

Lesson 16: Hardship, A Cause of Awakening

Those who are drunk on the arrogance of power and success and who have totally forgotten humane ethics because of the seduction of their soul and their senses will sometimes find, in various corners of the world, that the occurrence of unpleasant events makes them open to fundamental changes and developments that tear away from them the veils of forgetfulness.

They may even be guided to a path leading to some degree of moral perfection and a future more fruitful than their present. They are people in whom misfortune has induced a profound transformation.

Considering the harmful effects of neglectfulness and the intoxication of arrogance, on the one hand, and the numerous moral lessons taught by misfortune, on the other, it can be said that failure and misfortune are relative insofar as they contain great blessings; they contribute fruitfully to the building of man's awareness and will.

Hardship is, then, the preliminary to higher, more advanced states of being; it prepares man for the recompense that awaits him, and from his response to it, it becomes apparent whether he has attained the lofty degree of sincerity and devotion or is sunk in decay. The Qur'an says:

"We have created man in the embrace of hardship." (90:4)

"We test you with fear, hunger, the loss of wealth and possessions, death, and the loss of the fruits of your toil. Give glad tidings to those who struggle manfully on this path that those who say when afflicted with calamity and pain, 'We are from God and to Him we return on our path to perfection,'—that it is they who receive kindness and mercy from their Lord together with their suffering, and they it is who are truly guided." (2:155-57)

Without doubt, God could have created a world without hardship, pain and misfortune, but that would have meant His depriving man of freedom and choice; he would have been let loose in the world as a creature without will or the power of decision, just like any other creature lacking perception and awareness, formed exclusively by nature and totally obedient to it. Would he then have deserved the name of man?

Having paid the heavy price of losing all his innate capacities and freedom, his most precious resource, would he have advanced toward perfection, or decayed and declined? Would not the world, too, have lost all goodness and beauty, these being comprehensible only in terms of their opposites?

It is plain that the power to distinguish and discriminate makes possible the existence of good and evil, of beauty and ugliness. By giving man the inestimable blessing of freedom and the ability to choose, God, whose wisdom is manifest throughout creation, wished to display fully His ability to create phenomena bearing witness to His wisdom and power.

He placed within man's being the possibility of doing both good and evil, and although He compels him to do neither, He always expects him to do good. God does not approve of evil; it is righteous conduct that meets with His approval and, in exchange for which He provides abundant, unimaginable reward. God warns man against following the path of evil and threatens him with punishment and torment if he does so.

Thus, by using the power of choice that God has bestowed on him, man can act as he should, conforming both to divine guidance and to his own conscience.

But, if occasionally his foot should slip and he should commit some sin, the path remains open for him to return to purity and light, to God's favor and mercy. This is in itself a further manifestation of God's generosity and all-embracing justice, one more of the blessings He bestows on His servants.

Were God to give immediate reward to the virtuous for their righteous conduct and acts, they would not in any way be superior to the corrupt and the sinful. And if the evil in thought and in deed were to be always met with instant punishment and retribution, virtue and purity would not enjoy any superiority in this world to vice and impurity.

The principle of contradiction, is, in fact, the basis of the created world; it is what enables matter to change and evolve so that God's grace flows through the world. Were matter not to take on different shapes as a result of its encounter with various beings and were being unable to accommodate new forms within itself, the differentiation and advancement of being would be impossible.

A stable and unchanging world would resemble stagnant capital that produces no profit.

For creation, change is the capital that brings about profit. It is, of course, possible that the investment of a certain portion of capital should result in loss, but the constant motion of matter as a whole definitely results in profit. The contradiction that takes place in the forms of matter results in the advancement of the order of being toward perfection.

There is some question as to whether evil exists in the world in the real sense of the word. If we look carefully, we will see that the evil of things is not a true attribute; it is a relative one.

Fire arms in the hands of my enemy are an evil for me, and firearms in my hands are an evil for my enemy. Setting aside me and my enemy, firearms are in themselves neither good nor bad.

The course of nature can be said to be mathematical; that is, its system has been established in such a way as not to answer all of our needs. We, however, wish to fulfill all our countless desires without encountering the least hindrance, and the forces of nature do not answer the limitless wishes we cherish, wishes which are in any event worthless from the point of view of our essential nature. Nature pays no attention to our desires and refuses to submit to our wants. So when we encounter unpleasantness in our lives, we become unjustifiably upset and we term the causes of our discomfort as "evil."

If someone wants to light his lamp when there is no oil in it, he will not start sighing and complaining or curse the whole universe!

Creation is constantly advancing toward a clear goal, through unceasing effort and striving. Specific causes determine each step it takes, and the changes and development it undergoes are not designed to meet men's approval or satisfy their desires.

It should be accepted that some of the occurrences of this world will not correspond to our wishes, and we ought not to regard as injustice things we experience as unpleasant.

The Commander of the Faithful 'Ali, peace be upon him, describes the world as an abode of hardship, but nonetheless a good place for the one who knows it properly. Although he encountered himself all kinds of hardship and unpleasantness, he constantly drew men's attention to the absolute justice of God! [1](#)

Another important point which must not be overlooked is that good and evil do not represent two mutually exclusive categories or series in the order of creation. Goodness is identical with being, and evil is identical with non-being; wherever being makes its appearance, non-existence is also implied.

When we speak of poverty, indigence, ignorance or disease we should not imagine that they have separate realities: poverty is simply not having wealth, ignorance is the absence of knowledge, and disease is the loss of health. Wealth and knowledge are realities, but poverty is nothing other than the emptiness of the hand and the pocket, and ignorance, the absence of knowledge. Hence poverty and ignorance have no tangible reality; they are defined through the non-existence of other things.

The same is the case with calamities and misfortunes that we regard as evil and the source of suffering. They, too, are a kind of loss or non-being, and are evil only in the sense that they result in the destruction or non-existence of something other than themselves. Apart from this, nothing, insofar as it exists, can in any way be called evil or ugly.

If calamities did not entail sickness and death, the loss and ruin of certain creatures, thus preventing

their capacities from unfolding, they would not be bad. It is the loss and ruin arising from misfortunes that is inherently bad. Whatever exists in the world is good; evil pertains to non-being, and since non-being does not form a category independent of being, it has not been created and does not exist.

Being and non-being are like the sun and its shadow. When a body is turned to the sun, it casts a shadow. What is a shadow? The shadow has not been created by anything; it consists simply of the sun not shining in a given place because of the existence of an obstacle; it has no source or origin of its own.

Things have a real existence by virtue of having been created without reference to things other than them in this sense, they are not evil. For a worldview derived from belief in God, the world is equivalent to good.

Everything is inherently good; if it is evil, it is so only in a relative sense and in connection with things other than itself. The existence of everything is unreal for other than itself, and untouched by creation.

The malarial mosquito is not evil in itself. If it is described as such, it is because it is harmful to man and causes disease. That which is created is the existence of a thing in and of itself, which is a true existence; speculative or conditional existence has no place in the order of being and is not real.

We cannot, therefore, ask why God has created relative or conditional existence.

Conditional or abstract entities are inseparable from the real entities that give rise to them; they are their inevitable concomitants and do not partake of their being. One cannot then speak of conditional entities having been created.

That which is real must necessarily derive its being from the Creator. Only those things and attributes are real that exist outside the mind. Relative attributes are created by the mind and have no existence outside it so one cannot go looking for the creator.

Furthermore, that which has the potential to exist is the world as a whole, with all the objects it contains and the attributes that are inseparable from it; the world represents an indivisible unit. From the vantage point of God's wisdom, either the world must exist on the pattern that is peculiar to it, or it cannot exist at all.

A world without order or lacking the principle of causality, a world where good and evil were not separate from each other, would be an impossibility and a fantasy. It is not possible to suppose that one part of the world should exist and another should not. Creation is a whole, like the form and figure of man, and its parts are inseparable from each other.

God is absolutely free of all need, and one consequence of this is that He freely bestows being, like a generous man whose largess expects no return, or like a skilled artist who is constantly busy with the creation of new forms. Such abundant generosity and creativity define the essence of the Lord Whose signs are manifest and evident in every phenomenon.

1. Nahj al-Balaghah, ed., Subhi Salh, p. 493.

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