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Lesson 13: The Insignificance and Minuteness of the World and the Importance of Perceiving the Hereafter

The Differences of Perception and Conduct between an Intelligent and an Unintelligent Person

The previous discourse was concerned with the fact that if man commits sin and becomes regretful and fearful afterwards, Allah grants him forgiveness as a result of that regret and anxiety. It is likely to falsely imagine that every person who commits sin and repents afterwards will be forgiven and this in itself gives birth to more sin and contamination. In order to put an end to this false illusion, the Noble Prophet states that a smart and clever person is one who is always contemplating about the best way of making use of his life and performing commendable works. He tramples the carnal desires of the soul underfoot and does not act according to the dictates of his appetitive heart, which consequently leads to getting afflicted by negligence:

"O Abu Dharr! Smart and wise is a man who disciplines his soul and strives for the life after death and stupid is a person who follows his soul and its carnal cravings and in spite of that has hope in Allah."

Man has an intellect and an appetitive soul; sometimes his intellect is triumphant over his craving soul and at other times the longing heart is victorious over his reason. Both types have been portrayed in this section:

At times, the soul becomes weak and its yearnings do not have [any] influence on the intellect. This is in regard to a sagacious man who is on the path of edification of character and unceasingly reflects upon the everlasting life after death. In contrast, from time to time the soul and its carnal desires triumph over reason and man becomes weak in the face of the appetitive soul and cannot resist the animal instincts

[of the flesh].

This interpretation is based on the copy of "*Bihar al–Anwar*" in which has been recorded "whoever debases his soul", [*man dana nafsah*] that is to say wise is a man whose carnal desires have become weak but the other copies have recorded "whoever disciplines his soul" [*man adabba nafsah*].

Perhaps, the second expression is better than the first, and in this case the denotation of the sentence will be thus: wise is a person who endeavors to discipline his soul. In other words, a sagacious man undertakes edification of character and does not indulge his soul in its every whim and desire. Such a person can think rationally and close his eyes to the marginal material world and set them on the infinite horizon and the perpetuity of the final abode and stop them from short–sightedness and limited perceptions. He discharges his works for the everlasting life after the Resurrection.

From the Islamic point of view, this kind of thinking is intelligent and this type of person is clever, because he meditates about the destination and conceives the infinite cosmos of the hereafter in place of this finite world. By contrasting the transient pleasures of the world with the permanent blessings of the eternal abode, a sagacious man prefers the second.

Myopic people think of nothing but short–term pleasures and prefer them over the imperishable gratifications of the afterworld. They have handed over the authority of the intellect to the appetitive soul and meekly put themselves at the disposal of the stomach and passion; and in the words of the Commander of the Faithful, Imam 'Ali ('a):

"All too often, the intellect and wisdom are captives and hostages of the carnal soul and desires of the flesh which reign over them."1

Such a person follows the appetitive soul and hopes to be companions with the saints [awliya'] of Allah!

Trustworthiness and Humility

Previous to this, the discussion was concerned with the two inner qualities of fear and sorrow and that two commendable and desirable transcendental states appear as a result of them but for the reason that some perfections and spiritual sates are likely to be divested of man, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

"O Abu Dharr! The first attribute that will be divested of this *ummah* (Islamic Community) is dependability and humility, to the extent that a humble individual will not be seen."

In this statement, the Noble Prophet (S) has mentioned two eminent ethical qualities. One of those two values is trustworthiness, which is a social ethical attribute, and plays a pivotal role in establishing healthy social relationships and without which it is impossible to found a sound community, because the bedrock of social relationships is reciprocal trust.

In this section, the Noble Prophet (S) warns Abu Dharr that after his departure, a good and acclaimed attribute will be removed from the Islamic community the highest and first of which is reliability and modesty.

The community of the Noble Prophet of Islam (S), as a well-trained community, had two inimitable distinctions over the rest of the nations; the first quality was concerned with social relationships among themselves and with the other nations. The second characteristic was connected with the spiritual states and morals and the formation of the individual personality of the community. It was outstanding both from the point of view of individual and spiritual personality and from the social perspective. This trait was attained as a result of the prolonged instructions sanctioned by Allah and executed by the Noble Prophet (S).

The Islamic community was like a garden of greenery in blossom and trees bearing fruit in the hands of an illustrious gardener such as the Noble Prophet (S). Now once this garden meets with misfortune, the effects of that calamity will become apparent and it will head towards ruin and extinction.

Instructed by the Noble Prophet (S), a community which was superlative from the aspect of individual and social qualities had been met with catastrophe and the greenery turned to yellow leaves after the departure of the Noble Prophet (S). The first misfortune to befall the Islamic community was that the people became hard-hearted and forfeited humility and tender-heartedness, to the extent that they never submitted to right, and positive and invaluable attributes could never impress themselves upon their hearts. Every one of them was a cold and cruel man whose heart could never be moved by the right word and he never got soft-hearted and tearful where it was appropriate to do that.

The second calamity in connection to their social relations came into being when dependability and right conduct lost their weight; they were not truthful and honest with each other, and used to betray each other. This is a warning bell for the community: once these two individual and social afflictions come to appearance in a community, that individual and community will be propelled into decline.

This value is not confined to Islam and/or the Muslims only. Before the advent of Islam, all the people used to know that truthfulness and trustworthiness are good and treachery in regard to people's property and possessions is not commendable.

a) The Function of Trustworthiness

The greatest factor which rendered the Noble Prophet (S) successful not only among the Arabs, but amidst all the inhabitants of the world, was that he was a trustworthy man [right] before the Prophetic mission. The people used to acknowledge him as a dependable man and used to call him, 'Muhammad the Trustworthy' [*Muhammad–i amin*]. And this very trait became a cause of the people's inclination to him, because reliability also calls for telling the truth. A man who betrays people with regard to their property cannot tell the truth. A lot of people conceded his assertion that he was the Prophet (S)

because he never used to tell any lies.

As has been mentioned previously, a value such as dependability is conceived by the intellect, and if there had not been the prophetic mission and the divine call, the people would still perceive it but Islam endorsed this command of the intellect and stated:

"Surely, Allah commands you to make over trusts to their owners..."2

Trustworthiness is one of the needs of life and if people do not abide by it and do not become dependable, the system breaks up and no man trusts another any longer for the reason that the bedrock and foundation of social life is mutual trust. (Reliability in speech is a necessity of telling the truth and dependability in works is a requirement of correct conduct and its value derives independently from the intellect and does not stand in need of deductive reasoning and in this regard Islamic admonitions have the aspect of instruction, the divine Islamic law [shar'] countersigns what reason has perceived and advises mankind to follow it.)

Reliability is not only pertinent to safeguarding the personal properties of other people but caring about community property and the public funds of the Islamic government are also instances of trustworthiness. The streets, water and the trees and everything else belonging to the society is considered as property [entrusted to us for safeguarding].

Apart from that, taking good care of public assets is higher for the reason that if someone commits treachery with regard to the holdings of an individual, it is only to one person that he is indebted but once he is traitorous to assets of the community and the funds of the Islamic society, he has betrayed all the Muslims. If that driver who is in charge of a government car is not honest and does not take good care of that car, he has committed treachery against all the people. He has committed treachery once he uses public means for personal purposes.

The Glorious Qur'an introduces the Islamic community as loyal and faithful to their promises:

"And those who are keepers of their trusts and covenants." 3

At another point, it orders them to return the trusts to their owners:

"Surely Allah commands you to make over trusts to their owners..."4

The reason for the injunction about dependability is because once the value of reliability is divested of the society, the people double-cross each other and they abuse each other's rights and consequently the social links and bonds which are the bedrock of reciprocal trust disintegrate and this is itself a beginning of disregard for invaluable attributes and human qualities.

b) The Function of Humility

If the people were to be humble and flexible in the face of right, they would not be indifferent and would show reaction to the incidents and occurrences that take place in society. Such a people respond to the call and guidance of the prophets and tremble once they are warned [about hell] and become lively and happy when given glad tidings [about the eternal Garden of bliss]. They become angry and tearful when they see someone being oppressed and get gladdened at seeing the right of someone being discharged. Such people are soft–hearted and humble in the face of right and have opened their breasts to accept what is true.

In contrast to them, stony-hearted people are apathetic and unexcited in the face of truths which are presented to them and to incidents and happenings taking place around them because their hearts do not have the preparedness to accept the truth and naturally they never used to respond positively to the call of the prophets and never used to be submissive in the face of right. They only think and care about themselves and their animal desires.

The Glorious Qur'an mentions two kinds of the people of the Book: the first kind is the tribe of Israel who are the bitterest enemies of Islam and the believers:

"... Then your hearts hardened after that, so that they were like rocks from which streams burst forth, and surely there are some of them which split asunder so water issues out of them..."5

Water springs from a rock but the Jews are so hard-hearted that never do their hearts break down so as to let tears flow and this tribe is a pig-headed enemy of the believers.

In contrast to this group, the Glorious Qur'an states with regard to the other group of the people of the Book called the Christians, who are friendly and kind to the believers:

"... Certainly you will find the most violent of people in enmity for those who believe (to be) the Jews and those who are polytheists, and you will certainly find the nearest in friendship to those who believe (to be) those who say, 'We are Christians'; this is because there are priests and monks among them and because they do not behave proudly."6

In continuation of this verse, Allah sates:

"And when they hear what has been revealed to the Apostle, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears on account of the truth that they recognize..."

This characteristic of flexibility and tenderness in the face of right became the reason of their believing, because their hearts were open to the truth. In contrast to them, the hard-hearted Jews never used to believe. It is for this reason that we see in history that a great deal of Christians became Muslims and became pure and sincere believers, in contrast to a tiny number of Jews.

The Noble Prophet states that a day will come when no humble man will be found and the notion of humility and modesty will become meaningless. Some of the people who fancied themselves to be informed Islamists used to say that Islam does not approve of abjectness and lowliness, even in the presence of Allah man ought not to feel abject! Melancholy, crying and humility are worthless for such kind of people! This is in spite of the Glorious Qur'an introducing the believers as humble.

One of the Islamic scholars was accused of deviating from the right path because every time that the Glorious Qur'an was recited in his presence, he used to break down and cry. They used to conjecture that only in mourning ceremonies and misfortunes should people cry and shedding tears at the time of recitation of the Qur'an is an innovated practice in Religion. That is to say that this practice had so been abandoned and forsaken that if a person did it, he would get accused of deviation and innovation in religion.

Humility denotes a feeling of lowliness, abasement and modesty which occurs in the heart and its reflection manifests itself in the organs and limbs of man. The deceased Raghib Isfahani says, "Humility connotes a feeling of weakness and abasement and its most prevalent application is where its manifestations appear in the organs and limbs of man."

For instance, in the Glorious Qur'an humility has been used in these cases:

A) In speech

"On that Day they shall follow the inviter, there is no crookedness on him, and the voices shall be low before the Beneficent God so that you shall not hear aught but a soft sound."8

B) In the eyes

"Their eyes cast down, going forth from their graves as if they were scattered locusts."9

C) In the face

"Some faces on that Day shall be downcast." 10

D) In prostration

"And they fall down on their faces weeping, and it adds to their humility." 11

E) In supplication and prayer

"Successful indeed are the believers, who are humble in their prayers." 12

F) In the heart

"Has not the time come for those who believe that their hearts should not be humble for the remembrance of Allah and what has come down of the truth?" 13

Discourse concerning every one of the aforementioned instances calls for a lot of time and presently there is no opportunity of engaging in them now. In brief, it has become clear that humble is a man in whose conduct modesty, wisdom and intelligence appear without pride and boastfulness, like an abject slave he ought to put to death the spirit of egotism and pride because self-conceit and arrogance prevent man from modesty and humility and is without doubt a clear instance of the proud and rebellious Devil:

"So the angels made obeisance, all of them together, but Iblis (did it not); he refused to be with those who made obeisance."14

While explicating this verse, Imam 'Ali ('a) states:

"Pride and egotism overcame him and he prided himself on his creation over that of Adam, and became bigoted on account of his origin (that he was created from the fire) and audaciously disobeyed Allah. Therefore, this enemy of Allah is the leader of the arrogant and the standard-bearer of the disobedient, who founded the prejudice and disputed with Allah over the dress of honor and greatness (which is specially reserved for Allah) and wore the garment of glory and honor, for which he was not worthy, and divested his body of the dress of lowliness and humility."

In continuation, he states:

"Take lesson from what Allah did to Satan, whose countless acts of worship and unceasing endeavors were rendered null and void, in spite of worshiping Allah for six thousand years of which it is not clear whether their reckoning is of this world or of the hereafter. All this was a consequence of his momentary pride and disobedience. Therefore, is there any proud and rebellious man who remains safe from the retribution of Allah after Satan? Allah, the Exalted, will never make a slave, who has committed a sin for which an angel was expelled from the Garden of bliss, enter therein. Verily, the judgment of Allah is equal for the dwellers of the skies and the inhabitants of the earth."

It is important to mention this point that the fountainhead and cause of losing humility and of hard-heartedness and betrayal of people's trusts is love of the world. Love of the world robs man of the grace for humility, crying and supplication and it is as a result of love of the world that man gets polluted by doubt, and finally gets addicted to committing forbidden acts and insists on perpetrating great sins. Therefore, we are compelled to restrain the heart from falling in love with the world and making it its goal and we ought to prevent it from being addicted to dubious and forbidden acts.

If we notice that values and virtues are departing from society day by day and social corruption is gradually on the increase, it is because of man's inclination to materialism; this love and fondness of the world prepares the ground for the perpetration of any sin imaginable.

People do not get sad over the sins which they commit but once a worldly loss is inflicted upon them, they become sorrowful. This is as a result of love and affection for the world. If an individual sets their heart on the hereafter and fixes it as their final destination, he makes use of everything to secure his hereafter. If he is rich, he makes use of his wealth to secure his afterworld. If he is not well-to-do, he makes use of patience and submission to acquire the eternal Garden of bliss. If he is affluent, he spends his money in the way of Allah and if he is not wealthy, he helps people in other ways.

Once man's love for this world increases, he derives benefit from the permitted pleasures to the extent that he can, and if he got less than he wanted, he turns his attention on dubious acts and tries to exonerate himself by seeking the help of religious edicts which have been passed by the religious jurisprudent. Today, he justifies a kind of illegal profit and tomorrow he commits a categorically and explicitly forbidden act and he drifts down to the extent that he does not dread committing any kind of sin, no matter how big.

It is natural that the heart of such a person has become hard, and the state of humility will be divested of him. Once love of the world becomes imbedded in man's heart, he commits treachery with regard to the possessions of other people and makes use of them for personal benefit. Therefore, what causes the hardness of heart is sin, obsession with material things and pleasures of the flesh.

Now, in order to remedy this pain, we ought to find its causes, we must see why this tree has gotten dry and what poisonous food has been given to it so as to cause it to dry. In order for the tree of man's life to remain safe and sound from plagues, healthy food ought to be given to it and stop it from following

animal instincts and passions because they give birth to hard-heartedness and stone-heartedness.

In order to root out hardness of heart and wipe out sin, diseases which plague the heart have to be made known to man and the fountainhead of all the blights which result in man's separation from Allah and spirituality is love of the world. With different expressions, the Gracious Qur'an cautions man against the world and warns him about its consequences. Sometimes, in one sermon of the "Nahj al–Balaghah", the world had been reproached several times and Imam 'Ali ('a) always cautions his companions against the world, because His Holiness knows that the root cause of all pains is love of the world. While there is room for love of the world, no virtue and no perfection remains stable for man.

It is possible for man to make effort for many years and acquire virtues, but wipe all of them out with one deadly poison. It is because of this that the Qur'an, the Noble Prophet (S) and the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) used different reasons [and arguments] to advise men to disincline from the world. Of course, abstaining from the world does not mean quitting work and giving up [the acquisition of] knowledge and abolishing technology; on the contrary, it connotes not falling in love with the world and its alluring objects and not chasing the passions.

In one word, abstinence from the world denotes not giving primacy to the world and making use of it as a means of attaining the world. In this case, all of man's efforts and even the acquisition of wealth and possessions acquire an eschatological bearing for the reason that striving for the hereafter and seeking the world are related to the motivation and aim of man. For example, if man's motive for marrying is only to satisfy his passions, this is called libertinism [and is a kind of seeking the world and a type of materialism]. He only absorbs himself with gratifying his animal passions and cravings of the flesh.

All too often, it makes no difference for him whether he satisfies his sensual desires in a permissible or forbidden way. On the contrary, if his incentive in marrying is to obey Allah because it is He who has demanded that man founds a household, otherwise he would not have done so even if it was full of pleasure. But he marries for the good pleasure of Allah, even if he may be besieged by thousands of problems.

If you see that nowadays the foundations of family life have been enfeebled in the west, it is because they merely think about deriving pleasure and their sexual gratification is better secured by illicit means than by marriage; therefore, they do not confine themselves to the shackles of family life. When they see that the necessity of marriage is perseverance of hardships and problems, they quit it; but the Islamic society is not like this.

Until Islamic values preside, they patiently forebear the problems of family life, because Allah's wish is thus. Of course, Allah too has placed pleasures in this action (He has placed innate and natural pleasures in spouses and children) but in any case, it has problems too. Therefore, if a person derives benefit from the pleasures of the world for the good pleasure of Allah, not only is his action acceptable, but his work is meant for the hereafter, not worldliness. Worldliness [or materialism] takes place when

primacy is accorded to pleasures.

The Insignificance and Minuteness of the World in Allah's View

To explain the frivolity of the world and reproach materialism, the Noble Prophet (S) states in the following sentences:

"O Abu Dharr! I swear upon Allah in whose hands lies Muhammad's soul [or life] that if the world had the value of one fly's wing and mosquito's wing before Allah, He would not have given even one drop of water to an infidel."

Love of the world is a misfortune which more or less affects all of us. If we are presently not affected by it, there is [still] the probability of our getting afflicted by it in the future. It is therefore worthwhile to pay more attention to this explication of the Noble Prophet (S) and try to derive benefit from it for the edification of souls [and characters].

Pleasures of the flesh are the criterion of value for us, therefore we accord value to whatever pleases us more and that is more desirable for us. But Islam introduces another standard and that is conformity with the wish of Allah; that is to say, a thing has value once it is valuable before Allah.

The Noble Prophet (S) swears that if this world, with all its expansiveness and largeness and inclusive of all its gratifications, for which lives are lost and wasted, had the value of a fly's wing before Allah, He would not have given a drop of it to an infidel. If oceans and seas had price before Allah, an infidel would not derive benefit from it and He would only grant its benefits to His saints [awliya'] ('a). (Of course, the purport of infidel in this saying is one who is inimical and hostile to the religion and does not yield to right otherwise the weak, oppressed and coerced unbeliever has another reckoning.) The reason why you see the Muslim and infidel are equal in the derivation of pleasure from the world is because it has no essential value and is a means of trial.

Allah states in the Qur'an:

"Your possessions and your children are only a trial..."15

Elsewhere, He states:

"Wealth and children are an adornment of the life of this world; and the ever abiding, the good

works, are better with your Lord in reward and are better in expectation."16

In another verse, in regard to the destructibleness of the world and the indestructibleness of what is before Allah. He states:

"What is with you passes away and what is with Allah is enduring..."17

Man imagines that the things of this world have value, and whoever has more is regarded as important; in expounding this false illusion, the Glorious Qur'an states:

"And as for man, when his Lord tries him, then treats him with honor and makes him lead an easy life, he says, 'My Lord honors me; but when He tries him (differently), then straightens to him the means of subsistence, he says, 'My Lord has disgraced me'."18

The truth is that the world is a means of trials and man is an object of Allah's testing, whether he is granted of the blessings of this world or deprived of them. Neither is derivation of benefit from the world a sign of superiority nor is poverty and destitution an indication of lowliness. Therefore, because the world is worthless in Allah's point of view, He does not deprive an unbeliever of its blessings. In contrast, the Garden of eternal bliss and its graces have value before Allah; that is why He deprives man of it:

"And the inmates of the Fire shall call out to the dwellers of the Garden, saying, 'Pour on us some water or that of which Allah has given you.' They shall say, 'Surely He has prohibited them both to the unbelievers'." 19

Heaven and its graces have such value that the infidels do not merit deriving benefit from them and in truth this primary and real worth has been especially reserved for the saints [awliya'] of Allah. In contrast, the world has no value for Allah, the reason of which an unbeliever derives benefit from it too and all too often they procure more gain from it than the rest of the people and better make use of the facilities of this world; of course, the more they gather gain from it, the more it adds to their retribution because the unbelievers utilize those graces on the path of disobedience and deviation from right.

What is surprising is that in explaining the insignificance and irrelevance of this world, the Noble Prophet

(S) swears upon Allah. It becomes clear that accepting this issue is very hard for ordinary people; how is it possible for the world not to have the value of a fly's wing with all its expansiveness, resources, facilities and innumerable pleasures which are enjoyable to man! The reason for this is because our awareness of the realities of the world is little and our inner eye is myopic.

We have made preoccupation with the world the cornerstone of our lives and have given primacy to the world, heedless of the fact that in the divine perspective and the Qur'anic point of view, the world lacks value and it has subjective value [or metaphorical interpretation] only to the extent of being an instrument. Its true value belongs to its excellences and beauties which result in man's prosperity and attainment of the good pleasure of Allah. Its true value is found in that which results in proximity to Allah which is that same goal for which man has been created and it has been requested of him to make use of every means and ways of arriving at it.

- 1. Nahj al-Balaghah, p. 1182, wisdom [hikmat] 202, trans. Fayd al-Islam.
- 2. Surat al-Nisa' 4:58.
- 3. Surat al-Mu'minun 23:8.
- 4. Surat al-Nisa' 4:58.
- 5. Surat al-Bagarah 2:74.
- 6. Surat al-Ma'idah 5:82.
- 7. Surat al-Ma'idah 5:83.
- 8. Surat Ta Ha 20: 108.
- 9. Surat al-Qamar 54:7.
- 10. Surat al-Ghashiyah 88:2.
- 11. Surat al-Isra' (or Bani Isra'il) 17:109.
- 12. Surat al-Mu'minun 23: 1-2.
- 13. Surat al-Hadid 57:16.
- 14. Surat al-Hijr 15:30-31.
- 15. Surat al-Taghabun 64:15.
- 16. Surat al-Kahf 18:46.
- 17. Surat al-Nahl 16:96.
- 18. Surat al-Fajr 89:15-16.
- 19. Surat al-A'raf 7:50.

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