

Qualities and Attributes of the Spiritually Learned

Excerpts from

The Secret of Divine Civilization

by

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1. The happiness and pride of a nation consist in this, that it should shine out like the sun in the high heaven of knowledge. *“Shall they who have knowledge and they who have not, be treated alike?”* [Qur’án 39:12] And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world’s multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight. {Pages 2-3}

2. God has given us eyes, that we may look about us at the world, and lay hold of whatsoever will further civilization and the arts of living. He has given us ears, that we may hear and profit by the wisdom of scholars and philosophers and arise to promote and practice it. Senses and faculties have been bestowed upon us, to be devoted to the service of the general good; so that we, distinguished above all other forms for perceptiveness and reason, should labor at all times and along all lines, whether the occasion be great or small, ordinary or extraordinary, until all mankind are safely gathered into the impregnable stronghold of knowledge. We should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities towards this end. How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfil his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages. Supreme happiness is man’s and he beholds the signs of God in the world and in the human soul, if he urges on the steed of high endeavor in the arena of civilization and justice. *“We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves.”* [Qur’án 41:53]

.... We must now highly resolve to arise and lay hold of all those instrumentalities that promote ease and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race. Thus, through the restoring waters of pure intention and unselfish effort, the earth of human potentialities will blossom with its own latent excellence and flower into praiseworthy qualities, and bear and flourish until it becomes to rival that rosegarden of knowledge which belonged to our forefathers. {Pages 3-4}

3. A man should pause and reflect and be just; his Lord, out of measureless grace, has made him a human being and honored him with the words: *“Verily, We created man in the goodliest of forms”* [Qur’án 95:4]—and caused His mercy which arises out of the dawn of oneness to shine down upon him, until he became the wellspring of the words of God and the place where the

mysteries of heaven alighted, and on the morning of creation he was covered with the rays of the qualities of perfection and graces of holiness. How can he stain this immaculate garment with the filth of selfish desires, or exchange this everlasting life for infamy? *“Dost thou think thyself only a puny form, when the universe is folded up within thee?”* [The `Imám Alí] {Page 19}

4. Again, there are those famed and accomplished men of learning, possessors of praiseworthy qualities and vast erudition, who lay hold on the strong handle of the fear of God and keep to the ways of salvation. In the mirror of their minds the forms of the transcendent realities are reflected, and the lamp of their inner vision derives its light from the sun of universal knowledge. They are busy by night and by day with the meticulous research into such sciences as are profitable to mankind, and they devote themselves to the training of students of capacity. It is certain that to their discerning taste, the proffered treasures of kings would not compare with a single drop of the waters of knowledge, and mountains of gold and silver could not outweigh the successful solution of a difficult problem. To them, the delights that lie outside their work are only toys for children, and the cumbersome load of unnecessary possessions is only good for the ignorant and base. Content like the birds, they give thanks for a handful of seeds, and the song of their wisdom dazzles the minds of the world’s most wise. {Page 21}
5. It is unquestionable that the object in establishing parliaments is to bring about justice and righteousness, but everything hinges on the efforts of the elected representatives. If their intention is sincere, desirable results and unforeseen improvements will be forthcoming. If not, it is certain that the whole thing will be meaningless, the country will come to a standstill and public affairs will continually deteriorate. *“I see a thousand builders unequal to one subverter; what then of the one builder who is followed by a thousand subverters?”*

The purpose of the foregoing statements is to demonstrate at least this, that the happiness and greatness, the rank and station, the pleasure and the peace, of an individual have never consisted in his personal wealth, but rather in his excellent character, his high resolve, the breadth of his learning and his ability to solve difficult problems. How well has it been said: *“On my back is a garment which, were it sold for a penny, that penny would be worth far more; yet within the garment is a soul which if you weighed it against all the souls of the world, would prove greater and nobler.”* {Pages 23-24}

6. Those eminent divines and men of learning who walk the straight pathway and are versed in the secrets of divine wisdom and informed of the inner realities of the sacred Books; who wear in their hearts the jewel of the fear of God and whose luminous faces shine with the lights of salvation – these are

alert to the present need and they understand the requirements of modern times, and certainly devote all their energies toward encouraging the advancement of learning and civilization. *“Are they equal, those who know, and those who do not know?... Or is the darkness equal with the light?”* [Qur’án 39:12 and 13:17]

The spiritually learned are lamps of guidance among the nations, and stars of good fortune shining from the horizons of humankind. They are fountains of life for such as lie in the death of ignorance and unawareness, and clear springs of perfections for those who thirst and wander in the wasteland of their defects and errors. They are the dawning-places of the emblems of Divine Unity and initiates in the mysteries of the glorious Qur’án. They are skilled physicians for the ailing body of the world, they are the sure antidote to the poison that has corrupted human society. It is they who are the strong citadel guarding humanity, and the impregnable sanctuary of the sorely distressed, the anxious and tormented, victims of ignorance. *“Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth”*.

For every thing, however, God has created a sign and symbol, and established standards and tests by which it may be known. The spiritually learned must be characterized by inward and outward perfections; they must possess a good character, an enlightened nature, a pure intent, as well as intellectual power, brilliance and discernment, intuition, indiscretion and foresight, temperance, reverence, and a heartfelt fear of God. For an unlit candle, however great in diameter and tall, is no better than a barren palm tree or a pile of dead wood.

*“The flower-faced may sulk or play the flirt,
The cruel fair may bridle and coquet;
But coyness in the ugly is ill-met,
And pain in a blind eye’s a double hurt.”*
[Rúmi, The Mathnaví, I, 1906-1907]

An authoritative Tradition states: *“As for him who is one of the learned; he must guard himself, defend his faith, oppose his passions and obey the commands of his Lord. It is then the duty of the people to pattern themselves after him.”* Since these illustrious and holy words embody all the conditions of learning, a brief commentary on their meaning is appropriate. Whoever is lacking in these divine qualifications and does not demonstrate these inescapable requirements in his own life, should not be referred to as learned and is not worthy to serve as a model for the believers.

The first of these requirements is to guard one’s own self. It is obvious that this does not refer to protecting oneself from calamities and material tests,

for the Prophets and saints were, each and every one, subjected to the bitterest afflictions that the world has to offer and were the targets for the cruelties and aggressions of mankind. They sacrificed their lives for the welfare of the people. And with all their hearts they hastened to the place of their martyrdom; and with their inward and outward perfections they arrayed humanity in new garments of excellent qualities, both acquired and inborn. The primary meaning of this guarding of oneself is to acquire the attributes of spiritual and material perfection.

The first attribute of perfection is learning and the cultural attainments of the mind, and this eminent station is achieved when the individual combines in himself a thorough knowledge of those complex and transcendental realities pertaining to God, of the fundamental truths of Qur'anic political and religious law, of the contents of the scriptures of other faiths, and of those regulations and procedures which would contribute to the progress and civilizations of this distinguished country. He should in addition be informed as to the laws and principles, the customs, conditions and manners, and the material and moral virtues characterizing the statecraft of other nations, and should be well versed in all the useful branches of learning of the day, and study the historical records of bygone governments and peoples. For if a learned individual has no knowledge of the Sacred scriptures and the entire field of divine and natural science, or religious jurisprudence and the arts of government and the varied learning of the time and the great events in history, he might prove unequal to an emergency, and this is inconsistent with the necessary qualification of comprehensive knowledge. *{Pages 32-36}*

7. The second attribute of perfection is justice and impartiality. This means to have no regard for one's own personal benefits and selfish advantages, and to carry out the laws of God without the slightest concern for anything else. It means to see one's self as only one of the servants of God, the All-Possessing, and except for aspiring to spiritual distinction, never attempting to be singled out from the others. It means to consider the welfare of the community as one's own. It means, in brief, to regard humanity as a single individual, and one's own self as a member of that corporeal form, and to know of a certainty that if pain or injury afflicts any member of that body, it must inevitably result in suffering for all the rest.

The third requirement of perfection is to arise with complete sincerity and purity of purpose to educate the masses; to exert the utmost effort to instruct them in the various branches of learning and useful sciences, to encourage the development of modern progress, to widen the scope of commerce, industry and the arts, to further such measures as will increase the people's wealth. For the mass of the population is uninformed as to these vital

agencies which would constitute an immediate remedy to society's chronic ills.

It is essential that scholars and the spiritually learned should undertake in all sincerity and purity of intent and for the sake of God alone the counsel and exhort the masses and clarify their vision with that collyrium which is knowledge.

... Other attributes of perfection are to fear God, to love God by loving His servants, to exercise mildness and forbearance and calm, to be sincere, amenable, clement and compassionate; to have resolution and courage, trustworthiness and energy, to strive and struggle, to be generous, loyal, without malice, to have zeal and a sense of honor, to be high-minded and magnanimous, and to have regard for the rights of others. Whoever is lacking in these excellent human qualities is defective. If We were to explain the inner meanings of each of these attributes, "*the poem would take up 70 maunds of paper**." (*about 467 lbs) {Pages 39-40}

8. The second of these spiritual standards which apply to the possessor of knowledge is that he should be the defender of his faith. It is obvious that these holy words do not refer exclusively to searching out the implications of the Law, observing the forms of worship, avoiding greater and lesser sins, practicing the religious ordinances, and by all these methods, protecting the Faith. They mean rather that the whole population should be protected in every way; that every effort should be exerted to adopt a combination of all possible measures to raise up the Word of God, increase the number of believers, promote the Faith of God and exalt it and make it victorious over other religions. {Page 41}
9. If we ponder a while over the Qur'anic verses and proofs, and the traditional accounts which have come down to us from those stars of the heaven of Divine Unity, the Holy Imáms, we shall be convinced of the fact that if a soul is endowed with the attributes of true faith and characterized with spiritual qualities he will become to all mankind an emblem of the outstretched mercies of God. For the attributes of the people of faith are justice and fair-mindedness; forbearance and compassion and generosity; consideration for others, candor, trustworthiness, and loyalty; love and loving-kindness; devotion and determination and humanity. If therefore, an individual is truly righteous, he will avail himself of all those means which will attract the hearts of men, and through the attributes of God he will draw them to the straight path of faith and cause them to drink from the river of everlasting life. {Page 55}

10. The spiritually learned, those who have derived infinite significance and wisdom from the Book of Divine Revelation, and whose illumined hearts draw inspiration from the unseen world of God, certainly exert their efforts to bring about the supremacy of the true followers of God, in all respects and above all peoples, and they toil and struggle to make use of every agency that will conduce to progress. If any man neglects these high purposes he can never prove acceptable in the sight of God; he stands out with all his shortcomings and claims perfection, and destitute, pretends to wealth. {Page 58}
11. The third element of the utterance under discussion is “*opposes his passions.*” How wonderful are the implications of this deceptively easy, all-inclusive phrase. This is the very foundation of every laudable human quality; indeed, these few words embody the light of the world, the impregnable basis for all the spiritual attributes of human beings. This is the balance wheel of all behavior, the means of keeping all man’s good qualities in equilibrium.

For desire is a flame that has reduced to ashes uncounted lifetime harvests of the learned, a devouring fire that even as the vast sea of their accumulated knowledge could never quench. How often has it happened that an individual who was graced with every attribute of humanity and wore the jewel of true understanding, nevertheless followed after his passions until his excellent qualities passed beyond moderation and he was forced into excess. His pure intentions changed to evil ones, his attributes were no longer put to worthy use of them, and the power of his desires turned him aside from righteousness and its rewards into ways that were dangerous and dark. A good character is in the sight of God and his chosen ones and the possessors of insight, the most excellent and praiseworthy of all things, but always on condition that its center of emanation should be reason and knowledge and its base should be true moderation. Were the implications of this subject to be developed as they deserve the work would grow too long and our main theme would be lost to view. {Pages 59-60}

12. It is clear from what has already been said that man’s glory and greatness do not consist in his being avid for blood and sharp of claw, in tearing down cities and spreading havoc, in butchering armed forces and civilians. What would mean a bright future for him would be his reputation for justice, his kindness to the entire population whether high or low, his building up countries and cities, villages and districts, his making life easy, peaceful and happy for his fellow human beings, his laying down fundamental principles for progress, his raising the standards and increasing the wealth of the entire population. {Page 67}
13. The fourth phrase of the aforementioned Utterance which points out the way to salvation is” “*obedient to the commandments of his Lord.*” It is certain that man’s highest distinction is to be lowly before and obedient to his God; that his

greatest glory, his most exalted rank and honor, depend on his close observance of the Divine commands and prohibitions. {Page 71}

14. It is certain that the greatest of instrumentalities for achieving the advancement and the glory of man, the supreme agency for the enlightenment of the world, is love and fellowship and unity among all members of the human race. Nothing can be effected in the world, not even conceivably, without unity and agreement, and the perfect means for engendering fellowship and union is true religion. {Pages 73-74}
15. Sincerity is the foundation-stone of faith. That is, a religious individual must disregard his personal desires and seek in whatever way he can wholeheartedly to serve the public interest; and it is impossible for a human being to turn aside from his own selfish advantages and sacrifice his own good for the community except through true religious faith. For self-love is kneaded into the very clay of man, and it is not possible that, without any hope of a substantial regard, he should neglect his own present material good. That individual, however, who puts his faith in God and believes in the words of God – because he is promised and certain of a plentiful reward in the next life, and because worldly benefits as compared to the abiding joy and glory of future planes of existence are nothing for him, will for the sake of God abandon his own peace and will freely consecrate his heart and soul for the common good. “*A man, too, there is who selleth his very self out of desire to please God.*” [Qur’án 2:203]

There are some who imagine an innate sense of human dignity will prevent man from committing evil actions and ensure his spiritual and material perfection. That is, that an individual who is characterized with natural intelligence, high resolve and a driving zeal, will, without any consideration for the severe punishments on evil acts, or for the great rewards of righteousness, instinctively refrain from inflicting harm on his fellow men and will hunger and thirst to do good. And yet, if we ponder the lessons of history it will become evident that this very sense of honor and dignity is itself one of the bounties deriving from the instructions of the Prophets of God. We also observe in infants the signs of aggression and lawlessness, and that if a child is deprived of a teacher’s instructions his undesirable qualities increase from one moment to the next. It is therefore clear that the emergence of this natural sense of human dignity and honor is the result of education. Secondly, if we grant for the sake of argument that instinctive intelligence and innate moral quality would prevent wrongdoing, it is obvious that individuals so characterized are as rare as the philosopher’s stone. An assumption of this sort cannot be validated by mere words, it must be supported by the facts. Let us see what power in creation impels the masses towards righteous aims and deeds!

Aside from this, if that rare individual who does exemplify such a faculty should also become an embodiment of the fear of God, it is certain that his strivings toward righteousness would be strongly reinforced.

Universal benefits derive from the grace of Divine religions, for they lead their true followers to sincerity of intent, to high purpose, to purity and spotless honor, to surpassing kindness and compassion, to the keeping of their covenants when they have covenanted, to concern for the rights of others, to liberality, to justice in every aspect of life, to humanity and philanthropy, to valor and unflagging efforts in the service of mankind. It is religion, to sum up, which produces all human virtues, and it is these virtues which are the bright candles of civilization. If a man is not characterized by these excellent qualities, it is certain that he has never attained to so much as a drop out of the fathomless river of the waters of life that flows through the teachings of the Holy Books, nor caught the faintest breath of the fragrant breezes that blow from the gardens of God; for nothing on earth can be demonstrated by words alone, and every level of existence is known by its signs and symbols, and every degree in man's development has its identifying mark.

The purpose of these statements is to make it abundantly clear that the Divine religions, the holy precepts, the heavenly teachings, are the unassailable basis of human happiness, and that the peoples of the world can hope for no real relief or deliverance without this one great remedy. The panacea must, however, be administered by a wise and skilled physician, for in the hands of an incompetent all the cures that the Lord of man has ever created to heal men's ills could produce no health, and would on the contrary, only destroy the helpless and burden the hearts of the already afflicted. {Pages 96-99}

16. Again, is there any deed in the world that would be nobler than service to the common good? Is there any greater blessing conceivable for a man, than that he should become the cause of education, the development, the prosperity of his fellow-creatures? No, by the Lord God! The highest righteousness of all is for blessed souls to take hold of the hands of the helpless and deliver them out of their ignorance and abasement and poverty, and with pure motives, and only for the sake of God, to arise and energetically devote themselves to the services of the masses, forgetting their own worldly advantage and working only to serve the general good. *"They prefer them before themselves, though poverty be their own lot."* [Qur'an 59:9] *"The best of men are those who serve the people; the worst of men are those who harm the people."* {Page 103}