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Sins, *Tawbah* and the Process of Change

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Abstract. From an Islamic perspective repentance has to do with the relationship between the individual and Allah, the Almighty, as they are inherent moral, psychological and spiritual factors in the process and experience of repentance. From a psychological perspective, an individual's disclosure or non-disclosure of the sin is determined by the beliefs and practices and the implications of the sin. *Tawbah* is an integral part of the practice within the Islamic psychology paradigm. It is an ongoing process in the behavior of a Muslim which involve the challenging and confronting both thoughts and behaviors that are contrary to the Shari'ah. Sinning is part of human nature and is one of the inhibitors of spiritual development. The aims of this paper are to examine the concept of *Tawbah* from an Islamic perspective and to apply the Transtheoretical model of change in the understanding the change of behavior from sinning to the process repentance.

Keywords: behavior, change, repentance, transtheoretical model, Qur'an

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Introduction

Tawbah (Arabic: توبة) literally mean" to return" and in the Islamic context, based on the Qur'ān and Sunnah. This concept signifies sincere and faithful repentance to God due to the performance of sins and misdeeds. The concept of repentance is both a psychological and theological construct. From an Islamic perspective repentance (*Tawbah*) has to do with the relationship between the individual and Allah, the Almighty, as they are inherent moral, psychological and spiritual factors in the process and experience of repentance. The concept of repentance includes constructs such as sins, hope, gratitude, and forgiveness. From a psychological perspective, an individual's disclosure or non-disclosure of sin is determined by the beliefs and practices and the implications of the sin. In essence, psychology emphasizes that "the obstacles to power and freedom found in the universal human experience of guilt, to the paralyzing effect of remorse upon moral energies, and the vast psychological importance of having repressed moral secrets brought up into the open, in order to relieve the patient of acme hidden complex by which he1 has been haunted." (Mackintosh, 2013, p.40).

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Repentance is an ongoing process in the behavior of a Muslim which involve the challenging and confronting both thoughts and behaviors that are contrary to the Shari'ah. However, despite an ongoing process, the gateway of repentance is open to until the sun rises from the west. It is narrated by Mu'awiyah that Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said Migration will not end until repentance ends, and repentance will not end until the sun rises in the west." (Abu Dawud). In another version of the same theme, the Prophet: (ﷺ) "Allah spreads out His Hand at night to accept the repentance of those who did wrong during the day, and He spreads out His Hand during the day to accept the repentance of those who did wrong during the night. (This will continue) until the sun rises from the west." (Muslim). There are some similarities between the process of *Tawbah* and an contemporary models of psychology such as the Transtheoretical Model of Change (Prochaska and Velicer, 1997; Prochaska et al., 1992). In order to understand an individual stage of readiness for repentance one could apply the Transtheoretical model. This is an integrative model where behavioral change is viewed as a process with individuals at various levels of motivation or stages for 'readiness' to change (pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance) (Rassool, 2021). Various interven-

tions may be used to facilitate the transition from the different stages of change. These include psychosocial, cognitive and spiritual interventions. In the context of this paper, *Tawbah*, the act of repentance within Islamic practice, can be understood psychologically as a process of change towards a more religiously desirable condition. The aims of this paper are to examine the concept of *Tawbah* from an Islamic perspective and to apply the Transtheoretical model of change.

Tawbah in Islamic Literature

Tawbah is "A major theme of the Qur'ān, mentioned over seventy times and with an entire surah [At-*Tawbah*: 9] titled for it. *Tawbah* is described as turning toward God, asking forgiveness, and being forgiven. Islam has no concept of original sin, need for atonement, or ecclesiastical confession. Repentance and forgiveness are a direct matter between the individual and God, requiring no intercession." (Oxford Islamic Studies Online). According to Rothman (2018) "*Tawbah* is the process of turning our hearts toward the Divine presence, bringing our inner self into witnessing and accessing that primordial source." (p.48). *Tawbah* consists of six elements according to Ali ibn Abi Tâlib (may Allah be please with him (Maulana Ahmed Khalil Aziz & Muhammad Taqi Usmani, p.525.)

- To regret one's past evil deeds;
- To carry out divine duties (Fard, Wajib etc.) That were missed;
- To return the rights/properties of others that were usurped unjustly;
- To ask forgiveness of a person who has been wronged by him, physically or verbally;
- To make a firm resolve of avoiding the sin in future; and
- To employ oneself in Allah's obedience, as he previously employed himself in Allah's disobedience.

Original Sin and Human Errors

In Western Christian theology, the original sin is the result of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God when they ate a forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The notion is that everyone is born sinful, with guilt feelings, to be separated from, and to disobey God. The implication of this is that it brings remorse and guilt feelings into human lives because of the first human transgression of God's command. However, according to White (n.d.), "that original sin is a condition, not something that people do. It's the normal spiritual and psychological condition of human beings, not their bad thoughts and actions. In Islamic theology, there is no concept of the original sin as found in Western Christian theology. In addition, there is contrasting characteristic between sinning in Islam and Christianity. It has been stated that "there is no concept of "sinning in the mind" in Islam; to a Muslim, an evil thought becomes a *good* deed when a person refuses to act upon it. Overcoming and dismissing the evil thoughts which forever assail our minds is considered deserving of reward rather than punishment. Islamicly speaking, an evil thought only becomes sinful when acted upon." (Brown, 2011).

Sinning is part of human nature and is one of the inhibitors of spiritual development. Human nature have flaws and weaknesses and it is those human errors that may lead them to deviant behavior. Basiony (2017) suggested that "All human beings commit sins. We cannot be sinless, but we can definitely control being sinful by working on disciplining our Nafs (lower self), purifying our thoughts and actions, doing good deeds, seeking righteous companions and repenting often." In relation to sin, on the authority of an-Nawas bin Sam'an (may Allah be pleased with him), that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: "Righteousness is in good character, and wrongdoing is that which wavers in your soul, and which you dislike people finding out about. (Muslim (a)).

Sins tend to blemish the heart and the Nafs and induced emotional grief, sorrow, guilt, remorse and pain for most individuals. Abu Huairah narrated that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "Verily, when the slave (of Allah) commits a sin, a black spot appears on his heart. When he refrains from it, seeks forgiveness and repents, his heart is polished clean. But if he returns, it increases until it covers his entire heart. And that is the 'Ran' which Allah mentioned: 'Nay, but on their hearts is the Ran which they used to earn.'" (Tirmidhi).

Qur'ānic and Hadith Guidance on Sins

Allah says in the Qur'ān (Interpretation of the meaning):

- "Say, 'O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful.' (Az-Zumar 39:53).

- Allah will love you and forgive you your sins; And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful. (Ali-'Imran3:31)

Anas narrated that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, "Every son of Adam commits sin, and the best of those who commit sin are those who repent.'" Ibn Majah (a).

Tawbah in the Qur'ān and Hadith

Allah says in the Qur'ān (Interpretation of the meaning):

- And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed. (An-Nur 24:3).
- you who have believed, repent to Allah with sincere repentance. Perhaps your Lord will remove from you your misdeeds and admit you to Gardens beneath which Rivers flow ... (Al-Tahreem 66:8).
- Indeed, Allah loves those who are constantly repentant and loves those who purify themselves. (Al-Baqarah 2: 222).
- The repentance accepted by Allah is only for those who do wrong in ignorance [or carelessness] and then repent soon after. It is those to whom Allah will turn in forgiveness, and Allah is ever Knowing and Wise. But repentance is not [accepted] of those who [continue to] do evil deeds up until, when death comes to one of them, he says, "Indeed, I have repented now," or of those who die while they are disbelievers. For them We have prepared a painful punishment. (An-Nisā 4:17–18).

On the authority of Anas (may Allah be pleased with him), who said, "I heard the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) say: Allah the Almighty said: O son of Adam, so long as you call upon Me and ask of Me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of Me, I would forgive you. O son of Adam, were you to come to Me with sins nearly as great as the earth and were you then to face Me, ascribing no partner to Me, I would bring you forgiveness nearly as great as it. (Tirmidhi and Ahmad ibn Hanbal).

It is narrated by Abu Sa`id Al-Khudri that the Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Amongst the men of Bani Israel there was a man who had murdered ninety-nine persons. Then he set out asking (whether his repentance could be accepted or not). He came upon a monk and asked him if his repentance could be accepted. The monk replied in the negative and so the man killed him. He kept on asking till a man advised to go to such and such village. (So he left for it) but death overtook him on the way. While dying, he turned his chest towards that village (where he had hoped his repentance would be accepted), and so the angels of mercy and the angels of punishment quarrelled amongst themselves regarding him. Allah ordered the village (towards which he was going) to come closer to him, and ordered the village (whence he had come), to go far away, and then He ordered the angels to measure the distances between his body and the two villages. So he was found to be one span closer to the village (he was going to). So he was forgiven." (Bukhari (a)).

It is narrated by Ibn Mas`ud (may Allah be pleased with him): a man kissed a woman (unlawfully) and then went to the Prophet (ﷺ) and informed him. Allah revealed: "And offer prayers perfectly At the two ends of the day And in some hours of the night (i.e. the five compulsory prayers). Verily! good deeds remove (annul) the evil deeds (small sins)" (Qur'an 11.114). The man asked Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) "Is it for me?". He said, "It is for all my followers."

Anas (may Allah be pleased with him), reported that a person came to Allah's Apostle (ﷺ) said, "Allah's Messenger, I have committed an offence which deserves imposition of *Haad*, so impose it upon me according to the Book of Allah." Thereupon he said, "Were you not present with us at the time of prayer?". He said: "Yes". Thereupon he said, "You have been granted pardon." (Muslim (b)).

The Psychology of *Tawbah*.

Tawbah is an integral part of the practice within the Islamic psychology paradigm. *Tawbah*, according to Al-Maakki, "is not an optional act of religious devotion meant primarily for those who have committed themselves completely to God, but a requirement for the generality of believers. Unlike other expressions of religious piety, *Tawbah* is an essential and inescapable requirement for anyone who surrenders to God. Nor is repentance meant only for individual sins but must, instead, be an all-embracing process of self-purification. (Khalil 2012, p.8). *Tawbah* is not equated with forgiveness but it is consequence of being repentant. By repent-

ing, you will earn forgiveness, depending on the Mercy of Allah. In committing sins, there is always some admission of guilt with the aim to resolve not to repeat the offense or make a sincere attempt to make restitution for the sins. In repentance, the individual frees himself or herself from shame, guilt and remorse.

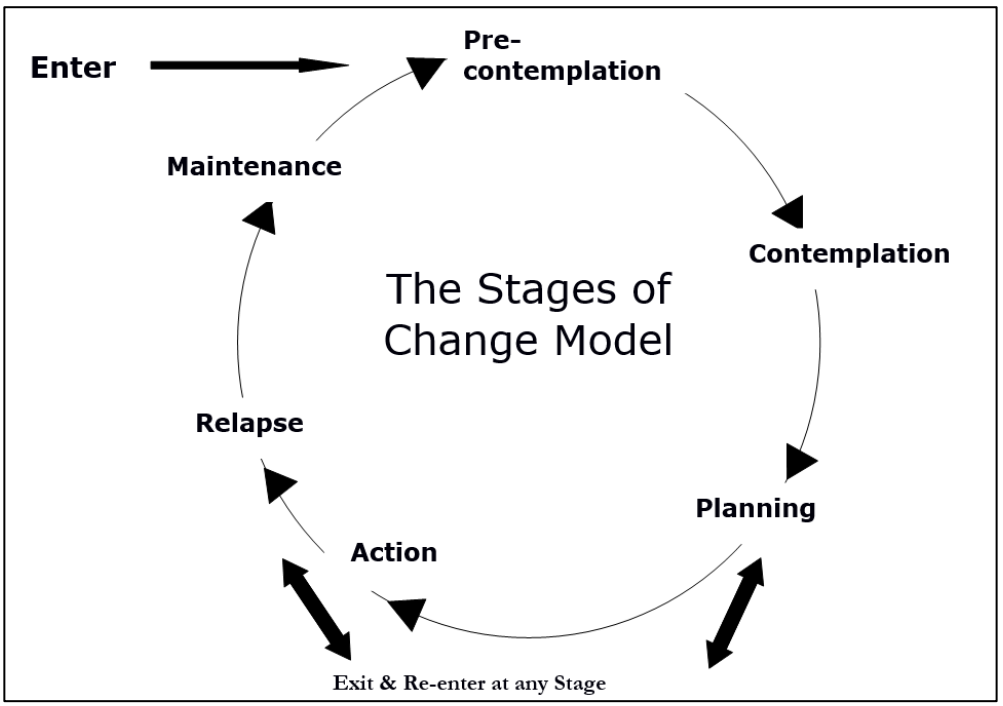
The ten conditions which Al-Makki (1995, p.363–364) suggested in his psychology of *Tawbah* include:

- Not to repeat the sin.
- If tried by it, to avoid, at all costs, falling back. There must be no persistence in the sin.
- Return to God from the sin.
- Feel regret for what has been lost.
- He must then vow or resolve to remain upright for the remainder of his life.
- Fear the punishment which is his due.
- Have hope in divine forgiveness.
- He must acknowledge that he has sinned.
- God has decreed that sin for him and that this decree does not detract from his justice.
- He must follow the sin with a righteous act as a penance or atonement for his previous wrong.

Process of Change

From a psychological perspective, there are ways effective ways to help people change their behavior. One model that focus on the process of change is the Transtheoretical model (Prochaska and Velicer, 1997; Prochaska et al., 1992). The Transtheoretical Model (See Figure 1) is an integrative model where behavioral change is viewed as a process with individuals at various levels of motivation or stages for "readiness" to change (precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance). Various interventions may be used to facilitate the transition from the different stages of change. These include support, counselling, motivational interviewing (Miller and Rollnick, 2002), and cognitive-behavioral therapies.

Figure 1. Transtheoretical Model of Change

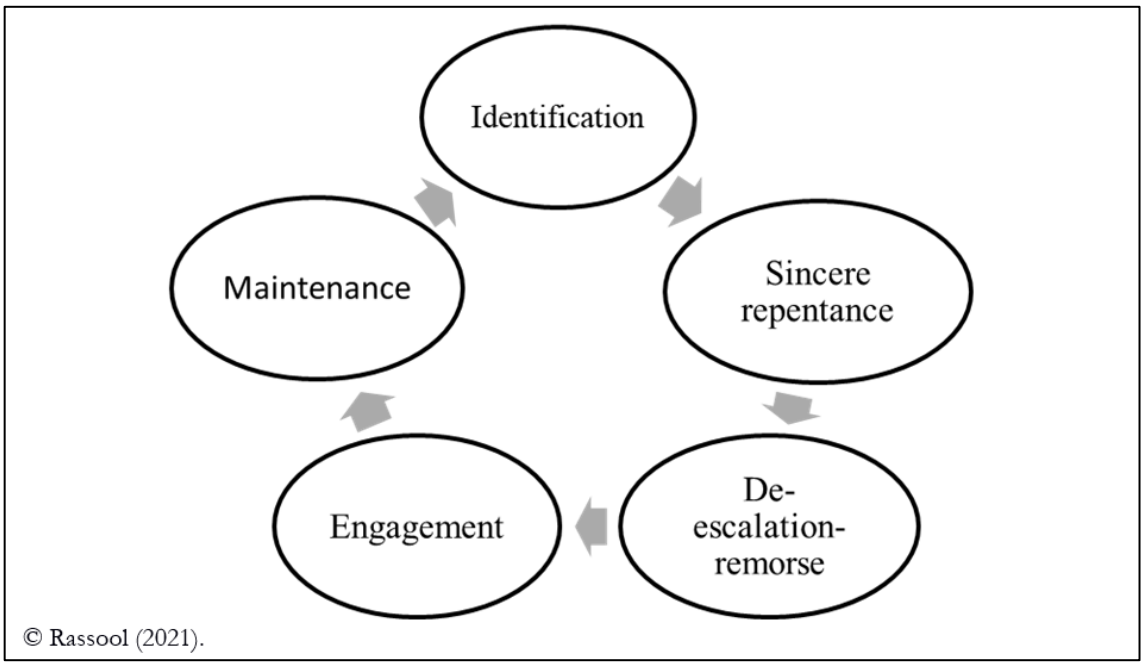


The first stage of change is the pre-contemplation stage. During *the pre-contemplation stage*, the individual is in denial whether they have committed a sin or bad deeds. Individual fails to recognize the sin and ill-informed about the consequences of their bad deeds. During the *stage of Contemplation*, the individual has recognized his sin and become more and more aware of the potential benefits of making repentance. He starts to feel true remorse and sense of guilt and shame. The individual may weigh the costs and benefits of making repentance. *Preparation stage:* During the preparation stage, the individual start making preparation to repent or ask for forgiveness about the bad deeds. *Action stage*: This is the stage of complete repentance to God and also using spiritual strategies to compensate for the bad deeds. In addition, it is the stage where the individual has modified their behavior. *Maintenance stage*: This is the stage where there is the maintenance of the changed behavior. The individual must now resolve to remain upright and not to return to the bad deeds. Relapse is part of human behavior for some, it is the return to a sin or bad deeds. The whole process needs to start all over again. The importance is not to delay repentance. Basiony (2017) suggested the following steps:

- Regret the sin.
- Stop the sin.
- Make a sincere intention to not go back to the sin.
- Seek forgiveness of Allah and repent.
- Suffocate the sin with good deeds and do not let it suffocate you.

The process of change, in the Islamic context for repentance, is achieved through the facilitation of five sequential 'movements': identification of the sin or misdeed; de-escalation of the sin or misdeed; making sincere repentance; and re-engagement with the resolution to change and implementing the change; and maintenance of the change. See Figure 2.

Figure 2. Process of Change in *Tawbah*



In the model of the Process of Change in *Tawbah*, the first stage is to identify the sin, whether small or big. Part of the identification is having insight in the transgression. The second stage is having sincere repentance and having the regret to doing this. It was narrated that Ibn Ma'qil said: "I entered with my father upon 'Abdullah, and I heard him say: 'The messenger of Allah said: "Regret is repentance." My father said: 'Did you hear the Prophet (ﷺ) say: "Regret is repentance?" He said: 'Yes.'" (Ibn Majah (b)).

The second stage is accompanied with making ablution and praying two *Rak'aa* (unit of prayers). That is performing the Salaat al-*Tawbah* (the prayer of repentance). It's reported that the prayer of repentance is two *Rak'aa*, as it says in the Hadith of Abu Bakr al-Siddeeq (may Allah be pleased with him). It is prescribed for the one who is repenting to pray alone, because it is one of the optional prayers that it is not prescribed to offer in congregation. After that it is prescribed to ask Allah for forgiveness, because of the Hadith of Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him). his prayer may be offered at any time, including times when prayer is disallowed. It is recommended for the penitent to do some good deeds along with this prayer, such as charity etc. There is no report from the Prophet (ﷺ) to say that it is recommended to recite any particular surah's in these two *Rak'aa*, so the worshipper may recite whatever he wants." (Islam Q&A, 2007).

De-escalation, in this context, is a behavior that is intended to increase the sense of remorse by having guilt and shame. Individuals may become committed to take specific measures so that the transgressions may not be committed. It is also a stage involving pure intention.

Engagement is a stage of seeking forgiveness from God and having more sincere repentance. This is accompanied with performing more supplication, making Istighfar (act of seeking forgiveness from God, and undertake good deeds and charitable activities (like *Sadaqah*).

The maintenance phase is ensuring that the maintenance of the new behavior free from past transgressions. This is achieved through the process of purification of the soul *(Tazkiyah al-Nafs)* in order purify and cleanse the heart of vices and immoral behaviors. It is the development of ethical intelligence and the moral good that drive eternal happiness and well-being *(Falaḥ).*

Allah says in the Qur'ān (Interpretation of the meaning):

- And [by] the soul and He who proportioned it.
- And inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness,
- He has succeeded who purifies it,
- And he has failed who instils it [with corruption]. (Ash-Shams 97: 7-10).

Purification of Sins

In order to purify the sins from our hearts and soul, it is essential to seek forgiveness of Allah, the Almighty, and repent. The purification of the soul and heart is known as "purification of the soul" (*Tazkiyyat an-Nafs*). Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said, "No man will commit a sin, then get up and purify himself, then pray, then ask God's forgiveness without God forgiving him." Then he recited, "And those who, when they do something to be ashamed of, or who wrong themselves, remember God and ask forgiveness for their sins" (Al-Qur'an; 3:135). (Tirmidhi and Ibn Majah transmitted it, but Ibn Majah did not mention the verse).

Allah says in the Qur'ān (Interpretation of the meaning), "And those who, when they commit an immorality or wrong themselves [by transgression], remember God and seek forgiveness for their sins – and who can forgive sins except God? – and [who] do not persist in what they have done while they know." (Ali-'Imran 3:135).

Ali said: If Heard something from the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ), Allah would benefit me thereby as He willed. Abu Bakr told me - and Abu Bakr spoke the truth - he said: The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "There is no Muslim who commits a sin then does wudu' [ablution] and prays two *Rak'aa* [units of prayer] then asks Allah for forgiveness for that sin, but He will forgive him." And he recited these two verses: "And whoever does evil or wrongs himself but afterwards seeks Allah's forgiveness, he will find Allah Oft-Forgiving Most Merciful"

[An-Nisā' 4:110]. "And those who, when they have committed Fahishah (illegal sexual intercourse) or wronged themselves with evil, remember Allah and ask forgiveness for their sins;-and none can forgive sins but Allah - and do not persist in what (wrong) they have done, while they know" [Al 'Imran 3:135]. Shu'bah said: I heard 'Uthman from the family of Abu 'Aqeel ath Thaqafi say--but he said. Shu'bah said: "And he recited one of these two verses: `whosoever works evil, will have the recompense thereof` [An-Nisa'4:110] or 'And those who, when they have committed Fahishah (illegal sexual intercourse).` [Al 'Imran 3:135)". (Ahmad).

It is important to follow a bad deed with good deeds by the night prayer, giving charity etc. Allah says in the Qur'ān (Interpretation of the meaning):

- "And establish prayer at the two ends of the day and at the approach of the night. Indeed, good deeds do away with misdeeds. That is a reminder for those who remember." (Hud11:114).

It is narrated by Abu Huraira that Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said, Whoever says, 'Subhan Allah wa bihamdihi,' one hundred times a day, will be forgiven all his sins even if they were as much as the foam of the sea. (Bukhari (b)).

Some Supplication for *Tawbah*

- *{Rabbanaa thalamnaa anfusanaa, wa illam taghfir lanaa wa tar'hamnaa, lanakunanna mina'l Khaasireen!}.*

  Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers!} (Al-A'raf 7:23).

- *{Astaghrirullaah wa atoobu ilayh}*

  I seek Allah's forgiveness and repent to him.

- *{Allaahumma innee dhalamtu nafsee dhulman katheeran wa laay aghfirudh dhunooba illaa anta warhamnee innaka anta al ghafoorur Raheem}.*

  Allaah, indeed I have wronged myself greatly and no-one forgives sin except You. So forgive me and have mercy upon me, indeed You are the Oft- Forgiving, the Especially Merciful.

- *{Allaahumma anta rabbee, laa ilaaha illaa ant, khalaqtanee wa ana sharri dhanbee, faghfirlee fa innahu laa yaghfirudhunooba illaa ant}.*

  Allah, You are my Lord, there is no god worthy of worship except You. You created me and I am Your servant. I will follow Your contract and Your promise as much as I am able. I seek refuge in You from the evil that I have done, I acknowledge Your blessings upon me and I acknowledge my sin. So forgive me for there is no-one to forgive sins except You.

- *{Allaahummaghfir lee warhamnee walhiqnee birrateqil a'laa}.*

  Allaah forgive me, have mercy upon me and join me with the lofty companions.

Conclusion

Being the children of Prophet Adam (ﷺ), we are bound to commit sins and human errors. Thus by having the vulnerability to making mistakes and sins. we need to repent and seek forgiveness repeatedly. The Prophet (ﷺ) said: "By Allah, I seek the forgiveness of Allaah and I turn to Him in repentance more than seventy times each day." (-Bukhari(c)). It is reported that :Allah loves the repentance of His slaves, and accept it. Indeed, He rejoices over it, as the Prophet (ﷺ) said: "When a person repents, Allaah rejoices more than one of you who found his camel after he lost it in the desert." (Bukhari (d)). Allah in His infinite Wisdom, has provided human the tool for repentance. The choice is ours.

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