

# **Selection from Glimpses of the Nahj al- Balaghah**

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This is the translation of sections from Martyr Mutahhari's book Sayri dar Nahj al-balaghah. This book consists of seven sections. In the first section the author discusses the two main characteristics of the Nahj al-balaghah; its literary excellence and its multidimensionality, quoted various opinions expressed about Imam Ali's eloquence in general and about the Nahj al-balaghah in particular. In the second section, the author discusses the theological and metaphysical ideas propounded in the Nahj al-balaghah and compared them with the parallel notions familiar to the Muslim mutakallimun and philosophers. The third section deals with ibadah (worship) and its various levels. The fourth section deals with Islamic Government and Social Justice. The fifth, dealing with the controversial issue of caliphate (khilafah) and the superior status of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), has been deleted in this translation. The sixth and the seventh sections discuss the Nahj al-balaghah's ethical teachings, in particular the Islamic Concept of zuhd (abstinence); the meaning of the world (dunya), so often condemned in the Nahj al-balaghah; and the meaning of the contradiction between the world and the hereafter, which is also recurring theme. These extracts have been published in several issues of Al-Tawhid Journal: Vols. 2 No. 3, 4, Vol. 3, No. 1, Vol. 3, No. 3, No. 4.

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# Preface

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In the second section, the author discusses the theological and metaphysical ideas propounded in the *Nahj al-balaghah* and compared them with the parallel notions familiar to the Muslim *mutakallimun* and philosophers.

The third section deals with *ibadah* (worship) and its various levels. The fourth section deals with Islamic Government and Social Justice. The fifth, dealing with the controversial issue of caliphate (*khilafah*) and the superior status of the Ahl al-Bayt (A), has been deleted in this translation.

The sixth and the seventh sections discuss the *Nahj al-balaghah's* ethical teachings, in particular the Islamic Concept of *zuhd* (abstinence); the meaning of the world (*dunya*), so often condemned in the *Nahj al-balaghah*; and the meaning of the contradiction between the world and the hereafter, which is also recurring theme.

# Introduction

This is the first part of Martyr Mutahhari's book *Sayri dar Nahj al-balaghah*, and consists of the introduction and the first section of the book. The introduction, which the author, presumably wrote before giving the book to the publishers is dated Muharram 3, 1995 (January 15, 1975).

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Perhaps it may have happened to you, and if not, you may still visualize it: someone lives on your street or in your neighbourhood for years; you see him at least once every day and habitually nod to him and pass by. Years pass in this manner, until, one day, accidentally, you get an opportunity to sit down with him and to become familiar with his ideas, views and feelings, his likes and dislikes. You are amazed at what you have come to know about him. You never imagined or guessed that he might be as you found him, and never thought that he was what you later discovered him to be.

After that, whenever you see him, his face, somehow, appears to be different. Not only this, your entire attitude towards him is altered. His personality assumes a new meaning, a new depth and respect in

your heart, as if he were some person other than the one you thought you knew for years. You feel as if you have discovered a new world.

My experience was similar in regard to the *Nahj al-balaghah*. From my childhood years I was familiar with the name of this book, and I could distinguish it from other books on the shelves in my father's library.

Years later, during my studies, first at the theological school of Mashhad, and later at Qum, when I was finishing the last stages of the preliminary education in theology called "*sutuh*", during all those days the name of the *Nahj al-balaghah* was heard more often than that of any other book after the Qur'an. Some of its sermons on piety I had heard so many times that I almost remembered them by heart.

Nevertheless, I must admit, like all of my colleagues at the theology school (*Hawzah 'ilmiyyah*), I was quite ignorant of the world of the *Nahj al-balaghah*. We had met as strangers and passed by each other in the manner of strangers. This continued until the summer of 1325 (1946) when in order to escape the heat of Qum, I went to Isfahan. A trifling accident brought me into contact with a person who took my hand and led me somewhat into the world of the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

When this happened, I realized that I knew little about this book until that time. Later I wished that I would also find someone who would introduce me into the world of the Qur'an. Since then, the countenance of the *Nahj al-balaghah* was transformed in my eyes. I became fond of it, and gradually my fondness grew into love.

It was now a different book from the one I had known until that moment. I felt as if I had discovered an entirely new world. Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh, the former mufti of Egypt, who edited and published the *Nahj al-balaghah* with a brief commentary, and for the first time introduced this book to the Egyptians, says that he had no knowledge of this book until he undertook its study far from home in a distant land.

He was struck with wonder and felt as if he had discovered a precious treasure trove. Thereupon, he immediately decided to publish it and introduce it to the Arab public. The unfamiliarity of a Sunni scholar with the *Nahj al-balaghah* is not surprising; what is amazing is that the *Nahj al-balaghah* should be a stranger and alien in its own homeland and among the Shi'ah of 'Ali ('a) and that too in the Shi'i theological schools in the same way as 'Ali himself has remained isolated and a stranger.

Evidently, if the content and ideas of a book or the feelings and emotions of a person do not harmonize with the mentality of a people, that book or person practically remains isolated as a stranger in an alien world, even though the name of such a person or book may be mentioned with great respect and admiration.

We, the theology students, must confess our estrangement from the *Nahj al-balaghah*. We have built a mental world of our own which is alien to the world of the *Nahj al-balaghah*. As I write this preface, I cannot abstain from recalling with sorrow the memory of that great man who introduced me for the first

time into the world of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, and whose acquaintance I treasure as one of the most precious experiences of my life, which I would not exchange for anything.

No day or night passes without my remembering him or mentioning him with feelings of gratitude. I dare say that he was a divine scholar (*'alim-e rabbani*) in the true sense of the word, though I dare not claim that I was “a learner of the path of deliverance” (*muta'allim 'ala sabil al-najat*). [1](#)

I remember that in my meetings with him, I was always reminded of the following verse of Sa'di:

*The devout, the ascetic, and the Subi,  
All are toddlers on the path;  
If there is any mature man,  
It is none other than the 'alim-e rabbani.*

He was a *faqih* (jurisprudent)[2](#), a philosopher, a man of letters and a physician, all at once. He was well versed in *fiqh* (jurisprudence), philosophy, the Arabic and Persian literature and the traditional medicine, and was considered a specialist of the first order in some of these fields. He was a masterly teacher of Bu 'Ali's *al-Qanun*, the treatise of Ibn Sina in medicine, which does not find a teacher these days, and many scholars of the theology school attended his lessons.

However, it was not possible for him to confine himself to one field and his spirit revolted against any kind of restrictions. Of his lectures the most that interested him were those on the *Nahj al-balaghah*, which threw him into ecstasies. It seemed as if the *Nahj al-balaghah* had opened its wings and he, having mounted on its wings, was taken on a journey through strange worlds which were beyond our reach.

It was evident that he lived by the *Nahj al-balaghah*; he lived with it and breathed with it. His spirit was united with that book; his pulse throbbed and his heart beat in harmony with the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Its sentences were always on his lips and their meanings had been engraved upon his heart.

When he quoted its passages, tears would flow from his eyes and soak his white beard. During lessons, his encounter with and involvement in the *Nahj al-balaghah* would make him totally oblivious of his surroundings. It was a very educative as well as an attractive spectacle. Listening to the language of the heart from someone whose great heart is full of love and wisdom has altogether a different affect and attraction. He was a living example of the saints of the bygone days. The words of 'Ali fully applies to him:

Had it not been that the Providence had decreed the years of their life the passionate earning for Divine reward and fear of chastisement would not have permitted their souls to remain in their bodies even for a moment. Their realization of the greatness of the creator has made everything besides Him insignificant in their eyes. [3](#)

This refined man of letters, the speculative philosopher, the great *faqih*, the adept man of medicine and the excellent master of theology was the late Hajj Mirza 'Ali Aqa al-Shirazi al-'Isfahani, sanctified by God, a man of truth and wisdom, who had attained deliverance from the finite self and selfhood and had merged with the Infinite Truth.

In spite of his high scholarly status and eminent social standing, his sense of commitment to society and his burning love for al-Imam al-Husayn ('a) had impelled him to deliver sermons from the *minbar*.

His sermons, since they came from the heart, had a deep effect on the hearts. Whenever he visited Qum, the scholars of the first rank would persuade him to deliver sermons from the *minbar*.<sup>4</sup> His sermons were charged with a passionate purity and sincerity that made them profoundly effective. They were not just words to be heard, but a spiritual state to be experienced.

However, he abstained from leading prayers. One year, during the holy month of Ramadan, after much persuasion, he accepted to lead prayers at the *Madrseh-ye Sadr* for that month. In spite of the fact that he did not come regularly and refused to stick to any regular schedule, unprecedented crowds of people would come to attend the prayers led by him. I heard that strength declined in the jama'at in the neighbourhood mosques and he, too, did not continue.

As far as I know, the people of Isfahan generally knew him in person and liked him. He was also loved at the theology school of Qum. The '*ulama*' of Qum would go forth eagerly to see him at the news of his arrival in the city.

Like all other restrictions, he also refused to be bound by the conditions set for having murids and followers. May Allah shower His infinite mercy upon him and raise him with His *awliya*' on the Day of Resurrection.

With all his merits, it is not my claim that he was familiar with all the worlds that the *Nahj al-balaghah* embraces and had set his foot in all the domains encompassed by it. He had explored only a portion of its realms and that part of the *Nahj al-balaghah* had been incarnated in his person.

The universe of the *Nahj al-balaghah* includes numerous worlds: the world of *zuhd* (abstinence, piety) and *taqwa* (God-fearing), the world of '*ibadah* (worship, devotion) and '*irfan* (mystic knowledge), the world of *hikmah* (wisdom) and philosophy, the world of moral preaching and guidance, the world of eschatology (*malahim*) and mysteries (*mughayyabat*), the world of politics and social responsibilities, the world of heroism and bravery ...; too many worlds to be conquered by any individual. Hajj Mirza 'Ali Aqa al-Shirazi had explored only a part of this great ocean and knew it well.

## **Nahj al-balaghah and the Present-Day Islamic Society**

The alienation from the *Nahj al-balaghah* was not confined to me or others like me, but pervaded through the Islamic society. Those who understood this book, their knowledge did not go beyond the

translation of its words and explanatory notes on its sentences.

The spirit and the content of the book were hidden from the eyes of all. Only lately, it may be said, the Islamic world has begun to explore the *Nahj al-balaghah*, or in other words, the *Nahj al-balaghah* has started its conquest of the Muslim world.

What is surprising is that a part of the contents of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, both in Shi'ite Iran and Arab countries, was first discovered either by atheists or non-Muslim theists, who revealed the greatness of the book to the Muslims. Of course, the purpose of most or all of them was to utilize the *Nahj al-balaghah* of 'Ali ('a) for justifying and confirming their own social views; but the outcome was exactly opposite of what they desired.

Because, for the first time the Muslims realized that the views expressed grandiloquently by others had nothing new to offer and that they cannot surpass what is said in the *Nahj al-balaghah* of 'Ali ('a), or translated into action through the character (*sirah*) of 'Ali and his disciples like Salman al-Farsi, Abu Dharr, and 'Ammar.

The result of it was that instead of supporting the pretentious views of those who wished to exploit the *Nahj al-balaghah*, 'Ali and his book defeated their purpose. Nevertheless, it must be accepted that before this occurred, most of us had little knowledge of the *Nahj al-balaghah* and it hardly went beyond appreciation of few sermons about virtues of piety and abstinence.

Nobody had yet recognized the significance of the valuable epistle of Mawla 'Ali to Malik al-'Ashtar al-Nakh'i; nobody had paid attention to it.

As mentioned in the first and second chapters of this book, the *Nahj al-balaghah* is a collection of sermons, precepts, prayers, epistles and aphorisms of 'Ali ('a) compiled by al-Sayyid al-Sharif al-Radi about one thousand years ago.

However, neither the recorded words of Mawla 'Ali are confined to those collected by al-Sayyid al-Radi, nor was he the only man to compile the sayings of Amir al-Muminin. Al-Masudi, who lived a hundred years before al-Sayyid al-Radi, in the second volume of his work *Muruj al-dhahab*, writes: "At present there are over 480 sermons of 'Ali in the hands of the people," whereas the total number of sermons included by al-Sayyid al-Radi in his collection is 239 only.

There are, at present, two kinds of work that must be accomplished with respect to the *Nahj al-balaghah*, so that 'Ali's thought and his views on various important issues expressed in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, which are still relevant and are direly needed by the present-day Islamic society, may be brought to light.

The second kind of work required in relation to the *Nahj al-balaghah* is research on the sources (*asnad*) and the documents related to its contents. Fortunately, we hear that Muslim scholars in various parts of

the Islamic world are devoting themselves to both of these important tasks.

This book is a collection of a series of articles that originally appeared in the journal *Maktab e Islam* during 1351–52 (1972–73), now presented to the learned readers in the form of the present book. Formerly, I had delivered five lectures on this topic at the *Husayniyyah Irshad*.<sup>5</sup> Later, I took up with the idea of writing a series of articles to deal with the subject in greater detail.

From the outset, when I chose to call it “*Sayri dar Nahj al-balaghah*” (‘A journey into the *Nahj al-balaghah*’), I was aware that my attempt does not deserve to be called more than a journey, or a short trip. This work, by no means, can deserve to be called a research study. I neither had the time and opportunity for a research study, nor did I consider myself fit for this task.

Moreover, a profound and comprehensive research study of the contents of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, exploration of the thought of ‘Ali, and, besides it, research about documentation of its contents, is the job of a group and not of a single individual. But as it is said, that which cannot be attained in entirety is not to be abandoned in entirety<sup>6</sup>.

And since humble attempts open the way for great tasks, I started on my trip. Unfortunately, even this journey was not completed. The project that I had prepared for, and which the reader shall find mentioned in the third chapter, remained unaccomplished on account of many preoccupations. I do not know whether will ever get the opportunity to continue my journey through the *Nahj al-balaghah*. But it is my great desire to be able to do so.

## A Literary Marvel

The *Nahj al-balaghah* is a magnificent collection of the inimitable sermons, invocations (*du‘a*), wills or advices, epistles and aphorisms of Amir al-mu‘minin, Imam ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (‘a), compiled by al-Sayyid al Sharif al-Radi (may God be pleased with him) about one thousand years ago. Time and years have not only failed to diminish the impressive freshness of this work, but have added constantly to its value as new concepts and ideas have emerged.

‘Ali (‘a) was undoubtedly a man of eloquence and delivered a large number of speeches that became famous. Likewise, numerous sayings containing philosophic wisdom were heard from him. He wrote many letters, especially during the days of his caliphate, which his admirers recorded and preserved with remarkable interest and zeal.

Al-Mas‘udi (d. 346/955–6), who lived almost a hundred years before al-Sayyid al-Radi (d. 406/1115), in the second volume of his *Muruj al-dhahab*, under the heading “*Fi dhikr luma‘ min kalamih, wa akhbarih, wa zuhdih*”, says:

That which has been preserved by people of ‘Ali’s sermons, delivered on various occasions, exceeds 480 in number. ‘Ali (‘a) used to deliver his sermons extempore without any previous preparation. The

people recorded [7](#) his words and practically derived benefit from them.[8](#)

The testimony of an informed researcher and scholar like al-Mas'udi bears out the large number of 'Ali's speeches that were extant during his time. Only 239 of these have been handed down to us in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, whereas their number, as mentioned by al-Mas'udi, was more than 480.

Moreover, al-Mas'udi informs us about the extraordinary dedication and ardour of various groups of people in recording and preserving 'Ali's words.

## Al-Sayyid al-Radi and the Nahj al-balaghah

Al-Sayyid al-Sharif al-Radi, or al-Sayyid al-Radi, as he is commonly called, was an ardent admirer of 'Ali's speeches. He was a scholar, a poet and a man of cultivated taste. Al-Tha'alibi, his contemporary, says of him:

He is the most remarkable man among his contemporary and the noblest amongst the sayyids of Iraq. Family and descent aside, he is fully adorned and endowed with literary excellence. He is the most remarkable poet among the descendants of Abu Talib, though there are many distinguished poets among them. To say that of all the Quraysh no poet could ever surpass him would not be an exaggeration.[9](#)

It was on account of al-Sayyid al-Radi's earnest love of literature in general, and admiration for 'Ali's discourses in particular, that his interest was mainly literary in compiling 'Ali's words. Consequently, he gave greater attention to those passages which were more prominent from the literary point of view.

This was the reason why he named his anthology "*Nahj al-balaghah*", [10](#) which means the "path of eloquence" giving little importance to mentioning his sources, a point rarely ignored by compilers of *hadith* (traditions). Only at times does he casually mention the name of a certain book from which a particular sermon or epistle has been taken. In a book of history or *hadith*, it is of primary importance that the sources be precisely specified; otherwise, little credence can be given to it.

The value of a literary masterpiece, however, lies in its intrinsic beauty, subtlety, elegance and depth. Meanwhile, it is not possible to assert that al-Sayyid al-Radi was entirely oblivious of the historical value and other dimensions of this sacred work, or that his attention was exclusively absorbed by its literary qualities.

Fortunately, after al-Sayyid al-Radi, others took up the task of collecting the *asnad* of the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Perhaps the most comprehensive book in this regard is the *Nahj al-sa'adah fi mustadrak Nahj al-balaghah* by Muhammad Baqir al-Mahmudi, a distinguished Shi'ah scholar of Iraq. In this valuable book, all of 'Ali's extant speeches, sermons, decrees, epistles, prayers, and sayings have been collected. It includes the *Nahj al-balaghah* and other discourses which were not incorporated by al-Sayyid al-Radi or were not available to him.

Apparently, except for some of the aphorisms, the original sources of all the contents of the *Nahj al-balaghah* have been determined. [11](#)

It should be mentioned that al-Sayyid al-Radi was not the only man to compile a collection of 'Ali's utterances; others, too, have compiled various books with different titles in this field. The most famous of them is *Ghurur al-hikam wa durar al-kalim* by al-Amudi, on which Muhaqqiq Jamal al-Din al-Khunsari has written a commentary in Persian and which has been recently printed by the University of Tehran through the efforts of the eminent scholar Mir Jalal al-Din al-Muhaddith al-'Urumawi.

'Ali al Jundi, the dean of the faculty of sciences at the Cairo University, in the introduction to the book 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, *shi'ruhu wa hikamuh* cites a number of these collections some of which have not yet appeared in print and exist as manuscripts. These are:

1. *Dustur ma'alim al-hikam* by al-Quda'i, the author of the *al-Khutat*;
2. *Nathr al-la 'ali'*; this book has been translated and published by a Russian Orientalist in one bulky volume.
3. *Hikam sayyidina 'Ali*. A manuscript of this book exists in the Egyptian library, Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyyah.

## Two Distinctive Characteristics

From the earliest times, two distinct merits have been recognized as characterizing 'Ali's discourses: firstly, literary elegance (*fasahah*) and eloquence (*balaghah*); secondly, their characteristic multi-dimensional nature. Any of these two qualities is sufficient for estimating 'Ali's words as valuable, but the combination of these two qualities (i.e. matchless eloquence, literary elegance, and their multi-dimensional nature—in that they deal with diverse and occasionally incompatible spheres of life) has made it almost miraculous.

For this reason, 'Ali's speech occupies a position in between the speech of the human being and the Word of God. Indeed, it has been said of it that 'it is above the speech of creatures and below the Word of the Creator.' [12](#)

## Literary Beauty and Elegance

This aspect of the *Nahj al-balaghah* requires no introduction for a reader of cultivated literary taste capable of appreciating the elegance and charm of language. Basically, beauty is a thing to be perceived and experienced and not to be described or defined. The *Nahj al-balaghah*, even after nearly fourteen centuries, has retained the same attractiveness, freshness, charm, and beauty for the present-day audience that it possessed for the people of earlier days. Here we do not intend to give an elaborate proof of this claim.

Nevertheless, as a part of our discourse, we shall briefly describe the marvellous power of 'Ali's words in moving hearts and infusing them with the feeling of wonder. We shall start with 'Ali's own times and follow the effect of his discourses through the changes and variations in tastes, outlooks, and modes of thought during different successive ages up to the present day.

The companions of 'Ali ('a), particularly those who had a taste for language and literary grace, greatly admired him as an orator. 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas is one of them, who himself, as al Jahiz points out in his *al-Bayan wa al-tabyin*,<sup>13</sup> was a powerful orator. He did not conceal his passion for listening to 'Ali speak or the enjoyment he derived from it.

Once, when 'Ali was delivering his famous sermon called *al-Shiqshiqiyah*,<sup>14</sup> Ibn al-'Abbas was also present. While 'Ali ('a) was speaking, an ordinary man of Kufah handed him a paper containing some questions, thus causing 'Ali to discontinue his speech. 'Ali, after reading the letter, did not continue his speech in spite of Ibn al-'Abbas urging him to continue.

Ibn al-'Abbas later expressed the deep regret he felt on that occasion, saying, "Never in life was I ever so sorry for interruption of a speech as I was for the interruption of this sermon."<sup>15</sup>

Referring to a certain letter that 'Ali had written to Ibn al-'Abbas, he used to say: "Except the speech of the Holy Prophet, I did not derive so much benefit from any utterance as from this one."<sup>16</sup>

Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan, 'Ali's most contumacious enemy, also acknowledges his extraordinary eloquence. When Muhqin ibn Abi Muhqin forsook 'Ali and joined Mu'awiyah, in order to please Mu'awiyah, whose heart surged with ill-will and bitterness towards 'Ali, he told him, "I have left the dumbest of men and come to you."

The flagrancy of this kind of flattery was so obvious that Mu'awiyah himself reproached him, saying: "Woe to you! You call 'Ali the dumbest of men? The Quraysh knew nothing about eloquence before him. It was he who taught them the art of eloquence."

## Influence of 'Ali's Oratory

Those who heard 'Ali speaking from the *minbar* were very much affected by his words. His sermons made hearts tremble and drew tears from the eyes. Even today, who can hear or read 'Ali's sermons without a tremor passing through his heart? Al-Sayyid al-Radi, after narrating 'Ali's famous sermon *al-Gharra'*,<sup>17</sup> says:

As 'Ali delivered his sermon, tears flowed from the eyes of the listeners and hearts quivered with emotion.

Hammam ibn Shurayh, one of 'Ali's companions, was a man with a heart full of God's love and a soul burning with spiritual fire. At one time, he requested 'Ali to describe the qualities of pious and God-

fearing men. 'Ali, on the one hand, did not want to turn down his request, and on the other, he was afraid that Hammam might not be able to bear what 'Ali would say. Therefore, he eludes this request giving only a perfunctory description of piety and the pious.

Hammam is not only unsatisfied with this, but also his eagerness is heightened and he beseeches 'Ali to speak with greater elaboration. 'Ali commences his famous sermon and begins to describe the characteristics of the truly pious. He enumerates about one hundred and five [18](#) qualities of such human beings and goes on to describe more.

But as 'Ali's words flow in fiery sequence, Hammam is carried to the very extreme of ecstasy. His heart throbs terribly and his spirit is driven to the furthest limits of emotion. It advances in eagerness like a restless bird trying to break out of its cage. Suddenly, there is a terrible cry and the audience turn around to find that it came from no other man than Hammam himself. Approaching, they find that his soul has left its earthly mould to embrace everlasting life.

When this happened, 'Ali's remark, which carries both eulogy and regret, was: "I feared this would happen. Strange, yet this is how effective admonition affects sensitive hearts."[19](#) This is an example of the kind of influence 'Ali's sermons had over the minds and hearts of his contemporaries.

## [The Opinions of Ancient and Modern Scholars](#)

After the Holy Prophet (S), 'Ali ('a) alone has the distinction of being one whose speeches and sayings were recorded and preserved by the people with particular care.

Ibn Abi al-Hadid quotes 'Abd al-Hamid al-Katib, the great master of Arabic prose [20](#) who lived during the early part of the second century of the Hijrah, as saying, "I learnt by heart seventy sermons of 'Ali, and from that time onwards my mind always overflowed [ with inspiration ]."

'Ali al Jundi also relates that when 'Abd al-Hamid was asked about what had helped him most in attaining literary excellence, he replied, "Memorizing of the discourses of the 'bald one'."[21](#)

In the Islamic period of history the name of 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Nubatah is proverbial for oratory among Arabs. He acknowledges that his intellectual and artistic attainments are indebted to 'Ali. Ibn Abi al-Hadid quotes him as saying:

I committed to memory about a hundred discourses of 'Ali; since then this has served me as an inexhaustible treasure [of inspiration].

Al Jahiz was a celebrated literary genius of the early third century of the Hijrah, and his book *Al-Bayan wa al-tabyin* is regarded as one of the four main classics of Arabic literature[22](#).

Often, in his book, he expresses his great wonder and immense admiration for 'Ali's discourses. From his

remarks it is evident that a large number of 'Ali's sermons were commonly known to the people of his day. In the first volume of his *Al-Bayan wa al-tabyin*,<sup>23</sup> after mentioning that some people praise precision in talk or rather prefer silence and disapprove profusion in speech, al-Jahiz writes:

The profuseness of speech that has been regarded with disapproval is futile talk not that which is fruitful and illuminating. Otherwise, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas were men of prolific speech.

In the same volume of his work, he quotes this famous sentence of 'Ali ('a): <sup>24</sup>

The worth of a man lies in what he has mastered. <sup>25</sup>

Al Jahiz then devotes half a page to expressing his admiration for this sentence, and writes further:

If our book did not contain anything but this sentence, it would suffice it. The best speech is one little of which makes you dispense with much of it and in which the meanings are not concealed within words but are made manifest.

Then he remarks:

It appears as if Allah the Almighty has enveloped it with His glory, and covered it with the light of wisdom proportionate to the piety and *taqwa* of its speaker.

Al Jahiz, in the same work, where he discusses the oratory of Sasa'ah ibn Suhan al-'Abdi<sup>26</sup>, says that:

No greater proof of his excellence as an orator is required than the fact that 'Ali occasionally came to him and asked him to deliver a speech.

Al-Sayyid al-Radi's following remarks in appreciation and praise of the speech of Imam 'Ali ('a) are famous:

Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a) was the reservoir and fountainhead of eloquence which derived its principles from his speeches and revealed its secrets through him. Every orator of mark tried to imitate him and every preacher learned from him the art of eloquence. Nevertheless, they lagged far behind him while he excelled them all. His speech (alone) bears the imprint of Divine Wisdom and the fragrance of the Prophet's eloquence.

Ibn Abi al-Hadid is a Mu'tazilite scholar of the 7th/13th century. He was a masterly writer and an adept poet, and, as we know, was an adorer of 'Ali's discourses. Accordingly, he expresses his profound admiration for 'Ali recurringly throughout his book. In the introduction to his famous commentary on the *Nahj al-balaghah*, he writes:

Rightly has 'Ali's discourse been regarded as being only inferior to that of the Creator and superior to that of all creatures.

All people have learnt the arts of oration and writing from him. It suffices to say that the people have not recorded even one-tenth of one-twentieth from any other Companion of the Prophet (S) of what they recorded and preserved of 'Ali's discourses, although there were many eloquent persons among them. Again, it is sufficient that such a man as al Jahiz is all praise for 'Ali in his book *al-Bayan wa al-tabyin*.

Ibn Abi al-Hadid, in the fourth volume of his commentary, commenting on Imam 'Ali's letter to 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas (written after the fall of Egypt to Mu'awiyah's forces and the martyrdom of Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr, in which 'Ali ('a) breaks the news of this disaster to 'Abd Allah, who was at Basrah) writes: [27](#)

Look how eloquence has given its reins into the hands of this man and is docile to his every signal. Observe the wonderful order of the words coming one after the other to bow in his presence, or gushing like a spring that flows effortlessly out of the ground. Subhan Allah! An Arab youth grows up in a town like Mecca, has never met any sage or philosopher, yet his discourses have surpassed those of Plato and Aristotle in eloquence and profundity.

He has no intercourse with men of wisdom, but has surpassed Socrates. He has not grown up among warriors and heroes but amongst traders and merchants for the people of Mecca were not a warrior nation but traders, yet he emerges as the greatest warrior of supreme courage to have walked upon the earth. Khalil ibn Ahmad was asked: Of 'Ali, Bistam, and 'Anbasah, who was the more courageous?

Replied he, "Bistam and 'Anbasah should be compared with other men; 'Ali was something superior to human beings." He came from the Quraysh, who were not the foremost in eloquence, for, the most eloquent among Arabs were Banu Jurhum, though they were not famous for wisdom or wit, yet 'Ali surpassed even Sahban ibn Wa'il and Qays ibn Sa'dah in eloquence.

## Modern Perspectives

During the fourteen centuries that have passed since 'Ali's times, the world has seen innumerable changes in language, culture and taste, and one may be led to think that 'Ali's discourses, which although might have invoked the adoration of the ancients, may not suit the modern taste. But one would be surprised to learn that such is not the case.

From the point of view of literary form and content, 'Ali's discourses have the rare quality of transcending the limits imposed by time and place. That 'Ali's discourses are universal in their appeal to men of all times we shall discuss later. Here, after quoting the views of the classical writers, we shall quote the relevant views expressed by our contemporaries.

The late Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh, formerly Mufti of Egypt, is a man who came to know the *Nahj al-balaghah* by accident. This preliminary acquaintance grew into a passionate love for the sacred book and led him to write a commentary on it. It also prompted him to endeavour to make it popular amongst the Arab youth. In the preface to his commentary, he says:

Among all those who speak the Arabic language, there is not a single man who does not believe that 'Ali's discourses, after the Qur'an and the discourses of the Prophet (S) are the noblest, the most eloquent, the most profound and the most comprehensive.

'Ali al-Jundi, the dean of the faculty of sciences at the Cairo University, in his book *'Ali ibn Abi Talib, shi'ruhu wa hikamuh*, writing about 'Ali's prose, says:

A certain musical rhythm which moves the innermost depths of the soul is characteristic of these discourses. The phrases are so rhymed that it can be called 'prose-poetry'.

He then quotes Qudamah ibn Ja'far as saying:

Some have shown mastery in short sayings and others in long discourses, but 'Ali has surpassed all others in both of these, even as he has surpassed them in other merits.

Taha Husayn, the contemporary Egyptian writer of renown, in his book *'Ali wa banuh* ('Ali and His Sons), recounts the story of a man during the Battle of al-Jamal. The man is in doubt as to which of the two sides is in the right. He says to himself, "How is it possible that such personalities as Talhah and al-Zubayr should be at fault?" He informs 'Ali ('a) about his dilemma and asks him whether it is possible that such great personalities and men of established repute should be in error. 'Ali answers him:

You are seriously mistaken and reversed the measure! Truth and falsehood are not measured by the worth of persons. Firstly find out what is truth and which is falsehood, then you will see who stands by truth and who with falsehood.

What 'Ali means to say is that you have reversed the measure. Truth and falsity are not measured by the nobility or baseness of persons. Instead of regarding truth and falsehood as the measure of nobility and meanness, you prejudge persons by your own pre-conceived notions of nobility and meanness. Reverse your approach.

First of all find out the truth itself, then you will be able to recognize who are truthful. Find out what is falsehood, and then you will identify those who are wrong. It is not significant which person stands by truth and which sides with falsehood.

After quoting 'Ali's above-mentioned reply, Taha Husayn says:

After the Revelation and the Word of God, I have never seen a more glorious and admirably expressed view than this reply of 'Ali.

Shakib Arsalan, nicknamed "*amir al-bayan*" (the master of speech), is another celebrated contemporary writer. Once in a gathering held in his honour, in Egypt, one of the speakers mounted the rostrum and in the course of his address remarked: "There are two individuals in the history of Islam who can truly be named *amir al-bayan*: one of them is 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and the other is Shakib."

At which Shakib Arsalan (1871–1946), irritated, left his seat and walked to the rostrum. Deploring the comparison his friend had made between 'Ali and himself, he said: “What comparison is there between 'Ali and me! I am not worth even the strap of 'Ali's sandals!” [28](#)

Michael Na'imah, a contemporary Lebanese Christian writer, in the introduction to the book *al-Imam 'Ali* by George Jurdaq, also a Lebanese Christian, writes:

'Ali was not only a champion on the battlefield but was also a hero in all other fields: in sincerity of heart, in purity of conscience, in the spellbinding magic of speech, in true humanitarianism, in the fineness and warmth of faith, in the height of tranquility, in readiness to help the oppressed and the wronged, and in total submission to truth wherever it may lie and whichever form it assumes. He was a hero in all these fields.

I do not intend to quote more from those who paid tributes to 'Ali, for the above–quoted remarks are sufficient to prove my point. One who praises 'Ali extols his own merit, for:

*He who admires the Sun's brilliance extols himself:  
My two eyes are bright and my vision is not clouded*

I conclude my discourse with 'Ali's own statement about himself. One day, one of his companions attempted to deliver a speech. He couldn't as he found himself tongue–tied. 'Ali told him:

You should know that the tongue is a part of man and under the command of his mind. If the mind lacks stimulation and refuses to budge, his tongue will not assist him. However, if the mind is ready his speech will not give him respite. Indeed we (the *Ahl al-Bayt*) are the lords of (the domain of) speech. In us are sunk its roots and over us are hung its branches. [29](#)

Al Jahiz, in the *al-Bayan wa al-tabyin*, relates from 'Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan ibn 'Ali that 'Ali ('a) once said:

We (the *Ahl al-Bayt*) are superior to others in five qualities: eloquence, good looks, forgiveness, courage, and popularity with women. [30](#)

Now we shall take up another characteristic of 'Ali's discourses, which is in fact the main theme of this book; that is, their multi–dimensionality.

## **The Nahj al-balaghah Among Literary Classics**

Most nations possess certain literary works which are regarded as 'masterpieces' or 'classics'. Here we shall limit our discussion to the classics of Arabic and Persian literature whose merits are more or less perceptible for us, leaving the other classics of the ancient world, Greece and Rome and so on, and the masterpieces of the modern age from Italy, England, France and other countries, to be discussed and evaluated by those who are familiar with them and qualified to discuss them.

Of course, an accurate judgement about the classics of Arabic and Persian is possible only for scholars who have specialized in the classical literature; but it is an accepted fact that every one of these masterpieces is great only in a particular aspect, not in every aspect.

To be more precise, every one of the authors of these classics displayed his mastery only in a single, special field to which their ingenuity was confined, and occasionally if they have left their special field to tread other grounds they failed miserably.

In Persian there are numerous masterpieces in mystical *ghazal*, general *ghazal*, *qasidah*, epic, spiritual and mystical allegorical verse, etc; but as we know, none of the Persian poets of world renown has succeeded in creating masterpieces in all these literary forms.

Hafiz is famous for mystical *ghazal*, Sa'di for anecdotes and general *ghazal*, Firdawsi for epic, Rumi for his allegorical and spiritual poetry, Khayyam for his philosophic pessimism and Nizami for something else. For this reason it is not possible to compare them with one another or prefer one over the other.

All that can be said is that each one of them is foremost in his own field. If occasionally any of these poetic geniuses has left his special field to try another literary form, a visible decline in quality is readily perceptible. The same is true of Arab poets of the Islamic and pre-Islamic periods. There is an anecdote in the *Nahj al-balaghah* that once 'Ali ('a) was asked the question, "who is the foremost among Arab poets?" 'Ali replied:

To be sure all poets did not tread a single path so that you may tell the leader from the follower; but if one were forced to choose one of them, I would say that the foremost among them was al-Malik al-Dillil (the nickname of Umru' al-Qays). [31](#)

In his commentary, Ibn Abi al-Hadid cites with *asnad* (authentic sources) an anecdote under the above-mentioned comment. Here is what he writes:

During the holy month of Ramadan, it was 'Ali's custom to invite people to dinner. The guests were offered meat, but 'Ali himself abstained from the food which was prepared for the guests. After the dinner, 'Ali would address them and impart moral instruction. One night, as they sat for dinner, a discussion commenced about the poets of the past.

After the dinner, 'Ali in the course of his discourse said: "The faith is the criterion of your deeds; *taqwa* is your shield and protector; good manners are your adornment; and forbearance is the fortress of your honour." Then turning to Abu al-'Aswad al-Du'ali, who was present and moments ago had taken part in the discussion about poets, said, "Let us see, who in your opinion is the most meritorious of poets?"

Abu al-'Aswad recited a verse of Abu Dawud al-'Ayadi adding the remark that in his opinion Abu Dawud was the greatest among poets. "You are mistaken; such is not the case," 'Ali told him. Whereupon the guests, seeing 'Ali taking an interest in their discussion, pressed him to express his opinion as to whom

he considered the best among poets.

'Ali said to them: "It is not right to give a judgement in this matter, for, to be certain, the pursuits of the poets are not confined to a single field so that we may point out the forerunner amongst them.

Yet, if one were forced to choose one of them, then it may be said that the best of them is one who composes not according to the period inclinations or out of fear and inhibition [but he who gives free rein to his imagination and poetic inspiration] . Asked as to whom this description would fit, 'Ali replied, "Al-Malik al-Dillil, Umru' al-Qays."

It is said that when inquired as to who was the most eminent poet of the *Jahiliyyah* (the pre-Islamic period), Yunus ibn Habib al Dabbi (d. 798 A.D.), the famous grammarian, answered:

The greatest of poets is Umru' al-Qays when he mounts his steed, [i.e. when he composes epic poetry motivated by the feelings of courage and bravery, and the passions roused on the battlefield]; al-Nabighah al Dhubyani when he flees in fear [i.e. when he expresses himself on the psychological effects of danger and fear]; Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma when he takes delight [in something]; and al-'A'sha, when he is in a gay and joyful mood."

Yunus meant to say that every one of these poets had a special talent in his own field in which his works are considered to be master pieces. Each of them was foremost in his own speciality beyond which his talent and genius did not extend.

## Imam 'Ali's Versatility

One of the outstanding characteristics of Imam 'Ali's sayings which have come down to us in the form of the *Nahj al-balaghah* is that they are not confined to any particular field alone; 'Ali ('a), in his own words, has not trodden a single path only, but has covered varied and various grounds, which occasionally are quite antithetical.

The *Nahj al-balaghah* is a masterpiece, but not of the kind which excels in one field such as the epic, the *ghazal*, sermon, eulogy, satire or love poetry; rather it covers multifarious fields, as shall be elaborated.

In fact, works which are masterpieces in a particular field exist, nevertheless their number is not great and they are countable on fingers. The number of works which cover numerous subjects but are not masterpieces is quite large.

But the characteristic that a work be simultaneously a masterpiece without restricting itself to any one particular subject is an exclusive merit of the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Excepting the Qur'an, which is altogether a different subject to be dealt with independently, what masterpiece is comparable to the *Nahj al-balaghah* in versatility?

Speech is the spirit's envoy and the words of a man relate to the sphere in which his spirit dwells. Naturally, a speech which pertains to multiple spheres is characteristic of a spirit which is too creative to be confined to a single sphere.

Since the spirit of 'Ali is not limited to a particular domain but encompasses various spheres and he is in the terminology of the Islamic mystics, *al-'insan al-kamil* (a perfect man), *al-kawn al jami'* (a complete microcosm) and *jami' kullal-hadarat*, [32](#) the possessor of all higher virtues, so his speech is not limited to any one particular sphere.

Accordingly, as we should say, in terms current today, that 'Ali's merit lies in the multidimensional nature of his speech, that it is different from one-dimensional works. The all-embracing nature of 'Ali's spirit and his speech is not a recent discovery. It is a feature which has invoked a sense of wonder since at least one thousand years. It was this quality that had attracted the attention of al-Sayyid al-Radi a thousand years ago, and he fell in love with 'Ali's speeches and writings. He writes:

Of 'Ali's wonderful qualities which exclusively belong to him, nobody sharing in it with him, is that when one reflects upon his discourses regarding abstinence (*zuhd*), and his exhortations concerning spiritual awakenedness, for a while one totally forgets that the speaker of these words was a person of highest social and political calibre, who ruled over vast territories during his time and his word was command for all.

Even for a moment the thought does not enter the reader's mind that the speaker of these words might have been inclined to anything except piety and seclusion, anything except devotion and worship, having selected a quiet corner of his house or a cave in some mountain valley where he heard no voice except his own and knew nobody except himself, being totally oblivious of the world and its hustle and bustle.

It is unbelievable that those sublime discourses on asceticism, detachment and abstinence and those spiritual exhortations came from somebody who pierced the enemy's ranks and went fighting to the very heart of their forces, with a sword in his hand, poised to sever the enemy's head, and who threw many a mighty warrior down from his steed, rolling into blood and dust. Blood drips from the edge of his sword and yet he is the most pious of saints and the most devoted of sages.

Then, after this, al-Sayyid al-Radi adds:

Frequently I discuss this matter with friends and it equally invokes their sense of wonder.

Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh, too, was profoundly moved by this aspect of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, and it made him marvel at its swiftly changing scenes, which take the reader on a journey through different worlds. He makes a note of it in the introduction to his commentary of the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

Aside from his speech, in general, 'Ali ('a) had a spirit that was universal, all-embracing, and multidimensional, and he has always been eulogized for this quality. He is a just ruler, a devotee who

remains awake all night worshipping God; he weeps in the niche of prayer (*mihrab*) and smiles on the field of battle. He is a tough warrior and a soft-hearted and kind guardian.

He is a philosopher of profound insight and an able general. He is a teacher, a preacher, a judge, a jurist, a peasant, and a writer. He is a perfect man whose great soul envelops all spheres of the human spirit.

Safi al-Din al-Hilli (1277–1349 A.D.) says of him:

*Opposites have come together in thy attributes,*

*And for that thou has no rivals.*

*A devout, a ruler, a man of forbearance, and a courageous one, A deadly warrior, an ascetic, a pauper, and generous to others, Traits which never gathered in one man, And the like of which none ever possessed;*

*A gentleness and charm to abash the morning breeze, A valour and might to melt sturdy rocks;*

*Poetry cannot describe the glory of thy soul,*

*Thy multifaceted personality is above the comprehension of critics.*

Apart from what has been said, an interesting point is that in spite of the fact that 'Ali's discourses are about spiritual and moral issues, in them his literary charm and eloquence have attained their peak. 'Ali ('a) has not dealt with popular poetic themes such as love, wine and vainglory, which are fertile subjects for literary expression in prose and poetry. Moreover, he did not aim at displaying his skills in the art of oratory.

Speech for him was a means and not an end in itself. Neither did he intend to create an object of art nor he wished to be known as an author of a literary masterpiece. Above all, his words have a universality which transcends the limits of time and place. His addressee is the human being within every person, and accordingly, his message does not know any frontier; although, generally, time and place impose limits on the outlook of a speaker and confine his personality.

The main aspect of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an is that its subjects and themes are altogether at variance with those current during the time of its revelation. It marks the beginning of a new era in literature and deals with another world and a different sphere. The beauty and charm of its style and its literary excellence are truly miraculous. In these aspects too, like in its other features, the *Nahj al-balaghah* comes closer to the Qur'an. In truth it is the offspring of the Holy Qur'an.

## [The themes of the Nahj al-balaghah](#)

The variety of topics and themes discussed in the *Nahj al-balaghah* unfolds a wide spectrum of problems that give colour and hue to these heavenly discourses. The author of this dissertation has no pretension to possessing the capacity to do the book full justice and analyse it in depth. I just intend to

give a brief account of the variety of its themes, and it is my firm belief that others will come in the future who shall be able to do justice to this masterpiece of human power of speech.

## [A Glance at the Varied Problems Covered by the Nahj al-balaghah](#)

The various topics found in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, everyone of which is worthy of discussion, can be outlined as follows:

1. Theological and metaphysical issues;
2. Mystic path and worship;
3. Government and social justice;
4. The *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) and the issue of caliphate;
5. Wisdom and admonition;
6. The world and worldliness;
7. Heroism and bravery;
8. Prophecies, predictions, and eschatology;
9. Prayers and invocations;
10. Critique of contemporary society;
11. Social philosophy;
12. Islam and the Qur'an;
13. Morality and the discipline of self;
14. Personalities;

and a series of other topics. Obviously, as the titles of the various chapters of the present book indicate, this author does not make any claim that the topics cited above are all that can be found in the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Neither does he claim that he has done an exhaustive study of these topics, nor has he any pretension to being considered competent for such work.

That which is offered in these chapters is no more than a glimpse. Perhaps, in future, with Divine assistance, after deriving greater benefit from this inexhaustible treasure, the author may be able to undertake a more comprehensive study; or others may be blessed with the opportunity to accomplish such a job. God is wise and indeed His assistance and help is the best.

- [1.](#) This is a reference to the following words of Ali, taken from Nahj al-balaghah, (ed. Subhi al Salih, Beirut 1387), Hikam, No 147 "O Kumayl, the mankind consists of three kinds of people: the sage adept in the knowledge of the Divine (alim rabbani), the novice of the path of deliverance (muta'allim 'ala sabili najat) and the vulgar populace'.
- [2.](#) Faqih means an expert in Islamic Law, the Shariah, whose study is called fiqh. Equivalent terms are mufti, mujtahid, and ayatullah. (Tr.)
- [3.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Khutab, No. 193
- [4.](#) Minbar is a raised platform with steps, the Islamic pulpit. Traditionally as a rule, the function at speaking at mourning gatherings, the majalis, has been performed in Iran by the Mullahs, or ruhaniyyun, as they are called in Iran. (Tr.)
- [5.](#) Husayniyyeh Irshad is a building in Tehran founded by the late Dr. Ali Shariati. (Tr.)
- [6.](#) This is in reference to an Arabic maxim: That which cannot be attained in entirety is not to be abandoned completely.
- [7.](#) Here it is not clear whether al Masudi means that Ali's sermons were recorded in writing, in books, or if he implies that people preserved them by memorizing them, or if he means both.
- [8.](#) al Masudi, Muruj al dhahab, (Beirut, 1983), vol II, p. 431
- [9.](#) al Tha'alibi quoted by Muhammad Abduh, Sharh Nahj al-balaghah, Introduction, p. 9
- [10.](#) Nahj means open way, road, course, method or manner; balaghah means eloquence, art of good style and communication, rhetoric etc
- [11.](#) Here the author adds that 'till now four volumes of this have been published'.
- [12.](#) The arabic is: fawq kamil makhluq wa duna kalam ul khaliq
- [13.](#) al Jahiz, al-Bayan wa al-tabyin, vol. I p. 230
- [14.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Khutab, No. 3
- [15.](#) Ibid.
- [16.](#) Ibid., Rasail, No. 22
- [17.](#) Ibid., Rasail, No. 83
- [18.](#) According to my own counting, if I have not made a mistake
- [19.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Khutab, No. 193
- [20.](#) Abd al Hamid was a scribe (katib) at the court of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan ibn Muhammad. Of Persian origin, he was the teacher of the famous Ibn al Muqaffa. It was said of him, 'the art of writing began with 'Abd al Hamid and ended with Ibn al Amid'. Ibn al Amid was a minister to the Buyids.
- [21.](#) Asla means someone whose frontal position, portion of the head is bald. Abd al Hamid while confessing the greatness of Imam Ali, mentions him in a detracting manner due to his attachment to the Umayyad court
- [22.](#) The other three being: Adab al kitab of Ibn Qutaybah, al Kamil, of al Mubarrad, and al Nawadir of Abu Ali al Qali: quoted from the introduction to al-Bayan wa al-tabyin by Ibn Khaldun in his Muqaddamah.
- [23.](#) al-Bayan wa al-tabyin, vol. I p. 202
- [24.](#) bid, Vol. I p. 83
- [25.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Hikam, No. 81. See also al Sayyid al Radi's comment on this aphorism.
- [26.](#) Sasa'ah ibn Suhan al Abdi was of the eminent companions of Imam Ali. When after the death of the third Caliph, Ali became the Caliph, it was Sa'sa'ah who said to him: You [by assuming the caliphate] have given it beauty, while caliphate has not added lustre to your personality. You have raised its worth, and it has not raised your station. It stands in greater need of you than you need it.
- [27.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Rasail, No. 35
- [28.](#) This anecdote was related by Muhammad Jawad Mughniyyah, a contemporary Lebanese scholar, at the occasion of a reception party given in his honor in the holy city of Mashad.
- [29.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Khutab, No. 230
- [30.](#) al Jahiz, op. cit., vol. II p. 99
- [31.](#) A poetic form much popular in classical Arabic and Persian poetry. Ghazal is also another poetic form.
- [32.](#) Umru al Qays (500-540 AD) the famous poet of the pre-Islamic era (Jahiliyyah), the author of the first Mu'allaqat. Al Malik al Dillili is his nickname.

# Theology and Metaphysics

One of the fundamental issues dealt with in the *Nahj al-balaghah* relates to theological and metaphysical problems. In all, there are about forty places in the sermons, letters, and aphorisms where these matters are discussed. Some of these pertain to the aphorisms, but more often the discussion is longer, covering sometimes several pages.

The passages on *tawhid* (Divine Unity) in the *Nahj al-balaghah* can perhaps be considered to be the most wonderful discussions of the book. Without any exaggeration, when we take into account the conditions in which they were delivered, they can almost be said to be miraculous.

The discussions on this theme in the *Nahj al-balaghah* are of a varied nature. Some of them constitute studies of the scheme of creation bearing witness to Divine creativity and wisdom. Here, 'Ali speaks about the whole system of the heaven and the earth, or occasionally discusses the wonderful features of some specific creature like the bat, the peacock or the ant, and the role of Divine design and purpose in their creation. To give an example of this kind of discussion, we may quote a passage regarding the ant:

Have you observed the tiny creatures that He has created? How He has made them strong and perfected their constitution and shaped their organs of hearing and sight, and how He has styled their bones and skin?

Observe the ant with its tiny body and delicate form. It is so small that its features can hardly be discerned by the eye and so insignificant that it does not enter our thoughts. See how it roams about upon the ground and arduously collects its livelihood. It carries the grain to its hole and deposits it in its store.

It collects during the summer for the winter and, when winter arrives, it foresees the time to reemerge. Its livelihood is guaranteed and designed according to its built. The Benefactor and the Provider does not forget or forsake it. He does not deprive it, even though it should be in hard and dry stones and rocks.

You will be amazed at the delicate intricacy of its wonderful constitution if you investigate the structure of its alimentary canals, its belly, and its eyes and ears which are in its head ...[1](#)

However, most of the discussions about *tawhid* in the *Nahj al-balaghah* are rational and philosophical. The rare sublimity of the *Nahj al-balaghah* becomes manifest in these discourses. In these philosophical and rational discourses of the *Nahj al-balaghah* on *tawhid* what constitutes the focus of all arguments is the infinite, absolute and self-sufficing nature of the Divine Essence. In these passages, 'Ali ('a) attains to the heights of eloquence, and none, neither before him nor after him, has approached him in this aspect.

Another issue dealt with is that of the absolute simplicity (*al-basatatal-mutlaqah*) of the Divine Essence and negation of every kind of multiplicity, divisibility in the Godhead and refutation of separability of the Divine Attributes from the Divine Essence. This theme occurs repeatedly in the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

Also discussed is a series of other profound problems which had never been touched before him. They are: God being the First while also being the Last; His being simultaneously the Manifest and the Hidden; His priority over time and number, i.e.

His pre-eternity is not temporal and His Unity is not numerical; His Supremacy, Authority, and Self-sufficiency; His Creativeness; that attendance to one affair does not prevent Him from attending to other affairs; the identity of Divine Word and Act; the limited capacity of human reason to comprehend His reality; that gnosis (*ma'rifah*) is a kind of manifestation (*tajalli*) of Him upon the intellects, which is different from conception or cognition by the mind; the negation of such categories and qualities as corporeality, motion, rest, change, place, time, similarity, opposition, partnership, possession of organs or instruments, limitation and number; and a series of other issues which we shall, God willing, mention later and give examples of every one of these.

Even a thinker well-versed in the beliefs and views of ancient and modern philosophers would be struck with wonder to see the wide range and scope of the problems propounded in that wonderful book.

An elaborate discussion of the issues raised and dealt with in the *Nahj al-balaghah* would itself require a voluminous book and cannot be covered in one or two articles. Unavoidably, we shall be brief; but before we commence our brief survey, we are compelled to mention certain points as an introduction to our discussion.

## [A Bitter Fact](#)

We, the Shi'ah Muslims, must confess that we have been unjust in regard to our duty with respect to the man whom we, more than others, take pride in following; or, at the very least, we must admit falling short in our duty towards him. In substance, any kind of failure in fulfilling our responsibility is an act of injustice on our part.

We did not want to realize the significance of 'Ali ('a), or we had been unable to. All our energy and labour were devoted to proclaiming the Prophet's statements about 'Ali and to denouncing those who ignored them, but we failed to pay attention to the intellectual side of Imam 'Ali's personality.

Sadi says:

*The reality of musk lies in its scent, Not in the perfumer's advice.*

Applying Sa'di's words to our attitude regarding Imam 'Ali's personality, we did not realize that this musk, recommended by the Divine Perfumer, itself carried its pleasant aroma, and before everything else we

should have tried to know its scent and become familiar with it. That is, we should have familiarized ourselves and others with its inner fragrance.

The counsel of the Divine Perfumer was meant to acquaint the people with its pleasant redolence, not for the purpose that they may believe that it is musk and then devote all their energies trying to convince others by arguing with them, without bothering to acquaint themselves with its real fragrance.

Had the *Nahj al-balaghah* belonged to some other people, would they have treated it in the way we treated this great book? The country of Iran is the centre of Shi'ism and the language of its people is Persian. You have only to examine the translations and commentaries on the *Nahj al-balaghah* to make a judgement about what our accomplishment amounts to.

To take a more general case, the Shi'i sources of *hadith* (tradition) and texts of *du'a'* (prayers) are incomparable to the texts of the non-Shi'i works in the same field. This is also true of Divine teachings and other subjects. The problems and issues discussed in works like al-Kulayni's *al-Kafi*, or al-Shaykh al-Saduq's *al-Tawhid*, or *al-Ihtijaj* of al-Tabarsi are nowhere to be found among the works of the non-Shi'is.

It can be said that if occasionally similar issues are dealt with in the non-Shi'i books, the material is unmistakably spurious, for it is not only opposed to the prophetic teachings but is also contradictory to the Qur'anic fundamentals.

There is a strong smell of anthropomorphism which hangs around them. Recently, Hashim Ma'ruf al-Hasani, in his book *Dirasat fi al-Kafi li al-Kulayni wa al-Sahih li al-Bukhari*, which is an original but a brief comparative study of al-Sahih of al-Bukhari and al-Kulayni's *al-Kafi*, has dealt with the traditions related to the problems of theology.

## Shi'i Rationalism

The discussion of theological problems and their analysis by the Shi'i Imams, of which the *Nahj al-balaghah* is the earliest example, was the main cause of the emergence of rationalistic approach and philosophic outlook in the Shi'i intellectual world from the earliest days of Islam.

This cannot be labelled as an innovation in Islam; rather, its basis was laid down by the Qur'an itself. It was in accordance with the approach of the Qur'an and for the purpose of its interpretation that the Imams of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) expounded such issues. If anybody can be reproached in this matter, it is those who did not adopt this method and abandoned the means to follow it.

History shows that from the earliest Islamic era, the Shiah, more than any other sect, were interested in these problems. Amongst the Ahl al-Sunnah, the Mu'tazilites, who were nearer to the Shi'ah, did possess similar inclinations. But, as we know, the general view predominant among the Ahl al-Sunnah did not welcome it, and as a result the Mu'tazilite sect became extinct about the end of the 3rd/9th

century .

Ahmad Amin, the Egyptian writer, confirms this view in the first volume of his *Zuhr al-Islam*. After discussing the philosophic movement in Egypt during the reign of the Fatimids, who were a Shi'ah sect, he writes:

Philosophy is more akin to Shi'ism than it is to the Sunni Islam, and we witness the truth of this in the era of the Fatimid rule [in Egypt] and in that of the Buyids [in Iran]. Even during the later ages Iran, which is a Shi'ite country, has paid more attention to philosophy than any other Islamic country. In our own times, Sayyid Jamal al-Din al Asadabadi, who had Shi'ite inclinations and had studied philosophy in Iran, created a philosophic movement in Egypt when he arrived here.

Curiously, Ahmad Amin in his explanation of why the Shi'ah showed more inclination towards philosophy, commits an error, willfully or otherwise. According to him, "the reason for greater inclination on the part of the Shi'ah towards rational and philosophical discussions is to be found in their esotericism and their flair for *ta'wil*. [2](#)

They were compelled to seek the assistance of philosophy for defence of their esotericism. That is why the Fatimid Egypt and Buyid Persia, and Iran during the Safawid and Qajar periods, were more disposed towards philosophy than the rest of the Islamic world."

This is sheer nonsense on the part of Ahmad Amin. It was the Imams ('a) of the Shi'ah who for the first time introduced philosophical approach, and it was they who introduced the most profound and intricate concepts with regard to theological problems in their arguments, polemics, sermons, *ahadith*, and prayers, of which the *Nahj al-balaghah* is one example.

Even with regard to the prophetic traditions, the Shi'ah sources are far more sublime and profound than the traditions contained in the non-Shi'i sources. This characteristic is not confined to philosophy only, but is also true of *kalam*, *fiqh*, and *usul al-fiqh*, in which the Shi'ah enjoy a position of distinction. All this owes its origin to one and same source: stress on rationalism.

Some others have tried to trace the origin of this difference [between the Shi'i and the Sunni intellects] in the concept of "the Shi'ite nation". According to them, since the Persians are Shi'ite and the Shi'ah are Persian, and as the Persians are a people with a philosophical temperament, fond of the intricacies of speculation and pure thought, with the help of their rich and strong philosophical tradition, they succeeded in raising the level of Shi'a thought and gave it an Islamic colour.

Bertrand Russell, in *A History of Western Philosophy*, expresses a similar view based on the above-mentioned argument. With his habitual or inherent impoliteness he puts forth this opinion. However, Russell lacks the capacity of vindicating his claim, since he was totally unfamiliar with Islamic philosophy and basically knew nothing about it.

He was not qualified to express any informed opinion about the origins of Shi'ah thought and its sources.

Our rejoinder to the upholders of this view is: first of all, not all Shi'ah were Iranian, nor all Iranians were Shi'ah. Were Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni, Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Babawayh al-Qummi and Muhammad ibn Abi Talib al-Mazandarani Persian, but not Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, Abu Dawud al-Sijistani and Muslim ibn Hajjaj al-Nishaburi?

Was al-Sayyid al-Radi, the compiler of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, of Persian origin? Were the Fatimids of Egypt of Persian descent?

Why was philosophic thought revived in Egypt with the inception of Fatimid rule and why did it decline with their fall? And why was it revived later, after a long interval, only through the influence of an Iranian Shi'ah?

The truth is that the Imams of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) were the only real dynamic force behind this mode of thinking and this kind of approach. All scholars of the Ahl al-Sunnah admit that among the Prophet's Companions only 'Ali ('a) was a man of philosophic wisdom, who had an altogether distinct rational approach. Abu 'Ali ibn Sina is quoted as having remarked:

'Ali's position among the Companions of Muhammad (S), was that of the "rational" in the midst of the "corporeal."

Obviously, the intellectual approach of the followers of such an Imam as 'Ali ('a) should be expected to be radically different from that of those who followed others. Moreover, Ahmad Amin and others have been susceptible to another similar misunderstanding. They express doubts with regard to the authenticity of ascription of such philosophic statements [as exist in the *Nahj al-balaghah* ] to 'Ali ('a).

They say that the Arabs were not familiar with such kind of issues and such arguments and elaborate analyses as are found in the *Nahj al-balaghah* before their acquaintance with Greek philosophy, and evidently, according to them, these discourses should have been composed by some later scholars familiar with Greek philosophy, and were attributed to Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib ('a).

We also accept that the Arabs were not familiar with such ideas and notions. Not only the Arabs, the non-Arabs, too, were not acquainted with them, nor were those notions familiar to the Greeks and Greek philosophy.

Ahmad Amin first brings down 'Ali ('a) to the level of such Arabs like Abu Jahl and Abu Sufyan and then he postulates his minor and major premises and bases his conclusion on them: The Arabs were unfamiliar with philosophical notions; 'Ali was an Arab: therefore 'Ali was also unfamiliar with philosophical notions. One should ask him whether the Arabs of the Jahiliyyah were familiar with the ideas and concepts that were propounded in the Qur'an.

Had not 'Ali ('a) been brought up and trained by the Messenger of Allah himself? Didn't the Prophet (S)

introduce 'Ali ('a) to his Companions as the most learned and knowledgeable amongst them? Why should we deny the high spiritual status of someone who enriched his inner self by drawing on the bounteous wealth of Islam in order to protect the prestige of some of the Prophet's Companions who could never rise above the ordinary level?

Ahmad Amin says that before acquaintance with Greek philosophy the people of Arabia were not familiar with the ideas and concepts found in the *Nahj al-balaghah*. The answer to this is that the Arabs did not become acquainted with the ideas and notions propounded in the *Nahj al-balaghah* even after centuries of familiarity with Greek philosophy.

Not only the Arabs, even the non-Arab Muslims were not acquainted with these ideas, for the simple reason that there is no trace of them in Greek philosophy itself! These ideas are exclusively special to Islamic philosophy. The Islamic philosophers gradually picked these ideas up from the basic Islamic sources and incorporated them in their thought under the guidance of revelation.

## Philosophical Notions Concerning Metaphysics

As mentioned before, the *Nahj al-balaghah* adopts two kinds of approach to the problems of theology. The first kind of approach calls attention to the sensible world and its phenomena as a mirror reflecting the Knowledge and Perfection of the Creator. The second approach involves purely rationalistic and philosophical reflections. The latter approach accounts for the greater part of the theological discussions of the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Moreover, it is the only approach adopted in regard to the discussion about the Divine Essence and Attributes.

As we know, the value of such discussions and the legitimacy of such reflections have been always questioned by those who consider them improper from the viewpoint of reason or canon, or both. In our own times, a certain group claims that this kind of analysis and inference does not agree with the spirit of Islam and that the Muslims were initiated into such kind of speculations under the influence of Greek philosophy and not as a result of any inspiration or guidance effused from the Qur'an.

They say that if the Muslims had adhered closely to the Qur'anic teachings they would not have entangled themselves with these tortuous debates. For the same reason, they view with suspicion the authenticity of such speculations found in the *Nahj al-balaghah* and their ascription to Imam 'Ali ('a).

In the second and third centuries a group of people opposed such kind of discussions and questioned their legitimacy, raising doctrinal objections. They insisted that it is obligatory for Muslims to be satisfied with the literal and commonly understood meaning of the words of the Qur'an, and regarded every kind of inquiry into the meaning of the Qur'an as an innovation (*bid'ah*) in religion.

For instance, if someone inquired about the meaning of the Qur'anic verse "*The All-compassionate sat Himself upon the Throne*" [20:5], he was confronted by the displeasure of those who regarded such

questions as not only improper but distasteful. He would be told: “The exact meaning is unknown and questioning is heresy”. [3](#)

During the 3rd/9th century, this group, which later came to be called Ash'arites, overwhelmed the Mu'tazilites, who considered such speculations to be within the bounds of legitimacy. This victory of the Asharites delivered a severe blow to the intellectual life of Islam.

The Akhbaris, who were a Shi'i school which flourished during the period between the 10th/16th and the 14th/20th centuries—and particularly during the 10th/16th and 11th/17th centuries—followed the Asha'irah in their ideas and beliefs. They raised doctrinal objections against ratiocination. Now we shall proceed to discuss the objections raised from a rationalist point of view.

As a result of the triumph of the empirical and experimental method over the deductive approach in Europe, especially in the physical sciences, the view began to prevail that rational speculation was unreliable not only in the physical sciences but also in all scientific disciplines and that the only reliable method was that of empirical philosophy. The result of it was that the problems of theology were viewed with doubt and suspicion, because they lay beyond the domain of experimental and empirical observation.

The past victories of the Ash'arites, on the one hand, and the amazing triumphs of the empirical method, which followed one another in quick succession, on the other hand, drove some non-Shi'ite Muslim writers to the extremes of excitement.

The outcome was the eclectic opinion that from the religious (*Shar'i*) as well as the rational point of view the use of deductive method even in problems of theology should be discarded. From the *Shar'i* viewpoint, they made the claim that according to the outlook of the Qur'an the only approach valid in theology was the empirical and experimental method and the study of the natural phenomena and the system of creation; the rest, they declared, is no more than an exercise in futility.

They pointed out that in scores of its verses, the Qur'an in most unequivocal terms has invited human beings to study the phenomena of nature; it considers the keys to the secrets of the origin and workings of the universe to be concealed within nature itself. In this way they echoed, in their writings and speeches, the ideas expressed by the European proponents of empirical philosophy .

Farid al-Wajdi in his book *'Ala atlal al-madhab al-maddi* (On the Ruins of Materialism), and Sayyid Abu al-Hasan al-Nadawi, in his *Madha khasira al-'alam bi-inhitat al-Muslimin* (“What the World Lost Through the Decline of Muslims”) and the writers belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) such as Sayyid Qutb and others, have supported this view, vehemently attacking the opposite viewpoint.

Al-Nadawi, in his above-mentioned book, says:

The prophets informed men about the existence of God and His Attributes and informed them about the origin and beginning of the world and the ultimate destiny of man, putting this free information at his disposal.

They relieved him of the need to understand and discuss these problems the basics of which lie beyond our reach (because these problems belong to the sphere of the supra-sensible and our knowledge and experience is limited to the physical and the sensible). But men did not value this blessing and entangled themselves in debates and speculations about these problems, and strode into the dark regions of the hidden and the unknowable. [4](#)

The same author, in another chapter of the same book, where he discusses the causes of the decline of Muslims, under the heading "*The Neglect of Useful Sciences*," criticizes the muslim '*ulama*' in these words:

The Muslim scholars and thinkers did not give as much importance to practical and experimental sciences as they gave to debating about metaphysics, which they had learnt from Greek philosophy.

The Greek metaphysics and theology is nothing more than Greek's polytheistic mythology presented in a philosophical outfit, and is no more than a series of meaningless conjectures expressed in an absurd jargon. God has exempted Muslims from debate, speculation and analysis in these matters, which are not much different from the analytic pursuits of the Alchemists. But out of ingratitude for this great blessing, the Muslims wasted their energy and genius in problems of this sort. [5](#)

Without doubt, the views of the like of Farid al-Wajid; and al-Nadawi should be regarded as a kind of return to Ash'arism, though dressed in contemporary style akin to the language of empirical philosophy.

Here, we cannot enter into a philosophic discussion about the value of philosophic reflection. In the chapters entitled "*The Value of Information*" and "*Origin of Multiplicity in Perception*" of the book *The Principles and Method of Realism*, we have discussed the matter in sufficient detail. Here, we shall confine ourselves to the Qur'anic aspect of this problem, and investigate whether the Holy Qur'an considers the study of nature to be the only valid method of inquiry into theological problems, or whether it allows for another approach besides the above-mentioned.

However, it is essential to point out that the disagreement between the Ash'arites and the non-Ash'arites is not about the legitimacy of the use of the Book and the Sunnah as sources in the problems of theology; rather, the disagreement concerns the manner of their utilization. According to the Ash'arites, their application should not exceed mute acceptance.

According to them, we assign the various Attributes like Unity, Omniscience, Omnipotence and the rest to God because they have been ascribed to Him by the *Shar'iah*, otherwise we would not know whether God is such or not, because the basic principles and essentials dealing with God are beyond our reach.

Therefore, according to them, we are forced to accept God as such, but we cannot know or understand that God is such. The role of the religious texts is that they prescribe for us the way we ought to think and believe so that we may follow it in our thought and beliefs.

According to the contestants of this view, these issues are amenable to human understanding, like any other rational concept or idea. That is, there exist certain principles and essentials which if known properly enable man to understand them.

The role of the religious texts lies in their capacity to inspire, motivate, and guide human reason by putting understandable principles and essentials at its disposal. Basically servitude in intellectual matters is absurd. It is like ordering one to think in a certain fashion, and asking him to derive certain prescribed conclusions.

It is like ordering someone to see a thing in a certain fashion and then asking him, "How do you see it? Is it big or small? black or white?" Servitude in thinking does not mean anything other than absence of thinking and acceptance without reflection.

In short, the question is not whether it is possible for man to go beyond the teachings of the Revelation. God be our refuge, there is nothing that lies beyond them; because that which has reached us through Revelation and the Household of the Revelation (i.e. the *Ahl al-Bayt* [A]) is the utmost limit of perfection concerning knowledge of the Divine.

Here our debate centres upon the capacity of human thought and reason, whether it can, when supplied with the basic principles and essentials, undertake an intellectual journey through the world of theological problems<sup>6</sup> or not.

As to the invitation of the Qur'an to study and inquiry about the phenomena of creation, and its emphasis on nature as a means for attaining the knowledge of God and the supra-natural, it should be said that it is, indubitably, a basic principle of the Qur'anic teachings. It is with extraordinary insistence that the Qur'an asks human beings to inquire into the nature of the earth, the sky, the plants and animals, and man himself, and urges them to study them scientifically.

It is also indubitable that the Muslims did not take enough worthy steps in this direction. Perhaps the real reason behind it was Greek philosophy, which was deductive and based on pure speculation, and they used this approach even in the field of the physical sciences. Nevertheless, as the history of science bears testimony, the muslim scientists did not altogether abandon the experimental method in their studies like the Greeks.

The Muslims were the pioneers of the experimental method, not the Europeans, as is commonly thought, who followed on the tracks first laid by the Muslims.

## The Value of Study of the Natural Phenomena

Aside from all of this, the question worthy of consideration is whether the Qur'an, besides its emphasis on the study of the creatures of earth, water, and air, allows other ways of approaching the issue, or if it closes all other doors.

The question is whether the Qur'an, even as it invites people to study the signs of God (*ayat*), also welcomes other modes of intellectual endeavour. Basically, what is the value of inquiry into the works of creation (an inquiry which the Qur'an urges us, explicitly or implicitly, to undertake), from the viewpoint of initiating us into the awareness and consciousness which this heavenly Book aims to cultivate?

The truth is that the measure of assistance provided by the study of the works of the creation in understanding the problems explicitly pointed out by the Holy Qur'an is quite restricted. The Qur'an has propounded certain problems of theology which are by no means understandable through the study of the created world or nature.

The value of study of the system of creation is limited only to the extent to which it proves that the world is governed by a Power which knows, designs, plans, and administers it. The world is a mirror, open to empirical experiment, only to the extent that it points towards something that lies beyond nature and discloses the existence of a Mighty Hand which runs nature's cosmic wheels.

But the Qur'an is not content that man should only know that a Mighty, Knowing, and Wise Power administers this universe. This may perhaps be true of other heavenly scriptures, but is by no means true of the Holy Qur'an, which is the final and ultimate heavenly message and has a great deal to say about God and the reality transcending nature.

## Purely Rationalistic Problems

The most basic problem to which the mere study of the world of creation fails to provide an answer is the necessity of existence and uncreatedness of the Power which transcends nature. The world is a mirror in the sense that it indicates the existence of a Mighty Hand and a Wise Power, but it does not tell us anything more about its nature. It does not tell us whether that Power is subservient to something else or not, or if it is self-subsisting. And if it is subject to something else, what is that?

The objective of the Qur'an is not only that we should know that a Mighty Hand administers the world, but that we may know that that Administrator is "Allah" and that "Allah" is the indefinable: (There is nothing like Him), whose Essence encompasses all perfection, or in other words, that "Allah" signifies Absolute Perfection and is the referent of, (His is the loftiest likeness). How can the study of nature give us an understanding of such notions and concepts?

The second problem is that of the Unity of God. The Qur'an has stated this issue in a logical form and

used a syllogistic argument to explain it. The method of argument it has employed in this regard is what is called 'exclusive syllogism' or 'reductio ad impossibile' (*burhan al-tamanu*). On occasion it eliminates the possibility of multiplicity in the efficient cause as in the following verse: [7](#)

***“If there had been (multiple) gods in them (i.e. the earth and the heaven) other than God, they would surely go to ruin ...”*** (21:22)

At other times it argues by eliminating the possibility of multiplicity in the final cause:

***“God has not taken to Himself any son, nor is there any god besides Him; for then each god would have taken off that he created and some of them would have risen up over others ...”***  
(23:91)

The Qur'an never suggests that the study of the system of creation can lead us to the knowledge of the Unity of the Godhead so as to imply that the essential knowledge of the transcendental Creator be considered attainable from that source. Moreover, such a suggestion would not have been correct.

The Qur'an alludes to various problems as indicated by the following examples:

***“No thing is like Him ...”*** (42:11) ***“And God's is the loftiest likeness ...”*** (16:60) ***“To Him belong the Names most Beautiful.”*** (20:8) ***“And His is the loftiest likeness in the heavens and the earth ...”*** (30:27) ***“He is God, there is no god but He. He is the King, the All-holy, the All-peaceable. the All-faithful, the All-preserver, the All-mighty, the All-compeller, the All-sublime ...”*** (59:23) ***“And to God belong the East and the West; whither so ever you turn, there is the Face of God ...”*** (2:115) ***“And He is God in the heavens and the earth; He knows your secrets, and what you publish ...”*** (6:3) ***“He is the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward; He has knowledge of everything.”*** (57:3) ***“He is the Living, the Everlasting ...”*** (2:255) ***“God, is the Everlasting, [Who] has not begotten, and has not been begotten and equal to Him is not any one.”*** (112:2-4)

Why does the Qur'an raise such issues? Is it for the sake of propounding mysterious matters incomprehensible to man, who, according to al-Nadawi, lacks the knowledge of its essential principles, and then asking him to accept them without comprehending their meaning? Or, the Qur'an actually does want him to know God through the attributes and descriptions that have come in it? And, if this is true, what reliable approach does it recommend?

How is it possible to acquire this knowledge through the study of the natural phenomena? The study of the creation teaches us that God has knowledge of the things; that is, the things that He has made were created knowingly and wisely. But the Qur'an expects us not only to know this, but also stresses that:

***“Indeed God has the knowledge of everything.”*** (2:231) ***“And not so much as the weight of an atom in earth or heaven escapes from thy Lord, neither is aught smaller than that, or greater, but in a Manifest Book.”*** (10:61) ***“Say: If the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be***

***spent before the Words of my Lord are spent, though We brought replenishment the like of it. “***

(18:109)

This means that God's knowledge is infinite and so is His power. How and wherefore is it possible through perception and observation of the world of creation to reach the conclusion that the Creator's Knowledge and Power are infinite? The Qur'an, similarly, propounds numerous other problems of the kind.

For instance, it mentions *al-lawh al-mahfuz* (the Protected Tablet), *lawh al-mahw wa al-'ithbat* (The Tablet of Expunction and Affirmation), *jabr* and *ikhtiyar* (determinism and free will), *wahy* (revelation) and *ilham* (intuition), etc.; none of which are susceptible to inquiry through the empirical study of the world of creation.

It must be admitted that the Qur'an, definitely, has raised these problems in the form of a series of lessons and has emphasized their importance through advice and exhortation. The following verses of the Qur'an may be quoted in this connection:

***“What, do they not meditate in the Qur'an? Or is it that there are locks upon their hearts? ....”***

(47:24) ***“(This is) a Scripture that We have revealed unto thee, full of blessing, that they may ponder its revelations, and that men of understanding may reflect.”*** (38:29)

Inevitably, we are forced to accept that the Qur'an assumes the existence of a reliable method for understanding the meaning of these truths, which have not been revealed as a series of obscure incomprehensibles which lie beyond the reach of the human mind.

The scope of problems propounded by the Qur'an in the sphere of metaphysics is far greater than what can be resolved or be answered through the study of physical creation. This is the reason why the Muslims have pursued these problems, at times through spiritual and gnostic efforts, and at other times through speculative and rational approach.

I wonder whether those who claim that the Qur'an considers the study of nature as the sole, sufficient means for the solution of metaphysical problems, can give a satisfying answer in regard to the multifarious problems propounded by it, a characteristic which is special to this great heavenly Book.

'Ali's sole source of inspiration in his exposition of the problems mentioned in the previous chapters is the Holy Qur'an, and the sole motive behind his discourses is exegetical. Perhaps, had it not been for 'Ali ('a) the rationalistic and speculative aspects of the Qur'an would have forever remained uninterpreted.

After these brief introductory remarks on the value of these issues, we shall go on to cite some relevant examples from the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

## The Divine Essence and Attributes

In this section we shall cite some examples of the *Nahj al-balaghah*'s treatment of the problems of theology related with Divine Essence and Attributes. Later we shall make a brief comparative study of the issue in various schools and conclude our discussion on this aspect of the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

However, before proceeding further, I ask for the reader's pardon that the discussion in the last three sections became a bit technical and philosophical, which is not very welcome for those not used to it. But what is the remedy?

Discussion on a book such as the *Nahj al-balaghah* does entail such ups and downs. For this reason, we shall limit ourselves to giving only a few examples from the book on this subject, and refrain from any elaborate discussion. Because, if we were to comment on every sentence of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, the result will be, as is said:

*My mathnawi requires seventy maunds of paper.*

## The Divine Essence

Does the *Nahj al-balaghah* have anything to say about the Divine Essence and how to define it? The answer is, Yes, and a lot. However, much of the discussion revolves around the point that the Divine Essence is Absolute and Infinite Being, without a quiddity. His Essence accepts no limits and boundaries like other beings, static or changeable, which are limited and finite.

A changeable being is one which constantly transcends its former limits and assumes new ones. But such is not the Divine Essence. Quiddity, which may qualify and confine Him within limits of finitude, is not applicable to Him. None of the aspects of being are devoid of His Presence, and no kind of imperfection is applicable to Him, except absence of any imperfection whatsoever: the only thing amiss in Him is absence of defect or inadequacy of any kind.

The sole kind of negation applicable to Him is the negation of all negations. The only kind of non-being attributable to Him is the negation of any kind of imperfection in relation to Him. He is free from all shades of non-being which characterize the creatures and effects. He is free from finitude, multiplicity, divisibility, and need.

The only territory that He does not enter is that of nothingness and non-being. He is with every thing, but not in any thing, and nothing is with Him. He is not within things, though not out of them. He is over and above every kind of condition, state, similarity, and likeness. For, these qualities relate to limited and determinate beings characterized by quiddity:

*“He is with everything but not in the sense of [physical] nearness. He is different from every thing but not in the sense of separation.” (Sermon 1 )*

*“He is not inside things in the sense of physical [pervasion or] penetration, and is not outside them in the sense of [physical] exclusion [for exclusion entails a kind of finitude].” (Sermon 186)*

*“He is distinct from things because He overpowers them, and the things are distinct from Him because of their subjection to Him.” (Sermon 152)*

That is, His distinctness from things lies in the fact that He has authority and control over them. However, His power, authority and sovereignty, unlike that of the creatures, is not accompanied with simultaneous weakness, subjugation, and subjection.

His distinction and separateness from things lies in the fact that things are totally subject to His power and authority, and that which is subject and subordinated can never be like the one who subjugates and commands control over it. His separateness from things does not lie in physical separation but is on account of the distinction which lies between the Provider and the provided, the Perfect and the imperfect, the Powerful and the weak.

These kind of ideas are replete in 'Ali's discourses. All the problems which shall be discussed later are based on the principle that Divine Essence is Absolute and Infinite, and the concepts of limit, form and condition do not apply to it.

## **Divine Unity an Ontological, not a Numerical Concept**

Another feature of *tawhid* (monotheism) as propounded by the *Nahj al-balaghah* is that Divine Unity is not numerical, but something else. Numerical unity means the oneness of something which has possibility of recurrence.

It is always possible to imagine that the quiddity and form of an existent is realizable in another individual being. In such cases, the unity of an individual possessing that quiddity is numerical oneness and stands in opposition to duplicity or multiplicity.

'It is one,' means that there is not another like it, and inevitably this kind of unity entails the quality of being restricted in number, which is a defect; because one is lesser in number as compared to two or more of its kind.

But, if a being be such that assumption of recurrence with regard to it is impossible, since it is infinite and unlimited, and if we assume another like it to exist, it will follow that it is the same as the first being or that it is something which is not similar to it and therefore cannot be called a second instance of it. In such a case, unity is not numerical.

That is, this kind of unity is not one opposed to duplicity or multiplicity, and when it is said 'It is one,' it does not mean that 'there are not two, three or more of its kind,' but it means that a second to it is unconceivable.

This notion can further be clarified through an example. We know that the astronomers and physicists are not in agreement about the dimensions of the universe, whether it is limited in size or infinite.

Some scientists have favoured the idea of an unlimited and infinite universe; others claim that the universe is limited in dimensions so that if we travel in any direction, we shall reach a point beyond which there is no space. The other issue is whether the universe in which we live is the only universe in existence, or if there are other universes existing besides it.

Evidently, the assumption of another physical world beyond our own is a corollary to the assumption that our universe is not infinite. Only in this case it is possible to assume the existence of, say, two physical universes each of which is limited and has finite dimensions. But if we assume that our universe is infinite, it is not possible to entertain the assumption of another universe existing beyond it. For, whatever we were to assume would be identical with this universe or a part of it.

The assumption of another being similar to the Being of the One God—like the assumption of another physical universe besides an infinite material universe—amounts to assuming the impossible, for the Being of God is absolute: Absolute Selfhood and Absolute Reality.

The notion that Divine Unity is not a numerical concept, and that qualifying it by a number is synonymous with imposing limits on the Divine Essence, is repeatedly discussed by the *Nahj al-balaghah*:

*“He is the One, but not in a numerical sense.” (Sermon 152)*

*“He is not confined by limits nor counted by numbers.” (Sermon 186)*

*“He who points to Him, admits for Him limitations; and he who admits limitations for Him has numbered Him.” (Sermon 1)*

*“He who qualifies Him limits Him. He who limits Him numbers Him. He who numbers Him denies His pre-eternity.” (Sermon 152)*

*“Everything associated with unity is deficient except Him.” (Sermon 65)*

How beautiful, profound, and full of meaning is the last sentence. It states that everything except the Divine Essence is limited if it is one. That is, every thing for which another of its kind is conceivable is a limited being and an addition of another individual would increase its number. But this is not true of the Unity of the Divine Essence; for God's Unity lies in His greatness and infinity, for which a like, a second, an equal or a match is not conceivable.

This concept that Divine Unity is not a numerical notion is exclusively an Islamic concept, original and profound, and unprecedented in any other school of thought. Even the Muslim philosophers only gradually realized its profundity through contemplating the spirit of the original Islamic texts and in

particular the discourses of 'Ali ('a), and ultimately formally incorporated it in the Islamic metaphysical philosophy.

There is no trace of this profound concept in the writings of the early Islamic philosophers like al Farabi and Ibn Sina. Only the later philosophers ushered this concept into their philosophic thinking calling it “*Really True Unity*,” in their terminology.

## God, The First and the Last; the Manifest and the Hidden

Of the many issues discussed by the *Nahj al-balaghah* is the notion that God is the First and the Last, the Hidden and the Manifest. Of course this, too, like other notions, has been deduced from the Holy Qur'an; though here we are not going to quote the verses from the Qur'an. God is the First, but His precedence is not temporal so as to be in contradiction with His being the Last.

He is the Manifest, but not in the sense of being physically visible or perceptible to the senses; His Manifestness does not contradict His Hiddenness. In fact His Firstness is identical with His Lastness and similarly His Manifestness and Hiddenness are identical; they are not two different things:

*“Praise be to Allah, for whom one condition does not precede another, so that He may be the First before being the Last or may be Manifest before being Hidden ...”*<sup>8</sup>

*“Time is not His accomplice, nor does He need the assistance of tools and agents His Being transcends time. His Existence transcends nothingness and His pre-eternity transcends all beginning.”*<sup>9</sup>

The Divine Essence's transcendence over time, nothingness, beginning, and end is one of the most profound concepts of *al-hikmah* philosophy. God's pre-eternity does not mean that God has always existed. Certainly God has always existed but Divine pre-eternity (*azaliyyah*) is something greater in meaning than 'existence at all times'; because, 'existing at all times' assumes existence in time; but God's Being has not only been at all times, It precedes time itself. This is the meaning of Divine pre-eternity. This shows that His precedence is something other than temporal precedence.

*“Praise be to God, whose creation bears testimony to His Existence; temporality (huduth) of whose creation is the evidence of His preternity the similarity and likeness amongst whose creation proves that He is unique. The senses do not perceive Him and nothing can conceal Him.”*<sup>10</sup>

That is, God is both Hidden and Manifest. By Himself He is Manifest but is Hidden from the human senses. His Hiddenness from the senses is due to man's own limitations and not on account of Him.

It needs no proof that existence is synonymous with manifestation; the more powerful the existence of a being, the more manifest it would be. Conversely, the weaker its being is and the more intermingled it is with non-being, the less manifest it is to itself and others.

For everything, there are two modes of being: its being-in-itself (*wujud fi nafsih*), and its being-for-others. The being of every thing for us depends upon the structure of our senses and certain special conditions. Accordingly, the manifestation of a thing is also of two kinds: its manifestation-in-itself (*zuhur fi nafsih*) and its manifestation-for-others.

Our senses, on account of their limitations, are able to perceive only a limited number of finite objects possessing the characteristics of similarity and opposition. The senses can perceive colours, shapes, sounds, etc., which are limited temporally and spatially; that is, their existence is confined within a particular time and place. Now if there existed a uniform light, always and everywhere, it would not be perceptible. A continuous monotonous sound heard always and everywhere would not be audible.

The Being of God, which is absolute being and absolute reality, is not confined to any particular time and place, and is hidden from our senses. But God in Himself is absolutely manifest; the perfection of His manifestness, which follows from the perfection of His Being, is itself the cause of His hiddenness from our senses. The two aspects of His manifestness and hiddenness are one and the same in His Essence. He is hidden because He is perfectly manifest, and this perfect manifestness conceals Him.

Thou, who art hidden on account of Thy perfect brilliance, Thou Art the Manifest, hidden in Thy manifestness.

*The veil on Thy face is also Thy face,  
So manifest Thou art,  
Thy manifestness conceals Thee from the world's eyes.*

## An Appraisal

An appraisal however brief of the approach of the *Nahj al-balaghah* and its comparison with that of other schools of thought is essential for discovering the true worth of its views on the problems of theology. We shall confine ourselves to the brief, though not quite sufficient, examples quoted in the foregoing pages and proceed to evaluate them.

The subject of the Divine Essence and Attributes is one which has been discussed a lot by the ancient and modern philosophers, mystics and Sufis of the East and the West. But in general their method and approach is totally different from that of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, whose approach is highly original and unprecedented.

Only in the Holy Qur'an can be found a precedent for the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Apart from the Holy Qur'an, we do not find any other source that provides some ground for the discourses of the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

As pointed out earlier, some scholars, because of their failure to trace back to some earlier source the notions elaborated in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, have questioned the authenticity of ascription of these discourses to 'Ali ('a). They have supposed that these discourses appeared in a later period, after the

appearance of the Mu'tazilites and assimilation of Greek thought, heedless of the saying:

The mean earth with the sublime heaven does not compare!

What ignorance to compare the Mu'tazilite and Greek ideas with the teachings of the *Nahj al-balaghah* !

## [The Nahj al-balaghah and the Notions of Kalam](#)

The *Nahj al-balaghah*, while it ascribes all the Attributes of perfection to God, the Exalted, negates any separation of these Attributes from His Essence and does not consider them as an appendage of Divine Essence. On the other hand, the Ash'arites, as we know, consider the Divine Attributes to be additional to Essence and the Mu'tazilites negate all Attributes.

*The Ash'arite believes in Separation [of the Attributes from the Essence]*

*The Mu'tazilite speaks of subservience [of the Attributes to the Essence].*

This has led some to imagine that the discourses found in the *Nahj al-balaghah* on this topic are fabrications of a later period under the influence of Mu'tazilite views; whereas, anyone with some insight can readily perceive that the Attributes negated by the *Nahj al-balaghah* with respect to Divine Essence are qualities of imperfection and limitation; for the Divine Essence, being infinite and limitless, necessitates identity of the Attributes with the Essence, not negation of the Attributes as professed by the Mu'tazilites. Had the Mu'tazilites reached such a notion they would never have negated the Divine Attributes considering them subservient to the Essence.

The same is true of the views on the createdness or temporality (*huduth*) of the Qur'an in the *sermon* 184. One may, possibly, imagine that these passages of the *Nahj al-balaghah* relate to the latter heated controversies among the Islamic theologians (*mutakallimun*) regarding the eternity (*qidam*) or temporality (*huduth*) of the Holy Qur'an, and which might have been added to the *Nahj al-balaghah* during the latter centuries.

However, a little reflection will reveal that the discourses of the *Nahj al-balaghah* related to this issue have nothing to do with the debate on the Qur'an being either created or uncreated, which was a meaningless controversy, but relates to the creative command (*amr takwini*), and Will of the Almighty.

'Ali ('a) says that God's Will and His command represent Divine Acts and, therefore, are *hadith* and posterior to the Essence; for if the command and Will were co-eternal and identical with His Essence, they will have, necessarily, to be considered His associates and equals. 'Ali ('a) says:

When He decrees the creation of a thing, He says to it, "Be", and it assumes existence; but not through an audible voice which strikes the ear or a cry that can be heard. Indeed the speech of God, glory be to Him, is but His created Act, which did not exist before [it came into existence]. Had it (Divine speech) been itself eternal, it would be another god besides Him. (*Sermon* 186)

In addition, there are other musnad traditions on this subject related from 'Ali ('a), only some of which have been collected in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, and can be traced back to his time. On this basis, there is no room for doubting their genuineness.

If any superficial resemblance is observed between the statements made by 'Ali ('a) and some views held by the Mu'tazilah, the probability to be allowed in this connection is that some of his ideas were adopted by the Mu'tazilah.

The controversies of the Muslim theologians (*mutakallimun*), both the Shi'ah and the Sunni, the Asha'irah as well as the Mu'tazilah, generally revolved around the doctrine of rational basis of ethical judgement concerning good and evil (*al-husn wa al-qubh al-'aqliyyan*).

This doctrine which is not other than a practical principle operating in human society, is considered by the *mutakallimun* to be also applicable to the Divine sphere and govern the laws of creation; but we find no trace of it in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, similarly there is no sign of it in the Qur'an. Had the ideas and beliefs of the *mutakallimun* found their way into the *Nahj al-balaghah*, first of all the traces of this doctrine should have been found in that book.

## **The Nahj al-balaghah and Philosophical Concepts**

Some others, on coming across certain words such as 'existence' (*wujud*), 'non-existence' (*'adam*), 'temporality' (*huduth*) and 'pre-eternity' (*qidam*), and so on in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, have been led to assume that these terms entered the Muslim intellectual world under the influence of Greek philosophy and were inserted, unintentionally or intentionally, into the discourses of 'Ali ('a). If those who advocate this view had gone deeper into the meanings of these words, they would not have paid heed to such a hypothesis.

The method and approach adopted in the arguments of the *Nahj al-balaghah* is completely different from that of the philosophers who lived before al-Sayyid al-Radi or during his time, or even those born many centuries after the compilation of the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

Presently, we shall not discuss the metaphysics of Greek or Alexandrian (Neo-Platonic) philosophy, but shall confine ourselves to the metaphysical views propounded by al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi. Undoubtedly Muslim philosophers brought new problems into philosophy under the influence of Islamic teachings which did not exist before, and in addition to them, introduced radically original ways of demonstration and inference to explain and argue their point with regard to some other problems.

Nevertheless, what we learn from the *Nahj al-balaghah* is obviously different from this approach. My teacher, 'Allamah Tabataba'i, in the preface to his discourse on the traditions of Islamic scholarship, writes:

These statements help in resolving a number of problems in the theological philosophy. Apart from the fact that Muslims were not acquainted with these notions and they were incomprehensible to the Arabs, basically there is no trace of them in the writings and statements of pre-Islamic philosophers whose books were translated into Arabic, and, similarly, they do not appear in the works of Muslim philosophers, Arab or Persian.

These problems remained obscure and unintelligible, and every commentator discussed them according to his own conjecture, until the eleventh century of the Hijrah (17th century A.D.). Only then they were properly understood for the first time—namely, the problem of the True Unity (*al-wahdat al-haqqah*) of the Necessary Being (*wajib al-wujud*) (a non-numerical unity); the problem that the proof of the existence of the Necessary Being is identical with the proof of His Unity (since the Necessary Being is Absolute Existence, Him Being implies His Unity); the problem that the Necessary Existent is the known-in-His-Essence (*ma'lum bil dhat*); that the Necessary Being is known directly without the need of an intermediary, and that the reality of every thing else is known through the Necessary Being, not vice versa ... [11](#)

The arguments of the early Muslim philosophers like al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, such as the discussions on the Divine Essence and Attributes, such as Unity, Simplicity (*basatah*), Self-Sufficiency, Knowledge, Power, Will, Providence, and so on, revolve around the conception of the necessity of existence (*wujub al-wujud*), from which all of them are derived, and the necessity of existence itself is deduced indirectly.

In this fashion it is demonstrated that the existence of all possible existents (*mumkinat*) cannot be explained without assuming the existence of the Necessary Being. Although the argument used for proving the truth of this cannot be called demonstration per impossible (*burhan khulf*) in view of its indirect mode of inference, it resembles *burhan khulf* and hence it fails to provide completely satisfactory demonstration, for it does not explain the necessity of existence of the Necessary Being. Ibn Sina in his *al-Isharat* claims that he has succeeded in discovering “the Why?” (*lima*) of it and hence chooses to call his argument “*burhan al-siddiqin*” (*burhan limmi*, i.e. causal proof). However, the latter philosophers considered his exposition of “the Why?” (*lima*) as insufficient.

In the *Nahj al-balaghah*, necessity of existence is never used to explain the existence of the possible beings (*mumkinat*). That on which this book relies for this purpose is the real criterion of the necessity of existence, that is, the absolute reality and pure being of the Divine Essence.

'Allamah Tabataba'i, in the above-mentioned work, while explaining a *hadith* of 'Ali ('a) found in *al-Tawhid* of al-Shaykh al-Saduq, says:

The basis of our discussion rests upon the principle that Divine Being is a reality that does not accept any limits or restrictions whatsoever. Because, God, the Most Exalted, is Absolute Reality from Whom is derived the existence of all other beings within the ontological limits and characteristics peculiar to

themselves, and their existence depends on that of the Absolute Being. [12](#)

In the *Nahj al-balaghah* the very basis of all discussions on Divine Essence rests on the position that God is Absolute and Infinite Being, which transcends all limits and finitude. No point of space or time, nor any thing is devoid of Him.

He is with everything, yet no thing is with Him. Since He is the Absolute, and the Infinite, He transcends all time, number, limit and proximity (all kinds of quiddities). That is, time and space, number and limit are applicable to a lower stage i.e. stage of Divine Acts and creation. Everything is from Him and returns unto Him. He is the First of the first and the Last of the last. He precedes everything and succeeds everything.

This is the idea that forms the axis of all discourses of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, and of which there is no trace in the works of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, al-Ghazali, and Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi.

As pointed out by 'Allamah Tabataba'i, these profound discussions of theology proper (*ilahiyat bil-ma'na al-'akhas*) are based on a series of inter-related problems which have been posited in metaphysics (*al-'umur al-'ammah*). [13](#)An elaborate discussion of those theological problems and their relevant issues mentioned above is outside the scope of our present discussion.

There are two reasons for rejecting the claims that the theological discussions of the *Nahj al-balaghah* were inventions of later writers familiar with philosophical notions. Firstly, the kind of problems discussed in the *Nahj al-balaghah* were not at all raised by any philosopher till the time of al-Sayyid al-Radi, the compiler of the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

That the Unity of the Necessary Being is not of the numerical kind and that Divine Essence precedes number; that the existence of the Necessary Being implies Its Unity; the simple reality of the Necessary Being; His immanence and other such notions were not known to philosophy during or before al-Sayyid al-Radi's times. Secondly, the axes of arguments presented in this book are altogether different from the axes of philosophical discussions which have been prevalent throughout history until the present day.

## [The Nahj al-balaghah and Western Philosophic Thought](#)

The *Nahj al-balaghah* has played a great role in the history of Eastern Philosophy. Mulla Sadra, who brought a revolution in theological thought (*al-hikmat al-'ilahiyah*), was under profound influence of 'Ali's discourses.

His method of argument with regard to the problems of *tawhid* is the method of inferring the Essence from the Essence, and also deducing the Attributes and Acts from the Essence, and all these arguments are based on the belief that there exists the Necessary Being only. These arguments are based on radically different general principles, which are elaborated in his system of metaphysics.

Eastern theological thought (*al-hikmat al-'ilahiyyah*) attained fruition and strength from the sources of Islamic teachings and was firmly established on unviolable foundations. However, theological philosophy in the West remained deprived of such source of inspiration. The widespread philosophical malaise of inclination towards materialism in the West has many causes whose discussion is outside the scope of our discourse.

But we believe that the major cause of this phenomenon is the weakness and insufficiency of theological conceptions of Western religious thought. <sup>14</sup>Anyone interested in making a comparative study of the approaches pointed out in these chapters, should first study the arguments advanced by Western philosophers such as Anselm, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, Kant and others for proving the existence of God and their discussions about acceptance or rejection of various arguments, then he should compare them with the *burhan al-siddiqin* argument advanced by Mulla Sadra under the inspiration of 'Ali's words. He would see for himself the wide chasm that separates the one from the other.

<sup>1.</sup> Sermon 185

<sup>2.</sup> The term ta'wil has been defined variously, but generally when used in the opposition to tafsir (which is applied to the explanation of the literal and explicit meanings of the Qur'anic texts) it is applied to interpretation of the Qur'anic verses which goes beyond their literal meaning. According to Imamiyyah Shi'ah, no one except the Prophet (S) and the twelve Imams (A) is entitled to draw tawil of the Qur'anic verses. To illustrate what is meant by ta'wil consider these examples: (1) According to Shi'ah hadith, the verse 2:158, 'Where ever you maybe, God will bring you all together', pertains to the 313 companions of al Imam al Mahdi (A) whom God will gather in a certain place from various parts of the earth in a single night. (2) According to another hadith the verse 67:30, 'Say: What think you? If your water (in wells) should have vanished into the earth, then who would bring you running water?' pertains to the ghaybah (occultation) of al Imam al Mahdi (A). Such interpretations, which obviously go beyond the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic verses, are called ta'wil.

<sup>3.</sup> Allamah S.M.H Tabatabai, *Usul e falsafah wa rawish e riyalism* (The Principles and Method of Philosophy of Realism), Introduction to vol. I

<sup>4.</sup> Muhammad Sulayman Nadawi, *Madha khasara al alam bi inhitat al Muslimin*, vol. IV, p. 97

<sup>5.</sup> Ibid., p. 135

<sup>6.</sup> Allamah Tabatabai, op. Cit

<sup>7.</sup> Ibid, vol. V

<sup>8.</sup> Sermon 65

<sup>9.</sup> Sermon 186

<sup>10.</sup> Sermon 152

<sup>11.</sup> Maktab e tashayyu, No. 2 p. 120

<sup>12.</sup> Ibid, p. 126

<sup>13.</sup> Ibid, p. 157

<sup>14.</sup> See Murtada Mutahhari, *Ilal e garayesh beh maddigari* (The causes of inclination towards Materialism), under the chapter: *Naresa iha ye mafahi me falsafil* (The inadequacies of [Western] Philosophical Ideas)

# Suluk and 'Ibadah

*'Ibadah*, or service, of the One God and negation of everything else as an object of service and worship, is one of the essential teachings of God-sent apostles—a feature never absent from the teachings of any prophet.

As we know, in the sacred religion of Islam, too, worship occupies a preeminent position, with the only difference that worship in Islam is not regarded as a series of devotional rituals separate from everyday life and as pertaining solely to another world. Worship in Islam is located in the context of life and is an unalienable part of the Islamic philosophy of life.

Aside from the fact that some of the Islamic acts of worship are performed collectively, Islam has structured them in such a fashion that their performance automatically ensures the performance of other duties of life. For instance, *salat* is a complete expression of man's servitude and surrender to God.

It has been specified in such a manner that even a man who desires to pray in a lonely corner is forced to observe certain things of moral and social relevance, such as cleanliness, respect for rights of others, observance of punctuality, possession of a sense of direction, control over one's emotions, and expression of good-will and benevolence towards other righteous servants of God.

From the point of view of Islam, every good and beneficial action if performed with a pure, God-seeking intention, is viewed as worship. Therefore, learning, acquisition of knowledge and livelihood and social service, if performed for God's sake, are acts of worship. Nevertheless, Islam also specifies a system of rituals and formal acts of worship such as *salat*, *sawm* (fasting) etc., which have a specific philosophy for performing them.

## Levels of Worship

Men have varying attitudes towards worship. Not all of them view it in the same light. For some, worship is a kind of deal, a barter and an exchange of labour performed for wages. Like an ordinary worker who spends his time and labour for the benefit of an employer and expects a daily wage in return, the devotee also endeavours for the sake of Divine reward, which, however, he would receive in the next world.

Like the labourer, for whom his labour bears fruit in the form of his wages and who would not work except for a wage, the benefit of the devotee's worship, according to the outlook of this particular group of devotees, lies in the wages and reward which shall be granted to the devotees in the shape of the goods and comforts in the other world.

However, every employer pays wages in return for the benefit he derives from his workers, but what

benefit can the Lord of the heavens derive from the labours of a weak and feeble servant? Moreover, if we assume that the Great Employer does remunerate His servants in the form of the blessings and rewards of the Hereafter, then why does He not reward them without any effort and consumption of labour and energy?

These are questions which never occur to this class of pious. From their viewpoint, the essence of worship lies in certain visible bodily movements and oscillations of the tongue. This is one attitude towards worship. Unrefined and vulgar it be, it is, in the words of Ibn Sina, as he puts it in the ninth chapter of His *al-'Isharat*, 'the attitude of the unenlightened and God-ignorant, acceptable only to the plebeians.'

Another approach towards worship is that of the enlightened. Here the aforementioned problems of worker and employer, labour and wage, have no relevance. How can they be relevant when worship is viewed by them as the ladder to attain nearness to God, as the means of human sublimity, edification and upliftment of the soul and its flight to the invisible sphere of spiritual greatness, as an invigorating exercise of his spiritual faculties, and as a triumph of the spirit over the corporeal?

It is the highest expression of the gratitude and love of the human being towards his Creator and his declaration of love for the Most Perfect and the Absolutely Beautiful, and finally, his wayfaring towards Allah!

According to this approach, worship has a form and a soul, an appearance and an inner meaning. That which is expressed by the tongue and the movements of other members of the body, is the form, the outer mould, and the appearance of worship. Its soul and meaning is something else. The soul of worship is inextricably connected with the significance attached to worship by the devotee, his attitude towards it, his inner motive that drives him to it, the ultimate satisfaction and benefit he derives from it, and the extent to which he covers the Divine path in his journey towards God.

## [The Approach of the Nahj al-balaghah](#)

What approach and attitude is adopted by the *Nahj al-balaghah* towards worship? The *Nahj al-balaghah* takes an enlightened view of worship, or rather, it is, after the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (s), the main source of inspiration towards the enlightened approach to worship in the Islamic tradition.

As we know, of the most sublime and imaginative themes of Islamic literature, both Arabic and Persian, is relationship between the ardent love of the devotee for the Divine Essence expressed in delicate and elegant passages in the form of sermons, prayers, allegories, parables, both in prose and verse.

When we compare them with the pre-Islamic notions prevalent in the regions which subsequently constituted the domains of Islam, it is surprising to observe the gigantic leap that was taken by Islam in

bestowing depth, scope, sweetness, and delicacy to human thought.

Islam transformed a people who worshipped idols, images, fire, or degraded the Eternal God to the level of a human 'Father', and whose flight of imagination prompted them to identify the 'Father' with the 'Son', or who officially considered the Ahura Mazda to be a material form, whose statues they erected in every place, into a people whose intellect could grasp and evolve the most abstract of concepts, the most sophisticated ideas, the most elegant thoughts and most sublime notions.

How was human intellect so radically transformed? What revolutionized their logic, elevated their thoughts, refined their emotions and sublimated their values? How did it happen? The *al-Mu'allaqat al-sab'ah* and the *Nahj al-balaghah* stand only one generation apart.

Both of those generations of Arabs were proverbial in eloquence and literary genius. But as to the content, they stand as far apart as the earth and the sky. The former sing of the beauty of the beloved, the pleasures of love, of gallantry, horses, spears, nightly assaults, and compose eulogy and lampoon; the latter contains the sublimest ideas of man.

In order to elucidate the approach of 'Ali ('a) towards worship, now we shall proceed to cite few examples from the *Nahj al-balaghah*, beginning with a statement about the differences in various approaches of people towards worship.

## The Worship of Freeman

A group of people worshipped God out of desire for reward; this is the worship of traders. Another group worshipped God out of fear; this is the worship of slaves. Yet another group worshipped God out of gratitude; this is the worship of freemen. [1](#)

Even if God had not warned those disobedient to Him of chastisement, it was obligatory by way of gratefulness for His favours that He should not be disobeyed. [2](#)

My God, I have not worshipped Thee out of fear of Thy Hell and out of greed for Thy Paradise; but I found Thee worthy of worship, and so I worshipped Thee. [3](#)

## God's Remembrance

The roots of all spiritual, moral, and social aspects of worship lie in one thing: the remembrance of God and obliviousness towards everything else. In one of its verses, the Holy Qur'an refers to the educative and invigorating effect of worship, and says:

***The salat protects from unseemly acts. (29:45)***

***Adhere to salat in order that you remain in My remembrance. (20: 14)***

This is a reminder of the fact that the person who prays remembers God and lives by the knowledge that He is always observing and watching him, and does not forget that he himself is His servant.

The remembrance of God, which is the aim of worship, is burnishing of the heart and an agency of its purification. It prepares the heart for the reflection of Divine Light in it. Speaking of the remembrance of God and the meaning of worship, 'Ali ('a) says:

Certainly God, the glorified, has made His remembrance burnishing of the hearts, which makes them hear after deafness, see after blindness, and makes them submissive after unruliness. In all periods and times when there were no prophets, there were individuals to whom He spoke in whispers through their conscience and intellects. [4](#)

These sentences speak of the wonderful effect of Divine remembrance on the heart, to the extent of making it capable of receiving Divine inspiration and bringing it in intimate communion with God.

## Levels of Devotion

In the same sermon are explained the various spiritual states and levels attained by the worshippers in the course of their devotional search. 'Ali ('a) describes such men in these words:

The angels have surrounded them and peace is showered upon them. The doors of heavens are opened for them and abodes of blessedness, of which He had informed them, have been prepared for them. He is pleased with their struggle and admires their station. When they call Him, they breathe the scent of His forgiveness and mercy.[5](#)

## Nights of the Devout

From the point of view of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, the world of worship is another world altogether. Its delights are not comparable with any pleasures of the three-dimensional corporeal world. The world of worship effuses movement, progress, and journey, but a journey which is quite unlike physical travel to new lands.

It is spiritual journey to the 'nameless city'. It does not know night from the day, because it is always drenched in light. In it there is no trace of darkness and pain, for it is throughout purity, sincerity, and delight. Happy is the man, in the view of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, who sets his foot into this world and is refreshed by its invigorating breeze. Such a man then no longer cares whether he lays his head on silken pillow or on a stone:

Blessed is he who discharges his duties towards his Lord, and endures the hardships they entail. He allows himself no sleep at nights until it over whelms him. Then lies down with the palm of his hand under head as his pillow. He is among those whom the thought of the Day of Judgement keeps wakeful at nights, whose beds remain vacant, whose lips hum in God's remembrance and whose sins have been

erased by their prolonged earnest supplication for forgiveness They are the 'Party of God'; "surely God's Party—they are the prosperers!" [6](#)

*The nights of the men of God are like shiny days,  
The gloomy nights do not exist for the enlightened.*

## The Profile of the Pious

In the last section we discussed the viewpoint of the *Nahj al-balaghah* with respect to worship. We found that the *Nahj al-balaghah* does not regard worship as a series of cut-and-dried, lifeless rituals. The bodily movements constitute the apparent body of worship, while its soul and meaning is something else. Only when endowed with meaning and spirit is worship worth its name. Real worship means transcending the three-dimensional world into the spiritual sphere, which is a world of perpetual delight and sublimation for the soul and the source of vigour and strength for the heart, which has its own pleasures.

There are many references to the characteristics of the pious and the devout in the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Often the *Nahj al-balaghah* sketches the profiles of the pious and the devout and describes their characteristic fear of God, their devotion and delight in worship, their constant sorrow and grief over sins and frequent reciting of the Qur'an, and their occasional ecstatic experiences and states which they achieve in the course of their worshipful endeavours and struggle against their corporeal self.

At times it discusses the role of worship in lifting from the human soul the pall of sins and black deeds, and often points out to the effect of worship in curing moral and psychic diseases. At other times it speaks about the unadulterated, unsurpassable and pure delights and ecstasies of the followers of the spiritual path and sincere worshippers of God.

## Night Vigils

During the night they are on their feet reciting the verses of the Qur'an one after the other, tarrying to deliberate about their meaning, and thereby instilling gnostic pathos into their souls and by means of it seek remedy for their spiritual ailments. What they hear from the Qur'an seems to them as if they are witnessing it with their own eyes.

If they come across a verse arousing eagerness (for Paradise) they lean towards it covetingly and their souls cling to it avidly as if they are approaching their ultimate goal. And when they come across a verse that instills fear, their heart's ear is turned in attention to it as if they themselves hear the cracking sound of the flames of Hell Fire.

Their backs are bent in reverence and their foreheads, palms, knees and toes rest on the ground as they beseech God for deliverance. But when the day dawns, they are kind, patient, scholarly, pious and

righteous. [7](#)

## The Spiritual Experience

He has revived his intellect and slain his self, until his body became lean and its bulkiness shrunk, and stubbornness turned into tenderness (of heart). Then an effulgence, like a thunderbolt, descended his heart and illuminated the path before him, opening all the doors, and led him straight into the gateway of Peace. Now his feet, carrying his body, are firmly rooted in the position of safety (on the *Sirat*) and comfort because he kept his heart busy with good deeds and won the good pleasure of his God. [8](#)

As we observe, this passage speaks of another kind of life, which is called '*the life of intellect*'. It speaks about struggle against the carnal self (*al-nafs al-'ammarah*) and its destruction; it speaks about exercise of the spirit and the body, about lightening, which as a result of exercise illumines the being of the follower and brightens his spiritual world; it speaks about the stages and targets that the devotee's earnest soul reaches on his way until it attains the last and highest stage of man's spiritual journey. [9](#)

The Qur'an says:

***“O man! Thou art labouring unto thy Lord laboriously, and thou shalt encounter Him.”*** (84:6)

'Ali ('a), in the passage cited above, speaks about the inner peace, contentment and tranquillity of soul which a man's restless, disturbed and anxious heart ultimately attains:

***“Indeed, the hearts are at rest in God's remembrance.”*** (13:28)

In the sermon 228, 'Ali ('a) describes the significance attached by this class of devotees to spiritual life—the life of the heart:

*“They see that the worldly people attach great importance to the death of their bodies but they themselves attach much greater importance to the death of hearts of those who are living.”* (Sermon 230)

'Ali ('a) describes the ecstatic eagerness of the earnest souls which impels them to move onwards on the path of spiritual perfection in these words:

They lived in society and participated in its affairs with their bodies, while their souls rested in the higher spiritual spheres. [10](#)

Had there been no preordained time of death for each of them, their spirits would not have remained in their bodies even for the twinkling of an eye because of their eagerness for the Divine reward and their fear of chastisement. [11](#)

He did everything only for God, and so God also made him His own. [12](#)

The esoteric knowledge and emanated insight, revealed to the heart of the follower of the spiritual path as a result of self-education and self-refinement, is described in these words:

The knowledge that bursts upon them and surrounds them is endowed with absolute certainty, and their soul attains the highest degree of conviction. They easily bear what the easy-going regard as harsh and unbearable. They endear what makes the ignorant recoil with horror. [13](#)

## Purging of Sins

From the point of view of Islamic teachings, every sin leaves a black stain and the effects of distortion in the human heart which in turn weakens a person's aptitude for good and righteous actions, and consequently further deviates him towards other sins and foul deeds. On the other hand, worship, prayer and remembrance of God, develop a human being's religious consciousness, strengthen his aptitude for virtuous deeds and diminish his proneness to sin. This means that worship and remembrance of God efface the mal-effects of sins and replace these with fondness for virtue and goodness.

In the *Nahj al-balaghah* there is a sermon which deals with *salat*, *zakat* and delivering of trust; after emphasizing the importance of *salat*, 'Ali ('a) further says:

Certainly, prayer removes sins like autumn strips leaves off from trees, and it liberates you from the rope (of sins) tied around your neck. The Prophet ('s) likened it to a refreshing stream at one's door in which one takes a purifying bath five times in a day and night. Will after so much cleansing any dirt remain on him? [14](#)

## Moral Remedy

In the sermon 196, after referring to evil conduct such as disobedience, oppression, injustice and pride, 'Ali ('a) says:

It is on account of these perils that God has encouraged His believing servants to perform *salat* and *zakat*, to keep fast during the days when it is made obligatory; these acts of worship give their limbs peace and rest, cast fear in their eyes, soften their spirits, cultivate a sense of humility in their hearts and purge them from pride.

## Intimacy and Ecstasy

My God, Thou, of all beloved ones, art the most attached to Thy lovers and most ready to trust those who trust in Thee. Thou seest, Thou lookest into their secrets and knowest that which lies in their conscience and art aware of the extent of their inner vision. Consequently their secrets are open to Thee and their hearts look up to Thee in eager apprehension. In loneliness, Thy remembrance is their friend and consolation. In distress Thy help is their protection. [15](#)

There are some people devoted to remembrance of Allah who have chosen it in place of all worldly goods. [16](#)

In the sermon 148, 'Ali ('a) alludes to the coming times of the Promised al-Mahdi ('a)–may God hasten his appearance–and at the end of his discourse describes the courage, wisdom, insight and

Then a group of people will be made ready by God like the swords sharpened by the blacksmith. Their sight would be brightened by revelations the inner meaning of the Qur'an would be familiar to their ears and they would be given to drink the cup of wisdom every morning and evening. [17](#)

[1.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Hikam, No. 237

[2.](#) Ibid, Hikam, No. 290

[3.](#) Source of reference not indicated (Tr.)

[4.](#) Ibid,. Khutab, No. 222

[5.](#) Ibid,. p. 343

[6.](#) Ibid,. Rasail, No. 45

[7.](#) Ibid,. Khutab, No. 193

[8.](#) Ibid,. Khutab No. 220

[9.](#) Ibid, Khutab No. 230

[10.](#) Ibid, Khutab No. 230

[11.](#) Ibid, Hikam, No. 147

[12.](#) Ibid, Khutab No. 193

[13.](#) Ibid, Khutab No. 87

[14.](#) Ibid, Hikam, No. 147

[15.](#) Ibid, Khutab No.199

[16.](#) Ibid, Khutab No.227

[17.](#) Ibid, Khutab No.222

## Government and Justice

### [The Nahj al-balaghah on State](#)

One of the frequently discussed issues in the *Nahj al-balaghah* is that of government and justice. To anyone who goes through the book, it is evident to what extent 'Ali ('a) is sensitive to the issues related to government and justice.

He considers them to be of paramount importance. For those who lack an understanding of Islam but have knowledge of the teachings of other religions, it is astonishing why a religious personage should devote himself to this sort of problems. Don't such problems relate to the world and worldly life!

Shouldn't a sage keep aloof from the matters of the world and society? They wonder.

On the other hand, such a thing is not at all surprising for one acquainted with the teachings of Islam and the details of 'Ali's life; that 'Ali was brought up from childhood by the Holy Prophet of Islam, that the Prophet ('s), having taken him from his father as a child, had reared him in his home under his own care, that the Prophet ('s) had trained 'Ali ('a) and instructed him in his own characteristic way, teaching him the secrets of Islam.

'Ali's spirit had assimilated within itself the doctrines of Islam and the code of its laws. Therefore, it is not strange that 'Ali should have been such; rather it would have been astonishing if he wasn't such as we find him to be. Doesn't the Qur'an declare:

***“Indeed, We sent Our messengers with the clear signs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance so that men might uphold justice ...”*** (57:25)

In this verse, establishment of justice has been declared as being the objective of the mission of all the prophets. The sanctity of justice is so stressed that it is considered the aim of all prophetic missions. Hence, how were it possible that someone like 'Ali ('a), whose duty was to expound the teachings of the Qur'an and explain the doctrines and laws of Islam, might have ignored this issue or, at least, accorded it a secondary importance?

Those who neglect these issues in their teachings, or imagine that these problems are only of marginal significance and that the central issues are those of ritual purity and impurity (*taharah* and *najasah*), it is essential that they should re-examine their own beliefs and views.

## **The Importance of Politics**

The first thing which must be examined is the significance and value attached to the issue of government and justice by the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Indeed, what is essentially the importance of these problems in Islam?

A thorough discussion of this question is obviously outside the scope of this book, but a passing reference, however, seems inevitable. The Holy Qur'an, in the verse where it commands the Prophet ('s) to inform the people that 'Ali ('a) would succeed him as the leader of the Muslims and the Prophet's khalifah, declares with extraordinary insistence

***“O Messenger communicate that which has been sent down to thee from thy Lord; for if thou dost not, thou will not have delivered His Message !”*** (5:67)

Is there any other issue in Islam to which this much importance was attached? What other issue is of such significance that if not communicated to the people should amount to the failure of the prophetic mission itself?

During the battle of Uhud, when the Muslims were defeated and the rumour spread that the Holy

Prophet (‘s) had been killed, a group of the Muslims fled from the battlefield. Referring to this incident, the Qur’an says:

**“Muhammad is naught but a Messenger; Messengers have passed away before him. Why, if he should die or is slain, will you turn about on your heels?”** (3:144) <sup>1</sup>

Allamah Tabataba‘i, in an article entitled *Wilayat wa-hakumat*, derives the following conclusion from the above verse: 'If the Messenger (‘s) is killed in battle, it should not in any way stall, even temporarily, your struggle. Immediately afterwards, you should place yourselves under the banner of the successor to the Prophet (‘s), and continue your endeavour. In other words, if, supposedly, the Prophet (‘s) is killed or if he dies, the social system and military organization of the Muslims should not disintegrate.'

There is a *hadith*, according to which the Prophet (‘s) said: “If (as few as) three persons go on a journey, they must appoint one out of themselves as their leader.” From this one may infer to what extent the Prophet regarded as harmful the disorder and absence of an authority that could resolve social conflicts and serve as a unifying bond among individuals.

The *Nahj al-balaghah* deals with numerous problems concerning the State and social justice, a few of which, God willing, we shall discuss here.

The first problem to be discussed here is that of the necessity and value of a State. ‘Ali (‘a) has repeatedly stressed the need for a powerful government, and, in his own time, battled against the views propagated by the Khawarij, who, in the beginning, denied the need for a State, considering the Qur’an as sufficient.

The slogan of the Khawarij as is known was “The right of judgement (or authority to rule) is exclusively God's” (*la hukm illa li-Allah*), a phrase adopted from the holy Qur’an. Its Qur’anic meaning is that the prerogative of legislation belongs to God or those whom God has permitted to legislate. But the Khawarij interpreted it differently.

According to ‘Ali (‘a), they had imparted a false sense to a true statement. The essence of their view was that no human being possesses any right to rule others; sovereignty belongs exclusively to God. ‘Ali's argument was:

Yes, I also say *la hukm illa li-Allah*, in the sense that the right of legislation belongs solely to God. But their claim that the prerogative to govern and lead also belongs to God is not reasonable. After all, the laws of God need to be implemented by human beings.

Men cannot do without a ruler, good or evil. <sup>1</sup> It is under the protection of a State that the believers strive for God's sake, and the unbelievers derive material benefit from their worldly endeavours, and men attain the fruits of their labours. It is through the authority of State that taxes are collected, aggressors are repelled, the security of highways is maintained, and the weak reclaim their rights (through courts of law)

from the strong.

(This process continues) until the good citizens are happy and secure from the evils of miscreants. (*Nahj al-balaghah, Khutab 40*)

'Ali ('a), like other godly men and spiritual leaders, despises temporal power and political office for being lowly and degrading when an instrument of gratification of lust for power and political ambition. He looks down upon it with extreme contempt when it is desired as an end-in-itself and aspired as an ideal of life.

He considers such kind of power to be devoid of any value and considers it to be more detestable than 'a pig's bone in a leper's hand.'

But the same power and leadership if used as a means for the establishment and execution of social justice and service to society is regarded by him as a thing of paramount sanctity, for which he is willing to fight any opportunist and political adventurer seeking to grab power and illegitimate wealth. In its defence, he does not hesitate to draw his sword against plunderers and usurpers.

During the days of 'Ali's caliphate, 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas once came to him. He found 'Ali mending his old shoes with his own hand. Turning to Ibn al-'Abbas, 'Ali asked him, "How much do you think is this shoe worth?" "Nothing," replied Ibn al-'Abbas. 'Ali said, "But the same shoe is of more worth to me than authority over you if it were not to me a means for establishing justice, recovering the rights of the deprived, and wiping out evil practices." (*Khutab 33*)

In the sermon 216, we come across a general discussion about human rights and duties. Here, 'Ali states that every right always involves two parties.

Of the various Divine duties the ones which God has ordained are duties of people towards people; they are framed in such a way that each right necessitates a duty towards others; each right which benefits an individual or a group, holds the individual or group responsible to fulfil some duty towards others. Every duty becomes binding when the other party also fulfils his duty. He says further regarding this issue:

But the most important of the reciprocal rights that God has made obligatory is the right of the ruler over the subjects and the rights of the subjects over the ruler. It is a mutual and reciprocal obligation decreed by God for them. He has made it the basis of the strength of their society and their religion.

Consequently, the subjects cannot prosper unless the rulers are righteous. The rulers cannot be righteous unless the subjects are firm and steadfast.

If the subjects fulfil their duties toward the ruler and the ruler his duty to them, then righteousness prevails amongst them. Only then the objectives of the religion are realized, the pillars of justice become stable and wholesome traditions become established. In this way, better conditions of life and social environment emerge. The people become eager to safeguard the integrity of the State, and thus

frustrate the plots of its enemies. (*Khutab* 126)

## **Justice, a Supreme Value**

The first consequence of the sacred teachings of Islam was the influence exercised on the minds and ideas of its adherents. Not only did Islam introduce new teachings regarding the world, man, and his society, but also changed the ways of thinking. The importance of the latter achievement is not less than the former.

Every teacher imparts new knowledge to his pupils and every school of thought furnishes new information to its adherents. But the teachers and schools of thought who furnish their followers with a new logic and revolutionize their ways of thinking altogether, are few.

But how do the ways of thinking change and one logic replaces another? This requires some elucidation.

Man by virtue of being a rational creature thinks rationally on scientific and social issues. His arguments, intentionally or unintentionally, are based on certain principles and axioms. All his conclusions are drawn and judgements are based on them. The difference in ways of thinking originates precisely in these first principles or axioms, used as the ground of inferences and conclusions.

Here it is crucial what premises and axioms form the foundation for inference, and here lies the cause of all disparity in inferences and conclusions. In every age there is a close similarity between the ways of thinking of those familiar with the intellectual spirit of the age on scientific issues.

However, the difference is conspicuous between the intellectual spirits of different ages. But in regard to social problems, such a similarity and consensus is not found even among persons who are contemporaries.

There is a secret behind this, to expound which would take us outside the scope of the present discussion.

Man, in his confrontation with social and moral problems, is inevitably led to adopt some sort of value-orientation. In his estimations he arrives at a certain hierarchy of values in which he arranges all the issues. This order or hierarchy of values plays a significant role in the adoption of the kind of basic premises and axioms he utilizes. It makes him think differently from others who have differently evaluated the issues and have arrived at a different hierarchy of values. This is what leads to disparity among ways of thinking.

Take for example the question of feminine chastity, which is a matter of social significance. Do all people prescribe a similar system of evaluation with regard to this issue? Certainly not. There is a great amount of disparity between views.

For some its significance is near zero and it plays no part in their thinking. For some the matter is of utmost value. Such persons regard life as worthless in an environment where feminine chastity is regarded as unimportant.

When we say that Islam revolutionized the ways of thinking, what is meant is that it drastically altered their system and hierarchy of values. It elevated values like *taqwa* (God-fearing), which had no value at all in the past, to a very high status and attached an unprecedented importance to it. On the other hand, it deflated the value of such factors as blood, race and the like, which in the pre-Islamic days were of predominant significance, bringing their worth to zero.

Justice is one of the values revived by Islam and given an extraordinary status. It is true that Islam recommended justice and stressed its implementation, but what is very significant is that it elevated its value in society. It is better to leave the elaboration of this point to 'Ali ('a) himself, and see what the *Nahj al-balaghah* says. A man of intelligence and understanding puts the following question to Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a):

*“Which is superior, justice or generosity?” (Hikam 437)*

Here the question is about two human qualities. Man has always detested oppression and injustice and has also held in high regard acts of kindness and benevolence performed without the hope of reward or return.

Apparently the answer to the above question seems both obvious and easy: generosity is superior to justice, for what is justice except observance of the rights of others and avoiding violating them; but a generous man willingly foregoes his own right in favour of another person.

The just man does not transgress the rights of others or he safeguards their rights from being violated. But the generous man sacrifices his own right for another's sake. Therefore, generosity must be superior to justice.

In truth, the above reasoning appears to be quite valid when we estimate their worth from the viewpoint of individual morality, and generosity, more than justice, seems to be the sign of human perfection and the nobleness of the human soul. But 'Ali's reply is contrary to the above answer. 'Ali ('a) gives two reasons for superiority of justice over generosity. Firstly he says:

Justice puts things in their proper place and generosity diverts them from their (natural) direction.

For, the meaning of justice is that the natural deservedness of everybody must be taken into consideration; everyone should be given his due according to his work, ability and qualifications. Society is comparable to a machine whose every part has a proper place and function.

It is true that generosity is a quality of great worth from the point of view that the generous man donates to another what legitimately belongs to himself, but we must note that it is an unnatural occurrence. It

may be compared to a body one of whose organs is malfunctioning, and its other healthy organs and members temporarily redirect their activity to the recovery of the suffering organ.

From the point of view of society, it would be far more preferable if the society did not possess such sick members at all, so that the healthy organs and members may completely devote their activities and energies to the general growth and perfection of society, instead of being absorbed with helping and assisting of some particular member.

To return to 'Ali's reply, the other reason he gives for preferring justice to generosity is this:

Justice is the general caretaker, whereas generosity is a particular reliever.

That is, justice is like a general law which is applicable to the management of all the affairs of society. Its benefit is universal and all-embracing; it is the highway which serves all and everyone. But generosity is something exceptional and limited, which cannot be always relied upon. Basically, if generosity were to become a general rule, it would no longer be regarded as such. Deriving his conclusion, Ali ('a) says:

*“Consequently, justice is the nobler of the two and possesses the greater merit. This way of thinking about man and human problems is one based on a specific value system rooted in the idea of the fundamental importance of society. In this system of values, social principles and criteria precede the norms of individual morality. The former is a principle, whereas the latter is only a ramification. The former is a trunk, while the latter is a branch of it. The former is the foundation of the structure, whereas the latter is an embellishment.”*

From 'Ali's viewpoint, it is the principle of justice that is of crucial significance in preserving the balance of society, and winning goodwill of the public. Its practice can ensure the health of society and bring peace to its soul.

Oppression, injustice and discrimination cannot bring peace and happiness—even to the tyrant or the one in whose interest the injustice is perpetrated. Justice is like a public highway which has room for all and through which everyone may pass without impediment. But injustice and oppression constitute a blind alley which does not lead even the oppressor to his desired destination.

As is known, during his caliphate, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan put a portion of the public property of the Muslims at the disposal of his kinsmen and friends. After the death of 'Uthman, 'Ali ('a) assumed power. 'Ali ('a) was advised by some to overlook whatever injustices had occurred in the past and to do nothing about them, confining his efforts to what would befall from then on during his own caliphate. But to this his reply was:

A long standing right does not become invalid!

Then he exclaimed: “By God, even if I find that by such misappropriated money women have been married or slave-maids have been bought, I would reclaim it and have it returned to the public treasury,

because:

There is a wide scope and room in the dispensation of justice. [Justice is vast enough to include and envelop everyone;] he who [being of a diseased temperament] finds restriction and hardship in justice should know that the path of injustice and oppression is harder and even more restricted. (*Khutab* 15)

Justice, according to this conception, is a barrier and limit to be observed, respected, and believed in by every person. All should be content to remain within its limits. But if its limits are broken and violated, and the belief in it and respect for it are lost, human greed and lust, being insatiable by nature, would not stop at any limit; the further man advances on this interminable journey of greed and lust, the greater becomes his dissatisfaction.

## Indifference to Injustice

'Ali ('a) regards justice to be a duty and a Divine trust; rather, to him it is a Divine sanctity. He does not expect a Muslim who is aware and informed about the teachings of Islam to be an idle spectator at the scenes of injustice and discrimination.

In the sermon called '*al-Shiqshiqiyah*', after relating the pathetic political episodes of the past, 'Ali ('a) proceeds to advance his reasons for accepting the caliphate. He mentions how, after the assassination of 'Uthman, the people thronged around him urging him to accept the leadership of Muslims.

But 'Ali ('a), after the unfortunate events of the past and being aware of the extent of deterioration in the prevailing situation, was not disposed to accept that grave responsibility. Nevertheless, he saw that should he reject the caliphate, the face of truth would become still more clouded, and it might be alleged that he was not interested in this matter from the very beginning, and that he gave no importance to such affairs.

Moreover, in view of the fact that Islam does not consider it permissible for anyone to remain an idle spectator in a society divided into two classes of the oppressed and the oppressor, one suffering the pangs of hunger and the other well-fed and uneasy with the discomforts of over-eating, there was no alternative for 'Ali ('a) but to shoulder this heavy responsibility. He himself explains this in the aforementioned sermon:

(By Him who split the grain and created living things,) had it not been for the presence of the pressing crowd, were it not for the establishment of (God's) testimony upon me through the existence of supporters, and had it not been for the pledge of God with the learned, to the effect that they should not connive with the gluttony of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed, I would have cast the reins of [the camel of] the caliphate on its own shoulders and would have made the last one drink from the same cup that I made the first one to drink (i.e. I would have taken the same stance towards the caliphate as at the time of the first caliph).

(Then you would have seen that in my view the world of yours is not worth more than a goat's sneeze.)

(*Khutab 3*)

## Justice Should not be Compromised

Favouritism, nepotism, partiality and shutting up of mouths by big morsels, have always been the essential tools of politicians. Now a man had assumed power and captained the ship of the caliphate who profoundly detested these things.

In fact his main objective was to struggle and fight against this kind of politics. Naturally, with the very inception of 'Ali's reign, the politicians with their hopes and expectations were disappointed.

Their disappointment soon grew into subversive conspiracies against 'Ali's government, creating for him many a headache. Well-meaning friends, with sincere goodwill, advised 'Ali ('a) to adopt greater flexibility in his policies for the sake of higher interests. Their advice was: "Extricate yourself from the ruses of these demagogues, as is said, 'sewing the dog's mouth with a big morsel'.

These are influential persons, some of whom are from the elite of the early days of Islam. Presently, your real enemy is Mu'awiyah, who is in control of a rich and fertile province like Syria. The wisdom lies in setting aside, for the time being, the matter of equality and justice. What harm there is in it?"

'Ali ('a) replied to them:

Do you ask me to seek support through injustice [to my subjects and to sacrifice justice for the sake of political advantage]? By God! I will not do it as long as the world lasts and one star follows another in the sky [i.e. I will not do it as long as the order of the universe exists]. Even if it were my own property I would distribute it with justice, and why not when it is the property of God and when I am His trustee?

(*Khutab 126*)

This is an example of how highly 'Ali valued justice and what status it held in his opinion.

## The Rights of the People

The needs of a human being are not summarized in the phrase 'food, clothing, and housing.' It may be possible to keep an animal happy by satisfying all its bodily needs; but in the case of man, spiritual and psychological factors are as important as the physical ones. Different governments following a similar course in providing for the material welfare of the public might achieve differing results, because one of them fulfils the psychological needs of society while the other doesn't.

One of the pivotal factors which contribute to the securing of the goodwill of the masses is the way a government views them, if it regards them as its slaves or as its masters and guardians, if it considers the people as possessing legitimate rights and itself only as their trustee, agent, and representative.

In the first case, whatever service a government may perform for the people is not more than a kind of the master's care of his beast. In the second case, every service performed is equivalent to discharging of duty by a right trustee. A State's acknowledgement of the authentic rights of the people and avoidance of any kind of action that implies negation of their right of sovereignty, are the primary conditions for securing their confidence and goodwill.

## The Church and the Right of Sovereignty

At the dawn of the modern age there was a movement against religion in Europe, which also affected more or less other regions outside the Christendom. This movement was inclined towards materialism.

When we examine the causes and roots of this movement, we discover that one of them was the inadequacy of the teachings of the Church from the viewpoint of political rights. The Church authorities, and some European philosophers, developed an artificial relationship and association between belief in God on the one hand and stripping the people of their political rights by despotic regimes on the other.

Naturally, this led to the assumption of some necessary relation between democracy on the one hand and atheism on the other. It came to be believed that either we should choose the belief in God and accept the right of sovereignty bestowed by Him upon certain individuals who have otherwise no superiority over others, or deny the existence of God so as to establish our right as masters of our own political destinies.

From the point of view of religious psychology, one of the causes of the decline of the influence of religion was the contradiction between religion and a natural social need, contrived by religious authorities, especially at a time when that need expressed itself strongly at the level of public consciousness.

Right at a time when despotism and repression had reached their peak in European political life and the people were thirstily cherishing the ideas of liberty and people's sovereignty, the Church and its supporters made an assertion that the people had only duties and responsibilities towards the State and had no rights.

This was sufficient to turn the lovers of liberty and democracy against religion and God in general and the Church in particular.

This mode of thought, in the West as well as in the East, was deeply rooted from ancient times. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *The Social Contract*, writes:

We are told by Philo, the Emperor Caligula argued, concluding, reasonably enough on this same analogy, that kings were gods or alternately that the people were animals.

During the Middle Ages, this outlook was revived again; since it assumed the status of religious faith, it

induced a revolt against religion itself. Rousseau, in the same book, writes:

Grotius denies that all human government is established for the benefit of the governed, and he cites the example of slavery. His characteristic method of reasoning is always to offer fact as a proof of right.

It is possible to imagine a more logical method, but not one more favourable to tyrants. According to Grotius, therefore, it is doubtful whether humanity belongs to a hundred men, or whether these hundred men belong to humanity, though he seems throughout his book to lean to the first of these views, which is also that of Hobbes. These authors show us the human race divided into herds of cattle, each with a master who presents it only in order to devour its members.[2](#)

Rousseau, who calls such a right 'the right of might' (right=force), replies to this logic in this fashion:

'Obey those in power.' If this means 'yield to force' the precept is sound, but superfluous; it has never, I suggest, been violated. All power comes from God, I agree; but so does every disease, and no one forbids us to summon a physician.

If I am held up by a robber at the edge of a wood, force compels me to hand over my purse. But if I could somehow contrive to keep the purse from him, would I still be obliged in conscience to surrender it? After all, the pistol in the robber's hand is undoubtedly a power. [3](#)

Hobbes, whose views have been referred to above, although he does not incline to God in his totalitarian logic, the basis of his philosophic position regarding political rights is that the sovereign represents and personifies the will of the people and he actually translates the will of the people itself into his actions.

However, when we closely examine his reasoning, we find that he has been influenced by the ideas of the Church. Hobbes claims that individual liberty is not contrary to unlimited power of the sovereign. He writes:

Nevertheless we are not to understand that by such liberty the sovereign power of life and death is either abolished or limited. For it has been already shown that nothing the sovereign representative can do to a subject, on what pretence soever, can properly be called injustice or injury, because every subject is the author of every act the sovereign does, so that he never wants right to anything otherwise than as he himself is the subject of God and bound thereby to observe the laws of nature.

And therefore it may and does often happen in commonwealths that a subject may be put to death by the command of the sovereign power and yet neither do the other wrong—as when Jephtha caused his daughter to be sacrificed; in which, and the like cases, he that so dies, had the liberty to do the action for which he is nevertheless without injury put to death.

And the same hold also in a sovereign prince that puts to death an innocent subject. For though the action be against the law of nature as being contrary to equity, as was the killing of Uriah by David, yet it was not an injury to Uriah but to God. [4](#)

As can be noticed, in this philosophy the responsibility to God is assumed to negate the responsibility toward the people. Acknowledgement of duty to God is considered sufficient in order that the people may have no rights.

Justice, here, is what the sovereign does and oppression and injustice have no meaning. In other words, duty to (God is assumed to annul the duty to man, and the right of God to override the rights of men. Indubitably, Hobbes, though apparently a free thinker independent of the ideology of the Church, had ecclesiastical ideas not penetrated into his mind, would not have developed such a theory.

Precisely that which is totally absent from such philosophies is the idea that faith and belief in God should be considered conducive to establishment of justice and realization of human rights. The truth is that, firstly, the belief in God is the foundation of the idea of justice and inalienable human rights; it is only through acceptance of the existence of God that it is possible to affirm innate human rights and uphold true justice as two realities independent of any premise and convention; secondly, it is the best guarantee for their execution in practice.

## **The approach of the *Nahj al-balaghah***

The approach of the *Nahj al-balaghah* to justice and human rights rests on the above-mentioned foundations. In sermon 216, from which we have quoted before, 'Ali ('a) says:

Allah has, by encharging me with your affairs, given me a right over you and awarded you a similar right over me. The issue of rights, as a subject of discourse, is inexhaustible, but is the most restricted of things when it comes to practice. A right does not accrue in favour of any person unless it accrues against him also, and it does not accrue against him unless that it also accrues in his favour.

As can be noticed from the above passage, God is central to 'Ali's statement about justice, rights, and duties. But 'Ali's stand is opposed to the aforementioned view according to which God has bestowed rights on only a handful of individuals solely responsible to Him, and has deprived the rest of people of these rights, making them responsible not only to Him but also to those who have been granted by Him the unlimited privilege to rule others.

As a result, the ideas of justice and injustice in regard to the relationship between the ruler and the ruled become meaningless.

In the same sermon 'Ali ('a) says:

No individual, however eminent and high his station in religion, is not above needing cooperation of the people in discharging his obligations and the responsibilities placed upon him by God. Again, no man, however humble and insignificant in the eyes of others, is not too low to be ignored for the purpose of his cooperation and providing assistance.

In the same sermon, 'Ali ('a) asks the people not to address him in the way despots are addressed:

Do not address me in the manner despots are addressed [i.e. Do not address me by titles that are used to flatter despots and tyrants]. In your attitude towards me do not entertain the kind of considerations that are adopted in the presence of unpredictable tyrants. Do not treat me with affected and obsequious manners.

Do not imagine that your candour would displease me or that I expect you to treat me with veneration. One who finds it disagreeable to face truth and just criticism, would find it more detestable to act upon them. Therefore, do not deny me a word of truth or a just advice.

## **The Rulers are the People's Trustees Not Their Lords**

In the last chapter, we said that a dangerous and misleading view became current in the thought of some modern European thinkers interlinking in an unnatural fashion the belief in God on the one hand and negation of peoples rights on the other.

This correlation played a significant role in inducing a group to incline towards materialism. Duty and responsibility to God was assumed to necessarily negate the duty and responsibility to the people. Divine obligations completely displaced human obligations.

The belief and faith in God (Who, according to the Islamic teachings, created the universe on the principles of truth and justice) was considered to conflict with and contradict the belief in innate and natural human rights, instead of being regarded as their basis. Naturally, belief in the right of people's sovereignty was equated with atheism.

From Islamic point of view the case is actually the reverse. In the *Nahj al-balaghah*, which is the subject of our discussion, the main topics are *tawhid* and *'irfan*; throughout the talk is about God, whose Name occurs repeatedly everywhere in its pages.

Nevertheless, it not only does not neglect to discuss the rights of the people and their privileges vis-a-vis the ruler, in fact regarding the ruler as the trustee and protector of their rights, but also lays great emphasis on this point.

According to the logic of this noble book, the imam and the ruler is the protector and trustee of the rights of the people and responsible to them. If one is asked as to which of them exists for the other, it is the ruler<sup>1</sup> who exists for the people and not vice versa. Sa'di has a similar idea in his mind when he says:

It's not the sheep who are to serve the shepherd, But it is the shepherd who is for their service.

The word *ra'iyyah* (lit. herd), despite that it gradually acquired an abominable meaning in the Persian language, has an original meaning which is essentially good and humanitarian. The word *ra'i* for the ruler

and *rai'yyah* for the masses first appears in the speech of the Prophet ('s) and is literally used thereafter by 'Ali ('a).

This word is derived from the root *ra'a*, which carries the sense of 'protection' and 'safeguarding'. The word *rai'yyah* is applied to the people for the reason that the ruler is responsible for protecting their lives, property, rights, and liberties.

A tradition related from the Holy Prophet ('s) throws full light on the meaning of this word:

Truly, everyone of you is a *rail* responsible for his *rai'yyah*. The ruler is the *ra'i* of his people and responsible for them; the woman is the *ra'i* of her husband's house and responsible for it; the slave is the *ra'i* of his master's property and responsible for it; indeed all of you are *ra'i* and responsible [for those under your charge]. [5](#)

In the preceding pages we cited some examples from the *Nahj al-balaghah* which illustrated 'Ali's outlook regarding the rights of the people. Here we shall give sample quotes from other sources, beginning with the following verse of the Holy Qur'an:

***“God commands you to deliver trusts back to their owners; and that when you judge between the people, judge with justice ...”*** (4:58)

Al-Tabarsi, in his exegesis *Majma' al-bayan*, commenting upon this verse, remarks:

There are several opinions regarding the meaning of this verse; firstly, that it is about trusts in general, including the Divine and the non Divine, the material and the non-material trusts; secondly, that it is addressed to the rulers, and that God, by making the returning of the trusts an obligation, is commanding them to observe the rights of the people.

Then he further adds:

***“This is corroborated by the verse immediately following it: O believers, obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you ...”*** (4:59)

According to this verse the people are bound to obey the commands of God, His Messenger and those in authority (*wulat al-'amr*). While the preceding verse mentions the rights of the people, this one reiterates the complementary rights of those in authority.

It has been related from the Imams ('a) that 'one of these two verses is ours (i.e. it establishes our rights in relation to you), and the other is yours (i.e. it outlines your rights in relation to us)' ... Al-Imam al-Baqir ('a) said that the performanee of *salat*, *zakat*, *sawm*, and *Hajj* are some of the trusts (mentioned in 4:58).

One of the trusts (*amanat*) is that the *wulat al-'amr* have been commanded to justly distribute the *ghana'im*, *sadaqat*, and whatever is a part of the rights of the people, among them.

In the exegesis *al-Mizan*, in the part of the commentary upon this verse which deals with tradition, the author relates a tradition from *al-Durr al-manthur* from 'Ali ('a) that he said:

It is incumbent on the imam to rule according to the decrees revealed by God, and to discharge the trusts that he has been charged with. When he does that, it is incumbent upon the people to pay attention to the Divine command (about obeying the *wali al-'amr*), to obey him and respond to his call.

As noticed earlier, the Holy Qur'an considers the ruler and the head of the State as a trustee and a guardian; it regards just government as a fulfillment of a trust entrusted to the ruler. The approach of the Imams('a), in particular that of Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a), corresponds with the view which can be inferred from the Holy Qur'an.

Now that we know the Qur'an's view of this matter, we may go on to examine the statements of the *Nahj al-balaghah* on this issue. More than anything else, we must study 'Ali's letters to his governors, especially those which were meant to be official circulars.

It is in these letters that we would find glimpses of the teachings of Islam regarding the functions of the ruler and his duties towards the people as well as their rights. Ali ('a), in his letter to the governor of Adharba'ijan, reminds him of his duties towards the people in these words:

Beware lest you consider this assignment as a bait [for acquiring personal gain]; rather, it is a trust lying on your neck. You have been charged with caretaking [of the people] by your superior. It is not for you to betray your duties with respect to the people (*ra'iyyah*). (*Kutub* 5)

In another letter written as a circular to tax collectors, after a few words of advice and admonition, 'Ali ('a) says:

Fulfill the demands of justice in your relationship with the people and be patient in matters regarding their needs; because you are treasurers of the people (*ra'iyyah*), representatives of the community (*Ummah*), and envoys of your imams. *Kutub* 51

In the famous epistle to Malik al-'Ashtar, which contains elaborate instructions about various aspects of government, he writes:

Awaken your heart to kindness and mercy for the people (*ra'iyyah*) and love and tenderness for them. Never, never act with them like a predatory beast which seeks to be satiated by devouring them, for the people fall into two categories: they are either your brethren in faith or your kindred in creation ... Do not ever say, 'I have been given authority' or 'My command should be obeyed.' Because it corrupts the heart, consumes one's faith, and invites calamities.

In another letter sent as a circular to army commanders, he says:

It is an obligation that an official should not behave differently with the people (*ra'iyyah*) on account of a

distinction he receives or material advantage that he may achieve. Instead these favours from Allah should bring him nearer to God's creatures and increase his compassion towards his brethren. *Kutub* 50

'Ali ('a) shows an amazing sensitivity to justice and compassion towards the people and a great respect for them and their rights, which, as reflected in his letters, is an exemplary and unique attitude towards this issue.

There is another letter in the *Nahj al-balaghah* consisting of instructions to the collectors of *zakat*, and is entitled: 'To the officials assigned to the job of collecting *zakat*'. The title indicates that it was not addressed to any particular official but sent either as a general instruction in writing or delivered as a routine oral instruction.

Al-Sayyid al-Radi has included it in the section of *kutub*, or letters, with the clarification that he is placing this letter here to show to what extent 'Ali was meticulous in matters pertaining to justice and rights of the people, being attentive not only to main points but also to minute details. Here are 'Ali's instructions:

Set out with the fear of God, Who is One and has no partner. Do not intimidate any Muslim. Do not trespass upon his land so as to displease him. Do not take from him more than Allah's share in his property.

When you approach a tribe, at first come down at their watering place, stay there instead of entering their houses. Approach them with calm dignity and salute them when you stand amongst them, grudge not a proper greeting to them. Then say to them "O servants of God, the *Wali* and *Khalifah* of God has sent me to you to collect from you Allah's share in your property. Is there anything of His share in your property?"

If there is, return it to His *Wali*. " If someone says 'No', then do not repeat the demand. If someone answers in the affirmative, then go with him without frightening, threatening, or compelling him. Take whatever gold and silver he gives you. If he has cattle or camels, do not approach them save with his permission, because the major part belongs to him.

When you arrive (into the cattle enclosure), do not enter upon them in a bossy and rude manner ...  
*Kutub* 25, also see 26, 27 and 46

The passages quoted above are sufficient to throw light on 'Ali's attitude as a ruler toward the people under his rule.

[1.](#) That is, in the absence of a righteous government, an unjust government, at least preserves law and order in society, which is, of course, better than chaos and rule of jungle.

[2.](#) Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (trns. by Maurice Granston Penguin Books, 1978, p. 51

[3.](#) (Ibid p. 53)

[4.](#) Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, The Liberal Arts Press, New York, 1958, p. 173

[5.](#) Bukhari, *Kitab al Nikah*, vol. VIII

# Moral Lectures and Aphorisms

## Inimitable Moral Teaching

Moral and spiritual teachings constitute the greater part of the *Nahj al-balaghah* making up almost half of the book. More than anything else the fame of the *Nahj al-balaghah* is due to the sermons, exhortations, and aphorisms on ethical and moral subjects.

Aside from the moral teachings of the Qur'an and a number of the sermons and sayings of the Holy Prophet ('s), which are to be considered the source and antecedent of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, the teachings of the *Nahj al-balaghah* are without a match in the Arabic and Persian languages.

For more than a thousand years these sermons have played an influential role serving as a matchless source of inspiration, and yet retained their original power to quicken the heart, to sublimate emotions, and to bring tears to the eyes. It seems that as long as there remains any trace of humanity in the world, these sermons shall continue to exercise their original power and influence.

## A Comparison

The literature of Arabic and Persian is replete with works containing spiritual and moral teachings of highest sublimity and elegance though mainly in the form of poetry. There is, for example, the famous qasidah by Abu al-Fath al-Busti (360-400/971-1010), which begins with the verse:

*Worldly profit and achievement is loss,  
And the gain unmarked by the seal of pure goodness.*

There is also the elegiacal qasidah of Abu al-Hasan al-Tihami, which he wrote on the early death of his youthful son. It begins with these lines:

*The law of fate governs the destiny of creation,  
And this world is not a place to settle in.*

Every one of these works is an everlasting masterpiece of its kind and shines like a star on the horizons of the Arabic literature of Islamic era, never to lose its freshness and charm.

In Persian, the *Gulistan* and the *Bustan* of Sa'di and his qasaid serve as an unusually attractive and effective means of moral advice and are masterpieces of their own kind. To give some examples, there are those famous verses of the *Gulistan* which start with the verse:

*Every breath is a fraction of life gone,*

*And when I see, not much has remained of it.*

Or in his qasa'id where he says:

*O people, the world is not a place for leisure and repose;  
To the wise man, the world is not worth the effort of acquiring it.*

Or at another place where he says:

*The world on water and life on wind do rest;  
Salutes to the brave who do not tie their hearts to them.*

And where he says:

*Time and fortune are subject to endless change;  
The wise man doesn't attach his heart to the world.*

Sa'di's *Bustan* is full of profound and glowing spiritual advices, and, perhaps, is at its best in the ninth chapter on "*Penitence and the Right Way*". The same is true of some portions of the *Mathnawi* of Rumi and works of all other Persian poets, from whom we shall not further quote any examples.

In Islamic literature, including the Arabic and the Persian, there exist excellent examples of spiritual counsels and aphorisms. This Islamic literary genre is not confined to these two languages, but is also found in Turkish, Urdu, and other languages, and a characteristic spirit pervades all of them. Anyone familiar with the Holy Qur'an, the sayings of the Holy Prophet ('s), Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a), the other Imams ('a), and Muslim saints of the first rank, can observe a characteristic spirit pervading all Persian literature containing spiritual counsel, which represents the spirit of Islam embodied in the Persian language and embellished with its charm and sweetness.

If an expert or a group of experts in Arabic and Persian literature acquainted with the works in all other languages that reflect the spirit of Islam, were to collect the masterpieces in the field of spiritual counsel, the extraordinary richness and maturity of the Islamic culture in this field will be revealed.

It is strange that so far as the works on spiritual counsel are concerned the Persian genius has mostly expressed itself in poetry; there is no such work of eminence in prose. All that exists of it in prose is in the form of short sayings, like the prose writings of the *Gulistan*—a part of which consists of spiritual counsels and is in itself a masterpiece—or the sayings ascribed to Khwajah 'Abd Allah al-'Ansari.

Of course, my own knowledge is inadequate, but as far as I know there does not exist in Persian prose any remarkable work, except for short sayings—not even a passage which is long enough to be counted as a short discourse, especially a discourse which was originally delivered extempore and later collected and recorded in writing.

There are discourses which have been related from Rumi or Sa'di, meant as oral moral advice to their followers; they also by no means possess the brilliance and charm of the poetic works of those masters, and definitely are not worth considering for a comparison with the discourses of the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

The same can be said about the writings which have reached us in the form of a treatise or letter, such as the *Nasihah al-muluk* by Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, the *Taziyaneh-ye suluk* by Ahmad al-Ghazali, the latter being an elaborate epistle addressed to his follower and pupil 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadan

## Spiritual Counsel and Wisdom

Moral counsel, according to the Qur'an, is one of the three ways of invitation towards God (*hikmah*, *maw'izah*, *al-jidal al-hasan*, i.e. wisdom, good admonition, and honourable debate, as mentioned in 16: 125).

The difference between *hikmah* (wisdom, philosophy) and *maw'izah* (spiritual and moral advice and admonition) lies in this that *hikmah* is for instruction and imparting knowledge, while *maw'izah* is meant for reminding. *Hikmah* is struggle against ignorance and *maw'izah* is struggle against negligence and indifference.

*Hikmah* deals with the intellect and *maw'izah* appeals to the heart. *Hikmah* educates, while *maw'izah* prepares the intellect for employment of its reserves. *Hikmah* is a lamp and *maw'izah* is an eye-opener.

*Hikmah* is for ratiocination, while *maw'izah* is for self-awakening. *Hikmah* is the language of the intellect, while *maw'izah* is the message for the spirit. Accordingly, the personality of the speaker plays an essential role in *maw'izah*, which is not the case with *hikmah*. In *hikmah*, two minds communicate in an impersonal manner. But in *maw'izah* the situation is like the passage of an electric charge that flows from the speaker, who is at a higher potential, to the listener.

For this reason, it has been said of *maw'izah* that:

If it comes forth from the soul, then it necessarily alights upon the heart.

Otherwise it does not go beyond the listener's ears. It is about the quality of *maw'izah* that it is said:

The speech which originates from the heart enters another heart, and the words which originate from the tongue do not go beyond the ears.

It is true that the words that come from the heart, being the message of the soul, invade other hearts; but if they do not convey the message of the soul, are no more than empty literary devices, which do not go beyond the listener's ear-drum.

## Maw'izah and Khitabah (Exhortation and Oratory)

*Maw'izah* also differs from *khitabah* (oratory, rhetoric). Although oratory also deals with emotions, but it seeks to stir and agitate them. *Maw'izah* on the other hand is intended to pacify emotions and it seeks to bring them under control. Oratory is effective when emotions are inert and stagnant; *maw'izah* is required when lusts and passions become unmanageable.

Oratory stirs the passion for power and glory, the feelings of honour, heroism, chivalry, manliness, patriotism, nobility, righteousness, virtue, and service; it is followed by movement and excitement. But *maw'izah* checks inappropriate passion and excitement.

Rhetoric and oratory snatch control from the hands of calculating reason, handing it over to tempestuous passions. But *maw'izah* appeases the tempests of passions and prepares the ground for calculation and foresight. Oratory draws one to the outside, and *maw'izah* makes him turn to his inner self.

Rhetoric and counsel are both necessary and essential, and the *Nahj al-balaghah* makes use of both of them. The main thing is to judge the right time for the use of each of them.

The impassioned speeches of Amir al-Mu'minin ('a) were delivered at a time when it was necessary to stir up passions and to build up a tempest to destroy an unjust and oppressive structure, such as at the time of the Battle of Siffin when 'Ali ('a) delivered a fiery speech before the engagement with Mu'awiyah's forces. Mu'awiyah's forces, arriving ahead of 'Ali's army, had taken control of the river bank and stopped the supply of water to 'Ali's camp.

At first 'Ali ('a) strived to abstain from resorting to force, desiring the problem to be solved through negotiation. But Mu'awiyah, who had some other designs, considering occupation of the river bank a victory for himself, refused every offer of negotiation.

When things became difficult for 'Ali's men, it was time when he should stir the emotions of his soldiers through a fiery speech, creating a tempest that would rout the enemy. This is how 'Ali ('a) addressed his companions:

They are eager that you should make them taste the flavour of battle. So you have two alternatives before you: either submit to disgrace and ignominy, or quench your swords in their blood and appease your thirst with water.

It is death to survive through defeat and true life is to die for the sake of victory. Muawiyah is leading a handful of deluded insurgents and has deceived them by keeping them in the dark about the truth, with the result that their throats are the targets of your deadly arrows. [1](#)

These words flared their emotions, provoked their sense of honour, and made the blood surge in their veins. It was not yet sunset when 'Ali's companions seized the river bank and threw back Mu'awiyah's

forces.

However, 'Ali's *mawaiz* were delivered in different conditions. During the days of the first three caliphs, and particularly during 'Uthman's rule, immeasurable amounts of wealth and booty won through consecutive victories flowed into Muslim hands.

Due to the absence of any careful programmes for correct utilization of that wealth, particularly due to the aristocratic, or rather tribal, rule during the reign of 'Uthman, moral corruption, worldliness, and love of comfort and luxury found their way into the Muslim society. Tribal rivalries were revived, and racial prejudice between Arabs and non-Arabs was added to it.

In that clamour for worldliness and mounting prejudices, rivalries, and greed for greater share of the war booty, the only cry of protest charged with spiritual exhortation was that of 'Ali ('a).

God willing, we shall discuss in coming chapters the various themes dealt with in 'Ali's *mawa'iz*, such as *taqwa* (God-fearing), worldliness, *zuhd* (abstinence), desires, the dread of death, the dreads of the Day of Judgement, the need to take lesson from the history of past nations and peoples, etc.

## The Nahj al-balaghah's Recurring Themes

Out of the 241 fragments collected under the title '*Khutab*' by al-Sayyid al-Radi (though not all of them are *Khutab* or sermons) about 86 can be classed as *mawa'iz* or at least contain a series of spiritual advices.

Some of them, however, are elaborate and lengthy, like the *khutbah* 176, which opens with the sentence (*Avail of the Divine expositions*), the *khutbah* named '*al-Qasi'ah*'; (which is the longest of the sermons of the *Nahj al-balaghah*), and the *khutbah* 93 (called *khutbat al-muttaqin*, the 'Sermon of the Pious').

Out of some seventy-nine passages that are classed as '*kutub*' letters, (which not all of them are) about twenty-five, either completely or partially, consist of spiritual and moral teachings. Some of them are quite lengthy and elaborate—like letter 31, which constitutes 'Ali's advice to his son al-Imam al-Hasan al-Mujtaba ('a), and the lengthiest of all, except the famous directive sent to Malik al-'Ashtar. Another one is letter 45, the well-known epistle of 'Ali ('a) to Uthman ibn Hunayf, his governor in Basrah.

## The Themes in Spiritual Advices

Various themes are found in the spiritual advices of the *Nahj al-balaghah*: *taqwa* (God-fearing); *tawakkul* (trust in God); *sabr* (patience, Fortitude); *zuhd* (abstinence); the renunciation of worldly pleasures and luxuries, the renunciation of inordinate desires and far-fetched hopes; the condemnation of injustice and prejudice, emphasis on mercy, love, helping of the oppressed and sympathy toward the weak; emphasis on the qualities of fortitude, courage, and strength; emphasis on unity and solidarity and condemnation of disunity; the invitation to take lesson from history; the invitation to thought, meditation,

remembrance, and self-criticism; the reminders about the brevity of life and the swiftness of its pace; the remembrance of death; the hardships of death-throes; experiences of the life after death; the reminders of the dreadful events of the Day of Judgement, and so on.

These are some of the frequent themes of the spiritual advices of the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

## Imam Ali's Logic

In order to understand this aspect of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, or, in other words, to understand 'Ali ('a) when he speaks as a moral and spiritual counsellor and to understand his didactic outlook, so as to draw benefit from that everflowing source, it is not enough to enumerate the various themes and topics dealt with by 'Ali ('a) in his discourses.

It is not sufficient merely to remark that 'Ali ('a) has spoken about *taqwa*, *tawakkul* or *zuhd*; rather, we must see what significance did he attribute to these words. We must uncover his didactic philosophy regarding the development of the human character and his perception of the human aspiration for piety, purity, freedom, and deliverance from spiritual servitude and thralldom.

As we know, these are words employed by all—in particular those who are wont to play the role of a moralist; but all individuals do not mean the same kind of things by these terms. Sometimes, the meanings one person attributes to these words are quite contrary to those meant by another, and naturally lead to conclusions which are quite opposite.

Consequently, it is essential to elaborate somewhat the specific meanings of these terms in 'Ali's vocabulary, starting with *taqwa*.

## Taqwa

*Taqwa* is one of the most frequent motifs of the *Nahj al-balaghah*. In fact it would be hard to find another book which emphasizes this spiritual term to the extent of this book. Even in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, no other term or concept receives so much attention and stress as *taqwa*. What is *taqwa*?

Often it is thought that *taqwa* means piety and abstinence and so implies a negative attitude. In other words, it is maintained that the greater the amount of abstinence, withdrawal, and self-denial, the more perfect is one's *taqwa*.

According to this interpretation, *taqwa* is a concept divorced from active life; secondly it is a negative attitude; thirdly, it means that the more severely this negative attitude is exercised, the greater one's *taqwa* would be.

Accordingly, the sanctimonious professors of *taqwa*, in order to avoid its being tainted and to protect it from any blemish, withdraw from the bustle of life, keeping themselves away from involvement in any

matter or affair of the world.

Undeniably, abstinence and caution exercised with discretion is an essential principle of wholesome living. For, in order to lead a healthy life, man is forced to negate and affirm, deny and posit, renounce and accept, avoid and welcome different things. It is through denial and negation that the positive in life can be realized. It is through renunciation and avoidance that concentration is given to action.

The principle of *tawhid* contained in the dictum *la ilaha illa Allah* is at the same time a negation as well as an affirmation. Without negation of everything other than God it is not possible to arrive at *tawhid*.

That is why rebellion and surrender, *kufr* (unbelief) and *iman* (belief), go together; that is, every surrender requires a rebellion and every faith (*iman*) calls for a denial and rejection (*kufr*), and every affirmation implies a negation. The Qur'an says:

***“So whoever disbelieves in taghut and believes in God, has laid hold of the most firm bond ....”***  
(2:256)

However, firstly, every denial, negation, rejection, and rebellion operates between the limits of two opposites; the negation of one thing implies movement towards its opposite; the rejection of the one marks the beginning of the acceptance of the other.

Accordingly, every healthy denial and rejection has both a direction and a goal, and is confined within certain definite limits. Therefore, a blind practice and purposeless attitude, which has neither direction nor a goal, nor is confined within any limits, is neither defensible nor of any spiritual worth.

Secondly, the meaning of *taqwa* in the *Nahj al-balaghah* is not synonymous with that of 'abstinence', even in its logically accepted sense discussed above. *Taqwa*, on the other hand, according to the *Nahj al-balaghah*, is a spiritual faculty which appears as a result of continued exercise and practice.

The healthy and rational forms of abstinence are, firstly, the preparatory causes for the emergence of that spiritual faculty; secondly, they are also its effects and outcome.

This faculty strengthens and vitalizes the soul, giving it a kind of immunity. A person who is devoid of this faculty, if he wants to keep himself free from sins, it is unavoidable for him to keep away from the causes of sin. Since society is never without these causes, inevitably he has to go into seclusion and isolate himself.

It follows from this argument that one should either remain pious by isolating himself from one's environment, or he should enter society and bid farewell to *taqwa*. Moreover, according to this logic, the more isolated and secluded a person's life is and the more he abstains from mixing with other people, the greater is his piety and *taqwa* in the eyes of the common people.

However, if the faculty of *taqwa* is cultivated inside a person's soul, it is no longer necessary for him to

seclude himself from his environment. He can keep himself clean and uncorrupted without severing his relations with society.

The former kind of persons are like those who take refuge in mountains for fear of some plague or epidemic.

The second kind resemble those who acquire immunity and resistance through vaccination and so do not deem it necessary to leave the city and avoid contact with their townsfolk. On the other hand, they hasten to the aid of the suffering sick in order to save them. Sa'di is alluding to the first kind of pious in his Gulistan, when he says:

*Saw I a sage in the mountains,  
Happy in a cave, far from the world's tide.  
Said I, "Why not to the city return,  
And lighten your heart of this burden?"  
He said, "The city abounds in tempting beauties,  
And even elephants slip where mud is thick."*

The *Nahj al-balaghah* speaks of *taqwa* as a spiritual faculty acquired through exercise and assiduity, which on its emergence produces certain characteristic effects, one of which is the ability to abstain from sins with ease.

I guarantee the truth of my words and I am responsible for what I say. If similar events and experiences of the past serve as a lesson for a person, then *taqwa* prevents him from plunging recklessly into doubts ... [2](#)

Beware that sins are like unruly horses whose reins have been taken away and which plunge with their riders into hell-fire. But *taqwa* is like a trained steed whose reins are in the hands of its rider and enters with its rider into Paradise. [3](#)

In this sermon *taqwa* is described as a spiritual condition which results in control and command over one's self. It explains that the result of subjugation to desires and lusts and being devoid of *taqwa* degrades one's personality making it vulnerable to the cravings of the carnal self. In such a state, man is like a helpless rider without any power and control, whom his mount takes wherever it desires.

The essence of *taqwa* lies in possessing a spiritual personality endowed with will-power, and possessing mastery over the domain of one's self. A man with *taqwa* is like an expert horseman riding a well-trained horse and who with complete mastery and control drives his tractable steed in the direction of his choice.

Certainly the *taqwa* of God assists His awliya (friends) in abstaining from unlawful deeds and instils His fear into their hearts. As a result, their nights are passed in wakefulness and their days in thirst [on

account of fasting].[4](#)

Here 'Ali ('a) makes it clear that *taqwa* is something which automatically leads to abstention from unlawful actions and to the fear of God, which are its necessary effects. Therefore, according to this view, *taqwa* is neither itself abstinence nor fear of God; rather, it is a sacred spiritual faculty of which these two are only consequences:

For indeed, today *taqwa* is a shield and a safeguard, and tomorrow (i.e. in the Hereafter) it shall be the path to Paradise. [5](#)

In *khutbah* 157, *taqwa* is compared to an invincible fortress built on heights which the enemy has no power to infiltrate. Throughout, the emphasis of the Imam ('a) lies on the spiritual and psychological aspect of *taqwa* and its effects upon human spirit involving the emergence of a dislike for sin and corruption and an inclination towards piety, purity, and virtue.

Further illustrations of this view can be cited from the *Nahj al-balaghah*, but it seems that the above quotations are sufficient.

## Taqwa is Immunity not Restraint

We have already mentioned some of the various elements found in the spiritual advices (*mawa'iz*) of the *Nahj al-balaghah*. We began with *taqwa* and saw that *taqwa*, from the viewpoint of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, is a sublime spiritual faculty which is the cause of certain attractions and repulsions; i.e. attraction towards edifying spiritual values and repulsion towards degrading materialistic vices. The *Nahj al-balaghah* considers *taqwa* as a spiritual state that gives strength to human personality and makes man the master of his own self.

## Taqwa as Immunity

The *Nahj al-balaghah* stresses that *taqwa* is for man a shield and a shelter, not a chain or a prison. There are many who do not distinguish between immunity and restraint, between security and confinement, and promptly advocate the destruction of the sanctuary of *taqwa* in the name of freedom and liberation from bonds and restraint.

That which is common between a sanctuary and a prison is the existence of a barrier. Whereas the walls of a sanctuary avert dangers, the walls of a prison hinder the inmates from realizing their inner capacities and from benefiting from the bounties of life. 'Ali ('a) clarifies the difference between the two, where he says:

Let it be known to you, O servants of God, that *taqwa* is a formidable fortress, whereas impiety and corruption is a weak and indefensible enclosure that does not safeguard its people, and does not offer any protection to those who take refuge in it. Indeed, it is only with *taqwa* that the tentacles of sins and

misdeeds can be severed. [6](#)

'Ali ('a), in this sublime advice, compares sins and evil deeds which are afflictions of the human soul to poisonous insects and reptiles, and suggests that the faculty of *taqwa* is an effective defence against them. In some of his discourses, he makes it clear that *taqwa* not only does not entail restraint and restriction or is an impediment to freedom, but on the other hand it is the source and fountainhead of all true freedoms. In *khutbah* 230, he says:

*Taqwa* is the key to guidance, the provision for the next world, the freedom from every kind of slavery, and the deliverance from every form of destruction.

The message is clear. *Taqwa* gives man spiritual freedom and liberates him from the chains of slavery and servitude to lusts and passions. It releases him from the bonds of envy, lust, and anger, and this expurgates society from all kinds of social bondages and servitudes.

Men who are not slaves of comfort, money, power, and glory, never surrender to the various forms of bondage which plague the human society.

The *Nahj al-balaghah* deals with the theme of *taqwa* and its various effects in many of its passages; but we don't consider it necessary to discuss all of them here. Our main objective here is to discover the meaning of *taqwa* from the point of view of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, so as to unearth the reason for so much emphasis that this book places on this concept.

Of the many effects of *taqwa* that have been pointed out, two are more important than the rest: firstly, the development of insight and clarity of vision; secondly, the capacity to solve problems and to weather difficulties and crises.

We have discussed this in detail elsewhere.[7](#) Moreover, a discussion of these effects of *taqwa* here will take us beyond our present aim which is to clarify the true meaning of *taqwa*. It will not be out of place to call attention to certain profound remarks of the *Nahj al-balaghah* about the reciprocal relationship between the human being and *taqwa*.

## [A Reciprocal Commitment](#)

In spite of the great emphasis laid by the *Nahj al-balaghah* on *taqwa* as a kind of guarantee and immunity against sin and temptation, it should be noticed that one must never neglect to safeguard and protect *taqwa* itself. *Taqwa* guards man, and man must safeguard his *taqwa*. This, as we shall presently explain, is not a vicious circle.

This reciprocal guarding of the one by the other is comparable to the one between a person and his clothes. A man takes care of his clothes and protects them from being spoiled or stolen, while the clothes in turn guard him against heat or cold. In fact the Holy Qur'an speaks of *taqwa* as a garment:

### ***And the garment of taqwa –that is better. (7:26)***

'Ali ('a), speaking about this relationship of mutual protection between a person and his *taqwa*', says:

Turn your sleep into wakefulness by the means of *taqwa* and spend your days in its company. Keep its consciousness alive in your hearts. With it wash away your sins and cure your ailments... Beware, guard your *taqwa* and place your self under its guard. [8](#)

At another place in the same sermon, 'Ali ('a) says:

O God's servants, I advise you to cultivate the *taqwa* of God. Indeed it is a right that God has over you and it is through it that you can have any right over God. You should beseech God's help for guarding it and seek its aid for [fulfilling your duty to] God.[9](#)

## **Zuhd and Piety**

Another spiritual motif conspicuous in the teachings of the *Nahj al-balaghah* is *zuhd*, which after *taqwa* is the most recurring theme of the book. '*Zuhd*' means renunciation of the 'world', and very often we encounter denunciation of the 'world', and invitation and exhortation to renounce it.

It appears to me that it forms one of the important themes of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, which needs to be elucidated and explained in the light of various aspects of 'Ali's approach.

We shall begin our discussion with the word '*zuhd*'. The words '*zuhd*' and '*raghbah*' (attraction, desire), if mentioned without reference to their objects, are opposite to each other. '*Zuhd*' means indifference and avoidance, and '*raghbah*' means attraction, inclination, and desire.

Indifference can be of two kinds: involuntary and cultivated. A person is involuntarily indifferent towards a certain thing when by nature he does not have any desire for it, as in the case of a sick person who shows no desire either for food, or fruits, or anything else. Obviously, this kind of indifference and abstinence has nothing to do with the particular sense implied in '*zuhd*'.

Another kind of indifference or abstinence is spiritual or intellectual; that is, things which are natural objects of desire are not considered the goal and objective by a human being in the course of his struggle for perfection and felicity.

The ultimate objective and goal may be something above mundane aims and sensual pleasures; either it may be to attain the sensuous pleasures of the Hereafter, or it may not belong to this kind of things.

It may be some high ethical and moral ideal, like honour, dignity, nobility, liberty, or it may belong to the spiritual sphere, like the remembrance of God, the love of God, and the desire to acquire nearness to Him.

Accordingly the *zahid* (i.e. one who practises *zuhd*) is someone whose interest transcends the sphere of material existence, and whose object of aspiration lies beyond the kind of things we have mentioned above. The indifference of a *zahid* originates in the sphere of his ideas, ideals, and hopes, not in his physiological makeup.

There are two places where we come across the definition of '*zuhd*' in the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Both of them confirm the above interpretation of *zuhd*. 'Ali ('a), in *khutba* 81, says:

O people! *zuhd* means curtailing of hopes, thanking God for His blessings and bounties, and abstaining from that which He has forbidden.

In *hikmah* 439, he says:

All *zuhd* is summarized in two sentences of the Qur'an: God, the Most Exalted, says, ... *So that you may not grieve for what escapes you, nor rejoice in what has come to you.* [57:23] Whoever does not grieve over what he has lost and does not rejoice over what comes to him has acquired *zuhd* in both of its aspects.

Obviously when something does not occupy a significant position amongst one's objectives and ideals, or rather is not at all significant in the scheme of things which matter to him, its gain and loss do not make the slightest difference to him.

However, there are some points that need clarification. Is *zuhd*, or detachment from the world, on which the *Nahj al-balaghah*, following the Qur'anic teachings, puts so much emphasis, to be taken solely in an ethical and spiritual sense?

In other words, is *zuhd* purely a spiritual state, or does it possess practical implications also? That is, is *zuhd* spiritual abstinence only or is it accompanied by an abstinence in practical life also? Assuming that *zuhd* is to be applied in practice, is it limited to abstinence from unlawful things (*muharramat*), as pointed out in *khutba* 81, or does it include something more, as exemplified by the life of 'Ali ('a) and before him by the life of the Holy Prophet ('s)?

Proceeding on the assumption that *zuhd* is not limited to *-muharramat* only and that it covers permissible things (*mubahat*) as well, one may ask: what is its underlying rationale and philosophy?

What is the use of an ascetic life that limits and confines life, rejecting its blessings and bounties? Is *zuhd* to be practised at all times or only under certain particular conditions? Is *zuhd*—in the sense of abstinence from even permissible things—basically in agreement with other Islamic teachings?

Apart from this, the basis of *zuhd* and renunciation of the world is the pursuit of supra-material objectives and ideals. What are they from the point of view of Islam? In particular, how does the *Nahj al-balaghah* describe them?

All these questions regarding *zuhd*, renunciation, and curtailing of hopes—themes which have so often been discussed in the *Nahj al-balaghah*—need to be clarified. We shall discuss these questions in the following pages and try to answer them.

## Islamic Zuhd and Christian Asceticism

In the last section we said that *zuhd*, as defined by the *Nahj al-balaghah*, is a spiritual state that makes the *zahid*, on account of his spiritual and other worldly aspirations, indifferent towards the manifestations of material existence. This indifference is not confined to his heart, intellect, and feelings and is not limited to his conscience.

It also manifests itself on the practical level of life in the form of simplicity, contentment, and abstention from hedonistic urges and love of luxuries. A life of *zuhd* not only implies that a man should be free from attachment to the material aspects of life, but he should also practically abstain from indulgence in pleasures.

The *zuhhad* are those who in life are satisfied with the barest material necessities. 'Ali ('a) was a *zahid*, who was not only emotionally detached from the world but also indifferent to its pleasures and enjoyments. In other words, he had 'renounced' the 'world'.

## Two Questions

Here, inevitably, two questions shall arise in the reader's mind. Firstly, as we know, Islam has opposed monasticism considering it to be an innovation of Christian priests and monks.<sup>10</sup> The Prophet ('s) has stated in unequivocal terms that:

There is no monasticism (*rahbaniyyah*) in Islam.

Once when the Prophet ('s) was informed that some of his Companions had retired into seclusion renouncing everything and devoting all their time to worship and prayer in seclusion, he became very indignant.

He told them: "I, who am your prophet, am not such". In this way, the Prophet ('s) made them to understand that Islam is a religion of life and society, not a monastic faith. Moreover, the comprehensive and multifaceted teachings of Islam in social, economic, political and moral spheres are based on reverence for life, not on its renunciation.

Apart from this, monasticism and renunciation of life are incompatible with the world-view of Islam and its optimistic outlook about the universe and creation. Unlike some other philosophies and creeds, Islam does not view the world and life in society with pessimism.

It does not divide all creation into ugly and beautiful, black and white, good and evil, proper and

improper, right and wrong.

Now the second question may be stated in these words: "Aside from the fact that asceticism is the same as monasticism—which are both incompatible with the Islamic spirit—what is the philosophy underlying *zuhd* ?

Moreover, why should men be urged to practise *zuhd*? Why should man, seeing the limitless bounties of God and good things of life around him, be called upon to pass by the side of this delightful stream indifferently and without so much as wetting his feet?

Are the ascetic teachings found in Islam, on this basis, later innovations (*bid'ah*) introduced into Islam from other creeds like Christianity and Buddhism? And if this is correct, how are we to explain and interpret the teachings of the *Nahj al-balaghah*? How can we explain the indubitable details known about the Prophet's life and that of 'Ali ('a)?

The answer is that Islamic *zuhd* is different from Christian asceticism or monasticism. Asceticism is retreat from people and society and seclusion for the purpose of worship. According to it, the life and works of the world are separate from the works of the Here-after and the one is alien to the other. One should, of necessity, choose either one of the two.

One should either devote oneself to worship of God which shall bear fruits in the Hereafter, or take up the life of the world and benefit from its immediate pleasures. Accordingly, monasticism is opposed to life and social relationships. It requires withdrawal from people and negation of responsibility and commitment towards them.

On the other hand, *zuhd* in Islam, though it requires a simple and unaffected life-style and is based on abstention from luxuries and love of comforts and pleasures, operates in the very midst of life and social relations and is sociable. It draws inspiration, and proceeds, from the goal of better fulfilment of social responsibilities and duties.

The conception of *zuhd* in Islam is not something that would lead to asceticism, because a sharp distinction between this world and the next is nowhere drawn. From the viewpoint of Islam, this world and the next are not separable, not alien to each other. The relation of this world to the other is similar to that between the inward and outward sides of a single reality.

They are like the warp and woof of a single fabric. They are to each other as the soul to the body. Their relationship can be assumed to be something midway between unity and duality. The works of this world and those of the next are interrelated similarly. Their difference is that of quality, without being essential.

Accordingly, that which is harmful for the other world is also to one's detriment in the present world, and everything which is beneficial for the summum bonum of life in this world is also beneficial for life in the

next world.

Therefore, if a certain work which is in accordance with the higher interests of life in this world is performed with motives that are devoid of the higher, supra-material, and transcendental elements, that work would be considered totally this-worldly and would not, as the Qur'an tells us, elevate man in his ascent towards God.

However, if a work or action is motivated by sublime aims and intentions and is executed with a higher vision that transcends the narrow limits of worldly life, the same work and action is considered 'other-worldly.'

The Islamic *zuhd*, as we said, is grounded in the very context and stream of life and gives a peculiar quality to living by emphasizing certain values in life. As affirmed by the Islamic texts, *zuhd* in Islam is based on three essential principles of the Islamic world-outlook.

## The Three Essential Principles

1. Enjoyments derived from the physical, material, and natural means of life are not sufficient for man's happiness and felicity. A series of spiritual needs are inbuilt in the human nature, without whose satisfaction the enjoyment provided by material means of life is not enough to make man truly happy.
2. The individual's felicity and happiness is not separable from that of society. Since man is emotionally bound to his society, and carries within him a sense of responsibility towards it, his individual happiness cannot be independent of the prosperity and peace of his fellow men.
3. The soul, despite its fusion and a kind of unity with the body, has a reality of its own. It is a principle in addition to the body which constitutes another principle in itself. The soul is an independent source of pleasure and pain. Like the body, or rather even more than it, it stands in need of nourishment, training, growth, and development.

The soul, however, cannot dispense with the health and vigour of the body. At the same time, it is undeniable that total indulgence in physical pleasures and complete immersion into the delights of sensual experiences does not leave any opportunity for realizing the soul's unlimited possibilities. Therefore, there exists a kind of incompatibility between physical enjoyment and spiritual satisfaction. This is especially true if the attention and attachment to physical needs were carried to the very extreme of total immersion and absorption.

It is not true that all sorrow and grief are related to the soul and that all pleasures are derived from the body. In fact, the spiritual pleasures are much profounder, purer, and lasting than bodily pleasures. To sum up, one-sided attention to physical pleasures and material enjoyments finally results in compromising the total human happiness.

Therefore, if we want to make our lives happy, rich, pure, majestic, attractive, and beautiful, we cannot afford to ignore the spiritual aspects of our being.

With due attention to these principles, the meaning of *zuhd* in Islam becomes clear. The knowledge of these principles allows us to understand why Islam rejects monasticism but welcomes a form of asceticism which is rooted in the very heart of life and in the context of social existence. We shall explain the meaning of *zuhd* in Islamic texts on the basis of these three principles.

## The Zahid and the Monk

We said that Islam encourages *zuhd* but condemns monasticism. Both the *zahid* and the ascetic monk seek abstinence from pleasures and enjoyments. But the monk evades life in society and the responsibilities and the duties it entails, regarding them as the low and mean facets of worldly existence, and takes refuge in mountains or monasteries.

On the other hand, the *zahid* accepts society with its norms, ideals, duties, and commitments. Both the *zahid* and the monk are otherworldly, but the *zahid* is a social otherworldly. Also their attitudes to abstinence from pleasures are not identical; the monk disdains hygiene and cleanliness and derides married life and procreation.

The *zahid*, on the contrary, considers hygiene and cleanliness, matrimony and parenthood to be a part of his duties. Both the *zahid* and the monk are ascetics, but whereas the 'world' renounced by the *zahid* is indulgence and immersion in pleasures, luxuries, and comforts (he rejects the attitude which considers them to be life's ultimate goal and objective), the 'world' renounced by the monk includes life's work and activity, and the duty and responsibility which go with social life.

That is why the *zahid's zuhd* operates in the midst of social life, and is, therefore, not only compatible with social responsibility and commitment but is moreover a very effective means of discharging them.

The difference between the *zahid* and the monk arises from two different world-outlooks. From the viewpoint of the monk, this world and the next are two different spheres, separate from and unrelated to each other. To him, happiness in this world is not only independent of happiness in the next but is incompatible with it.

He considers the two forms of happiness as irreconcilable contradictories. Naturally, that which leads to felicity and happiness in this world is considered different from the works and deeds which lead to success in the Hereafter. In other words, the means of acquiring happiness in this world and the next are regarded as being incompatible and contradictory.

It is imagined that a single work and action cannot simultaneously be a means for acquiring happiness in both the worlds.

But in the world-view of the *zahid*, the world and the Hereafter are interconnected. The world is a preamble to the Hereafter. It is a farm of which the Hereafter is the harvest. From the *zahid's* viewpoint, that which gives order, security, uprightness, prosperity, and flourish to life is application of other-worldly criteria to the life of this world.

The essence of felicity and happiness in the other world lies in successful accomplishment of commitments and responsibilities of this world, performed with faith, piety, purity, and *taqwa*.

In truth, the *zahid's* concept of *zuhd* and the monk's rationale for his asceticism are incompatible and contradictory to each other. Basically, monasticism is a deviation introduced by men into the teachings of prophets, due to ignorance or vested interests. Now we shall explain the philosophy of *zuhd* in the light of the teachings of the Islamic texts.

## Zuhd and Altruism

One of the ingredients of *zuhd* is altruism. *Ithar* (altruism) and *atharah* (egoism) are derived from the same root. *Atharah* means giving precedence to one's interests over those of others. In other words it implies monopolizing everything for oneself and depriving others. But *Ithar* means preferring others over oneself and bearing hardship for the comfort and good of others.

The *zahid*, by virtue of his simple, humble, and content living, is hard upon himself so that others may live in ease.

He sacrifices for the sake of the needy because with his sensitive heart which feels the pains of others he can relish the world's bounties only when there does not exist a single man oppressed by need. He derives greater satisfaction by feeding and clothing others and working for their ease than if he did those things for himself.

He endures deprivation, hunger, and pain, so that others may be well fed and live without hardships.

*Ithar* represents the most majestic and sublime manifestation of human greatness, and only very great human beings climb to its noble heights.

The Holy Qur'an refers to the episode of the self-sacrifice of 'Ali ('a) and his honoured family in the glorious verses of the Surat *Hal ata*. 'Ali, Fatimah, and their sons once gave away whatever they had—which was no more than a few loaves of bread—to the poor for the sake of God, and despite their own distress.

That is why this story circulated among the angels and a verse of the Qur'an was revealed in the praise of their act.

Once when the Holy Prophet ('s) came to visit Hadrat al-Zahra' ('s), observing that his daughter had put

on a silver bracelet and hung a new curtain on the door, signs of unease appeared upon his face. Al-Zahra' ('a) was quick to discern the cause of her father's reaction.

When the Prophet ('s) left, without losing time, she took out her bracelet and removing the curtain from the door, sent them to be carried to the Prophet ('s) so that he might give them to the needy.

When al-Zahra's messenger brought them to the Prophet ('s) he looked at them with amazement. He was glad that his daughter had taken the hint and foregone her simplest luxuries for the benefit of others.

'The neighbours first', was the maxim in the household of 'Ali ('a) and Fatimah ('a). In *khutbah* 193, which describes the qualities of the pious, 'Ali ('a) says:

The man of [*taqwa*] subjects his own self to hardships so that the people may live in comfort.

The Holy Qur'an describes the Ansar (the Helpers), who in spite of their poverty welcomed the Muhajirun (the Emigrants) as their own brethren, giving them preference over their own selves, in these words:

*They love whosoever has migrated to them, not finding in their breasts any need for what they have been given, and prefer others above themselves, even though poverty be their lot ... (59:9)*

Obviously, the altruistic ingredient of *zuhd* comes into play only under certain conditions. In an affluent society, altruism is less frequently required.

But in conditions where poverty and deprivation are prevalent—as in the society of al-Madinah during the Prophet's time—its need is greater. This is one of the secrets of the apparent difference of the life-styles of 'Ali ('a) and the Holy Prophet ('s) with the rest of the Imams ('a).

In any case, *zuhd* with its underlying altruistic motives has nothing in common with monasticism and escape from society; instead it is a product of man's gregarious instincts and a manifestation of his noblest feelings, which reinforce the social bonds between fellow human beings.

## Sympathy and Kindness

The sympathy and the willingness to share the suffering of the needy and the deprived is another ingredient of *zuhd*. When the destitute witness the luxuries and comforts of the richer classes, their anguish is multiplied. To the hardships of poverty and destitution is added the stinging feeling of deprivation and backwardness in relation to others.

Man, by nature, cannot tolerate to remain a silent spectator while others who have no merit over him eat, drink, enjoy and relish freely at the cost of his deprivation. When society is divided into haves and have-nots, the man of God considers himself responsible.

In the first place, as Amir al-Mu'minin ('a) says, he should strive to change the situation which permits the gluttony of the rich oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed, in accordance with the covenant of God with the learned men of the Ummah. [11](#) In the second place, he strives to ameliorate the state of affairs through altruism and self-sacrifice, by sharing whatever he possesses with the needy and the deprived.

But when he sees that the situation has deteriorated beyond reparation and it is practically impossible to alleviate the misery of the poor through sympathy, he practically shares their deprivation and tries to soothe their wounded hearts by adopting a life-style similar to that of the poor.

Sympathy with others and sharing their suffering is of essential importance especially in the case of the leaders of the Ummah on whom all eyes are fixed. 'Ali ('a), more than at any other time, lived a severely ascetic life during the days of his caliphate. He used to say:

Indeed God has made it obligatory for just leaders that they should maintain themselves at the level of the poor class so that they do not despair of their distress. [12](#)

Should I be content with being called 'Amir al-Mu'minin' while refusing to share the adversities of the times with the people? Or should I be an example to them in the distress of life? [13](#)

In the same letter (to 'Uthman ibn Hunayf) he says:

It is absolutely out of question that my desires should overpower me and my greed should lead me to relish choicest foods while in the Hijaz and Yamamah there may be some people who despair of even a single loaf of bread and who do not get a full meal. Shall I lie with a satiated belly while around me are those whose stomachs are hungry and whose livers are burning? [14](#)

At the same time, 'Ali ('a) would reproach anyone else for practising the same kind of asceticism in life. When faced with their objection as to why he himself practised it, he would reply, "I am not like you. The leaders have a different duty." This approach of 'Ali ('a) can be observed in the conversation with 'Asim ibn Ziyad al-Harith. [15](#)

In volume IX of the Bihar al-'anwar, it has been related from al-Kafi that Amir al-Mu'minin ('a) said:

God has appointed me the leader of the people and made it my duty to adopt a way of living, in food and clothing, on a par with the poorest classes of society, so that, on the one hand, it may soothe the distress of the poor and, on the other, restrain the rich from revolting. [16](#)

An incident is related from the life of the great *faqih* Wahid Behbahani, may God be pleased with him. One day he observed one of his daughters-in-law wearing a garment made of a fabric usually worn by women of rich families of those days. He reproached his son (the late Aqa Muhammad Isma'il, the lady's husband) in that regard. The son recited this verse of the Qur'an in reply to his father's remarks:

**“Say: ‘Who has forbidden the ornament of God which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good things of His providing?’ (7:32)**

The father said: “I don't say that putting on good dress, eating good food, and making use of God's bounties is forbidden. Not at all. Such restrictions do not exist in Islam. However, there is one thing to be remembered. We are a family charged with the duty of the religious leadership of Muslims and have special responsibilities.

When the people of poor families see the rich live luxuriously, their frustration is aggravated. Their only consolation is that at least the 'Aqa's family' lives like they do. Now if we too adopt the life-styles of the rich, that will deprive them of their only consolation. However, we cannot practically change the present social condition, but let us not grudge at least this much of sympathy.”

As can be clearly seen, *zuhd*, which derives motivation from sympathy and readiness to share the sufferings of others, has nothing common with monastic asceticism. It is not based on escapism from society. The Islamic conception of *zuhd* is a means of alleviating the sufferings of society.

## Zuhd and Freedom

Another ingredient of *zuhd* is love of freedom and independence. The union between *zuhd* and freedom is as primordial as it is indissoluble.

The dictates of need and exigency are the criteria of opportunists, whereas independence from want is characteristic of free men. The deepest aspiration of the free men unattached to the world is unencumbrance, buoyancy, absence of hindrance, and freedom of movement.

As a result they adopt *zuhd* and contentment so as to reduce their wants to a minimum, liberating their selves from the bondage of need, of things and persons.

The life of a human being, like that of any other animal, requires a series of natural and indispensable necessities, like air, shelter, bread, water, and clothing. Man cannot free himself entirely from attachment to such needs and other things such as light and heat so as to make himself, in philosophical terminology, “self-sustaining” (*muktafi bidhatih*).

However, there are a series of other wants which are not necessary and natural, but are imposed upon one in the course of one's life either by oneself, or by social and historical factors beyond his control, which nevertheless set limits upon his freedom.

Such constraints are not very dangerous as long as they are not transformed into inner needs, such as certain political constraints and compulsions. The most dangerous of compulsions are those which emerge as inner needs from within one's own self and shackle him.

The mechanism of these needs, which lead to inner weakness, impotence, and defeat, operates in such a way that when one turns to luxuries and comforts in order to add charm, delight, and glamour to one's life so as to feel more secure and strong in order to derive greater gratification from life, one is impelled to possess more and more things.

In the course of time one gets gradually accustomed to and engrossed in the means of one's comfort, luxury, and power. These habits gradually result in deeper attachment to and love for those things, and he is bound to them with invisible bonds, thus becoming helpless and impotent in front of them.

That is, the same thing which had once added charm and delight to his life later deprives his personality of its vigour, and the same thing which once made him feel powerful against nature now turns him into a helpless slave without a will of his own.

Man's inclination towards *zuhd* is rooted in his love of freedom. By nature he is disposed toward possession of things and their exploitation; but when he realizes that the things, to the very extent they make him outwardly powerful and successful, inwardly transform him into a weakling without will-power and a slave, he rebels against this slavery. This rebellion of man is what we call *zuhd*.

Our poets and sages have spoken a lot about freedom and liberation. Hafiz calls himself 'the slave of the magnanimity of him who is free of everything under the blue sky that carries any taint of attachment.' Among the trees, he admires the cypress which to him seems 'free of all woes.' What those great men meant by 'freedom' is freedom from attachment, freedom from being possessed, bewitched, and captivated by anything.

But freedom implies something greater than being devoid of attachments. The ties which make a man weak, helpless, dependent, and impotent are not only those which originate in the heart or emotional attachments; to these must be added the various bodily, physical and psychological conditionings and artificial appendages that are first acquired for adding charm and glory to life and for satisfaction of the lust for power and strength, later growing into a form of addiction or rather becoming a second nature.

These, while they may not involve one's emotional attachments, or may even be regarded by one as reprehensible, should be counted as even stronger means of human servitude and which may bring greater even degradation than emotional attachments.

Take the example of an enlightened '*arif*' with a heart free of worldly attachments, for whom, nevertheless, addiction to tea, tobacco or opium has become a second nature, or for whom abstention from foods to which he is accustomed may endanger his life. Can such a man lead a free existence?

Liberty from attachments is a necessary condition of freedom, but it is not sufficient in itself. Accustoming oneself to a minimum of the niceties of life and abstention from affluent living is another condition of freedom.

The first thing to strike Abu Sa'īd al-Khudri, one of the honoured Companions, when describing the station of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ), is:

The Prophet of God, may peace be upon him and his Household, could manage with the minimum necessities of life.

Is it a merit to be able to do with a minimum of means? If we take only the economic aspect into view, we should say that the Prophet's level of consumption was quite low. In this respect, therefore, the answer would be: "No, not at all; it is not a significant merit."

But if viewed from a spiritual viewpoint, that is when examined by the criterion of freedom from worldly bondages, we have to admit that it is a great merit indeed. Because it is only by acquisition of this merit that a human being can live with any measure of unfettered freedom and unimpeded mobility, and participate in the incessant struggle of life with agility and vigour.

This matter is not restricted to habits involving the individual; binding oneself to social habits and customs, to modes and manners of dealing with people, the mesh of social connections and gatherings, adherence to styles and fashions in dress and demeanour—these and the like of these encumber life and deprive it of dynamism

Freedom of movement in the arena of life is like swimming; lesser the interference and incumbrance for the swimmer, the greater is his ability to move around in water. Too many attachments will not only deprive him of his mobility but bring the danger of drowning.

Athir al-Din Akhsikati (d. 577 or 579/1181 or 1183) says:

*To cross the river of life, shed your robes;  
Nakedness is a condition of keeping afloat.*

Farrukhi Yazdi says:

*Of nakedness the sage does not complain,  
A sword of good steel would not rust without a sheath.*

Baba Tahir has a *ruba'i* which though intended for some other purpose is nevertheless relevant here:

*O heart, thy path is better when covered with thorns;  
Thy track is better when stretched on heavens high;  
Nay, if thou can strip the skin off thine flesh,  
Do it, for the lighter thy burden the better it be.*

Sa'di, too, relates a relevant fable in the chapter 7 of his *Gulistan*, although it also aims at some other purpose:

I saw a rich mans son squatting by the side of his father's grave, and bragging thus before a darwish's son: 'My father's tomb is constructed of rare stones. Inside, it is paved with marble with enlaid turquois. And look at the one of your father's! An unbaked brick or two was fetched, on which a handful of earth was thrown.'

The sage's son heard these remarks and replied: 'Yet before your father is able to budge under the pile of those stones, my father would have reached the paradise itself.'

These are allegories underlining the significance of lightness and freedom from bondages, which is the essential condition for dynamism, nobility, and nimbleness.

Leaps, movements, and struggles were achieved by individuals who were practically freer of bondages and attachments; that is, in some sense they were *zahids*. Gandhi, with his ascetic mode of life, brought the British imperialism to its knees.

Ya'qub Layth Saffar, in his own words, 'did not set aside his diet of bread and onions until he became a terror for the caliph.' In our own times, the Vietcongs were such an example. Their surprising power of resistance was drawn from what in Islamic idiom has been called 'lightness of provisions'. A Vietcong could sustain for days in his shelter with a handful of rice and continue his battle with the enemy.

Which leader, religious or political, living in luxury and comfort has brought about drastic upheavals in world history? Which monarch who founded a dynasty, having transferred power from another family to his own, has been a lover of luxuries and comforts?

'Ali ibn Abi Talib, may peace be upon him, was the freest of the world's free men. He was a free man in the complete sense of the word, because he was a *zahid* in the profoundest sense of the word. 'Ali ('a), in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, lays great emphasis on renunciation of worldly pleasures and comforts as a means of liberation. In one of the hikam (aphorisms), he says:

Greed is everlasting slavery. [17](#)

In a sermon he describes the *zuhd* of Jesus ('a), the son of Mary, in these words:

He was free of any abasing greed. [18](#)

At another place he says:

The world is a place of transit, not a place to abide. Its people fall into two categories: those who sell away their souls into slavery, and those who ransom their souls and liberate them. [19](#)

In a letter to 'Uthman ibn Hunayf, 'Ali ('a) is more explicit than elsewhere. Towards the end of the letter, addressing the world and its pleasures, he reveals to us the philosophy of *zuhd* and the secrets of renunciation:

O world! Get away from me! I have thrown thy reins on thy shoulders, have freed myself from thy claws, and released myself from thy snares .... Go, get thee away! By God, I shall not surrender to thee so that thou should abase me! I shall not follow thee tractably that thou may control me and lead me wherever thou willeth.

Yes. 'Ali's *zuhd* is a rebellion against abasement and indignity on account of pleasures. It is a rebellion against human weakness and impotence before the tyranny of desires. It is a defiance of servitude to the world and obsequiousness before its charms.

## Zuhd And Spirituality

### Zuhd, Love, and Worship

Another fountainhead of *zuhd* and renunciation of hedonism is the aspiration to avail of spiritual bounties. Presently we do not intend to undertake any argument to the effect that man and the universe possess an undeniable spiritual aspect. It is another story by itself.

It is evident that from a materialistic outlook of the world, the rejection of hedonism, materialism, and love of money and wealth as a prerequisite for acquisition of spiritual virtues is devoid of any meaning.

We have, here, nothing to say about the followers of materialism as a school of thought. At present, we address only those who have experienced the aroma of spirituality.

For, anybody who has smelled its fragrance knows that as long as one does not liberate oneself from the bondage of desire, as long as the infant soul is not weaned away from the breasts of nature, and as long as the material aspects of life are seen as not being the ultimate end of life and are seen as means, the domain of the heart is not ready for the emergence of chaste emotions, majestic thoughts, and angelic feelings.

That is why, it is said, that *zuhd* is the essential condition for exuberance of gnosis and is inalienably linked with it.

The worship of God, in its real sense, that is, ardour of love and zeal of devotion and service in the way of God, His constant presence in thoughts and His remembrance, the sense of delight and ecstasy in His adoration and worship—it is not at all compatible with self-adoration, hedonist attitude, and being captured by the glamour and charm of material things.

The need of *zuhd* is not characteristic solely of the worship of God; rather, every kind of love and adoration, whether it pertains to one's country, creed, conviction, or something else, calls for some kind of *zuhd* and indifference towards material aspects of life.

It is characteristic of love and adoration, as opposed to knowledge, science or philosophy, that they have

to deal with the heart and as such do not tolerate any rivals. Nothing prevents a scientist or a philosopher who is enslaved to money and wealth from devoting and concentrating his intellectual powers, when necessary, on the study of the problems of philosophy, logic, physics, or mathematics.

But it is not possible, at the same time, that his heart should be full to the brim with love, especially love of a spiritual nature, such as for humanity, or his religion and creed. Certainly, it cannot burn with the light of Divine love nor can it receive an enlightenment or inspiration of a Divine sort.

Consequently, the essential condition for reception of spiritual grace and realization of authentic humanhood is purging the temple of the heart from every trace of materialistic attachments and exterminating from the Ka'bah of the heart all the idols of gold and silver and destroying them.

As we have said before, we should not be led to misinterpret freedom from the bondage of gold and silver, and indifference towards what these metals can be exchanged for, as monastic asceticism which is an attempt to evade responsibility and commitment.

Instead, it is only in the light of such *zuhd* that responsibility and commitment reacquire their real significance and are no longer empty words without content and hollow claims. The personality of 'Ali, upon whom be peace, is a glorious example of it. In him *zuhd* and commitment were combined together.

While he was a *zahid* who had renounced the world, at the same time, he had a heart that was most sensitive to the demands of social responsibility. On the one hand he used to say:

What has 'Ali to do with perishable niceties and short-lived pleasures.[20](#)

On the other hand, a small injustice or the sight of someone in distress was enough to snatch sleep from his eyes at nights. He was ready to go to bed with an empty stomach lest someone in his dominion might have remained hungry:

Shall I stuff my belly with delicious foods while in the Hijaz and Yamamah there may be people who have no hope of getting a loaf of bread or a full meal?[21](#)

There was a direct relation between that *zuhd* of his and this sensitiveness. Since 'Ali ('a) was a *zahid*, indifferent to the world and unselfish, with a heart that overflowed with the exuberance of the love of God, he looked at the world, from the minutest particle to the greatest star, as a unit entrusted with responsibility and duty.

That is why he was so sensitive towards the matters of social rights. Had he been a hedonist devoted to his own interests, he would never have been the responsible and committed person that he was.

The Islamic traditions are eloquent in regard to this philosophy of *zuhd* and the *Nahj al-balaghah* lays particular emphasis upon it. In a *hadith*, it is related from al-Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq ('a) that he said:

All hearts that harbour doubt or entertain shirk shall be inauthentic; that is why they adopted *zuhd* so that hearts may be emptied and made ready for the Hereafter.[22](#)

As can be seen from this tradition, every kind of hedonism and attachment to pleasures is considered shirk and contrary to the worship of the One God. Mawlana (Rumi) describes the *zuhd* of the 'arif in these words:

*Zuhd* means taking pains while sowing; Mystic knowledge (*ma'rifah*) is (care during) its cultivation; The 'arif is the soul of the Law and the spirit of *taqwa*; For mystic knowledge is the fruit of the labours of *zuhd*.

Abu 'Ali Ibn Sina, in the ninth namat of his *al-'Isharat*, which he devotes to the description of various stations of the mystics (*maqamat al-'arifin*), differentiates between the *zuhd* of the 'arif and that of the non-'arif. He writes:

The *zahids* who have no knowledge of the philosophy of *zuhd*, make a certain deal in their imagination: they barter the goods of the world for the goods of the Hereafter. They forego the enjoyments of the world in order that they may enjoy the pleasures of the Hereafter.

In other words, they abstain here in order to indulge there. But an aware *zahid*, acquainted with the philosophy of *zuhd*, practises it because of his unwillingness to engage his inner self with anything other than God. Such a man, out of his self-respect, regards anything other than God to be unworthy of attention and servitude.

In another section of the same book where he discusses spiritual discipline, Ibn Sina says:

This training has three ends in view. First, removal of impediments from the path towards God; second, subjugation of the earnal self (*al-nafs al-'ammarah*) to the contented self (*al-nafs al-mutma'innah*), third, refinement of the inward (*batin*).

Then he proceeds to mention the effective means of realization of these three ends. He tells us that true *zuhd* helps in achieving the first of these objectives, that is, removal of impediments, the non-God, from the way.

## **The Contradiction Between the World and the Hereafter:**

The problem of the conflict between the world and the Hereafter and the contradiction between them as two opposite poles, such as the north and the south, which are such that proximity to the one means remoteness from the other—is related to the world of human heart, conscience, human attachment, love and worship. God has not given two hearts to man:

*God has not assigned to any man two hearts within his breast. (33:4)*

With one heart one cannot choose two beloveds. That is why once when questioned about his old and worn-out clothes, 'Ali ('a) replied:

These make the heart humble, subdue the self, and induce the believers to follow it as an example. [23](#)

That is, those who have no new clothes to wear are not ashamed to put on old and worn-out dress. They no longer feel humiliation on their account for they see that their leader himself hasn't put on any better. Then 'Ali ('a) goes on to add that the world and the Hereafter are like two irreconcilable enemies.

They are two divergent paths. Anyone who loves the world and chooses its bondage is, by nature, led to loathe the Hereafter and detest everything that is related to it. The world and the Hereafter are like the east and the west, the north and the south. Anyone who approaches the one gets farther from the other. They are like two wives.

In one of his epistles, he writes:

I swear by God that, God willing, I shall so discipline my own self that it would rejoice to have a single loaf of bread for eating and be content with only salt to season it. (In prayer) I shall empty my eyes of tears until they become like dried up springs.

The cattle fill their stomachs on the pasture and lie down to repose. The goats graze, devour green herbs, and enter their enclosures. Should 'Ali in a similar manner swallow whatever he can lay his hands on and lie down to doze'? Congratulations! For, if he does that' after long years he has chosen to follow the wild grazing animals and the cattle led out to pasture. [24](#)

Then he goes on to add:

Happy is the man who fulfils his duties to God and overcomes hardships like a mill grinding the grain, who allows himself no sleep at nights and when it overpowers him lies down on the ground with his hand for a pillow.

He is accompanied by those who keep their eyes awake in fear of the Day of Judgement, whose bodies are ever away from their beds, whose lips constantly hum in the Lord's remembrance, whose sins have been erased by prolonged supplications for forgiveness. They are the party of Allah; why surely Allah's party—they are the prosperers. (58:22) [25](#)

The two passages quoted above completely illustrate the relation-ship between *zuhd* and spirituality.

To sum up, one has to choose one of the two paths; either to drink, eat, browse and hanker after sensual pleasures in utter indifference to the secrets of the spirit, to avoid the agonies of love and its tears, to speak not of enlightenment and progress, not to take a step beyond the threshold of bestiality; or to resolve on a journey into the valley of authentic humanhood, towards the effulgence and-exuberance of Divine grace which descends upon chaste hearts and enlightened souls.

## Zuhd: Minimum of Intake for Maximum Output

Some days ago I was in Isfahan on a visit for a few days. During it, in a gathering of the learned, a discussion started about *zuhd*. The various aspects of it were scrutinized in the light of the multifaceted teachings of Islam.

Everyone wanted to find a comprehensive and articulate definition of *zuhd*. Among them a learned high school teacher,<sup>26</sup> who (I later came to know, that he was writing a treatise on the subject, the manuscript of which he showed me later) suggested a wonderfully eloquent definition of *zuhd*. He said:

Islamic *zuhd* is minimizing the intake and maximizing the output.

This definition fascinated me and I saw that it was in conformity with my own earlier understanding and the conclusions that I have drawn in the foregoing chapters. Here I, with the permission of that learned man, making a little amendment in his definition, would say:

*Zuhd* in Islam means drawing a minimum of intake for the sake of maximizing the output.

That is, there exists a relation between drawing as little as possible of material benefits of life on the one hand and aiming at maximizing one's output on the other.

Human 'outputs', whether in the sphere of the actualization of one's potentialities, whether on the level of emotion and morality, or from the point of view of individuals role in social co-operation and mutual help, or from the aspect of realizing spiritual edification and refinement, all in all have a converse relationship to his intake of material benefits.

It is a human characteristic that the greater one's enjoyment of material benefits and indulgence in such things as pleasures, luxuries, and affluence, the greater is one's weakness, indignity, impotence, sterility, and impoverishment.

Conversely, abstinence from indulgent and extravagant enjoyment of nature—of course, within definite limits—refines and purifies human nature and invigorates and strengthens two of the highest of all human powers: thought and will .

It is true only of animals that greater benefit from the possibilities provided by nature contributes to their animal development and perfection. Even in animals it is not applicable when we consider what is called the 'merit' desirable in a beast. For example, sheep and cattle which are reared for obtaining greater amount of meat, milk, or fleece should be given greater attention and care and fed well. However, this is not true of a race horse.

It is impossible for a common stable horse to show any good performance in a race. The horse which has to run and win races is given days or rather months of training with a controlled diet until its body

becomes lean and nimble, shedding all its excessive fat so that it can acquire the desirable agility and speed or the 'excellence' of which it is capable.

*Zuhd* is also an exercise and discipline for man. But it is the exercise of the soul. Through *zuhd* the soul is disciplined; shedding all excessive appendages, and becoming, as a result, light, agile, and nimble, it takes an easy flight into the skies of spiritual merits.

Incidentally, 'Ali ('a) also describes *taqwa* and *zuhd* as 'exercise' and practice. The word *riyadah* originally meant exercising horses intended for racing. Physical exercise is also called *riyadah*. 'Ali ('a) says:

Indeed, as to my self, I shall exercise it and discipline it through *taqwa*. [27](#)

What about plant life? Like animals that which may be, loosely speaking, called the merit of a tree or shrub is its capacity to thrive with a minimum amount of nourishment from nature. 'Ali ('a), also, makes an allusion to this point in one of his letters to his governors. In that letter, after describing his own ascetic life-style, characterized by a minimum of consumption, 'Ali ('a) encourages him to emulate it. He says:

I can already anticipate your criticism. Someone might say that if this is what the son of Abu Talib eats then weakness should have made him unfit for an encounter with the enemy's warriors. Remember the untended tree that thrives in the harsh conditions of the desert—its wood is firm and tough; even the fire lit from it is more enduring and fierce.

This law, which applies to all living things, is more effective in the case of man because of the various characteristics special to him which are summed up under the term 'human personality'. [28](#)

The word '*zuhd*', despite its sublime human meaning, has suffered an evil fate, and is fiercely denounced particularly in our own times. Sometimes, the term is advertently or otherwise misinterpreted; sometimes it is equated with sanctimoniousness and show of piety; at other times, it is considered equivalent to monasticism and ascetic seclusion.

Everybody is free to coin terms of his own with any meaning of his own choice. But no one has the right to condemn any concept or term by imparting to it a wrong and misconceived meaning and sense. In its system of ethics and education, Islam has used a certain term, *zuhd*. The *Nahj al-balaghah* and the Islamic tradition are replete with it.

Before we make any judgement about *zuhd* in Islam, first, before everything, we must understand its Islamic connotation. The meaning of *zuhd* in Islam is what we have tried to explain, and the philosophy behind it is what we have discussed in the light of Islamic texts. If anyone finds any fault with this meaning and philosophy, let him inform me so that I too might be benefited.

What school of thought and what kind of logic can justify monasticism? What school of thought can recommend and justify the worship of money, consumerism, love of goods, lust for position, or—to use an

expression which includes them all—worldliness?

Is it possible for man to be the slave and prisoner of material things—or in the words of Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a), 'the slave of the world and the slave of him who exercises control over it'—and yet speak of 'human personality'?

Here, it would not be out of place to cite the views of a Marxist writer about the relation between love of money and human personality. In a useful and concise book regarding capitalist and Marxist economies, he points out the moral consequences of the power of money for society. He writes:

The extraordinary power of 'gold' over our contemporary society is something deeply detested by men of sensitive nature. Men in search of truth have always expressed their strong aversion towards this filthy metal, and consider it to be the main cause of corruption in contemporary society. However, those little round pieces of a shining yellow metal called 'gold' are really not to be blamed.

The power and domination of money as a general manifestation of power and authority of things over man is the essential characteristic of a disorderly economy based on barter and exchange. In the same way as the uncivilized man of ancient times adored and worshipped idols made by his own hands, the contemporary man also worships the product of his own labour, and his life is overwhelmed by the power of things he has made with his own hands.

In order that the worship of consumer goods and the worship of money, which is the filthiest form evolved of idolatry, may be completely eradicated, the social causes which brought them into existence should be eliminated and the society should be so organized that the power and authority of the little coins of this yellow brilliant metal would be thoroughly obliterated.

In such an organization of society, things will no more wield their present power over human beings. On the other hand, man's power and predominance over things shall be absolute and according to a preconceived scheme. Then worship of money and things shall give their place to honour and reverence for the human personality.

We agree with the author that the power of things over man, and in particular the authority of money, is opposed to the demands of human dignity and nobility, and is as condemnable as idolatry. However, we do not agree with his suggested exclusive prescription for solution of this problem.

Here we are not concerned with the question whether collective ownership is preferable from a social or economic point of view. Nevertheless, morally speaking, this suggestion, instead of redeeming society's spirit of honesty, eliminates right away the very object of honesty!

Man can reclaim his identity only by liberating himself from the power of money and by bringing money under his own control. True human personality can emerge when the danger of money and goods remains possible without overcoming man, who is not ruled by them but rules them. This kind of

personality is what Islam calls *zuhd*.

In the educational system of Islam, man regains his personality without the need to obliterate the right of property. Those who are trained in the school of Islamic teachings are equipped with the power of *zuhd*. They strip money and goods of their power and subjugate them to their own authority.

- [1.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Khutab, No. 51 pp. 88–89
- [2.](#) Ibid., Khutab 16
- [3.](#) Ibid.
- [4.](#) Ibid., Khutab 114
- [5.](#) Ibid., Khutab 191
- [6.](#) Ibid., Khutab 157
- [7.](#) See Guftar e mah, vol. I, the second speech
- [8.](#) Ibid., Khutab 191
- [9.](#) Ibid.,
- [10.](#) Bihar al Anwar, vol. XV Bab al nahy an al rahbaniyyah wa al siyahah. Rumi in the sixth part of his Mathnawi, refers to this tradition in the story of the bird and the hunter.
- [11.](#) This is a reference to to Khutab No. 3 p. 50
- [12.](#) Ibid., Khutab 209
- [13.](#) Ibid., Khutab 45
- [14.](#) Ibid.,
- [15.](#) Ibid., Khutab 209
- [16.](#) Bihar al-anwar (Tabriz)(Vol IX. p. 758)
- [17.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Hikam, No. 103
- [18.](#) Ibid, Khutab, No. 160
- [19.](#) Ibid, Khutab, No. 133
- [20.](#) Ibid, Khutab, No. 224
- [21.](#) Ibid, Kutub, No. 45
- [22.](#) al Kulayni, al Kafi, vol. III p 194–5
- [23.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Hikam, No. 103
- [24.](#) Ibid., Kutub, No. 45
- [25.](#) Ibid., 420
- [26.](#) The person referred here is Akbar Parwarish
- [27.](#) Ibid., Kutub 45
- [28.](#) Usul e Iqtisad e Nuhsin, “Shakl e arzish e pul”.

## The World and Worldliness

### Renunciation in the Nahj al-balaghah

Of the frequent themes of the *Nahj al-balaghah* is strong warning against the dangers of worldliness. Our preceding discussion about *zuhd* (abstinence) and its aims also serves here to throw light on the meaning of worldliness; because, the *zuhd* which is strongly enjoined is the very opposite of the

worldliness which is severely condemned.

To define and explain any one of them is to define and explain the other. However, in view of the tremendous emphasis laid in 'Ali's moral *sermons* upon the warning against the dangers of worldliness, we considered it appropriate to devote a separate chapter to this topic with a view to further explaining this concept so that all ambiguities are removed in this matter.

The first point to be investigated is why so much attention has been given to the concept of *zuhd* in the sayings and *sermons* of Amir al-Mu'minin, to the extent that no other issue has been so much emphasized by him, and neither the Holy Prophet (S) nor any of the other Imams (A) have spoken as recurrently about the deceptions of worldly life, its ephemeral and unenduring nature, the disloyalty of its slippery comforts, and the dangers of wealth, affluence, and immersion in and complete surrender to worldly pleasures and comforts.

## **The Danger Created by War Booty**

This was not a matter of accident, rather it was something related to the conditions that came into existence during 'Ali's times, that is, during the days of the past caliphs and especially during the caliphate of 'Uthman. A series of serious dangers visited the world of Islam in the wake of the influx of huge quantities of wealth and riches. 'Ali (A) sensed its dangerous consequences and struggled against them.

This struggle is reflected in his practices and policies during the period of his caliphate, in the course of which he ultimately gave up his life. This struggle, at the ideological level, is also reflected in his *sermons*, letters, and sayings.

The Muslims were blessed with great victories in battles that diverted huge amounts of property and wealth into the Muslim world. However, instead of being utilized for public benefit or being distributed justly among the people, the wealth fell into the hands of a few individuals and an elite.

Especially during the days of 'Uthman, this imbalance became greatly pronounced. Persons who possessed nothing only a few years ago appropriated for their personal use fabulous amounts of wealth. This was the time when worldly tendencies gained strength in the Muslim society and the Muslim Ummah started on a course of moral decline and degeneration.

It was following the awareness of this great danger to society that 'Ali raised his cry of protest to warn the Ummah of Islam. Al-Mas'udi, writing about the days of 'Uthman, says:

'Uthman was a man of extraordinary generosity (of course, it was exercised at the cost of the public treasury). The government officials and the people followed his example. He was the first among the Caliphs to build a house made of stone and mortar with wooden doors made of teak and juniper, and amassed other properties, such as gardens, orchards, and springs, in al-Madinah.

When he died, there were 150,000 Dinars and a million Dirhams in cash with his treasurer and his property in Wadi al-Qura, Hunayn, and elsewhere was valued above 100,000 Dinars. His legacy consisted of a large number of horses and camels.

Then he writes:

During his reign, a group of his associates also hoarded similar amounts of wealth. Al-Zubayr ibn al-'Awwam built a house in Basrah which still stands intact in the year 332 H. [al-Mas'udi's own time]. It is also well known that he built similar houses in Egypt, Kufah, and Alexandria.

When al-Zubayr died he left 50,000 Dinars in cash, a thousand horses and thousands of other things. The house which Talhah ibn 'Abd Allah built of brick, mortar and teak in Kufah still exists and is known as '*Dar al-Talhatayn*.'

Talhah's daily income from his properties in Iraq was one thousand Dinars. He had one thousand horses in his stables. A one-thirty-second ( $1/32$ ) part of the wealth that he left at his death was estimated at 84,000 Dinars ...

Al-Mas'udi mentions similar amounts of wealth in the possession of Zayd ibn Thabit, Ya'la ibn 'Umayyah and others. Evidently, such huge amounts of wealth do not emerge from under the ground nor fall from the sky. Such immense riches are never amassed except by the side of extreme and horrifying poverty. That is why 'Ali (A), in *sermon* 129, after warning the people of the dangers of worldliness, says:

You live in a period when virtues recede and evils advance step by step, and the Satan becomes greedier in his eagerness to ruin human beings. Today his equipment has been reinforced, his traps are set in every place, and his prey comes easily.

Look around; you will see either a poor man hardly able to breathe in extreme poverty and penury, or a rich man who has transformed God's blessings into his own infidelity, or you will see a miser who makes stinginess in discharging the obligations imposed by God a means of increasing his own wealth, or you will find the rebellious whose unruly hearts are deaf to moral admonition.

Where are the virtuous, the righteous amongst you? Where are the free men and the magnanimous? Where are those who avoid every trace of deceit in their dealings and pursue piety and honesty in their ways?

## [The Intoxication of Affluence](#)

Amir al-Mu'minin (A), in his utterances, has used the phrase *sakarāt al-ni'mah*, meaning 'intoxication induced by comfort and affluence', which is inevitably followed by a vengeful disaster. In *sermon* 151 he warns them:

You, O people of Arabia, would be victims of calamities which are drawing near. Beware of the intoxication induced by affluence and fear the vengeful disaster which will follow it.

Then he describes the misfortunes caused by such immoderations. In *sermon* 187 he foretells the calamities that were to befall the Muslim society in future. He says:

This would happen when you would be intoxicated, not by drinking wine, but with wealth and affluence.

Yes, the flow of immense amounts of wealth into the domain of Islam and the unjust distribution of this wealth together with nepotism and partiality, infected the Islamic society with the disease of worldliness and the race for affluence.

'Ali (A) struggled to save the Islamic world from this grave danger, and was severely critical of those who were responsible for the infection to set in. He set an example of an altogether different life style in his own personal living, and, on attaining caliphate, he gave the top priority to the campaign against these dangers in his revolutionary programme.

## **The General Aspect of 'Ali's Warnings**

This prologue was intended to throw light upon the particular aspect of the warnings of Amir al-Mu'minin (A) about worldliness as a specific reaction to a particular social phenomenon of his times. Yet, aside from this particular feature, there is a general aspect to 'Ali's words that is not confined to his own time and applies to all times and all people as an essential part of Islamic teaching.

This specific logic emanates from the teaching of the Holy Qur'an which is followed up in the sayings of the Holy Prophet (S), Amir al-Mu'minin (A) and the rest of Imams (A), as well as in the writings of great Muslim sages. However, it is a logic which needs a detailed analysis. In the present discussion, our concern will be more with the general aspect of the discourses of Amir al-Mu'minin (A) in the sense that in them 'Ali (A) addresses himself to all human beings of all times.

## **The Terminology of Every School**

Every school of thought has a terminology which is specific to it. In order to understand the concepts and issues of a certain school, it is essential to be familiar with its terms. On the other hand, in order to understand its particular terminology, it is necessary, in the first place, to understand its general view of the universe, life and man: that is its *weltanschauung*.

Islam has a clear view of being and creation, and has a particular way of looking at man and human life. One of the fundamental principles of the Islamic world-outlook is the notion that there is no duality of any kind whatsoever in being; that is, the world of creation is not divisible into two domains of 'good' and 'evil'.

That is, it is not true that some existents are good and beautiful and should have been created, whereas

some are evil and ugly and should not have been created but nevertheless exist. Such a view is regarded as *kufr* in the Islamic world-outlook, and is considered contrary to the principle of *tawhid*. In the view of Islam, the creation of all things is based on goodness, wisdom, and beauty:

***Thou seest not in the creation of the All-merciful any imperfection ... (67:3)***

***He is the Knower of the unseen and the visible, the All-mighty, the All-compassionate, Who made good everything He created; ... (32:6-7)***

Accordingly, Islam's condemnation of 'the world' does not apply to the world of creation. The Islamic world-outlook rests on the foundation of pure *tawhid* and lays great emphasis on the Unity of the Acting Principle; it does not admit the existence of any partner who would share God's sovereignty. Such a world-outlook can never be pessimistic. The idea of an evil world abounding in crookedness and wickedness is not an Islamic notion. Then why does it denounce 'the world'?

## **The 'World ' that is Condemned**

Commonly it is said that attachment to the 'world' is condemned and disapproved by Islam. This is both true and false. If what is implied is an emotional attachment, it cannot be true; because, man, in relation to the total system of creation, has been created with a series of congenital emotional attachments and inclinations.

In addition, he does not acquire these inclinations, nor are they superfluous or incongruous. Even as in the human body there is no superfluous organ—not even a single nerve ending—so also there are no redundant congenital tendencies of attachment in his nature.

All innate human tendencies, and aptitudes have a purpose which is wise and sagacious. The Holy Qur'an regards such tendencies as the 'signs' of Divine Wisdom and the Creator's consummate design:

***And of His signs is that He created for you, of yourselves, spouses, that you might repose in them, and He has set between you love and mercy ... (30:21)***

These attachments and sentiments form a series of channels of communication between man and his world. Without them man would not be able to pursue the course of his development.

Consequently, it should be said that the Islamic world-outlook, even as it does not permit us to denounce and reject the world, it also does not allow us to regard the natural attachments and the channels of communication as superfluous, useless, and breakable, because such sentiments and tendencies are a part of the general pattern of creation.

In fact, the prophets (A) and the *awliya*<sup>1</sup> were endowed with these sentiments and emotions to a high degree of exuberance.

The truth is that what is implied by 'attachment to the world' are not these natural and innate inclinations; instead, what is meant is bondage to material and worldly affairs and total surrender to them, which leads to spiritual stagnation and inertia, deprives the human spirit of its freedom of movement and buoyancy, and makes it immobile and dead.

That is what Islam calls 'worldliness' and has severely campaigned against it as something contrary to the evolutionary system of creation. Not only this, Islam considers this struggle as being in tune with the laws of the evolutionary processes of creation. The expressions employed by the Qur'an in this regard are miraculous, as we shall explain in the following sections.

## The Relation Between Man and the World

As made explicit in the last chapter, that which is regarded as disapprovable by the Qur'an and the *Nahj al-balaghah* is neither the world-in-itself, nor the natural and innate human urges and attachments. In the view of Islam, neither has the world been created without a purpose, nor has man strayed into it aimlessly.

There have been, and are, some schools of thought which view the world with pessimism. In their view, the existing order of the universe is far from being perfect. There have existed other schools which considered man's entry into the world of existence to be the result of some cosmic error, as if man had strayed into it.

According to them, man is a total stranger in this world with which he has no ties of consanguinity, and is a prisoner of existence. Like Joseph, he has been thrown into the black-hole of being by his evil brethren where he is confined and his every endeavour should be aimed at finding an exit from this abyss.

Obviously, when the relation of man to the world and nature is regarded as the one between a prison and its prisoner, and an abyss and one entrapped in it, his ultimate aim cannot be anything but seeking 'deliverance'.

## The Logic of Islam

But from the viewpoint of Islam, the relation of man to the world is not that of a prisoner with his prison; or that of one entrapped in a well with the well; rather it is the kind of relation that exists between a peasant and his farm [1](#), or a horse and the racecourse [2](#), or a merchant and the marketplace [3](#), or a devotee and his temple [4](#). The world, from the Islamic point of view, is a school for man, his training ground, and the place where he can acquire perfection.

There is an anecdote related in the *Nahj al-balaghah* of a man who condemned the world in Amir al-Mu'minin's presence. 'Ali (A) rebuked him for his confusing 'the world' which is condemned by Islam with

the actual physical world and informed him about his error<sup>5</sup>. Shaykh Farid al-Din 'Attar has rendered this incident into verse in his *Musibat nameh*:

*In the presence of the Tiger of Providence,  
A man denounced the world with vehemence.  
“The world “, exclaimed Hayder, “is not to be blamed “.  
Wretched are you, being far from wisdom.  
The world, son, is a farm To be attended to day and night.  
Whatsoever is of the honour and riches of faith,  
An in all it is to be acquired from this world.  
Tomorrow's fruit is the blooming of today's seed;  
And one who is idle here, shall taste the bitter fruit of regret.  
The world is the best place for you,  
Where in you can prepare provision for the Hereafter.  
Go into the world, but don 't get immersed in the ego.  
And prepare yourself for the other world.  
If you act thus, the world will suit you,  
Hence befriend the world just for this aim.*

Nasir Khusrow 'Alawi, justifiably considered a philosopher among the poets (*Hakim al-shu'ara'*), is one of the most profound and truly religious amongst Persian poets.

He has composed a eulogy about the world, simultaneously highlighting both the good and evil qualities of it, which is as much in conformity with the Islamic outlook as it is extraordinarily beautiful from artistic viewpoint. This eulogy appears in his collected poetical works (*diwan*), and is included in his book *Jami' al-hitmatayn*. He says:

*O world, how apt and essential you are,  
Even though you haven't been loyal to any.  
Sick and wretched you appear to the afflicted eye,  
Yet fine and healthy if one looks at your inside.  
If sometimes you have broken a robust man or two,  
Many a broken one you have joined and restored.  
You are filthy to the unclean,  
To the pure unstained.  
If any one should blame you, say,  
“You know me not. “  
You have grown out of me.  
If you are wise,  
Why blame the tree of which you are a branch?*

*The Lord made me a path for your ascending journey,  
And you have settled down on this lowly road.  
God planted a tree from whose trunk you have grown;  
If you grow out straight, you will be saved,  
And if crooked, confined to the flames.  
Yes, everyone burns crooked branches,  
And asks not "Is it teak or walnut?"  
You are the arrow of God aimed at His enemy,  
Why have you hurt yourself with this weapon?*

Now it is evident that man's relation to the world is similar to the one that exists between the farmer and his field of cultivation, between the merchant and the marketplace, between the devotee and the temple. It is not possible for man to alienate himself from the world or sever his ties with it or to develop a kind of relationship which is wholly negative.

There exists a design and intelligent planning behind every natural urge. Man has neither come to this world by cheating or fraud, nor should he go from here as an accused.

There is a general force of attraction and gravitation that encompasses the whole universe. All the particles in it attract each other according to a set pattern. This pattern of mutual attraction and absorption is determined by a judicious design. Moreover, the force of attraction and love is not confined to man alone. No particle in the universe is devoid of this power.

The difference, however, is that man, contrary to other things, is aware of his own leanings and inclinations.

Wahshi Kirmani says:

*Every dancing particle is permeated with the same force of attraction  
That draws it towards a certain specific goal.  
It carries one Rower to the side of another,  
And urges one spark to pursue the company of its likes,  
From fire to wind, from water to dust,  
From underneath the moon to the top of the heavens,  
From flock to flock and from horde to horde,  
You will observe this attraction in every moving thing  
From heavenly spheres to the terrestrial bodies.*

Accordingly, from the viewpoint of Islam the world is neither without a purpose nor is human being created by any error, nor are man's innate tendencies undesirable and evil. Then what is meant by "the world" that the Qur'an and the *Nahj al-balaghah* regard as undesirable and condemnable?

Before embarking on the issue, a few preliminary principles need to be *clarified*. It is characteristic of man that he is inherently an idealist and a lover of perfection. He is in the search of something with which he wants to develop a relationship closer than an ordinary attachment. In other words, he is by nature a devotee and a worshipper in search of something which is the ultimate object of his desire and the end of his entire being.

However, if he is not rightly guided, or not on his guard, his relation with things and inclination towards them is transformed into a relation of reliance and attachment, changing means into end and an association into bondage. As a result his spirit of mobility, freedom and capacity to quest are transformed into inertia, complacency and captivity.

This is what is undesirable and contrary to the perfection-seeking order of the world. It is a defect and a kind of non-being, not a merit or a positive mode of being. It is a dangerous malady and a disaster for man, and this is against which the Qur'an and the *Nahj al-balaghah* warn.

Without any doubt, Islam does not regard the material world and life in it—even if it involves the greatest material achievements—as a fitting goal of man's highest aspirations. This is because, firstly, in the Islamic world-outlook, this world is followed by the eternal and everlasting world of the Hereafter where conditions of life would be determined by the deeds, good or evil, of a person in this world. Secondly, the worth of a human being is too great to warrant his surrender to the slavery of and servitude to the material aspects of life.

That is why 'Ali (A) so often points out that the world is a good place, but only for him who knows that it is not a permanent abode, but only a road or a caravanserai.

What a good abode it is for him who would not want to make it a home. [6](#)

This world indeed is a transit camp, whereas the Hereafter is a place of permanent abode. So take from the transit what you need for your destination. [7](#)

From the viewpoint of humanistic philosophies there is no doubt that everything which binds man to itself and immerses him completely within itself violates his human identity by making it inert and frozen. The process of human perfection knows no limit or end, and every halt, delay and bondage is injurious to it. As we find no reason to controvert this view, we accept it without any argument. However, there are two other points that need to be discussed here.

Firstly, does the Qur'an and following it the *Nahj al-balaghah* confirm such a relation between man and his world? Is it true that what the Qur'an condemns is attachment and bondage to the world when taken as the ultimate end of life, an attitude which retards man's movement towards perfection and represents inertness, stagnation, and non-being?

Does the Qur'an abstain from absolutely condemning worldly ties and sentiments so long as they do not

become man's ultimate goal of life and stall his progress?

Secondly, if it is admitted that human attachment to beings other than himself causes bondage and servitude, and retards the development of human personality, does it make any difference if that being is God or something else?

The Qur'an negates every form of bondage and servitude and calls man to welcome every kind of spiritual and human freedom. It does not, however, condemn servitude to God; it does not invite man to liberate himself from God in order to acquire absolute freedom.

Instead, the invitation of the Qur'an is based on liberation from everything besides God and complete surrender to Him. It is based on the rejection of obedience to anything except Him and the acceptance of submission to Him.

The expression '*La ilaha illa Allah*' (There is no god except Allah) is the foundation of the Islamic faith. It implies simultaneously a negation and an affirmation, a rejection and an acceptance, and *kufr* and *iman*.

It signifies the negation, the rejection, the renunciation, and the *kufr* in relation to the non-God, and the affirmation, the acceptance, the submission, and the *iman* in relation to God. The essential testimony required by Islam is neither just a 'Yes' nor merely a 'No'; it is a combination of both a 'Yes' and a 'No'.

If the needs of the growth of the human personality demand that man should liberate himself from every kind of bondage, servitude, and submissiveness to anything whatsoever, that he should revolt against everything that compromises his absolute freedom, that he ought to say 'No' to everything—as the Existentialists say—what difference does it make whether that thing is God or something else?

And if it is to be decided that man should renounce his freedom and adopt slavery, servitude and submission to something, what difference does it make, after all, whether it is God or something else?

Is there a difference between accepting God as the supreme ideal and accepting some other thing as the Summum Bonum? Does it mean that only God is such that servitude to Him is freedom in itself, and that losing oneself in Him is identical with the realization of one's self and the recovery of one's true identity and personality? And if this is true, what is the basis of this claim? How can it be justified?

In our opinion, here we arrive at one of the subtlest, most profound, and progressive teachings of Islam and one of the most glorious of human ideas. It is here that the sublimity of the logic of Islam and the insignificance and pettiness of other ideologies becomes evident. We shall answer these queries in the following sections.

## ['The World' in the Qur'an and the Nahj al-balaghah](#)

In the last chapter we said that that which is execrable from the viewpoint of Islam in regard to man's

relation with the world is that it should grow to the extent of becoming a malady and an affliction of the human soul.

It is the bondage and the enslaving attachment to the world against which Islam has waged an unrelenting struggle considering it as undesirable, not the mere relation and attachment with it. It is the life of captivity that is condemnable, not the life of freedom. The world is rejected as a goal and objective and not as a way or a means.

If the relation of man to the world develops into his servitude and subjugation, it leads to the negation and obliteration of all higher human values; man's worth lies in the greatness of his pursued ends and objectives.

Obviously, if, for instance, his ultimate objectives do not go beyond filling his belly to satisfaction, and if all his efforts and aspirations were to revolve around his stomach, his worth will not surpass that of his stomach. That is why 'Ali (A) says: "The worth of a man whose only aim is to stuff his belly is equal to that which is excreted from it."

The question is what kind of relation is appropriate between the human being and the world and what form should it have.

In one kind of relation, his personality is effaced and sacrificed to things, and since the worth of anyone in pursuit of an objective is lower than the objective itself, he is, to use a Qur'anic expression, bound to sink to the level of 'the lowest of the low' (*asfal al-safilin*), becoming thereby the most abject, degenerate and the most contemptible creature in the world.

He, then, loses not only his higher values but also his human identity. In the other kind of relation the world and worldly things are sacrificed at the altar of his humanity and are used to serve man while he reclaims his higher ideals. That is why it has been said in a *hadith-e qudsi*:

*O son of Adam! I have created everything for thy sake,  
but I have created thee for My Own Self.*

We have already cited two passages from the *Nahj al-balaghah* indicating its position in denouncing the degenerate and distorted kind of relationship between man and the world of nature that leads to man's servitude and bondage. Here we shall quote a few verses from the Qur'an to endorse this viewpoint, and return to the *Nahj al-balaghah* for further relevant references.

The Qur'anic verses relating to man and the world are of two kinds: the first group of verses is of an introductory nature; that is, it lays the ground for the second group of verses. In truth, the first group can be regarded as representing the major and the minor premises of a syllogism of which the second group constitutes the conclusion.

The first set of verses consists of those which emphasize the changeability, the inconstancy and the

ephemeral nature of this world. In these verses the reality of material objects is depicted as being changeable, fleeting, and transitory. For instance, the world is compared to the vegetation that sprouts from the ground.

In the beginning it is green and flourishing but little by little turns yellow, shrivels, and ultimately dries up. Then the elements break it into bits and scatter it into the wind. Such is life in the present world.

Obviously, whether man should like it or not his physical life is not much more durable than that of the reed, and is subject to a similar fate. If man must base his outlook on reality and not on fancy and if it is only through the discovery of truth and not by flight of imagination and hallucinations that he can hope to attain felicity and true happiness, then he should not forget this truth.

This set of verses constitutes a kind of a background argument for denying the importance of material things as ultimate ideals worthy of man's adoration. These verses are followed immediately by the reminder that man should know that there exists another world which is eternal and everlasting.

Don't imagine that the present life is everything that there is; and since it is not worthy of man, do not conclude that life is futile and meaningless, they remind.

The second set of verses illuminates the solution to the problem of man's relation to the world. It can be clearly seen from these verses that the execrable form of relation is one that grows to the extent of becoming a bondage, requiring man's submission, willing surrender and servitude to the transitory things of the world. It is in these verses that the crux of the Qur'an's logic comes to light:

1. ***“Wealth and sons are the adornment of the worldly life; but the abiding things, the deeds of righteousness (which survive one's death and continue to benefit other people), are better with God in reward and better in hope.”*** (18:46)

This verse, as can be seen, speaks of the ultimate aspiration of man. His ultimate aspiration is the thing for which he lives and without which life has no meaning in his eyes.

2. ***“Surely those who look not to encounter Us and are well-pleased with the present life and are at rest in it, and those who are heedless of Our signs, those—their refuge is the Fire, for that they have been earning.”*** (10:7–8)

In this verse, that which is considered execrable is the absence of hope in the next life and the satisfaction and contentment with material things.

3. ***“So turn thou from him who turns away from Our remembrance, and desires only the present life. That is their attainment of knowledge ...”*** (53:29–30)

4. ***“And they rejoice in this world's life; and this world's life is nothing compared with the Hereafter but a temporary enjoyment.”*** (13:26)

5. ***“They know an outward part of the present life, but of the Hereafter they are heedless.”*** (30:7)

There are many other verses which have a similar meaning. In all of them the same theme recurs, that is the negation of the world as the goal and ideal of man's highest aspirations and the ultimate object of his desire, and the only source of his happiness and delight.

It is held that this form of relation between man and the world, instead of putting the world at man's disposal, sacrifices man to it and dispossesses him of his humanity.

In the *Nahj al-balaghah* as in the Qur'an we encounter a similar twofold argument. In the first set of statements the transitory nature of the world is depicted in profound, forceful metaphors, allegories and parables put in precise and elegant phrases which follow one another in an absorbing rhythm. In the second category, conclusions are drawn which are exactly the same as those derived by the Qur'an.

In *Khutbah 32*, people are at first divided into two categories: the worldly and the otherworldly. The worldly people are again divided into four groups.

In the first group are put those who are meek and tractable like sheep. They are the most innocuous of creatures, never seen to commit any overt injustice or aggression, or covert deceit or subversion. Not that they detest such things but because they lack the power and daring to carry them out.

To the second category belong those who possess both the power and the daring to carry out such ambitions. They muster their will to amass money and wealth, to acquire power and authority, or to occupy important posts and offices and do not stop short of any degree of perverseness.

Those belonging to the third group are wolves in the skins of sheep. They are slaves of the world in the garb of the otherworldly and the pious. They, sanctimoniously, hang their heads in affected humility, walk with the slow steps of a sage and dress like the devout. Through their hypocrisy they win the confidence of the people and become their most confident trustees.

To the fourth group belong those whose hearts burn regretfully with the fire of ambition but their feeling of inferiority has forced them to retire to seclusion. They put on the dress of piety and *zuhd* in order to conceal their deep sense of inferiority and dejection.

All the four kinds of people, regardless of the diverse degrees of their success and failure, are regarded by 'Ali (A) to constitute, spiritually, a single class on account of their commonly shared attitude: worldliness.

Why? Because all of them have one common characteristic: they are like the unfortunate birds whom the world has made its prey one way or another. Captured, they enjoy no longer the freedom of flight. They are slaves and prisoners of the world.

In the same *sermon*, 'Ali (A) describes the qualities of the other-worldly, the opposite group, and says:

Evil is the barter of those who purchase this world at the cost of their souls.

In the eyes of 'Ali (A) the whole world with everything in it is too inferior to be the price of a man's humanity; hence it ends in the great loss of one who exchanges it for his human identity. Nasir Khusrow has the same theme in mind, when he says:

*Never shall I fall an easy prey to the world,  
For no more do its woes burden my heart.  
In fact, I am the hunter and the world my prey,  
Though once it did pursue me on its hunt.  
Though many a man has fallen pierced by its arrows,  
The world could not make me a target.  
My soul flies over the world's tides,  
And no more do I worry about its waves and tides.*

This theme that one should never sacrifice one's humanity for anything in the world is a theme that recurs a lot in the sayings of the leaders of the Islamic faith. Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A) in his famous will to al-'Imam al-Hasan (A) which is included in the section of *Kutub* (letters) in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, says:

Keep your self above every contemptible thing, because, whatever it should be, it is not worth the compromise of your self.

In the account of his life given in the *Bihar al-'anwar*, al-'Imam Ja'far al Sadiq (A) is reported to have said:

The price of my soul is (the good-pleasure of) its Lord The whole of creation doesn't equal its worth.

In the *Tuhaf al-'uqul*, the following tradition is recorded:

Al-'Imam al-Sajjad (A) was asked, 'Who is the most important among people?' He replied, 'The one who does not regard the whole world to be equal to his worth.'

There are many traditions which deal with a similar theme, but we shall abstain from quoting more for the sake of brevity.

A close study of the Qur'an, the *Nahj al-balaghah*, and the sayings of other religious leaders, will reveal that Islam has not depreciated the world; rather it has elevated the station and worth of the human being as compared to it. For Islam, the world is for the sake of man and not the other way round. It aims to revive human values, not to disparage the world.

## Freedom and Bondage

Our discussion about the meaning of 'worldliness' in the *Nahj al-balaghah* has become somewhat drawn out. However, one issue, which cannot be omitted, remains unanswered. We raised it earlier in the form of a question which we had promised to answer later.

The question was this: If attachment and bondage to anything is a kind of unhealthy condition that leads to abandonment of human values and cause stagnation, inertness, and inertia of the human personality, what difference does it make whether that thing is something material or spiritual, this worldly or otherworldly, or, as goes the saying, 'the Lord or the apple'?

It may be said that if the aim of Islam by prohibiting attachment and warning against bondage to temporal things is to safeguard the human being's identity and to rescue him from servitude and to protect him from stagnating and vegetating in life, it should have encouraged man to acquire absolute freedom and to consider every thing that compromises and confines it as *kufr*; for such is the standpoint of some modern schools of philosophy which consider freedom to be the essence of man's human identity.

These schools of thought equate man's human identity with his capacity to rebel and disobey every form of servitude and to assert his absolute freedom. Accordingly, every manner of bondage, confinement, and submission is, according to them, inconsistent with man's real identity and leads to self alienation.

They say that man realizes his true humanity only by refusing to submit and surrender. It is characteristic of attachment that the object of love absorbs man's attention and compromises his self-awareness.

This results in his forgetting his own self and, subsequently, this aware and free being called man, whose identity is summarized in his awareness and freedom, becomes a slavish creature devoid of freedom and self-awareness.

In forgetting his own identity, man also becomes oblivious of his human values. In this state of bondage and servitude he ceases to progress and edify his self and becomes stagnant and frozen at some point.

If Islam's philosophy of struggle against worldliness aims at the resurrection of human identity and personality, it should oppose every form of servitude and liberate man from every form of bondage. This, however, is not the case, for Islam, undeniably, advocates liberation from material for the sake of spiritual servitude. Freedom from the world is acquired for the sake of the fetters of the Hereafter and the apple is renounced for the sake of the Lord.

The '*urafa*' who advise absolute freedom from attachments, however, do allow an exception. Hafiz says:

*I am the slave of the magnanimity of him*

*Who is free of the taint of attachment to anything under the blue sky*

*Except the love of the moon-cheeked one,  
The joy of whose love redeems all sorrows and woes.  
Openly do I declare, and am delighted to proclaim,  
I am the slave of Love and free from both the worlds.  
Except for the Beloved's Name inscribed on the slate of my heart,  
The teacher did not teach me another word.*

From the viewpoint of *'irfan*, one must be free of both the worlds but should surrender totally to love. As Hafiz says, the tablet of the heart must be clean of every name except that of the Beloved. The heart should be cleansed of every attachment except the love of 'the moon-cheeked one', that is God, whose love brings redemption from all sorrows and woes.

However, from the viewpoint of the so-called humanistic philosophy freedom of the *'arif*, being only relative, does not take us anywhere, because it is freedom from everything for total surrender and servitude to one being, whatever that may be. Servitude is after all servitude and bondage is bondage, regardless of the agent towards which it is directed.

This is the objection raised by the followers of modern humanistic philosophies. In order that the issues involved may be further illuminated, we are compelled to refer to certain philosophical issues.

First of all, one may point out that to assume that there exists a kind of human selfhood and identity and to insist that this identity should be safeguarded, in itself amounts to the negation of movement, progress and development of this selfhood, because, motion and change necessarily result in alienation from this selfhood.

This is because movement means becoming: that is, becoming something one is not; it implies continuous transcendence of selfhood and embracing of otherness. Obviously, if we accept this view, it is only by the means of immobility and stagnation that one can preserve his identity; for development necessitates self-alienation.

For this reason, some ancient philosophers defined motion in terms of otherness and self-estrangement. Accordingly, to assume that there exists a certain kind of human 'self' and to insist that this self should be safeguarded and protected from becoming 'non-self', and to speak of movement, progress, and evolution in the same breath, involves an unresolvable contradiction

Some, in order to free themselves from this contradiction, have said that man's identity lies in being devoid of any kind of 'self' whatsoever. Man, they say, is a creature absolutely undefined in his essence and free from any kind of limit, form, or essence.

His essence lies in his being without any defined essence. Man is a creature devoid of a fixed nature and essential necessity. Any attempt to define, limit and confine him amounts to depriving him of his real self and identity.

Such a view may be aptly considered poetry and flight of imagination rather than a philosophy. The absolute absence of a fixed form and essence is possible in one of the two cases: Firstly, such a being should possess infinite perfection and pure and unlimited actuality; that is, it should be a being unlimited and unconfined, encompassing all times and places and predominant over all existents, such as the Being of the Creator.

For such a being, movement and growth are impossible; because motion and development involve overcoming of defects and imperfections, whereas such a being cannot possibly be supposed to possess any imperfection. Secondly, it may apply to a being devoid of every kind of actuality and merit. That is, it should be pure possibility and sheer potentiality, a neighbour of nothingness, existing only on the remotest frontiers of existence.

It should be devoid of any innate reality and essence though capable of assuming any form or essence. Such a being, which itself absolutely undefined, is always associated with a definite being; though shapeless and colourless in itself, it exists in the protective shadow of a being possessing form, shape and colour. Such a being is what the philosophers call 'the primal matter'.

It occupies the lowest status in the hierarchy of existence and stands on the extremity of being, even as the Divine Essence, being absolute perfection, stands on the other extremity of existence—with the difference that the extremity occupied by the Divine Essence circumscribes all the contents of being. Man, like all other creatures, is situated somewhere between these two extremes and so cannot possibly lack any defined essence.

Admittedly, he is different from other creatures, but, unlike them, there is no limit to his movement towards perfection. Whereas other creatures remain confined to certain definite limits which they cannot transcend, there is no end to the possibilities of human development.

Man possesses a special kind of being. But contrary to the view of the philosophers who believe in the precedence of essence and reduce the being of every thing to its quiddity, and who deny the possibility of transcendence and essential change as being self-contradictory, and consider all changes to occur at the level of accidents, the existential nature of man, like that of any other material thing, is fluid, with the difference that its movement and fluidity know no final limits.

Some commentators of the Qur'an, in their explanations of the verse: "*O people of Yathrib, there is no abiding here for you*" (33: 13), have generalized it to cover all humanity. They hold that man is a creature which does not move to certain and definite stage or halt; the further he moves the greater are the possibilities open to him.

Here we do not wish to indulge in discussing the legitimacy of imposing such interpretations on Qur'anic verses; we only intend to show that Muslim scholars have thought about man in such terms.

In the *hadith* about the Prophet's Ascension (*al-mi'raj*), Gabriel who accompanies the Prophet (S), at a

certain point, gives up his journey declaring: "I will get burnt if I move an inch further", while the Prophet (S) leaves him behind and moves further. This is an allusion to the truth mentioned above.

Also, as we know, there is a debate among Muslim scholars about the *salawat* (Benedictions) upon the Holy Prophet (S) and the *Ahl al-Bayt*, which we make as a prayer to God to shower greater blessings upon them.

Now the debate is whether the *salawat* is of any benefit to the Holy Prophet (S), who is the most perfect man. In other words, is there any possibility of ascension in the Prophet's station? Or does the *salawat* benefit only the person who pronounces it and beseeches God to bless the Prophet (S), a favour that has already been granted?

The late Sayyid 'Ali Khan opened this debate in his commentary on *al-Sahifat al-kamilah*. A group of theologians believe that the Holy Prophet (S) is always ascending and climbing higher in his station, and this movement is never halted.

Yes, such is the station of man. That which makes man such is not the absolute absence of a defined essence but a certain kind of essence which is ordinarily referred to as 'human nature' and other similar expressions.

Man does not have any ultimate limits but he has a path. The Qur'an lays great emphasis on what it calls the Straight Path, which is an unambiguous path before man. Man is not constrained by stages so as to be forced to stop at every stage in his journey. Instead there is an orbit in which he should move. This is the orbit of human perfection which is different from those of the animals. This means the movement in a specified orbit, a movement which is orderly not haphazard.

## [The Existentialist Viewpoint](#)

Existentialism has been rightly criticized for its refusal to acknowledge any kind of determination or definition of the human nature, for its considering every determination (even in the form of path or orbit) as contrary to his humanity, and for its emphasis on his absolute freedom and capacity for rebellion; for this philosophy necessarily leads to the breakdown of social morality and the negation of the individual's commitments and responsibilities.

## [Does Evolution Involve Self-Alienation?](#)

Now returning to what we said earlier, does movement and evolution necessitate alienation from one's self? Should every being, in order to remain itself, abstain from change and evolution? Does it mean that either man should retain his human identity or, if he chooses an evolutionary course, become something alien to his essence?

The answer is that the true evolution of anything is a movement towards the perfect state which

conforms to its nature. In other words, the transformations during movement on the straight path of nature by no means necessitate any loss of specific identity.

That which constitutes the real self of a being is its existence, not its essence. Accordingly, any change in essence does not imply mutation of the 'self' into a 'non-self'. Mulla Sadra, who is the champion of this philosophy, holds that man does not have any definite essence; rather every developing being passing through the stages of its evolution is not a single species but a plurality of species.

The relation of an imperfect being with its ultimate stage of perfection is not a relation of otherness; rather it is a relation of the thing to itself. It is the relation of an imperfect self to the perfect self. A thing while evolving toward its perfect state is in movement from its self to its self. In a sense, it can be said to be in movement from the non-self towards its true self.

A seed that breaks the ground and sprouts leaves, and sends out branches and flowers, does not move from the self to the non-self. If it were aware of itself and aware of its ultimate evolution, it would not feel self alienated.

That is why the love of true perfection is the love of a higher self, and a praiseworthy love is in itself a desirable and praiseworthy egotism or self-love. Shaykh al-'Ishraq Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi has an elegant ruba'i on this subject:

*Beware lest you lose the wisdom 's thread,  
And lose your self for the sake of water and bread.  
You are the traveller, the way, the destination,  
Beware lest you lose the path from the self to the self.*

On the basis of what has been said it can be surmised that there is a great difference between desiring God, the movement towards God, the love of God, the attachment and the servitude to God and submission to Him, and the love, the submission, and the servitude to other things. The servitude to God is freedom itself.

It is the only relation and tie which does not stagnate the human personality or make it inert and immobile. It is the only kind of worship which does not imply self-forgetfulness and self-alienation. Why? Because He is the Absolute Perfection and the Ultimate Goal and the Destination of all existents: '*And unto thy Lord will be the end of all things*' (53:42).

Now we have reached a point from where we can proceed to explain the position of the Qur'an that forgetting God is forgetting one's own self and the separation from God is absolute annihilation.

## **Forgetting and Losing the Self**

I remember that about eighteen years ago while discussing the exegesis of certain verses of the Holy

Qur'an in a private gathering, for the first time the point struck me that the Qur'an very often employs typical expressions about a certain group of human beings, such as those who 'lose', 'forget', or 'sell' their selves. For instance, it says:

***They have indeed lost their selves, and that which they were forging has gone astray from them.***  
**(7:53)**

***Say: 'Surely the losers are they who lose their selves and their families on the Day of Resurrection' (39: 15)***

***Be not as those who forgot God, and so He caused them to forget their selves; those—they are the ungodly. (59: 19)***

The question might occur to a mind with a philosophic bent. Is it possible for a man to lose his self? The loss of anything necessitates two things: the loser and the thing lost. Now how is it possible for a human being to lose its self? Is it not self-contradictory?

Likewise, is it possible for a man to forget himself? A living human being is always immersed in itself and perceives everything as something other and additional to its own self; its attention is, before everything else, focussed on itself. Then what is meant by forgetting one's self?

Later I realized that this matter occupies a significant place in Islamic teachings, especially in the prayers and some traditions as well as in the writings of Muslim 'urafa'. It shows that often man mistakes 'non-self' as his self, regards that non-self as his real self. Then imagining the non-self to be his self, he treats the non-self and takes care of it as he would have treated and cared for his true self.

The true self, as a result, falls into neglect and oblivion, and occasionally under goes a metamorphosis. For instance, when man imagines his body to represent his total entity, all his endeavour revolves about his body, it means that he has forgotten his self conceiving the non-self to be his real self.

Such a man, in the words of Rumi, is like the one who owns a piece of land somewhere; he carries building materials and hires masons and workers to build a house for him; after much toil, the house is made ready for living; the doors and windows are painted, the floor is carpeted, curtains are hung and the house is furnished beautifully in every way; however, one day when he prepares to move into the new house, all of a sudden he realizes his mistake; to his dismay, he notes that instead of erecting the house on his own land, he has constructed it on a land that belongs to somebody else, while his own plot lies abandoned elsewhere:

*Don 't build your house on the land of another,  
Work for your own self and toil not for the stranger.  
Who is the stranger except your own earthen frame?  
On whose account are all your sorrows and woes?*

*So long as you nurse and pamper your body,  
The soul would not prosper, nor would it become sturdy.*

At another place Rumi says:

*You, who have lost your self in a losing encounter,  
Distinguishing not the other from your own true self;  
At every shadow you are quick to exclaim,  
“Ah! This is me!” By God it is not you!  
Isolate yourself for a while from the crowd,  
And immerse yourself to the neck in thought.  
Indeed you shall find that you are one with the One,  
Beautiful, serene, and blessed is your self.*

Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A) has a saying in this regard which is as profound as it is elegant:

I wonder at the man who searches for his lost things but doesn't care to recover his lost self. [8](#)

Losing oneself and forgetting oneself is not confined to man's error in recognizing his true identity and essence—such as the ordinary man's self-identification with the body, or the 'arif's occasional identification of himself with his *barzakhi* body.

We have said in the last chapter that actually every being in the natural course of its development moves from the self to the self; that is, it moves from a lower, weaker self to a self which is powerful and higher. Accordingly, the deviation of every existent from the path of its perfection and development is deviation from the self towards the non-self.

Man, more than any other creature, being endowed with a free will and freedom of choice, is subject to this deviation. By choosing a deviant objective as ultimate for himself, in reality he replaces his true self with the non-self, mistaking the non-self to be the self. It is on this basis that the human being's total immersion in material aspects of life has been regarded as condemnable.

Therefore, the adoption of devious goals and ends is one of the factors of self-alienation that leads man to forget his true self and finally to lose it.

Devious goals and objectives not only result in the disease of self loss; they lead ultimately to the metamorphosis of man's human essence, a metamorphosis that is determined by that particular devious goal.

A significant part of Islamic teachings is devoted to drive home the point that on the Day of Resurrection every human being shall be raised with the object of his love. Our traditions declare unequivocally:

Everyone, on the Day of Judgement shall be raised in the company of his object of love, whatever that

should be, even if it is a stone. [9](#)

With attention to the indubitable and unequivocal Islamic teaching that on the Day of Judgement man would be raised in the form of what he acquired in this world, it becomes clear that the reason for a person's resurrection together with the objects of his love is that the love and attachment for that object make it the ultimate goal of the path of his becoming. However devious that objective may be, it causes the soul and the inner reality of a person to transform into that object.

This subject has been given great attention by Muslim sages and philosophers, who have made great many interesting observations in this regard. For brevity's sake, we shall quote only one ruba'i on this topic: The seeker of a mine of diamonds is himself a mine; The seeker of the spirit is himself the spirit; I will divulge the secret of this matter: You are whatever you seek, you are the object of your quest.

## [The Discovery of the Self and of God](#)

The rediscovery of the self, in addition to the above two, requires to fulfil one more condition, and that is the realization and knowledge of the Cause of one's creation and existence. That is, it is impossible for man to recognize himself and know himself by viewing himself in separation from the Cause of his creation. The real Cause of every existent is prior to it and nearer to it than it is to itself:

***And We are nearer to him than his jugular vein. (50: 16) And know that God stands between a man and his heart. (8:24)***

The Muslim mystics have laid great emphasis on the point that the knowledge of the self (*ma'rifat al-nafs*) and the knowledge of God (*ma'rifat Allah*) are not separate from one another. To experience the spirit, which according to the Qur'an is God's 'breath', is, to experience the Divine Essence. The Muslim mystics have raised severe objections against the statements of Muslim philosophers regarding the problem of self-knowledge and consider them to be inadequate.

Shaykh Mahmud al-Shabistari was sent a series of versified questions by someone from Khurasan. His poem *Gulshan-e raz* is the reply he gave to the questions. In one of the questions, the enquirer asks:

*Who am I?*

*Inform me about my self.*

*What is meant by "Journey within thy self"?*

The Shaykh's reply is elaborate. There he says:

*Forms and spirits, from the same light are derived,*

*Reflected of mirror or beaming from the lamp.*

*I' the word is everywhere in all your speech.*

*It refers to the soul, the spirit. 'I' and 'You ' ,*

*are greater than the body and the spirit,  
Which are together parts of the self.  
Go then, my good man, first know well your self,  
And remember: edema is different from robustness. [10](#)  
Leave one of them to soar over the undulations of space and time,  
Abandon the world to become a world in yourself.*

A further elaboration of this theme will take us outside the scope of our present discussion. To be brief, it should be said that the gnosis of the self is inseparable from that of God. This is exactly the meaning of the famous saying of the Prophet (S), and the same theme recurs in the recorded statements of Imam 'Ali (A):

He who knows his self knows his Lord.

In the *Nahj al-balaghah* it is reported that Imam 'Ali (A) was asked by somebody: 'Have you seen your God?' Ali (A) replied: 'Would I worship what I have not seen?' Then he elaborated his answer thus:

He is not visible to the eyes but the hearts perceive Him through (the factual experience of) faith (*iman*).  
[11](#)

An interesting point that is implicit in the statements of the Qur'an is that man is in possession of himself as long as he 'possesses' God. Only through the remembrance of God does he remember his self and become fully aware of it, and to forget God is to neglect one's own self. Forgetting God is accompanied by self-forgetfulness:

*Be not as those who forgot God, and so He caused them to forget their selves. (59: 19)*

Rumi, following his verses quoted above, says:

*Even if the body should lie amidst fragrance and musk,  
On death it will petrify and give out its stink.  
So scent not the body, but perfume the soul with musk,  
What is that musk except the Name of the Glorious Lord ?*

Hafiz says:

*Hafiz, if you desire presence,  
do not be absent from Him.  
If you desire His rendezvous,  
abandon the world and forget it.*

This shows why the remembrance of God is essential for the life of the heart; it awakens and illumines the heart and gives peace to the soul; it revives, purifies, refines, and humbles the human conscience

and fills it with delight. How profound and beautiful are 'Ali's words in the *Nahj al-balaghah* where he says:

Certainly God Almighty has made His remembrance a means for cleaning and polishing the hearts. It makes them hear after deafness, see after blindness, and makes them submissive to guidance after being stubborn and resisting.

In all periods and times when there were no prophets, there were individuals to whom He whispered through their thoughts and spoke to them through their intellects. As a result they were enlightened with a light awakening their hearts, their vision and their hearing. [12](#)

## **Worship and the Rediscovery of the Self**

There is so much that can be said about worship that if we were to be elaborate we would have to devote scores of chapters to this subject. Here we shall make a brief reference to the value of worship in the rediscovery of the self.

As much as the bondage to material matters and immersion in them severs man from his true self and induces self-alienation, worship helps him in recovering his own self. Worship awakens and arouses man from his spiritual slumber.

It rescues him from drowning in the sea of self-neglect and forgetfulness and saves his identity from being lapsed in the world of material things. It is in the mirror of worship and God's remembrance that man can observe himself as he really is and become aware of his failings and faults. It is in worship that he acquires the true perspective of being, life, space and time, like watching a city from a high mountain, and perceives the insignificance, pettiness and abjectness of his materialistic hopes, desires, and ambitions. It is in worship that a yearning is awakened in his heart to attain to the very core of being.

I have always marvelled at the following words of the famous scientist of our age, Albert Einstein. What adds to my amazement is that he was a physicist and a mathematician, not a psychologist, theologian or philosopher. After dividing religion into three stages, he calls the third stage of religious experience as the one arising from 'cosmic religious feeling.' He describes this religious experience in these words:

The individual feels the futility of human desires and aims, and the sublimity and marvellous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought. Individual existence impresses him as a sort of prison and he wants to experience the universe as a single significant whole. [13](#)

William James, writing about prayer, says:

The impulse to pray is a necessary consequence of the fact that whilst the innermost of the empirical selves of a man is a self of the social sort it yet can find its only adequate socius (its "great companion") in an ideal world. Most men, either continually or occasionally, carry a reference to it in their breasts. The

humblest outcast on this earth can feel himself to be real and valid by means of this higher recognition.

[14](#)

Iqbal also has something profound to say about worship and prayer and their value for the rediscovery of the self. He writes:

Prayer as a means of spiritual illumination is a normal vital act by which the island of our personality suddenly discovers its situation in a larger whole of life. [15](#)

We conclude our discussion of this extensive subject right here.

## Some Relevant Issues

Now that our discussion about the concept of the world in the *Nahj al-balaghah* is nearing its conclusion, I want to *clarify* some issues with attention to the principles discussed above.

## The World Versus the Hereafter

Some Islamic traditions seem to imply that there exists a kind of conflict between the world and the Hereafter. For instance, it is stated that they are like 'two rival wives' who can never be reconciled, or it is said that they are like the East and the West: one cannot approach any one of them without moving farther from the other. How should one interpret these statements in order to reconcile them with what has been said above?

The answer is that, firstly, as has been expressly stated in most Islamic traditions, a reconciliation between winning the world and the Hereafter is not only possible but is a necessity of the Islamic creed. That which is impossible is their reconciliation as ultimate ends and goals.

The enjoyment of the good things of the world does not necessarily require deprivation from the blessings of the next world. That which deprives one of the rewards of the next life is a series of mortal sins, not the enjoyment of a wholesome, comfortable life and the availing of pure and lawful bounties provided by God.

Similarly, that which leads to deprivation in the world is not *taqwa* or righteous deeds or the endeavour for the Hereafter; a number of other factors are responsible for it.

Many prophets, Imams, and pious believers, whose virtuousness and piety are indubitable, have been among those who benefited greatly from the legitimate bounties of the world. Accordingly, even if it be assumed that the religious texts do imply irreconcilability between the enjoyment of the world and that of the Hereafter, they would not be acceptable because of the incontrovertible evidence to the contrary.

Secondly, if we scrutinize such traditions closely, an interesting point comes to the surface in whose light

we observe no contradiction between them and the incontrovertible principles of Islam. But before that this point may be explained, we should examine three possible relationships between the world and the Hereafter:

1. The relation between enjoyment of the good things of the world and enjoyment of the rewards of the Hereafter.
2. The relation between the world as the ultimate goal and the Hereafter as such.
3. The relation between adoption of one of these as the ultimate goal with the enjoyment of the other.

There is no conflict whatsoever involved in the first case. Accordingly a reconciliation between the two is quite possible. The second case, however, involves a contradiction; for there is no possibility of reconciling these two opposite goals.

As to the third, it involves in turn two cases: first, the adoption of the world as the ultimate end and the enjoyment of the Hereafter; second, the adoption of the Hereafter as the ultimate goal and the enjoyment of the world. The first case involves a contradiction, whereas the second doesn't.

## [The Primary and the Secondary](#)

The conflict between the adoption of either the world or the Hereafter as ultimate ends and the enjoyment of the other is the kind that exists between a perfect and an imperfect end. If the imperfect is made the ultimate goal, the perfect is necessarily missed; whereas if the perfect were one's end and goal, it would not necessarily preclude the imperfect.

The same is true of anything primary in relation to its secondaries. If something secondary were made the aim, it would result in deprivation from the primary. But if the primary is made the aim and goal, the secondary, being a corollary of the primary, is automatically included. This is most eloquently explained in *Hikmah* 269 of the *Nahj al-balaghah*:

There are two types of workers among the people of the world: (One type is represented by) the man who works in this world for this world and his involvement in the world makes him forget the Hereafter.

He is worried about those whom he shall leave behind (on death) lest poverty should strike them as if he were himself secure of it (in the Hereafter). So he spends his life for the (worldly) benefit of others. The other type of man works in the world for the sake of the Hereafter and secures his share of the world effortlessly. Thus he derives benefit from the both and comes to possess both the worlds. As a result he acquires honour before God, Who grants him whatever he asks of Him.

Rumi offers an interesting allegory. He compares the Hereafter and the world to a train of camels and the trail of dung that it leaves behind. If one's aim were to own the train of camels he would also have

the camels' dung and wool. But if one wants only the dung and the wool, he will never come to acquire the train of camels and will always be collecting dung and wool of camels which belong to others.

*Hanker you after faith for its pursuit yields*

*Beauty, wealth, honour, and good fortune.*

*Consider the Hereafter as a camel train;*

*The world is a trail of wool and dung in its rear.*

*If you want only the wool, you will never the camels own;*

*Yet if you own a camel train, isn't its wool your own ?*

That the relation of the world to the Hereafter is like that of a secondary thing to its primary; that worldliness, being a pursuit of the secondary, leads to deprivation from the benefits of the

Hereafter; and that other worldliness by itself ensures the benefits of the world, is a teaching that originates in the Qur'an. Verses 145–148 of the Surat *Al 'Imran* expressly, and verses 18 and 19 of the Surat *al-'Isra'* together with verse 20 of the Surat *al-Shura* implicitly present this view.

## A Tradition

There is a well-known tradition found in the texts of *hadith* as well as other books and is also mentioned in the last will of al-'Imam al-Hasan al-Mujtaba (A). This is the text of the tradition:

In regard to the world be as if you were going to live for ever. With respect to the Hereafter be as if you were going to die tomorrow. [16](#)

This tradition has been highly controversial in that it has led to contradictory interpretations. Some interpret it as implying that one should deal with worldly matters with relaxed inattention and without hurry.

Whenever one is faced with an affair of worldly life, one should say to himself "There is still a lot of time, why hurry?" But when performing good deeds for the Hereafter, one should imagine as if he were not going to be alive after tomorrow and say to himself: "There isn't much time left; it is already too late."

Others with the conviction that Islam would never recommend negligence and carelessness, which certainly has not been the practice of the leaders of the faith, have said that what is implied is that one should always approach the worldly affairs as if he were immortal, attend to them with attention and care, and not perform them in a perfunctory manner with the pretext that life is fleeting. Rather, they say, the works of the world should be done with firmness and great foresight and attention, as if one were going to live till the end of the world.

The rationale for this is that if one were to die, others will derive benefit from one's works. The affairs of the Hereafter, however, are in God's hand; so think of them as if you were going to die tomorrow and

there is not much time left for anything .

As can be noticed, the first one of these two interpretations recommends negligence and lack of commitment towards the affairs of the world, whereas the second one advises a similar attitude towards the Hereafter. Obviously, none of these two interpretations can be regarded as acceptable.

In our opinion, this, one of the most subtle of traditions, consists of an invitation to action, care, and attention and avoidance of negligence and indifference, whether with respect to the worldly activities or those which relate to the Hereafter.

Suppose a person living in a house knows that sooner or later he will have to move to another house where he will stay permanently. However, he does not know the day, the month or the year when he shall have to make the shift. Such a man is in a state of dilemma with regard to matters relating to his present home and his plans about his future house.

If he knows that he will move tomorrow, he would not pay any attention to the repairs and upkeep of his present house, and attend only to matters concerning the planned Shift. But if he knows that he would not be shifting his residence for several years, he will act in an opposite manner; presently he will devote all his attention to the present house, knowing that there is much time left to deal with those relating to his future residence.

Now this person, in a state of doubt about the exact date of the shift, not knowing whether he will have to shift in near future or remain in his present house for years, meets a friend who wisely advises him to attend to the affairs of his present house as if he were to continue living there for a long time and not to neglect its upkeep.

As to the other house, the wise friend advises him to get it ready as if he were going to move tomorrow and have it furnished as soon as possible. This advice will have the consequence that it will make him adopt a serious and active attitude towards both his houses.

Suppose someone wants to start a work, like writing a book or founding an institution or taking up a project which requires years of pursuit. If such a person thinks that he will not live long enough to finish his work, he might desist from starting it.

That is why it is said that one must think that he will live for long. But the same person, from the point of view of repenting for his sins and compensating for the past excesses with regard to religious duties or the rights of the people he has transgressed—all of which require little time for their accomplishment given the will to do so—may keep on postponing them every day so that the promised tomorrow may never come.

In such cases, contrary to the first kind of attitude, to assume that one has still enough time and there is no reason to hasten, would result in negligence and delay in fulfilment of one's duties. Therefore, here

one should assume that there isn't much time left.

Therefore, we see that in one case to assume that one has enough time encourages action and endeavour and the assumption that there is no time left would lead one to abstain from action and endeavour. In the other case, the result is quite the opposite.

Here, the assumption that one has still a lot of time leads to negligence and procrastination, and the assumption that there isn't much time left leads to quick accomplishment of duties.

In the light of this, the *hadith* means to say that in regard to one kind of duties one should assume that he is going to live on and with respect to another kind suppose that not much remains of his life.

This interpretation is not baseless. There are several traditions which confirm the above interpretation. The reason that this tradition gave rise to controversy is that attention was not paid to such traditions.

*Safinat al-bihar*, under *rifq*, relates a tradition of the Holy Prophet (S) addressed to Jabir:

Indeed this (i.e. Islam) is a firm religion. So (do not make it hard on yourself but) act in it with mildness ... Cultivate like him who thinks he will never die and work (for the hereafter) like him who is afraid he will die tomorrow.

In volume XV of *Bihar al-'anwar* (the section on *akhlaq*, Bab 29), it is related from *al-Kafi* that the Holy Prophet (S) addressed 'Ali (A), saying:

This (Islam) is a firm religion ... So work like him who hopes to live for long and be cautious like him who is afraid that he would die tomorrow. [17](#)

That is, when commencing a useful project that requires a long time for its completion, assume that you will live long enough to complete it. However, in regard to matters which you might postpone thinking that you have enough time to handle them, assume that you shall die tomorrow, so that time is not wasted and delay is avoided.

In *Nahj al-balaghah*, it is related from the Holy Prophet (S) that he said:

Attend to the affairs of the world; but with respect to the Hereafter be such as if you were going to die tomorrow.

In the same book, the Prophet (S) is related as saying:

Work like the man who imagines that he will never die; and be cautious like him who knows he is going to die tomorrow.

In another tradition the Prophet (S) is reported to have said:

The mu'min is the most vexed of men, for he must attend to the affairs of the world as well as those of the Hereafter.

In *Safinat al-bihar*, under nafs, a *hadith* of al-'Imam Musa al-Kazim (A) is related from *Tuhaf al-'uqul* to the effect that:

He who abandons the world for his Hereafter or abandons his Hereafter for his world is not from us.

The above discussion on the whole confirms our interpretation of the *hadith* and also shows that this approach finds recurring echo in the teachings of the leaders of the Islamic faith.

Concluded; *wal-hamdu lilla-h*

- [1.](#) This is a tradition of the Prophet (S).
- [2.](#) This is in reference to a sentence from Nahj al-balaghah, Khutab, No. 28
- [3.](#) This is in reference to a sentence from Nahj al-balaghah, Hikam, No. 131
- [4.](#) This is in reference to a sentence from Nahj al-balaghah, Hikam, No. 131
- [5.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Hikam, No. 131
- [6.](#) Ibid., Khutab, No. 223
- [7.](#) Ibid, Khutab, No. 203
- [8.](#) al Amudi, al Shurar wa al durar, vol. 4 p. 340
- [9.](#) Safinat ul Bihar, under hubb
- [10.](#) This reference to the famous words of Ibn al Arabi about one who imagines to have known the mysteries of the self through the statement of the philosophers.
- [11.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Khutab, No. 179
- [12.](#) Ibid, Khutab, No. 222
- [13.](#) A. Einstein, Ideas and Opinions (London 1973) based on Mein Weltbild; ed by Carl Seeling, p. 38
- [14.](#) Muhammad Iqbal, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, Lahore 1971, p. 89
- [15.](#) bid., p. 90
- [16.](#) Wasail al Shiah, vol. 2 p. 535 (Bab No. 82, hadith No. 2)
- [17.](#) Bihar al-'anwar volume XV, section on akhlaq, Bab 29

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