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# From *Murāqaba* to Mindfulness: Comparative Perspectives on *Nahj al-Balāghah* and Contemporary Psychology

**Aliasghar Hashemzadeh**[*]

Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Theology and Ahl al-Bayt (AS) Knowledge, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran.

**Hamzehali Bahrami**

Associate Professor, Department of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Theology and Ahl al-Bayt (AS) Knowledge, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran.

**Maryamsadat Hashemi**

PhD in Islamic Theology, Teacher at Farhangian University, Isfahan, Iran.

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## Abstract

The study used a descriptive–analytical approach, examining Sermons, Letters, and Aphorisms in *Nahj al-Balāghah* via conceptual frequency and relevance criteria, and then comparing these findings with modern psychological theories. The results were grouped into four domains: (1) physical *Murāqaba*; preserving bodily faculties and

[*] Corresponding Author: a.hashemzadeh@theo.ui.ac.ir

health; (2) spiritual *Murāqaba*; controlling thoughts, intentions, and cultivating inner presence; (3) individual *Murāqaba*; time-management, self-assessment, and self-discipline; and (4) social *Murāqaba*; upholding others' rights and collective responsibility. Imam Ali's teachings on *Murāqaba*, anchored in piety, extend beyond secular meditation and psychological constructs such as mindfulness and self-regulation, offering a framework that integrates moral growth, well-being, and social responsibility. This highlights both the overlaps and unique aspects of *Nahj al-Balāghah* compared to modern psychology, and suggest that such a framework can guide self-care programs and interventions for spiritual elevation, resilience, and social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Murāqaba, Piety, Nahj al-Balāghah, Mindfulness, Self-regulation, Contemporary Psychology, Islamic Ethics.

## Introduction

*Murāqaba means* "Watching Over" or "Guarding." It refers to the deliberate supervision of one's inner and outer life: thoughts, intentions, words, and actions. In Islamic thought, it is tied to *piety* (God-consciousness) and the pursuit of moral integrity (Rāghib Iṣfahānī, 2017 AD/1396 SH: 361; Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1974 AD/1393 AH: 18, 136). The Qurʾān uses derivatives of the root *Raqaba* many times. These words convey meanings such as vigilance, anticipation, protection, observance of others' rights, and piety (Q 59:18; 26:88–89; 2:225; 98:5; 18:110; 22:46; 7:179). These passages emphasize both

divine supervision and the believer's responsibility to exercise foresight and moral self-monitoring[1]. Prophetic traditions and sayings of the Imams (AS) describe *Murāqaba* as a discipline. It restrains the lower self (N*afs Ammāra*) and opposes base desire (*Hawāʾ*). Imam Ali (AS) says: "Blessed is the one who attends to his Lord, examines his deeds, opposes his lower self, and regards his desire as falsehood." (Majlisī, 1983–1984 AD/1403 AH: 74, 423) Such statements highlight that *Murāqaba* is not only personal vigilance. It is also a divinely oriented practice of self-reform. *Nahj al-Balāghah* is a treasury of the teachings of Imam Ali. It offers a comprehensive view of *Murāqaba*. This text presents *Murāqaba* as an integrated ethical-spiritual practice. It unites bodily preservation, spiritual purification, individual discipline, and social responsibility within one framework. It connects inner vigilance to outward conduct and community welfare (see, e.g., Sermons 176, 193; Aphorisms 289, 349; Letter 53).

## 1. Background

In Islamic ethical and mystical terminology, *Murāqaba* commonly signifies the presence of the heart and continuous attention to God,

1. The Qurʾān repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of inner watchfulness. Verses such as "*O! You who believe, be mindful of God, and let every soul consider what it has sent forth for tomorrow*" (Q 59:18) and "*He knows the treachery of the eyes and what the hearts conceal*" (Q 40:19) underscore that divine awareness penetrates both outward actions and hidden intentions. Within this framework, *Murāqaba* functions as a discipline that aligns human agency with divine omniscience.

accompanied by an internal monitoring of thoughts, intentions, and actions to prevent deviation and sin (Majlisī, 1983–1984 AD/1403 AH: 70, 327). Some moralists treat *Murāqaba* as the prerequisite of self-assessment: "Prior to action, the seeker reflects on the consequences for both this world and the hereafter, evaluating each deed against the criterion of divine pleasure." (Narāqī, 1995 AD/1415 AH: 1, 69)

Early exemplars of this practice appear in the conduct of the *Aṣḥāb al-Ṣuffa* and the ascetics of the early centuries (Qushayrī, 1995 AD/1374 SH: 72–75; al-Kulaynī, 1987–1988 AD/1407 AH, vol. 3: 550). The ultimate aim of this orientation is nearness to God and the purification of the soul by which the human being is recognized as both Servant and Vicegerent of God. Principal practices include heartfelt and verbal remembrance, *Muḥāsabah*, seclusion for God, contemplative study of sacred verses, and presence of heart in worship (Ghazzālī, n.d.; Majlisī, 1983–1984 AD/1403 AH: 70, 225–235). In this orientation, impure thoughts are cleansed and replaced by remembrance of God and sanctified meanings. This vigilance is not merely defensive but constructive: it nurtures virtues such as humility, patience, and compassion, while preventing moral negligence and heedlessness.[1]

1. Working Definition. Drawing on lexical, devotional, and comparative sources, this study defines *Murāqaba* as a conscious, continuous process of monitoring thoughts, intentions, speech, and actions with the twin aims of gaining divine approval and preventing moral error—thus encompassing both the personal (self-

Scholarly attention to *Murāqaba* has often been indirect, as it appears within broader discussions of Islamic ethics, mysticism, or Qurʾānic spirituality. For instance, classical exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 5th/11th century) emphasize its Quranic roots, interpreting vigilance as both divine supervision and human responsibility. Furthermore, later Sufi manuals, such as *al-Qushayrī's Risāla* and *al-Ghazālī's Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, develop *Murāqaba* as a station on the spiritual path and closely link it to *Muḥāsaba*. These works, in turn, highlight its role in cultivating sincerity and restraining the lower self. In the modern context, Islamic studies address *Murāqaba* mainly in relation to Sufi practice or Quranic exegesis. However, a systematic analysis of its ethical, psychological, and social dimensions in *Nahj al-Balāghah* remains limited. While a few studies examine Imam Ali's teachings on self-control, they often treat the concept descriptively, rather than comparatively.

By contrast, many modern Western meditation forms derive from Eastern religious traditions, mainly Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. In the twentieth century, these were adapted into secular programs focused on well-being, relaxation, and cognitive performance. These practices use breath awareness, body scanning, mantra repetition, and

regulation, purification) and the social (respect for others' rights, communal accountability).

cognitive and emotional control to guide behavior. In contemporary psychology, several constructs share affinities with *Murāqaba*: "Mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) emphasizes nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment; self-regulation theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981) explains how individuals monitor and adjust their behavior toward goals; and cognitive-behavioral therapy (Beck, 2011) uses thought monitoring and stimulus control." Broader models, such as Engel's (1977) biopsychosocial framework and prosocial development theories (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998), also reflect vigilance over body, mind, and social relations. Nevertheless, these approaches are largely secular and individualistic, often lacking the theological grounding, eschatological orientation, and communal responsibility stressed in Islam. For Imam Ali, vigilance is not just a strategy for psychological well-being, but also a holistic program for soul purification, refinement of intention, social justice, and accountability before God.

Recent psychological research has further highlighted the importance of attentional control, emotional regulation, and goal-directed behavior (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). However, despite these advances, the frameworks continue to overlook the transcendent and collective dimensions central to Islamic sources. Over the past decade, interdisciplinary studies have begun to bridge this gap by exploring how Islamic

practices of self-discipline intersect with psychological well-being (e.g., Rothman & Coyle, 2018; Kaplick & Skinner, 2017). Nevertheless, few works have systematically compared *Murāqaba* in *Nahj al-Balāghah* with contemporary psychological theories. Therefore, this lacuna underscores the need for a study that not only analyzes the textual foundations of *Murāqaba* but also situates them within current debates on mindfulness, resilience, and moral psychology.

## 2. Methodology

This study is descriptive–analytical and employs a library-based methodology to extract and explicate the dimensions of *Murāqaba* in *Nahj al-Balāghah,* and to compare them with contemporary psychological theories. The sermons, letters, and aphorisms of Imam Ali, as compiled by *Sharīf Raḍī* (d. 406/1015), were subjected to systematic analysis, with passages on *Murāqaba* identified according to two criteria: "Frequency and conceptual relevance. Data were gathered through searches in the Noor software complemented by repeated manual readings of the corpus, and the extracted material was organized into four primary domains: physical *Murāqaba* (protection of bodily health and faculties), spiritual *Murāqaba* (vigilance over thought, heart, and intention), individual *Murāqaba* (time management, self-regulation, and self-assessment), and social *Murāqaba* (protection of others' rights and collective interests)." Each

domain was then mapped onto contemporary approaches in health, cognitive, and social psychology to delineate points of convergence and divergence and to highlight the distinctive contributions of Imam Ali's paradigm relative to secular models; the study's novelty lies in presenting an integrated framework grounded in authentic Islamic sources that align with recent scientific findings on self-care and mental health.

## 3. Dimensions of Human *Murāqaba*

The analysis of *Nahj al-Balāghah* identified four interrelated domains of *Murāqaba*: "Physical, spiritual, individual, and social." Together, these domains form a comprehensive model that encompasses bodily health, spiritual purification, personal discipline, and communal responsibility.

### 3-1. Physical *Murāqaba*

In the Islamic perspective, the body and its faculties are a divine trust for which the human being is accountable. Physical health and the soundness of the senses are prerequisites for worship, moral action, and social duty. Imam Ali employs both the language of wonder at created structure and pragmatic admonitions to preserve bodily faculties. His perspective aligns with an ethical framework that treats sensory inputs and outputs as morally significant. It should be noted, however, that *Nahj al-Balāghah* is an ethical and spiritual manual

rather than a compendium of medical prescriptions; specific clinical guidance falls within the realm of medical and juridical literature. Nonetheless, the Imam's exhortations imply practical rules—moderation in consumption, protection against injury, and attention to hygiene—that resonate with contemporary public-health principles (Letters 31, 53; Sermons 135, 222). In several aphorisms, Imam Ali warns against indulgence and negligence, urging believers to guard their senses, appetites, and physical strength. For example, he states: "The eyes are the scouts of the heart; guard them from what is unlawful." (Aphorism 349) Such passages frame the body not as an autonomous entity but as a gateway to the soul, requiring vigilant supervision.

The main components of physical *Murāqaba* in *Nahj al-Balāghah* include:

- Care for the eye (vision);
- Care for the ear (hearing and discernment of auditory input);
- Care for the tongue (ethical speech and restraint);
- Care for the abdomen and sexual organs (dietary moderation, chastity, and control of desires).

Each is treated in the text with both a physiological register (recognition of bodily fragility and function) and an ethical register (moral and communicative consequences of sensory use).

In Aphorism 8, Imam Ali strikingly recalls the delicate structure of

key organs:

"Marvel at this human who sees by means of a bit of fat (*Shaḥm*), speaks by a piece of flesh (*Laḥm*), hears by a bone, and breathes through a narrow aperture."

This statement underscores both the fragility of bodily organs and the ethical responsibility to preserve them. Later commentators expand on the biological references (ocular tissues, muscular structure of the tongue, ossicles of the ear, airways) to underline how fragile these systems are and why they require protection (Ibn Maytham, 2007 AD/1428 AH; Makarim Shirazi, 2007 AD/1386 SH: 5, 45–48).

**A. The Eye**

The eye is identified as an extremely sensitive and frequently employed organ requiring vigilant care. Imam Ali's reference to *shaḥm* (transparent fatty tissue) emphasizes structural delicacy and suggests preventive measures against physical harm. Traditions attributed to the Imam—for example, in *Ghurar al-Ḥikam*—recommend washing hands before and after meals, noting its benefit for eyesight (Āmidī, 1990 AD/1410 AH: 2, 325–332). This hygienic emphasis broadly aligns with contemporary public health guidance (American Academy of Ophthalmology, 2022). From an ethical standpoint, the eye serves as a gateway between the body and the soul. Unchecked, impure gazes can corrupt spiritual well-being, whereas contemplative sight—such as gazing upon God's signs in nature—

nurtures faith and inner tranquility. The Qurʾān explicitly enjoins believers to guard their sight (Q 24:30). Similarly, in Sermons 176 and 193, Imam Ali warns against illicit or intrusive looks, linking them to moral failings, and identifies the guarding of one's gaze as a defining trait of the pious (Makarim Shirazi, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 2, 158). Thus, the Imam's guidance concerning the eye encompasses two complementary dimensions: Physical preservation (preventing injury and avoiding harmful illumination or contaminants) and Spiritual-ethical safeguarding (disciplining visual intake to protect moral and spiritual integrity).

**B. The Ear**

The ear, described in *Nahj al-Balāghah* with the phrase "And he hears with a bone," draws attention to the auditory ossicles—the smallest bones in the body—and underscores both the structural delicacy of hearing and its moral significance. Imam Ali frames hearing as a dual faculty: physiologically fragile yet spiritually decisive. From a physical perspective, his words imply the need to protect the ear from harm, including noise-induced injury and infection, a concern echoed in modern medical guidance (WHO, 2008). From an ethical perspective, the ear serves as a conduit to the heart and intellect; what is heard shapes one's beliefs, emotions, and conduct. The Qurʾān warns against listening to falsehood (Q 31:6; 25:72) and praises those who incline their ears to truth (Q 39:18). In *Nahj al-Balāghah*, the

Imam cautions against gossip, slander, and vain talk (Sermons 153, 176; Aphorism 349), while urging attentiveness to wisdom and divine remembrance. Thus, *Murāqaba* of the ear entails both the preservation of auditory health and the ethical discipline of listening, summarized as an "ethics of listening" that includes awareness of the impact of hearing, avoidance of corruptive speech, and receptivity to beneficial counsel.

**C. The Tongue**

Physiologically, the tongue is a delicate muscular organ enabling speech, swallowing, and taste. In *Nahj al-Balāghah*, it is treated as the principal indicator of intellect and character. Commentators interpret the phrase "And he speaks with flesh" as a reference to the tongue's delicate muscular tissue, underscoring both its fragility and its immense influence (Makarim Shirazi, 2007 AD/1386 SH: 5, 47). From a health perspective, oral hygiene—including the use of the tooth brush—is linked to both physical well-being and spiritual benefit, facilitating Qurʾānic recitation and divine remembrance (Kulaynī, 1987–1988 AD/1407 AH: 6, 495; Āmidī, 1990 AD/1410 AH: 2, 457–463). From an ethical perspective, the tongue is the mirror of one's character. Imam Ali declares: "Man is hidden under his tongue" (Aphorism 148), and "The tongue of the wise is behind his heart, while the heart of the fool is before his tongue". (Aphorism 40) These sayings establish the moral primacy of measured speech,

enjoining honesty, prudence, and silence when appropriate, while prohibiting lying, backbiting, and slander. Thus, *Murāqaba* of the tongue integrates oral health with the ethics of speech, linking bodily care to social harmony and personal integrity.

**D. The Abdomen and Genital Organs**

Dietary restraint and sexual self-control receive sustained emphasis in *Nahj al-Balāghah*. Imam Ali repeatedly warns against gluttony and excess, which weaken bodily strength and moral resolve, and treats uncontrolled sexual appetite as a source of social disorder and spiritual distraction (Sermon 176; Letter 31; Aphorism 47). He counsels moderation in eating, avoidance of harmful substances, and chastity, noting that even lawful food should be consumed with moderation (Āmidī, 1990 AD/1410 AH: 2 73–78, 164–168). In one aphorism, Imam warns: "Guard your stomach and your private parts, for calamity and troubles originate from them." (ibid: 1, 385) His counsel to avoid immediate over-drinking after meals and to adopt periodic fasting further exhibits an integrated ethic where bodily care serves spiritual ends (Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, 1996 AD/1416 AH: 1, 354). These teachings align with contemporary findings that link diet and sexual health to psychological and somatic outcomes (WHO, 2008), although the Imam's concern is primarily framed in terms of moral discipline and divine accountability.

Physical *Murāqaba* combines ethical, spiritual, and physiological

dimensions. It safeguards the body as a sacred trust, disciplines appetites to preserve moral clarity, and situates health within a broader vision of God-conscious living. In this way, the body's faculties are portrayed as entrusted responsibilities requiring vigilant care, such that *Murāqaba* encompasses both the preservation of health and the regulation of sensory and bodily functions, affirming that spiritual life is sustained through bodily discipline and that moral integrity is inseparable from physical stewardship.

## 3-2. Spiritual *Murāqaba*

The second dimension of *Murāqaba* in *Nahj al-Balāghah* concerns vigilance over the inner life—the regulation of thoughts, intentions, and spiritual orientation. The Qurʾān presents inner vigilance and sincerity not as optional virtues but as conditions for the acceptance of faith and deeds (Q 59:18; 26:88–89; 2:225; 98:5; 18:110; 22:46; 7:179). Although the term "*Spiritual Murāqaba*" does not appear verbatim in *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Imam Ali repeatedly emphasizes three essential practices: (1) self-assessment, (2) reflection on creation, (3) purification of intention.

### A. Vigilance over Thought

Thought is the origin of intention and action. Imam Ali describes it as "a clear mirror that reflects truth" (Aphorism 349). Spiritual *Murāqaba*, therefore, requires monitoring cognitive inputs, avoiding corrupt or distracting ideas, and cultivating beneficial reflections. He

warns that excessive preoccupation with sinful pleasures leads to entrapment (Āmidī, 1990 AD/1410 AH: 6, 345). Conversely, careful thought produces insight, clarity of vision, and motivation for righteous deeds (ibid: 1, 534; 2, 455).

Practical steps include:

- **Purifying inputs**; refraining from hearing or seeing falsehoods that taint the mind (Sermon 176);
- **Healthy intellectual nourishment**; seeking the company of the wise and engaging with knowledge (Letter 31);
- **Reflection on divine signs**; dedicating time to contemplate creation as a source of spiritual awakening (Sermon 185).

Thus, vigilance over thought is the first stage of spiritual *Murāqaba*, laying the foundation for a sound heart.

**B. Vigilance over the Heart**

The heart is portrayed in the Qurʾān and *Nahj al-Balāghah* as the locus of faith, intention, and moral evaluation (Q 22:46; 7:179; Aphorism 338). Spiritual *Murāqaba*, therefore, entails purifying the heart from vices such as envy, hypocrisy, and malice, while strengthening sincerity and avoiding hardness of the heart. Imam Ali counsels daily self-assessment (Letter 31), warns against hidden sins that nullify outwardly good deeds (Sermon 193), and emphasizes nourishing the heart with remembrance and supplication (Aphorism 222). He also cautions: "When you feel more secure in your soul than

ever, be more cautious of its stratagems," (Aphorism 223) underscoring the need for vigilance even at moments of apparent spiritual strength. Commentators note that a "Sound Heart" is one emptied of grudges and duplicity, filled instead with remembrance of God and oriented toward the Hereafter (Majlisī, 1983–1984 AD/1403 AH: 67: 644; Makarem Shirazi, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 246).

**C. Dhikr as the Instrument of Vigilance**

Remembrance of God sustains vigilance at three interrelated levels: "Verbal recitation, heartfelt or inner remembrance, and practical remembrance." Lexically, dhikr denotes reminder, admonition, invocation, and learning, and its derivatives appear frequently in the Qurʾān (e.g., Q 33:41; 7:205; 41:4). In *Nahj al-Balāghah*, dhikr is described as illumination of the heart (Aphorism 222), a guard against forgetfulness, and the foundation of gratitude, repentance, and patience (Sermon 64; Aphorisms 82, 87).

Verbal remembrance is a recitation of the Qurʾān, supplications, and transmitted invocations. Verbal remembrance acts as a constant reminder, preventing negligence and preparing the heart for sincerity. Imam Ali calls repentance "The weapon of sinners and the greatest means of seeking the Lord's refuge". (Āmidī, 1990 AD/1410 AH: 1, 204; Aphorism 417)

Heartfelt remembrance is continuous remembrance without tongue

movement, maintaining the presence of the heart. Imam Ali states: "The remembrance of God enlightens and awakens the heart" (Aphorism 222). This includes *Khawf* (fear of God) and *Rajāʾ* (hope in His mercy), which together form the two wings of spiritual progress (Sermon 114; Aphorisms 81, 237).

Practical remembrance is orienting behavior toward divine will through obedience and abstention from sin. Its pillars are repentance, patience, and gratitude. Imam Ali teaches: "Persist in patience, for it is the head of faith upon the body, and faith without patience is like a body without a head." (Aphorism 82) Gratitude, in turn, is expressed by using blessings in accordance with God's commands (Āmidī, 1990 AD/1410 AH: 1, 42).

Together, these three forms of remembrance create a cycle that cleanses, fortifies, and sustains spiritual growth, ensuring that vigilance is not only verbal or emotional but embodied in action.

Spiritual *Murāqaba* integrates cognitive vigilance, intentional purity, and divine consciousness. It transforms the believer's inner life into a disciplined space where thoughts are filtered, intentions purified, and presence with God sustained. While psychology affirms the benefits of attentional control, *Nahj al-Balāghah* situates this discipline within a transcendent framework, where inner vigilance is both a path to self-mastery and a means of drawing nearer to God.

### 3-3. Individual *Murāqaba*

The third dimension of *Murāqaba* translates inner vigilance into disciplined personal conduct. It entails the systematic regulation of behavior, habits, and decision-making processes so that the rhythms of daily life remain in harmony with overarching moral and spiritual objectives. Functioning as an intermediary dimension, it links spiritual *Murāqaba*—concerned with inner purification—with social *Murāqaba*—oriented toward responsibility for others—thereby ensuring that ethical principles are not merely abstract ideals but are concretely embodied in lived practice. Imam Ali presents the self not as a passive entity but as a field of struggle, requiring constant evaluation and correction.

Key elements emphasized in *Nahj al-Balāghah* highlight several practices:

**1) Self-Discipline**

Imam Ali stresses the wise use of time and energy. In Aphorism 390, he counsels that "The believer's day is divided into three parts: "One for worship, one for livelihood, and one for permissible pleasures." This structured approach reflects a holistic vision of life, balancing spiritual devotion, worldly responsibility, and restorative leisure, and situates *Murāqaba* as a discipline that organizes the believer's daily rhythm in accordance with divine priorities; complementing this, Aphorism 73 underscores that one must first impose duties upon oneself before seeking to correct others, thereby linking self-discipline with moral authority. Finally, Aphorism 21 reminds believers to

cherish opportunities before they vanish, likening them to fleeting "Spring Clouds," thus reinforcing the importance of vigilance over time as a sacred trust.

**2) Order**

Beyond personal regulation, Imam Ali emphasizes the structuring of affairs as the foundation of inner tranquility and communal stability. In his testament, he instructs: "I advise you to observe order in your affairs." (Letter 47) Here, order extends the principle of discipline outward; highlighting that spiritual integrity is inseparable from disciplined organization in both personal and social life.

**3) Self-assessment**

It means the regular reflection on one's deeds to identify faults and correct them. Imam Ali consistently urges believers to scrutinize their actions before they are judged by God. This principle transforms *Murāqaba* into an active practice of moral auditing, in which successes are reinforced and failures corrected. As he declares: "Whoever examines himself profits, and whoever is heedless of himself loses." (Aphorism 89)

Individual *Murāqaba* thus provides a practical framework for applying physical and spiritual teachings in daily life. Through self-assessment, self-discipline, time management, and personal growth, the individual becomes balanced, purposeful, and prepared for social responsibilities. In the *Alawī* perspective, such a person not only benefits himself but also contributes to society. Mastery of thought,

heart, and personal habits equips the believer to extend vigilance into the social sphere, where justice, respect for others' rights, and collective well-being are realized.

### 3-4. Social Murāqaba

The outward dimension of *Murāqaba* concerns vigilance in social interaction. For Imam Ali, moral responsibility extends beyond the self to the rights, dignity, and welfare of others. *Nahj al-Balāghah* presents this as indispensable for justice, solidarity, and communal trust. The Qurʾān likewise emphasizes justice and benevolence as foundations of social life (Q 2:83; 16:90). The Imam denounces oppression in all its forms and demands fairness and protection of public resources. He urges believers to avoid suspicion, gossip, and slander and praises modesty as a shield for faults. As a ruler, Imam Ali exemplified vigilance in leadership, combining compassion with strict accountability and transparency.

#### A) Justice and Governance

In his celebrated Letter 53 to *Mālik Ashtar*, Imam Ali instructs the governor to exercise constant vigilance in ruling justly: "Watch over yourself in what is hidden from the people, for the witness of the unseen is the judge over you". This passage illustrates that *Murāqaba* is foundational to ethical leadership, requiring rulers to act with integrity even when unobserved. Social *Murāqaba* thus functions as a safeguard against corruption and tyranny. In the same letter, Imam Ali

commands filling the heart with mercy for the people and treating them with justice, reminding *Mālik* those subjects are either "Your brothers in religion or your equals in creation." He also warns against oppression, which he categorizes into unforgivable, punishable, and reparable forms (Sermon 214). His vigilance is exemplified in his strict protection of public funds: when his daughter borrowed a necklace from the treasury as a secured loan, he immediately ordered its return and reprimanded her (Ḥurr ʿĀmilī, 1996 AD/1416 AH: 28, 292). In another case, when his brother ʿ*Aqīl* requested an unjust share of the treasury, the Imam heated a piece of iron and brought it near his hand, warning that the fire of the Hereafter is far more severe (Sermon 224). Such episodes demonstrate that *Murāqaba* in leadership is not abstract piety but a lived ethic of justice, accountability, and incorruptibility.

**B) Responsibility Toward Others**

Beyond governance, Imam Ali counsels respect for kinship ties, neighbors, and parents. He emphasizes that the believer's vigilance must extend to interactions with family, neighbors, and society as a whole. He declares: "The best of people is the one who benefits others." (Āmidī, ibid: 2, 397) Here, *Murāqaba* is framed not only as inward discipline but also as outward service, ensuring that one's conduct contributes positively to the community. In Letter 31, he exhorts his son *Ḥasan* to honor relatives, describing them as "Wings with which you fly, roots to which you return, and hands with which you strike." In his will, he emphasizes: "By God, take care of your neighbors! Your Prophet

described them and constantly advised regarding them until we thought he would assign them a share of inheritance." (Letter 47) Such teachings highlight that social *Murāqaba* is not only personal but also communal and political in nature.

**C) Safeguarding Dignity and Reputation**

Imam Ali places a high value on personal and communal honor. He exhorts: "Guard yourself from situations of suspicion," (Aphorism 159) "Modesty veils defects" (Aphorism 223), and "Whoever conceals his secret holds his destiny." (Aphorism 162) He warns that safeguarding honor is as vital as protecting life and wealth, declaring: "It is a sign of nobility for one to sacrifice his life and wealth for the sake of his honor." (Āmidī, 1990 AD/1410 AH: 4, 242)

In his discourses, he outlines proactive and prohibitive measures for preserving dignity:

- Modesty as a cloak for faults (Aphorism 223);
- Discretion in keeping secrets (Aphorism 162);
- Forgiveness and forbearance as guardians of honor (Aphorism 211);
- Avoiding quarrels to protect dignity (Aphorism 354);
- Refraining from suspicion to maintain communal trust (Aphorism 159).

These principles establish the foundation of trust, cohesion, and well-being in society.

## 3-5. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

The fourfold framework of *Murāqaba* in *Nahj al-Balāghah*—physical, spiritual, individual, and social—offers both points of convergence with contemporary psychological theories and distinctive features that set it apart.

### 3-6. Physical Vigilance and the Health Psychology

Imam Ali's exhortations to guard the senses, the tongue, and bodily desires resonate with modern theories of stimulus management and self-regulation. Cognitive-behavioral models view avoidance of harmful stimuli as crucial in preventing maladaptive thoughts (Beck, 2011). Empirical Research on sensory regulation confirms that visual and auditory hygiene promotes concentration and lowers anxiety (Kaplan, 1989; Sweller, 1988; WHO, 2008). Similarly, studies on linguistic regulation suggest that careful control of language can diminish interpersonal conflict and foster trust (Pennebaker, 2011). Dietary moderation and sexual restraint are likewise recognized as vital components of physical and psychological well-being; what distinguishes Imam Ali's paradigm, however, is its theological orientation: "These practices are not merely instrumental strategies for health or psychological balance but are framed as obligations arising from the divine trust. In this respect, the domain of bodily regulation parallels health psychology and stimulus-control techniques in CBT, yet it departs from them in its underlying rationale. Whereas modern approaches typically construe bodily care as a biomedical or psychological necessity, the *Alawī* model situates it within a broader

ethic of stewardship, in which the body is entrusted by God and must therefore be preserved through disciplined self-regulation."

### 3-7. Spiritual Vigilance and Cognitive–Affective Models

The triadic cycle of thought monitoring, heart purification, and remembrance parallels mindfulness and self-monitoring techniques in psychology. Mindfulness-based interventions encourage non-judgmental observation (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), whereas self-determination theory emphasizes intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Yet Imam Ali grounds these processes in piety, integrating psychological resilience with eschatological accountability. For instance, while mindfulness encourages nonjudgmental awareness, Imam Ali insists that awareness must be evaluative, distinguishing between pure and impure thoughts, and directed toward the remembrance of God. This combination of self-awareness, ethical evaluation, and theological orientation differentiates the Islamic model from secular counterparts; the balance of fear and hope functions similarly to expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), but with the distinctive aim of nearness to God. Thus, while the modern approach emphasizes psychological well-being and adaptive functioning, spiritual *Murāqaba* situates these within a teleological horizon oriented toward eternal salvation. Together, these teachings demonstrate that the essence of spiritual *Murāqaba* lies in regulating one's inner state before any outward act. Vigilance over thought and

heart underpins all other pious actions, ensuring that intention and consciousness align with divine will.

### 3-8. Individual Vigilance and Theories of Self-Regulation

From a psychological perspective, practices such as daily self-assessment, disciplined time use, and structured living resemble strategies emphasized in self-regulation theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981) and are supported by research demonstrating that continuous evaluation of one's behavior enhances performance (Snyder, 1974), that self-discipline strongly predicts academic and professional achievement (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005), and that structured time management reduces stress while improving productivity (Macan, Shahani, Dipboye, & Phillips, 1990). Contemporary productivity frameworks echo these findings: "Covey's "Importance–Urgency Matrix" highlights the prioritization of significant but non-urgent tasks to maximize long-term impact (Covey, 1989: 151), while Newport's Deep Work underscores the value of structured scheduling and distraction-free focus for cognitive efficiency." (Newport, 2016: 44) These insights resonate with Imam Ali's emphasis on order, planning, and the optimal use of opportunities, most explicitly articulated in his final testament (Letter 47). His insistence on order anticipates modern evidence that structured daily practices enhance concentration and life satisfaction. Yet the *Alawī* framework diverges from secular models in its grounding principles: whereas psychology and productivity theory

frame self-regulation as a pragmatic strategy for performance and well-being, Imam Ali situates these practices within a spiritual ethic of stewardship, where the individual is not merely a manager of personal goals but a servant of God whose bodily and temporal order constitute obligations of divine accountability with eternal implications.

### 3-9. Social Vigilance and Prosocial Behavior

Modern psychology has extensively examined prosocial tendencies, empathic responsiveness, and cooperative behavior as central to social cohesion (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Research in this field demonstrates that empathy motivates altruistic action that prosocial norms sustain trust within groups, and that cooperative behavior enhances both individual well-being and collective stability. Theories of procedural justice emphasize that perceptions of fairness in decision-making processes increase legitimacy and voluntary compliance with authority (Tyler, 1990). Similarly, the concept of social capital highlights the role of trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement in strengthening institutional performance and societal resilience (Putnam, 2000). Complementary to these perspectives, models of social support emphasize the protective function of interpersonal networks, demonstrating that supportive relationships buffer stress and promote psychological well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Together, these frameworks converge on the idea that empathy, fairness, and trust are indispensable for sustaining both personal flourishing and effective governance.

*Nahj al-Balāghah* articulates parallel principles, but embeds them within a theological and eschatological framework. In Letter 53 to *Mālik Ashtar*, Imam Ali instructs the governor to "Watch over yourself in what is hidden from the people, for the witness of the unseen is the judge over you." He provides a normative charter for leadership, commanding rulers to exercise mercy, equity, and vigilance in the administration of public affairs. Sermon 214 categorizes forms of oppression, thereby offering taxonomy of injustice that anticipates modern concerns with systemic and interpersonal harm. His insistence on accountability in financial matters—illustrated in the incidents of the necklace and the heated iron—demonstrates that ethical governance requires transparency and restraint in the use of public resources. Moreover, his exhortations regarding kinship, neighbors, and parents (Letters 31, 47; Sermon 23) extend the ethic of responsibility beyond political institutions to the intimate fabric of communal life.

The analytical comparison reveals both convergence and divergence. On the one hand, modern psychology and Imam Ali alike underscore the indispensability of compassion, fairness, and communal trust for the flourishing of individuals and societies. On the other hand, the *Alawī* framework diverges in its ontological grounding: "Whereas psychology and social theory typically frame these virtues as pragmatic strategies for enhancing performance,

legitimacy, or well-being, Imam Ali situates them within a spiritual ethic of stewardship. Protecting human dignity is not merely a social utility but a fulfillment of divine obligation, where the rights of people are inseparable from the rights of God. Thus, while contemporary theories emphasize the instrumental benefits of prosociality and justice, *Nahj al-Balāghah* reorients these same practices toward eternal accountability and the cultivation of a God-centered moral order."

### 3-10. Toward an Integrative Model

Taken together, these comparisons reveal that the *Murāqaba* framework anticipates many constructs now studied in health, cognitive, and social psychology, yet it does not fragment the human being into discrete domains of body, mind, and society. Instead, Imam Ali's paradigm integrates these dimensions within a unified theological–ethical telos: "Piety and nearness." His model weaves physical discipline, cognitive vigilance, and social responsibility into a holistic fabric oriented toward God-consciousness. This integrative vision parallels contemporary psychological insights but transcends them by situating human flourishing within an eschatological horizon. In doing so, it provides conceptual resources for developing culturally grounded and spiritually sensitive intervention models that respect both the psychological and spiritual dimensions of human well-being.

## Limitations and Future Directions

This study is textual and conceptual; it does not test the empirical impact of self-assessment practices on psychological outcomes. Future

research could operationalize specific practices (e.g., heart-purification exercises, daily self-assessment, and remembrance routines) and examine their effects on resilience, stress reduction, and social behavior through empirical studies.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *Murāqaba* in *Nahj al-Balāghah* is a multidimensional practice encompassing physical, spiritual, individual, and social domains. While these domains parallel concepts in health psychology, mindfulness, self-regulation, and prosocial research, their distinctive character lies in their theological foundation in piety and their orientation toward accountability before God. Imam Ali's paradigm does not treat the body, mind, and society as separate spheres but as integrated components of a single theocentric model of human development. The findings of this study suggest that Imam Ali's framework of *Murāqaba* provides a holistic model of self-care, discipline, and social responsibility that can inform both personal development and institutional practice across diverse contexts. Practical applications include:

**Clinical psychology and counseling:** "Techniques such as daily self-assessment, vigilance over thoughts and desires, and *dhikr* may enrich therapeutic programs by strengthening self-regulation, reducing stress, and enhancing resilience."

**Health promotion:** "Emphasis on bodily vigilance, dietary moderation, and restraint of harmful impulses aligns with preventive health strategies and contributes to psychological and physical well-being."

**Education and character formation:** "Training in time management, order, and ethical speech can foster responsibility, moral integrity, and effective interpersonal communication among students and professionals."

**Leadership and governance:** "Imam Ali's insistence on justice, transparency, and stewardship of public trust anticipates modern concerns with ethical leadership and institutional accountability, offering insights applicable to both religious and secular societies."

**Social cohesion:** "The integrated ethic of empathy, fairness, and communal trust highlighted in *Nahj al-Balāghah* converges with modern psychological theories of prosocial behavior, while transcending them by grounding these values in a broader moral–spiritual horizon."

Taken together, these applications indicate that *Murāqaba* is not limited to a single cultural or religious setting but offers conceptual resources for developing intervention models that are both culturally sensitive and universally relevant. The novelty of this study lies in presenting a systematic comparison between Imam Ali's multidimensional model of *Murāqaba* and contemporary psychological theories, thereby offering a fresh interdisciplinary contribution.

**Table 1. Comprehensive comparison of *Murāqaba* in Imam Ali's teachings and psychology**

| Dimension of Murāqaba | Definition / Core | Qur'anic–Hadith Evidence | Moral–Ethical Implication | Psychological Alignment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Physical Murāqaba | Safeguarding the senses and | Q 24:30; Sermon 176; *Ghurar al-* | Self-control of senses and | Mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003): |

| Dimension of Murāqaba | Definition / Core | Qur'anic–Hadith Evidence | Moral–Ethical Implication | Psychological Alignment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | bodily powers (eyes, ears, tongue, stomach, genitals). | *Ḥikam* 1585. | desires; foundation of spiritual and behavioral health. | conscious attention to stimuli to reduce reactivity; ego depletion (Baumeister et al., 2007): Using willpower judiciously for sustained restraint. |
| Spiritual Murāqaba | Purification of thought and heart, sustained through dhikr. | Aphorism 349 & 222; Letter 31; Q 26:88–89; Q 13:28. | Purified mind, sound heart and constant remembrance of God. | Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Beck, 2011): restructuring negative automatic thoughts; Self-Determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000): Intrinsic motivation and quality of behavior; relaxation response (Kaplan, 1989): Reducing anxiety and inducing physiological calm. |
| Individual Murāqaba | Self-monitoring, personal discipline, time management and continuous growth. | Aphorism 89, 73, 357; Letter 31. | Turning values into a purposeful, balanced lifestyle. | Self-Monitoring (Snyder, 1974): Recording and evaluating behavior for positive change; covey's urgency-importance Matrix (1989): Prioritizing tasks; growth Mindset (Dweck, 2006): belief in lifelong learning. |
| Social Murāqaba | Observance of others' rights, justice, avoidance of | Q 2:83; Q 16:90; Letter 53 & Sermon 214. | Manifestation of values in social interactions | Social Capital (Putnam, 2000): Prosocial Development |

| Dimension of Murāqaba | Definition / Core | Qur'anic–Hadith Evidence | Moral–Ethical Implication | Psychological Alignment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | oppression and corruption. | | and fair structures. | (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998): Empathy and cooperation as key foundations of social cohesion. |

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