



Center for Cultural
and Ethical Studies

Spiritual Quest

**A Biannual Journal of
Ethics and Spirituality**

Vol. 10 | No. 2 | Summer & Autumn 2020

Wisdom - Part VI

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Abstract



In this segment, wisdom or *hikmah* is further discussed via the traditions and *hadith* of the Ahlul Bayt. Firstly, those traditions that mention some of the signs of a wise person are mentioned. However, the great majority of this segment deals with those traditions that indicate characteristics that hinder one from attaining and establishing wisdom, such as gluttony and anger, alongside the recommendations and traditions that mention whom knowledge can be shared with and presented to. Also, a discussion on the concept of universal moral values and their necessity is briefly touched upon within this segment. At the end of this segment, a summary of some of the key aspects and factors that are necessary prerequisites for the attainment and establishment of wisdom that can be derived from the traditions is stated.

Keywords

Wisdom, signs of a wise person, obstacles to wisdom, knowledge, intellect, universal moral values.

Wisdom in *Hadith* (A Continuation)

Previously, we looked at wisdom, which, as was noted, is a very important notion and concept from the point of view of the Glorious Quran, semantics, and from the hadith, which is where this section will continue. We ended the previous section with this tradition from Imam Ali (as):

كَسْبُ الْحِكْمَةِ إِجْمَالُ النَّطْقِ وَاسْتِعْمَالُ الرَّفْقِ

The obtaining of wisdom is short speech and acting with moderation. (RayShari, 1389 SH, vol. 3, 183)

In order to obtain wisdom, you should use simple, beautiful words, so, not only do you have to watch your words, but also you have to make sure that you use beautiful words, in addition to acting in a moderate manner.

Sometimes people may force themselves to speak with beautiful words or to act moderately; this is good, but is a step towards wisdom. A person who is wise does not need to force himself to use beautiful words; it is something that occurs as second nature. For example, to be moderate, to be patient, or as mentioned before, to be tolerant, and so on, are those things that will be performed automatically and naturally if you are wise. However, if you are not wise, you can gradually learn to be wise, starting by “pretending” to be wise. So, you act like a wise person and, over time, you gain this quality. The discussion on how to attain wisdom will be held later.

It is said that Luqman was asked, “You were just a normal person, and you were just a servant, so how have you become a wise person?” He was asked:

مَا بَلَغَ بِكَ مَا تَرَى؟

What has allowed you to reach the position we see you in?

He said, in addition to those things mentioned before:

صِدْقُ الْحَدِيثِ وَأَدَاءُ الْأَمَانَةِ

Speaking the truth and being loyal to trusts. (Ibid.)

These are some of the signs of piety that are of extreme importance. If you want to test the faithfulness of a person, these two traits are very helpful. A person's practice and manner of speech are not sufficient, but rather their honesty and trustworthiness should be examined.

Universal Moral Values

In moral philosophy, there is a discussion among moral philosophers on whether or not there are universal values. This is a discussion in ethical relativism, and some have a beautiful argument. They claim that not only does research on different cultures indicate that some values are proved to be universal, but also that they have to be universal; otherwise, no society could continue. This is an important point. One of the things that they mention that has to be universal is love for children. If there were no such value as loving children, then parents would not look after their children and, after one or two generations, human beings would have stopped existing, since human children are not like other animals. Some animals, as soon as they are born, can be independent, or they just take a few hours or a short period of time to become so, but human children are quite different. Allah in his wise plan wanted us to live as a family unit. Part of the wisdom of Allah was to make our children very dependent on us; since they have need for their parents, naturally, they remain a

family. Of course, later when they feel they can survive on their own, they may leave the family. Thus, parents have to instill moral values in them, so that when this time arrives, it is not force that keeps them within the family, but rather the love and respect that has been nurtured. So, if there were no such value as love for children among all the different ethnicities and nationalities, then no one would have done their best to protect their children. This demonstrates the concept of universal values.

Another universal value, which exists in all cultures, is respect for parents. If there were no respect for parents and parents were just supposed to support their children without being respected, after a few generations, they would have stopped having children, for they would ask, “Why should we spend all our time and energy on the children, when they don't respect us?” This respect for parents is also universal, but, unfortunately, nowadays this respect is gradually disappearing, and, as a result, people tend not to have children. They prefer to have pets instead of having children. So, these are two universal values.

Another universal value is to be truthful. They present an excellent argument. They claim that if telling the truth were not a universal value, then there would be no point in creating language, since the main point in having a language is to convey one's ideas, thoughts, etc. This requires truthfulness, because if I say one thing but mean something else, then the whole language will collapse. The assumption, for those who use language, is that when a person says something, that person means it. Indeed, even those who do not tell the truth benefit from this assumption. For if people did not assume that they were telling the truth, then their lies would have no benefit, as the benefit of lying is based on the assumption that the truth is being spoken. So, the whole point in having language is to be truthful and, since all human beings have language, it can be concluded that all human beings appreciate truthfulness. For example, if someone says, “Please come to my house,” what is said is what is intended. But if people gradually

tend to say things without meaning them, then after some time it becomes useless, as trust in its entirety will be lost.

Another value that they strongly emphasize is keeping promises. They again claim that this is a universal value in all different societies: that to keep one's promise is a virtue. Whether or not it is kept in practice is another issue, but even those who do not keep their promises do not want other people to do the same with them. Everyone appreciates trustworthiness and keeping promises, and in Islam, this is considered one of the most important requirements of faith. A question may arise as to which virtue is more important. Some may say that telling the truth is more important, since it is in fact derived from the virtue of keeping one's promise, because we have promised, implicitly, that when we say something we intend it. This is a promise that we have made. Hence, if we do not use it in a truthful way, we have not kept our promise. However, some have a different opinion, and say that keeping one's promise is part of honesty and truthfulness, because, when you say, "I'm going to do this for you" or "I'm going to, for example, buy this for you," you have to mean what you say. So, they say that keeping one's promise goes back to truthfulness; this is a philosophical discussion. Which one is more important? Is keeping one's promises the most fundamental thing, or to tell the truth? In practice, it does not make much of a difference. All people appreciate and have high regard for these two values, and Islam is no different, be it with added emphasis. We have many *hadiths* about this. So Luqman said that the reason he had been chosen by Allah to be given this gift of wisdom is because he was honest in his speech and loyal to his trusts.

He then adds:

وَتَرَكْتُ مَا لَا يُعِينُنِي وَغَضُّ بَصَرِي وَكَفُّ لِسَانِي وَعِقَّةُ طُعْمَتِي فَمَنْ تَقَصَّ
عَنْ هَذَا فَهُوَ دُونِي وَمَنْ زَادَ عَلَيْهِ فَهُوَ فَوْقِي وَمَنْ عَمِلَهُ فَهُوَ مِثْلِي

... abandoning those things that were not beneficial to me, shielding my sight, controlling my tongue, ensuring the purity of my food. Whoever is deficient in these is lower than me, whoever has more of these things is higher than me, and whoever acts upon them is like me.

He did not pursue things which did not matter or which were not important. He did not speak or ask about those things which were not important – things that make no differences whether you know them or not. Why spend time and energy on investigating and pursuing those things? He also tried to observe modesty in his sight and did not look at something forbidden. He watched his words. He protected his tongue. He was also very careful about what he ate. He then concludes that whoever lacks these mentioned virtues and qualities is lower than him; if anyone has more of these qualities, then he is better than him; and a person who has all these qualities is like him.

Hence, he did not have any special admiration for himself. He said that one can either be worse, better or like him. So, it is up to us; we can either become like Luqman, better than him, or lower. There is no restriction. No law in this world that says that we cannot become Luqman. We can have many Luqmans in this world. It is possible. Try it and see that it will work.

Obstacles to Wisdom

One of the characteristics that stop people from becoming wise is, as mentioned before, overeating. Eating too much blocks a person from attaining wisdom. The Holy Prophet said:

الْقَلْبُ يَتَحَمَّلُ الْحِكْمَةَ عِنْدَ خُلُوفِ الْبَطْنِ

The heart gains the ability to attain wisdom when

the stomach is empty. (Ibid., vol. 1, 179)

If the stomach is full, then the heart will not have the opportunity to attain wisdom. Inspiration, good ideas and thoughts come when the body is not busy digesting food. Similarly, it is reported:

الْقَلْبُ يَمُجُّ الْحِكْمَةَ عِنْدَ امْتِلَاءِ الْبَطْنِ

The heart rejects wisdom when the stomach is full. (Ibid.)

There is a *hadith* from Imam Sadiq (a), where he gives some advice to an individual named Unwan al-Basri. In that *hadith*, the Imam says that whenever you want to eat, try to eat only when you are feeling hungry and to also stop eating before becoming completely full. He also said to divide the stomach capacity into three: a third for food, a third for drinks and a third for air, i.e., leave it empty. Then the Imam quoted the *hadith* from the Holy Prophet (s), where he said:

مَا مَلَأَ آدَمِيُّ وَعَاءًا شَرًّا مِنْ بَطْنِهِ فَإِنْ كَانَ وَلَا بَدَّ فَثَلَّثَ لِبَطْعَامِهِ وَثَلَّثَ لَشَرَابِهِ وَثَلَّثَ لِنَفْسِهِ.

Human beings have not filled any container worse than their stomach. Therefore, a third of it is for food, a third for drink, and a third for his breath.

(Majlisi, 1403 AH, vol. 1, p. 226)

No container is worse than the stomach. Many diseases arise because of eating, either too much or not appropriate food. So, it not only does it disturb physical health, but it is also bad for spirituality.

In another tradition, Imam Ali said:

لَا تَجْتَمِعُ الشَّهْوَةُ وَالْحِكْمَةُ

Wisdom and the appetites cannot be combined.

(RayShahri, 1389 SH, vol. 3, p. 184)

So, we can either go for wisdom or go after our lower desires. We cannot have both. It is impossible to have both, as per this tradition. At times we may think that we are clever and want to have everything at once. We aspire for closeness to God, for spirituality and also this world. However, there are certain things that we have to leave aside.

The Holy Prophet said:

مَنْ أَكَلَ طَعَاماً لِلشَّهْوَةِ حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ عَلَى قَلْبِهِ الْحِكْمَةَ

Whoever eats food out of gluttony, Allah will prevent wisdom from entering his heart. (Ibid.)

An example of an instance of the above *hadith* could be that if someone eats something as a result of a lower desire, for pure enjoyment. It may be possible that the food attained is *haram* or that the money used to purchase the food may not have been earned in a *halal* manner, but just because this type of food or drink is loved and desired, then Allah will block wisdom from this person. This means that it will be impossible for this individual to become wise. So we have to be very careful about our food and drink.

Another thing which is very harmful in the attainment of wisdom is anger. If a person is angry, aggressive, and arrogant, wisdom will vanish from him or her.

Imam Sadiq said:

الْغَضَبُ مُمَحِّقَةٌ لِقَلْبِ الْحَكِيمِ وَمَنْ لَمْ يَمْلِكْ غَضَبَهُ لَمْ يَمْلِكْ عَقْلَهُ

Anger destroys the heart of a wise person, so he who has no control over his anger will have no

control over his intellect. (Ibid. (

A wise person depends significantly on his intellect, because wisdom and the intellect are very closely related. When one becomes angry, obvious mistakes are made, as one cannot think properly and, as a result, decisions cannot be properly made. Anger is a very severe enemy of the intellect. Hence, a wise person, first of all, does not get angry easily. He is very patient and, even if he gets angry, he is able to control his anger, refrains from speaking and making decisions at that time, as he may come to regret them later.

Another important aspect in the attainment of wisdom is humbleness.

In this regard, Imam Kazim said:

إِنَّ الزَّرْعَ يَنْبُتُ فِي السَّهْلِ وَلَا يَنْبُتُ فِي الصُّفَا فَكَذَلِكَ الْحِكْمَةُ تَعْمُرُ فِي
قَلْبِ الْمُتَوَاضِعِ وَلَا تَعْمُرُ فِي قَلْبِ الْمُتَكَبِّرِ الْجَبَّارِ لِأَنَّ اللَّهَ جَعَلَ التَّوَاضَعَ
آلَةَ الْعَقْلِ

Indeed, crops grow in fertile fields and not upon a bed of rocks. Similarly, wisdom is established in the hearts of the humble and not within the hearts of the arrogant and prideful, as Allah has made humbleness the tool of the intellect [wisdom]. (Ibid., vol. 13, p. 221)

The analogy used by the Imam indicates that if you want to grow something, it should be grown in a place that meets the requirements for growth, so a farmer who has the options of planting on flat land or on a hilltop should choose the flat land since water will not remain on the hilltop but rather will flow towards the flat land. It means that if you are humble, all goodness comes to you. So if you want wisdom, you have to possess a very humble heart. If you are arrogant, wisdom will not

come to you.

Similarly, the intellect can understand and function properly when one is humble. If I am arrogant, my intellect will not function properly. Why? Because an arrogant person is not concerned about the truth; he just wants to strengthen his position, which is his main objective. So, if in your thinking or in creating relations or in decision-making, instead of being concerned about the truth, about what is right and what is wrong, you are always more concerned about your own position, your own respect, your own fame, your own power, and so on, you will be liable to making big mistakes. The best way to serve your real interest is to forget your ego and just to be concerned with the truth. If we are all interested in serving the truth, it will be better for us long term.

Imam Ali said:

غَيْرُ مُنْتَفِعٍ بِالْعِظَاتِ قَلْبٌ مُتَعَلِّقٌ بِالشَّهَوَاتِ

That which benefits not from advice and admonition is a heart that is preoccupied with its carnal lusts and desires. (*Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 185)

In his famous sermon on the God-conscious, Imam Ali (a) was asked by Hammam,

صِفْ لِي الْمُتَّقِينَ حَتَّى كَأَنِّي أَنْظُرُ إِلَيْهِمْ

Describe for me the pious in such a way as if I am seeing them. (*Razi*, 1414 AH, p. 303)

Sometimes people may describe something in such a way as if it were present and had been observed. So, he asked the Imam to describe the *muttaqin* in this way. The Imam, in answering his request, described them in such a beautiful way in this famous,

short sermon known as the Sermon on the *Muttaqin* in *Nahj al-Balagha*. At the end of the sermon, this individual, Hammam was so awestruck by the manner in which the Imam described the *muttaqin* that he passed away. Some hypocrites who were there and witnessed this event started criticizing Imam Ali(a), saying that he had killed him. Imam had not done anything but described the *muttaqin*. The Imam then said to them:

قَالَ هَكَذَا تَصْنَعُ الْمَوَاعِظُ بِأَهْلِهَا فَقَالَ لَهُ قَائِلٌ فَمَا بِأَنَّكَ يَا أَمِيرَ
الْمُؤْمِنِينَ فَقَالَ عَ وَيْحَاكَ إِنَّ لِكُلِّ أَجَلٍ وَقْتًا لَا يَعْدُوهُ وَسَبَبًا لَا يَتَجَاوِزُهُ
فَمَهْلًا لَا تَعُدُّ لِمِثْلِهَا فَإِنَّمَا نَفَثَ الشَّيْطَانُ عَلَى لِسَانِكَ

Effective advice produces such effects on receptive minds. Someone then said to him: “O Amir al-Mu’minin, how is it you do not experience such an effect?” Amir al-Mu’minin (a) replied: “Woe upon you! For death, there is a fixed hour which cannot be exceeded, and a cause which does not change. Now look, never repeat such talk which Satan has put on your tongue.” (Ibid., p. 306)

The Imam is alluding to the fact that when advice is wise and beneficial, in addition to the receiver being very capable, then such a result is a normal occurrence. If someone like Ali is giving advice and the other person wholeheartedly listens and appreciates, there is this possibility of death. It is as if by this advice, the Imam took him to his destination in a very short span of time. So, good advice is one condition, a good listener is the other. Sometimes we have good listeners, but we do not have good speakers, and at other times it is reversed, i.e., we have good speakers but not good listeners. However, if we have both, then miracles are possible. At times, one lecture can change the whole community; one lecture can change the life of many people. One reason that people do not listen and benefit from this piece of

advice is that, as Imam Ali (a) says:

قَلْبٌ مُتَعَلِّقٌ بِالشَّهَوَاتِ

Their hearts are attached to carnal lusts and lower desires.

You are telling them about heaven, but they are thinking about something else. They are not paying much attention. Their attention is somewhere else.

On the other hand, Imam Ali in another *hadith* said:

مَنْ تَبَيَّنَتْ لَهُ الْحِكْمَةُ عَرَفَ الْعِبْرَةَ

For he who wisdom is established, good advice is known. (RayShahri, 1389 SH, vol. 3, 186)

If a person has been given wisdom, and wisdom is established for him, he will take lessons. Not only by listening, but by looking around as well, as, for a wise person, everything is full of lessons. Lessons are not confined to just listening; everything around us can be inspiring and beneficial. Even what children say can be inspiring. Sometimes Allah (swt) puts in the mouth of children something which is very useful for us; we should never underestimate children and what they say. At other times, maybe all of a sudden, a person comes and says something. He may not even be aware what he is saying, but, in it, there is a message for us. We may even get a message from our enemies; they may mention something that can help in correcting ourselves. We have to always be alert and receptive since messages can come from every direction and angle. A wise person does not miss any message or any signal. This is very important. Allah (swt), at times, may choose to speak to you directly, by means of suggesting some ideas into your heart, but, at other times, indirectly, through

people, or on occasion all of a sudden. For example, you open the Glorious Qur'an, and there you see a verse that speaks to you; maybe you read a book and there is something which is relevant to you within it. If we achieve wisdom, we will live a very different type of life. A wise person will find that every verse of the Glorious Qur'an is relevant to his life. As such, a person who has not yet developed wisdom may read the Glorious Qur'an for days and weeks and eventually conclude that nothing within it is relevant to his life. It may even become boring to him. This is not because the Glorious Qur'an is different; it is the same Qur'an, but it depends on our receptiveness. The Glorious Qur'an can speak to us directly or it can be silent. It depends on our ability to receive the message. So, a wise person takes lessons from everything.

Imam Sadiq (a) is reported to have said:

كَثْرَةُ النَّظَرِ فِي الْحِكْمَةِ تَلْقَحُ الْعُقْلَ

Looking constantly at wisdom will cause it to impregnate the intellect. (Ibid., vol. 7, 537)

So, constantly reflecting and pondering over wise words, sayings, and ideas will fertilize the reason and intellect.

Sharing Wisdom

Another important aspect regarding wisdom is who it is given to and who it is not. It must not be shared with those who will not appreciate it, and, on the contrary, it must be shared with those who will appreciate it. If it is shared with those who will be appreciative, it will not only be beneficial, but also it is surely their right to hear it, for if they are not given it, an injustice and unkindness will have been done to them; and if it is shared with those who will be unappreciative, they will surely misuse it. In this

instance, the right of wisdom will not have been fulfilled, as it enjoys the right of only being shared with those who are worthy and appreciative.

Imam Kazim (a) said in this regard:

لَا تَمْنَحُوا الْجَهَّالَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَتَظْلِمُوهَا وَلَا تَمْنَعُوهَا أَهْلَهَا فَتَظْلِمُوهُمْ

Do not present wisdom to the ignorant, since they will oppress it. And do not withhold it from those worthy, for if you do so, you will have oppressed them. (Ibid., vol. 3, 186)

“Ignorant” does not just mean “not knowing” but also refers to those who do not act according to reason and intellect, for in Arabic, the word *jahl* has two meanings: one is not to know, the other is not to act wisely. So, either you are unjust to wisdom or unjust to people deserving of it, but if we are attentive, we can observe the right of wisdom and people together.

Similarly, the Holy Prophet (s) said:

وَاضِعُ الْعِلْمِ عِنْدَ غَيْرِ أَهْلِهِ كَمُقَلِّدِ الْخَنَازِيرِ الْجَوْهَرَ وَاللُّؤْلُؤَ وَالذَّهَبَ

One who places knowledge with those not worthy of it is like one who hangs gems, jewels, and pearls around a neck of a pig. (Ibid., vol. 3, 349)

These are things that are not supposed to be put on the neck of a pig, but on the neck of a human being. So, if you give wisdom to those people who are not worthy of it, you are wasting it. They may even use this against you and other innocent people, so you have to be very careful.

Wisdom can also refresh your mind and heart. The Holy Prophet is reported to have said:

إِنَّ هَذِهِ الْقُلُوبَ تَمَلُّ كَمَا تَمَلُّ الْأَجْدَانُ فَابْتَغُوا لَهَا طَرَائِفَ الْحِكْمَةِ

Just as bodies become tired, so does the heart. So seek for it fresh wisdom. (Ibid., vol. 9, 518)

In this tradition, the Holy Prophet (a) alludes to an important point. He says that just as bodies may become tired and in need of rest, hearts do too. Sometimes your heart becomes tired and needs to be relaxed, but this is not something that you can do with physical relaxation; you need something else to refresh your heart. For example, meeting a good friend causes the heart to be refreshed. Another example, which is mentioned in the above tradition, is wisdom and wise sayings. If you listen to wise sayings or reflect on wise ideas, your heart regains its energy and will become refreshed.

The above are just some examples of traditions pertaining to wisdom, and even though quite a few were mentioned, there is still much more that could have been, but we will suffice with what has been mentioned.

Summary

Based on the traditions and *hadiths* quoted above and in the previous segments, we can derive the following elements as a prerequisite and requirement for the attaining and establishment of wisdom.

- Firstly, wisdom is related to understanding; this is unquestionable. Wisdom and understanding are interconnected, but we cannot translate *hikmah* as mere understanding, because *hikmah* is much more. As was previously mentioned, there is no single word in Farsi or English that can accurately translate the word *hikmah*, so we

use different terms; one is “understanding”.

- Secondly, the intellect and wisdom. The intellect and reason are also connected to wisdom. But with regards to wisdom and emotion, no such connection exists.
- Thirdly, knowledge. Wisdom and knowledge are quite related. It is impossible to be both ignorant and wise. Although knowledge is different from wisdom, a person can be knowledgeable and not wise, but a person cannot be wise without knowledge; so knowledge is a requirement for wisdom.
- Another factor which is mentioned in the *hadith* is that wisdom, obedience, and fear of God are related. A wise person knows that he or she must observe the position of Allah to the extent that it is even recorded in the *hadith*:

رَأْسُ الْحِكْمَةِ مَخَافَةُ اللَّهِ

The foundation of wisdom is the fear of Allah. (Ibid.,
vol. 3, 182)

- Another thing which is understood from the *hadith* is that wisdom is, first of all, related to the heart – not the mind, nor the tongue, nor any other organ. Primarily, it is related to the heart, and, as a result of this, it can affect other aspects of our being.
- Another thing which we understood from the *hadith* is that wisdom comes with patience, forbearance, tolerance, or, in other words, *mudarah*. A *hadith* mentions moderation (rifq) – not to be an extremist, not to be radical, to be able to forgive easily when you are wronged. You do not develop enmity or hostility. If you say or do something bad to some people, they will never forgive you. They may verbally forgive you, but even

after 20 years, they will say that you said this-and-that to me. This is a very bad trait; one must not remember these things. A *mu'min* forgets when he is wronged, but always remembers when someone has done a good thing for him. If a person has given him, for example, a cup of tea, after years he will remember, but if someone has wronged him, he coolly forgets. This is a sign of a wise person. So, wisdom requires the ability to forgive and forget, and having a good temperament.

- Additionally, the *hadith* mention that wisdom and experience are very much connected. It is possible to have a prophet, or an Imam who does not have any experience in the normal sense of the word, but who is granted wisdom; for example, Jesus, who was given wisdom immediately after birth. We are not talking about these types of people, but normal people. Therefore, one should never expect wisdom to come from a very young individual. One should always seek someone who has some experience; even if a person has knowledge, experience is something else. If you want to choose someone, choose someone with experience, in addition to the other required qualifications, as your guide, mentor and leader of the community, for nothing can replace it.
- Furthermore, wisdom and renunciation from worldly pleasure are connected. So, wisdom is not purely theoretical. Wisdom is not conceptual; it concerns the heart and therefore is related to the way you view the world and its pleasures.
- Finally, wisdom and honesty are related. A wise person does not deceive others.

This was a summary of some of the aspects of and factors surrounding wisdom from the traditions and *hadith*. In the next segment, we will discuss the means and manners of how one can achieve this wisdom.

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