

## Spiritual Freedom

By Shahīd Murtadha Mutahhari

The subject of our discussion is spiritual freedom. The points that I wish to submit are as follows: Firstly, the nature of freedom; secondly, how many kinds of freedom there are though I confine myself to two types here, namely, spiritual freedom and social freedom and thirdly, the relationship between these two types of freedom and the extent to which spiritual freedom is possible without social freedom and vice versa. The discussion will mainly be centered round the last point, namely, the connection between the two types of freedom.

Let us see what is the meaning of freedom and liberty. Freedom is a requisite of life and evolution and one of the greatest needs of living creatures, whether they are plants, animals or human beings. The difference in their freedom lies in their differences of structure. The human being needs a freedom beyond that of plants and animals. Every living thing must grow and find perfection. It cannot remain stationary. Solids do not grow so they have no need of freedom. But living creatures need three things for their growth and evolution: nurturing, security and freedom.

Nurturing consists of a number of factors required by living creatures for their growth. For example, a plant needs soil and water as well as light and heat in order to grow. An animal needs food and other things. A human being's needs are the same as those of plants and animals plus a series of other needs which would come under the heading of nurturing, all of which are like food for it. How can one live without food? The faculty of nourishment is a necessary asset to a living being.

The next requisite of a living being is security. What does security mean? It means being able to keep the means and equipment necessary for living. It should not be withheld from them by an enemy or a foreign power. Next to this nurturing it needs security in order to keep its life and wealth and health and belongings safe against aggression.

The third need is freedom. What does freedom mean? It means the absence of obstacles in the way of growth. For example, in growing a plant, in addition to other requisites, you must provide a suitable environment for it and remove all obstacles. If

you plant a tree under a roof, you are depriving it of free space above to attain its full growth. Thus every living being needs freedom for its growth and evolution. What is this freedom? It is the absence of barriers. Free persons are those who fight against all obstacles set in their way of growth and perfection. They do not submit to obstacles.

Now we must see what types of freedom there are. The human being is a peculiar being and his or her life is a social one, in addition to being a complex creature in his or her individual life. Human beings are quite different from plants and animals; they have certain other needs which may be divided into two kinds. One of them is social freedom. What does social freedom mean? It means having freedom in connection with other individuals in society, so that they do not hinder their growth, do not imprison them to check their activities, do not exploit or enslave them, do not exploit all their physical and mental powers in their own interests.

One of the greatest problems of human beings throughout history has been this same abuse of power by powerful elements in subjugating others and enslaving them so as to enjoy the whole fruits of their lives and labor. Do you know what exploitation means? It means picking someone else's fruits. For each person his or her essence is a fruitful tree and his or her labor and thoughts are the product of that tree. This crop must be his or hers. But when others seize these fruits by one means or another, we say a person is exploited by another or others.

In the Holy Quran, one of the explicit purposes of the prophets has been to offer mankind social liberty and deliver them from their mutual enslavement. The Quran is a wonderful Book. Some ideas flourish in a particular period while they lose their brilliance at other times. But the case is different with the Quran for its ideas and words possess a permanent lustre and this is something of an epic and miracle. One example of which is this idea of social liberty. I do not believe that you can find a sentence elsewhere or at any time about this matter more lively and surging than what you meet in the Quran. It has been unrivaled in all the last three centuries when the motto of philosophers has constantly been liberty. This is the sentence:

*Say: O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah. . . (Q 3:64)*

What is this banner? The banner consists of two sentences: The first one is that nothing must be worshipped but the unique God, neither Christ nor any other nor the devil should be worshipped. Only God. The second one is that 'none of us must consider another as his slave or master.' This means the abolition of the order of servitude, the system of exploitation, of the exploiter and exploited, getting rid of inequality and doing away with the right of enslavement.

The world of today, too, considers social freedom as being sacred and if you have read the universal declaration of human rights, you will see that the major cause of all wars, bloodshed and misfortunes in the world is that individuals do not respect the freedom of others. . . . It is true then that social liberty is sacred.

Another kind of liberty is spiritual freedom. The difference between the Prophets' school and other human schools is that the Prophets have come to offer spiritual freedom to mankind as well as social freedom, the former having a greater value than anything else. Both social liberty and spiritual freedom are sacred and the former liberty is not possible without the latter. The trouble with modern human society is that it tries to safeguard social liberty without seeking spiritual freedom. In fact it has not the ability to do so, since spiritual freedom is obtainable only through Prophethood and Prophets, and through faith and divine books.

Now let us see what spiritual freedom is. The human being is a complex being with various powers and instincts, with strength, appetites, anger, greed, ambition and love of excess. On the other hand, it has been granted reason, mental and moral conscience. Internally and spiritually the human being may feel the self, free or enslaved. It may be a slave of its greed, lust, anger and love of excess or it may be free of all these vices

Can human beings have social freedom without spiritual freedom? That is, can they be slaves to their own lust, anger and greed and at the same time respect the freedom of others? Today they say yes and they practically expect each person to be a slave to his or her greed, anger and lust and at the same time to respect social liberty. This is one of the many examples of contradictory ideas from which human society suffers.

Hadrat Ali has an utterance about virtue which, like his other sayings, is highly worthy, even though to some people it seems old fashioned. He says, “Divine virtue is the key to every truth, provisions for the resurrection day, factor of release from any sort of slavery and deliverance from any cause of perditions.”

The phrase shows that virtue delivers the human being from every kind of servitude and frees him or her spiritually to enable him or her to give freedom to others. Who, then, is a true liberal in the world? It is men like Ali ibn Abi Talib, peace be upon him, who stand in the same rank as he or are trained in his school. For they are, in the first place, liberated from the bonds of self.

Little attention seems to be paid to spiritual freedom by human societies, which is the cause of many present troubles. This is so evident that many people consider spiritual freedom as something abolished, even though the need for it is much greater than in the past. What does spiritual freedom mean? Freedom requires two sides so that one side becomes free of the bond of the other. In spiritual freedom what must the human be free of? Spiritual freedom is freedom from one's self as against social freedom which is freedom from the bonds of others.

What does spiritual freedom consist of in simple language? We will begin with something which everyone would understand. Undoubtedly we need food to live and the more of it the better, and we need clothing and the finer the better and we require a dwelling and the more magnificent the better. We desire spouses and children, luxury, money and material things.

But at one point we may reach a cross-road where we should keep our honor and nobility and at the same time put up with poverty, eat dry bread, wear shabby clothes, live in a poor hut and have no money and be distressed. If we ignore our honor and nobility and submit to abjection, then all material benefits will be provided for us. We see that many people are not willing to suffer humiliations for the sake of material things while others readily accept this exchange, even though they and their consciences are ashamed of themselves.

The truth is that when a person thinks the self to be a slave of wealth, that person is in fact a slave to his or her mental characteristics, a slave to greed and one's animal

nature. For inanimate things like money, land, machine and even animals have no power to enslave that person. When one ponders deeply over this matter, one finds the source of slavery to lie in one's own peculiarities such as greed, lust, anger and carnal desires.

The Prophets are sent to preserve the spiritual freedom of humanity. It means preventing human honor, humanity, intelligence and conscience from being subjugated to its own lust, passion and love of profits. If you overcome your passion, you are free. If you conquer your lust and not vice versa, you are free. If you are in a position to gain an illegitimate profit, but your faith and conscience and intelligence forbid you to do so, you have overcome your desire and then you can say that you are really spiritually free. . . the human being's complex personality has a lower animal side and higher human side. Spiritual freedom means that the higher side is free from the lower one.

The greatest damage of our time is speaking of freedom and confining it to social freedom. Spiritual freedom is never spoken of and, in consequence, social freedom is not secured. A great crime is committed in our time in the form of philosophy and philosophical schools totally ignoring the human being, its personality, spiritual honor and God's revelation, "I breathed into him of My Spirit," is quite forgotten. They deny that the human being has two aspects an animal side and a human one. They claim that this human being is no different from animals and is subject to the survival of the fittest. This means that each individual's effort is for his or her own interests. Can you imagine how much damage this attitude has done to humanity?

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Extracted from: *Spiritual Discourses* by Ayt Murtadha Mutahhari., Discourse 3 and 4  
<http://www.al-islam.org/spiritual-discourses-murtadha-mutahhari/discourse-4-spiritual-freedom-2>