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Home > Spiritual Discourses > Discourse 8 : Repentance 1

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And (remember) Jonah when he went forth enraged and thought that We would have no power over him, then he called out, "There is no God but You. Glory be to You. I have done evil." So We answered him and delivered him out of grief even so do We deliver the believers. (Quran 21:87-8)

In my last two discourses, I explained that worship and prayer, if correctly performed, eventually leads to a true affinity to God. The human being, through worship, will be a real servant of God and a real servant has a true affinity to God. In other words, to be a real servant of God implies a sacred journey which culminates in affinity to God.

Tonight I wish to discuss the first stage of the sacred journey, the point where we must begin our journey towards affinity to God. And this is what we need today. We who have not taken any steps in this sacred path, will not benefit from discussing the higher stages of those travelling this path.

If we are practical beings, we should realize the first step and the first stage and how we should begin our worship.

The first step on the path of affinity to God is repentance, which is the topic of my talk tonight. What does repentance means and what is its nature psychologically and what is its consequence spiritually? For many of us, it seems a simple matter but have we ever thought of analyzing it psychologically? Repentance is a characteristic of the human being that sets it apart from animals. The human being possesses certain high aptitudes and distinctive qualities which are not found in animals. One of these is the ability to repent. It does not mean only uttering the phrase, "I seek forgiveness from God, the Most High and I repent to Him."

It is not something verbal. It is a psychological and spiritual state, a revolution of the mind and the above phrase describes that state but it is not the state itself. So if we utter this phrase several times a day, it does not mean we are penitent. True repentance once a day brings us stage by stage nearer to God.

As an introduction, let me say that there is a difference between inanimate and living things in the fact that inanimate things have not the ability to change the course they follow by their own power such as the revolution of the earth around the sun or the movement of the stars in their orbits or a stone which is dropped from a height and pulled down by the force of gravity. There must be an external factor to be able to deliver them from their habitual course.

On the other hand, living things such as plants and animals have the ability to change their course from within themselves and if they meet conditions which do not accord with their life and its continuation, they themselves change their course. When a sheep, a pigeon or even a fly meets an obstacle in its way, it will change its course even to the extent of a hundred and eighty degrees, thus moving in quite the opposite direction.

Even plants can choose and change their course within certain limits and conditions. When the roots of a tree reach a stone, they change its course.

The human being, too, is similar to plants and animals in this matter. Repentance is in fact a change of the course, not a simple one like that of plants and animals, rather something much more complex and worthy of analysis.

Repentance is an internal revolution of the human being against the self. Plants and animals do not act against themselves yet the human being has the ability to do so. The rise of one group of human beings against another group is a natural and obvious matter since we expect the oppressed to arise against the oppressor. This is also true of the rise of one country or nation against another country or nation. But the rise of a person against the self is not so simple and obvious.

Why does it happen? The reason is that, in spite of having one body, a human being is intellectually and spiritually a complex being. The human being is a mixture of animal ferocity and passion, on the one hand, and of angelic qualities on the other. Sometimes the pig takes over the command as a lustful being, giving no choice to the ferocious beast, devil or angel within to act. Suddenly one part rebels against this rule and subverts it in favor of the domination of another of its aspects.

A sinful being is one who is dominated by the beast or devil within by which the angel and its noble qualities are imprisoned. Repentance is the arising of the noble qualities within against one's own mean and wicked aspects, putting an end to their domination and destroying all their force.

The converse is also true and the base aspects of the human being can defeat the noble aspects and govern the person to its own destruction. It is true that all the instincts and forces granted to human beings have some use and must be employed in their proper place and time. But there is a limit for each of them which must be observed.

A horse and dog must be taken care of in order to be useful. There are conditions for proper attention to them and a limit to using them. For a child, play is a necessity for the excess of energy to be spent and for the child to learn. It would be mis-education to hinder the child from its natural playfulness. It would be unnatural to force it to attend the society of adults. It would be wrong of a clergyman to compel his

young son to wear the garment and turban of a mullah and to prevent him from following his natural desire of playing with other children.

You may have come across children who, at their father's persistent suggestion, engage in ritual prayer and other acts of devotion for many years but when they attain manhood they are suddenly changed into libertines who know no limit in their debauchery. Why is it so? Because natural instincts have long been suppressed on the excuse of promoting higher spiritual education. Of course, inclination towards godliness and worship forms a part of a child's nature but these should not be strengthened at the price of checking all his other natural instincts, each of which has a share and importance in developing a perfect human being. Otherwise, when by chance a child sees a sexy film or meets a woman, the whole of the structure which has been forcefully imposed upon him will collapse causing irreparable damage and ruin.

Repentance is quite the reverse of the above conduct. When a person sinks deeply into sin and lust, and the angel within is not satiated, a catastrophe suddenly occurs. A human being does not have only one mouth; it has hundreds of mouths to be fed, the mouth of desire, the mouth of love, and the mouth of worship. The spirit must be fed with worship and devotion. But when it is starved, the subsequent uneasiness is terrible. A young man who is well off and for whom everything has been provided, suddenly commits suicide. Everyone wonders why he did so. The reason is that a holy power had been imprisoned in him causing him so much pain that it was beyond his endurance and he chose that way out. You meet someone living a luxurious life in a lovely garden and yet he is dissatisfied and uncomfortable. For he lacks the spiritual pleasures which he needs and which must be produced from within him, not from the outside.

Thus, repentance is a reaction of the holy, and noble spirit of the human being against the lower animal self; a holy rebellion of the angelic side against the evil and beastly vices within.

How does this retrocession occur? You should firstly remember that if the holy elements in the human being's personality go wholly out of action and are so completely fettered as to make release impossible, then one cannot gain the divine favor of repentance. But just as the presence of only a few virtuous and chaste people in a country may motivate a revolution, so the existence of a few fine and noble elements in a human being will make repentance possible. If one knows God, this repentance may take the form of turning to God. If not, it will take some other form and may even lead to madness.

We called repentance a reaction. When you throw a ball down, it rebounds. Throwing it is an action and the rebound is its reaction. How high the ball rebounds depends on two things: Firstly, the intensity of the action, namely the sin. If it is small, the reaction will be small and if it is great, the reaction in the spirit will be great. So the more cruel a person is, and the bigger his crime, the more intense will be the reaction. The American pilot of the plane which bombed Hiroshima, on looking down at the city he had bombed and the old and young people he had destroyed, felt such a pang of conscience that when he returned to his country to receive his countrymen's welcome and the wreath around his neck, he was a

changed man altogether, even though he had been picked for that task in the first place for his cruelty and indifference. He may have smiled at the words of praise showered on him but in the privacy of his home when he was alone with his conscience he felt such a criminal that he ended his life in a lunatic asylum.

Bushr ibn Artas was a most cruel general of Muawiyyah. A policy of Mu'awiyah was to send him or other equally hard-hearted men at the head of an army to penetrate the frontiers of Ali's realm and do as much damage as possible; they were given a free hand to kill, burn, pillage and destroy. This Bushr once attacked Yemen, committing many crimes including the capture and beheading of the two small sons of Ubaidullah ibn Abbas, Ali's cousin, who was the governor there. Later his conscience troubled him so much for this ugly deed that neither in his sleep nor while awake even for a moment could he forget this bloody action. Finally he went out and rode a wooden horse in the street with a wooden sword in one hand and a whip in the other, followed by groups of children hooting and laughing at him.

The second factor on which the intensity of the reaction of repentance depends is the nature of a person's conscience and the strength of his faith. That is why even small blunders which may hardly be called sins rouse the conscience of those who are spiritually firm and strong, while most of us may commit hundreds of these blunders every day without worrying about them.

Chaste and spiritually strong people are constantly in a state of penitence. One such man was my great teacher, the late Haj Mirza Ali Agha Shirazi. Once he visited us at Qum and then invited me to accompany him to a gathering, where, as it happened, the choicest pieces of both Persian and Arabic poetry were recited. He took an active part in the discussions and was amongst those who recited some poetry. Never did I realize that he had such a profound knowledge in this field. The poetry was of the poets Sa'di and Hafiz and others like them. Of course, to recite poems, especially poems like this, is no sin. But to recite poems at night is undesirable and when we left that house he kept on repeating words of repentance as if he had committed a great sin while many of us would not have worried about acts which may have been considered even more wrong.

The punishment that God has appointed for such beings is such that we are not worthy of them. This man was in the habit of rising two hours before dawn and it was by his example that I understood the meaning of devotion, godliness, penitence and complete absorption in God. But the next morning he happened to wake up later than his habitual hour for prayer and he declared that this was God's punishment for his listening to poetry the night before. In this man's belief, a man who wastes two hours at such an occupation is not worthy of two hours of necessary convocation with God.

I can cite you another example. If you leave a clear mirror in a place where you think, the air is pure and fine, you will see a layer of dust collected on it an hour later even though you had not felt that any dust was in the air before or on the wall or furniture. When a wall is dirty no stain shows on it in an obvious way and if it is blackened with tar, you cannot distinguish any trace of dirt or stain on it.

When the Prophet sat in a gathering, he uttered the following words of penitence many times: I feel traces of turbidity on my heart and every day I repent for them seventy times." Such things seem like a clear mirror to us while for him they are dimness and turbidity. Even talking to us human beings about God may seem turbidity to him in spite of seeing God in the mirror of our existence.

It has been narrated by Umm Salmah and others that for two months before his death, wherever the Prophet sat or did something, he always uttered the following prayer, "Glory be to God. I seek forgiveness from Him and I repent to Him." She says, "I asked him why he uttered words of repentance so often and he answered that he was commanded to do so. It was later that we realized that the last chapter of the Quran had been revealed to him and he felt that it was a declaration of his end." This was Sura 110, having those three verses,

"When comes the help of God and victory and you see men entering God's religion in throngs, then proclaim the praise of your Lord and seek His forgiveness for He is the Acceptor of Forgiveness."

This chapter was revealed to him even later than the verses concerning the completion of religion of Islam and the succession of Ali, peace be upon him, and it informed him that his task was done and it was time for the Prophet to think of himself and this is why he continually glorified God and sought His forgiveness.

But we poor creatures are like that tarred wall and repeated sins produce no reaction in our spirit. I do not know where and for how long in our spirit we have been imprisoned that we see no signs of regret for our dark past and realize that we had gone astray and must now turn to God. Then we will be at the starting point of our heavenly journey.

A man came to Ali, peace be upon him, asking for advice. He said, "Be not one of those who long for the next life but do nothing for it." This is actually what some of us are like. We claim to love Ali, peace be upon him, but it is not real love for if it were, we would accompany it with action. Such people suppose that Ali, peace be upon him, needs a crowd, even if they are not true followers. The same behavior is true of those who weep for Imam Husain, peace be upon him, unaccompanied by good deeds. But if it were true love, they would do something to prove it.

The second advice of Ali, peace be upon him, was, "Be not one of those who feel repentance to be necessary and yet they postpone it." People often think that they are too young to start repenting for they see old people engaged in worship and penitence. But the truth is that the time for repentance is youth. A young branch can be straightened, but when it grows thicker it does not lend itself to a change of shape. In old age no strength is left to make penitence practicable. By that time, our back is too bent with sin to make repentance effective. Rumi, the poet, tells a story about a man who had planted a bramble on the people's path. When it grew up, he was asked to uproot it but he said, "It is too early, there is no hurry. It is easily uprooted." He kept on offering the same excuse year after year. But the

brambles grew thicker and its roots firmer and its thorns sharper and more dangerous, while the man grew older and weaker and unable to pull it out by the root.

The poet means that vices take root rapidly in a person. You can remove them when you are young but as you grow older, you become more and more helpless against them. It is then too late to do anything. I swear by God that even one hour's delay is important; so is one night and one day. Today is better for repentance than tomorrow and tonight better than tomorrow night. Worship is no use without repentance. Just as one washes oneself for ritual prayer, so one should first repent before one performs an act of devotion whether it is praying, fasting, reading the Quran, going on a pilgrimage or even attending sermons.

Someone came to Ali, peace be upon him, claiming strongly his intention to repent. The Imam realized that he was not serious and asked him, "Do you know what repentance is? It is an act worthy of exalted being; it is a holy state of mind which makes you feel that God has bestowed His grace on you and that you are surrounded by angels. You lose your egoism and feel you are purified." In repentance there is no need to go to a clergyman or to another human being. Repent to your God as it is said in the Quran,

Say, "Oh my people who have been prodigal against yourselves, do not despair of God's Mercy," surely God forgives sins altogether. (Quran 39:53)

The following sentence has been quoted in a Sacred Tradition,

The groan (of repentance) of sinners is dearer to Me than the glorified glorifications (of Me) so you should sigh and groan in these precious nights. Be your own judge and censor, confess all your sins and be sure that God will forgive you and purify your soul. Then you taste the sweetness of worship and sin and the pleasure obtained from them will seem to you so trifling that you will never feel inclined to commit them anymore nor to lie or slander or accuse others.

Ali, peace be upon him, has considered six conditions necessary for repentance: Two form its basis, two are the requisites for its acceptance and two for its completion. These six points will be explained in my next discourse.

The greatest joy of chaste people has always been to admit to God their shortcomings, their faults, their needs and their poverty, saying that they show nothing but negligence, while God grants nothing but favor and grace. The following prayer is quoted from Imam Husain, peace be upon him,

My Master, when I glance at my sins I am overcome by fear but when I glance at Your Grace I am filled with hope.

Let me say a few words about the tragedy of Karbala. On the 9th of Muharram, the day before the martyrdom of Imam Husain, peace be upon him, the army of Umar Ibn Sa'd launched their assault on the orders of Ubidullah Ibn Ziad intending to give battle at night. Imam Husain, peace be upon him,

asked through his brother, Abu'l Fadl al-Abbas for a respite of one night. To remove suspicion that he intended to delay the fight, he said,

Dear brother, God Himself knows that I love to offer my ritual prayers to Him and tonight which is the last night of my life, I am more eager to do so and to offer my repentance and beg His Forgiveness.

It was a wonderful night of joy for them, full of hopes of martyrdom. They made themselves neat and tidy and even cut their hair. They set aside one of the tents especially for this. One person would be inside and two men were standing outside when one of them began joking. The other one told him that it was no occasion for mirth and joy. He answered that as a rule he did not joke but he felt that night to be a night for mirth.

When others (the enemy) approached the tents, they heard sounds like the buzzing of bees and asked what it was. They were told that the Imam, his household and companions were busy praying and invoking God's Name. The Imam spent that night in devotion and worship. He saw to the affairs of his family and it was then that he delivered his last, eloquent sermon to his followers.

Let me mention a penitent of Karbala that night, a real penitent whose repentance was accepted: Hurr ibn Yazid Riahi. He was a brave warrior of Kufa. When Ibn Ziad wanted to send a thousand men for the first time against Imam Husain, peace be upon him, Hurr was the man chosen. In doing so he oppressed and mistreated the Prophet's household. It is said that Hurr was seen to be trembling like a leaf. The same narrator was surprised and, approaching him, asked him the reason and whether he was afraid. Hurr told him.

"No. I have no fear of fighting but I see myself at a cross roads between heaven and hell and I am wondering which route to take."

At last he chose the right route. Slowly, slowly he turned his horse away in such a way that no one knew what he intended to do. When he reached a certain point, he spurred his horse on until he reached the Imam's tent with his shield turned backward as a sign of coming in peace.

On seeing the Imam, he cried out, "Is my repentance acceptable?" Then the Imam said, "Yes." His chivalry was such that he did not put one word of blame upon him for his past conduct. Hurr begged the Imam to let him go and fight. The Imam said, "You are our guest. Get down off your horse and stay with us awhile." But he felt shy, whispering to himself with shame for his past, for having sinned against the family of the Prophet. That is why he again requested that Imam Husain let him go and fight the attacking foes lest one of the children look at him and cause him to die of shame.

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