(Tawbah (Repentance

With a continuous chain of transmission reaching the pioneering leader, a proof of the sect and a chief of the ummah, Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni (R) from Muhammad ibn Yahya, from Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn 'Isa, from, al-Hasan ibn Mahbub, from Mu'awiyah ibn Wahab, who said, "I heard Abu 'Abd Allah (A) says: 'When a servant turns to God with sincere repentance (tawbatan nasuhan), God loves him and covers him (i.e. his sins) in the world and the Hereafter.' I said, 'And how does He cover him? 'The Imam (A) replied, "He makes the two angels (assigned to write his deeds) forget that which they have written of his sins. Then He inspires his bodily members (saying), "Do conceal his sins," and He inspires the earth's places (saying), "Conceal the sins that he used to commit over you." Then he meets God, at the time that he meets Him, in such a manner that there is nothing to give witness against him [regarding any sin."[1]

Exposition

Know that tawbah (repentance) is one of the important as well as difficult stages, which signifies the return from (physical) nature (tabi'ah) to the soul's spirituality after that the light of (primordial) human nature (fitrah) and the spirit has been blinded by the darkness of carnal nature through sins and disobedience. To explain, the soul in its initial natural state (fitrah) is devoid of any kind of excellence, beauty, light or delight, in the same way as it is free from their opposites. It is like a blank tablet absolutely without any inscription. Neither it possesses any spiritual merits nor any vices. But there has been planted in it the sparks of capacity and capability to attain any kind of station. Its nature (fitrah) is straight and its essence carries intrinsic luminosity. But commission of sins causes obscurity within the heart and this obfuscation increases with the number of sins until it becomes totally darkened. The light of intrinsic nature is extinguished and changed into abiding wretchedness. But between these two states, before the onset of total darkness over the heart's tablet, if it awakes from its slumber of negligence, this state of awakening is followed by that of repentance.

The benefit arising from this state - with the conditions to be mentioned, God willing, in the following pages - becomes complete and the soul returns from the darkness and obscurity of carnal nature to the light of original nature and its essential spirituality. In other words, it

becomes again like a tablet devoid of virtues and vices., as mentioned in the famous hadith: One who repents from sin is like one who has not sinned.[2]

This shows that tawbah in reality is a return from the domain of physical nature (tabi'ah) and its laws to the domain of spirituality and primordial nature (fitrah). Similarly, the reality of inabah is return from fitrah and spirituality to God and setting out and migrating from the soul's habitat to its ultimate destination. Hence the station of tawbah is prior to that of inabah and an elaboration of this point is not proper for these pages.

Tawbah And Postponement

An important point whose awareness is necessary for the wayfarer of the path of guidance and salvation is that success in a complete and sound repentance, meeting all its conditions (to be mentioned), is a difficult thing and rarely attainable. The indulgence in sin, especially the major and mortal ones, causes man to become totally forgetful of tawbah. If the tree of sinfulness growing in the orchard of the human heart reaches maturity and fruition, its roots becoming strong, the results are calamitous, one of which is to turn away man totally from repentance. Even if once in a while it comes to his mind, he keeps on postponing it from day to day and from one month to another, telling himself, "I will make a sound repentance at the end of my life and in old age," forgetting that this is a Divine stratagem: And God is the best of devisers. (3:54)

Don't imagine that man can perform tawbah after the strengthening of the roots of sinfulness or meet its conditions. Therefore, the springtime for tawbah is the time of-youth when the sins are fewer, the inner darkness of the heart incomplete, the conditions of tawbah easier, and their fulfillment less difficult.

Moreover, man's greed is greater in old age and so also are his love of wealth,. ambition and his hopes. This is proved by experience and borne out by the Prophet's noble tradition. Even if it be admitted that man can succeed in performing tawbah in old age, there is no certainty of reaching old age and-of not meeting one's death in youth in the condition of habitual disobedience. The relative fewness of old people is also an indication of the fact that death is closer to the young. In a city of fifty thousand we do not see more than fifty octogenarians. Therefore, my dear, beware of Satan's guiles and abstain from playing tricks with your Lord by telling yourself: "I will lead a life of lust for some fifty years or more, and will make amends for the past by asking His pardon." This is wishful thinking.

If you have heard or read in a tradition that God Almighty has favored this ummah and accepts the repentance of its members until before the appearance of death or its signs, that is true.

But alas, that is the time when the opportunity of tawbah is taken away from man. Do you think that tawbah is a mere verbal exercise? No, such is not the case; the performance of-tawbah requires effort and hardship. The return, as well as the determination to return, requires practical effort as well as the exercise of knowledge.

Otherwise it rarely happens for a man, either to think of tawbah or to succeed in performing it, or to fulfill the conditions of its validity and acceptance, or the conditions of its perfection. And it often happens that death grants no respite for the thought of tawbah to occur, or for tawbah to materialize, as one is transferred from this habitat with the burden of weighty sins and their endless darkness. Then, only God knows what 'misfortunes and calamities befall him.

Even if it be assumed that one is ultimately destined to salvation and felicity in the Hereafter, the atonement of sins is not an easy task in that world. It entails terrible squeezes, hardships and burnings before one becomes worthy of the intercession (of the intercessors) and the mercy of the Most Merciful.

So, my dear, make up your mind as soon as possible and make firm your resolution and will. Repent from your sins so long as you are young and alive in this world. Don't let this God-given opportunity to slip away. Don't pay attention to satanic enticements and the tricks of the carnal .self

An Important Point

Here it is also necessary to pay attention to another important point. The person who repents cannot completely recover that inward spiritual purity and that intellectual illumination (of those who abstain from sin) even after tawbah. Because a sheet of paper does not regain its former whiteness after being blackened and then cleaned with an eraser. It is difficult for a broken pot when repaired to recover its former condition. Great is the difference between a lifelong faithful and sincere friend and the friend who apologizes after betraying one.

Moreover, few are they who can correctly fulfill the duties of repentance.

Hence man should try as much as possible not to enter sin and disobedience, for the correction of the soul after its corruption is a difficult task. And if, God forbid, should such an adversity occur, one should try to take a curative step as soon as possible, for a slight damage is sooner and better repaired.

My dear, do not pass by this stage nonchalantly' and indifferently! Meditate and reflect over your condition and your ultimate end. Turn to the Book of God, the traditions of the Seal of Prophets and the Imams of guidance - upon all of whom be God's salutations - to the utterances of the ulama of the Ummah as well as to the dictates of your own intellect and

conscience. Do open this door, which is the key to all other openings, and enter this house which, for us, is the main abode of humanity.

Consider it important and attend to it with care. Implore God, the Exalted and the Blessed, to grant you success in finding your cherished goal. Seek help from the spiritual station of the Noble Messenger and the Imams of guidance – upon all of whom be peace – and seek refuge in the Wali al-'Amr, the Age's honor and its Leader (the Twelfth Imam), may God hasten his appearance. Of course, that holy personage does assist the weak and the destitute and answer .the call of the helpless

The Essentials Of Tawbah

Let it be known to you that there are certain essentials and requirements of a thorough repentance without whose materialization an authentic repentance is not attained. We shall mention the main ones of these, which are essential.

One of them, which is the most essential, is regret and remorse for one's past sins and faults. Another is resolving not to make a return to their commission ever. These two, in fact, constitute the essential reality of tawbah and comprise its essential constituents. The main thing in this respect is the attainment of this state and the realization of this reality, which should take place in such a manner that man recognizes the effect of sins on the soul and its consequences in the world of Barzakh and the Day of Resurrection, both by means of rational reflection as well as from tradition.

For it is a demonstrable truth for the urafa, which has also been mentioned in the traditions of the Household of Inerrancy (A) that sins have reified forms in Barzakh and at the time of Resurrection which correspond with those sins. They are endowed with a life and will of their own in that world and torment men awaringly and willfully. In the same way, the fire of Hell also burns men awaringly and willfully. That is because that realm is the realm of total life.

Hence in that world we shall encounter forms which are the result of our evil or good deeds. This matter has been often mentioned, expressly or implicitly, in the Holy Qur'an and the noble traditions. It is also in accordance with the creed of the emanationist philosophers and the experience and discoveries of the mystics and 'urafa. Similarly, every sin has an effect upon the soul that has been called al-nuqtat al-sawda' (a black spot) in traditions. It is an obfuscation which appears in the heart and the soul and grows gradually. Ultimately, it may grow to completion and lead man to disbelief, apostasy and everlasting wretchedness, as explained earlier.

Hence the intelligent man when he becomes aware of this fact and pays as much heed to the

statements of the prophets and awliya' as to the advice of a physician and doctor, he would certainly abstain from sin and distance himself from it. And if, God forbid, he commits any he would turn away loathfully in penitence and his heart would be filled with remorse. The result that this remorse produces is something great and its effects are very beneficial. The determination to quit disobedience and sin is a consequence of this remorse.

If these two essential conditions are realized, the task of the wayfarer of the Hereafter becomes easier. God's graceful succor becomes his lot, and, in accordance with the explicit meaning of the holy verse: Verily God loves the repentant, (2:222)

as well as the present noble tradition, he becomes the beloved of God if he is sincere in his repentance.

And man should strive in the sincerity of his repentance with practical and meditative exercises and contemplative effort, realizing that being beloved of God is something priceless, beyond all worth. Only God knows what spiritual resplendence and what flares of perfection make up the Hereafterly form of that love, and only God, the Sublime and the Blessed, knows how He shall treat His beloved ones.

O man! How sinful and foolish thou art not to know the worth of the bounties of thy Provider (wali al-ni'am). After having spent years in disobedience and after prolonged disloyalty to such a Lord, Who has provided all the means of your comfort and ease - without that being, na'udhu bi Allah, of any imaginable benefit to Him - having violated His sanctities and taken shamelessness and recalcitrance to their extreme, now that you are remorseful, penitent and repentant, God Almighty has taken you for His loved one. What abundance of mercy and what plentitude of bounty is it!

O God! We are incapable of thanking You for Your bounties. Our tongues and those of all other beings are unable to praise You and extol You. All that we can do is to bow our heads in shame and to ask Your pardon for our shamelessness. What are we to deserve Your mercy? Yet Your mercy is more abundant and Your bounties are more inclusive than can be described. Indeed. You are as You have praised Yourself.[3]

And man should endeavor to intensify the form of contrition and remorse in the heart so that God willing, it enters the burning chamber. That is, through meditation about the terrible consequences of sin, remorse becomes stronger in his heart, thereby voluntarily kindling the holy fire, the fire of which the Qur'an says: The fire of God kindled, roaring over the hearts covered down upon them, in columns outstretched.[4]

In his heart, burning the heart in the fire of remorse to incinerate all its sins and to burn away all its rust and corrosion. He should know that were he not to kindle himself this fire in this world

and were he not to open upon himself the door of this hell - which itself is the main gateway of Paradise - he would inevitably pass from this world into the other to face the terribly cauterizing fire prepared for him there. Thereupon the doors of Hell shall be opened and the doors of Paradise closed to him.

O God! Give us a breast lit with the fire of remorse. Set our hearts aflame with the worldly fire and set it afire by throwing into it the sparks of remorse. Remove the corrosion of our hearts and take us from this world in a state of freedom from the consequences of sins. Verily Thou .art the Lord of bounties and are powerful over everything

The Conditions Of Tawbah

That which was mentioned in the section above were the essential requirements of tawbah. There are certain conditions for its acceptance, as well as for its perfection, that we shall mention below.

The main conditions for the acceptance of tawbah are two. So also there are two main conditions for its perfection. In this section we shall mention the noble utterance of Hadrat Mawla al-Mawali, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (A), for, in fact, it is the essence of wisdom, being of the order of 'speech of kings and king of speech': It is narrated by al Sayyid al Radi (R) in the Nahj al balaghah that some said 'Astaghfirullah (I seek God's forgiveness) before 'Ali (A). 'Ali said to him. "May thy mother mourn for thee! Do you know what is istighfar? Verily istighfar is a degree of the 'illiyyun and it is a word that means six things. First is remorse over the past. Second, the resolution not to return to it ever. Third, to return to the creatures their rights (usurped in the past) so that you meet God Almighty in such a state of purity that no one has a claim against you. Fourth, that you fulfill every duty that was neglected by you, in order to satisfy your obligation in respect of it. Fifth, that you attend to the flesh of your body that had grown on unlawful nourishment so that it melts away as a result of grief and mourning and the skin adheres to the bones, after which new flesh grows there between. Sixth, that you make your body taste the pain of obedience in the same way as it tasted earlier the pleasure of sinfulness. When you have done these things then say Astaghfirullah!"[5]

This noble tradition mentions firstly two essential requirements of penitence, which are remorse and the resolution not to relapse into sin. Then it mentions the two important condition for its acceptance, which are returning the rights of creatures and then of the Creator. Tawbah is not accepted from anyone on the mere verbal declaration, 'I repent.' The penitent man is one who returns everything illegitimately taken from others. If anyone has a claim against him, he should satisfy it if possible, or acquire his propitiation.

He should discharge whatever divine obligations and duties that have remained unfulfilled, and if all of them cannot possibly be fulfilled he should try to make amends to the extent that he can. He should know that everyone of these is a claim with a claimant that would demand it of him in the other life in the hardest of conditions, and he would be unable to satisfy it without taking up the burden of others' sins and exchanging his good deeds for the satisfaction of those claims. At that time, he will be helpless and destitute and have no way out for his relief. My dear, let not Satan and the carnal self take hold of you and make the matter appear an insurmountable difficulty in your eyes and thus finish you off by making you refrain from tawbah. Do know that it is better to act in this regard even if to a small extent. If the unoffered prayers, fasts and atonements are many, if God's unfulfilled duties are numerous and the people's usurped rights are innumerable, if your sins are abundant and your vices are plenty, do not despair of God's grace and' do not lose hope in His mercy. God Almighty will facilitate your passage if you act to the extent of your capacity and He will show you the path of salvation. You should know that to despair of the mercy of God is the biggest of sins and I don't think that any other sin has a more evil effect upon the soul.

A person that despairs of divine mercy, his heart is so full of gloom and he becomes so unbridled that nothing can correct him. Beware, lest you despair of God's mercy and consider sins and their consequences as insurmountable. God's mercy is greater than everything and encompasses all things, and God's justice is not bound by conditions. What were you, to begin with? In the void of nothingness, when there was no question of capacity or worthiness, God, the Supreme and the Glorious, endowed you with the bounty of being and the excellences of existence without any request or prayer or any worthiness or capacity on your part.

Then He provided you with His unlimited bounties and His unending favors, subjecting all the creatures to you. Even now your condition is not worse than absolute nothingness and pure non-being. Moreover, God has promised mercy and forgiveness. Take a step forward towards His Holy threshold and He will Himself assist you by all means. If you cannot make amends for the return of His rights, He will overlook your failure. If you cannot satisfy the rights of others, He will compensate for it. And you have already heard the story of the young grave-opener during the times of the Messenger of Allah (S).

My dear, the path of God is easy and simple. All that it requires is some attentiveness. Postponement, delay, neglect and allowing the sins to pile up day after day is what makes the matter difficult. But resolute action and decision to set aright the affairs of the soul makes the path shorter and the task easier. Make an experiment by taking some action. If you achieve results, the truth of this matter will be proved to you. Otherwise the path of perversion is open

and the hands of your sinfulness are long.

The other two things mentioned by Amir al-Mu'minin (A) are the conditions for a perfect tawbah and a thorough penitence. Not that tawbah is not realized or accepted without them, rather it does not become perfect in their absence.

Let it be known to you that everyone of the stations (manazil) of the wayfarers has stages (maratib)which differ in accordance with the state of their hearts. If the penitent person wants to attain to its perfect degree, after having attended to the omissions - i.e. after having made good for the neglect of the duties-he should now attend to the accretions also. That is, he must now take up the spiritual accretion acquired during the days of sinfulness.

That takes place by completely wiping out the physical and spiritual effects produced in the realm of the self so that the soul recovers its former refinement and its primordial, natural spirituality by a process of thorough purification. As you already know, every sin and pleasure produces an effect upon the soul in the same way as the body too derives nourishment from some of them. Hence the penitent person should with manly courage and determination exterminate all those effects and their traces through physical and spiritual austerities, as taught by Mawla 'Ali (A).

Thus through physical austerities and abstinence from pleasures and dietary luxuries, through obligatory or supererogatory fasting, he should remove the flesh that accumulated in his body through sin or during his sinful days. By means of spiritual exercises, worship and ritual devotions he must attend to the accretions of carnal nature. This is because the forms of physical pleasures still linger in the soul, and as these forms are present there the carnal self is inclined toward them and the heart is infatuated with them and it is feared that, God forbid, the self would rebel again and snatch away its reins.

Hence it is necessary for the wayfarers of the Hereafterly path and the penitent from sins to make the soul taste the pain of austerities and worship. If a night was spent in sin and licentiousness, that must be compensated with a night's watch devoted to the worship of God. If a day was spent in corporeal pleasures, that must be compensated with fasts and appropriate devotional rites. This is necessary so that the soul may be completely purged of the effects arid traces of the attachments arising from the love of the world. If this is done, tawbah, of course, becomes perfect arid the soul's primordial brilliance returns to it.

Throughout the course of such exercises he must contemplate and meditate upon, the consequences of sin, the severity of God Almighty's might, the precision of the Balance of deeds, and the intensity of the chastisement of Barzakh and Resurrection. He must understand and make his self and heart understand that all these things are consequences and forms of

one's vicious deeds, of opposition to the King of kings. It is hoped that after this knowledge and reflection the soul will loath sins and detest them with a complete and total hatred, thus attaining the intended result of tawbah, which now becomes perfect and complete.

Those two stages thus are what make the station of tawbah perfect and complete. Of course, when man at first wishes to enter the station of tawbah, he must not think that he is required to reach the last of stages, so that the path appears to him to be full of difficulty and hardship and he decides to leave off once for all. To whatever extent the wayfarer of the path of Hereafter is able to traverse this path, it is good and desirable to that extent. After that, when he sets out on the path, God Almighty makes the journey easy for him.

Hence the difficulty of the journey must not stop one from setting out towards his destination. For the goal is very great and important, and once one understands the greatness of the goal the hardships of the path become easy and bearable. Tell me, what goal is higher than eternal salvation, joy and bless? What peril is greater than eternal wretchedness and damnation? By shunning tawbah or postponing it and delaying it one may subject oneself to eternal wretchedness, unending punishment and everlasting damnation, and by performing it one may obtain absolute felicity and become the beloved of God. Hence if the goal is so great, why should one be scared of a few days' hardship?

You should know that whatever action one can take, even if little, is beneficial. Compare the matters of the Hereafter with worldly affairs, wherein the worldly wise, if they are incapable of attaining their highest objective, do not desist from reaching a lower goal. If an objective cannot be obtained in its totality, that does not prevent them from attaining it partially. You too, if you are incapable of attaining this objective to its perfect degree, should not give up the principal goal itself. Try to achieve it to the extent that is possible for you.

The Result Of Istighfar

Of the things in respect of which it is necessary for the penitent person to act is taking refuge in the forgiveness of God Almighty and attainment of the state of istighfar. Openly and secretly, mournfully and pleadingly, in solitude, with lamentation, tears and wails of woe, he should implore the forgiveness of His Sacred Essence to cover his sins and wipe out their consequences.

Of course, the forgivefulness and the veiling grace of that Sacred Essence implies the covering of defects and forgiveness of the sins' consequences. And since the spiritual forms of deeds are like a man's offspring, or something even more closely linked to him, and since the reality of tawbah and the form of istighfar is tantamount to disowning and cursing (li'an), God

Almighty, since He is the All-forgiving and the Veiler, dissociates those offsprings of the penitent from him on account of his li'an and separates them from him.

Thereupon He obscures that sin from the sight to all those beings that have come to know about his sin, including the angels and the notaries of offences, the time and the place of its commission, as well his own bodily members and organs, and makes them forget it, as pointed out in the noble tradition which says: He makes His two angels forget that which they have recorded of his sins.

And possibly God Almighty's 'inspiring' the bodily members and organs, as well as the earth's locations, to conceal the sins, as mentioned in the noble tradition, is the same as the erasing of the sins from their memory. It is also possible that it means a command to abstain from giving testimony. Or perhaps that which is meant is the obliteration of the effects of sins from bodily members, whose presence amounts to their existential witness, so that if one did not perform tawbah every one of his organs, either with the tongue of speech or condition, would bear testimony to his deeds.

As it is, God's station of forgivefulness and His veiling grace have required that now that we are in this world our organs and members abstain from giving testimony about our deeds and time and space conceal our actions. In the same way, if we leave this world with genuine tawbah and sincere istaghfar, they will conceal our deeds, or our deeds will be totally obscured for them. And perhaps the second explanation is more in order in view of the God Almighty's magnanimity, so that the penitent human being is not ashamed in front of anyone. And God knows best.

On The Interpretation Of Tawbah Nasuh

You should know that there is difference of opinion regarding the interpretation of the term tawbah nasuh and a brief mention of it is suitable here. Here we will confine ourselves to translating the words of the greater researcher al-Shaykh al-Bahai (Q).

The informed traditionist al-Majlisi (M) quotes al-Shaykh al-Baha'i as having said that the exegetes have given several meanings of tawbatan nasuh. According to one of them, it means a tawbah that 'advise' the people, that is invites them to simulate him on account of the good effect produced in its performer, or that it 'counsels' its performer to root out sins and to never return to their commission.

Another interpretation is that tawbah nasuh is a tawbah which is done purely (khalis) for God's sake, in the same way as pure honey free from wax is called 'asal nasuh. And sincerity means that the remorse should be on account of the ugliness of sins or because they are contrary to

God's good pleasure, not for the fear of hellfire.

The honorable researcher al-Tusi has ruled in the Tajrid that a remorse felt for sins on account of the fear of hellfire is not tawbah at all.

According to another interpretation, nasuh is related to nasabah, which means tailoring, because tawbah sews together the body of faith torn by sin, or because it joins the penitent person to God's awliya' and His lovers in the same way as separate pieces of cloth are joined together by tailoring.

According to yet another interpretation, 'nasuh' here is an attribute of the penitent and is linked to tawbah in a metaphorical manner. That is, tawbah nasuh is a tawbah whose performer counsels and advises himself to perform it as perfectly and completely as it is worthy of being performed until the effects of sins are totally purged from the heart, which is attained by making the soul melt with regret and grief and by clearing the darkness of vices by the light of virtues.

All Beings Are Endowed With Life And Knowledge

Let it be known to you that there are certain realities, mysteries and subtleties for tawbah, and there is a specific tawbah particular to his own station for every one of the wayfarers of the path towards God. And since we do not partake of those stations, an elaboration of their details is not proper for these pages. Therefore it is better to conclude this discourse with the mention of a point inferable from the noble tradition, which is also in accordance with the literal meanings of the verses of the Noble Qur'an and a large number of traditions scattered through various chapters. That point is that every one of the existents is possessed of knowledge, life and consciousness.

Rather, all the existents possess the marifah (gnosis) of the station of God, the Glorious and the Sublime. The inspiration imparted to bodily organs and members and the earth's locations regarding the concealment (of sins) and their obedience to divine commands, the tasbih of all existents referred to expressly in the Glorious Qur'an and with the mention of which things the noble traditions are replete - all these are proof of their knowledge, cognition and life. Rather, they constitute the proof of a special relation between the Creator and the creation, of which none has any knowledge except the Sacred Essence of God Almighty and those who it pleases Him should know.

And this is itself one of the teachings that the Noble Qur'an and the traditions of the inerrant Imams have imparted to mankind, which is also in agreement with the views of the emanationist philosophers and the mystics, as well as the experience of the mystics. In the

sublime science of metaphysics it has been proved that existence is identical with divine Excellences, Names and Attributes and at whatever level they manifest themselves and are reflected in a mirror, the manifestation is accompanied with all the aspects and excellences, including life, cognition and the rest of the seven main Attributes. And every one of the phases of manifestation of the reality of being and every level in the descendence of the light of the perfect beauty of the Deity has a special relation with the One, through which it has the secret gnosis of the Lord, as stated in the noble verse.

There is no creature that crawls, but He takes it by the forelock. (11:56)

It is said that huwa (He) refers to the mystery of Divine Ipseity, and 'the taking by the forelock' is the same mysterious, secret primordial existential relation the way to whose cognition is .closed to all existents

Notes:

[1] Al-Kulayni, Usul al-Kafi, kitab al-'iman wa al-kufr, bab al-tawbah, hadith No. 1.

[2] Al-Kulayni, Usul al-Kafi, hadith No. 10.

[3] Safinat al-Bihar, II, 180.

[4] 104:6

.[5] Nahj al-balaghah, ed. Subhi al-Salih, Beirut 1387(1967), p.549, Hikam, No. 417