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6) Cause your heart to die through asceticism

و أمته ـ بالزهادة

As we have already said: in order to survive, man is equipped with certain means such as desires towards possession, food, clothing, shelter, horses, social positions, and sexual drives. If man did not have these innate drives, he would not attain perfection.

But if these desires go beyond the status of means and justice and become aims by themselves, they would, no doubt, bring about irreparable losses and lead us toward the lowest of the low.[1]*
Although Islam considers one's beloved affairs as *hasanah*[2] (good) and embellishment of Allah,[3] it blames too much enchantment with the world.[4]

For this reason, Islam proposes the ethical principle of God-wariness to control excessive attachment to the differing manifestations of this world. Through this policy, Islam harnesses man's exceeding demands and lusts from one hand, and tames his aggressive spirit, on the other hand to the degree that he will say, as Imam ‘Ali (as) has said,

"مَا لِعَلِيّ وَلِنَعِيمٍ يَفنَى وَلَذَّةٍ لا تَبْقَى"

"What does ‘Ali have to do with transitory enjoyments and pleasures?"[5] and he would agree with Hafiz: I am a slave to the high-mindedness of that person who is free from anything possessible.

The Essence of Asceticism In Islam

The word "*zuhd*" or "asceticism" means lack of desire and to abandon something. It is true that in the Qur’an and tradition the topic of asceticism and the lack of concern for this world is emphasized, and the world and its manifestations are blamed.

On the other hand, our religious leaders have had an ascetic approach, however.

The issue to be researched here is whether the essence of zuhd is the same as monastic life which exists among Christians, Buddhists, and some other nations? What is the philosophy of the Islamic asceticism?

Definitely, the Islamic asceticism does not imply monastic life. As we have said before, from the view point of the Islamic logic, all aspects of life, including wealth, women, clothing, food and social position and the like, are just a means for man's perfection.

If these are used normally, not only will the world of other people be built, but the Hereafter will also be built; this is because

"وَابْتَغِ فِيمَا آتَاكَ اللَّهُ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ وَلَا تَنسَ نَصِيبَكَ مِنْ الدُّنْيَا"

"And seek, by means of what Allah has given you, the future abode, and do not neglect your portion of this world". 6

In fact, from the viewpoint of Islam, everything in this world is good and God has not created any bad thing. Thus, neither the world nor its manifestations are bad. The liking of this world is naturally given to man.

On the basis of these facts, we will see that the Holy Qur'an rejects monasticism, and recognizes it as one of the innovations of Christian monks, who erroneously put forward the existence of badness in the creation, and the conflict between this world and the Hereafter, and entered these issues into the religion of Jesus Christ (as).7 The prophet of Islam, too, has explicitly, rejected monasticism.8
The Prophet of Islam prohibited any kind of these deviations when he saw them among Muslims. The following two samples would suffice:

a) One day, the wife of 'Uthman Ibn Ma'dhun went to the Prophet (S), complaining about her husband. She said: O Messenger of God: My husband goes on fasting during the days and stays awake at nights in prayer. Upon hearing this, the Prophet, being irritated, went to 'Uthman; he was at prayer. Seeing the Prophet, he stopped praying. The Prophet (S) told him: God did not appoint me to indoctrinate monasticism, but He appointed me for the indoctrination of an easy and moderate religion. I go on fasting, I pray and I sleep with my wife. Anybody who loves my religion should behave as I do. Marriage is among my sunnah (customs)"9

b) One day three women came to see the Prophet (S). One of them complained that her husband did not eat meat; the second woman complained that her husband did not use perfumes; and the third woman said her husband did not go to bed with his wives. Upon hearing these complaints, the Prophet (S) hurried to the mosque, dragging his garment on the floor. After praising God, he said, "Why do some

of my friends not eat meat, not use perfumes and not go to bed with their wives? But I eat meat, I use perfumes and I go to bed with my wives. Anybody who does not follow me does not belong to me."[10]

In a story which is narrated in Nahj al-Balaghah, Imam ‘Ali (as) had gone to pay a visit to ‘Ala’ Ibn Ziyad. He had a discussion with Asim Ibn Ziyad. In this story monasticism is distinctively rejected. The story goes like this[11]: When Imam (as) saw the huge mansion of ‘Ala’, he asked him: What is the use of this huge house here when you will need it in the Hereafter? If you want to have a big house like this in the other world, you have got to have guests here, meet your relatives and pay people what you owe them. In this case you will have a big house in the next world. Then ‘Ala’ said: “I would like to complain about my brother Asim”. Imam (as) asked: What is wrong with him? He answered: He wraps up a gown around himself and has said farewell to the world. The Imam ordered him to be brought to him. Imam ‘Ali (as) told him: “Satan has misled you. Do you not have mercy on your family? Do you think that God would dislike you to use the good things He has made permissible for you? You are too insignificant before God for that!”

Asim said to Imam ‘Ali (as): “You (too) put on rough garments and eat coarse food”. Imam (as) answered: “I am not like you. God has made it obligatory for the just leaders to make themselves like the indigent, so that the poor man’s burden of poverty is not unbearable for him.”
As we see from these texts: Islam opposes monasticism and the shunning of social responsibilities. Islam does not allow us to forget our social tasks; neither does it permit us to put on rough garments and abandon material pleasures altogether to engage in worship and asceticism.

Thus, by "Islamic asceticism" it is meant that man should live simply in order to carry out his individual and social responsibilities, and not to fear the hardships of life.

It is obvious that "Islamic asceticism" only makes a man do his social duties in proper ways and it is not to be taken to mean an approach which considers this world nasty or to suppose a contrast between this world and Hereafter or to shun responsibilities as is the principle of the monasticism.
Thus, Islamic asceticism is not inconsistent with being rich or having social positions. The point that a God-wary person should consider is that he should not love this life more than God or truthfulness. He should not sacrifice Divine aims for personal interests.[12]

Some Examples Of Traditions

What we said above on Islamic asceticism is not a haphazard interpretation. It is a synopsis of different explanations given by books on tradition: Here are some of them:
a) The Prophet (S), in one of his maxims says:

"الزُهَادَةُ في الدُّنيا لَيسَت بِتَحرِيمِ الحَلالَ وَلا إِضَاعَةِ المالِ وَلكِنَّ الزُهَادَة في الدُّنيَا اَن لا تَكُونَ بِما في يَدِكَ أَوثَقَ مَنكَ بِمَا في يَدِ الله"

"Asceticism in this world is not to prohibit what is lawful or to leave wealth alone; rather, asceticism in this world is that you should not have more confidence in what is your hand than what is in the hand of God"[13]

b) In Nahj al-Balaghah, Imam ʻAli (as) describes asceticism in the following manner:

"الزُهدُ كُلُّهُ بَينَ كَلِمَتَينِ مِنَ القُرآن: قَالَ الله سُبحانَه "لِكَيْلَا تَأْسَوْا عَلَى مَا فَاتَكُمْ وَلَا تَفْرَحُوا بِمَا آتَاكُمْ" فمن لم يأس على الماضي ولم يفرح بالآتي فقد اخذ الزهد بِطَرَفَيْهِ"

"The whole of asceticism lies within two phrases of the Holy Qur'an: God the Almighty has said: ***"So that you may not grieve for what has escaped you, nor be exultant at what He has given you"*** [*Qur'an 57:23*]

So one who does not grieve for what has passed and is not joyful over what is to come, has taken hold of both aspects of asceticism."[14]

c) Elsewhere in Nahj al-Balaghah, we read:

"أَيُّهَا النّاسُ الزُّهَادَةُ قُصرُ الأَمَلِ وَالشُكرُ عِندَ النِعَمِ وَالوَرَعُ عَن المَحارِمِ"

"O people! Asceticism is the curtailment of hope, thanking God for blessings, and the utmost self-vigilance in abstaining from what is unlawful". [15]

As you will notice, in each one of the three statements narrated from the Prophet (S) and Imam ʻAli (as), one of the complex meanings of asceticism is brought up.
In the first sentence, after scolding the monks and hermits, who make God's lawful blessings unlawful, and in this way, waste wealth, the great Prophet (S) mentions the spirit of asceticism as not to be a slave in the hands of social positions and lusts; rather, to prefer God over anything else.
In the second sentence, it is implied that from an ascetic's point of view the world is a means and not an aim in itself. Thus, a truly ascetic man does not slit his shirt if he loses what he possesses and will not feel proud for what he has.

This lack of interest in the material life and being fond of getting God's satisfaction is not in conflict with being affluent. It happens that one has everything, but loves none of in. In contrast, one is deprived of everything, but is fond of his walking stick, for instance.

In the third and last sentence, Imam (as) refers to three signs of asceticism:
1) To limit far-fetched hopes; this will lead to remember truthfulness and to forget one's transitory interests.
2) To use God's blessings in the right way; this will lead to the employment of all material and spiritual

forces for God.
3) To avoid committing the Islamically unlawful affairs which hinder man to achieve perfection and which cause man and society to fall.

Two Interesting Historic Events

1. It is narrated that Mulla Ahmad Naraqi, the writer of the erudite book "Mustanad al-Shi'ah," and one of the great Shi'ah jurisprudents and the teacher of Sheikh Murtaza Ansari, had a big mansion. Once a dervish went to his mansion. Looking at Mulla's big house, he started criticizing him, saying a great Shi'ah scholar should not possess such a huge house.

Based on Imam Sadiq's statement: *"It is not asceticism that you should not possess anything; rather, ascetism is that nothing should possess you,"*

"لَيسَ الزُّهدُ اَن لا تَملِكَ شَيئاً بَل الزُّهدُ اَن لا يَملِكَكَ شَيءٌ"

and also based on the fact that for a ascetic person this world is a means and not an objective, Naraqi asked the dervish what kind of life he preferred. He replied, "I prefer my own way of life which is freedom from possessing anything and involvement in journeys and worship"
In order for the dervish to realize that to own something does not imply being a slave to it, Naraqi asked him to accompany him on a long excursion. On the way, they sat besides a brook to take some rest. They took some loaves of bread, and then continued with their journey. Having traveled a little, Naraqi observed that the dervish was extremely upset.

Naraqi inquired about his uneasiness. The dervish said he had an ebony walking-stick, which he liked very much, but he had left it beside the brook.
Naraqi replied: "Look, I left all my possessions behind, and came on this trip with you. How do you make such a noise over a stick"? He then said: "Let us separate and each one go on his way".
Naraqi left him, heading for his house.[16]
Although this event might not have happened in Naraqi's life, it clearly shows one fact: it is not asceticism for a man not to possess anything, but asceticism relies in the fact that nothing in this world should own and enchant us.

2. The Advice of Sayyid Ibn Tawus to his son:
In chapter 14 of his book Kashf al-Mahajjah, which is written for the education of his son, Sayyid Ibn Tawus has brought out the issue that being wealthy and ascetic are not contradictory. He writes:
"Muhammad, my son: May God make you aware of what you need, and make you turn your attention towards Him. Some people believe that your grandfather Muhammad (as) and your father, Imam 'Ali (as) were poor. These people assume that these great men gave away their sustenance to others, and slept on empty stomachs. Therefore, they concluded that asceticism and poverty are the same and asceticism

is in contrast to wealth.

But this assumption is far from being true: this is because the Prophets (as) were the most affluent people in the sense that they were given whatever they wished for. They were the richest of all because of their position as Prophets. These great men preferred people over themselves, however. They were content with what God had bestowed upon them.

Among your great grandfather's assets given to your mother Fatimah (as) were Fadak and Awali, the annual revenues of which were 24.000 dinars according to one tradition and 70.000 dinars according to another tradition. But we should realize that Fatimah (as) and her husband and her father were among the greatest ascetics. A small portion of this revenue would suffice them. But remember that men of God never dispute on the amount of possession given them by God. Therefore, their employment of these resources is like the dominance of God over them. They are content with God's demands.

And I have seen in a history book written in 237 AH, a tradition from your father Imam 'Ali (as), who said, 'When I married Fatimah (as) I did not have a carpet, but today I have bequeathed such an amount of endowed property that if I divide it among all Bani Hashim, they would each get a big portion'.[17]

And it is written in the same book: When Imam 'Ali (as) bequeathed his endowed property which had the annual income of 40.000 dinars, he wanted to sell his sword. When he was selling it, he said, 'If I had my dinner, I would not sell it.' Another day, Imam 'Ali (as) said, 'Who is going to buy that sword of mine? If I had the price of this garment, I would not sell it.'"

The writer adds: "Imam 'Ali (as) behaved like this when his income of the endowed property was 40.000 dinars. O my son Muhammad! I swore to God who is present everywhere and whose angels witness to this: In most cases, although your father Imam 'Ali Ibn Musa (as) was managing this endowed property and its revenues by dividing it among people as alms, he was most of the time left with nothing. Some people, however, erroneously thought he donated from his saved treasure of gold. Unfortunately, people have thought wrongly about your father. This always happened when people assumed wrong things about Prophets and God's men.

If your father had the control over the entire world, he would definitely divide it among the needy. But God had decided to give him by piecemeal.
Thus, Muhammad, my son, you and your brothers and your offspring, follow the way of your fathers who have gone the right way and God, as He has said, is the greatest Giver.

In Ibrahim Ibn Mohammad Asha'ari's book, which is a reliable book, I have seen a tradition from Imam Baqir (as): When Imam 'Ali (as) passed away he owed 800.000 dirhams. Then, Imam Hassan (as) sold one of the properties of Imam 'Ali (as) for 500.000 dirhams and another piece of property for 300.000 dirhams to pay his debt. Imam 'Ali (as) had run up into this debt because he did not leave anything from khums (statutory 20% Islamic levy on things) for himself and gave it all to the needy.
And I saw in Abdullah Ibn Beker's book that he had narrated from Imam Baqir (as): Husayn (as) was

martyred while he was in debt and Imam ‘Ali Ibn al–Husayn (as) sold a piece of land to clear his debts.

And your ancestor Imam ‘Ali (as) left some endowed properties for his children from Fatima (as) and put the superintendence among his children.[18]
Thus, how do some foolish people assume that Imam ‘Ali (as) was poor or erroneously think that God's men can not be affluent?[19]
Has God created this world and Hereafter for people whom He does not love?”[20]

The Philosophy Of Islamic Asceticism

Now that we understand the difference between asceticism and monasticism, we should recognize the philosophy of Islamic asceticism. How come Islam has allowed us to use all sorts of blessings including sustenance and livelihood and ornaments, but under the title of Islamic asceticism recommend to us not to use them excessively and advises us to have a simple life?
Definitely, Islamic asceticism is based on some valid reasons. And for these reasons it can rely on Islamic justice. Those reasons are the following:

1. To Tolerate Hardships But To Ask For Others Comfort

In a society where not many people enjoy the rudiments of life: some are rich, but the majority are poor, where some are affluent, but others suffer deprivation of all sorts, the best way to bridge this gap is for the rich to adopt not only a simple and easy life, but be ready to share what they have with the needy. They should even go so far as to let others eat when they themselves avoid eating, dress others when they don't have enough to wear, to let other have comfort when they themselves suffer.

This state of the affairs, which in books on ethics is interpreted as sacrifice, is felt to be more crucial in a society where deep gaps exist among social layers. For this reason, the Holy Qur’an praises the people of Medina (the Ansar) who gave priority to the needs of Muhajirin in the following manner:

"وَيُؤْثِرُونَ عَلَى أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَلَوْ كَانَ بِهِمْ خَصَاصَةٌ"

“And they prefer (them) before themselves though poverty may afflict them”.[21]

Allah has revealed:

"وَيُطْعِمُونَ الطَّعَامَ عَلَى حُبِّهِ مِسْكِينًا وَيَتِيمًا وَأَسِيرًا"

"And they give food out of love for Him to the poor and the orphan and the captive"[22] because Imam ‘Ali (as), Fatima (as), Imam Hasan (as) and Imam Husayn (as) went on fast for three consecutive days to give their food to the poor and the orphan and the captive.

Imam ‘Ali (as) in his sermon Al-muttaqin (The God-wary ones) mentions "Tolerating hardships oneself for the comfort of others" as one of the attributes of the true believers:

"نَفسُهُ في عَنَاءٍ وَالنَاسُ مِنهُ في رَاحَةٍ، اَتعَبَ نَفسَه لآخرَتِهِ وَارَاحَ النّاسَ مِن نَفسِهِ"

"His own self is in difficulty while people are at ease from him. He wearies himself for the Hereafter, while he gives people ease."[23]

2. Showing Sympathy

Another symptom of the philosophy of the Islamic asceticism is showing sympathy towards the deprived layers of society. In a society where people are practically in two differing strata: the rich and the deprived, the poor suffer in two ways: they suffer their poverty; they also feel backward.
In such a society a responsible man is obliged, first of all, not to stay away and be an on-looker. He should try to improve the society in such a way as to establish social justice. Secondly, he should bridge this gap by sacrifice and by tolerating hardships in order to provide others with comfort.
When such a responsible man observes that the number of the deprived is so great that he can do nothing to provide them with financial help, he at least can do his best by sympathizing with them. In this way he can alleviate some of their sufferings. Of course, the necessity of such an approach is more felt by the religious leaders and governors as well. That is a good reason why Imam ‘Ali (as) lived simply during his caliphate.

Imam ‘Ali (as) in one place states:

"اِنَّ الله فَرَضَ على اَئِمَةِ العَدلِ اَن يَقدِرُوا اَنفُسَهُم بِضَعَفَةِ النّاسِ كَيلا يَتَبيّغَ بِالفَقِيرِ فَقرُهُ"

"God has made it obligatory for the just leaders to make themselves like the indigent, so that the poor man’s burden of poverty is not unbearable for him."[24]

Imam ‘Ali (as) has stated somewhere else:

"... أأقنَعُ مِن نَفسِي بِاَن يُقالَ أَمِيرُ المُؤمِنِينَ وَلا اُشَارِكُهُم في مَكَارِهِ الدَّهرِ او اَكُونَ اُسوَةً لَهُم في جُشُوبَةِ العَيشِ
وَلكِن هَيهَاتَ اَن يَغلِبَنِي هَوايَ وَيَقُودَنِي جَشَعِي الى تَخَيُّرِ الاطعِمَةِ وَلَعَلَّ بِالحِجَازِ اَواليَمَامَةِ مَن لا طَمَعَ لَهُ في القُرْصِ
وَلا عَهْدَ لَهُ بِالشَبَعِ او اَبِيتَ مِبطَانَا وَحَولِي بُطُونٌ غَرثَى وَاكبَادٌ حَرَّى"

"Should I be content to be called Amir al-Mu'minin, but not share with them (the deprived) in the adversities of time or be an example for them to follow in the difficulties of life?
...But it is impossible that my whims and desires should overcome me and my greed should lead me to select the best kinds of foods, when perhaps in Hijaz or Yamamah there is one who has no hope of

getting a loaf of bread or one who has never experienced satiation. Should I sleep with a full stomach when around me there are hungry stomachs and livers dry with thirst?"[25]*

3. Broadmindedness And Struggle Against Splendor

As we have said, in order to live, man needs food, shelter, clothing, sex and the like. These needs are innately motivated. But sometimes we go to extremes and make use of these needs extravagantly. In this way the life objectives are compromised for luxuries in life. It is a fact that this kind of luxuries becomes a habit and build up one's secondary nature and man, compared with these needs, sees himself weak and vulnerable.

Some people fall prey to these luxuries to the extent that if they do not attain certain food, shelter, clothing, cosmetics, cars, positions, and women, life would be hell for them.
Therefore, to get these luxuries, such people would not stop committing any kind of mischievous affairs. These are slaves to their luxurious lives.

They would be impatient if they do not get what they wish for. They feel defeated if their wishes are not taken care of. They feel they are not natural human beings.
Thus, asceticism is to break these chains, to revolt against these whims and desires and to defeat these hurdles. Adopting a simple life, an ascetic releases himself from these shackles.
He is content with meager food and worn out clothes. He is not a slave in the hands of luxury. Hafiz [the Persian poet] says:
I am a slave to the manliness of that one who under this blue dome, is free from anything possessible.

Revolutions and constant struggles are always initiated by those who are ascetics in practice. Gandhi, for instance, broke the British spine of Imperialism with his famous struggles of non-cooperation and opposition just because he had broken the chains of luxurious life. The Viet Kong caused the biggest military and economic force of the world i.e., USA, to withdraw from their land because of their ascetic ways of life, being content with a fistful of rice for consecutive days, taking refuge in the fields. When we see Arabs suffered a great blow from Israelis in the third Israeli war against Arabs, we will not be surprised because the Egyptian planes took ice-creams from Cairo to the battle field for the Egyptian officers! A poet says:
In this world, a nation would become miserable,
If it gets used to the pleasures of life.

Imam ‘Ali (as), Broadmindedness, And Struggle Against Luxuries

One of the reasons for Imam ‘Ali's ascetic approach to life was his broadmindedness. He did not wish to get used to luxurious life which gradually weakens human spirit. He used to put on rugged cotton garments, eat barley bread and drink sour milk. His caliphate position was to him less important than his patched shoes.[26]

Once a butcher proposed to him that he had good meat for sale and asked Imam ‘Ali (as) if he would buy some. Imam ‘Ali (as) replied he did not have money. The butcher said that Imam ‘Ali (as) could pay later. But Imam ‘Ali (as) replied: It is better that I owe to my soul (self) than owe to you.
In Nahj al-Balaghah, Imam (as) emphasized the motto of leaving this world, i.e., leaving pleasure-taking a lot.

Imam ‘Ali (as) says:

"الدُّنيا دَارُ مَمَرٍّ لا دَارُ مَقَرٍّ، وَالنّاس فِيهَا رَجُلانِ: رَجُلٌ بَاعَ نَفسَهُ فَأَوبَقَهَا وَرَجُلٌ اِبتَاعَ نَفسَهُ فَأَعتَقَها"

"This world is a place of passage, not a resting place, and people in it are of two types: one who sells his soul (*through following his desires*) *and destroys it, and one who purchases his soul* (*through obedience to God*) *and liberates it."*[27]

Elsewhere, declaring the secret behind his abandonment of pleasure- seeking, Imam ‘Ali (as) states: "Get away from me, O world, for I left you free to go your way. I have slipped away from your clutches and escaped your snares; and I have avoided entering your slippery places....

"Get away from me; I swear to God that I will not be humbled to you so that you may abase me. I will not become submissive to you so that you may lead me (wherever you wish). By God...I have disciplined my soul to such an extent that it is pleased with a loaf of bread with salt as its stew."[28]
Of course, asceticism in sympathy, sacrifice, manliness, and other aspects does not merely belong to Imam ‘Ali (as) alone. All Prophets, Imams, and true believers share this human trait. Through these characteristics, all of them have struggled with unjust social systems and have freed themselves from the slavery of evil habits and pernicious luxuries.

The Degrees Of Asceticism

Avoidance and the abandonment of life here in this world have different degrees. Sometimes it is possible for an ascetic person, due to the lightness of his responsibilities, or because of his tamed self, or because of the good conditions in which people live, to live a simple life away from luxuries. But at other times, the conditions might be in such a way as to force the ascetic man show more sympathy towards people and practice more severe restrictions on himself. Under such circumstances, an ascetic should negate for himself what is allowable for others.

This variety in the life conditions of Prophets (as) and Imams (as) and pious scholars made each one of them adopt a specific approach. One was like Solomon about whose case God says "We made jinn and men subservient to him" and the other was Jesus Christ (as) about whom God has said: "Honorable and chaste".[29] The other one was Imam ‘Ali (as) who did not satiate himself even with barley bread and his dress had so many patches that he felt ashamed.[30]

Another Imam like Imam Sadiq (as) used better clothing. For this he was often criticized by people not very bright. It is narrated, for instance, that Ibad Ibn Kathir al-Basri, protested to Imam for wearing a new dress, asking him "Did Imam ‘Ali put on this kind of dress?"

In reply, Imam (as) said, "First of all, I have bought a one-dinar dress (so it is not luxurious, but it is clean); secondly, Imam ‘Ali (as) used to live at a time when the conditions were different than those of ours. Those circumstances dictated him to put on rugged dress. People might ask me, 'Are you a hypocrite like Ibad?'"[31]

On the other hand, people abandon pleasure-seeking in this world for the pleasures, houris or nymphs of paradise, and castles in the Hereafter: in fact, they are bargaining. But there are those who adopt an ascetic life just for God's sake and in this process they are "enchanted by Him" and they do not think of anything but "Allah". Sa'di, the great Persian poet says in this regard:
When I breathe my last breath I’m wishing to meet you,
I give up my life in the hope of becoming the earth of your abode;
When, on Doom’s Day, I raise my head,
I rise for Your discourse, I rise to look for You;
At a location where people gather from the two worlds,
I am looking for You, I’ll be Your slave;
If I sleep on the bedroom of nonexistence for a thousand years,
I’ll wake up to the odor of Your hair;
I’ll not describe the Garden, nor will I smell paradise flowers,
I won’t go after Houris, I’ll run to meet You;
I won’t drink paradise wine from the hand of Heaven’s cupbearer,
I won’t need wine, because I’m drunk with Your face;
I’d go to a thousand deserts with You,
And if you, Sa’adi, choose the wrong path,
You will still be heading for Him, anyway.[32]

Imam Sadiq (as) emphasizes this stage of asceticism in the following words:

"وَهُوَ تَركُ كُلِّ شَيءٍ شَغَلَكَ عَن الله مِن غَيرِ تَأسُفٍ عَلى فَوتِها"

"Asceticism means the abandonment of everything which diverts you from God without regretting its abandonment"[33]

At the end of this discussion two expressions from two great philosophers of Islam will be presented here to illuminate the matter further:

Asceticism From The Viewpoint Of Khwajah Nasr Tusi:

Khwajah, may God bless him, in his erudite book "Awsaf al-Ashraf" writes on asceticism (zuhd) in Chapter two:

"قال الله تعالى: "وَلَا تَمُدَّنَّ عَيْنَيْكَ إِلَى مَا مَتَّعْنَا بِهِ أَزْوَاجًا مِنْهُمْ زَهْرَةَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنيَا لِنَفْتِنَهُمْ فِيهِ وَرِزْقُ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَى

"And do not stretch your eyes after that with which we have provided different classes of them, of the splendor of this world's life, that we may thereby try them; and the sustenance given by your Lord is better and more abiding".[34]

Asceticism is the absence of desire and an ascetic (*zahid*) is one who does not take delight in what is worldly such as foods, drinks, clothing, houses, relishes, pleasures, wealth, position, company of kings, influence and attainment of anything which would part from him at his death. Asceticism should not be out of weakness or ignorance. It should not be for any reward. Anybody who possesses this trait is a genuinely ascetic person.

A truly ascetic man is one who is delighted in asceticism; he does not rely on asceticism for fear of the Hell or for Allah's reward in paradise, but solely for the sake of restraining his soul after knowing the benefits and consequences of each of these things mentioned. His asceticism is habitual and is without any trace of greed, hope or expectation, worldly or otherworldly. This quality becomes habitual by means of restraining the soul from seeking pleasures, and by making it accustomed to austerities so that indifference to desire becomes firmly established in it.

It is narrated in the story of ascetics: A man baked sheep's head and "*palude*" (sweet beverage containing starch jelly in the form of thin fibers) for thirty years without tasting either even once. People asked him the reason for this self-discipline. He replied: "When my soul desired these two things, I told it that it would never get any of them if it were to touch any of them. I did that so that it would not incline towards any pleasure whatsoever".

A person who adopts asceticism in this world in the hope of getting rewards in the next world is like a person who does not eat because of his meanness in the hope of getting food in the feast which he is invited to attend later. Or he is like a tradesman who does barter to make a profit out of his merchandise.

In wayfaring, the benefit of asceticism lies in the curtailment of preoccupations, so that the wayfarer is saved from being preoccupied with anything that would keep him from reaching his goal."[35]

Asceticism In The Viewpoint Of Sheikh Al-Ra'ees

Avicenna in chapter nine of his erudite book "Al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat" which deals with the stages is Sufism writes on the degrees of asceticism:

"المُعْرِضُ عَن مَتاعِ الدُّنيا وَطيّبَاتِها يُخَصُّ بإسمِ الزُّهدِ... الزُهدُ عِندَ غَيرِ العَارِفِ مُعَامَلَةُ مَا كَأَنَّهُ يُشتَرى بِمتَاعِ الدُّنيا بِمَتَاعَ الآخِرَةِ وَعِندَ العَارِفِ تَنَزُّهَ مَا عَمَّا يَشْغَل سِرَّه عَن الحَقِّ وَتَكَبَّر عَلى كُلِّ شَئٍ غَيرَ الحَقِّ"

"Anybody who turns away from the enjoyments of the world and its pleasures is characterized by the term asceticism... Asceticism for one who is not a gnostic is a transaction in which the pleasures of the world are sold for the pleasures of the Hereafter. For one who is a gnostic, asceticism is keeping oneself aloof from anything that diverts one's heart from the Truth and considering oneself above everything other than the Truth".36

The Last and Final noticeable Point

At the end of this discussion, it is necessary to draw your attention to one important point in Imam 'Ali's discourse: In this letter, Imam 'Ali (as) said of exhortation: "Enliven your heart through exhortation", but in case of asceticism, he said: "Cause it (your heart) to die through asceticism." Does the pronoun "it" refer to the word "heart" used earlier in the text, which must be enlivened by exhortation, or does it refer to the aggressive self (soul), which is implied, and which the ascetic must mortify?

The fact is that the words "soul", "heart", "self", "breast", "*fu'ad*" (heart), "wisdom" and the like all refer to just one thing. In man there exists a truth which is neither matter nor does it have the properties of the matter. During seven years all the material molecules and particles of man completely change, but nevertheless, he carries on his duties all his life.37

The same truth takes on different titles in different conditions: the words heart, breast (*sadr*) and wisdom are the titles used when this truth is taken to be abstract, not relying on matter. It is called *Nafs* (self) on the basis of the fact that to be realized it needs some means; it has different phases: commanding (*Ammarah*), blaming (*lawwamah*), satisfied (*raziyah*) and the like.38

Thus, the pronoun "it" in the phrase "cause it to die" refers to the heart itself; it is because it wishes for a lot of things and should be controlled and its excesses should be hindered, or else it leads man to the lowest of the low.39

1. Ustadh Allamah Tabataba'i, in verse 14 of Sura Aal-'Imran «زُيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ حُبُّ الشَّهَوَاتِ مِنْ النِّسَاءِ وَالْبَنِينَ» "The love of desires, of women and sons... is made to seem fair to men." has explained this fact in much detail.

2. وَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ يَقُولُ رَبَّنَا آتِنَا فِي الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ حَسَنَةً وَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ أُوْلَئِكَ لَهُمْ نَصِيبٌ مِمَّا كَسَبُوا وَاللَّهُ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ" . "

"And there are some among them who way: Our Lord, grant us good in this world and good in the hereafter, and save us from the chastisement of the fire. They shall have their portion of what they have earned, and Allah is swift in reckoning." [Qur'an:201-202].

3. "قُلْ مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِ وَالطَّيِّبَاتِ مِنْ الرِّزْقِ...." .

"Say: Who has prohibited the embellishment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants and the good provisions?" [Qur'an 7:32].

4. "فَأَعْرِضْ عَنْ مَنْ تَوَلَّى عَنْ ذِكْرِنَا وَلَمْ يُرِدْ إِلَّا الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا ذَلِكَ مَبْلَغُهُمْ مِنْ الْعِلْمِ" .

"Therefore turn aside from him who turns his back upon Our reminder and does not desire anything but this world's life. That is their goal of knowledge" [Qur'an 53:29-30].

5. . Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 224.

6. . Qur’an 28:77.
7. . "وَرَهْبَانِيَّةً ابْتَدَعُوهَا مَا كَتَبْنَاهَا عَلَيْهِمْ" “And as for monasticism, they innovated it – we did not prescribe it to them”. [Qur’an 57:27].
8. . “There is no monasticism in Islam”. (Ibn Athir's al-Nahaya, vol.2, p.280).
9. . Wasa’il al-Shi’ah, vol.3, p.68.
10. . Wasa’il al-Shi’ah, old printing, vol.3, p.68.
11. . Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 209.
12. . The Qur’an describes the rejected love for world in the following manner:
"إِنَّ الَّذِينَ لَا يَرْجُونَ لِقَاءَنَا وَرَضُوا بِالْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَاطْمَأَنُّوا بِهَا وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنْ آيَاتِنَا غَافِلُونَ أُوْلَئِكَ مَأْوَاهُمْ النَّارُ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ".
“Surely those who do not hope in Our meeting and are pleased with this world's life and are content with it, and those who are heedless of our communications; those, their abode is the fire because of what they earned.” [Qur’an 10:7-8].
13. . Nahj al-Fasahah, Hadith 1712.
14. . Nahj al-Balaghah, Hikmah 439.
15. . Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 80.
16. . “The causes for the development of Islam and the fall of the Muslims”, page 295.
17. . Imam ‘Ali (as) had prepared these pieces of endowed property by digging subterranean canals, establishing gardens and palm groves.
18. . The possession of these properties, their handling and their ample annual incomes indicates that asceticism could go hand in hand with affluence.
19. . Imam ‘Ali’s (as) letter 27 from Nahj al-Balaghah written to Muhammad Ibn Abu Bakr.
20. . Kashf al-Mahajjah li Thamarat il-Muhjah, pp.123-126; The schedule for prosperity, pp.155-159.
21. . Qur’an 59:9.
22. . Qur’an 76:8.
23. . Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 184.
24. . Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 200.
25. *. Nahj al-Balaghah, letter 45.
26. . Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 33.
27. . Nahj al-Balaghah, Hikmah 128.
28. . Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter 45.
29. .Qur’an 3:39.
30. . Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 159.
31. . A’yan al-Shi’ah, vol.1, p.660.
32. . Sa’di’s collection of literature, lyrics, p.92.
33. . Misbah al-Shari’ah, p.191.
34. . Qur’an 20:131.
35. . Awsaf al-Ashraf, pp.22-23.
36. . Al-Isharah wa al-tanbihat, vol. 3, pp.369-370.
37. . In this regard, see Towards the Eternal life, the section on the puzzle of spirit.
38. . Refer to Asfar, Al-mizan, Manazil Al-Sa’irin, Mulla Hadi Sabzwrari's Manzumah Hikmah, and Fayd Kashani’s Mahjjah al-Bayda, vol. 5.
39. . Mustadrak al-Wasa’il, vol.2, p.284.

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