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Lecture 3: To Be "Alive" And To Be "Dead" In Thinking

One of the matters described in the Qur'an is the question of life and death, which is mentioned in all its phases for various reasons. It speaks of the life of plants, animals and human beings. But as our discussion is not about life in general but only a particular life, that is, human life, we will pay special attention to it.

Many of us think that as long as a man's heart beats, and the nerves are active and he walks about, he is alive. When can he be said to be dead? When the physician listens to his heart and declares that it has stopped functioning. This is to some extent true, but this kind of life is not a really human life; it is his biological life. In this respect he has a common bond with animals. A dog, too, has a heart, nerves, veins (in which blood flows), organs and limbs. But a human being has another kind of life, as well. It means, according to the Qur'an that a man's heart, nerves and limbs may be active, but he may be 'dead'.

The Qur'an refers to people as dead and alive, and then says it affects those who show a trace of life, while it has no effect on the dead ones. What is meant by being dead or alive? The Qur'an says elsewhere that whoever is born comes into the world with a divine-endowed nature, which seeks truth. But some people this light of inquiry is extinguished, and thus he "dies", though he is biologically alive.

The Qur'an gives another example and says that those who show a trace of life blossom forth in spirit when show a trace of life blossom forth in spirit when they assimilate the Qur'an, since they become susceptible to the same, like a land prepared for the growth of plants and trees.

The Qur'an says:

"Is he who was dead and we received him (through the Qur'an) and gave him a light by which he walks among people, like one who remains in utter darkness and without access to the world beyond him?..." (6:122)

Another verse of the Qur'an in which the people are divided into two groups of "dead" and "alive", is the one with which I began my discourse...How explicitly and beautifully it (8:24) exhorts to the effect that God and the Prophet invite us to accept Islam for its life-giving quality, since it will receive us.

Islam speaks persistently of life and says the Prophet has brought "life" for you. You are dead now, but you do not know it. Come and submit to this spiritual physician to see how he offers you life.

What does life mean? It means clear-sightedness and ability. The difference between life and death lies in these two. The greater the measure of these two, the livelier is life. Why do we call God alive? Does it mean having a beating heart and blood flow? This meaning does not apply to God; in His case, heart and blood do not exist.

Does life mean breathing and letting breath in and out? No, this is not the meaning of life. These are conditions of life for us, not life itself. Life itself is awareness and ability, we call God alive because He represents Absolute Wisdom and Ability, and because an excellent human life reflects qualities of His Essence, including kindness, mercy, compassion and beneficence. Islam, too, promotes wisdom and ability in actual practice, as it did for many centuries. Therefore, when human thought does not reflect the divine-endowed wisdom and ability, and instead, leads only to aggravation of ignorance and inactivity, it no longer represents Islam.

Islam is the religion of life which is incompatible with ignorance and inability. You can accept this as a general criterion of understanding Islam. In the last session I mentioned action as an element of life in Islamic thought. Islam tries in its teachings to predicate human destiny on action, so as to make man rely on his own will. Islam says that your unhappiness is the result of your own misdeeds.

A human being must rely on his own conduct and personal initiative. What is more explicit than the phrase of the Qur'an which says: ***"There is not for man save what he strives for."*** (***53:39***), No doubt, it involves human dynamism, alertness, insight and ability.

To-day, educators try hard to awaken the sense of self-reliance in man, and rightly do so. The kind of self-reliance that Islam awakens in man is that it puts an end to the hope of relying on everything outside himself, and if there is a hope it must be centered on oneself. Similarly, every connection with other things or persons is through action. You cannot be connected with the Prophet (S) or Imam Ali (as) or the latter's chaste Fatima (as) except through deeds.

I remember a narration from eighteen years ago which affected me deeply. It was an anecdote from the life of the Holy Prophet (S), so fine and meaningful, and peerless in the biography of all human beings. It is amazing how a man in a desert environment, such as that of the Prophet's could act in an extraordinarily thoughtful manner.

The Prophet in one of his travels with his companions ordered the caravan to stop and dismount. Then he dismounted and started walking in a certain direction. Soon he returned, and his companions

supposed that he was looking for a suitable place for camping before he could decide about moving to another spot.

They saw him approach his camel, take a knee-band from the sack, tie the camel's knees and walk on as before. They wondered why the Prophet (S) had walked so far and back for such a trifling task and asked him why he did not order them to do it. The Prophet said: "Never seek help from others even for a small piece of work. Try to do it yourself."

If the Prophet (S) had said this from the pulpit it would not have had such a deep effect, but he said it when it was combined with action. My purpose is to show that one of the principles of Islamic teachings which revive Islamic thought is action and reliance on action.

I want to explain two other points of Islamic morals and educational principles, which are very significant, like a double-edged sword. If they are taught properly the result would be excellent, but if diverted from their course, they will have opposite effects. In my experience many of the moral and educational ideas in Islam have become perverted in the minds of Muslims.

The dynamic concept of reliance on God has an ethical educational meaning in Islam. The Qur'an conveys an extraordinarily harmonious and heroic sense in endorsing absolute adherence to, and trust in, God. The Qur'an brings man into action and removes all fear from him. It teaches us not to fear, but rely on God and go ahead. It instructs us to tell the truth without fearing any might of an enemy.

When you seek to find this kind of reliance in the minds and hearts of people today, you see that it is absent or dead. When we want to be idle, and tend to neglect our duty, we resort to "reliance on God", and use it in a sense quite the reverse of what the Qur'an teaches.

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