

Nobility of the Soul

By Ayt. Mutahhari

I began [this] discourse [by] saying that anyone who possessed a lofty spirit must suffer physical discomfort while only those who have loose spirits live in comfort, sleep soundly and enjoy delicious dishes and other benefits. Tonight, I wish to discuss the greatness and nobility of the spirit and show the differences between the two. Greatness of spirit is one thing but nobility is a higher quality. In other words, every greatness is not nobility but every nobility is also greatness.

Determination is obviously a sign of greatness of the spirit and there are different levels of determination. One person is content to secure a diploma while another knows no limit to the pursuit of knowledge, and his aim is to make the utmost use of his life and gain as much knowledge as he can.

You may have heard the well-known story of Abu Rayhān Biruni, a man whose true worth according to scholars, is not quite known. He was so extraordinary a mathematician, sociologists and historian that he is considered by some to be superior to Abu Ali Sina (Avicenna).

These two were contemporaries. Abu Rayhān was in love with knowledge, research and discoveries. Sultan Mahmud summoned him to attend his court and he had to obey the call. He accompanied the King in his conquest of India and found a great treasure of knowledge in that country. But he did not know Sanskrit, so he began learning it. In spite of his old age, he learned it to a very high degree and after many years of study, he produced a book called *Tabqiq mal al-Hind min maqulibi marzalab fi al-aql wa maqbulat*, which is a very valuable source of reference for the Indianologists of the world.

He was on his death bed when a jurisprudent neighbor of his, learning of his serious illness, went to visit him. Abu Rayhān was still conscious and, in seeing the jurisprudent, asked him a question of jurisprudence concerning inheritance or some other issue. The jurisprudent was amazed that a dying man should show interest in such matters. Abu Rayhān said, "I should like to ask you which is better, to die with knowledge or without it?" The man said, "Of course it is better to know and die." Abu Rayhān said, "That is why I asked my first question." Shortly after the jurisprudent reached home, the cries of lamentation told him that Abu Rayhān had died. This shows his determination even at the moments of death.

One person is great in gathering wealth, for example, while others show no such endeavors and are content with earning a simple livelihood by whatever means they can, whether it is by serving others or begging or submitting to abasement. Are those two types of effort equal? Not at all. Sometimes you see the people who lack the resolution to get rich, simply because they are weak and others scorn and laugh at them. They recite verses of the Quran about asceticism, based on fallacious reasoning. But they are wrong. The person who pursues the amassing of wealth, with all his misery, with all his devotion to the world, is still better than those having a weak determination or no determination who resemble beggars and thus, he has more character. This person is not blameworthy before him. These persons can be considered blameworthy only before a real ascetic who himself is a man of determination. Like Ali, peace be upon him, he can gather riches, not because of his own needs, but to spend on others and help the needy. He is in a position to reproach another for whom storing and hiding riches have become a goal, not a means.

Similarly, one may seek high rank and position. Alexander the Great was such a man who desired to rule the world. He is a superior to a man who lives in servility and has no determination for feelings of nobility. Nadir Shah is another example of high-mindedness. These men have great spirits but it cannot be said that they have noble spirits. Alexander is an example of a great ambition, and his greatness has developed only in one direction, in ambition, fame and influence, in being the most powerful man in the world. His spirit is noble only to that extent. But did he experience any ease and comfort? Could Nadir have had an easy life with his tyranny, and his building of minarets with the skulls of those he had killed, the man who pulled men's eyes out of their sockets, the man who was madly ambitious? He had no time sometimes to take off his boots for ten days.

One may become a Nadir, but he can never enjoy a comfortable bed, fine food and hundreds of other luxuries. His body can never relax. And eventually he will die. Whoever has great determination, in whatever area it may be, will have no physical ease. But none of these men possessed noble souls. Their souls were great but were not noble. Suppose a man to be a great man of learning without any other good quality. He has lofty thoughts about human knowledge. Another is skillful in gathering wealth. Someone else is full of rancour, envy or ambition. All of them are extremely selfish but none of them is noble and magnanimous.

The point is that from a psychological and philosophical point of view, there is another kind of greatness which does not depend on selfishness and which is called humanity. I have not yet seen how materialists explain away this aspect of the human being. What makes the human being or, at least, some individuals have a feeling of honor in their spirits, something which is beyond and above selfishness? Such a human being wishes to be noble and great, but not at the expense of another. One's spirit does not allow one to tell a lie. Nobility is the opposite of baseness and a person avoids baseness completely.

Mussolini, the well-known Italian dictator, is reported to have said to a friend that he preferred to live like a lion for one year, rather than like a sheep for a hundred years. He insisted that his friend should not quote his words to anyone since his being a lion must mean that other people are sheep and if other people learned what Mussolini desired, they, too, would want to be lions in which case the dictator could no longer remain a lion. There is no nobleness in such an attitude.

But what is a noble person like? It is a person who wants all people to be lions rather than sheep in the world. The Prophet has said, "I was appointed to perfect the morality of nobility," not "I was appointed to perfect good morals." The latter is not the correct meaning. Every innovator of a school claims that what he teaches is right. Even Nietzsche who believes in might and has no compassion for the weak, considers his school as one of the true ethics. His words mean nobleness not mastery over others.

Ali, peace be upon him, says to his son, Imam Husain, peace be upon him, "Uplift your spirit above every mean act and think that your spirit is worthier than to be polluted by meanness." He advises his son to think himself nobler than to demean himself by lies or by abasing himself before others. Ali, peace be upon him, says that an honorable person never commits adultery and this is irrespective of the fact that it is forbidden by the divine law and punishable in both worlds.

Ali, peace be upon him, believes that all vices are caused by the baseness of character. For example, he thinks slandering is the act of a weak person. A brave person is so noble and magnanimous that he or she expresses the objections he or she feels for another to that person's face or at least keeps silent. One who is covetous towards others is making the self-contemptuous. One who laments one's misfortune before others is abasing the self.

Someone came before Imam Sadiq, peace be upon him, lamenting his distress and poverty. The Imam asked an attendant to go and pay him a few dinars. The man said in apology to the Imam, "I did not intend to ask for anything." The Imam said, "I did not say that you did but my advice to you is to abstain from narrating your difficulties before others, for you lose your worth, and Islam does not wish a believer to be humbled before others."

Ali, peace be upon him, says, "He who describes his helplessness for others is destroying his self-respect and honor which are the dearest things for a true believer. And he who lets his carnal desires dominate him is abasing himself." Ali peace be upon him, believes that all virtues are due to the nobleness of spirit. Being truthful, honest, perseverant and avoiding all vices are the result of that nobleness. Drinking, to give an example, causes drunkenness, even though temporarily robbing one of reason and reducing one to the level of a stupid animal.

Do you know of anyone like Ali who called people to renounce the world? Ali did this but at the same time he emphasized self-respect and magnanimity. He says to his son, Hasan, peace be upon him, "Do not be the slave of another being. God has created you free." How is it that Ali, peace be upon him, as the most humble man in the world, invites people to regard the self? This self that he respects is the noble side of mankind.

We have in hand many sayings of this kind belonging to Ali, peace be upon him, but few quotations from his two sons, a result of the despotic conditions of their time. But in the books containing the words of Imam Husain, peace be upon him, the question of narrowness of the spirit is noticed abundantly, particularly his sayings in the last moments before his martyrdom, blaming those who had sold themselves to tyrants. He says, "If you are not religious and do not fear the Resurrection, at least be free men in your world." In his discourse in Mecca, he says that his spirit does not allow him to live and see such corrupt conditions, let alone be a part of it. Again he says, "Verily I consider death to be nothing but felicity and life with these tyrants to be anything but misery." By this he means that it is an honor for him not to be amongst such people who bring nothing but weariness and sorrow to his soul.

On the day of his martyrdom (the 10th of Muharram), Imam Husain, peace be upon him, gives this answer to the messenger of Ibn Ziyad who was demanding allegiance, "I will never offer my hand in humiliation nor confess like a slave (that I have been in error)." Even in his last moments

of fighting when all his relatives and companions died and he himself, in facing death, and his household is in danger of capture, he continues to declare his exalted goal of nobility and freedom.

Thus we see that all great men are not noble but all noble ones are great. About Imam Husain, peace be upon him, we must say that he was great in his good deeds, his indifference to wealth, his endeavours in enjoining to good and forbidding the wrong, in his lack of ambition and vengefulness, in his insistence on prayer and communion with God and in his revival of the noble self in fighting for (God and the truth. I pray God to grant us such spirits of nobleness and to give us the awareness of our destiny.