



The Crisis of the Heart in the Age of Screens: An Islamic Study of Attention, Tazkiyah al-Nafs, Haya, and Inner Moral Discipline

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METADATA

Paper history

Received: 22 February 2026

Revised: 21 May 2026

Accepted: 07 June 2026

Published online: 27 June 2026

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Keywords

Emotion regulation

Digital age

Islamic ethics

Prophet guidance

Citation

Shareef U (2026) The crisis of the heart in the age of screens: an Islamic study of attention, tazkiyah al-nafs, haya, and inner moral discipline. *Al-Amīn (Faisalabad)* 4: 26040104. <https://doi.org/10.63793/Al-Amin/34>.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the contemporary screen environment through the Islamic conception of the heart as the center of perception, moral awareness, and spiritual transformation. It argues that the age of screens should not be understood merely in terms of convenience or technological progress, since prolonged digital immersion increasingly affects attention, sleep, emotional regulation, social conduct, and inward discipline. Read through Qur'anic anthropology and Prophetic guidance, this condition appears not simply as distraction but as a deeper crisis of the heart, particularly in light of the verses. The force of this verse lies in its distinction between sensory possession and inward comprehension. A person may see, hear, consume vast amounts of content, and yet remain spiritually unresponsive. This observation has unusual force in the digital age, which often combines abundance of information with poverty of reflection. For that reason, the most adequate Islamic response is neither technophobia nor uncritical celebration of digital convenience. It is disciplined inhabitation. The heart must be protected through dhikr, muhasabah, tazkiyah al-nafs, disciplined sight, guarded time, and renewed haya' (Qur'an 13:28; Qur'an 24:30; al-Ghazali, 1998; Ibn al-Qayyim, 1996). Only then can the Muslim benefit from technology without allowing technology to become a means through which the nafs is strengthened, heedlessness is normalized, and inward seriousness is lost. The central question of the age is therefore not whether screens are present, but whether the heart remains morally sovereign in their presence.

INTRODUCTION

Digital excess may intensify ghaflah, weaken contemplation, diminish haya', and erode self-governance. While engaging scientific literature with methodological caution, the study notes showed meaningful associations between excessive screen exposure, poor sleep, anxiety, and attentional strain (Stiglic and Viner, 2019; Santos et al., 2023; Gomes and Goldman, 2024). It concludes that Islam offers not a rejection of technology, but a disciplined framework of inward reform through dhikr, muhasabah, guarded sight, regulated time, and purification of the self.

إِنَّ لِّسْمَعِ وَالْبَصَرِ وَالْفُؤَادِ كُلُّ أُولَئِكَ كَانَ عَنْهُ مَسْئُولًا

“Indeed, the hearing, the sight, and the heart—each of these shall be questioned” (Qur'an 17:36; Abdel Haleem, 2004), and

أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ

“Surely, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest” (Qur'an 13:28; Abdel Haleem, 2004). The article further draws on the Prophetic statement,

أَلَا وَهِيَ الْقَلْبُ... أَلَا وَإِنَّ فِي الْجَسَدِ مُضْغَةً

“Indeed, in the body there is a piece of flesh... truly, it is the heart,” (al-Bukhari, 52; 2001, Muslim, 1599a; 1955). The screen has become one of the defining structures of modern life. It no longer functions only as a neutral medium through which information passes. It has become an environment in which perception, reaction, desire, memory, and self-presentation are continuously shaped. Human beings wake to screens, work through them, socialize through them, rest with them, and often carry them into the final moments before sleep. Such saturation changes the conditions of moral and psychological life. It

normalizes interruption, multiplies visual exposure, and reduces the spaces once available for stillness, reflection, and inward recollection. For that reason, the question of screens cannot be reduced to convenience or habit. It must be studied as a question of human formation (Carr, 2010; Turkle, 2015; Williams, 2018). Contemporary research increasingly reports associations between heavier screen use and poorer sleep, weakened well-being, anxiety, and attention problems, even while many researchers remain careful about overclaiming causation (Ophir et al., 2009; Ward et al., 2017; Orben and Przybylski, 2019; Stiglic and Viner, 2019; Santos et al., 2023). From an Islamic perspective, the issue becomes more serious because the primary site of injury is not only time or mood, but the heart. The Qur'an speaks of the heart not merely as an emotional metaphor, but as a faculty of discernment and accountability. Allah Most High says (Qur'an 17:36; Abdel Haleem, 2004):

وَلَا تَقْفُ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَٰئِكَ كَانَ عَنْهُ مَسْئُولًا

This verse places hearing, sight, and the heart under moral responsibility. In another verse, Allah says (Qur'an 13:28; Abdel Haleem, 2004):

أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ

The verse does not present tranquillity as the result of endless stimulation, but of remembrance. Together, these verses establish an anthropology in which sensory intake and inward condition are inseparably related. The digital problem, therefore, is not simply that people are busy; it is that the sensory and cognitive order of life is being reorganized in ways that may weaken receptivity to remembrance, contemplation, and moral steadiness. The purpose of this article is not to condemn technology in a simplistic way, nor to romanticize a pre-digital past. Its aim is to ask how the age of screens should be understood when read through the Islamic discourse of qalb, nafs, ghaflah, haya', and tazkiyah. This makes the inquiry both classical and contemporary: classical in its conceptual resources and contemporary in its application.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article adopts an interpretive and analytical method. It proceeds in four stages. First, it identifies selected Qur'anic and Prophetic texts relevant to attention, moral intake, modesty, remembrance, and purification. Second, it situates those texts within the conceptual architecture of classical Islamic moral psychology, especially the literature of the heart, the nafs, and tazkiyah al-nafs. Third, it brings that framework into conversation with selected contemporary scientific research on screen exposure, sleep, anxiety, stress, and attention. Fourth, it proposes an Islamic response grounded in inward reform rather than technological withdrawal. The scope of the article is deliberately limited. It does not claim that every form of screen use is harmful. It does not deny the real

benefits of digital tools in education, research, communication, and da'wah. It also avoids simplistic causal language, since much of the current scientific literature reports associations, elevated risks, or complex bidirectional relationships rather than a single universal causal mechanism (Orben and Przybylski, 2019; Stiglic and Viner, 2019; Santos et al., 2023). Yet such caution does not weaken the argument. It strengthens it. The cumulative evidence is sufficient to justify serious concern, and the Islamic moral framework is sufficiently rich to interpret that concern at a deeper level than psychology alone.

THE HEART IN QUR'ANIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Any serious Islamic treatment of modern distraction must begin with the qalb. In Qur'anic discourse, the heart is not a sentimental ornament. It is a faculty of perception and moral understanding. One of the clearest verses is (Qur'an 7:179; Abdel Haleem, 2004):

لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ بِهَا وَلَهُمْ أَعْيُنٌ لَا يُبْصِرُونَ بِهَا وَلَهُمْ آذَانٌ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا أُولَٰئِكَ كَالْأَنْعَامِ بَلْ هُمْ أَضَلُّ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْغَافِلُونَ

The Prophetic Sunnah confirms the governing place of the heart in even more explicit form. The Prophet said (al-Bukhari, 52; 2001; Muslim, 1599a ; 1955):

أَلَا وَإِنَّ فِي الْجَسَدِ مُضْغَةً إِذَا صَلَحَتْ صَلَحَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ، وَإِذَا فَسَدَتْ فَسَدَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ، أَلَا وَهِيَ الْقَلْبُ

This hadith establishes that the outward life is governed by inward condition. Action, restraint, judgment, speech, and desire do not stand apart from the heart; they emerge from it. Accordingly, any environment that persistently unsettles attention, agitates desire, weakens self-command, and normalizes inner restlessness is acting not only upon conduct but upon the very centre from which conduct proceeds.

CLASSICAL ISLAMIC FRAMEWORK: QALB, NAFS, AND TAZKIYAH

A serious article at this level cannot rely on isolated quotations alone. It must show how the issue fits within the wider architecture of the tradition. In classical Islamic thought, the heart is discussed alongside the nafs, the intellect, desire, intention, and moral discipline. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* treats the heart as the governing inward reality of the human being and repeatedly links moral failure to inner corruption rather than outward form alone (al-Ghazali, 1998). Ibn al-Qayyim's *Madarij al-Salikin* develops a rich spiritual psychology in which heedlessness, vanity, repentance, vigilance, sincerity, and desire are not passing moods but structuring conditions of the inward path (Ibn al-Qayyim, 1996). Al-Raghib al-Isfahani's *al-Dhari'ah ila Makarim al-Shari'ah* likewise places moral excellence within a

framework of disciplined inward cultivation (al-Raghib al-Isfahani, 2007). These sources matter because they prevent the present discussion from collapsing into secular therapeutic language. The issue here is not merely wellness, but the ordered or disordered condition of the self before Allah. This is where tazkiyah al-nafs becomes essential. The Qur'an says (Qur'an 91:9–10; Abdel Haleem, 2004):

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا ۖ وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا

The verse makes purification and corruption the axis of success and failure. Tazkiyah is therefore not an optional devotional refinement. It is a condition of human felicity. In the context of screen culture, the relevance is immediate. If the digital environment repeatedly stimulates desire, disperses concentration, weakens modesty, and invites self-display, then it directly concerns the purification or corruption of the nafs. The device itself is not the moral agent; the deeper issue is whether the nafs remains governed by taqwa and discipline, or becomes increasingly habituated to novelty, impulse, and external validation.

GHAFLAH AS THE SPIRITUAL LOGIC OF DIGITAL EXCESS

Among the classical Islamic concepts most capable of interpreting the present condition is ghaflah. Ghaflah is more than casual forgetfulness. It refers to a state in which the heart becomes occupied by surfaces and loses attentiveness to truth, accountability, and divine presence. Screen culture intensifies ghaflah because it trains the self to prefer immediacy over depth, reaction over reflection, and perpetual contact over reflective distance.

A person may remain busy, informed, and socially connected while inwardly losing seriousness, stillness, and moral clarity.

This is why the screen problem cannot be defined only by clearly immoral content. Even lawful or educational content, when consumed excessively and without discipline, may cultivate scattered attention and shallow receptivity. The issue is not only what is viewed, but the form of viewing itself: hurried, fragmented, repetitive, and emotionally manipulative. In Islamic terms, one danger of such repetition is that it accustoms the heart to movement without depth and reaction without inward digestion. Ghaflah in this sense is not only verbal forgetfulness of Allah. It is the loss of sustained inward presence. The Prophetic teaching

مِنْ خُسْنِ إِسْلَامِ الْمَرْءِ تَرْكُهُ مَا لَا يَغْنِيهِ

It acquires striking relevance here (al-Nawawi, 12; 2007). Modern platforms are designed to persuade the user that everything concerns him: every quarrel, every rumor, every image, every trend, every emotional wave. The hadith teaches the opposite discipline. It trains the believer to refuse needless involvement and to preserve moral energy for what is weighty. In the age of the feed,

this is not a small courtesy. It is a form of spiritual resistance.

HAYA' AND THE ETHICS OF VISIBILITY

One of the most important categories for this discussion is haya'. Screen culture does not only distract; it reorganizes visibility. It rewards self-exposure, continuous self-curation, and external validation. In this environment, haya' must be understood as more than a narrow social modesty. It is a moral discipline that regulates what one reveals, what one seeks, what one normalizes, and how one inhabits the gaze of others. The Prophet said that modesty is a branch of faith, and in another narration that haya' brings nothing except good (al-Bukhari, 9, 6117 and 6118; 2001; Muslim, 35b; 1955). These hadiths show that haya' is not an accessory to iman but one of its active expressions. If haya' belongs to faith, then the erosion of shame, reserve, and reverence is not socially trivial. It is spiritually consequential. In digital environments, where the self can be constantly displayed, measured, and compared, the weakening of haya' does not remain confined to dress or speech. It extends to habits of exposure, appetite for spectacle, voyeurism, and the subtle replacement of sincerity with visibility. The Qur'anic command regarding the gaze deepens this point (Qur'an 24:30 Abdel Haleem, 2004):

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ذَلِكَ أَزْكَىٰ لَهُمْ

The verse ties visual restraint to purification. In the screen age, this command acquires even greater depth. The eye is no longer occasionally tempted; it is continuously solicited by images, spectacle, provocation, and curated lives. Guarding the gaze today therefore includes resisting voyeurism, curated envy, habitual image consumption, and the restless impulse to peer into every passing matter. It is part of preserving haya', resisting desensitization, and protecting the heart from a flood of impressions that weaken reverence and moral shame.

SCIENTIFIC DISCUSSION IN CAUTIOUS TERMS

The scientific literature does not justify sensational claims, but it does support serious concern. Recent studies and reviews commonly report associations between heavier or problematic screen use and poorer sleep, anxiety, depressive symptoms, stress, and attentional strain (Ophir et al., 2009; Ward et al., 2017; Stiglic and Viner, 2019; Santos et al., 2023; Gomes and Goldman, 2024). A 2023 systematic review on screen time and mental health among adolescents also reported meaningful associations between heavier screen use and poorer mental well-being (Santos et al., 2023). Such findings do not prove a single causal chain, but they strengthen the case that screen habits are relevant to

human functioning in significant ways. These findings should be used with discipline. They do not prove that screens alone cause every mental or spiritual disturbance. Nor do they justify identical claims across all age groups, usage patterns, or forms of media. Yet the cumulative pattern matters (Orben and Przybylski, 2019; Stiglic and Viner, 2019; Santos et al., 2023).

It shows that poorly regulated screen use is not a harmless add-on to life. It may affect sleep rhythms, emotional steadiness, and sustained attention, all of which are directly relevant to Islamic worship and moral self-command. A person who sleeps badly, lives in recurrent distraction, and becomes increasingly reactive is not merely less productive. He may also become less capable of *khushu'*, *sabr*, disciplined speech, and serious *muhasabah*. This is where scientific caution and Islamic anthropology meet fruitfully. Science identifies patterns of strain and dysregulation. Revelation clarifies why those patterns matter morally and spiritually. The point is not that science proves the Qur'an. The point is that empirical observation and Islamic moral wisdom converge upon a common practical reality: ungoverned digital life can damage the conditions under which the heart remains awake, balanced, and receptive to remembrance.

DISTINCT SPIRITUAL CONSEQUENCES

The first consequence is weakened contemplation. Deep reflection requires continuity of thought, but screen culture privileges rapid transitions and intermittent attention (Carr, 2010; Ophir et al., 2009). This reduces the soul's ability to dwell with a verse, a moral question, or a moment of repentance. In a tradition where *tadabbur* is central, the loss of contemplative endurance is spiritually significant.

The second consequence is diminished *khushu'*. Worship depends on gathered inwardness. When a person is habituated to speed, interruption, and constant stimulation, prayer may begin to feel inwardly thin, not because worship has lost meaning, but because the self has been trained into dispersion. The issue is therefore formative, not merely emotional. The third consequence is moral desensitization. Repeated exposure to shamelessness, hostility, spectacle, and constant commentary can lower the threshold at which the heart feels disturbed. What once produced caution, grief, or shame may gradually seem ordinary.

Here the relevance of *haya'* and guarding the gaze becomes unmistakable. The fourth consequence is performative selfhood. Social media environments train the user to imagine life under continuous observation (Turkle, 2015; Williams, 2018). This threatens sincerity because the self may begin to seek visibility before truth, impression before substance, and reaction before integrity. In Islamic moral language, this does not mean that every user necessarily falls into *riya'*, but it does

mean that the digital environment may make sincerity harder to preserve and self-display easier to normalize.

ISLAMIC RESPONSE: INWARD REFORM, NOT TECHNOLOGICAL WITHDRAWAL

The Islamic response is not the simplistic abandonment of all modern tools. Such a position would neither fit reality nor reflect the broader moral intelligence of the tradition. Islam does not define maturity by fleeing the world, but by disciplining the self within it. The central question is therefore how to inhabit the technological world without surrendering the sovereignty of the heart. The first response is *dhikr*. The verse

أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ

It presents remembrance as the ground of inward repose (Qur'an 13:28; Abdel Haleem, 2004). The heart cannot be repaired merely by replacing one distraction with another. It requires reorientation toward Allah. Regular *dhikr*, recitation, and moments of silent remembrance oppose the centrifugal pull of digital life by re-centering the heart around permanence rather than novelty. The second response is *muhasabah*. Since the Qur'an makes hearing, sight, and the heart accountable (Qur'an 17:36; Abdel Haleem, 2004), the believer must ask: what enters my eyes, what consumes my hours, what disturbs my sleep, what weakens my prayer, what inflames my envy, and what hardens my inward life? *Muhasabah* transforms digital use from an invisible routine into a morally visible practice. It reconnects behavior with consequence, which is one of the chief aims of *tazkiyah al-nafs*. The third response is disciplined sight. Lowering the gaze in the digital age includes more than avoiding explicit indecency (Qur'an 24:30; Abdel Haleem, 2004). It includes resisting voyeurism, curated envy, habitual image consumption, and restless curiosity. This widens the verse's relevance without weakening its original force. The fourth response is regulation of time. The contemporary evidence on sleep and bedtime technology use supports practical limits, especially before sleep and around worship (Gomes and Goldman, 2024). Structured screen boundaries are not merely productivity advice. They are protective disciplines for the heart, the body, and the rhythm of devotion. The fifth response is the rehabilitation of *haya'*. In practical terms, this means reducing unnecessary self-display, being selective about what is shared, resisting the compulsion to narrate the self publicly, and preserving a zone of inward reserve. *Haya'* protects not only modesty but sincerity. It teaches the self that not everything must be shown, not every reaction must be posted, and not every private moment must be turned into public material. The sixth response is renewed *tazkiyah al-nafs*. The struggle with screens is ultimately a struggle over the training of the self: desire, timing, gaze, attention, anger, and intention. So long as the *nafs* remains untrained, the screen will keep finding doors through which to enter the

heart. Tazkiyah therefore remains the deepest remedy (al-Ghazali, 1998; Ibn al-Qayyim, 1996), because it addresses not only the object of distraction but the inward vulnerability that turns distraction into attachment.

CONCLUSION

The crisis of the heart in the age of screens is not a rhetorical exaggeration. It is a diagnosis of a real condition in which sensory overload, attentional fragmentation, poor sleep, emotional strain, performative visibility, and weakened inward discipline increasingly converge. Scientific research, used cautiously, supports concern about associations between excessive screen exposure and disturbed sleep, anxiety, and attentional difficulty (Ophir et al., 2009; Ward et al., 2017; Orben and Przybylski, 2019; Stiglic and Viner, 2019; Santos et al., 2023; Gomes and Goldman, 2024). Islamic anthropology explains why these findings matter at a deeper level: because the human being is not merely a cognitive unit or social consumer, but a moral and spiritual creature whose heart, sight, and inward state are all accountable before Allah (Qur'an 17:36; Abdel Haleem, 2004).

DATA AVAILABILITY

Data will be made available on a fair request to the corresponding author

ETHICS APPROVAL

Not applicable to this paper.

FUNDING SOURCE

Self-funded.

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