

## **Spirituality and Ethics: The Paradigms of Imam 'Ali (A.S.)**

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In today's world, we are in continuous search for godly individuals who can inspire us and through whom we can feel the presence of the divine. The Qur'an constantly reminds us of "those who believe and act righteously"- that is, those who assent to God's existence and then become godly in their life. Imam 'Ali embodied such a personality. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to state that spirituality was the key to the personality of Imam 'Ali. Imam 'Ali did not just worship God, he adored him. It is from Imam 'Ali that we can comprehend the quest to experience God in the present world, to feel His majestic presence and to remove the veils that separate human from the divine. The adoration of God, in the Islamic perspective, takes many forms. These range from various forms of spiritual exercises, vigils, protracted prayers, meditation to emulating the spiritual exercises of the Prophet Muhammad.

For Imam 'Ali, an important method of experiencing the divine is by emulating the Prophetic paradigm. Imam 'Ali tried to replicate in his life a sense of the spiritual experience of the Prophet himself. He modeled his inner and outward behavior on the Prophet, exemplifying his every act. This includes patterning his outer behavior, imitating his devotional exercises as well as his reported inner states. As the spiritual heir to the Prophet, Imam 'Ali exemplified the living paradigm of the prophetic ideal. Emulating the Prophet in every possible way was an indispensable means to attaining holiness and experiencing the divine in the same way that the Prophet had. The virtues of the Prophet are visible in Imam 'Ali as a mirror.

Imam 'Ali (AS) emphasizes the notion of *taqwa* very often. In fact, it is hard to find another book which emphasizes this spiritual term as much as *Nahj al-Balagha* does. Even in the *Nahj al-Balagha*, no other term or concept receives as much attention and stress as *taqwa* does.

The concept of *taqwa* needs to be comprehended. Considering all the verses in the Qur'an perhaps the best way to define *taqwa* is a morally conscious and integrated human being. *Taqwa* reflects a coalescence of the public and private life, a person who is transparent in his acts and lives within the boundaries of God. *Taqwa*, in the context of my argument, also means to be anchored within the moral limits of God and not to "transgress" or violate the balance. It further denotes an inner light, a spiritual spark which a person must light within himself to distinguish

between right and wrong; an inner guide to proper conduct. When a person is fully integrated, morally and ethically correct, and conducts himself accordingly, he has true *taqwa*.

Stated differently, *taqwa* indicates a state of continuous awareness of God's presence. It is a kind of an inner torch that guides a believer in his/her acts, preventing him or her from immoral conduct. Thus, it becomes an important element in creating a morally upright human being. The importance of *taqwa* is demonstrated in the Qur'anic verse: "Observe *taqwa* and God will teach you" (2:282). This idea can also be conveyed by the term "conscience", a term which is equated with *qalb* (heart) and is central to Islam.

The message from Imam 'Ali in the *Nahj al-Balagha* is clear. *Taqwa* grants a person spiritual freedom and liberates him from the chains of slavery and servitude to lusts and passions.<sup>1</sup> It releases him from the bonds of envy, lust, and anger, and this expurgates society from all kinds of social bondage and servitude. *Taqwa* creates a "free slave", one who is free from the bondage of all desires and yet is a slave to God only.

### **Spiritual Exercises**

The cultivation of spirituality requires certain devotional exercises. Imam 'Ali's spiritual practices ranged from lengthy vigils and fasts to *dhikr*, which inculcates the continuous remembrance of and complete closeness to God. The underlying motive for all the forms of exercises is to adore God and to establish a spiritual relationship with Him. The search for the divine is accompanied by long and rigorous exercises for internal purification conjoined with continuous remembrance of God. The emphasis lies more on the inculcation of the divine presence in the mind so that everything else is deemed to be unworthy of contemplation and consideration.

To emphasize Imam 'Ali's ascetic and spiritual qualities, Shi'i biographical literature contains copious reports on his piety, excessive acts of devotional worship, meditation, and acts of self-denial and control. For example, in a sermon recorded in the *Nahj al-Balagha*, Imam 'Ali engages in a lengthy description of the attributes of the pious ones. Reflecting on their exalted stations he states, "They see what others cannot see and they hear what others do not hear. They

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<sup>1</sup> *Khutba* 230

have access to divine secrets.”<sup>2</sup> The statement demonstrates the incredible powers that God can endow upon those willing to tread the spiritual path.

The spiritual state of Imam ‘Ali is further discerned in a moving anecdote recorded in the *Nahj al-Balagha*. When asked if he ever saw his Lord it is reported that Imam ‘Ali replied: “Would I worship what I have not seen?!” Then he elaborated on his answer: “He is not visible to the eyes but the hearts perceive Him through faith (*iman*).”<sup>3</sup>

The *Nahj al-Balagha* encourages a creation of a spiritual being who is very close to his Lord. Such a person worships God only because He is worthy of our worship. Thus Imam ‘Ali said: “Lord! I have not worshipped You out of fear of Your Hell nor out of greed for Your Paradise; but I found Thee worthy of being worshipped, so I worshipped Thee.”

A key lesson to be learnt from the sermons and letters of Imam ‘Ali in the *Nahj al-Balagha* is that the foundation of faith lies in sincerity. The more sincere a person is, the more he is removed from falsehood. Stated differently, transparency was key to the character of Imam ‘Ali. The human heart is like a mirror. The more polished it is, the more it reflects the light of God. It is human sincerity, translated into transparency, that polishes the dusty heart. It is through sincerity that the conscience talks to a person.

Thus Jalal al-Din Rumi was so correct when he said  
"Learn from ‘Ali the sincerity of actions  
The Lion of God is free from deception"

A person who is sincere and spiritual is able to inspire others in the path of God. The following tradition bears testimony to ‘Ali's ability to inspire others, even through his prayers. The tradition is narrated in Bukhari's *Sahih*. On three separate occasions, Bukhari relates the following tradition. In the section titled "To end the *takbir* on prostrating" he narrates on the authority of Mutarrif b. 'Abd Allah, who said:

Imran b. Husayn and I offered the prayer behind ‘Ali b. Abi Talib [in Basra]. When ‘Ali prostrated, he said the *takbir*; when he raised his head he said the *takbir* and when he stood up for the third unit (*rak'a*) he said *takbir*. On completion of the prayer Imran took my hand and

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<sup>2</sup> Khutba 226

<sup>3</sup> khutba 179

said: "He [‘Ali ] made me remember the prayer of Muhammad, peace be upon him." Or, he said [something to the effect that] ". He led us in prayer like that of Muhammad, peace be upon him."<sup>4</sup>

I leave the final words to Imam ‘Ali. Hamman ibn Shurayh, one of Imam ‘Ali’s companions, was a man with a heart full of love for God and a soul burning with spiritual fire. At one time, he requested Imam ‘Ali to describe the qualities of the pious and the God-fearing. Imam ‘Ali, on the one hand, did not want to turn down his request and, on the other, he was concerned that Hamman might not be able to bear what Imam ‘Ali would say. He, therefore, evaded this request, giving only a perfunctory description of piety and the pious. Hamman was not only dissatisfied with this, his eagerness was heightened, so he beseeched Imam ‘Ali to speak with greater elaboration. Imam ‘Ali commenced his famous sermon and began to describe the characteristics of the truly pious. He enumerated about one hundred and five qualities of such human beings and went on to describe more. But as Imam ‘Ali’s words flowed in sequence, Hamman was carried away to the very extremes of ecstasy. His heart throbbed terribly and his spirit was driven to the furthest limits of emotion. It advanced in eagerness like a restless bird trying to break out of its cage. Suddenly, there was a terrible cry and the audience turned around to find out that it came from no other man than Hamman himself. Approaching him, they found out that his soul had already left its earthly abode to embrace an everlasting life. When this happened, Imam ‘Ali’s remark, which carried both praise and regret, was: “I feared this would happen. Strange, yet this is how effective admonition affects sensitive hearts.”<sup>5</sup> This is an example of the kind of influence which Imam ‘Ali’s sermons had over the minds and the hearts of his contemporaries.

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<sup>4</sup> Bukhari, *Sahih*, 1/417f. *Hadith* # 753.

<sup>5</sup> *Khutba* 193.