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Part Five

Moral Lectures And Aphorisms: Inimitable Moral Teaching

Moral and spiritual teachings constitute the greater part of Nahjul-Balagha, making up almost half of the book. More than anything else, the fame of Nahjul-Balagha is due to the sermons, exhortations and aphorisms on ethical and moral subjects.

Aside from the moral teachings of the Holy Qur'an and a number of the sermons and sayings of the Holy Prophet (S), which are to be considered the source and antecedent of Nahjul-Balagha, the teachings of Nahjul-Balagha are without a match in the Arabic and Persian languages.

For more than a thousand years, these sermons have played an influential role serving as a matchless source of inspiration, yet retaining their original power to quicken the heartbeat, to sublimate emotions, and to bring tears to the eyes. It seems that as long as there remains any trace of humanity in the world, these sermons shall continue to exercise their original power and influence.

Comparison

The literature of Arabic and Persian is replete with works containing spiritual and moral teachings of the highest sublimity and elegance, though mainly in the form of poetry. There is, for example, the famous qasida by Abul-Fath al-Busti (360-400/971-1010) which begins with the verse saying:

Worldly profit and achievement is loss,
And the gain unmarked by the seal of pure goodness...

There is also the eulogizing qasida by Abul-Hassan al-Tihami, which he wrote on the early death of his youthful son; it begins with these lines:

The law of fate governs the destiny of creation,
And this world is not a place to settle in.

Every one of these works is an everlasting masterpiece of its kind and shines like a star on the horizons of the Arabic literature of the Islamic era, never to lose its freshness and charm. In Persian, the Gulistan and the Bustan of Sa'di and his qasa'id serve as unusually attractive and effective means of moral advice and are masterpieces of their own kind. To give some examples, here are some famous verses of the Gulistan which start with:

Every breath is a fraction of life gone,
And when I see, not much of it does remain.

Or in another qasida where he says the following:

O people! The world is not a place for leisure and repose;
To a wise man, it is not worth the effort to possess.

Or, at another place, he says the following:

The world on water and life on wind do rest;
Salute the brave ones who to them do not tie their hearts.

... And he also says the following:

Time and fortune are subject to endless change;
The wise man doesn't attach his heart to the world.

Sa'di's Bustan is full of profound and glowing spiritual pieces of advice and, perhaps, it is at its best in the ninth chapter on Penitence and the Right Way. The same is true of some portions of the Mathnawi of Rumi and works of all other Persian poets from whom we shall not further quote any examples.

In Islamic literature, including the Arabic and the Persian, there exist excellent examples of spiritual counsels and aphorisms. This Islamic literary genre is not confined to these two languages but is also found in Turkish, Urdu and other languages. A characteristic spirit pervades all of them. Anyone familiar with the Holy Qur'an, the sayings of the Holy Prophet (S), of Amir al-Mu'minin Ali (as), of the other Imams, and of

Muslim saints of the first rank can observe a characteristic spirit pervading all Persian literature containing spiritual counsel which represents the spirit of Islam embodied in the Persian language and embellished with its charm and sweetness.

If an expert, or a group of experts, in Arabic and Persian literature acquainted with the works in all other languages that reflect the spirit of Islam were to collect the masterpieces in the field of spiritual counsel, the extraordinary richness and maturity of the Islamic culture in this field will be revealed.

It is strange that as far as the works on spiritual counsel are concerned, the Persian genius has mostly

expressed itself in poetry; there is no such work of eminence in prose. All that exists of it in prose is in the form of short sayings, like the prose writings of the Gulistan, a part of which consists of spiritual counsels and is in itself a masterpiece, or the sayings ascribed to Khawajah ‘Abdullah al-Ansari.

Of course, my own knowledge is inadequate, but as far as I know, there does not exist in Persian prose any remarkable work, except for short sayings, not even a passage, which is long enough to be counted as a short discourse, especially a discourse which was originally delivered extempore and later collected and recorded in writing.

There are discourses which have been related from Rumi or Sa’di meant as oral moral advice to their followers; they also by no means possess the brilliance and charm of the poetic works of those masters and definitely are not worth being compared with the discourses of Nahjul- Balagha.

The same can be said about the writings which have reached us in the form of a treatise or letter, such as the Nasihat al-Muluk by Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, the Taziyaneh-ye suluk by Ahmed al-Ghazali, the latter being an elaborate epistle addressed to his follower and pupil A’Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani.

Spiritual Counsel And Wisdom

Moral counsel, according to the Holy Qur’an, is one of the three ways of invitation towards Allah (hikma, mawiza, al-jidal al-hasan, i.e. wisdom, good admonition, and honorable debate, as mentioned in 16: 125).

The difference between hikma (wisdom, philosophy) and mawiza (spiritual and moral advice and admonition) lies in the fact that hikma is for instruction and imparting knowledge, while mawiza is meant for reminding. Hikma is struggle against ignorance and maw’iza is struggle against negligence and indifference. Hikma deals with the intellect and mawiza appeals to the heart. Hikma educates, while mawiza prepares the intellect for the employment of its reserves. Hikma is a lamp and maw’iza is an eye-opener.

Hikma is for ratiocination, while mawiza is for self- n awakening. Hikma is the language of the intellect, while mawiza is the message for the spirit. Accordingly, the personality of the speaker plays an essential role in mawiza, which is not the case with hikma. In hikma, two minds communicate in an impersonal manner. But in mawiza, the situation is like the passage of an electric charge that flows from the speaker, who is at a higher potential, to the listener.

For this reason, it has been said of mawiza that: “If it comes forth from the soul, then it necessarily alights upon the heart. Otherwise, it does not go beyond the listener’s ears. It is about the quality of mawiza that it is said: “The speech which originates from the heart enters another heart, and the words which originate from the tongue do not go beyond the ears.”

It is true that the words that come from the heart, being the message of the soul, invade other hearts; but if they do not convey the message of the soul, they are no more than empty literary devices which do not go beyond the listener's ear-drum.

Mawiza And Khitaba (Exhortation And Oratory)

Mawiza also differs from khitaba (oratory, rhetoric). Although oratory also deals with emotions, it seeks to stir and agitate them. Maw'iza, on the other hand, is intended to pacify emotions, and it seeks to bring them under control. Oratory is effective when emotions are inert and stagnant; mawiza is required when lusts and passions become unmanageable.

Oratory stirs the passion for power and glory, the feelings of honor, heroism, chivalry, manliness, patriotism, nobility, righteousness, virtue and service; it is followed by movement and excitement. But mawiza checks inappropriate passion and excitement. Rhetoric and oratory snatch control from the hands of calculating reason, handing it over to tempestuous passions. But mawiza appeases the tempests of passions and prepares the ground for calculation and foresight. Oratory draws one to the outside while mawiza makes him turn to his inner self.

Rhetoric and counsel are both necessary and essential, and Nahjul-Balagha makes use of both of them. The main thing is to judge the right time for the use of each of them. The impassioned speeches of Amir al-Mu'minin (as) were delivered at a time when it was necessary to stir up passions and to build up a tempest to destroy an unjust and oppressive structure, such as at the time of the Battle of Siffin when Ali (as) delivered a fiery speech before the engagement with Muawiyah's forces.

Muawiyah's forces, arriving ahead of Ali's army, had taken control of the river bank and stopped the supply of water to Ali's camp. At first, Ali (as) strived to abstain from resorting to force, desiring the problem to be solved through negotiation. But Muawiyah, who had some other designs, considering occupation of the river bank a victory for himself, refused every offer of negotiation. When things became difficult for Ali's men, it was time when he should stir the emotions of his soldiers through a fiery speech, creating a tempest that would rout the enemy. This is how Ali (as) addressed his companions:

They are eager that you should make them taste the flavor of battle. So you have two alternatives before you: either submit to disgrace and ignominy, or quench your swords' thirst with their blood and quench your own thirst with water. It is death to survive through defeat, while true life is to die for the sake of victory. Muawiyah is leading a handful of deluded insurgents and has deceived them by keeping them in the dark about the truth, with the result that their throats are the targets of your deadly arrows.[1]

These words flared their emotions, provoked their sense of honor and made the blood surge in their veins. It was not yet sunset before Ali's companions had seized the river bank, throwing back Muawiyah's forces.

However, Ali's mawaa'iz were delivered in different circumstances. During the days of the first three caliphs, particularly during "Othman's rule, immeasurable amounts of wealth and booty, won through consecutive victories, flowed into Muslim hands.

Due to the absence of any careful programs for correct utilization of that wealth, particularly due to the aristocratic, or rather tribal, rule during the reign of "Othman, moral corruption, worldliness, and love of comfort and luxury found their ways into the Muslim society. Tribal rivalries were revived, and racial prejudice between Arabs and non-Arabs was added to it. In that clamor for worldliness and mounting prejudices, rivalries, and greed for greater share of the war booty, the only cry of protest charged with spiritual exhortation was that of Ali (as).

God willing, we shall discuss in the coming chapters the various themes dealt with in Ali's mawaiz, such as taqwa (piety), worldliness, zuhd (asceticism), desires, the dread of death, the dreads of the Day of Judgement, the need to take lesson from the history of past nations and peoples... etc.

Nahjul-Balagha's Recurring Themes

Out of the 241 fragments collected under the title Khutab by Sayyid ar-Radi (though not all of them are Khutab or sermons), about 86 can be classified as mawaiz or at least contain a series of spiritual pieces of advice. Some of them, however, are elaborate and lengthy, like khutba 176 which opens with the sentence Avail yourselves of the Divine expositions, the khutba named al-Qasia (which is the longest sermon in Nahjul-Balagha), and the khutba 93 (called khutbat al-muttaqin, the "sermon of the pious").

Out of some seventy-nine passages classified as epistles, letters (which not all of them are), about twenty-five, either completely or partially, consist of spiritual and moral teachings. Some of them are quite lengthy and elaborate, such as letter 31, which constitutes of Ali's advice to his son Imam al-Hassan al-Mujtaba (as), and the lengthiest of all, except the famous directive sent to Malik al-Ashtar. Another is letter 45, the well-known epistle of Ali (as) to Othman ibn Hunayf, his governor over Basra.

The Themes In Spiritual Pieces Of Advice

Various themes are found in the spiritual pieces of advice of Nahjul-Balagha: taqwa (piety); tawakkul (trust in Allah); sabr (patience, ortitude); zuhd(asceticism); the renunciation of worldly pleasures and luxuries, the renunciation of inordinate desires and far-fetched hopes; the condemnation of injustice and prejudice, emphasis on mercy, love, helping of the oppressed and sympathy toward the weak; emphasis on the qualities of fortitude, courage, and strength; emphasis on unity and solidarity and condemnation of disunity; the invitation to take lesson from history; the invitation to thought, meditation, remembrance, and self- criticism; the reminders about the brevity of life and the swiftness of its pace; theremembrance of death; the hardships of death-throes; experiences of the life after death; the reminders of the dreadful events of the Day of Judgement, and so on. These are some of the frequent themes of the spiritual pieces of advice of Nahjul-Balagha.

Ali's Logic

In order to understand this aspect of Nahjul-Balagha, or, in other words, to understand Ali (as) when he speaks as a moral and spiritual counselor and to understand his didactic outlook, so as to draw benefit from that ever-flowing source, it is not enough to enumerate the various themes and topics dealt with by Ali (as) in his discourses.

It is not sufficient merely to remark that Ali (as) has spoken about taqwa, tawakkul or zuhd; rather, we must see what significance did he attribute to these words. We must uncover his didactic philosophy regarding the development of the human character and his perception of the human aspiration for piety, purity, freedom, and deliverance from spiritual servitude and thraldom.

As we know, these are words employed by all-in particular those who are wont to play the role of a moralist; but all individuals do not mean the same kind of things by these terms. Sometimes, the meanings one person attributes to these words are quite contrary to those meant by another, and naturally lead to conclusions which are quite opposite.

Consequently, it is essential to elaborate somewhat the specific meanings of these terms in Ali's vocabulary, starting with taqwa.

Taqwa

Taqwa is one of the most frequent motifs of Nahjul-Balagha. In fact it would be hard to find another book which emphasizes this spiritual term to the extent of this book. Even in Nahjul-Balagha, no other term or concept receives so much attention and stress as taqwa. What is taqwa?

Often, it is thought that taqwa means piety and abstinence and so implies a negative attitude. In other words, it is maintained that the greater the amount of abstinence, withdrawal, and self-denial, the more perfect is one's taqwa. According to this interpretation, taqwa is a concept divorced from active life; secondly it is a negative attitude; thirdly, it means that the more severely this negative attitude is exercised, the greater one's taqwa would be.

Accordingly, the sanctimonious professors of taqwa, in order to avoid its being tainted and to protect it from any blemish, withdraw from the bustle of life, keeping themselves away from involvement in any matter or affair of the world.

Undeniably, abstinence and caution exercised with discretion is an essential principle of wholesome living. For, in order to lead a healthy life, man is forced to negate and affirm, deny and posit, renounce and accept, avoid and welcome different things. It is through denial and negation that the positive in life can be realized. It is through renunciation and avoidance that concentration is given to action.

The principle of tawhid contained in the dictum la ilaha illa Allah is at the same time a negation as well

as an affirmation. Without negation of everything other than Allah it is not possible to arrive at tawhid. That is why rebellion and surrender, kufr (unbelief) and iman (belief), go together; that is, every surrender requires a rebellion and every faith (iman) calls for a denial and rejection (kufr), and every affirmation implies a negation. The Holy Qur'an says the following:

So whoever disbelieves in taghut and believes in Allah, has laid hold of the most firm bond. (***2: 256***)

However, firstly, every denial, negation, rejection, and rebellion operates between the limits of two opposites; the negation of one thing implies movement towards its opposite; therejection of the one marks the beginning of the acceptance of the other. Accordingly, every healthy denial and rejection has both a direction and a goal, and is confined within certain definite limits. Therefore, a blind practice and purposeless attitude, which has neither direction nor a goal, nor is confined within any limits, is neither defensible nor of any spiritual worth.

Secondly, the meaning of taqwa in Nahjul-Balagha is not synonymous with that of "abstinence', even in its logically accepted sense discussed above. Taqwa, on the other hand, according to Nahjul-Balagha, is a spiritual faculty which appears as a result of continued exercise and practice. The healthy and rational forms of abstinence are, firstly, the preparatory causes for the emergence of that spiritual faculty; secondly, they are also its effects and outcome.

This faculty strengthens and vitalizes the soul, giving it a kind of immunity. A person who is devoid of this faculty, if he wants to keep himself free from sins, it is unavoidable for him to keep away from the causes of sin. Since society is never without these causes, inevitably he has to go into seclusion and isolate himself. It follows from this argument that one should either remain pious by isolating himself from one's environment, or he should enter society and bid farewell to taqwa. Moreover, according to this logic, the more isolated and secluded a person's life is and the more he abstains from mixing with other people, the greater is his piety and taqwa in the eyes of the common people.

However, if the faculty of taqwa is cultivated inside a person's soul, it is no longer necessary for him to seclude himself from his environment. He can keep himself clean and uncorrupted without severing his relations with society.

The former kinds of persons are like those who take refuge in mountains for fear of some plague or epidemic. The second kinds resemble those who acquire immunity and resistance through vaccination and so do not deem it necessary to leave the city and avoid contact with their townsfolk. On the other hand, they hasten to the aid of the suffering sick in order to save them. Sa'di is alluding to the first kind of pious in his Gulistan, when he says the following:

Saw I a sage in the mountains,
Happy in a cave, far from the world's tide.
Said I, Why not to the city return,

And lighten your heart of this burden?
He said, “The city abounds in tempting beauties,
And even elephants slip where mud is thick.

Nahjul-Balagha speaks of taqwa as a spiritual faculty acquired through exercise and assiduity, which on its emergence produces certain characteristic effects, one of which is the ability to abstain from sins with ease.

I guarantee the truth of my words and I am responsible for what I say. If similar events and experiences of the past serve as a lesson for a person, then taqwa prevents him from plunging recklessly into doubts.2

Beware that sins are like unruly horses whose reins have been taken way and which plunge with their riders into hell-fire. But taqwa is like a trained steed whose reins are in the hands of its rider and enters with its rider into Paradise.3

In this sermon taqwa is described as a spiritual condition which results in control and command over one’s self. It explains that theresult of subjugation to desires and lusts and being devoid of taqwa degrades one’s personality making it vulnerable to the cravings of the carnal self.

In such a state, man is like a helpless rider without any power and control, whom his mount takes wherever it desires. The essence of taqwa lies in possessing a spiritual personality endowed with will-power, and possessing mastery over the domain of one’s self. A man with taqwa is like an expert horseman riding a well-trained horse and who with complete mastery and control drives his tractable steed in the direction of his choice.

Certainly the taqwa of Allah assists His awliya’ (friends) in abstaining from unlawful deeds and instils His fear into their hearts. As a result, their nights are passed in wakefulness and their days in thirst [on account of fasting].4

Here Ali (as) makes it clear that taqwa is something which automatically leads to abstention from unlawful actions and to the fear of Allah, which are its necessary effects. Therefore, according to this view, taqwa is neither itself abstinence nor fear of Allah; rather, it is a sacred spiritual faculty of which these two are only consequences:

For indeed, today taqwa is a shield and a safeguard, and tomorrow (i.e. in the Hereafter) it shall be the path to Paradise.5

In khutba 157, taqwa is compared to an invincible fortress built on heights which the enemy has no power to infiltrate. Throughout, the emphasis of the Imam (as) lies on the spiritual and psychological aspect of taqwa and its effects upon human spirit involving the emergence of a dislike for sin and corruption and an inclination towards piety, purity, and virtue.

Further illustrations of this view can be cited from Nahjul– Balagha, but it seems that the above quotations are sufficient.

Taqwa Is Immunity Not Restraint

We have already mentioned some of the various elements found in the spiritual pieces of advice (mawa'iz) of Nahjul–Balagha. We began with taqwa and saw that taqwa, from the viewpoint of Nahjul–Balagha, is a sublime spiritual faculty which is the cause of certain attractions and repulsions; i.e. attraction towards edifying spiritual values and repulsion towards degrading materialistic vices. Nahjul–Balagha considers taqwa as a spiritual state that gives strength to human personality and makes man the master of his own self.

Taqwa As Immunity

Nahjul–Balagha stresses that taqwa is for man a shield and a shelter, not a chain or a prison. There are many who do not distinguish between immunity and restraint, between security and confinement, and promptly advocate the destruction of the sanctuary of taqwa in the name of freedom and liberation from bonds and restraint.

That which is common between a sanctuary and a prison is the existence of a barrier. Whereas the walls of a sanctuary avert dangers, the walls of a prison hinder the inmates from realizing their inner capacities and from benefitting from the bounties of life. Ali (as) clarifies the difference between the two, where he says the following:

Let it be known to you, O servants of Allah!, that taqwa is a formidable fortress, whereas impiety and corruption is a weak and indefensible enclosure that does not safeguard its people, and does not offer any protection to those who take refuge in it. Indeed, it is only with taqwa that the tentacles of sins and misdeeds can be severed.[6]

Ali (as), in this sublime advice, compares sins and evil deeds which are afflictions of the human soul to poisonous insects and reptiles, and suggests that the faculty of taqwa is an effective defence against them. In some of his discourses, he makes it clear that taqwa not only does not entail restraint and restriction or is an impediment to freedom, but on the other hand it is the source and fountainhead of all true freedoms. In khutba 230, he says the following:

Taqwa is the key to guidance, the provision for the Hereafter, the freedom from every kind of slavery, and the deliverance from every form of destruction.

The message is clear. Taqwa gives man spiritual freedom and liberates him from the chains of slavery and servitude to lusts and passions. It releases him from the bonds of envy, lust, and anger, and this expurgates society from all kinds of social bondage and servitude. Men who are not slaves of comfort,

money, power, and glory, never surrender to the various forms of bondage which plague the human society.

Nahjul–Balagha deals with the theme of taqwa and its various effects in many of its passages; but we don't consider it necessary to discuss all of them here. Our main objective here is to discover the meaning of taqwa from the point of view of Nahjul–Balagha, so as to unearth thereason for so much emphasis that this book places on this concept.

Of the many effects of taqwa that have been pointed out, two are more important than the rest: firstly, the development of insight and clarity of vision; secondly, the capacity to solve problems and to weather difficulties and crises. We have discussed this in detail elsewhere.[7] Moreover, a discussion of these effects of taqwa here will take us beyond our present aim which is to clarify the true meaning of taqwa. It will not be out of place to call attention to certain profound remarks of Nahjul– Balagha about the reciprocal relationship between the human being and taqwa.

Reciprocal Commitment

In spite of the great emphasis laid by Nahjul–Balagha on taqwa as a kind of guarantee and immunity against sin and temptation, it should be noticed that one must never neglect to safeguard and protect taqwa itself. Taqwa guards man, and man must safeguard his taqwa. This, as we shall presently explain, is not a vicious circle.

This reciprocal guarding of the one by the other is comparable to the one between a person and his clothes. A man takes care of his clothes and protects them from being spoiled or stolen, while the clothes in turn guard him against heat or cold. In fact the Holy Qur'an speaks of taqwa as a garment:

And the garment of taqwa –that is better. (***7: 26***)

Ali (as), speaking about this relationship of mutual protection between a person and his tawqa, says the following: "Turn your sleep into wakefulness by the means of taqwa and spend your days in its company. Keep its consciousness alive in your hearts. With it wash away your sins and cure your ailments. Beware, guard your taqwa and place yourself under its guard."[8]

At another place in the same sermon, Ali (as) says the following: "O Allah's servants, I admonish you to cultivate the taqwa of Allah. Indeed it is a right that Allah has over you and it is through it that you can have any right over Allah. You should beseech Allah's help for guarding it and seek its aid for [fulfilling your duty to] Allah."[9]

Zuhd (Asceticism) And Piety

Another spiritual motif conspicuous in the teachings of Nahjul– Balagha is zuhd, which after taqwa is the most recurring theme of the book. "Zuhd' means renunciation of the "world', and very often we

encounter denunciation of the “world’, and invitation and exhortation to renounce it. It appears to me that it forms one of the important themes of Nahjul-Balagha, which needs to be elucidated and explained in the light of various aspects of Ali’s approach.

We shall begin our discussion with the word “zuhd’ the words “zuhd’ and “raghbah’ (attraction, desire), if mentioned without reference to their objects, are opposite to each other. “Zuhd’ means indifference and avoidance, and “raghbah “means attraction, inclination, and desire.

Indifference can be of two kinds: involuntary and cultivated. A person is involuntarily indifferent towards a certain thing when by nature he does not have any desire for it, as in the case of a sick person who shows no desire either for food, or fruits, or anything else. Obviously, this kind of indifference and abstinence has nothing to do with the particular sense implied in zuhd.

Another kind of indifference or abstinence is spiritual or intellectual; that is, things which are natural objects of desire are not considered the goal and objective by a human being in the course of his struggle for perfection and felicity. The ultimate objective and goal may be something above mundane aims and sensual pleasures; either it may be to attain The sensuous pleasures of the Hereafter, or it may not belong to this kind of things. It may be some high ethical and moral ideal, like honor, dignity, nobility, liberty, or it may belong to the spiritual sphere, like the remembrance of Allah, the love of Allah, and the desire to acquire nearness to Him.

Accordingly the zahid (i.e. one who practises zuhd) is someone whose interest transcends the sphere of material existence, and whose object of aspiration lies beyond the kind of things we have mentioned above. The indifference of a zahid originates in the sphere of his ideas, ideals, and hopes, not in his physiological makeup.

There are two places where we come across the definition of “zuhd’ in Nahjul-Balagha. Both of them confirm the above interpretation of zuhd. Ali (as), in khutba 81, says the following:

O people! Zuhd means curtailing of hopes, thanking Allah for His blessings and bounties, and abstaining from that which He has forbidden.

In hikma 439, he says the following:

“All zuhd is summarized in two sentences of the Holy Qur’an: “Allah, the Most Exalted, says,. So that you may not grieve for what escapes you, nor rejoice in what has come to you. [57: 23] Whoever does not grieve over what he has lost and does not rejoice over what comes to him has acquired zuhd in both of its aspects.”

Obviously when something does not occupy a significant status among one’s objectives and ideals, or rather is not at all significant in the scheme of things which matter to him, its gain and loss do not make the slightest difference to him.

However, there are some points that need clarification. Is zuhd, or detachment from the world, on which Nahjul-Balagha, following the Qur'anic teachings, puts so much emphasis, to be taken solely in an ethical and spiritual sense? In other words, is zuhd purely a spiritual state, or does it possess practical implications also? That is, is zuhd spiritual abstinence only or is it accompanied by an abstinence in practical life also? Assuming that zuhd is to be applied in practice, is it limited to abstinence from unlawful things (muharramat), as pointed out in khutba 81, or does it include something more, as exemplified by the life of Ali (as) and before him bythe life of the Holy Prophet (S)?

Proceeding on the assumption that zuhd is not limited to- muharramat only and that it covers permissible things (mubahat) as well, one may ask: what is its underlying rationale and philosophy? What is the use of an ascetic life that limits and confines life, rejecting its blessings and bounties? Is zuhd to be practiced at all times or only under certain particular conditions? Is zuhd-in The sense of abstinence from even permissible things-basically in agreement with other Islamic teachings?

Apart from this, the basis of zuhd and renunciation of the world is the pursuit of supra-material objectives and ideals. What are they from the point of view of Islam? In particular, how does Nahjul-Balagha describe them?

All these questions regarding zuhd, renunciation, and curtailing of hopes-themes which have so often been discussed in Nahjul-Balagha- need to be clarified. We shall discuss these questions in the following pages and try to answer them.

Islamic Zuhd And Christian Asceticism

In the last section we said that zuhd, as defined by Nahjul- Balagha, is a spiritual state that makes the zahid, on account of his spiritual and other worldly aspirations, indifferent towards the manifestations of material existence. This indifference is not confined to his heart, intellect, and feelings and is not limited to his conscience. It also manifests itself on the practical level of life in the form of simplicity, contentment, and obstention from hedonistic urges and love of luxuries.

A life of zuhd not only implies that a man should be free from attachment to the material aspects of life, but he should also practically abstain from indulgence in pleasures. The zuhhad are those who in life are satisfied with the barest material necessities. Ali (as) was a zahid, who was not only emotionally detached from the world but also indifferent to its pleasures and enjoyments. In other words, he had "renounced' the "world'.

Two Questions

Here, inevitably, two questions shall arise in thereader's mind. Firstly, as we know, Islam has opposed monasticism considering it to be an innovation of Christian priests and monks.[10] The Prophet (S) has stated in unequivocal terms that: "There is no monasticism (rahbaniyya) in Islam."

Once when the Prophet (S) was informed that some of his Companions had retired into seclusion renouncing everything and devoting all their time to worship and prayer in seclusion, he became very indignant. He told them: “I, who am your prophet, am not such. In this way, the Prophet (S) made them to understand that Islam is a religion of life and society, not a monastic faith. Moreover, the comprehensive and multi-faceted teachings of Islam in social, economic, political and moral spheres are based on reverence for life, not on its renunciation.”

Apart from this, monasticism and renunciation of life are incompatible with the world-view of Islam and its optimistic outlook about the universe and creation. Unlike some other philosophies and creeds, Islam does not view the world and life in society with pessimism. It does not divide all creation into ugly and beautiful, black and white, good and evil, proper and improper, right and wrong. Now the second question may be stated in these words: “Aside from the fact that asceticism is the same as monasticism-which are both incompatible with the Islamic spirit-, what is the philosophy underlying zuhd?”

Moreover, why should men be urged to practice zuhd? Why should man, seeing the limitless bounties of Allah and good things of life around him, be called upon to pass by the side of this delightful stream indifferently and without so much as wetting his feet? Are the ascetic teachings found in Islam, on this basis, later innovations (bid’a) introduced into Islam from other creeds like Christianity and Buddhism? And if this is correct, how are we to explain and interpret the teachings of Nahjul-Balagha? How can we explain the indubitable details known about the Prophet’s life and that of Ali (as)?

The answer is that Islamic zuhd is different from Christian asceticism or monasticism. Asceticism is retreat from people and society and seclusion for the purpose of worship. According to it, the life and works of the world are separate from the works of the Here-after and the one is alien to the other. One should, of necessity, choose either one of the two. One should either devote oneself to worship of Allah which shall bear fruits in the Hereafter, or take up the life of the world and benefit from its immediate pleasures. Accordingly, monasticism is opposed to life and social relationships. It requires with-drawal from people and negation of responsibility and commitment towards them.

On the other hand, zuhd in Islam, though it requires a simple and unaffected life-style and is based on abstention from luxuries and love of comforts and pleasures, operates in the very midst of life and social relations and is sociable. It draws inspiration, and proceeds, from the goal of better fulfilment of social responsibilities and duties.

The conception of zuhd in Islam is not something that would lead to asceticism because a sharp distinction between this world and the next is nowhere drawn. From the viewpoint of Islam, this world and the next are not separable, not alien to each other. The relation of this world to the other is similar to that between the inward and outward sides of a single reality. They are like the warp and woof of a single fabric. They are to each other as the soul to the body. Their relation-ship can be assumed to be something midway between unity and duality. The works of this world and those of the next are

interrelated similarly. Their difference is that of quality, without being essential.

Accordingly, that which is harmful for the other world is also to one's detriment in the present world, and everything which is beneficial for the summum bonum of life in this world is also beneficial for life in the Hereafter. Therefore, if a certain work which is in accordance with the higher interests of life in this world is performed with motives that are devoid of the higher, supra-material, and transcendental elements, that work would be considered totally this- worldly and would not, as the Holy Qur'an tells us, elevate man in his ascent towards Allah. However, if a work or action is motivated by sublime aims and intentions and is executed with a higher vision that transcends the narrow limits of worldly life, the same work and action is considered "other-worldly."

The Islamic zuhd, as we said, is grounded in the very context and stream of life and gives a peculiar quality to living by emphasizing certain values in life. As affirmed by the Islamic texts, zuhd in Islam is based on three essential principles of the Islamic world-outlook.

The Three Essential Principles

Enjoyments derived from the physical, material, and natural means of life are not sufficient for man's happiness and felicity. A series of spiritual needs are inbuilt in the human nature, without whose satisfaction the enjoyment provided by material means of life is not enough to make man truly happy.

The individual's felicity and happiness is not separable from that of society. Since man is emotionally bound to his society, and carries within him a sense of responsibility towards it, his individual happiness cannot be independent of the prosperity and peace of his fellow men.

The soul, despite its fusion and a kind of unity with the body, has a reality of its own. It is a principle in addition to the body which constitutes another principle in itself. The soul is an independent source of pleasure and pain. Like the body, or rather even more than it, it stands in need of nourishment, training, growth, and development. The soul, however, cannot dispense with the health and vigour of the body.

At the same time, it is undeniable that total indulgence in physical pleasures and complete immersion into the delights of sensual experiences does not leave any opportunity for realizing the soul's unlimited possibilities. Therefore, there exists a kind of incompatibility between physical enjoyment and spiritual satisfaction. This is especially true if the attention and attachment to physical needs were carried to the very extreme of total immersion and absorption.

It is not true that all sorrow and grief are related to the soul and that all pleasures are derived from the body. In fact, the spiritual pleasures are much profounder, purer, and lasting than bodily pleasures. To sum up, one-sided attention to physical pleasures and material enjoyments finally results in compromising the total human happiness. Therefore, if we want to make our lives happy, rich, pure, majestic, attractive, and beautiful, we cannot afford to ignore the spiritual aspects of our being.

With due attention to these principles, the meaning of zuhd in Islam becomes clear. The knowledge of these principles allows us to understand why Islam rejects monasticism but welcomes a form of asceticism which is rooted in the very heart of life and in the context of social existence. We shall explain the meaning of zuhd in Islamic texts on the basis of these three principles.

The Zahid And The Monk

We said that Islam encourages zuhd but condemns monasticism. Both the zahid and the ascetic monk seek abstinence from pleasures and enjoyments. But the monk evades life in society and the responsibilities and the duties it entails, regarding them as the low and mean facets of worldly existence, and takes refuge in mountains or monasteries. On the other hand, the zahid accepts society with its norms, ideals, duties, and commitments. Both the zahid and the monk are otherworldly, but the zahid is a social otherworldly. Also their attitudes to abstinence from pleasures are not identical; the monk disdains hygiene and cleanliness and derides married life and procreation.

The zahid, on the contrary, considers hygiene and cleanliness, matrimony and parenthood to be a part of his duties. Both the zahid and the monk are ascetics, but whereas the “world” renounced by the zahid is indulgence and immersion in pleasures, luxuries, and comforts (he rejects the attitude which considers them to be life’s ultimate goal and objective), the “world”renounced by the monk includes life’s work and activity, and the duty and responsibility which go with social life. That is why the zahid’s zuhd operates in the midst of social life, and is, therefore, not only compatible with social responsibility and commitment but is moreover a very effective means of discharging them.

The difference between the zahid and the monk arises from two different world-outlooks. From the viewpoint of the monk, this world and the next are two different spheres, separate from and unrelated to each other. To him, happiness in this world is not only independent of happiness in the next but is incompatible with it. He considers the two forms of happiness as irreconcilable contradictories.

Naturally, that which leads to felicity and happiness in this world is considered different from the works and deeds which lead to success in the Hereafter. In other words, the means of acquiring happiness in this world and the next are regarded as being incompatible and contradictory. It is imagined that a single work and action cannot simultaneously be a means for acquiring happiness in both the worlds.

But in the world-view of the zahid, the world and the Hereafter are interconnected. The world is a preamble to the Hereafter. It is a farm of which the Hereafter is the harvest. From the zahid’s viewpoint, that which gives order, security, uprightness, prosperity, and flourish to life is application of other-worldly criteria to the life of this world.

The essence of felicity and happiness in the other world lies in successful accomplishment of commitments and responsibilities of this world, performed with faith, piety, purity, and taqwa.

In truth, the zahid's concept of zuhd and the monk's rationale for his asceticism are incompatible and contradictory to each other. Basically, monasticism is a deviation introduced by men into the teachings of prophets, due to ignorance or vested interests. Now we shall explain the philosophy of zuhd in the light of the teachings of the Islamic texts.

Zuhd And Altruism

One of the ingredients of zuhd is altruism. Ithar (altruism) and atharah (egoism) are derived from the same root. Atharah means giving precedence to one's interests over those of others. In other words it implies monopolizing everything for oneself and depriving others. But Ithar means preferring others over oneself and bearing hardship for the comfort and good of others.

The zahid, by virtue of his simple, humble, and content living, is hard upon himself so that others may live in ease. He sacrifices for the sake of the needy because with his sensitive heart which feels the pains of others he can relish the world's bounties only when there does not exist a single man oppressed by need. He derives greater satisfaction by feeding and clothing others and working for their ease than if he did those things for himself. He endures deprivation, hunger, and pain, so that others may be well fed and live without hardships.

Ithar represents the most majestic and sublime manifestation of human greatness, and only very great human beings climb to its noble heights.

The Holy Qur'an refers to the episode of The self-sacrifice of Ali (as) and his honored family in the glorious verses of surat Hal Ata. Ali (as), Fatima (as), and their sons once gave away whatever they had-which was no more than a few loaves of bread-to the poor for the sake of Allah, and despite their own distress. That is why this story circulated among the angels and a verse of the Holy Qur'an was revealed in the praise of their act.

Once when the Holy Prophet (S) came to visit Hadrat al-Zahra' (k), observing that his daughter had put on a silver bracelet and hung a new curtain on the door, signs of unease appeared upon his face. Al-Zahra' (as) was quick to discern the cause of her father's reaction.

When the Prophet (S) left, without losing time, she took out her bracelet and removing the curtain from the door, sent them to be carried to the Prophet (S) so that he might give them to the needy. When al-Zahra's messenger brought them to the Prophet (S) he looked at them with amazement. He was glad that his daughter had taken the hint and foregone her simplest luxuries for the benefit of others.

"The neighbours first", was the maxim in the household of Ali (as) and Fatima (as). In khutba 193, which describes the qualities of the pious, Ali (as) says the following: "The man of [taqwa] subjects his own self to hardships so that the people may live in comfort."

The Holy Qur'an describes the Ansar (Helpers), who in spite of their poverty welcomed the Muhajirun

(the Emigrants) as their own brethren, giving them preference over their own selves, in these words:

They love whosoever has migrated to them, not finiding in their breasts any need for what they have been given, and prefer others above themselves, even though poverty be their lot. (59: 9)

Obviously, the altruistic ingredient of zuhd comes into play only under certain conditions. In an affluent society, altruism is less frequently required. But in conditions where poverty and deprivation are prevalent– as in the society of al–Medina during the Prophet's time–its need is greater. This is one of the secrets of the apparent difference of the life– styles of Ali (as) and the Holy Prophet (S) with the rest of the Imams.

In any case, zuhd with its underlying altruistic motives has nothing in common with monasticism and escape from society; instead it is a product of man's gregarious instincts and a manifestation of his noblest feelings, which reinforce the social bonds between fellow human beings.

Sympathy And Kindness

The sympathy and the willingness to share the suffering of the needy and the deprived is another ingredient of zuhd. When the destitute witness the luxuries and comforts of the richer classes, their anguish is multiplied. To the hardships of poverty and destitution is added the stinging feeling of deprivation and backwardness in relation to others.

Man, by nature, cannot tolerate to remain a silent spectator while others, who have no merit over him, eat, drink, enjoy and relish freely at the cost of his deprivation. When society is divided into haves and have–nots, the man of Allah considers himself responsible.

In the first place, as Amir al–Mu'minin (as) says, he should strive to change the situation which permits the gluttony of the rich oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed, in accordance with the covenant of Allah with the learned men of the umma.[11]

In the second place, he strives to ameliorate the state of affairs through altruism and self–sacrifice by sharing whatever he possesses with the needy and the deprived. But when he sees the situation deteriorating beyond reparation and it is practically impossible to alleviate the misery of the poor through sympathy, he practically shares their deprivation and tries to soothe their wounded hearts by adopting a life– style similar to that of the poor.

Sympathy with others and sharing their suffering is of essential importance especially in the case of the leaders of the umma on whom all eyes are fixed. Ali (as), more than at any other time, lived a severely ascetic life during the days of his caliphate. He used to say: "Indeed Allah has made it obligatory for just leaders that they should maintain themselves at the level of the poor class so that they do not despair of their distress.[12] Should I be content with being called Amir al–Mu'minin (as) while refusing to share the adversities of the times with the people? Or should I be an example to them in the distress of life?"[13]

In the same letter (to ‘Othman ibn Hunayf), he says the following: “It is absolutely out of question that my desires should overpower me and my greed should lead me to relish the choicest foods while in Hijaz and Yamama there may be some people who despair of even a single loaf of bread and who do not get a full meal. Shall I lie with a satiated belly while around me are those whose stomachs are hungry and whose livers are burning?14

At the same time, Ali (as) would reproach anyone else for practicing the same kind of asceticism in life. When faced with their objection as to why he himself practiced it, he would reply, AI am not like you. The leaders have a different duty. This approach of Ali (as) can be observed in the conversation with “Asim ibn Ziyad al-Harith.15

In Volume 9 of Bihar al-Anwar, it has been related from Al-Kafi that Amir al-Mu’minin (as) said: “Allah has appointed me as the leader of the people and made it my duty to adopt a way of living, in food and clothing, on par with the poorest classes of the society so that, on the one hand, it may soothe the distress of the poor and, on the other, restrain the rich from rebellioning.”16

An incident is related from the life of the great faqih Wahid Behbahani, may Allah be pleased with him. One day he observed one of his daughters-in-law wearing a garment made of a fabric usually worn by women of rich families of those days. He reproached his son (the late Aqa Muhammad Ismail, the lady’s husband) in that regard. The son recited this verse of the Holy Qur’an in reply to his father’s remarks:

“Say: Who has forbidden the ornament of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants and the good things of His providing?”(***7: 32***).

The father said: “I don’t say that putting on good dresses, eating good food, and making use of Allah’s bounties is forbidden. Not at all. Such restrictions do not exist in Islam. However, there is one thing to be remembered. We are a family charged with the duty of the religious leadership of Muslims and have special responsibilities. When the people of poor families see the rich live luxuriously, their frustration is aggravated. Their only consolation is that at least the Aqa’s family lives like they do. Now if we, too, adopt the life-styles of the rich, that will deprive them of their only consolation. However, we cannot practically change the present social condition, but let us not grudge at least this much of sympathy.”

As can be clearly seen, zuhd, which derives motivation from sympathy and readiness to share the sufferings of others, has nothing common with monastic asceticism. It is not based on escapism from the society. The Islamic concept of zuhd is a means of alleviating the sufferings of the society.

Zuhd And Freedom

Another ingredient of zuhd is love of freedom and independence. The union between zuhd and freedom is as primordial as it is indissoluble.

The dictates of need and exigency are the criteria of opportunists, whereas independence from want is

characteristic of free men. The deepest aspiration of the free men unattached to the world is non-encumbrance, buoyancy, absence of hindrance and freedom of movement.

As a result, they adopt zuhd and contentment so as to reduce their wants to a minimum, thus liberating themselves from the bondage of need for things and persons.

The life of a human being, like that of any other [rational] animal, requires a series of natural and indispensable necessities like air, shelter, food, water and clothing. Man cannot free himself entirely from attachment to such needs and other things such as light and heat so as to make himself, in philosophical terminology, "self-sustaining"(muktafi bidhatih).

However, there are series of other wants which are not necessary and natural but are imposed upon one in the course of one's life either by oneself or by social and historical factors beyond his control, which nevertheless set limits upon his freedom. Such constraints are not very dangerous as long as they are not transformed into inner needs, such as certain political constraints and compulsions. The most dangerous of compulsions are those which emerge as inner needs from within one's own self to shackle him.

The mechanism of these needs which lead to inner weakness, impotence and defeat, operates in such a way that when one turns to luxuries and comforts in order to add charm, delight and glamour to one's life so as to feel more secure and strong in order to derive a greater gratification from life, one is impelled to possess more and more things.

In the course of time, one gets gradually accustomed to and engrossed in the means of comfort, luxury and power. These habits gradually result in a deeper attachment to and love for those things, and he is bound to them with invisible bonds, thus becoming helpless and impotent in front of them. That is, the same thing which had once added charm and delight to his life later deprives his personality of its vigor, and the same thing which once made him feel powerful against nature now turns him into a helpless slave without a will of his own.

Man's inclination towards zuhd is rooted in his love of freedom. By nature, he is disposed toward possession of things and their exploitation. But when he realizes that the things, to the very extent they make him outwardly powerful and successful, inwardly transform him into a weakling without a will-power and a slave, he rebels against this slavery. This rebellion of man is what we call zuhd.

Our poets and sages have spoken a lot about freedom and liberation. Hafiz calls himself "the slave of the magnanimity of the One Who is free of everything under the blue sky that carries any taint of attachment." Among the trees, he admires the cypress which to him seems free of all woes. What those great men meant by "freedom is freedom from attachment, freedom from being possessed, bewitched, and captivated by anything."

But freedom implies something greater than being devoid of attachments. The ties which make a man

weak, helpless, dependent and impotent are not only those which originate in the heart or emotional attachments; to these must be added the various bodily, physical and psychological conditioning and artificial appendages that are first acquired for adding charm and glory to life and for the satisfaction of the lust for power and dominance, later growing into a form of addiction or rather becoming a second nature.

These, while they may not involve one's emotional attachments or may even be regarded by one as reprehensible, should be counted as even stronger means of human servitude: They may bring an even greater degradation than emotional attachments do.

Take the example of an enlightened arif with a heart free of worldly attachments. For him, an addiction to tea, tobacco or opium has become a second nature. For him, abstention from foods to which he is accustomed may endanger his life. Can such a man lead a carefree life?

Liberty from attachments is a necessary condition of freedom, but it is not sufficient in itself. Getting used to a minimum amount of the niceties of life, an abstention from affluent living, is another condition of freedom.

The first thing to strike Abu Sa'id al-Khudri, one of the honored Companions, when describing the station of the Holy Prophet (S), is the following: "The Prophet of Allah (S) was able to manage with the minimum necessities of life."

Is it a merit to be able to do with a minimum amount of means? If we take only the economic aspect into view, we should say that the Prophet's level of consumption was quite low. In this respect, therefore, the answer would be: "No, not at all; it is not a significant merit.

But if viewed from a spiritual viewpoint, that is, when examined according to the criterion of one being free from the worldly bondage, we have to admit that it is a great merit indeed because it is only by acquisition of this merit that a human being can live with any measure of unfettered freedom and unimpeded mobility and participate in the incessant struggle of life with agility and vigor.

This matter is not restricted to habits involving the individual; binding one's self to social habits and customs, to modes and manners of dealing with people, the mesh of social connections and gatherings, adherence to styles and fashions in dress and demeanor... these and the like encumber life and deprive it of dynamism

Freedom of movement in the arena of life is like swimming: The lesser the interference and incumbrance for the swimmer, the greater is his ability to move around in the water. Too many attachments will not only deprive him of his mobility but bring him closer to the danger of drowning. Athir al-Din Akhsikati (d. 577 or 579/1181 or 1183) says the following:

To cross the river of life, shed your robes;

Nakedness is a condition of keeping afloat.

Farrukhi Yazdi says the following:

Of nakedness the sage does not complain,
A sword of good steel would not rust without a sheath.

Baba Tahir has a rubai which, though intended for some other purpose, is nevertheless relevant here:

O heart! Thy path is better when covered with thorns;
Your track is better when stretched on heavens high;
Nay! If thou can strip the skin off thine flesh,
Do it, for the lighter thy burden the better it be.

Sa'di, too, relates a relevant fable in chapter 7 of his Gulistan, although it also aims at some other purpose: "I saw a rich man's son squatting by the side of his father's grave and bragging thus before the son of a darwish son: 'My father's tomb is constructed of rare stones. Inside, it is paved with marble with inlaid turquoise. And look at your father's! An unbaked brick or two was/were fetched on which a handful of earth was thrown!'

"The sage's son heard these remarks and replied: 'Yet before your father is able to budge under the pile of those stones, my father would have already reached Paradise!'"

These are allegories underlining the significance of lightness and freedom from bondage, the essential condition for dynamism, nobility and nimbleness. Leaps, movements and struggles were achieved by individuals who were practically freer of bondage and attachments, that is, in some sense, they were zahids. Gandhi, with his ascetic mode of life, brought the British imperialism to its knees.

In the words of Ya'qub Layth al-Saffar, Ghandi Adid not set aside his diet of bread and onions till he became a terror for the caliph. In our own times, the Vietcong fighterss were such an example. Their surprising power of resistance was drawn from what in Islamic idioms has been called "Alightness of provisions." A Vietcong fighter could sustain himself for days in his shelter with a handful of rice and continue his battle against the enemy.

Which leader, religious or political, living in luxury and comfort has brought about drastic upheavals in world history? Which monarch who, having founded a dynasty, transferred power from another family to his own, has been a lover of luxuries and comforts?

Ali ibn Abu Talib (as) was the most free of all the world's free men. He was a free man in the complete sense of the word because he was a zahid in the most profound sense of the word. Ali (as), in Nahjul-Balagha, lays great emphasis on renunciation of worldly pleasures and

comforts as a means of liberation. In one of the hikam (aphorisms), he says the following: "Greed is

everlasting slavery."[17]

In one of his sermons, he describes the zuhd of Jesus, the son of Mary (as), in these words: "He was free of any abasing greed.[18]"In another place he says the following: "The world is a place of transit, not a place of abode. Its people fall into two categories: those who sell away their souls into slavery and those who ransom their souls and liberate them."[19]

In a letter to Othman ibn Hunayf, Ali (as) is more explicit than elsewhere. Towards the end of the letter, addressing the world and its pleasures, he reveals to us the philosophy of zuhd and the secrets of renunciation thus: "O world! Get away from me! I have thrown your reins on your shoulders, have freed myself from your claws and released myself from your snares. Go, get away! By Allah, I shall not surrender to you so that you should abase me! I shall not follow you tractably so that you may control me and lead me wherever you please."

Yes. Ali's zuhd is a rebellion against abasement and indignity on account of life's pleasures. It is a rebellion against human weaknesses and impotence before the tyranny of desires. It is a defiance of servitude to the world and obsequiousness before its charms.

Zuhd And Spirituality; Zuhd, Love And Worship

Another fountainhead of zuhd and renunciation of hedonism is the aspiration to avail of spiritual bounties. Presently, we do not intend to undertake any argument to the effect that man and the universe possess an undeniable spiritual aspect. This is another story all by itself. It is evident that from a materialistic outlook of the world, the rejection of hedonism, materialism and love for money and wealth as a prerequisite for acquisition of spiritual virtues is devoid of any meaning.

We have, here, nothing to say about the followers of materialism as a school of thought. At present, we address only those who have experienced the aroma of spirituality. This is so because anyone who has smelled its fragrance knows that as long as one does not liberate himself from the bondage of desire, as long as the infant soul is not weaned away from the breasts of nature, and as long as the material aspects of life are seen as not being the ultimate end of life and are seen, instead, only as means, the domain of the heart is not ready for the emergence of chaste emotions, majestic thoughts and angelic feelings. That is why, it is said, that zuhd is the essential condition for exuberance of gnosis and is inalienably linked to it.

The worship of Allah, in its real sense, that is, the ardor of love, the zeal of devotion and service in the way of Allah, His constant presence in thoughts and His remembrance, the sense of delight and ecstasy in His adoration and worship... is not at all compatible with self– adoration, hedonist attitude and being captured by the glamour and charm of material things.

The need of zuhd is not characteristic solely of the worship of Allah; rather, every kind of love and

adoration, whether it pertains to one's country, creed, conviction, or someone/something else, calls for some kind of zuhd and indifference towards the material aspects of life.

It is characteristic of love and adoration, as opposed to knowledge, science or philosophy, that they have to deal with the heart and, as such, they do not tolerate any rivals. Nothing prevents a scientist or a philosopher who is enslaved to money and wealth from devoting and concentrating his intellectual powers, when necessary, on the study of the problems of philosophy, logic, physics, or mathematics.

But it is not possible, at the same time, that his heart should be full to the brim with love, especially love of a spiritual nature, such as love for humanity, for his religion or creed. Certainly, it cannot burn with the light of the Divine love nor can it receive an enlightenment or inspiration of the Divine sort. Consequently, the essential condition for receiving the spiritual grace and the realization of true humanitarianism is the purging of the temple of the heart from every trace of materialistic attachments, the extermination from the Ka'ba of the heart of all the idols of gold and silver and of their destruction.

As we have said before, we should not be led to misinterpret freedom from the bondage of gold and silver and the indifference towards what these metals can be exchanged for as monastic asceticism which is an attempt to evade responsibility and commitment. Instead, it is only in the light of such zuhd that responsibility and commitment reacquire their real significance and are no longer empty words without content and but hollow claims.

The personality of Ali (as) is a glorious example. In him, zuhd and commitment were combined together. While he was a zahid who had renounced the world, he, at the same time, had a heart that was most sensitive to the demands of social responsibility. On the one hand, he used to say: "What has Ali to do with perishable niceties and short- lived pleasures?[20] On the other hand, a small injustice or the sight of someone in distress was enough to snatch sleep from his eyes for nights. He was ready to go to bed with an empty stomach lest someone in his dominion should remain hungry: "Shall I stuff my belly with delicious foods while in Hijaz and in Yamama there may be people who have no hope of getting a loaf of bread or a full meal?"[21]

There was a direct co-relation between such zuhd of his and such sensitivity. Since Ali (as) was a zahid, an unselfish man indifferent to the world, with a heart that overflowed with the exuberance of the love for Allah, he looked at the world, from the minutest particle to the greatest star, as a unit entrusted with responsibility and duty. This is why he was so sensitive towards the issues of social rights. Had he been a hedonist devoted to his own interests, he would never have been the responsible and committed person that he was.

The Islamic traditions are eloquent with regard to this philosophy of zuhd and Nahjul-Balagha lays particular emphasis upon it. In one particular hadith, it is related from Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (as) that he said, "All hearts that harbor doubt or entertain shirk shall be inauthentic; that is why they adopted zuhd so that such hearts may be emptied and be prepared for the Hereafter."[22]

As can be seen from this tradition, every kind of hedonism and attachment to pleasures is considered as shirk and contrary to the worship of the One God, Allah. Rumi describes the zuhd of the A'arif in these words: "Zuhd means taking pains while sowing. Mystic knowledge (ma'rifa) is (care during) its cultivation; the arif is the soul of the Law and the spirit of taqwa. Mystic knowledge is the fruit of the labors of zuhd."

Abu Ali ibn Sina, in the ninth namat of his work Al-Isharat, which he devotes to the description of various stations of the mystics (maqamat al-'arifin), differentiates between the zuhd of the arif and that of the non-arif.

He writes the following: "The zahids who have no knowledge of the philosophy of zuhd make a certain deal in their imagination: They barter the goods of the world for the goods of the Hereafter. They forego the enjoyments of the world so that they may enjoy the pleasures of the Hereafter. In other words, they abstain here in order to indulge there. But an aware zahid, one who is acquainted with the philosophy of zuhd, practices it because of his unwillingness to engage his inner self with anything other than Allah. Such a man, out of his self- respect, regards anything other than Allah to be unworthy of attention and servitude."

In another section of the same book, where he discusses spiritual discipline, Ibn Sina says the following: "This training has three ends in view. First, the removal of impediments from the path towards Allah; second, the subjugation of the carnal self (al-nafs al-ammara) to the contented self (al-nafs al-mutma'inna), third, the refinement of the inward (batin)."

Then he proceeds to mention the effective means of realizing these three ends. He tells us that true zuhd helps in achieving the first of these objectives, that is, the removal of impediments, the non-God, from the way.

Contradiction Between The This World And The Hereafter

The problem of the conflict between this world and the Hereafter and the contradiction between them as two opposite poles, like the north and the south, which are such that proximity to the one means remoteness from the other, is related to the world of the human heart, of conscience, human attachment, love and worship. Allah has not given two hearts to man:

Allah has not assigned to any man two hearts within his breast. (***Qur'an, 33:4***)

With one heart, one cannot choose two beloved persons. That is why once when questioned about his old and worn-out clothes, Ali (as) replied: "These make the heart humble, subdue the self [nafs] and induce the believers to emulate it."[23]

That is, those who have no new clothes to wear are not ashamed to put on old and worn-out clothes. They no longer suffer from humiliation on their account, for they see that their leader himself has not put

on anything better.

Then Ali (as) goes on to add that the world and the Hereafter are like two irreconcilable enemies. They are two divergent paths. Anyone who loves the world and chooses its bondage is, by nature, led to loathe the Hereafter and detest everything that is related to it. The world and the Hereafter are like the east and the west, the north and the south. Anyone who approaches the one gets farther from the other. They are like two wives.

In one of his epistles, he writes the following: "I swear by Allah that, if He wills, I shall so discipline my own self that it would rejoice to have a single loaf of bread and be content with only salt to season it. (In prayer) I shall empty my eyes of tears until they become like dried springs. The cattle fill their stomachs on the pasture and lie down to repose. The goats graze, devour green vegetation then enter their enclosures. Should Ali (as) in a similar manner swallow whatever he can lay his hands on and lie down to doze? Congratulations! For, if he does that, after long years, he then has chosen to follow the grazing animals and the cattle led out to pasture."[24]

Then he goes on to add: "Happy is the man who fulfils his duties to Allah and overcomes hardships like a mill grinding the grain, who allows himself no sleep at nights, and when he is overpowered, he lies down on the ground with his hand as a pillow. He is accompanied by those who keep their eyes awake out of their fear of the Day of Judgement, whose bodies are ever away from their beds, whose lips constantly hum in the Master's remembrance, whose sins have been erased by prolonged supplications for forgiveness. They are the party of Allah; why, ***'surely Allah's party are the ones who prosper'*** (***Qur'an, 58: 22***)".[25]

The two passages quoted above completely illustrate the relationship between zuhd and spirituality. To sum up, one has to choose one of the two paths; either to drink, eat, browse and hanker after sensual pleasures in utter indifference to the secrets of the spirit, to avoid the agonies of love and its tears, to speak not of enlightenment and progress, not to take a step beyond the threshold of bestiality... or to resolve on a journey into the valley of true humanity, towards the glory and exuberance of the Divine grace which descends upon chaste hearts and enlightened souls.

Zuhd: Minimum Of Intake For Maximum Output

Some days ago, I was in Isfahan on a visit for a few days. During it, in a gathering of the learned, a discussion started about zuhd. The various aspects of it were scrutinized in the light of the multi-faceted teachings of Islam. Everyone wanted to find a comprehensive and articulate definition of zuhd. Among them, a learned high school teacher[26] who (I later came to know, that he was writing a treatise on the subject, the manuscript of which he showed me later) suggested a wonderfully eloquent definition of zuhd. He said: "Islamic zuhd is minimizing the intake and maximizing the output."

This definition fascinated me; I saw that it was in conformity with my own earlier understanding and the

conclusions that I have drawn in the foregoing chapters. Here I, with the permission of that learned man, making a little amendment in his definition, would like to say the following: “Zuhd in Islam means drawing a minimum of intake for the sake of maximizing the output.”

That is, there exists a relation between drawing as little as possible of material benefits of life on the one hand and aiming at maximizing one’s output on the other. Human outputs, whether in the sphere of the actualization of one’s potentials, whether on the level of emotion and morality, or from the point of view of individuals’ role in social cooperation and mutual help, or from the aspect of realizing spiritual edification and refinement... all in all have a converse relationship to one’s intake, consumption or acquisition of material benefits.

It is a human characteristic that the greater one’s enjoyment of material benefits and indulgence in such things as pleasures, luxuries and affluence, the greater is one’s weakness, indignity, impotence, sterility and impoverishment. Conversely, abstinence from indulgent and extravagant enjoyments of nature (surely within definite limits) refines and purifies the human nature, invigorates and strengthens two of the highest of all human powers: thought and will.

It is true only of animals that a greater benefit from the possibilities provided by nature contributes to their animal development and perfection. Even in animals, it is not applicable when we consider what is called the merits desirable in a beast.

For example, sheep and cattle which are reared for in order to obtain a greater amount of meat, milk, or fleece, etc. should be given a greater attention and care and be well fed. However, this is not true of, say, a race horse. It is impossible for a common stable horse to show any good performance in a race. The horse which has to run and win races is given days or rather months of training with a controlled diet until its body becomes lean and nimble, shedding all its excessive fat, so that it can acquire the desirable agility and speed or the excellence of which it is capable.

Zuhd is also an exercise and discipline for man. But it is the exercise of the soul. Through zuhd, the soul is disciplined, shedding all excessive appendages and becoming, as a result, light, agile and nimble, it takes an easy flight into the skies of spiritual merits.

Incidentally, Ali (as) also describes taqwa and zuhd as exercise and practice. The word riyada originally meant exercising horses intended for racing. Physical exercise is also called riyada. Ali (as) says the following: “Indeed, as to myself, I shall exercise it and discipline it through taqwa.”[27]

What about plant life? Like animals, that which may be, loosely speaking, called the merit of a tree or a shrub is its capacity to thrive with a minimum amount of nourishment from nature. Ali (as) also makes an allusion to this point in one of his letters to his governors.

In that letter, after describing his own ascetic life-style, characterized by a minimum of consumption, Ali (as) encourages him to emulate it. He says the following: “I can already anticipate your criticism.

Someone might say that if this is what the son of Abu Talib eats, then weakness should have made him unfit for an encounter with the enemy's warriors. Remember the untended tree that thrives in the harsh conditions of the desert: its wood is firm and tough; even the fire lit from it is more enduring and fierce.

This law, which applies to all living things and beings, is more effective in the case of man because of the various characteristics special to him which are summed up under the term "human personality".[28]

The word zuhd, despite its sublime human meaning, has suffered an evil fate and is fiercely denounced particularly in our own times. Sometimes, the term is advertently or; otherwise, misinterpreted; sometimes, it is equated with sanctimoniousness and show of piety. At other times, it is considered equivalent to monasticism and ascetic seclusion. Everybody is free to coin terms of his own with any meaning of his own choice. But no one has the right to condemn any concept or term by imparting to it a wrong and misconceived meaning and sense.

In its system of ethics and education, Islam has used a certain term, zuhd. Nahjul–Balagha and the Islamic tradition are replete with it. Before we make any judgment about zuhd in Islam, first and foremost, we must understand its Islamic connotation. The meaning of zuhd in Islam is what we have tried to explain and the philosophy behind it is what we have discussed in the light of Islamic texts. If anyone finds fault with this meaning and philosophy, let him inform me so that I, too, may benefit from it.

What school of thought and what kind of logic can justify monasticism? What school of thought can recommend and justify the worship of money, consumerism, love of goods, lust for status or, to use an expression which includes them all, worldliness? Is it possible for man to be the slave and prisoner of material things or, in the words of Amir al– Mu'minin Ali (as), the slave of the world and the slave of him who exercises control over it and yet speak of human personality?

Here, it would not be out of place to cite the views of a Marxist writer about the relationship between love for money and human personality. In a useful and concise book regarding capitalist and Marxist economies, he points out the moral consequences of the power of money in the society.

He writes the following: The extraordinary power of gold over our contemporary society is something deeply detested by men of sensitive nature. Men in search of truth have always expressed their strong aversion towards this filthy metal and consider it to be the main cause of corruption in contemporary society. However, those little round pieces of a shining yellow metal called gold are really not to be blamed. The power and domination of money as a general manifestation of power and authority of things over man is the essential characteristic of a disorderly economy based on barter and exchange.

In the same way as the uncivilized man of ancient times adored and worshipped idols made with his own hands, the contemporary man also worships the product of his own labor. His life is overwhelmed by the power of things which he has made with his own hands. In order that the worship of consumer goods and the worship of money, which is the filthiest form evolved of idolatry, may be completely eradicated, the social causes which brought them into existence should be eliminated and the society should be so

organized that the power and authority of the little coins of this yellow brilliant metal would be thoroughly obliterated.

In such an organization of society, things will no more wield their present power over human beings. On the other hand, man's power and predominance over things shall be absolute and in accordance with a preconceived scheme. The worship of money and things shall then give place to honor and reverence for the human personality.

We agree with the author that the power of things over man, particularly the power of money, is opposed to the demands of human dignity and nobility and is as condemnable as idolatry. However, we do not agree with his suggested exclusive prescription for solution of this problem.

Here we are not concerned with the question whether collective ownership is preferable from a social or economic point of view. Nevertheless, morally speaking, this suggestion, instead of redeeming society's spirit of honesty, it eliminates right away the very object of honesty!

Man can reclaim his identity only by liberating himself from the power of money and by bringing money under his own control. True human personality can emerge when the danger of money and goods remains possible without overcoming man, who is not ruled by them but rules them. Such a person is called by Islam zahid.

In the educational system of Islam, man regains his personality without the need to obliterate the right to own property. Those who are trained in the school of Islamic teachings are equipped with the power of zuhd. They strip money and goods of their power and subjugate them to their own authority.

1. Nahjul-Balagha, Khutab, No. 51 pp. 88-89.
2. Ibid. Khutab 16.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. Khutab 114.
5. Ibid. Khutab, No. 191.
6. Ibid. Khutab, No. 157.
7. See Guftar-e-mah, Vol. 1, the second speech.
8. Ibid. Khutab 191.
9. Ibid.
10. Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 15, Bab al-nahy an al-rahbaniyyah wa al-siyahah. Rumi in the sixth part of his Mathnawi, refers to this tradition in the story of the bird and the hunter.
11. This is a reference to to Khutab No. 3, p. 50.
12. Ibid. Khutab 209.
13. Ibid. Khutab 45.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid. Khutab 209
16. 78Bihar al-anwar (Tabriz), Vol. 9, p. 758.
17. Nahjul-Balagha, Hikam,No. 103.
18. Ibid. Khutab, No. 160.
19. Ibid. Khutab, No. 133.

20. Ibid. Khutab, No. 224.
21. Ibid. Epistle, No. 45.
22. Al-Kulayni, Al-Kafi, Vol. 2, pp. 194-5.
23. Nahjul-Balagha, Hikam, No. 103.
24. Ibid. Epistle, No. 45.
25. Ibid. 420.
26. The person referred here is Akbar Parwarish.
27. Ibid. Epistle 45
28. Usul-e-Iqtisad-e-Nuhsin, Shakl-e-arzish-e-pul.

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