

Chapter 12: Secured Spiritual Well-Being by Means of Fruitful Social Contracts

The influence of social surroundings is a basic problem of education and a topic that has been given special attention by moralists. In general, man leads his life among people, and the fabric of his personal existence is made in society. The role of society in laying down the foundations of an individual's personality, moral character, and conduct is one of the self-evident facts of human existence.

Man cannot break his links with his fellowmen or live in isolation, because the frightful darkness of loneliness would make his life grim and unbearable, and make his spirit languish in solitary confinement. If one did not have ties of friendship and love with anyone and were one to feel that there isn't a single heart in the whole world that throbs for him and that one can find no emotional refuge, one would be in deep anguish and the skies of one's being would become dark and gloomy.

On the other hand, in the same way that the body needs various kinds of nourishment for its health and strength, our souls also draw their nourishment from the company of friends, often acquiring virtues and merits from them, and at times becoming tainted with their vices and sins.

Everyone has strong feelings of attachment for the way that he has chosen in life. He also desires others to adopt it and tries to create, through those with whom he associates, an environment for himself that is harmonious and pleasant. Regarding the world through the window of his world outlook, he gives a certain hue and perspective to its problems, and actually tries to find justification for the way that he has chosen for himself. Obviously he would find any opposition to his chosen lifestyle to be very painful.

Accordingly, the character of one's company and the understanding of its limits is something on which our happiness profoundly depends. It is by the means of fruitful social contacts we cultivate today that our future spiritual well-being and individual independence are secured. Hence it is necessary to understand one's psychological needs in the sphere of social relations, and, on the basis of these requirements, to carefully develop and follow a program.

Some scholars believe that the tendency to emulate others is innate in the human nature. This tendency is so imperceptible that it is not so simple to discover its profound effects. The study of various situations relating to emulation indicates that one is influenced by others in one's conduct, feelings, decisions, and even in one's opinions and judgements. One tends to mould oneself in accordance with the principles subscribed to by one's community and group. Others influence one's development in proportion to their personal power and influence over one, and no matter how much a person may be educated and intelligent, a part of his independence vanishes in the company of other people and his personality is overshadowed by the spiritual domination and pressure of the beliefs of his community. Of course, those who suffer with spiritual inadequacies are more acutely susceptible to the influence of others, as their mental powers are relatively more deficient.

According to the view of a group of psychologists, a person emulates others when he finds a mental satisfaction in doing so, or because he imagines that his conduct would win the approval of others, or that such conduct has been the cause of others' success. For instance, the emulation of heroic figures, or children's imitation of the conduct of the elders, occurs for this reason. Even in animals it occurs under particular conditions when an animal imitates others when it achieves something by that means.

Brown says:

People resort to imitating others when that helps them reach goals in the psychological sphere. In other words, the condition of latent urges leads to imitation, not that these goals are created by an urge called the urge to imitate. When a saleswoman adopts the hair-style of some celebrity, that is not because she is driven by an urge to imitate. Rather, the reason behind her action is that for her it is a means to realise the lifestyle of that celebrity or other stars whom she represents. ¹

Although special attention to the problem of social intercourse is necessary at all stages of life, it has a greater importance for the young who, having left behind the traits of childhood years, stand at the threshold of a serious career, in social life and relations. That is because, due to spontaneous emotional factors and passing motives, they are prone to being drawn into friendships and close relations without carefully examining the spiritual and moral condition of those with whom they associate or make friends and without evaluating their way of thinking and fitness for friendship. This lack of attention to what is reasonable and proper may divert the youth from the real highway of life and land him in corruption and vice. Accordingly, we should neither ignore their natural inclination for associating with persons of their age group, nor neglect the need for effective guidance and logical and well-reasoned advice, to make them resistant to influence of any kind of vicious and destructive elements, so that they may grow in a way free from all kinds of educational hazards.

At this stage, which are tense years of unrest, the personality of the youth advances towards independence. The heroes whom he adulates and the persons whom he admires disclose his need for a guide, a model, and source of inspiration to be emulated. Similarly, the state of uncertainty and doubt that takes hold of his being derive from his inadequate intellectual power of judgement and his effort to

obtain mental independence.

With attention to the fact that the youth has an innocent and receptive heart, as he passes through a period of passion and emotional excitement, one may well assess the magnitude of the big role played by his associates at this sensitive stage in the development of his spiritual and mental faculties.

Accordingly, for the sake of precaution against any deviation, failing, and setback it is essential for them to be acquainted with the principles of healthy and fruitful company and to be guided towards true personal development.

True Worth of a Friend

In choosing a friend one must employ one's judgement in a manner free from emotion and try to find the criterion for assessing his real worth. One must know his inadequacies and weak points, his ideas, feelings, dislikes and infirmities. Ultimately, one must discover the human merits and desirable qualities that he carries in the depth of his spirit so that one may benefit from his outstanding virtues.

One may discover many sublime moral qualities in persons whose outward appearance indicates no sign of their existence. Continuous contact and company of worthy and good-natured persons brings about remarkable changes in the constitution of one's personality. One's vital energies are directed in new channels, and they take a new form, forming one's faculty of will into a creative and innovative source of outstanding achievements. On the other hand, the lack of sufficient care and negligence in this regard can be the biggest mistake one can make, damaging seriously the foundations of one's felicity and welfare.

Avebury, a well-known British writer, says:

One is thrown in life with a great many people who, though not actively bad, though they may not wilfully lead us astray, yet take no pains with themselves, neglect their own minds, and direct the conversation to petty puerilities or mere gossip; who do not seem to realise that conversation may by a little effort be made instructive and delightful, without being in any way pedantic; or, on the other hand, may be allowed to drift into a mere morass of muddy thought and weedy words. There are few from whom we may not learn something, if only they will trouble themselves to tell us.²

Sensitivity and Touchiness

One of the basic necessities of social life is learning to get along with other people. One can hardly find two persons who have beliefs, thoughts, and feelings that are identical in all respects. Even in regard to the most insignificant matters of life it is rare to find people who are in complete agreement. This fact must always be kept in mind and one must try, so far as one can, to get along with different kinds of temperaments and personalities, so that one is able to adjust and develop friendly and harmonious relations with associates and companions.

Some individuals, due the lack of a certain degree of maturity necessary for social coexistence, are so sensitive and touchy and so rigid and unforgiving in their relations that they cannot overlook the smallest thing that happens against their expectations. A lapse on behalf of their friends makes them simply succumb to their violent and immature feelings, leading them to abandon all hopes of arriving at a mutual understanding. They allow good relations to be severed on account of a deep resentment and ill feeling. Life, however, has its bright and dark sides, thorns as well as flowers, beauty as well as ugliness, and these always go together. One's approach, from the outset of social life, should be based on pleasant manners and sound moral principles. One should learn the law of social life that it is necessary to bear some unpleasant things for the sake of its numerous advantages. At the same time, one should refrain from misplaced expectations and pursuing idle dreams. The art of living lies in being as flexible as one can in regard to one's expectations, and very often stable peaceful relations cannot be maintained and friendship and intimacy cannot prevail without it.

One should try to understand and accept people and their needs as they are, not as we would like them to be. This depends on the measure of one's moral development, emotional refinement, and spirit of understanding.

It is a mistake to judge everything from the perspective of our own wishes and desires. But there are many people whose feelings are adversely lopsided; selfishness and egoism are so strong in their character that they totally lack the capacity to be objective. Moreover, thereby they torture and torment themselves, whereas objectivity and reasonable expectations would have secured them mental peace.

A psychiatrist recounts the tale of his inordinate expectations. During World War II, he wanted to leave his hometown for a distant city. Despite his insistence, they declined to give him an air ticket. They told him that priority lay with the transportation of army personnel, and he was forced to go by the train and that, too, in the third class.

"A few moments after that I took my uncomfortable seat in the third-class compartment," he says, "I felt furious. I saw that it was a torture for me to continue my journey on these hard benches. Immediately I began to analyse my perturbed state. After a while I asked myself whether the torture I felt was really due the uncomfortable seats, or if it was because I was upset that a respectable and dedicated psychiatrist like me had been denied the consideration of being favoured with an air ticket, so I wouldn't be compelled to waste hours of my valuable time on journey by train. Then I asked myself if I had a right to expect such a favour during wartime and if my expecting them to be treat me as an exception was selfish and stupid. Immediately I realised that it was an unjustified expectation, because certainly at a time when my brothers were under the rain of bullets and shells, their work had a priority over everything else.

"As soon as the matter thus cleared up in my mind and I was convinced that I should not be upset, the hard seats not only did not bother me any longer, I spent the rest of the journey, happily reading or conversing with other passengers. I did not feel tired by the journey at all, although neither the seat had

become softer, nor the duration of the journey had become shorter."

At times, selfish and hollow people cultivate social relations for some particular purpose. Their relations and contacts with others, which should be untainted by personal gain and purpose, are meant to obtain some particular goals of their own. They continuously hunt for friends through whom they might make some personal gain. For instance, they would never seek the friendship of those who have sublime feelings and sincere intentions but whose company would not procure any material gain. As a result, their friendly relations are sustained so long as there is some hope of a gain. But if they do not get any nearer to their goal in this way, sensing that the friendship would not help them in achieving their ends, a peculiar coldness replaces the previous warmth and they terminate their hypocritical relationship.

Obviously, when unsteadiness and infirmity cloud all aspects of someone's social life, the reality is gradually exposed and others, too, on recognising such a character, treat him coldly and contemptuously and avoid him. And this is an injurious spiritual condition that we often observe among many people.

Emerson says:

We pass for what we are. Character teaches above our wills. Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment. There will be an agreement in whatever variety of actions, so they be each honest and natural in their hour. For of one will, the actions will be harmonious, however unlike they seem. These varieties are lost sight of at a little distance, at a little height of thought. One tendency unites them all. The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tracks. See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency Your genuine action will explain your other genuine actions.³

A Warning Against Corrupt Company

In general there exist two alternatives for man, either to surrender totally to his corporal and natural faculties and subjugate his soul absolutely to his instincts and appetites, or to answer the summons of his higher spiritual aspirations and to cultivate the higher part of his spirit and realise the vital significance of this precious gift.

Man is constantly under the pull of the two opposite poles of virtue and vice. Therefore, he should pay undivided attention to the great mission that he has to fulfil in this inner conflict. He should select for himself a way that is worthy of man and choose the most reliable means for attaining his high human goal in order to realise the full significance of life.

This choice is something continuous and perpetual, and it should be made in such a way that at every moment one makes a forward movement as long as one is alive without either coming to a standstill or going back. In view of the brevity of human life, that which is important is to obtain a worthy provision out of this brief, transitory existence for the life of the next world, which is everlasting. Without doubt, one

would derive the most lasting and precious benefit by dominating destructive desires and by refraining from submitting to deviant urges.

Islam wishes to develop a capacity for discernment and bring about an inner discipline in the human mind by making people reflect on the significance of social intercourse and selection of one's companions. It desires to habituate people to observance of discipline in their activities and decisions. Besides, in this manner it draws their attention to real human merit so that they come to have in it a faith arising from the depths of their hearts, perpetually keeping the higher planes of reality in their view to attain to the utmost human perfection, a perfection whose worth cannot be measured by any materialistic criteria.

Islam has pointed out to man each of the two paths of human progress and edification, the outward and the inward, and it is now up to him to utilise that guidance in choosing his mode of thinking and formulating his approach in action.

The company of pious persons committed to moral and human considerations provides an appropriate opportunity for the nourishment and growth of man's spiritual faculties. Minds grow and develop in the radiance of their sublime thoughts and the inclination to virtue and piety is awakened in one's mind. As a result of personal contact with them, one becomes more conscious of one's spiritual inadequacies, and that provides one with the chance to judge one's own capabilities by comparing them with those of worthy and competent humans.

It is through such a comparison that one can gradually free oneself from the influence of vicious and undesirable qualities, and derive light from the most hidden depths of one's soul. The significance of the moral and spiritual qualities of one's associates is not something which has been studied for the first time by modern psychology. In fact, the necessity of identifying the qualities of friends and one's intimates has been recognised for centuries, and this is dealt with clearly and abundantly in religious texts and traditions. What modern psychology has done is to reaffirm the value of those profound prescriptions and to reiterate the beneficial and fruitful guiding principles that have been recognised since long in this regard.

The Prophet of Islam, may God bless him and his Household, declared in an eloquent and absorbing statement of his:

*Persons follow the ways and conduct of their friends. Hence everybody should be careful in choosing his friends, and study the character of those with whom he wishes to develop terms of friendship.*⁴

In one of his aphorisms, Imam 'Ali, may Peace be upon him, points out that one should avoid associating with degenerate persons, as one tends to pick up their personal traits:

*Avoid the company of the vicious, because your character would pick up their degenerate and deviant qualities without your knowing it.*⁵

Dr. Alexis Carrel, the well-known scholar, writes:

The psychological state of the social group determines, in a large measure, the number, the quality, and the intensity of the manifestations of individual consciousness. If the social environment is mediocre intelligence and moral sense fail to develop. These activities may become thoroughly vitiated by bad surroundings. We are immersed in the habits of our epoch, like tissue cells in the organic fluids; like these cells, we are incapable of defending ourselves against the influence of the community. The body more effectively resists the cosmic than the psychological world. It is guarded against the incursions of its physical and chemical enemies by the skin, and the digestive and respiratory mucosae. On the contrary, the frontiers of the mind are entirely open. Consciousness is thus exposed to the attacks of its intellectual and spiritual surroundings. According to the natures of these attacks, it develops in a normal or defective manner.

The education of the intelligence is relatively easy. But the formation of the moral, aesthetic, and religious activities is very difficult. The influence of environment on these aspects of consciousness is much more subtle.

Man is powerless against such psychological attacks. He necessarily yields to the influence of his group. If one lives in the company of criminals or fools, one becomes a criminal or a fool.⁶

In the course of their experiments, social psychologists have made interesting findings on the tendency to imitate others.

In the spring of 1953, a group of hundred male candidates applying for managerial jobs involving leadership qualities were subjected to a three-day test in order to evaluate their mental abilities in the psychology lab of the University of California.

On the third day, it was the turn to precisely measure their personal susceptibility to the influence of others. First, these hundred men were divided into two groups of fifty, the group under test and the group of spectators. The purpose was that when those in the test group were subjected to the influence of the opinion of the group, each of the individuals in the group of spectators was individually and independently tested in relation to the opinion of their group. Then arrangements were made to divide the test group into ten subgroups of five. There was a device in front of each individual so that when a question was put to him he could know the result of the answers given by others in his group by the means of special lamps.

However, the secret of the experiment lay in the point that the answer that appeared on the board was one manipulated by the experimenter, not one that reflected the group's response. In fact, in every case, by creating an artificial and arbitrary majority the experimenter duped those who were under test, and they, unaware of this secret, thought what they saw on the board to be the opinion of the majority, and mostly followed it blindly.

To the astonishment of the experimenters, in a case involving the solution of a mathematical problem, seventy-nine per cent of men thoughtlessly followed the incorrect and illogical answer of the hoax majority.⁷

Helping the Victims of Vicious Company

One should know that if one associates with corrupt persons for the sake of rescuing them from their wretched condition, it is something very commendable and praiseworthy. Islam approves of the method of associating with persons who have violated moral norms for the purpose of helping them through beneficial guidance. However, such a task requires a sophisticated approach, since mere reproach and censure will not give the desired results. In many cases, it would not be effective. However, a careful approach will not only be effective in most cases, it might bring about a positive change. For the awareness that is created in the victim may lead him to strive towards the path of real humanity, piety, and salvation. That might lead him to discover his real worth and dignity as a human being, and the one who keeps him company for the sake of helping him would have fulfilled the rights of companionship in the worthiest manner.

Imam Sadiq, may Peace be upon him, has said in this regard:

*When someone observes a friend taking a wrong and sinful course and, while possessing the capacity restrain him, does not so out of indifference, he has actually betrayed his friend.*⁸

It has been said since ancient times that it is unpleasant to be told about one's faults. This is a fact. However, sympathetic advice should be given in a soft and gentle tone, and someone's weak point or moral inadequacy should be pointed out in an effective manner, suggesting in a friendly way that the path selected is one that would result in misfortune and ruin. At the same time one should try to secure the companion's confidence in one's objective attitude, while being careful to deliver one's counsels privately in a manner unnoticed by others.

A friend may point out someone's shortcomings in an unwise manner and his exhortations may produce the very opposite result, whereas an advice given in a wise and skilful manner, even by someone himself suffering from some moral infirmity, can prove to be fruitful.

Imam 'Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, may Peace be upon him, makes this point in the following manner:

*Pointing out someone's shortcomings publicly is censure, not advice.*⁹

*At times one is betrayed by the advice of a trusted friend, and the advice of someone of whose betrayal one is wary may prove to be effective.*¹⁰

Dale Carnegie says:

If you want to prove a point, act cleverly and skilfully so that no one guesses what you have in mind. Use the advice of the poet who said, "Preach without being anyone knowing that you are preaching." The people who have a power of clear judgement are a rarity. Most of us are stubborn and prejudiced, and envy, suspicion, fear, greed, and pride cloud our reason. Study your own character; if you see that most of the time you are after picking others' faults, you must start thinking of a remedy.

When we make a mistake, we would easily admit it to ourselves. Others, too, if they have the ability and skill, can, with the sweetness of their speech, grace, and charm induce us to confess our errors. In such cases, we might even congratulate ourselves for our candour and courage in confessing to our shortcomings. But if the other person were to attempt to compel us to make this unpleasant admission, he would never succeed. 11

The Eleventh Imam, may Peace be upon him, said:

One who exhorts his brother privately in fact helps him to appear in a good light, whereas one who exhorts him publicly and indiscreetly spoils his image. 12

On the other hand, when someone suffering from an infirmity is exhorted by a far-sighted friend who seeks to rescue him from moral degeneration, it is essential for him accept the well-meaning advice of his friend and to make an effort to reform himself. Imam 'Ali, may Peace be upon him, said:

Someone who exhorts you is your well-wisher and benefactor. He foresees the consequences of your conduct, and seeks to restore what you have lost. Therefore, your welfare lies in obeying his counsel, and any disobedience or indifference to his fruitful guidance will be ruinous for you. 13

On noticing the traces of moral corruption, the sooner one can correct oneself, the better it is for him, and any kind of delay and negligence in this regard will lead to regret and, ultimately, might be ruinous for his repute and personal dignity.

Imam 'Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, has said in this regard:

One who does not get rid of his infirmities while he is still held in good repute will be forced to remove them after falling into disrepute. 14

Not only the admonishment of one's associates but also the criticism of one's enemies can be effective in making one mend his ways. Imam 'Ali, may Peace be upon him, said:

At times one's enemy is more helpful than one's friends, because he makes one aware of his shortcomings, leading one to overcome them.

An American philosopher writes:

A great man is always willing to be little. Whilst he sits on the cushion of advantages, he goes to sleep. When he is pushed, tormented, defeated, he has a chance to learn something; he has been put on his

wits, on his manhood; he has gained facts; learns his ignorance; is cured of the insanity of conceit; has got moderation and real skill. The wise man throws himself on the side of his assailants. It is more his interest than it is theirs to find his weak point. The wound cicatrises and falls off from him like a dead skin, and when they would triumph, Lo! he has passed on invulnerable. Blame is safer than praise. I hate to be defended in a newspaper. As long as all that is said is said against me, I feel a certain assurance of success. But as soon as honeyed words of praise are spoken for me I feel as one that lies unprotected before his enemies. In general, every evil to which we do not succumb is a benefactor. As the Sandwich Islander believes that the strength and valour of the enemy he kills passes into himself, so we gain the strength of the temptation we resist. 15

Of the most injurious is the company of stupid persons, which might bring about a setback in one's life and land one in misfortune. At times, the dangers and harms arising from a foolish friend are greater than what an enemy might inflict. That is because one is seldom on his guard against a friend on account of one's confidence and goodwill and might be easily taken by surprise, and when he wakes up there might be no way of retreat, whereas one is on his guard against the possible dangers of an enemy.

His wrong judgements which lead his friend into trouble might be due to goodwill and a desire to be useful, but often his counsels land his friends in trouble and bring loss of face.

There is an ancient tale that once an intelligent and wise person went on a journey with a fool. While travelling they reached a place where the road branched out into two directions. One way was smooth and level and the other was rough and uneven. The foolish companion insisted that they take the better road. The wise man knew that the rugged road was shorter and safer, and he suggested to his companion that they take it. However, he submitted to the insistence of the fool and both of them went along on the good road.

Shortly afterwards, they encountered a band of robbers and were taken captive. Later on, the two friends were captured along with the robbers and taken before the judge. The wise man told the judge what had happened, putting the blame on his foolish companion for misleading him and forcing him to take the dangerous road.

When it was the fool's turn to defend himself, he admitted that he was merely a fool. But, he said, his friend who was intelligent should not have yielded to a fool's suggestions and abandon a decision made wisely. After hearing them the judge condemned each of them to a similar punishment.

Hence mere attachment and loyalty in mutual relations are not sufficient grounds for the selection of a friend. Rather, the quality and degree of his wisdom should be given the foremost importance. Undoubtedly, those who refrain from cultivating the intimacy of fools should be ranked with wise men of foresight.

Imam 'Ali, may Peace be upon him, said:

Never make someone who is brainless your friend. 16

Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, may Peace be upon him, speaks in these words of the harms that result from improper associates and unworthy company:

Never associate with four kinds of persons and don't make them your friends: the fool, the niggardly, the coward, and the liar. As to the fool, he will bring you harm despite his good intentions to do something for your benefit. As to the niggardly man, he will only grab from you without giving you anything in return. As to the coward, he will flee at the smallest danger abandoning not only you but even his own parents to their fate. As to the liar, you cannot trust him even if he tells the truth. 17

Mental immaturity and inattention to consequences lead one into bad company and ultimately into a catastrophe. It is frequently observed that those who give in to the temptations of their vicious friends and compromise their honour and well-being by attending their sinful gatherings and parties fall into ruin.

They might be aware that they are treading a dangerous path, but they are afraid lest they be considered timid or prude. In order to avoid this charge they surrender without resisting to the insistence and demands of their vicious friends and ultimately bring disgrace upon themselves and fall headlong into the ravine of moral corruption and abasement. However, one day they would realise their irreparable mistake and their thoughtlessness, which was merely a product of their mimicking others and without foresight. But unfortunately this realisation comes when they have already spent a considerable part of their lives and after a precious lifetime has been ruined by vicious conduct. At times, their state of negligence and inattention continues to the end of their lives and they are left with an everlasting regret.

The Noble Qur'an mentions the wails of regret as uttered by a lost and sinful person on the Day of Resurrection. He would say:

Woe to me! Had I never taken so and so for my intimate friend. (25:28)

Imam 'Ali, The Commander of Faithful, may Peace be upon him, warns in these words against associating with a certain group of people who are unfit for company and whose friendship is to be avoided:

Avoid making friends with worldly people, who will start looking down upon you once your wealth and means are diminished and who will be jealous of you if you become wealthier. 18

Do not keep company with someone who remembers your vices and forgets your merits and excellences. 19

Do not befriend someone who conceals your merits and publicises your faults. 20

Do not take a flatterer for your friend, who will make even your erroneous acts appear in a good light and

*who wants you to be like him.*²¹

*Should you know it, the company of someone who is of no avail to you in acquiring spiritual and human merits is an encumbrance.*²²

Moderation in Friendship

The policy of the wise and the foresighted is to observe certain criteria and exercise caution in friendly relations. Immoderation in this regard may lead to deplorable consequences and bring regret and pain. That is because the bond of friendship and intimacy might not endure under all conditions and circumstances.

Perhaps some event or a rivalry might lead to disagreement and tension in relations and vitiate cordial and sympathetic terms of friendship. Warm and intimate terms of friendship have often turned into violent enmity and fiery hostility due to such matters, and there are not few who have faced merciless attacks of an old friend familiar with one's secrets and weak points, whereas earlier none of them ever expected such a painful reversal in mutual relations.

However, a friendship founded upon wisdom and moderation would not only be free of such dangers, it would be stable and enduring. It is with such a subtle consideration in view that Imam Sadiq, may Peace be upon him, strictly warned his disciples against immoderation in friendly relations and the disclosure of one's secret matters:

*Don't inform your friends of your secret matters except those whose disclosure to your enemy would be harmless. That is because in the vicissitudes of life today's friend might be tomorrow's enemy.*²³

A Western Scholar writes in this regard.

It has been said that it is wise always to treat a friend, remembering that he may become an enemy, and an enemy, remembering that he may become a friend; and whatever may be thought of the first part of the adage, there is certainly much wisdom in the latter.²⁴

An advice of Imam 'Ali, may Peace be upon him, which is full of wisdom is to be observed in this regard also:

*Be moderate in your friendly relations, for today's friend might be tomorrow's enemy. And be moderate in your hostility towards your enemy, for today's enemy be tomorrow's friend.*²⁵

Pretence and Hypocrisy

Perhaps everyone has come across in his social surroundings persons who chum up with everybody, but their only goal is to attract others' attention to themselves, although their hearts are devoid of any

fraternal feeling. They hide their real face under the mask of friendship and take resort in flattery and affected geniality. As and when required by circumstances, they consider their pretence to genuineness a means of achieving their social ends, and that is their trade. This hidden tendency overshadows their entire character, conduct, and mind. They forget that a real personal merit is a thousand times or incomparably more precious than others' opinion about oneself. When one observes such people, striving hard single-mindedly in pursuit of their selfish ends instead of responding to the call of their own conscience, one realises to what extent they are victims of their exhibitionist urges.

Others' opinion is not so significant as to be allowed to influence one's happiness. Of course, the opinions and feelings of other people are to be respected to a certain extent, but the source of one's happiness lies within oneself, not in what others may think of one. Otherwise if one were to become used to the habit of looking at oneself from the eyes of others, he would become a hapless captive of other people's ideas, losing one's freedom and independence.

Moreover, the judgements that people make concerning one another are mostly inspired by their personal interests and prejudices, and they change with conditions and circumstances. The value of such judgements would be realised when we keep this point in our view. ¹ Hence if one chooses a correct path in life that is not regarded by others with approval, one should not be pained by their futile critical remarks.

Imam 'Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, may Peace be upon him, said:

*Don't be grieved by the remarks that people may make about you, because if what they say is true, you will have been reattributed for your misconduct in this world itself [instead of the Hereafter] and if what they say is untrue, it is a reward that you got without having worked for it.*²⁶

Bertrand Russell says:

Fear of public opinion, like every other form of fear, is oppressive and stunts growth. It is difficult to achieve any kind of greatness while a fear of this kind remains strong, and it is impossible to acquire that freedom of spirit in which true happiness consists, for it is essential to happiness that our way of living should spring from our own deep impulses and not from the accidental tastes and desires of those who happen to be our neighbours, or even our relations.²⁷

William John Reilly, an American writer, says in this regard:

There is no one more lacking in personality and content than the self-seeking people who are inert and impassive. They are always curious as to what other people think of them, and therefore are ever after something that may be regarded by others with approval.

This sort of persons actually sacrifice their personality and will to the collective prejudices of others if you allow yourself to be influenced by others beyond measure, you will never find the courage to accomplish anything, and will not succeed in life.

Of course, this does not mean that one should totally ignore the useful and well-meaning suggestions of others and not put them to use. However, that which is to be remembered is that one should accept and act upon only those suggestions which one believes to be more worthwhile and useful and those which offer a more complete and sound solution

If you follow the prejudice and personal preferences of others you will be confronted with a social quandary and personal misfortune. On the other hand, if you are steadfast in regard to your ideas that you believe to be useful, you will feel relaxed, strong, independent, and self-assured. The futile pursuit of others' prejudices and judgements will mar whatever significant inspiration and valuable idea that you may have, divesting you totally of your personal liberty, independence, and personality, and you will never be able to be your own self. If you give up your freedom of thought, you will lose everything. The state, circumstances and beliefs of people are changeable and conflicting in societies. The more you strive to achieve general approval, the lesser results will you obtain, and the lesser attention you pay to it and avoid submitting to it, the more it will incline towards you. The world, by nature, admires men who have the courage to decide for themselves and have a strong determination.²⁸

Isolation and Unsociability

One of the causes of social isolation and unsociability is the feeling of resentment towards people which results in a stunted emotional and social personality. The dream of amicable relations is changed into a nightmare of despair and inability to socialise with others.

Imam 'Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, may Peace be upon him said:

*One who is always distrustful of others' motives develops a phobia of everyone.*²⁹

Schachter, the well-known psychologist, writes:

Everyone likes to socialise with others and aspires to receive their attention and love and enjoy their company. But when this wish is not satisfied, it seems easier to flee from people than to adjust, whereas the truth is something else. If the failure to adjust and avoidance of the company of others provide a temporary relief, it neither satisfies our innate urge and need nor does it offer any solution or remedy.

Isolation and fleeing from people may have various degrees, and it may reach the point where, out of despair and a sense of defeat, one distances oneself from his friends, family, and the whole world.

I used to know an engineer who was highly qualified and had complete mastery over his profession. But in the factory he behaved with outright dryness and brutality with his subordinates. He would eat alone and did not participate in conversation, nor would he take part in their amusements. Laughter or humour never came out of his mouth and he would not allow anyone to be critical of him.

But we knew that in the depth of his heart he underwent a torment on account of his state and conduct, and that he longed to be able to converse with others, laugh and dine with them at the same table, and

to be on friendly and fraternal terms with others. When the professor of psychology studied his case, it was known that, without himself knowing it, he was suspicious of the loyalty of his subordinates and imagined that they did not consider him fit to lead them, and therefore he had to impose his authority upon them in a brutal manner.³⁰

Books, Precious Companions

One can have a friend and companion even when one is alone and relaxing in solitude. These companions are books that provoke one to think upon matters that contribute to one's mental growth and edification. By reflecting upon the writings of great men, who passed away centuries ago, we become familiar with their valuable thoughts and their wisdom and profit from their teachings. The wonderful advancements and progress made by man in the various sciences and arts is not the result of a sudden leap, but the product of his experience through long eras of history as the knowledge and the sciences of earlier generations was transmitted to succeeding ones by the means of books and writings. Although the illustrious lives of great thinkers lie concealed behind a curtain of darkness and uncertainty, the essence of their thought and work has been preserved in the safe custody of books. It is as if the study of these works allows one to travel a distance of several centuries to become acquainted with outstanding human beings, who are now gone, and discover great truths by exploring the vast panorama of their works. One of the advantages of reading is that everyone, rich or poor, can equally benefit from the company of great minds and spend one's time with great heroes, and all that is needed to enter their company is the license of literacy. Reading can be a good means of relief from loneliness and bring peace of mind.

Imam 'Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, may Peace be upon him, says:

*One who derives consolation from books will never lose his peace of mind.*³¹

*One who pursues knowledge in solitude is never scared of loneliness.*³²

A European scholar writes:

The debt we owe to books was well expressed by Richard de Bury, Bishop of Durham, author of *Philobiblon*, written as long as 1344, published in 1473, and the earliest treatise on the delights of literature. "There," he says, "are the masters who instruct us without hard words and anger, without clothes or money. If you approach them, they are not asleep; if investigating you interrogate them, they conceal nothing; if you mistake them, they never grumble; if you are ignorant, they cannot laugh at you. The library, therefore, of wisdom is more precious than all riches, and nothing that can be wished for is worthy to be compared with it. Whosoever therefore acknowledges himself to a zealous follower of truth, of happiness, of wisdom, of science, or even faith, must of necessity make himself a lover of books ..."

This feeling that books are real friends is constantly present to all who love reading. "I have friends," said

Petrarch, "whose society is extremely agreeable to me; they are of all ages, and of every country. They have distinguished themselves both in the cabinet and in the field, and obtained high honours for their knowledge of the sciences. It is easy to gain access to them, for they are always at my service, and I admit them to my company, and dismiss them from it, whenever I please. They are never troublesome, but immediately answer every question I ask them. Some relate to me the events of the past ages, while others reveal to me how to live, and others how to die. Some, by their vivacity, drive away my cares and exhilarate my spirits; while others give fortitude to my mind, and teach me the important lesson how to restrain my desires, and to depend wholly on myself. They open to me, in short, the various avenues of all the arts and sciences, and upon their information I may safely rely in all emergencies. "

"Books," says Jermy Collier, "are a guide in youth and entertainment for age. They support us under solitude and keep us from being a burden to ourselves. They help us to forget the grossness of men and things; compose our cares and our passions; and lay our disappointments asleep. When we are weary of the living, we repair to the dead, who have nothing of peevishness, pride, or design in their conversation."³³

Even the study of the biographies of eminent figures who have brought about fruitful changes in the world and changed the course of human destiny is not without a formative influence on one's mind and soul. It can reveal to one the meaning of life and initiate him into outstanding spiritual virtues. If historic events and the character and conduct of everlasting personalities are so absorbing and fascinating for the reader, that is because of their intimate relationship and bond with the thoughts and feelings of the great men who authored them. In the same way as the moral character of every person can be judged through the character of his friends and associates, so also one's selection of books and one's interests provides a clue to one's intellectual and spiritual calibre and character. In the same way as one should be careful in the selection of friends to avoid the dangers of inappropriate company, so also a great care is to be exercised in the choice of books. That is because the study of improper material is not only without benefit, their toxic effects poison our ideas and vitiate the purity of one's soul.

This is especially true of the young people, who have not acquired moral maturity and stability. Their minds are impressionable and they readily digest the contents of such books, subjecting themselves to the danger of deviance and degeneration.

Unfortunately, these days barren and misleading published material, whose evil and harmful influence on youth is not at all hidden, has acquired great currency. These books are like invisible robbers who enter the privacy of one's mind and soul and, with a surprising alacrity, devastate the foundations of one's faith and human merit. Mostly base and vulgar writings form part of the means of amusement of young people, and that is the reason why there is an increasing tendency among them to a fantastic approach towards life. For this group of people, that which matters is not the educative content and impact of a book but its soporific and intoxicating power, as is the case with many novels and much fiction. These make their basic conditions for the selection of a book. Obviously, when the material one reads is not

selected with care and insight, and amusement and sexual excitement is the only end of reading, apart from the time wasted, that would result in moral degeneration and ruin of one's constructive faculties

Raymond Beach, a Western psychologist, says:

The matter of reading should be given careful attention by the youth Although all sorts of newspapers, and various weekly, monthly and other periodicals make up the most important source of reading by the youth today, it must said that we come across fewer outstanding minds and ideas than in the past

When boys and girls select light and nonsensical material for reading, they gradually lose sight of that which is beautiful, valuable and sublime in life Bad books incite feelings of anger, rage, and excitement in the reader and bring him to the verge of moral degeneration These books enfeeble the will, create intellectual torpor, and debase spiritual life.

The study of worthy and beneficial books, besides giving a special clarity to one's insight, may even open a new chapter in one's life, giving a new direction and impetus to one's energies and efforts and bringing one's spiritual personality to a definite fruition There are many people who have obtained their moral and spiritual vigour and power from this plenteous and fecund source and have been drawn towards personal sublimity and edification.

Thomas Hood writes

My born interest and attachment to books rescued my life from foundering in the vortex of ignorance and moral ruin in the early years of my life, though someone like me who had been deprived of the blessing of parental care and sympathy in childhood years can rarely escape this frightful danger.

My books restrained me from getting involved in gambling, drinking and visiting improper places Truly, it is impossible for anyone who benefits from the precious and sublime ideas of great men to incline towards the company of base and frivolous characters.³⁴

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 3. Emerson, "Self-reliance," cf. Commins & Linscott, *The Social Philosophers* (New York: Modern Pocket Library 1954), p. 399.
 4. Al-Nuri, *Mustadrak al-Wasail* ii, p. 62.
 5. Ibn Abi al-Hadid, *Sharh Nahj al-balaghah*, xx, p. 272.
 6. Alexis Carrel, *Man the Unknown* (Bombay: Wilco Publishing Co.), pp. 146, 147, 149.
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 8. Bihar al-anwar, xv, "kitab al-'ishrah," p. 52.
 9. Al-Amidi, *Ghurar al-hikam*, p. 775.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 587.
 11. Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends*, Persian trans. A'in-e dastyabi, pp. 156, 159, 161.
 12. Al-Harrani, *Tuhaf al-'uqul*, p. 489.
 13. Al-Amidi, *Ghurar al-hikam*, p. 765.

14. Ibid., p. 641.
15. Emerson, "Compensation," cf. Commins & Linscott, *The Social Philosophers* New York: Modern Pocket Library 1954), p. 451.
16. Al-Amidi, *Ghurar al-hikam*, p. 800.
17. *Bihar al-anwar*, xv, ' kitab al-'ishrah," p. 52.
18. Al-Amidi, *Ghurar al-hikam*, p. 812.
19. Ibid., p. 827.
20. Ibid., p. 827.
21. Ibid., p. 707.
22. Ibid., p. 812.
23. Al-Hurr al-'Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'ah*, "al-ahkam al-mu'asharah," bab 101.
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25. Al-Hurr al-'Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'ah*, "al-ahkam al-mu'asharah," bab 101.
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28. William John Reilly, *Twelve Rules of or Straight Thinking*, Persian trans. Taf akkur-e sahih, p. 122.
29. Al-Amidi, *Ghurar al-hikam*, p. 712.
30. *Rushd-e shakhsyyat*; p. 111.
31. Al-Amidi, *Ghurar al-hikam*, p. 632.
32. Aveybury, *On Peace and Happiness*, Persian trans., Dar aghosh-e kaushbakhti, pp.46-448
33. Raymond Beach, Persian trans. by Banu Munir Mehran, *Ma wa farzandan-e ma* p. 83.
34. *Akhlaq-e Samuel*, p. 124.

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