

Discourse 12: A Description of The Material World and a Comparison Between its Past and Future

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ فِي خُطْبَتِهِ: لَا تَكُونُوا مِمَّنْ خَدَعَتْهُ الْعَاجِلَةُ، وَغَرَّتْهُ الْأَمْنِيَّةُ فَاسْتَهْوَتْهُ الْخُدْعَةُ فَرَكَنَ إِلَى دَارِ السُّوءِ سَرِيعَةَ الزَّوَالِ، وَشَيْكَةَ الْإِنْتِقَالِ. إِنَّهُ لَمْ يَبْقَ مِنْ دُنْيَاكُمْ هَذِهِ فِي جَنْبِ مَا مَضَى إِلَّا كَأَنَّاخَةَ رَاكِبٍ أَوْ صِرَّ حَالِبٍ، فَعَلَى مَا تَعْرَجُونَ وَ مَاذَا تَنْتَظِرُونَ؟

The Messenger of Allah (S) said the following in his speech, “Do not be like the one who was fooled by the transient world and was deluded by the long desires which kept him pre-occupied. Thus, he pinned his hopes on the material world that is full of evils and shall pass by quickly.

You should know that all that remains of this world (its time span), in comparison to that which has already passed is like the amount of time which a camel lies down on the ground (when a person goes to mount it or place some load on it). Its worth is the (monetary) amount of that thing which a person uses to tie the udders of an animal (to prevent the child from taking milk from its mother or so that the milk is not wasted in other ways). Therefore what do you raise yourselves upon (where do you live and build your dwellings upon), and what are you in anticipation of?”¹

In this speech, the Noble Prophet (S) has brought forth some very important issues.²

The first thing he has spoken about is: “The gold and glitter of the material world is an illusion which tricks a person – both from the internal and external aspects of the world.”

These things have been referred to in the tradition as being “خدعة” or an imposter and cheater and as

“غرور” or delusion and trickery – just as it is stated:

خَدَعَتْهُ الْعَاجِلَةُ وَ غَرَّتْهُ الْأَمْنِيَّةُ...

“The fast ending material world has cheated the person, and the long desires which the material world contains have deluded him.”

In reality, the two characteristics of cheating (خدعة) and delusion (غرور) are one and the same and very close in meaning. However, in this tradition, the term 'imposter' or 'cheater' (خدعة) is in relation to the internal illusions of the material world, while 'delusion' or 'trickery' (غرور) is in relation to the outer illusions of the material world.

A person sees the gold, glitter, status and apparent lofty position of the material world and sees one who possesses these bounties and other good things and it is these things which end up keeping him preoccupied and ultimately, negligent of Allah (SwT). Through this, he becomes completely unaware of Allah (SwT), the next life and the spiritual attractions of the faith.

Thus, the Noble Prophet (S) has stated that we must not be like the one who is sometimes cheated by the outer forces of the material world, while at other times is tricked by the inner powers!³

The second point mentioned in the tradition is the instability of the transient world.

In reality, the one who is deluded by either the inner or outer aspects of the material world has placed his trust on “دارالسوء” or “The wicked abode” and that too, a locality which shall very soon be destroyed!

As we know, the person shall move from this abode to the next life and at any time, “...the bell shall toll (and it will be announced) that you lazy people must now move on...”

In this part of the tradition, we see that two words are used – namely “الزوال” and “الانتقال”. These two words carry a very important point since “الزوال” means that the person will have to give up whatever he has in his possession, while “الانتقال” means that a person will be transferred to another area (the next life) in which he must give full account for the actions performed in the world. Thus, the blessings of the material world are not only given to us very quickly, rather they are taken away from us just as fast!

The Qur`an also emphasizes this issue and in regards to the material world, its delusionary tactics have been referred to as the glitter and attraction. Sometimes the attraction is attributed to Allah Himself; sometimes to the person; and in other times to Satan. However, from one point of view, all of these are correct:

1. Attributing the glitter and attraction of the material world to Allah (SwT) is in reference to Him being the “Musababal Asbab” or the “Causer of all Causes” as all things which occur in the universe are through

His permission.

2. Attributing this act to Satan is due to the evil whisperings that he is known for which affect a person – both from his outside surroundings and from his inner self.

3. Attributing this act to the person is because of following the lower desires and negative, inner characteristics.

From the point of view of the common people who look at things at a very rudimentary level, the material world is one of gold and glitter. However, the person who has delved deep into the material world knows that there is no beauty to it! The luster of the material world is only there so that the person is able to see these things from far away and then judge (the true worth of the world)! However, when one gets close to it and falls into its trap, then his entire life is engulfed in flames and such a person becomes confused to the realities.

Since a majority of people rely on what they see and perceive (with their other senses) as their only form of knowledge and do not go deeper in issues which come up in their lives, they are caught up in chasing the foolish things of the material world.

With this said, when we look deep into the private lives of those who have achieved status, wealth, position, hold a great rank in the material world and whose entire presence is busy with these things, we see that their lives are not even worth “porridge in the mouth.”

Thus in summary, from afar, the material world is attractive and beautiful, however when a person enters into it, he would then realize that there is nothing of worth present!

There is a very beautiful phrase given by the Commander of the Faithful, ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (as) where he says:

كُلُّ شَيْءٍ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا سَمَاعُهُ أَعْظَمُ مِنْ عِيَانِهِ، وَكُلُّ شَيْءٍ مِنَ الْآخِرَةِ عِيَانُهُ أَعْظَمُ
مِنْ سَمَاعِهِ.

“Everything that one hears about the transient world is greater (in the person's estimation) than what it actually is when he sees it; and everything that he sees which is in the next life is greater than what is heard about it.”⁴

The next life is indescribable with words and keeping in mind the words of Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (as) mentioned above, it is possible that one may state, “The transient world is all a delusion! The material world has announced to us with 100 tongues that it has no loyalty and is not going to last!”

In addition, the Prophet (S) has also stated that, “Are these destroyed graves of your fore-fathers that which has deluded you? Are the remains of those who have passed away that which deludes you? Are these sick people whom you were sitting beside from morning till night and taking care of, that which is deluding you!?”

In summary, if we study this issue carefully, then without doubt we would realize that we are actually trying to delude our selves!

Continuing on, the Noble Prophet (S) then mentioned a phrase which is not commonly used in the Noble Qur`an or the traditions.

The phrases used in regards to the transient world are usually things such as 'disloyalty', or 'lack of foundation' or that the material world is something that cannot be trusted. However in this tradition, another comparison is given. The Prophet (S) tells us that in comparison to that which has already passed us by, whatever remains from the transient world is insignificant. To further elucidate on this, he has given us two parables:

1. The first is the phrase, “إِناخَة رَاكِب” or 'the camel that is lying down on its stomache.'

In order for a person to sit on top of a camel, the camel must lie down since it is not possible to mount or dismount the camel while it is standing up due to its height!

One of the amazing qualities of the camel is that while it is lying down, if a person was to put some heavy load on top of it or was to sit on it, the camel could still easily stand up. However, when we look at other animals, we see that this is not the case! It is due to this characteristic of the camel that has led some of the commentators of the Noble Qur`an to state that this may be the reason why Allah (SwT) referred to the camel with the following verse:

أَفَلَا يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَى الْإِبِلِ كَيْفَ خُلِقَتْ

“What then, do they not look at the camel and how it has been created?”⁵

A great deal of the camel's unique abilities lie in the special characteristics of the head and neck; its head works like a lever or crow bar and it is through the rocking and specific movements it makes that it is able to stand up while carrying heavy loads.

The time which the camel spends lying on the ground is very short and similar to the transient word! Just as the camel does not spend much time lying down, so too is the length of this temporal world short...

2) The second parable given is that of “مِرْحَالِب” and this parable refers to the stomache of the animal when it is full of milk. If a person did not want the child of the animal to drink its mothers' milk, then they

would cover the udders with a bag; or in order for the milk not to be wasted, they would cover the udders and tie a knot to prevent the bag from opening. That thing used to tie the udders is referred to in 'Arabic as "صرار".

Thus, without doubt, the choice of these two parables is an interesting way to look at the material world. Therefore, when the Prophet (S) stated "إنّاخرة راکب", it means that since we are at the end of our journey, we must get down! Comparing the act of the camel to us leaving the transient world is completely in order and can be best understood when one dismounts his ride when he reaches the end of the journey. The camel would be made to lie down and the person would then dismount.

In addition, when it is stated "صرحالب" this means that just as baby of an animal is given the opportunity to drink its mother's milk however after a period of time, the child is prevented from drinking more, in the same way we see that every human being is given a specific length of time to live in this world, and at some point, death will come to cut these roots from this life!

The Prophet (S) then stated, "Your share of the transient world is nothing more than the amount of time which a camel lays down in order for a person to mount or dismount it nor is it worth more than the amount of the string which is used to tie the udders of the animal so that its child can not drink the milk!"

At this point, a question may come up: what is the meaning of, "The time remaining in the life of this world, in relation the time of the world that has already passed, is something short?" Is the life of the entire world like this or is the life of the human being measured in this way?

If the meaning of this statement is the life of the physical world and refers to the time remaining in the life of the Earth in comparison to that which has already passed by as being something short, then this could refer to the fact that millions of years have already gone by in the life of this world. However if this refers to the life of humanity, then it means that mankind has been living on this Earth for countless number of years.

However it is unknown if this is relation to the children of Adam (as) (or others) since in this case, the life of humanity which has passed, compared to that which is remaining is something very small.

It is possible that the life span of Adam (as) was not much, however humanity is not limited to Prophet Adam (as) alone and we have proof that before Adam (as), there were other human beings on this Earth and that this Earth existed!

It is also possible that the meaning of this phrase is the life of each one of us which has passed and that which remains of our lives with the difference between these two being a very small amount of time.

Therefore, a person should have any certainty in his life, as it is possible that there may be only one hour left in it! Thus, he should remove the thought from his head that he still has a long time to live. If the life of this world is like this, what can we place our trust and reliance upon? What can we use to

advance and spiritually ascend in life?

There may not be but a moment left in our lives and thus, even this one moment which remains must be valued. If we wish to turn back to Allah (SwT) in repentance, then we must do so now and must not lose this valuable opportunity!

Today we see that events are occurring in greater quantity and must faster than they used to in the past and thus, we are being put face to face with many challenges. We have to deal with things that people of the past could never have even imagined in their dreams!

Without doubt, the life of today, in relation to the life of the past, has become very untrustworthy!

1. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 74, pg. 183

2. It is important to mention that between the speeches and the general traditions, there is a great difference (of content), since normally, the speeches were given in a gathering setting. These were delivered in an open gathering or Majlis, in the presence of a large number of people. In addition, the people who were listening to these talks were present as they wanted to hear the principle and foundational issues of the faith being discussed.

3. People are of various groups: There are some people who are so spiritually weak and feeble that merely seeing the gold and glitter of the material world is enough to delude and deceive them. However there are others whose spiritual strength is much stronger and thus, in addition to the gold and glitter of the material world, if they are to be deluded and tricked, they are also in need of the evil whispering of Satan. For such people, the internal and external Satan must both work hand and hand to try and deceive them.

Without doubt, a majority of the apparent aspects of the material life are aimed at deceiving us and throwing us into a state of negligence. Sometimes it can be seen that such a person would even be busy with his family and in this, he would become negligent of everything around him.

It is because of this fact that in the Islamic narrations from the Commander of the Faithful (as) we read that when the Imam was asked:

أَيُّ النَّاسِ أَثْبَتَ رَأْيًا؟

“Which person is the most firm in his thoughts and reflections?”

He replied:

مَنْ لَمْ يَغُرَّهُ النَّاسُ مِنْ نَفْسِهِ وَ لَمْ تَغُرَّهُ الدُّنْيَا بِتَشْوِيقِهَا.

“The person who is not deluded by those who seek to delude him, and the one who does not become deluded with the encouragement of the material world.”

However even with this said we see that some of the views of the deluding world speak volumes and through these, we can clearly understand that the material world is (spiritually) hollow and is only an outward and apparent gold and glitter. This itself can spiritually wake up the intelligent person – rather, even the unintelligent people can also be awaked to this aspect of the material world! (Tafsir-e-Namuna, vol. 18, pg. 95)

4. Nahj al-Balagha, Lecture 114

5. Surat al-Ghashiyah (88), verse 18

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