

**Yuthabbitul-lahul ladhīna āmanū bil-qawlīt-thābiti fī l-ḥayatid-dun`yā wafī l-ākhira.  
wayuḍillul-lahul-żālimīn. wayaf`alu l-lahu mā yashā** Surah Ibrahim (14:27)

Sadaqqallah

Allah grants firmness unto those who have attained to faith with the firm word in the life of this world as well as in the life to come; but the wrongdoers He lets go astray.

When we are faced with challenging life situations, it is difficult not to slip in a behaviour that makes us regret. This happens no matter how much we think we are prepared, or how much we think we know what we will face. We cannot truly know how we will react until the moment arrives. We believe we can think our way through a crisis, but a crisis moves too fast for thought. So, if we cannot think fast enough, we need something faster. We need an internal system that operates at the speed of the crisis itself. What is it that operates faster than thought? It is our reflexes.

The most common type of reflex we are aware of is the physical reflex. These are involuntary automatic actions performed without conscious thought. We are hardwired with these reflexes; they are our factory settings. If someone throws a brick at us, we do not stop to calculate the speed or the trajectory of the object, but we duck or cover our face immediately. Our body reacts before our conscious mind even registers that there is a brick. This is like the knee-jerk reaction: when you hit the tendon, the leg kicks. You cannot stop it. We need this to survive. We have to bypass the brain's decision-making mechanism, and the purpose is immediate bodily survival. When there is fire, we withdraw our hands. When there is loud noise, we flinch. Allah-u Ta'ala designed us with mechanisms to keep us alive, to protect us.

We also have emotional reflexes: the survival mechanism of the ego. Think about when someone insults you. What is your immediate urge? What does your ego want to do at that moment? The ego wants to insult back, but even worse, to punch the offender. This is the emotional knee-jerk reaction. Our ego tries to survive the emotion, just like our body tries to survive the brick. So the biological default is: you hurt me, I hurt you, or you attack me, I run. Often emotional reflexes seem harmless when we are complaining about something small, such as: the coffee is cold, the traffic is bad, the meeting is pointless, or the wi-fi is slow. We think we are just venting, blowing off steam. The truth is, every time we complain about a minor inconvenience, we are training our heart to be reactive. We are training the muscles of discontent by repetitive

actions. We are training ourselves to be the victim of our circumstances, however small. When we think things are not perfect, we are reinforcing a neural pathway that says, “I am entitled to be unhappy and vocal about it.”

There is another reflex, another muscle, which is available for us to resist the urge of the ego to fire the emotional reflexes. It is called thabat. It translates roughly to firmness or stability, constancy. It is an internal mechanism that assists us in resisting the urge to react unconsciously. Thabat, firmness of the heart, is an intense state of holding one’s ground against the storm of your emotions. It is a shield. It is our spiritual reflex. Physical reflexes save the body; spiritual reflexes save the character before it is destroyed by emotional reflexes. Imagine a great oak tree in a hurricane. Is it passive? No, not at all. It is fighting for every inch, straining its roots to stay in the ground. Similarly, thabat is an intense state of holding one’s ground against the tsunami of our own emotions, enabling us to remain righteous.

Rasulallah (saws) has a beautiful prayer. He said: “Oh My Lord, the turner of hearts, make my heart firm in your religion.” Rasullah (saws) had the least to worry about of any human being regarding firmness of his heart. He was infallible, ma’sum, and protected. He was protected by Allah and forgiven for any possible shortcomings. His firmness was not like the firmness of our hearts, because he did not have the potential to commit the types of sins we are committing. He is the model of perfection in thabat, in behaviour. Why did he pray for firmness of the heart when he had a heart which was the firmest? There is a difference.

For us, firmness means not to do something bad. We think in terms of sinning or not sinning, pass or fail. But Rasulallah’s (saws) firmness is not like the firmness of our hearts, it is totally at a different level. The meaning of his prayer is, “Oh Allah, allow me to perfect the response in the most heated moments. Keep me with what is most blessed, most beloved to you when the most difficult circumstances arise in the future.” For the Prophet (saws), thabat meant ensuring that no matter how heated the moment or how difficult the trial, his response would remain the most blessed and beautiful possible.

We must learn how to build our spiritual muscles. We must start with minor urges that we need to practice resisting. We build spiritual muscles by resisting complaining about something small, arguing about something small, using the tongue to break someone’s heart. So resisting to use our tongue in a way that would hurt someone, choosing patience, resisting to prove that we are right for trivial matters, resisting having the last word, (the ego loves to have the last word) and resisting the need to be right, are all spiritual exercises. Just swallowing the correction, letting the other person

be wrong about something that doesn't matter, is a difficult exercise for the ego. It feels physically painful sometimes to let someone be wrong, especially when you know you are right. This is choosing harmony over being right. The ego feels the pain, and that pain is the pain of the spiritual muscle growing. That is the burn. We are literally saying to our ego, "You are not in charge here."

During the month of Ramadan, Allah-u Ta'ala will ask us to use our spiritual muscles when we are tested with a little hunger and exhaustion. The month of Shaban is an excellent opportunity to exercise before we are given the final exam during the month of Ramadan.

**Yurdaer Al Latif Al Jerrahi**