

Right n. 4: The Right of Hearing

حق السمع

وَأَمَّا حَقُّ السَّمْعِ فَتَنْزِيهِهُ عَنِ أَنْ تَجْعَلَهُ طَرِيقًا إِلَى قَلْبِكَ إِلَّا لِفُوهَةٍ كَرِيمَةٍ تُحَدِّثُ فِي قَلْبِكَ خَيْرًا أَوْ تَكْسِبُ خُلُقًا كَرِيمًا فَإِنَّهُ بَابُ الْكَلَامِ إِلَى الْقَلْبِ يُؤَدِّي إِلَيْهِ ضُرُوبُ الْمَعَانِي عَلَى مَا فِيهَا مِنْ خَيْرٍ أَوْ شَرٍّ. وَلَا قُوَّةَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ.

And the right of hearing is to keep it pure by not making it the direct pathway to your heart, except for noble words that establish some good in your heart or grant you a noble trait. Indeed hearing is the gateway through which various concepts reach the heart —whether good or evil. And there is no power but in God. 1

The Almighty God said:

قُلْ هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْشَأَكُمْ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ

“Say: It is He who has created you (and made you grow), and made for you the faculties of hearing, seeing, feeding and understanding. Little thanks it is ye give.” [The Holy Qur’an, al-Mulk 67:23]

The Role of Hearing in Development

When man is born, he is not familiar with the creatures in this world, but he slowly gets acquainted with them. One of the means of acquiring such recognition is the faculty of hearing. We hear things and they are recorded in our minds. Imam Ali said to someone seeking advice:

أَيُّهَا السَّائِلُ! اِسْتَمِعْ ثُمَّ اسْتَفْهَمْ ثُمَّ اسْتَيْقِنْ ثُمَّ اسْتَعْمَلْ.

“O questioner! Listen first, and then understand. Then believe and put what you have learned into practice.”²

Thus, we realize that the key to understanding, believing and putting things into practice is our hearing. Therefore, hearing can be considered our social sense, and in this sense, it can be considered more important than seeing.

What is sound?

Sound is produced from vibration. Human voice is the product of the vibration of our vocal cords. It has been proven that sound will not be transmitted in a vacuum. However, we should not think that air is the only media for the transmission of sound. Sound can be propagated in liquids, gases and solids. It propagates in liquids faster than in gases. Solids propagate sound even faster than liquids do. There are three parts to the ear: the external ear, middle ear and inner ear.

The external ear consists of the pinna³ and the ear canal. The pinna is made of cartilage and is so formed as to act as a receiving antenna in charge of guiding the incoming sound waves towards the ear canal. The ear canal is nearly three centimeters long, and produces wax to prevent the entry of dirt and insects into the ear. The middle ear is separated from the ear canal by the eardrum. The middle ear normally contains air and is connected to the back of the pharynx by the Eustachian tube. There are delicate bones in the middle ear.

When sound waves enter the ear and touch the eardrum, these delicate bones vibrate and transfer these signals to a liquid inside the ear. The hearing cells that are there sense these changes and transmit the information to the brain. In simple terms, that is how we hear. Our hearing ability depends on the position of the source of sound, our physical state, the way we eat, and our age.

Anatomy and Physiology of the Ear

What is the ear?

The ear is the organ of hearing. The parts of the ear include:

External Ear or Outer Ear, consisting of:

- 1) Pinna or auricle – the outside part of the ear.
- 2) External auditory canal or tube – the tube that connects the outer ear to the inside or middle ear.
- 3) Tympanic membrane – also called the eardrum. The tympanic membrane divides the external ear from the middle ear.
- 4) Middle ear (tympanic cavity), consisting of:
 - A) Ossicles – three small bones that are connected and transmit the sound waves to the inner ear. The bones are called: malleus,4 incus,5 stapes.6
 - B) Eustachian tube – a canal that links the middle ear with the throat area. The Eustachian tube helps to equalize the pressure between the outer ear and the middle ear. Having the same pressure allows for the proper transfer of sound waves. The Eustachian tube is lined with mucous, just like the inside of the nose and throat.
- 5) Inner ear, consisting of:
 - A) Cochlea (contains the nerves for hearing)
 - B) Vestibule (contains receptors for balance)
 - C) Semicircular canals (contain receptors for balance)

How do we hear?

Hearing starts with the outer ear. When a sound is made outside the outer ear, the sound waves, or vibrations, travel down the external auditory canal and strike the eardrum (tympanic membrane). The eardrum vibrates. The vibrations are then passed to three tiny bones in the middle ear called the ossicles. The ossicles amplify the sound. They send the sound waves to the inner ear and into the fluid-filled hearing organ (cochlea).

Once the sound waves reach the inner ear, they are converted into electrical impulses that the auditory nerve sends to the brain. The brain then translates these electrical impulses into sound.

The Ear Relative to the Eyes and the Heart

Now let us address the question of why the ear is usually mentioned before the eyes and the heart in the Holy Qur'an. Let us look at a few verses in this regard:

قُلْ مَنْ يَرْزُقُكُمْ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَمَّنْ يَمْلِكُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ

“Say: Who is that sustains you (in life) from the sky and from the earth? Or who is it that has power over hearing and sight?” [The Holy Qur'an, Yunus 10:31]

إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَئِكَ كَانَ عَنْهُ مَسْئُولًا

“Surely the hearing and the sight and the heart, all of these, shall be questioned about that.” [The Holy Qur'an, al-Israa 17:36]

Also in Naḥl 16:78, Baqarah 2:7, Ha-Mim 41:20 and many other verses hearing and the ears have been mentioned before seeing and the eyes. Scientists have mentioned several reasons for the superiority of the ear over the eye. At first we should realize that the range of frequencies we could detect via our hearing is wide. The ratio of the highest frequencies we can hear to the lowest is nearly one thousand. However, our sight is much more limited.

We can only sense a small fraction of the wavelengths. We cannot see the infrared or the ultraviolet. The eyes are also very vulnerable and might easily be damaged if we look at the sun or an eclipse, or ultraviolet light emitted while welding is in progress. However, the ears are much stronger. In addition, our viewing angle is very limited, while we can hear sounds coming to us from all directions. These seem to be the physical reasons for the superiority of hearing to sight, but it seems that hearing is more powerful than sight in self-reconstruction and spiritual enlightenment.⁷

The Jurisprudents' View on the Value of the Ear

In addition to the rights of the hearing that we discussed, the ear has certain worth expressed in Islamic jurisprudence. Al-Muḥaqqiq al-Hilli said: “The compensation to be paid for both ears is full compensation: Each ear's compensation is one half of the full compensation. The compensation for the earlobe is one-third of the full compensation whether it be torn or punctured.⁸

In addition, in the Farsi editions of the Treatise of the Muslim Jurisprudents we read: “If you cut both ears off, or make them deaf you must pay the full compensation. If you only cut or damage one ear, you

must pay half compensation. If one cuts someone else's earlobe he should do his best to please him."9

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1. In the other version it is followed by: "The right of your hearing is to keep it pure from listening to backbiting and listening to that to which it is unlawful to listen."
 2. Usul al-Kafi, v.2, p.456.
 3. The largely cartilaginous projecting portion of the external ear.
 4. The outermost of a chain of three small bones of the mammalian middle ear.
 5. The middle bone of a chain of three small bones in the ear of a mammal.
 6. The innermost ossicle of the ear of mammals.
 7. Avvalin Daneshgah va Akharin Payambar, v. 15, pp.101-106.
 8. Mukhtasar al-Manafi', p.300, and Mabani Taklimat al-Minhaj, v.2, p.282.
 9. The Treatise of al-Khu'i, p.503.

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