

The First Step in Refinement

How long do you wish to remain in the sleep of negligence, plunged in corruption? Fear God! Beware of the aftermath of your deeds! Wake up from the sleep of negligence! You have not yet awakened. You have not yet taken the first step. The first step of wayfaring is *yaqzah* (awakening), but you are still asleep. Your eyes may be open, but your hearts are asleep.

If your hearts were not so sleepy and rusted and blackened with the effects of sin, you would not continue your wrongful deeds and words so carelessly and indifferently. If you thought a bit about the affairs of the other world and its terrible path you would give more importance to the heavy duties and responsibilities which rest upon your shoulders.

There is also another world for you, there is also the resurrection. (You are not like other existents for which there is no returning.) Why do you not take warning? Why are you not awake and conscious? Why do you so heedlessly engage in backbiting and speaking ill of your Muslim brothers, or listening to such things? Do you not know that the tongue which wags in backbiting will be trampled under the feet of others on the day of resurrection?

Have you heard that backbiting will be food for the dogs of hell? 1 Have you never given a thought to how evil are the consequences of these differences, enmities, jealousies, cynicism and selfishness, and arrogance and conceit? Do you know that repercussion of these wicked forbidden deeds is hell and that it is possible, God forbid, that they will lead to the everlasting fire?

God does not want man to be afflicted with illnesses unaccompanied by pain, for when an illness is accompanied by pain, it forces man to seek a cure, to consult a doctor or go to hospital, but an unfelt illness without pain is more dangerous. By the time one becomes aware of it, it is too late. If mental illnesses were accompanied by pain, this would be something for which to be thankful. Ultimately, man would be forced to find a cure or a remedy.

But what can be done about such dangerous diseases for which there is no pain? The illnesses of arrogance and selfishness are without pain. Other sins corrupt the heart and the spirit without causing any pain. Not only are these illnesses unaccompanied by pain, but they also bring apparent pleasure.

Meetings and sessions of backbiting are very warm and sweet! Love of the self and love of the world, which are the roots of all sins, are pleasurable. 2

One who is afflicted with dropsy may die from water, but yet enjoy drinking it until his last breath. 3 Naturally, if one gets pleasure from an illness, and it also has no pain, he will not seek any cure for it. However much he is warned that it is fatal, he will not believe it. If someone is afflicted with the illnesses of hedonism and worshipping the world, and his heart is filled with love of the world, he will grow weary of all else but the world and what is in it. Allah forbid, he will become an enemy of God, the servants of God, the divine prophets and *awliya*, and the angels of Allah.

He will have sense of hatred and loathing for them, and when the angels come at the command of the Glorious God to take his soul, he will have a feeling of repulsion and abhorrence, for he will see that God and the angels of Allah want to separate him from his beloved (the world and worldly things).

It is possible that he will leave the world with hostility and enmity toward the Presence of the Exalted Truth (God). One of the great men of Qazvin [a province in the northwest of Tehran], may Allah have mercy on him, reported that he was present at the bedside of someone at the moment of his death. During the last instants of his life, he opened his eyes and said: "The oppression with which God has afflicted me, no one has ever afflicted!

Now, God wants to separate me from these children whom I have taken such pains to raise. Is there any greater oppression than this?" If one has not refined oneself, and has not averted oneself from the world, and has not expelled love of the world from his heart, there is the fear that he will die with a heart overflowing with anger and hatred toward God and His *awliya*.

He will have to contend with an ominous destiny. Is such an unbridled man to be considered as the crown of creation or as the most vile of creatures?

"By Time. Surely man is lost, except for he who believes and does good works, and enjoins upon each other truth, and enjoins upon each other patience" (Q 103:1-3).

In this *surah*, the only exceptions are the believers who perform good works.

And good work is a work which is congruous with the spirit. However, you see that many of man's works are only congruent with the body. "Enjoining" is also not practiced. If you are dominated by love of the world and love of the self, and if this prevents you from perceiving truths and realities, and prevents you from performing deed purely for God, and if you are kept from enjoining the truth and enjoining patience, and you are thereby obstructed from the way to guidance, then you will be lost.

You will be lost in this world and in the next, for you will have given up your youth and will be prohibited from the blessings of heaven and otherworldly advantages, and also lack this world. If others have no way to heaven, and if the doors to divine mercy are closed to them, if they are to abide eternally in the

fire of hell, at least they will have had the world, they will have enjoyed worldly advantages, but you...

Beware, lest love of the world and love of the self gradually increase within you, to the point that Satan is able to take away your faith. It is said that all of the efforts of Satan are for the sake of robbing faith. 4 All of his efforts and labors, night and day, are for the sake of taking away the faith of men.

No one has given you a document to guarantee your faith. Perhaps one's faith is merely on loan [*mustawda*],⁵ and in the end Satan will get it, and you will leave this world with enmity for the Blessed and Exalted God and His *awliya*. Perhaps one will have enjoyed an entire life of divine blessings, provide for by Imam az-Zaman ('a) 6 and, God forbid, in the end one may give up his life without faith and in enmity toward the Bestower of the Blessings.

If you have any interest in, relation with and affection for, the world, try to cut it. This world, with all its superficial splendor and glitter is too insignificant to be worthy of love, especially for one who has divested himself of such superficialities of life. What do you have of this world that your heart should be attached to it? You have naught but the mosque, the prayer niche, the seminary, the corner of a room. Is it proper for you to compete for the mosque and the prayer niche?

Should this be a cause of disagreement among you, to corrupt the society? Suppose that, like the worldly people, you had a comfortable sumptuous life, and that, God forbid, you spent your life on feasting and drinking. After your life is over, you would see that your life had passed like a pleasant dream, but the requital and liability for it will be with you always.

What values does this fleeting and apparently sweet life have (assuming that it is very sweet) in comparison to endless chastisement? The chastisement of worldly people is sometimes endless. The worldly people, who imagine that they have acquired the world and benefit from its advantages and boons, are remiss and mistaken. Everyone sees the world from the window of his own environment and situation, and imagines that the world is exactly that which he has.

The physical world is broader than that which man imagines he has acquired, discovered and through which, he roams. It has been narrated about this world with all its means and ways that: "He has never looked kindly upon it." 7 So, how must the other world be upon which God, the Blessed and Exalted, has looked kindly? What is the source of greatness to which man is called and what is it like? Man is too low to comprehend the source of greatness.

If you purify your intentions, rectify your deeds, expel love of self and position from your hearts, a high station will be prepared for you. The whole world and what exists will be prepared for you. The whole world and what exists in it along with its superficial aspects is not worth even a cent by comparison to the station prepared for the righteous servants of God. Try to achieve this lofty station.

If you are able, try to make something of yourselves and improve yourselves so that you may pay no heed even to this lofty station. Do not worship God in order to reach this station but rather call upon Him

and prostrate yourselves with your heads upon the earth before Him because He is worthy of worship and the Almighty. 8 In that case you will have torn through curtains of light and have attained the source of greatness.

Can you obtain such a position with these deeds and actions which you perform? Can this be reached by the path you tread? Is it easy to be saved from divine chastisement and to escape the terrible torment and the fire of hell? Do you imagine that the weeping of the Pure Imams and the cries of Imam Sajjad (‘a) were a teaching, and that they wanted to instruct others about how to cry? With all this spirituality and the lofty position they hold, they wept for fear of God!

They understood how difficult and dangerous it is to advance along the way before them. They were aware of the difficulties, hardships and problems of crossing the *sirat*, which has this world at one end and the next world at the other and which passes through hell. They were aware of the world of the grave, of the *barzakh*, and of the resurrection, and of their terrible torments, and hence they were never content and always took refuge in God from the intense chastisement of the other world.

What thought have you given to these terrible devastating torments, and what way have you found to salvation from them? When are you going to decide to reform and refine yourselves? Now, while you are young, have the strength of youth, you have power over your faculties, and physical weaknesses have not yet overtaken you.

If you do not think of refinement and of making something of yourselves, then how will you be able to do it when you become old, when your bodies and souls are in the grip of weakness and feebleness, and you have lost your will power, your decisiveness and your resistance, and when the burden of your sins has blackened your hearts? With every breath and every step you take, and with each passing moment of your life, reform becomes more difficult, and it is possible for darkness and corruption to increase.

The more one’s age advances, the more the things which conflict with human felicity multiply and the more one’s powers are weakened. Thus, when old age arrives, it is difficult to be successful at refinement and the acquisition of the virtues and piety (*taqwa*). One is unable to repent, for repentance is not merely the verbal expression, “I repent before Allah,” rather, contrition and the resolve to abandon one’s sin are also necessary. 9

Such contrition and resolve are not to be obtained by one who has engaged in backbiting and lying for fifty or seventy years, whose beard has become white with sin and transgression. Such a person is afflicted with sin to the end of his life. Youths should not sit still the dust of age turns them grey. (I have reached old age, and am aware of its misfortunes and difficulties). While you are young, you are able to accomplish something.

While you enjoy the strength and determination of youth you can expel selfish desires, worldly attractions and animal wants from yourselves. However, if you do not think about reform and making something of yourselves while you are young, it will be too late when you become old. Think, while you

are young, before you become old and exhausted. A young heart is subtle and celestial, and within it the motivation for corruption is weak.

However, the older one gets the stronger and more firm is the source of sin implanted in the heart, until it can no longer be uprooted, as it is reported. The heart of man is clear and shining like a mirror. With each sin a man commits, another black mark is added to the heart, until it becomes black, so that it is possible a night and day cannot pass without the commission of a sin against the Lord. 1059

When old age arrives, it is difficult to return one's heart to its original form and state. If, God forbid, you have not reformed yourself when you leave the world, in what manner do you expect to meet God, when your heart is black and your eyes, ears and tongue are polluted by sins? How can you return that with which you have entrusted by God when it has become polluted and wicked, while it was given to you in perfect purity and cleanliness?

These eyes and ears which are under your control, this hand and tongue which are at your command, these organs and limbs with which you live—all have been entrusted to you by God, the Almighty, and were given to you in perfect purity and righteousness. If they are afflicted with sin, they become polluted. If, God forbid, they are polluted with that which is forbidden, wickedness results.

When the time comes to return this trust, it is possible that you will be asked if this is the right way to protect the trust which was given you. When the trust was placed under your control, was it like this? Was the heart which you were given like this? Were the eyes which were bestowed upon you like this? Were the other organs and limbs which were placed at your will this polluted and dirty? What will be your answer to these questions?

How will you meet God when you have committed such treachery with regard to that with which you have been entrusted? You are young. You have spent your youth in such a way that from a worldly perspective you have given up many benefits. If you use this valuable time and the spring of your youth in the way of God and with a specific sacred purpose, then it has not been wasted, but rather this world and the next have been determined for you.

However, if your behavior is of such a manner as is currently witnessed, then you have wasted your youth and the prime of your life has been passed in vain. In the other world also, various severe difficulties, calamities and troubles will grab you by the neck, and you will fall into the whirlpool of misfortunes and disaster.

1. In the advice given by the Commander of the Faithful [Imam 'Ali ('a)] to Nuf al-Bakali, it is stated: "Keep away from backbiting, for it will be food for the dogs of hell." *Wasa'il ash-Shi'ah*, vol. 8, p. 600, The Book of Hajj, The Chapters on the Precepts of the Ten, chap. 152, hadith 16.

2. It is reported that Abi 'Abdillah (Imam Ja'far), peace be with him, said: The head of all sins is love of the world. *Usul al-Kafi*, vol. 4, p. 2, The Book of Faith and Infidelity, The Chapter on Love of the World and Avarice Toward It, hadith 1; *Usul*

al-Kafi, vol. 3, p. 197, The Book of Faith and Infidelity, The Chapter on Derogation of the World and Asceticism in It, hadith 11; Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 1 and vol. 74, p. 178.

3. On the symptoms of dropsy is inordinate thirst. In Arabic the disease is called *istisqa'* and one who has the disease is *mustasqa*

4. He (Iblis) said:

“As You have caused me to remain disappointed, I will certainly lie in wait for them in Your straight path” (Q 7:16).

In the exegesis of ‘Ali ibn Ibrahim pertaining to this ayah it is written: “If people tread the path of guidance, Satan tries to make them leave the path of religion.” Tafsir of ‘Ali ibn Ibrahim, vol. 1, p. 224; Tafsir Burhan, vol. 2, p. 5.

5. In a narration from the Family of the Prophet (‘a) under ayah 98, Surah al-An‘am, pertaining to the phrase, “a resting place and a depository,” it is said that the faiths of individuals may be divided into two kinds, fixed and borrowed. As in the narration from Muhammad ibn al-Fadil from Musa ibn al-Ja‘far (‘a) who said: “Faith which is in a resting place will be fixed until the Day of Resurrection. Faith which is in a depository will be taken by God prior to death.” Tafsir ‘Ayashi, vol. 1, p. 401. In Nahj al-Balaghah it is also to be found that: “A kind of faith is fixed in the heart, and another kind is loaned in the hearts and breasts until the time of death.” Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 231.

6. The phrase used is more literally, “sitting at the table of Imam az-Zaman (‘a),” indicating that the religious students are provided for through religious donations. [Tr.]

7. The full text of the hadith is: “For God, the Glorious and Exalted, the world is without value; and among the creatures known to us which God has created, there is no existent more despicable to Him than the world, and since the time when He created the world, God has never looked kindly upon it.” Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 70, p. 110, The Book of Faith and Infidelity, chap. 122, hadith 109

8. It is narrated from Imam as-Sadiq (‘a): Worship is of three kinds: one group worships God for fear; this is the worship of the servants. Another group worships God in order to obtain a reward; this is the worship of hirelings. And the third group worships God, the Great and Lofty, because of love, and this is the worship of the free. And this is the most excellent worship.” Wasa’il ash-Shi‘ah, vol. 1, p. 45, The Chapters of Introduction to Worship, chap. 9, hadith 1; Usul al-Kafi, vol. 3, p. 131, The Book of Faith and Infidelity, Chapter on Worship, hadith 5.

9. It is narrated that Imam ‘Ali (‘a) said: “Verily, asking for forgiveness is a degree of the ‘illiyin and it is a word that means six things. The first of them is regret for what has occurred. The second is the resolve not to return to that evil ever again...” Nahj al-Balaghah, p. 1281, Hikmat 409.

For more information refer to Forty Hadiths: An Exposition by Imam Khomeini, hadith 17, translated by ‘Ali Quli Qara’i in the journal, Al-Tawhid, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 39-52. and on line at:

<http://www.al-islam.org/forty-hadith-an-exposition-second-edition-imam-k...> [1] Note that the ‘illiyin are those of the most lofty heights of heaven. Cf. Q 83:17. [Tr.]

10. It is reported from Imam al-Baqir (‘a): “There is no servant without a white spot on his heart. When a sin is performed a black spot appears on it. Then if he repents, this blackness is erased. But if he continues to sin, the blackness increases, until it covers the white. When the white is covered, one with such a heart never returns to excellence and goodness. Usul al-Kafi, vol. 3, p. 274, The Book of Faith and Infidelity, The Chapter on Sins, hadith 20.

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