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Question 33: The role a person plays in obtaining his sustenance

Question: What is the relationship between man's efforts and the sustenance that has been measured out for him?

The answer to this question can be explained in the form of two preliminaries and one conclusion:

First Premise: The sustenance that Allah (awj) has taken upon Himself is the following: The allotment and portion that must reach the creatures in order for them to continue existing. Of course the Divine pledge and the giving out of sustenance that we attribute to Allah (awj) is different from that of creatures. If it has come in the Qur`an that: "The sustenance of every creature is upon Allah."¹ then one must not lose sight of the fact that the sustenance of the creatures is upon Allah (awj) and not any of His creatures. Allah (awj) is that being who has created the realm of existence and who is the Creator of all things.

For this reason, the promise of Allah (awj) differs from the promise of the creature that is itself part of this realm of existence and that is under the influence of the beings of this realm. To know the actions of Allah (awj) and His sustenance one must know the world. We are ourselves a part of this world and have responsibilities. Of course the responsibilities that we have with regards to sustenance – those which the laws of nature or laws of religion have laid upon us – are just so many minor aspects and weak manifestations of the all –pervasive sustenance of Allah (awj).

The power of digestion that is in plants, the desires that are in animate beings and that guide them towards food all are manifestations of Allah's (awj) sustenance. Ultimately, it is Allah (awj) who has taken control of each animal by means of the sum of its desires in order for it to go after all that it is in need of and so that it struggles and works to satisfy these desires. Thought, work, and effort are but preliminaries to Allah's (awj) sustenance. Allah (awj) has created an attraction between the sustenance and the one that partakes of the sustenance – sending one after the other. There is a special kind of connection between the various parts of existence that connects them with one another.

When a person is still an infant and does not have the power to find his own nourishment, his sustenance is provided for him. As he gradually gains more abilities and can find his sustenance by means of his constant pursuits, his sustenance will not be obtained so easily. For instance his sustenance may be situated in some far off place, requiring him to set off and find it.

As a general principle, there is some form of reciprocity between the accessibility of sustenance, the measure of strength and ability of the sustained being, and the amount of guidance that has been given to that being in order to reach the sustenance. For this very reason, man is considered a higher and more subtle being than the plants and animals, and that which is sufficient for the plants and animals is not sufficient for him. The problem of his nourishment will differ from that of the other beings. The distance between the sustenance and the one who needs the sustenance in the human world is far greater.

Because of this, better means of survival have been put at his disposal and his guidance has been increased. Reason, knowledge, and thought have been given to him and revelation and prophethood have come to help him; while certain responsibilities have been put upon him. All of these are but dimensions of the sustenance of Allah (awj).

In a certain poem it is said that the very existence of teeth calls forth the provision of bread for the teeth to chew on. Of course it does not mean that having teeth is sufficient in order for the bread to be cooked and made ready at the dinner table of a person. Rather it means that if there were no bread, there would have been no teeth; and if there had been no teeth, there would have been no bread.

In other words, there exists a relationship between sustenance, the one who uses the sustenance, the means of obtaining the sustenance, the digestive system, and the means of guidance. That Being who created man in nature and gave him teeth, has also created bread in the realm of nature. He has placed at his disposal thought, power, action and the sense of responsibility. All of these are manifestations of the sustenance of Allah (awj).

Second Premise: Sustenance and nourishment are of two kinds: That which we seek and that which seeks us.² The “sustenance that seeks” comes after us even if we run away from it. It does not let us go, even as escaping from the claws of death is impossible. It has been mentioned in a hadith that: “If the son of Adam were to run from his sustenance as he runs from his death, it would still find him, even as death will eventually find him.”³ This kind of sustenance has roots in the Providence of Allah (awj) and hence, no kind of change is possible in it.

In connection with this matter the late sage, 'Allamah Tabataba'i has said, “Sustenance and the one who consumes the sustenance are necessary corollaries of one another. It is meaningless to assume that the one who needs sustenance is after his nourishment in his life, but there be no sustenance for him. It is also impossible that there be sustenance, but there be nobody to use that sustenance or that the sustenance be more than his needs. For this reason sustenance is part of the predetermined Providence

of Allah.”

The “sought after sustenance” is the sustenance that has been measured out for the seeker. If we seek it and fulfil all the necessary conditions and actions that are necessary for obtaining it, we will reach it. In reality the effort we make in order to reach this sustenance is a partial cause. If it is put alongside the other causes that lie in the unseen world, we will reach it for sure. In this connection our Master, the Commander of the Faithful, Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) has said, “Seek after sustenance, for certainly it is guaranteed for the one who goes after it.”⁴

Just as effort without a guarantee of its giving fruit is meaningless, a guaranteed sustenance without any accompanying effort is also impossible (in the “sought after sustenance”). For this very reason, from amongst the two kinds of sustenance that Allah (awj) has allocated for His servants, He has made one unconditional (the “sustenance that seeks”), and one conditional (“the sought after sustenance”).

The unconditional sustenance seeks man in all conditions and until the scales of man are not filled to their capacity with this kind of sustenance, his death will not come. According to the saying of the Noble Prophet (ص), “No one will die until his sustenance has been completed.”⁵

The surety of the “sought after sustenance”, however, is conditioned by the performance of certain actions and by taking into account certain matters. Without fulfilling these conditions and without putting them into order, this sustenance does not come into being.

The “sustenance that seeks”, the one that is certain, is the sustenance that determines our very existence, our lifespan, the possibilities open to us, the environment we were put in, our family, and our predisposed talents. This kind of sustenance gives rise to the power, energy, and intelligence that we need in order to struggle and perform work; and it is in the wake of these that the door for the second kind of sustenance—the conditioned sustenance—opens up for us.

In order to obtain the “sought after sustenance,” everyone must not only make their own efforts, but they must also raise his hands up towards Allah (awj) in utter poverty as it were. The nursing infant whose effort and struggle comes in the form of crying, pouting, and screaming will reach the milk of his mother by means of these kinds of actions. Yet when this child grows up and sets higher goals for himself, his effort and struggle will transform. It will change into thinking, working, and physical exertions. Moreover, the quality of his sustenance will also change.

To summarize, we may say that it is after the unconditional, certain “sustenance that seeks” that effort, struggle, work and action are created, and following this effort and desire the “sought after sustenance” comes into being. The certain sustenance is incapable of change or increase and decrease but the “sought after sustenance” is capable of being increased or decreased.

As to the latter, neither does the greediness of the greedy person make it come about, nor does the sadness of the lazy one prevent it from reaching us. However it can be increased or decreased given the

right conditions and if its prerequisites are met. A person asked the Noble Prophet (ﷺ), “I wish that my sustenance be increased.” The Noble Prophet replied, “Keep yourself in the state of ablution so that your sustenance be increased.”⁶

Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) has said, “One whose intentions are pure, his sustenance will be increased.”⁷

Therefore it is necessary for us to make effort and to seek the best and safest means for reaching our sustenance, to use our faculties, and to trust in Allah (awj) who is the creator of this path. All this after having understood the relationship between sustenance and the one who needs it, and after having known that the means for obtaining sustenance have also been created, and after having realized that the responsibility for obtaining sustenance has been placed upon us.

Brief Answer

There are two kinds of sustenance. There is a sustenance that we go after and a sustenance that comes after us. In the traditions, the sustenance that comes after us is called “the sustenance that seeks,” and the sustenance that we seek has been named “the sought after sustenance.” The first is certain and is the sustenance that determines our very existence, our lifespan, the possibilities open to us, the environment we were put in, our family, and our predisposed talents. This kind of sustenance gives rise to the power, energy, and intelligence that we need in order to struggle and perform work; and it is in the wake of these that the door for the second kind of sustenance– the conditioned sustenance– opens up for us.

In order to obtain the “sought after sustenance,” everyone must not only make their own efforts, but they must also raise their hands up towards Allah (awj) in utter poverty as it were. The nursing infant whose effort and struggle comes in the form of crying, pouting, and screaming will reach the milk of his mother by means of these kinds of actions. Yet when this child grows up and sets higher goals for himself, his effort and struggle will transform. It will change into thinking, working, and physical exertions. Moreover, the quality of his sustenance will also change.

In conclusion, we may say that it is only after the certain outcome of the “sustenance that seeks”—which is certain and unconditional—and after due efforts are made and the human will–power is engaged that the “sought after sustenance” comes into being. The certain sustenance is incapable of change or increase and decrease, but the “sought after sustenance” is capable of being increased or decreased, depending upon the order, quality, and composure of the actions that precede it– being counted as amongst its prerequisites.

Detailed Answer

1. Surat Hud (11), Verse 6:

{ وَمَا مِنْ دَابَّةٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ إِلَّا عَلَى اللَّهِ رِزْقُهَا وَيَعْلَمُ مُسْتَقَرَّهَا وَمُسْتَوْدَعَهَا كُلٌّ فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ }

2. Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter 31:

وَأَعْلَمُ يَا بُنَيَّ أَنَّ الرِّزْقَ رِزْقَانِ: رِزْقٌ تَطْلُبُهُ، وَرِزْقٌ يَطْلُبُكَ فَإِنْ أَنْتَ لَمْ تَأْتِهِ أَنْتَ

3. Muntakhab Mizan al-Hikmah, no. 2564:

لَوْ أَنَّ ابْنَ آدَمَ فَرَّ مِنْ رِزْقِهِ كَمَا يَفِرُّ مِنَ الْمَوْتِ لَأَدْرَكَهُ كَمَا يُدْرِكُهُ الْمَوْتُ

4. Muntakhab Mizan al-Hikmah, no. 2555:

أَطْلُبُوا الرِّزْقَ فَإِنَّهُ مَضْمُونٌ لِطَالِبِهِ

5. Muntakhab Mizan al-Hikmah, no. 2561:

...عَنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ (ص): ...أَنَّهُ لَنْ تَمُوتَ نَفْسٌ حَتَّى تَسْتَكْمِلَ رِزْقَهَا

6. Muntakhab Mizan al-Hikmah, no. 2574:

عَنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ (ص) لَمَّا قِيلَ لَهُ: أُجِبْ أَنْ يُوسَعَ عَلَيَّ فِي رِزْقِي - يَدُمُ عَلَى الطَّهَارَةِ يُوسَعَ عَلَيْكَ فِي الرِّزْقِ

7. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 100, pg. 21:

قَالَ أَمِيرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ (ع): مَنْ حَسُنَتْ نَيْتُهُ زِيدَ فِي رِزْقِهِ

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