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CHAPTER 14

ON ANGER

A furious person who does not have the strength to take revenge swallows his anger. Then his inner being becomes inflamed with vengefulness, destroying him.

Wrath is a passion produced by the agitation of the blood in the heart at an encounter with danger. It is also a release of anger, which comforts a person after being unjustly hurt. In some cases it is a necessary feeling, as the world and sacred things may be protected by it.

Courage is a characteristic praised by people, religion, and justice alike. Yet both its lack and its extreme are blameworthy. The lack of courage is called cowardice. That is a sickness of the heart that renders one paralyzed, unable to act to help either oneself or others. The coward becomes a rag under everyone's feet, attracting tyranny and injustice from certain people, and thereby causing them to sin.

Our Lord says in a Divine tradition:

> In defense of your rights, let the enemy find both patience and valor in you. Neither let your sense of gentleness and compassion prevent you from executing Allah's orders against those who have broken the Divine Laws.

Hadrat `Ali reported that the Prophet said:

> The best of my people are those whose strength of religion is like steel. (Bayhaqi, Tabarani)

To rid yourself of your fears, you should face what you fear and gradually force yourself to fight it. And you should remind yourself that while fear surely will lead you to defeat, in courage there is hope of victory, no matter how strong the enemy is, if you persevere.

On the other hand, an excess of anger becomes a sickness of the heart called fury. It causes great damage and injury to the one who is furious, perhaps more so than to his adversary. Worse, it is a contagious sickness, infecting in full force whoever is around. Fury renders a person totally mindless and unaware of the consequences of his ravings and violence.

The opposite of fury is forbearance or gentleness. This quality enables one to be patient, considerate, and calm instead of flying into passion when encountering an unpleasant and aggressive situation. As the effect of anger is violence and destruction, so the effect of forbearance is compassion and peace of mind. If we were able to remember that during the very

few seconds before the flame of fury envelops us, we might be able to save ourselves.

There are four medicines to cure anger. We can use our intelligence to realize the consequences of our violence. We can take certain actions to prevent anger's flaring up. We can foresee and prevent the occasions that may create anger. And we can learn forbearance.

Emotions are much swifter than reasoning. But if you are intelligent and experienced enough to be firm with yourself even for a short while before the explosion of anger, you may be able to stop its occurrence. That is only possible when the reason for anger is slight and not devastating. If you know and have the time to consider the following four losses suffered through expressing anger, and the seven following benefits you may reap by suppressing your fury, the recollection may save you.

Intelligence demands we consider the consequences of our actions that are against our interests. The worst result of fury is a loss of all control. This in turn can make us do or say something so awful that it corrupts and subverts our faith. It can even lead a person to lose faith and become an infidel.

Bahz ibn Hakim related that his grandfather heard the Prophet say:

> Anger subverts religious feeling as bitter substances spoil honey. (Bayhaqi, Tabarani)

You should also consider that in that rabid condition you are liable to inflict great unjust pain upon your adversary—especially if you are more powerful than your enemy. You should realize that Allah is All-Powerful, and on the Day of Judgment may inflict upon you a punishment whose extent cannot be imagined.

If you attack your enemy in anger, you should expect retaliation from him, and it may perhaps be much harsher than the punishment you have inflicted yourself. Furthermore, you will never know when it may come. The anxiety will poison your days for a long time, unless reconciliation is reached.

If you were to see yourself in a state of fury, if you looked in a mirror, you would see that your face changes from that of a human being to that of a wild animal. And it is not only the expression on our faces, but the whole of our rational human nature that turns into the worst of animal nature.

Even if we are unable totally to prevent the negative feeling, if we simply manage to stop expressing our anger, we may save ourselves from the disasters mentioned above.

You may find it helpful to remind yourself of the seven benefits you can reap by swallowing your anger.

1. Allah Most High says that He has prepared His Paradise for those who are able to swallow their anger and forgive the ones who did them wrong.

2. If someone has the strength to obliterate his enemy but restrains himself, Allah promises he may choose his own rewards on the Day of Judgment. Sahl ibn Sa`d heard the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) say:

> He who has the strength, the opportunity, and favorable conditions for success in expressing anger by violence, yet restrains himself, will be shown to the resurrected crowds on the Day of Judgment as an honored servant of Allah and asked to choose his own rewards. (Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi)

3. Anas ibn Malik reported that the Prophet said:

> Allah Most High abandons the punishment due to anyone who can abandon his own anger. (Tabarani)

4. Ibn `Umar reported that the Prophet said:

> There is nothing a servant of Allah may swallow that is considered as praiseworthy as the swallowing of anger. (Ibn Maja)

5. Allah protects from misfortunes and afflictions whoever protects himself from the violation of anger.

6. Allah's compassion reaches whoever escapes from the battlefield of the manifestation of his anger.

7. Allah loves the one who can put out the fire of fury in his heart. Ibn `Abbas reported that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> Whoever possesses these three qualities will receive the compassion of Allah and is made worthy of His love: to be thankful for all that the Lord gives; to forgive instead of punishing when one is wronged; to be able to restrain oneself from expressing one's anger and hurting people. (Hakim)

Over and above these seven benefits that we may hope to receive by suppressing our anger, there is a much greater reward if we are able to forgive the cause of our anger. Impatient and weak as we are, if we can manage to forgive, how should Allah the All-Powerful and Most Merciful not forgive our sins in return? Indeed He says in a Divine tradition:

> Forgive and forget! Don't you want Allah to forgive your wrongdoings?

The anger that bursts out so quickly after the initial emotional reaction

to an irritation can be subdued by four measures to be taken immediately:

The first is to make a ritual ablution with cold water. `Atiyyah reported that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> Anger comes from Satan and Satan is created from fire. Fire can only be put out by water. So whenever one of you is stricken by anger, make an ablution. (Abu Dawud)

The second remedy is to sit if you are standing, and to lie down if you are sitting. Abu Dharr al-Gifari reported that the Prophet said:

> If you become angry sit down; if it does not pass, lie down. (Abu Dawud)

The third remedy is to take refuge in Allah. Sulayman ibn Sured related:

> Once, in the presence of the Prophet, two people cursed each other. Their faces became bright red from anger. The Messenger of Allah said, "I know a phrase that, if you would have said it, the anger you feel would have totally left you. Say *A`udhu bi-Llahi min ash-shaytan ar-rajim* ('I take refuge in Allah from the accursed Devil')." (Bukhari, Muslim)

To achieve total freedom from the maleficent effects of anger, we must study the causes and effects of negativity and try to avoid them. As we have already learned, the worst causes of anger are arrogance, selfishness, and excessive ambition. If someone afflicted with one of these moral ills feels slighted in the smallest thing he imagines to be his due, he erupts with fury. Yet if the same sort of short exchange should happen to somebody else, it would have no negative effect whatsoever. The difficult cures for arrogance, selfishness, and ambition have already been mentioned.

Then there are a number of exterior causes, each not too grave by itself, which may create anger in some people. They include bad jokes, criticism, opposition, lies, gossip, duplicity, harsh discussions and debates, stubbornness, cursing, hitting, destroying property, stealing, inequity, and so forth. All this may be summarized as tyrannical behavior, which invariably produces a negative reaction in the majority of people. Certainly one should never participate in such behavior. And unless you have patience and strength of will, compassion and ability to forgive, you should escape from places where tyrannical people are present.

There are some people who consider anger to be a sign of manliness, valor, zeal and ardor, self-respect and a sense of honor—thus something commendable. This is stupidity, and one sign of a diseased mind. Indeed

stupid or sick people are liable to get angry more quickly and more often than intelligent and healthy people. They may even be proud of it.

Alas! There are some scholars and teachers who preach the truth of religion in a harsh manner, blaming their listeners with sins they may not have committed, threatening them with the wrath of God. They become causes of anger. A house of worship is no place for anger. Those who provoke it there are none other than hypocrites and pompous, arrogant, and selfish creatures. For even if what they say is true, by the tone of their speech, the words become their own instead of God's. Then instead of preventing people from sinning, they cause them to sin by inciting them to fury.

Anyone who advises people to do right ought first to know certainly what the right is. That certainty is in the Words of Allah—in the Holy Qur'an and in the words and actions of the Messenger of Allah, which were not his own but came from Allah Most High.

Next he must make sure that the people whom he is addressing can understand what he says. He also has to be so convincing that they will agree with what he says. And the advice must be such that people are able to act upon it once it is given. If any one of these conditions is missing, it is best not to say anything at all. Obviously kind and sweet and encouraging words are the primary means of obtaining a useable result.

Finally, if the one who preaches does not do what he advises others to do, his words will have no positive effect whatsoever.

As for people who are listening to advice, they ought to consider the good intentions and fervor of the speaker, even if what he says is offered in an aggressive way. They should consider the truth of the words, not the tone in which they are presented. If the words are critical of the behavior of the audience, even if that criticism is unjustified, it is best to remember the principle that those who criticize us are our friends, since they are the enemy of our enemy, our evil-commanding ego, while the ones who praise us are our enemies, since they are the friends of our enemy, our ego.

How often a stone thrown at something else accidentally falls on our heads and enrages us against the one who cast it! Such unintended events hurt us or the ones we love or our property and create angry retaliation, and retaliation to our retaliation, sucking yet others who are totally innocent into the conflict. All this results in wars. In order to avoid the accidental causation of anger, people must be heedful of what they are doing, especially when undertaking actions that may be dangerous. And if perchance our actions cause unexpected harm to someone, we should immediately ask for forgiveness and try to compensate the harm done. In such circumstances, the one who has suffered from harm should realize that the negative act was accidental and show patience and acceptance and excuse the person who caused the accident.

Yet another cause of anger is excessive desires and demands from the life of this world. Often, when we wish for a thing that is not our due, if we consider our actual state rather than identifying with the state of those who have what we want, we can reconcile ourselves to what we already possess. But the poor want what the rich have. And when they ask for it and are refused, both the poor and the rich are angry. The one who wants what is not his due is guilty of arrogance, while the one who won't part with what he holds is guilty of avarice.

When a person is promised something and the one who made the promise breaks his word, again anger may arise on both sides. Abu Sa`id al-Khudri reported that the Prophet said:

> On the Day of Judgment there will be a big sign pointing behind all those who have promised something and broken their word. (Muslim)

If we make a promise that is conditional, therefore breakable, we should warn the other party about the condition. Otherwise, even when the excusing situation arises, breaking our word will be unlawful for keeping one's word is a religious duty.

Promising something while knowing perfectly well that the promise cannot be kept is treachery, which is a great sin. Its opposite, trustworthiness, is one of the great religious accomplishments. Anas ibn Malik reported that the Prophet said:

> A person who is not trustworthy does not have faith. The religion of the one who does not keep his word is not true religion. (Tabarani)

Treachery and trustworthiness do not merely apply to the loss or security of material things. They go much deeper than that. Abu Hurayrah reported that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> Whoever is consulted must be trustworthy. An ignorant person who gives erroneous opinions on religious legal matters suffers the punishment for the sins he has created. And whoever gives bad advice to his Muslim brother certainly has been unfaithful to him. (Abu Dawud)

Allah Most High declares through His Prophet:

> Why promise something that you will not do or that you are unable to do? A false promise draws Allah's wrath on the liar.

Abu Hurayrah reported that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> Three signs indicate a hypocrite: He lies when he talks, he breaks his promises, and he is a traitor to what is entrusted to him. (Muslim)

In another tradition, Ibn `Amr ibn al-`As reported that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> Whoever is afflicted with four bad characteristics is certainly a hypocrite, and whoever has even one of them is liable to insincerity until he gets rid of it. They are to betray a trust; to lie; to dishonor one's own promise; to try to distort the truth of a matter in one's own favor. (Muslim)

To promise something while knowing that you will not fulfill the pledge is a purposeful lie and religiously unlawful. But a promise made with an honest intention that cannot be fulfilled because of circumstances beyond your control is permissible according to our religion. According to Abu Nu'man the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> If you promise and cannot keep your promise, it is not a sin. (Abu Dawud)

According to Imam Ahmad and his followers, to keep one's promise is an obligation and to break it is a sin in every case. Since there are Qur'anic verses on the subject that lead in several directions, one may be in doubt about this matter. We should avoid doing things that involve doubt concerning the religious law.

Anger may arise from association with melancholy and irrational people, with children having tantrums, with raving madmen, with ill-trained animals. Indeed it is unreasonable to react in such situations, since the conditions that produce our anger are not the fault of those we blame, but facts of life and a natural part of affairs. Worse still is becoming angry at lifeless things—things falling, breaking, burning, disappearing; or a stone that causes us to trip. These objects have no will of their own and have no intention to cause trouble to anyone. When, after an outburst, we realize this, we may get angry with ourselves—but this also is unreasonable and disapproved by the religion.

On the other hand, to be annoyed at yourself because you have been lax in worship or you realize that you have sinned is correct, so long as it is not excessive. When your anger leads you to decide to redeem yourself by good actions and extra prayers, it is commendable.

The worst kind of anger among all we have enumerated is to become angry at Allah and His Messenger. This usually happens in reaction to some other person who cites Qur'anic verses or Traditions of the Prophet to substantiate his criticism of us. Our anger at him may develop into anger against our Sustainer and our Prophet. We take refuge in Allah from such an eventuality. That is why our Prophet said:

Anger corrupts one's faith and one's religion.

To become upset when you observe people sinning or hurting each other is right—as long as you do not overreact. For this is a feeling inspired by faith and attachment to the teachings of one's religion, as well as by compassion for fellow human beings. But to accuse such people of infidelity, hypocrisy, dishonesty, adultery, and so forth, insulting them or attempting to punish them, is a sin. Trying to advise them gently and reasonably, if possible—that is the good deed. Many people are sensitive to other people's behavior and think of themselves as reformers. Unfortunately, they are often too harsh in their criticism. They do more harm than good, and this is something to be aware of.

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