

THE INNER WORLD OF A HUMAN BEING (PART 1)

The *Nafs* and *Rûh*

INTRODUCTION

In Islāmic psychology, the metaphysical elements and the inner psyche that influence human behaviours are the self (*Nafs*), the soul (*Rûh*), the heart (*Qalb*), and the intellect (*‘Aql*). From an Islāmic perspective, these elements are in the inner world (*Alam-e-Batin*) of humans. However, only Allāh, the Almighty, knows the truth of the inner world of a person and His knowledge encompasses generalities and minor details of the essence of man.

Allāh Almighty has called Himself Names which reflect this attribute, such as *Al-Khabeer* (the All-Aware), which entails that Allāh Knows what will be before it happens; *Al-Hakeem* (the Wise), which entails that Allāh Knows the details of things; *Ash-Shaheed* (the Witness), which entails that Allāh Knows what is unseen and what is seen, i.e., that nothing is unknown to Him; and *Al-Muhsiy* (the Reckoner), which entails that the fact that Allāh Knows so much does not distract Him from knowing the tiniest details, such as the light of the day and how strong the wind is, and when the leaves fall. Allāh Knows the numbers and the movements of each leaf.

(IslamWeb, 2012)

Allāh says in the Qur’ān:

إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ

- *Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Knowing.*

(Ash-Shu’arâ 26:220)

The concepts of self (*Nafs*), the soul (*Rūh*), the heart (*Qalb*), and the intellect (*‘Aql*) are the metaphysical elements of the spiritual being based on the work of the Islamic scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī and derived from Qur’anic sources. It has been noted by Keshavarzi and Haque (2013) that Al-Ghazālī viewed the four aspects of the human being (*Nafs*, *Rūh*, *‘Aql*, and *Qalb*) as interconnected and having an interdependent holistic relationship with one another, which makes up the soul of the human being. However, it would be valuable not only to distinguish between these concepts, due to their distinct purposes, but also to identify the kinds of characteristics divine revelation gives to the entities in this constellation. This and the following chapter examine the concepts of the self (*Nafs*), the soul (*Rūh*), the heart (*Qalb*), and the intellect (*‘Aql*) in the development of personality and provides an analysis of the multifaceted relationship between these concepts. Let us first examine the nature of the *Nafs* (self) and the soul (*Ruh*).

NAFS (SELF)

The study of the *Nafs* is a major element of Islāmīc psychology. *Nafs* (pl. *Anfus* or *Nufus*) (نَفْس) is an Arabic word that lexically means self, soul, the psyche, the ego, life, person, heart, or mind. (Al-Akiti, 1997). In the literature, the *Nafs* is synonymous with the concepts of “self,” “psyche,” or “soul”. In the Qur’ān, the word *Nafs* appears 295 times as a noun and is used in two ways. Ahmed (2015) suggested that the first way in which the word *Nafs* is used is to indicate our own self. The second explanation refers to the elements of the self, which include desires, appetite, anger, passion, and lust. The three levels or states of the *Nafs* described in the Qur’ān are: *Nafs Ammāra* (Yusuf 12:53), *Nafs Lawwāma* (Al-Qiyamah 75:2), and *Nafs Muṭma’innah* (Fajr 89:27–28). The concept of *Nafs* is also predominant in Sufi literature, and it has been referred as the lowest facet of an individual’s inner animal and satanic psyche (Chittick, 1983, p. 12).

There is a general misconception in the literature on Islāmīc psychology that equates the *Nafs* with the Freudian psychosexual development of the id, ego, and super-ego. Keshavarzi and Ali (2021) proposed that “it is possible to liken the *nafs* in this sense to Freud’s conceptualization of the id” (p. 28). This notion has been rejected by contemporary Islāmīc psychology scholars and thinkers because of its Orientalist approach, including the doyen of Islāmīc psychology, Malik Badri. Badri (2021) stated,

A good and widely held example at the time was their proposition that the Freudian seminal theory of the three structures of personality – namely the id, ego, and superego – are the same as the three spiritual ego states of the soul that are mentioned in the Qur’ān. They claimed that the commanding soul *Nafs ammārah* stands for the id, the soul *nafs* is exemplified by the ego, and the tranquil soul *Nafs muṭma’innah* stands for the superego. This undermined the richer and metaphysical nature of these Qur’ānic concepts. In the late 1950s I personally witnessed many Muslim psychologists strongly defend this false belief as if Freud were a spiritually motivated scholar.

(p. xxi)

Students of Islāmic psychology, however, should be aware of the literature on Islāmic psychology, both print and web-based, from contemporary thinkers who equate Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of personality with the states of the *Nafs* as stated in the Qur’ān. An additional explanation of the *Nafs* (self) is presented in Box 6.1.

Box 6.1 Additional explanation of the *Nafs* (self)

- In Islāmic tradition, the spiritual soul is referred to as *Nafs* (Al-Raghib; Ibn Sina; Ibn al-Arabi).
- The *Nafs* is simply related to the human soul, the entire soul, and the self (Ahmad, 1992).
- Al-Ghazālī (2009) refers to the paradigm of the spiritual self as the “lower” part of the self/soul.
- Ibn al-Qayyim Al-Jawziyyah (b), commenting on the states of *Nafs*, said that the “*Nafs* is a single entity, although its state may change from the *Nafs al-Ammara*, to the *Nafs al-Lawwama*, to the *Nafs al-Mutma’innah*, which is the final aim of perfection” (p. 308).
- The concept is interchangeable with terms like the “soul,” “spirit,” “body,” or “self.”
- The *Nafs* has been defined as “something internal in the entity of a human whose exact nature is not perceived. It is ready to accept direction towards good or evil. It combines together a number of human attributes and characteristics that have a clear effect on human behaviour” (Karzoon, 1997, p. 60).

- The *Nafs* is an internal entity or drive that shapes or directs human behaviour, in combination with personality, towards good or evil (Rassool, 2021a, p. 60).
- The *Nafs* is the totality of the human self/human psyche.

AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S CONCEPT OF *NAFS*

Al-Ghazālī has two distinct meanings for the *Nafs*. The first meaning is the principle that “unites the irascible and appetitive faculties, and constantly enjoins evil” (Al-Ghazālī, 1995, p. 233). The second meaning is the soul, which is a person’s essence, free of matter. Al-Ghazālī (2010) refers to the *Nafs* as the appetitive soul, which “united man’s blameworthy qualities” (p. xvi), as opposed to his rational soul. He speaks of the *Nafs* as the vehicle (*markab*) of the heart and states that that Sufis call the *Nafs* the animal spirit (*al-riih al-hayawdni an nafs*). He also views the *Nafs* as the “subtle spiritual substance which is the real essence of man” (p. xvii). He describes the two meanings of the *Nafs*. One consists of both the faculty of anger (*ghadab*) and of appetite (*shahwa*) [appetites, desires] in man. This, in simplistic terms, is the principle in man that includes his blameworthy qualities. He uses the saying that your worst enemy is your *Nafs*. The other consists of that which is “the soul of man and his essence”. But it is identified by different descriptors according to its differing states.

When it is at rest under His command, and agitation has left it on account of its opposition to the fleshly appetites, it is called “the soul at rest” (*al-nafi al-mufma'inna*). Of such a soul did God, the Exalted, say, Oh, you soul at peace, return to your Lord, pleased, and pleasing Him (Al-Fajr 89:27–28).

(Al-Ghazālī, 2010, p. 8)

He said, “Never have I dealt with anything more difficult than my own soul, which sometimes helps me and sometimes opposed me” (Cited in Abu Zainab, 2015). Imam al-Ghazālī categorised the *Nafs* into three stages as identified in the Qur’ān.

TYPES OF *NAFS*

Allāh says in the Qur'ān,

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

- *And they ask you, [O Muhammad], about the soul. Say, "The soul is of the affair of my Lord. And mankind has not been given of knowledge except a little."*

(Al-Isrā 17:85, interpretation of the meaning)

The knowledge of the *Nafs* is based on the Qur'ān, traditional knowledge, and scholarly interpretation of the Qur'ān. There is a general consensus among the scholars that Allāh has described at least three main types of the *Nafs*, namely *Nafs al-Ammara Bissu'* (the *Nafs* that urges evil), *Nafs al-Lawwama* (the *Nafs* that Blames), and *Nafs al-Mutma'innah* (the *Nafs* at Peace) (Figure 6.1).

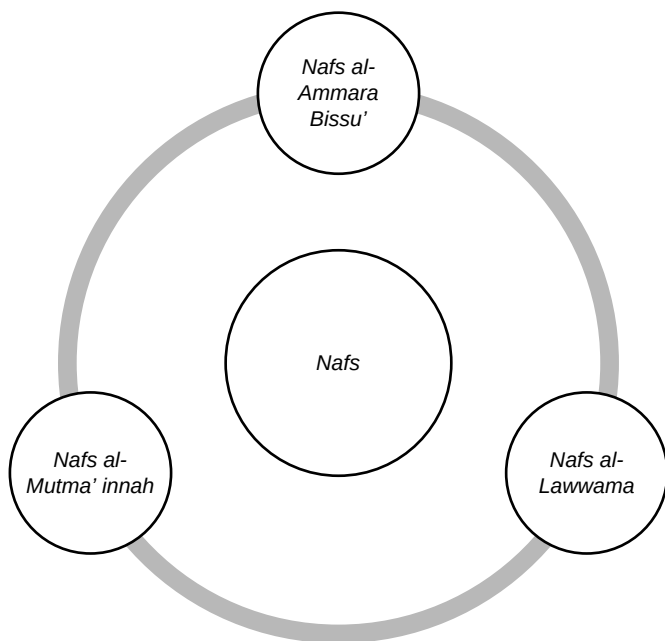


Figure 6.1 The three types of *Nafs*

Nafs al-Ammara Bissu' (the Nafs that urges evil)

The *Nafs al-Ammara Bissu'* is found Surah Yusuf verse 53. Allāh says in the Qur'ān:

إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ

- *Indeed, the soul is a persistent enjoiner of evil.*
(Yusuf 12:53, interpretation of the meaning)

This *Nafs*, by its very nature, directs the individual towards every wrong action. This evil can only be relieved by the help of Allāh, who refers to this *Nafs* in the story of the wife of al-Aziz (Zuleika) and Prophet Yusuf [Qur'ān, Chapter 12]. The behavioural intention of this *Nafs* is inclined towards wants and desires in an impulsive way towards enjoining evil. This evil, based on conceptualisation of the *Nafs* by Al-Ghazālī, “is contained within the aspect of the human being as a social animal with survival/aggressive instincts (*quwwat ghaḍabiyyah*) and appetitive/carnal drives (*Quwwat shahawiyyah*)” (Keshavarzi & Ali, 2021, p. 28). Imam Al-Tabari, in his exegesis of the above verse [Yusuf 12:53], commented that it is this *Nafs* that brings punishment itself. He further commented that Allāh also says:

يَنَاقِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَتَّبِعُوا خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ ۚ وَمَنْ يَتَّبِعْ خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ فَإِنَّهُ يَأْمُرُ بِالْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ ۚ وَلَوْلَا فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَتُهُ مَا زَكَا مِنْكُمْ مِنْ أَحَدٍ أَبَدًا وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يُزَكِّي مَنْ يَشَاءُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

- *O you who have believed, do not follow the footsteps of Satan. And whoever follows the footsteps of Satan – indeed, he enjoins immorality and wrongdoing. And if not for the favor of Allāh upon you and His mercy, not one of you would have been pure, ever, but Allāh purifies whom He wills, and Allāh is Hearing and Knowing.*
(An-Nur 24:21, interpretation of the meaning)

Imam Al-Tabari explained the above verse by stating that

this *Nafs* resides in the world of the senses and is dominated by earthly desires (*shahwat*) and passions ... Evil lies hidden in the *nafs* and it is this that leads it on to do wrong. If Allāh were to leave the servant alone with his self, the servant would be

destroyed between its evil and the evil. This particular soul, at the lowest level, is prone to disobedience and sinful behaviours because of its attractions towards evil and fails to submit to Allāh.

Zarabozo (2002) maintains that if individuals allow the soul to exert a significant control, they start losing a sense of remorse or guilt for their sinful behaviours (pp. 62–63). This state has been described as having their hearts blocked from believing in the truth. Allāh also says:

كَأَلَّا طَبْلٌ رَانَ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ

- *No! Rather, the stain has covered their hearts of that which they were earning.*

(Al-Mutaffifin 83:14, interpretation of the meaning)

According to exegesis of Ibn Kathir (2000), “It is the dark covering that cast over it from the many sins and wrong they committed that has covered up their hearts.” (*And if not for the favor of Allāh upon you and His mercy, not one of you would have been pure*), meaning, if He did not help whomever He wills to repent and come back to Him and be purified from *Shirk*, evil and sin, and whatever bad characteristics each person has according to his nature, no one would ever attain purity and goodness. In this context, Zarabozo (2002) commented that “since the soul is already predisposed to those kinds of evil acts, *Satan* will whisper to them and easily persuade them to do evil deeds” (p. 63).

Nafs al-Lawwama (*the Nafs that blames*)

This type of self is also viewed as the self-reproaching soul and as having an awareness of evil deeds. It is a self-critical stage during which an individual blames himself for his bad deeds or not doing more good deeds and feels a sense of guilt or remorse. It is reported by Ibn Kathir (2000) that “‘Ikrimah Ibn Abi Najih reported from Mujahid: ‘He is sorry for what he missed (of good deeds) and he blames himself for it.’” This may be regarded as the policing of “ethical intelligence” of the soul. Allāh mentions in the Qur’ān:

وَلَا أُقْسِمُ بِالنَّفْسِ اللَّوَّامَةِ

- *And I swear by the reproaching soul.*

(Al-Qiyamah75:2, interpretation of the meaning)

Hasan al-Basri said, “You always see the believer blaming himself and saying things like ‘Did I want this? Why did I do that? Was this better than that?’” (Cited in Al-Akiti, 1997). In this stage, the *Nafs*, being conscious of its own imperfections, means that individuals have a sense of guilt and would seek repentance from Allāh or at-tempt to address their transgressions [*Fahishah* (immoral sin)].

وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا فَعَلُوا فَحِشَةً أَوْ ظَلَمُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ ذَكَرُوا اللَّهَ فَاسْتَغْفَرُوا لِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَنْ يَغْفِرُ
الذُّنُوبَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَلَمْ يُصِرُّوا عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلُوا وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ

- *And those who, when they commit an immorality or wrong themselves [by transgression], remember Allāh and seek forgiveness for their sins – and who can forgive sins except Allāh? – and [who] do not persist in what they have done while they know.*

(Ali 'Imran 3:135, interpretation of the meaning)

This is the stage of contemplation and spiritual awakening in repentance and seeking forgiveness. Anas (May Allāh be pleased with him) reported that the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) said,

Allāh, the Exalted, has said: “O son of Adam, I forgive you as long as you pray to Me and hope for My forgiveness, whatever sins you have committed. O son of Adam, I do not care if your sins reach the height of the heaven, then you ask for my forgiveness, I will forgive you. O son of Adam, if you come to Me with an earth load of sins, and meet Me associating nothing to Me, I would match it with an earth load of forgiveness.”

(Tirmidhî (i))

Nafs al-Mutma`innah (the Nafs at peace)

This is the *Nafs* at peace, serenity, or in a tranquil state as a consequence of spiritual health. This is the stage where the *Nafs* has earned the pleasure of Allāh and the person displays goodness, piety, and righteousness. It was narrated that ‘Ā’ishah (may Allāh be

pleased with her) said: “I heard the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) said: ‘Enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil, before you call and you are not answered’” (Ibn Majah (d)). About this stage of the *Nafs*, Allāh mentions in the Qur’ān,

يَا أَيَّتُهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ
ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ رَاضِيَةً مُّرْضِيَةً
فَادْخُلِي فِي عِبَادِي
وَادْخُلِي جَنَّاتِي

- [To the righteous it will be said]: O reassured soul, return to your Lord, well pleased and pleasing [to Him]. And enter among My [righteous] servants. And enter My paradise.

(Al-Fajr 89:27–30, interpretation of the meaning)

According to Imam Al-Tabari, Ibn Abbas said that “It is the tranquil and believing soul.” Al-Qatadah said,

It is the soul of the believer, made calm by what Allāh has promised. Its owner is at rest and content with his knowledge of Allāh’s Names and Attributes, and with what He has said about Himself and His Messenger, and with what He has said about what awaits the soul after death: about the departure of the soul, the life in the *Barzakh* [designates a place between hell and heaven, where the soul resides after death], and the events of the Day of *Qiyamah* [Day of Judgment] which will follow. So much so that a believer such as this can almost see them with his own eyes. So, he submits to the will of Allāh and surrenders to Him contentedly, never dissatisfied or complaining, and with his faith never wavering. He does not rejoice at his gains, nor do his afflictions make him despair – for he knows that they were decreed long before they happened to him, even before he was created.

(Imam Al-Tabari, cited in Al-Akiti, 1997)

Ibn al-Qayyim Al-Jawziyyah (b) stated,

It has been said that the *Nafs al-Lawwama* is the one, which cannot rest in any one state. It often changes, remembers and forgets, submits and evades, loves and hates, rejoices and become

sad, accepts and rejects, obeys and rebels. *Nafs al-Lauwama* is also the *nafs* of the believer ... It has also been mentioned that the *nafs* blames itself on the Day of *Qiyamah* – for everyone blames himself for his actions, either his bad deeds, if he was one who had many wrong actions, or for his shortcomings, if he was one who did good deeds. All of this is accurate.

(p. 308)

Imam al-Ghazālī (2010) suggests, “When it is at rest under His command, and agitation has left it on account of its opposition to the fleshly appetites, it is called ‘the soul at rest’ (*al-nafi al-mufina’inna*)” (p. 10). Thus, being in strong connection with the Creator is a level that we need to strive to attain in this life. This is our ‘self-actualisation’, but it is through the purification of the soul that we are able to, in essence, fulfil the rationale of our creation, which is the worship of and obedience to Allāh.

DISCIPLINING THE *NAFS*

Despite the evil nature of the *Nafs*, according to Al-Ghazālī, the *Nafs* is the essence by which man can get to know God. Khan (2020) suggested that “contrary to the popular usage of the term among Muslims, the *nafs*, by its very nature, is not intrinsically evil. It can be trained and disciplined, leading to its ultimate state: *Muṭma’innah*” (p. 119). The Qur’ān and *Sunnah* repeatedly emphasise purifying the soul. This is reflected in the following verse:

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَن تَزَكَّى

- *He has certainly succeeded who purifies himself.*
(Al A’la 87:14, interpretation of the meaning)

Jihaad al-nafs is the struggle against self in relation to evil ideas, desires, lust, anger, and deviant behaviours. Disciplining the self is considered to be a major struggle and is compared to fighting in the battlefield (*al-jihad al-akbar*). In order to overcome this struggle, there is a need to purge all animalistic and satanic ideas and influences from one’s soul. Ibn al-Qayyim Al-Jawziyyah (c) said:

Jihad al-nafs means striving to make oneself learn true guidance, and to follow it after coming to know it, calling others to it, and

bearing with patience the difficulties of calling others to Allāh. *Jihad al-Shaytaan* means striving against him and warding off the doubts and desires that he throws at a person, and the doubts that undermine faith, and striving against the corrupt desires that he tries to inspire in a person.

(pp. 9–12)

Skinner (2019) cited Al-Ghazālī's analogy of a rider on a horse to show how the *Nafs* can be disciplined. According to Skinner (2019),

In this analogy, the horse is the *hawā* [animal self], healthy and operating in its *fiṭrah*; guided by *aql* (the reins), under the control of the rider who is centered in the *Qalb* under divine guidance. From this analogy, psychopathology can be seen in different manifestations. For example, the horse out of control; the horse under control but by the reins directing it in an irrational way; the horse firmly under control and being firmly guided by the reins to where the rider wants to go but being contrary to *Fiṭrah* and destructive.

(p. 24)

In some way, it is the *hawā* of the *Nafs* (self) that need to be restrained or disciplined. Al-Ghazālī describes how a believer must protect himself against these enemies, saying:

Know that the body is like a city and the intellect of the mature human being is like a king ruling that town. All the forces of the external and internal senses he can muster are like his soldiers and his aides. The soul/self that enjoins evil (*nafs ammāra*), that is, lust and anger, is like an enemy that challenges him in his kingdom and strives to slaughter his people. The body thus becomes like a garrison-town or sea-outpost, and the soul like its custodian posted in it. If he fights against his enemies, defeats them, and compels them to do what he likes, he will be praised when he returns to God's presence, as God said: "... [who strive and fight] in the way of God with their wealth and their lives over those of remained [behind], by degrees. And to all God has promised the best [reward]." [An-Nisa' 4:95]

(sunnahonline.com)

The purification of the soul means to purify and cleanse the heart of vices and immoral traits by minimising the effect of the *hawā*. The purification of the soul is found in the fabric of Islāmic beliefs and practices in order to overcome and discipline the corrupted *Nafs*. Some of the approaches in training and disciplining the *Nafs* include seeking authentic religious knowledge, making sincere intentions, reading the Qur'ān and reflecting on its teachings, providing the soul with beneficial nourishment by the remembrance of Allāh (*zikr*), enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong, performing obligatory prayers, increasing small acts of kindness; not enriching the self with sins and evil deeds, not succumbing to the *Nafs* by obeying and fulfilling every dictate and demand of fantasies and desires rather than meeting basic needs, making supplications (the weapon of the believer), and being charitable. Allāh says in the Qur'ān,

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ تَزَكَّى
وَذَكَرَ اسْمَ رَبِّهِ فَصَلَّى

- *He has certainly succeeded who purifies himself*

And mentions the name of his Lord and prays.

(Al A'la 87:14–15, interpretation of the meaning)

On the authority of Abu Abbas Abdullah bin Abbas (may Allāh be pleased with him) who said: One day I was behind the Prophet (ﷺ) [riding on the same mount] and he said, “O young man, I shall teach you some words [of advice]: Be mindful of Allāh and Allāh will protect you. Be mindful of Allāh and you will find Him in front of you. If you ask, then ask Allāh [alone]; and if you seek help, then seek help from Allāh [alone]. And know that if the nation were to gather together to benefit you with anything, they would not benefit you except with what Allāh had already prescribed for you. And if they were to gather together to harm you with anything, they would not harm you except with what Allāh had already prescribed against you. The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried.”

(An-Nawawi (b))

The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) commanded us to say:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ الْعُجْزِ وَالْكَسَلِ وَالْبُخْلِ وَالْجُبْنِ وَالْهَرَمِ وَعَذَابِ الْقَبْرِ اللَّهُمَّ آتِ
نَفْسِي تَقْوَاهَا وَزَكَّاها أَنْتَ خَيْرُ مَنْ زَكَّاها أَنْتَ وَلِيِّها وَمَوْلَاهَا اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنْ
نَفْسٍ لَا تَشْبَعُ وَمِنْ قَلْبٍ لَا يَخْشَعُ وَمِنْ عِلْمٍ لَا يَنْفَعُ وَدَعْوَةٍ لَا تُسْتَجَابُ

O Allāh, I seek refuge in You from incapacity, laziness, miserliness, cowardice, old age, the torment of the grave. O Allāh, make my soul obedient and purify it, for You are the best One to purify it, You are its Guardian and Lord. O Allāh, I seek refuge in You from a soul that is not satisfied, a heart that is not humble, knowledge that is of no benefit and a supplication that is not answered.

(An-Nasa'i (c))

Thus, it is through the process of the purification of the soul (*Tazkiyah-an-Nafs*) that the behavioural inclinations of *Nafs* can be controlled and disciplined.

THE *RŪH* (SPIRIT): AN INTRODUCTION

The word *Rūh* is mentioned 21 times in Qur'ān in 20 verses. The Qur'ān uses the concepts of both the *Nafs* and the *Rūh* to highlight the notion of the soul. The term *Rūh* (also known as spirit, soul, or breath of life) is used in the Qur'ān in various ways to refer to metaphysical entities such as angels, revelation, or divine inspiration. It is also used to signify the inner human nature or soul, which is the constituent that gives life to the mind and body by spreading throughout the physical limbs. It drives the feelings, thoughts, behaviours, and volition of human beings. However, the *Nafs* and *Rūh* (spirit) are regarded as synonyms and, depending on the context of use, are interchangeable by the majority of Islāmic scholars. Allāh says in the Qur'ān:

وَلَوْ تَرَىٰ إِذِ الظَّالِمُونَ فِي غَمَرَاتِ الْمَوْتِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ بَاسِطُو أَيْدِيهِمْ أَخْرِجُوا أَنْفُسَكُمُ ۖ

- And if you could but see when the wrongdoers are in the overwhelming pangs of death while the angels extend their hands, [saying], "Discharge your souls!"

(Al An'am 6:93, interpretation of the meaning)

لَهُ يَتَوَفَّى الْأَنفُسَ حِينَ مَوْتِهَا وَالَّتِي لَمْ تَمُتْ فِي مَنَامِهَا فَيُمْسِكُ الَّتِي قَضَىٰ عَلَيْهَا الْمَوْتَ وَيُرْسِلُ الْأُخْرَىٰ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۖ

- *Allāh takes the souls at the time of their death, and those that do not die [He takes] during their sleep. Then He keeps those for which He has decreed death and releases the others for a specified term.*
(Surah Az-Zumar 39:42, interpretation of the meaning)

Knowledge about the *Rūh*'s true essence belongs exclusively to Allāh. This is exemplified in a *Hādīth* that was narrated by Ibn 'Abbas.

The Quraysh said to the Jews: "Give us something that we can ask this man about." So, he said: "Ask him about the *rūh*." So, they asked him about the *rūh*. So, Allāh Most High, revealed: They ask you concerning the *rūh*. Say: "The *rūh* is one of the things, the knowledge of which is only with my Lord. And of knowledge, you have been given only a little" (Al-Isrā 17:85).
(Tirmidhī (i))

Allāh says in the Qur'ān:

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ ۖ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

- *And they ask you [Muhammad] about the soul. Say: The soul is of the affair [i.e., concern] of my Lord. And you [i.e., mankind] have not been given of knowledge except a little.*
(Al-Isrā' 17:85, interpretation of the meaning)

In the exegesis of Ibn Kathir (2000), it is noted that Al-Bukhari recorded in his Tafsir of this Ayah [verse] that 'Abdullah bin Mas'ud said,

While I was walking with the Prophet on a farm, and he was resting on a palm-leaf stalk, some Jews passed by. Some of them said to the others, "Ask him about the *rūh*." Some of them said, "What urges you to ask him about that?" Others said, "Do not ask him, lest he gives you a reply which you do not like." But they said, "Ask him." So, they asked him about the *rūh*. The Prophet kept quiet and did not give them an answer, and I knew that he was receiving revelation, so I stayed where I was. When the revelation was complete, the Prophet said: "And they ask you

concerning the *rūh* (the spirit). Say: ‘The *rūh* (the spirit) is one of the things, the knowledge of which is only with my Lord’ ”

QUR’ĀNIC EVIDENCE: RANGE OF MEANINGS FOR MAN’S SOUL

Allāh says in the Qur’ān:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً ۚ

- *O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women.*
(An-Nisā 4:1, interpretation of the meaning)

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْهَا ۚ

- *It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her.*
(Al-A’raf 7:189, interpretation of the meaning)

خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ

- *He created you from one soul.*

(Az-Zumar 39:6)

وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَنْشَأَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ فَمُسْتَقَرٌّ وَمُسْتَوْدَعٌ ۚ

- *And it is He who produced you from one soul and [gave you] a place of dwelling and of storage.*
(Al-An’ām 6:98, interpretation of the meaning)

The soul is the one that tastes death, and this is explained in the following verses. Allāh says in the Qur’ān:

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ ۚ ثُمَّ إِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ

- *Every soul shall taste death, then to Us will you be returned.*
(Al-ʿAnkabūt 29:57, interpretation of the meaning)
كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ ۖ وَنَبْلُوكُم بِالشَّرِّ وَالْخَيْرِ فِتْنَةً ۖ وَإِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ
- *Every soul will taste death. And We test you with evil and with good as trial; and to Us you will be returned.*
(Al-Anbiya 21:35, interpretation of the meaning)
كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ ۖ وَإِنَّمَا تُؤَفَّقُونَ أَجُورَكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ ۖ
- *Every soul will taste death, and you will only be given your [full] compensation on the Day of Resurrection.*
(Ali ʿImran 3:185, interpretation of the meaning)

The above verses indicate that all souls will taste death, but this cannot happen without the decree or permission of God. The soul has also attributes, both positive and negative, which include:

- Desires (Al-Anbya 21:102; Fussilat 41:31, Az-Zukhruf 43:71);
- Needs and desires (Yusuf 12:68);
- Stinginess (Al-Hashr 59:9; An-Nisā 4:12; At-Taghabun 64:16);
- Constraint or restriction (At-Tawbah 9:118);
- Regret (Az-Zumar 39:56); and
- Purification (Ash-Shams 91:7–10).

NAFS AND RŪH

The scholars of *Ahlus-Sunnah wal Jamaah* (Ibn Taymīyyah and Ibn Qayyim of Jawziyyah) maintained that the terms *Nafs* and *Rūh* are interchangeable. Their rationale is that the three states of *Nafs* mentioned in the Qurʾān – *Nafs Ammara*, *Nafs Lawwama*, and *Nafs Mutmaʾinnah* – can also apply to *Rūh*. Other scholars say that *Nafs* and *Rūh* are two different things. That is, life exists in humans when *Rūh* has entered inside his heart (*Qalb*). Simply, when the soul as an entity is in the body it is referred as *Nafs*, but when the soul is separated or apart from the body it is known as *Rūh*. According to Sharfuddin (2021),

nafs is the name of the state of man when his *rūh* is inside his corpus. *Nafs* is also the heart (*qalb*). *Nafs* is the arrogant 'I' or the 'self' inside every person. It is the ego. Arrogance or excess of ego can destroy a person.

Al-Tuwaijri (2016) suggested that the essence of the *Rûh* is “different from that of the physical body, and once the soul is removed, the physical body ceases to function.”

However, there are several *Hādīth* that indicate that the *Nafs* and the *Rûh* are the same thing. Umm Salamah reported that the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) said: “When the *rûh* is taken out, the eyesight follows it.” (Muslim (f)). In another *Hādīth*, Abu Hurayrah reported that the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) said, “Do you not see that when a person dies his gaze is fixed intently? That occurs when his eyesight follows his *nafs* [as it comes out]” (Muslim (g)). However, as “these terms may be used interchangeably in relation to their essence, the difference between them is merely a difference in attributes and usage” (Al-Kanadi, 1996). Box 6.2 provides an overview of different perspectives on the interchangeability of *Nafs* and *Rûh*.

Box 6.2 *Nafs* and *Rûh*

Ibn Taymīyyah and Ibn Qayyim of Jawziyyah	<i>Nafs</i> and <i>Rûh</i> are interchangeable. <i>Nafs Ammara</i> , <i>Nafs Lawwama</i> , and <i>Nafs Mutma'innah</i> can also apply to <i>Rûh</i> .
Other scholars	<i>Nafs</i> and <i>Rûh</i> are two different things: 1. <i>Nafs</i> = the soul as an entity is in the body. 2. <i>Rûh</i> = the soul is separated or apart from the body.
Sharfuddin (2021)	<i>Nafs</i> is the name of the state of man when his <i>Rûh</i> is inside his corpus. <i>Nafs</i> is also the heart (<i>Qalb</i>).
Al-Tuwaijri (2016)	The essence of the <i>Rûh</i> is different from that of the physical body, and once the soul is removed, the physical body ceases to function.
Al-Kanadi (1996)	<i>Nafs</i> and <i>Rûh</i> are used interchangeably in relation to their essence; the difference between them is merely a difference in attributes and usage.
<i>Hādīth</i> s (Muslim)	When the <i>Rûh</i> is taken out, the eyesight follows it: “Do you not see that when a person dies his gaze is fixed intently? That occurs when his eyesight follows his <i>Nafs</i> [as it comes out]”.

NAFS OR RŪH: SLEEP, BIRTH, AND DEATH

Both the Qur’ān and Hādīth provide explanations for when the *Rūh* or soul enters the human body and what happens to a soul when it departs the body after a person’s death. Ibn Sulaymaan explains the view of the role of the *Rūh* during sleep as follows:

Man has life [*hayaah*], a spirit [*rūh*] and a soul [*nafs*]. When he sleeps, his *nafs* – with which he senses and understands things – emerges from his body; however, it doesn’t completely separate from the physical body. Rather, it extends from it, radiating outward like a cable. While both life and the *rūh* remain in his body (being the two means by which he breathes as well as tosses and turns during sleep), man sees visions by means of the *nafs* which emerges from him. When he is about to awaken, his *nafs* returns to him faster than the blinking of an eye. However, if Allah wills that he die in his sleep, He seizes that *nafs* which had come out as described.

This position is based on the following verse of the Qur’ān:

اللَّهُ يَتَوَفَّى الْأَنفُسَ حِينَ مَوْتِهَا وَالَّتِي لَمْ تَمُتْ فِي مَنَامِهَا ۖ فَيُمْسِكُ الَّتِي قَضَىٰ عَلَيْهَا الْمَوْتَ وَيُرْسِلُ الْأُخْرَىٰ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

- *God takes the souls at the time of their death, and those that do not die [He takes] during their sleep. Then He keeps those for which He has decreed death and releases the others for a specified term. Indeed, in that are signs for a people who give thought.*
(Az-Zumar 39:42, interpretation of the meaning)

It is narrated by Abu Qatada that when the people slept so late that they did not offer the (morning) prayer, the Prophet (ﷺ) said, “Allah captured your souls (made you sleep) when He willed and returned them (to your bodies) when He willed” (Bukhari (g)). Ibn Rajab (c) (may Allāh have mercy on him) comments that the above verse indicates that

sleep is a death, and the Hādīth indicates when a person sleeps his soul is taken. They both indicate that the soul that is taken in death is the soul that is taken during sleep. The taking of the soul from the body does not necessarily mean that it has departed from the body altogether; rather it may be taken

whilst some kind of connection is still present, as in the case of one who is sleeping.

(pp. 325–326)

There is a *Hādīth* that describes when the soul first enters the human body in the mother's womb. Ibn Mas'ud said that God's messenger, who spoke the truth and whose word was believed, told them the following:

'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud said: The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) who spoke the truth and whose word was belief told us the following: The constituents of one of you are collected for forty days in his mother's womb, then they become a piece of congealed blood for a similar period, then they become a lump of flesh for a similar period. Then Allah sends to him an angel with four words who records his provision the period of his life, his deeds, and whether he will be miserable or blessed; thereafter he breathes the spirit into him. One of you will do the deeds of those who go to Paradise so that there will be only a cubit between him and it or will be within a cubit, then what is decreed will overcome him so that he will do the deeds of those who go to Hell and will enter it; and one of you will do the deeds of those who go to hell, so that there will be only a cubit between him and it or will be within a cubit, then what is decreed will overcome him, so that he will do the deeds of those who go to Paradise and will enter it.

(Abu Dawud (c))

The soul after death is described in the following *Hādīth*:

He reported God's messenger as saying, "When the soul of a believer comes out, two angels meet it and take it up." Hammad said he mentioned some of the fragrance of its odour and made mention of musk, and said, "The inhabitants of heaven will say, 'A good soul has come from the earth. God bless you and a body which you inhabited!' He will then be taken to his Lord who will tell them to take him away till the end of the appointed time" [a reference to the day of resurrection. Cf. Qur'ān, vi, 2]. He said, "When an infidel's soul comes out (Hammad saying that he mentioned some of its stench and made mention of cursing), the

inhabitants of heaven say, ‘A wicked soul has come from the earth,’ and they will be told to take him away till the end of the appointed time.” Abu Hurairah said that God’s messenger then put a seamless garment he was wearing over his nose thus [this would be indicated by putting his garment over his nose].

(Muslim (h))

CONCLUSION

In the context of Islāmic psychology, the *Nafs* and *Rūh* are two components of the inner world of the human being. The *Nafs* is considered the self and the *Rūh* is considered the soul. However, depending on the context of use, the two terms are considered interchangeable by the majority of Islāmic scholars.

FURTHER READING

- Dalhat, Y. (2015). The Concept of *Al-Rūh* (Soul) In Islam. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 3(8), 431–440.
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