Desire and Hope

Muhammad ibn Ya'qub (al-Kulayni) (R) reports from al-Husayn ibn Muhammad, he from Mu'alla ibn Muhammad, from al-Washsha', from 'Asim ibn Humayd, he from Abu Hamzah, who narrates on the authority of Yahya ibn 'Aqil that the latter reported that Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A) said, "I am apprehensive for you on account of two things: submission to desire and cherishing of inordinate hope. As to desire, it prevents one from haqq (Truth, righteousness, God); and as to inordinate hope, it makes man oblivious of the Hereafter".

Exposition

Literally hawiya means 'to love', 'to desire' and 'to become fond of something'. It may either be something commendable or abominable, or it may be something towards which one is inclined as a result of natural urge. The carnal self is inclined towards lust and desire, if it is not bridled by reason and the Shari'ah. But the possibility of hawd being used here as a legal term (haqiqah Shar'iyyah) with a special meaning, as maintained by some scholars, seems remote. The phrase (صَـــدَّ عَـــنْ) gives the sense of repelling something, turning away, preventing or dissuading from something. But here the verb sadda is used in the transitive sense of stopping and preventing. God willing, we shall discuss the two evils and their consequent conditions: first, that of being prevented from the truth and from God; and, secondly, that of obliviousness of the Hereafter. We implore God's assistance in this regard.

A) On The Evil Of Following One's Desires)

(A):Though it is not directly relevant to our topic, it is essential to know that the human soul is by nature and instinct inclined to believe not only in the principle of tawhid (monotheism), but to follow all truthful doctrines also. Yet, since the moment of birth and stepping into this universe, man starts growing and developing along with his natural urges and animal desires, except for those who are protected and assisted by God, the Holy Preserver. The latter being exceptions and among the marvels of existence, are not our concern here.

We are here concerned with the condition of the species in general. It is evident that at the time of his birth, after passing through certain stages, man is no better than a weak animal and has no distinction over other animals, except for his potentiality of becoming a human being. That is, his humanness is potential, not present.

Therefore, man is an animal in actuality in the initial stages of his life in this world. No power but the law of animal nature, which governs through the faculties of Desire (shahwah) and Anger (ghadhab), rules over him. And since this marvel of nature is capable of acquiring all kinds of attributes, in order to cater to the needs of these two faculties he employs another fiendish power, the faculty of imagination (quwwah wahmiyyah) also in this direction through such means as: lying, deceit, hypocrisy, slander and all the other kind of tools. He grows and develops with these three powers, which are the roots of all other vices and fatal sins, and they too develop and flourish within him with age.

If he is not influenced by an instructor or guide, after having grown and reached the age of maturity he becomes a beast of uncommon rarity which surpasses all other beasts and devils in the above-mentioned qualities, becoming only stronger and more completely devilish and bestial. If he retains the same pattern of growth, he will not do anything except follow the desires of the carnal self and servilely obey these three powers. No sign of Divine knowledge or awareness, moral excellence or righteous deed can be found in him, and the innate light of nature gets stifled within his personality.

Thus all the dimensions of spiritual health-which do not go beyond the three above-mentioned things, i.e., Divine knowledge, moral virtues and righteous deeds-are suppressed by the desires of the carnal self. His servility to sensual inclinations and bestial comforts does not allow any of the manifestations of righteousness to appear in his being. The darkness of sensual desire extinguishes the light of reason and faith. He does not experience the second birth which in reality is the birth of the human being. He continues to exist in the same state and is cut off and removed from God and truth.

When he departs from this world in this state and enters the next world, which is the realm of unveiling of reality, he does not find himself in any other form except that of a beast or a devil. With no reminiscence and memory whatsoever of a human existence, he dwells in this state in the abode of eternal darkness, torment and dread, until God Almighty wills what He may. Such is the fate of total servility to sensual desires which causes one to be cut off absolutely from God and righteousness.

It can be concluded from this that the amount of alienation from God is the measure and criterion of the extent of servility to the desires of the self. Conversely, the extent of such alienation can be gauged by means of the extent of such servility.

For instance, a person who had espoused these three faculties since the initial stages of his life, having developed and grown with them, if he is influenced and trained by means of the teachings of the prophets and instructions of scholars and sages, gradually submitting himself

to the educative influence of the prophets and the awliya' of God (A) it is possible that the innate potentiality for perfect humanness, which is inherent in his nature, may soon become an actuality. When that happens, all the modes of his inner being acquire a human dimension and the inner devil of the carnal self is converted to faith, as the Prophet of God remarked about himself: The devil inside me has been converted to faith at my hand.

The bestial self then surrenders itself to the human self in such a way that it carries its rider like a docile and subdued celestial mount on the journey towards the skies of perfection, becoming a buraq carrying its rider swiftly towards the horizons of the Hereafter, never turning wild again. The powers of Desire and Anger having been subdued by the forces of justice and law (shar'), spiritual peace, balance and justice rule over the domain of man's being, establishing there the Kingdom of God and the rule of righteousness and Divine Law. Nothing that is opposed to justice and truth can occur in it, and the whole kingdom is absolutely freed from all sorts of untruth and injustice.

Therefore, in the same way as the criterion of deprival from truth and righteousness is the pursuit of desire, the criterion of attainment of truth and achievement of righteousness is submission to reason and Divine Law. In between these two extremities, that is, total servility to desire and total subservience to reason, are an infinite number of stages so that every step towards desire is a step away from righteousness.

With every such step the reality is further hidden behind misty veils and the lights of human excellence and the secrets of human existence grow dimmer. And, contrarily, every step that is taken away from desire is instrumental to the same extent in removing the veils and in brightening the gleams of Divine light in the domain of the inner being.

B) The Qur'an And Hadith On The Evil Of Submission To Desire)

Denouncing submission to desires, God Almighty says in the Quran: And follow not desire lest it lead thee astray from the way of God. (38:26)

And who is further astray than he who follows his desire without guidance from God? (28:50)

And in a tradition of al-Kafi from Imam al-Baqir (A), the Imam is reported to have said: The Prophet (S) said: God Almighty said: "By My honor, My Glory, My Greatness, My Light, My Loftiness, and by the Highness of My Station! When My slave gives preference to his desire over My wish, I put his affairs into confusion, make his life baffling in this world and his heart preoccupied with the world, although I do not give him anything of it except what I have preordained for him. And by My honor, My Glory, My Greatness, My Light, My Loftiness and by the Highness of My Station! If My slave prefers My wish to his desire, My angels protect him,

the heavens and the earth guarantee his sustenance, and I look after his trade and bring the world to him though it should be reluctant and recalcitrant."

This tradition is a very authentic one, whose text and wording bear testimony to its pure origin, that its source is no other than God Almighty, the Fountainhead of all knowledge, though its chain of transmission may be a weak one, and to discuss this matter further is not possible here. There is another tradition reported from Amir al Mu'minin (A), which is different from the one we have expounded: I am apprehensive for you concerning two things: Submission to desire and entertaining of endless hope.

In al-Kafi Imam al-Sadiq (A) is reported to have said: Be apprehensive of your desires in the same way as you are apprehensive of your enemies. For there is no greater enemy for human beings than their own desires and what their tongues reap.

My dear, remember that desires are endless and ever insatiable. If man takes one step in following them, he will be bound to take a few more. If he submits to one of the desires, he will soon be forced to yield to a number of them. If you open one door to the desires of the self, you will soon be forced to open several other doors to them.

Thus a single act of submission will expose you to a number of vices following it and through them you will fall victim to a thousand abominations, until, God forbid, all the roads to God are closed to you, as stated by God Almighty in the Holy Book.

That is why the Commander of the Believers (A), the Wali al-'Amr and the spiritual master and instructor of mankind, who was assigned the task of guiding the human family, has expressed so much concern and apprehension on account of it. Rather, the Holy Prophet (S) and all the Imams (A) are anxious lest the tree of nubuwwah (prophethood) and wilayah - of which the believers are the leaves- should shed its foliage and become as if autumn stricken. Look what the Prophet (S) has said: Marry and procreate, for indeed I shall be proud of you over other nations, even though it should be on account of an aborted fetus.

Obviously, if man happens to stand on such a dangerous path as this, where it is feared that he may fall over the precipice of annihilation, being disowned by his real father-the Holy Prophet (S), who is a mercy for all the worlds-having caused his indignance, what a great misfortune it would be and what disasters and woes it would involve? Thus if you know the Holy Prophet (S) and love the Master of the Faithful (A) and befriend their pure progeny, relieve their blessed hearts from their fear, anguish and uncertainty on your account. In a verse of the Surat Hud of the Quran the Prophet (S) is addressed thus

So be steady as thou hast been commanded, thou and those who have turned (unto Allah) with thee. (11:112)

And the Prophet (S) is reported to have said: The Surat Hud caused my hair to turn grey on account of this verse of it.

Shaykh Shahabadi, the accomplished ‘Arif -may my soul be ransomed for him- has said: (وَمَــنْ تَــابَ Although the same verse occurs in the Surat al-Shura- though without the phrase and those who have turned with thee— the reason that the Prophet (S) has made—(مَعَــــــــكَ special mention of the Surat Hud is that in it God Almighty has demanded from the Prophet (S) the steadiness of his ummah also. The Prophet (S) feared that this task might not be carried out, otherwise he himself had the steadiness, or, rather, he was in fact the very incarnation of justice and righteousness.

So, my brother, if you consider yourself one of the followers of that holy personage and a participant of his mission, come and don’t be an embarrassment to him in its fulfillment on account of your ugly, vicious deeds. Think yourself that if one of your children or your kinsmen does something odious or improper by your norms, how ashamed you feel in front of others on their account! And you know that the Prophet of God (S) and Amir al-Mu’minin (A) are the true fathers of the ummah, for in the Prophet’s own words: I and ‘Ali are the two fathers of this ummah.

If we are taken into the presence of the Almighty and are called to account in front of them, and should the record of our deeds reflect nothing except evil and odiousness, it would be very hard upon them, for they would feel ashamed in front of the angels and prophets of God. What a great injustice it would be! What a catastrophe we shall have invited for ourselves and what treatment will be meted out to us by God Almighty?

So, O unjust and ignorant man who have not only done injustice to yourself but are guilty of injustice to your benefactors, who laid down their lives and sacrificed their worldly possessions and comforts of life for the sake of your guidance, who were assassinated after undergoing the hardest sufferings and the harshest tortures and whose women and children were taken captive for the sake of your guidance and your deliverance, should you, instead of being grateful to them for their merciful efforts, be guilty of such a flagrant injustice and imagine that you have been unjust to yourself alone?

Wake up for a while from this deep slumber and be a little ashamed of yourself. Don’t allow yourself to commit the same inequities that were committed by the enemies of the Din. You, who claim to be a friend, do not be unjust, for the acts of injustice committed by a friend and the one who claims to be a friend are more grievous and odious.

C) On Numerousness Of Desires)

It should be remembered that the desires of the carnal self are numerous and of diverse kinds, varying according to their intensity as well as the desired object. Sometimes they are so subtle that one is not aware of them as suspect wiles of Satan and of the self, unless he is made conscious and waken up. With all their variety, all of them work together in obstructing people from the Divine path and deviating them from it. Their grades are various. There are the victims of desire who take gold and wealth and the like to be their god; there are others about whom Almighty God informs us in these words: Hast thou seen him who has taken his desire (hawa) to be his god? (25:43)

Again, there are those who, according to the holy tradition under discussion, are alienated from God by following the desires of the self and the fabrications of the Devil, in the form of false creeds, corrupt norms or something else. There are the perpetrators of mortal and major or minor and venial sins who are kept from the path of God in a measure proportional to the degree of their transgressions.

Then there are the followers of legitimate pleasures and desires who, on account of their overindulgence in them, are kept back from treading the Divine path in a different way. There are the devout given to prayers and formal rites, which are aimed to secure a good life in the Hereafter or to satisfy some worldly purpose or are meant to secure higher spiritual stations or to avoid spiritual decline, who are prevented from the path of God in a different way.

There are the practitioners of ethics devoted to purification of the soul and spiritual disciplining for the sake of attaining self control or reaching the paradise of moral excellence, who are kept from God and righteousness in their own manner. There are the practitioners of ‘irfan, the wayfarers of the Path, the seekers of ecstasies and of mystic stations and states, who have no other purpose except His vision and His vicinity, yet whose vision is obstructed in a different way and are kept from receiving the special illuminations.

Besides, there are other stages whose description is not possible here. Thus it is necessary for every individual, in accordance with the category to which he belongs, to examine his own condition and purge himself of the desires of the self in order not to be kept from the path of righteousness and of truth, so that the doors of compassion and benevolence are opened to him, whatever his station and stage: Indeed God is the Lord of guidance.

2. On The Evil Of Endless Hopes

This discussion also consists of two sections:

(A) On The Endlessness Of Hopes

Remember that the first and foremost step towards authentic humanness is that of awareness

and awakening (yaqzah), as mentioned by the leading mystics (mashayiq) concerning the stages of wayfaring. There are ten stages in this step, as enumerated by the great Shaykh Shahabadi, which we are not in a position to elaborate here.

However, it is essential to mention here that unless man does not wake up to the fact that he is a traveler with an inescapable journey lying ahead and a destination towards which he must move, he will not muster the resolution necessary to reach his goal. Each of these matters needs an elaboration from which we must abstain for brevity's sake. However, it is enough to say that one of the biggest obstacles in the way of the awakening that leads one to forget his destination and neglect his journey and deadens his will and resolution is the feeling that there is plenty of time for the journey, that if one does not set out today he may do it tomorrow, if not this month then the next and so on. Such a state of extended and outstretched hope, together with a false assurance of unlimited life and unbounded availability of time, make man oblivious of his ultimate goal, the Hereafter, and prevent him from preparing for the unavoidable journey and securing provisions for it, ultimately leading him to completely forget the Hereafter and his goal.

May God save us from the state in which one who has a long and perilous journey before him and is given a limited time in which to procure the provisions and dire necessities of the way, does not possess anything having forgotten both about the journey and his destination. It is obvious that if such a state of neglect befalls one, he will fail to procure the necessary provisions for his way, being helpless and at a loss at the time of departure. Such a man will perish on his way and his journey will not take him to his desired destination.

B) Provisions For The Long Journey Ahead)

And so, my dear, remember that you have a perilous journey ahead, for which the provisions of sound knowledge and fruitful action are needed. The time of departure is unknown. Possibly, there is little time and opportunity left. No one knows when the call for departure will come and one would be forced to depart. This prolonging of hope by you and me arises from self love and is the most masterly of the guiles of the accursed Satan.

Through it he distracts our attention from the Hereafter and keeps us from attending to its affairs. And with the perils of the journey and the obstacles in the way of preparing for it, if we fail to repent or to return to God and if we fail to procure provisions for the journey, the appointed call shall come unexpectedly and send us unprepared and unprovided on the way, without any store of righteous deeds and useful knowledge which together make up the provisions of the Hereafterly journey.

For even if we have performed good deeds, they are not pure and untainted. A thousand contaminations, each of which is enough to make them unacceptable to God, afflict them. If we acquired any knowledge, it was futile and fruitless for us, our learning being either nonsensical and absurd or itself a big impediment in the path of the Hereafter. Had the deeds that we have done and the knowledge that we have learnt been beneficial, they should have left some mark on us who have been in their pursuit for years and should have transformed our habits and morals.

What went wrong that our forty or fifty years' labor has produced an opposite result and has hardened our hearts, harder even than flint? What did we achieve from salat, which is the mi'raj of a mu'min? Where is that fear of God which is the outcome of true knowledge? God forbid, if we are called to depart from this world in this present state of ours, there are many a lasting disappointment and remorse in store for us!

Therefore, if obliviousness of the Hereafter caused by endless hope is something on account of which the greatest Wali of God, Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A) is concerned for us, he is justified; for he knows as to how perilous a journey awaits us and that with such a journey in view no one should ever be complacent even for a while. At all times, one should be busy, without a moment of rest, in gathering the provisions for the Hereafterly journey. If one becomes oblivious of that world or considers it a mere dream, as if that world did not exist and there was no journey to be undertaken, one cannot imagine the calamities that one will have to face and the misfortunes that are in store for him.

It would do us much good if we think for a while about the general state of mind of the Prophet (S) and of Amir al-Mu'minin (A) who were the best of God's creatures and free from error, lapse or forgetfulness-in order to understand our own state in relation to theirs. Their cognition of the hardships and perils of the journey had made them renounce ease and rest, while our ignorance has bred forgetfulness in us. The Seal of the Prophets (S) subjected himself to such austerities and strenuously stood in prayer before his Lord for such lengthy hours that his blessed feet became swollen and the following verse was sent down to him by the Most Exalted: Ta Ha. We have not sent down the Quran upon thee to cause thee distress. (20:1, 2)

The state of Amir al-Mu'minin during prayers and his fear of God Almighty are also well known.

Hence, we should know that the journey is full of perils and this spell of obliviousness and forgetfulness of ours is nothing except a ruse of the Devil and a guile of our own self. These endless hopes and unlimited expectations are the biggest snares of Iblis and the most artful of his ruses. So wake up from this sleep and remember that you are a traveler with goal and

purpose. Your destination is the next world and you will be forced to leave this world ultimately. If you are prepared to set out on this journey and have procured the provisions needed, you will not be rendered helpless or stranded on this journey. Otherwise you will find yourself in a distress which knows no relief, a wretchedness that is not followed by felicity, a humiliation that will last and never be followed by honor, a poverty that does not terminate in abundance, a torment that is not followed by comfort, a fire that never cools down, and a regret and shame which knows no end.

My dear, look what the Commander of the Faithful (A) says, in Du'a Kumayl, in his supplications to the Almighty: (My Lord) You know my frailness before a little of the afflictions and torments of this world and before the kind of calamities that affect its inhabitants, though such afflictions and adversities are transitory and short-lived. And how shall I endure the afflictions of the Hereafter and the severity of its calamities, which are enduring, perpetual and unabating on its inhabitants, since they are nothing other than Your wrath, Your retribution and Your displeasure, which neither the heavens nor the earth can bear.

A torment which the heavens and earth cannot stand has been reserved for you, and it is not enough to awaken you from your deepening slumber and your obliviousness increases day by day!

O slumberous heart! Awake and arise! Get ready for the journey to the Hereafter!

The call of the caravan's departure has been sounded and all around there is the clamor of those who depart and take leave. The agents of 'Izra'il (the angel of death) are at work and they are driving you every moment nearer and nearer to the gates of the Hereafter and yet you are neglectful, unmindful and ignorant!

O God, I implore Thee to save me from the house of illusion and the abode of delirium and help me return to the abode of joy. Grant me the ability and preparedness to die before such an opportunity is lost.