

# **AKHLAQ**

## **(Ethics)**



# Lesson 1

## Development of Akhlāq & the Faculties of the Soul

Humans have a soul and a physical body, each with its own pleasures and diseases. What harms the body is sickness and what gives it pleasure is health, well being and being in harmony with nature. The science of medicine deals with the health and maladies of the body.

The diseases of the soul consist of evil habits and addictions such as submission to lusts that degrade a human soul and lowers it to the level of beasts. The pleasures of the soul are moral and ethical values, which elevate humans to move them closer to perfection and Allāh. The science that deals with such matters is called the science of ethics (*'ilm al-akhlāq*).

Those who say humans are no different from animals in how they eat, sleep, reproduce, defecate, etc. are comparing the human *body* with that of animals. They are either assuming humans have no soul or that the real essence of a human being is the body.

The soul of a human being who has surrendered to Allāh is a mirror through which Allāh reflects His beautiful Names and Attributes in this world. The human soul is also indestructible and permanent. The body on the other hand is temporary, prone to breaking down and only able to survive in this world. It is a just a vehicle and a 'clothing' for the soul for a short while before the soul moves on to another, better and more perfect plane of existence.

A faithful (*mu'min*) stays healthy and protects his or her body not because the life of this world is better or that they fear death or would rather be here instead of the next world but because they see this life as a gift from Allāh to use to build their permanent abode. The longer they are able to stay in this body, the more they can prepare for the next world, such as in worshipping Allāh or earning a lawful living and helping others, or using their time and strength to help others. As the body is used to serve Allāh, the soul is nurtured and built stronger.

What prevents humans from building the soul is addictions. Addiction is a slavish habit of doing something that the mind believes will bring it happiness but it is engaged in it only for the pleasure with no purpose or meaningful reason. Some addictions are *harām* such as substance use (drugs, alcohol), gambling and pornography. Others are not labelled *harām* in fiqh but nonetheless prevent or slow the soul's growth, such as addiction to tea, coffee, smoking, shopping, the internet, food, sleep, games, etc.

The human mind, through its attempt to survive what it perceives as conflict, creates from infancy an illusory (mind-made) 'self' (that we call the 'ego') and that it refers to as 'I'. By the time most humans grow up, they forget their soul and don't 'listen' to it anymore, which is the voice of their real 'self'. They are busy trying to protect this illusory ego through constant seeking of pleasure and fulfilling of desires and through conflict like blaming, jealousy, anger, backbiting, fighting, accusing, etc. that the mind believes will resolve its pain and remove its fears. The mind believes that if this ego is compromised or diminished it will cease to exist (because 'I' will die).

Spiritual growth and realization of who a human really is comes from learning to let go of the ego or at least realizing the games that the mind plays and being aware every time the mind is using conflict or seeking addictions to stay alive. This realization in turn allows a human to 'connect' with nature and all of existence. And since Allāh permeates the very fabric of all existence, it allows a human to connect with Allāh and truly become Allāh's representative.

One of the philosophies of fasting in the month of Ramadan is to give a human being the chance to break away from addictions and see how it feels to be free and not enslaved by the mind's desires.



Whenever you feel obsessed by a hobby or anything in life, think about this. You will realize the 'real me' is asleep and it is the mind in the driver's seat using the obsession to promote and strengthen its own mind-made false 'self'. This state of the real self being asleep – what Imām Ali ('a) eludes too in the hadith, '*the people of this world are asleep, they wake up when they die*' – is called heedlessness or *ghaflah*. Waking up from *ghaflah* can be done periodically but to be awake permanently, one must let the false self or ego die. That is the meaning of true surrender to Allāh – surrendering the mind's own self-will. Hence the hadith of Rasullāh (s) – '*die before you die*'. Meaning, let the ego die (that you can control and allow to die) before your body's physical death (that you have no control over).

Jannah is an abode of perfection. It is not that Allāh wants some to enter it and others not to. All are welcome. But only a perfect soul can survive and live in such a perfect place. Consider a person who is addicted to fear, worry, anxiety and blame. Even if you try and force them away from this habit, they will resist it and fight you because they equate giving up the habit to death. The mind believes it would rather die than give this up. But the person who is free from this habit can see how much pain and suffering the person addicted is in. Yet only the person suffering can help himself or herself by first acknowledging his or her malady and choosing to heal. Similarly, people cannot be forced into Jannah. They must choose it themselves. If they become creatures that can only live with pain, they would resist going to Jannah because they cannot relate to it.

The secret to not failing in life is to ask yourself about everything that you become passionate about and make a goal and important part of your life: why am I doing this? How does it affect my hereafter? Is it a need of my soul or an addiction through which the mind seeks to find illusory happiness?

### **The Immaterial Soul**

We have said that unlike the body, the soul is everlasting and is therefore independent of the body. The soul survives even after the body can no longer support it and falls apart, forcing the soul to leave and move on to another existence. Seeing yourself primarily as the soul and not the body is the first step to realizing the importance of *akhlāq*, the importance of preparing for eternal existence and the importance of development (or purification) of the soul (*tazkiyat an-nafs*).

## Lesson 2

# Akhlāq & the Faculties of the Soul (cont'd)

### Meaning and Origin of Akhlāq

The word *akhlāq* is the plural of *khulq* that means 'nature' as in the nature of someone. It can also be translated as disposition or characteristic.

Every soul has a character or nature that comes about through repetitive practice of an action by the physical body that is tightly integrated to the soul. When an action is done repeatedly, it becomes a habit or trait (called a *malakah* in Arabic) that is impressed upon the soul. A soul then is chiselled or formed into a being – beautiful or ugly – through a multitude of *malakāt*. And this real form is what emerges on the Day of Judgement and takes residence in the infinite levels of Jannah or Jahannam, where it fits most. It 'floats' up or down to where it just rightly belongs. Sometimes a *malakah* can be helped by a person's nature and tendency but through practice and effort, weak tendencies can also be strengthened and made into a *malakah* (trait).

We could therefore say, a particular disposition (*malakah*) may appear in a human being because of one of three reasons:

1. Nature and physical makeup: Some people are naturally patient while others are touchy, moody, sensitive or hasty. Some are easily disturbed and saddened while others show greater resistance and resilience at difficulties.
2. Habit: This is formed because of unconscious continual repetition of certain acts until it emerges as a certain disposition (*malakah*).
3. Practice and conscious effort: If continued long enough it can eventually lead to the formation of a *malakah*.

Even though people have different natures, it is by no means true that humans have no choice and are compelled to act in a certain way. Training the soul does not mean killing the needs of the physical body or not using the mind at all. If the body and mind are seen and accepted as vehicles that support the soul's existence and operation in this world, then of course their needs must be fulfilled. But what is key is to train them so that they serve our soul and not the other way around where the soul is enslaved by them.

Just as a seed grows into a tree through proper care and a wild horse can be tamed to serve its master or a dog is trained to be a lifelong friend and help to a man, so can a human soul attain perfection and wisdom through self-discipline and spiritual practices even if it is 'wild' and untamed initially. Desires can be compared to an unruly beast or a tamed horse. Anger can be like a rabid dog or a loyal one; and the

intellect and imagination can be likened to a strong tree providing shade and fruits or a weak sapling blowing one way or the other with every passing 'gust of wind' (i.e. false idea or doubt planted in the mind).

Perfection is not one final stage. It has infinite levels. The more self-discipline and effort, the higher the level of perfection attained. There is a scale where the lowest level is demonic and even below beasts and the highest level surpasses even the angels. The movement of the human soul between these two extremes until it settles at one place on the scale is what *'ilm al-akhlāq* is all about. The goal of the science of *akhlāq* is to take a human soul as far up the scale of perfection as possible.

After knowing all this, of course the key thing is to practice what one knows. Knowledge is very important as a signpost towards perfection but it is only a *means* and not the *end*. In ignorance we remain heedless (i.e. in *ghaflah*) and are never motivated to act and grow because we don't even know its importance or the potential of the soul. However constant gaining of knowledge without acting on it will not help either. When a person is only concerned with the theoretical knowledge of spirituality, it becomes an addiction itself - to satisfy and gratify the mind with knowledge. That is why it has been said by some that 'knowledge is the thickest of veils' (that obstruct us from knowing Allāh).

## How Spirituality Becomes Accessible

Some falsely imagine that when a person has purified himself or herself *then* Allāh will grant such a person special abilities and spiritual hidden knowledge. In reality all the spirituality we will even need is already accessible and readily present in abundance all around us. What stops our souls from taking this grace of Allāh is the lack of purity in our souls, too much sin and attachment to the ego and its addictions. It is like beautiful jewels all around us blocked by dirty clothes. When self-purification is complete and a soul has gotten rid of all evil habits of thought, speech and action, then the soul is ready to receive Allāh's knowledge. In fact it begins as soon as self-purification starts until it is complete.

And this is in fact the purpose and reason why Allāh created humans – to know Allāh. Keep in mind, psychic abilities such as telepathy, levitation, dream interpretation, traversing the earth in short spans, prophesizing the future, seeing others in their 'real form' and even 'walking on water' are not a sign of one's spirituality. They may come as a result of meditation or extreme psychic exercises and they may even show themselves in a person as 'side effects' of self-purification. But in reality they are not the goal of self-purification and if they enthrall a person, he or she actually stops his or her spiritual growth.

True spirituality is indicated by one thing only: how much realization (*ma'rifah*) of Allāh a person has. To the degree that a person knows Allāh, to that degree they are spiritual and enlightened. Again, when we say 'knows' Allāh we do not mean it in the sense of rational knowing with the mind. We mean knowing through surrender and

realization with one's entire being. Such a perfect person is called an *'ārif* (a realized being) or one who truly 'knows' Allāh. The feminine is *'ārifa* and the plural is *'urafā*.

A human soul is unique in its ability to know its own Creator intelligently and to surrender in such a manner that it allows Allāh to take over and shine His attributes through the human being. Hence the hadith – *takhallaqu bi akhlāqillah* – 'make your akhlāq the akhlāq of Allāh'. We mentioned in Lesson 1 that a perfect human soul acts like a mirror to Allāh in which Allāh witnesses the reflection of His own attributes such as the divine attributes of love, knowledge, power, generosity, and all other such beautiful Names.

A soul that is enslaved and driven by desires is like a dog driven mindlessly. This could be the spiritual meaning of the Prophetic hadith *'angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog.'* (And of course the hadith has a literal meaning as well since a dog is *najis al-'ayn*.)

But if angels – who are pure beings of light – cannot mix with dogs, how can the rays of Allāh's grace and Divine illumination enter a heart that is filled to the brim with immoral, selfish and bestial desires?

One hadith says, *'The heart of a mu'min is the throne of the Merciful Lord'* and in a hadith *al-qudsi* Allāh says, *'The heavens and the earth cannot contain Me but the heart of My mu'min servant encompasses Me.'* And also, *'The heart of a mu'min is between My two fingers. I turn it as I please.'* We see therefore that the heart is also the central source of purity and the measure of how well we are using the body to purify the soul. Hence the hadith of Rasulullāh (s), *'I was sent to perfect good manners (makārim al-akhlāq).'* Also, the hadith of Rasulullāh (s), *'My religion is based on cleanliness (tahārah)'* does not refer to outward cleanliness alone. If anything, it eludes to inner purity of the soul.

When the soul is not pure, good advice has no effect on it. Not even the Qur'ān helps it. In fact the more Qur'ān such an impure soul encounters, the more it denies and mocks the truth. The Qur'ān also says about itself, *'None can touch it except the purified'* (Surah al-Wāqī'ah, 56:79). The outer meaning of course is to touch the Qur'ān with wudu. But the inner meaning is to 'touch' the meaning of the Qur'ān. Its hidden realities cannot be fathomed except by those who are 'purified' of heart.

To attain ultimate and final perfection, it is necessary to walk the path of struggle against selfish lusts and immoral tendencies which may exist within the soul, and thus to prepare the soul to receive the grace of Allāh. If a person sets foot on the path of self-purification, Allāh shall come to his or her aid and guide them along, as He promises: *'And (as for) those who struggle in Our cause, surely We guide them on to our ways.'* (Surah al-Ankabut, 29:69).



# Lesson 3

## Akhlāq & the Faculties of the Soul (cont'd)

### Faculties of the Soul

Just like the body has five faculties (the power of speech, sight, hearing, touch and taste), experts of akhlāq like to divide the faculties of the soul into four:

1. The power of intellectual thought (*al-quwwat al-'aqliyya*)
2. The power of imagination (*al-quwwat al-wahmiyya*)
3. The power of anger (*al-quwwat al-gadabiyya*)
4. The power of desire (*al-quwwat ash-shahwiya*)

Each one of these powers or faculties has a very important role to play in a human's spiritual journey. But they need to be tamed, controlled and used in moderation. In either extreme, they become a spiritual disease.

For example, when the intellectual power is too weak, a human cannot distinguish good from evil and is easily misled. When it is too extreme, then everything is sought through the mind only and often leads to atheism and doubt in God.

If the power of imagination is too weak, a person loses all creativity and the ability to nurture the gifts that Allāh has blessed him or her with; and if it is too strong it leads to demonic ideas, satanic plots, sinful fantasies and so on.

If the power of anger is too weak, a human cannot defend himself or stand up to fight for the truth, verbally or physically. When it is excessive, a person will not forgive or stop to think but will unleash anger that may destroy himself and those around him in a fit of rage.

When the power of desire is too weak, a person may lose interest in life and in healthy socializing with others. When it is too extreme and untrained it leads to promiscuity and immorality (such as adultery) and love for the world in general (wealth, power, comfort, pleasure, etc.).

The relationship of the four powers of the soul has been compared to a traveller riding a strong fast horse accompanied with a dog and also having a spy for him that looks out for him against highway bandits. The traveller is the power of reason. The horse is the power of desires. The dog represents anger and the spy employed by the rider is the power of imagination.

If the traveller can control all three – the mount, the dog and the spy, it all works in his favour and he arrives to his final destination safely. But if not, they destroy him.

The horse (desires) may throw the traveller (reason) off its back, the dog (anger) might start attacking everything around and even harm the traveller (reason) and the spy (imagination) might start giving false information to the traveller (reason) creating all kinds of false ideas and fears in the traveller. On the other hand, if the traveller knows when to trust the spy and what to use him for, how to stay on top of and in control of the horse and ensure the dog always listens to him and hunts or attacks only when his master orders it, then all is well.

Every spiritual disease is simply a deficiency or excess of one of these four faculties of the soul (or a combination of them). When found in moderation, it becomes a spiritual virtue instead of a disease. Here are some examples:

<b>Faculty of the Soul</b>	<b>Deficiency (Tafreet)</b>	<b>Moderation (I'tidāl)</b>	<b>Excess (Ifrāt)</b>
<b>Intellect</b>	Stupidity	Wisdom	Slyness and Craftiness
<b>Anger</b>	Cowardice	Courage and Bravery	Foolhardiness
<b>Desire</b>	Lethargy	Chastity and Modesty	Voraciousness and Insatiable Greed
<b>Intellect &amp; Imagination</b>	Submissiveness	Justice	Tyranny

## Jihād al-Akbar

By now you are already familiar with the term Jihād al-Akbar (the Greater Jihād) that refers to the struggle and striving against one's self.

We have already described how the mind and instinctive physical needs of a human being seek to dominate themselves and it is only the spiritual dimension of people that truly make them 'human' instead of just a glorified socio-political animal.

The eleventh century scholar al-Ghazāli remarked that before the process of self-purification begins, man is just 'envious like an ox, greedy like a pig, bites like a dog, eats like a camel, takes revenge like a leopard, is cunning like a fox, and clever like a devil.'

We therefore have two existences. When we look at our physical existence only, we seem to be very weak and humble creatures no different from animals that are constantly and only occupied with eating, drinking, seeking shelter, procreating, and all that is related to the body. It is only when we start focusing on the intellectual, moral, emotional and spiritual aspects of our life that we see our other, more important and everlasting existence. That is where we find the goals and aspirations that differentiates us from other animals and elevates us over them. That is where we move from being selfish to selfless, from simply

fighting for survival to being willing to sacrifice our lives for a greater, eternal good. That is where we realize we are different because of our soul and that even though we share the same planet as animals, this is not our home.

It is as if we came from Jannah and we are aliens here trying to go back home. In fact, we are not physical beings who undergo spiritual experiences. Rather we are spiritual beings undergoing physical experiences for a while so that we may learn from it and perfect our spirits or souls.

The ultimate purpose and philosophy of all Islāmic laws (*ahkām*) is therefore the refining of the character and soul of individuals. And success in this world and the hereafter will only come to us if we are concerned with *tazkiyat an-nafs*. Otherwise life will appear to have no purpose or meaning to us.

As we begin with a firm resolution to focus on our souls and to perfect it and liberate it from identification with the ego, we must remember that *tazkiyat an-nafs* operates at all levels of human activity: thought, emotions and action. It is not only purity in our actions that we must strive for, but even purity in our thoughts, consciousness and our very existence at all times.

*Sufi Comics*  
کتاب و آق

### THE BLIND ASTRONOMER

PSST! THERE SITS THE MOST WISEST MAN IN THE CITY

HMM... I SHOULD MEET HIM

SALAAM!

WALAIKUM SALAAAM

OH HE'S BLIND!

SIR, SINCE WHEN HAVE YOU BEEN BLIND?

SINCE BIRTH

I'M AN ASTRONOMER

YOU'RE A BLIND ASTRONOMER?!

... AND WHAT PATH OF WISDOM DO YOU FOLLOW?

EMOTIONS

MIND

THOUGHTS

DESIRES

SOUL

INTELLECT

IMAGINATION

PAST

FUTURE

I WATCH ALL THESE SUNS, MOONS AND STARS

YOU THINK YOU ARE NOTHING BUT A TINY ENTITY, YET WRAPPED UP INSIDE YOU IS THE GREATEST UNIVERSE ~ IMAM ALI

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## Lesson 4

# Dealing with Balá

The word '*balā*' can mean many things: trials, tribulations, sufferings, afflictions, and so on. Some Muslims assume that *balā* only befalls the evil as a punishment for their sins and disobedience to Allāh. But this is not true. *Balā* is reserved for the most elite amongst the faithful. It serves as a test of faith whilst helping the pious purifying themselves of attachment to the world and elevating them to higher levels of spirituality.

*Balā* may come in the form of illness, poverty, imprisonment, mistreatment by others, loss of loved ones (including children), and practically anything that we can imagine as unpleasant and hard to endure.

Those who are evil and deserving of punishment in this world may also experience similar unpleasantness but their experiences are because of very different reasons and therefore referred to as '*adhāb* (punishment) or '*iqāb* (chastisement).

How can a person tell if what they suffer in life is a punishment ('*adhāb*) or a trial (*balā*)? Their reaction to the experience will tell them. If it brings them closer to Allāh and elevates their faith, then it is *balā*. If it drives them further away from Allāh and increases their doubt in Him then it is a form of punishment. This is because Allāh never tries a *mu'min(a)* to shake his or her faith. He only tries them to the capacity that they can endure so that they grow further in their spirituality. He also never punishes a person in a manner that would shake their faith unless all excuses have been exhausted and the person has chosen to sell his or her hereafter for this world.

Islām has a unique perspective on *balā*. Because humans by nature will flee from suffering and Islām does not ask them to desire what is unnatural, Muslims are told not to pray or wish for *balā*. Yet if they are tested, then they are asked to show patience and even give thanks for being chosen for the test. And thereafter they are encouraged to ask Allāh to help them pass the test and to relieve them of the suffering.

All prophets, Imāms and people of Allāh suffered in life as an example that what humans see as good is not reserved for the faithful and what humans consider as bad is not a sign of being evil. And because the prophets and Imāms have greater endurance to suffering and more conviction and trust in Allāh, they bore the most suffering in human history.

Suffering and trials are like a black cloud with a silver lining. Even natural disasters that seem meaningless have wisdom behind them that only becomes apparent after many years. The key is to trust Allāh's wisdom and not to assume good and bad as being absolute. Everything is relative. If an experience brings you closer to Allāh, it is

good even if it appears to be unpleasant. And if an experience distances you from Allāh, it is bad even if it appears pleasant. Hence Allāh says:

﴿...وَعَسَىٰ أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ وَعَسَىٰ أَنْ تُحِبُّوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ شَرٌّ لَّكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ﴾

Yet it may be that you dislike something while it is good for you, and it may be that you love something while it is bad for you, and Allāh knows and you do not know.

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:216

**NO PROBLEM!**

WE THINK PROBLEMS ARE BAD, BUT PROBLEMS CAN BE A GOOD THING, IF WE CAN CHANGE OUR PERSPECTIVE.

PROBLEMS CAN BECOME A MEANS FOR THE ATTRIBUTES OF ALLAH TO REVEAL THROUGH US INTO THIS WORLD

**PROBLEM = GOOD THING**

PROBLEM → HOW? ...

العفو  
العدل  
الرزاق  
الشكور

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WHEN YOU SEE POVERTY GIVE CHARITY TO SUSTAIN THE POOR.

الرَّزَاقُ  
**THE SUSTAINER**

WHEN SOMEONE HAS DONE SOMETHING TO HURT YOU, FORGIVE THEM.

الْغَفُورُ  
**THE FORGIVER**

WHEN YOU'RE FEELING DEPRESSED, BECOME APPRECIATIVE OF ALLAH'S BOUNTIES

الشَّكُورُ  
**THE APPRECIATIVE**

WHEN YOU SEE INJUSTICE IN THIS WORLD, BECOME A FORCE OF JUSTICE

الْعَادِلُ  
**THE JUST**

THE NEXT TIME YOU'RE FACED WITH A PROBLEM. LOOK AT THE PROBLEM FROM GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

AND ASK WHICH OF THE ATTRIBUTES OF ALLAH NEED TO MANIFEST IN THIS SITUATION

USE THESE ATTRIBUTES AS ANTIDOTES FOR THE PROBLEM, BY MEDITATING ON THEIR MEANINGS...

**PROBLEM = GOOD THING**

... AND THEN TAKING ACTION!

### The Qur'ān on Balā

﴿أَمْ حَسِبْتُمْ أَنْ تَدْخُلُوا الْجَنَّةَ وَلَمَّا يَأْتِكُمْ مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ خَلَوْا مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ مَسَّتْهُمُ الْبَأْسَاءُ  
وَالضَّرَّاءُ وَزُلْزَلُوا حَتَّى يَقُولَ الرَّسُولُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَعَهُ مَتَى نَصُرُ اللَّهُ أَلَا إِنَّ نَصْرَ  
اللَّهِ قَرِيبٌ﴾

*Do you suppose that you shall enter paradise though there has not yet come to you the like of [what befell] those who went before you? Stress and distress befell them and they were convulsed until the apostle and the faithful who were with him said, 'When will Allāh's help [come]?' Look! Allāh's help is indeed near!*

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:214

﴿...وَلِيَبْتَلِيَ اللَّهُ مَا فِي صُدُورِكُمْ وَلِيُمَحَّصَ مَا فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ  
الصُّدُورِ﴾

*...so that Allāh may test what is in your breasts, and that He may purge what is in your hearts, and Allāh knows best what is in the breasts.*

- Surah Al-i Imrān, 3:154

﴿أَمْ حَسِبْتُمْ أَنْ تُتْرَكُوا وَلَمَّا يَعْلَمِ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا مِنْكُمْ وَلَمْ يَتَّخِذُوا مِنْ دُونِ  
اللَّهِ وَلَا رَسُولِهِ وَلَا الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَلِجَنَّةٍ وَاللَّهُ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ﴾

*Do you suppose that you will be let off while Allāh has not yet ascertained those of you who struggle (lit. do jihād) amongst you and those who do not take, besides Allāh and His Apostle and the faithful, anyone as [their] confidant? Allāh is well aware of what you do.*

- Surah Tawbah, 9:16

﴿أَحْسِبَ النَّاسُ أَنْ يُتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا آمَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ  
فَلَيَعْلَمَنَّ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ صَدَقُوا وَلَيَعْلَمَنَّ الْكَاذِبِينَ﴾

*Do the people suppose that they will be let off because they say, 'We have faith,' and they will not be tested? Certainly We tested those who were before them. So Allāh shall surely ascertain those who are truthful, and He shall surely ascertain the liars.*

- Surah al-Ankabut, 29:2-3

﴿وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ حَتَّىٰ نَعْلَمَ الْمُجَاهِدِينَ مِنكُمْ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَتَبْلُوَ أَخْبَارَكُمْ﴾

*We will surely test you until We ascertain those of you who struggle (do jihād) and those who are patient, and We shall appraise your record.*

- Surah Muhammad, 47:31

In all these āyāt, when Allāh says, ‘until We ascertain’ (meaning ‘until We prove’) the test is not because Allāh does not know but it is to let a person see for himself or herself how true he or she is to what he or she claims and for people to pass and fail tests so that they are granted a place in Paradise or Hellfire accordingly.

### Hadith on Balā

1. Rasulullāh (s), ‘You are not a *mu’min* until you count *balā* as a blessing (*ni’mah*) and comfort as a trial. This is because the suffering of this world is the blessing of the hereafter and the comfort of this world is a trial in the next world.’
2. Rasulullāh (s), ‘Allāh nourishes his *mu’min* (faithful) servant with trials just like a mother nourishes her baby with milk.’
3. Rasulullāh (s), ‘When Allāh intends good for a community, He tries them.’
4. *Balā* is a sign of Allāh’s love. Rasulullāh (s), ‘When Allāh loves a person, He tries him. When this love reaches a climax, He annihilates him.’ He was asked, ‘what does ‘*annihilates him*’ mean?’ He said, ‘He does not leave him with any wealth nor any children.’
5. Imām Ali (‘a), ‘Trials for an oppressor is to discipline him. For a *mu’min* it is to test him and for a prophet it is to elevate his status.’
6. Imām Ali (‘a), ‘All praise is to Allāh who made the purging of the sins of our Shī’ah in this world through their trials so as to secure their obedience and so that they may become deserving of its reward.’
7. Imām Ali (‘a), ‘*Balā* comes faster to a pure *mu’min* than rain runs down into a valley.’
8. Imām Ali (‘a), ‘Do not rejoice at wealth and comfort and do not grieve at poverty and *balā*. For gold is purified with fire and a *mu’min* is purified with tests (*balā*).’
9. Imām Ali (‘a) said the severest trials for a believer are three: to give out his money to help others, to be just and fair even when it is against himself and to remember Allāh excessively. Then he clarified that when he says remembering Allāh excessively he doesn’t mean saying, ‘*subhān Allāh wal*



*hamdu lillāh*' but he means remembering Allāh with regards to what Allāh has made *halāl* and *harām* for him. i.e. at the time of temptation to sin.

10. Imām Zayn al-Abidin ('a), 'I dislike that a person should always be healthy and well in the world and never be tried with some affliction.'
11. Imām al-Bāqir ('a), 'A man is tried according to the measure of his love.'
12. Imām al-Bāqir ('a), 'A *mu'min* suffers every kind of affliction and dies every kind of death except that he never commits suicide.'
13. Imām al-Bāqir ('a) and Imām as-Sādiq ('a) were asked at separate occasions whether a *mu'min* suffers and undergoes tribulations and they answered, 'Is *balā* for anyone but a *mu'min*?'
14. Imām as-Sādiq ('a), 'The world is a prison for the faithful. From what prison is good expected?'
15. Imām as-Sādiq ('a), 'A *mu'min* is like two sides of a scale. Every time his *imān* (faith) increases, so do his trials.'
16. Imām as-Sādiq ('a), 'Allāh sends his *mu'min* servant with a variety of trials just like a man who is away from home sends his family gifts.'
17. Imām as-Sādiq ('a), 'In paradise there is a level that a person can never attain except by being tried in his health.'
18. It is said that Abu Dhar once said, 'People hate three things while I love them. I love death, I love poverty and I love trials.' Imām as-Sādiq ('a) said, 'May Allāh bless Abu Dhar! But the correct thing is to say: 'death in obedience to Allāh is better than life in disobedience to Allāh. Poverty in obedience to Allāh is better than wealth in disobedience to Allāh. Trials in obedience to Allāh is better than health in disobedience to Allāh.'
19. Imām al-Askari ('a), 'There is no suffering except that Allāh has in it a blessing that overcomes it.'

### Istidrāj

Just as Allāh gives trials and suffering in this world to those He loves, He also gives comfort, pleasure, wealth and what we think of as 'good' to those who disbelieve in Him. This is because too much 'good' in this world makes a person forgetful of Allāh, of the Hereafter and even of his or her own soul and its purification. So a person who turns away from Allāh attracts more worldly pleasures to himself or herself. It is as if the worldly pleasures become his or her reward and then they have nothing in the hereafter. As Allāh puts it:

﴿وَمَا كَانَ لِنَفْسٍ أَنْ تَمُوتَ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ كِتَابًا مُؤَجَّلًا وَمَنْ يُرِدْ ثَوَابَ الدُّنْيَا نُؤْتِهِ مِنْهَا وَمَنْ يُرِدْ ثَوَابَ الآخِرَةِ نُؤْتِهِ مِنْهَا وَسَنَجْزِي الشَّاكِرِينَ﴾

*No soul may die except by Allāh's leave, at an appointed time. Whoever desires the reward of this world, We will give him of it; and whoever desires the reward of the Hereafter, We will give him of it; and soon We will reward the grateful.*

- Surah Al-i Imrān, 3:145

And also:

﴿مَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ الآخِرَةِ نَزِدْ لَهُ فِي حَرْثِهِ وَمَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ الدُّنْيَا نُؤْتِهِ مِنْهَا وَمَا لَهُ فِي الآخِرَةِ مِنْ نَصِيبٍ﴾

*Whoever desires the harvest of the Hereafter, We will increase for him his harvest, and whoever desires the harvest of the world, We will give it to him, but he will have no share in the Hereafter.*

- Surah ash-Shura, 42:20

The 'ulama of *akhlāq* and spirituality have a special term for when Allāh punishes a person and destroys him not by what we think of as 'bad' but by what we think of as 'good' such as too much wealth, too many children, too much luxury and comfort, very good health, and so on. The term is called '*istidrāj*'. It literally means taking someone or something gradually. This is because when a person is punished through *istidrāj*, it is so subtle and slow that he or she never realizes what is happening and also the fact that it is a punishment disguised as a blessing.

One of the qualities of *istidrāj* is the fact that it is gradual, meaning Allāh gives the person a lot of time (or what is called 'respite'). And Allāh actually describes this in the Qur'ān as well:

﴿وَلَا يَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَنَّ مَّا نُمَلِّئُهُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّأَنفُسِهِمْ إِنَّمَا نُمَلِّئُهُمْ لِيُزِدُوا إِثْمًا وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُهِينٌ مَا كَانَ اللَّهُ لِيَذَرَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ عَلَىٰ مَا أَنْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ حَتَّىٰ يَمِيزَ الْخَبِيثَ مِنَ الطَّيِّبِ ...﴾

*Let the faithless not suppose that the respite that We grant them is good for their souls: We give them respite only that they may increase in sin, and there is a humiliating punishment for them. Allāh will not leave the faithful in your present state, until He has separated the bad ones from the good...*

- Surah Al-i Imrān, 3:178-179

The idea that the world is not a place of comfort and rest for the faithful is so clear in Islām that Allāh tells us in the Qur'ān that if it was not for the fact that some of the

Muslims with weak faith would stop believing, Allāh would in fact shower the good of this world on the faithless and the faithful would not have a share in it. He says:

﴿وَلَوْلَا أَنْ يَكُونَ النَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً لَجَعَلْنَا لِمَنْ يَكْفُرُ بِالرَّحْمَانِ لِبُيُوتِهِمْ سُقْفًا مِنْ  
فِضَّةٍ وَمَعَارِجَ عَلَيْهَا يَظْهَرُونَ وَلِبُيُوتِهِمْ أَبْوَابًا وَسُرُورًا عَلَيْهَا يَتَكَبَّرُونَ وَزُخْرَفًا وَإِنْ كُلُّ  
ذَلِكَ لَمَّا مَتَاعَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةُ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ﴾

*Were it not [for the danger] that mankind would be one community,<sup>68</sup> We would have surely made for those who defy the All-beneficent, silver roofs for their houses and [silver] stairways by which they ascend; and [silver] doors for their houses and [silver] couches on which they recline; and ornaments of gold;<sup>69</sup> yet all that would be nothing but the wares of the life of this world, and the Hereafter near your Lord is for the Godway.*

- Surah az-Zukhruf, 43:33-35

Imām Ja'far as-Sādiq ('a) commented on the āyah above and said, 'If Allāh were to do that then no one would have remained a believer.'

The origin of the word *istidrāj* comes from the Qur'ān itself:

﴿وَالَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا سَنَسْتَدْرِجُهُمْ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ وَأُمْلِي لَهُمْ إِنَّ كَيْدِي  
مَتِينٌ﴾

*As for those who deny Our signs, We will draw them imperceptibly [into ruin] (nastadrijuhum), whence they do not know. And I will grant them respite, for My devising is indeed sure.*

- Surah al-Arif, 7:182-183

﴿فَذَرْنِي وَمَنْ يُكَذِّبُ بِهَذَا الْحَدِيثِ سَنَسْتَدْرِجُهُمْ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ وَأُمْلِي لَهُمْ  
إِنَّ كَيْدِي مَتِينٌ﴾

*So leave Me with those who deny this discourse. We will draw them imperceptibly [into ruin], whence they do not know. I will grant them respite, for My devising is indeed sure.*

- Surah al-Qalam, 68:44

Obviously the question that comes to mind is: when I am healthy or earning a lot of money or blessed with children and happiness or succeeding in life, how do I know if

<sup>68</sup> That is, a monolithic community of people without faith.

<sup>69</sup> Or 'houses embellished with gold.'

it is truly a blessing from Allāh or if it is *istidrāj* and I am being set up for destruction in the hereafter?

The answer is the same as the previous question on how do we know if a suffering is a test (*balā*) or a punishment (*‘adhāb*). It will depend on our reaction. If we find we are obeying Allāh and the more He blesses us the more we remember Him, thank Him and share our blessings with others, then it is truly a blessing. If we find that the more He blesses us, the more we disobey Him, forget Him, stop praying, stop going to the masjid, and we begin to hoard and become miserly, then it is *istidrāj*.

That is why Imām Ali (‘a) said, ‘When you see your Lord sending you trials (while you obey Him) then thank Him. When you see your Lord sending you only blessings consecutively while you continue to disobey Him, then beware!’

### What to do During Trials and Suffering

﴿وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ  
وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمُ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاغِبُونَ أُولَئِكَ  
عَلَيْهِمْ صَلَوَاتٌ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ وَرَحْمَةٌ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُهْتَدُونَ﴾

*We will surely test you with a measure of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth, lives, and fruits; and give good news to the patient — those who, when an affliction visits them, say, ‘Indeed we belong to Allāh, and to Him do we indeed return.’ It is they who receive the blessings of their Lord and [His] mercy, and it is they who are the [rightly] guided.*

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:155-157

Allāh revealed to Nabi Musa (‘a), ‘O Musa, during difficulties, make Me your shield and fort, to resolve your issues.’ i.e. turn to Me for help.

Imām Ali (‘a), ‘When in difficulty, say, *‘la hawla wa lā quwwata illa billāhi al-‘alliyi al-adheem’*, you will be released from it.

Imām ar-Rida (‘a), ‘I saw my father in a dream and he said to me, ‘my son, when you are in difficulty then say often, *‘Yā Ra‘ufu Yā Raheem’ (O Compassionate, O Merciful).*’ Then Imām ar-Rida (‘a) said, ‘And one whom we see in a dream, it is the same as if we saw him whilst awake.’

### How to Behave when Others Suffer

Rasulullāh (s), ‘When you see people in suffering then say *‘Al-hamdulillah’* but let them not hear you for that will grieve them.’

Imām al-Bāqir (‘a), ‘when you see someone suffering, then say three times without the person hearing you, *‘Alhamdu lillāhi ladhi ‘āfāni mimma ibtalāk bihi wa law shā’a fa’al.’* (‘All praise is to Allāh who protected me from what you are afflicted with and had He wished, He could have afflicted me too.’) Then he said, ‘whoever does that will never suffer from that *balā.*’

Imām as-Sādiq (‘a), said, ‘When you see a man suffering and Allāh has blessed you from it, then say ‘O Allāh, I neither laugh nor boast but I thank You over how great Your blessing is on me.’ (*Allāhumma inni lā askharu wa lā afkharu wa lākin ahmaduka ‘ala ‘adhimi ni’māika ‘allaya).*

Imām Ali (‘a) has also said that the person who is not afflicted is not in any less need of praying to Allāh for help and safety than the person who is already afflicted. This teaches us that we must ask Allāh for His protection even when we are healthy and in ease. And that one of the key reactions to suffering is to turn to Allāh for help and use it as a means to come closer to Him and to surrender to His Will and His Wisdom.

## Sabr (Patience)

*Sabr* or patience, are of two types: Sabr over difficulties (what pains you) and sabr over temptation (what pleases you). And Sabr over temptation is greater in reward. This is because when you are in pain, you don’t have much of a choice except to bear patience over your suffering. But when you are tempted with sinful desires, you have a choice of giving in and doing *harām* or bearing patience and avoiding it. It therefore requires a stronger willpower and more courage.

Rasulullāh (s), ‘I am amazed at a faithful (*mu’min*) and his complaining when sick. If he knew how much reward he gets in the illness, he would wish never to stop being sick until he meets his Lord, the Mighty and Glorious.’

Imām Ali (‘a), ‘Patience is a form of courage.’

Imām al-Bāqir (‘a), ‘If a *mu’min* knew what reward he gets for suffering afflictions, he would wish he could be cut up into pieces with scissors.’

Imām as-Sādiq (‘a), ‘Patience is to faith (*imān*) what the head is to the body. Just as without the head the body is lost and useless, so without patience, faith is lost and useless.’

Nabi Isa (‘a), ‘You will never reach what you love until you are patient over what you hate.’

**AL-HAMDU-LILLAH**  
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IT'S 10TH CENTURY BAGHDAD, SHAYKH ABDUL QADIR TAKES A CLASS IN A MADRESSA. SOMEONE EXCLAIMS...

O SHAYKH! YOUR SHIP CARRYING GOODS ACROSS SEA HAS SUNK. NOTHING HAS REMAINED !!

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ

O SHAYKH, I BRING GOOD NEWS THAT YOUR SHIP IS SAFE!

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ

\* AL-HAMDU-LILLAH (ALL PRAISE BELONGS TO GOD)

WE UNDERSTOOD WHY YOU PRAISED GOD WHEN YOU HEARD THE GOOD NEWS, BUT WHAT IS THE REASON FOR PRAISING GOD WHEN YOU HEARD YOUR SHIP SUNK?

WHEN I HEARD MY SHIP HAD SUNK, I SEARCHED IN MYSELF IF I FELT **GRIEVED** BECAUSE OF THE NEWS. I PRAISED GOD, THAT I WAS NOT.

WHEN I HEARD THAT MY SHIP WAS SAFE, I SEARCHED IN MYSELF IF I WAS **OVER JOYED**.

AND I PRAISED GOD THAT I WAS NOT

لِكَيْلَا تَأْسَوْا عَلَىٰ مَا فَاتَكُمْ وَلَا تَفْرَحُوا بِمَا آتَاكُمْ

SO THAT YOU MAY NOT GRIEVE FOR WHAT HAS ESCAPED YOU, NOR BE EXULTANT AT WHAT HE HAS GIVEN YOU (QURAN 57:23)



# Lesson 5

## Introduction to Nahj al-Balāgha

The phrase *Nahj al-Balāgha* means ‘The Peak of Eloquence’. It is a collection of 241 sermons, 79 letters and 489 short sayings (aphorisms) of Imām Ali b. Abi Tālib (‘a). It was compiled by Sayyid ar-Radi, a student of Shaykh al-Mufid.

Sayyid ar-Radi did not compile *all* of Imām Ali (‘a)’s words but only the ones that he wanted to use to show as examples of Amir al-Mumineen (‘a)’s eloquence. Nahj al-Balāgha is regarded to be highly reliable and one of the most important texts in Islām after the Qur’ān.

In this and the next lesson, we want to gain some appreciation of this valuable text so that you become very familiar with it. You will find that, along with the Qur’ān, Nahj al-Balāgha can be a great source of inspiration and also a source of comfort in all the ups and downs that you will experience in life. It is a book you must own and keep by your bedside and read every once in a while.

Some of the main themes in Nahj al-Balāgha are:

1. Theology: Knowing Allāh, the Attributes of Allāh, the Prophets and Messengers of Allāh.
2. Theology: Death, the Resurrection, Day of Judgement, Paradise and Hellfire. All such topics are usually referred to as ‘Eschatology’.
3. Spirituality: Asceticism (*zuhd*) and abstinence from the World.
4. Knowledge and Piety.
5. History: The Khilāfah, Imām Ali (‘a)’s right to It.
6. Politics & Warfare: Imām Ali (‘a)’s philosophy in battle, his correspondence with Mu’āwiya and others.
7. Justice & Government: How to govern over people.
8. Topics that Need Explanation: Some words of Imām Ali (‘a) have been misunderstood and need to be explained based on the Imām’s holistic view of the topics. The words that are misunderstood are because of looking at them in isolation or out of context e.g. his strong criticism of the world, his comments on women and their qualities, etc.

In order to get you very familiar with Nahj al-Balāgha, only the sermon, letter or saying numbers will be given here. You must bring a copy of the text with you in class to review this and the next lesson. The text can also be borrowed from the madrasah library. The sermon, letter and aphorism references here are based on the English translation edited and published by the Ahlul Bayt Assembly of America (1996) and the reference numbers in other translations/editions may vary slightly.



The teacher does not have to read the entire sermon or passage for each but simply highlight them for the students so as to make them aware of its content.

### **1. Theology: Knowing Allāh, the Attributes of Allāh, the Prophets and Messengers of Allāh.**

Sermon 1: The opening paragraphs that praise and describe Allāh and define what “deen” is. (*‘awwalu deen ma’rifatuhu’*).

Sermon 40: On the Kharijites slogan, “The Verdict is Only Allāh’s”.

Sermon 49: On Allāh’s Magnificence and Uniqueness.

Sermon 65: On the attributes of Allāh.

Sermons 104 and 160: His words on Rasullāh (s), his character, and his role in bringing forth mankind from darkness.

Sermon 112: His words on the angel of death being beyond description – how then can the Creator be described?

Aphorism 125: His definition of ‘Islām’.

### **2. Theology: Death, the Resurrection, Day of Judgement, Paradise and Hellfire. All such topics are usually referred to as ‘Eschatology’.**

Sermon 20: If you could see what those who have died have seen!

Sermons 85 and 102: Description of the Day of Judgement and Paradise.

Aphorism 130: His speech to the dead at a cemetery.

### **3. Spirituality: Asceticism (*zuhd*) and Abstinence from the World**

Sermon 28: I have never seen one who covets paradise or fears hell, asleep.

Sermon 42: Be the children of the hereafter and not the children of the world: on following pleasures and far-fetched hopes for the world.

Sermon 63: People are tested here through calamities. The world is like a shade – one moment here and then gone.

Sermon 64: Purchase yourself a place in paradise with good actions here.

Sermon 99: Keep away from the world and remember death before you sin.

Sermon 103: Know your worth and abstain from the world.

Sermon 209: The fine balance: Advice to the companion who built a large house for himself and his brother who renounced the world.

Letter 45: To his governor in Basra Uthmān b. Hunayf, who held a banquet for the rich only.

Aphorism 77: To the world – “I have divorced you thrice”.

Aphorism 119: The world is like a serpent – soft to touch but full of venom.

Aphorism 121: What a difference between a temporary sinful pleasure and a hardship whose reward remains forever!

Aphorism 131: To the man who was abusing and cursing the world.

Aphorism 237: The leftover bone of a pig in the hands of a leper.

Aphorism 465: Is there no free man to leave this world?

Conclusion: what ‘world’ is Imām Ali (‘a) condemning? Do you see the difference between the physical world that provides humans with their physical needs of life versus materialism and making the life of the world the end and objective of one’s existence?

#### 4. The Ahl al-Bayt (‘a)

Sermon 109: Last paragraph on the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a).

Sermon 144: On the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) being the only *Rāsikhuna fi al-‘Ilm* (‘Those immersed in knowledge’).

Sermon 154: We are the doors to the House. Anyone who enters from other than the doors is called a thief!

Sermon 202: His mourning the demise of Sayyida Fātima az-Zahra (‘a), the daughter of Rasullāh (s).

Sermon 239: A description of the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a).

Letter 31: Advice of a father to his son (Imām Hasan (‘a) or Muhammad al-Hanafiya).

Aphorisms 37 and 332: His dislike for the excessive veneration of the Imām.

Aphorism 109: We the Ahl al-Bayt are the measure.

Aphorism 111: If a mountain had loved me, it would crumble.

Aphorism 326: I am the leader (*ya’sub*) of the faithful.

#### 5. The Human Being:

Aphorism 8: How wonderful is man!

Aphorism 108: The human heart and need for moderation in everything.

#### 6. Akhlāq

Sermon 206: Urging decency and *akhlāq* to his men, even against the enemy.

Aphorism 31: Faith and Faithlessness both stand on four things.

Aphorism 150: On hypocrisy and preaching to others what you don't practice.

**7. Qualities of His Shi'ah:**

Sermon 12: Even those yet to be born were with me in Jamal.

Sermon 190: Last paragraph: One who dies knowing the right of Allāh, Rasullāh (s) and the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) dies a martyr.

Sermon 193: The qualities of the truly Godwary (*Khutbat al-Mutaqin*).

Aphorism 45: Even if I strike the nose of a believer, he will never hate me.

Aphorism 299: Amir al-Mu'minin ('a)'s "brother-in-faith" and his qualities.

Aphorism 343: Qualities of a *mu'min*.

Aphorism 441: Qualities of the lovers of Allāh.

# Lesson 6

## Nahj al-Balāgha (Cont'd)

### 1. Knowledge and Piety

Sermon 5: "I have hidden knowledge".

Sermon 18: on unworthy people passing judgement when Allāh has clarified everything.

Aphorism 147: On Knowledge vs. Wealth and the truly learned.

### 2. History: The Khilāfah, Imām Ali ('a)'s right to It

Sermon 3: Khutbat ash-Shiqshiqiyya.

Sermon 6: "I have continually been deprived of my right".

Sermon 17: About those who sat to judge others whilst they were ignorant themselves.

Sermon 22: On being accused for the murder of Uthmān as a pretext to fight him.

Sermon 33: On leadership having less value to him than an old shoe.

Sermon 139: At the Consultative Counsel (Shura) after 'Umar.

Sermon 172: When he was accused of being greedy for the Khilāfah.

Sermon 173: On eligibility for the Khilāfah.

Letter 28: To Mu'āwiya on the rope that was tied around his neck.

### 3. Politics & Warfare: Imām Ali ('a)'s philosophy in battle, his correspondence with Mu'āwiya and others

Sermons 9, 56 and 66: On how to fight in battle.

Sermon 11: How to battle – advice to his son Muhammad al-Hanafiya.

Sermon 13: Condemning the people of Basra for causing the first civil war in Islām (Jamal) on the instigation of Talha, Zubayr and Aisha (with Mu'āwiya behind the scenes).

Sermon 25: Expressing his disappointment with the people of Kufa after Siffin.

Sermon 55: His reluctance to start the Battle of Siffin.

Letters 6, 7, 9, 10, 17, 30, 32, 37, 64, 73: Samples of letters to Mu'āwiya.

Conclusion: Note Imām Ali (‘a)’s refusal to start a battle – both in Jamal and Siffin. In one battle he sent a young man with a Qur’ān offering arbitration and peace but they killed the young man and tore the Qur’ān with arrows. Yet once Imām Ali (‘a) started the battle, he wouldn’t hesitate or flee. So the refusal to fight initially is not on doubt but to prevent bloodshed and to reconcile where possible. It also indicates his understand that as long as dialogue and peace is possible, violence should be avoided for it always brings more disunity, hate and harm in its aftermath.

#### **4. Justice & Government: How to govern over human beings**

Sermon 15: Restoring Justice after his predecessors.

Sermon 53: To Malik al-Ashtar when he appointed him governor of Egypt.

#### **5. Sayings that need clarification:**

Sermon 80: On the ‘deficiencies’ of ‘women’.

Aphorism 61: A woman is a ‘scorpion’.

Aphorism 235: The qualities bad in a man are good in a woman.

Aphorism 239: A woman is all evil but more evil is man’s helplessness before her.

#### **6. The Most Famous Sermons:** These are given just to make the students aware of them – they are fairly lengthy and do not need to be discussed in class. They are held in high regard by scholars because of their eloquence and content and have therefore been given titles of their own:

Khutba ash-Shiqshiqiyya (The Sermon of the Camel’s Froth): Sermon 3

Khutbat al-Gharrā (The Brilliant Sermon): Sermon 83

Khutba Ashbāh (The Sermon of the Skeletons): Sermon 91

Khutba al-Qāsiyya (The Sermon of Disparagement): Sermon 192

Khutba al-Mutaqeen (Sermon of the Godwary): Sermon 193

# Lesson 7

## A Profile of the Perfect Shí'ah Youth

Before defining what makes the *Perfect Muslim Youth*, let us summarize the key lessons of life that we have covered during this final Madrasah graduating year:

### 1. Importance of Practice

Acquiring religious knowledge is easy. Being interested in spirituality (*Irfān*), *tafsir*, etc. is easy. What is difficult is putting it into practice. Instead of practising what they already know, most people are in search of 'more knowledge' in the hope that it will somehow 'miraculously' help them evolve further. So they attend more classes, more seminars, more lectures. Knowledge is a double-edged sword. Without it, we remain ignorant and don't know how to evolve. But acquiring it and not practising it, blocks us from acquiring more real knowledge and in fact hardens our hearts. Hence the hadith of Rasullullāh (s) that say, '*One who increases in knowledge but does not increase in his/her detachment from the world, does not increase in anything except his/her distance from Allāh.*' It is therefore the 'boring' stuff and difficult matters – fasting, worshipping, reflecting, working with the poor, etc. that is required to change the theory we learn into real knowledge.

### 2. Importance of Being Connected to the Community

A lot of youth feel pressured to help out in their community and withdraw when they have exams or start university. The community doesn't need the youth. Middle-aged individuals (who can help themselves) usually run the community. The youth are simply given the opportunity to learn to become adults. From a youth perspective however, the community can be a life-saver – literally – especially when they start university. Everyone needs to socialize and to mingle with peers. The community gives you an alternative to being friends with those who lack Islāmic values, experiment with drugs, dabble with issues like atheism, etc. When you are attached to and involved in your local community (e.g. a youth group), it acts as a shield that protects you from being confused, lost, depressed, lonely, losing your faith, etc. To stop coming to the masjid because you now go to university is a fatal mistake. It is when you start university that you need to be part of the Muslim community the most.

### 3. Importance of Learning all your Life by Teaching

It would be nice to have a teacher all our lives or someone who can always be there to help answer all our questions. But at some point, we need to

become our own teacher. And it starts after you graduate from Madrasah. Nothing will give you the discipline of constant learning like being a teacher.

#### **4. Importance of Giving Back to Society – the Meaning of Being Responsible and an Adult**

The youth will often complain that their parents treat them like kids. The reason parents do that is because they don't see a sense of responsibility in you. A sense of responsibility is shown when you can do what normal adults do without being told to do it. For example, when you don't have to be reminded to clean your room or to take out the garbage. When you contribute some of what you earn to the family upkeep. When you don't spend all your free time playing computer games, chatting with friends, surfing the internet. As soon as you learn to show the concerns that an adult does and you take on the responsibility of tasks at home without being told – it may be running the washing machine, picking up things lying around, going out to get the grocery, etc. - you begin to evolve into an adult. To put it differently, a child is very selfish from birth. They assume their parents have to serve them and provide for them food, clothes, shelter, time and make their entire lives rotate around theirs. It never occurs them to thank their parents or appreciate their sacrifices except perhaps on special occasions. Your parents will only see you as an adult when you move from being entirely selfish to being selfless.

#### **5. Life Only Gets Busier Until You Retire**

A lot of people assume they will contribute to society and the community or attain all their noble and religious goals after they finish university or this and that. As we grow older, life only gets busier and our commitments multiply. We only find time when we retire at which we point we don't have the energy and zeal to make a difference.

#### **6. Maximize your Productivity in Life before you are 60-65 – not before you die.**

No one wishes to die when they are 60-65. Everyone would love to live longer. At least until their 80s or 90s. But whatever you wish to accomplish in life, do so before you are in your 60s. Don't say, I hope to do this or that 'before I die.' The point is: most people, even if they are alive after they grow old, they are not productive enough to do much. So being alive when you're old won't make that much of a difference in terms of your goals in life.

**7. Don't be Ashamed of Learning and Asking Regardless of your Age or Circumstances.**

**8. Importance of Memorizing the Qur'ān and Ad'iyā**

Memorizing the Qur'ān, hadith and *ad'iyā* (pl. of du'a) is not just for the spiritual rewards (*thawāb*). Often in life, when you are faced with challenges or severe difficulties, you will only find solace from the Qur'ān, ad'iyā, hadith of Rasullāh (s) and the Ahl al-Bayt (a) and your faith. If you know much of this by heart, you will be surprised how the appropriate passages will come to you naturally to guide you in how you react to situations.

Remember: Whatever you make an effort to memorize while you are a child or even a teenager, can stay with you for life. What you try and memorize in your 30s and 40s will be hard to retain. So make the time to memorize as much of the Qur'ān as you can before you are older.

**9. The Major Decisions you Will Make in Life Include:**

- Career
- Spouse
- Religious Devotion and Practice

**10. The Not So Major Aspects of Life Include:**

- How Rich You Are
- Where you Live
- Who your Friends Are

Of course where you live is important. It is *harām* to go and live in a place where there are no Shi'ahs or Muslims and where you will not be able to practice your faith or there is danger you will lose it. And of course it is very important who your friends are because they can influence you positively or negatively and help you succeed in the hereafter or ruin you. But what we mean is that if you make the right career choice and you make the right choice of spouse who shares your religious goals and you don't compromise on your faith and how you practice Islām (salāh on time, hijāb, going to masjid, etc.) then you don't have to live in a Muslim country or have lots of friends. You could be living in a non-Muslim country and have no friends but still lead an Islāmic life.



## The Perfect Youth

### BELIEF

The perfect youth understands the importance of tawhid and why it is the primary purpose for which all prophets and messengers were ever sent. The aim in life, for the perfect youth is to gain true realization (*ma'rifah*) of Allāh. He or she is deep in his/her reflection and understanding of religion and his/her faith is unshakable. The perfect youth lives by the Qur'ān and the teachings of Rasulullāh (s) and the Ahl al-Bayt ('a). He or she is very tolerant and understanding.

Because of his or her pure belief that is not mixed with culture, the perfect youth is very moderate and never over emotional about anything. He or she is never extreme or radical whether it is in what they believe or what they don't believe. The perfect youth does not doubt in Islām or its teachings only because science says so. He/she is not judgmental, harsh and intolerant of others. The perfect youth sees himself or herself as a student of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) and a teacher of others.

### DEVOTION & PRACTICE

The Perfect Youth is strong in faith and not ashamed of showing it. If it is a girl she does not compromise on her hijāb for example. If it is time for salāh, the perfect youth will pray even in a public park without worrying who is watching. This is because he/she is too focused on the fact that Allāh is watching.

One of the aims of the perfect youth is to memorize the Qur'ān. He/she is eager to learn Arabic.

The perfect youth loves to help the poor and the needy and is always looking for ways to help the underprivileged.

The perfect youth never misses *salāt al-layl* and loves to fast often even when it is not the month of Ramadan e.g. on Mondays and Thursdays. When the perfect youth prays, it is noticeable how long their ruku' and sujud are and how much they enjoy worshipping their Lord.

The perfect youth is greedy for religious knowledge. The perfect youth has read the Qur'ān with its meaning (translation) several times and has read Nahj al-Balāgha cover-to-cover.

The perfect youth is sincere in his/her faith. This means he or she obeys the shari'ah without ask 'why'. There is nothing more hateful to the perfect youth than committing harām. He or she will take extra precaution in obeying Allāh. The perfect youth does not listen to music or like being around a place where there is music being played.

## RELATIONS

### **FAMILY**

The perfect youth has utmost respect for his/her parents. He or she will not let his/her parents serve him/her but will always be at hand to serve them. He/she is dependable and responsible even in the eyes of his/her parents. When a parent walks into a room, the perfect youth stands up in respect for his/her parent and will not sit down until they do. He or she does not raise his/her voice above his/her parents and does not look back at them with anger. You will never see the perfect youth arguing or speaking back rudely to his/her parent.

### **FRIENDS**

The perfect youth has a strong personality. He or she influences others positively instead of being influenced by them. The perfect youth does not have friends who do drugs or alcohol. In fact, the perfect youth does not have any friends who lead sinful lives or are disrespectful of Islām.

The perfect youth values his/her time and will not go to the mall ‘just to hang out’ or ‘kill time’. His or her friends are few and selective with similar interests. Most of the perfect youth’s friends are practising Muslims. He/she does not make fun of others especially just to make their friends laugh. When the perfect youth socializes with his/her friends he/she is never seen backbiting or lying, even if it is in jest and joking. The perfect youth sees him or herself as one waiting to serve the Imām of the Time.

### **WORK**

The perfect youth is not lazy. Rarely will you see him/her just lying around doing nothing. They regard their time as being precious so they won’t sit in front of the TV/computer just to waste time.

The perfect youth always has more religious knowledge than anyone else around them in their family and/or friends gathering. He or she is reliable and independent. The perfect youth does not like to ask others for help when they can help themselves. He or she is neither a miser nor extravagant.

### **GOALS IN LIFE**

The perfect youth is simple in his or her clothes and food. They see the people of the world as being foolish in how they give such importance to brand names and fashion. The perfect youth is aware of the current world political affairs and concerned about fellow Muslims and their suffering around the world.

The motto of the perfect youth is simply this: ‘My prayers and my sacrifices, my life and my death, are all only for Allāh, the Sustainer of the Universe.’ (Qur’ān, 6:162)

## CHARACTER

The perfect youth is very polite and gentle yet very brave and courageous. Everyone speaks of how nice and polite he/she is. When the perfect youth is happy you will see him/her laugh lightly or smile but never laugh loudly and noisily. No one has ever heard the perfect youth swear and no one ever will.

The perfect youth is decent. He or she is never seen with their legs stretched out in front of others, even if it is just their friends. He or she is always seated respectfully in the presence of others. The perfect youth dresses modestly. Besides Hijab, he or she is never seen dressed in clothes that are tight or revealing. He/she loves to dress in comfortable but loose-fitting clothes that reflect his/her inner sense of shame and modesty. He/she is so chaste that no one will even think or dare of sharing a dirty joke or saying indecent things in their presence. And because he/she is courageous, even if someone were to act sinfully in his/her presence, he/she would walk away or show his/her displeasure. He/she won't smile or 'play along' only to please someone whilst displeasing Allāh.

The perfect youth rarely loses his/her temper. He or she does not like being praised for the good he/she does. When he/she gives charity or helps someone, he/she will always hide it. The perfect youth is not wasteful, whether in food or clothes or spending. They never buy anything impulsively and they never hoard clothes or anything that can be of help of others.

## LIFESTYLE

The perfect youth is not obsessed with what others his or her age group are obsessed with e.g. computer games, internet, chatting, or the latest craze. The perfect youth is focused on the hereafter. He or she will often talk to Allāh even if it is in his or her heart. She or he is extremely sincere.