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Surely prayer keeps (one) away from indecency and dishonor and certainly the remembrance of God is the greatest. (29:44)

In Islam, acts of devotion, in addition to their preeminence, are a part of its educational program. By genuineness is meant being a goal of creation irrespective of the matter of human life in any other respect. The Quran says,

"And I have not created jinn and mankind except to worship Me." (51:59)

Worship is a means of the human being's proximity to God as well as one's true perfection. That is, that which is the manifestation of the human being's perfection is, at the same time, a goal in itself. It desires to train individuals morally and socially and so a means has been adopted which is most effective on human morals and spirit. It enables one to forget the self and self-interests.

In social matters, the basic principle is justice, which is respecting other people's rights. This is the main difficulty of humanity in both morality and society. There is no one who is ignorant of morality and its necessity. The difficulty is practising it.

When a human being wants to put this principle into practice, that person is faced with interests on one side and morality on the other; truthfulness on one side and profit on the other. One should either resort to falsehood and treason in order to gain profit, or tell the truth and forsake profit. Here we see a man who speaks of justice, acting against ethics and justice in practice. The only thing that acts as a support to the human being's morality and justice and enables one to forsake profit is faith.

Faith in what? In justice and morality themselves. When a person believes in both justice and morality as something sacred? When a person has faith in the basis of sacredness, namely God. So, a person is bound to both justice and morality to the same extent that one is bound to God, and has faith in Him.

This is the problem of our time: That science is supposed to be sufficient for mankind. If we recognize justice and morality and act according to them, we can be both just and moral. But it is actually shown that when knowledge is separate from faith, not only is it not useful for morality and justice, it is harmful.

As Sana'i, the poet, says, "When a thief carries a light, he can pick more choice objects." But with faith, both morality and justice will endure. In Islam, worship of God is not set up as something separate from morality and justice.

To illustrate this point, here is a question. Where in the world have you seen a guilty person come forth voluntarily for punishment? A guilty person usually flees from justice. The only force that can make a human being voluntarily submit to punishment is faith. We see many examples of this in early Islam. Islam has envisaged punishment for all sins, such as drinking, adultery and theft. At the same time it says, "Punishments are abandoned with the slightest doubt." Islam does not compel a judge or governor to seek out a guilty person; rather it places an urge within a guilty person to come forward for punishment. This kind of thing often happened in the time of both the Prophet and Hadrat Ali. A man would come before them begging to be punished in order to purify himself.

A man came to the Prophet, confessing adultery. In such matters the confession should be repeated four times to be credible. The Prophet said, "Maybe you mean you kissed her?" The man said, "No. It was adultery." The Prophet said again, "Perhaps you only gave her a pinch" hoping again that he would say: "Yes," and he would then be pardoned. But the man gave a negative answer. This dialogue went on until it was quite clear that adultery had been committed and the man begged for punishment in order to be relieved of punishment in the next world.

There is another case of a woman who came to Ali, peace be upon him, and said, "Oh Commander of the Faithful, I am married and in the absence of my husband, I have committed adultery and I am now pregnant. I wish to be purified from my sin." Hadrat Ali said, "One confession is not sufficient. It should be repeated four times." Then he said, "The punishment for the adultery of a married woman is being stoned to death. If you are dealt this punishment, what happens to the baby in your womb? The baby has done no wrong and must not be stoned. Go away until your baby is born."

After a few months, the woman came again. This time with a baby in her arms and asked to be purified since the baby was born. This was her second confession. Again Ali, peace be upon him, said, "We might stone you but this baby is not guilty. It needs milk and a mother to nurse it. So, go away now since the baby needs you."

The woman returned home uneasily and after two years reappeared before the Imam, and said, "Purify me now as the baby has been weaned and is growing up." Ali, peace be upon him, said, "Go away. This child still needs a mother." The mother wept and said, "Oh God, I have confessed three times but the Imam has sent me away three times and refused to stone me. I cannot bear being polluted with sin."

As it happened, a hypocrite called Amr bin Hariz saw the woman and asked what the matter was. She explained what had happened and the man said, "I will settle this. Give me the child and let me be his guardian." She was not aware that Ali wanted her not to make the fourth confession.

They went back to Ali, peace be upon him, and the woman asked to be purified since the man had

agreed to look after the child and insisted on receiving the punishment. Ali, peace be upon him, felt very uncomfortable that the matter reached a point where no alternative was left for him but to order her to be punished.

This is an example of true faith in religion capturing one's conscience and making one submit to justice. The purpose of worship is to revive one's religious life and give it freshness and strength. The greater one's faith, the more one turns to God and the less one sins. Sinning and not sinning are not the concern of knowledge; they are the concern of faith and neglecting faith leads to sinfulness.

Let me explain a point about the immaculateness of Prophets and Imams. What does this mean? You may say they never sin. That is true, but there are two answers to this. One is that God intentionally prevents them from sinning. If this is the case, then sinlessness is not an accomplishment. If this is the case, no one could sin, since he is hindered by a power beyond himself. Therefore Prophets and Imams may be supposed to have no superiority over other people except that they are treated discriminately by God. So it is not a question of their desiring to sin but being prevented from doing so by God.

Purity is a high degree of faith in God and thinking constantly of him. A person without faith rarely or never thinks of God; that person is altogether negligent. There are others who are occasionally negligent and commit sins in this state of negligence, but when they turn to God, they naturally avoid sin. But if faith attains a perfect state of permanently thinking of God, a person is never negligent and every act of that person is based on faith.

The Quran refers to those who are engaged in trade but never forget God. It does not speak of avoiding trade and commerce. Islam does not prohibit trading. On the contrary it encourages work and commerce and at the same time expects one to think of God and therefore never sin.

Let me give an example. Has it ever happened to you to put your hand in the fire knowingly-? It does not as a rule happen unless you wish to burn yourself. Why do we avoid fire? Because our knowledge tells us it is dangerous and we are sure of this knowledge. In this way we are pure in relation to fire and our certainty and belief about fire serves as a check.

The friends of God, too, are innocent since they are certain of the burning power of sins and thus, thinking of God and thereby being attached to morality, justice and rights, enables them to avoid sin. In Islam the life of both worlds is inter-related. Christianity, on the other hand, separates the reckoning of each world. For example, the other-worldly aspect of the Islamic prayer is thinking of God and fearing Him, otherwise why should so many rites be necessary. Being clean in body makes no difference to God for proximity to Him for He says, "When you stand up for the prayer you should have first performed ablution by washing your face and hands as far as the elbows."

Cleanliness has been combined with acts of devotion. Again according to the injunction, "When your body is unclean, you must wash yourself completely." Your place of worship must be lawful and not usurped. So must be your prayer-carpet and your clothes. If one single thread of these is gained

illegitimately, your prayer is null and void. Again, worship must be combined with respect for others' rights. If a house is seized by force, praying in it is invalid for him who has violated the owner's right. Such a house should have either been bought by the latter in order to render his acts of worship correct, or the owner's satisfaction should have been secured first. The same applies to clothes and carpets. Moreover if a religious tax is due on the property of the worshipper, it should have been paid.

Then we are told to face the Ka'ba in the prayer. Where is the Ka'ba? It is the first temple built in the world for the worship of God. Everyone should perform the ritual prayer standing facing the direction of the first mosque built by the Prophets Abraham and Ismail. Why should we face it? Is God there? The Quran says, "Whither so ever you turn, there is the Face of God." Why should we face the Ka'ba? It is meant as a social education for all to face one spot, for, facing any direction one wants, means dispersion and confusion. Thus facing the first temple is devotion.

Again we are told that there is a definite time for devotion, even to the minute. Morning ritual prayer times is between dawn and sunrise, and performing it even a minute before dawn or a minute after sunrise makes it void. You cannot offer the excuse of being sleepy, for, this has no meaning for God since all hours are the same to Him. But the purpose of regarding time is to train and educate human beings. The same punctuality applies also to noon, afternoon, evening and night prayers.

Prayer and worship are inseparable. In praying you are not free to do what you like, such as crying in memory of something unpleasant or laughing at a funny incident. Praying is the control of feelings. There is no turning to any side but the point in front, no glancing at anything which might attract your attention. Nor are you allowed to eat or drink while praying. All such diversions are contrary to the spirit of worship, which requires total self-control.

Another point is bodily control. Unnecessary movements of the limbs in standing position, in bowing and prostration are not allowed. The whole body must be calm and stable before the phrase allahu akbar is uttered. If you feel pain in some part of your body, rest awhile in the same position before resuming your prayer.

Now we come to other parts of the prayer which means attention to God only, and we utter the phrase, "Greetings to all worthy servants of God." This is a declaration of peace and goodwill towards all good beings. This means mingling worship of God with educational matters. In spiritual matters, the more one forgets one's self, the better it is, but from a social viewpoint, one should never forget others.

In the first chapter of the Holy Quran which we recite as part of the ritual prayer, "We worship only You, Oh, God, and beg only Your help." Here we do not use the word 'l' but 'we' to show that all Muslims are inter-related in an Islamic community. In Islam, 'l' is always replaced by 'we'. All these are lessons to learn. When we say allahu akbar are we expressing our fear of God? It is natural for the human being to be afraid of anything which is great, whether it is a mountain, a sea, or a powerful person. But when we say "God is Greater," in a convinced manner, nothing else and no one can frighten us by their greatness,

for God is Greater than anything we may imagine and all other things are trivial in comparison with Him.

Hadrat Ali says, "God has manifested Himself in the spirit of the true believers and thus everything else unrelated to God seems small in their eyes."

Smallness and greatness are, of course, relative. If you were in a smaller place before coming here, this hall would seem very large to you; the reverse is also true. Therefore, those who are acquainted with the greatness of God, consider other things insignificant. Sa'di says that for mystics nothing exists but God and only those who understand truth realize the meaning of his words, while others criticize him lor those words. He then asks, "If there exists nothing but God then what are the heaven and earth and men and monsters and beasts?" He answers this question himself by saying that all these things are too small to say they exist as compared with God's existence. He then compares this with an ocean and a drop of water and with the sun and a tiny particle.

When you utter the phrase "God is Greater" in all sincerity, His greatness is personified before you and thus nothing else finds enough significance to be flattered or feared or shown humbleness. In this way, devotion to God brings freedom: you become God's servant but free in relation to everything else. Each of the following words in the ritual prayer has a meaning illustrating God's greatness: "God is great. Glory be to God. Praise belongs to God. Glory be to my great Lord and I am praising Him. Glory be to my great Lord and I am praising Him."

Many other phrases have been used in the ritual prayers. Someone asked Ali, peace be upon him, why in each cycle of the ritual prayer there are two prostrations and only one bowing. You know, of course, that prostration shows more humility than bowing. In prostrating, the head, which is the dearest part of the body, is placed on the low earth, as a sign of humility and worship.

In answer, Ali, peace be upon him, said, "In the first prostration you are reminding yourself that you are made of dust and in the second one you remember that you will die and return to dust and by raising your head once more, you will think of the day you will be raised again for a future life." Let me tell you in connection with the importance of daily prayers that each of us is responsible, not only for the performance of one's own acts of devotion, but also for that of the other members of one's household. This phrase is addressed to the Prophet: "Bid your family to pray and be patient in it." This Command is not only for the Prophet; all of us are duty-bound to it.

What about children? Should they be trained to perform ritual prayer from childhood? The injunction is that children should be taught to perform the ritual prayers from the age of seven. They cannot, of course, yet utter the sentences with the correct pronunciation but they can be trained to observe the form of it as a habit when they begin their elementary education. It should, however, be remembered that force must not be used in this matter. They should be encouraged and give the chance to perform it willingly. There are many ways of encouragement such as praising, rewarding, showing greater affection and providing an environment conducive to such a performance.

Taking a child to congregational ritual prayer in a mosque is an effective way of encouragement and religious training. Even adults are greatly influenced by the spirit of worship in a group. Negligence in making habitual visits to places of devotion causes a frequent lack of inclination towards ritual prayer. This is especially true of children who have not been brought up to regard this as a religious duty and who when they reach the age of manhood, they are quite indifferent towards it.

If the objection is raised that mosques are often not kept clean enough to attract people or that preacher's sermons are sometimes boring, these are matters which could be remedied and not a reason to ignore a religious duty. The Quran says,

"What brought you into hell? They shall answer, 'We were not of those who prayed, neither did we feed the poor and we used to talk vanities with vain talkers." (74:43–46)

Now you understand why in Islam the ritual prayer has been called a pillar of religion by the Prophet, for everything will be accepted when the ritual prayer is correctly performed. In his last moment of life, Ali, peace be upon him, invited people to take the remark of the Prophet about prayer most seriously. You may have heard that on Ashura (the 10th of Muharram when Imam Husain and his followers were martyred), the martyrdom of Imam Husain took place in the afternoon, so by noon most of the Imam's household and companions were still alive, and only thirty of them were killed before noon. One of the Imam's companions realized suddenly that it was noon and the time to perform the ritual prayer. He begged the Imam for a collective prayer for the last time. The Imam agreed and said, "You have remembered your ritual prayer so may God make you a devoted man in praying."

It was fitting for this warrior to be spoken of thus by the Imam. At any rate, they performed the ritual prayer together on the battlefield, a ritual prayer which is called 'ritual prayer of fear' in jurisprudence, consisting of two cycles instead of four since it must be brief enough to see the line of defence against the enemy when half of the army prays and the other half is on the alert in case of enemy attack. Then the groups change places for performing the ritual prayer and military duty.

Imam Husain, peace be upon him, performed the ritual prayer in this manner, not far from the enemy's line. The shameless enemy did not even at this moment leave them at peace and continued their assaults with their bows and arrows and by their biting tongues, sneering at these devouted soldiers. Two of the men who shielded the Imam in his ritual prayer fell by the enemy's arrows. One of them was Sa'id bin Abdullah Hanafi who was at the point of death when the Imam finished his ritual prayer. When the Imam went to him, Sa'id said, "Oh Abu Abdullah. Have I done my duty?" implying that he would have wished to do more."

This was Imam Husain's ritual prayer in Karbala. In the battlefield of Karbala, he was bowing forward when he received an arrow in his chest, which he drew out from his back. In his prostration, when the right side of his face was on the earth, for he could not lay his forehead on the ground as he had fallen off his horse. At this moment, he said, "In the Name of God and with the help of God and with the

religion of the Prophet of God and there is neither might nor power but in God the Most High, the Great. Oh God bless Muhammad and his chaste family."

In conclusion I pray God grant us a happy end, give us the favor of worship and devotion to Him, make us true performers of ritual prayer, make our intentions pure, protect us against jinn and human beings, and grant salvation to our deceased ones.

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