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Lesson 1: The Quality of Servitude and the Path to Eternal Bliss

The *hadith* which we have put forward as the pivot of our discussion is one of the most comprehensive and rewarding exhortations of the Noble Prophet (S) [1](#) to one of his most eminent companions by the name of Abu Dharr. The text of this *hadith* has been recorded in the distinguished books entitled “*Makarim al-Akhlaq*”, “*Amali Shaykh Tusi*”, “*Majmu‘ah Warram*” and “*Bihar al-Anwar*”. With Allah’s grace we have quoted it from “*Bihar al-Anwar*”, and we will set about explaining and elucidating it as far as we can.

Abu al-Aswad Du‘ili says, “When Abu Dharr was living in exile in Rabadhah, I went to visit him. While I was there with him, he narrated a *hadith* to me. Abu Dharr said, ‘Early one morning, I went to see the Noble Prophet (S) in the Mosque. He was seated with no one present save ‘Ali (‘a)[2](#). After being admitted in His Holiness’ audience and subsequent to greeting him with respect, I availed myself of the opportunity and presented my humble request to him. I said ‘May my father and mother be thy ransom! Give me a piece of advice by means of which Allah will grant me good’.’

“The Noble Prophet (S) kindly stated,

‘O Abu Dharr! What a noble man you are, and you are surely reckoned as one of our household’...”

The grammatical form ‘*af‘il bih*’ in Arabic functions as an exclamation phrase [*sighah ta‘ajjub*]; that is to say, it is used when a person is surprised at something. For instance, they say ‘*ajmil bik*’ to mean “How beautiful you are!” when they are amazed at the beauty and charm of someone. Therefore, the meaning of ‘*akrim bik*’ [in the above-mentioned narration’s Arabic text] is “What a noble man you are!”

The application of the term ‘noble’ [*karim*] by the Prophet (S) on such a man as Abu Dharr speaks clearly about the eminence, status and rank of that great companion in the perception of His Holiness (S). In addition, in order to lay emphasis on the above statement, the Noble Prophet (S) has included

Abu Dharr among his (S) kith and kin, the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a). (The Noble Prophet (S) has stated the same about Salman Farsi, when he says, "Salman is one of us, the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a).")

In continuation of the *hadith*, the Prophet (S) embarks upon advising Abu Dharr:

"I give you advice with the expectation that you will safeguard it and act upon it; because this counsel consists of all the paths which lead to good and prosperity. If you put this will and counsel into practice, the good of both the world and hereafter will become inexpensive for you."

The term 'will' in the above statement means a piece of advice and exhortation, not the will [or testament] that is made at the time of someone's death. Also '*tariq*' and '*sabil*' both denote road, but '*tariq*' connotes a wide and main route while '*sabil*' means a subsidiary course.

Two meanings can be inferred from the term '*kiflan*': one is that it denotes additional and the second meaning is twofold mercy. The Gracious Qur'an has employed '*kiflan*' in the second sense, that is to say twofold mercy.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَآمِنُوا بِرَسُولِهِ يُؤْتِكُمْ كِفْلَيْنِ مِنْ رَحْمَتِهِ

"O you who believe! Be careful of your duty to Allah and believe in his Apostle: He will give you two portions of his mercy..."³

Therefore, the purport of the Noble Prophet's (S) words will be as follows: If you put my advice into practice, you will attain twofold and additional good. But the second possibility is that '*kiflan*' connotes the world and the hereafter, in which case the meaning of the sentence shall be: If you act upon what I have said, you will have attained the prosperity of the world and the hereafter for yourself.

Worship and the perception of Allah

"O Abu Dharr! Worship Allah as though you are seeing Him, because if you do not see Him, He nevertheless sees you."

If this part of the *hadith* has not been reported recurrently, then at least it is equivalent to successive narration and has been related by various channels and mainly by Abu Dharr and with different expressions. In regard to this meaning, it has thus been narrated in another *hadith*:

"Goodness means that you ought to worship Allah as if you see Him..."⁴

Maybe the best advice for Abu Dharr, a man who has been trudging the path of devotion to Allah for many long years and a person who aspires to derive optimum benefit from the Prophet's (S) recipes in order to attain felicity is to inculcate in him the method of procuring benefit from worship and open a way

in front of him that leads to acquiring the best fruits from his acts of adoration, and that implies having the presence of heart during worship.

The means of attaining the presence of heart is practice and exercise and perceiving the presence of Allah: that is to say man ought to always perceive himself in the presence of Allah and close to Him, because if man becomes fond of Allah, never does he get tired of conversing with Him and listening to His words; for the reason that the more the lover is in the presence of his beloved and speaks with Him, the thirstier he becomes for more love.

The reason why we quickly get tired when performing our acts of worship and why we recite our prayers with haste and with the intention of quickly embarking upon our daily duties, and the reason why not only do we not feel any pleasure from worship but reckon that we are trapped in a cage once prayer takes long is because we do not perceive before whom we are standing and with whom we are talking! It is possible for us to discern our status of servitude in regard to Allah and conceive His lofty position and greatness by means of acquired knowledge, but this acquired knowledge has not had any effect on our hearts and does not give fruit to real affinity with Allah.

That which causes real and true connection with Allah is the presence of heart when we are performing acts of devotion. The only acts of worship which we are successful at fulfilling only serve to clear us from religious obligation and we do not derive the kind of benefit which we ought to gain because our acts of devotion have no life-giving spirit and are discharged without the presence of heart. Pre-occupation with worldly affairs is an impediment to rapport with Allah and the presence of heart during acts of devotion, and that is the problem with which we are faced.

It is always asked that what ought we to do in order to acquire presence of heart when performing acts of devotion? Attaining the presence of heart needs strict exercise and self-discipline. In the beginning, man has to sit in solitude and contemplate that Allah is seeing him. Some ethical mentors used to recommend making use of imaginative aspects of the mind during this exercise; that is to say that if you are in spiritual retreat in a room and/or are spending your days in a secluded place, imagine that a man is hidden and is watching your conduct and that you do not see him.

Is your behavior the same when someone is watching you with when no one is watching you? Especially when that person is not an ordinary man but a person you consider as of great importance and believe that your destiny lies in his hands? You are desirous of being beloved by him and of him loving you. Can you in this case completely pay no heed to him and get busy with other matters?

If man, with the help of exercise, conceives this point that he is in the presence of Allah and that Allah constantly looks at him and even if man himself does not see Allah, Allah nonetheless sees him, he will bit by bit attain presence of heart when performing acts of worship and such kind of worship has a life-giving spirit. This kind of worship will not only result in clearing us from duty, but will result in spiritual progress, ascendance through the stations of perfection and nearness to Allah. Without doubt, Imam

‘Ali’s (‘a) words bear witness to this issue:

“Beware of disobeying Allah in solitude because the Witness of that situation is also the Judge.”[5](#)

It is therefore necessary for people who have not yet had practice to have presence of heart during prayer to set aside some time during the course of the day for sitting in seclusion and concentrating on this point that Allah is seeing them. Of course, there is no doubt that man is always in the presence of Allah and Allah sees him; as the Noble Qur’an hints at this reality in several instances, among them:

يَعْلَمُ خَائِنَةَ الْأَعْيُنِ وَمَا تُخْفِي الصُّدُورِ

“He knows the stealthy looks and that which the breasts conceal.”[6](#)

In his short sayings, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) states:

“O people! Fear Allah who is such that when you speak He hears and when you conceal a secret (in your hearts) he knows it. Prepare yourself to meet death which will overtake you even if you run away, catch you even if you stay and remember you even if you forget it.”[7](#)

In the first section of this *hadith*, the Noble Prophet (S) has cited worship as man’s key to prosperity.

Thereafter, in the following sections, he begins to explain the stages that worship of Allah consists of. In addition to that, in the first section of the *hadith*, recommendation has been made with respect to the quality of worship and the fact that acts of devotion ought to have a life-giving spirit, and that spirit is the presence of heart, and in reality, no mention with regard to the origin of worship has been made, as though that point has been taken for granted.

Worship And Adoration Of Allah Is A Means Of Ascending And Rising Through The Stations Of Perfection For The Believers

It is worthy of mentioning that the nature of man is concealed in devotion and adoration of Allah and man without worship has no distinction of freedom of choice over the other animals and only enjoys existential privileges, without having discharged their right (without having earned those privileges himself). A person who abstains from worshipping Allah has in reality closed the road towards human perfection on himself because attaining human perfection is only feasible by this means.

If we pay attention to the ways of life of great men, we notice that one of the inseparable principles of their lives is devotion to Allah. All the people who had the merit of achieving the status of ‘*Kalimullah* (the Interlocutor of Allah)’, ‘*Khalilullah* (the Friend of Allah)’, and ‘*Habibullah* (the Friend of Allah)’ only arrived at those lofty stations by means of traversing this course and undergoing hard and difficult trials. Not even one individual can be found who attained [even] one perfection from the volitional perfections of

man without devotional servitude to Allah. In addition to what has been said, achieving stations such as the stations of contentment, certitude et cetera et cetera have to be searched for in the adoration of Allah.

Allah in the Qur'an states:

وَاعْبُدْ رَبَّكَ حَتَّى يَأْتِيَكَ الْيَقِينُ

“And serve your Lord until there comes to you that which is certain.”⁸

And with regard to the station of being well pleased with whatever Allah decrees [*maqam-i rida*], it says:

وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ قَبْلَ طُلُوعِ الشَّمْسِ وَقَبْلَ غُرُوبِهَا وَمِنْ آنَاءِ اللَّيْلِ فَسَبِّحْ وَأَطْرَافَ النَّهَارِ لَعَلَّكَ تَرْضَى ...

“...Bear then patiently what they say, and glorify your Lord by the praising of Him before the rising of the sun and before its setting, and during the hours of the night do also glorify Him and during parts of the day, that you may be well pleased.”⁹

The mission of all the Prophets (‘a) has been to direct people towards adoration and worship of Allah:

...وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولًا أَنْ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاجْتَنِبُوا الطَّاغُوتَ

“And certainly we raised in every nation an apostle saying: ‘Serve Allah and shun the shaitan...”¹⁰

One of the subjects on which the Gracious Qur'an lays great emphasis is that everything in existence is preoccupied with worshiping Allah, whether they like it or not:

...يُسَبِّحُ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ

“Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth declares the glory of Allah...”¹¹

But this glorification is existential and performs no function in the perfection of man. What plays a role in the perfection of man is worship done of his own volition, and in other than this case stones and the mountains too would attain their ultimate perfection by means of existential worship.

The importance and value of worship and devotion to Allah reaches an extent where Allah, the Exalted, states in the Gracious Qur'an that the ultimate goal of creating the jinn and mankind is worship:

“And I have not created the jinn and the men except that they should worship Me.”¹²

In addition to what has been said, the sense of worship is man’s natural disposition; that is to say, the need for worship has been kneaded and concealed in the essence of man and this truth that no nation or community has ever existed that did not engage in worship and adoration of one kind or another can be inferred from studying the history of religions and nations.

The stages of worship of Allah

a) Knowledge of Allah

In continuation of the *hadith*, the Noble Prophet (S) embarks upon propounding the stages of worship:

“Know O Abu Dharr that the first stage of devotion to Allah is knowledge of Him. Verily, He is the first before whom there is none, He is the One and the Only, and there is none like Him. He is the Everlasting, the Eternal. He is the One who created the heavens and the earth and that which is between them. Allah is the Knowing, the Kind and He is capable of doing anything.”

In this section, the first stage of worship mentioned is knowledge of Allah; of course, cognition of Allah has a great deal of stages, but that which is necessary in worship and adoration of Allah is a general awareness of Him; man ought to know that Allah exists and He is the Creator of man and the world. If this stage of knowledge is not attained by man, the turn does not come for worship and adoration of Allah.

For this reason, this stage of knowledge is prior to worship. Of course, at the ultimate destination of his spiritual journey towards his perfection, man reaches the highest stages of cognition and awareness especially reserved for the saints [*awliya*] of Allah, and we [the ordinary people] cannot find our way to its reality and truth. We know in brief that the ultimate knowledge which the saints [*awliya*] of Allah attain at the end of their spiritual wayfaring is very valuable and high and that it is the last phase of devotion to Allah.

After man has attained the first stage of worship and has perceived that Allah does exist, it is incumbent to meditate upon the attributes and effects of Allah in order for that knowledge to become firm, grounded and constant so that it does not only remain as a mental conception but is turned into a present and lively awareness that leaves an impression on man. This stage of cognition and knowledge which goes with reflection is called ‘medium knowledge’ [*ma‘rifat-i mutawassit*].

Medium knowledge itself has different stages and covers a wide spectrum and man can attain those stages by way of meditation and reflection on divine signs and also by means of practical acts of

devotion. It has become clear from what has been said that meditation about the divine attributes and effects and also knowing Allah better is itself worship and a kind of volitional deed and that awareness, which is one of the preliminaries of worship, is attained along with it. (Meditation and reflection about divine signs is a proximate prerequisite [*muqaddamah qaribah*] of cognition and attending class and studying books is the remote precondition [*muqaddamat-i ba'idah*].)

b) Belief in the Prophet (S) and acknowledgement of his divine mission

“At the second stage you ought to believe in me and acknowledge that Allah, the Exalted, has appointed me to be the giver of glad tidings, the admonisher, the caller towards Allah by His permission and the light of guidance for all mankind...”

Every one of the attributes mentioned in the *hadiths* and Qur'an about the Noble Prophet (S) stand in need of explanation and interpretation, and if our faith in the Noble Prophet's (S) divine mission becomes strong and complete, we will not get ensnared in a great number of doubts. The lack of adequate knowledge and faith in regard to the Noble Prophet (S) in a lot of Muslims of weak faith results in their getting entangled in skepticisms and by the passage of time they get deviated from the correct path and in the end, Allah forbid, they are drawn towards disbelief; the reason for this is because they have not believed that whatever the Noble Prophet (S) says is correct.

Some people of weak faith say that the Islamic laws which the Noble Prophet (S) brought are not binding in our age. These injunctions and decrees were meant for bringing order to the disorderly state of the people of the Arabian Peninsula in the age of the Noble Prophet (S) and there is no more need for Islamic laws in our age!

This [vain] talk is a result of their not having faith in Allah's Prophet (S), and if they had faith in the Noble Prophet's (S) words in which he stated, “I have been sent to all mankind”, they would not have placed any limitations of time on his prophetic mission. In reality, it must be said that all the deviations that appear in religion are a result of weak faith in both Allah's Prophet (S) and the fruits of his divine mission.

c) Love for the Prophet's Ahl al-Bayt ('a)

“The third stage is love for my *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a), those whom Allah has cleansed and purified from every kind of impurity.”

It can generally be said that the greatness of knowing the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) and their high position and loving them reaches an extent where Imam Khomeini, may Allah be pleased with him, begins his political-divine will with the Noble Prophet's (S) saying, “Verily I leave two priceless things for you, the Book of Allah and my [pure] progeny...” Perhaps it was surprising to the people of the world that in his final will the leader of the great Islamic revolution prides himself on following that Pure and Infallible Household of the Noble Prophet (S).

We do not know what lies [concealed] in this love and affection for the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) and dependence on knowledge and cognition of them and we may likely construe it to be a simple matter and mistakenly imagine that we ought to love the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) because they are the children and relatives of the Allah’s Prophet (S). If it were like this, they would not have been introduced as being equivalent and the same with the Gracious Qur’an. Emphasis upon love for the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) is not on account of their being the Noble Prophet’s (S) near ones, for the reason that the Noble Prophet (S) had several wives and no such recommendation has been made in regard to any one of them but this emphasis is because Allah has purified them from every kind of impurity.

Likening the Ahl al-Bayt to Noah’s (‘a) vessel and the gate of repentance for the Children of Israel

“Know O Abu Dharr! The Honored and Glorified Lord has made my *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) like the vessel of Noah (‘a), upon which everyone who embarked got saved and whoever did not embark got drowned. Likewise, they are similar to the gate of repentance [*bab hittah*] for the Children of Israel which provided safety from the punishment to anyone who entered it.”

The Noble Prophet’s (S) emphasis on love for the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) and his likening them to the gate of repentance for the Children of Israel is not a sentimental issue so that some people might mistakenly imagine that the natural love and affection of the Noble Prophet (S) for his children and near ones caused him to always make recommendations and advices about friendship and fondness for them, but these counsels go beyond natural love and affection and are made as a result of his believing that the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) are the ship of salvation for the Islamic *ummah* (universal community of the Muslims) and for the reason that he is convinced that every person lost and bewildered in the valley of perplexity will get saved from drowning in the sea full of turbulence, contortion and deviations, in the same way that Noah’s (‘a) community got saved from divine damnation by embarking upon Noah’s ship and those who disobeyed, amongst them Noah’s son, perished and got annihilated.

At the beginning of the Islamic call, when there was no talk about division and disagreement as yet in the Islamic *ummah*, the Noble Prophet (S) advises Abu Dharr that the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) are similar to Noah’s (‘a) vessel. Man perishes if he has no connection with them and if he does not emulate them. In reality, this is an admonition and advice to the Muslims who succumb to deviations, fanaticisms and discords that appear at the same time with the Noble Prophet’s (S) passing away and to a number of opportunists and double-tongued hypocrites who robbed other human beings of opportunities that the only people who can save the Islamic *ummah* from danger and collapsing into aberration, misguidance and deviation are the Pure and Infallible *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a), with ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (‘a) at their head.

Thereafter, the Noble Prophet (S) likens his Pure and Infallible *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) to the gate of deliverance [*bab hittah*] for the Children of Israel (these two similes, the similitude to Noah’s (‘a) vessel and the similitude to the gate of deliverance of the Children of Israel have been narrated in a great number of

hadiths by both the Sunnis and Shi'ahs and have reached the extent of successive transmission). When the Children of Israel were afflicted by divine wrath as a result of their sin and oppression, and when they wandered for forty years in the wilderness, out of His mercy and as a result of their penance, grief and turning back to Him, Allah once more opened the door of repentance for them.

About this, the Qur'an states:

"...And when We said: 'Enter this city, then eat from a plenteous (food) wherever you wish, and enter the gate making obeisance, and say, forgiveness.' We will forgive you your wrongs and give more to those who do good (to others)." ¹³

Every person who entered the gate, in addition to attaining honor and prosperity, also got their sins forgiven. The Noble Prophet's (S) intention in citing this similitude is to explain this point that in the same way that the Children of Israel secured their earthly and other worldly salvation by means of entering the gate of repentance, the Muslims too will guarantee their worldly and heavenly welfare if they enter the door of knowledge and cognition of the Pure and Infallible *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) and follow them.

The word '*hittah*' literally means spilling and destroying; by saying this word the Children of Israel were asking for forgiveness and the destruction of their sins. Allah made it a means of attaining their forgiveness. But a group among them did not have faith in Allah; they took Allah's word for a mockery and according to what has been recorded in the *hadiths*, in place of the word '*hittah*' they pronounced the word '*hantah*' which means wheat. Allah sent down upon them His divine wrath because of their moral corruption and their refusing to repent and seek forgiveness:

فَبَدَّلَ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا قَوْلًا غَيْرَ الَّذِي قِيلَ لَهُمْ فَأَنْزَلْنَا عَلَى الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا رِجْزًا مِنَ السَّمَاءِ بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْسُقُونَ

"Those who were unjust changed it for a saying other than that which had been spoken to them, so We sent upon those who were unjust a pestilence from heaven, because they transgressed." ¹⁴

The Noble Prophet (S) presented the Pure and Infallible *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) as the gate whom following and obeying are a cause of worldly and heavenly prosperity and freedom from eternal retribution, but the people did not accept his word and instead of the Pure and Infallible *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a), they appointed other people and never used to see any difference between Imam 'Ali ('a) and the others and they used to fantasize that in the same way that Imam 'Ali ('a) is the son in law of the Noble Prophet (S), 'Uthman, too, was the Noble Prophet's (S) son in law!

The other message of this section of the *hadith* is that the most fundamental stage of worship consists of matters of the heart and inner deeds; that is to say, no person can derive enough benefit from worship unless he has knowledge, faith in Allah, love for the Pure and Infallible *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) and conviction in the Noble Prophet (S). For this reason, adoration is not confined to external matters and outward deeds, but the origin and roots of devotion are inner conceptions and all acts of worship that spring from the

heart.

- [1.](#) The abbreviation, “S”, stands for the Arabic invocative phrase, sallallahu ‘alayhi wa alihi wa sallam [may God’s blessings and peace be upon him and his progeny], which is mentioned after the name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S). [ed.]
- [2.](#) The abbreviation, “a” stands for the Arabic invocative phrase, ‘alayhi’s–salam, ‘alayhim’us–salam, or ‘alayha’s–salam [may peace be upon him/them/her], which is mentioned after the names of the prophets, angels, Imams from the Prophet’s progeny, and saints (‘a). [ed.]
- [3.](#) Surat al–Hadid 57:28.
- [4.](#) Bihar al–Anwar, vol. 65, section [bab] 1, p. 116.
- [5.](#) Nahj al–Balaghah, p. 316, wisdom [hikmat] 316, trans. Fayd al–Islam.
- [6.](#) Surat al–Mu’min (or Ghafir) 40: 19.
- [7.](#) Nahj al–Balaghah, p. 1178, wisdom [hikmat] 194, trans. Fayd al–Islam.
- [8.](#) Surat al–Hijr 15:99.
- [9.](#) Surat Ta Ha 20: 130.
- [10.](#) Surat al–Nahl 16:36.
- [11.](#) Surat al–Jumu’ah 62: 1.
- [12.](#) Surat al–Dharyat 51:56.
- [13.](#) Surat al–Baqarah 2:58.
- [14.](#) Surat al–Baqarah 2:59.

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