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ZUHD AND ITS EXPLANATION

Allāh has said *We made everything on the earth adornment for it so that we could test them to see whose actions are the best* (Qur’ān, 18:7). Sufyān al-Thawrī  has stated, in relation to the words “whose actions are the best,” that they mean: [To see] who exercises the greatest *zuhd* in relation to it, i.e., the adornment.³ Likewise, Abū ‘Aṣṣām al-‘Aṣqalānī commented about the same phrase: Those who forgo it the most.⁴ The word *zuhd*, in the speech of the Arabs, signifies the following: *Turning away from wealth and fame*.

Al-Jawharī and other linguists have asserted that *zuhd* is the opposite of desire. One says in Arabic: *Zahida fi al-shay’* or ‘*an al-shay’*, *yazhadu zuhdan wa zahādatan*.⁵ *Zahada yazha du* is another morphological variant.⁶ As for so-and-so *tazahhada*, it means *ta‘abbada*, i.e., withdraw into devotional worship. *Al-tazahhhud fi al-shay’* or ‘*an al-shay’*⁷ is the contrary of the stimulation of desire. And the word *al-muzhid*⁸ means a man of scarce wealth.

In the prophetic hadith it has been reported that: “The best of people is the believer of little wealth (*mu’min muzhid*).”⁹

The connotation of the word *al-zahīd* is (the) “little”. One says in Arabic: *Fulān zahīd al-akl*, i.e., “So-and-so eats little”; and *Wādīn zahīd* means, “A valley that takes in little water.” It is also said by the Arabs: *Khudh zuhda mā yakfīk*, that is, “Take the measured amount that suffices you”; as well as, *Fulān yazhadu ‘aṭā’a fulān*, “So-and-so esteems the gift of so-and-so as being little.”¹⁰

The Prophet  was of all people the one with the highest level of *zuhd*, and the one who was the most self-sufficient, i.e., in want of the least amount of



external material things. It suffices, on the issue of his *zuhd*, to relate what has been reported by al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah, and others, on the authority of Abū Umāmah,¹¹ that he ﷺ said: “My Lord offered me the land of Makkah in its gold and silver equivalent. I said: ‘No, Lord, rather I satiate myself with food one day and stay hungry another day, so that, when I am hungry I turn to You beseechingly and remember You, and when I eat to my full satisfaction I praise and thank You.’”¹² Al-Tirmidhī said it was a good (*ḥasan*)¹³ hadith.

Zuhd was the state of Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿAlī, Abū Dharr [al-Ghifārī], ʿUthmān, Abū al-Dardāʾ, Tamīm al-Dārī and their likes. How many indeed were those who practised *zuhd* among the companions! ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. ʿAwf and al-Zubayr were both people of *zuhd*, and no heed is paid to the transmission of the one who narrated that ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. ʿAwf would enter *jannah* crawling, no one having previously narrated it. As for al-Zubayr, he had no equal. Allāh willing, examples of the states of those who practised *zuhd* in this world, and the modalities of their *zuhd*, will be mentioned hereafter.¹⁴

VARIANT ALLUSIONS TO ZUHD AMONG THE SAGES

Mālik b. Anas said that *zuhd* was *taqwā*. Our scholars¹⁵ stated that he intended guarding oneself from dubious things, since man has ample room to maneuver in neutrally permissible things.¹⁶

Al-Musayyib b. Wāḍiḥ¹⁷ asserted that Ibn ʿUyaynah was asked about *zuhd*, whereupon he replied: “To do without what Allāh has proscribed. As for what He has declared lawful, He has permitted it. Thus, the prophets ate, drank, and married.”

Al-Zuhrī said that *zuhd* was not attained by ascetically mortifying the flesh, but rather by exercising self-restraint [and staying] away from the dubious things. It was further reported from him that he was questioned as to what *zuhd* in this life was, and he responded as follows: “Not to let the forbidden overcome your patient self-restraint, or the permitted your thankfulness.”

Sufyān al-Thawrī and those who took from him said: “Reducing and curbing hope. It does not lie in eating coarse food or wearing a woollen wrap.” That is a fine statement, since the one whose hope is lessened and held back turns away from this World and devotes his full energy to worshipping the Master.¹⁸

Ibn Zurārah b. Awfā,¹⁹ after the death of Sufyān al-Thawrī, said to him: “May



Allāh show mercy on you. What were you told?” He turned away from me [Ibn Zurārah b. Awfā], and then I said:²⁰ “What did Allāh do with you?” He was receptive to me on hearing the question put to him that way, and he answered: “Allāh has bestowed favor on me by His generosity and kindness.” I asked him: “Which action in your knowledge best helps one attain the goal?” “Contentment,”²¹ he replied, and a limited hope.

Some people, on the other hand, maintained that *zuhd* meant to loathe encomium and the love of praise.²²

I said: This is an allusive reference by him to the fact that to forgo the whole of this World is the most loved form of forgoing it.²³

It has further been related from him that he declared: “*Zuhd* is to do without meeting people.”

I said: “And this is an allusion by him to seclusion and (concealed) devotional worship, as well as finding friendly solace in loneliness.”

Abū Sulaymān al-Khaṭṭābī ؓ has indeed excelled when he said:

I found solacing friendliness in my loneliness, and clang to my house
That way amiable friendliness endured, and happiness increased
Time has disciplined me, and I don't mind
I fled, so I'm neither visited nor do I visit
I will not ask anyone for favors so long as I'm alive
whether the sitting companion departs or the governor travels away.

And Maṣū'ir the jurist said excellently as well:

Good gathers better in silence and in clinging to one's houses
So if this or that is equal for you, then be contented with the least food.

In the same vein are the words of the judge Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī:

A Muslim attains untainted safety
when he repairs to a dwelling and some basic nourishment
What then is slowed down and deferred
after he takes shelter in a house and a minimum modicum of food?

Poems on this abound. Abū Muṭī' Makhūl b. al-Faḍl al-Nasafī put it well when he said:

Trace a path, O self, so that I aim at an Absolute One,
Everlasting Sustainer of All, Sustaining Himself on none
And leave me alone, lest I seek anyone other than my Lord
He is my full sufficiency and my friendly companion, so forgo people
In none apart from Him will you ever find any refuge.



Ja'far b. Sulaymān stated the following: I asked a woman about the devout worshippers, and said to her: "Who is with you in your house?" She replied: "The One I confide intimately with is my company. Can I experience loneliness once He is my intimate friend, 'Abdallāh?"²⁴

Al-Fuḍayl said: "Whenever I see the night approaching I rejoice in it, and say to myself that I will withdraw in the company of my Lord. Conversely, whenever I see that daylight has dawned upon me, I say *innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji'ūn* as if a calamity has struck me, out of dislike of meeting people, and the thought that someone who will engross me away from My Lord, Mighty and Exalted is He, will appear."²⁵

It has also been said: "No one exercises *zuhd*²⁶ until and unless renouncing the World is dearer to him than appropriating it." That was said by Ibrāhīm b. Adham. I say: Such a saying concurs with the linguistic signification of *zuhd* in accordance with what has been stated hereabove.²⁷ One man said to al-Ḥasan:²⁸ "Our jurists say," [and before he could complete the sentence] al-Ḥasan remarked: "And have you seen any jurist (*faqīh*)? The *faqīh* is the one who practices *zuhd* in his worldly life, who possesses insightful knowledge of his *dīn*, and who persistently worships his Lord." Some said: "*Zuhd* is to do without in this world with one's heart." That was stated by Ibn al-Mubārak. I say: "This is a very good statement, since it is the same whether this world yields itself to his hand or not, as *zuhd* is one of the actions of the heart."

Likewise with the companions: This world fell into their hands, while they turned away from it with their hearts, in accordance with what shall be explained hereunder.

One group affirmed: *Zuhd* is love of death. I say: "This statement encompasses the semantic range of all the sayings quoted about it, as love of death implies love of meeting the Master as well as turning away from this World, so it represents the summit of all such sayings."²⁹



The Prophet ﷺ explained *zuhd* with a clarification dispensing with any other statement on it. Ibn Mājah reported in his *Sunan*, and al-Tirmidhī in his *Jāmi'*,³⁰ on the authority of Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī ؓ that he narrated: The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said:



Zuhd in this World is not by forbidding to oneself the lawful or in dissipating wealth away. Rather, *zuhd* in this World is not to feel more confident in what is in your hand compared to what is in Allāh's hand ﷻ and to desire the reward of a calamity when you are afflicted by it more than you would do if it were to be held back for your sake and deferred.³¹

Ibn Mājah said: Hishām b. ʿAmmār stated the following: “Abū Idrīs al-Khawlānī used to mention that this hadith³² was, among the *aḥādīth*, the equivalent of pure gold from within the family of golden products.” Al-Tirmidhī said about it: “A strange (*gharīb*) hadith.”³³ The name of Abū Idrīs al-Khawlānī was ʿĀ'idhullāh b. ʿAbdallāh. As for ʿAmr b. Wāqid³⁴ (found in the transmission chain of the said hadith), he was one whose narrations were disowned.³⁵

I say: In this hadith, he ﷻ allusively indicated two vast dimensions: 1) reliance (on Allāh).³⁶ Reference to it has already occurred here above; and 2) contentment,³⁷ which falls into two types:

FIRST is general contentment. It is to find no Lord but Allāh, no *dīn* but Islām, and no Messenger but Muḥammad. The *zuhd* of (general) contentment is something no Muslim is devoid of, since no profession of the *dīn* of Islām is true without it. That is the import of his statement ﷻ: “[Only] he who is pleased with Allāh as Lord, with Islām as *dīn*, and with Muḥammad as Messenger, is the one who tastes the flavor of *īmān*.”³⁸ Muslim, *inter alia*, has reported it;

SECOND is specific contentment. It is the one spoken about by the masters of hearts.³⁹ The best expression of it came in the statement of al-Thawrī: “It is the hearts' happiness on the unfolding of the Decree.” This second category is what the Prophet ﷺ alluded to in this hadith [from Abū Dharr], and Allāh knows best. This [narrower, more specific] variety is the ultimate goal of contentment: The slave manifests tolerant endurance of suffering at the inception of hardship; he is pleased with Allāh's reward as a quid pro quo for what He took away from him; and he resents nothing, hence does not reject the Decree. Shaqīq said: “I purchased a watermelon for my mother, who got angry when she cut it open. I said: ‘Mother, what are you angry about? Do you reject the Decree? Or do you blame the ploughman or its seller, or perhaps you blame its Creator? As for the ploughman and the vendor, by Allāh, no sin can be attached to either of them, since they only wished it to be a watermelon of the best quality. In truth, I see you blaming none but its Creator, so fear Allāh and do not blame



Him.” Shaqīq went on to state: “By Allāh, my mother never heard from me a more beneficial talk than that.” Al-Zubayr b. Bakkār said: “‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh related to me the following: Ghaylān wrote to one of his brothers who had been stricken by a calamity that befell his son: ‘Allāh granted you the gift of your son, and imposed on you the duty of educating him and providing for him, while you feared the testing of your faith by means of your son, whereupon your happiness was strengthened by such gift. When Allāh retracted the gift of his life, removed from you the task of disciplining him, and you thereby became safe from his trial, your fretful despondency grew stronger. [If only you exercised patience vis-à-vis such testing affliction],⁴⁹ you would have delighted in the loss you consoled yourself about. When this writing of mine reaches you, bear patiently the matter with the reward for which you cannot dispense, and the punishment of which you cannot endure, and know that every calamity that causes you to rejoice with the reward does not banish the grief it encompasses, that is the everlasting grief. Peace.”

