

Spirituality in the *Nahj al-Balagha*

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Human beings often seek role models for the purpose of uplifting and edifying their moral and spiritual lives. Paradigmatic figures reinforce our values and inspire us to become morally upright human beings. In their demeanor, Muslims have always looked back to the exemplary model provided by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). In addition to the Prophet, Muslims derive much inspiration from the figure of Imam ‘Ali (A.S.), the cousin and son-in law of the Prophet Muhammad. ‘Ali, who was assassinated in 680 A.D., exemplifies what it means to encompass different dimensions within a singular being. Historically, ‘Ali was an extremely brave soldier, a loving husband and father, a just ruler, a compassionate human being, a deeply spiritual holy man and a social activist at the same time.

Even though he was the ruler of the entire Islamic empire, he cautioned Malik, his governor in Egypt, to be just to all citizens and open his doors even to the most poor in his community. ‘Ali also asked Malik to investigate the affairs of the most deprived in his society and to make sure that there were no soldiers around when he met with people lest they refrain from speaking to the governor frankly due to the presence of his generals. He even asked Malik not to lavish the praise heaped upon him because that could make him arrogant and conceited.¹ ‘Ali’s sense of piety and social justice can be discerned from the fact that when he died, he left no gold or silver behind even though he was the ruler of the Islamic empire in his time.

‘Ali was more than just an advocate for justice. He was a deeply spiritual being. Muslim sources have recorded some remarkably moving spiritual discourses from ‘Ali. He was often

¹ See his letter to Malik al-Ashtar in the *Nahj al-Balagha*.

seen in the mosque in the middle of the night, engaged in devotional prayers. He was also deeply committed to the creation of an upright ethical being.

This paper will examine the spirituality of ‘Ali as reflected in the *Nahj al-Balagha*. This book is a compilation of the sermons, letters and sayings of Imam ‘Ali. Although it was compiled in the tenth century by Sharif al-Radi, it has remained one of the most eloquent articulation of Islamic literature. Out of the 241 fragments collected under the title *al-Khutab* by Sayyid al-Radi, about 86 can be classified as admonishments (*mawaid*) or contain a series of spiritual pieces of advice. Some of these, are elaborate and lengthy, like *khutba* 176 which opens with the sentence "Avail yourselves of the Divine expositions", the *khutba* named *al-Qasia* (the longest sermon in *Nahj ul-Balagha*), and the *khutba* 93 (called *al-khutba al-muttaqin*, the “sermon of the pious”). Out of some 79 passages classified as epistles, letters, about 25, either completely or partially, consist of spiritual and moral teachings. Some of them are quite lengthy and elaborate, such as letter 31, which constitutes ‘Ali’s advice to his son Imam al-Hasan al-Mujtaba. Another is letter 45, the well-known epistle of ‘Ali to 'Uthman ibn Hunayf, his governor in Basra.

It should be noted that Sayyid al-Radi's compilation of *Nahj ul-Balagha* does not contain all the sermons letters and sayings of Imam ‘Ali. Mas`udi (d. 346 A.H.) in his famous historical work titled *Muruj al-Dhahab* says that the sermons of Imam ‘Ali number more than 480. Many were spontaneous orations, people transmitted them from each other and compiled them in book forms; they cited and quoted passages in their books.² Apparently, out of these 480 sermons some were lost and Sayyid al-Radi could find only about 245 sermons; in addition he collected about 75 letters and more than 200 sayings. Almost every sermon, letter and saying collected in *Nahj al-Balagha* is to be found in books of authors who died before Sayyid al-Radi was born,

² Mas`udi, ‘Ali b. Husayn. *Muruj al-Dhahab wa Ma`adin al-Jawhar*. 4 vols. Qum: Dar al-Hijra, 1983, vol. 2, p. 33.

while some are found in works of such authors who, though his contemporaries, were older to him and had written their books before *Nahj ul-Balagha* was compiled.

Spirituality in *Nahj al-Balagha*

In today's world, we are in continuous search for godly individuals who can inspire us to 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 'Ali. Imam 'Ali did not just worship God, he adored him. It is from '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 'Ali, an important method of experiencing the divine is by emulating the Muhammadan paradigm. '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 'Ali as a mirror.

The Spiritual Component in the *Nahj al-Balagha*

A key component in discovering the spirituality of the *Nahj al-Balagha* is the concept of *taqwa*, one of the most frequent motifs in the book. 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. The root of the term, *wqy*, means to guard or protect. It has also been used in this literal sense in verses 40:9; 40:45; 76:11 in the Qur'an. *Taqwa can* mean to protect oneself of the negative consequences of one's conduct. 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.

Often, *taqwa* is equated with means piety and abstinence, implying a negative, other-worldly 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 social life; the more severely this negative attitude is exercised, the greater is one's *taqwa*. Indubitably, abstinence and caution exercised with discretion is an essential principle of moral living. It is through denial and negation that a spiritual life can be realized.

However, *taqwa* in *Nahj ul-Balagha* is not synonymous with abstinence. *Taqwa*, on the contrary, is a positive spiritual faculty which appears as a result of continued exercise and practice. The healthy and rational forms of abstinence are, firstly, the preparatory causes for the emergence of that spiritual faculty. This faculty strengthens and vitalizes the soul, giving it a kind of immunity from unethical behavior.

Nahj al-Balagha 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. Thus, in sermon 16, *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 to the carnal self.³

The essence of *taqwa* lies in possessing a spiritual personality endowed with will-power, and possessing mastery over the domain of one's self. 'Ali himself is said to have been very pious, often depriving himself of the pleasures of this world. Reflecting this sense of abstinence, he said: "Blessed are those who have renounced this world and only aspire to the life to come!"⁴

³ *Nahj al-Balagha*, 3rd edition (Karachi: Khorasan Islamic center, 1977) *Khutba* 16.

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.⁵ 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.

At another place, Imam ‘Ali states: “O Allah’s servants, I admonish you to cultivate the *taqwa* of Allah. Indeed it is a right that Allah has over you and it is through it that you can have any right over Allah. You should beseech Allah’s help for guarding it and seek its aid for [fulfilling your duty to] Allah.”⁶ *Taqwa* is also compared to an invincible fortress built on heights which the enemy cannot infiltrate. Throughout, the emphasis of the Imam lies on the spiritual and psychological aspect of *taqwa* and its effects upon human spirit involving the emergence of a dislike for sin and corruption and an inclination towards piety, purity, and virtue.⁷

Spiritual Exercises

The cultivation of spirituality requires certain devotional exercises. ‘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

⁴ *Ibid*, Statement, 104.

⁵ *Khutba* 230

⁶ *khutba* 191.

⁷ *Khutba* 157.

presence in the mind so that everything else is deemed to be unworthy of contemplation and consideration.

The spiritual authority of the Imam is predicated on two main features: asceticism and knowledge. Asceticism is an important consideration since it helps structure his spiritual and moral life, generating a constant mindfulness of God. The Imam duplicates the Prophet's spiritual journeys and devotional exercises. It is this element that enables the imam to experience the divine in the same way that the Prophet did.

To emphasize '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*, '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 have access to divine secrets."⁸ 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*)."⁹

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."

⁸ Khutba 226

⁹ khutba 179

For those who remember God intensely, Imam ‘Ali has special advise for them. He states “Certainly Allah, the Glorified One, has made His remembrance the burnishing of the hearts which makes them hear after deafness, see after blindness and which makes them submissive after unruliness. In all periods and times when there were no prophets, there were individuals to whom He spoke in whispers through their conscience and intellect.”¹⁰

The last sentence further confirms the sense of *taqwa* and its effects on the human conscience as discussed earlier in this paper. These sentences of Imam ‘Ali speak of the wonderful effect of the divine remembrance on the heart, to the extent of making it capable of receiving the divine inspiration and bringing it in intimate communion with God.¹¹

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 ‘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

¹⁰ Khutba 222.

¹¹ khutba 222

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 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."¹²

Ramifications of Spirituality

The results of this sense of spirituality are truly remarkable. Human beings who cultivate *taqwa* and behave righteously are endowed with special blessings from God, in the form of inspiration or even miraculous powers. In a section in his *Kitab al-Irshad* that enumerates the miracles of 'Ali, al-Mufid states that 'Ali's power encapsulated not only human beings but even extended to nature. According to him, 'Ali made the sun revert to an earlier position in the sky on two occasions, during and after the time of the Prophet. The use of such modalities and aspects of the Imams prove the functioning of the divine agency in the world through the lives of holy men. They also indicate the divine favors and blessings bestowed on 'Ali .¹³

In another sermon are explained the various spiritual states and levels attained by the worshippers in the course of their devotional pursuit. 'Ali describes such men in these words:

¹² Bukhari, *Sahih*, 1/417f. *Hadith* # 753.

¹³ Al-Mufid, Muhammad b. Muhammad, *Kitab al-Irshad*. Translated by I. Howard. (London: Balagha & Muhammadi Trust, 1981), 261.

“The angels have surrounded them and peace is showered upon them. The doors of heaven are opened for them and the abodes of bliss, of which He had informed them, have been prepared for them. He is pleased with their struggle and admires their station. When they call upon Him, they breathe the fragrance of His forgiveness and mercy.”¹⁴ “He did everything only for the sake of Allah, so Allah also made him His own.”¹⁵

Doing beautiful deeds to others is a reflection of the divine beauty within us. Overflowing love to others is based on overflowing love for the divine. When human beings are spiritually close to the divine, they experience the world in a different way. Extraordinary powers are given to extraordinary human beings. ‘Ali says: "due to sincerity in love and devotion to God, God selects him to act as a guide, he becomes the foundation of religion, pillar of faith on earth."

I leave the final words to Imam ‘Ali. Hamman ibn Shurayh, one of ‘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 ‘Ali to describe the qualities of the pious and the God-fearing. ‘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 ‘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 ‘Ali to speak with greater elaboration. ‘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 ‘Ali’s words flowed in sequence, Hamman was carried away to the very extremes

¹⁴ Khutba 222

¹⁵ Khutba 87.

of ecstasy. His heart throbbed terribly and his spirit was driven to the furthestmost 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, ‘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.”¹⁶ This is an example of the kind of influence which ‘Ali’s sermons had over the minds and the hearts of his contemporaries.

¹⁶ *Khutba* 193.