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## Dialogue on death related matters

I was tense, apprehensive, and agitated when my father started the discussion on the topic of death. He approached the subject with due care and serenity that was expressed in his look and the intonation of his voice.

This seemingly unusual way of starting the discussion and the somewhat death charged atmosphere scared me, causing my heartbeat to go faster with a shiver down my spine. Finally, the drops of sweat that gathered on my forehead gave my true feeling away.

When my father noticed the signs of fear in my eyes and on my face, he asked me:

- Are you afraid?
- \* Why should I not be afraid?
- Are you afraid of death or the dead?
- \* Although I am afraid of death more than the dead, yet I said, "the dead".

It was a terrifying fear that I admitted to today, for I have never witnessed a person dying. I did not know how I would face the experience of someone dying before my eyes. Before today, when I witnessed a funeral procession, a state of melancholy would force me to turn away.

\* Yes, I am scared of the dead.

I said it for a second time to reinforce my state of mind.

- Are you scared of the dead more than death? What is there after death to be afraid of? My father explained.

He added: Are you scared of a person who just moments before death was like you; he used to eat, drink, laugh, cry, go for a stroll, have dreams, sleep etc. Then surrendered to death which does not spare anyone.

Why not be more realistic and admit that you are afraid of death more than you are of the dead?

Haven't you asked yourself where all those bygone nations and their generations have gone.

"The day when their abodes became graveyards and their wealth inherited; the day they could no longer respond to a call nor hear anyone who bemoaned them". "How many of the gardens and fountains they have left! And cornfields and noble places! And goodly things wherein they rejoiced; thus (it was), and We gave them as a heritage to another people." (44/25–28).

And where have those you know gone when they passed away?

Where are your ancestors? "They exchanged the face of the earth for its depth, vastness for a very limited space, light for darkness, and parting with their loved ones to solitude".

He then reminded me of the words of Imam Ali (a.s.) at the hour of his death, "Yesterday, I was your companion. Today, I am an example to be pondered. Tomorrow, I shall leave you. Take your lesson from the state I am in – my quietness, pacifity, my eyes can hardly turn in their sockets, and my limbs can hardly move. This is clearer to you than words of advice".

My father also talked of the Imam's words when he warned of the fire of hell, "Let it be known, this delicate flesh cannot stand the hell fire. So, have mercy on yourselves as you have experienced the trials and tribulations of this life. Have you experienced agony of a prick of a thorn, a stumble that bleeds the foot, and the unbearable sweltering heat? Just imagine how much worse it will be, if one is thrown into two layers of fire, lying on stone and taking Satan for a companion!".

It is time you should fear the aftermath of death, not merely death itself,

"On the day when you shall see it, every nursing woman shall quit in confusion what she suckled, and every pregnant woman shall lay down her burden, and you shall see men intoxicated, and they shall not be intoxicated but the chastisement of Allah will be severe." (22/2).

"On the day that every soul shall find present what it has done of good and what it has done of evil, it shall wish that between it and that (evil) there was a long duration of time; and Allah makes you to be cautious of (retribution from) Himself and Allah is Compassionate to the servants." (3/28)

Let it be that the person who is in their last throws or who has just died serve as a reminder for you that your turn shall come. It should not be a terrifying experience.

A momentary silence prevailed that gave me the chance to reconsider my position. However, it did not last long, for my father cut short my contemplation, saying:

- Should it happen that you see a Muslim dying, leave your apprehensions aside and [turn him towards

the Qiblah (the direction, of Ka'ba, one must face while praying)].

- \* How should one do that?
- Make him lie on his back with the soles of his feet pointing to the qiblah.
- \* Does this mean that I should stretch his legs in the direction of the qiblah?
- Precisely, irrespective of whether the dying person is a man or a woman, old or young. It is advisable too that you whisper into his ears to instil in him how to bear witness to the unity of Allah and the prophethood of Mohammad (s.a.w.), to acknowledge the imamate of the twelve Imams, and to recite the Chapter of as–Saffat unto him to ease the agony of the last throws of death. It is makrouh for a person who is in a state of either janabah or haydh to be present while a person is dying, or to touch their body at the point of their giving up the soul.
- \* And if he dies?
- It is mustahab to close their eyes, shut their mouth, stretch their arms beside their body, straighten their legs, cover them, recite verses from the Holy Qur'an, light the place where they used to dwell, and inform the faithful to attend their funeral; it is also mustahab to prepare the body for burial quickly, unless you suspect the person is not really dead.
- \* What if you are not sure the person is dead?
- You may delay burial preparations until you have made sure that they were dead. Then, it will become obligatory that you wash the body and take other necessary steps.
- \* What about foetal miscarriage or abortion?
- Even the foetus, of four months [or even less than that, but well-proportioned in creation] should be accorded the same treatment. Prayer for its soul, however, is not obligatory and not mustahab.
- \* Who takes the responsibility of washing the body of a dead person?
- A male can wash a body of a male. Likewise, A female can wash a body of a female, except in the case of husband and wife. They can wash one another's body. The same goes for a discerning youngster, male or female; they can wash each other's body. The same ruling applies to a mahram (One's immediate relatives according to a certain classification detailed in Shari'a law), who can wash the body of his mahram from the opposite sex [if a mahram from the same sex was not available].
- \* How is the corpse washed?
- Three types of ghusl should be carried out.

- 1. Once using lotus leaves (sidr) added to water.
- 2. The second ghusl using water with camphor added to it.
- 3. The third ghusl using pure water.

[Provided ghusl be sequential], i.e. washing the head and neck first, then the right part of the body, then the left part. Furthermore, the water used should be tahir, not najis, ownerless (mubah), not maghsoub (usurped), free from impurities (mutlaq), not mixed; the lotus leaves and camphor should also be ownerless.

- \* Do you have to remove the clothes of the dead person while washing?
- It can be washed with the clothes on; it might even be better.
- \* How can you guarantee the purity of the water when you add lotus and camphor to it?
- Care must be taken to add the quantity that would not turn it into a mixed type of water, i.e. without losing its properties as water free from impurities.
- \* The body of a dead person might become najis through contact with an external source or from within the body during ghusl. What should one do?
- Removing the source of najasah and rendering the body tahir from it is obligatory. Renewing ghusl, however, is not mandatory.
- \* What should be done after ghusl?
- It is obligatory to embalm the corpse and shroud it.
- \* What does embalming involve?
- Wiping the seven points of the body that are usually placed on the floor during prayer (mawadhi' as-sujoud) with pounded camphor that still has its smell. The camphor used should also be ownerless, not usurped, tahir, and not najis, [even though it will not necessary lead to rendering the dead body najis]. It is preferable that the wiping is done with the palm of the hand, starting from the forehead.
- \* What about the order of the rest of the seven points?
- No particular order is necessary.
- \* How should you go about shrouding the body?
- It is obligatory that the dead body be shrouded with three pieces:

- 1. The loin cloth [that should cover the area of the body between the umbilicus and the knees]
- 2. The shirt [which should cover the area of the body between the shoulders and the middle of legs].
- 3. The covering cloth, that should cover the whole body [and should be long enough so that you can tie it at both ends].
- \* And widthwise?
- It should be wide enough [to wrap the entire body and overlap].
- \* Are there any other conditions regarding these pieces of cloth that should be met?
- Yes, in total they should be sufficient to cover the entirety of the corpse. It should not be maghsoub, not made of pure silk, [not gilded, and not made of furs of animals whose meat is not fit for human consumption], and not najis; in an emergency, however, apart from cloth that is maghsoub, shrouding with the rest becomes permissible.
- \* If, for any reason, shrouding with three pieces becomes impossible?
- Shrouding the body with any piece available would suffice.
- \* Once ghusl, embalming, and shrouding is done, what next?
- Performing the special prayer for the dead is obligatory, even if the dead person is a child, who could not understand what prayer is, e.g. a six-year old.
- \* How is prayer conducted?
- Prayer for the soul of the dead is different from the daily prayer that is usually done, both in form and content. It consists of five takbirat (the utterance of "Allahu Akbar", Allah is Great); it involves no recitation from the Holy Qur'an, no bowing, no prostration, no tashahhud (the middle of a prayer, said sitting, where testament of the unity of God and the prophethood of Mohammad is uttered), and no tasleem (the concluding part, of a prayer, said sitting, where saluting the Prophet, oneself and the good servants of the Creator, and the two angels takes place). Basically, the person who leads the prayer and those taking part in it invoke mercy for the dead person after the first takbirah. As for the rest four takbirat, you could offer a number of supplications, praying for peace to be with the Prophet and his Pure Progeny, praying for the well–being of the faithful, and praising God Almighty.
- \* Could you give me a brief account of it?
- After uttering the inaugural takbira, you should bear witness to the unity of Allah and the prophethood of Mohammad. On reciting the second takbira, you may say, "Allahumma Salli Ala Mohammadin Wa Aali Mohammad", meaning, May Allah's peace be with Mohammad and his Pure Progeny. After the

utterance of the third takbira, you may invoke forgiveness for the believers. After the fourth takbira, you may pray for mercy and forgiveness for the dead person. Upon uttering the fifth takbira, this special prayer ends.

- \* Are there any other important matters one should take account of when performing this special prayer?
- Yes, the following are the salient points:
- 1. There must be niyyah (intention to designate the prayer one is performing, or any other act of worship, and that the sole purpose of the act is to seek nearness to Allah). In this case, the name of the deceased must be specified.
- 2. Performing the prayer in a standing position so long as one possibly can.
- 3. The prayer must be performed after the dead body has been washed, embalmed, and shrouded.
- 4. On performing the prayer, one should face the qibla, if one is free to do so.
- 5. The dead body should be lying in front of the person who is conducting the prayer.
- 6. The head of the dead person should be on the right hand side of the person conducting the prayer and his legs to his left.
- 7. The dead body should rest on its back.
- 8. There must be no barrier between the dead body and the person conducting the prayer, such as a screen or a wall. There is no harm, however, if the body is in a coffin, or shielded by another dead body.
- 9. There must not be a great distance between the station of the person conducting the prayer and the dead body; the same goes for the height, i.e. one must not be much higher than the other. However, there is no harm in separation, if the rows of those saying the prayer were solid, or if there was one prayer for more than one soul.
- 10. Permission must be obtained from the next of kin of the deceased to say the prayer.
- 11. There should be no break between the takbirat, the supplications and remembrance.
- \* I have noticed that you did not mention that those who offer the prayer should be in wudhu, ghusl, or tayamum. Is there any reason for that?
- Tahara is not obligatory on the people who are conducting the prayer.
- \* After the prayer has been performed, what next?
- The corpse must be buried, provided that:

- 1. The burial be so secured that carnivorous animals, should they be present, would not encroach upon the sanctity of the body.
- 2. The burial ensures no spread of bad smell, from the body, that might be a source of discomfort to other people.

Upon entombing the corpse, it should be placed on its right hand side, ensuring that the face should be set in the direction of the gibla.

- \* Are there any conditions that should be taken into consideration insofar as the place of burial is concerned?
- Yes,
- 1. The plot of land must be ownerless, not maghsoub; not reserved by way of endowment to any private quarter, such as schools and Hussainyyas. Due care should be accorded to the upkeep of the place or adjacent buildings, [even if it does not pose any damage or hindrance to the place].
- 2. Extra care must be accorded to the sanctity of the corpse, in that, places, such as rubbish tips should be avoided as places for burial.
- 3. The corpse of a Muslim must not be buried in the graveyards of the infidels.
- \* And after burial?
- It has been related from the Messenger (s.a.w.) that, "Nothing more difficult shall befall the dead than the first night. So have mercy over your dead by way of almsgiving. Should you not afford it, you may perform a two–raka'a (the bowing act) prayer for their souls. In the first raka'a, you may read after the Chapter of al–Fatiha, the verse of al–Kursi (The Throne). In the second, after al–Fatiha, you may recite the Chapter of al–Qadr ten times. On concluding the prayer, you may say, "Allahumma Salli Ala Mohammadin Wa Aal Mohammad", and, "Oh Allah, please accept this on behalf of the dead person, i.e be naming them.
- \* In a previous dialogue, you mentioned a special ghusl you called, "ghusl of touching a dead body". Could you tell me more about it?
- Yes, ghusl is obligatory on anyone who comes into contact with a dead body, which has lost its heat and before it is washed, irrespective of whether it belongs to a Muslim or an unbeliever.
- \* Is ghusl called for, if the body is wet?
- Irrespective of whether it is wet or dry, and no matter whether touching the corpse is done at will or accidental.

- \* What should the person who came into contact with a corpse do?
- They should do the following:
- 1. Perform ghusl before embarking on prayer, for example.
- 2. It is haraam for a person in a state of uncleanness to touch the writing of the Holy Qur'an, or do other things that are forbidden to a person in a state of janabah.

There are also other matters that follow on from a death of a person that you need to know about.

- When a husband dies, his wife should observe a waiting period, irrespective of the age of the wife, and whether or not the marriage was consummated. A non-pregnant wife should wait four months and ten days. If she is adult and sane, she should, during the waiting period, abandon wearing make-up, perfume, and glamorous clothes, for it is haraam. However, she has the right to bathing, putting on clean clothes, and going out, especially, if she has something to attend to or an act of worship to perform, and, of course, in an emergency.
- \* You mentioned a woman who is pregnant. Is this a special case?
- The ruling on a widowed pregnant woman is that she must observe a waiting period for the rest of her pregnancy. If after she has given birth, the total period that has elapsed since her husband died was four months and ten days, her waiting period should end. If not, she should wait for the remaining period that completes the four months and ten days.

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