

Lesson Two: Two Views Concerning the Pleasures of This World

Man can construct a solid barrier against the danger of the dissolution of his inward personality only when he attains religious belief and certainty, the conviction that our sorrows and joys do not go to waste, that we are not advancing to annihilation, but are rather moving towards Him. In other words, our residence in this abode of clay is temporary, lasting only until the appointed day when the summons of resurrection arouses us from our tombs and transfers us from our narrow earthly abode to our eternal residence, in order to enjoy everlasting existence in the proximity of the favor, blessings and mercy of God, the infinite source of all grace.

Belief in the existence of an eternal essence bestows nobility and value on man; it enables him to become a creature that is endowed with wisdom and aspires to ascend. Without the presence of man thus defined, nature itself would become meaningless, for all of its wonders. Once equipped with such a belief, man obtains the peace of mind and tranquillity he desires.

A European thinker writes:

“When the human mind is purified and cleansed of all the evils and lusts that plague the soul, it will turn away from purely human concerns to contemplating the beauty of nature. It will take pleasure in observing the variety of animals, plants and minerals, with the different forms, qualities and substances that each possesses, together with the relationships, contradictions and hierarchies of causation that exist in every natural phenomenon.

“When man's mind advances beyond this stage, he will next begin to fly in the heavens on the wings of thought and awareness. He will gaze on the splendor, beauty and power of the heavenly bodies, witness their motion and phases, and listen to the pleasing harmony that prevails throughout the universe. A pleasure of the purest kind will suffuse his being, and an ardent desire stirs within him to discover the primary cause and creator of this masterpiece of beauty. When he becomes aware that the essence, power, intelligence and goodness of this primary cause are infinite and beyond his perception, his mind

will finally have attained rest.” (*Khudavandan i And ishayi yi Siyasi*, II, 75)

If the world be regarded as a laboratory and the hereafter as a continuation of the life of this world, albeit on a higher plane, and the body be considered as a means of implementation or expression for the wishes and intentions of man, the personality of man is no longer restricted to a single orbit. A vast space is opened before him for his flight and ascent, and life takes on its true meaning.

The Effectiveness of Faith

If we examine the influence of belief in the hereafter in preserving social security and preventing the spread of corruption, crime and the violation of law, we reach the conclusion that this belief is the only force capable of taming the rebellious desires of the soul. It is like a protective shield that guards man from the assault of his passions, for the one who holds this belief will obey a series of ethical principles without hypocrisy and without being subject to external pressure; he will accept the discipline they inculcate with a clear conscience.

Such an aim cannot be assured simply by a high standard of education or economic prosperity, the power of technology, or by the existence of highly developed punitive mechanisms. A society that relies on these will be unable to advance toward a balanced and ideal situation.

Today we witness a growing wave of corruption, injustice and cruelty in countries which are well-developed with respect to education, economic prosperity, and judicial organization. Such is the extent of the moral decay in those countries that the forces of law and order – well organized though they are and provided with all the equipment that the scientific and technological revolutions have bestowed on them – are unable to take the place of the basic element of faith in taming the rebellious inclination of the soul to deviance and sin.

There are many people today who lament and are distressed by the present condition of their societies, but they are unable to do anything effective or to sketch out a plan of action.

A society that has fallen prey to a sick culture cannot fail to be replete with all kinds of impurity and abomination. What we mean by a “sick culture” is pessimism, the absence of goals, a belief that life lacks all meaning. Intellectual confusion is also one of the chief symptoms of a sick culture. The solutions that are proposed for the solution of the crisis are fruitless and ineffective when it comes to controlling the deviant tendencies rampant in society.

Modern science has expelled man from certain spheres of thought he used to inhabit; this is a phenomenon which has inevitably affected the whole of humanity. Insofar as man retains a firm and correct belief, this is a positive development, but insofar as he is ignorant and lacking in belief it is harmful. Man is not always in a position to draw logical conclusions from his knowledge, and if scientific civilization is to be a civilization that benefits man, true faith and wisdom must be added to man's

augmented body of knowledge.

In this world where the need for the cultivation of virtue is always keenly felt, the moral capacities and abilities of men are always tested by the goods that come into their possession. It is belief in the hereafter that enlarges the inner capacities of man through a profound and qualitative transformation; they begin to unfold like an unending succession of waves. Belief in the hereafter tames the obstinacy of the self and its mad greed for the untrammelled enjoyment of the goods of this world; it brings under control all of his faculties and properties. Hoping for great rewards and fearing severe chastisement, man shuns the greedy, irrational and undisciplined accumulation of worldly goods.

For he knows that here he is dwelling in a temporary realm; his residence on earth is like that of passing caravan. When he quits his bodily form, which was simply the expression of his transitory life, and is freed from this narrow realm, the gateway to another world is opened before him, and bounties are placed before him that bear no relation to the enjoyments of this world.

Man's heart never ceases to desire as long as he is in this world. Nonetheless, belief in the hereafter will permit him to realize that the opportunities afforded by this world are limited, that the gain to be had from it is very slight, that even the portion which lies within reach cannot be retained for ever, and that delight and pleasure are not restricted to our brief days here on earth. He will not be overcome every instant, then, by an endless surge of desire, causing him to form countless attachments and ultimately to lose himself, nor will he be excessively troubled if he does not acquire an excessive amount of the bounties of this world and the pleasures they yield.

His attitude to material enjoyments will never be the same as that of the hasty person who is in a state of constant anxiety and agitation lest his possessions not last him until death. It is only for those who worship this world that material possessions count as a goal in themselves; those who are advancing towards the abode of eternity use the bounties of this world as a means for attaining lofty goal. Moreover, indifference to what this narrow world contains causes man to enjoy the inner peace that he seeks. Such peace will undoubtedly permit him to enjoy to a heightened degree those pleasures of life that are in conformity with the criteria of religion.

Rousseau says:

"I know that I am destined to die; why, then, should I create attachments for myself in this world? In a world where all things are changing and passing, where I myself will soon become non-existent, of what use to me are attachments? Emile, my son, if I lose you, what will be left for me? I must nonetheless prepare myself for such an intolerable eventuality, because no one can assure me that I will die before you.

"So if you wish to live happily and rationally, attach your heart only to beauties that are imperishable; try to limit your desires and hold duty in higher esteem than all else. Seek only those things that do not violate the law of morality, and accustom yourself to losing things without distress. Accept nothing,

unless your conscience permits you. If you do all of this, you will surely be happy, and not become over-attached to anything on earth.” (*Emile*, (Persian Translation) p 547)

When the spirit of man overflows with faith in God and is assured of its own immortality, it will feel a remarkable and ever-increasing power within itself. Once it frees itself of absolute attachment to the perishable values of this world, it will in fact be the master of the universe.

The elevating tranquillity that results from such an orientation of the spirit gives man the ability to resist firmly the allurements of the world and the demands of the passionate self. He no longer laments the deficiencies and misfortunes that assail him, nor does he become proud and arrogant on account of his successes. Whatever causes other men to lose their bearings has no undesirable effect on him.

Belief in the day of reckoning and in the existence of an absolute perfection whose scrutinizing gaze encompasses all things and before whom the deeds of all man are present, even if they be as inconsequential as an atom – this belief creates a powerful influence in the depths of man's being that no other force can equal. Belief in God and His commands not only prevents man from fearing the difficulties of life but also transforms those difficulties into means of development and ascent toward the lofty goals of life.

Thus the Qur'an says:

“Whosoever believes and reforms himself shall never be prey to fear or to sadness.” (6:48)

“God shall guide to the path of happiness those who believe and do good deeds.” (10:9)

Who can underestimate the role of the spirit and the heart in the development of man and not ascribe to the heart the greatest share in the ascent of the spirit to the highest degree of perfection? Have not love and faith made possible throughout human history the greatest acts of devotion and self-sacrifice?

It is the purpose of the Qur'an firmly to implant awareness in the inner being and heart of man, to transform his heart and fashion him in such a way that he is inwardly impelled to perform deeds of value.

Since the believer depends for success in his striving on the infinite power of God, in Whom he places all his hope and reliance, the passing hardships and sorrows he encounters will never be able to darken his life, however difficult the path to his goal may appear. He will even accept failure with equanimity, if that failure occurs on the path leading to God, and regard failure as being a kind of victory in itself.

Whoever chooses God as His protector and guardian will escape the darkness of bewilderment and misguidance.

The Qur'an says: ***“God is the Guardian and Protector of those who believe; He brings them forth from darkness into light” (2:257).***

Those who refuse to worship God find themselves prostrating before their inner idol; passion and desire rule every dimension of their beings.

Self-worship is a dangerous sickness that with its different manifestations in the individual and social life of man entails the most tragic misfortunes and disorders. It creates a powerful barrier between man and the truth and results in the breakdown of man's capacities of perception and the blinding of his inner being.

The Qur'an says:

“Do you not see the one who takes his own desires as god? God has made him go astray, despite his possession of knowledge; He has placed a seal on his ears and his heart and drawn a curtain of darkness over his eyes. Who other than God can guide him? Will you then not take heed?” (45:23)

Since Islam regards this world as the tillage of the hereafter, it is acceptable that man should regard it as a means. Through choosing the correct path and acting virtuously man is in fact preparing his own life in the hereafter. But if man regards the world not as a passage leading to a higher, eternal life but as an aim and goal in itself, his meaningless attachment will deprive him of happiness and prevent him from growing towards perfection.

The Qur'an declares:

“Are you content with the life of the world in exchange for the here after, although the life of this world is as nothing when compared with the hereafter.” (9:38)

A Unique Advantage

A unique and valuable advantage enjoyed by the one who accepts the principle of an afterlife as part of his belief system is that he knows his future is fundamentally dependent on his own conduct and deeds. His behavior is therefore based on truthfulness and the absence of hypocrisy, on purity and sincerity. Belief in the hereafter not only raises qualitatively the level of his deeds but even accelerates their quantitative growth. The richer the content of his belief, the greater will be the extent of his sincerity, to the extent that even the least of his acts will be suffused by the purest intention.

He will be aware that all of his acts are constantly subject to the severest scrutiny. Whatever good or evil act he performs will be entered in the ledger of his deeds and retained for accounting. The day will come when his account will be examined with the greatest of care, for there is no mystery that is hidden to the one who watches over him.

By contrast, one whose inner being is empty of belief in the Last Day and who denies the most fruitful of realities, imagines that he will not be called to account for any aspect of his deeds, that he will not be

burned by the flames of the fire that he kindles today, and that he will not suffer the grave consequences of his corrupt deeds. He is accordingly engulfed in waves of delusion and untruth; he looks with hot desire on all forms of corruption and gazes coldly and listlessly on virtues and lofty qualities of the soul. Because of his mode of thought, if he occasionally undertakes some useful and creditable deed, this will remain unappreciated by the blind and purposeless future in which he believes. He therefore regards himself as justified in remaining indifferent to all considerations of virtue and emotion and in disdaining all lofty human qualities. If he commits various forms of crime, treachery and oppression, he recognizes no sanction other than the conventions and regulations of society that would call him to account for his misdeeds and punish him.

The fundamental shortcomings of human laws are that they assume all forms of human life will come to an end with death and that they are based on the wishes and sentiments of the majority of the members of society. Divine legislation follows a different path, one based on the eternity of human life, a life that is not severed by the blade of death, and it draws up its agenda accordingly.

A question calling for analysis is why science and the human mind are incapable of enlarging their sphere to aid in building the loftier dimensions of man and in bringing about profound transformations within him as does the fertile power of religion. The reason for the descent of man into the depths of banality and for the existence of all kinds of shortcoming in society is to be found in the very essence of man-made laws and their lack of congruence with the essential nature of man.

The religious man willingly implements the laws that he has come to accept as expressions of the eternal wisdom of God. He recognizes, moreover, that while obeying those laws he is journeying towards eternity and an imperishable realm across a span of infinite time. The narrow vision of human knowledge is incapable of fully comprehending the lofty destiny of such a man.

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