

Lesson 3: Correct Perception of the Realities of Life and Making Optimum Use of [Man's] Lifespan

Making Timely Use Of Opportunities And Keeping Protracted Hopes At Bay

“O Abu Dharr! [Beware] lest you procrastinate praiseworthy deeds on account of your protracted hopes.”

(This expression is a completion of the Noble Prophet's (S) previous saying and it underscores making timely use of opportunities and not wasting opportunities or moments of life.)

Procrastination [*taswif*] is one of the cankers of the soul which obstructs the fulfillment of good and praiseworthy deeds and that is why it has been an object of distain in the *hadiths*. Procrastination denotes putting obligations off with the hope of discharging them later. This state can be caused by a great deal of factors, but its chief and primary cause—as has been mentioned in this section—is man's delusive dreams; that is to say, man does not discharge today's obligations in the hope of staying alive until tomorrow when he will carry them out. When the following day arrives, he again plays for time and hopes for the other day and thus months and years pass while he puts off his work. The Noble Prophet (S) states that if you desire to cleanse your inner self of this quality and attribute, you ought to imagine that you only have this very day and hour and moment and you will not have another opportunity to live after this.

The concept of procrastination, like a great number of other ethical concepts, ranging from moral virtues to vices, is a graded notion and has different stages. These graded axioms vary with regard to different individuals, ranging from believers to unbelievers inclusive, and even in regard to the levels of faith. Some of its levels are ordinary obligatory deeds, others are emphasized obligatory works and others are ordinary recommended acts and others emphasized recommended works. At times, some of these

levels are so accurate that their imagination is impossible for ordinary people.

The Stages Of Negligence

The first stage of procrastination is seeking ease and complacency with regard to worldly affairs, which results in man putting off his works. This bad habit is not related to belief; it is also possible for an unbeliever to be afflicted by it in the same way that a believer does, because unbelievers too sometimes get lazy and negligent as regards their worldly affairs. This bad trait and disposition, which causes man to put off his duties, is considered as an undesirable habit both by the believer and the unbeliever.

Of course, this quality is uglier for a believing man because if he gets used to putting off his obligations for later, bit by bit this quality becomes his permanent disposition of mind and spreads by contagion to his religious obligations too, resulting in his not performing divine obligations on time. That is the reason why it has been said that if a man were lazy in his worldly affairs, this quality gradually becomes his permanent trait of mind giving rise to carelessness and negligence being extended to matters of the hereafter.

The second stage of procrastination is laziness in performing religious obligations and duties. This indolence, based on the three divisions of obligatory duties, is also divided into three sections:

1. Laziness and carelessness at performing long and time-consuming obligatory deeds, like the five daily prayers, every one of which has its own specified long time. Some people are lazy and torpid at performing these kinds of prayers, and always put them off to be performed at the last moments. Even if this kind of indolence and carelessness is not *haram* (prohibited by Islamic laws), it is still considered as an indecent act.
2. Laziness at performing obligatory actions that ought to be done with immediacy, even if their urgency is not absolute, in the sense that if they are not discharged at the first opportunity, they have to be fulfilled with urgency at the second opportunity and likewise if they have not been performed at the second opportunity, they have to be discharged at the other opportunities; like repentance, whose incumbency is obligatory at the first opportunity and whose putting off is forbidden [*haram*] by Islamic law but it does not imply that its incumbency is nullified if procrastinated.
3. Laziness and heedlessness with regard to discharging limited-time obligatory works, like fasting, which ought to be done within a restricted and limited time. Some people procrastinate at discharging these responsibilities within their specified time and tell themselves that they will make up for them later in the form of *qada'* (belated religious obligations performed outside their prescribed time). Even though the sin committed by such an individual is less than that of a man whose decision is not to make up at all for belated divine duties, nonetheless this action is *haram* (forbidden by Islamic law).

Asceticism And Wrong Interpretations

The other point worthy of mentioning is that matters have been mentioned in a lot of verses of the Glorious Qur'an and the *hadiths* which might have different and sometimes conflicting interpretations, and their explication calls for perfect expertise and professional knowledge in religious sciences for the reason that in such circumstances the possibility of error and the likelihood of inadmissible understandings is high.

For example, there are verses of the Glorious Qur'an and the *hadiths* that have been quoted whose apparent purport is rebuking, praising or retreating from the world, and whose interpretations vary and sometimes oppose each other. One of those interpretations is the Sufi version which is arrived at without paying attention to the other aspects of Islam and the explicit religious sciences. In the Sufi point of view, man has to retreat from this world's life and engage in worship in solitude far from the society and/or have companionship with animals, regardless that this kind of inference is in direct contradiction to the verses of the Glorious Qur'an, the *hadiths* and the categorical primary principles of religion.

If self-reclusion were the primacy of religion, then what fate will befall religious social obligations such as spending money and wealth in Allah's cause, fighting against oppression, enjoining the good and forbidding the evil, and striving for the establishment of an Islamic government, which are among the explicit essentials of Islam!? And where, apart from in the society, are they supposed to be fulfilled? Can these responsibilities be discharged in privacy and seclusion? It is for this reason that deduction of religious principles calls for expertise in the whole collection of religious sciences and it demands attention to all the aspects and dimensions of religion.

In response to this misconception, it ought to be said that seeking the world is reprehensible if it is perceived as the ultimate goal of life. But if the world becomes a means of attaining the perfection of the hereafter, not only is it irreprehensible, but praiseworthy and commendable as well. Conceiving the world as a means of attaining the hereafter has itself levels, some of which are necessary and some of which are considered as part of human perfections.

The utmost limit of seeking the world is that deriving benefit from the pleasures of the world and engaging in material issues ought not to lead a human being to quitting the divine obligatory works and committing forbidden actions. Seeking the world is forbidden by Islamic law [*haram*] if it leads to committing sins and quitting obligatory [*wajib*] deeds and if this materialism becomes firm as a bad habit and permanent trait of the mind, fighting against it becomes incumbent [*wajib*].

From the Islamic point of view, an exemplary man is a person who does not believe in the primacy of the world and does not perform worldly actions, even the permissible ones, for attaining materialistic pleasures. Insightful and perceptive people have attained this stage, which is the highest human achievement; that is to say, they conduct themselves in such a way that all their deeds and behavior, even their breathing, are considered as acts of devotion to Allah. All their physical actions and conduct,

such as their eating, physical exercise, and even the permissible coital gratifications, are prerequisites for matters of the hereafter and it is for this reason that they are considered as either obligatory [*wajib*] or recommendable [*mustahabb*].

Asceticism and belief in the primacy of the hereafter

For every reason, believing or not believing in the primacy of the hereafter is delicate and intricate and its criterion of sincerity cannot be based on man's word, but is dependent on the inner intentions of individuals: for instance, if man eats food in order to derive pleasure, he has believed in the primacy of materialism even if he denies that by word of mouth, and if his intention is to thank Allah by means of deriving gratification from the taste of the food, he has believed in the primacy of the hereafter because his aim is thanksgiving to Allah.

It is for this reason that in the Glorious Qur'an, after mentioning a part of Allah's favors, thanksgiving to Him has been referred to as an aim of making use of His graces. For that reason, the goal is thanksgiving [to Allah] and this occurs when all of man's physical actions acquire a divine color. Most people do not pay attention to the spiritual aspect of their lives and have gotten so attached to physical gratification that they cannot have any other goal than materials and physical satisfaction. There is no doubt that man needs a mentor in order to procure spiritual states because it is likely for him to stray from the limits of moderation and get propelled towards extremism.

People who want to traverse the course of spiritual perfection and its edification ought to make the pre-eminence and superiority of heavenly pleasures become embedded in their minds in order to weaken their worldly inclinations and reduce their materialistic pleasure seeking. In order to overlook worldly pleasures, they have to inculcate in themselves the conviction that material gratifications are nothing and valueless in comparison to heavenly pleasures.

It is for this reason that in their statements, the Noble Prophet (S) and the Pure and Infallible Imams (‘a) seek to lead people towards giving preference to the hereafter and to encourage them to forgo the world and entirely free themselves from nature because if man considers the world as a precondition for the hereafter, not only is he not a materialist, but also a seeker of paradise. All too often availing oneself of permissible pleasures is itself a prerequisite of not committing forbidden actions [or seeking forbidden pleasures], and it is for this reason that they are considered as acts of worship. In addition to this, availing oneself of permissible pleasures results in spiritual growth and preparedness for discharging higher obligations.

In regard to dividing daily hours, Imam Musa ibn Ja'far, (‘a) states,

“Also set aside one hour for the purpose of deriving benefit from permissible pleasures, because it is by deriving benefit from what is *halal* (permissible) that you can have the vigor to perform the rest of the duties.”

As we have already been reminded, the Noble Prophet (S) has alluded to this truth that the cause for procrastination is man's dreams of achieving pleasure; that is to say, man is always trying to attain his worldly pleasures and this in itself motivates him to put his obligations off. In other words, the issue revolves around whether he uses opportunities to attain transient physical pleasures or to achieve perpetual heavenly pleasures, but because he sees the world readily available and accessible, he expends his time and efforts trying to bring it to hand; in reality man has more faith in the world than he has belief in the hereafter and he prefers the transient and short-lived gratifications to the imperishable pleasures of the eternal paradise. It is surprising that most of us are afflicted by a degree of polytheism because we have no faith in the superiority of the hereafter over the world:

وَمَا يُؤْمِنُ أَكْثَرُهُمْ بِاللَّهِ إِلَّا وَهُمْ مُشْرِكُونَ

“And most of them do not believe in Allah without associating others (with Him).”¹

Man is polytheistic once he performs an action for other than Allah, even if it is for attaining the reward of the hereafter. In pure monotheism, there is no other goal save Allah; even fear of hell and eagerness for paradise are not ultimate aims in pure monotheism, as Imam ‘Ali (‘a) states:

“O my Lord! I do not worship Thee because of fear of hell and/or because of craving for paradise, but because you are worthy of my devoted adoration.”²

Protracted hopes endanger man's prosperity, and it is for this reason that Imam ‘Ali's (‘a) biggest dread was in case people should get afflicted by prolonged hopes and sacrifice divine duties for their own desires:

“I fear two things greatly; the first thing is pursuing vain passions and desires of the soul and the other thing is protracted hopes, because chasing sensual desires results in forgetting the hereafter.”³

Discharging Religious Duties And Obligations Promptly

In continuation of his advice with regard to abstaining from procrastination, the Noble Prophet (S) states,

“Because you only have today and tomorrow is not yours.”

The Noble Prophet (S) advises Abu Dharr not to put off today's obligations until tomorrow, for the reason that none can be certain about tomorrow's coming, and assuming that tomorrow does come, there will still be other responsibilities to be discharged on that day. When you fulfill your duties today, you will have no regret if tomorrow never comes, but once you put off your obligations until tomorrow and it occurs that tomorrow never comes, you will carry this regret and contrition to the next world with you.

Therefore, one ought to think about this very moment and make the most of the present life and abstain

from procrastination and putting obligations off in the hope of discharging them another day. When studying and doing research, we ought not to tell ourselves that time is plentiful and we will study tomorrow, because we will have other responsibilities in the future:

“If you had a tomorrow, keep discharging your duties just like today, and if tomorrow never comes, you will not be remorseful about your today’s negligence.”

It is possible for an individual to feel contrition for not being successful at performing more responsibilities in spite of having fulfilled his daily duties, but he no longer feels remorseful when he takes the limitations of man’s ability into consideration and pays heed to the fact that he has discharged his obligations to the utmost extent of his ability.

To complete the previous issues and to emphasize the point that one ought not to sit idly waiting for tomorrow, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“O Abu Dharr! How so many a people there are who wake up in the morning but do not see the sun go down, and what a great number of human beings there are waiting for tomorrow but will not see it.”

Notice and observe how the Noble Prophet (S) prepares the mind of the listener so that he may make the most of the moments of his life. In the beginning, he urges the listener to think about the extent to which man can be optimistic about tomorrow for him to put off his responsibilities until then.

If he has no confidence in his tomorrow coming, why does he put his obligations off until then? When the time for the afternoon prayers arrives, what makes him so sure that he will remain alive for another hour so as to delay his prayers? It is self-evident that if he recites his prayers on time, he will not be regretful later and he can even better manage to perform his other responsibilities.

The Thought Of Death Terminates Protracted Hopes

“O Abu Dharr! If you contemplate about the hour of death and perceive with what speed it is coming, you will hate its deception and snare.”

The best way to fight prolonged hopes and their deception is to think about death and to know that the hour of death frustrates protracted dreams and takes man hopelessly to the other world, as Imam ‘Ali (‘a) states:

“(And he who has fallen in love with the world), then it fills his heart with grief which keeps alternating in the black part of his heart, some grief worrying him and another giving him pain. This goes on till the suffocation of death overtakes him. He is flung dead in the open while his life veins are severed.”^{[4](#)}

Again, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) states elsewhere:

“... As for (one) of its lessons, a man reaches near realization of his desires when suddenly the

approach of his death cuts them; then neither is the desire achieved nor the desirer spared...”⁵

The Intermediary Role Of The World

Further on in the *hadith*, the Prophet (S) states:

“O Abu Dharr! Live like either a stranger or a passer-by in this world and consider yourself as a dead human being.”

The Noble Prophet (S) recommends that in the world man ought to be like a stranger who enters a town and he must observe how one who has no friends and acquaintances lives. With regard to his not being able to gain fondness with anyone, can such a man engage in feasting and entertainment? The believer’s true abode is the hereafter, and he is like a way-farer and passer-by in this world. Therefore, he does not intend to spread facilities around himself and embark upon feasting, drinking and entertainment. By the same token, the Noble Prophet (S) advises that man ought to be in the world like a traveler who does not [even] have the opportunity to stop and rest.

It is likely that attention to the apparent purports of such statements would lead man to misinterpretation and most probably lead him to thinking about secluding himself from the rest of the people and abandon thinking about procuring a house and starting a family and finally [lead him into] abstaining from the blessings and graces of this world and steer him to only reflecting upon the hereafter because that is man’s eternal abode! Beyond the shadow of doubt, such an understanding is not compatible with the basic principles of Islam. All too often, it is likely that acquiring friends and companions, founding a household, saving wealth and buying a house et cetera et cetera all pivot on the hereafter and at the same time it occurs that love for this world is not man’s motive, rather his incentive is paying heed to the hereafter and devotion to Allah, because by means of the world and utilizing its facilities and pleasures, man can attain heavenly perfections and gain nearness to Allah.

In reality, an individual who has designated the hereafter as his goal has set the world as a means of attaining the hereafter. Now if a human being cannot [completely] renounce the world and he makes use of it as a means of attaining the hereafter, then at least let him be like a passer-by who rests only to the extent of replenishing his powers. Even if in such an individual’s point of view worldly affairs are primary and he cannot dispense with them altogether, at least let him use them to the extent of rejuvenating his abilities and securing the needs and necessities from the facilities and permissible [pleasures] of this world; as Imam Musa ibn Ja’far (‘a), in regard to this issue, has stated that you ought to set aside a part of your day for the purpose of pursuing permissible [*hala*] pleasures.

The sentence “consider yourself as a dead human being” is the highest expression which the Noble Prophet (S) has employed, but it is likely to be understood wrongly. When the Noble Prophet (S) states that you should count yourself among the dead, the apparent meaning is that in the same way that the dead are deprived of the most basic needs of life such as eating, you too ought to abstain from the world

and from seeking its benefits. However, the Prophet's (S) intention is that you should pay attention to your permanent place of abode.

When the life of this world is [viewed as] a stopping-place, and a bridge for crossing over to the everlasting world, your attention has to be fixed on your final place of residence and your effort has to be concentrated on preparing yourself and acquiring enough provisions so as not to become ashamed and apologetic there. For that reason, the Noble Prophet's (S) intention is not that you ought to abstain from earthly affairs altogether and quit thinking about securing livelihood, buying amenities for yourself and your children's future and their ease.

Improper deductions from the verses of the Gracious Qur'an and *hadiths* have had an old history among the Muslims; such as when the verse about divine retribution was revealed, some of the Noble Prophet's (S) companions left their homes, abstained from coital relations with their wives, refrained from eating [good] foods and wearing [good] clothes, and [instead only] got busy with worshiping Allah! When news of this reached the Noble Prophet (S), he called them and said, "Why do you act like this? I, who am a Prophet, mix with my wives and derive benefit from the gifts of the world alongside my acts of devotion and fasting. You too ought to imitate me and do not forsake your homes and lives."

With regard to the previous matters, mentioning this point is necessary that all too often it happens that an individual lives a life of abundance in this world and still does not go under its influence, because he can employ all material matters as a means and way of attaining the truth. By the same token, it ought to be taken into consideration that when this world is castigated, it does not imply that we ought to consider its natural and material gifts as having no value [at all], because they are all Allah's creations and His divine signs.

But criticism is laid on man's point of view and intention; castigation is made when he gets addicted to the world and its gifts and sets them as his main goal and he becomes heedless of their intermediary role. For that reason, the real object of castigation is man and his improper way of employing material tools.

In praise of the Noble Prophet (S), Imam 'Ali ('a) says:

"(The Holy Prophet) treated this world disdainfully and regarded it as low. He held it contemptible and hated it. He realized that Allah kept it away from him with intention and spread it out for the others by way of contempt. For this reason, he kept away from it of his own volition, banished its recollection from his heart and mind and wished that its recollection should remain hidden from his eye so that he should not acquire any clothing from it, or hope for staying in it."^{[6](#)}

"O Abu Dharr! When you wake up in the morning do not hope to see the sun set and when you sleep at night do not hope to see the sun rise."

¹. Surat Yusuf 12:106.

- [2.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 41, p. 14.
- [3.](#) Ibid., vol. 77, p. 419.
- [4.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, p. 1256, wisdom [hikmat] 359, trans. Fayd al-Islam.
- [5.](#) Ibid., p. 353, sermon [khutbah] 113.
- [6.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, p. 294, sermon [khutbah] 108, trans. Fayd al-Islam.

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