The Aversion For Death

With my continuous sanad reaching up to the pillar of Islam and its reliable authority, Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni, from Muhammad ibn Yahya, from Ahmad ibn Muhammad, from some of his teachers, from al-Hasan ibn 'Ali ibn Abi 'Uthman, from Wasil, from 'Abd Allah ibn Sinan, from Abu 'Abd Allah (A) that he said: A man came to Abu Dharr and said to him, "O Abu Dharr, what is wrong with us that we abhor death?" Abu Dharr replied, "That is because you have built and cultivated your world and ruined your Hereafter. So, you hate to be moved from prosperity towards desolation." He was asked, "How do you see our entry into God's presence?" Abu Dharr replied, "As to the good-doer amongst you, he is like someone returning to his family after a (long) absence. As to the evil-doer amongst you, he is like an absconding slave being returned to his master." He was asked, "How do you see our situation before God?" Abu Dharr replied, "Evaluate your deeds in view of the Qur'anic criterion. Verily God says: Surely, the pious shall be in bliss and the profane shall he in a fiery furnace (82:12-3). The Imam (A) added: Thereat, the man said, "Then, where is the mercy of God?" Abu Dharr replied, "The mercy of God is near to the good-doers."

Abu 'Abd Allah (A) continued: A man wrote to Abu Dharr (R), "O Abu Dharr, teach me something new of knowledge." Abu Dharr wrote to him, "Knowledge is vast. However, if you can abstain from wronging someone that you love, do so." The man asked him, "Have you seen anyone wrong someone that he loves?" Abu Dharr replied, "Yes, your own self is the dearest of [all things to you. And when you disobey God you have wronged it."[1

Exposition

One should know that people differ in their fear and abhorrence of death and the reasons that underlie their abhorrence. That which Hadrat Abu Dharr (R) has described, relates to the state of the middle ones (mutawassitun) and we will briefly describe here the condition of the deficient (naqisun) as well as that of the perfect (kamilun).

It should be known that the fear and abhorrence of ours, the deficient (naqisun), for death is on account of a cause that was referred to in the course of exposition of some of the foregoing traditions. It lies in this that man, in accordance with his original and God-given nature, loves life and survival and hates death and extinction.

This love is related to absolute survival and immortal, everlasting life, a survival free from

extinction and a life that knows no end. Some of our honored predecessors used to prove the necessity of Resurrection on the basis of this human nature, and a description of their arguments here is outside the aims of our present discourse. Now, since this love and that hate lie in human nature, man comes to love that which he reckons to be the enduring realm of life and hates that which he regards as being contrary to it. Since we have no faith in the realm of the Hereafter and our hearts have no conviction in immortal life and eternal survival, we are attached to this world and abhor death in accordance with that nature.

We have mentioned earlier that rational Judgment and perception is different from the faith and conviction of the heart. In accordance with our rational apperception, or Judgment based on traditional belief (taqlid), we affirm that death—which is a transition from the dark, lowly sphere of corporeal (mulki) existence to the radiant world of immortal life and the everlasting higher sphere of incorporeal (malakuti) existence—is a reality.

However, our hearts do not partake of this knowledge and are oblivious of it. Rather, our hearts cling to earthly nature and the corporeal realm and consider life to be exclusively confined to the lower corporeal mode of animal life. They do not believe in the life and immortality of the other world, which is the world of Hereafter and the realm of (pure) life. Hence, we put total reliance in this world and regard the other world with fear, repulsion, and resentment. All the misfortunes of ours are on account of this lack of faith and conviction.

Had we even a tenth of what faith we have in this world's life and living, its existence and survival, in the world of the Hereafter and its eternal, everlasting life, our hearts would have been more attached to it and we would have devoted some effort to building it. But, alas, the springs of our faith are dry and the edifice of our faith rests on water. Inevitably, we fear death, extinction, and end. The exclusive and definite remedy for this malady is cultivation of faith in the heart through beneficial reflection and remembrance as well as sound knowledge and works.

However, as to the fear and abhorrence of the mutawassitun¬—that is, those who have inadequate faith in Hereafter—that is because the attention of their hearts is turned to the cultivation of the world and they are neglectful of cultivating the Hereafter. Therefore, they are not inclined to move from a well-built and prosperous place to one, which is a desolation, as pointed out by Hadrat Abu Dharr (R). This attitude is also on account of inadequate faith and conviction.

Otherwise, with a complete faith it is not possible that one should confine his efforts to the base mundane affairs to the neglect of the Hereafter. On the whole, these fears, anxieties, and hatreds arise from unwholesomeness of deeds, waywardness and opposition to one's Master

(Mawla). Otherwise, had our evaluation been a correct one and had we critically examined ourselves we would not have been fearful of God's reckoning.

For there, the reckoning is just and the judge is a just one. Hence, our fear of the reckoning is due to our own inequity and our self-deceptive and fraudulent evaluation of our own selves. In the noble al-Kafi, the following musnad tradition of Hadrat Musa ibn Ja'far (A) is recorded: The Imam (A) said, "One who does not examine and evaluate himself every day is not one of us (i.e. he is not a follower of the Prophet and the Ahl al Bayt). (A person who examines himself every day), if he does a good deed, he beseeches God to increase him (in virtues and if he has perpetrated a vice, he seeks God's forgiveness for it and is penitent before Him."[2]

Hence, if you have been taking account of yourself, you shall have no fear of the time of reckoning, for the perils and tribulations of that world are subject to the works performed in this. For instance, had you walked in this world on the straight path of prophethood and the straight path of wilayah without deviating or swerving from the path of the wilayah of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (M) there will be no fear on you when passing over the Sirat.[3]

For the reality of the Sirat is the inward form of the wilayah, as it has been mentioned in ahadith that Amir al-Mu'minin (A) is the Sirat.[4] In another tradition, the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt are reported to have stated, "We are the Sirat." In the blessed al-Ziyarat al-jami'ah, it is stated: You (the Ahl al-Bayt) are the greatest path (sabil) and the firmest way (Sirat).[5]

Whoever moves on this path steadily without stumbling, his feet will not stagger on that Sirat too, and he will pass over it in a moment as short as the stroke of lightning. Similarly, should his morals and habits be equitable and radiant, he will be immune from the darkness and horrors of the grave, of the Barzakh and the Resurrection, and there will be no fear upon him in those realms. Hence, here, we are ourselves responsible for the malady, and its remedy is in our own hands, as pointed out by Hadrat Amir al-Mu'minin in verses ascribed to him: The remedy lies in you and you perceive not The malady arises from you and you discern not.[6]

And the noble al-Kafi records the following musnad tradition of al' Imam al-Sadiq (A): The Imam (A) said to a man, "Verily, you have been made your own doctor. The malady has been described to you, the sign of health ho also been made known to you, and the medicine has been shown to you. Hence look how you attend your own soul."[7]

You are afflicted with corrupt beliefs, morals, and behavior. The signs of health are contained in the prescriptions of the prophets and the illuminations of (primordial) nature and the intellect. The remedy for the soul's sickness lies in taking steps for its removal. This is the condition of the mutawassitun. However, as to the condition of the perfect and those of convinced faith, they have no abhorrence of death, although they may regard it with fear and anxiety on account

of their awe of the Majesty of God, the Exalted, and the dignity of that Sacred Essence. And hence, the Messenger of Allah (S) used to say; So where is the terror of him who knows? And Hadrat Amir al-Mu'minin (A) had a terrific fear and horror on the night of the nineteenth of Ramadan (the night of his assassination), although he used to say: By God, the son of Abu Talib is more intimate with death than an infant with its mother's bosom.[9]

Their fear is on account of other matters and is not like the fear of those like us who are in the chains of desires and hopes and are enamored to the transitory world. The hearts of the awliya', too, greatly differ from one another. Their difference cannot be encompassed by any description or writing, and we will refer briefly to some of their points of difference.

The hearts of the awliya' differ in their capacity to receive the irradiations (tajalliyat) of the Divine Names. The hearts of some of them are characterized with love and yearning and God Almighty is manifested in them through the Names of Beauty (Jamal). Such an irradiation brings an awe suffused with yearning, and the fear in their terror is on account of the manifestation of Divine Majesty and its vision. The lover's heart palpitates with fear and anxiety as the time of meeting the beloved approaches, but this anxiety and terror is different from the ordinary kinds of fear.

The hearts of some of them are characterized with trepidation and grief and God Almighty is manifested in them through the Names of Majesty and Glory. Such a tajalli creates an intense yearning suffused with dread and a wonder and an awe suffused with grief. And it is related in hadith that once Hadrat Yahya –John- (A) noticed Hadrat 'Isa –Jesus- (A) laughing. Angrily, he said to the latter, "It appears as if you are immune of God's chastisement!" Hadrat 'Isa retorted, "It appears as if you have despaired of God's mercy and beneficence!" God Almighty revealed to them that, "Whoever of you has a better opinion of Me is the dearer to Me."

Since God manifested Himself in the heart of Hadrat Yahya (A) through the Names of Majesty, he always dwelt in dread and awe and showed his displeasure to Hadrat 'Isa (A), who gave him a reply in accordance with the tajalliyat of Divine Mercy and Compassion.

The Reality Of Heaven And Hell

The literal meaning of the hadith where it says: (you have built the world and ruined the Hereafter) is that the abodes of the Hereafter and paradise are places already built and flourishing that are turned into ruins by our works. But it is obvious that the intent is parallelism of expression. Since the term ta'mir (building) was used in relation to the world, the parallel term takhrib (destruction) was used in relation to the Hereafter. Although the realms of hell and paradise are creations (of God), the building agency of paradise and the material of hell is

subject to the deeds of their inhabitants.[9] And this interpretation is in accordance with demonstrative proof as well as mystic intuition (kashf). Hence, some of the researchers among the mystics have said: Let it be known to you – may God preserve you and us from error – that hell (Jahannam) is one of God's great creations, and it is God's prison in the Hereafter. It is called 'Jahannam' because of the remoteness of its pit. Hence, a well with a deep pit is called bi'r jahnam. It contains heat and bitter cold. Its coldness reaches the extreme degree of cold and its heat the extreme degree of hotness. A distance of seven hundred and fifty years' journey separates its uppermost and lowermost parts. The people disagree as to whether it is a creation or not, and similarly they disagree concerning paradise. However, in our opinion and that of our companions and the mystics, they are and are not creations. When we say that they are creations, it is like saying of a man building a house and who has built only its boundary walls that "he has built a house." However, on entering one sees nothing but an area and space surrounded by a wall. It is only afterwards that its inner quarters shall be built with rooms, compartments, storerooms, and water tanks in accordance with the needs of those who shall come to live therein.

And it is mentioned in hadith that when the Messenger of Allah (S) went on his noble ascent (mi'raj), he saw certain angels in paradise who would, for some time, engage in constructing buildings and for some time stopped their work.

The Prophet (S) asked Gabriel (A), "What is the reason behind this?" Gabriel (A) replied, 'The material for this building is made up of the remembrance of the individuals of the Ummah. Whenever they engage in remembrance, the material becomes available for building and the angels too resume their building work. But when they cease in their remembrance, these angels too stop their work."'[10]

The physical form of heaven and hell is made up of the forms of the good and evil works and deeds of the Children of Adam, which return to them in that world. This has also been referred to in the noble verses of the Qur'an, as in the following utterance of God Almighty: And they find all that they did confronting them. (18:49)

And: Indeed, these are your own works that are being returned to you.[11]

It is possible that the worlds of heaven and hell are two independent realms and abodes towards which the Children of Adam journey through substantial motions (harakat-e jawhari) and voluntary spiritual (malakuti) movements derived from their behavior and character, where they receive their share of the Hereafter in the shape of the forms of their works.

The heaven is the higher malakuti realm, being an independent sphere by itself towards which the felicitous spirits are directed, and the hell is the nether malakuti realm towards which the

spirits of the wretched make their journey. But that which each of them encounters in its own sphere are the fair and blessed or painful and dreadful forms of their own deeds. This description reconciles the literal meanings of the Book and the traditions -which are apparently contradictory-and is also in agreement with philosophical proofs as well as the teaching of the urafa'.

It is obvious that this saying of Hadrat Abu Dharr (R) consists of a comprehensive and firm command which every human being must observe with due care. Thereafter Hadrat Abu Dharr says that one should examine his deeds in the light of the Book of God. And God says: Mankind consist of two groups: the pious, who are in bliss, and the wayward, who are in hell. The man (who questioned Abu Dharr) made an attempt to cling to Divine mercy when he said, "If that is so, then where is the mercy of God Almighty?" Abu Dharr replied: God's mercy is not extravagant; it is near to the good-doers.

You should know that the accursed Satan and the vicious self that incites man to evil deceive the human being in many ways and drive him towards eternal damnation. The last arrow in their quiver is to deceive man through hope in Divine mercy and to keep man from (virtuous) action by the means of this deception, for this kind of reliance on Divine mercy is one of Satanic snares and deceits.

The evidence of it is that we never put any trust in the mercy of God, the Exalted, in our mundane affairs, and we consider natural and apparent means as being independent and effective, to the extent of believing that there is no efficient agency in the world except the apparent causes. However, in matters relating to the Hereafter we imagine ourselves to be reliant on Divine mercy while we neglect the commands of God and His Messenger (A) as if God had given us no power to act and had not shown us the paths of (spiritual) health and sickness.

In the matters of the world we follow the creed of tafwid (the belief that God has delegated complete freedom to man), while in relation to the matters of the Hereafter we follow the creed of jabr (fatalism), forgetting that both of them are wrong, void and contrary to the teachings of the prophets (A) and the abiding path of the Imams of guidance and the awliya' near to God, whose faith was greater than all others and all of whom had convinced faith in Divine mercy. Notwithstanding it, they did not neglect their duties and did not leave off effort and endeavor for a single moment.

Brother! Study the book of their works! Read the supplications of Sayyid al-Sajidin Zayn al-Abidin (A). Look carefully and see how he approaches God in the station of servantship ('Ubudiyyah). See how he attends to the duties of slavehood. Despite it all, when he studies the

book of works of the Master of the Pious, Amir al-Mu'minin (A) he expresses his regret and his incapability!

Does it mean that, na'udhu billah, we should question their veracity and say that they did not, like us, possess faith and conviction in Divine mercy? Or should we doubt our own veracity and understand once for all that all that we say are no more than snares of Satan and deceits of the carnal self, which scheme to deviate us from the straight path? We take refuge in God, the Exalted, from their malice!

And so, my dear, knowledge is extensive, as remarked by Hadrat Abu Dharr to that man, but the beneficial piece of knowledge for the likes of us is to abstain from doing ourselves this extent of wrong. We must understand that the commands of the prophets and the awliya' (A) contain certain truths which are concealed from us. They, who know what kind of forms and consequences these corrupt words and evil acts of ours possess and what kind of blessed malakuti forms the noble morals and good deeds have, have described all the maladies and their remedies.

You - should you have any love for yourself - should not pass by these prescriptions. Decide to cure your afflictions and diseases. Should we move in this condition of ours from this world to the next, God knows what afflictions, calamities and pains await us! And all praise is God's at the beginning and the end.

Notes:

[1] Al-Kafi, ii, "kitab al-'iman wa al-kufr" "bab muhasabat al-'amal", hadith no. 20.

[2] Al-Kafi, ii, "kitab al-'iman wa al-kufr" "bab muhasabat al-'amal", hadith no. 2.

[3] Tafsir al-burhan, i. 46.

[4] Tafsir al-burhan, 51.

[5] Man la yahduruhu al-faqih, ii, 613; Mafitih al-jinan, "al-Ziyarat al-jami'ah al-kabirah."

[6] The Diwan ascribed to Amir al-Mu'minin, 57.

[7] Al-Kafi, ii, "kitab al-iman wa al-kufr", "bab muhasabat al-amal," hadith no. 6.

[8] Nahj al- balaghah, Khutab, No. 5.

[9] Al-Saduq, al-'Amali, majlis no. 69, p. 405.

[10] Bihar al-'anwar, xviii, 292.

[11] Al-Majlisi, 'Ilm al-yaqin, ii, 884.