

Lecture 6: Purifying One's Self; Knowledge and Action

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِّنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِن كَانُوا مِن قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ

It is He who has sent amongst the unlettered a messenger from among themselves, to rehearse to them His signs, to sanctify them, and to instruct them in scripture and Wisdom, although they had been in manifest error. ¹

One should know what the carnal desires are and then stay away from them. One should also know what the human characteristics are and acquire them. One must act as well as learn. First, one must learn how to escape from his low self and obtain human characteristics, and then he must put what he learned into action. He should not satisfy himself with knowledge alone.

The bad nature of animals does not come from its paws or teeth; instead it is from the predatory nature that is found inside of them. This nature is also found in man along with the human and angelic natures as well. Man can become like a dog or wolf or like an angel.

Habits Are Not Formed Spontaneously

One's nature is nothing but his habits. These habits are not formed spontaneously; instead they are formed by the repetition of actions and words. Someone whose actions are animalistic will eventually become an animal. One's inside is affected when he oppresses others. If he continues to oppress, his inside will turn into a dog. We said that man is different from skin and bones; his reality is his rational soul. Different natures take on different shapes. After time, if one acts and talks in accordance with the divine law, one will become a human.

One will not reach the stage of humanity without struggle. One can only dream that one can rid himself

of all the animalistic natures and obtain all the angelic natures without struggle. Allah has created in such a way that man himself chooses whether he wants to be an animal or a human. One can slowly rid himself of his animalistic nature and try to perform angelic actions so that slowly he can gleam with humanity. If he does this he will be full of blessings and others can benefit from him.

'Alī (A) Also Struggled To Perfect Himself

Pay attention to the sentence of Imām 'Alī (a) found in his sermon to Hamam. He said: "The pious are people whose good one is hopeful of, while they do not commit any bad actions."² People are hopeful of their good while they are safe from their evil. A person who struggles with his self will become a human. The sign of a person like this is that he does not cause man any loss. People are comfortable with him and even expect good from him.

People should not think that one can reach a high spiritual level easily by performing outward forms of worship, like prayer, fasting, or pilgrimage, without having one's heart in it. The way one can become a human is by refraining from strengthening his animalistic nature. One must control one's tongue; if one's tongue is left alone it will become predatory.

I will mention another sentence on this line from the Commander of the faithful (a). He said: "I struggle against myself (*nafs*). I give my *nafs* manners. I protect my *nafs* so that on the Day of Judgment I will be safe." You, who are the follower (*shā'a*) of Imām 'Alī (a), must follow him in this.

Today I will explain one of the animalistic qualities so that we can understand it well. Then, we must refrain from using this trait and use a human trait in its place.

Anger, An Animalistic Trait

Anger becomes an animalistic trait for man when he gets upset at others who are a barrier for him to reach his goals or when something is done against his desires. For example, he was cursed or oppressed and the feeling of revenge comes to his mind. Sometimes his face turns red and the movement of blood in his face becomes apparent. At this time his *nafs* tells him to get revenge. First, he says something against reality then curses or hits his opponent. In this state, he is unaware of his actions. It is an animalistic state where truth is non-existent. He is able to perform any action in this state, just like an animal. When he becomes angry he does not know anything except revenge. Sometimes he tears his own shirt and hits his own self.

Sometimes he even gets a stroke if his anger reaches an extremely high level and he is unable to get revenge. I have known some people who have got strokes while they were angry. Some of them died and some of them became paralyzed. They were people who performed prayers, but prayer alone can not make one human. One must control his *nafs* and stop his animalistic nature from growing into a wolf. A dog or wolf will rip his opponent's skin or flesh off, but an angry man takes away the honor of another

man, which is a worse form of oppression.

What should we do when we are left without Choice?

Suppose one wants to get rid of the animalistic traits. The first step to doing this is controlling one's self when one starts to get angry. Controlling one's self at this stage is easy, but if one does not control his self at the beginning he will reach a state where he will be uncontrollable. You are young, just at the beginning of your Islamic life. Animalistic traits have yet to take form in you. You can shape yourself with ease. You can refrain from answering someone who swears at you. With a little practice, this is easy for you.

Malik Ashtar And A Young Man

You have heard that Malik Ashtar was the commander of Imam 'Ali's (a) army. Imam 'Ali (a) said: "Malik Ashtar was with me like I was with the Messenger of Allah (S)." He was the leader of the Kandeh tribe and the commander of the Islamic army. One day he went to Kufa's marketplace and was looking to buy a shirt. A young man, who did not know Malik, wanted to make fun of him and threw a handful of dirt at him.

Malik did not say anything to him and left. Some people asked the young man: "Do you know who that was?"

He said: "No."

They told him: "That was Malik Ashtar."

The young man became frightened and upset. He went after Malik. Some people told him that Malik entered the mosque and the young man also went inside to see that Malik was praying. When his prayer finished the young man kneeled in front of Malik and said: "I did not know who you were. I made a mistake, forgive me."

Malik replied: "I forgave you at the same time that you threw dirt at me. Now, I have come to this mosque to pray for you so that Allah will forgive you as well."

Malik was a true follower (*shā'a*) of 'Ali (a). Can we call ourselves *shā'a*? What have we done to be called a *shā'a* of 'Ali (a)? A *shā'a* controls his anger; he does not hit someone with a rock after being hit by a piece of dirt.

Should throwing a piece of dirt be rewarded with a Rock?

Common people believe that one should answer bad language with bad language or answer a thrown piece of dirt with a rock. These are completely incorrect actions. A predator should not be treated like a

predator. If you curse him out you are just like him; so what is the difference between a human and an animal? He cursed because of his animalistic traits, so you should refrain from cursing because of your humane traits. You should even behave with him using good manners.

The late Nar^ق wrote in the book *Mi'raj al-Sa'adat*: "One does not have the right to swear at someone who swore at him. But, if they do, they will become the example of the Prophet's (S) saying: 'Those who insult each other will be in the fire.'" [3](#)

Both of the people who curse are condemned, even though the one who started it is a bigger oppressor. But, the one who answers him is also an oppressor. Bad language stems from anger and animalistic qualities.

The late Nar^ق continued: "One should remain silent in front of someone who is cursing him or, if he wants to give an answer, he should be careful not to lie, defame, or curse that person. He can call the other person ignorant because in reality he is. If one does this he both answered the person who is cursing him, but did not lie or act in a predatory manner. Who is not ignorant?"

Showing Patience in Anger is a Human Characteristic

If man wants to use human qualities instead of animalistic anger at difficulties he should use patience and forbearance. These are human characteristics. An animal does not know what forbearance is. What difference would there be between us and animals if we, who know what forbearance is, act only according to anger? But if we forbear we will be using a human characteristic.

I said that one cannot reach the level of a human without struggle. Man is at a crossroad, he can either become an animal or a human. There is no compulsion, Allah created man with choice. He gave man a tongue and the power of choice. Man can either use this tongue to curse people, to create problems or to solve problems.

What is meant by forbearance is showing restraint and patience at difficulties. Whenever one faces a difficulty he should control his tongue, hands and feet.

Muhaqqiq T^ق's Interesting Answer To An Ignorant Person

'All^قmah Nasir al-D^قn T^ق wrote that an ignorant person addressed a letter to him using the word 'dog'. Muhaqqiq answered him by saying: You thought that I am a dog? I thought about it, but could not understand how I am similar to a dog. I have two feet, but a dog has four. A dog has sharp teeth that can break bones but my teeth do not work any more. A dog has fur, but I do not. A dog has claws, but I do not." He answered him in this way, showing forbearance.

Suppose he answered him in this way: "You're the dog, your father and mother are dogs!" The ignorant person would not sit quiet and the situation would become worse.

How Does It Come To A Dispute?

Some people related a story that would be good to say to change up the speech. They say that there was a shoe maker who was famous for having bad morals and being quick to fight. An unemployed person went to his store the first thing in the morning and, after greeting him, said: "I want something from you. I want you to tell me how it is that you start a dispute? What is it that starts a fight?"

The shoe maker asked: "What kind of a question is this so early in the morning? Are you trying to be funny?"

The unemployed man responded: "No; I'm serious. You must tell me how a fight is started."

The shoe maker said: "What's wrong with you? Maybe you're not all there upstairs, how should I know how a fight is started?"

The unemployed man said: "I will not leave you until you answer me."

The shoe maker responded: "You should be ashamed of your self, you little unemployed man who gets in people's way when they want to work. Let me get to work." Then after some more words the shoe maker hit the unemployed man on his head with the bottom of a shoe and blood dripped down the his head.

The unemployed man said: "Enough! I understand how a fight starts. One person says something but does not give in; eventually this will lead to a fight."

At first it is not important, but if continued, bad language will appear and eventually it will turn into a physical fight.

One must fight against one's self (*nafs*) until it becomes like a tamed animal who does not step out of bounds. Everyone must fight his *nafs* so much so that it does not step out of the bounds that Allah has put on man. Once it leaves the border of humanity there is nothing left other than the realm of animals. At the beginning there is a little struggle, but after time it becomes easy. One will become happy when he controls his anger.

I Deserve More Pain

One day an important man was in an alley when some dirt from a house fell on to his head. He looked into the sky and thanked Allah, he said: "O' Allah I thank you because I deserved to be hit by a rock for the punishment of my sins but you threw soft dirt on my head."

As everyone has read and heard, people would repeatedly throw dirt on the Prophet of Islam (S). Sometimes they would even hit him on the leg with a bone in such a way that blood would drip from his

leg. Sometimes they would throw the liver of a camel at his face. But, as an answer, the Prophet (S) would pray: “O' Allah, guide my people for they do not know.” He would forgive them and ask Allah to forgive them as well.

We must follow the way of the Prophet (S), especially we scholars. We must bear the difficulties that we see in society and we must know that it will not remain like this. The people will be guided.

I will end my lecture by reciting a tradition found in *Usūl al-Kāfī* regarding anger.

Refraining From Anger Is Refraining From Spilling Blood

One of the leaders of a nomadic Arab tribe met the Prophet (S). When he wanted to go he said: “O' Messenger of Allah! Give me some advice that I can benefit from.”

The Prophet answered him by saying: “Do not become angry.” The Arab man accepted his advice.

When he returned to his tribe he saw that they were in an abnormal condition. He asked what was up from the people who greeted him. They said that blood has been spilt between us and another tribe. They were waiting for him to start a war.

At the beginning, Arab pride overtook him. He armed himself and went off in the direction of the other tribe. He remembered what the Prophet (S) told him when he faced the other tribe. He remembered that the Prophet told him not to become angry. At that moment he threw his sword down and faced the enemy tribe. When they saw that he was unarmed and walking towards them they dropped their swords and waited to hear what he had to say.

He came close to them and called their leaders. He asked them in a nice voice: “Why are we fighting? Suppose you kill someone in revenge for the person from your tribe who was killed, he still would not come back to life. Come; take this blood money and whatever else you want. If you insist that someone from my tribe must be killed as revenge, you can kill me.”

The enemy tribe, with seeing this leader's unprecedented condition, became humane and without even taking the blood money made a peace contract.

1. 62:2.

2. Imām 'Alī (a), Nahj al-Balāgha, letter 45

3. Shaykh Kulaynī, Usūl al-Kāfī, volume 2, page 243, chapter al-Sifah

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