

Hadith of Unwan al-Basri from Imam as-Sadiq (a)

Introduction

The Hadith of Unwan al-Basri is an advice from Imam Jafar as-Sadiq (a) to the seeker of the path towards Allah (swt). It is a very noteworthy narration with words of advice by the Imam to those who wish to seek closeness to their Lord. Critical issues related to seeking knowledge, servanthood and obedience to Allah, and struggling against the lower self are mentioned.

Allama Tabatabai's master of practical ethics, Ayatollah Seyyid Ali Qazi Tabataba'i (may their souls be sanctified), refused to teach Islamic practical ethics to any new student unless he expressed his commitment to this tradition. The late 'Ayatollah Qazi (may God have mercy on him) used to recommend this tradition to his students, who sought the mystical journey to God the Almighty. He also asked them to write it and keep it in their pockets and read it twice a week. He regarded this tradition as the best treatment for one's temporal desires, lust and anger, which mainly stem from spite, greed, and indulgence in sensual pleasures.

The Hadith

I (Allamah Majlisi) say: I found it (this narration) in the handwriting of Shaykh al-Baha'i (qs), with the following words: Shaykh Shams al-Din Muhammad ibn Makki has said: I copied it from the handwriting of Shaykh Ahmad al-Farahani (rh), who has narrated from `Unwan al-Basri, who was a grand old shaykh of 94 years, who has said: I would often visit Malik ibn Anas for many years. When Ja`far al-Sadiq (as) came to Madinah, I visited him (frequently) and I loved to learn from him like I would learn from Malik. One day he (as) said: I am a busy man, and besides I need to [say certain dhikrs/litanies] during the day and night. So please do not keep me busy that I miss saying these. You can learn from Malik and you can keep visiting him as you had done this in the past.

I felt depressed because of what he told me. I left him and thought: Had he found any goodness in me then he would not have treated me in such an unfavorable way, and would not have stopped me from visiting him as many times as I wanted, in order to learn from him.

I then went to the Masjid of the Prophet (sawa) and offered my salams. The next day I returned to his grave and performed two rak`ats, saying: O Allah, O Allah! Please soften Ja`far's (as) heart to me, and grant to me from his knowledge so much so that it will ensure I find Your right path. I then returned home with sadness, and stopped visiting Malik, because my heart had drunk of the love of Ja`far (as). After that, I would not leave my house except for the wajib salawat, until finally my patience was reaching its limits.

When my chest grew constricted with anxiety, I put on my shoes and gown, and decided to visit Ja`far. It was after the `asr prayer. When I arrived at his door, I asked permission to see him. One of his servants came out and asked: What do you want? I said: I would like to give my salams to al-Sharif (as). He said: He is in his maqam.

I sat next to the door, and shortly thereafter, the servant came out and said: Enter with the blessings of Allah. I went inside and offered him (as) salams, which he requited, and said: Sit,

may Allah forgive you. He gazed down calmly for some time, then raised his head and asked: Whose father are you? I said: I am Abu `Abdullah. He (as) said: May Allah make your fatherhood (patronym) firm and grant you success, O Abu `Abdullah. What do you wish to ask of me? I then thought: If nothing else, my visiting and offering him salams, just after his (asr) salat, his supplication just now is more than enough for me!

Then he (as) then raised his head and asked: What do you want to ask? I said: I prayed to Allah to turn your heart with kindness to me, and to grant me of your knowledge, and I hope that Allah (t) has answered my prayer about al-Sharif (as).

He (as) then said: O Abu `Abdullah, knowledge comes not only through learning. It is a light that falls upon the hearts of those whom Allah (awj) wishes to guide. If you desire knowledge, then first you must find, within your soul, the reality and essence of servanthood, and then seek knowledge through using this fact, and ask Allah to help you understand.

Then I said: O Sharif (a). He (a) said: (Please,) call me Aba `Abdullah. I then said: O Aba `Abdullah (as), what is the true essence of servant-hood? He (as) said: It is three things: That a man see nothing that Allah has privileged him as being from himself or belonging to him, because slaves own nothing. He must see that all possessions are the belongings of Allah. That he must only use his endowments (from Allah) as Allah commands of him. That he must not be self-reliant in managing and planning his affairs, but rather his whole efforts must be devoted solely to fulfilling his obligations to Allah, and abiding His prohibitions. When a servant realizes that, out of all the things with which Allah has privileged him, not one iota of it belongs to him, then giving charity becomes easy in matters Allah (t) has ordained. When a servant leaves the management of his affairs to his true Master and Planner, then accepting and coping with worldly afflictions becomes easy. When a servant busies himself solely with fulfilling his duties to Allah (t), and abiding His prohibitions, then there can be no room left in him for quarreling and arrogance. When Allah graces His servant with these three things then it becomes easy to cope with worldly difficulties, Shaytan (la), and Allah's creatures; and consequently neither will he chase the dunyah in order to accumulate wealth and show off, nor will he seek what others possess, so that he might become powerful and increase his (worldly) rank. He no longer fritters away his days in vanity and falsehood. And Allah (t) has said: *{This is the abode of the Hereafter which We shall grant to those who do not desire to domineer in the earth nor to cause corruption, and the outcome will be in favour of the Godwary. Whoever brings virtue shall receive [a reward] better than it, but whoever brings vice —those who commit misdeeds shall not be requited except for what they used to do.}* (28:83-84).

I then said: O Aba `Abdullah, advise me. He (as) said: I advise you of nine things, and my advice is for those who wish to travel upon the sirat to Allah (t). And I pray to Allah to grant you tawfiq to make the best use of them. Three are in the matter of disciplining the soul, three are in the matter of forbearance, and three are in the matter of knowledge and learning. You must guard them and never neglect them.

`Unwan said: I then emptied my heart to make room for them.

He (as) said: Of the matters of disciplining the soul are that you must never eat unless you are hungry, because to do otherwise creates in one foolishness and weak understanding. You must never eat unless you are hungry, and when you eat, you must eat only what is lawful, and mention the name of Allah. You must recall the words of the Messenger of Allah (sawa): Of the containers that people fill up, the most wicked is one's stomach. If one must eat, then fill one third of it (the stomach) with food, one third with water, and leave one third empty for breath.

Of the matters of forbearance are that if one says to you: If you say one word you will hear ten. To this person you must say: If you say ten words then you will not hear even one. If one slanders you, say to them: If you are right, I pray that Allah forgives me, and if you are wrong, I pray that Allah forgives you. If someone threatens you with slanderous words, you must promise him good advice and favors.

Of the matters of knowledge are that you must always ask the scholars about whatever you do not know; but you must not ask them because simply challenge or test them. You must never act on the basis of your own opinion; but rather you must act with ihtiyat in all affairs where maintaining it (precaution) is possible. You must flee from issuing (your own personal) fatawa just as you flee a lion, and you must never allow your neck to be used as a bridge by others (should they act upon such personal fatawa).

Now you must take your leave. I have advised you, O Abu `Abdullah, so do not spoil my dhikr of Allah because I am a man who is very protective of himself. May peace be upon those who follow guidance.

[Bihar al-Anwar, H384]