



Waswas in the quran: Insights and strategies for overcoming spiritual distractions

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ABSTRACT

The concept of *waswas* is a recurring theme in Islamic teachings, particularly in the Quran, where it is depicted as a subtle yet powerful tool used by Shaytan to mislead believers. This study explores the nature of *waswas* as described in the Quran, its psychological and spiritual implications, and the strategies prescribed in Islamic teachings to combat it. By analyzing key Quranic verses and interpretations from classical and contemporary scholars, this paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of *waswas* and its effects on faith, decision-making, and mental well-being. The study further highlights practical approaches, including supplications (*du'a*), remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*), and adherence to Islamic principles, to resist and overcome satanic whisperings. Ultimately, this research seeks to offer a comprehensive perspective on maintaining spiritual resilience in the face of these challenges. By understanding the nature of *waswas* and implementing Quranic guidance, believers can cultivate greater spiritual resilience and maintain focus in their religious and personal lives. This paper aims to equip readers with a deeper understanding of *waswas* and effective methods to combat it.

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Introduction

Waswas holds significant importance in Islamic theology and spirituality, referring to the subtle yet persistent whispers that cause doubts, distractions, and anxieties in a believer's heart and mind. From a grammatical perspective, the term *waswas* (وَسْوَسَ) is derived from the Arabic root و-س-و, which denotes a repeated or continuous whispering sound. The form of the word itself suggests an ongoing or insistent nature, emphasizing the persistence of these intrusive thoughts (Al-Raghib al-Isfahani d. 1108 CE). In Arabic morphology, *waswas* is both a noun and a verb, with the verb *waswasa* (وَسْوَسَ) meaning "to whisper repeatedly," highlighting the way in which doubts and distractions occur in a cyclical manner.

In the Islamic view, *waswas* is understood as a form of spiritual disturbance caused primarily by Shaytan (Satan) but also influenced by one's own *nafs* (inner self). It manifests in various aspects of life, including religious observances, personal decisions, and moral dilemmas. The Islamic tradition recognizes *waswas* as a significant challenge to faith and worship, as it can lead to excessive doubt (e.g., in purification and prayer), spiritual anxiety, and even obsessive behaviour. Islamic scholars categorize *waswas* into different types, such as



waswas al-qahri (overwhelming whispers that lead to compulsive behaviour) and *waswas al-shaytan* (Satanic whispers aimed at misleading believers (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1292–1350 CE).

From a Quranic perspective, *waswas* is explicitly mentioned in several verses, illustrating its origins, nature, and effects on human beings. In Surah An-Nas (114:4-5), Shaytan is described as "الَّذِي يُوَسْوِسُ فِي صُفُورِ النَّاسِ" (*the one who whispers into the hearts of mankind*), emphasizing his role in instilling doubt and fear. In Surah Al-A'raf (7:20-22), the Quran recounts how Shaytan whispered to Adam and Hawwa (Eve), leading them to disobey Allah's command. This serves as a foundational example of how *waswas* operates as a deceptive force that manipulates thoughts and emotions. Additionally, Surah Al-Baqarah (2:268) highlights how Shaytan instills fear of poverty to prevent believers from spending in charity, demonstrating that *waswas* is not limited to religious doubts but also affects worldly decisions.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the concept of *waswas*, focusing on its linguistic, theological, and psychological dimensions. A descriptive and analytical method is employed to explore how *waswas* is understood in Islamic thought, its classifications, and the strategies for managing it. By utilizing textual analysis, the study aims to provide an in-depth interpretation of *waswas* and its broader implications in religious and personal contexts. The research primarily involves the systematic examination of Islamic texts, including classical and contemporary scholarly interpretations. It draws from primary sources, such as Quran and Hadith, alongside secondary sources that include Quranic exegeses (*tafsir*), linguistic studies, and theological discussions. Key Islamic scholars, such as Ibn Kathir, Al-Razi, and Al-Qurtubi, contribute valuable insights through their interpretations, while classical Arabic lexicons like *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Manzur provide linguistic depth.

A thematic analysis approach is used to classify *waswas* into different types, such as obsessive intrusive thoughts (*waswas al-qahri*) and Satanic insinuations (*waswas al-shaytan*). This method allows for the identification of recurring patterns and concepts related to *waswas* across various scholarly works. Furthermore, the study ensures academic integrity by properly attributing sources and maintaining a rigorous qualitative framework. Through this structured approach, the research provides a nuanced understanding of *waswas* and its significance in Islamic discourse.

Results and Discussion

The term *waswas* (وسواس) originates from the Arabic root و-س-و, which signifies a repeated and persistent whispering sound. This etymology highlights the insistent and intrusive nature of *waswas*, suggesting that it is not a fleeting thought but rather a continuous inner disturbance that seeks to influence the mind and heart. According to Ibn Manzur (d. 1311), *waswas* is defined as a subtle, ongoing suggestion that does not cease unless actively countered through faith and remembrance of Allah (Ibn Manzur d. 1311 CE). This explanation underscores the spiritual dimension of *waswas*, emphasizing that it thrives in the absence of divine remembrance and weakens when confronted with conscious acts of worship.

Further, Al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d. 1108) in *Mufradat al-Quran* provides an expanded interpretation, linking *waswas* to both external influences and internal psychological struggles. He acknowledges its dual nature, explaining that while *waswas* can originate from Satan's whispers, it may also stem from one's inner self, leading to excessive doubts, anxieties, and compulsive thoughts. This perspective aligns with the broader Islamic understanding that *waswas* is not merely an external force but can also manifest as an internal battle within the human psyche. Through these linguistic and theological insights, classical scholars establish *waswas* as a persistent, disruptive force that can affect both faith and mental well-being, making it essential for individuals to develop spiritual resilience to overcome its influence. According to Ibn Manzur (d. 1311) in *Lisan al-Arab*, *waswas* is defined as a subtle, ongoing suggestion that does not cease unless actively countered through faith and remembrance of

Allah (dhikr). This explanation underscores the spiritual dimension of *waswas*, emphasizing that it thrives in the absence of divine remembrance and weakens when confronted with conscious acts of worship. Al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d. 1108) in *Mufradat al-Quran* provides an expanded interpretation, linking *waswas* to both external influences and internal psychological struggles. He acknowledges its dual nature, explaining that while *waswas* can originate from Satan's whispers, it may also stem from one's inner self, leading to excessive doubts, anxieties, and compulsive thoughts. This perspective aligns with the broader Islamic understanding that *waswas* is not merely an external force but can also manifest as an internal battle within the human psyche.

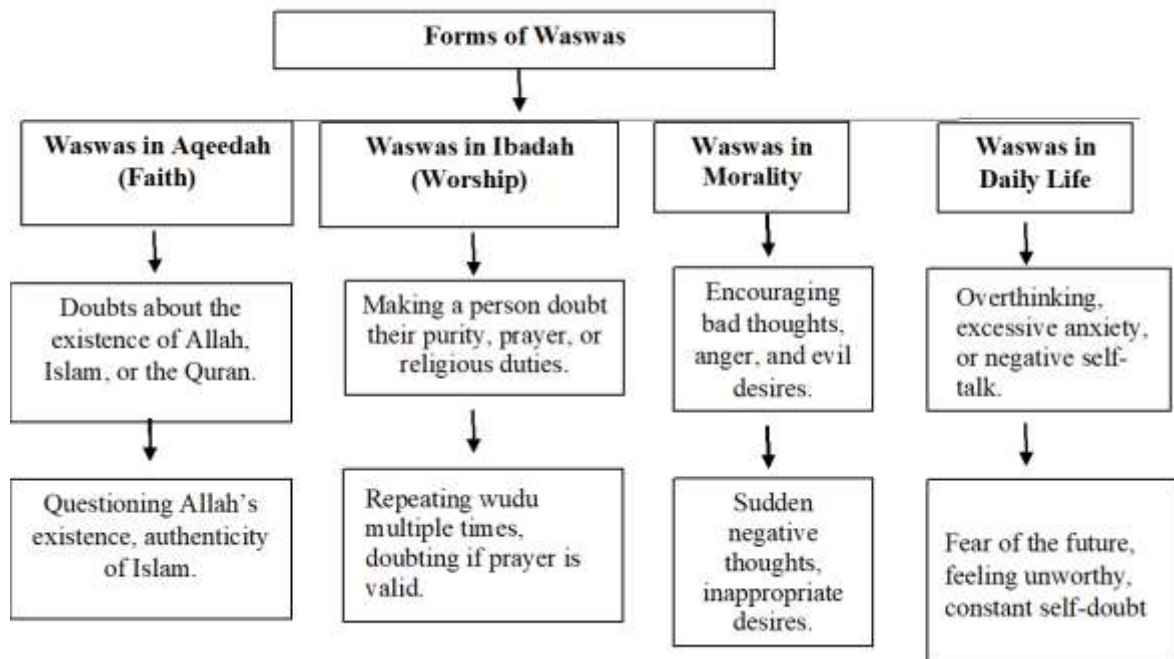
The phenomenon of *waswas* (وسواس) has been widely analyzed by classical Quranic exegetes, who emphasize that it originates from Shaytan (Satan) and preys on human vulnerability. These scholars explain how *waswas* influences faith, worship, and daily actions, making it a significant challenge for believers. By examining their interpretations, one can gain a deeper understanding of how *waswas* operates and the strategies for countering it. Imam Al-Qurtubi (d. 1273), in his renowned work *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*, describes *waswas* as a recurring internal disturbance that Shaytan uses to sow doubt and confusion in a believer's heart, particularly concerning matters of faith and religious obligations. He interprets the Quranic phrase "whisperer who withdraws" (الْخَنَّاسُ) as a reference to Shaytan's behaviour he whispers misgivings into the hearts of people but retreats when they remember Allah through dhikr. This explanation highlights the defensive power of spiritual practices such as reciting Quranic verses and seeking refuge in Allah (*isti'adha*), which serve as protective barriers against these harmful whispers.

Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) in *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* further elaborates on this idea, asserting that *waswas* is one of Shaytan's most deceptive tactics, particularly aimed at believers during acts of worship. He explains that when a person is engaged in prayer (*salah*), recitation of the Quran, or performing ablution (*wudu*), Shaytan seeks to distract them by instilling excessive doubts. This type of *waswas*, known as *waswas al-qahri* (overwhelming whispers), leads individuals to repeatedly question their purity, intentions, or the correctness of their rituals, sometimes causing them to abandon or excessively repeat acts of worship out of uncertainty. This aligns with the Islamic principle of avoiding unnecessary hardship in worship, as excessive doubts are regarded as an obstacle to sincere devotion.

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210), in his magnum opus *Tafsir al-Razi (Mafatih al-Ghayb)*, presents a psychological and philosophical perspective on *waswas*. He explores how *waswas* influences the human soul, gradually weakening faith and creating hesitation in performing good deeds. According to him, *waswas* manifests in two primary ways:

1. Religious doubts: where a person becomes uncertain about core beliefs, fearing that their faith is incomplete or invalid.
2. Intrusive thoughts: which affect every day decision-making, causing unnecessary hesitation and over-analysis, leading to mental distress and inaction.

Beyond these three major scholars, other classical and contemporary exegetes have also addressed the dangers of *waswas*. Al-Tabari (d. 923) in *Tafsir al-Tabari* describes *waswas* as a continuous cycle of deception, where Shaytan exploits human emotions such as fear, anxiety, and insecurity to mislead believers. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) in *Ighathat al-Lahafan* discusses how *waswas* can lead to despair and self-doubt, making a person feel unworthy of Allah's mercy, which can drive them away from worship rather than toward it.



Data on forms of Waswas

Faith-Related Doubts and Seeking Refuge in Allah

One of the most significant ways *waswas* affects believers is by creating doubts about fundamental aspects of faith, including the existence of Allah and the origins of creation. Imam Muslim (d. 875) narrates in *Sahih Muslim* that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ warned about this phenomenon, explaining that Shaytan whispers to people, asking:

"Who created this? Who created that? Until he eventually asks: Who created Allah?" (Sahih al-Bukhari Hadith 3276, 6598) The Prophet ﷺ instructed that when such thoughts arise, one should seek refuge in Allah (saying *A'udhu billahi min al-Shaytan al-rajim*) and stop entertaining the thought. This hadith underscores a crucial strategy for combating *waswas*: immediate rejection and turning to Allah rather than engaging in endless intellectual debate, which could lead to confusion and distress. A similar narration appears in Sahih al-Bukhari, where the Prophet ﷺ reassures that merely experiencing these thoughts does not harm one's faith, as long as the believer does not accept them. This is an important psychological insight, showing that intrusive thoughts are not sinful but rather a test from Shaytan, meant to shake one's confidence in their beliefs.

Another common manifestation of *waswas* occurs in religious practices, especially in purification (*tahara*), prayer (*salah*), and other acts of worship. Ibn Majah (d. 887) in *Sunan Ibn Majah* records a hadith where a man complained to the Prophet ﷺ about experiencing repeated doubts regarding his ritual purity (*wudu*), feeling uncertain about whether he had broken it. The Prophet ﷺ advised him to ignore such doubts unless he was certain (e.g., hearing a sound or perceiving a clear sign). This highlights the Islamic principle of certainty overriding doubt (*al-yaqīn lā yazūlu bi al-shakk*) a fundamental rule in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) that discourages falling into unnecessary hardship caused by excessive self-doubt. Similarly, many scholars classify these excessive doubts under *waswas al-qahri* (overwhelming whispers), which can lead individuals to compulsively repeat *wudu*, *salah*, or other rituals, believing they have not performed them correctly. This excessive concern, if left unchecked, may develop into obsessive-compulsive behaviors, causing emotional distress and disrupting normal worship.

The Psychological Perspective on Waswas

Classical scholars also recognized the psychological impact of *waswas*, comparing it to intrusive thoughts and compulsive behaviors seen in modern psychology. Al-Nawawi (d. 1277) in *Sharh Sahih Muslim* discusses this issue extensively, explaining that while some individuals experience occasional doubts, others suffer from persistent intrusive thoughts that interfere with their daily religious and personal life. He describes cases where people become excessively fixated on repeating prayers, making wudu multiple times, or feeling unworthy of Allah's forgiveness, all of which are manifestations of *waswas*.

Other scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) in *Majmu' al-Fatawa*, emphasize that *waswas* often targets devout individuals, as Shaytan seeks to distort their sincerity by overwhelming them with unnecessary doubts. He explains that the best way to counter *waswas* is through firm belief, reliance on Allah (tawakkul), and ignoring baseless thoughts, as giving in to them only reinforces their power. Even in modern times, *waswas* continues to affect individuals in various forms. During the lifetime of the Prophet ﷺ, several companions struggled with intrusive thoughts. One of the most famous incidents is recorded in Sahih Muslim (Hadith 132), where some companions came to the Prophet ﷺ and said:

"O Messenger of Allah, some of us experience thoughts that are too terrible to speak of!"

The Prophet ﷺ responded:

"Do you really feel this?"

They said: "Yes."

He said:

"That is a clear sign of faith (Iman)."

One of the Prophet's ﷺ key teachings was that Islam is meant to be easy and that excessive hardship is not from Allah but from Shaytan. In Sahih al-Bukhari (Hadith 3268), a companion named Abu Lubabah once felt extreme guilt for his mistake. He believed his repentance would not be accepted unless he punished himself, so he tied himself to a pillar in the Masjid and refused to untie himself until Allah forgave him. When the Prophet ﷺ heard about this, he ordered that he be untied and said:

"Allah is more merciful than this. Repentance does not require self-punishment."

The Prophetic Solution to Waswas

Waswas (whispers of Shaytan) is a spiritual challenge that affects believers across generations. It manifests as persistent doubts, intrusive thoughts, and distractions that attempt to weaken faith and create uncertainty in religious practices. Islam provides clear guidance on overcoming waswas through prophetic teachings, offering a timeless and effective approach. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ prescribed specific methods to combat waswas, including seeking refuge in Allah (isti'adha), ignoring baseless doubts, engaging in acts of remembrance (dhikr), and trusting in Allah's mercy without falling into despair. These strategies not only protect the believer from Shaytan's whispers but also strengthen their connection with Allah and enhance their spiritual resilience.

A. Seeking Refuge in Allah (Isti'adha)

One of the most fundamental ways to combat waswas is through isti'adha—seeking refuge in Allah from Shaytan. The Quran instructs believers to turn to Allah when troubled by Satanic whispers:

وَمَا يَنْزِعُ عَنْكَ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ نَزْعٌ فَاسْتَعِذْ بِاللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

"And if an evil whisper comes to you from Shaytan, then seek refuge with Allah. Verily, He is the All-Hearer, the All-Knower."

(Surah Al-A'raf 7:200)

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ emphasized the importance of isti'adha as a means of spiritual protection. In Sahih Muslim (Hadith 134), a companion approached the Prophet ﷺ, distressed by troubling thoughts about faith. The Prophet ﷺ reassured him, saying:

"Say: 'I seek refuge in Allah from Shaytan, the accursed,' and stop thinking about it."

This hadith highlights the power of turning to Allah as a direct response to intrusive doubts. By sincerely reciting *A'udhu billahi min al-Shaytan al-rajim*, a believer can cut off the influence of Shaytan and refocus on worship. This method is particularly useful in moments of vulnerability, such as during prayer or deep contemplation, when Shaytan attempts to sow seeds of doubt.

Conclusion

Waswas, or the intrusive whispers of Shaytan, is a spiritual trial that affects the hearts and minds of believers, leading to doubts, anxiety, and distractions from worship and faith. The Quran explicitly addresses waswas, offering divine guidance on recognizing, resisting, and overcoming these spiritual distractions. Through numerous verses, Allah reassures believers that Shaytan's whispers hold no real power over those who remain steadfast in their faith, seek His refuge, and engage in constant remembrance (dhikr). The battle against waswas is, therefore, not one of physical confrontation but a test of spiritual resilience and unwavering reliance on Allah. One of the most profound strategies to counter waswas, as emphasized in the Quran, is seeking refuge in Allah through supplication and reciting specific protective verses. Surah An-Nas and Surah Al-Falaq serve as divine shields against the whisperings of Shaytan, reinforcing the importance of spiritual fortification. Additionally, Ayat-ul-Kursi (Surah Al-Baqarah 2:255) and the last two verses of Surah Al-Baqarah act as powerful protections against the unseen harm that Shaytan attempts to inflict. The act of consistently turning to Allah in prayer and supplication (du'a) strengthens one's spiritual immunity, ensuring that waswas does not take root in the heart.

Moreover, the teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ provide practical strategies for overcoming waswas. His guidance encourages believers to dismiss doubts, avoid overanalyzing intrusive thoughts, and engage in acts of worship with sincerity and certainty. The Prophet ﷺ himself sought refuge from Shaytan and advised his companions to do the same, highlighting that excessive concern over doubts in faith or worship is a tactic used by Shaytan to weaken a believer's connection with Allah. By maintaining steadfastness in prayer, engaging in dhikr, and practicing Ruqyah, believers can shield themselves from these distractions and attain a state of inner peace.

The battle against waswas is not just a personal struggle but a broader test of one's devotion and trust in Allah. In today's world, where distractions, anxieties, and uncertainties are prevalent, the wisdom of the Quran provides a timeless solution to overcoming spiritual disturbances. Waswas may attempt to cloud the mind, but through reliance on Allah, the recitation of protective verses, and adherence to the Prophet's ﷺ teachings, believers can navigate this challenge with strength and clarity. Ultimately, victory over waswas lies in faith, persistence, and the unyielding belief that Allah is the ultimate source of peace and guidance.

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