya dönmek ve O’nun aşkına yönelmektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Tevbe, kalp, ruh, manevî ve ilahî sevgi, kendini-dönüştürme.

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<sup>1</sup>Suleyman Uludag, *Tasavvuf Terimleri Sözlüğü*, Marifet Publishing, İstanbul, 1999, p. 529.

<sup>2</sup>Uludag, *ibid*, p. 529.

## 1. Introduction

Worship starts with recognizing defects, and to will to be purified and cleaned. "Tewbe is to show the will to turn away from misdeeds, and not commit them again. "In this sense, if man plans to act in good manner, then he would reset himself each day. When man repents and worships, by choosing to commit good deeds against negative thoughts, lust and decoys, this would be conforming to the Divine purposes"<sup>1</sup>. Tewbe, in this sense, reconstructs muraqaba, through awareness to turn back from misdeeds and self-renewal.

### 1.1. Effect on Hope and Self-Renewal

No matter what your perspective is tewbe is to seek refuge in Allah. It is a process starting with 'turning' from mischief, and continues by 'turning' to Allah in every means. In truth however tewbe is to turn to Allah, from every situation and condition other than Allah. In this sense, tewbe contains hope, love and self-renewal. Containing hope, love and self-renewal, tewbe is the key for mental health and means of therapy for diseases.

"No matter the perspective, man, through tewbe, feels sorrow and regret for his deeds against Allah's will, and deserts such deeds. By frequently repenting, he removes the traces of all thoughts, acts and sins, which come between him and Allah, and tries to come closer to Allah"<sup>2</sup>. It reaches such a stage that repentance would mean forgetting about everything but Allah.

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Man restructures himself through tewbe. When he is tenacious to follow Allah's will in feelings, thoughts, attention and care, will and desire, worship and all other commitments, when he is determined to reach Him by eluding himself, then his personality would be shaped again. Through tewbe, therefore, man seeks to unify mind and heart only with Allah and to turn towards Him.

Tewbe is to regret and refuse sins. The pure repentance called reforming (nasuhaan) repentance does not leave any gaps; it is as if repairing the ailing parts. Just like the milk which cannot go back to the breast, not turning back to the sin is called *nasuhaan repentance*.

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<sup>1</sup> Nevzat Tarhan, *Inanc Psikolojisi-Ruh, Beyin ve Akil Ucgeninde Insanoglu*, Timas Publishing, Istanbul, 2011, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, Académie Press, London, 1974, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Tarhan, N., 2011, age.

“The only way to embellish morals and to suppress rage and desire is to enhance thinking desire of the soul. If the thinking desires of the soul are enhanced settled in man, it would be possible for him to command his two other powers, ‘rage and desire’. Hence, man will be able to refrain from all ugly deeds. This way, man will be constantly embellished with good habits”<sup>4</sup>. For a man renewing and enhancing himself with good character, universe, man and the Creator become a unifying love. In this case, a loving human being is not only the friend of man, but, loves life as a whole.

A man who welcomes each new day with a new hope and purification through repentance, embraces himself and the universe with Divine love. “In Divine love, God loves us not only for ourselves, but also for Himself. Therefore, God has created us for Himself, so we can know Him. After all, Allah has created us only for himself. Talking about the love from Allah to us, this love is expressed in the way which we are introduced the means to our salvation from the deeds not conforming to our nature and aim in life”<sup>5</sup>. This love presents hope and the energy needed for self-renewal of man.

“In conclusion, Allah has created earth together with love. Therefore, love completely fills the universe. Allah never ends creating with love. This protects the universe from a constant change and chaos”<sup>6</sup>. The spiritual power and renewal awareness at the core of Divine love, constantly keeps repentance dynamic. This indicates that through Divine love, hope and awareness for renewal constantly enhance each other.

### 1.2. Effect on Self-Knowledge and Productivity

“A true and right *tewbe* has three conditions: To regret having committed acts against the rule of Allah, instantly leaving misdeeds and sins behind, and being determined not to repeat former sins. It is necessary that these conditions are met for a healthy *tewbe*. According to scholars, repentance is to regret committing sins, which have been mentioned in hadith. The phrase ‘*Those who repent their sins will become as if never committed those sins*’<sup>7</sup> indicates that repentance is mostly about regretting”<sup>8</sup>. The process of regret, in this sense, helps man to go on an internal journey, and know more about himself inside out.

“If a man knows himself, it means that he is aware of having an independent and unique personality. This helps to know what he is, what he wants in life, and which path he needs to walk. Knowing one’s self means recognizing feelings and thoughts, desires and ideals, strengths and weaknesses

<sup>4</sup> Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, *Allah Kimleri Sever*, (trans. Ekrem Demirli), Hayybook, Istanbul, 2006, p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, *Ilahi Ask*, (trans. Mahmut Kanik), İnsan Publishing, Istanbul, 2006, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> William C. Chittick, *Sufism*, One World Oxford Press, London, 1986, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Mace, *Zuhd*, 30/425.

<sup>8</sup> Abdulkarim Kuseyri, *Risaletu’l-Kuseyri*, Daru’l-Hayr, Beyrut, 2003, p. 180.

and hence, being able to control behaviour"<sup>9</sup>. People, who know themselves, are aware of their motivations and feelings. Even though, none of us is ever able to exactly understand our feelings or behaviours, ordinary people cannot hide their important feelings and motivations from themselves.

The tewbe of a Gnostic, who lives and internalizes his scholar, is to seek refuge in Allah, from everything but Allah. Perhaps the real tewbe is to repent from repentance. In fact, even repentance contains a constant change and renewal within itself. In other words, even repentance is constantly renewing itself. "At this point, repentance has three meanings: First one is, regret; Second one is, to decide never to commit a sin against Allah again; Third one is, to show an effort to compensate for the committed injustice"<sup>10</sup>. In this sense, repentance is to avoid saying 'I shall do it tomorrow' and instantly act upon the Divine orders-prohibitions.

Repentance saves man from everything but the love of Allah; avoids the danger of arrogance by turning man away from all love but the love of Allah; makes man determined not to go back to misdeeds, and also erases their negative effects and turns them into positive deeds.

While directing man towards positive characteristic traits, it takes him towards a point where he generates goodness, beauty and Divine love within himself. This process, which we may also call spiritual productivity, renews man's spiritual world and rejuvenates him. Productive people can direct their talents towards productive activities. They are willing for life, and do not have to force themselves to meet the demands of daily life. Lack of productivity on the other hand, is an indication of lack of constant energy and psychological tension, which is mostly caused by unsolved problems.

While directing man towards positive characteristic traits, repentance uncovers a man who does not live only for himself, but also turns to Allah, in order to ensure a peaceful life and spiritual energy for all human beings. This dimension of productivity adds a social dimension on top of the spiritual dimension of productivity. "What we mean by productivity here, is the concern to establish and direct future generations. Productive man also starts dealing with rising the next generation. He goes beyond the narrow borders of family, and directs himself to deal with the other people, future generations and the society and the world they are going to live in"<sup>11</sup>.

Repentance is the key and driving force behind mental health, through awareness of renewal, hope, productivity and the ability to know one's self.

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<sup>9</sup> Hayati Hokelekli, *Ailede, Okulda, Toplumda Deger Psikolojisi ve Egitimi*, Timas Publishing, Istanbul, 2011, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Kuseyri, *ibid*, p. 190.

<sup>11</sup> Hayati Hokelekli, *Psikolojiye Giris*, Dusunce Publishing, Istanbul, 2009, p. 60.

Spirit and body are inseparable concepts. Even flu, which is totally a physical sickness, may make us feel down, and demoralize us. Just like the bodily nuisances being reflected to our inner world; our inner problems may also indicate themselves by physical symptoms.

Our body consists of many organs and each one of these organs is affected by our mental condition. Let us discuss depression. Depression develops with symptoms such as pessimism, sorrow, breakdown, and from heart to intestine, all our organs slow down. Intestines may start to fail; microbial diseases may find it easier to settle in our bodies. As such, depression is defined as feeling down and sad, and not enjoying anything and it can be observed in any age group. At his point, with all its aspects forming mental peace, repentance is a pre-condition for physical as well as mental health.

### 1.3. Effect on Human Search for a Meaning

“Ordinary man’s repentance is due to sin, prominent man’s repentance is due to negligence. True repentance on the other hand, is to *tewbe* from everything, but Allah”<sup>12</sup>. “When man reaches repentance in its real meaning, he would even repent from all the thoughts, but Allah, that cross his mind during prayer”<sup>13</sup>. At this point, we can say that even a single breath would not conform to true repentance, if it is taken without the love, approval and closeness of Allah. It is pure negligence for a man to lead his life without placing Allah at the centre of his heart. In this sense, true repentance draws a border to thoughts other than Allah, and to loves without Allah at the centre. This borderline is drawn at the point of repentance, when man turns to Allah with his soul and his heart.

Repentance purifies heart from thoughts and feelings other than Allah, and in this sense, places the heart into a spiritual curing process. After all, with this aspect, repentance is the essence of Divine love. And love adds value to the beloved. If a human being loves another one, it means that he values, and cares for the other one. Loving someone is to desire his existence; and to feel joy of his existence. In this way, repentance is such a turning towards Allah that man longs for His existence all the time, and gets great taste from His existence.

“According to Sufis, repentance is turning back from being against Allah’s rule. What we mean by turning back here is the heart to stop rebelling against Allah and start obeying Him. So if a man repents with his tongue, but his heart continues to sin, than his *tewbe* is that of a liar. And it will never be accepted. His Holiness Ali said:

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<sup>12</sup> Ebu Nasr Serrac Tusi, *el-Luma fi Tarihi’t-Tasavvufi’l-Islamiyyi*, Daru’l-Kutubi’l-Imiyyeti, Beirut, 2001, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Ebu Hafs Suhreverdi, *Avarifu’l-Maarif*, Daru’l-Kitabi’l-Arabiyyi, Beirut, 1966, p. 627.

'Tewbe of the liar is a tewbe done by the tips of their tongue'. Arabic term 'Tevbete'n-Nas'uha' means 'sincere Tewbe' and this means pure, sincere tewbe, with no doubt in its honesty"<sup>14</sup>. Sincere Tewbe is the centre of Divine love, as it purifies the heart from all the thoughts and emotions other than Allah; and spiritually cleanses the heart. Divine love on the other hand, is a tewbe with sincere love and deep love.

Tewbe with sincerity, fondness and deep love has a therapic effect on man's search for a meaning. As such, when man is face with uncertainty, he feels threatened and tries to evade this feeling by placing a meaning to life; and with a will to believe in a sacred and powerful entity, he fights against ignorance. Meaning, consolation and the search for after life are present in our minds. As long as he turns to God, and seeks refuge in Him, man discovers the meanings which value life. And this unifies with self-renewal and hope, which are the essences of repentance.

Experiencing the best of sincerity and hope through repentance, Celaladdin Rumi likened it to a speedy horse, which flies man to forgiveness and Divine treats: "The night of passing away approaches. This game, till when? Come and abandon your nafs! Get the thief, and take your belongings back"<sup>15</sup>. The horse of repentance helps man to catch (thief natured) nafs and Satan, who stole his belongings (forgiveness and Divine treats). This way, man will be able to discover the secrets of the meanings of both worlds.

"Life is never deprived of meaning. There is no doubt that this meaning can be understood even if we perceive that there is a potential meaning beyond life and love. But we should never forget that we can find a meaning in life, even when we are the desperate victim of a hopeless situation, or when we are faced with an unchangeable destiny"<sup>16</sup>. Because what matters then, is to witness the unique human potential, which can be defined as turning a tragedy into a personal victory, turning a difficulty into a human success.

In fact, most of the time self-renewal and change means to go beyond our abilities and strength. Besides this, the power of repentance comes from the constant opportunities it provides man to change and renew himself. Man's potential to renew and change himself adds a magnificent and unique meaning to his life.

At this point, repentance is man's best helper in his search for a meaning, as it contains the potential to turn hope, energy of life and difficulty into success and happiness.

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<sup>14</sup> Suhreverdi, *ibid*, p. 382.

<sup>15</sup> Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, *Mesnevi-i Manevi*, (prep. A. Nicholson), Intisarar-i Hermes, Tahran, 2003, p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> J. Schmahmann, *Trandance and Cognition*, Academic Press, New York, 1997, p. 78.

#### 1.4. Effect on Deprivation and Guiltiness

“According to Sufism, the following three principles need to present in order for the tawbe -repentance- to be healthy:

- a) Regretting past sins (past)
- b) Eluding sins (current)
- c) Deciding not to turn into sin anymore (future) Through repentance, man not only regrets his past sins, but leaves them behind and decides not to go back to them, therefore he will be saved from the destructive effects of deprivation and guiltiness. In this sense, repentance not only requires to elude sins, but also to compensate the past. Because, the committed sins obscures the mirror of the heart. As such, Allah expresses this truth, with the following verse, *‘Their deeds have become rust on their hearts’*<sup>17</sup><sup>18</sup>. Repentance in Sufism is a start, a spiritual awareness, and turning before Allah.

Repentance covers man’s past, present and future with the feelings of hope and peace. Because for man, making up for mistakes, eluding mistakes and the sensitivity to replace mistakes by good deeds is always valid. Repentance, therefore, cures and treats man against the destructive effects of deprivation and guiltiness. Deprivation and guiltiness are among the reasons for abnormal behaviour.

A man in deprivation is a man who believes that his sins will not be forgiven, or his sins are so bad that they could never be forgiven. He always questions himself in his heart for his actions, and never forgives himself. And he believes that he will never be forgiven. He becomes desperate and abnormal. Repentance on the other hand, renews man and directs him towards positive characteristics and constantly builds him up psychologically and spiritually. In this case, repenting man constantly renews his hopes to be forgiven; therefore he gets a curing effect against deprivation.

Repentance spiritually renews man and gradually directs him towards positive characteristics; therefore it also protects him against the negative effects of guiltiness. “Feeling of guiltiness, a psychological reality, is a universal and humane phenomenon which is experienced by most people. Therefore it may come before religious tendencies and motivate them. However, religion places a new dimension upon it, the dimension of ‘sin’, which is mistake before Allah. When doing this, religion may help man to turn the feeling of sinfulness, which is hidden in the depths of our hearts, into gratefulness, against Allah, who

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<sup>17</sup> Mutaffifin surah, 83:14.

<sup>18</sup> Hasan Kamil Yılmaz, *Anahatlarıyla Tasavvuf ve Tarikatlar*, Ensar Publishing, İstanbul, 2002, p. 112.

forgives with his grace, and invites him to make this feeling the starting point of a constructive deed"<sup>19</sup>.

While directing man towards positive characteristics, repentance also reduces his guiltiness into lowest levels. In other words, there is an inverse proportion between repentance and depravation. According to research results related to depravation, people with a feeling of guiltiness resort to their own selves and the society more often they do to Allah.

"Repentance provides an important opportunity for religious purification against the sufferings; relieving from the guiltiness caused by sins and for reaching religious maturity. When faced with seemingly meaningless or unjust situations, repentance offers man with a new cognitive interpretation system to maintain meaning. Severe disease, unsuccessfulness or death may get a whole new meaning in religious terms"<sup>20</sup>. Man can think that this is the result of Allah's great will and that Allah is purifying him by testing him.

As repentance contains the feeling of hope and awareness for renewal, it may be possible to remove the effects of neurotic guiltiness. "Neurotic individual will put forward his invaluable, and at the same time, will have great demands for attention and applause, and he will display clear involuntariness to accept even the smallest criticism"<sup>21</sup>.

True repentance must be like extracted honey. Repentance with the deepest sincerity and true determination not to turn back to mischief is called *nasuhaan repentance -nasuhtewbe-*. This is the true repentance. "This is called 'aselu'n-nasih' among people. The meaning of this is extracted honey. The word 'nasih' here means filtered, pure, transparent honey, with no unappetizing residue or dirt. If we combine this likening with repentance, we can say that sincere repentance is like pure honey, filtered, pure with no dirt. Just like the honey being purified by removing the beeswax in it, repentance is purified by removing the hypocrisy and dirt in it and it becomes sincere (nasuhaan). In other words, the most important characteristic of nasuhaan repentance is being pure, loyal and spotless"<sup>22</sup>.

A pure, natural, plain and sincere repentance, just like extracted honey, will also protect man from the fear of being accused. Because, such a man has the ability to, refrain from situations, acts and behaviour which would lead to neurotic guiltiness feeling and being accused and to turn his mistakes into positive deeds. "As such, the main factor in the feeling of being accused is the

<sup>19</sup> Hayati Hokelekli, *Din Psikolojisi*, Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Publishing, Ankara, 1998, p. 89.

<sup>20</sup> Hayati Hokelekli, *Din Psikolojisine Giriş, Degerler Egitimi Merkezi Publishing, İstanbul, 2010, p. 68.*

<sup>21</sup> Karen Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, Academic Press, New York, 2006, p. 108.

<sup>22</sup> İsmail Ankaravi, *Minhacu'l-Fukara*, (prep. Saadetin Ekici), İnsan Publishing, İstanbul, 1996, p. 162.



great contradiction between the mask presented to the man himself and to the world; and all the suppressed tendencies which hide behind his mask”<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, feeling of guiltiness and the accompanying self-accusations are the result of the fear of being accused.

### 1.5. Effect on Anxiety Disorder

“When asked ‘what is repentance’, Junaid b. Mohammed replied: ‘it is to forget sin’. Forgetting sin, would eliminate the possibility to go back to that sin, therefore man would almost forget about his mischief. On the other hand, when asked ‘what is repentance’, Sehl Tusteri replied: ‘It is not to forget sin’. The meaning of Junaid’s reply is this: You should remove the joy and trace of the sin from your heart, in such a way that there is no trace left from it in your soul. Hence, you will be like you have never known anything about that sin. In other words, when you commit a sin, let the God’s greatness cover your heart so much that the sin and its trace would never cross your mind”<sup>24</sup>. In fact, *tewbe* is to repent from citing the name of anyone but Allah. A Gnostic repents, if someone other than Allah comes into his mind.

Forgetting the destructive effects of sin, treats man against the negative effects of depravation and neurotic guilt; while not forgetting the sin renews man, takes him out of his negligence, and helps him to turn mischief into a positive characteristic. When man forming a balance between treating deprivation and protecting his own mind-soul balance from negligence, his existing anxiety disorders could also be removed. After all, anxiety disorders are among the most common psychiatric disorders. The problem solving deficiencies of humans are related to their anxiety experiences and getting a diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. The common point of anxiety disorders is that they are all based on worry and uncertainty.

“Anxiety patients are constantly in a state of worry, without knowing its cause, and these people cannot bear uncertainty, cannot live with it. Therefore, when such people attain the ability to solve problems, it will not only solve their problems but also comfort them, as there will be no more uncertainty”<sup>25</sup>.

While forming an incredible balance between self-renewal and evading blindness, by removing the negative effects of depravation; repentance also cures and treats anxieties, worries, and uncertainties.

Self-renewal and the ability to turn wrongful acts into positive deeds are treated by Allah, even if the will of man is involved. “When asked what *Tewbe* is

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<sup>23</sup> Horney, *ibid*, p. 192.

<sup>24</sup> Ebu Bekir Muhammad Kelabazi, *et-Taarruf li Mezhebi Ehli't-Tasavvuf, Mektebetu'l-Kulliyati'l-Ezheriyye*, Kahire, 1980, p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> Mehmet Eskin, *Problem Solving Therapy*, Academic Press, New York, 2009, p. 138.

EbuHafsa replied: 'Man has no role in Tewbe, because Tewbe and repentance is first from Allah to man, not from man to Allah'. The meaning of this is, when Allah desires so, man will repent. Therefore, Haris Muhasibi prayed, 'My Lord, I never said I am begging for repentance. But, I beg you to constantly grant me the desire to repent'<sup>26</sup>.

Similar to gratitude, repentance is also mutual. Allah turns to man, and then man turns to Allah. This way, Allah grants man with abilities to renew him, to look into the future with hope and to finish a mistake with a positive deed.

## 2. Conclusion

Through repentance, Allah directs hearts with the desire to be forgiven; and shapes the thoughts of man, with a will to turn mistakes into positive deeds. This is Allah turning towards man. And man, through repentance, renews himself, attributes a meaning to life with hope, and turns mischief into a positive characteristic. And this is man turning to Allah and repenting. Therefore, through repentance man can his hopelessness, worries and most importantly, from depravation. Besides, when man is in need of assurance in cases of fear and anxiety, he feels the need to seek refuge in Allah.

"A man with anxiety disorder lives with constant tension. Most of the time he will feel uneasy and worried, and is inclined to show extreme reactions even for simple pressures. Being unable to ease, disturbed sleep, fatigue, headache, dizziness and palpitation are among the most common physical disorders. In addition, such individuals constantly worry about various possible problems and find it difficult to make decisions"<sup>27</sup>. Repentance on the other hand, cures and treats the inner worries and fears of man, through attribution of a meaning, forgiveness and the awareness of self-renewal.

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<sup>26</sup> Kuseyri, *ibid*, p. 186.

<sup>27</sup> B. Spilka, G. Brown, S. Cassidy, *The Structure of Religious Mystical Experience*, International Journal for The Psychology of Religion, Los Angeles, 1992, c. 2, p. 237.

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