

ALI 453 - Readings #1

Understanding Taqwa

Taqwa is one of the most frequent motifs of the Nahj al-balaghah. In fact it would be hard to find another book which emphasizes this spiritual term to the extent of this book. Even in the Nahj al-balaghah, no other term or concept receives so much attention and stress as taqwa. What is taqwa?

Often it is thought that taqwa means piety and abstinence and so implies a negative attitude. In other words, it is maintained that the greater the amount of abstinence, withdrawal, and self-denial, the more perfect is one's taqwa.

According to this interpretation, taqwa is a concept divorced from active life; secondly it is a negative attitude; thirdly, it means that the more severely this negative attitude is exercised, the greater one's taqwa would be.

Undeniably, abstinence and caution exercised with discretion is an essential principle of wholesome living. For, in order to lead a healthy life, man is forced to negate and affirm, deny and posit, renounce and accept, avoid and welcome different things. It is through denial and negation that the positive in life can be realized. It is through renunciation and avoidance that concentration is given to action.

The principle of tawhid contained in the dictum *la ilaha illa Allah* is at the same time a negation as well as an affirmation. Without negation of everything other than God it is not possible to arrive at tawhid.

That is why rebellion and surrender, *kufr* (unbelief) and *iman* (belief), go together; that is, every surrender requires a rebellion and every faith (*iman*) calls for a denial and rejection (*kufr*), and every affirmation implies a negation. The Qur'an says: *So whoever disbelieves in taghut and believes in God, has laid hold of the most firm bond ...* (2:256)

However, firstly, every denial, negation, rejection, and rebellion operates between the limits of two opposites; the negation of one thing implies movement towards its opposite; the rejection of the one marks the beginning of the acceptance of the other.

The Nahj al-balaghah speaks of taqwa as a spiritual faculty acquired through exercise and assiduity, which on its emergence produces certain characteristic effects, one of which is the ability to abstain from sins with ease.

Taqwa is described as a spiritual condition which results in control and command over one's self. It explains that the result of subjugation to desires and lusts and being devoid of taqwa degrades one's personality making it vulnerable to the cravings of the carnal self.

The Nahj al-balaghah stresses that taqwa is for man a shield and a shelter, not a chain or a prison. There are many who do not distinguish between immunity and restraint, between security and confinement, and promptly advocate the destruction of the sanctuary of taqwa in the name of freedom and liberation from bonds and restraint.

That which is common between a sanctuary and a prison is the existence of a barrier. Whereas the walls of a sanctuary avert dangers, the walls of a prison hinder the inmates from realizing their inner capacities and from benefiting from the bounties of life.

In spite of the great emphasis laid by the Nahj al-balaghah on taqwa as a kind of guarantee and immunity against sin and temptation, it should be noticed that one must never neglect to safeguard and protect taqwa itself. Taqwa guards man, and man must safeguard his taqwa. This is not a vicious circle. This reciprocal guarding of the one by the other is comparable to the one between a person and his clothes. A man takes care of his clothes and protects them from being spoiled or stolen, while the clothes in turn guard him against heat or cold. In fact the Holy Qur'an speaks of taqwa as a garment: *And the garment of taqwa -that is better.* (7:26)

Taqwa gives man spiritual freedom and liberates him from the chains of slavery and servitude to lusts and passions. It releases him from the bonds of envy, lust, and anger, and this expurgates society from all kinds of social bondages and servitudes. People who are not slaves of comfort, money, power, and glory, never surrender to the various forms of bondage which plague the human society.

Of the many effects of taqwa that have been pointed out, two are more important than the rest: firstly, the development of insight and clarity of vision; secondly, the capacity to solve problems and to weather difficulties and crises.

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