The Best of Actions

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The Prophet Muhammad (S) has said, “O' ‘Ali! The greatest of actions are the following three: Your acting in fairness with people more than with your own self; showing equality with your brother for Allah the Noble and Grand; remembering Allah, Glory and Greatness be to Him, in all states.”

In this tradition, the Prophet (S) has explained the greatest of actions in which the issues of fairness, equality and self-sacrifice and their relationship with Allah (SwT) have been elucidated upon. Of course, in regards to the first and second issue, the relationship is between the people and the person performing the action.

1. *“Acting in fairness with people more than with your own self…” can be better understood from the saying which tell us, “Like for yourself that which you would like for others…”*

This means that the rights which are on your neck in regards to other people must be fulfilled just as you would like others to fulfill the rights which you have upon them.

The word 'إنصـــاف' comes from the root 'نصـــف' and means that a person divides something equally in two, and then half of it is kept for himself while the other portion is given to others. Thus the term “dividing one's wealth” is actually an allusion to showing justice with one's wealth - a person keeps half of what he has for himself and gives the other half to someone else.

In regards to this issue, it makes no difference if we speak in regards to societal rights or individual rights, just as the word 'قسـط' refers to the act of dealing or spreading something and giving a return or profit (of course this word too refers to a person having a share of the profit while giving half of it to another person.)

Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (as) has said:

أَلإِنْصَافُ أَفْضَلُ الْفَضَائِلِ

Equity is the greatest of eminent deeds.”[1] “

With this said and in order to make this issue clearer, we present the following example. If we study the source of a majority of the troubles within society, we see that all of them return back to one thing which is 'love of self'. This characteristic leads a person to want everything for himself, assuming that others have no right to have a share in anything. Thus in the end, the

'love of self' would actually be a source for encroachment upon the rights and possessions of others, pride and jealousy. Truly, 'love of self' is the source of all corruption and is the mother of all calamities.

Question: If 'love of self' does not manifest in a person and an individual ends up not 'loving his self' then he will definitely not strive to attain anything in this life. For example, obeying Allah (SwT) is for the salvation of the self; attaining knowledge is for a person to become a scholar. Thus in summary, all struggles and endeavors stem from the 'love of self'. If this trait of 'love of self' cannot exist, then no one would put forth efforts in life! Therefore, in summary we can state that the 'love of self' is actually the driving force for a person. Hence, how can you claim that 'love of self' is the source of all sins!?

Answer: The 'love of self', when taken to an extreme is the mother of all calamities. Sometimes a person develops such a love of his self that he forgets about other people, and this is what is the source of corruption, pride, miserliness, etc… and becomes the greatest of spiritual veils for a person while on the path towards Allah (SwT).

In summary, if a person pays excess attention to himself then he will definitely not be able to (spiritually) see Allah (SwT) since the trait of individualism is the opposite of keeping Allah (SwT) in mind and heart.

Thus, the outcome of this extreme and excessive form of 'love of self' manifests itself in the trait of not showing equity to others and this is the greatest impediment in the advancement of a person.

Therefore, if we wish to be the complete manifestation of these words of the Prophet (S), then we must, even when it comes to discussions of knowledge, show equity and fairness. For example, if something comes into my mind and the theory or belief is something which I strongly believe in – even if the proofs for that thought or belief are weak however another person says something different and proofs which he brings forth to prove his point are very strong, if I was not to show equity in regards to this discussion of knowledge, then I would definitely not pay any attention to what this other person is saying to me! Thus in this example, I have shown that there is no justice present in my discussions and studies…

Within scholarly discussions, the only time that a person is able to reach to the truth contained of an issue is when he shows equity.

When we sit down to review the proofs of those who offer statements opposed to what we believe, we realize that the person who has brought forth these beliefs has the same passion for his theories just as we have for our own. That other person has also examined his beliefs and theories from all angles before reaching his conclusion.

Some of the great scholars, and even our own teachers, showed great equity and fairness in their scholarly disputes, arguments and debates. In regards to the life of the late Shaykh ‘Abdul Karim hairi, the founder of the Sacred Theological Seminary of Qum it has been narrated that one day he brought up a scholarly discussion and began to defend his belief in such a way that all of his students were completely in agreement and believed in it.

In his next session, he brought forth an opinion that was diametrically opposed to what he had mentioned the previous day and again, carried his discussion in such a manner that it convinced all of his students thus, the discussion of the previous day was made weak and insubstantial. On the third day, he came with another angle on the discussion and…

The purpose of us citing this example is to show the way he acted in relating the opinions of other people.

Therefore, when it comes to the various beliefs which people have, one must show justice to the varying opinions such that it could be stated that he is actually bringing forth his own words and thoughts (and not that of others) and this is something which can not be accomplished merely through words. Rather, it must be done through one's deeds and actions!

Thus, equity means that all differences are removed and this can be done in regards to scholarly discussions, and also in regards to societal issues.

If people displayed equity and fairness, then we would not see all of the cases in the court system as most, if not all of the lawsuits, stem from the fact that each person is simply looking out for what is best for himself and is not considering what is in the best interest of others. It is for this reason that fights and disputes break out between people.

However if the spirit of fairness and equity ruled supreme, then these conflicts would not be there! If fairness and equity existed amongst people, then all forms of disagreement would be removed and the intellectual and societal relations between people would be made firm.

There is a point which should be mentioned here which is that before the issue of ethics possesses a scholarly side to it, it has a practical and applied aspect. By this we mean that scholarly discussions are read and then understood while ethical issues and injunctions are not topics which are merely comprehended - rather, they are practical and are things which must be enacted and practiced in life.

The rules of driving a car can be taken as an example. Even if hundreds of books are studied on this topic, it will have no impact and a person will still not get his driver's licence as he must practice driving a real car before he can get his license. Islamic akhlaq and morals are the same - they must be practiced and put into motion such that they become ingrained in the spirit of the person and become second nature.

For example, if this issue of equity is put into practice and at one instance we see that one of our friends is speaking the truth on a particular issue, we should not remain quiet - rather, we should speak up and confirm that he is indeed speaking the truth. If we were to repeat this ten times and every time, were to tell him that he is speaking the truth, then it is only in this instance that this issue (which he is speaking about and about which others may be arguing with him about) may see closure.

Therefore, it makes sense to see why the Prophet (S) has considered equity and fairness as being one of the best actions of a person!

Another point which must also be mentioned is that within an Islamic society, opposite to that which is seen and is common amongst the people which is the taking of their rights (from others), we must be ready to give others their rights.

By this we mean that rather than the person who is owed something grabbing the person who owes him something by the neck and forcing him to give him what is owed, when the time comes to repay back the person whom one borrowed something from, the one who has indebted should actually go running in search of that person to give him back his right!

The act of forcefully taking one's property or thing which has been borrowed is not some great attainment or source of pride for the person!

Therefore in summary, within the Islamic society, it is not the duty for the person who has loaned or given something out to search for his right to be given back, rather, it is the duty of the person who is indebted to go and find the one who he is indebted to and give his rights back to him.

2. The tradition continues and we then read, *"…your showing equality with your brother for Allah the Noble and Grand…"* and this is nothing other than the distribution and division of blessings conferred upon a person.

or 'brother' has been used and as we know, one of "أخ" In this sentence, we see that the word the minimum conditions for brotherhood is that of equality and the maximum level of :brotherhood is self-sacrifice. The Qur`an tells us that

وَيُؤْثِرُونَ عَلى أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَهِمْ خَصَاصَة

and they prefer (other) before themselves though poverty may afflict them."[2]*…"*

Thus, showing equality to other people; dividing the Divinely conferred bounties and gifts to others; taking the less-fortunate and deprived people under your care and including them within your care, are all considered as the greatest of actions.

or "…for Allah, the Noble and Grand…" is a very important phrase "فـي الله عـز وجـل" The phrase since it shows us that brotherhood is of various types:

1. True brotherhood (through birth rites);

2. Close friends and fellowship with another person;

3. Brotherhood in which the relationship of a person with another is a Divinely and Celestially designed relationship. By this we mean that it is through a religious linkage, a faith link and a Taqwa-based relationship that brotherhood is established between individuals.

It is the third form of brotherhood which the tradition under review refers to when it gives us the second action to be carried out that such a brotherhood and equality must exist.

Of course, in regards to equity and self-sacrifice (of what one has) there is much which can be said, however it is enough to state that just as has been mentioned as an ethical admonition as has been referred to in this saying, it is the leader (Sayyid) of all other actions!

In regards to self-sacrifice, there are various discussions which have been mentioned of which we shall discuss the following.

1. What is 'self-sacrifice'?

Self-sacrifice simply means that a person wants others to also be granted bounties and blessings - even if this means that he is prevented from these same bounties. Such a person is even ready and willing to give whatever he has to other people and to not make use of the bounties which he has. This grand station is referred to as 'self-sacrifice' and happens to be one of the most important humanistic characteristics.[3]

Examples of Self-Sacrifice as seen within the Family of the Prophet Muhammad (S)

Ibne 'Abbas has stated, "One day, Hasan (as) and Husayn (as) had become sick. The Prophet (S), along with a group of his companions came to see them and said to 'Ali (as), 'O' Abul Hasan! It would be good if you made an oath to Allah (SwT) in regards to your two sons being cured of their illness.'

'Ali (as), Fatima (as) and Fiddha (as) who was their assistant, made an oath to Allah (SwT) that if the two boys were cured, then they would fast for three days (according to some of the traditions, Hasan (as) and Husayn (as) also said that they made the same oath to Allah (SwT) and that they too would fast if they were cured).

Not even a short time passed when these two children became cured of their sickness and

thus, the entire family was then obligated to fast for the three days to fulfill their oath. However, upon looking in the house, it was found that there was very little food to be eaten.

‘Ali (as) took a loan of some barley and gave it to his wife Fatima (as) who took one third of it, and on the first day of fasting, made it into flour and baked bread from it.

At the time of breaking their fast on the first day, a beggar came to the door of the house and said, 'Peace be upon you O' Ahlu'l Bayt of Muhammad (S). I am a poor person from amongst the poor Muslims. Please give me some food. May Allah grant you the foods of Paradise in return for this noble deed!'

The entire family put the call of this beggar in front of their own needs and each one gave their portion of bread to him and thus ended up breaking their fast that night with only water.

On the second night at the time of breaking their fast - which was with that same barley bread made by Fatima (as), an orphan came to their door. On the second night too, the family of the Prophet (S) showed their self-sacrifice and gave whatever food they had to the orphan and once again, broke their fast with water.

The following day they also kept the fast. On this night, a war captive came to their door at the time of sunset and requested food and thus, the Ahlu'l Bayt also gave them whatever food they had at home - that same barley bread.

When the morning of the fourth day came, ‘Ali (as) took Hasan (as) and Husayn (as) to see the Prophet (S). When the Prophet (S) saw the state they were in and their intense shaking due to their intense hunger pains he said to them, 'This state which I see you in is something very hard for me to bear.'

He then got up and all of them went to the house of Fatima (as). The entre family saw her in the prayer niche (mihrab), engaged in worship while, due to the pains of hunger, her stomache had gone in and her eyes were deeply set. At seeing this, the Prophet (S) became deeply troubled.

It was at this moment that Jibra`il (as) came down and said, 'O' Muhammad! Allah greets you over having such a family.” At this point, the chapter of the Qur’an known as “Suratul Insan” was revealed![4]

3. Continuing on in the tradition under review, the Prophet (S) has then said, “…and your remembrance of Allah, Glory and Greatness be to him in all states.”

In this part of the tradition, we must point out that the phrase which reads “…in all states” is or 'remembrance of Allah' is also 'ذكـــر' one which carries a lot of meaning to it just as the word very meaningful.

The remembrance (of Allah (SwT)) has three segments to it: the tongue (verbal), heart

(spiritual) and the body parts (practical and physical). Thus, when a person wants to do something, he must be vigilant and must see where the pleasure of Allah (SwT) resides. Thus, he must consider that Allah (SwT) is watching him at all times and in all states.

:In some of the traditions, it has been mentioned that

وَلَيْسَ هُوَ قَوْلُ لاَ إِلٰهَ إِلاَّ اللّٰهُ وَاللّٰهُ أَكْبَرُ

The meaning of the remembrance of Allah) is other than the mere saying of 'There is no)" creature worthy of worship except for Allah and Allah is greater than what can be compared to Him."

Rather, the meaning of the remembrance of Allah (SwT) is that a person is constantly in His remembrance.

Thus, the meaning of "(remembering Allah) … in every state…" means that one keeps Him in mind whether at times of victory or defeat; safety or danger; sickness and health. It does not mean that when one is in a state of happiness and jubilance that he forgets Allah (SwT) and only at times of need that he remembers Him and runs after Him since this is something which :even the polytheistic 'Arabs used to do

وَ إِذَا رَكَبُوا فِي الْفُلْكِ دَعَوْا اللّٰهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ

And when they board the ship then they call upon Allah, sincere to Him in their faith…"[5] "

Thus we see that these people are sincere in their faith, however this is nothing to be proud of! Therefore, the meaning of the remembrance of Allah (SwT) is the actual remembrance of Allah (SwT) in all states.

In summary it can be stated that the state of forgetfulness should not lead a person to fall into neglect in regards to the Creator of the Universe and the remembrance should not be such that it is only a verbal remembrance at times of needs and necessities of one's daily life.

The remembrance of Allah (SwT) is the greatest alchemy and the spring of life; it is that which enlivens the heart of a person; it is the thing which protects one from spiritual slips; it is the tree of true faith; it satiates a person's inner being and gives him glory! The remembrance of Allah (SwT) is the food of the soul of the person and is the thing which repulses the Satan! Truly, this is something which we have taken lightly whereas it is actually a valuable treasure which carries great importance to it and is available for everyone to make use of. However, we :have all fallen into neglect in regards to His remembrance, just as the Qur`an states that

أَلاَ بِذِكْرِ اللّٰهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبِ

Now surely with the remembrance of Allah are the hearts put at rest."[6]"
Thus, the tranquility and serenity which comes in the heart and soul of a person is due to the remembrance of Allah.
Of course, the reasons for a person turning away from the remembrance of Allah (SwT) are many and just as we see, in every step which he takes in this life and with everything that he comes across, his mind becomes preoccupied with other than Allah (SwT).
Thus, we must practice the act of remembrance of Allah (SwT) to such an extent that we are able to continuously be in a state of remembrance of Allah (SwT) - even when we are busy with other acts in the world. Even in this state of working in the transient world, we must remember Allah (SwT) and actually in principal, we must start out all of our actions with the remembrance of Allah (SwT) as this actually grants us the ability to constantly be in His remembrance.
It is not necessary that one shows off in this act of remembering Allah (SwT) - just the heart repeating 'O' Allah' is more than enough; when a person goes to sit down in a gathering he should say 'O' Allah'; when he stands up to leave he should say:

سُبْحَانَ رَبِّكَ رَبِّ الْعِزَّةِ عَمَّا يَصِفوُن

Glory be to Your Lord the Lord of Greatness from that which others ignorantly attribute to"
Him…"[7]
When a person goes into his car or any other form of transportation, he should say:

أَلْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ الَّذِي سَخَّرَلَنا هٰذَا وَ مَا كُنَّا مُقَرِنِينَ...

All praise belongs to Allah who has made this means of transportation subservient to us and"
had it not been for Him, we would never have been able to have such a thing…"[8]
When the person reaches to his destination, he should say:

أَلْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ عَلَى السَلاَمَةِ

All Praise belongs to Allah for safety (and reaching our destination unharmed).""
When we start to eat, we must remember the name of Allah (SwT) and say:

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ

:*In the name of Allah';* when we finish out food we must thank Him and say'

أَلْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ

Thanks be to Allah (for this)'.'

Thus in summary, in every state that we find ourselves in, we must remember Allah (SwT) such that this act becomes a part of ourselves and an intrinsic habit. This is truly a very important issue as the remembrance of Allah (SwT) actually acts as insurance for a person.

There are some people who state that, "We have yet to develop a state of presence of the heart in the Salat and to be able to remember Him." However we state that "There is no difference between being in the state of Salat and being outside the state of Salat." Rather, we must always be in the remembrance of Allah (SwT) and must realize that as much as we remember Allah (SwT), in that same amount shall we be closer to success. Conversely, the further we are from the remembrance of Allah (SwT) and negligent of this issue, the more we shall feel the lure of the devils.

Question: How does the heart attain tranquility through the remembrance of Allah (SwT)?

Answer: The states of anxiety and insecurity have always been and will always be the greatest sources of tribulation in the life of humanity and the things which these traits stem from in the individual and societal life of a person are completely observable.

The state of tranquility has always been one of the lost, important traits for human society. The person will knock on every door until he is able to find this all-important characteristic. If the struggles and endeavors of humanity throughout the ages were gathered together in their search for tranquility - from both the correct and permitted and false means which they have sought out - they would definitely fill up a large book!

There are some scholars who have stated that, "At the beginning of an outbreak (of a disease), some sick people who had a contagious disease - out of every ten people who had this disease and 'apparently' ended up dying due to it, it was noticed that a majority of them actually died due to the fear and uneasiness they felt. Thus in reality, only a small number of these people truly died due to the sickness which they had!"

Truly, the two states of tranquility and apprehension play a very important role in the health and sickness of a person and the entire society and in the success and failure of the individual. In addition, there is not a single thing which can cool this state within a person and it is for this

reason that numerous books have been written whose main topic has been on fear and the ways to combat this and the way to acquire tranquility of the heart!

Human history is full of sorrowful scenes in which people have run after all sorts of things in order to attain tranquility. However, in whichever valley they have stepped into, they have taken to various addictions to help them cope with their sorrow.

However the Qur'an, in one short, yet meaningful sentence has told us that the most assured and closest path: "Know that through the remembrance of Allah shall your hearts and minds be put at rest and ease."

In order for this Qur'anic reality to be made clear, please pay attention to the following explanation.

The Causes of Worry and Anxiety

1. Sometimes, distress and anxiety are related to a dark and uncertain future which lie ahead of a person and manifest itself to him. The possibility of blessings leaving a person, falling into the grip of the enemies, weakness, sickness, inability to work, desperation and his need of others all result in a person being put through mental trauma.

However, true faith in Allah (SwT) the All-Able and High, the Merciful and Compassionate, the Creator who has taken it upon Himself to be sufficient for all of His servants is able to remove all forms of worry and anxiety and grant a person tranquility since we are helpless in regards to the future events, however Allah has the power, ability and mercy (to help us).

2. Sometimes the bleak past would make an individual busy within himself and this would cause him anxiety. Showing grief over sins that were committed in the past, feeling remorse from one's inabilities and past slips would cause a person worry.

However, paying attention to Allah (SwT) the All-Forgiving, the One who accepts repentance and is the Merciful would grant tranquility to a person!

In reality, these traits of Allah (SwT) would convey the following thoughts to the person that, "Take your appeals of culpability to Him, seek forgiveness for your past acts and make amends for what you did in the past since He is the Forgiving and the One who will make accept the amends for your misdeeds."

3. Weakness and an inability in the face of natural occurrences and sometimes even in the face of enemies - both internal and external, makes a person upset and insecure such that he may think to himself, "What am I able to do in the war against all of these powerful opponents? What can I do in the face of other challenges and struggles?"

However when one remembers Allah (SwT) and begins to rely upon His power and mercy - the

Power which is the greatest of all powers such that there is not a single other thing which has the potential to stand up to Him, then the person's heart would become at ease and he would say to himself, “Yes, I am not alone. I am under the shadow of the Mercy and Assistance of Allah (SwT) - the never ending Source of Power.”

4. Sometimes the source of grief, insecurity and that which pains a person is his feeling that his life is worthless and that the goals which he has set for himself are insignificant. However, the one who has true faith in Allah (SwT) and has accepted that traversing the path of perfection is the greatest goal and knows everything which transpires in life must be experienced while on the path of perfection, would not feel that his life is worthless, that he is without goals, nor that he is an uncertain wanderer, filled with distress.

5. Another reason for grief and insecurity is that sometimes in order for one to reach his a goal, a person may need to bear difficulties. However at the same time, he does not see a single person who encourages or appreciates the troubles and difficulties which he has gone through. This feeling of ingratitude would cause him great stress and would cause him to sink into a deeper state of anguish and insecurity.

However when he senses that other people are aware of his struggle, value his efforts and are ready to reward him, then there would not be any room for grief and insecurity.

6. Having bad thoughts of others and empty delusions is another reason which leads to insecurity and grief and this is one of the things which a large number of people see in their life. However, how is it possible for us to deny that focusing our attention on Allah (SwT) and His never ending grace, His commandment to us of maintaining good thoughts and suppositions of other people – which is the responsibility for every single person who claims to possess true faith, would not remove this state of grief and trepidation which is inside a person and would cause him to have tranquility and certainty in his life!?

7. Worship of the transient world and infatuation with the gold and glitter of the life of the material world we are living in is one of the greatest reasons why a person faces distress and insecurity in his life.

This point is apparent to such an extent that sometimes if a person is not able to find a particular color of clothing or a color of shoes, hat or some other item of apparel in the shopping centres or any other item which he uses in his daily life, that the thoughts of such a person who worships this transient world may become so engulfed and enraptured that he would spend hours, days or even weeks in a state of insecurity and anxiousness until he can find what he wants!

However, true faith in Allah (SwT) and constant focus on the spiritual freedom which a true

believer possesses - in which he is constantly enraptured in austerity and devotion to Allah (SwT) and is not bound by the clutches of the gold and glitter which accompany the material world, would bring an end to such feelings of insecurity and anxiety.

When the soul of a person reaches to that level of spiritual expanse that just like ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (as) can say:

إِنَّ دُنْـيَاكُمْ لاَهْوَنُ عِنْدِي مِنْ وَرَقَةٍ فِي فَمِ جَرَادَةٍ تَقْضَمُهَا

Surely your world has as much value to me as the leaf of a tree which is in the mouth of a locust who is chewing upon it.” [9]

then at that point how is it possible that having grief or fear due to the material world or losing it from one's grip would cause one's soul to be affected and to cause a sense of grief and insecurity in his heart and mind!?

8. Another important factor which leads to grief and insecurity is the fear of death as this is something which always causes a person's soul trouble. Since death is something which can strike a person at any age especially at the times of sickness, wars, insecurity in a country and other such things, thus this sense of insecurity and grief is a general trait and is seen by all people.

However, in the Islamic world-outlook, if death meant annihilation, inexistence and the end of all things - just as the materialists of the world believe, then this grief and anxiety would be completely in place for us to experience! In addition, it would be completely inline for a Muslim to be frightened of such a death which is the end of all things and brings closure of all of his desires and wishes.

However, anytime a person comes under the shade of true faith in Allah (SwT), then at this point, he would consider death as being a bridge to a wider, more spacious, and spiritually higher world. Passing through the stage of “death” would be just as passing from the jail cell into the free society.

At this point, there would be no meaning to grief and anxiety! Rather, when such a death comes while on the path of fulfilling one's responsibilities, then at this time, death is something that is liked and anticipated!

Of course, the reasons for grief and anxiety are not limited to only these. Rather, we can list many more reasons why people feel grief and stress in their lives. However we must accept the fact that a majority of the cause of this grief and anxiety are related to one of the eight reasons listed above.

When we see the reasons for anxiety actually melting away and being removed when one brings about true faith in Allah (SwT), then we will definitely confirm the fact that the remembrance of Allah (SwT) is that which brings tranquility to the hearts:

أَلَابِذِكْرِاللهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبِ

"Now surely with the remembrance of Allah are the hearts put at ease." !

Notes:

[1] Ghurur al-hikm, Saying 28

[2] Surat al-Hashr (59), verse 9

[3] Tafsir-e-Namuna, vol. 9, pg. 326

[4] Ibid., vol. 25, pp. 343 to 344

[5] Surat al-Ankabut, verse 65

[6] Surat al-Rad, verse 28

[7] Surat al-Saffat, verse 257

[8] Surat al-Zukhruf, verse 13

[9] Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 75, pg. 359