

## Lecture 5: The Spiritual Goal And Worldly Aversions

If we admit that Islam favors asceticism, then what is the goal recommended for it? Some people suppose that the function of a religion is something apart from other activities, such as commerce, agriculture and industry, and that it belongs to a different world, They think the task of a religion is simply worship, and that of commerce, agriculture, industry and management are worldly, and for them asceticism is turning away from worldly matters to other-worldly tasks. This is, of course, wrong; for the affairs which are called worldly are recommended by Islam, and asceticism in the Islamic sense does not reject them.

There are two kinds of asceticism which explicit Islamic texts deny, but they exist in non-Islamic ways. One of them is that the tasks of both worlds are separate from each other. Every activity that is related to the worldly life belongs to this world and has no connection with the other world, and those tasks which are not connected with this world, irrespective of having a useful or harmful effect on the worldly life, are called worship, where worship means praying, fasting and self-denial, asceticism could mean abandoning worldly affairs so as to concentrate on other-worldly tasks.

The Arabic dictionary 'Al-Munjad' has defined 'asceticism' exactly in this way which corresponds with its Christian definition. It says: 'Leaving the affairs of the world to have time for worship'. It implies that the tasks of the two worlds are separate, without any connection between, or benefit for, one another. Thus, to be an ascetic meant retirement from society and choosing seclusion in a monastery, a convent or a cave, or to lead a monastic life.

Does Islam accept such a definition for asceticism? No, obviously not. In my book; "Mas'aleh Hijab" (The Question of Veil), I have said that according to some people the philosophy of veil is related to self-denial and monasticism, but Islam has rejected this idea and is wholly opposed to isolation from society.

The Prophet (S) himself said explicitly: "There is no monasticism in Islam." He said that the kind of asceticism his followers practiced was as good as Jihad, or purposeful endeavor. Moreover, Islam

recommends as devotion what other religions regard as secular or worldly.

Asceticism as understood in the secular sense does not exist in the Qur'an... In any case what Christian asceticism considers worldly is accepted by Islam as a part of other-worldly things on one condition, that is to be abstemious in the way of God.

Islam does not differentiate between the two worlds in which Muslims believe. In Islam commerce or agriculture has both the worldly and other-worldly significance, depending on the objective, if your trading is legitimate, and not based on usury or unfairness, but intended to gain incomes to avoid beggary and to serve your society and augment its economic strength, Islam considers this as part of one's devoutness. So are agriculture and animal husbandry, if they have a similar goal. All these are included in devotions to God on part of those who are aware of Islamic goals and pursue them.

In the same way whatever other schools of thought consider as worship are regarded by Islam as a part of worldly life, so that praying and fasting are not only beneficial for the next world, but also for this one.

Thus, we cannot consider asceticism as belonging to one world. Islam has described both legitimate and illegitimate things. It has said that drinking, gambling and usury are forbidden and harmful for both worlds. Islam does not agree with Christian asceticism, and it is unfortunate that many of us understand it in its Christian or secular sense.

There is another meaning attached to asceticism which must be explained. It is not a question of separating the two worlds and their tasks and forsaking the pleasures of one of them for the other, such people do not recommend leaving aside the tasks of life. They say it is a duty which must be fulfilled that we must try to avoid pleasures in this world to prevent to decrease of enjoyment in the next!

Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna) says (in his book: *Namat Nahume Isharat*) that an ascetic is one whose aversion to the worldly enjoyments is geared to attainment of the other-worldly satisfactions. This does not mean however, that one can properly or legitimately exchange pleasures of this world for those of the next. Islam does not teach that if one enjoyed this world, he will be deprived of the next.

Man is not granted enjoyment in the Hereafter because of abandoning it here. Also, it does not mean that each being is allotted a certain amount of pleasure that must be secured here, while leaving other enjoyments for the hereafter. There is no apportionment of pleasures to make up there is no apportionment of pleasures to make up there for a deficit here. Other-worldly pleasures are not the result of deliberate deprivation in this world, but a consequence of other factors.

Imam Ali (as) says in *Nahjul-Balagha*: There are virtuous people who deserve the blessings of both worlds. They enjoy the best food and living here and receive blessing of the next world, too. Islam considers certain pleasures unlawful, and indulgence in them does not only deprive us of the next world's satisfactions, but, on the contrary, results in punishment there. Adultery is one of these. So are drinking, gambling, usury, slander, and lying.

But legitimate deeds are not so. The Qur'an has affirmed that enjoyments which are pure and bring no misfortune for man are lawful. The Qur'an forbids what is not a genuine pleasure. Drinking wine produces evil consequences for the mind, body and society. So does adultery.

The Qur'an says:

***"Those who follow the Apostle, the Prophet, the Ummi, whom they find written down in the Tawrat and the Injeel, (Who) commends them (what is) good and prohibits impure things, and removes from them their burden and the yokes which upon them, ... ?" (7:157)***

***"Say: (O' Our Apostle Muhammad!) who has prohibited the adornment (granted) of God which He has brought forth for His servants... ?" (7:32)***

Accordingly, a pleasure which is not momentary and transient and has not undesirable results for the body, spirit and society is lawful, as God's Graces granted to human beings? Thus, we are encouraged to benefit from clean and pure livelihoods. Nevertheless, these provisions are not exchangeable as between the two worlds.

Asceticism in Islam is not obligatory, but an attainment towards perfection with a spiritual goal different from the two worldly goals mentioned earlier, It has been recommended to avoid worshipping pleasures and sinking in them, even in lawful ones, which are not forbidden, when abstention would be conducive to achievement of goal.

There are several goals which Islam accepts for asceticism in the sense of forsaking legitimate pleasures. A person may be placed in a situation where others are in greater need him. What should he do? He shows generosity and self-sacrifice and offers his own lawful satisfaction to others. If he wastes it, he is foolish. But he offers food, clothing, and comfort in order to bring ease to the life of others. This is self-sacrifice and one of the noblest of human qualities. This is an exalted, correct, human asceticism, in the sense conveyed by Ali (as). That is, one abstains but does not waste, and, at the same time helps others.

Does Islam accept this kind of asceticism? Of course, it does. What intellect and sentiment can reject it if it is understood? A religion that does not recommend an asceticism as such is no religion. A school of thought which does not recommend it is not human.

The Qur'an speaking of a number of the Prophet's companions and followers in Madina, says: ***"And those who had made their abode in the city (Madina) and are (firm) in their faith (and) love those who have fled to them and do not find in their hearts a need of what has been given to them (the Muhajirs) and prefer them over their own selves, though their own lot be poverty and whoever is saved from the niggardliness of his self, these it is who are the successful ones."*** (59:9)

Imam Zeynal-Abedin (as) observed fast, and ordered preparation of a dish, usually of meat for him.

When it was time to break his fast, he came to the kitchen and served several bowls to be taken to the poor and needy, and at the end he kept a small share for himself, Of course in Islam the family has priority over others in partaking of meals, but sometimes when a poor man came to his door, he offered him his own share. This is what is meant by humane asceticism.

Sympathy is another goal of Islamic asceticism. One should be as generous as one can. But sometimes this is of no avail, as when there are so many without food and clothes that one does not have the means of satisfying them all. It used to be said about the people of Sistan that sometime in the past they left their children in the fields like animals for eating grass.

Again, Ali (as) as an ascetic of the first order considers it the duty of leaders to show fellow-feeling and sympathy at least when they cannot provide material assistance. No wonder, he abstained from eating to be on the same footing as those who may have remained helpless.

Ali (as) says: "God has made me a leader with the special obligation of living like the weakest of my followers in matters of food, clothes and other aspects of life, so that poor encouraged, and the rich seeing me as leader are not deviated by wealth."

There is a story about a great Shi'a clergyman, the late Wahid Behbahani, whose religious class in Karbala was always crowded. He had two sons named Muhammad Ali and Muhammad Isma'il. One day, he saw the wife of the second son wearing a fine dress. He admonished his son as to why he bought such clothes for her. His son answered: "Are such things forbidden?" He said: "My son, I am not saying they are forbidden. I have a different reason for my question. I am a teacher and guide for people who are both poor and rich. Some of them can afford such fine clothes, but many of them cannot. We cannot provide them all with the kind of clothes your wife wore, but there is one thing we can do, and that is to sympathize with them so that a poor man can say to his wife she should follow our example. So, if we dress ourselves like a rich person, we are robbing the poor of their only consolation. Ours ought to be an ascetic life. Any day that others can afford fine garments, we, too, may give ourselves that luxury. "This duty of sympathy is recommended for all, but especially for leaders and guides of people.

The following story is from Nahjul-Balagha: When Ali (as) entered Basra after the victory at the Battle of Jamal, he alighted at the house of Ala-bin-Ziad who lived in a magnificent house. The Imam asked him rebukingly: "What do you want such a house for? You can live in a smaller dwelling. You need a large home in the next world, so you can use this house for that purpose by bringing in guests and serving people."

Later, Ala said: "I have a complaint to make about my brother, Assem." Ali (as) asked what it was. Ala said: "My brother has retired as an ascetic, eats bad food, dresses in coarse garments and has renounced the world." Ali (as) asked to summon him and when he came said seriously to him: "You, who oppress yourself, has the devil misled you? You are too insignificant to suppose that God will rebuke you

for benefitting from His gifts. He has created them for His creatures." Assem answered: "O, Imam, you yourself are living like me. My garment is not less poor than yours." Ali (as) said: "You are mistaken. I am a leader, and have a special duty, God has made it incumbent upon us to place our living at the level of the lowest individuals, for, they look to us for sympathy and consolation, when we are unable to help them materially."

Asceticism does not involve separations of the affairs of this world, and the next, it is not because of an incompatibility between the satisfactions of the two worlds, but because of a general or particular necessity, one of which is self-sacrifice when others are in need. One offers help by depriving himself. This is one of the most desirable human qualities, i.e. to sacrifice one's own joy for the sake of others. The Qur'an has praised this quality most eloquently, showing it as a sign of the liveliness of the human spirit. But the other two ideas of asceticism are devoid of life, since they are based on two wrong assumptions. The first is to consider that devoutness is beneficial for both this world and the next. An ascetic who abandons all activity in this world and retires to a cave or convent hoping to attain the next world, loses the blessings of this world, too. He virtually turns himself into a useless creature. This is dead idea. Another supposition is that God does not grant worldly enjoyment to him who deserves other-worldly joy, or vice versa. According to this belief it is not possible to have a happy life in both worlds, so we must forsake this world for the sake of the next one. This is another dead idea.

But he understands God's Grace and believes in kindness, benevolence and serving others, and thus deprives himself of something in order to give to another, becomes a living creature and attains a higher quality of life.

Sympathy is another basis of asceticism in order to attain a fair condition for human beings in the means of living. It is wrong to have one class of people having all blessings, and another class having all sufferings. I do not mean that all individuals must be at same level, or that a worker and an idle person should enjoy, the same benefits. Individuals vary in their aptitude, ability, work and ingenuity. Life is competition, and he who is more active, should naturally get more benefits. But the stagnation of wealth is through injustice and tyranny and not through effort, ingenuity and competence. And poverty which is not due to laziness, but caused by uncontrollable conditions, should not be allowed.

Imam Ali (as) speaking of why he accepted the caliphate late says that under the previous conditions he was by no means willing to undertake that responsibility. When they insisted on his acceptance, he asked them to leave him alone as they had done before, and offer it to someone else, for, he could foresee the mishaps which would occur. But he thought his duty compelled him to accept it. What duty? One of them was that God had made it incumbent upon the wise followers of Islam to accept the duty of checking excess in wealth and poverty. Was that the only reason? No, fellow-feeling and humane considerations were also involved.

In the time of Imam al-Sadiq (as) a famine occurred in Madina with great severity. At such a time people lose their wits and begin to hoard provisions twice as much as they need. The Imam asked his

housekeeper if there was any reserve provisions in the house, and he said that there was enough reserve for one year. But the Imam told him to take all the wheat to the market and sell it. The housekeeper said: "You know that we can't buy back any." The Imam asked: "What do all the people do?" He answered: "They buy their bread, which is a mixture of barley and wheat daily from the market, or only barley bread." The Imam said: "Sell the whole wheat and buy us bread from the market as from tomorrow, for, other people cannot obtain wheat bread, so we can bring ourselves down to their level to show our sympathy and solidarity with our neighbors."

Another philosophical reason for asceticism lies in availing what one is free to do. The Qur'an has never forbidden legitimate satisfaction to man. At the same time, human beings who long to live freely always try to break their chains and fetters. It never says that whatever satisfaction is obtained in a legitimate way should be deferred for the hereafter.

In this world we have certain needs which we cannot do without, according to the law of creation, we need food and we cannot free ourselves from it. We cannot do without air, and to some extent we cannot do without clothes. These are limitations imposed on us by nature. But there are certain other bonds adopted by man himself which impose limitations on him and deprive him of freedom of action. For example, some people have addictions to something, such as drinking tea, or smoking, without which they feel uncomfortable, and others are addicted to dangerous and forbidden things, such as opium or worse than that.

The more one gets into habit, the greater will be his attachment and enslavement, and the less free he will be. It is not only tea or cigarettes. One may always want a soft mattress or pillow, and he cannot sleep if he is compelled to lie down on a carpet or bare ground. Thus, he is handicapped.

On the other hand, there are people who live a simple life without abandoning the tasks of life. They wish to live simply, have simple food, simple clothes and a simple home. Why? Because they do not want to sell their freedom for anything; the more they are fettered, the more they cannot act freely and without encumbrance. The life of great prophets and social leaders has always been simple, for, if they sought luxury, they had to abandon leadership. A luxurious life is incompatible with an unencumbered activity, liberty and liberality. The first thing that attracts us in the character of the first thing that attracts us in the character of the Prophet (S) is simplicity in his way of living and interacting with others.

These fetters and luxuries that man creates for himself check his progress immensely and bend his back with a heavy burden. Let me choose myself as an example. Suppose I am a well-known clergyman. Should I go on a pilgrimage to Mashhad or not? It is not a simple matter. How should I receive people? What should be the other condition? Thus, the simplest and the most necessary travel becomes a complex problem and so full of limitations that I cannot undertake it readily and conveniently. The Prophet (S) had a simple life, for, otherwise, he could not lead his society. In breaking his fast, there was no difference with other ordinary days; and he came home an hour and a half later after completing his evening and night prayers. His servant, Anas Bin Malik, says that his supper consisted of a bowl of milk

and a little bread. Then he began to work. As he ate little, a couple of hours of sleep rested him adequately. Then he spent two-thirds of the night in worship. The Qur'an was revealed to him on these occasions and these places. A Persian poet, Assiruddin, expresses this unencumbered state beautifully in the following couplet:

*"Plunge suitably clad in the river of events;*

*for, an unencumbered state is a pre-requisite for swimming."*

If a person wants to swim with his clothes on, he is likely to be drowned. One who does not want to enter social events and desires seclusion, can act as he pleases. But diving into the sea of society requires an unencumbered state. How did Imam Ali (as) live? He described the great Prophets as follows: "They lived simply; even David and Solomon who were kings did so. David made chain-armor and sold it and lived on its proceeds." He said that Jesus Christ lived so simply that his legs were his means of travel and his hands were his tools and his light was the moon. In this way the Prophets were able to lead men. Such asceticism is still alive, since it is based on a proper philosophy.

For example, Mahatma Gandhi wished to lead India and liberate millions of Indians from the clutches of imperialism. He had no alternative but to adopt the way of prophets, live a simple life, throw a piece of cloth on his shoulder, and tie another one round his loins, and have a goat as his only belonging, and be content with it.

What was his philosophy? On the one hand he is member of a society and wants to save it from imperialism, and on the other hand, his belongings consist of two pieces of cloth and a goat. He tells the Indian people, if they wish to liberate themselves, they should live simply and free themselves from fetters and limitations.

Another notable point about asceticism has to do with exigencies of circumstances. Times vary. Sometimes it is a duty to live ascetically, and at other times it is not. For example, the lives of the Prophet (S) and Imam Ali (as) were different from those of their descendants: Imam al-Baqir (as), Imam al-Sadiq (as), Imam Ja'far (as), Imam al-Ridha (as), and even Imam al-Hassan (as). They all lived more simply and ascetically. The reason for this is explained by Imam al-Sadiq (as).

A Sufi came to Imam al-Sadiq in the first half of the second century of the Hijra and saw the latter dressed in a fine and beautiful garment. He asked why the descendant of a prophet should wear such fine clothes. The Imam asked him to sit down and listen, if he really wanted to know the reason and not to, be demagogical. The Imam gave some explanations which he could not refute. He went out and came back with some of his friends.

The Imam (as) said, "I suppose you wonder why the Prophet (S) and Ali (as) did not wear fine clothes, if wearing such clothes is good, and why I wear them if it is bad." They answered that was what they thought. The Imam said: "You disregard the exigencies of time. It is not a sin to wear fine clothes. God

has granted his gifts to mankind to benefit from, and not to waste them. But sometimes conditions make it necessary to forsake them. One of them is that the conditions of life may be hard for all people. In such a society even if our private means allow us to live comfortably, we should not do so, because in doing so we are not showing sympathy to our brothers and other human beings. But when we live under good conditions, there is no reason to forsake fine clothes."

He then explained that the Prophet (S) and Imam Ali (as) lived in hard times. The Prophet lived in Madina which was full of poor people and in a state of war, which naturally created severe economic pressure. Some of his followers were strangers to that town and had no dwellings. The Prophet (S) let them stay in the mosque at first, and then outside of it. They were so poor that they had no clothes to take part in congregational prayers, and sometimes they joined prayers in borrowed clothes.

It is under adverse socioeconomic conditions that the Prophet, on entering his daughter's house and finding curtain, he objected to these. Fatima (as) who knew her father's character well, took off the bracelet and took down the curtain, and sent them to her father, asking him to do what he liked with them. The Prophet (S) at once ordered several shirts or trousers to be made for the poor. That is why Imam al-Sadiq (as) told the Sufis that if he lived under the conditions of his great grandfather, he would follow his example. Yet another reason for asceticism is that if one indulges in material pleasures, he will be deprived of spiritual ones.

There are some spiritual pleasures which increase and exalt our spirituality. For a person who loves wakefulness in night prayers, being awake and praying are enjoyable. A man who overindulges in carnal pleasures can never feel the depth of joy that a devout person secures. But if we stay awake and spend hours joking and laughing and eating heartily, we only tire ourselves and fall asleep like a dead man. Can we then rise at dawn and pray to God? Even if we wake up, we stagger like a drunken man.

Therefore, in order to secure spiritual joys, one should diminish material and physical pleasures. When like Imam Ali one wakes up and glances at God's starry sky and recites the verses of the Qur'an which are the voice of life and rise from the heart, one feels it to be the equivalent of a full life's enjoyment in this world. Such a man has no desire to eat like a glutton who becomes dead in spirit and cannot enjoy worship.

Devout people ignore material pleasures. Let me say a few words about my father, I remember he never went to bed late and he was always awake two hours before sunrise and each night he read one-thirtieth of the Qur'an and prayed in all tranquility. As a centenarian, he never spent an unquiet night. It is a spiritual joy that has kept him up like this. He always prayed for his parents. He had a step-mother who was very kind to him, and he always prayed for her and for all his kith and kin. Such a man must diminish material pleasures in order to secure deeper spiritual enjoyments.

Ibn Sina (Avicenna) says the asceticism of a gnostic is different from that of a non-gnostic. The former nurtures and trains his power of imagination and sensitivity anticipating that whenever his turn comes to

stand before God, his spirit is not weighed down or encumbered in matching with that of the celestial ones. This, too, is another reason for asceticism. Thus, asceticism is to be cherished for the sake of self-sacrifice, or sympathy, or for bringing oneself down to the level of the less fortunate, or for remaining unencumbered and free in society, or to be free minded and candid in praying to God, or simply to be alive. Obviously, it enlivens man as it did in the case of Hazrat Ali (as) who consequently possessed moral courage and was a just leader of his society. So, the kind of ascetics who are sequestered, and have no contact with people and retire for worship are "dead" ascetics and Islam does not endorse such asceticism.

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