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Tazkiyah & Islamic Leadership

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Sourced from:

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“My Lord! I ask You for beneficial knowledge, and I seek refuge with You from non-beneficial knowledge.”

The foundations of Islamic society are basically ethico-religious. Hence, anyone who honestly comes forward to lead the Muslims to the goal prescribed for them in the Holy Qur'an should possess a personality refulgent in its spiritual, moral and intellectual dimensions. This is the verdict of the Qur'an, and this is the verdict of Islamic history.

But how can such a personality be built up? By mere emotionalism? By mere mysticism? By mere intellectualism? By mere ritualism? By mere formal puritanism? By mere externalism and legalism? By mere ritualistic missionary-ism? By mere political agitationism in the name of Islam? No. A thousand times, No!

The only alchemy which can transform the human personality into 'pure gold' is the alchemy of the rigorous discipline of tazkiyah, with its rigours enhanced in the measure of the height of achievement desired. This is what has been taught and demonstrated by the Holy Prophet (in whom abide God's choicest Blessings!), and this is what has been practised throughout Islamic history by those who had truly grasped the dynamics of leadership in Islam and were consequently able to achieve historic success. One such personality was Saiyyid Abd el-Qader al-Jilani of Baghdad, the Ghaus al-A'zam (Grand Master) of the Qaderiyah Spiritual Discipline, who built up, with the spiritual dynamism of his personality and without any political power, the forces that crushed the menace of the Assassins for good, on the one hand, and the might of the Crusaders' barbaric hordes entrenched in Palestine at that time, on the other.

The Holy Prophet (P.b.u.h.) was born as Messenger of God, having been ordained by God as such at the dawn of Creation (III: 81). Hence, he needed no spiritual exercise for earning that office. But we find him withdrawing from the life of the world to the Cave of Hira, in the stark solitude of wilderness, for fifteen years before he proclaimed his divine mission. Then, throughout his ministry, his exercise in the transcendental dimension with its spending of nights in prayers and the days in fasting and prayers both, in the midst of handling the multifarious duties relating to the most glorious and comprehensive revolution of human history; with its majestic austerity enshrining extreme selflessness; with its flowering in the moral domain at the highest level; and with the flood of multi-dimensional blessings for humanity surging from his august personality — that exercise is the most conspicuous trait of his character. In that he established the Sunnah for every future Islamic leader.

There were in history many of his followers who realised the obligatoriness of this Sunnah, in opposition to other leaders whose personal limitations kept them away. One of the glorious products of this Sunnah was the great Saiyyid Abd el-Qader al-Jilani, to whom we have referred. It is recorded in history that, in imitation of the Holy Prophet's exercise of retreat to Hira, he was accustomed to retreat to the forest every evening during the course of his formal education, and after the completion of that education he withdrew to the wilderness and stayed there in solitude for many years in total devotion to God, finally acquiring through an extremely rigorous discipline that high level of tazkiyah which not only elevated him to great eminence in godliness but enabled him to change the course of history.

The history of Islam is studded with a host of other spiritual luminaries, commonly called Sufis, on whom the rigorous discipline of tazkiyah bestowed greatness in their achievements for the cause of humanity. Among them was Khwaja Mu'in al-Din of Sanjar (later of Ajmer) who, alone with his spiritual dynamism and without any army or political thrust, pitched the banner of Islam in the heart of an inimical and alien population, changing the course of history in the South-Asian sub-continent permanently. Among them was Sheykh al-Islam Abdullah al-Ansari of Herat who fought with his spiritual armour alone against the corruptions of the tyrants and brought them down to their knees with masculine grace. Among them were the Sufis of the Naqshbandia Order who, under the most adverse circumstances when the prestige of the Muslims was at its lowest ebb, conquered, without any material means and purely through the power of their spiritual personalities, the hearts of the haughty enemies of Islam who had destroyed the political power of the Muslims under Halaku Khan — defeating at the same time the Buddhist and the Christian religious forces that were fully entrenched in the field. And, among them were a host of others who, through their tazkiyah and in contradistinction to those Muslim religious leaders who were devoid of tazkiyah, acquired the

glorious distinction of becoming the sole pioneers in respect of the most difficult task of converting vast and widespread human communities to Islam.

Alas, the Islamic leaders of today have turned their backs on tazkiyah, with the result that they cannot benefit even the Muslims, not to speak of humanity at large. And the world of Islam presents a scene of unspeakable mass destruction of Islamic values, with the forces of the newfangled secular 'isms' pouncing upon the Muslim communities like vultures.

The world of Islam will have to revive the pursuit of comprehensive tazkiyah in accordance with the norms and principles laid down in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, in order that genuine Islamic leadership of the Muhammadan Pattern emerges on a high level and in a large measure and acts fruitfully for the fulfilment of the mission of Islam.

As matters stand in respect of the Muslim religious leadership of the present day, neither those who are popularly known as Sufis nor those who have become anti-Tasawwuf, and neither the political agitators among the 'Ulama nor the professional preachers and writers among them, seem to possess any chances of achieving success in defeating the forces of evil that sway the world.

II. TECHNIQUE OF RESOLVING THE EXTERNAL CONFLICT:

The conflict between good and evil rages not only within the inner world of the human personality but also in the external world of social phenomena. That conflict also has to be resolved if the moral development of the human beings in general has to be ensured. This is so, because man is a social being, and he is born and grows in society, whose good and evil influences have a potent influence on the formation of his character in either direction, i.e., good and evil. The social order has to be, therefore, of necessity transformed into, and maintained as, a moral order, if the individual is to attain his true moral stature. That is why the Holy Qur'an has commissioned the Muslim Fraternity to strive for transforming the human society into moral order (III: 110).

The transformation of the society into moral order, however, presents a challenge to all morally-struggling individuals. Hence, every Muslim has been commanded and commissioned to meet this challenge with all his might and to wage a determined struggle without respite all his life to defeat the forces of evil and to enthrone the forces of good. The Holy Qur'an calls it Jihad and says:

O ye who believe! Keep your duty to Allah, seek the Medium of Approach (al-Wasilah) unto Him, and strive with might and main (jahidu) in His Way (which comprehends spiritual and moral tazkiyah at individual and collective levels): that ye may succeed". (V: 35).

Again:

And strive hard for Allah (which includes eradication of vice and establishment of virtue on earth) — as is due unto Him hard striving (jihad). He has chosen you (for this striving), and has not placed upon you any narrowness in religion." (XXII:78).

In human nature we find that there are only two incentives which bring out the best in man and lift him up in the scale of personality, namely, ambition and danger. Jihad provides both. Now, the greater and the more difficult of achievement the ambition, — and what social ambition can be greater than the transformation of human society into a moral order —, the greater the dangers that are involved. And the greater the dangers involved, the greater the incentive for the maintenance of disciplined struggle and integrity of character; and the greater the said incentive, the greater the tazkiyah.