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A Glance at the Hadith of Unwan Basri

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Abstract

Unwan Basri's ardent love for Imam Ja'far al- Sadiq as well as his eagerness to gain from intellectual gatherings and courses motivated him to benefit from the Imam's knowledge. In a one-on-one meeting with Basri, Imam Ja'far Sadiq spoke to him about the reality of true servitude along with its practical instructions.

This article presents this hadith and elucidates the relation between understanding and fearing God, the relation between understanding and (sulook) wayfaring towards God, the sources of insight (ma'rifa), and the reality of servitude. In order to comprehend true servitude, one must believe God to be the true owner of all creation, entrusting one's affairs to Him (tafweedh), wholeheartedly accepting all that God wants for a servant (tasleem), and acting within the boundaries of God's commands and prohibitions.

Hadith of Unwan Basri

Allameh Majlisi in Biharul Anwar says, "I have seen this tradition in the handwriting of my teacher, Sheikh Bahai: Sheikh Shams ud-Deen bin Makki has related: From the handwritten notes of Sheikh Ahmad Farahani, I narrated from Unwan Basri (aged 94):

For many years I attended Malek bin Anas's classes. When Ja'far bin Mohammed[1] entered the city of Medina, I began to attend his classes and benefitted from his presence just as I benefited from Malek. One day Ja'far bin Mohammed said to me:

My movement is being controlled by the government, and I am also engaged in prayers throughout the entire day, so please do not prevent me from my prayers. You may continue to gain knowledge from

Malek like you did in the past.

I was very saddened by this and as I was leaving his place I said to myself, “If Ja’far bin Mohammed had seen any goodness in me he would not have prevented me from visiting him.” So I entered the Prophet’s mosque and saluted him.

The next day I returned to the Prophet’s shrine and recited two units of prayer after which I raised my hands in prayer and said, “O Lord, O God! I ask you to make Ja’far’s heart considerate towards me, and make me benefit from his knowledge so much so that I may be guided to the right path.”

Then I returned home. Due to my love for Ja’fer, I no longer visited Malek. From then onwards I would not leave my house except to participate in congregational prayers. Finally my patience ran out.

One day after reciting my evening prayers, I left my house and headed towards Ja’far’s place. Upon reaching his house when I asked for permission to enter, his servant asked me, “May I help you?” To which I replied, “I would like to greet the noble one.”[2] The servant informed me that He was busy praying at his alter, so I sat on his doorstep waiting for a reply. After a while, the servant granted me permission, and I entered the house. I greeted Ja’far, he replied, and invited me to sit down.

Then he said, ‘May God have mercy upon you.’ His head was bent down and after a few moments of silence he asked me, “What is your *teknonym* (kunyah)?” I replied, “Abdullah.”

He said, “May God make you firm upon your title. What is it that you would like?” In my mind I replied to him, saying, “If there were to be no benefit in this visit except for this prayer, it would suffice me.”

He asked again, “What is your question?” I said, “I have asked God to make your heart considerate towards me and to benefit me from your knowledge. I hope God will accept my prayer in this regard.”

He said, "Knowledge cannot, as you might think, be achieved through learning; rather, it is a light which reaches into the heart of the one whom God wishes to guide. If you are seeking knowledge, then look for true devotion to God within yourself, seek knowledge through practice, and ask God to grant you the power of understanding so that you will be able to understand."

I said, “Oh noble one!”

He said; “Say, Oh Aba ‘Abdillah."

I asked, “Oh Aba ‘Abdillah. What is true devotion?”

He answered, "It consists of three things: the servant must not consider himself as the true owner of what God has conferred upon him, for servants own nothing and they believe that the wealth belongs to God alone. Therefore, it has to be spent on what God has commanded.

Servants must not entrust their affairs to themselves and all their attention must be directed to God's

commands concerning what to do or not to do.

Hence, when a servant does not consider himself as the true owner of what has been conferred upon him, it will be easy for him to spend it on what God has commanded; and when the servant entrusts his affairs to the Almighty, the divine providence, it will be easy for him to withstand worldly misfortunes; and when the servant directs all of his attention to God's commands concerning what to do or not to do, he will spare no time on boasting and vying.

If a servant is favoured by God with these three characteristics, it will be easy for him to deal with this world, Satan, and people. He will not seek after worldly gains to amass possessions, nor will he demand fame.

Furthermore, he will not seek might and superiority other people have, and will not let his days pass by vainly. This is the first step to piety. The Almighty God – blessed is He and high exalted – says, "That is the hereafter abode which We will set for those who do not seek for high-handedness or corruption on the earth, and the blissful conclusion is for the pious."

No information as such can be found concerning Unwan Basri in the books of Rijal[3] and little is known about him except that which is offered in this tradition: he was 94 years old, and though he was one of the elders of society in his time, he was very fond of gaining knowledge as he eagerly attended intellectual gatherings and classes.

Commentary of the hadith

Knowledge, insight, worship, devotion to God are the most important features illustrated in this hadith.

Knowledge and insight

The knowledge intended in this hadith is an insight and understanding different from what is commonly meant by the word 'knowledge.' Insight is closely related to spiritual journey (Seyr-o-Sulook) and Islamic ethics. The connection between ma'rifat, sulook, and ethics can be understood more clearly from the following verse:

***"...Only those of Allah's servants having knowledge are apprehensive of Him* (*35:28*)."**

Those who have knowledge in this verse refers to the 'Urafa.[4] The verse conveys the relation between insight and the fear of God. A person's benefit from the fear of God depends on his knowledge and understanding of God, and so an increase in such knowledge results in an increase of apprehensiveness.

The relationship between understanding and apprehensiveness

On two occasions, the Qur'an mentions an exclusive relation between understanding God and fear of God. On one occasion, "fear of God" has been restricted to those who have understanding; in another, the Qur'an has limited the fear of those who have an understanding to the fear of God alone.

In the verse (35:28), fear of God has been restricted to those who have understanding. Only those of Allah's servants who have knowledge fear Him.

In the verse:

***"...deliver the messages of Allah and fear Him, and fear no one except Allah, and Allah suffices as reckoner,"* (*33:39*),**

the fear held by the knowledgeable is limited to fear of God alone, given that those who carry out the message of God to the people are to be understanding and knowledgeable.

According to one hadith, once a Bedouin went to the Prophet, who in turn asked one of his companions to teach the Qur'an to the Bedouin. The companion began to recite the chapter 995 for him until he reached the verse,

***"So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it – and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it."*(*99:7–8*)**

The Bedouin said, 'That which you have read suffices me,' and then he left. When the companion related the incident to the Prophet, the Prophet said, "When this man came he was a simple Bedouin, but now on his return he has deep understanding."

The logical relation between understanding and sulook

There is a logical relation between understanding and wayfaring towards God which is also indicated in the Qur'an:

***"... Only those of Allah's servants having knowledge fear Him"* (*35:28*).**

According to this verse, fear of Allah is a result of understanding and knowledge, and God increases His servant's fear for Him depending on the extent of his cognizance in relation to Him. The opposite of this statement is also true. God has said:

***"... Be wary of Allah and Allah shall teach you* (*2:282*)."**

Sheikh Mohammed 'Abduh in Tafseer al–Manar6 denies this interpretation of the verse. He says, "This kind of interpretation supports the Sufi way of thinking. According to them knowledge cannot be acquired

except through education and piety. To fear God is not a means of acquiring knowledge."

If we were to take the word 'knowledge' in its technical meaning – which is the opposite of understanding and insight – then we can accept Sheikh Mohammed Abdah's words. But if the word 'knowledge' in this particular verse means cognizance and understanding of God, then the Sheikh's words are debatable. God says in the Qur'an:

O you who have faith! Be wary of Allah and have faith in His Apostle. He will grant you a double share of His mercy and give you a light to walk by...And He has also said O you who have faith! If you are wary of Allah, He shall appoint a criterion for you.[7]And in this manner God bestows this light and ability to separate truth from falsehood by means of piety to His servants.

God also says:

Is he who was lifeless, then We gave him life and provided him with a light by which he walks among the people, like one who dwells in a manifold darkness which he cannot leave? To the faithless is thus presented as decorous what they have been doing.[8]

God places this light –which is the recognition and ma'refat of Him – in the heart of whosoever loves him, and the good doers benefit from it in their path to perfection.

Sources of Ma'rifat

In this hadith, Imam Sadiq introduces three ways for acquiring ma'rifat to Unwan Basri:

Search for the reality of worship within yourself
Seek ma'refat (*insight*) *by acting upon what you know*
Ask God for understanding so that He may make you understand

The First Source: Searching for the reality of worship within oneself

There are three aspects which a person must understand in order to realize the reality of worship of God and devotion to Him: they are God, oneself, and one's relation with God. The human soul is God's creation and is owned by Him; therefore, God is its protector and is ultimately the one who sustains it. Certainty and belief in these matters is in actual fact the reality of devotion to God. God says,

"Allah draws a parable: a chattel who has no power over anything;...[9]

When a person understands the reality of worship by means of understanding his relation with God, he will also be able to clearly comprehend the effects of such devotion to God. These realities can be understood from two angles: first, such a person attributes these realities to God, and second, he does not attribute them to other than God without God's permission:

…and fear Him, and fear no one except Allah. [10]

It is through self-knowledge that one can understand these teachings and facts.

Second Source: Searching for knowledge by acting upon what you know

Action is one of the main sources of knowledge, as the Qur'an says, "Be wary of Allah and Allah shall teach you."[11]

Sheikh Mohammad Abdah in his Tafseer al-Manar has claimed that the following explanation for the above verse paves the way for scholars to gain knowledge, especially those scholars who claim to have understood God, the Qur'an, and the secrets of jurisprudential laws without having studied. They also believe piety to generate an increase in knowledge, which confirms their status in the eyes of the public. Sheikh Mohammed explains this verse by saying:

The combination of the phrases 'Allah teaches you' with 'be careful of (your duty) to Allah' in this verse is a sign that there is no relation between these two elements, because the two conjunctive elements should differ from each other. The difference between the two conjunctive elements is a known fact, but we should not forget that the conjunction of the two elements is also a sign of connection between them. What is the connection in this verse?

Without a doubt, the knowledge mentioned in the second element is not the knowledge acquired at schools and in classrooms. For this conjunction to be correct, there must be a relation between acting carefully in our duty towards Allah and the knowledge that is attained from it. On the other hand, it cannot mean that this teaching by God would make us needless of learning the Qur'an, hadiths, and jurisprudence.

We can conclude from the above that this verse indicates a subtle reality from the Qur'an; piety of the heart – i.e. carrying out one's duty to God – paves the way for a person to receive more wisdom and knowledge from Allah. Sometimes two people will read verses from the Qur'an, yet only one of them will gain deeper understanding which will help him in his journey to perfection. Every human being can see the signs of God in the natural world around them, yet only a few of them through this reach higher understanding and a deeper grasp of the oneness of God.

Piety gives a person the power and ability to understand monotheism (tawheed) and wisdom (hikma); it enlightens his heart to the extent that God prevents him from making a mistake. The Qur'an says,

"O you who have faith! If you are wary of Allah, He shall appoint a criterion for you, and absolve you of your misdeeds." [12]

In this verse, knowledge has been made conditional upon piety; these two elements are not in conjunction with each other as was seen in verse 2:282. The fact that piety can be increased through

knowledge is known to all, as piety is one of the many fruits of knowledge. God says:

Indeed those who were given knowledge before it when it is recited to them, fall down in prostration on their face, and say, 'Immaculate is our Lord! Indeed Our Lord's promise is bound to be fulfilled' weeping, they fall down on their faces, and it increases them in humility. (***17:107-109***)

Likewise, knowledge and understanding is one of the outcomes of piety, and therefore there is a bilateral relation between these two. Imam Sadiq said, "Knowledge is alongside action, so whoever knows acts according to his knowledge, and whosoever does so will know."

But these words do not mean piety alone makes a person needless of studying, or that by relying on piety a person becomes needless of teachers, books, or attending a classroom. In the journey to seek knowledge, piety and effort coincide with one another. The Prophet said, "Hazrat Musa met Prophet Khizr and said to him, 'Advise me.' To which Khizr replied, 'Enfold your heart with piety so that you may attain knowledge.'"

In Misbah a-Shariayh it has been reported from Imam Baqir that piety is the criterion and measure for every knowledge and wisdom. Sheikh Kulayni, in his book al-Kafi has quoted Imam Baqir's statement to Sa'd al-Khair:

And thereafter, I advise you to piety and abstinence [from wrongdoing] for surely in it there is safety from misuse and profit in the hereafter. It is by means of piety that God prevents evils from a person which not a single person has ever thought of, and He removes the blindness of the inner eyes and ignorance by it.

Many hadiths have been narrated in this regard. For example, the Prophet and his family have said that whosoever acts according to what they know, God will teach him that which he does not know. The Prophet also has said, "Whoever acquires knowledge and acts accordingly for the sake of Allah, Allah will teach him that which he does not know." Similarly, Imam Baqir said, "Whoever practises his knowledge for the sake of Allah, Allah will teach him that which he does not know."

Third Source: Asking God to grant understanding (ma'rifat)

Imam Sadiq in his narration to Unwan Basri says, "Ask God for understanding so that He may make you understand." According to this tradition, knowledge is a light which is placed by God in the heart of whosoever He wishes to guide. This light – as has been mentioned earlier – is the understanding and insight which only God can give to a person. God in the Qur'an says,

"And one whom Allah has not granted any light has no light" (***24:40***).

Therefore, if a person wants a flame of this light, he has no choice but to ask Allah for it, because such a

light cannot be found except with Him. Of course, we should not think that asking Allah to bestow this light is sufficient and would make us needless of any kind of effort. Both performing the ritual prayer and striving are required because every victory is given by Allah, as said in the Qur'an,

"…victory comes only from Allah" (***3:126***).

In Arabic literature, negating or making an exception indicates exclusiveness, so initially one would think this verse limits victory to the will of God. But God also teaches us that in order to gain victory and success, we must prepare the grounds for it by organizing the necessary causes. God said,

"Prepare against them whatever you can…" (***8:60***).

Most certainly, making necessary preparations does not contradict one's belief in that all victory is given by God. Knowledge and insight is also bestowed by God, but this also does not contradict a person's need to strive to gain this knowledge.

The Reality of Devotion to God (servitude)

After asking the Imam about the reality of knowledge, the most important question asked by Unwan Basri is: What is the reality of devotion to God?

Devotion to God and servitude are one of the main sources of knowledge and therefore it is not surprising that Unwan asks such a question. In his reply, Imam Sadiq points out three features:

● The servant of God does not feel any kind of ownership in that which God has given to him. True servants acknowledge that everything they possess is from God, and they do not use it except in ways which He has commanded.

● The servant does not plan for himself.

● All of his actions are within the limits of God's commands and prohibitions.

God is the Owner

In the Qur'an, only God owns the skies and the earth:

Do you not know that to Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth? (***2:107***)

Say, "O Allah, Master of all sovereignty! You give sovereignty to whomever You wish, and strip of sovereignty whomever You wish…" (***3:26***)

To Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and Allah has power over all things. (***3:189***)

…and to Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. (***5:18***)

These verses have a direct effect on the way a person lives his or her life because when a person believes that God is the absolute owner of the skies and earth – and what is in it – and that there is no owner other than Him, this person would then reduce his or her worldly desires and be detached to this world. This is what the ethicists call zuhd (asceticism), which is the opposite of attachment to this world.

Imam Ali (a) summarizes the meaning of zuhd: "Zuhd has been explained in two sentences of the Qur'an:

'So that you may not grieve for what has escaped you, nor be exultant at what He has given you; and Allah does not love any arrogant boaster' (***57:23***)***."***

A pious man does not feel remorse when losing something and does not rejoice when he receives something. Attachment to this world will make a person feel heavy and tied down, causing indolence and snatching away the light feeling needed to approach Allah:

O you who have faith! What is the matter with you that when you are told: 'Go forth in the way of Allah,' you sink heavily to the ground? Are you pleased with the life of this world instead of the Hereafter? But the wares of the life of this world compared with the Hereafter are but insignificant. (***9:38***)

The question then arises: How can a person not feel a sense of ownership over that which God has bestowed on him? Such a matter can only be achieved when a person sees himself as the servant of God. The Imams' words offer a chain-like form. The first link of this chain is that a person should see himself as a servant of God, and the meaning of servitude should be understood in compliance with this verse:

"…the servant who has no power to carry out anything." (***16:75***)

A servant must know that without God's benevolence, he will not own anything; and without God's consent and permission he will be unable to do anything. After passing this stage, a person no longer sees himself as the owner of that which is around him. This second stage is a natural result of the first link, because it is only natural that when a person accepts God's ownership over everything he realises that he himself does not own anything.

To justify this, Imam Sadiq conveys to Unwan Basri that servants are not owners; they believe everything belongs to God, and they use the property in the way which God has commanded them to do so.

The third link in this chain of reasons is piety in this world. If a person believes that God is the real owner and that nothing is for himself, he will most certainly result in a balanced love for the material world, which is piety (zuhd).

The fourth and final link in this hadith from the Imam to Unwan Basri is this: When a servant does not see himself as an owner in that which God has bestowed to him, giving charity in the way God has commanded becomes easy for him. It is the attachment to the material world which results in stinginess and prevents one from giving charity in the way of Allah. Certainly, when such attachment is removed, giving charity would then become easy.

Submitting one's affairs to God

If God had left the affairs of the people to themselves, human civilisation would have been destructed many years ago, and we would have reached a dead end. However, God governs all affairs, big and small, and those who perceive will see the hand of God planning their lives whether in hardship or sorrow. Human life and the maintenance of the world in general are not possible without the God's planning. In the same way a person needs to be created in order to come into this world, continuation of his existence is also dependent on God:

It is God who gives victory or defeat. (***3:126*** & ***160***)

He is the provider of sustenance. (***11:6***)

He amplifies some people's sustenance whilst reducing others. (***13:26*** & ***17:30***)

Whoever seeks honour [***should know that***] ***honour entirely belongs to Allah.*** (***35:10***)

Say, 'O Allah, Master of all sovereignty! You give sovereignty to whomever You wish, and strip of sovereignty whomever You wish…' (***3:26***)

He will grant you a double share of His mercy and give you a light to walk by… (***57:28***)

…and one whom Allah has not granted any light has no light. (***24:40***)

Evidently, each one of the policies mentioned in these verses has specific reasons. Whether God helps a group of people, or leads them to defeat; if He improves the sustenance of a group or tightens it; or whether He places the light of guidance in a person's heart or repels it from him, all is a result of the person's actions based on his or her free will. Indeed, God does not carry out these matters in vain given His attributes of wisdom and mercy:

…Indeed Allah does not change a people's lot, unless they change what is in their souls… (***13:11***)

If the people of the towns had been faithful and Godwary, We would have opened to them blessings from the heaven and the earth. But they denied; so We seized them because of what they used to earn. (***7:96***)

If a person perceives this reality and sees the Hand of God in the ups and downs of his life and accepts

that he is dependent on God's planning, he will always leave the affairs of his life to Him. Imam Sadiq said, "Ask God for grace, because Musa asked for a flame of fire yet God gave him prophethood."

Tafwitf

Tafwid. refers to entrusting all of one's affairs to God. One does not accept any effect or role for oneself and believes that all existence belongs to God. God commands and plans, and there is no movement or stillness in this world except by His order and command.

Tafwid is different from tawakkul.[13] When a person does tawakkul, he makes God his deputy in different aspects of his life and in what he wants:

"Allah is sufficient for us, and He is an excellent trustee" **(*3:173*)**

But tafwid, as the mystic Khwaja Abdullah Ansari said, has a wider and finer meaning: "In tafwid., the servant, due to his trust in God, does not believe in any authority or management for himself, and he entrusts everything to Allah." Allamah Tabataba'i says:

Tafwid is when a servant turns the affairs which are related to him back to God, and his condition becomes that of one who has no effect on his surroundings and no one turns to him. Tawakkul is when a servant makes God his deputy in all affairs under His control.

Taslim, or submission, is when a person wholeheartedly accepts everything God wants from him…These are three stages from the stages of devotion to God and servitude, and each one more precise than the other; tafwid is more accurate than tawakkul, and more accurate than both is taslim.[14]

When making God a deputy, the servant sees himself as absent and puts God in place of himself. But in the idea of tafwid, the servant sees himself as non-existent and therefore being present or absent is meaningless for him; he does not see anything other than God's will, power, and management. In such a condition, the servant refers everything to God. This can be seen in the story of the believer from amongst the people of Pharaoh (mu'min-i al-i Fir'awn) when he says:

…and I entrust my affair to Allah. Indeed Allah sees best the servants. **(*40:44*)**

Tasleem means to have complete submission to the will of God, which is more subtle in meaning than tafwid. and it is applicable in all hardships and ease.

Proper understanding of the generative (takwini) relation between the servant and his Creator leads to a deep spiritual state in which the servant refers everything to the will, wisdom, and desire of God.

In such a condition the servant does not experience any attachment, uncertainty, sadness, and worry in the face of problems in life. This is because he completely believes that his existence is in the hands of a wise, kind, and powerful king who is the most caring and sees the condition of his servant at all times:

“Surely God is watchful over His servants.” (40:44)

This idea does not mean that people do not have will or choice in their lives as such a thought would result in humans not having any sense of responsibility for their own actions. Also, it does not mean that people should put aside their efforts and free will in order to improve their condition – whether it is for this world or for the hereafter.

As understood from the Qur’an, God has created human beings to have free will, choice, and understanding. It is up to the person himself to use this to improve his condition in this world and in the hereafter:

“And that nothing belongs to man except what he strives for” (***53:39***).

It is also obvious that human life is governed by the pleasant and unpleasant events he must face. This is true for both good-doers and bad-doers. It is in this stage that tafwid. plays its role. In such situations a person must leave himself to the will and wisdom of God and entrust his life to Him. A person entrusts himself to the power of God who is All-Seeing, Wise, and the most Merciful.

If a person realises that all of his strengths and choices depend on the power and will of God, that he is merely an owned servant, and is unable to do anything without the permission of God, he will then find certainty in the divine decree (qada) and measure (qadar) of God and submit himself to God’s decision. This idea can be found in many of the supplications taught to us by the household of the Prophet: “O Lord! Make me pleased with that which you have ordained for me, and make me humble at all times. O Lord! Make me certain in what has been destined for me, and make me pleased with your choice.”

Tafwid. does not mean that a person should not try to save himself by shouting for help or praying to God when he is drowning. Instead, he should know that his cries for help and his prayers are an extension of

God’s power. It is only if God wills that he will be saved. Tafwid. means that in such a situation it is God who will either save the drowning person or let him drown, and in both cases He is wise, forgiving, and watchful over His good servants. It is in these moments and with such understanding that a person shouts for help and prays to God.

If God saves him he will thank and praise Him, and if God’s decree is for him to drown and die, he will submit himself to the decree of God whilst having certainty that God is All-seeing, Wise, and most Merciful.

These matters are in predestined situations in which a person does not have a choice, and is therefore not responsible for them; but in circumstances under which God has made His servants responsible and has given them choice, every person is responsible for his or her own actions. And

“Indeed Allah does not change a people's lot, unless they change what is in their souls” (***13:11***).

The Beginning and End of Knowledge

The Prophet said, “The beginning of knowledge is in knowing God, and its end is in leaving matters to Him (tafwid.).”

I recall reading this hadith from my books during the initial years of my studies, yet I didn’t quite understand it at the time. After a while, I sat and thought about it and realised that this hadith consists of the entire journey one might take to achieve understanding (ma‘rifat) from the very beginning until the end.

It is a long and hard journey, beginning with recognising Allah and ending in tafwid. The journey begins when a person realises that all affairs, including this vast existence, are in God’s hands;[15] that only He can give and take;[16] He gives life and takes it away, and dignifies and weakens, elevates, and lowers;[17] He is the Creator and the Manager;[18] He can give benefit[19] or loss[20] and sustenance[21] and He forgives.[22]

This is the first stage in understanding God, and tafwid is the final stage of this journey. If a person becomes certain that it is only God who handles the affairs and that only He can give and take, forgive and prevent, and give benefit and loss, undoubtedly such a person would submit his affairs to God. Here tafwiq means to submit and believe, to believe that all the affairs are handled by God, and to submit to His command in all conditions.

The Prophet said, “I am surprised to see that God does not predestine for a believer anything unless it results in goodness for him.” He also said, “Whosoever from amongst the creatures knows God better God more is more worthy of submitting himself to the will of God.”

Imam Sadiq said, “One of the revelations from God to Musa was, ‘The dearest of my creation to me is a believing servant. Whenever I afflict him with a calamity it is for his good, and whenever I give him something that is also for his good. So he should be patient during calamities, thank me for my blessings, and be pleased with what I ordained.’”

Imam Sadiq also said, “The most knowledgeable of people are those who are the most content with the will of God.”

Ibn Sanan has narrated from someone who asked Imam Sadiq, “How can one realise whether a person is a real believer. To which the Imam replied, “By submitting oneself to the will of God in whatever happiness and sadness which befalls him.”

Imam Sadiq has also said, “The Prophet never said, ‘In relation to that which had occurred and passed, I wish it had happened in another way.’”

Anas bin Malek said, “For ten years I was a servant of the Prophet and never did he ask me ‘Why did

you do that?' in relation to what I had done, or 'Why didn't you do that?' in relation to what I had not done. And when he said, 'I wish it had been...' and whenever a person disrespected his family in my presence, he would say, 'Leave him. If there is something in the decree of God it will certainly happen.'"[23]

It has been narrated in al-Kafi, "Once Imam Husayn met Abdullah ibn Ja'far and he said, 'O Abdullah, how can a believer be a believer knowing that God manages all affairs, yet he is sad about his share in life resulting in lowering his level? I guarantee that if a person was to only be satisfied with the decree of God, his prayers would be always answered.'"

The household of the Prophet – held secure and confident hearts, and God has said about them, "O soul at peace! Return to your Lord, pleased, pleasing!"[24]

Ibn Sina in his book Isharat[25] has also pointed out this fact when explaining the level of the mystics; he says, "A mystic is happy, smiling, and joyous. He respects the young ones as he would the elders because of his humbleness, and meets with respect and openness both intelligent and unintelligent ones. How can he be sad when God is his happiness and when he sees God in everything?"[26]

Stages of the Path

It is beyond the constraints of this paper to discuss the many stages between knowing God and tafwid. When a person realises that God is the Lord of the universe and that He is forgiving and caring, he will naturally be thankful and will certainly choose to worship and obey Him.

When he realises that God answers the prayers of his servants he will pray; when he understands God's forgiveness he would spend time to repent; when he perceives God's severe punishment he would fear Him; when he appreciates God's extensive mercy he will find hope in him; and when he realises that God loves his servants and that he honours them, he would love God.

Therefore, the journey to Allah is a long journey that begins with knowing God and its end lies in tafwid. The traveller of this path must pass many stages such as worship, obedience, fear, hope, devotion, love and humility. These realities have been mentioned in many of the Islamic hadiths. In what follows, we refer to some of those hadiths:

The Prophet: "Whosoever recognises God would guard his tongue from vain talk, his stomach from impure food, and would force himself to observe modesty through fasting and praying."

Imam Ali: "I am amazed by a person who knows his Lord and yet does not strive for his eternal abode."

The following hadiths have been reported from Imam Ali (a):

- Lord, make us of those who have prevented themselves from desires by your remembrance.

- If recognition of God rests in one's heart, then that heart would feel needless of people.
- It is not worthy of a person who understands the greatness of God to feel great himself.
- Whoever recognises God more is more fearful of God.
- The peak of insight (ma'rifat) is in fear of God. The objective of knowledge is fear of God.
- The most knowledgeable person is the one who asks God for his needs more often.
- I am amazed by a person who recognises God but his fear of God does not increase.
- It is proper for those who know God to fear Him.
- The heart of one who knows God should not be vacant from the fear of God even for an instant.
- The face (apparent) of a mystic is cheerful, and his heart is sombre.
- The worship of the mystics is to weep in the fear of God.
- Everything has a source, and the source of piety is the hearts of the mystics.
- The lowest level of insight (ma'rifat) results in piety in this world.
- The fruit of insight (ma'rifat) is disinclination to this world.
- Whoever recognises God becomes a [true] monotheist.

Imam Sadiq: "Whosoever attains recognition would be wary of God, and whosoever is wary of God his soul will pass from this world easily."

Each one of these hadiths is considered to be stations on the journey to perfection and understanding in relation to God. Ma'rifat – as has been mentioned in the traditions – is the pillar of movement towards piety in this world and detachment from it, independence from people, humility, prayer, supplication, reliance on God, fear of God, hope in God and sadness.

This is a section of the stages that are passed throughout a person's journey to perfection and as said before, it begins with understanding and ends with tafwid. Some may ask: Why does the journey end with tafwid?

In this last stage, a person sees no other authority in this world other than God's power. This results in the person's will and satisfaction to follow completely the will and pleasure of God. Such a person's pleasure would be in the pleasure of God and he would submit himself wholly to His decree and would be pleased with it. Such a person would not feel the presence of 'ego.' This is truly the end of the path.

Within the boundaries of the commands and prohibitions of God

To act within the boundaries of God has been mentioned as the third sign of worship in the hadith of Unwan Basri. A true servant's ambition which plays on his mind throughout the day is to ensure he does what his master wants from him, and to abandon that which he has prohibited, because his aim in life must be the pleasure of his master which evidently lies in keeping within these boundaries. If a person is true to his claim in that he is a servant, he should continuously think about this. Even heaven – with all its bounties and blessings prepared by God for his worthy servants – should not preoccupy his mind and intentions.

Whosoever reaches this stage, no matter how much he strives in the way of obeying God, would still feel guilty and negligent in relation to his actions. This feeling will increase in proportion to the increase in a person's understanding of obedience. This is because he never sees himself in a position to be able to carry out the Lord's orders in their most perfect form, and therefore he is never overtaken by pride or vanity.

This causes him to feel an increase in his shortcomings and sins. He laughs less and cries more. Such a person has much grief and plays little. Vanity, pride, greediness, showing off, boasting, or any other levels of worldly attachment cannot be found in him, and the hardship of obeying God prevents him from acquiring any of these attributes.

The abovementioned attributes are some of the effects of a careless and unrestrained life. Heedlessness and occupation both have different effects and side effects on a person's life. The effects of carelessness are greed and dispute over worldly possessions, pride and boasting, (extreme) happiness and seeking pleasure, enmity and quarrelling over worldly affairs, and interacting with people under the shadow of selfishness and pride.

Thus, true servitude is constantly performing what the Master wants of him and to abandon what He prohibited because the aim in life is the Master's pleasure. Little did Unwan Basri know that his devotion to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq as well as his keenness for gaining knowledge would result in this memorable meeting in which the Imam lovingly shared from his vast wisdom, and wherein numerous people continue to learn from until today.

1. The 6th Holy Imam
2. Imam Ja'far (a)
3. Literally meaning 'men'. It is the science in which the narrators of hadith are investigated.
4. Gnostics
5. Chapter al-Zilzal – The Shaking – verses 7 & 8
6. This commentary contains the teachings of Abdah, but it has been written and compiled by his student Rashid Reza.
7. Anfal 8:29
8. An'aam, 6:122
9. Nahl, 16:75
10. Ahzab, 33:39

11. Baqarah, 2:282
12. Anfal 8:29
13. Relying upon Allah
14. Tafseer Al-Mizan, volume 17, p. 353 (available in Farsi)
15. Yunus 10: 49
16. Baqarah 2:245
17. Aale Imran 3:26
18. Talaq 65: 3
19. Yunus 10: 18
20. Taghabun 64:11
21. Isra' 17: 45
22. Baqarah 2:105
23. Of course, such traditions should not be understood alone, and it must be investigated alongside other traditions in order that the right meaning be understood. (Translator)
24. Fajr 89:27-28
25. A philosophical book written by the great Muslim scholar Bu Ali Sina.
26. Commentary on Isharat, vol. 3, p. 391

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