

Twentieth Hadith: Pure Intention (Ikhlas)

بِالسَّنَدِ الْمُتَّصِلِ إِلَى الشَّيْخِ الثَّقَةِ الْجَلِيلِ مُحَمَّدِ بْنِ يَعْقُوبَ عَنْ عَلِيِّ بْنِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ، عَنْ أَبِيهِ، عَنِ الْقَاسِمِ بْنِ مُحَمَّدٍ، عَنِ الْمِنْقَرِيِّ، عَنْ سُفْيَانَ بْنِ عُيَيْنَةَ، عَنْ أَبِي عَبْدِ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ فِي قَوْلِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ: ﴿لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا﴾ قَالَ: لَيْسَ يَعْنِي أَكْثَرَ عَمَلًا وَلَكِنْ أَصْوَبَكُمْ عَمَلًا. وَإِنَّمَا الْإِصَابَةُ خَشْيَةُ اللَّهِ وَالنِّيَّةُ الصَّادِقَةُ وَالْحَسَنَةُ. ثُمَّ قَالَ: الْإِبْقَاءُ عَلَى الْعَمَلِ حَتَّى يَخْلُصَ أَشَدَّ مِنَ الْعَمَلِ. وَالْعَمَلُ الْخَالِصُ: الَّذِي لَا تُرِيدُ أَنْ يَحْمَدَكَ عَلَيْهِ أَحَدٌ إِلَّا اللَّهَ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ. وَالنِّيَّةُ أَفْضَلُ مِنَ الْعَمَلِ. أَلَا وَإِنَّ النِّيَّةَ هِيَ الْعَمَلُ. – ثُمَّ تَلَا قَوْلَهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ – ﴿قُلْ كُلٌّ يَعْمَلُ عَلَى شَاكِلَتِهِ﴾ يَعْنِي عَلَى نِيَّتِهِ

With my isnad reaching back to the venerable and trustworthy shaykh Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni (Q) from Ali ibn Ibrahim, from his father, from al-Qasim ibn Muhammad, from al-Minqari, from Sufyan ibn 'Uyaynah, from Abu 'Abd Allah (A), who, explaining the utterance of God Almighty: That He might try you (to see) which of you is fairest in works. (67:2), said, "It does not mean one of you whose deeds are more numerous but one who is more rightful in his conduct, and this rightness is nothing but the fear of God and sincerity of intention (niyyah) and fear." Then he (A) added, "To persevere in an action until it becomes sincere is more difficult than (performing) the action itself, and sincerity of action lies in this that you should not desire anyone to praise you for it except God Almighty, and intention supersedes action. Lo, verily, intention is action itself." Then he recited the Qur'anic verse, "Say, everyone acts in accordance with his character –shakilatihi- (17:84), adding, "That shakilah means niyyah."¹

Exposition

Bala' (mentioned in verse 67: 2) means 'test' and 'examination' as pointed out by *al-Sihah*:

بَلَوْتُهُ بَلْوًا: جَرَّبْتُهُ وَاخْتَبَرْتُهُ، وَبَلَاهُ اللَّهُ بَلَاءً وَأَبْلَاهُ إِبْلَاءً حَسَنًا وَابْتَلَاهُ أَيَّ اخْتَبَرَهُ

'Balawtuhi balwan' means 'I tested him', 'I examined him', and 'balahu Allah bala'an', or 'ablahu ibla'an hasanan' or ibtaluhu means 'He (God) tested him.'

'Ayyukum' is the second object (*maf'ul duwwom*) for *li yabluwakum*, with the sense of knowing being implicit in it, according to al-Majlisi. But this does not seem to fit, because the interrogative pronoun *ayy* makes the verb conditional on action ('amal). That which is correct is that *أَيْكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا* is a nominal sentence (*jumleh-ye muftada wa khabar*) and is the object of the verb *balwa*. If *ayy* is taken to be relative pronoun (*mawsulah*), there is a sense for the statement of al-Majlisi (M). But its interrogative character is more evident.

Sawab is the opposite of *khata'* (error), as mentioned by al-Jawhari. The second 'khashyah' (fear) does not appear in some manuscripts, as mentioned by al-Majlisi, and should it be there, there are several probable interpretations for it, the more evident of which is that the *waw* here is in the sense of *ma'a* (with). And this phrase is narrated in the *Asrar al-salat* of al-Shahid al-Thani (M) *وَالنِّيَّةُ الصَّادِقَةُ وَالْحَسَنَةُ* ('sincere and fair intention'; instead of *وَالنِّيَّةُ الصَّادِقَةُ وَالْحَشِيَّةُ*).

lbqa' 'ala al-'amal means observance of action and exercising care over it, as pointed out by al-Jawhari, who says:

أَبْقَيْتُ عَلَى فُلَانٍ إِذَا أَرْعَيْتُ عَلَيْهِ وَرَحِمْتُهُ.

Shakilah has (also) the sense of *tariqah* (way), *shakl* (shape), and *nahiyah* (region), as mentioned in *al-Qamus* and *al-Sihah*. *Al-Qamus* states:

الشَّاكِلَةُ: الشَّكْلُ وَالنَّاحِيَةُ وَالنِّيَّةُ وَالطَّرِيقَةُ.

We will, God willing, explain that which needs explanation in this noble *hadith* in course of a few sections.

The Meaning Of 'Test' In Relation To God

The clause, "That He might try you..." (quoted in the tradition) refers to the utterance of God Almighty:

﴿تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي بِيَدِهِ الْمُلْكُ وَهُوَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ. الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا﴾

Blessed is He in Whose hand is the Kingdom and Who is powerful over everything, Who created death and life, that He might try you which of you is fairest in works. (67: 1-2)

The *muhaqqiq* al-Majlisi (Q) says, "This noble verse (which refers to the 'creation' of death) indicates that death is something which has being, and means either death as something that happens to life or essential non-existence."

The meaning of the noble verse indicates a sense in which creation relates to it (death) as a substance; it does not indicate a sense in which the relation is accidental, as pointed out by the *muhaqqiqun*. And the possible sense of death as essential non-existence does not apply here, for ascription of being to something essentially non-existent involves a contradiction, with the further observation that to ascribe the sense of essential non-existence to death does not appear in itself to be something correct.

However, that which is correct is that 'death' means transference from the apparent corporeal realm (*nash'eh-ye zahereh-ye mulkiyyeh*) to the hidden higher realm (*nash'eh-ye bateneh-ye malakutiyyeh*). Or 'death' means the second life in *malakut* (the realm higher to that of physical nature) following the first life in the realm of *mulk* (physical nature). Both of these senses involve being, or rather refer to a mode of being more complete than that of *mulk*.

This is because life in the world or physical nature is adulterated with lifeless physical materials and their life is an ephemeral accident, as opposed to the substantial (i.e. inherent in substance) life of the realm of *malakut* where the souls obtain independence (from all elements of lifelessness that characterize the physical world). That realm is the realm of life, life being its essential quality, and the non-corporeal bodies of *Barzakh* (*abdan al-mithaliye barzakhi*) have their existential dependence on the souls, as has been demonstrated in the place proper to it.

Moreover, the life of *malakut* – which is expressed by 'death' (*al-mawt*, in the verse) in order not to weigh heavily on the ears of the listeners – does relate to creation and is under the power of the Sacred Essence.

The meaning of 'trial' and 'test' and the character of their ascription to God, the Exalted and the Glorious, was mentioned during the earlier exposition of some traditions. It was explained that ignorance (implicit in the meaning of 'trial' and 'test') cannot be ascribed to the Sacred Essence, and there is no need of interpretations and studied explanations in this regard. Here we shall briefly explain this issue.

At the beginning of their creation, the human souls are nothing but pure potentialities and are devoid of every kind of actuality inclining either toward felicity or wretchedness. It is only after their coming into the ambit of physical, substantial motion and voluntary actuality that the potentialities and capacities change into actualities and distinctions. Hence the difference between the felicitous and the wretched, the fat and the lean, comes into existence in corporeal life (*hayat al-mulki*), and the purpose of the creation of life is the distinction and examination of the souls. Thus the relation of trial and creation becomes clear. As to the creation of death, it has also a role in these distinctions, or rather it is the last link in the causative process (of the emergence of distinctions in the realm of actuality).

For the criterion in the realm of actuality is the ultimate forms with which man makes the migration (from *mulk* to *malakut*); also, the criterion in the distinctions is the otherworldly *malakuti* forms that are acquired through the substantial and voluntary movements of the corporeal world. This also makes clear the relation of testing and trial to creation of death and life, without involving any ignorance (on the part

of God). An exposition of this issue elaborate enough to dispel all the doubts surrounding it depends on a discussion of God's essential knowledge prior to creation (*'ilm al-dhati qabl al-ijad*) and His actual knowledge accompanying creation (*'ilm al-fi'lli ma'a al-'ijad*), which is outside the scope of this exposition. And the Divine utterance, "(that He might see) which one of you is fairest in action," as well as the trial relating to the more righteous of deeds, relate to the above-mentioned matter, and hence the noble tradition.

This is because the relative fairness of deeds has been interpreted as their relative rightness, which in turn is made to depend on fear and sincerity of intention. These are the inward forms of the soul, which make up the real distinctive features of the souls or are the manifestations of the hidden distinctions among the essences. And because of the fact that outward action affects the heart and the inward self, these distinctions are also brought about by deeds. Hence, the testing of deeds is also the testing of the essences.

And if the noble verse were interpreted in accordance with its apparent sense and in independence of the exposition of the Imam (A), even then the testing will have the above-mentioned sense, because the life in the present world and the creation of life and death by itself results in the distinctions that characterize good and evil acts. As to the creation of life, its significance is clear, and as to death, its significance in this relation also becomes clear when we know the ephemeral nature of worldly life and the necessity of transition from this transitory life which is, of course, accompanied with distinctions arising from distinctions of deeds.

Fear, Sincere Intention And Rightness Of Action

You should know that in this noble tradition the rightness and goodness of action is made to depend on two sublime bases, which also constitute the criteria of their perfection and wholeness. One of these is the fear and awe of God Almighty and the other is the sincerity of intention and purity of purpose. Now we have to explain the relation between these two principles and the perfection of action and its rightness and rectitude.

The fear and awe of God Almighty leads to the *taqwa* and piety of the souls and these result in greater effectiveness of deeds. To elaborate, as mentioned in the course of the exposition of earlier traditions, every act, good or evil, has an effect upon the soul. Now if the act is of the category of acts of devotion and worship, its effect is that of making the physical faculties subservient to the intellectual faculties, making the *malakuti* aspect of the self-dominant over its *mulki* aspect.

As a result of it, physical nature is made subject to spirituality, until the soul reaches the stage of spiritual emotion and attains its essential goal. Every act that increases this effect and discharges this service in a better way is more rightful and more effective in attaining the essential goal. Also, everything that has a role in this effectiveness has also a role in the rightness of action. Largely, this is also the criterion of relative merit in acts and the famous following tradition also refers to this point:

أَفْضَلُ الْأَعْمَالِ أَحْمَرُهَا.

The best of deeds are those which are the most difficult.²

These preliminaries show that *taqwa* purifies the souls from contaminations and obfuscations, and, obviously, if the tablet of the soul is free of the coverings of sins and clear of the obfuscations caused by them, the good actions are more effective— upon it and more conducive to the realization of the goal, thus better fulfilling the great secret purpose of devotional rites, which is the taming of corporeal nature, subjugation of *mulk* to *malakut*, and strengthening of the soul's active will power (*iradeh-ye fa'ileh-ye nafs*).

Hence, the fear of God, which has a thorough influence on the soul's *taqwa*, is one of the major agents of spiritual reform with an effective role in the rectitude of action and its beauty and perfection. This is because *taqwa*, besides being one of the reforming agents of the soul, also affects the influence of inward and outward human actions and is the cause of their acceptability, as declared by God Almighty:

﴿إِنَّمَا يَتَقَبَّلُ اللَّهُ مِنَ الْمُتَّقِينَ﴾

Verily God accepts only from the God-fearing. (5:27)

The second major factor in the rightness and perfection of actions which, in fact, is tantamount to their efficient force (in the same way as the awe and *taqwa* acquired from them is equivalent to the condition of their effectiveness and which, in fact, purify the receptor and remove the impediments). It is sincere intention and pure purpose on which depend the perfection and defectiveness of *'ibadat* (worships) and their validity and invalidity.

As much as the *'ibadat* are free from association with non-God and from adulteration of intention, to the same extent they are sincere and perfect. And nothing is as important in *'ibadat* as intention and its purity, for the relationship of intention to *'ibadah* is like that of the soul to the body and the spirit to the corporeal frame.

In the same way as their physical form originates in the physical aspect of the self and its body, intention and their spirit originate from the self's inward aspect and the heart. No worship is acceptable to God Almighty without sincere intention and unless it is free from the outward *mulki riya'* (a kind of *riya'* which the *fuqaha'* (R) have mentioned) and *shirk*, which invalidate and nullify the outward parts (of an *ibadah*).

And unless it is free from inward *shirk*, in whose presence although an *'ibadah* may be correct from the exoteric aspect of the *Shari'ah* and *fiqhi* ordinances, it is not valid and acceptable to God Almighty from the esoteric aspect and from the viewpoint of the reality and secrets of worship. Hence there is no necessary relation between the (legal) validity of *'ibadah* and its acceptability, a point which has often

been mentioned in the traditions.

An exhaustive definition of 'shirk in 'ibadah' that encompasses all its levels is the inclusion of the good pleasure and satisfaction of anyone other than God, whether it is one's own self or someone else.' If it is for someone else's satisfaction and for other people, it is outward *shirk* and *fiqhi riya'*. If it is for one's own satisfaction (*rida*), it is hidden and inward *shirk*; this also invalidates the 'ibadah in view of the *urafa* and makes it unacceptable to God. Examples of it are offering the nightly prayer for increase in one's livelihood, giving *sadaqah* for safety from afflictions, or giving *zakat* for increase in one's wealth; that is, when one does these things for God Almighty in order to seek these things from His grace.

Although those 'ibadat are valid, and one who performs them is considered to have performed his duty and fulfilled the requirements of the *Shari'ah*, they do not amount to the worship of God Almighty, nor are they characterized with sincerity of intention and purity of purpose. Rather, this kind of 'ibadat are aimed to achieve mundane purposes and to seek the objects of carnal, mundane desires. Hence, the acts of such a person are not rightful.

Similarly, if 'ibadah is for the sake of the fear of hell and yearning for paradise, it is not sincerely for God and is devoid of sincere intention. Rather, it may be said that such acts of worship are purely for the sake of Satan and the carnal self. The good pleasure of God does not enter the intentions of a person performing such a kind of *ibadah* in order to be considered even *shirk*.

Rather he has worshipped solely the great idol, the mother of all idols, the idol of one's carnal desire. However, God Almighty has accepted this kind of *ibadah* from us out of His expansive mercy and on account of our weakness, by allowing a degree of leniency; that is, He has bestowed upon it certain effects and attached certain favors to it so that if man should fulfill the outward conditions of its acceptance, and perform it with the presence of the heart, all those effects will follow and all the related promises of reward shall be carried out.

Such is the condition of the 'ibadat of the slaves and mercenaries. But as to the 'ibadah of free men (*ahrar*), performed for the love of God Almighty and to seek the attention given by that Sacred Essence to Its worshippers, the motive of fear of hell and yearning for paradise being absent in it, it is the first station of the *awliya'* and *ahrar*.

There are other stations and degrees for them, which escape description and lie outside the scope of this discourse. As long as the soul's attention is fixed on worship, worshipper, and the worshipped one, worship is not sincere. The heart must be vacated of every other thing and there should be nothing in it except God in order for worship to be sincere, as mentioned in a noble tradition of *al-Kafi*

قَالَ: سَأَلْتُهُ عَنْ قَوْلِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ: ﴿إِلَّا مَنْ أَتَى اللَّهَ بِقَلْبٍ سَلِيمٍ﴾ قَالَ: الْقَلْبُ السَّلِيمُ الَّذِي يَلْقَى رَبَّهُ وَلَيْسَ فِيهِ أَحَدٌ سِوَاهُ. وَكُلُّ قَلْبٍ فِيهِ شِرْكٌ أَوْ شَكٌّ فَهُوَ سَاقِطٌ. وَإِنَّمَا أَرَادُوا الزُّهْدَ فِي الدُّنْيَا لِنَفْسِهِمْ لِالْآخِرَةِ.

Sufyan ibn ‘Uyaynah (the narrator of the earlier tradition) says, “I asked Imam al–Sadiq (A) about the utterance of God, the Exalted and the Glorious, in regard to the Day of Resurrection, ‘The day when neither wealth nor sons shall profit except he who comes with a pure heart (26: 88–89).’ The Imam (A) replied, ‘A pure heart is one that meets its Lord in a state in which there is none in it except Him.’ Then he (A) added: ‘Every heart in which there is shirk or doubt shall fail. Indeed, He has meant by it (the purity of heart) nothing except zuhd in regard to the world so that their hearts may be made ready for the Hereafter.’³

Of course, the heart which is occupied with non–God and contaminated with doubt and *shirk* – whether of the manifest (*jali*) or the concealed (*khafi*) kind – has no credibility in the sacred presence of the Lord. To the concealed kind of *shirk* pertains reliance on means and dependence on anything other than God.

It is even mentioned in tradition that changing the position of one’s ring in order to remind one of something is also concealed *shirk*.⁴ To allow other–than–God to enter the heart is considered concealed *shirk*, and sincerity of intention (*ikhlas al–niyyat*) is expulsion of other–than God from His sacred abode (i.e. the heart). Similarly, there are various degrees of doubt (*shakk*), some of which should be reckoned as manifest and some as concealed, which are caused by the weakness of conviction and feebleness of faith.

Similarly, hesitation in matters is also on account of doubt. Of the stages of concealed doubt is changeability and absence of stability in *tawhid*. Therefore, true *tawhid* means the dropping of relations, limits and pluralities, even the pluralities relating to the Names and Attributes, and fixation in it is purity from doubt. The purity of heart means absolute freedom from *shirk* and doubt.

In the tradition, the phrase “He has meant by it nothing except *zuhd*...” is a reference to the fact that the ultimate goal of *zuhd* is that the heart should gradually become detached from the world and loathful toward it, with its attention turned to the real goal and the true object of all yearning. From the beginning part of the tradition it appears that the meaning of ‘Hereafter’ is the ultimate limit of the circle of existence and the ultimate destination. This is what ‘Hereafter’ means in its absolute sense.

Accordingly, the world constitutes the complete circle of manifestation, and *zuhd* in regard to it necessarily entails purifying the heart of other–than–God. Hence even one who has other–than–God in his heart and is attached to others – whether they be corporeal, *mulki* matters, or spiritual ones relating to hereafterly forms, excellences and degrees, and everything other than God – is a man of the world, not *zahid* in regard to it, being deprived from the true Hereafter and the paradise of Divine communion, which is the highest of the levels of paradise, although he may possess other degrees of spiritual excellences and attain to the sublime levels of paradise in the same way as the people of the world differ in regard to possession of worldly wealth and status but whose stations are far remote from those of the men of God.

The Definition Of Ikhlas

You should know that various definitions have been suggested for *ikhlas*, to some of which that are prevalent among the people of the mystic path we shall briefly refer here. The honorable ‘*arif*’ and the wise wayfarer, Khwajah ‘Abd Allah al-’Ansari, *quddisa sirruh*, says:

الإِخْلَاصُ تَصْفِيَةُ الْعَمَلِ مِنْ كُلِّ شَوْبٍ.

Ikhlas means purging action of all impurities.

And the impurity mentioned here is a general one, including both that which arises from the desire to please oneself and other creatures. It is narrated from the great Shaykh Baha’i that the people of the heart have offered various definitions for it:

قِيلَ: تَنْزِيهِ الْعَمَلِ أَنْ يَكُونَ لِعَیْرِ اللَّهِ فِيهِ نَصِيبٌ.

It has been said, “(Ikhlas means) keeping action free from other-than-God having a role in it.”

This definition is close to the former one.

وقيل: أَنْ لَا يُرِيدَ عَامِلُهُ عَلَيْهِ عَوْضاً فِي الدَّارَيْنِ.

And it has been said, “(Ikhlas means) that the performer of an action should not desire any reward for it in the world and the Hereafter.”

And it has been narrated from the author of *Ghara’ib al-bayan* that the *mukhlisun* are those who worship God in such a way that they don’t see themselves in service nor do they take notice of the world or .its people, nor transcend the bounds of servitude in their vision of Lordship.

Hence when the devotee foregoes all gains and stakes in everything from the earth to the Throne (*‘arsh*), he comes to traverse the path of *din*, which is the path of service and devotion on which the soul does not take any notice of the events on account of its vision of the beauty of the Lord. This is the *Din* that God Almighty has chosen for Himself and cleared it from the taint of association with other-than-God, and He has said:

﴿أَلَا لِلَّهِ الدِّينُ الْخَالِصُ﴾

Lo, to God belongs sincere allegiance —al-din al-khalis—. (39:3)

And ‘sincere religion’ is the light of pre-eternity (*qidam*) that appears after the disappearance of contingency (*huduth*) in the wilderness of resplendent glory and monism. It is as if God Almighty has invited His servants by indicating and signaling to them that they should purify their souls from others and make them turn exclusively towards Him. And it has been narrated from al-Shaykh al-Muhaqqiq Muhyi al-Din al-‘Arabi that he said:

أَلَا لِلَّهِ الدِّينُ الْخَالِصُ عَنْ شَوْبِ الْغَيْرِيَّةِ وَالْأَنَايَةِ، لَأَنَّكَ لِفَنَائِكَ فِيهِ بِالْكُلِّيَّةِ فَلَا ذَاتَ لَكَ وَلَا صِفَةَ وَلَا فِعْلَ وَلَا دِينَ وَإِلَّا لِمَا خُلِّصَ الدِّينُ بِالْحَقِيقَةِ فَلَا يَكُونُ لِلَّهِ

‘Lo, to God belongs sincere allegiance,’ free from the taints of otherness and egoism. And that your extinction in Him should be total, the Essence; the Attributes, the Acts and the *din* should cease to be relevant for you. Lo, until the allegiance is not purified by Reality, it will not belong to God.

Until the traces of servitude (*‘ubudiyyah*), otherness (*ghayriyyah*) and egoism (*ananiyyah*) remain and as long as there is a worshipper and the worshipped one, worship, sincerity, and *din*, there remain the taints of otherness and egoism, and this is regarded as *shirk* by the *urafa*. The worship of the sincere ones is the imprint of the manifestations (*tajalliyat*) of the Beloved and nothing passes through their hearts except the Essence of the One God.

And although the horizons of possibility (*imkan*) and necessity (*wujub*) have been joined for them and they have attained proximity to the Essence (*tadalli-ye dhati*) and absolute nearness to the Real (*dunuww al-mutlaq al-haqiqi*) and the traces of otherness have been completely wiped out, they still perform the duties of servanthship. And their servitude is not through reflection and thought, but through manifestation – a point indicated by the prayer of the Messenger of Allah (S) on the night of his heavenly ascent (*mi’raj*).

Ikhlas Is Subsequent To Action

You should know that that which is said in the noble tradition, that

الإِبْقَاءُ عَلَى الْعَمَلِ حَتَّى يَخْلُصَ أَشَدُّ مِنَ الْعَمَلِ

To persevere in an action until it becomes sincere is more difficult than the action itself,

is meant to encourage man to exercise care and diligence in that which he does, both at the time of its performance and after it. For it sometimes happens that man carries out an action faultlessly and without any shortcoming and performs it without *riya’* or *‘ujb*; but after the action he becomes afflicted with *riya’* through mentioning it, as pointed out in the following noble *hadith* of al-Kari:

عَنْ أَبِي جَعْفَرٍ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ أَنَّهُ قَالَ: الْإِبْقَاءُ عَلَى الْعَمَلِ أَشَدُّ مِنَ الْعَمَلِ. قَالَ: وَمَا الْإِبْقَاءُ عَلَى الْعَمَلِ؟ قَالَ: يَصِلُ الرَّجُلُ بِصِلَةٍ وَيُنْفِقُ نَفَقَةً لِلَّهِ وَحَدَهُ لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ فَتُكْتَبُ لَهُ سِرًّا ثُمَّ يَذْكُرُهَا فَتُمحَى فَتُكْتَبُ لَهُ عَلَانِيَةً، ثُمَّ يَذْكُرُهَا فَتُمحَى وَتُكْتَبُ لَهُ رِبَاءً.

Imam al-Baqir (A) said, “Perseverance in an action is more difficult than the act itself.” He was asked, “What is meant by perseverance in action?” He replied, “A man does some kindness to a relative or expends something for the sake of God, Who is One and has no partner. Thereupon the reward of a good deed performed secretly is written for him. Later, he mentions it to someone, and that which was written earlier is wiped out, and instead the reward of a good deed performed openly is written for him. Later, when he makes a mention of it again, the vice of *riya*’ is written for him (instead of the reward written earlier).”⁵

Man is never secure from the evil of Satan and his self until the end of his life. He must not imagine that once he has performed an act solely for the sake of God, without desire for the good pleasure of creatures having played any role in it, the purity of his act shall remain secure from the evil of the vicious self. Should he fail to exercise care and vigilance, the self may prompt him to make a mention of it or, as sometimes happens, to express it in the way of a subtle hint.

For instance, wishing to impress people about his nightly prayers, the subtle machinations of the self may prompt him to pass a hint by speaking about the good or bad weather conditions at daybreak or about supplications or the call for prayer, thus making his acts invalid and unworthy. Man must keep a watch over himself, like a kind physician or nurse, and not let the rebellious self get out of control; for a moment of neglect may give it the opportunity to break its reins and lead man into ignominy and perdition. Hence, in all conditions he must take refuge in God Almighty from the evil of Satan and the carnal self:

﴿إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ إِلَّا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّي﴾

Surely the self of man incites to evil - except in as much as my Lord had mercy. (12:53)

And it should be known to you that purification of intention from all levels of *shirk*, *riya*’ and other things, constant vigilance over it, and its perseverance in purity make up a greatly difficult as well as an important task. Rather, some degrees of it are not attainable by anyone except the sincere *awliya*’ of Allah. This is because intention is the efficient motive of action and is subject to other goals. These goals are in turn subject to the spiritual traits that make up man’s inward essence and spiritual character. If someone possesses the love of office and position and this love becomes part of his spiritual makeup and character, the end of his desires is to reach that goal and the actions that originate from him are subject to that goal; his motive being the same sought-after object of his spirit, the actions that originate from him are directed to reaching the goal sought.

As long as this love remains in his heart, his acts cannot be sincere, and one whose spiritual character and make-up are characterized by self-love and egoism his ultimate goal and end is attainment of selfish satisfactions, which are also the motive of his acts, regardless of whether his acts are directed to mundane goals or such otherworldly ends as the houris, palaces, gardens and bounties of the next life. Rather, as long as egoism, self-seeking and egotism are there, even if he takes a step for the acquisition of mystic knowledge and spiritual excellences, these are sought for selfish ends, self-seeking, not God-seeking, being their aim. And it is obvious that self-seeking and God-seeking cannot go together. Rather, if God is sought for the sake of the self, the ultimate end and goal is the self and the ego.

Thus it is evident that the absolute purification of intention from *shirk* is a great task that cannot be achieved by every one, and the defectiveness and excellence of deeds is subject to the defectiveness and perfection of intentions, for intention is the efficient and *malakuti* form of action, as hinted above. The noble tradition also refers to this point where it says:

وَالنِّيَّةُ أَفْضَلُ مِنَ الْعَمَلِ. أَلَا وَإِنَّ النِّيَّةَ هِيَ الْعَمَلُ.

And intention is superior to action, or, rather, intention is the complete reality of act itself.

And there is no exaggeration involved in this, as some have suggested; rather, it is based on fact, for intention is the complete form of action and its essence itself, the wholesomeness and corruption, the excellence and defectiveness of acts depending upon it.

Accordingly, a single act may, on account of the intention that underlies it, at times imply respect and at times insult. Sometimes it may be perfect and sometimes defective. Sometimes it may belong to the highest level of spiritual sublimity, possessing a beautiful, blessed form. Sometimes it may belong to the lower spiritual realm and possess a frightful and odious form.

The apparent form of the *salat* of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (A) does not differ outwardly in regard to its elements and conditions from that of a certain hypocrite; but whereas for the former it is a means of spiritual ascent toward God (*mi'raj ila Allah*) and has the highest spiritual form, for the latter it is a means of descent to hell and its spiritual form is incomparably black due to the intensity of darkness.

Because of a few loaves of bread of barley given away by the House of Inerrancy, i.e. The Prophet's Ahl al-Bayt (A), for the sake of God, God Almighty sent down several verses in their praise. An ignorant person may be led to think that two or three days of hunger and giving away one's food to the poor is a matter of importance, whereas such kind of acts may be performed by anybody and are of not much consequence. Their significance lies in the purity of their (i.e. the Ahl al-Bayt's) purpose and the sincerity of their intention. It is the power and elegance of the spirit of their action, coming forth from their pure hearts that gives their action so much significance.

The outward appearance of the Noble Prophet (S) was not much different from that of other people. Hence, often when he (S) was sitting with a group of people and some strangers from among the Arab Bedouins came to meet him (S), they would ask, “Which one of you is the Messenger?” That which distinguished the Messenger (S) from others is the power and elegance of the spirit of that Master, not his blessed body or his noble frame. In the rational sciences, it is demonstrated that a thing’s thingness depends on its form, not on its matter.

Rather, a definition based on species is exhaustive, and it is defective when based on genus and species, because intermingling with that which is strange and foreign to a thing is inimical to its reality, definition, and wholeness, and matter and genus are foreign and strange to its reality, which lies in its form, actuality, and species. Hence, the total reality of acts is that of their forms and their *malakuti* dimension, represented by intention.

This discussion shows that that which Imam al-Sadiq (A) says in this noble tradition is, firstly, in view of the form of action and its matter. What he says is that their formal aspect supersedes their material aspect and that, therefore, intention supersedes action, in the same way as spirit is superior to body. And this does not necessitate the validity of an act devoid of intention and the possibility of a body devoid of spirit. Rather, it is the association of intention with action and the attachment of spirit to body that makes action and body what they are. These two are compounds of intention and action, body and spirit and the formal, *malakuti* aspect of each is superior to its material, *mulki* aspect. And this is the meaning of the famous tradition:

نِيَّةُ الْمَرْءِ خَيْرٌ مِنْ عَمَلِهِ.

The intention of the man of faith is better than his act.⁶

Secondly, that which the Imam (A) says is in view of the dissolution of action in intention, of the *mulk* in the *malakut*, and manifestation (*mazhar*) in the manifest (*zahir*). Hence he (A) states:

أَلَا وَإِنَّ النِّيَّةَ هِيَ الْعَمَلُ.

Lo, verily intention is act itself.

Apart from intention, there is nothing that is involved and the totality of act is merged in intention; action has no independent reality of its own. Thereafter, he (A) cites the utterance of God Almighty as witness:

﴿قُلْ كُلٌّ يَعْمَلُ عَلَى شَاكِلَتِهِ﴾

Say: ‘Everyone acts according to his character’ (*shakilatihi*) (17:84)

Acts are subservient to the soul's character (*shakilah*) and although the soul's character is constituted by its inward form and the traits (*malakat*) inherent in it, intentions constitute its outward character.

It may be said that spiritual traits constitute the soul's primary character and intentions, to which actions are subservient, makeup its secondary character. Hence, the statement of the Imam (A) that *shakilah* is *niyyah*.

This shows that the way to the purification of action from all kinds of *shirk*, *riya'*, etc., is only through the reform of the soul and its *malakat*, for it is the fountainhead of all the reforms and the source of all the excellences and degrees of perfection. Hence if man expels the love of the world from his heart by means of austerities and exercises based on knowledge and action, the world will cease to be his ultimate goal and his acts will be purged of the biggest *shirk*, which is the desire to attract the attention of the world's people and to attain respect in their eyes. When that happens, he will be the same in solitude and company, inwardly and outwardly.

To the extent that he succeeds in purging his heart of self-love, through spiritual austerities, the love of God shall enter it to the same extent and it shall also be purified of latent *shirk*. And as long as self-love remains in the heart and man remains in the oppressive habitat of the self, he is not a wayfarer toward God (*musafir ila Allah*); rather, he is one of those who cling to the earth (*mukhalladun ila al-'ard*). The first step in the journey toward God is abandonment of self-love and crushing the head of egoism under one's foot. And there are some who say that one of the meanings of the noble verse:

﴿وَمَنْ يَخْرُجْ مِنْ بَيْتِهِ مُهَاجِرًا إِلَى اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ثُمَّ يُدْرِكْهُ الْمَوْتُ﴾

Whoso goes forth from his house an emigrant to God and His Messenger, and then death overtakes him, his wage will have fallen on God. (4: 100)

is that if someone leaves the habitat of the self to migrate to God and sets out on a spiritual journey, and thereafter he encounters complete annihilation (*fana' al-tamm*), his reward lies with God, the Exalted. And it is obvious that such a wayfarer deserves no reward except the vision (*mushahadah*) of that Sacred Essence and entry into His court. These words express their sentiments:

در ضمیرما نمی گنجد غیر دوست کس
هر دو عالم را به دشمن ده که ما را دوست بس

None except the Beloved has a place in our heart, Give both the worlds to the enemy, for the Beloved suffices us.

[1.](#) Al-Kulayni, al-Kafi, ii, kitab al- iman wa al-kufr, bab al-'ikhlās, hadith No.4.

[2.](#) Usul al-Kafi, vol. iv, p. 9.

- [3.](#) Al-Kulayni, op. cit., hadith No. 5.
- [4.](#) The tradition appears in Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, in the chapter on the ahkam of dressing (ahkam al-malabis).
- [5.](#) Al -Kulayni at-Kafi, kitab al-'iman wa al-kufr, bab al-riya', hadith No. 16.
- [6.](#) Al -Kulayni at-Kafi, kitab al-'iman wa al-kufr, bab al-niyah, hadith No.2.

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