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31) Preserve Yourself from the Greedness of this World and remain Free

واعلَم يا بُنَىَّ اَنَّ مَن كانَت مَطِيَته الَّليل والنَّهار فإنَّه يُسارُ بِهِ وإِن كانَ واقِفاً، ويَقطَعُ المَسافَةَ وإِن كانَ مُقِيماً وادعاً." واعلَم يَقِيناً اَنَّكَ لَن تَبلُغَ اَمَلَكَ ولَن تَعْدُو اَجَلَكَ وإنَّكَ في سَبَيلِ مَن كانَ قَبلَكَ فَخَفِّض في الطَلَبِ واَجمِل في المُكْتَسَبِ فإنَّه رُبَّ طَلَبٍ قَد جَرَّ إلى حَربٍ ولَيسَ كُلُّ طَالِبٍ بِمرزُوقٍ ولا كُلُّ مُجمِلٍ بِمَحْرُومٍ، وأكرِم نَفسَكَ عَن كُلِّ دَنِيَّةٍ وإِن سَاقَتكَ إلى الرَّغائِب فَإِنَّكَ لَن تَعتَاضَ بِما تَبْذِلُ مِن نَفسَكَ عَوضاً ولا تَكُن عَبْد غَيرِكَ وقد جَعَلكَ اللهُ حُرَّا وما خَيرُ سَاقَتكَ إلى الرَّغائِب فَإِنَّكَ لَن تَعتَاضَ بِما تَبْذِلُ مِن نَفسَكَ عَوضاً ولا تَكُن عَبْد غَيرِكَ وقد جَعَلكَ اللهُ حُراً وما خَيرُ اللهُ اللهِ اللهُ اللهُ

وإيَّاكَ أَن تُوجِفَ بِكَ مَطايَا الطَمَعِ فَتُورِدَكَ مَناهِلَ الهَلَكَةِ وإن استَطَعْتَ أَن لا يَكُونَ بَينَكَ وبَينَ الله ذُو نِغْمَةٍ فَافعَل "فَإِنَّكَ مُدرِكَ قِسْمَكَ، وآخِذٌ سَهمَكَ وإنَّ اليَسِيرَ مِنَ الله سُبحانَهُ أعظَمُ واكرَمُ مِنَ الكَثيرِ مِنْ خَلقِهِ وإنْ كانَ كُلٌّ مِنْهُ

"Know, my son! One whose riding animal is the day and the night, is continuously on the move although he is standing still, and he is travelling (long) distances although he is resident and stationary.

Know for certain that you will never attain all your wishes and or exceed your appointed time of death. You are on the same path as those before you, therefore reduce your seeking (of this world) and be moderate in earning, for sometimes seeking leads to destruction and not every seeker receives sustenance nor is every moderate one deprived.

Preserve your self from every baseness, even though it may take you to your desired objectives, for you will never be compensated in return for what you have spent of yourself (i.e. of your honour). Do not be a slave to another when Allah has created you free. There is no good in that good which is only acquired through evil, and in that ease which is only acquired through hardship.

Beware that the mount of greed should carry you and make you enter the springs of destruction. If you are able to do so, then do not let there be a benefactor between you and Allah, for you will attain your

portion and acquire your share (anyway). The little (you receive) from Allah is greater and more precious than the abundance from His creatures, although everything is from Him".

Commentary

From here to the very end of the letter, Imam 'Ali (as) mentions one hundred pieces of wisdom, if one of which, in the words of Qutb al–Din Rawandi, were found in the will, that would have been sufficient. 1 In this portion of the letter, Imam 'Ali (as) attracts our attention to the following points:

1. Man Is A Traveler Riding On The Palfrey Of Time

As we know, man, like natural objects and animals, is always in movement and is in a state of change, although he thinks he is motionless. The Holy Qur'an talks about his change in the following words:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْب مِنْ الْبَعْثِ فَإِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ تُرَابِ ثُمَّ مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ عَلَقَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ مُضْغَةٍ مُخَلَّقَةٍ وَغَيْرِ مُخَلَّقَةٍ لِنُبيِّنَ لَكُمْ وَنُقِرُ فِي الْأَرْحَامِ مَا نَشَاءُ إِلَى أَجَل مُسَمَّى ثُمَّ نُخْرِجُكُمْ طِفْلًا ثُمَّ لِتَبْلُغُوا أَشُدَّكُمْ مَنْ يُتَوَفَّى مُخْلَقَةٍ لِنُبيِّنَ لَكُمْ وَنُقِرُ فِي الْأَرْحَامِ مَا نَشَاءُ إِلَى أَجَل مُسَمَّى ثُمَّ نُخْرِجُكُمْ طِفْلًا ثُمَّ لِتَبْلُغُوا أَشُدَّكُمْ مَنْ يُتَوَفَّى وَمُنْكُمْ مَنْ يُرَدُّ إِلَى أَرْذَلِ الْعُمُرِ لِكَيْلَا يَعْلَمَ مِنْ بَعْدِ عِلْمٍ شَيْئًا ... وَأَنَّهُ يُحْيِ الْمَوْتَى وَأَنَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ وَأَنَّ السَّاعَةَ وَمِنْكُمْ مَنْ يُرَدُّ إِلَى أَرْذَلِ الْعُمُرِ لِكَيْلَا يَعْلَمَ مِنْ بَعْدِ عِلْمٍ شَيْئًا ... وَأَنَّهُ يُحْيِ الْمَوْتَى وَأَنَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ وَأَنَّ السَّاعَةَ الْمَوْتَى وَأَنَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ وَأَنَّ السَّاعَة

"O people! If you are in doubt about the raising, then surely we created you from a clot, then from a lump of flesh, complete in make and incomplete, that we may make clear to you; and we cause what we please to stay in the wombs till an appointed time, then we bring you forth as babies, then that you may attain your maturity; and of you is he who is caused to die, and of you is he who is brought back to the worst part of life, so that after having knowledge he does not know anything; and you see the earth sterile land, but when we send down on it the water, it stirs and swells and brings forth of every kind a beautiful herbage.

This is because Allah is the Truth and because He gives life to the dead and because He has power over all things. And because the hour is coming, there is no doubt about it; and because Allah shall raise up those who are in the graves".2

الإنسانُ مُسافِرٌ ومَنازِلهُ سِتَّةٌ: وَقَد قَطَعَ مِنها ثَلاَثَةً وبَقِي ثَلاثَةٌ فَالَّتِي قَطَعَها اَوَّلُها مِن كَثْمِ العَدَمِ اِلى صُلُب الأب وتائِب الأب وتائِب الأم كَمَا قالَ تَعالى: (يَخْرُجُ مِنْ بَيْنِ الصُّلْبِ وَالتَّرائِب). وثانيها رَحِمِ الأُم قال سبحانه: (هُوَ الَّذِي يُصوَوِرُكُمْ فِي وَتَرائِب الأَمْ كَمَا قالَ تَعالى: (يَخْرُجُ مِنْ بَيْنِ الصَّلْبِ وَالتَّها مِنَ الرَحِمِ اللَّه فَضاءِ الدُّنيا قال عَزَّ مِن قَائِل: (وَحَمْلُهُ وَفِصَالُهُ ثَلاَثُونَ شَهْرًا)، وامّا المنازِلِ الثلاث الَّتِي لَم يَقطَعها فَاوَلُها القبر قال عليه السلام:)القبرُ اوَّلُ مَنزِلٍ مِن مَنازِلِ الدُّنيا وثانِيها فَضاءُ المَحشَر) قال سبحانه: (وَعُرِضُوا عَلَى رَبِّكَ صَفَاً). وثالِثَها الجَنَّةُ أو النَّارِ قال سبحانه: (فَرِيقٌ فِي الجَنَّةِ وفَرِيقٌ فِي السَعِير)، ونحن الآن في قَطْعِ مَرحَلَةِ المَنزِلِ الرَّابِعِ ومُدَّةِ قَطْعِها مُدَّةُ عُمرِنا فَايَّامُنا فَراسِخُ وسَاعاتِنا أَمِيالٌ وانفَاسُنا خُطُواتٌ فَكَم مِن شَخْصٍ بَقِيَ لَهُ فَراسِخٌ وآخَرُ بَقِيَ لَهُ خَطُواتٌ حَمْرِنا فَايَّامُنا فَراسِخُ وسَاعاتِنا أَمِيالٌ وانفَاسُنا خُطُواتٌ فَكَم مِن شَخْصٍ بَقِيَ لَهُ فَراسِخُ وآخَرُ بَقِيَ لَهُ خَطُواتٌ خَمْرِنا فَايًامُنا فَراسِخُ وسَاعاتِنا أَمِيالٌ وانفَاسُنا خُطُواتٌ فَكَم مِن شَخْصٍ بَقِيَ لَهُ فَراسِخُ وآخَرُ بَقِيَ لَهُ حَلُواتٌ خَمْرِنا فَايَّامُنا فَراسِخُ وسَاعاتِنا أَمِيالٌ وانفَاسُنا خُطُواتٌ فَكَم مِن شَخْصٍ بَقِيَ لَهُ فَراسِخُ وآخَرُ بَقِيَ لَهُ الْعَالِ وَانفَاسُنا خُطُواتٌ فَكَم مِن شَخْصٍ بَقِيَ لَهُ فَرَاسِخُ وَاحْرَا لَا لَاللَاقِ وَلَوْلِ اللَّهُ الْعَلَى وَلَا لَا لَاللَّهَ الْعَلَا فَلَاسُونُ وَلَوْلَالُ وَلَوْلِ الْعَلَالُ وَلَا الْعَلَالُ وَلَالْعَالَ الْمَاسُلُولُ وَلَالُولُ وَلَمْ الْعَلَى وَلِي عَلَيْ الْمَالِيُ وَلَوْلَةُ الْمَلْوَلِ اللَّهُ وَلَالْوَلِي الْعَلَاقُ وَلَوْلِي الْعَلَالُ وَلَالَا فَلَالَ وَيَقَالُونَ وَلَوْلِهُ وَلِلَالَ وَلَالَالَ وَلَوْلِي الْمَلْوَلَةُ فَلَالْمُنَا فَلَا فَرَالْمُ فَلَالْمُ فَالْمُ وَالْمُلْعُ فَلُولُ اللَّهُ فَلَا صَلَقَ الْمَالُولُ وَلَالِهُ وَلَالِهُ وَلِهُ الْمَالِلُ وَالْمَالِلُ وَلَالِهُ فَلَا الْمَالُولُ وَلَوْلُولُولُ اللْولِ اللَّهُ الْمَلَ

'Man is a traveler and has six stages (on his jouney): he has passed three and three remain. The first of those that he has passed is from the concealment of non-existence to the loins of the father and the ribs of the mother. God says in this regard *"Coming from between the back and the ribs"*The second stage is the mother's womb. In this regard Allah says:

"He it is who shapes you in the wombs as He likes; there is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise".4

And the third stage is the passage from the mother's womb into this world. God has said in this regard:

"And the bearing of him and the wearing of him was thirty months"5

The three remaining stages include the world of the graves and it is said, "The grave is the first stage of the stages of the Hereafter and the last of the stages of the world."

The second stage of the three remaining stages is "Mahshar" or the gathering place of mankind on the Resurrection Day. God says:

"And they shall be brought before your Lord, standing in ranks" 6

And the third of the three remaining stages is either Paradise or Hell. God has said, regarding this:

"A party shall be in the garden and another party in the burning fire." 7

And now we are passing through the fourth stage, and the duration of its passage is the duration of our lives. Our days are *farsakhs* (a measure of 3 to 4 miles) and our hours are miles, and our breaths are steps. How many people are there for whom *farsakhs* remain and how many others for whom steps remain?

Imam 'Ali (as) has the following interpretation in this letter: Man is a traveler who is riding the palfrey of time which is manifested as day and night. This movement is continuous, but he seems as though he were motionless.

Imam 'Ali (as) in this portion of letter warns us not to be carried away in this evolutionary process by negligence so that you suddenly notice that "day and night went by but you are still asleep".

Sa'di, the great Persian poet has written two beautiful pieces:

We may not harvest dates from the thorn we have planted,

We may not weave silk from this wool;

We did not put an excuse line on the slate of our sins,

We did not write anything good beside our sins;

We are the victims to our inner selves, and we will cry,

On the Doom's Day why we did not kill our inner selves;

Alas! Our precious lives passed away,

But we did not stop our wrong-doing;

Old age and youth passed like day and night,

The night arrived, the day came and we are still asleep.

You, who can do something, do it,

Before you are unable to do it;

You who were, at one stage, a sperm in the belly,

And turned into an infant;

Then you grew till you arrived at the puberty,

You became a handsome youth;

Till you changed into a man of fame,

The rider in the court and a man of war;

What you did see did not stay long,

Neither will it stay long what you will see;

Sooner or later this handsome man,

Will change into earth and his earth into dust;

A good name for a man after his death,

Is preferable to a gold-ornamented house;

Who knows who is going to be alive next year?

Or where did the person who was our friend go?

The miserable dead are in the grave,

There is a lizard in their heads each;

The handsome appearance is nothing,

O brother bring forth a handsome conduct.8

2. Since Not All Wishes Are Obtainable...

As it was explained before, nobody can attain his wishes at all times. There are many wishes which remain unsatisfied. Thus, Imam (as) says: Since not all our wishes are obtainable and since nobody will exceed his life-limit, and since everybody has got to go the way of those who have passed away, therefore we should observe the following points:

- **a)** We should never be greedy for what we want. We should endeavor not more than adequate.
- **b**) We should be honest in our business. We should have our incomes obtained legally and we should spend in good ways what we earn.9

Sometimes it may happen that greed may cause the loss of the owner's capital altogether. And not every effort is always of benefit. Any well-wisher will benefit from his trials, however.

The Prophet (S) has said:

"The Holy spirit inspired into my spirit that no soul will die until its sustenance is complete. Therefore be moderate in seeking (your livelihood)". 10

3. Keep Up Your Generosity Under Any Conditions

Sometimes a man could attain his desires through lies, deception, injustice and flattering and the like. But since these traits are in contrast with man's true nature, man should never humiliate himself to resort to these deceitful means. Man's soul is more honest than these means. This is because nothing in this world could be equal to man's personality. Any illegitimate act may change man's character badly. It is an old maxim which says "Do not pour into your throat the water which damages your personality". Thus, it is mentioned in many traditions that the most precious persons are those who do not give much value to this world and who do not consider equal to their personality any of the world manifestations such as women, children, wealth, possessions, positions or whatever.

Imam 'Ali (as) has said in one occasion:

"Your world to me is of less value than the mucus from the nose of a goat". 11

He said in another occasion:

"What does 'Ali have to do with enjoyments that perish and pleasures that are transitory?" 12

Somebody asked the Imam al-Bagir (as):

"Who are the most precious people?"

He answered:

"Those who do not see the world as their equal."

Sa'di, the great Persian poet says:

Our human body is honorable because of our human spirit,

Our clothes not a sign for a human being;

If eyes, tongues, ears and noses were the symbols of humanity,

Then what is the difference between man and a wall-drawing?

Eating, sleeping, anger and lusts are ignorance,

A beast knows nothing from man's world;

Be truly a man, or else a bird,

Can use human speech;

Did you see the flight of birds, now put aside lusts,

Till you see the flight of man;

Why did you make yourself a slave in the hands of a devil?

You are a man and even an angel can not fill your place.

If you kill the savage in your nature,

All life-long you will be living with human morale;

A man can reach a place where he can see nobody but God,

See how lofty is human dignity.

Sa'di elsewhere has said:

It is better for you to tell the truth and remain in jail,

Than telling a lie and getting freed.

4. Man Is Created Free And Should Remain Free

Freedom is a gift from God. Man is created free. But it is the man who makes himself a slave in the hands of others. This happens in different ways: Sometimes out of extreme love with worldly manifestations, sometimes out of getting accustomed to bad manners and at times out of being obliged to others because of their benevolence, and sometimes out of aggression towards righteousness, which entails conflict with the followers of righteousness and in this way he will become a slave in their hands. 13 All these manifestations of slavery are caused by man himself and cause his becoming a slave.

Islam, however, will not agree with any kind of slavery. It wants everybody to live freely and be in Hafiz's words: free from anything which smells of possession.

On one hand, Islam considers the excessive love towards the life manifestations as a kind of slavery and condemns it seriously.

Imam Husayn (as) tells those who have sold their religion to the world:

"النَّاسُ عَبِيدُ الدُّنيا والدِّينُ لَعْقٌ عَلَى اَلسِنَتِهم يَحُوطُونَهُ مَا دَرَّت مَعايشُهُم فَإذا مُحِّصُوا بالبَلاءِ قَلَّ الدَّيانُون"

"People are slaves to the world and religion is only a substance to lick on their tongues. They take care of it as long as their livelihood is abundant. But when they are tested through trials, true believers are few". 14

And Imam 'Ali (as) introduces the end point of those who are in love with the world in the following words:

"A person who worships this world and prefers it to the Hereafter, has ruined his fate." 15
On the other hand, Imam 'Ali (as) considers people subject to desire as the slaves of desire.

"The slave of desires is more abject than a slave in bondage." 16

And the Holy Qur'an considers slavery to desire as a hindrance to the realization of facts:

"Have you then considered him who takes his low desire for his god and Allah has made him err having knowledge and has set a seal upon his ear and his heart and put a covering upon his eye? Who can then guide him after Allah? Will you not then be mindful?"17

On the other hand, the overcoming one's (bad) habits, which are a kind of slavery, causes man to reach lofty human positions:

"Man can reach lofty places by overcoming his bad habits". 18

Elsewhere, Imam 'Ali (as) mentions overcoming one's bad habits to be the best type of worshipping:

"Overcoming (bad) habits is the most excellent worship." 19

At the end, he considers struggle against righteousness as a means of failure:

مَنْ صَارَعَ الحَقَّ صَرُعِ" 570"

"One who fights the truth, will be defeated".

And if anybody fought against righteousness and fell a slave in the hands of its followers, he should not blame anybody else except himself.

Anyway, Islam wants freedom for everybody: natural freedom, freedom of thought, political freedom, civic freedom and religious freedom. See "Islam and Human rights" for more detail.

Imam 'Ali (as) has showed this meaning clearly in his letter. 20 So far as possible do not accept anything from anybody which limits your freedom or causes you to thank him since man is a slave to generosity.

5. If Happiness And Abundance Are Illegally Obtained, They Are Worthless

Imam 'Ali (as) first emphasizes the fact that man should not lose his generosity and should not belittle himself for material advantages. Then, he comes to the conclusion that if man commits wrong-doings in order to obtain social positions, the result is not happiness, nor is it abundance. This is because a position which is obtained through mischievous actions can not be good. And abudance does not make us happy if it is gained illegally. If we obtain anything by belittling we have engaged in committing sins.

This topic, however, is not in contradiction with the sayings that the good and the bad of the world are entangled or no pain, no gain. Imam 'Ali's statement here entails prosperity in life.

6. Avoid Greed

By greed is meant to expect too much of people's possessions. It is one of the most pernicious traits of human beings. Even a small amount of it humiliates people greatly. Imam 'Ali (as) has said:

"There is no one more abased than a greedy person".21

Regarding this topic, Sa'di says:

He added to my daily bread but caused my lack of honor,

Poverty is better than the humiliation of asking.

Imam 'Ali (as), in other positions, considers slavery as one of the vicious side effects of greed.

"Be free of need of whomsoever you wish and you will be his equal. Make a request from whomsoever you wish and you will be his captive. Do good to whomsoever you wish and you will be his lord."22

Man's needlessness and his satisfaction with what he possesses cause his freedom from want and being greedy towards others. Possessions cause present poverty. For the first case Imam Sadiq (as) has said:

"The one who is content with what God has provided him is the most needless of men". 23

For the second case, the Great Prophet (S) has stated:

"Beware of greed for it is the present poverty."24

It is for the above reasons that Imam (as) in his letter warns his faithful son to avoid greed and emphasizes that he should not let the palfrey of greed take him to the desert of destruction.

7. Do Not Ask People

It is a fact that life contains numerous hurdles which may not be resolved without other people's cooperation. But we should not ask people for help as far as possible. This is, firstly, the cause for humiliation. Secondly, it causes man to lose his bashfulness gradually. Thirdly, this causes man to lose his resort to God and, fourthly, it lowers man's dignity. Thus, there is an emphasis in the Islamic texts on the inappropriateness of asking others for help.

The Prophet (S) has told Abu Dharr:

"Beware of asking from people, for it is present humiliation and a speedy poverty and it will entail a long accounting on the Day of Judgment". 25

Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (as) has said:

"Seeking needs from people causes humiliation in life, the departure of shame and attaching little value to one's dignity, and it is present poverty".26

Imam 'Ali (as) has said:

السُّوَالُ يُضعِفُ لِسانَ المُتَكَلِّم ويَكسِرُ قَلبَ الشُّجَاعِ البَطَلِ ويُوقِفُ الحُرِّ العَزِيز مَوقِفَ العَبدِ الذَلِيلِ ويُدهِبُ بَهَاءً" "الوَجْهِ ويَمحَقُ الرزقَ

"Asking people for help weakens one's tongue, breaks the heart of the brave one, puts a free man in place of a lowly slave, causes one to lose face and deprives one of his sustenance". 27

That is why Imam 'Ali (as) in his letter says: "If you are able to do so, then do not let there be a benefactor between you and Allah (and do not ask a go-between for any help), for you will attain your portion and acquire your share (anyway). The little (you receive) from Allah is greater and more precious than the abundance from His creatures, although everything is from Him". The owners of such abundance, in reality, do not have anything.

- 1. . Minhaj al-Bara'a fi Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah, vol.3, p.43.
- 2. . Qur'an 22:5-7.
- 3. . Qur'an 86:7.
- 4. . Qur'an 3:6.
- 5. . Qur'an 46:15.
- 6. . Qur'an 18:48.
- 7. . Qur'an 42:7.
- 8. . Sa'di's Odes, p. 12.
- 9. The word "Muktasab" may either mean the obtained assets or it may mean. "To earn"; The first is objective, and the second one is an infinitive (Ibn Maytham's Commentary on Nahj al-Balaghah, vol.5, p.45).
- 10. (Ibn Maytham's Commentary on Nahj al-Balaghah, vol.5, p.45).
- 11. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 3.
- 12. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 224.
- 13. Mizan al-Hikmah, vol.6, p. 18).
- 14. . Tuhaf al-'Uqul, p.245.
- 15. Bihar, vol.73, p. 104.
- 16. Ghurar al-Hikam, vol.4, p.352.
- 17. . Qur'an 45:23.
- 18. The commentary of Ghurar al-Hikam, vol.3, p.229, vol.2, p.375.

There are other interpretations for these two sentences. Refer to the above commentary.

- 19. Op. cit.
- 20. . Ibn Maytham's commentary on Nahj al-Balaghah, vol.5, p.46.

Sa'di, too, has written the following poem:

The King of Khotan gave one of the bright-minded

Men a large piece of silk made into dress;

He wore it and kissed the ground,

And sent the king thousands thanks;

He became as happy as flower leafs,

Then he kissed the king's hand, saying:

How nice is the present of the king of Khotan,

And better than that is my own shabby dress

It is better for a free man to sleep on bare ground

Than to kiss the ground to obtain a carpet.

- 21. . Ghurar al-Hikam.
- 22. . Jami' al-Sa'adat, vol.2, p. 106.
- 23. Bihar al-Anwar, vol.73, p.78.
- 24. Op. cit. p. 168.
- 25. Bihar, vol.77, p.61.
- 26. . Bihar, vol.78, p. 136.
- 27. . Ghurar al-Hikam, vol.2, p. 141.

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