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Lesson 24: The Importance of Self-examination, Comparing Works and Shame for Allah

This section of the Noble Prophet's (S) advises is related to self-inspection and shame of Allah. In the *hadiths*, and amongst them in the *Nahj al-Balaghah* (the Peak of Eloquence), a lot of emphasis has been laid on self-examination of the soul and the scholars of morals believe that one of the initial stages of edification of the soul and spiritual way-faring and journeying is self-inspection of the inner being.

“O Abu Dharr! Hold yourself accountable before they hold you accountable, and in order for your accounting to be easy tomorrow.”

The likeness of this subject matter has repeatedly been related in other *hadiths* too:

“Hold yourself accountable before you are held accountable.”^{[1](#)}

But in this *hadith* something more has been added that does not appear in the rest of the narrated *hadiths* and that is that self-examination in the world makes accounting in the Resurrection lighter and easier.

Self-examination Is an Unavoidable Need

The axiom of self-inspection and examination of man's conduct is an unavoidable issue and is understandable and perceivable. Every person has some accounting and inspection to do in his life; accounting is very important especially for those who do earn money and the businessmen whose occupation involves investments, money, profit and loss.

Usually, every seller checks his account at least once a year, but in addition to this yearly accounting, he checks his accounts on a daily, weekly and monthly basis also so that at the end of the year his checking and balancing of accounts may be easier. If that businessman does not check and balance his

accounts on a daily or weekly or monthly basis and allows his account books to increase, his work at the end of the year becomes hard and sometimes makes big mistakes as a result of heedlessness and inattention.

What is being asserted is that just like a trader who checks and balances his accounts with careful attention to know how much profit and loss he is making and does not bypass a single coin, a believer too ought to settle his accounts with Allah and in this regard he ought to be careful of the trickery of his soul and fear lest his soul deceive him by justifying sins and in this way not let him settle his accounts with accuracy. He ought to demand a convincing reply and hold himself as accountable as the divine agents will hold him accountable on the Day of Resurrection.

Principally, accounting for sin is more accurate if it occurs on time and is not left to accumulate and man gets a more accurate result and is confronted by less problems on the one hand and on the other hand if accounting for sins is delayed, with the passage of time we forget what sins we have committed and thus they accumulate. In addition, when we pay no heed to our sins, we do not think about the alternative and also we do not believe the thickness of our sins.

If it were asked of me what sins I have committed and I were very honest, I would say a thousand sins despite that if I were more accurate in my accounting, I would gather that perhaps in a day, week and month I commit more than a thousand! When all these sins are put together, a great astronomical figure is made. We are heedless and we imagine that because we have not committed theft and murder, the rest of the sins are not worthy of the name. Perhaps, if we were called sinners, we would protest and say, "What sin have we committed to be called wrong doers?" The nature of man's soul is forgetfulness, especially in regard to that which is harmful for it.

One of the psychological subjects is that because mentioning and reminding man about his errors and sins gives rise to shame and shyness, he is not inclined to pay heed to them and he endeavors to forget those shortcomings. Nowadays, psychologists have made a lot of progress in the field of forgetfulness and remembrance of events which have come to pass and how man ought to forget things and what factors play a role in forgetfulness and how man ought to make himself forget things and also in regard to what causes give rise to a strong memory so that man may easily remember events?

Unfortunately—in spite of the fact that examining and analyzing these topics is good and very important for our religion and world—we have not made advances in these fields and have lagged behind the others.

Therefore, man does not like to attribute that which he does not like to himself. According to psychological research, man who is after committing every kind of crime and iniquity strives to justify his sins. Because of the pain which he endures as a result of committing that sin and for the reason that he seeks to get free from guilt of consciousness, he desires to evade the guilt of perpetrating sin and, in other words, he strives to show himself as not being at fault and endeavors to either forget his sin or lays the blame on other people, or the environment, or the world, or the Devil, or the structure of the society

and/or other factors.

In this way, he takes refuge in these defense mechanisms in order to defend himself and once seeking refuge in a defense mechanism becomes firm in man and he justifies every sin and does not hold himself accountable and does not judge fairly in regard to himself and did not condemn himself for his sinful deeds, there is also the danger of committing greater sins for the reason that he with his action has liberated himself from the scourge of sin and on account of that he has no pain and remorse so as to be dreadful of the consequences of sin. It is here that the ill consequences of justifying sins and also its dangers are greater than the ill consequences of sin itself.

Because man has self-love, in addition to wanting to be respectable in the society, he also desires to be proud of himself; he does not want to be ashamed of himself and perceive himself as incomplete. He wants to conceive himself as complete and honorable. For this reason, he expels from his memory that which is a cause of his incompleteness and decadence; because remembering them gives rise to his feeling low and light and this is opposed to the natural inclination and desire of man.

Taking this point into consideration, if in this regard there are no factors which remind man of those imperfections and defects and deviations, a bad end lies in wait for him and he will have to bear irreparable losses. It is for this reason that in the *hadiths* in the direction of mentioning factors which remind man of his bad deeds and effort to make up and compensate for them has been chosen as the best way and the scholars of ethics, taking these *hadiths* into consideration, have mentioned the three stages of 'preconditioning', 'alertness' and 'accounting' for people who plan to undertake edification of character and purification of the soul in such books as "*Mi'raj al-Sa'adah*", "*Jami' al-Sa'adat*" and "*Ihya' al-'Ulum*".

Preconditioning, Watching over the Soul and Self-examination

Preconditioning [musharitah], watching over the soul [muraqibah] and self-examination [muhasibah]

a) Preconditioning [musharitah]

When man wakes up in the morning, he ought to pay heed to this fact that new capital has been placed in his hands: if we did not wake up from sleep and the soul left our bodies for ever, would our life not come to an end?

اللَّهُ يَتَوَفَّى الْأَنفُسَ حِينَ مَوْتِهَا وَالَّتِي لَمْ تَمُتْ فِي مَنَامِهَا فَيُمْسِكُ الَّتِي قَضَىٰ عَلَيْهَا الْمَوْتَ وَيُرْسِلُ الْأُخْرَىٰ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

"Allah takes the souls at the time of their death, and those that die not during their sleep; then He

withholds those on whom He has passed the decree of death and sends the others back till an appointed term; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect. [2](#)

Therefore, by sleeping, we pass through a stage of death and we lack any activity in the same way that the dead lack activity. Now, once we wake up again from sleep, a second life has been granted to us and new capital has been placed at our disposal. For this reason, we ought to thank Allah and address our souls in this way, “O soul! Allah has placed this invaluable capital at your disposal so that by means of it you may secure the prosperity of the hereafter. If you commit error, you will lose your capital and meet with loss and failure.”

We ought to set conditions with our souls and get it to promise and pledge not to come close to sin and not to do anything which will result in the anger and discontent of Allah. We ought to make our souls promise to use this invaluable capital in the way that is pleasing to Allah, the Exalted, and gives fruit to prosperity for man because the pleasure of Allah results in man’s prosperity and if Allah is not pleased, man cannot and does not attain prosperity. We ought to set conditions on our souls not to be lazy at discharging incumbent duties [*wajibat*] and divine duties and not to abstain from doing every good deed that is feasible for it.

It is better for this preconditioning [*musharitah*] to be done after the morning prayers and the supplications that follow it [*ta’qibat*] and man has to address his soul in this way, “O soul! I have no capital save this limited life and if I lose it, all my capital will have been lost in thin air. O Soul! Today Allah, the Merciful, has again granted me a grace period and if I were dead today, I would wish that Allah returns me to the world so as to make ready my provisions. For this reason, O Soul! Imagine that you were dead and requested to be brought back to the world and you were brought back. Therefore, be careful lest your today is wasted for the reason that every breath that you take is a precious and invaluable jewel and it is possible to attain eternal pleasures by means of it so as to give fruit to lasting peace.”

b) Watching over the Soul [*muraqibah*]

After the stage of pre-conditioning [*musharitah*] comes the stage of watching over the soul [*muraqibah*]; this denotes that during the course of the day man ought to be careful to act according to what he has preconditioned on himself and be careful at every moment not to commit sin. He ought to see whether he is traversing the right path or the way of sin and error.

To put it another way, watching over the self is tantamount to piety [*taqwa*], because piety implies watching over divine values and protecting good works: it has been narrated in a *hadith* that piety is similar to a man who walks in the darkest of nights in a desert full of snakes and scorpions and it is possible for that every moment he may step either on a snake or scorpion and put an end to his life once bitten by them.

Now, in the same way that he takes utmost care and makes sound judgment so as not to be bitten by either a snake or scorpion, man has to also have perfect precaution and care to go free from the danger of the Devil and not be afflicted by the retribution of the hereafter. Therefore, piety denotes that man has to continually meditate about his deeds and perceive the consequences of his deeds.

Imam al-Sadiq (‘a) states:

“A man came to the Noble Prophet (S) and said, ‘O Prophet of Allah! Give me some advice.’ The Noble Prophet asked him three times, ‘Are you going to accept my advice if I give it to you?’ The man replied, ‘Yes O Prophet of Allah.’ The Noble Prophet (S) stated, ‘If you make up your mind to do something, think about its consequences. If the results of your decision are good, discharge that work and if its end were bad, abstain from it’.”

Keeping permanent watch over the self is attained as a result of knowledge of Allah and due to certitude that Allah, the Exalted, is aware of the inner secrets of man and nothing is hidden from Him. For this reason, there is no deed which man commits without needing watch over the soul at the time of doing it because man in his deeds is either in a state of obeying and worshiping Allah and/or in a state of committing sin and/or in a state of doing deeds that are permissible but not recommendable.

His watching over the self at the time of obedience and worship of Allah denotes that he ought to have purity of intention and striving in the direction of perfecting his deeds and observing the etiquettes of worship and protecting his deeds from decadence. His self-vigilance at the time of sinning implies repentance, feeling remorse, detaching his heart from misdeeds, feeling shame and resolving to make up for his wrong doing.

His watching over the self and being vigilant at the time of doing permissible but not recommendable deeds means that he observes correct conduct and always keeps in mind the Giver at the time of deriving benefit from the blessings of this world and being thankful for those gifts and bearing afflictions with the utmost of patience.

c) Self-examination [muhasibah]

Self-examination [*muhasibah*] is the third stage which the scholars of *hadith* have recommended for the edification of character and purification of the soul. Self-examination denotes examining his daily deeds at the end of the day and asking himself whether he has discharged the divine and incumbent duties which lie on his shoulders or not.

If after self-inspection he perceives that he has discharged his divine duties and his daily deeds were concordant with the legal criteria, he ought to be thankful to Allah for granting him the opportunity to perform his duties for the reason that discharging divine duties is dependent on the grace of Allah and man ought to be thankful for that term.

Likewise, he ought to try on the other days to continue that same sound and correct path. But if he has not discharged his divine duties, or he has performed them imperfectly and has been afflicted by error and deviation, he ought to endeavor to make up for them by discharging recommendable [*mustahabb*] and especially optional prayers and castigate himself and repent when he has not discharged his divine duties and has committed sin against Allah so that Allah may forgive his sins.

Likewise, he ought to try to make up for his sins by doing good and praiseworthy deeds; in this case, his sins will be compensated for at the time of sleeping and no sin remains for him. This is that same self-examination which the Infallible and Pure *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) have recommended for their companions and scholars of ethics on the basis of the orders of the Infallible and Pure *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) have advised other people to be accountable for their deeds.

Taking into consideration the role and importance of self-examination in the edification of the character and purification of the soul, Imam al-Kazim (‘a) states:

“He is not from us a person who does not hold himself accountable for his deeds; therefore if he has done good deeds, he ought to ask Allah to increase his good deeds and when he has committed sinful and bad deeds, he ought to seek forgiveness from Allah and return to Him.”^{[3](#)}

The Noble Prophet (S) orders his companions thus:

“Should I inform you about the most intelligent of intelligent people and the most ignorant of ignorant people?” The companions responded, “Yes, O Prophet of Allah.” The Noble Prophet (S) stated, “The most intelligent of people is the one who holds his soul accountable and performs good deeds for his life after death and the most foolish of people is the one who follows his carnal soul and always asks Allah to grant him his wishes.”^{[4](#)}

The Benefit of Self-examining the Soul

One of the benefits of holding the soul accountable is that once man has perceived his errors, he immediately makes up for them and does not let their effects to remain in his soul. If man does not hold himself accountable, he will not know how many sins he has committed. If it were asked of us how many good deeds and how many ugly and unacceptable works we have done and where we committed error, we would not know.

But when we have undertaken to hold the soul accountable for its deeds, we remember every one of the deeds we have done and know how many of our sins were corrected and how many were not corrected.

When man does not pay any heed to the sins he commits, those sins leave an effect in his soul and a black spot is created in his heart and with the increase of sin, the blackness and darkness of the heart encompasses his heart and, all too often, no bright spot remains in it. This point has been inferred from the purport of some of the *hadiths*, one of which is Imam al-Sadiq’s (‘a) statement:

“Whenever an individual commits sin, a dark spot arises in his heart. Therefore, the blackness of the spot is erased whenever he repents and it is increased whenever he commits sin, to the extent that it becomes predominant over his entire heart and never will he get guided.”[5](#)

Sometimes, man does not comprehend this and when he understands that sin has encompassed his entire heart and if he compares his present state with his previous state, he perceives that a blatantly obscene change has taken place in him.

Some of the people who for some time are pre-occupied with learning and acquisition of knowledge, taking into consideration the decline which they witness in their souls, morals and conduct, thus tell themselves: at the beginning of education, we had high spirits and purity of heart, what has caused that high spiritedness to decline by the passage of time?

Some people blame this decline on studies; they imagine that studying causes the darkness of heart. This group of people does not want to concede that their sins are the cause of the decadence and degeneration of souls and the darkness of their hearts. Without the least doubt, studying is one of the good and invaluable deeds of man; even if sometimes these same good deeds of man have a great deal of defects which arise from the weakness and inattention of man.

This is one kind of self-deception which man lays his blame on once he sees that he gets tired of studying and/or he has no hope of being successful, or when studying is not compatible with his carnal desires, he blames it as a cause of his defect and decadence and says that studying has caused his heart to become dark because at the beginning of our studies and education, our hearts were pure! It is true that at the beginning our hearts were pure and now they have become impure, but the cause is not studying; on the contrary, the cause is not studying correctly. The cause of darkness of our hearts is sins and education devoid of purification of the soul and edification of character.

Yes, when man does not hold himself accountable, the real and existential effects of sin do not get effaced and make his heart black and he does not have the least attention. This is similar to a person who wears white clothes and black spots regularly fall on it and he does not pay any attention to them and does not see that his clothes have become dirty and impure, without the least doubt with the continued increase of those black spots his clothes become so dirty and disgusting that they raise the disgust of every looker, but the owner does not know anything because he has closed his eyes.

The greatest defect and loss of abstaining from holding the soul accountable for its deeds is that the effects of sin remain embedded in his soul and man day by day becomes more contaminated and his heart becomes darker and he becomes more distanced from Allah but he himself is not aware of this and often times he imagines that he is a good and capable man and falsely prides himself on being this and that. In spite of the fact, everyday he is declining and in the end he falls in the pit of decadence and ill fate:

قُلْ هَلْ نُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِالْأَخْسَرِينَ أَعْمَالًا * الَّذِينَ ضَلَّ سَعِيَّهُمْ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ يُحْسِنُونَ صُنْعًا

“Say, ‘Shall We inform you of the greatest losers in their deeds? These are those whose labor is lost in this world’s life and they think that they are well versed in skill of the hands’.”⁶

‘Allamah Tabataba’i, may he reside in Allah’s Garden of eternal bliss, in interpretation of this verse, states: “Loss and failure in regard to work and occupation whose aim is making profit occurs when that goal is not attained and/or when capital is decreased and/or once man’s efforts are wasted. In the blessed verse, wasted effort implies losing and wasting effort; like when man loses his way and does not arrive at his destination as a result of that.

“Sometimes, man’s losing in work and occupation is a result of inexperience at work and/or not being acquainted with the way and/or because of other undesirable causes. This loss and depletion is likely to be made up for the reason that there is hope of the loser waking up and starting all over again and regaining what has been lost and making up for the past. But sometimes it happens that man meets with loss and imagines that he has made profit. He makes loss and believes that he has attained nothing save profit! This is the worst loss and misfortune for which there is no hope of making up for.

“Man’s duty in the world is only to struggle for prosperity and he ought not to wish save for that. If he is on the path of right and has attained his aim, he has arrived at the goal. But if he deviates from the right path and does not conceive his deviation and mistake, he has made loss in his efforts and endeavors but there is hope of his being saved.

But if he deviates from the right path and attains other than right and insists on it and never does a ray of right become manifest for him, a curtain has been drawn over his soul and has made him afflicted with the self-conceit and pride of the Age of Ignorance. This person is the biggest loser in his deeds and efforts for the reason that there is no hope in making up for his losses and there is no hope of his attaining prosperity; this is that same point which Allah has mentioned in the blessed verse.”⁷

As has been previously said, one of the benefits of accountability of the soul is that man perceives his errors and embarks upon correcting them. He does not let the existential effects of sin remain in the soul and gives rise to its degeneration.

The Noble Prophet (S) has explained this reality with two expressions which are: “Hold your soul accountable before others hold you accountable;” and after that he states, “Because that will make your accountability easier tomorrow on the Day of Resurrection;” for the reason that if you hold yourself accountable for your deeds, you embark upon remedying and making up for your errors and deviations and the result is that your accountability on the Day of Resurrection will be light.

But if you do not do thus, your sins will accumulate and your problems on the Day of Resurrection will be increased. In the world, you do not know and are unaware of how much you have fallen, but when you

will be confronted with the list of your deeds and see your innumerable sins, regret as a result of those sins is more torturing than the torture of hell. In continuation of the *hadith*, the Noble Prophet states:

“Weigh yourself before they weigh you and be ready before you are presented in the presence of Allah on the Day of Resurrection before there is nothing which remains hidden from Him.”

In regard to the weighing of deeds, Allah, the Exalted, states:

...وَالْوَزْنُ يَوْمَئِذٍ الْحَقُّ

“And the measuring out on that Day will be just...”⁸

Measuring and weighing of deeds is one of our religious beliefs. Measuring of deeds denotes comparing and counting their amplex and meagerness, now if we embark upon measuring our own deeds and conceive that our sins have become heavy, we try to make our burdens lighter. But if we do not embark upon weighing our deeds, and do not weigh our sins and do not perceive their effects on our souls, one day we will find ourselves in the presence of Allah and there we will be disgraced and be caught in regrets.

Therefore, a person who measures his deeds and holds himself accountable for them will be light-burdened in the presence of Allah for the reason that he has made up for his sins and ethical weaknesses. But that person who has not undertaken to weigh his deeds and hold himself accountable for his deeds, he will be regretful on the day when his great and small deeds will be made apparent before Allah, the Exalted.

In order not to be affected by regret on the Day of Resurrection, start meditating right now and perceive your deeds right now. Imagine that your lives have come to an end—because no one is certain whether he will remain alive tomorrow or not—and your deeds have been presented to Allah. Perceive what you have presented to Allah and what state you have before Him.

If the Pure Imams (‘a) take refuge in Allah on the Day of the great presentation when all deeds are made apparent before Allah, it is befitting that we hold ourselves accountable for our daily deeds and make up for any ugly and undesirable deeds we have committed so that they are erased from the record of our deeds in order not to be afflicted by the remorse and regret of that day, which is one of the most deadly regrets.

Shame as a Result of the Ugliness of Works

Without the least doubt, once talk about the presentation of works before Allah comes about, discussion about shame and disgrace of Allah also arises. When man does a bad deed and/or perpetrates treachery and thereafter forgets, he is indifferent and no change arises in his soul. It is for this reason

that we are weak and we do not correctly conceive realities and also for the sake of gradually perceiving reality and the truth, we cite a sensible example: imagine that two people have been friends for long years and had promised not to betray each other.

Now, if one of those two betrays his friend, if his betrayed friend was not aware of the treachery and/or forgets the betrayal, his conduct is normal when he meets his treacherous friend. But if his friend takes pictures of the scene of betrayal and after a period of time shows it to the betrayer and says, “You had promised not to betray me and used to talk a lot about the value of friendship, why then have you betrayed me?”

It is here that shame and disgrace overtakes the betrayer which is harder than torture and punishment. He had committed treachery and had forgotten the scene of treachery and did not believe that his friend had known about his betrayal. If his friend shows him the scene of his treachery, what state is he going to be in?

We have given an example of filming and taking pictures of the scene of treachery for the presentation of deeds in the world, but on the Day of Resurrection deeds themselves will be present. Even if our intellect does not conceive the manner of the presence and embodiment of works, but on the basis of our religious beliefs, the embodiment of deeds has been proved:

...وَوَجَدُوا مَا عَمِلُوا حَاضِرًا...

“...and what they had done they shall find present there...”⁹

In this verse Allah explicitly explains the presence of deeds themselves and it is not possible to interpret the verse otherwise and in addition to this verse, other verses also have explained the embodiment of deeds; amongst them:

...يَوْمَ تَجِدُ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَا عَمِلَتْ مِنْ خَيْرٍ مُحْضَرًا وَمَا عَمِلَتْ مِنْ سُوءٍ

“On the day that every soul shall find present what it has done of good and what it has done of evil...”¹⁰

Even if on the Day of Resurrection, pictures and films of our works were shown, we still could not deny them. If they show us the works themselves and/or present films of them, and say that on such a day at such and such a time or on such a night you did such a deed, when we come face to face with Allah, the shame that will overcome us will be harder than any torture.

In order for man to remember the Day of Resurrection and the presentation of works on the Day of Resurrection, it is befitting to picture or describe the scene of presentation of works and the disgrace of

sin and disobedience of Allah and/or if it is disgraceful right in this world, man ought to picture it for himself. He ought to imagine that he were doing some ugly deed and all of a sudden a child appeared and saw his ugly deeds.

Perhaps, it has occurred for every person that he was busy committing an ugly deed without looking around himself and all of a sudden finds out that someone else has been watching him. In such circumstances, man becomes so ashamed that he wishes he could become water and sink in the ground; worse if that person were not a child but a full grown man having enough understanding and intelligence and worse still if that person had a right on man and that ugly deed were a betrayal in his right.

There is no doubt that whatever we have is from Allah and every indecent deed is considered as treachery against Him. If man thinks properly, he will perceive that he commits sin in the presence of the Owner of Right and it is a betrayal to Him; he conceives that he is sinning against the One who gave him existence and his ability to commit this same misdeed is from Him.

The power of breathing and speaking and everything that we have is from Him. He has given us all these blessings and abilities in order to employ them in the way of our perfection and gaining proximity to Him, therefore it is very shameful of us to use Allah's blessings in the way of sin and distancing ourselves from Him and treachery against Him.

Taking into consideration what has been mentioned, if man sets apart a few minutes of every night to holding his soul accountable for what it has done and visualize his deeds before himself, in the presence of Allah who is the Giver of whatever he has, without the least doubt this self-examination and taking into consideration the fact that error and sin occur in the presence of Allah will lead to a reduction of sin, even if it does not lead to sincere contrition and repentance which leads to a complete effacement of all the sins; just this feeling of shame reduces an amount of the burden of sin and prevents the settlement and establishment of the effects of sin and after that man does not easily commit sin. Now, once this state of admonition and attention to the fact that he is in the presence of Allah becomes his permanent disposition of mind, he will not commit sin anymore.

The Concept and Domain of Shame and Shyness

“O Abu Dharr! Be modest with Allah. I swear upon Allah at Whose disposal my life is, whenever I go to present my needs to Him, I cover my head and face and feel shy of the two angels accompanying me.”

The issue of shame and modesty is very important and unfortunately there exist wrong and unsound understandings in regard to it. As a result of the influence and penetration of foreign culture, intellectual problems have arisen for us in regard to shame and modesty. For this reason, it is befitting for us to examine or ponder about this issue. Even if we are inclined in this opportunity to content ourselves with mentioning admonitions and perhaps we may not have a session for preparing a plan for these subjects,

but still we find it necessary to cite the intellectual substructures of this issue:

We all know that in the Islamic culture, shame and modesty are as worthy values and, in contrast, impudence and lack of shame are considered as uncouth and counter values. In the past, whenever they wanted to curse or use indecent words at someone, they used to call that person impudent because the word impudent used to be considered as an insult and a curse. Whenever they wanted to emphasize and deepen their curse, they used to call that person unashamed. Calling someone unashamed used to be a very bad insult in our culture. But nowadays, in western culture and the world of infidelity, shame and modesty are considered as defects.

One of the issues that has a lot of application nowadays in psychology, the philosophy of ethics and personal training and instruction is the issue of shame and modesty. Should man be shy and modest in the point of view of psychology, ethics and the principles of personal instruction? Of course, when we say that in western culture, in contrast to Islamic culture, lack of modesty is encouraged, we do not mean that our understanding of shame and modesty and our conduct are completely correct; it is for this reason that this topic or category is in need of examination and for the sake of making the subject clear, we will hint at the root of shame and modesty in man:

On the basis of the innate instinct which exists in man's natural disposition, if man commits a deed which he knows is indecent, a special emotion by the name of shame arises in his inner being. Of course, the appearance of this psychological emotion and spiritual reaction depends on two matters: the first is that man ought to perceive his deeds as bad, and the second is that his natural temperament ought not to have been ridiculed because man has a lot of natural states, but when he tramples his natural disposition underfoot, those natural states become weak and faint-colored and bit by bit become effaced.

Therefore, the feeling of shame in regard to bad and ugly deeds is a natural thing, but knowing the ugly and bad sometimes takes place by means of the intellect and at other times by means of personal training and instruction and at other instances man follows the environment and generally held beliefs in order to decide what is good and bad.

In the beginning, parents inculcate their child with what is bad and what is good, now if that inculcation is properly done, once a child does something bad and becomes aware that someone is observing him, he feels ashamed and embarrassed as a result of his natural temperament and instincts and drops his head and sometimes even sweats. This reaction in connection with an ugly deed from that child is natural and as has been said, he learns the good and bad by means of personal training and instruction from his parents.

The Causes of Propagating Wrong Manners and False Customs

Besides ethical and Islamic values, another set of manners and customs which have been promoted and

circulated among us as a result of the demands of the environment, the society and/or as a result of tribalism and other national and racial causes and thus we consider certain things as either good or bad.

This perception is not related to the divine law and it is likely that they may even be against the divine law: for example, we conceive as bad a child speaking in front of an elderly person and as soon as a child wants to speak in front of an elderly person, we say, “Keep quite! This is bad.” Because a child learns what is good and bad from his parents and those around him, he imagines that this is indeed a very bad deed.

The very fact that he notices other people reacting negatively in regard to his deeds and frowning and showing an unpleasant reaction, he comprehends the badness and ugliness of his deeds and feels shy and ashamed when he does that deed. For this reason, he does not dare to talk in the presence of an elderly person, and feels shy to speak in class and to ask questions from the teacher.

With the passage of time this state becomes his permanent habit of mind and the more he grows and his age increases, he feels shy and ashamed at the time of speaking. When he intends to ask questions in higher classes and contribute positively, his heart beats and his color changes.

Without the least doubt, divine law does not approve of man not being able to speak out his opinion, or to ask his question or speak the right word.

The likeness of this wrong understanding exists in regard to the modesty of a woman; in our culture a woman's biggest capital is modesty, but in relation to the instances of applying this value concept, our society has gone to improper extremes. A chaste and veiled girl is brought up in such a way that she is not able to utter a word in front of a strange man and they make her perceive that this is the proper result and reflex of modesty.

From the Islamic point of view, a woman has to nurture her power of speech in the presence of other people, but it is very proper and acceptable not to speak in instances where there is no need to speak and/or not to make her voice so soft and tender so as to attract the attention of other people; but she ought not to be made to believe that never has a strange person got to hear her voice. In reality, we have not been successful at separating different issues and aspects from each other.

If a woman's speaking in front of other people were unacceptable, who would have managed to make that fluent and excellent speech which Her Holiness Fatimah al-Zahra' (‘a) made in the Mosque of Medina? Or, who would have managed to make that speech which Zaynab Kubra' (‘a) made in the session of Ibn Ziyad? Yes, divine law says that a woman ought not to speak in such a way that attracts and deviates others and the way of speaking is not supposed to be motivated by arousing the sensual feelings of other people, otherwise it is not proper for a woman not to have the ability to speak.

We have some extremist tendencies and in some sense prodigality in one set of issues—especially ethical and instructional values—which have left behind very bad effects. When westerners noticed

these extremist tendencies and embarked upon remedying their ill effects, they fell into prodigality and put aside those values from the origin. We came forward and raised our children to be shy and not speak in front of the elders. We have brought up our women so as not to be able to speak in front of men.

When the westerners noticed that was improper and wrong, they went further and asserted that a child has to be absolutely free to do whatever he wants and a woman has to be free and not be shy or ashamed of anything; even if she were to strip naked in front of men! This improper understanding of shame and modesty and feeling shy has had such an effect in the West that they have completely done away with limitations and restrictions: "An ignorant man is either excessive or prodigal."

Neither have we comprehended Islam correctly nor have the westerners traversed the right path. Neither have we applied the values of Islam correctly nor have they paid any heed to divine values. Of course, we cannot have any expectations from them because the basis of their thinking is corrupt. It is not even clear whether they have any faith in God.

In the West, it is not clear whether even believing Christians who go to church have any faith in God and only profess their faith in religion and religious values by the tongue otherwise in reality they have no inclination towards religion. Therefore, no expectation can be had of them. The question is why have we not correctly comprehended the truths of Islam and have not correctly acted upon them and have not properly applied them and have not derived right and praiseworthy benefit from them so as not to be reproached by other people?

Taking what has been said into consideration, it is incumbent for the realm and domain of shame and modesty to be made clear. We have to clarify what the concept of shame and modesty is and where are they proper and where are shyness and modesty unacceptable and blameworthy? Without doubt, being shy is not desirable in all instances and not every weakness that arises as a result of shyness is good or desirable. Good and bad ought to be known and made compatible with decisive logic and divine law [*shar'*].

Why do we tell our children that speaking in front of elderly people is bad? Is this Allah's and the Noble Prophet's (S) order? Was the conduct of the Pure and Infallible Imams ('a) like this? Without the least doubt, this is not true at all. Yes, shouting and hollering is not good for anyone at all and, of course, bit by bit a child learns as a result of correct teaching how to speak in such a manner that the listener hears him and not to raise his voice higher than the limits; but not that the child completely ought not to talk.

Who has said that a woman ought to be so shy as to not have even the ability to talk in front of other people such that if she wanted to prove her claim in court or to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, she even lacks the ability to utter a word!?

Therefore, we ought to set good and bad on Islamic criteria; we ought to perceive what is bad and what is good from an Islamic point of view; that is when shyness and modesty in contrast to what is really bad

are desirable, not the modesty which is a custom and habit made and enjoined by one special community, tribe, nation and/or race and location.

This modesty is a product of manners and customs, not ethical and spiritual values. Manners and customs, if they are in the direction of Islamic values, are respectable and if they are opposed to what is right and divine values, are counter values. Therefore, in order for us to properly follow the injunctions of Islam, we ought to first know the real bad and real good so as to know when to feel shy and modest.

It has been said that knowing the good and bad, on the basis of natural instincts, after doing an ugly deed man feels shy. Now, if he resists this natural instinct and fights against his natural disposition, bit by bit, that natural instinct of shame and modesty becomes weak; and the quality of immodesty becomes firm in man. This matter is not confined to shame and modesty; on the contrary, if man resists every natural instinct, that natural instinct becomes weak bit by bit and becomes ineffective.

For people who commit sin and pay no heed to its consequences, bit by bit, the quality of sin becomes strong in them and after that, even if they know that they are committing sin in the presence of Allah, they do not feel any shame because their natural temperament has been subdued.

Yes, lack of self-inspection of the soul and not holding it accountable for its deeds bit by bit renders man's natural disposition ineffective and in the end man does not have any qualms with committing sin and does not reprimand his inner conscience. Man who initially used to feel ashamed whenever he committed sin no longer has any qualms about committing sin.

Of course, there are other causes too which lead to the extermination of shyness and modesty and mention of them has been made in the *hadiths*, but the main cause of lack of shame and immodesty is resistance in the face of the natural instinct of shame and modesty and paying no heed to it. In contrast, in order to strengthen that natural instinct, certain points have to be taken into consideration amongst which is the point which the Noble Prophet (S) has recommended to Abu Dharr that he ought to feel shame in the face of Allah and thereafter states, "Whenever I supplicate Allah, I cover my head and face and feel shy of the two angels accompanying me." This conduct is intended to strengthen the natural instinct of shame and modesty.

Abu Sa'id Khidri in regard to the immense modesty of the Noble Prophet (S) says:

"The Noble Prophet (S) was more modest than a virgin girl in the bridal chamber and used to keep quite whenever he got angry and we used to discern his anger from his face." [11](#)

It is well-known that Salman Farsi stated, "I have never in all my life looked at my private parts." Salman lived a very long life and beyond the shadow of doubt a person who is like this does not commit adultery or fornication. But if man is heedless, and does not make any difference between good and bad, bit by bit his natural modesty gets effaced and the causes and incentives of sin impel him towards sin. He is continually on the verge of sin and collapse. But if he is careful of his conduct right from the beginning

and strengthens his natural instinct, the spirit of shame and modesty becomes firm in him and he does not get contaminated by sin.

- [1.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 73.
- [2.](#) Surat al-Zumar 39:42.
- [3.](#) Usul al-Kafi (with Farsi translation), vol. 4, p. 191.
- [4.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 69.
- [5.](#) Usul al-Kafi (with Farsi translation), vol. 3, p. 373.
- [6.](#) Surat al-Kahf 18:103–104.
- [7.](#) Tafsir al-Mizan, vol. 3, p. 430.
- [8.](#) Surat al-A'raf 7:8.
- [9.](#) Surat al-Kahf 18:49.
- [10.](#) Surat Al 'Imran 3:30.
- [11.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 16, p. 230.

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