

## Features of self-control (patience) in sexual health from a religious perspective

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### Abstract:

*Marriage in Islam is categorized as part of the Prophet's tradition; however, it is also rooted in human creation. Human marriage is a sample of general coupling in nature; nevertheless, unlike other creatures whose mating is instinctive, human marriage is performed based on his will.*

*Different functions of marriage can be explained by considering coupling. One of the main functions of coupling is providing a suitable response to sexual desire. And this will improve sexual health. Religion aims at responding to the sexual desire within marriage in order to form a family with the purpose of reproduction, not just taking pleasure.*

*In religious teachings, controlling sexual desire is mentioned in the form and context of patience when caught in sinful situations. Patience is the recommended mechanism for controlling lust and sexual desire. Patience is a cognitive and internal skill used for controlling lust free from external interference. Indeed, this can be called self-control. According to religious teachings, patience is not an inactive concept, but rather a dynamic response the intensity of which is tightly related to one's level of knowledge, cognition and awareness. This article aims at explaining the cognitive features of patience, as the most significant recommendation to control the sexual desire. In fact, in this way, sexual desire is not suppressed and its arousal does not cause corruption within man's social relations. And consequently, his health in various dimensions is guaranteed.*

**Keywords:** patience, self-control, sexual desire, lust, sexual health

## **Introduction:**

The general connotation of patience is to stay calm and not to move around. Based on religious teachings, however, patience means to be active and dynamic. In the Holy Quran, patience is considered as the result and outcome of awareness. For instance, in the story of Prophet Moses and Prophet Khidr, where Khidr states to Moses: “He said: Surely you cannot have patience with me. And how can you have patience in that of which you have not got a comprehensive knowledge?” (18:67-68)

In this verse, Khidr tells Moses that he cannot be patient with something of which he is not aware; in other words, it is not possible to be patient without achieving awareness. Khidr calls Moses impatient due to his unawareness of the reasons of happenings. Although Moses promises to be patient, he does not manage to keep his promise in three events when he accompanies Prophet Khidr. After the first two events, prophet Khidr states: “Did I not say that you will not be able to have patience with me?” (18:72)

And eventually after the third event and Moses’s complaint, prophet Khidr said: “This shall be separation between me and you; now I will inform you of the significance of that with which you could not have patience.” (18:78) and then explains the reason of those events.

Accordingly, those who are mournful for the loss of some family member cannot be verbally asked to be patient, but they need to be enlightened. Therefore, when God mentions death and difficulties of life in the Holy Quran, He also highlights various enlightening points close attention to which can prevent man from despondency, panic and impatience.

For example, we read in the following verses: “And We will most certainly try you with somewhat of fear and hunger and loss of property and lives and fruits; and give good news to the patient; who, when a misfortune befalls them, say: Surely we are Allah's and to Him

we shall surely return. Those are they on whom are blessings and mercy from their Lord, and those are the followers of the right course.” (2:155-157)

In these verses, God calls the difficulties that may happen in every body's life - such as: fear, starvation, shortage of income, death of beloved ones, and loss of whatever we have gained so far - as divine evaluations and assessment. Lots of dissatisfactions and disappointments stem from people's considering life events to be meaningless and as things to have taken place for no reason or logic. Instead, if someone believes that life difficulties and pleasures are divine evaluations and assessment, and that one is expected to show the best reaction to them, events become meaningful for them; and in effect, not only would one not complain or be dissatisfied, but also he welcomes hardship since he knows that he is going to be rewarded in return. Very much comparable to students who seek for acquiring knowledge, scientific development and improving their awareness, they will choose an institute with strict rules and more quizzes during the semester; because they know that although taking lots of quizzes would be difficult, this will help them achieve greater fluency. Therefore, these people welcome hardship and even ask for more questions and quizzes.

In the above-mentioned verses, God gives good news to the people who tend to stay patient. The good news by itself motivates, exhilarates and energizes the person. The fact that the Creator of man, most omnisciently and omnipotently aware of the world and its every details, gives him good news makes one calm and confident. In the rest of these verses, some other cognitive spiritual points are also mentioned. For instance, the fact is highlighted that people are from God and they will return to Him. According to one important commentary:

‘Considering the fact that all of us are from Him teaches us not to get sad because all these provisions and even ourselves belong to Him; One day, He bestows and another day He decides that they should be taken back from us and both conditions are the best at the time.

And paying attention to this reality that we all will return to him reminds us that this is not an eternal life; losing provisions, shortage of blessings or abundance and profusion of them are all transient. They all are our tools for paving the way toward the perfection. Having these two significant principles in the mind has a strong effect on developing resistance and patience. Clearly the sentence “Surely we are Allah's and to Him we shall surely return” (2:156) is not just to be uttered orally, but if you pay serious attention to its truth and essence, you will reach a profound belief and faith deeply embedded in it.

And in a third verse, other positive effects are pointed out: “Those are they on whom are blessings and mercy from their Lord, and those are the followers of the right course.” (2:157)

All these awakening and cognitive teachings help people act patiently and show higher degrees of tolerance in the face of difficult life events and happenings of the life. Being aware of these, not only did prophets and their decedents tolerate the most difficult problems and issues but also managed to lead their followers and entire nations.

### **Patience and sexual desire**

Regarding how to deal with sexual desire, in religious teachings it is suggested to keep patience. For instance, according to a tradition narrated from the commander of the faithful, Imam Ali (peace be upon him): “There are three types of patience: patience in adversity, patience in worshiping, and patience in sinful situations.

Patience in sinful situations includes all deeds forbidden by God, one of the most obvious examples of which is not controlling sexual desire. Patience in worshiping and patience in sinful situations have been mentioned together; however, the latter is more difficult and tough. There is a tradition from Imam Sadiq (peace be upon him) recommending the adherents to be patient in worshiping God and to be patient in sinful situations.

In religious teaching, the concept “*Iffat*” (chastity) is used as a tool for controlling sexual desire. The word “*Iffat*” means abstaining and avoiding forbidden and taboo deeds. *Iffat*

has a general and a specific meaning. Its general meaning is to abstain any unlawful instinctive desire.

The author of the Arabic dictionary *Maqaees al-Loghat* writes in definition of the word “*Iffat*”: in fact there are two meanings for *Iffat*: one is to avoid doing immoral deeds and the other is the shortage of something. Therefore, the Arabs call the rest of the milk in women’s breast “*Iffat*”. Considering these two meanings, Rāghib Isfahanī makes a relationship between them and says: “those who have *Iffat* are content and satisfied with having fewer/less of things.”

In religious traditions, *Iffat* has been used in two categories: gluttony and sexual desire. Imam Sadiq (peace be upon him) states: God is best worshipped in having *Iffat* as regards gluttony and sexual desire.

Allamah Mostafavi clarifies “*Iffat*” in this way: it mainly means to prevent one’s self from inner desires just as “*Taqwa*” means to prevent one’s self from committing sins. Therefore *Iffat* point to an internal feature while *Taqwa* deals with apparently external deeds.

According to these explanations about the meaning of *Iffat* and the abovementioned meaning of patience, they are internal features which cause self-control and management. It is necessary to say that these internal features are not accompanied with any external change. In other words, patience and *Iffat*, with regard to the sexual desire, are internal mechanisms which extinguish lust in one’s self while it still exists (in the external manners). In Mottaqīn sermon of Nahjul-Balagha, Imam Ali (peace be upon him), while mentioning the characteristics of pious people, states: “his lust is dead”. Death of lust is a figurative phrase meaning to control it so well that if you face these people, you may think that they have no lust.

In a nutshell, in religious teachings, recommendation to *Iffat* and Patience are ways of prevention by self-control. Self-controlling happens with awareness. In religious teachings, different levels of awareness and various dimensions have been introduced:

### **A. Awareness of the philosophy and wisdom beyond sexual desire**

In Islamic tradition, coupling or espousing is known as one of the divine signs (*āyah*). In surah al-Rum, six consecutive verses start with “and one of His signs is ...” That is a constellation of signs in the man’s soul and in the universe; and in fact it is a comprehensive doctrine of monotheism. Those things, which are pointed to in these verses, seem to be understandable for everyone at the first glance; however, the more human science and knowledge improve, the more scientists find out new things about them. In the first verse, the creation of man from dust is mentioned and later, it talks about marriage. “And one of His signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest in them, and He put between you love and compassion; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect” (30:21)

In this verse, man’s marriage is related to his creation. While in a preceding verse, human creation is mentioned as a sign to know God, this verse describes that human espousing is derived from his creation: “He created partners for you from yourselves”. This verse emphasizes the fact that men and women are both human beings; meanwhile, regardless of their differences, they are created for each other. In other words, thanks to God’s wisdom and power, each man’s mate is of the opposite sex. According to the current statistics, the birth ratio of boys and girls is 1.3; i.e. for each 100 girls, 103 boys are born. And the reason for this little inequality, might be due to man’s interfering in the process bearing boys or girls; in such a way that it might not look extravagant to claim that these statistics could have been equal if men had not changed natural procedures.

In the commentary of this verse, Allamah Tabatabai writes:

“Yes, both man and woman have sexual systems which complete each other and it takes both of them for reproduction to take place. Therefore, each one of them is incomplete and requires the other one and the combination of them is a complete unity and it is because of this that they move toward each other and they will be calm as soon as they get the

association of the other; like the poor who would like to have his poverty finished. And this is the very lust that has been placed in either of them.”

Apparently, what is understood from this verse is very important and needs to be followed up; and it is forgotten by scientific society. All effects and functions mentioned for marriage should be associated with human creation which will be incomplete without marriage. Human espousing is in the same category with general coupling in the nature. As the Almighty God states: “And of everything We have created pairs that you may be mindful.” (51:49)

The main reason why human espousing is placed in the same category with general coupling in nature is reproduction. In the laws of nature, reproduction requires pairing. Among plants and animals which are two major groups of growing beings, mating/coupling is natural and instinctive. However, marriage of a human being, who is intellectual and has power of choice, is based on two parties’ will, decision and volition. So as human creation started with creation of man and women by the wisdom of God; it continues with their marriage and bearing of children. Therefore, the main reason for creating man in pairs, like other beings, might be continuation of generation.

Accordingly, in the first verse of suarh An-Nisa, after pointing to creation spouse for man, God clearly mentions the continuation of generation: “O people! be careful of (your duty to) your Lord, Who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same (kind) and spread from these two, many men and women” (04:01)

Considering the wisdom of reproduction beyond the concept of parity, when Quran narrates the story of prophet Zechariah, whose wife is barren, uses the word ... and states: “He said, ‘My Lord, how will I have a boy when I have reached old age and my wife is barren?’” (03:40) but when it is the matter of parity and reproduction, it uses the word ...: “So We responded to him and gave him Yahya and made his wife fit for him” (21:90)



After this short introduction, it should be said that based on religious teachings, sexual desire is mainly used as a tool to attract men and women to each other in order to reproduce similar human beings and is not the main goal of human life; just like eating and drinking which are not the aims of a person but they are means of surviving and continuation of man's life.

In religious teachings, controlling sexual desire is said to be the cause of blessing and felicity and has been known as one of the characteristics of the believers. "Successful indeed are the believers" (23:01) "And who guard their private parts" (23:08). Guarding one's private parts [sexual desire] is a great choice of words. "To guard" is used for protecting valuable things. God calls sexual desire valuable which should be guarded and it is a characteristic of faith. The same word is used for "*Salat*" (prayer): "Guard the *Salāt*". Guarding something requires knowing its value.

### **B. Being aware of the causes of sexual arousal and the way to manage it**

One of the other levels of awareness, pointed to by religious teachings, in order to be patient with regard to sexual desire is to identify and recognize the reasons of sexual arousal, what leads to that, and also paying attention to the consequences of ignoring them.

#### **B.1: Managing senses**

The eye is one of the first and the main causes of sexual arousal. According to Daily Telegraph, in a survey done among 3000 people by Kodak Lens Vision center it was found out that every day, men spend averagely 43 minutes staring at 10 different women. This time is equal to 259 hours or approximately 11 days a year; and in 32 years between the ages of 18–50, it will be more than 11 months and 11 days. Women also spend 20 minutes of their daily glances at 6 different men; this would equal about 6 months in the range of the ages 18–50. One third of participants in this research had the experience of arguing with their spouses over these glances and one in each ten of them had ended up with divorce.

The important role of the eye is also emphasized in Old Persian literature:



Beneath the tyranny of eyes and heart I cry

For, all that the eyes see, the heart stores up

Because of the importance of “the glance”, the Holy Quran in surah An-Nur, commands men and then women to control their eyes: “Tell the believing men to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what they do. And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts” (24:29-30)

In the book of Kafi, it is narrated from Imam Baqir (peace be upon him) about the cause of revelation of the first verse: that one of the young *ansārī* companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) saw a woman on his way – at that time, women used to put their scarves at the back their ears and clearly some part of their neck and chest would be visible - the woman’s face attracted the youth and he stared at her; even when she had passed, he was still staring at her and kept walking until he entered a narrow alley. While he was still glancing back at her over his shoulder, he hit a wall and a sharp bone and a piece of glass which was in the wall tore his skin. When the woman was away, the youth became conscious and found out that his face was bleeding and that he had stained his clothes. He got really sad and decided to go to the Prophet and tell him the story. When the holy Prophet saw him, he asked him to explain what had happened; and the young man narrated the story. At this time, Gabriel, the revelation angel, came down and revealed that verse.

The verb used in the verse means ‘to reduce or put down’ (the voice or a glance, for instance) or ‘to lose’. Hence, in this verse, believers are not told to shut their eyes but they are told to reduce and shorten their vision. This is a well-tuned phrase, which means that when a man faces a stranger woman, if he is going to completely close his eyes, then walking or doing other things will become impossible to him; but if he turns his eyes away from her face and body and looks down instead, he has actually reduced his vision and totally omitted the forbidden scene from his vision.

It should also be noted that the holy Quran does not say what not to look at (in other words the object of that verb is omitted) in order to make the ruling absolutely general. Rather, it is meant that they have to turn their eyes away from anything which is forbidden to be stared at.

But according to the theme of the verses and especially the next verse in which the concept of “*Hijab*” is mentioned, it becomes clear that it is talking about not looking at stranger women, and the abovementioned cause of revelation also confirm this.

Based on what is just said, it is clear that this verse does not order men not to look at women’s face so that some would think that usual looks (not staring) is allowed. Nevertheless, it means that because human beings can see a wide area in their vision panorama, whenever a stranger woman got to be in his vision, he must turn his eyes away in a manner that the woman is removed from his vision but he can see the rest of the things around him.

An important point which is understood from this verse is that controlling the eye is prioritized to controlling sexual desires and that before controlling sexual desires, one’s eyes and glances should be controlled. In fact, stimulating visions lead to thinking and end up in sexual arousal. In the next section, we will discuss this issue.

#### B.2. Managing thoughts:

Although sexual desire is a natural instinct, the need for which should be fulfilled, it is different from other instincts such as thirst and hunger. Therefore, some ideas that approach sexual desire as an instinct like hunger and thirst the only way to deal with which is to extinguish it by providing it with whatever you need, is an incomplete and incorrect answer. Human body reacts to eating and drinking even if it does not have any activity and feels hunger and thirst. And also there is no way to deal with it other than providing food and drink. But sexual desire is aroused by thinking and imagination and causes sexual thirst in man. Not only can managing thoughts and imaginations help prevent sexual arousal, but

also it can really help extinguish sexual thirst. Regarding the first point and controlling sexual lust, let us read about a real incident which has happened recently and then a story from the Qur'an.

'Afsāneh and I got familiar with each other in a simple incident. She was from a poor and deprived family and truly fell in love with me due to my emotional talks. With my sincere promise to marry her, we kept talking over the phone for 3 months. During this time, I had another friend who always tempted me to take her to an empty place and take pleasure from her by force. Although I did not want to commit such a big sin, I was affected by my friend's erotic talks and then we plotted for her. I took her to the garden to discuss about marriage. The teenage girl was trapped by us and had no way out. She cried and begged us to let her go safely. But my friend and I had got so wretched that we would commit any sin.'

The 22-year-old boy kept talking in the consultation center of Tāybād (an Eastern city of Iran) Police department: 'The 16-year-old girl was crying so much. At the very last moment when my friend went to her and was pulling her to a room, a picture fell out of her purse. I took it and looked at it. It was a picture of her classmates. And what made my eyes open consciously was to see my younger sister in the picture among other students. I stared at my sister's eyes which were staring at me out from the picture. Believe me, I heard her voice telling me: 'shame on you, you are not my brother, ...Afsāneh is my best friend, you should defend her like you own family member. I stopped looking at the picture imagining that my friend was going to commit a sin with my own sister. This made me very angry and zealous and then I angrily attacked my friend, saved Afsāneh and escaped from the garden with her. But he was chasing us and threatened me with a dagger. Because I couldn't think of any way and did not want to anything wrong to happen to her, I asked the police car in the neighborhood to help us. Police officers arrested my friend and now my conscience is relieved and just ask God to forgive me.'

As you read in the story, the thing which could control the young man's lust and sexual desire was his thought. After he had a different imagination of the victim and changed his attitude about her, and believed that she is like his own sister, his lust was extinguished and his anger and zeal was aroused against his friend who was going to rape the poor girl.

The same event is narrated to have happened at the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him): 'Once upon a time, the Prophet was among a huge crowd of Muslims (apparently it was in the mosque), he suddenly noticed that a group of people are shouting and crying in a corner and asked what was going on. They said that there is an imprudent youth asking to visit the Prophet and ask for permission to do adultery. The Prophet stated: let him come closer. He approached and stood before the Prophet and said: Let me do adultery. The Prophet asked him: do you like someone do this with your mother, daughter and sister? He replied: No, not at all. I am zealous about family members. The Prophet stated: other people also do not like someone commit sin with their mother, daughter and sister. He got sorry and asked the Prophet to forgive him. Then the Prophet put his hand on the man's chest and said: O' God, purify the heart of this young man and protect him against adultery and forgive his sins. After that, he taught of this sin as the most hated thing in the world.

In the story of Joseph and Zulaikha, managing thoughts could help him out of the lustful situation. The Qur'an describe the scene as follows: "And she in whose house he was sought to make himself yield (to her), and she made fast the doors and said: Come forward. He said: I seek Allah's refuge, surely my Lord made good my abode: Surely the unjust do not prosper." (12:23)

In this verse, the thing which helped Joseph to be patient and have self-control was his Godly thoughts because he said: "I seek Allah's refuge, surely my Lord made good my abode"

**Conclusion:**

Sexual desire is one of the strongest instincts in human nature. Letting it free would be corruptive and suppressing it also would be troublesome. Therefore, we need to seek for an educational way to face with it. In religious teachings, it is suggested that the adherents be patient. Patience does not mean inactivity or mere tolerance; in religious teachings, patience is based on awareness. And the deeper this awareness is, the stronger and better motivated the patience will be. In religious teachings, considering an educational purpose for this instinct to increase patience, informing about the philosophy and wisdom beyond sexual desire in human beings and recognition of the reasons of sexual arousal have been emphasized. In fact, paying attention to these matters helps the man recognize the importance and value of this desire and to try to guard it. Beside managing that, people shall need to try to provide a lawful response for that.

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