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Lesson 23: The Imam's Communication with the World of the Unseen

There are those to whom a gate is opened onto the treasures of the unseen and who become aware thereby of certain hidden truths. This takes place by means of inspiration and illumination, for entry into that sphere by means of mental activity and ratiocination is completely impossible.

Such non-sensory and non-rational perception, made possible by flashes of illumination and inspiration, is a valid way of knowing reality, for although it might appear difficult to justify from the point of view of a mono-dimensional and materialist worldview, there is no scientific reason to deny it

Dr. Alexis Carrel is one of the well known scientists who assign a particular value to inspiration and gnostic perception, regarding it in fact as a divine gift This is what he says:

"Scientific geniuses, in addition to their great capacities for research and perceptive insight, also possess qualities such as illumination, by means of which they discern things that are hidden from others. They see connections between phenomena that are apparently unconnected and instinctively perceive the existence of unknown things.

Thanks to their clear vision, they are able to read the thoughts of others, without recourse to their sensory faculties; to observe phenomena that are more or less distant, in terms of time and space; and to provide more definite information concerning certain things than that which is yielded by the senses.

"For one illumined in this sense, it is as easy to read someone's thoughts as to describe his face, and in fact it is misleading to use the words 'see' or 'feel' in connection with what passes through his consciousness, for he neither sees anything nor seeks it in a given place he simply knows it.

"Numerous are those people who under normal circumstances do not have this kind of illumined vision but have experienced it once or twice during their lives. It sometimes becomes possible for us to perceive the outer world by means other than our outer senses.

There is no doubt that the mind can sometimes establish communication between two individuals over great distances, and instances of this type, the study of which is known to present day science as metasychics, have to be accepted just as they are. For they contain truths within them and present us with a dimension of human existence that is not yet properly known. It may be that one day the cause for the extraordinary perceptive powers of some people will become clear."¹

The human spirit thus has means of communicating with the external world that lie beyond sensory and rational perception, and through the appropriate researches scholar's have come to accept that communication with the world of the unseen is not only possible for man, but a reality.

In just the same way that experience shows it to be possible to make contact with the external world in a dream and even to gain information concerning it, there is nothing to prevent our inner, spiritual faculties providing us with similar experiences while we are awake. This is an aperture that God has opened for His servants, permitting them to glimpse certain hidden mysteries and truths.

Given the fact that such a gift is bestowed on ordinary people, what is to prevent perfect human beings, such as the prophets and the friends of God who possess exalted qualities and attributes, from communicating with the world of the unseen and learning hidden truths, on a higher level and in a more extensive fashion than others, thanks to the depth of their devotion and inward purity?

One of the sources of the knowledge of the Imams is the inspiration that is bestowed on them by God's order; through communication with the world of the unseen, truths and realities become disclosed to them. There are numerous traditions bearing on this, confirming that persons chosen by God can indeed establish communication with the unseen and come to perceive a whole series of complex mysteries.

The inspiration that comes to the Imams initiating them into certain hidden concerns, is different from revelation, because the one who receives inspiration does not see the angel of revelation. However, the truths that are bestowed on the Imams help them greatly in expanding the scope of their vision and augmenting their cognitive abilities.

It needs to be added, of course, that the communication of the Imams with the world of the unseen is not unbounded, resulting in a complete awareness of all things unseen, or independent of God's infinite power; their relationship is with a specific zone or region of the unseen within boundaries set by God Himself. Given the inherent limitation of their knowledge and their dependence for it on divine power, they cannot attain that which is absolutely unknowable to all except God.

However, since each of the Imams is the most perfect man of his age, thanks to his rank and luminosity, and a complete manifestation of the divine names and attributes, the Creator of the World, the Knower of the Unseen and the Manifest, discloses to them certain matters relating to the unseen, thereby broadening and deepening their vision and opening an aperture onto what otherwise remains hidden.

It is not possible for them to enter into contact with the world of the unseen independently, as is apparent

from the traditions in which the Imams deny they have knowledge of the unseen; what is meant is that they have no complete or absolute access to the unseen and Cannot gain any knowledge of it without God's will and permission.

In addition, the Imams received certain knowledge concerning the unseen that had been vouchsafed to the Most Noble Messenger peace and blessings be upon him and his family.

One of the companions of Imam al-Baqir, peace be upon him, asked him about the meaning of the verse:

"None knows God's unseen realm except those whom He chooses from among His messengers."
(72:26)

He replied: *"I swear by God that Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, was one of those whom God desired to acquaint with the knowledge of the unseen. If God designated Himself as 'Knower of the Unseen,' this is because knowledge of certain matters is restricted to Him and hidden from His servants: things He predetermines in His knowledge before creating them and informing the angels of them, and which He then exercises His will to create or not to create. As for the knowledge of that which He both predetermines and wills to create, this is the knowledge that was conveyed to the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, and then to us."* [2](#)

The Noble Qur'an declares with the utmost clarity that God Almighty gives knowledge of the unseen to chosen servants such as the prophets in various ages. The Immaculate Imams can also make contact with the world of the unseen whenever necessary by seeking God's aid and support and thereby gain access to knowledge they need.

This does not mean that the Imams made regular use of some inner force in order to make contact with the world of the unseen in the course of their daily lives to obtain supernatural support. For it is a fundamental principle that the Prophet and the Imams should not exhibit any fundamental difference from other human beings in their mode of life; in taking decisions, they relied on their own judgement of matters as they appeared to be, and often consulted their companions.

Their acts took place in accordance with their own will and choice and were based on knowledge acquired by conventional means. Like other humans, they were subject to all the duties and obligations of religious observance. The way in which they exercised their teaching and guiding function in society was not visibly different from that of others, as a result of which some people came to imagine that they were on the same level as ordinary scholars of religion.

Attention must also be drawn to the fact that awareness of the unseen world, in the sense of the foreknowledge of events that are bound to occur, neither has any effect on the actual course of events, nor enables the Imams to exert any control over the actions of others, nor implies any obligation on their part to attempt to do so.

The Imam's knowledge that a certain individual is about to embark on a certain course of action, in accordance with his own choice and free will, has not the slightest effect on that individual's decision, nor does it in any way serve to restrain him, thereby negating his free will. Knowledge of that which God has definitively decreed is simply a form of awareness of events that will come to pass; it does not create for the Imam any additional duty of either enjoining a given course of action or forbidding it

One of the companions of Imam al-Baqir, peace be upon him, relates that someone from Fars once asked the Imam whether he had knowledge of the unseen. He answered: *"Sometimes knowledge of the unseen is granted to us, and sometimes it is not. God entrusted some of His mysteries to Jibril, and he conveyed them to Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, who in turn informed of them whomsoever he wished."*[3](#)

Someone once asked Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, peace be upon him, whether the Prophet witnessed the hidden dimensions of the heavens and the earth, as Ibrahim did. He answered: *"Yes, the Prophet saw those dimensions, and so does your Imam."*[4](#)

On another occasion Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq also said:

"Whenever the Imam wishes to be informed of something, God informs him of it."[5](#)

"We are the administrators of God's affair, the treasures of His knowledge, and the repository of His revealed mysteries."[6](#)

"God's greatness requires that when He appoints a person as His proof to mankind He discloses to him the knowledge of the heavens and the earth."[7](#)

"If I were to meet with Musa and Khidr, I would tell them that I am more knowledgeable than both of them, and I would expound to them matters unknown to them. For they knew only what had been and what was, and they knew nothing of what would happen down to the Day of Resurrection, whereas we have inherited knowledge of all that from the Prophet."[8](#)

"I swear by God that knowledge of the first things and the last things has been bestowed on us." On hearing this utterance of the Imam, one of his companions asked him whether he had knowledge of the unseen. He answered: "Woe upon you that you find it necessary to ask such a question. We are fully informed of each drop of sperm in the loins of men and the wombs of women. Woe upon you; open your eyes, and let your hearts perceive the truth! We are God's proof, dwelling among His creation, but only the believer whose faith is as firm as the mountains of Tihamah has the ability to perceive this truth. I swear by God that if I wished I could inform you how many pebbles exist in the world, even though their number is constantly growing, by night and by day. I swear by God that after me you will rise up in enmity against each other until one group among you destroys the other."[9](#)

Imam al-Baqir, peace be upon him, said: *"Once the Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali, peace be upon him,*

was asked about the extent of the Prophet's knowledge. He replied: 'He had the knowledge of all the preceding prophets; he knew all of the past and all of the future. I swear by God Who holds my soul in His hand that I know all that the Prophet knew, and that I know all of the past and all of the future, up until the Day of Resurrection.'"[10](#)

Imam al-Baqir' peace be upon him, also said: *"I am astonished at those who believe in following us and accept that obedience to us is equivalent to obeying God and the Messenger, but then contradict themselves and oppose us because of a sickness in their hearts. They underestimate us and object to those who fully appreciate our worth. Do you imagine that God would make it obligatory for His servants to obey us unless we had been given complete knowledge of the heavens and the earth and provided us with all we need to know for solving the problems people encounter?"*"[11](#)

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, peace be upon him, reported the Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali, peace be upon him, to have said: *"God bestowed upon me nine distinguishing qualities that He gave to none other save the Prophet: He opened up for me channels of knowledge permitting me to know when every death occurs, when disasters descend, what are men's genealogies, and the decisive speech (that separates truth from falsehood); He permitted me to look upon the world of the unseen, so that past and future events were unfolded before me; He perfected religion for mankind, completed His blessing for them, and accepted Islam for them as religion for them by appointing me as the holder of divine authority. and He instructed Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, to inform the people of all that. These are God's gifts to me, so may praise be given to Him alone."*"[12](#)

This is a selection from the very copious traditions on the subject that have been transmitted from the Immaculate Imams. Whenever the Imams deemed it a necessary part of their duty to proclaim truths from the world of the unseen, they made manifest matters that would otherwise have remained hidden.

The Sunni scholar Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid writes:

"When 'Ali, peace be upon him, invited people to ask him about the future, he was claiming neither divinity nor prophethood. What he meant thereby was that he had learned knowledge of the unseen from the Messenger of God. As for the predictions that he made we have tested and examined them all, and found them to correspond to reality, which is a proof of the accuracy of his words and the unique knowledge of the unseen that he possessed. For he said, 'I swear by God Who holds my soul in His hand that I have knowledge of the future and can tell you whatever you want to know.'"[13](#)

There is a celebrated story about a certain Maytham al-Tammar, one of the close companions of 'Ali. One day, in the presence of a number of other people, 'Ali foretold the sad fate that was to overtake him in the following words:

"O Maytham, know that after my death you will be arrested and hung from the gibbet. On the second day your beard will be reddened with the blood of your nose and your mouth, and on the third day, you will be pierced with a spear, and you will go to the presence of your Lord. The place where this will occur is

near the house of 'Amr b. Hurayth, and you will be the tenth person to die in that way, the only difference being that the gibbet from which you are hung will be shorter than the others. I will show you the tree from which it will be fashioned." Two days later, he showed Maytham the datepalm in question.

For days Maytham stayed close to that datepalm, which was situated in a quiet open space, immersed in worship and supplication. Every now and then he would look at the tree, murmuring to it: 'May God bless you, for I have been created for you, and you have been created for me."

Whenever he ran into Amr b. Hurayth he would say: "I am to be your neighbor, so take good care of me." Amr did not understand what he meant, so he asked him in surprise: "Have you decided to buy the house of Ibn Mas'ud or Ibn Hakam?"

Time passed, 'Ali was martyred, and Maytham's ordeal began. He was arrested and turned over to 'Ubaydullah b. Ziyad, who had been informed of Maytham's zealous devotion to 'Ali. Drunk with power, and intent on extinguishing the fire of belief in 'Ali's family, 'Ubaydullah asked Maytham: "What happened to your God?"

Unintimidated by 'Ubaydullah, Maytham replied: "He is setting a trap for the oppressors."

'Ubaydullah said: "I hear he foretold your fate." "Yes," Maytham answered, and when 'Ubaydullah insisted on hearing the details, he continued: "My master 'Ali, peace be upon him, told me that you will hang me from the gibbet, and that I will be the tenth person you martyr in that fashion, and that my gibbet will be shorter than the others."

Full of anger, 'Ubaydullah told Maytham that he would deal with him in a manner other than that which 'Ali had foretold.

To which Maytham responded: "How can you oppose what he said? It was the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, who informed 'Ali what my fate would be, and he had been informed of it by Jibril, the trustworthy spirit and angel, who learned of it from God Almighty Himself. I know the exact place where I will be hung from the gibbet, and I know, too, that I will be the first Muslim in whose mouth a muzzle is placed."

'Ubaydullah gave orders for Maytham to be imprisoned. While in prison, he came into contact with al-Mukhtar and told him that he would be set free and rise up one day to avenge the death of Husayn b. 'Ali by killing 'Ubaydullah.

Not long passed before al-Mukhtar was indeed set free, while Maytham was brought once again before 'Ubaydullah. He ordered him to be hung from a gibbet fashioned from a datepalm near the house of Amr b. Hurayth, who immediately remembered what Maytham had told him and accordingly instructed his servant every night to sweep the area in front of the datepalm and to light a lamp there.

For as long as Maytham hung from the gibbet, the people would gather to hear him discoursing On the

virtues of the Prophet's House, for love for the family of 'Ali had become intermingled with Maytham's faith. 'Ubaydullah was informed of the situation, and told that Maytham was humiliating and mocking him by his behavior. Accordingly, in a fit of rage, he ordered that a muzzle be placed in Maytham's mouth.

Maytham's fate proceeded to unfold just as 'Ali had predicted. On the second day that he hung from the gibbet, blood poured down from his nose and his mouth, and after all kinds of torture had been inflicted on that pious man, he was martyred with a thrust from a spear. Such was the painful end of that man of God." [14](#)

'Ali, peace be upon him, once said in a sermon after the Battle of the Camel was over and his army had entered Basra:

"I swear by God that this city of yours will be flooded so that your mosque will look like a ship floating on the waters; God will punish this city from above and below."

Commenting on these words, Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid writes:

"Basrah has been flooded twice up to now. One of the two occasions was during the caliphate of al-Qadir Billah when the waters of the Persian Gulf rose and flooded the town, and from all of its buildings only a part of the congregational mosque could be seen, in just the same way that 'Ali described it The whole city was destroyed, and many people perished." [15](#)

Imam Hasan b. 'Ali, peace be upon him, predicted that his wife Ju'dah would poison him, and he also told Imam Husayn, peace be upon him, that thirty people claiming to belong to the *ummah* of Islam would conspire to kill him and enslave his household and children. [16](#)

The Bani Hashim once decided to make Muhammad b. Abdullah the caliph and they convened a meeting for the purpose. Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, peace be upon him, accepted their invitation to participate, but when Abdullah asked him to swear allegiance to Muhammad b. Abduhlah, he answered as follows:

"You and your sons Muhammad and Ibrahim will never be able to win the caliphate. The first person to seize it will be this person," pointing to al-Saffah" followed by that person "pointing to al-Mansur" and then the caliphate will fall into the hands of the descendants of al-'Abbas. Matters will reach the point that even children will hold the office of caliph, and the counsel of women will be sought. As for your children, Muhammad and Ibrahim, they will both be killed." [17](#)

Imam, al-Baqir, peace be upon him, told his brother Zayd b. 'Ali, who was later hung from the gibbet in the Kannasah quarter of Kufah:

"Do not allow suspicious people to incite you, for they will be unable to ward off God's punishment from you. Be not hasty, for God does not conform Himself to the haste of His servants. Do not seek to outpace God (by acting prematurely), for difficulties and disasters will defeat and destroy you. I entrust

you to God, O my brother, for you will be hanged at Kannasah. "[18](#)

Shaykh Hurr al-'Amili writes: "The prediction made by Imam al-Baqir, peace be upon him, in this *hadith* is well-known and of indubitable authenticity."

According to Husayn b. Bashshar, Imam ar-Ridha', peace be upon him, said: "Abdullah al-Ma'mun (the 'Abbasid caliph) will kill his brother, Muhammad al-Amin." Husayn asked for clarification, and the Imam said: "Abdullah who is now in Khurasan will have Muhammad the son of Zubaydah put to death in Baghdad." [19](#)

Hudhayfah reports Imam Husayn b. 'Ali, peace be upon him, to have said the following:

"I swear by God that the Umayyads will decide to shed my blood, and 'Umar b. Sa'd will be the commander of their army."

Since the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, was alive at the time, Hudhayfah asked Husayn: *"O grandson of the Messenger, has the Prophet informed you of this?"* And Husayn responded that he had not. Then Hudhayfah went to the Prophet and informed him of what Husayn had said. The Prophet said thereupon: *"What I know, Husayn knows, and what Husayn knows, I know."* [20](#)

Abu Hashim, one of the companions of Imam al-'Askari, peace be upon him, says: *"I wrote a letter to the Imam complaining about the hardships of prison, and in his reply he wrote that very same day I would perform the noonday prayer in my own home. When noontime arrived, I was indeed set free, and I performed the prayer in my own home."* [21](#)

Khayran reports:

"One day I went to see Imam al-Hadi, peace be upon him, in Madinah. He asked me what news I had of al-Wathiq. I told him that I had been al-Wathiq ten days earlier and that he had seemed to be in good health. The Imam remarked that according to the people of Madinah al-Wathiq had died, and he then asked about Ja'far. I told him that Ja'far had been imprisoned, under very harsh conditions.

The Imam responded that Ja'far had been released and made caliph. Next he asked concerning Ibn Zayyat, and I informed him that Ibn Zayyat was busy taking care of people's affairs. He told me that such activity had proved harmful for Ibn Zayyat. After pausing a minute, the Imam continued: 'What God has foreordained must necessarily come to pass. al-Wathiq has died, and Ja'far has become caliph and put Ibn Zayyat to death.' I asked when all this had happened, and he told me, 'Six days after you left Baghdad.'" [22](#)

Suwayd b. Ghaflah says: "One day when 'Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, was delivering a sermon in the mosque at Kufah, a man got up and said: 'O Commander of the Faithful, when passing through the Wadi 'l-Qura I heard that Khalid b. 'Urfatah had died; beseech God that his sins may be forgiven,' 'Ali, peace be upon him, said: 'I swear by God that he is still alive, and will remain

so until he leads an army of the misguided of which the flagbearer will be Habib b. Hammar.'

Then somebody else got up and said, 'I am Habib b. Hammar; why do you say this of me even though I am one of your devoted companions and followers?' 'Ali asked him, 'Are you truly Habib b. Hammar?' 'Yes,' he answered. Then 'Ali said, 'I swear by God that you will indeed be the flagbearer of that army, and that you will enter the mosque of Kufah by this gate.' As he said this, he pointed to the *Bab al-Fil* (Elephant Gate)."

Thabit al-Thumali says: "I swear by God that I witnessed the whole event. Later I came to see that 'Ubaydullah b. Ziyad sent Amr b. Sa'd against Husayn b. 'Ali, peace be upon him, at the head of a vast army, which was commanded by Khalid b. 'Urfatah and had Habib b. Hammar as its flagbearer. They entered the mosque of Kufah through the Bab al-Fil."[23](#)

One of the remarkable events foreseen by the Commander of the Faithful was what happened to Rashid al-Hujriyy. When he was captured and taken before 'Ubaydullah b. Ziyad, he was asked: "What did 'Ali tell you I would do to you?" He replied: "That you would cut off my hands and feet and hang me from the gibbet."

'Ubaydullah exclaimed: "I swear by God that I will do the opposite of what 'Ali predicted to make it obvious that he was lying." So he commanded that Rashid be set free. But just as Rashid was about to leave the all, 'Ubaydullah gave orders for him to be brought back, saying the harshest punishment I can conceive for him is to cut off his hands and feet and to hang him from the gibbet." For he thought that this would help him to efface all trace of justice from society. 'Ubaydullah's orders were carried out, but Rashid continued courageously to voice his convictions.

Fury overcame 'Ubaydullah, and losing all self-control he gave orders for Rashid's tongue to be plucked out. When Rashid heard of this, he said, "This, too, is part of what 'Ali foretold for me." Then his tongue was cut out, and he was hung from the scaffold.[24](#)

These are a few examples of the stories that are to be found in books of history and tradition drawn up by compilers who lived at different places and in different periods. They compel any fair minded person to conclude that the Immaculate Imams were in communication with the world of the unseen and had the ability, with the permission of God, to gain knowledge of hidden truths whenever they wished.

[1.](#) Alexis Carrel, *Insan*, Mawjud-i Nashinakhteh, pp. 135 ff.

[2.](#) al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, Vol. I, p.256.

[3.](#) Ibid., p.256.

[4.](#) al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-anwar*, Vol. XXVI, p. 115.

[5.](#) al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, Vol. II, p.258.

[6.](#) Ibid., Vol. I, p. 192.

[7.](#) al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-anwar*, XXVI, p. 110.

[8.](#) al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, Vol. I, p.261.

[9.](#) al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-anwar*, Vol. XXVI, p. 27.

- [10.](#) Ibid., p. 110.
- [11.](#) al-Kulayni, al-Kafi, Vol. I, p.261.
- [12.](#) Bihar al-anwar, Vol. XXVI, p. 141.
- [13.](#) Ibn Abi 'l-Hadid, Sharh, Vol. II, p. 175.
- [14.](#) Ibid., p. 291.
- [15.](#) Ibid., p. 253.
- [16.](#) Hurr al-'Amili, Ithbat al-Hudat, Vol. V, p. 147.
- [17.](#) Abu al-Faraj al-Isbahani, Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, p. 172.
- [18.](#) Hurr al-'Amili, Ithbat al-Hudat, Vol. V, p.266.
- [19.](#) Abu al-Faraj al-Isbahani, Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, p.298.
- [20.](#) Hurr al-'Amili, Ithbat al-Hudat, Vol. V, p.207.
- [21.](#) Ibid., Vol. VI, p.286.
- [22.](#) Ibid., Vol. VI, p.213.
- [23.](#) Ibn Abi'l-Hadid, Sharh, Vol. II, p.286.
- [24.](#) Ibid., Vol. II, p.294.

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