

ALI 435 - Readings #4

Zuhd and its application in life

Another spiritual motif conspicuous in the teachings of the Nahj al-balaghah is zuhd, which after taqwa is the most recurring theme of the book. 'Zuhd' means renunciation of the 'world', and very often we encounter denunciation of the 'world', and invitation and exhortation to renounce it.

The words 'zuhd' and 'raghbah' (attraction, desire), if mentioned without reference to their objects, are opposite to each other. 'Zuhd' means indifference and avoidance, and 'raghbah' means attraction, inclination, and desire.

Indifference can be of two kinds: involuntary and cultivated. A person is involuntarily indifferent towards a certain thing when by nature he does not have any desire for it, as in the case of a sick person who shows no desire either for food, or fruits, or anything else. Obviously, this kind of indifference and abstinence has nothing to do with the particular sense implied in 'zuhd'.

Another kind of indifference or abstinence is spiritual or intellectual; that is, things which are natural objects of desire are not considered the goal and objective by a human being in the course of his struggle for perfection and felicity.

Accordingly the zahid (i.e. one who practises zuhd) is someone whose interest transcends the sphere of material existence, and whose object of aspiration lies beyond the kind of things we have mentioned above. The indifference of a zahid originates in the sphere of his ideas, ideals, and hopes, not in his physiological makeup. This indifference is not confined to his heart, intellect, and feelings and is not limited to his conscience. It also manifests itself on the practical level of life in the form of simplicity, contentment, and abstention from hedonistic urges and love of luxuries. A life of zuhd not only implies that a man should be free from attachment to the material aspects of life, but he should also practically abstain from indulgence in pleasures.

There are some points that need clarification. Is zuhd, or detachment from the world, on which the Nahj al-balaghah, following the Qur'anic teachings, puts so much emphasis, to be taken solely in an ethical and spiritual sense?

In other words, is zuhd purely a spiritual state, or does it possess practical implications also? That is, is zuhd spiritual abstinence only or is it accompanied by an abstinence in

practical life also? Assuming that zuhd is to be applied in practice, is it limited to abstinence from unlawful things (muharramat)? What is its underlying rationale and philosophy?

What is the use of an ascetic life that limits and confines life, rejecting its blessings and bounties? Is zuhd to be practised at all times or only under certain particular conditions? Is zuhd-in the sense of abstinence from even permissible things-basically in agreement with other Islamic teachings?

The conception of zuhd in Islam is not something that would lead to asceticism, because a sharp distinction between this world and the next is nowhere drawn. From the viewpoint of Islam, this world and the next are not separable, not alien to each other. The relation of this world to the other is similar to that between the inward and outward sides of a single reality.

The Three Essential Principles

1. Enjoyments derived from the physical, material, and natural means of life are not sufficient for man's happiness and felicity. A series of spiritual needs are inbuilt in the human nature, without whose satisfaction the enjoyment provided by material means of life is not enough to make man truly happy.
2. The individual's felicity and happiness is not separable from that of society. Since man is emotionally bound to his society, and carries within him a sense of responsibility towards it, his individual happiness cannot be independent of the prosperity and peace of his fellow men.
3. The soul, despite its fusion and a kind of unity with the body, has a reality of its own. It is a principle in addition to the body which constitutes another principle in itself. The soul is an independent source of pleasure and pain. Like the body, or rather even more than it, it stands in need of nourishment, training, growth, and development.

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