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Part Three

Suluk And Ibada

Ibada, or service, of the One God and the negation of everything else, as an object of service and worship, is one of the essential teachings of God-sent Messengers, a feature never absent from the teachings of any prophet. As we know, in the sacred religion of Islam, too, worship occupies a prominent status, with the only difference that worship in Islam is not regarded as a series of devotional rituals separate from everyday life and as pertaining solely to another world. Worship in Islam is located in the context of life and is an unalienable part of the Islamic philosophy of life.

Aside from the fact that some of the Islamic acts of worship are performed collectively, Islam has structured them in such a fashion that their performance automatically ensures the performance of other duties of life as well. For instance, salat is a complete expression of man's servitude and surrender to Allah. It has been specified in such a manner that even a man who desires to pray in a lonely corner is forced to observe certain things of moral and social relevance, such as cleanliness, respect for the rights of others, observance of punctuality, possession of a sense of direction, control over one's emotions, and expression of good-will and benevolence towards other righteous servants of Allah!.

From the Islamic point of view, every good and beneficial action, if performed with a pure, God-seeking intention, is viewed as an act of worship. Hence, learning, acquisition of knowledge and livelihood and social services, if performed for Allah's sake, are acts of worship. Nevertheless, Islam also specifies a system of rituals and formal acts of worship such as salat, sawm (fasting) etc. each having a specific philosophy for performing it.

The Levels Of Worship

Men have varying attitudes towards worship. Not all of them view it in the same light. For some, worship is a kind of deal, a barter and an exchange of labor performed for wages. Like an ordinary worker who spends his time and labor for the benefit of an employer and expects a daily wage in return, the devotee also endeavors for the sake of the Divine reward, which, however, he would receive in the Hereafter.

Like the laborer, for whom his labor bears fruit in the form of his wages and who would not work except for a wage, the benefit of the devotee's worship, according to the outlook of this particular group of devotees, lies in the wages and rewards which shall be granted to the devotees in the form of the things and the means of comfort in the other world.

However, every employer pays wages in return for the benefit which he derives from his employees, but what benefit can the Master of the heavens derive from the labours of a weak and feeble servant of His? Moreover, if we assume that the Great Employer does remunerate His servants in the form of the blessings and rewards of the Hereafter, then why does He not reward them without any effort and consumption of labour and energy? These are questions which never occur to this class of the pious.

From their viewpoint, the essence of worship lies in certain visible bodily movements and oscillations of the tongue. This is one attitude towards worship. Unrefined and vulgar it may be, it is, in the words of Ibn Sina, as he puts it in the ninth chapter of his book titled Al- Isharat, the attitude of the unenlightened and God-ignorant is acceptable only by the plebeians.

Another approach towards worship is that of the enlightened. Here, the aforementioned problems of worker and employer, labour and wage, have no relevance. How can they be relevant when worship is viewed by them as the ladder to attain nearness to Allah, as the means of human sublimity, edification and upliftment of the soul and its flight to the invisible sphere of spiritual greatness, an invigorating exercise of one's spiritual faculties and a triumph of the spirit over the corporeal? It is the highest expression of the gratitude and love of the human being towards his Creator, his declaration of love for the Most Perfect and the Absolutely Beautiful One and, finally, his wayfaring towards Allah!

According to this approach, worship has a form and a soul, an appearance and an inner meaning. That which is expressed by the tongue and the movements of other parts of the body, is the form, the outer mold, and the appearance of worship.

Its soul and meaning is something else. The soul of worship is inextricably connected with the significance attached to worship by the devotee, his attitude towards it, his inner motive that drives him to it, the ultimate satisfaction and benefit he derives from it, and the extent to which he covers the Divine path in his journey towards Allah.

The Approach Of Nahjul-Balagha

What is the approach and the attitude adopted by Nahjul-Balagha towards worship? Nahjul-Balagha takes an enlightened view of worship or, rather, it is, after the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (S), the main source of inspiration towards the enlightened approach to worship in the Islamic tradition.

As we know, of the most sublime and imaginative themes of Islamic literature, both Arabic and Persian,

is the relationship between the ardent love of the devotee for the Divine Essence expressed in delicate and elegant passages in the form of sermons, prayers, allegories, parables, both in prose and in verse.

When we compare them with the pre-Islamic notions prevalent in the regions which subsequently constituted the domains of Islam, it is surprising to observe the gigantic leap that was taken by Islam in bestowing depth, scope, sweetness, and delicacy to human thought. Islam transformed a people who worshipped idols, images, fire, or degraded the Eternal God to the level of a human A Father, and whose flight of imagination prompted them to identify the "Father" with the "Son", or who officially considered the Ahura Mazda to be a material form whose statues they erected in every place, into a people whose intellect could grasp and evolve the most abstract of concepts, the most sophisticated of ideas, the most elegant of thoughts and the most sublime of notions.

How was the human intellect so radically transformed? What revolutionized those people's logic, elevated their thoughts, refined their emotions and sublimated their values? How did it all happen? the al- Mu'allaqat al-sab'a and Nahjul-Balagha stand only one generation apart from each other.

Both of those generations of Arabs were proverbial in eloquence and literary genius. As to the content, they stand as far apart as the earth and the sky. The former sing of the beauty of the beloved one, the pleasures of love, of gallantry, of horses, spears, the nightly assaults and compose praise and lampoon; the latter contains the most sublime of the ideologies of man.

In order to elucidate the approach of Ali (as) towards worship, we now shall proceed to cite few examples from Nahjul-Balagha, beginning with a statement about the differences in various approaches of people towards worship.

The Worship Of Freemen

"Some people worship Allah out of their desire for rewards; this is the worship of traders. Another group worships Allah out of fear; this is the worship of slaves. Yet another group worships Allah out of gratitude; this is the worship of freemen."[1]

"Even if Allah had not warned those disobedient to Him of chastisement, it was obligatory by way of gratefulness for His favors that He should not be disobeyed."[2]

"Lord! I have not worshipped You out of fear of Your Hell nor out of greed for Your Paradise; but I found Thee worthy of being worshipped, so I worshipped Thee."[3]

Remembering Allah

The roots of all spiritual, moral and social aspects of worship lie in one thing: The remembrance of Allah and the obliviousness towards everything else. In one of its verses, the Holy Qur'an refers to the educative and the invigorating effect of worship and says the following:

"Salat protects from unseemly acts." (***29: 45***)

"Adhere to salat so that you may remain in My remembrance. (***20: 14***)***"***

This is a reminder of the fact that the person who prays remembers Allah and lives by the knowledge that He is always observing and watching him. He does not forget that he himself is His servant.

The remembrance of Allah, which is the aim of worship, is the burnishing of the heart and the object of its purification. It prepares the heart for the reflection of the Divine Light in it. Speaking of the remembrance of Allah and of the meaning of worship, Ali (as) says the following:

"Certainly Allah, the Glorified One, has made His remembrance the burnishing of the hearts which makes them hear after deafness, see after blindness and which makes them submissive after unruliness. In all periods and times when there were no prophets, there were individuals to whom He spoke in whispers through their conscience and intellect."[4]

These sentences speak of the wonderful effect of the Divine remembrance on the heart, to the extent of making it capable of receiving the Divine inspiration and bringing it in intimate communion with Allah.

The Levels Of Devotion

In the same sermon are explained the various spiritual states and levels attained by the worshippers in the course of their devotional pursuit. Ali (as) describes such men in these words:

"The angels have surrounded them and peace is showered upon them. The doors of heaven are opened for them and the abodes of bliss, of which He had informed them, have been prepared for them. He is pleased with their struggle and admires their station. When they call upon Him, they breathe the fragrance of His forgiveness and mercy."[5]

Nights Of The Devout

From the point of view of Nahjul-Balagha, the world of worship is another world altogether. Its delights are not comparable with any pleasures of the three-dimensional corporeal world. The world of worship effuses movement, progress and journey, a journey which is quite unlike physical travel to new lands. It is a spiritual journey to the "nameless" city.

It does not distinguish night from day because it is always drenched in light. In it, there is no trace of darkness or pain, for it is purity, sincerity, and delight all over. Happy is the man, in the view of Nahjul-Balagha, who sets his foot into this world and is refreshed by its invigorating breeze. Such a man, then, no longer cares whether he lays his head on a silk pillow or on a stone:

"Blessed is he who carries out his duties towards his Master and endures the hardships they entail. He

allows himself no sleep at night until it overwhelms him. Then he lies down with the palm of his hand under his head as his pillow. He is among those whom the thought of the Day of Judgement keeps awake at nights, whose bed remains vacant, whose lips hum in Allah's remembrance and whose sins have been erased by their prolonged earnest supplication for forgiveness These are the 'Party of Allah'; '... surely [members of] Allah's Party are the ones who prosper!'[6]

The nights of the men of Allah are like shiny days, Gloomy nights do not exist for the enlightened.

The Profile Of The Pious

In the last section we discussed the viewpoint of Nahjul-Balagha with respect to worship. We found that Nahjul-Balagha does not regard worship as a series of cut-and-dried, lifeless rituals. The bodily movements constitute the apparent motion of worship while its soul and meaning are something else.

Only when endowed with meaning and spirit is the worship worthy of its name. Real worship means the transcending of the three-dimensional world into the spiritual sphere, which is a world of perpetual delight and sublimation for the soul and the source of vigour and strength for the heart which has its own pleasures.

There are many references to the characteristics of the pious and the devout in Nahjul-Balagha. Often, Nahjul-Balagha sketches the profiles of the pious and the devout and describes their characteristic fear of Allah, their devotion and delight in worship, their constant sorrow and grief over sins.

It describes their frequent recitation of the Holy Qur'an, their occasional ecstatic experiences and states which they achieve in the course of their worshipful endeavors and struggle against their corporeal self. At times, it discusses the role of worship in lifting the human soul from the pall of sins and black deeds and often points out to the effect of worship in curing moral and psychological ailments. At other times, it speaks about the unadulterated, unsurpassable and pure delights and ecstasies of the followers of the spiritual path, the sincere worshippers of Allah.

Night Vigils

"During the night, they are on their feet reciting the verses of the Holy Qur'an one after the other, tarrying to deliberate about their meanings and thereby instilling gnostic pathos into their souls and by means of it seek remedy for their spiritual ailments. What they hear from the Holy Qur'an seems to them as if they are witnessing it with their own eyes. If they come across a verse arousing eagerness (for Paradise), they lean towards it eagerly, their souls clinging to it avidly, as if they are approaching their ultimate goal. And when they come across a verse that instills fear, their hearts' ear is turned in attention to it as if they themselves hear the cracking sound of the flames of Hell Fire.

Their backs are bent in reverence and their foreheads, palms, knees and toes rest on the ground as they

beseech Allah for salvation. But when the day dawns, they are kind, patient, scholarly, pious and righteous."[7]

The Spiritual Experience

"He has revived his intellect and slain his self until his body became lean and its bulkiness shrunk, and stubbornness turned into tenderness (of heart). Then an glory, like a thunderbolt, descended upon his heart, illuminating the path before him, opening all the doors and leading him straight into the gateway of Peace.

Now his feet, carrying his body, are firmly rooted in the status of safety (on the Sirat) and comfort because he kept his heart busy with good deeds and won the good pleasure of his God."[8]

As we observe, this passage speaks of another kind of life, the life of intellect. It speaks of struggle against the carnal self (al-nafs al-ammara bil su') and its destruction; it speaks of exercises of the spirit and the body, about lightening which, as a result of such an exercise, illuminates the being of the follower and brightens his spiritual world; it speaks of the stages and targets that the devotee's earnest soul reaches on its way until it attains the last and the highest stage of man's spiritual journey. The Holy Qur'an says the following:

O man! You are labouring unto your Lord laboriously, and thou shalt encounter Him. (***84: 6***)

Ali (as), in the passage cited above, speaks about the inner peace, contentment and tranquility of the soul which a man's restless, disturbed and anxious heart ultimately attains:

Indeed, the hearts are at rest in Allah's remembrance. (***13: 28***)

In sermon 228, Ali (as) describes the significance attached by this class of devotees to spiritual life-the life of the heart: "They see that the worldly people attach great importance to the death of their bodies, but they themselves attach much greater importance to the death of hearts of the living"(Sermon 230).[9]

Ali (as) describes the ecstatic eagerness of the earnest souls which impels them to move onwards on the path of spiritual perfection in these words: "They lived in the society and participated in its affairs with their bodies, while their souls rested in the higher spiritual spheres."[10]

"Had there been no preordained time of death for each of them, their spirits would not have remained in their bodies even for the twinkling of an eye because of their eagerness for the Divine reward and their fear of chastisement."[11]

"He did everything only for the sake of Allah, so Allah also made him His own."[12]

The esoteric knowledge and emanated insight, revealed to the heart of the follower of the spiritual path as a result of self-education and self-refinement, is described in these words:

“The knowledge that bursts upon them and surrounds them is endowed with absolute certainty, and their soul attains the highest degree of conviction. They easily bear what the easy-going regard as harsh and unbearable. They endear what makes the ignorant recoil with horror.”[13]

The Purging Of Sins

From the point of view of Islamic teachings, every sin leaves a black stain and the effects of distortion in the human heart which, in turn, weakens a person’s aptitude for good and righteous deeds.

Consequently, it further causes him to deviate and commit other sins and foul deeds as well. On the other hand, worship, prayer and remembrance of Allah develop a human being’s religious consciousness, strengthen his aptitude for virtuous deeds and diminish his proneness to sinning. This means that worship and remembrance of Allah efface the bad effects of sins, replacing them with fondness for virtue and goodness.

In Nahjul-Balagha, there is a sermon which deals with salat, zakat and the delivering of the trust back to its owner. Having emphasized the importance of salat, Ali (as) further says the following: “Certainly, prayer removes sins like autumn strips leaves off from trees, and it liberates you from the rope (of sins which is) tied around your neck. The Prophet (S) likened it to a refreshing stream at one’s door in which one takes a purifying bath five times during the day and the night. Will, after so much cleansing, any dirt remain on him?[14]

Moral Remedy

In sermon 196, after making a reference to evil conduct, such as disobedience, oppression, injustice and arrogance, Ali (as) says the following: “It is on account of these perils that Allah has encouraged His believing servants to perform salat and to pay zakat, to fast during the days when fast is obligatory; these acts of worship provide their limbs with peace and rest, casting fear in their eyes, softening their spirits, cultivating a sense of humility in their hearts and purging them from pride.”

Intimacy And Ecstasy

“Lord! You, of all beloved ones, are the most attached to Your lovers and the most ready to trust those who place their trust in You. You see, You look into their secrets and know that which lies in their conscience and are aware of the extent of their inner vision. Consequently, their secrets are open to You and their hearts look up to You in eager apprehension. In loneliness, Your remembrance is their friend and consolation. In distress Your help is their protection.”[15]

There are some people devoted to remembrance of Allah Who have chosen it in place of all worldly goods.[16]

In sermon 148, Ali (as) alludes to the coming times of the Promised al-Mahdi (as), may Allah hasten his appearance, and at the end of his discourse describes the courage, wisdom, insight and attributes of the Imam (as) and his supporters. Then a group of people will be made ready by Allah like the swords sharpened by the blacksmith. Their sight would be brightened by revelations the inner meaning of the Holy Qur'an would be familiar to their ears and they would be given to drink the cup of wisdom every morning and evening.[17]

1. Nahjul-Balagha, Hikam, No. 237.
2. Ibid. Hikam, No. 290.
3. Reference is not indicated. Tr.
4. Reference is not indicated. Tr.
5. Ibid. Khutab, No. 222.
6. Ibid. p. 343.
7. Ibid. Rasa'il, No. 45.
8. Ibid. Khutab, No. 193.
9. Ibid. Khutab No. 220.
10. Ibid. Hikam, No. 147.
11. Ibid. Khutab No. 193.
12. Ibid. Khutab No. 87.
13. Ibid. Hikam, No. 147.
14. Ibid. Khutab No. 199.
15. Ibid. Khutab No. 227.
16. Ibid. Khutab No. 222.
17. Ibid. Khutab No. 150.

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