

The Importance of Self-Knowledge

When discussing a topic such as this, it is perhaps best to begin with its definition and an assessment of its importance. Let us then begin by defining some terms. In Arabic self-knowledge is called Ma'rifatul-Nafs. What is Ma'rifatul-Nafs or self-knowledge? It is knowledge about us, but what kind of knowledge?

It is not the kind that has to do with knowing one's name, or father's name, or the place and date of one's birth. Self-knowledge deals with another aspect of our being. It is not related to our physical senses, rather it deals with the spiritual dimension of our lives.

When we speak of the different dimensions of the spirit, and of our being, we should not forget that the human being is fundamentally different from other beings. Although we are anchored to the animal world in many ways, here we wish to focus on that which separates us from animals and is not found in them.

To understand better why this topic is of such importance, perhaps it helps to quote a few verses of the Glorious Qur'an and Hadiths on the subject. There are many verses in the Glorious Qur'an which elaborate. One of these verses is found in Surah al-Hashr, where the Almighty Allah says:

وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ نَسُوا اللَّهَ فَأَنْسَاهُمْ أَنْفُسَهُمْ ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

“And be not like those who forgot Allah, so He made them forget their own souls; these it is that are the transgressors.” (59: 19)

Here the Lord is saying that forgetting Him causes us to forget ourselves in turn, and ultimately leads us to transgression. There is a tradition that makes a similar point to that of this verse, but looks at the matter from another angle. This tradition is a very famous one, and it is difficult to find a book on ethics, which has not quoted it: “He who truly knows himself has known his Lord “

This tradition implies that self-knowledge implies knowledge about the Lord as well. Awareness of oneself leads to awareness of the Lord. And likewise, one who is oblivious of the Lord is oblivious of

him. If one is determined to learn about one's Lord, then the best way to accomplish the task is to learn about oneself

Another verse dealing with the topic is found in Surah al Ma'idah, where Allah says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْفُسَكُمْ ۚ لَا يَضُرُّكُمْ مَنْ ضَلَّ إِذَا اهْتَدَيْتُمْ ۗ إِلَى اللَّهِ
مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

“O you who believe! Take care of yourselves; he who errs cannot hurt you when you are on the right path.” (5: 105)

In this verse Allah is telling us to take care of ourselves, to pay attention to ourselves, that we must be careful about the well-being of our spirits, that we must be aware of the diseases of our souls, and how to cure them. He also tells us that we should pay attention to our duties, made obligatory on us as Muslims.

Then He tells us that if we understand the way, that if we are faithful and committed believers, those who are misled will not harm us. From this we understand that our first duty is to take care of ourselves spiritually.

Sometimes a question may arise here about the relationship between the believer and society. Does the above verse mean that we should focus on ourselves and not pay any attention to the society at large? To answer this question let us see what Allamah Tabataba'i says on this topic in his landmark work, Al-Mizan.

This great interpreter and scholar of the Glorious Qur'an explains that what is meant here is that we should take care of ourselves, and be familiar with our social and private duties, so that we can also be socially responsible. For instance, in Islam we are commanded to advise people to do good and forbid them from evil deeds. One who does not perform this duty is not considered a devout Muslim, the reason being that he is not helping the society to better itself.

So, in Islam taking care of oneself spiritually is closely interwoven with being concerned with the welfare of the society as well. Conversely, it is important to remember that the society can greatly influence a person, weakening or strengthening one's faith.

Another question that may come up is “Are we responsible for guiding non-Muslims as well?” The answer is an unequivocal yes, although the most important thing before doing that is to conduct oneself in such a pious, righteous manner that others are able to see the immense practical benefits of being a faithful Muslim.

In inviting non-Muslims to Islam, we are continuing the job entrusted to the noble Prophet (S) in his lifetime. It is also a duty demanded by our love for our fellow human beings. If we have found the way and the light, we should invite others to immerse themselves in the light and its blessings as well.

After performing our personal and social duties, those who are still disbelieving and those who still insist on erring, will not be harmful to us. Perhaps they will bother you, and at most they may kill you, but they will not be able to take your faith away from you. On the contrary, these pressures strengthen your faith.

Returning to our main theme, the third verse on the importance of self-knowledge is found in:

“We will soon show them our signs in the universe and in their own souls, until it becomes quite clear to them that it is the Truth.” (41:53)

Allah says that very soon we will show them our signs, but what are these signs and where will they be found? Allah tells us that these signs are found in two places: meaning in the external world and in their own souls. This ayah tells us that by considering these signs which are within our own selves and which are in the universe, it will become completely clear that Allah truly exists. According to some interpretations this fact will not only be true, but will be the truth itself. It is important to understand the distinction between these two expressions; it is the same when we say that Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) is not only just but that he is just meaning that justice was embodied in Imam ‘Ali (a.s.).

Let us continue exploring the reasons the topic is so vital to our conduct in life. Once again we shall rely on the Glorious Qur'an for guidance. In everyday life when we purchase a new appliance or a gadget, we immediately turn to its manual for guidance in correctly operating it, believing that its manufacturer is the best source of guidance. So it seems quite logical for a Muslim to turn to the Glorious Qur'an for instructions on correct conduct in life, convinced that the Maker and Creator of human beings is also the best source of guidance in learning about the immensely complex nature of human beings.

Another verse pertaining to our topic is found in surah al-Dhariyat:

وَفِي الْأَرْضِ آيَاتٌ لِلْمُوقِنِينَ وَفِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ ۗ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ

“And there are signs on the earth for those who are certain. And in your own souls (too); will you not then see?”(51: 20, 21)

We learned that Allah has two kinds of signs, the ones in the external, physical world, and those within ourselves. Verse 20 deals with those signs that have to do with the physical realm. In it the Almighty God tells us that there are signs on the earth for those who believe.

Immediately a question arises: why should those who already believe need the reassurances of such

signs, and why should those who are not believers in God remain oblivious of them, yet more in need of them?

The answer given by great scholars of Islam is that those who do not believe in a creator as the Lord and Sovereign of the universe, also tend not to look or pay attention to that which is before them remaining for the most part oblivious of signs which are readily discernible to believers.

In the following verse, 21 of Surah al-Dharyyat, the Lord says:

وَفِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ

“And in your own souls (too); will you not then see?”(51:21)

This verse calls to our attention to the need to look for these signs within ourselves. We are clearly and unambiguously told that there are signs in the external world as well, and these are sources of guidance for us.

From these verses it becomes clear to us that Muslims are urged not to focus on their souls to the exclusion of the physical, material world; and conversely, not to think that material affairs are all that matter.

In India for instance, there are people who try to strengthen the power of their souls in order to enable themselves to perform certain deeds not ordinarily possible. But in so doing, they loose touch with the everyday life of the planet. That is not what faithful Muslims are commanded to do. Muslims are told the two go hand in hand and are complimentary to each other.

When a scientist is working on a project in the laboratory, or a person is performing the most menial of tasks to earn an honourable living, he or she is carrying out one of God's commandments. It is again, one of the most distinct characteristics of Islam that two worlds are never separated.

In today's world, in Western societies in particular, we see countless examples of people who are totally alienated from themselves, seeking all in the material life.

In more extreme cases, the alienation from the self has progressed to such a degree that being alone becomes painful and undesirable. Why?

Because when such a person is alone, in a way he has lost contact with the eternal world, which is all he has. So being alone with his soul and spirit, he has to face a world which has no meaning to him, and matters not to him. In trying to escape the inevitable loneliness, many resort to mind-altering drugs, such as alcohol and narcotics.

A person with a healthy spirit can be alone yet not lonely. One who has forsaken a part of himself, his spirit, his consciousness, when alone, seeks to destroy it, rather than facing that which is excruciatingly painful; thus resorting to drugs becomes an easy escape route.

This is one reason why some societies use solitary confinement as a method of punishment for hardened criminals who already are serving life sentences and have nothing to lose by further acts of violence.

But when a faithful Muslim is alone by himself, he is not lonely. As a matter of fact being alone is prized by faithful Muslims. There is a Hadith from Imam Sajjad (a.s.) in which the Imam is quoted as saying: “If all between the East and West were to die, I would not feel lonely as long as the Qur'an was with me.

Once again we shall turn to the Hadiths to further explore this topic. This invaluable heritage has been left to us by the scholars who instinctively knew the eternal value of observing the speech and deeds of the Noble Prophet and Imams, and recording for posterity this living example of the perfect Muslim and human being.

Earlier we discussed a famous Tradition, which has reached us in two similar versions: There is however, no difference in meaning: “However knows himself (his soul or spirit) knows [or has known] his Lord “(1)

Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) is also quoted on the subject, stressing the importance of knowledge: “Knowledge of oneself (self- knowledge) is the most beneficial knowledge of all “(2)

This again tells us that knowing oneself leads to knowing one's Lord and all that it entails. The second Hadith on the topic from ‘Ali (a.s.) reads: “I wonder at the person who urgently searches for that which he has lost, but he has lost his soul and is not searching for it “

The third Hadith from Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) on Self-knowledge is: 'I wonder how a person who ignores himself can know his Lord. '

The fourth Hadith from Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) is: “Whenever the knowledge of a man increases, his attention to his soul also increases and he tries his best to train, and purify' it”

Here is yet another Tradition on the subject from Imam ‘Ali (a.s.): “The ultimate knowledge of a man is to know himself”

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