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Oh soul at peace return unto your Lord, well pleased, well-pleasing. Enter among My servants. Enter My paradise. (89:28–30)

On the holy birthday anniversary of Imam Husain, peace be upon him, last Monday I began a discourse saying that anyone who possessed a lofty spirit must suffer physical discomfort while only those who have loose spirits live in comfort, sleep soundly and enjoy delicious dishes and other benefits.

Tonight, I wish to discuss the greatness and nobility of the spirit and show the differences between the two. Greatness of spirit is one thing but nobility is a higher quality. In other words, every greatness is not nobility but every nobility is also greatness.

Determination is obviously a sign of greatness of the spirit and there are different levels of determination. One person is content to secure a diploma while another knows no limit to the pursuit of knowledge, and his aim is to make the utmost use of his life and gain as much knowledge as he can.

You may have heard the well-known story of Abu Rayhan Biruni, a man whose true worth according to scholars, is not quite known. He was so extraordinary a mathematician, sociologists and historian that he is considered by some to be superior to Abu Ali Sina (Avicenna).

These two were contemporaries. Abu Rayhan was in love with knowledge, research and discoveries. Sultan Mahmud summoned him to attend his court and he had to obey the call. He accompanied the King in his conquest of India and found a great treasure of knowledge in that country. But he did not know Sanskrit, so he began learning it. Inspite of his old age, he learned it to a very high degree and after many years of study, he produced a book called Tahqiq mal al–Hind min maqulihi marzalah fi al–aql wa maqbulat, which is a very valuable source of reference for the Indianologists of the world.

He was on his death bed when a jurisprudent neighbor of his, learning of his serious illness, went to visit him. Abu Rayhan was still conscious and, in seeing the jurisprudent, asked him a question of jurisprudence concerning inheritance or some other issue. The jurisprudent was amazed that a dying man should show interest in such matters. Abu Rayhan said, "I should like to ask you which is better, to

die with knowledge or without it?" The man said, "Of course it is better to know and die." Abu Rayhan said, "That is why I asked my first question." Shortly after the jurisprudent reached home, the cries of lamentation told him that Abu Rayhan had died. This shows his determination even at the moments of death.

One person is great in gathering wealth, for example, while others show no such endeavors and are content with earning a simple livelihood by whatever means they can, whether it is by serving others or begging or submitting to abasement. Are those two types of effort equal? Not at all.

Sometimes you see the people who lack the resolution to get rich, simply because they are weak and others scorn and laugh at them. They recite verses of the Quran about asceticism, based on fallacious reasoning. But they are wrong. The person who pursues the amassing of wealth, with all his misery, with all his devotion to the world, is still better than those having a weak determination or no determination, who resemble beggars and thus, he has more character. This person is not blameworthy before him.

These persons can be considered blameworthy only before a real ascetic who himself is a man of determination. Like Ali, peace be upon him, he can gather riches, not because of his own needs, but to spend on others and help the needy. He is in a position to reproach another for whom storing and hiding riches have become a goal, not a means.

Similarly, one may seek high rank and position. Alexander the Great was such a man who desired to rule the world. He is a superior to a man who lives in servility and has no determination for feelings of nobility. Nadir Shah is another example of high-mindedness. These men have great spirits but it cannot be said that they have noble spirits.

Alexander is an example of a great ambition, and his greatness has developed only in one direction, in ambition, fame and influence, in being the most powerful man in the world.

His spirit is noble only to that extent. But did he experience any ease and comfort? Could Nadir have had an easy life with his tyranny, and his building of minarets with the skulls of those he had killed, the man who pulled men's eyes out of their sockets, the man who was madly ambitious? He had no time sometimes to take off his boots for ten days. A story is told about him that in a very severe winter night he reached a caravan serai by himself. The keeper was awakened by a loud knock, and when he opened the gate he saw a burly–looking man riding a big horse. He asked the keeper what food he had, and the latter said he only had eggs.

He was sharply ordered to fry the eggs and bring it with some bread for him and some fodder and barley for his horse. The keeper did so and the man rested there an hour or two and after grooming his horse, he threw some gold coins on to the keeper's lap and said, "Very soon a column of soldiers will reach here. Tell them Nadir has gone in that direction and they must follow at once." On hearing the name of Nadir, the keeper was so frightened that he let the coins fall down. Nadir ordered him to go on the roof and shout to the soldiers on their arrival not to linger a moment but to follow him speedily. The men

grumbled when they heard the message but none of them dared to stay a minute to refresh himself.

One may become a Nadir, but he can never enjoy a comfortable bed, fine food and hundreds of other luxuries. His body can never relax. And eventually he will die. Whoever has great determination, in whatever area it may be, will have no physical ease. But none of these men possessed noble souls. Their souls were great but were not noble. Suppose a man to be a great man of learning without any other good quality. He has lofty thoughts about human knowledge. Another is skillful in gathering wealth. Someone else is full of rancour, envy or ambition. All of them are extremely selfish but none of them is noble and magnanimous.

The point is that from a psychological and philosophical point of view, there is another kind of greatness which does not depend on selfishness and which is called humanity.

I have not yet seen how materialists explain away this aspect of the human being. What makes the human being or, at least, some individuals have a feeling of honor in their spirits, something which is beyond and above selfishness? Such a human being wishes to be noble and great, but not at the expense of another. One's spirit does not allow one to tell a lie. Nobility is the opposite of baseness and a person avoids baseness completely.

Mussolini, the well-known Italian dictator, is reported to have said to a friend that he preferred to live like a lion for one year, rather than like a sheep for a hundred years. He insisted that his friend should not quote his words to anyone since his being a lion must mean that other people are sheep and if other people learned what Mussolini desired, they, too, would want to be lions in which case the dictator could no longer remain a lion. There is no nobleness in such an attitude.

But what is a noble person like? It is a person who wants all people to be lions rather than sheep in the world. The Prophet has said, "I was appointed to perfect the morality of nobility," not "I was appointed to perfect good morals." The latter is not the correct meaning. Every innovator of a school claims that what he teaches is right. Even Nietzche who believes in might and has no compassion for the weak, considers his school as one of the true ethics. His words mean nobleness not mastery over others.

Ali, peace be upon him, says to his son, Imam Husain, peace be upon him, "Uplift your spirit above every mean act and think that your spirit is worthier than to be polluted by meanness." He advises his son to think himself nobler than to demean himself by lies or by abasing himself before others. Ali, peace be upon him, says that an honorable person never commits adultery and this is irrespective of the fact that it is forbidden by the divine law and punishable in both worlds. In the epic of the Nahj ul-balagha it is said that in the first encounter of Ali, peace be upon him, with Mu'awiyah, in the Battle of Siffin, the Imam had no desire to fight and wished to settle matters through letters and emissaries. But when Mu'awiyah seized the access to the waters of the Euphrates to prevent Ali's army from reaching it, hoping to inflict defeat on them through lack of water, he wrote a letter asking Mu'awiyah to desist from such strategy since fighting had not begun yet and there was the possibility of reaching an agreement.

Mu'awiyah refused to forego his advantage and when Ali found that his insistance was of no avail, he gathered his men and delivered a discourse saying, "These people are seeking war like food. If so, do you know what should be done? You are thirsty and there remains only one way, and that is to quench your swords with their blood in order to satisfy yourselves. If you die victoriously, you are alive but if you live in defeat, you are dead."

This is how Ali, peace be upon him, inspired the spirit of nobility and self-respect in his followers. Ali, peace be upon him, believes that all vices are caused by the baseness of character. For example, he thinks slandering is the act of a weak person. A brave person is so noble and magnanimous that he or she expresses the objections he or she feels for another to that person's face or at least keeps silent. One who is covetous towards others is making the self-contemptuous. One who laments one's misfortune before others is abasing the self.

Someone came before Imam Sadiq, peace be upon him, lamenting his distress and poverty. The Imam asked an attendant to go and pay him a few dinars. The man said in apology to the Imam, "I did not intend to ask for anything." The Imam said, "I did not say that you did but my advice to you is to abstain from narrating your difficulties before others, for you lose your worth, and Islam does not wish a believer to be humbled before others."

Ali, peace be upon him, says, "He who describes his helplessness for others is destroying his self-respect and honor which are the dearest things for a true believer. And he who lets his carnal desires dominate him is abasing himself." Ali peace be upon him, believes that all virtues are due to the nobleness of spirit. Being truthful, honest, perseverant and avoiding all vices are the result of that nobleness. Drinking, to give an example, causes drunkenness, even though temporarily robbing one of reason and reducing one to the level of a stupid animal.

He also says, "I do not base my life on excess." The teachings of our gnostics and Sufis have many exalted thoughts. But one of the problems that Islam suffered through the teachings of the gnostics and Suifis was that it was influenced by the teachings of Christianity, Buddhism and Manicheanism. They lost hold of the correct balance in what they called forgetting the self and killing the self. If they had paid attention to Islam, they would have realized that Islam is in favor of annihilating one aspect of the self and reviving another aspect of it. It advises you to forget your animal self and strengthen your noble spirit. I have come across the same idea in the works of the poet–philosopher, Igbal Lahouri.

Islam believes that one of the divine punishments is that the human being is brought to forget the self altogether. The Quran says,

Be not one of those who forgot God and so He caused them to forget their souls. (59:19)

Do you know of anyone like Ali who called people to renounce the world? Ali did this but at the same time he emphasized self-respect and magnanimity. He says to his son, Hasan, peace be upon him, "Do not be the slave of another being. God has created you free." How is it that Ali, peace be upon him, as

the most humble man in the world, invites people to regard the self? This self that he respects is the noble side of mankind.

We have in hand many sayings of this kind belonging to Ali, peace be upon him, but few quotations from his two sons, a result of the despotic conditions of their time. But in the books containing the words of Imam Husain, peace be upon him, the question of narrowness of the spirit is noticed abundantly, particularly his sayings in the last moments before his martyrdom, blaming those who had sold themselves to tyrants. He says, "If you are not religious and do not fear the Resurrection, at least be free men in your world." In his discourse in Mecca, he says that his spirit does not allow him to live and see such corrupt conditions, let alone be a part of it. Again he says, "Verily I consider death to be nothing but felicity and life with these tyrants to be anything but misery." By this he means that it is an honor for him not to be amongst such people who bring nothing but weariness and sorrow to his soul.

To those who advised him to abandon his fight against tyrants, he quoted the sentence of one of the Prophet's friends, said as an answer to his cousin who wished to prevent him from fighting. The sentence is, "No. I will go forth. Death is no disgrace but honor for a free man whose intention is to follow the right path and fight a holy war. Death in aiding the good and opposing the wicked is an honor." He continues saying," You who forbid me this humility is enough for you to live in abjection. Do you not see that they do not act according to what is right and no one forbids all this corruption?" Again he says, "A believer must seek death." When it was reported to Ali that Mu'awiyah's army had plundered the town of Ambar, and seized the earnings of a Muslim woman, he says, "By God, if a Muslim dies in sorrow for such a happening, he is not blameworthy."

On the day of his martyrdom (the 10th of Muharram), Imam Husain, peace be upon him, gives this answer to the messenger of Ibn Ziad who was demanding allegiance, "I will never offer my hand in humiliation nor confess like a slave (that I have been in error)." Even in his last moments of fighting when all his relatives and companions died and he himself, in facing death, and his household is in danger of capture, he continues to declare his exalted goal of nobility and freedom.

Thus we see that all great men are not noble but all noble ones are great. About Imam Husain, peace be upon him, we must say that he was great in his good deeds, his indifference to wealth, his endeavours in enjoining to good and forbidding the wrong, in his lack of ambition and vengefulness, in his insistence on prayer and communion with God and in his revival of the noble self in fighting for (God and the truth. I pray God to grant us such spirits of nobleness and to give us the awareness of our destiny.

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