

Meaning of Iman According to the Quran and Sunnah

The proper understanding of Iman (Faith) is essential for every Muslim to know, understand and practice. True enjoyment, peace of mind-heart- and soul, tranquility, and happiness in this world cannot be attained except with a correct understanding of Iman and how to actualize it in our daily lives.

Allah says in the Quran:

الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَتَطْمَئِنُّ قُلُوبُهُمْ بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ - 13:28

Those who have believed and whose hearts are tranquil and at peace by the remembrance of Allah. Unquestionably, by the remembrance of Allah hearts attain tranquility and peace."

Many Muslims know and memorize the six articles of faith:

1. Belief in Allah
2. Belief in His Angels
3. Belief in all of His Holy Books
4. Belief in all of His Messengers
5. Belief in the Day of Resurrection
6. Belief in Pre-Ordainment

Many of us when we discuss Iman, we only mention these six articles of faith that we have memorized. However, it is critical for the correctness of our beliefs that we understand what 'Iman' really means.

The linguistic meaning revolves around two meanings:

1. To give security and safety, as in Allah's statement:
- 2.

الَّذِي أَطْعَمَهُمْ مِنْ جُوعٍ وَأَمَّنَّهُمْ مِنْ خَوْفٍ - 106:4

"Who has fed them, [saving them] from hunger and made them safe, [saving them] from fear."

3. To mean 'Tasdeeq' (certainty/ true and sincere belief/affirmation), as in Allah's statement:

فَأَمَّنَ لَهُ لُوطٌ وَقَالَ إِنِّي مُهَاجِرٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّي إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ - 29:26

And Lot believed him. [Abraham] said, "Indeed, I will emigrate to [the service of] my Lord. Indeed, He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise."

'Tasdeeq' linguistically is found in the heart, in the tongue, and both the heart and the tongue at the same time, as well as in the limbs, as it came in the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad:

قَالَ أَبُو هُرَيْرَةَ عَنِ النَّبِيِّ ﷺ " إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَتَبَ عَلَىٰ ابْنِ آدَمَ حَظَّهُ مِنَ الزَّانِ، أَدْرَكَ ذَلِكَ لَا مَحَالَةَ، فَرْنَا الْعَيْنِ النَّظْرُ، وَزَنَا اللِّسَانِ الْمُنْطِقُ، وَالنَّفْسُ تَمَنَّى وَتَشْتَهِي، وَالْفَرْجُ يُصَدِّقُ ذَلِكَ كُلَّهُ وَيُكَيِّبُهُ "

Abu Huraira 'narrated from the Prophet who said "Allah has written for Adam's son his share of adultery which he commits inevitably. The adultery of the eyes is the sight (to gaze at a forbidden thing), the adultery of the tongue is the talk, and the inner self wishes and desires and the private parts testify all this or deny it."¹

¹ Sahih al Bukhari, Book of Asking Permission, Chapter: The adultery of the body parts (6243)

When explaining 'Tasdeeq' linguistically it is incorrect to understand it to restrict it only to the heart, or only to the limbs, or only to the tongue, rather 'Tasdeeq' is found in all three=heart-tongue-limbs.

The correct definition of Iman which was the opinion of the great Imam's and scholars of Islam such as: Imam Malik, Imam Shafi, Imam Ahmed, Ishaq ibn Rahawayah, the scholars of Ahlul Hadith, the scholars of Ahlul Madinah as well as the 'Thahiriyyah' is that 'Iman' is to affirm (tasdeeq) in the heart, declaration upon the tongue and actions upon the limbs.

Imam Al-Lalika'i has narrated with an authentic chain from al-Bukhari who said: "I met more than one thousand men from the scholars of different lands and I did not see anyone from amongst them differ regarding Iman being saying (of the tongue and action (of the limbs and the heart))..."² Iman increases and decreases:

Allah says in the Quran:

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِرَ اللَّهُ وَجِلَّتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَإِذَا تُلِيَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُهُ زَادَتْهُمْ إِيمَانًا وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ – 8:2

The believers are only those who, when Allah is mentioned, their hearts become fearful, and when His verses are recited to them, it increases them in faith; and upon their Lord they rely –(8:2)

Allah says:

الَّذِينَ قَالَ لَهُمُ النَّاسُ إِنَّ النَّاسَ قَدَّ جَمَعُوا لَكُمْ فَاتَّخَذْتَهُمْ فَرَادَهُمْ إِيمَانًا وَقَالُوا حَسْبُنَا اللَّهُ وَنِعْمَ الْوَكِيلُ – 3:173

Those to whom hypocrites said, "Indeed, the people have gathered against you, so fear them." But it [merely] increased them in faith, and they said, "Sufficient for us is Allah, and [He is] the best Disposer of affairs."

Imam Al-Laalikaa'ee (d. 418H) reports that Abdur-Razzaq as-San'aanee (d. 211H) said: I met sixty two Shouykh, amongst them were: Ma'mar, al-Awzaa'ee, ath-Thawree, al-Waleed bin Muhammad al-Qurashee, Yazeed ibn as-Saa'ib, Hammaad bin Salamah, Hammaad bin Zaid, Sufyaan bin Uyainah, Shu'ayb bin Harb, Wakee' bin al-Jarraah, Maalik bin Anas, Ibn Abee Laylaa, Isma'eel bin Ayyaash, al-Waleed ibn Muslim And those I have not named all of them saying: "Faith consists of speech and action, it increases and decreases."

Some of the scholars³ have summarized Iman to be:

القول باللسان

العمل بالأركان

الاعتقاد بالجنان

يزيد بطاعة الرحمن

ينقص بطاعة الشيطان

"A Statement of the Tongue, Action within the Limbs, Belief in the Heart, It increases with obedience to Ar Rahman, and decreases with obedience to Shaytaan."

² Sharh Usul I'tiqad Ahlus-Sunnah wa'l- Jama'ah by Abu Qasim al-Lalika'i (5/889) and this is as Ibn Hajr has mentioned it in Fath ul-Bari (5/889) with this meaning.

³ I heard this from Dr. Abdullah Bukhari in Makkah during one of his visits and lectures in Masjid as Subayyal, he mentioned that he learned this from his Sheikh-Sheikh Hammad Al Ansaari from Al Madinah.

The proof that Iman is comprised of these three (3) are numerous Quranic verses and many hadith of the Prophet Muhammad:

Aliah says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الرَّسُولُ لَا يَحْزُنْكَ الَّذِينَ يُسَارِعُونَ فِي الْكُفْرِ مِنَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا آمَنَّا بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَلَمْ تُؤْمِنْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَمِنَ الَّذِينَ هَادُوا سَمَّاعُونَ لِلْكَذِبِ سَمَّاعُونَ لِقَوْمٍ آخَرِينَ لَمْ يَأْتُواكَ بِكَلِمَةٍ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَوَاضِعِهِ يَقُولُونَ إِنْ أُوتِينَاهُمْ هَذَا فَخَدُّوه وَإِنْ لَمْ تُؤْتُوهُ فَاخْذَرُوا وَمَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ فِتْنَتَهُ فَلَنْ تَمْلِكَ لَهُ مِنْ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ أَنْ يُطَهِّرْ قُلُوبَهُمْ لَهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا حَزْبٌ وَلَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ - 5:41

O Messenger, let them not grieve you who hasten into disbelief of those who say, "We believe" with their mouths, but their hearts believe not, and from among the Jews. [They are] avid listeners to falsehood, listening to another people who have not come to you. They distort words beyond their [proper] usages, saying "If you are given this, take it; but if you are not given it, then beware." But he for whom Allah intends fitnah - never will you possess [power to do] for him a thing against Allah . Those are the ones for whom Allah does not intend to purify their hearts. For them in this world is disgrace, and for them in the Hereafter is a great punishment. (5:41)

Allah says:

قَالَتِ الْأَعْرَابُ آمَنَّا قُلْ لَمْ تُؤْمِنُوا وَلَكِنْ قُولُوا أَسْلَمْنَا وَلَمَّا يَدْخُلِ الْإِيمَانُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ وَإِنْ تُطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ لَا يَلِتْكُمْ مِنْ أَعْمَالِكُمْ شَيْئًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ - 49:14

The bedouins say, "We have believed." Say, "You have not [yet] believed; but say [instead], 'We have submitted,' for faith has not yet entered your hearts. And if you obey Allah and His Messenger, He will not deprive you from your deeds of anything. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful." (49:14)

Allah says:

قُولُوا آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَمَا أُوتِيَ النَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ - 2:136

Say, [O believers], "We have believed in Allah and what has been revealed to us and what has been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the Descendants and what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we are Muslims [in submission] to Him."

Allah says;

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ارْكَعُوا وَاسْجُدُوا وَاعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمْ وَافْعَلُوا الْخَيْرَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ - 22:77

O you who have believed, bow and prostrate and worship your Lord and do good - that you may succeed.

The Prophet Muhammad said:

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ " الْإِيمَانُ بَضْعٌ وَسَبْعُونَ أَوْ بَضْعٌ وَسِتُّونَ شُعْبَةً فَأَفْضَلُهَا قَوْلُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَأَدْنَاهَا إِمَاطَةُ الْأَدَىٰ عَنِ الطَّرِيقِ وَالْحَيَاءُ شُعْبَةٌ مِنَ الْإِيمَانِ "

It is narrated on the authority of Abu Huraira that the Messenger of Allah (may peace and blessings be upon him) said:

Faith has over seventy branches or over sixty branches, the most excellent of which is the declaration that there is no god but Allah, and the humblest of which is the, removal of what is injurious from the path: and modesty is the branch of faith.⁴

In these previous verses and hadith we clearly see that that:

1. Iman is comprised of different branches.
2. Iman consists of statements: La ilaha illa Allah, actions: removing something injurious from the path, actions or beliefs of the heart: modesty is a branch of faith.
3. Iman has the highest of branches and the lowest of branches.
4. The people of Iman bow, prostrate, and worship Allah.

From these Quranic verses and this hadith we understand that Iman is comprised of different parts and branches consisting of beliefs, statements and actions. It increases with good deeds and decreases with bad deeds.

*If all of one's statements regarding Iman are abandoned, then all of one's Iman is void.

*If some of one's statements regarding Iman are abandoned, then there still remains other statements which necessitate that the individual is still a believer. (as long as abandonment of some of those statements are not considered nullifiers of one's Iman or Islam).

*If all of one's actions representing Iman are abandoned, then all of one's Iman is void.

*If some of one's actions representing Iman are abandoned, then there still remains other actions which necessitate that the individual is still a believer. (as long as abandonment of some of those statements are not considered nullifiers of one's Iman or Islam).

Those who understand Iman correctly do not consider those who fall into major sins to be disbelievers, rather they consider that individual to be a sinner who is under Allah's will= If Allah chooses to forgive him, he can, if Allah doesn't want to forgive him, He can, and if Allah wants to punish him He can, Allah can do whatever He pleases, however He pleases, whenever He pleases.

The correct understanding of Iman is that if a believer commits a major sin, then that individual is still a believer and a Muslim, but he is a wrongdoer because of the major sin s/he committed. Those who understand Iman correctly do not think that someone who commits a major sin will abide in the Hellfire eternally.

Unfortunately, there were some individual and sects that emerged after the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad and understood Iman in an incorrect way.

There were those who believed that Iman was comprised of only one part, if one part is decreased, absent or removed, then all of that individual's Iman is gone, such as the Khawarij and Mutazilah. There were also those who believed that Iman is only affirmation and knowledge, without action and statements, such as the Jahmiyyah. There were also those who believe that Iman is only statements upon the tongue such as the Karimiyyah. Others who believed that Iman is only beliefs in the heart such as the Ashaa'irah. Also those who believe that Iman is only belief in the heart and statements upon the tongue, not considering actions of the limbs to be a part of Iman such as the Mur'ji'ah al Fuquhaa.

There are two incorrect understandings of Iman amongst many of the Muslims throughout the world today, which take their roots from two dangerous sects and their beliefs-the Murji'ah and the Khawarij.

⁴ Sahih Muslim, the Book of Faith, Chapter: Clarifying the number of branches of faith, the best and the least of them, the virtue of modesty (Al-Haya') and the fact that it is part of faith, (35b)

The Murji'ah

The Murji'ah who emerged in the 2nd to 4th century Hijri and were named as such because of their belief that actions are not part of Iman, or that actions do not affect one's Iman.

Their major mistake and misunderstanding is that Iman is only 'Tasdeeq' (affirmation in the heart with knowledge) without actions. Their second misunderstanding is that if Allah or His Messenger considered that someone is a disbeliever who will abide forever in the Hellfire, then the reason for such a punishment would be because of a lack of knowledge and 'tasdeeq' in one's heart. They claim that they can do any types of disobedience to Allah and their faith (which is only considered in their hearts) will not decrease. They claim that no matter what they do from acts of disobedience, sins, etc...that they are guaranteed paradise as long as they say: 'La ilaha illa Allah'. They claim that one may have Iman in their heart similar to that of Abu Bakr Sideeq and Umar, although he never prostrates to Allah, doesn't fast Ramadan, and fornicates with his mother or his sisters and drinks wine in the daylight hours of Ramadan. The Murji'ah claim that such a man has complete Iman.

Some modern day manifestations of this incorrect ideology:

1. Those who don't pray, don't fast, and constantly disobey Allah and commit sins claiming: "It's only what's in my heart that counts, if I don't pray, fast, pay Zakat I'm still going to the Paradise, I won't be punished."
2. Those who only want to consider, listen to, and read the Quranic verses and Hadith that mention the paradise and the rewards that Allah has in store for His obedient servants in the paradise, while ignoring, rejecting and abandoning the Quranic verses and Hadith that speak about the Hellfire, Allah's punishment for those who disobey him, etc...
3. Iman does not increase or decrease and all people (i.e. Muslims) are equal with regards to its foundations. Disbelief is only in the form of rejection (takdhib).
4. Disbelief only occurs by belief (i'tiqad), denial (juhud), or making something impermissible to be lawful (istihlal).
5. Abandoning all deeds of the limbs is not disbelief that expels one from the religion
6. The deeds of the limbs are a condition for perfection (shart kamal) in Iman, not a pillar (rukn) or a condition for validity (shart sihha).
7. Abandoning prayer is not disbelief because it is an action of the limbs, and actions of the limbs are a condition for the perfection (shart kamal) of Iman.
8. Misleading people by telling them that all deeds are not important for them to enter Heaven and that the worst of the people will be alongside the most believing in Heaven. This concept led to the loss of morals and values; it also led to ridiculing Allah's religion. Therefore, this loss of values have subsequently led the people to slowly pull away from their religion, while at the same time making them believe that they will enter Heaven along the best of the companions.

The Khawarij

The other incorrect understanding of Iman has emerged from the ideas and beliefs of the 'Khawarij' sect who emerged after the Prophet's (sal Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam) death. He actually foretold about their emergence in numerous 'ahadith'.

Technically, a 'Khariji' is from amongst the 'Khawarij' who are those who go against the agreed upon Imam that the community has selected.

What did they do: They accused Ali ibn Abee Taalib of disbelief and apostasy, and eventually separated themselves from Ali and the general body of Muslims saying that Ali wasn't Muslim and was an apostate.

Their ideology is ancient, but it still exists within the hearts of some Muslims who have not properly understood the meaning of Iman.

Some of the characteristics that someone can be identified with as having this ideology or being affected by this ideology are the following:

1. Considering a Muslim to be a disbeliever if s/he commits a major sin, such as fornication, uses drugs or alcohol, murder, gambling, accusing chaste women, stealing, etc...
2. Considering it permissible to take a Muslim's life, wealth, and property if s/he commits a major sin, because they don't consider them to be Muslim anymore.
3. Considering one to be a disbeliever if s/he falls into a sin and then persists in it.
4. Declaring that Iman is a single entity. If some of it departs, all of it is lost. This is why they consider someone who commits a major sin to be a disbeliever.
5. Permitting revolt against a Muslim ruler for his injustice, even if he has not been seen to commit clear disbelief. Publicizing the sins, mistakes and shortcomings of a Muslim ruler while inciting the people to revolt against him.
6. Not giving any excuse for ignorance at all.
7. Declaring all people who rule or judge by other than what Allah reveals in all instances and circumstances to be disbelievers.
8. Being hasty in declaring individuals to be disbelievers without verifying that the conditions are present and that the barriers have been lifted.
9. Considering people to be 'off the minhaj', or 'off the Sunnah' because of a mistake one may have made.
10. They only believe in, recite, and consider the Quranic verses and Hadith that mention Allah's punishment, the Hellfire, and Allah's warnings; while they abandon the Quranic verses and Hadith that mention Allah's promises for rewards for good deeds, Allah's paradise, etc....

Be diligent to learn the correct creed and the correct understanding of Iman, and be cautious about the incorrect understandings of Iman.