

# Ihsan, The pursuit of Excellence

By: [Ucla Sisters Halaqa](#) Source: [Ucla Sisters Halaqa](#)

*“We are what we repeatedly do.  
Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”  
– Aristotle*

Ihsan (Excellence in faith)...just thinking the word in my head has a special ring to it, brings a certain unique, inspiring feeling to my heart. This word, this topic moves me. I hope it has that effect on you as well. Our religion, our way of life is composed of three parts:

1. Iman
2. Islam
3. Ihsan

To discuss ihsan, we must briefly go through the first two, Iman and Islam.

## **Iman**

Iman or faith must be mentioned as the first part of our deen because it serves as our roots. For many years of the Prophet-hood of Muhammad, Allah (God) revealed nothing except the concept of taqwa (God consciousness), ikhlas (sincerity) and Iman (faith). It was not until the hearts of the first Muslims became saturated and strong with true Iman did Allah (swt) begin introducing the next concept – Islam, to the Muslims.

## **ISLAM**

After our roots are firmly in place and take hold within the rich soil of Iman and that is watered and nourished continually, we can begin understanding and encouraging the practice of Islam or submission to the will of Allah. This Islam, or submission, is like the trunk of the tree, sturdy, reaching up to heights. Muslim children are not required to pray until they are 7. Why? Because these first seven years are to be used by parents to plant the seed of Iman and help this seed to grow strong roots by teaching their children about Allah (swt), about jannah, about the miracles and the angels and preparing them to have a strong, balanced character. The “rules” of Islam come more easily to those who have prepared their hearts with Iman.

## **IHSAN**

Ihsan, which means excellence in belief is the neglected 1/3 of our deen. It is to believe in God Almighty without the slightest speck of doubt. It is similar in idea to the bodhisattva concept the Buddhists hold. And, when attained, it is like the “icing on the cake,” for the believer and his or her faith. “Ihsan is the fruit that blossoms from our planted trees and shows up when the roots are strong and nourished, free from disease and harmful insects. If we fail to nourish our Iman by submitting to Allah, we will bear no fruit and our soul will die. But look into the Islamic legacy.

It is rich with ihsan. All the achievements in art, science, architecture, literature, geography, politics, economics, social movement, philosophy, medicine and more came from the Muslims' desire to attain ihsan. Ihsan is our lost treasure that we must unearth and revive.

Ihsan...what does it mean? Like so many other Arabic words that I have mentioned, it has a vast array of meanings. It cannot be summed up prettily in one English word or phrase. Ihsan is excellence. It is perfection. It is beauty. It is balance, harmony, discipline, good character, softness, gentleness, improvement, drive, will power. Ihsan is a human reflection, a human attempt to achieve a high level in the areas covered by the revealed 99 beautiful names of Allah (swt).

In Surat Ar-Rahman, (Quranic chapter "The Merciful"), Allah (swt) uses one of the most powerful and difficult to use literary devices – the rhetorical question. If you have studied literature to any extent, you will know that the rhetorical question can only be used in very special, particularized situations and it can only be used when the author has much confidence and much leverage in the answer and the motivation for asking the question. The rhetorical device is amazing because, as it gives the answer to the question away, it leaves the reader to contemplate deeply on the meaning of the question, and the profound reasons behind the obvious. Allah (swt), in Surat Ar-Rahman, conquers this literary device and uses it in truly miraculous ways.

***"When a man says I cannot, he has made a suggestion to himself. He has weakened his power of accomplishing that which otherwise would have been accomplished."***

***Muhammad Ali***

In Surat Ar-Rahman, the most frequent rhetorical question asked is, "then which of the favors of your Lord will you deny?" and is asked 31 times out of a total of 78 verses in this chapter of the Quran. However, stuck in between 2 of these 31 rhetorical questions is another, more subtle, yet incredibly powerful ayah. It reads, "Is there any reward for ihsan except ihsan?"

This rhetorical question is amazing on a myriad of levels. I would like to share three levels of meaning for this rhetorical question:

(1) Those who sincerely strive in Allah's Cause and attain ihsan in both their worship and their everyday activities will be rewarded for this level of excellence by being blessed by Allah (swt) with the sweetness of faith. They will be some of the few people who have walked the face of the earth and tasted this level of faith. God-consciousness will be continuous, and everything these few do will be geared for a higher purpose. They will have attained ihsan and in return, they will feel ihsan in their hearts.

(2) Those who sincerely strive in Allah's Cause and attain ihsan in both their worship and their everyday activities will be rewarded for this excellence by being blessed by Allah (swt) with success in this dunya (life of the world). This can be seen in our history, in our Golden Age. The Muslims of that time attained ihsan in their rituals and in their other activities. Allah rewarded

this ihsan with ihsan – the excellence in this dunya that we read about – the amazing art, architecture, philosophy, medical advances, etc.

(3) Those who sincerely strive in Allah’s Cause and attain ihsan in both their worship and their everyday activities will be rewarded for this excellence by being blessed by Allah (swt) with the ultimate success, the ultimate ihsan – that of jannah (heaven) in al-akhira (hear-after).

So in summary, that one little rhetorical device in 55:60 is hidden, but it packs a huge punch. Those who realize the value of ihsan, who reach and strive and work for ihsan, who nourish their roots and groom their trunk in order to bear plentiful, amazing fruit will be rewarded with Allah’s form of ihsan – the sweetness of faith, success in the dunya, and the ultimate success in al-akhira.

So how does this relate to us right here, right now? Whether your in high school, college, or grad students. We’re young people in the workforce. We’re newly married, engaged, or waiting our turn. We’re brothers and sisters and aunts, uncles, cousins, and children. We’re youth group leaders or mentors or committee heads in MSA/MSU. What does ihsan mean in our lives?

It means that every day, when you’re in a boring class and get handed an assignment for a 15 page paper or you learn about a comprehensive final exam, or you get a huge project from your boss, or your mom asks you to make dinner or clean your room or your brother or sister asks for help with homework or to play with you outside – that you stop...that you stop the immediate negative reaction that we’ve been trained to play over and over again when it comes to these sorts of things and do the right thing, which is to remain positive.

We stop, and we realize that this is our opportunity for ihsan. That this is another opportunity for us to make our intentions for Allah (swt), to please Him. That this is a chance for us to add something to our Life’s Book that Allah (swt) will open on the Day of Judgment and look upon us with joy and be proud of us. For, as Professor Yusuf al-Qaradawi has mentioned,

***Allah loves when one of you is given a task, that he or she does it in the most excellent manner.***

Sheikh al-Qaradawi didn’t say that Allah “likes” when you do things with ihsan. He didn’t say that Allah thinks it’s “ok” or “cool” or “alright.” One of the greatest scholars of Islam says that Allah “LOVES” when we do things with ihsan. Allah LOVES. Think about that for just a second and let it sink in. Think about the last time someone you respected/admired told you that they loved something you did. How did that make you feel? You were beaming for days, most likely. You remembered what they said and how they reacted and you kept replaying it in your head again and again. Imagine then, how amazing it would feel to do something that Allah (swt) LOVES.

Imagine standing in front of Allah (swt) on the Day of Judgment and having Him tell you all the things that you did that He LOVED. Imagine how you would feel.

So when you have a test or a paper or you have to mow the law or you are going to the gym or playing football or doing an MSA event, do it with ihsan! Don't just "be," don't just get by, don't just pass. Be EXCELLENT, strive for PERFECTION, be the BEST in your class, show the world how Islam inspires you to attain ihsan!

We are given just a few moments in this dunya. Each breath is a priceless jewel and when it passes it never returns...make this moment, this breath, this heart beat one that resounds with ihsan (Excellence)!

**Iman.....ISLAM.....IHSAN**

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