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Home > Spiritual Discourses > Discourse 3: Spiritual Freedom 1

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Say, oh people of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you that we worship none but God and that we associate not aught with Him and do not some of us take others as Lord, apart from God. (3:64)

The subject of our discussion is spiritual freedom. The points that I wish to submit to this gathering tonight are as follows: Firstly, the nature of freedom; secondly, how many kinds of freedom there are though I confine myself to two types here, namely, spiritual freedom and social freedom and thirdly, the relationship between these two types of freedom and the extent to which spiritual freedom is possible without social freedom and vice versa. The discussion will mainly be centered round the last point, namely, the connection between the two types of freedom.

I begin my discourse with a point which is relevant to this occasion, the birthday anniversary of Hadrat Ali, the Master (mawla) of the virtuous, peace be upon him. One of the words we often use in connection with his personality is the word master and master of the virtuous and master of the masters. When we quote his sayings we add one of the above epithets instead of his name.

This epithet was first used by the Holy Prophet about him in his famous remark, "Ali is a master for him who accepts me as his master (when he lifted him up to present him to his followers), an uttering unanimously affirmed by both the Shi'ites and the Sunnis. The word has also appeared in the Holy Quran,

"If you both turn to God then indeed your hearts are already inclined (to this); and if you hack up each other against him, then surely God is Who is his Master and Gabriel and the believers that do good, and the angels after that are the aiders." (66:4)

What does the word master mean? I do not wish to go into great lengths about it tonight but to be brief. The original meaning of it is 'proximity' of two things which are close to one another. Therefore it is sometimes used with two opposite meanings. For example, God is said to be the Master of His servants. It is also used to mean a master or even a slave. Another meaning of it is both liberator and liberated.

In which sense, then, did the Prophet use the word 'mawla' in his utterance meaning, "As I am a master and friend to a person, then Ali is his master and friend." I have no intention of saying which meaning was, in my opinion, expressed here. But in connection with my discourse I may mention that the poet Jalal ul–din Rumi has tastefully used the word in his Mathnavi and taken it to mean liberator.

The word occurs in chapter six of his work in a well–known story of the woman and the treacherous judge. In this story the judge wants to hide in a chest. He is hidden there and the chest is given to a porter to carry. The judge begs the porter with the promise of a fine reward to go and find the judge's assistant to come and buy the chest. The assistant comes and buys the chest. Here the poet makes a digression to say, "All of us are confined in the chest of the lustful body without being aware of it and we need liberating prophets and apostles to deliver and save us." Then he goes on to say,

It was for this reason that the assiduous Prophet applied the word Master to himself and Ali

Saying whoever has me as his master and friend

Must have Ali, my cousin, as his master too.

Who is a master? He is one who liberates you.

And removes the fetters from your legs.

This is really true whether the Prophet's remark, "Whoever has me as his master has Ali as his master," would have the same meaning or not, that is, whether he used the word master to mean that he and Ali were liberators or not. The fact remains that every rightful Prophet is sent to liberate people and every rightful Imam possesses the same quality.

Now let us see what is the meaning of freedom and liberty. Freedom is a requisite of life and evolution and one of the greatest needs of living creatures, whether they are plants, animals or human beings. The difference in their freedom lies in their differences of structure. The human being needs a freedom beyond that of plants and animals. Every living thing must grow and find perfection. It cannot remain stationary. Solids do not grow so they have no need of freedom. But living creatures need three things for their growth and evolution: nurturing, security and freedom.

Nurturing consists of a number of factors required by living creatures for their growth. For example, a plant needs soil and water as well as light and heat in order to grow. An animal needs food and other things. A human being's needs are the same as those of plants and animals plus a series of other needs which would come under the heading of nurturing, all of which are like food for it. How can one live without food? The faculty of nourishment is a necessary asset to a living being.

The next requisite of a living being is security. What does security mean? It means being able to keep the means and equipment necessary for living. It should not be withheld from them by an enemy or a foreign power. Next to this nurturing it needs security in order to keep its life and wealth and health and

belongings safe against aggression.

The third need is freedom. What does freedom mean? It means the absence of obstacles in the way of growth. For example, in growing a plant, in addition to other requisites, you must provide a suitable environment for it and remove all obstacles. If you plant a tree under a roof, you are depriving it of free space above to attain its full growth. Thus every living being needs freedom for its growth and evolution. What is this freedom? It is the absence of barriers. Free persons are those who fight against all obstacles set in their way of growth and perfection. They do not submit to obstacles.

Now we must see what types of freedom there are. The human being is a peculiar being and his or her life is a social one, in addition to being a complex creature in his or her individual life. Human beings are quite different from plants and animals; they have certain other needs which may be divided into two kinds. One of them is social freedom. What does social freedom mean? It means having freedom in connection with other individuals in society, so that they do not hinder their growth, do not imprison them to check their activities, do not exploit or enslave them, do not exploit all their physical and mental powers in their own interests. This is called social freedom which may in its turn be of several types.

One of the greatest problems of human beings throughout history has been this same abuse of power by powerful elements in subjugating others and enslaving them so as to enjoy the whole fruits of their lives and labor.

Do you know what exploitation means? It means picking someone else's fruits. For each person his or her essence is a fruitful tree and his or her labor and thoughts are the product of that tree. This crop must be his or hers. But when others seize these fruits by one means or another, we say a person is exploited by another or others. Throughout history one person has been exploited by another person or a people by another people or enslaved by them. Or at least they have been deprived of the opportunity to give the exploiter a greater chance to secure maximum benefits. For example, suppose a piece of land belongs to two men but one of them who is stronger takes possession of the whole land and expels the other or employs him as a laborer; that will be a form of slavery.

In the Holy Quran, one of the explicit purposes of the prophets has been to offer mankind social liberty and deliver them from their mutual enslavement. The Quran is a wonderful Book. Some ideas flourish in a particular period while they lose their brilliance at other times. But the case is different with the Quran for its ideas and words possess a permanent lustre and this is something of an epic and miracle. One example of which is this idea of social liberty. I do not believe that you can find a sentence elsewhere or at any time about this matter more lively and surging than what you meet in the Quran. It has been unrivaled in all the last three centuries when the motto of philosophers has constantly been liberty. This is the sentence,

"Oh Prophet tell all those who claim to follow a divine book of the past (to the Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians or perhaps even the Sabeans whose name occurs in the Quran and to all

people who follow a previous divine book) to come and assemble around one tenet and under one banner." (3:64)

What is this banner? The banner consists of two sentences: The first one is that nothing must be worshipped but the unique God, neither Christ nor any other nor the devil should be worshipped. Only God. The second one is that 'none of us must consider another as his slave or master.' This means the abolition of the order of servitude, the system of exploitation, of the exploiter and exploited, getting rid of inequality and doing away with the right of enslavement. This is not the only verse about this matter in the Holy Quran. There are many of them but as I wish to be brief, I will mention a few of them. The Quran, quoting Moses in his argument with the Pharaoh, quotes the latter's remarks:

"And you did (that) deed of yours which you did; you are one of the ungrateful." (26:19) Moses answers, "And is it a favor of which you remind me that you have enslaved the children of Israel?" (26:22)

The Pharaoh had said to Moses, "You are the man who grew up in our house and at our table and when you grew up you committed the crime of killing a man." (All this was meant to make Moses feel lowly and under obligation.) But Moses answered, "Should I remain silent at your enslavement of my people solely because I have grown up in your house? I have come to save these slaves."

The late Ayatullah Nai'ni says in his book Tanzih ul-ummah, "Everyone knows that the tribe of Moses never worshipped the Pharaoh as the Egyptians did but as the Pharaoh used them as his slaves, the Quran employs the word enslavement as uttered by Moses." We definitely know that one of the aims of the Prophets is to establish social freedom and fight against every form of enslavement and social deprivation.

The world of today, too, considers social freedom as being sacred and if you have read the universal declaration of human rights, you will see that the major cause of all wars, bloodshed and misfortunes in the world is that individuals do not respect the freedom of others. Is the logic of a Prophet so far in accord with modern logic? Is liberty sacred? Yes, it is sacred and very much so.

The Prophet always feared the Umayyids and was worried about their future in connection with the Islamic ummah. So he (according to a successive narration) said, "If the offspring of Ibn Aas reach thirty in number, they will consider God's property as their own and God's servant as their own servants and will introduce their own innovations in God's religion."

It is true then that social liberty is sacred. Another kind of liberty is spiritual freedom. The difference between the Prophets' school and other human schools is that the Prophets have come to offer spiritual freedom to mankind as well as social freedom, the former having a greater value than anything else. Both social liberty and spiritual freedom are sacred and the former liberty is not possible without the latter. The trouble with modern human society is that it tries to safeguard social liberty without seeking spiritual freedom. In fact it has not the ability to do so, since spiritual freedom is obtainable only through

prophethood and Prophets, and through faith and divine books.

Now let us see what spiritual freedom is. The human being is a complex being with various powers and instincts, with strength, appetites, anger, greed, ambition and love of excess. On the other hand, it has been granted reason, mental and moral conscience. Internally and spiritually the human being may feel the self free or enslaved. It may be a slave of its greed, lust, anger and love of excess or it may be free of all these vices. As the poet says,

I tell the truth and feel thereby happy

I am a slave to love and free in both worlds.

A person may be so human that that person is socially free and rejects abjectness and servitude and preserves social liberty so ethically; that person also keeps his or her conscience, spirit and intelligence free. This kind of freedom is called 'self-purification' or 'virtue' in religion.

Can human beings have social freedom without spiritual freedom? That is, can they be slaves to their own lust, anger and greed and at the same time respect the freedom of others? Today they say yes and they practically expect each person to be a slave to his or her greed, anger and lust and at the same time to respect social liberty. This is one of the many examples of contradictory ideas from which human society suffers.

Human beings in ancient times had no respect for freedom and trampled upon it. Why? Was it because they were ignorant and so they deprived others of their freedom? Can we say that when they gained wisdom, they found it necessary to respect the freedom of others? Is this similar to the question of illness? Faced with sickness, they could rarely find their accidentally–found drugs effective but now with their increase of knowledge they can afford to discard old treatments and resort to new and efficacious ones.

We wish to know whether the action of ancient people in depriving others of their freedom was solely due to ignorance? No. It had nothing to do with ignorance or knowledge. Human beings were fully aware of their actions which served their interests. Was their lack of respect for the rights of others and liberty due to the forms the law took? If so, could a change of law bring about a change of behavior? For example, did the abolition of slavery in America really put an end to slavery? Or did it only change the form of slavery without changing the context? Was this disregard of the freedom of others due to their way of thinking and their philosophy?

It was none of these; it was nothing but self-interest. As an individual, the human being sought only to secure maximum profit for himself and get benefit from every possible means. Other human beings were one such means for him and he used them in the same way that he used wood, stone, iron and domestic animals. When he planted a tree or cut it down, the last thing that he cared about was the tree itself. He thought only of the way that the tree benefitted him. When he fattened a sheep and then

slaughtered it, what was his purpose but self-interest? When he enslaved other human beings and deprived them of their rights, it was to benefit himself. Thus all his actions including trampling on other people's liberty were based on self-interests. Is he the same today? Yes. He is and he has not changed at all. On the contrary, it should be said that his mouth is even opened wider to swallow more.

Neither science nor law has been able to check greed. The only thing they have done is to change the form of it. The content is the same with a new cover. Ancient man was an outspoken being and had not yet reached the state of hypocrisy. When the Pharaoh enslaved people, he frankly declared to Moses,

"What is your answer, Moses? These are my servants and slaves." (23:48)

The Pharaoh did not hide his deeds of exploitation and enslavement. But today human beings deprive others of all their rights and freedom in the name of a free world and under the pretext of defending peace and liberty. Why is it so? Because human beings lack spiritual freedom and are not virtuous and free in their souls. Hadrat Ali has an utterance about virtue which, like his other sayings, is highly worthy, even though to some people it seems old fashioned. He says, "Divine virtue is the key to every truth, provisions for the resurrection day, factor of release from any sort of slavery and deliverance from any cause of perditions."

The phrase shows that virtue delivers the human being from every kind of servitude and frees him or her spiritually to enable him or her to give freedom to others. Who, then, is a true liberal in the world? It is men like Ali ibn Abi Talib, peace be upon him, who stand in the same rank as he or are trained in his school. For they are, in the first place, liberated from the bonds of self. Ali, peace be upon him, says, "Shall I content myself with being entitled 'Amir ul-muminim' (the master of the faithful) and how can I oppress anybody for my own sake?"

Only a person who resembles Ali can truly be free and generous at all times or is at least his follower and calls his mind and spirit to account. When Ali was at the altar of prayer, stroking his beard, he said, "Oh worldly things. Oh gold and silver. Go away and deceive others but Ali, for he has divorced you forever." Only a person in whose heart and conscience there is a heavenly call can truly have a respect for people's rights and liberty without feeling the slightest hypocrisy. When such a man who possesses such chastity and spirituality and fears God is in a position of governor, he never feels that he is a man of power and other men are subjugated by him. Although custom makes people keep their distance from him, he persuades them not to do so and to come close to him. When Ali started his campaign for the battle of Siffin, he reached the town of Anbar which is now a part of Iraq but was then an old Iranian town. A number of the great citizens such as the mayor and aldermen had come forth to welcome the Caliph in a fitting manner, for they imagined Ali to be a royal successor to the Sassanid Kings. The moment he arrived on horseback, they started running towards him. Ali called them and asked what they meant by such behavior. They answered that it was their way of showing respect to their kings and great men. The Imam told them not to act thus for it meant abasing themselves before their Caliph. He said, "I am one of you and you are treating me badly by such behavior for you may (God forbid) fill me with

pride and cause me to consider myself superior to you."

This is what is meant by a generous person, who possesses spiritual freedom and has welcomed the call of the Quran.

"To worship nothing other than God". No man or stone or heaven or earth or any human attribute is worthy of worship but God. I will read you a sermon of Ali, peace be upon him, so that you may have an idea of his generosity and spirituality.

The sermon is rather long and is related to the mutual rights of the governor and the governed towards one another. Ali as a ruler advises his people to feel free with him and not to consider their governors as being superior to themselves. He says, "Do not use for him the expressions they use for tyrants by which they might abase themselves and elevate them." He wants them to speak with him as they do with ordinary people. He says, "If by chance they found him angry and hot–tempered, they should not lose courage, but should freely state their objections." He continues that they should not confirm and express agreement with every word and action of his. He says that they should not suppose their true words to seem to him too heavy to bear. On the contrary, he would be well pleased to hear truth and proper criticism. He goes on to say that even though he is their ruler and Caliph and they are his subjects, they should not praise and flatter him. Then he lays down a general principle by saying that a man who cannot bear hearing truth will find it even more difficult to act truly.

Christensen writes that Anushiravan, the Sassanian King, had assembled a number of people to discuss a matter. He stated his own opinion and everyone agreed with it. A secretary present, supposing this gathering to be a truly group discussion was duped into asking permission to express his own view. He did so and criticized the King's opinion. The King angrily called him insolent and at once ordered him to be punished. They knocked him so much on the head with his own pen box that he died.

In conclusion, Ali makes a request. He begs them never to withhold their true words and objections and counsels from him.

This is an example of a perfect man who is spiritually free while he enjoys the rank of a ruler and in this way he grants social liberty to others. I pray God to make us a follower of Ali, peace be upon him.

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