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Discourse 11: The Description of the Material World and our Responsibility While Living in it

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ: أَلَّا إِنَّ الدُّنْيَا قَدْ ارْتَحَلَتْ مُدْبِرَةً، وَ الْآخِرَةَ قَدْ احْتَمَلَتْ مُقْبَلَةً. أَلَّا
وَ إِنَّكُمْ فِي يَوْمٍ عَمَلٌ لِاحْسَابٍ فِيهِ، وَ يُوشِكُ أَنْ تَكُونُوا فِي يَوْمٍ حِسَابٍ لَيْسَ فِيهِ
عَمَلٌ وَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُعْطِي الدُّنْيَا مَنْ يُحِبُّ وَ يُبْغِضُ، وَ لَا يُعْطِي الْآخِرَةَ إِلَّا لِمَنْ
يُحِبُّ،

وَ إِنَّ لِلدُّنْيَا أَبْنَاءً وَ لِلآخِرَةِ أَبْنَاءً. فَكُونُوا مِنْ أَبْنَاءِ الْآخِرَةِ، وَ لَا تَكُونُوا مِنْ أَبْنَاءِ
الدُّنْيَا. إِنَّ شَرَّ مَا أَتَخَوَّفُ عَلَيْكُمْ: اتِّبَاعُ الْهَوَى وَ طُولُ الْأَمَلِ. فَاتَّبِعُوا الْهَوَى
يَصْرِفُ قُلُوبَكُمْ عَنِ الْحَقِّ وَ طُولُ الْأَمَلِ يَصْرِفُ هِمَمَكُمْ إِلَى الدُّنْيَا، وَ مَا بَعْدَهُمَا
لِأَحَدٍ مِنْ خَيْرٍ يَرْجَاهُ فِي دُنْيَا وَ لَا آخِرَةَ.

The Messenger of Allah (S) has said, “The material world has ceased to exist, has been left aside and is gone while the next life is inexhaustible and is in front (of you). You are living in an age in which there is only the performing of deeds while there is no accountability (for your deeds); however undoubtably in the future, it will be a time in which there will be accountability and no time to perform deeds. Most certainly Allah grants the (benefits) of the material world to those whom He loves and whom He hates.

However, He will not grant the next life to anyone except those whom He loves. Unquestionably this material world has its own offspring and the next life too has its' offspring. However, you should be the offspring of the next life and not the offspring of this life! The most frightful of things which I fear for you is the following of your lower desires and long aspirations.

As for the following of your lower desires, this act shall divert your hearts from the Truth; and the long desires shall divert all of your thoughts to be only about the material world. For the person who possesses these two traits, there is absolutely no good for him from either the transient world or the next life.”¹

The topics of discussion in this tradition have been divided into various sections by the Prophet of Islam (S) and it is in this manner of discussing it section by section that we shall proceed to elucidate upon its meaning.

1. In the introduction to the tradition and its first section, the Prophet (S) made two statements: “The material world has ceased to exist, has been left aside and is now gone, while the next life is inexhaustible and is in front (of you).”

It is possible that the two statements used in this section of the tradition (احتمال and ارتحال) which mean, 'even though the life of this world has not yet passed us by' and 'the life of the next world has not yet come', respectively, may have been mentioned in this fashion since in 'Arabic, anything which is imminent and is bound to occur is occasionally mentioned in the past tense. This is exactly what is mentioned in this tradition that this world is finished and the life of the next world (already) came.

What is meant by such an expression is that the opportunity to perform good deeds in this world is very short, while the coming of the life of the next world is certain.

2. The second part of the tradition states, “We are living in an age which is solely for the performance of deeds while there is no accountability (at this juncture).”

This is a very important issue as the nature of the transient world and the life of the next world are completely different from one another. In this world, we can only perform actions and plant the seeds (of our reward), while it is in the next world that we shall see the fruits of our labour and reap our harvest!

Sometimes a person sees the retribution of his deeds in this world however this is something insignificant, a minor issue and something unique which may not always occur. This is in no way a general rule or a universal issue – and this is the most important difference between this world and the next world.

We know that in this world, there is no accountability or reckoning for the deeds we perform and thus we see that people do not give much attention to the outcome of their actions since they do not see the product of their deeds. However, when they see the outcome in the next life, then they will definitely wish that they could make up for the bad deeds done in the world! Obviously, at that time, they would have lost the opportunity as there is no way to return back to the world!

From the verses of the Noble Qur`an, we can deduce that one of the most regretful states which those who committed sins will find themselves in is when they realize that they had actually done a bad deeds

and wish that they could offer some recompense for them. At that time, they would let out a scream, however no one would pay any attention to them:

رَبِّ ارْجِعُونِ

“O' my Lord! Return me back (to the world)!”

They will ask for the right to return back so that they can make amends for their deeds however the call will come that this is not possible! Once again, their cry shall be:

مَا فَرَّطْتُ فِي جَنْبِ اللَّهِ

“Alas my grief since I was unmindful of Allah!”

Sometimes a teacher may say to a student, “While you are young and have the ability, free time, are not busy with a wife and children and the difficulties of life are not chasing you, focus on your studies!” However, the student may not listen to the advice and later on, when the student's life has passed him by, he would realize that he does not have the physical strength to study, nor is his soul in a state to take in the knowledge.

At this point, he would realize that no matter what profession he wishes to go into, he must be educated. Since he has no education, he would be compelled to a life of either being worthless to society or performing menial labour jobs that are below his status! At that time, would he become regretful and wish to himself that if only when he was young, he had listened to his elders!

He would wish that he was young again such that he would, this time around, study properly! However as we know, it is not possible for his youth to return to him. The relationship between this life and the next life is the same!

It has been recorded in Nahj al-Balagha that the Commander of the Faithful, ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (as) has stated: “The deceased that you are now carrying upon your shoulders (to the graveyard) and that you carry every day are the best preachers for you!”

فَكَفَىٰ وَاعِظًا بِمَوْتِي...

“Sufficient for you as a preacher are the deceased ones...”

When the deceased are brought to the graveyard, they would think to themselves, “It is as if we were never even living in this world!”

All we need to do is take a cursory glance at the burial ceremony and how the dirt is thrown over the dead person; how the Suratul Fatiha is read over them and then how we say farewell to the deceased. When we look back at the entire episode, it is as if the person had been in that graveyard for the past one hundred years and that the life of the next world has been his abode since the beginning!

As soon as a person dies, others rush to perform the last rites and bury the person so that the smell of the body does not come out and annoy others! They carry the deceased to the graveyard, however when alive, if that same person was told to go and visit the graveyard for even one minute, he would not have gone since he was terrified of that place!

3. The third point in the tradition under review states that, “Surely Allah grants the (benefits) of this world to those whom He loves and those He hates – both the believer and the disbeliever, however, the next life is strictly reserved for the true believers.”

This part of the tradition shows us that in the presence of Allah (SwT), the transient world has absolutely no value to it. If this were not the case, then He (SwT) would have reserved the material world for those He (SwT) loves.

Something similar has been mentioned in other tradition in which we are told that if the material world was worth the wing of a fly, then Allah (SwT) would not have permitted the disbeliever even one drink of water from it!

As we know, the transient world is the testing ground (for the next life) and possessing material bounties from this world is definitely not a sign of a person possessing character, nor is giving it up a sign that a person has no character. However since the next life is the one with value, it will only be given to His (SwT) friends.

The same theme which is contained in the sentence of the tradition under review can more or less be seen in the verses of the Noble Qur`an. In such verses, we are given a general understanding that if we see a person well taken care from the material point of view, then we should realize that sometimes the authority which he yields in the transient world is actually a source of punishment from Allah (SwT):

إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ أَنْ يُعَذِّبَهُمْ بِهَا

“Surely Allah only intends to punish them through this.”

Thus, we must not become upset or saddened if one day we see that Allah (SwT) has taken away the bounties of the material world from us and we should not say to ourselves that we have been expelled from the spiritual presence of Allah (SwT)!

At the same time, we should also not be happy at the good fortune and luck that the material world brings us just as how we should not be upset at the adversity and hardships which come to us. If we look at the world with this type of an outlook, then the transient world would look insignificant to us and we would no longer pay attention to these things that possess no value. Thus, one must stand firm on his faith and belief in Allah (SwT) and must not sacrifice these values while traversing the path of the transient world.

4. The fourth point informs us, “Both the transient world and the next life have children and offspring. Some people are the children of the next life, while others are the offspring of this transient world.”

This is a very remarkable expression since we know that a child inherits certain characteristics and traits from the father. Not only do the rules of inheritance play a part in the over-all order of the universe laid down by the Creator, but even from the point of view of the natural world around us they also have a role. The law of inheritance also plays a role in our children as we know that a child definitely inherits the characteristics and traits of his parents.

The transient world has an apparent aspect and a hidden or inner aspect, and the people of the world are the same. The world can, all of a sudden – either day or night – overturn, and the people of the world are just the same.

The inner aspect of the transient world is that it is empty, ruined and continuously changing and those who are the offspring of the world are the same – they are (spiritually) empty, corrupt and destroyed. Today, they may be your friend and tomorrow your enemy! One day, the person may help and assist you and another day he will come and kick your gravestone!

However, the children of the next life are much better than those of the transient world from all points of view. The children of the next life are those who are faithful, resolute, and are a pleasure to be with – their outer characteristics and inner-self are one.

The tradition under discussion tells us that we must be children of the next life. Of course, this sentence may also point to other issues such as that the relationship and love between a child and his father is one that is very strong as the child is always under the guidance and protection of his or her father.

Similarly, the children of these two (both the material world and the next life) possess a very close relationship and bond with their father (either the material world or the next life).

5. The fifth point is that “Surely the most frightful of things which I am afraid for you all is...”

This phrase and way of speaking can also be seen in many other traditions from the Noble Prophet (S)

and the Commander of the Faithful, ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (as). However, the important thing is that which comes after this phrase.

In the tradition under discussion, the Prophet (S) has advised us to be aware of and keep away from two things:

1. Following of our lower desires.
2. Having long wishes or aspirations.

The Noble Prophet (S) then explained both of these points in detail.

1) Following the lower desires leads one to becoming misled from the path of truth. It is possible that the truth would not be what is in the person's benefit. If he comes to such a point in life, then he would place himself and his desires in front of the religion. In this instance, it is clear that he is a one who only wants for himself and does not want what Allah (SwT) wants! Such a person would be a perfect example of:

نُؤْمِنُ بِبَعْضٍ وَنَكْفُرُ بِبَعْضٍ

“You believe in some of it while you disbelieve in some of it.”

And this is the meaning of showing bias in relation to the religion.

When a person only wants the fulfillment of his personal desires and worships the lower self, this results in veils being placed in front of his sight and the person only desiring things for himself as opposed to that which Allah (SwT) wants for him. Thus, the worshipping of the lower self is actually a barrier to the truth.

The worshipping of the lower soul not only results in not acting properly, rather, it prevents one from having a clear perception of things around him – such a person can no longer comprehend good and bad. Worshipping of the lower soul also takes the intelligence away and prevents one from being able to perceive the realities around him. Through this, he is not able to come to a suitable outcome in his decision making process.

However, in this issue, we see that there is a difference between people who possess knowledge of the faith and people who do not have a deep knowledge of the religion. When it comes to issues which are in agreement with the person's soul and what he wants for himself but contradict what Allah (SwT) has ordered, the common people would say that, “It is true that Allah has said so and so, however, I am a sinner and thus, I will do what I want...”

However, those who (apparently) possess knowledge of Islam but still commit sins would try to

rationalize and explain the performance of the bad deed by saying that, “This issue is one of those related to the Hukumul Thanawiyah², or that in this instance, one is compelled to do it out of necessity (thus, it is permissible).”

Such people may also state, “The Islamic proofs which show that this act is prohibited, are weak.” In addition, they may state, “There is absolutely no evidence to support this act as being forbidden.” Thus, such a person would try to bring forth thousands of “religious excuses” so that he could be pardoned from the sin of that particular act!

Therefore, in order to have a complete understanding of the laws of Allah (SwT), we must first purify our soul.

2) The long desires keep a person pre-occupied with the material world and when this occurs, naturally he would forget the next life. When a person possesses long, unattainable desires in relation to the material world, then he has no time for the next life!

In summary, if a person possesses these two characteristics, then he would definitely not have any share of goodness of this world or the next life. He would tirelessly work day and night, however would not see any rest or tranquility!

1. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 74, pg. 188

2. The term hukm-e-Thanawiyah is a term used in Islamic Jurisprudence that can be translated as the “secondary ruling” which means the “exception to the rule” or a ruling that can – for various reasons – overrule the primary ruling. In such issues, if the leader of the Islamic nation decides that due to a particular reason such as if the needs of the society dictate that an Islamic legislation is temporarily put on hold, he has the power to do so. (Tr.)