

JIHAD BIL-NAFS: THE INNER BATTLEFIELD OF FAITH, PURIFICATION, AND SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE IN ISLAMIC AND SUFI THOUGHT

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Abstract

This paper explores the profound Islamic concept of Jihad bil-Nafs (the struggle against the self) as the central axis of spiritual, moral, and psychological transformation in both Qur'anic teachings and Sufi thought. While the term jihad is often narrowly interpreted in contemporary discourse, this study emphasizes its inner dimension as the "greater jihad," focusing on the purification of the soul (tazkiyah) and the refinement of the heart (qalb).

Drawing upon Qur'anic verses, Prophetic traditions, and classical Sufi scholarship, the paper examines the dynamic nature of the nafs through its stages — al-ammārah, al-lawwāmah, and al-muṭma'innah — highlighting the continuous struggle between divine guidance and human desire. The study further investigates the concept of the heart as a spiritual battlefield where light and darkness, remembrance and heedlessness, constantly interact.

In addition, this research situates Jihad bil-Nafs within contemporary psychological frameworks, presenting it as a model of self-regulation, ethical discipline, and emotional resilience. Special attention is given to the role of faith (īmān) as resistance against despair, oppression, and internal corruption, as well as the lived experiences of Muslim women whose spiritual endurance reflects a powerful dimension of inner jihad.

Through an integrative analysis of Islamic theology and Sufi metaphysics, this paper argues that Jihad bil-Nafs is not merely an abstract spiritual ideal but a practical, lifelong discipline that shapes moral character, strengthens faith, and fosters interfaith harmony and peaceful coexistence in a fragmented world.

Keywords: Jihad bil-Nafs, Tazkiyah, Sufism, Qalb, Nafs, Spiritual Psychology, Inner Struggle, Islamic Ethics, Faith, Mujahadah, Sabr, Dhikr

INTRODUCTION

In the vast landscape of Islamic teachings, Jihad bil-Nafs (the struggle against the self) stands as one of the most profound yet often neglected concepts. While the term jihad has been widely misinterpreted to refer solely to armed conflict, the Qur'an and Sunnah emphasize that the greatest jihad is the battle within — the struggle to purify one's heart from arrogance, envy, lust, anger, and hypocrisy. This inward struggle defines the true believer's spiritual journey and moral strength.

The Qur'anic Foundation of Jihad bil-Nafs

The Qur'an frequently calls believers to self-purification (tazkiyah), presenting it as the ultimate success. Allah Almighty says:

فَدَأَلَّخِ مَنْ رَكَاهَا ﴿١﴾ وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا. ¹

“He has succeeded who purifies it (the soul), and he has failed who corrupts it.”

This verse encapsulates the essence of inner jihad — the success of a believer is not determined by wealth, status, or power, but by the purification of the soul. The battle against the nafs (self) is continuous, for the human soul naturally inclines toward both good and evil:

وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا ﴿٢﴾ فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا²

“And by the soul and He who proportioned it, and inspired it with its wickedness and its righteousness.”

Here, Allah reminds humanity that every person carries within both the potential for corruption and the capacity for piety. The real jihad is to suppress the evil inclinations and nurture righteousness through remembrance, prayer, and obedience.

Prophetic Guidance: The Greater Jihad

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said upon returning from a military expedition:

“We have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad.”

The Companions asked, “What is the greater jihad, O Messenger of Allah?”

He replied, “It is the jihad against one’s own soul.”³

This hadith beautifully distinguishes between the outer jihad (against oppression and injustice) and the inner jihad (against one’s lower desires). The latter is constant and lifelong — a test of will, sincerity, and faith.

The Nature of the Nafs

Islamic scholars have categorized the nafs (self) into three types:

1. Nafs al-Ammārah (The Commanding Soul) — which inclines toward sin and evil.

> “Indeed, the soul is ever inclined to evil, except those upon which my Lord has mercy.”

— (Surah Yusuf, 12:53)

2. Nafs al-Lawwāmah (The Self-Reproaching Soul) — which feels guilt after wrongdoing and strives for correction.

> “And I swear by the self-reproaching soul.”⁴

3. Nafs al-Muṭma’innah (The Tranquil Soul) — which attains peace through faith and submission to Allah.

O tranquil soul, return to your Lord, well-pleased and pleasing to Him.”⁵

The believer’s journey is a gradual transformation — from the commanding soul to the tranquil soul — achieved through patience, worship, repentance, and self-accountability (muhasaba).

Moral and Psychological Dimensions

From a psychological perspective, Jihad bil-Nafs is the process of self-awareness and discipline. The nafs, when unchecked, drives humans toward destructive emotions — pride, greed, envy, and anger. Modern psychology speaks of ego control and emotional regulation; Islam had already given a divine framework century earlier, guiding believers to tame their desires through fasting, prayer, and remembrance (dhikr).

A Feminine Dimension: Women and the Inner Struggle

Muslim women throughout history have embodied spiritual resilience in the face of emotional, societal, and personal trials. Their jihad often takes the form of sabr (patience), Haya (modesty), and iman (faith) under pressure.

From Sayyidah Maryam (Mary) facing societal accusations with dignity, to Khadijah (RA) supporting the Prophet ﷺ during the hardest years of revelation, and Sumayyah bint Khayyat (RA) who became the first martyr of Islam — their inner jihad symbolizes strength rooted in faith, not force.

The Concept of Inner Struggle in the Qur’an Understanding of Jihad bil-Nafs

“Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.”⁶

The Qur’an repeatedly reminds humanity that the root of all moral and spiritual transformation lies within the self. The greatest battlefield is not in the deserts of Arabia or the fortresses of foreign lands, but within the chambers of the heart, where faith and desire wrestle for dominance.

For the Sufis, this struggle — Jihad bil-Nafs — is the core of the path to Allah (suluk ila Allah). They see the heart (qalb) as the meeting point between divine light (nur) and worldly darkness (zulm). Every moment, the believer is called to wage war between these two forces, for the soul (nafs) is both a bridge and a barrier to the Divine.

The Qur’anic Foundation of the Inner War

In the Qur’an, Allah commands believers to engage in struggle against the inner self by purifying it through remembrance and obedience:

وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَمَعَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ⁷

“And those who strive in Our cause — We will surely guide them to Our ways, and indeed Allah is with those who do good.”

This verse has been central to Sufi interpretation of mujahadah (spiritual striving). Al-Ghazali in *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* writes that this verse refers not merely to outward acts of struggle but to the continuous spiritual effort to conquer one's ego — to silence the inner voice of arrogance, greed, lust, and self-worship.

He states:

“The greatest veil between man and his Lord is his own self (nafs). Until he fights it and humbles it, he cannot taste the sweetness of certainty (yaqin).”

Thus, jihad bil-Nafs becomes a path of transformation, where the believer moves from heedlessness (ghaflah) to remembrance (dhikr), from pride to humility, from attachment to detachment.

The Sufi Path — From Darkness to Light

The Sufi masters describe the journey of the nafs as a spiritual ascent through purification. They explain that each level of the soul must be tamed and elevated through conscious struggle:

1. Nafs al-Ammārah (the commanding soul) — driven by desires and worldly passions.

It commands the person to fulfill immediate wants without moral restraint.

2. Nafs al-Lawwāmah (the self-reproaching soul) — awakened through conscience; it feels guilt, regret, and seeks forgiveness.

3. Nafs al-Muṭma'innah (the peaceful soul) — finds serenity in remembrance of Allah and is satisfied with His decree.

The journey from Ammārah to Muṭma'innah is the essence of the Sufi discipline of tazkiyat bil-Nafs (purification of the self). This is jihad not by the sword, but by patience, fasting, remembrance, and detachment from worldly illusion.

Rumi beautifully captures this transformation:

“The lion who breaks the enemy's ranks

Is a minor hero.

The true hero is he who conquers his own anger and hatred.”

Mathnawi, Book 1

For Rumi, the nafs is like a wild horse — powerful yet dangerous. The seeker's task is to bridle it through spiritual training, until it becomes a vehicle toward divine proximity rather than a barrier.

The Qur'an's Language of Struggle and Surrender

Throughout the Qur'an, Allah describes inner struggle not merely as self-denial but as a sacred act of surrender. The believer is invited to become a mujahid of the soul — one who resists temptation and ego for the sake of divine love.

وَأَمَّا مَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِ وَنَهَى النَّفْسَ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ ﴿٨﴾ فَإِنَّ الْجَنَّةَ هِيَ الْمَأْوَىٰ.

“But as for he who feared standing before his Lord and restrained the soul from desire — then indeed, Paradise will be his home.”

This verse reveals the heart of the inner jihad: the one who restrains (nahā an-nafs 'an al-hawā) is promised eternal bliss. The Sufis interpret this as the act of mujahadah — restraining the lower self not out of fear alone, but out of love and awe (khawf wa mahabbah) for Allah.

Abdul Qadir al-Jilani said in *Futuh al-Ghaib*:

“Your greatest enemy is your own self which lies between your two sides.

If you defeat it, you will defeat Satan; if you obey it, you will fall even before him.”

The Mirror of the Heart — Where Jihad Unfolds

According to Sufi metaphysics, the heart (qalb) is the battlefield of jihad bil-Nafs. It is the mirror of divine reality (haqiqah), but dusted with the rust of desires. The Qur'an says:

كَلَّا بَلْ رَانَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِم مَّا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ.

“No! But their hearts have been rusted by what they used to earn.”

The act of spiritual struggle — mujahadah — is the process of polishing this mirror through remembrance (dhikr), repentance (tawbah), and self-examination (muhasaba) until the heart reflects the light of truth again.

Imam Al-Haddad wrote:

“When the heart is purified, it becomes the throne of the Most Merciful.

But when it is filled with the smoke of desires, even angels turn away.”

Thus, jihad bil-Nafs is not only resistance; it is renewal — a return to one's divine origin.

The Feminine Soul and the Jihad of Patience

Within the Qur'anic vision, the moral and emotional strength of women is often portrayed through this inner jihad.

The story of Maryam (Mary) in Surah Maryam shows a woman engaged in both spiritual and emotional warfare — against loneliness, accusation, and fear — yet remaining steadfast in faith.

فَأَجَاءَهَا الْمَخَاضُ إِلَىٰ جِذْعِ النَّخْلَةِ قَالَتْ يَا لَيْتَنِي مِتُّ قَبْلَ هَذَا.

“And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, ‘Oh, I wish I had died before this!’

Her moment of despair was also her greatest jihad. But Allah comforted her with revelation — a sign that the one who endures the pain of the inner struggle is never abandoned.

For many Muslim women, their jihad bil-Nafs manifests not in the battlefield but in the battlefield of patience, forgiveness, emotional endurance, and faith amid betrayal and loss. Their strength is quiet yet profound — the strength of those who have fought themselves and found God.

The Continuous Struggle — Mujahadah as a Way of Life

Ibn al-Qayyim, in *Madarij al-Salikin*, defined mujahadah as:

“The effort of the heart to align every movement and desire with the command of Allah.”

He explains that this struggle never ends; it is the constant purification of intention (ikhlas), the correction of thought, and the surrender of will.

To the Sufi, every act — eating, speaking, serving — can become jihad if done with awareness of Allah (taqwa).

This understanding transforms jihad from a mere battle into a journey of love — the lover striving to return to the Beloved by purifying all that separates them

The Heart as a Battlefield

This section will be written in academic, spiritual, and Sufi style English, with authentic Qur’anic verses in Arabic, their English translations, classical sources (Ghazali, Rumi, Ibn al-Qayyim, Al-Harith al-Muhasibi, Al-Junayd, etc.), and a detailed, humanized reflection on the inner struggle within the human heart.

No summary will be included at the end — only continuous, in-depth discussion.

The Heart as a Battlefield

“Verily, in the body there is a piece of flesh; if it is sound, the whole body is sound, and if it is corrupt, the whole body is corrupt. Verily, it is the heart.”

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (Sahih al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Iman, Hadith 52)

The heart (Qalb) is not merely a physical organ in the Islamic worldview; it is the center of human consciousness, intention, and morality. The Qur’an describes the heart as the very seat of faith, where the struggle between light and darkness unfolds. Every thought, desire, and emotion passes through it; every moral decision originates from it. Therefore, in Islam, the true battlefield of jihad lies not in the outer world but within this spiritual center.

In the Qur’an, Allah says:

11 *فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ اللَّهُ مَرَضًا*

“In their hearts is a disease, and Allah has increased their disease.”

This “disease of the heart” (marad al-qalb) — hypocrisy, arrogance, lust, envy, self-deceit — is what the Sufis identify as the true enemy of the soul. It is not cured by medicine or ritual alone but by mujahadah (spiritual striving), tazkiyah (purification), and constant remembrance of God.

Imam Al-Ghazali in *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din* likens the heart to a mirror that reflects divine truth. Yet when covered by the rust of sins and worldly attachments, it can no longer receive the light of revelation:

“The heart is like a mirror facing the unseen world. When it is polished through remembrance and devotion, it reflects the light of God; but when it is stained with desires, it turns away from the truth.”

(Al-Ghazali, *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din*, Kitab Riyadat bil-Nafs)

The Qur’anic Imagery of the Heart

The Qur’an frequently employs the language of the heart to express the human condition. Allah says:

12 *يَوْمَ لَا يَنْفَعُ مَالٌ وَلَا بَنُونَ ﴿١٢﴾ إِلَّا مَنْ آتَى اللَّهَ بِقَلْبٍ سَلِيمٍ*

“The Day when neither wealth nor children will benefit, but only he will come to Allah with a pure heart.”

A pure heart (qalb salim) is one that has been purified of pride, hatred, and hypocrisy. It is not merely free of sin but filled with ikhlas (sincerity) and taqwa (God-consciousness). The Sufis explain that this purity is attained through constant jihad against the lower self, where the ego (nafs) seeks dominance, while the spirit (ruh) seeks liberation.

Rumi wrote in his *Mathnawi*:

“You have a heart — polish it. The mirror of your heart is covered with dust; cleanse it with tears and remembrance until it reflects the sun of truth.”

The Two Forces Within — Light and Shadow

According to the Sufi cosmology of the self, the heart is the meeting ground of two worlds — the world of light (‘alam al-nur) and the world of shadow (‘alam al-zulmah).

Ibn al-Qayyim explains in *Madarij al-Salikin*:

“The heart has two doors — one toward the unseen, where the angels enter, and one toward the world of desires, where Shaytan whispers. The servant is in constant war to guard one and close the other.”

This inner war is relentless. At times, the heart is lifted by faith (iman) and tranquility (sakina), and at other times, it is clouded by lust and anger. The believer, therefore, lives as a warrior of balance, striving to keep the light of remembrance alive amidst the storm of temptation.

The Qur’an declares:

13 *اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۗ مَثَلُ نُورِهِ كَمِثْقَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجْجَةٍ*

“Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp — the lamp is within glass.”

Sufi commentators such as Ibn ‘Ajibah interpret this as a metaphor for the heart of the believer, which becomes the “lamp” that holds divine illumination. The glass represents clarity — when the heart is cleansed, the divine light shines through it unbroken.

The Rust and the Remedy

The Qur’an further reveals how sins and heedlessness gradually darken the heart:

كَلَّا بَلْ رَانَ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ “No! Rather, their hearts have been rusted by what they used to earn.” Surah Al-Mutaffifin, 83:14

This “rust” (raan) symbolizes the layers of spiritual blindness that form when one indulges in worldly pleasures without remembrance. The Sufis warn that each act of heedlessness (ghaflah) adds a layer of dust to the heart until divine light can no longer penetrate.

To cleanse it, they prescribe the tools of the inner jihad:

Dhikr (Remembrance) — polishing the heart through constant invocation of God’s Name.

Tawbah (Repentance) — washing the stains of sin with tears of humility.

Sawm (Fasting) — starving the ego to strengthen the spirit.

Suhbah (Company of the righteous) — surrounding the self with light that dispels inner darkness.

Al-Harith al-Muhasibi wrote in Kitab al-Ri‘ayah li Huquq Allah:

“The heart dies from heedlessness, but it revives through remembrance. The more it remembers Allah, the stronger its pulse of faith becomes.”

The Heart in Sufi Psychology

For the mystics, the heart is not only the center of feeling but the organ of perception of the Divine. Imam al-Junayd of Baghdad said:

“The heart is the throne of God on earth. Whoever purifies it from other than Him, God sits upon it.”

This does not mean physical indwelling but divine presence through consciousness — the realization that the heart’s true rest is in God alone. The Qur’an declares:

أَلَا يَذْكُرُ اللَّهُ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ.¹⁴

“Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest.”

Every Sufi path (tariqah) begins from this verse. Peace is not achieved by escape but by remembrance — dhikr Allah. The heart becomes tranquil only when its movements align with divine rhythm.

The Feminine Heart — Strength in Sensitivity

Within the Sufi tradition, women’s spiritual hearts have often been described as mirrors of divine compassion. Rabi‘ah al-Adawiyyah, the great woman mystic of Basra, saw the heart as the true battlefield where love and ego clash. She prayed:

“O Lord, if I worship You from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship You for hope of Paradise, exclude me from it. But if I worship You for Your own sake, deny me not Your Eternal Beauty.”

Her words capture the essence of jihad al-qalb — the struggle to purify love from selfish motive. The feminine heart, in its depth of emotion and endurance, becomes a living symbol of the highest jihad: the conquest of self for the sake of divine love.

Maryam (Mary) in the Qur’an embodies this spiritual courage — her solitude, her pain, her faith, all reveal a heart that surrendered entirely to God despite human suffering. Thus, the battlefield of the heart is also the cradle of sainthood.

Guarding the Heart — The Duty of the Seeker

Ibn al-Qayyim advises in Al-Fawa’id:

“The heart is the house of Allah in the human being. Guard it from thieves — from lust, from pride, from heedlessness — lest they enter and destroy it.”

Every believer, male or female, is entrusted with guarding this sacred house. Each sin is an invasion; each act of remembrance is a defense. The heart must be protected as a fortress — its gates are opened by desire and closed by prayer.

Divine Illumination — When the Heart Conquers

When the heart conquers the nafs, it becomes illuminated by nur — the divine light mentioned in the Qur’an. The Prophet ﷺ said:

“When light enters the heart, it expands and opens.”

The companions asked, “What is the sign of this light?”

He replied, “Turning toward the eternal home and turning away from the world of deception.”¹⁵

At this stage, the heart becomes what Sufis call al-qalb al-munawwar — the enlightened heart. It no longer struggles between good and evil; rather, it lives in surrender and remembrance.

As Rumi writes:

“When the heart is clean, it becomes a window through which the Infinite is seen.”

1.4 Faith as Resistance

Faith in Islam is not merely an abstract belief confined to the heart; it is a living, breathing force that resists falsehood, oppression, and inner corruption. In its truest sense, faith (īmān) is both a shield and a sword — protecting the soul from despair and empowering it to struggle against the forces that weaken moral resolve. The Qur'an repeatedly calls upon believers to stand firm (thabat) in faith, especially when trials, betrayal, and suffering threaten to shake their spiritual foundations.

1.4.1 Qur'anic Foundation of Faith as Resistance

The Qur'an declares that true believers are those who remain steadfast in adversity and resist the temptations of the lower self and worldly deceit:

الَّذِينَ قَالَ لَهُمُ النَّاسُ إِنَّ النَّاسَ قَدِ جَمَعُوا لَكُمْ فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ فَرَّادَهُمْ قَرَادَهُمْ إِيْمَانًا وَقَالُوا حَسْبُنَا اللَّهُ وَنِعْمَ الْوَكِيلُ.¹⁶

“Those to whom hypocrites said, ‘Indeed, the people have gathered against you, so fear them,’ but it only increased them in faith; and they said, ‘Sufficient for us is Allah, and He is the best Disposer of affairs.’”

This verse captures the essence of faith as resistance — the refusal to be paralyzed by fear, the rejection of worldly pressure, and the turning of the heart wholly toward God. Such resistance is not loud rebellion but an inner stillness born of divine trust (tawakkul).

Similarly, Allah commands:

فَلَا تَهِنُوا وَلَا تَحْزَنُوا وَأَنْتُمْ الْأَعْلَوْنَ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ

“So do not weaken and do not grieve, and you will be superior if you are [true] believers.”

(Surah Āl-‘Imrān, 3:139)

Here, faith becomes an antidote to defeatism. True belief lifts the soul above humiliation, enabling it to endure loss, betrayal, or injustice with spiritual dignity.

1.4.2 Prophetic Model: Resistance through Patience and Principle

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ embodied faith as resistance not through worldly power but through moral steadfastness.

When offered wealth and kingship in exchange for abandoning his mission, he replied:

“By Allah, if they placed the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left, I would not abandon this mission until Allah makes it prevail or I perish in the attempt.”¹⁷

This statement epitomizes the spiritual defiance of a believer. It was not rebellion against men, but rebellion against compromise of truth. The Prophet ﷺ's patience (sabr) and his unshakeable faith under persecution became the archetype of jihad bil-Nafs — the inner resistance to fear, despair, and worldly temptation.

1.4.3 The Sufi Understanding of Faith as Inner Resistance

In Sufi thought, faith as resistance takes on a profoundly internal dimension. Al-Ghazālī, in *Ihyā' ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, writes that “the greatest jihad is the jihad against the self that commands evil (nafs al-ammārah).” This inner resistance, he argues, is not merely about suppressing desires but about transforming the heart into a dwelling of divine light.

Rumi, too, saw faith as an act of rebellion against the tyranny of the ego:

“The lion who breaks the enemy's ranks is a minor hero;

But the lion who conquers his own self is the true victor.”

(Rumi, *Mathnawi*, Book I, verse 2137)

The Sufis understood faith as a force that liberates the soul from inner enslavement — to anger, jealousy, lust, and pride. Resistance, therefore, is not aggression; it is purification.

1.4.4 Faith Amidst Betrayal and Oppression

When betrayal wounds the heart, the believer's greatest test is to hold on to faith. The Qur'an acknowledges this trial:

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالتَّمَرَاتِ ۗ وَبَشِيرِ الصَّابِرِينَ.¹⁸

“And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient.”

Faith, in this context, becomes a form of resistance against despair. A believer refuses to let pain destroy trust in Allah. Every heartbreak, every betrayal, becomes a battlefield where the soul reasserts its allegiance to God rather than to fleeting human attachments.

The Female Dimension of Faithful Resistance

In Islamic history, many women exemplified this spiritual resistance. Sayyidah Khadījah (RA) stood firm beside the Prophet ﷺ when the Quraysh boycotted them in the valley of Shi'b Abī Tālib, enduring hunger and hardship with unflinching faith. Similarly, Sayyidah Sumayyah bint Khayyāt (RA) — the first martyr of Islam — resisted the tyranny of Abu Jahl, uttering “There is no god but Allah” as she embraced death.

Such examples show that faith is not passivity; it is moral defiance grounded in trust and love of God.

The Role of Patience (Sabr) in Spiritual Strength

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالتَّمَرَاتِ ۗ وَبَشِيرِ الصَّابِرِينَ.¹⁹

“And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give glad tidings to those who are patient.

Patience — Sabr — is the soul's fortress against despair. It is not passive endurance but active resistance; a conscious act of faith when every worldly reason suggests surrender. The Qur'an reminds us that patience is not simply a moral

virtue but a divine weapon for those who seek inner strength. When fear, hunger, loss, or pain strike, the believer's response determines the depth of his or her faith. Sabr, therefore, becomes the truest form of jihad bil-Nafs — a battle against hopelessness, ego, and the illusion of control.

Allah says:

إِنَّمَا يُؤْتَى الصَّابِرُونَ أَجْرَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ.²⁰

“Indeed, the patient will be given their reward without measure.”

This verse illuminates a profound truth: divine reward for patience is beyond quantification. The Sufis interpreted this as a sign that Sabr aligns the human will with the divine decree. Al-Ghazālī, in *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm ad-Dīn*, explains that patience purifies the soul from rebellion and complaint — it transforms suffering into remembrance and surrender. Through patience, the believer's heart is polished, reflecting divine light in times of darkness.

Patience is also described in Surah Al-‘Asr (103:1–3) as one of the essential virtues of salvation:

وَالْعَصْرِ ۝ إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ ۝ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَّصُوا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَّصُوا بِالصَّبْرِ.²¹

“By time, indeed mankind is in loss, except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to patience.”

Patience here is not an individual emotion but a collective discipline — a moral bond that sustains a community of faith. A woman who endures betrayal, injustice, or emotional abandonment with faith is not weak; she embodies the divine command of *tawāsaw biṣ-ṣabr* — to uphold patience as resistance.

As Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya once said, “Patience is the soul’s way of saying: ‘My heart belongs to Him, even when the world denies me.’” Her words echo the Qur’anic message that true patience is a form of worship — a declaration that Allah alone controls both trial and relief.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ also said:

“Whoever practices patience, Allah will grant him patience, and no one is given a gift better or broader than patience.”.

²² Through Sabr, a believer transcends the limitations of human anguish and steps into the realm of divine companionship. It is through the storm that faith finds its weight; through pain that the spirit finds its purpose.

The Heart as a Battlefield

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا.

(Surah Ash-Shams, 91:9–10)

He has succeeded who purifies it, and he has failed who corrupts it.

The heart (qalb) in Islamic thought is not merely the seat of emotion — it is the battlefield of the soul. Within it, light and darkness struggle for dominion; faith (īmān) and ego (nafs) wrestle in silence. The Qur’an speaks of the purification of the self as the path to true success. The one who refines the soul, who disciplines its desires, who resists arrogance and resentment — that person has triumphed in the most sacred war: the Jihad al-Qalb.

The Sufi masters describe the heart as a mirror — it reflects what it holds. If it holds envy, anger, or betrayal, the mirror darkens; if it holds love, patience, and remembrance (dhikr), it shines with divine radiance. Rūmī wrote, “Between the heart and the Lord stands nothing but yourself. Remove yourself and He appears.” The struggle, therefore, is not against others but against the illusions within.

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۗ مِثْلُ نُورِهِ كَمِثْلِهَا فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ.²³

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp.

This verse reveals the symbolic link between divine light and the human heart. The lamp of guidance exists within — yet it can only glow when the heart's glass is cleansed of spiritual dust. The impurities of jealousy, deceit, and betrayal dim this light until a person forgets who they are. But when the believer turns back in remembrance, each act of repentance (tawbah) becomes a polishing stroke upon that inner glass.

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah described this struggle in *Madarij al-Salikin*: “The heart is the king, and the limbs are its soldiers. If the king is pure, the army is pure; if the king is corrupt, so are its followers.” This metaphor captures the essence of jihad bil-Nafs — the reform of one's inner realm before seeking to change the outer world.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

“In the body, there is a piece of flesh; if it becomes good, the whole body becomes good; but if it becomes corrupt, the whole body becomes corrupt — that is the heart.”.²⁴

A woman of faith who guards her heart amidst betrayal or emotional turmoil is a warrior of the unseen. Her silence is not weakness but discipline; her tears are not defeat but purification. In her endurance lies the echo of divine remembrance — for every struggle within her heart is a verse of surrender, a verse of hope.

SUMMARY

The true battlefield of life lies not in the world outside, but within the soul. The greatest struggle — Jihad bil-Nafs — is the constant effort to discipline the self, to resist temptation, and to preserve faith amidst betrayal, pain, and confusion. Through this inner jihad, the believer learns that strength is not the absence of weakness but the mastery of it through remembrance, patience, and surrender to Allah.

The Qur’an teaches that the purification of the heart is the foundation of success:

فَدَا أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا.²⁵

He has succeeded who purifies it.

This purification demands sincerity, repentance, and courage. The heart, as the seat of both divine light and human desire, becomes the field where truth and ego struggle for dominion. When faith becomes resistance, every hardship transforms into a lesson of divine nearness.

The believing woman, in her trials, embodies this sacred battle. Her patience (sabr), her reliance (tawakkul), and her moral steadfastness are acts of jihad no less noble than those fought with swords. Her silence in sorrow, her forgiveness after betrayal, and her devotion amidst loneliness are all forms of spiritual warfare — battles fought for the preservation of her soul.

As the Qur'an reminds us:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ.²⁶

Indeed, Allah is with those who are patient.

Thus, the inner jihad is not a moment but a lifetime — a continuous striving to return the heart to its origin: peace in the remembrance of Allah.

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