

Suluk and 'Ibadah

'Ibadah, or service, of the One God and negation of everything else as an object of service and worship, is one of the essential teachings of God-sent apostles—a feature never absent from the teachings of any prophet.

As we know, in the sacred religion of Islam, too, worship occupies a preeminent position, with the only difference that worship in Islam is not regarded as a series of devotional rituals separate from everyday life and as pertaining solely to another world. Worship in Islam is located in the context of life and is an unalienable part of the Islamic philosophy of life.

Aside from the fact that some of the Islamic acts of worship are performed collectively, Islam has structured them in such a fashion that their performance automatically ensures the performance of other duties of life. For instance, *salat* is a complete expression of man's servitude and surrender to God.

It has been specified in such a manner that even a man who desires to pray in a lonely corner is forced to observe certain things of moral and social relevance, such as cleanliness, respect for rights of others, observance of punctuality, possession of a sense of direction, control over one's emotions, and expression of good-will and benevolence towards other righteous servants of God.

From the point of view of Islam, every good and beneficial action if performed with a pure, God-seeking intention, is viewed as worship. Therefore, learning, acquisition of knowledge and livelihood and social service, if performed for God's sake, are acts of worship. Nevertheless, Islam also specifies a system of rituals and formal acts of worship such as *salat*, *sawm* (fasting) etc., which have a specific philosophy for performing them.

Levels of Worship

Men have varying attitudes towards worship. Not all of them view it in the same light. For some, worship is a kind of deal, a barter and an exchange of labour performed for wages. Like an ordinary worker who spends his time and labour for the benefit of an employer and expects a daily wage in return, the devotee also endeavours for the sake of Divine reward, which, however, he would receive in the next

world.

Like the labourer, for whom his labour bears fruit in the form of his wages and who would not work except for a wage, the benefit of the devotee's worship, according to the outlook of this particular group of devotees, lies in the wages and reward which shall be granted to the devotees in the shape of the goods and comforts in the other world.

However, every employer pays wages in return for the benefit he derives from his workers, but what benefit can the Lord of the heavens derive from the labours of a weak and feeble servant? Moreover, if we assume that the Great Employer does remunerate His servants in the form of the blessings and rewards of the Hereafter, then why does He not reward them without any effort and consumption of labour and energy?

These are questions which never occur to this class of pious. From their viewpoint, the essence of worship lies in certain visible bodily movements and oscillations of the tongue. This is one attitude towards worship. Unrefined and vulgar it be, it is, in the words of Ibn Sina, as he puts it in the ninth chapter of His *al-'Isharat*, 'the attitude of the unenlightened and God-ignorant, acceptable only to the plebeians.'

Another approach towards worship is that of the enlightened. Here the aforementioned problems of worker and employer, labour and wage, have no relevance. How can they be relevant when worship is viewed by them as the ladder to attain nearness to God, as the means of human sublimity, edification and upliftment of the soul and its flight to the invisible sphere of spiritual greatness, as an invigorating exercise of his spiritual faculties, and as a triumph of the spirit over the corporeal?

It is the highest expression of the gratitude and love of the human being towards his Creator and his declaration of love for the Most Perfect and the Absolutely Beautiful, and finally, his wayfaring towards Allah!

According to this approach, worship has a form and a soul, an appearance and an inner meaning. That which is expressed by the tongue and the movements of other members of the body, is the form, the outer mould, and the appearance of worship. Its soul and meaning is something else. The soul of worship is inextricably connected with the significance attached to worship by the devotee, his attitude towards it, his inner motive that drives him to it, the ultimate satisfaction and benefit he derives from it, and the extent to which he covers the Divine path in his journey towards God.

[The Approach of the Nahj al-balaghah](#)

What approach and attitude is adopted by the *Nahj al-balaghah* towards worship? The *Nahj al-balaghah* takes an enlightened view of worship, or rather, it is, after the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (s), the main source of inspiration towards the enlightened approach to worship in the Islamic

tradition.

As we know, of the most sublime and imaginative themes of Islamic literature, both Arabic and Persian, is relationship between the ardent love of the devotee for the Divine Essence expressed in delicate and elegant passages in the form of sermons, prayers, allegories, parables, both in prose and verse.

When we compare them with the pre-Islamic notions prevalent in the regions which subsequently constituted the domains of Islam, it is surprising to observe the gigantic leap that was taken by Islam in bestowing depth, scope, sweetness, and delicacy to human thought.

Islam transformed a people who worshipped idols, images, fire, or degraded the Eternal God to the level of a human 'Father', and whose flight of imagination prompted them to identify the 'Father' with the 'Son', or who officially considered the Ahura Mazda to be a material form, whose statues they erected in every place, into a people whose intellect could grasp and evolve the most abstract of concepts, the most sophisticated ideas, the most elegant thoughts and most sublime notions.

How was human intellect so radically transformed? What revolutionized their logic, elevated their thoughts, refined their emotions and sublimated their values? How did it happen? The *al-Mu'allaqat al-sab'ah* and the *Nahj al-balaghah* stand only one generation apart.

Both of those generations of Arabs were proverbial in eloquence and literary genius. But as to the content, they stand as far apart as the earth and the sky. The former sing of the beauty of the beloved, the pleasures of love, of gallantry, horses, spears, nightly assaults, and compose eulogy and lampoon; the latter contains the sublimest ideas of man.

In order to elucidate the approach of 'Ali ('a) towards worship, now we shall proceed to cite few examples from the *Nahj al-balaghah*, beginning with a statement about the differences in various approaches of people towards worship.

The Worship of Freemen

A group of people worshipped God out of desire for reward; this is the worship of traders. Another group worshipped God out of fear; this is the worship of slaves. Yet another group worshipped God out of gratitude; this is the worship of freemen. [1](#)

Even if God had not warned those disobedient to Him of chastisement, it was obligatory by way of gratefulness for His favours that He should not be disobeyed. [2](#)

My God, I have not worshipped Thee out of fear of Thy Hell and out of greed for Thy Paradise; but I found Thee worthy of worship, and so I worshipped Thee. [3](#)

God's Remembrance

The roots of all spiritual, moral, and social aspects of worship lie in one thing: the remembrance of God and obliviousness towards everything else. In one of its verses, the Holy Qur'an refers to the educative and invigorating effect of worship, and says:

The salat protects from unseemly acts. (29:45)

Adhere to salat in order that you remain in My remembrance. (20: 14)

This is a reminder of the fact that the person who prays remembers God and lives by the knowledge that He is always observing and watching him, and does not forget that he himself is His servant.

The remembrance of God, which is the aim of worship, is burnishing of the heart and an agency of its purification. It prepares the heart for the reflection of Divine Light in it. Speaking of the remembrance of God and the meaning of worship, 'Ali ('a) says:

Certainly God, the glorified, has made His remembrance burnishing of the hearts, which makes them hear after deafness, see after blindness, and makes them submissive after unruliness. In all periods and times when there were no prophets, there were individuals to whom He spoke in whispers through their conscience and intellects. [4](#)

These sentences speak of the wonderful effect of Divine remembrance on the heart, to the extent of making it capable of receiving Divine inspiration and bringing it in intimate communion with God.

Levels of Devotion

In the same sermon are explained the various spiritual states and levels attained by the worshippers in the course of their devotional search. 'Ali ('a) describes such men in these words:

The angels have surrounded them and peace is showered upon them. The doors of heavens are opened for them and abodes of blessedness, of which He had informed them, have been prepared for them. He is pleased with their struggle and admires their station. When they call Him, they breathe the scent of His forgiveness and mercy. [5](#)

Nights of the Devout

From the point of view of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, the world of worship is another world altogether. Its delights are not comparable with any pleasures of the three-dimensional corporeal world. The world of worship effuses movement, progress, and journey, but a journey which is quite unlike physical travel to new lands.

It is spiritual journey to the 'nameless city'. It does not know night from the day, because it is always drenched in light. In it there is no trace of darkness and pain, for it is throughout purity, sincerity, and delight. Happy is the man, in the view of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, who sets his foot into this world and is refreshed by its invigorating breeze. Such a man then no longer cares whether he lays his head on silken pillow or on a stone:

Blessed is he who discharges his duties towards his Lord, and endures the hardships they entail. He allows himself no sleep at nights until it over whelms him. Then lies down with the palm of his hand under head as his pillow. He is among those whom the thought of the Day of Judgement keeps wakeful at nights, whose beds remain vacant, whose lips hum in God's remembrance and whose sins have been erased by their prolonged earnest supplication for forgiveness They are the 'Party of God'; "surely God's Party—they are the prosperers!" [6](#)

*The nights of the men of God are like shiny days,
The gloomy nights do not exist for the enlightened.*

The Profile of the Pious

In the last section we discussed the viewpoint of the *Nahj al-balaghah* with respect to worship. We found that the *Nahj al-balaghah* does not regard worship as a series of cut-and-dried, lifeless rituals. The bodily movements constitute the apparent body of worship, while its soul and meaning is something else. Only when endowed with meaning and spirit is worship worth its name. Real worship means transcending the three-dimensional world into the spiritual sphere, which is a world of perpetual delight and sublimation for the soul and the source of vigour and strength for the heart, which has its own pleasures.

There are many references to the characteristics of the pious and the devout in the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Often the *Nahj al-balaghah* sketches the profiles of the pious and the devout and describes their characteristic fear of God, their devotion and delight in worship, their constant sorrow and grief over sins and frequent reciting of the Qur'an, and their occasional ecstatic experiences and states which they achieve in the course of their worshipful endeavours and struggle against their corporeal self.

At times it discusses the role of worship in lifting from the human soul the pall of sins and black deeds, and often points out to the effect of worship in curing moral and psychic diseases. At other times it speaks about the unadulterated, unsurpassable and pure delights and ecstasies of the followers of the spiritual path and sincere worshippers of God.

Night Vigils

During the night they are on their feet reciting the verses of the Qur'an one after the other, tarrying to deliberate about their meaning, and thereby instilling gnostic pathos into their souls and by means of it

seek remedy for their spiritual ailments. What they hear from the Qur'an seems to them as if they are witnessing it with their own eyes.

If they come across a verse arousing eagerness (for Paradise) they lean towards it covetingly and their souls cling to it avidly as if they are approaching their ultimate goal. And when they come across a verse that instills fear, their heart's ear is turned in attention to it as if they themselves hear the cracking sound of the flames of Hell Fire.

Their backs are bent in reverence and their foreheads, palms, knees and toes rest on the ground as they beseech God for deliverance. But when the day dawns, they are kind, patient, scholarly, pious and righteous. [7](#)

The Spiritual Experience

He has revived his intellect and slain his self, until his body became lean and its bulkiness shrunk, and stubbornness turned into tenderness (of heart). Then an effulgence, like a thunderbolt, descended his heart and illuminated the path before him, opening all the doors, and led him straight into the gateway of Peace. Now his feet, carrying his body, are firmly rooted in the position of safety (on the *Sirat*) and comfort because he kept his heart busy with good deeds and won the good pleasure of his God. [8](#)

As we observe, this passage speaks of another kind of life, which is called '*the life of intellect*'. It speaks about struggle against the carnal self (*al-nafs al-'ammarah*) and its destruction; it speaks about exercise of the spirit and the body, about lightening, which as a result of exercise illumines the being of the follower and brightens his spiritual world; it speaks about the stages and targets that the devotee's earnest soul reaches on his way until it attains the last and highest stage of man's spiritual journey. [9](#)

The Qur'an says:

"O man! Thou art labouring unto thy Lord laboriously, and thou shalt encounter Him." (84:6)

'Ali ('a), in the passage cited above, speaks about the inner peace, contentment and tranquillity of soul which a man's restless, disturbed and anxious heart ultimately attains:

"Indeed, the hearts are at rest in God's remembrance." (13:28)

In the sermon 228, 'Ali ('a) describes the significance attached by this class of devotees to spiritual life—the life of the heart:

"They see that the worldly people attach great importance to the death of their bodies but they themselves attach much greater importance to the death of hearts of those who are living." (Sermon 230)

'Ali ('a) describes the ecstatic eagerness of the earnest souls which impels them to move onwards on the

path of spiritual perfection in these words:

They lived in society and participated in its affairs with their bodies, while their souls rested in the higher spiritual spheres. [10](#)

Had there been no preordained time of death for each of them, their spirits would not have remained in their bodies even for the twinkling of an eye because of their eagerness for the Divine reward and their fear of chastisement. [11](#)

He did everything only for God, and so God also made him His own. [12](#)

The esoteric knowledge and emanated insight, revealed to the heart of the follower of the spiritual path as a result of self-education and self-refinement, is described in these words:

The knowledge that bursts upon them and surrounds them is endowed with absolute certainty, and their soul attains the highest degree of conviction. They easily bear what the easy-going regard as harsh and unbearable. They endure what makes the ignorant recoil with horror. [13](#)

Purging of Sins

From the point of view of Islamic teachings, every sin leaves a black stain and the effects of distortion in the human heart which in turn weakens a person's aptitude for good and righteous actions, and consequently further deviates him towards other sins and foul deeds. On the other hand, worship, prayer and remembrance of God, develop a human being's religious consciousness, strengthen his aptitude for virtuous deeds and diminish his proneness to sin. This means that worship and remembrance of God efface the mal-effects of sins and replace these with fondness for virtue and goodness.

In the *Nahj al-balaghah* there is a sermon which deals with *salat*, *zakat* and delivering of trust; after emphasizing the importance of *salat*, 'Ali ('a) further says:

Certainly, prayer removes sins like autumn strips leaves off from trees, and it liberates you from the rope (of sins) tied around your neck. The Prophet ('s) likened it to a refreshing stream at one's door in which one takes a purifying bath five times in a day and night. Will after so much cleansing any dirt remain on him? [14](#)

Moral Remedy

In the sermon 196, after referring to evil conduct such as disobedience, oppression, injustice and pride, 'Ali ('a) says:

It is on account of these perils that God has encouraged His believing servants to perform *salat* and *zakat*, to keep fast during the days when it is made obligatory; these acts of worship give their limbs

peace and rest, cast fear in their eyes, soften their spirits, cultivate a sense of humility in their hearts and purge them from pride.

[Intimacy and Ecstasy](#)

My God, Thou, of all beloved ones, art the most attached to Thy lovers and most ready to trust those who trust in Thee. Thou seest, Thou lookest into their secrets and knowest that which lies in their conscience and art aware of the extent of their inner vision. Consequently their secrets are open to Thee and their hearts look up to Thee in eager apprehension. In loneliness, Thy remembrance is their friend and consolation. In distress Thy help is their protection. [15](#)

There are some people devoted to remembrance of Allah who have chosen it in place of all worldly goods. [16](#)

In the sermon 148, 'Ali ('a) alludes to the coming times of the Promised al-Mahdi ('a)–may God hasten his appearance–and at the end of his discourse describes the courage, wisdom, insight and

Then a group of people will be made ready by God like the swords sharpened by the blacksmith. Their sight would be brightened by revelations the inner meaning of the Qur'an would be familiar to their ears and they would be given to drink the cup of wisdom every morning and evening. [17](#)

- [1.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Hikam, No. 237
- [2.](#) Ibid, Hikam, No. 290
- [3.](#) Source of reference not indicated (Tr.)
- [4.](#) Ibid,. Khutab, No. 222
- [5.](#) Ibid,. p. 343
- [6.](#) Ibid,. Rasail, No. 45
- [7.](#) Ibid,. Khutab, No. 193
- [8.](#) Ibid,. Khutab No. 220
- [9.](#) Ibid, Khutab No. 230
- [10.](#) Ibid, Khutab No. 230
- [11.](#) Ibid, Hikam, No. 147
- [12.](#) Ibid, Khutab No. 193
- [13.](#) Ibid, Khutab No. 87
- [14.](#) Ibid, Hikam, No. 147
- [15.](#) Ibid, Khutab No.199
- [16.](#) Ibid, Khutab No.227
- [17.](#) Ibid, Khutab No.222

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