(Contemplation (Tafakkur

By: An Exposition of Hadith by Imam Khomeini

Muhammad ibn Ya'qub (al-Kulayni), from 'Ali ibn Ibrahim, from his father, from al-Nawfali, from al-Sakuni, from Abu 'Abd Allah (Imam al Sadiq) (A) that he said: Amir al-Mu'minin (A) used to say: "Arouse your heart to contemplation; keep your side clear off the night; and be heedful towards your Lord".

Exposition

The phrase kana yaqul (used to say) has a meaning different from qala (said) or yaqul (says), as it indicates continuation and perpetuation. It shows that Amir al-Mu'minin (A) repeatedly used to utter these words. The word tanabbuh means 'to arouse', 'to warn', 'to call attention to', and 'to awaken from sleep.' Here all of these meanings are suitable, for the hearts are in a state of neglectfulness and sleep prior to contemplation, and they come out of this state by means of it. Sleep and awakening, unconsciousness and consciousness are different for the realm of the body and the kingdom of the soul.

Many a time the outward eye is awake, the corporeal personality is conscious but the inner eye and the inward vision is deep asleep, and the spiritual regions and the domain of the soul are heedless and unconscious. Tafakkur (contemplation, intellection) is the activity of the intellect. It is the reordering of known matters for the purpose of reaching hitherto unknown conclusions. It includes the kind of contemplation which is one of the characteristics of mystics and wayfarers of the Path. Khwajah 'Abd Allah al-'Ansari has described it in these words: Know that contemplation is the inquisitive groping of the inner vision for attaining the coveted end.

It is obvious that ma'rifah (gnosis) is the desired object of the heart. Accordingly, in this hadith also contemplation has a specific sense concerned with the heart and its life.

What Is Heart?

There are various applications and denotations of the word 'heart'. For physicians and the common people it is a tiny piece of flesh, whose contractions and expansions cause the flow of blood through arteries and veins, which generates a subtle élan vital. The philosophers

(hukama) use it for a certain seat of the psyche (nafs). The urafa assign to it grades (maratib) and stages (maqamat), and to go into their details is not our concern here. In the Holy Quran and the ahadith, it has been used both in its general as well as its particular senses in different places.

In the verse: The hearts reached to the throats. (33:10)

'Heart' is used in the same sense as used by physicians. And in: They have hearts wherewith they understand not, and they have eyes wherewith they see not. (7:179)

It is used in the sense used by the philosophers. And in: Therein verily is a reminder for him who hath a heart, or giveth ear with full intelligence. (50:37)

'Heart' is used in the same sense as used by the urafa.

In the tradition, tafakkur is used in the sense as is generally used by hukama', but the 'heart' as meant by urafa has no relation to tafakkur, especially on its certain levels, as those who are familiar with their terminology know well.

In the statement: (جَافِ عَنِ اللَّيْلِ جَنْبَكَ جفاً) gives the sense of bu'd, to keep away, to shun, and as given by al-Sihah. 'Night', here, has been (جَافَاهُ عَنْهُ فَتَجَافَى عَنِ الفِرَاشِ) such is its meaning in used allegorically for 'bed' and as discussed in detail by the usuli faqih Aqa Shaykh Rida Isfahani in Jaliyyat al-hal, the avoiding of 'night' refers to getting up from the bed for night prayers God willing, we shall discuss the holy tradition in a number of sections.

Merits Of Contemplation

It should be known that there is a great merit in contemplation. Contemplation is the key to the doors of ma'rifah and to the treasure chests of knowledge and excellence. It is the necessary and the surest first step on the path of genuine humanness. It has been highly commended and glorified by the Glorious Quran and in traditions, and one who abandons it has been censured and denounced.

In al-Kafi it is reported from Imam al-Sadiq (A) that: The best form of worship is to contemplate about God and His Power.

In another hadith, it is stated that an hour's contemplation is better than a night's worship.' And according to a Prophetic tradition, the contemplation of an hour is better than a year's worship. In another tradition it is stated that an hour's contemplation is better than sixty years of worship (according to another hadith, seventy years). And some traditionists and fuqaha' have even mentioned it as being better than a thousand years of worship. In any case, there are different grades and levels of contemplation, and every grade gives certain results and consequences. Here we shall mention a few of them.

1. The first kind of contemplation is about God, His Names, Attributes and His Perfections, the result of which is the knowledge of His existence and His irradiations (tajalliyat) from which the archetypes (ayan) and the manifestations (mazahir) emerge. And this is the most superior level of contemplation which yields the sublimest of the kinds of knowledge, and the firmest of the arguments (burhan); for thinking about the essence of the Cause and meditating on the Absolute Cause imparts knowledge about Him and the understanding of the effects. Such is the outline of the revelations on the hearts of the Truthful (siddiqun), and it is for this reason that it is called burhan al-siddiqin, the Proof of the Truthful; since the Truthful observe the Names and the Attributes, and view the first essences (a'yan) and manifestations (mazahir) in the mirror of the Names through the witness of the Essence.

The reason, however, that this type of proof is called burhan al-siddiqin is that if a Truthful one (siddiq) wishes to set forth his observations in the form of a proof and give his gnostic, intuitive experience the apparel of words, it would appear in this form; not that anyone who gains the knowledge of the Essence and its irradiations through this proof becomes one of the Truthful, or that the knowledge of the Truthful belongs to the category of proofs, even especial ones. How far from the truth to imagine that their knowledge is of the category of contemplation, or that their cognitions are like arguments and their premises!

As long as the heart is covered within the wrapping of arguments and one is in the stage of contemplation, one has not yet reached even the first grade of the Truthful. And when the thick curtains of knowledge and proof are set aside and contemplation brushed aside, it is at the extremity of the Path drat there, without the mediation of contemplation - in fact without any means or agency whatsoever - that he ultimately succeeds in viewing the glory and beauty of the Absolute at the end of his voyage; it is then that he experiences perpetual and everlasting delight. He transcends the world and everything therein, covered under the mantle of the Almighty to remain existent in total annihilation.

Nothing remains of him, and he passes into absolute oblivion, save that Divine favor should take him back to his realm and to the regions of (relative) being, in accordance with the capacity of his unchanging essence (al-'ayn al-thabitah). In the state of this return, the spheres of Divine glory and beauty are revealed to him, and he perceives (the meaning of) the Names and the Attributes in the mirror of the Essence.

Through that he witnesses his own unchanging essence and everything that is under His shelter and protection, and discovers the tracks of the manifestations and the ways of recourse to the heart's exterior. Then he is conferred with the robes of prophethood and the difference of the stations of the apostles and prophets becomes evident to him. The vastness or

narrowness of the circle of prophethood and that of those from whom the prophet is raised and those towards whom he is sent are revealed to him. And to enlarge on this topic further is not proper for these pages. So we shall leave it here and part, too, with the theme of burhan al-siddiqin, as it needs a preparatory introduction with its elaborate details.

The Desirable And The Forbidden Contemplation On The Divine Essence

It should be known that what we said about the possibility of contemplation on the Essence, the Names and the Attributes may lead the ignorant to imagine that it is forbidden in accordance with certain riwayat, knowing not that that which is forbidden is to attempt to fathom the quality and depths of the Essence, as is clear from the traditions.'

Sometimes those who are not capable of such (otherwise desirable) contemplation are also forbidden from reflecting on certain kinds of ma'arif which require initiation into certain subtleties. The hukama' confirm both of these points. The impossibility of fathoming the Essence is demonstrated in their writings, and the prohibition on contemplation on it is acknowledged by all of them. Also the conditions of entry into these sciences and the prohibition of the unworthy from learning them is also mentioned in their books; it is a customary advice which is mentioned by them either in the beginning or at the end of their works. For instance, the two great philosophers of Islam and authorities in this field, Shaykh Bu 'Ali Sina and Sadr al-Muta'allihin (R) have stated this at the end of al-'Isharat and at the beginning of al-'Asfar.

They have given eloquent counsels in this regard. But to contemplate the Essence for positing the principle of al-tawhid and affirming Its transcendence (al-tanzih) and sanctity was the ultimate goal and purpose of the sending of the prophets and the cherished end of the urafa. The Holy Quran and the sacred ahadith are loaded with the knowledge of the Essence, Its Perfections and the Divine Names.

Reliable books of traditions, like Usul al-Kafi and al-Tawhid of al Shaykh al-Saduq, also do not forbid contemplation for the purpose of affirmation of the Essence, the Names and the Attributes. The difference between the scriptures and traditions of the prophets and the writings of the philosophers is regarding their terminology and their synoptic or elaborate treatment of the subject, as is the case with the difference between fiqh and traditions.

But the calamity is that certain ignorant persons have appeared in the garb of scholars during the last few centuries, who, being bereft of the knowledge of the Quran and the Sunnah, consider their sheer ignorance as the sole proof of the vanity of the knowledge of al-mabda' and al-ma'ad. Such a man for the sake of promoting his trade, labels these ma'arif, which were

the ultimate goal of the apostles and the Awliya' (A) of God and with whose description the entire Book of God and the traditions of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A) are replete, as haram. Not sparing any charge and calumny against those who pursue these ma'arif, he diverts the hearts of the creatures of God from the knowledge of al-mabda' and al-ma'ad, in addition to sowing the seeds of discord and disharmony in the community of Muslims. When asked about the reason for all this takfir (calling someone kafir) and tafsiq, (calling someone fasiq), he immediately clings to the tradition: Do not contemplate upon the Essence (of God).

The ignorance and the error of this wretch is for two reasons: Firstly, he believes that the hukama' contemplate on the Essence, whereas they consider its intellection as impossible and probing deep into its mysteries as forbidden, and this itself is one of the established issues of their discipline. Secondly, having misunderstood the meaning of the tradition, he believes that not a single word be uttered regarding the Sacred Essence.

Here we shall cite some of the related traditions and, in our humble capacity, try to reconcile them, leaving the Judgment to the (reader's sense of) justice. Though this makes us digress from the proposed exposition of the hadith - our original goal -it is essential for eliminating doubts and refuting misconceptions. The following tradition is mentioned in al-Kafi: Abu Basir reports Abu Ja'far (A) as having said: Speak (takallamu) about the creation of God, and do not speak about God (fi Allah), for discourse about God will bring nothing but confusion (tahayyur) to the discourser.

This tradition itself indicates that the purpose of the prohibition is to discourage discourse aimed at fathoming the depths (iktinah) of the Essence and Its kayfiyyah (quality) with a view to discovering its cause. Otherwise, discoursing about the Essence with a view to affirming It, Its Perfections, Its Unity and Transcendence does not cause confusion. It is also possible that the prohibition here relates to such persons in whom discourse about these matters will cause perplexity and confusion. The late muhaddith al-Majlisi (R) has allowed both of these possibilities without elaborating them, but he gives more weight to the first one. Another tradition of al-Kafi states: From Hariz, from Abu 'Abd Allah (A) that he said, "Discuss everything, but do not discuss the Essence of the Almighty."

There are other traditions which are identical or close in import to this riwayah, and to cite them all is not essential. Another tradition of al-Kafi states: Abu Ja'far (A) said, "Beware of tafakkur in God. But if you wish to view His grandeur, observe the great of His creations."

Apparently, this riwayah also seems to forbid probing into the reality of the Essence, for the tradition adds that if someone wants to perceive the glory of the Almighty he should infer it from the grandeur of His creation. This kind of parabolic approach is intended for various types

of persons whose knowledge of God is derived through the means of the creation. This and other such traditions which appear to forbid discourse and contemplation on God by themselves support our claim, which is expressly confirmed by the following tradition of al-Kafı on contemplation: The best form of worship is to contemplate about God and His Power. Accordingly, contemplation on God for positing His Essence and contemplating His Power, His Names and Attributes is not only not prohibited, but is the most superior kind of worship. Another tradition of al-Kafi states: 'Ali (A) ibn al-Husayn (A) was questioned about tawhid; he answered "Verily, God Almighty knew that during the Last Age there would be a people of profound thinking. Hence the Almighty revealed Surat al-Tawhid and the verses of the Surat al-Hadid up to 'And God is the Knower of all that is in the hearts.' So whosoever goes beyond that will perish."

This shows that these verses about tawhid and tanzih, the verses about the emergence and the return of the creation mentioned therein, are for those who contemplate profoundly. Can then anyone still claim that contemplating on God Almighty is prohibited? What 'arif and Hakim has brought anything that goes beyond the commencing verses of the Surat al-Hadid? The ultimate of their achievement is that: All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifieth Allah. Is there any better way of describing God Almighty and the aspects of His Sacred Essence than the verse: He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward, and He is the Knower of all things. (57:3)

By the Life of the Beloved, had there been nothing besides this verse in the Glorious Book of God, it would have been sufficient for the men of heart!

If one were to consider the Book of God and the sermons and the traditions of the Holy Prophet (S) and his infallible vicegerents (A), one shall notice that no 'arif or Hakim has said anything on any of the conceivable sub-issues of the Divine teachings that goes beyond these; all their statements are replete with the description (tawsif) of the Almighty and full of arguments about His sacred Essence and Attributes, so that every class of scholars benefits from them according to the capacity of its comprehension.

Then all of these traditions show that contemplating and meditating on the Essence is forbidden on a certain level, which is to probe into the inmost mysteries (kunh) of the Essence and Its Quality (kayfiyyah), as stated in this tradition of al-Kafi: Whosoever contemplates in God to see how He is, perishes.

Moreover, the traditions forbidding contemplation and those enjoining it, when reconciled, give the conclusion that a group of people who do not possess the strength of giving ear to philosophical arguments (burhan), having no capacity of entering into such discussions, are

forbidden from doing so, and there are indications in the riwayat which testify to this. But as for those who have an aptitude for it, it is not only proper but is the highest form of worship. In any case, we have digressed completely from our proposed theme, but there was no way we could avoid examining those degenerate views and the kind of calumnies, displeasing to God, which have acquired circulation during recent times on tongues, with the hope that it will make some effect on some hearts, and if one person were to accept this it would be sufficient for me. And praise is God's and to Him do we complain.

Contemplation On Creation

Another level of contemplation is reflecting on the subtleties of creation, its perfection and refinement, to the extent that it is in human power. Such contemplation leads to the intellection of its Perfect Source, its Wise Maker, and is a process which is the reverse of the burhan al siddiqin; for, in the latter, the point of departure is the station of God Almighty, glorious is His Name, wherefrom is acquired the knowledge of the manifestations of His Sovereignty (wilayah).

Here, however, the point of departure is creation, whereafter is acquired the knowledge of its Source and Maker. This proof (burhan) is for ordinary people, who do not partake of the burhan al-siddiqin. Therefore, perhaps, many of them would negate that the contemplation of God can bring the knowledge of Him and that the knowledge of the Origin can lead to the knowledge of the creation.

Hence, the contemplation of the subtleties and the marvels of creation and the firmness and finesse of the system of creation belongs to the category of beneficial knowledge; it is the most meritorious of the actions of the heart and superior to all worships, since its result is the noblest of all results. Although in all forms of devotional rites ('ibadat) the main aim and the real secret is the acquisition of transcendental knowledge (ma'arif), yet the likes of us find no access to such secrets and such results. They are for their own people, to whom every devotional rite is like a grain of one or several revelations.

In any case, man has not been able to acquire the real knowledge of the subtleties and secrets of creation. So subtle are its foundations and so firm its design, so beautiful and perfectly planned is its system that if we consider any creature, however insignificant and humble it should appear to be, with all the scientific development acquired during centuries of studies man has been unable to discover even one of its thousand secrets, let alone the majesty of the cosmic system of creation whose intricacies and mysteries are beyond the reaches of our vision and inaccessible to our imperfect, limited ideas. Now we shall draw your attention to one

of the subtleties of creation which is relatively near to understanding and comprehension and is considered to lie in the realm of the sensible.

The Earth And The Sun: Two Masterpieces Of Creation

My dear, observe and reflect on the relationship between the earth and the sun, the fixed distance and the suitable speed with which the earth spins on its axis and revolves in its orbit around the sun, causing day and night and the seasons. What a perfection of creative skill and what a work of immaculate wisdom it is that had it been not exactly so - that is had the earth been a little away or nearer to the sun - there would not have been any vegetation and animal life, on account of chilling cold due to the former and excessive heat due to the latter.

And, similarly, had the earth remained static, there would not have been any days and nights and seasons either, and the earth would have been without any trace of life despite possessing everything else to support life.

Yet He did not suffice at this; He made its north furthest from the sun (in the northern hemisphere), so as to ensure that excessive heat does no harm to the creatures; the point nearest to the sun was situated towards the south, so that coldness should not harm the inhabitants of the earth. This was also not enough; the moon, which also influences the earth's creatures, was assigned a different course than the earth, in such a way that when the sun is the northern region of the earth, the moon appears in the southern, and vice versa.

This was for the sake of the utmost benefit of their positions relative to the earth. These are essentially sensible phenomena, yet to encompass their subtleties and secrets is not possible for anybody but their omnipotent Creator.

Why should we go so far ? If one contemplates his own creation, according to the scope of his knowledge and capability, beginning with the external senses he will see that they have been contrived according to the kind of sensations and sense perceptions they receive. For every group of sensible objects a separate faculty of perception has been created, and that too with what astounding propriety and skill! And for matters of a supra-sensible nature, which cannot be perceived through the outward senses, internal senses have been fashioned to perceive them.

Let alone the knowledge of the soul and its spiritual faculties, which the human intellect cannot comprehend, and contemplate upon the human body, its anatomy, its physical constitution and the functioning of each and every external and internal organ. See what a wonderful system and what a striking order they constitute!

In spite of a hundred centuries of scientific study, man has not been able to understand a thousandth fraction of it, and all the scientists declare their inability in this regard in

unambiguous terms, although this body of man is no more than an insignificant speck in comparison to other creatures on the earth's crust, and the earth with all its inhabitants is of little significance as compared with the solar system and our complete solar system is of no consequence when compared with other solar systems and galaxies; and all these macro and micro systems are parts of a disciplined and orderly system, no speck of which can be found faulty by anyone and all the human intellects are unable to understand even a single secret of its myriad recondite subtleties and secrets.

Does your intellect still need something more after this reflection to believe that an Omniscient, Omnipotent and All-Wise Being, who does not resemble any other being in anything, has created all these creatures with their firm orderliness and subtlety?

Can there be any doubt concerning God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth? (14:10)

All this orderly and systematic artistry, whose general laws no human mind can comprehend, has not come into existence by itself and spontaneously. Blind be the inner eye that fails to perceive the Truth and cannot observe its beauty in these creatures! Perish the man who is skeptical and doubtful despite seeing all these effects and signs! But, what else can helpless man, captivated by fantasies, do? If you take out your rosary and claim that its beads got assembled on the thread by themselves, without anybody arranging them, everyone will laugh at your intelligence.

You will invite a calamity if you take out your pocket watch and make similar claims about it; if you do such a thing will you not have stuck off your name from the list of the sane and wouldn't all the sane people of the world consider you a lunatic? If one who considers this simple and small mechanical system to originate without a cause and as being outside causality is considered insane and is likely to be stripped of all the rights belonging to men of reason, what is to be done with the person who claims not the whole cosmic system but even man and the complex system of his body and soul alone to have come into existence by itself?

Is he still to be reckoned among men of reason? What fool is more stupid than such a man? Perish man! What has made him an unbeliever? (80:17)

!Death to him whom knowledge cannot revive and who is drowned in the sea of his own error

Contemplation On The States Of The Soul

One of the levels of contemplation is meditation on the states of the soul, which is of immense benefit being the source of vast transcendental knowledge. Here we intend to discuss two benefits: one is the knowledge of the Day of Resurrection, and the other is the knowledge of (the necessity of) prophethood and revealed scriptures - that is, of general prophethood (al-

nubuwwat al-'ammah) and systems of Divine Law (sharayi' haqqah). One of the issues pertaining to the soul is its state of independence (from the body), a problem which has been given more significance than any other philosophical issue by all the eminent hukama about which they have given numerous proofs and explanations. Here we are not in a position to offer an elaborate proof of this. We shall confine ourselves to mentioning some simple preliminaries and then return to our subject.

All the physicians, scientists and anatomists unanimously agree that all the human organs, from the pia mater - which is the centre of sense perceptions and the stage for the manifestation of all psychic faculties - to the coarser parts and organs of the body, weaken, deteriorate and decline after the age of thirty or thirty-five years. We ourselves have experienced how weakness and sluggishness overtake all the organs of the body after that age.

However, at the same time, that is at the age of thirty and forty and after that, the spiritual faculties and intellectual perceptions become more refined and gain in growth and strength. This implies that the rational faculties are not physically based, for had they been corporeal like other physical faculties, they would also have declined.

It is not right to imagine that it is the extent of intellectual activity as well as experience which strengthen the intellectual faculties, because all the physical faculties weaken and decline despite prolonged use and do not grow in strength and perfection. This proves that the intellectual faculty is not physically rooted.

It is also improper to say that the faculty of intellect also declines with age, because, firstly, none of the physical faculties grows strong till middle age, so that it may be said that a certain organ of the body has been the centre of intellectual perception that grows in strength till middle age and then becomes weaker, thus rendering weak the faculty of intellect as well. Secondly, the weakness which continues into middle age is associated with rational thought, which is either a faculty present in the body or is dependent on the physical faculties. The purely intellectual and higher faculties continue to become stronger than ever before during middle age, although their expression and outward manifestation may be lesser. In short, the strength of the faculty of intellectual perception at the age of forty or fifty years is enough for proving our contention.

Moreover, every such faculty which is nearer to the physical and corporeal domain is inclined to deteriorate and decay more rapidly, and that which is more removed from it weakens more latterly. But the powers belonging to the world of the transcendent and the celestial become stronger and their vitality increases. This proves that the soul is not corporeal and physical in

nature. Since the properties, effects and activities of the soul are opposed to the properties, effects and activities of the purely corporeal organs, it proves that the soul is not corporeal in nature. For instance, through prior knowledge we know that a body does not accept more than one form. If it is to receive another form, it will have to part with the form it earlier had. For example, if a picture is drawn on a paper, another picture cannot be painted on that page as long as the first picture is not erased completely. This principle is applicable to all bodies; but for the soul, while one form is impressed on it, other totally different forms can also be stamped on it without the first form being wiped out. Every corporeal body can receive only finite forms, whereas the soul can receive infinite forms, and it is for this reason that it can posit infinity.

Also, every corporeal body, if it loses one form, that form cannot be restored to it without a renewed cause; but in the case of the soul, any form, after having left it, may return to it without any resumption of the cause. This shows that the soul is opposed to all corporeal bodies regarding properties, effects and action. Hence it has a non-corporeal existence of its own and does not belong to the category of bodies and physical objects.

Anything that is non-corporeal is not subject to decay - as has been demonstrated in its own place - because decay cannot occur without matter, and the non-corporeal is independent of matter. Matter is the precondition of corporeal bodies; therefore, decay is not possible for the soul. Hence we come to the conclusion that the soul does not weaken and decay or is destroyed with the weakening, decay or destruction of the body, or after separating from it. It remains in another world and there is no death and extinction for it; this is a spiritual resurrection for the souls, prior to the Day of Resurrection, when they are united with the bodies by the will of God.

Now we reach the point of absolute affirmation of Resurrection, and stand opposed to those who negate it absolutely. From these preliminaries it should be clear that there is health and disease, reform and corruption, knowledge and wretchedness for souls, and to discover their source and to know the secrets of their corruption and welfare is not possible for anyone except the Holy Essence of the Almighty.

In the perfect system of the cosmos, which is the best of possible systems ordered by the Absolutely Wise and the Omniscient, it is impossible that there should be any negligence regarding the education of mankind as to the ways of its felicity and wretchedness, its guidance towards the causes of spiritual soundness and corruption, and the prescription of remedies for curing the soul.

This is because such a negligence would imply a defect either in God’s knowledge or His

power, either His generosity or His justice, whereas it is known that His Holy Being is free from all these defects. He is absolutely perfect and absolutely generous. Any neglect providing guidance pointing out the paths of knowledge and wretchedness will imply a great defect in Divine wisdom, which would lead to cosmic disorder and chaos. Therefore, the perfect system necessitates the declaration of the paths of felicity and the road to guidance. This explanation leads to two clear conclusions.

One is that the Shari'ah is the prescription for spiritual maladies and is known to none except the Sacred Being of the Almighty. The other is that it is necessary for God to bring it to the knowledge of man. It is obvious that such a momentous, perfect and precise knowledge, whose apprehension is not possible through the intellectual faculties of men - none of which can grasp either the relationships between tile corporeal and transcendental worlds or the effects of the transcendental forms on the inner depths of the soul - can only be accessible through the agency of wahy or revelation, that is, by means of Divine teaching.

It is clear that every human individual is not worthy of this office and does not have the capability of occupying this station and performing this duty. It is only once in several centuries that one such individual is to be found who is worthy of performing this task and who can undertake such a great mission. God Almighty assigns to him the task of expounding the paths of felicity and wretchedness to humanity, to make them aware of that wherein lies their welfare. This is general prophethood (al-nubuwwat al-'ammah). Now that we have arrived at this point in our discussion, we may explain a further point which should be considered as one of self-evident truths.

A Conclusive Proof

Now that we know that there should necessarily be a Shari'ah laid down by the Divine Lawgiver for mankind, when we turn to the Shari'ahs prevailing amongst mankind we see that there are three principal ones: the Shari'ah of Jews, the Shari'ah of Christians, and the Shari'ah of Islam. We find that in all the three essential foundations which constitute the basis of all Shari'ahs (of which the first is concerned with the true doctrines and Divine teachings about God's Attributes and His transcendence, the knowledge of angels and the qualities of the prophets (A) and their infallibility, which are the principal and main component of the Shari'ahs; the second is about praiseworthy qualities, purification of the soul and moral excellences; the third is about outward individual and social acts and rites pertaining to political and civic actions and their like), the Islamic Shari'ah is more complete than the others.

Anyone who tries to judge without prejudice will discover that it is incomparable to the others,

and there does not exist any religious law pertaining to all the aspects and stages of life more perfect regarding its worldly and otherworldly aspects than this Law. This is itself the biggest proof in favor of its Divine origin.

Accordingly, after affirming the doctrine of universal prophethood and the doctrine that God Almighty has legislated a Divine Shari'ah for humanity, showing them the path of guidance and bringing them under the cover of one discipline and system, no preliminaries are required for proving the truthfulness of the Islamic Din except for examining it and comparing it with other religious laws on every conceivable level of human need – from righteous qualities and spiritual learning to individual and social responsibilities. And this is the meaning of the following sacred tradition: Islam surpasses (every creed) and is not surpassed (by anything).

This is because the more the intellects of men progress and the more they gain in understanding, they bow their heads in front of its light of guidance when they consider its proofs (hujaj) and arguments (barahin), and no hujjah in the world can refute them.

The result of our arguments relating to the positing of the prophetic mission of the Seal of Prophethood (S) is that in the same way as the creative perfection manifest in the creation of the cosmos and its perfect arrangement and order directs us towards the intellection of a Being who has ordered it and whose omniscience encompasses all its particulars, subtleties and grandeurs, the perfection of the Shari'ah – whose perfect order and methodical finesse is capable of guaranteeing all the material and spiritual, this-worldly and otherworldly, collective and individual needs – guides us to the fact that the system of this Shari'ah has been ordered by a knowledge which encircles all the needs of the human species.

And since our intellects tell us that the intellectual faculties of a man whose biography has been written by all the historians of religion and who was an unlettered person brought up in a society devoid of all higher knowledge and virtues, could not have produced such a perfect and systematic Shari'ah. Hence, of necessity, we have to acknowledge that this Shari'ah has a metaphysical and transcendental source, and reached that glorious personage (S) by means of Divine revelation and wahy. And praise is God's for the clarity of proofs.

We had intended to describe another stage of contemplation -the contemplation on this world, and zuhd is its fruit – but since this pen broke its reins in the earlier stages of this discourse making it somewhat lengthier than intended, we shall refrain from going into it.

Virtues Of The Midnight Prayer

Now remains the exposition of these two phrases of the hadith: Keep your side clear off the night; and be heedful towards your Lord.

In this blessed pronouncement, the Commander of the Faithful, Imam ‘Ali (A), has placed the actions of the heart, contemplative awareness, and the taqwa of God by the side of night vigils and keeping aloof from the bed for the sake of worship. This proves the distinction and merit it commands, and the practice has been greatly glorified in the traditions. The biographies of the Imams of guidance (A), and those of great sages and eminent scholars, indicate that they not only assiduously observed it, but attached great importance to the practice of staying awake until the late hours of night, aside from the aim of worship.

There are forty-one ahadith recorded in Wasai’l al-Shi’ah (the greatest of Shi’i books, which is the pivot of the Shi’i legal school and the source book of Shi’i scholars and fuqaha’) about the benefits and merits of observing this practice, and there are several ahadith about the undesirability of giving up this habit. There are, of course countless of similar traditions in the books of supplications and prayers, but we shall quote only a few in the following, as a token of barakah and blessing: It is reported in al-Kafı from Mu’awiyah ibn ‘Amman who said that he heard Imam al-Sadiq (A) say: “In the wasiyyah addressed to ‘Ali (A) by the Prophet (S), he (S) said: “O ‘Ali, I enjoin you regarding certain habits that you must safeguard.” Then the Prophet (S) prayed, “O God, succor him.” Then (continuing his advice) he said, “Observe the midnight prayer. Observe the midnight prayer. Observe the midnight prayer.”

Its great significance may be understood from the entire tradition: In al-Khisal, Abu ‘Abd Allah (A) is reported to have said, “The Prophet (S) asked Jibra’il to exhort him about something. Jibra’il said, “O Muhammad! Live you as you wish, for verily you will die one day. And love whatever you like, for verily you will have to part from it. Act as you wish, for verily you will have to face it. Know that the distinction of a believer lies in his establishing the night vigil and his nobleness lies in refraining from (maligning) the people’s honor.”

The high degree of its significance can be understood from Jibrail’s especially recommending it to the Messenger of God (S); for had Jibra’il (A) deemed anything else as more important, he would have mentioned it while giving advice.

It is reported in al-Majalis on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas that the Prophet (S) sad in a hadith: “When God Almighty appoints the night vigil as sustenance for His slave, man or woman, when he/she wakes up at night with sincere devotion towards God, performs a full ablution, and says prayer for the Almighty God with the purity of intention, with whole heartedness and with tearful eyes, God Almighty appoints seven rows of angels (to pray) behind him/her. No one except God can count their number on each side of each row, which extends from the east to the west. When he concludes the prayer, God Almighty writes grades for him equal to their number.”

In ‘Ilal al-shara’i, it is reported from Anas that he heard the Messenger of God say: “Two rak’ah of prayer performed in the middle of night are dearer to me than the entire world and everything therein.”

In a number of ahadith it has been reported that the midnight prayer is the mu’min’s honor and dignity, and his adornment in the Hereafter, in the same way as children and wealth are the adornments of this world.

In ‘Ilal al-shara’i, Jabir is reported to have heard the Prophet (S) say: “God did not befriend Ibrahim (A) except for his feeding people and offering prayers by night while the people were fast asleep.”

Had there been no other merit besides this for the midnight prayer, it would have been enough - but for those alone who deserve to practice it, not the likes of me. We do not know what honor and distinction it is and what it means to possess the station of being befriended by God. All intellects fail to comprehend it. If all the adornments of Paradise were displayed before his eyes, such a man would not even glance at them. You also, had you a beloved dear to your heart, or a very dear friend, were he to be present in front of you, it will cause you to neglect all the good and delicious things, absorbing your attention entirely with the vision of the beloved and the radiance of the countenance of the dear one, though this similitude is out of proportion for describing this condition, to the extent that the east is far from the west.

From ‘Ali ibn Ibrahim who, with his chain of narrators, reports from Imam al-Sadiq (A) that he said, “For every good deed that a slave of God performs, the reward for it is specified in the Quran, except for the midnight prayer, which commands an unusually high reward on account of its great worth. (God says in the Quran): Their sides shun their beds as they call on their Lord in fear and hope; and they expend of what We have provided them. No soul knows what delight is laid up for them secretly, as a recompense for that they were doing (32:16,17).”

What can be the delight that God Almighty has kept in store for them, concealing it from the eyes of all? Had it been something similar to the flowing streams, the magnificent mansions, and the diverse bounties of Paradise, He would have described it - as in the case of other deeds, of which (at least) the angels are aware. This shows that this reward is above all these and of a different kind; its greatness stands beyond that which can be communicated to anyone, especially the inhabitants of this lowly world. Do not liken the bounties of this world to those of the other.

Do not imagine that the Paradise and the gardens therein are similar to the gardens of this world, only somewhat vaster and of a greater degree of grandeur. There is the abode of Divine beneficence and the house of the hospitality of the Lord. The entire world is not comparable in

grandeur to a single hair of a houri of Paradise. Rather it is not comparable even to a thread of the garments made for its inhabitants.

Despite all this, God Almighty has named none of these as reward for the performers of the midnight prayer, and has only referred to the high station of theirs in the words of the above verse. But, alas, we are indolent, being not men of certitude. Otherwise, it would not have been possible for us to be neglectful to such a degree and to be so drowned in deep sleep till morning. If the night vigils were to make man aware of the mysteries of salat, were he to preoccupy his mind with the remembrance and contemplation of the Lord, and were his nights to become mounts of ascent into the Divine Proximity, his reward would be nothing other than the vision of the Absolute Beauty.

And woe to us, the negligent who do not wake up from slumber till the end of life and remain under the intoxication of nature! Woe to us, whom every day increases in stupefaction! Woe to us, who live on the animal plane, comprehending nothing but eating, drinking and lovemaking! Whatever we do, even if it is worship, that too is merely meant for catering to the needs of the belly and the underneath. Do you imagine that the salat of Khalil al-Rahman, the Friend of the Beneficent (Ibrahim), was similar to that of ours? He did not speak of his wishes even to Jibra'il - and we? We do not hesitate to beg even Satan (if we believe him to be mighty enough to grant our prayers) to fulfill our desires!

Yet there is no need to lose hope. It is possible that after a period of performing the night vigil and habituating ourselves to it God Almighty may gradually help you and cover you, with an invisible gesture of grace, with the robe of His mercy. But, on the whole, do not be oblivious of the mysteries of worship, and do not devote yourself merely to the outward refinements of Quranic recitings. If you cannot perform it with a sincerity of intention, strive at least for the delight that God Almighty has kept hidden from all the sights. And remember in your prayers, should it be your wish, this rebellious and beastly sinner who has forgone all higher stations to remain content to thrive on the animal plane. And chant with full attention and sincerity of intention this prayer: My God, I implore Thee to rescue me from the house of illusion and this abode of delirium, and help me to return to the abode of eternity. Grant me the ability and preparedness to die before such an opportunity is lost.

What Is Taqwa?

This should be known that taqwa (derived from wiqayah, defense) is a kind of defense and shielding. In common speech, as well as in the vocabulary of traditions, it means to restrain or bridle oneself from violating Divine commands (awamir and nawahi) and from going against

what is pleasing to God. It is usually used for efficacious guarding of the soul and total control of it from falling into illegal and illegitimate acts, by refraining from all that is suspect (i.e. not known to be permissible for certain): Whosoever pursues dubious things, falls into forbidden things (muharramat) and is destroyed on account of his ignorance, such as an animal that grazes around a mire is liable to soon get entrapped in it.

This should be known that although mere taqwa does not by itself constitute the higher stages of perfection and spiritual accomplishment, but reaching a high station is also not possible without it; for as long as the soul is smeared with commission of prohibited deeds, one cannot enter the door of humanity and cannot be a wayfarer of its path. As long as man remains obedient to his carnal wishes and sensual pleasures and their sweetness hangs in his mouth, he cannot even reach the preliminary grades of human perfection. As long as he cherishes the love of the world in his heart and has the fondness: for mundane things, he cannot reach the station of even those who are halfway on the road (mutawassitun) and the zuhhad.

And as long as self-love lies embedded in his essence, he will not reach the station of the sincere (mukhlisun) and the lovers of God. Until the love for the pluralities of the world (mulk) and the Hereafter (malakut) is evident in his heart, he will not reach the high station of the majdhubun (those immersed in the Divine and detached from all worldly attachments). And until the plurality of the Names is manifest within the core of his essence, he cannot attain total annihilation (fana). As long as his heart is turned towards the spiritual station, he has not attained the station of complete extinction. And until his essence is prone to take up different colors (talwin), he has not reached the station of stable endurance, and the Essence; as the referent of the Name of the Essence, will not cast Its eternal and everlasting radiance into his heart.

Thus, for ordinary men taqwa is with respect to the forbidden things; for the elect it is vis-a-vis sensual pleasures; for the ascetics it is in relation to the world, for the sincere it is in relation to the love of the self; and for the majdhubun it is in relation to the plurality of Act; for the faniyun (those who have annihilated themselves in the Essence) it is in relation to the plurality of the Names; for, the wasdun (those who have reached the Essence) taqwa is in relation to absorption in the annihilation; and for the mutamakkinun it is in regard to inner instabilities (talwinat), and hence the Quran enjoins: So be as steadfast as thou art commanded. (11: 112)

There is much that can be said for each one of these stations, the description of which would not lead the likes of us anywhere except into confusion and bafflement over terms, blind as we are to the meanings concealed by the veils of concepts, and there are a people who befit every field. Now we shall turn our attention to taqwa in its elementary form, which is more significant

.for mankind

Taqwa For The Common People

Remember, my dear, that in the same way as there is health and sickness for the human body and remedies and cures for correcting it, there is also health and disease and remedies and cures for the human soul as well. Its health and well-being is observance of moderation, it lies in treading the human path, and sickness and affliction is the result of deviating from the right path of humanity.

The spiritual maladies and diseases are a thousand times more significant than the physical maladies; for at the most the latter ultimately lead to death. As soon as death approaches and the soul leaves the body, all physical maladies and corporeal defects and infirmities disappear for one, and one does not feel any bodily pain and affliction any more.

But if, God forbid, one is afflicted with spiritual maladies and diseases of the soul, the time of death is withdrawal of the soul's attention from the body and its redirection towards the domain of the spirit: that is the beginning of the experience of these sicknesses and afflictions. The similitude of attention toward the world and its attachments is like the narcotics which makes its addict oblivious of himself. The breaking of the soul's bonds with the realm of the physical world makes the soul gain self-consciousness.

As soon as it becomes self-conscious, all the pains, diseases and indispositions that lie latent within the depths of the essence, now overwhelm it and each and every thing that remained invisible until that time, like fire smouldering under ashes, becomes evident. Those diseases and maladies either cannot be driven away and adhere firmly to one, or if they are remediable, it is only after being subjected to tortures, pains, fire and burning for thousands of years that they can be wiped away: The last cure is cauterization.

God Almighty says: It will be heated in the fire of hell, and their foreheads and their flanks and their backs will be branded therewith. (9:35)

The apostles of God are similar to kind physicians who out of great concern for treating illnesses prescribe different remedies in accordance with the severity of the disease. They have strived to guide mankind on the right path of genuine guidance (We are God-trained physicians). The effect of the spiritual deeds and actions of the heart, as well as the external deeds and actions of the body, is similar to that of a medicine. In the same way, the effect of taqwa, on each of its levels, is similar to abstaining from those things that aggravate the disease.

Unless the sick man does not abstain from harmful things, it is not possible that his malady be

replaced by well-being and the prescribed remedy be effectual. During physical illness, sometimes, despite a little intemperance, medicine and nature do their work and one may regain his health and well-being; for nature itself is a protector of health and medicine acts as its assistant. But the matter is more serious in the case of spiritual maladies, as here the nature dominates the spirit from the very beginning. and the spiritual side heads towards corruption and decline: Verily, it is the self which incites to evil (12:53)

Accordingly, the disease overwhelms it on the slightest indulgence and intemperance, making inroads and destroying its health and vigor completely. Therefore, anyone who is concerned with his spiritual soundness, will try to improve his condition after finding the ways of getting rid of painful chastisement. His well-being rests upon two things: one is to adopt those things which bring spiritual health, and the other is to abstain from things which bring spiritual harm and affliction.

It should be remembered that the spiritual harm inflicted by the forbidden things is greater than all other vices, and it is for this very reason that they have been forbidden. And to perform the obligatory and incumbent duties is also most necessary, and it is for this reason that they have been made obligatory and given priority over all other things. These have been considered as the foremost and the most essential steps in the direction of spiritual advancement.

Treading the path of felicity and reaching the highest human grades and stations depends upon having traversed these two stages. Anyone who observes them acquires felicity and salvation. Of these two, taqwa, or abstinence from muharramat, is the more significant. The mystics and the wayfarers have also considered it more significant than the other step. A study of the traditions (of the Prophet [S] and the Imams [A]) and the sermons of the Nahj al-balaghah further confirms this that the Infallible Ones (A) also laid great emphasis on this step. Therefore, O dear, consider the first stage to be of utmost importance and be greatly heedful and attentive regarding these matters. If the first step is taken rightly and this foundation is laid solidly, there is hope of reaching the other stations; otherwise it is impossible to attain the higher stations and very difficult and painstaking to obtain salvation. Our precious Shaykh used to enjoin us to attend constantly to the following verses of the Surat al-Hashr: O ye who believe! Observe your duty (taqwa) to God. And let every soul look to that which it sendeth on before for the morrow. And observe your duty (taqwa) to God! Verily, God is informed of what ye do. And be not ye as those who forgot God, and He caused them to forget their souls. Such are the evildoers. Not equal are the people of the Fire and the people of the Garden. The people of the Garden, they are the victorious. If We had caused the Quran to descent upon the mountain, thou (O Muhammad) verily hadest seen it humbled, rent asunder by the fear of God.

Such similitudes coin We for mankind that haply they may reflect. He is God, than Whom there is no other god, the Knower of the invisible and the visible. He is the Beneficent, the Merciful. He is God, than Whom there is no other god, the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One, Peace, the Keeper of faith, the Guardian, the Majestic, the Compeller, the Superb. Glorified be God from all that they ascribe as partners (unto Him)! He is God, the Creator, the Shaper out of naught, the Fashioner. His are the most beautiful names. All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifieth Him, and He is the Mighty, the Wise. (59:18–24)

Our Shaykh would ask us to recite these verses after daily prayers and to contemplate over their meaning, especially in the late hours of night when the heart is relaxed, stating that it is very effective for curing the soul and for holding the mischief of the self and Satan at bay. He would recommend us to be with ablution (wudu') all the time, for, he would say, it is like a warrior's armor.

In any case, beseech and entreat God Almighty with supplications and tears to succor you and assist you during this trial and to help you in acquiring the faculty of taqwa. Remember that in the beginning it will appear to be a little hard, but after strict observance of a few days discomfort will change into comfort and hardship into leisure and tranquility; rather, it will give you a unique spiritual joy, which those who have tasted value higher than all other enjoyments. God willing, after strict vigilance and total taqwa, you will progress towards the station of taqwa attained by the elect, which is taqwa against sensual pleasures. When you taste the sweetness of spiritual enjoyment, you will gradually turn away from physical pleasures and try to evade them. Traversing the path will become easier for you and you will not attach any value to transitory physical enjoyments; rather, you will abhor them. The worldly treasures will appear ugly and coarse to your eyes.

In this state of consciousness, you will realize that each one of the worldly pleasures leaves its trace on the soul, a black blot on the heart: it intensifies the love for this world, which itself causes one to cling to this place, and, at the time of the wrenching away of the soul from the body, takes the form of the agony of death and its distresses and squeezes. Mainly, the anguish and agony of death and its severity are the result of these pleasures and these attachments to the corporeal world, as said earlier. As soon as man gains consciousness of this fact, all the physical pleasures lose their significance in his eyes.

He becomes abhorrent towards the world, its treasures and adornments. This itself is another success, whence the wayfarer advances towards the third grade of taqwa. Thereupon, treading the Path of God becomes easier for him and the road to humanness becomes illuminated and spacious. Every step that he takes carries him further on the way of Truth.

His exercises assume sacred validity. He becomes averse to the self, its ways and its demands. He senses within his being the love of God and he is no more satisfied now with the promises of Paradise and the palaces and the houris thereof. He yearns for a higher ideal and end hating his (earlier) self-seeking and self-love. His taqwa is now directed against self love and he becomes muttaqi in regard to his own self-indulgence. This is a high and lofty attainment and the first step in the direction of sensing the fragrance of wilayah. God Almighty specifies a seat for him under the shelter of His grace and succors him with His special favors. The matters that the wayfarer on the Divine path experiences after this are beyond the ken of expression. And praise belongs to God, in the beginning and the end, outwardly and inwardly, .and may His benedictions be upon Muhammad and the pure of his progeny