

Lecture 4: Islamic Position Concerning Asceticism And Renunciation Of The World

Another aspect that I wish to discuss concerns the word: "زهد/Zuhud" (asceticism). In the Qur'an we do not come across the word in the sense used now. It has been mentioned in the Prophet's tradition and in the narrations attributed to the pious Imams. However, the meaning of the word as used in the Qur'an is not obscure, especially as explained in the sense in which it was used formerly in traditions and annals, which is different from its current sense. We hear of people, we find that their asceticism is negative, meaning that they are content with a little. But this is not the right meaning.

One of the qualities of an ascetic is to be able in his personal life to be content with a little, which is of great philosophical importance. But not everyone who is content with a little may be called an ascetic. Let me explain it further.

Asceticism is related to worldly goods and riches and even to positions. If you ask whether worldly goods and whether worldly goods and wealth and position are good or bad, the answer depends on their use or purpose? These things are a form of power, but the question is What do you want them for? You may be a slave of your lust and intend to satisfy them by means of these powers. If you are such a person whatever you use to attention your carnal desires (whether it is position, wealth, knowledge, religion or even devoutness) will be bad.

However, if you purify yourself, and do not lust, avoid self-centeredness, and have a divinely worthy social objective, then the wealth, or position which you employ in this way, is used properly. This is worship and devotion, since you are using them for your spiritual goals. This is emphasized by Imam al-Sadiq (as). A number of ascetics of his time discussed asceticism with him. The Imam (as) said: "If what you say were true, then, how is it that after Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) was proved innocent and released from prison. He sought from the Egyptian ruler a position of crucial importance to the whole wealth of the country? Why does the Qur'an mention this without accusing Yusuf (as) of being worldly? Because Yusuf (as) was devoted to God. He wanted that position for divine and spiritual goals, and so his action

is not worldly but spiritually motivated.”

Islamic men of learning say that accepting position from a tyrannical government is illegitimate, but if his goal in doing so is service, or to help the oppressed, it is not only not a sin, but according to religious verdicts, it is sometimes recommended and sometimes even obligatory. This applies to wealth, too. Why do you gather wealth? If you do not, you are sinful.

Islam is a supporter of two kinds of power spiritual and economic. It believes in spiritual power in the sense that it says you should be morally so strong that you do not pay undue attention to the world and what is in it, so as not to be enslaved by it. Imam Ali (as) says that God has declared in the Qur'an that you are an ascetic when you attain a stage where power over the whole world does not please or enslave you, and even if the world is taken away from you, it does not defeat your spirit. As for economic power, we should try to gain legitimate wealth in order to use it in the right way. When we realize that Islam supports both spiritual and economic powers, then we find that we are "ascetics" in the sense of harboring weakness or remaining actually weak in both spiritual and economic matters.

If we are ascetics who have avoided wealth and economic power, we have chosen weakness. Those who lack riches obviously can do nothing economically and are obliged to stretch their hands before others. We are also spiritually weak when we are brought up to think ourselves ascetic by keeping away from wealth.

Asceticism in Islam signifies spiritual strength, and having this spiritual strength enables one to make good use of wealth. Those who asked Imam al-Sadiq (as) about asceticism were ignorant of the philosophy of it. They had heard that Imam Ali (as) had been ascetic, and had supposed that an ascetic must, under all conditions, wear worn-out garments and eat barley bread. They were ignorant of the reason for eating barley bread. Imam al-Sadiq (as) explained it for them and told them that Ali (as) just wanted to be human. He was not an ascetic of a type who would choose seclusion.

Ali (as) was more sociable than anyone and was most active socially and economically, and, yet, he did not accumulate wealth. He was engaged in commerce, agriculture, gardening, planting trees, irrigation and in military expeditions. But he remained an ascetic with all these varied activities. Sometimes he went into the orchards of Madina which belonged to non-Muslims who belonged to the Book and worked there for a wage. Then he bought wheat or barley which his wife turned into dough and bread. And when they came across a poor or needy person or an orphan or a captive, they served him in preference to themselves. This was Ali's asceticism.

The asceticism of Ali (as) was based on sympathy, and sympathy is human. He did not even make full use of his legitimate earning. He gave himself only the wage of a soldier out of the public fund and he was not willing to sleep with a square meal. Why? Because his heart and conscience did not allow him. He said: "There are many hungry ones around me. How can I sleep with a full stomach?"

He was not referring only to his neighbors. He was thinking of the Islamic lands as a whole in which

someone might be in dire want of a loaf of bread. If you find such an example of asceticism, he deserves being honored by the whole humanity. But we seem to call our incapability, immobility and deadness asceticism. But Ali (as) said: "Should I be one of those about whom they say: 'it is enough pain for you to sleep in satiety while others are hungry around you?'"

The Prophet (S) in his old age was exerting himself with a self –sacrificing spirit so much that he was inspired in a Qur'an verse to observe moderation. Once the Prophet 's companions noticed that the Prophet (S) did not that an ill–clad man had come to his house at that hour, and the Prophet had nothing to offer him except his own clothes and this delayed his prayer. The Prophet had sent someone to buy the man a robe. The man bought a fine one for twelve Dirhams. The Prophet (S) on seeing the robe said: "I can do with a cheaper one." The Prophet (S) went out and obtained refund, and on the way back he met a slave girl who was weeping. Asked why, she said that she had lost four Dirhams of her master. He gave her four Dirhams out of the twelve and bought two robes with the remainder, giving one of them to the ill–clad man.

Later the Prophet (S) came across the same girl who was again found crying. He asked her the reason, and she said: "If I go back, I will be beaten (because I took your money)," The Prophet (S) offered to accompany her. On reaching her house he shouted his customary greetings from outside. He repeated his greetings three times as was his habit. The inmates were now sure that the Prophet (S) was there. So they invited him to come in. The Prophet asked why they did not answer his first greeting. They said: "We loved to hear your voice since it brings us blessings, and if we had acknowledged your first greeting, we would have been deprived of the second and the third." The Prophet silently entered and said: "I have come to intercede for this slave girl. If she is late, do not trouble her." They said: "In honor of your presence here, we will set her free." The Prophet (S) expressed his thanks to God that with twelve Dirhams he has clothed an ill–clad or under–clothed man and freed a slave. This indicates real asceticism, piety, sympathy and humanity.

This verse (8:24) shows that Islamic teachings can enliven every aspect of life, when they penetrate one's heart and produce a renewed spirit, insight and activity. Therefore, any other teaching which causes human stagnation or "deadness" is not of Islam. The history of Islam confirms the lively position indicated by the verse through several centuries.

Today we often see that the ideas that we have "derived" from Islam lack life–giving property. Therefore, it is necessary to revise them after finding out if we are possibly mistaken about them. This is the meaning of the revival of Islamic thought. The spectacles we are wearing are not right, so they must be changed for the better.

In the last session I discussed some ethical ideas of Islam, such as asceticism and trust in God. I realized that the discussion was incomplete. So, tonight is of fundamental importance.

The current idea of asceticism is related to worldly matters, love of the world and its renunciation, which

sense is not conveyed in the Qur'an. As used in Islamic traditions, especially in the sayings of the Prophet (S) and Imam Ali (as) and other Imams (as). There is no doubt that it has a sublime significance. In Islamic literature, both in poetry and prose, and in Persian and Arabic literatures, asceticism is often mentioned. Now we must see, what our way of thinking about it should be in connection with the evidence and teachings offered by the Holy Qur'an.

The word 'asceticism' originally meant 'disinclination'. But it has assumed a different meaning in Islamic, Christian and other non-Islamic teaching. An ascetic is not a person who is naturally disinclined to things, such as patient who has no desire for food, or someone who dislikes sweetmeats, or an impotent man becoming disinclined to sexuality.

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