

Discovering the “Messenger From Our Souls/Selves”¹

Some Representative Hadith on *Adab*

Clearly the limited extent of this talk does not allow a fuller development even of the hundreds of hadith included in the section of the *Mishkāt al-Masābīh*² devoted to *adab* (roughly a hundred pages of English translations, without any annotation): any closer and more inclusive examination of this section alone would naturally expand into a study of book length. But here we can at least highlight a few of the central Prophetic teachings that are particularly repeated and emphasized in a considerable number of these hadith. Not surprisingly, many of these sayings (or at least their essential meanings) are among the most familiar themes in the classic masterpieces of Sufi teaching and of the Islamic humanities more generally.

I. TRUE VISIONS, DREAMS, AND INSPIRATIONS:

The section on “sound vision” (*ru’ya sādiqa*) and spiritual inspirations (*mubashshirat*) includes some of the most famous and lastingly influential hadith of all, largely due to their key role in centuries of later theological, mystical and philosophical discussions regarding the nature of spiritual inspiration (*ilhām*), the interplay of intellect in relation to symbolism and imagination, and the qualities and essential roles of sound interpretation (*ta’bīr* and *ta’wīl*). Here are a few of the most important and oft-cited of those central hadith (almost all of the following hadith are included in the *Sahih* collections of both Bukhari and Muslim):

A sound spiritual vision comes from God, and a normal dream (*hulm*) from the Shaytan. So when one of you sees (in that dream/vision) what he likes, he must tell it only to someone he loves. But when he sees what he dislikes, he must seek refuge in God from its evil... and not tell anyone of it. It will then not harm him. [p. 962, from Abu Qatada.]

“All that is left of prophethood is the *mubashshirat* [dreams or inspired visions of good tidings].” The Prophet was asked what that meant, and he said it was a sound vision. [p. 962, from Abu Hurayra.]

A sound vision is a forty-sixth part of prophethood. [p. 962, from Anas.]

When the Hour draws near, the vision of a person of faith can hardly be false. The vision of a person of faith is a forty-sixth part of prophethood, and what

¹ Handout of selected translated hadith for public talk at Cerrahi Dargah, NYC, December 7, 2016.

² Selections below (and pagination references) from Vol. II, chapter on *adab*, transl. James Robson (with occasional small corrections of those translations).

pertains to prophethood cannot be false. [p. 963, from Abu Hurayra.]

What is less often mentioned, with regard to these particular hadith, is the ways in which they (and others not cited here) also emphasize the ensuing difficulties of correctly and positively interpreting and applying such spiritual inspirations—not to mention the even more common difficulties in discerning at the start what are in fact genuinely spiritual intuitions and inspirations. By a curious coincidence, two other hadith included in a later section (of the *adab* chapter) on caution and deliberation pointedly suggest that this process and quality of thoughtful and experienced reflection and discernment is perhaps even more essential than the dreams or visions themselves:

A good manner of conduct, deliberation and moderation are a twenty-fourth part of prophethood.³ [p. 1051, from Tirmidhi.]

And as reported by Ibn ‘Abbas: A good way of acting, a good manner of conduct and moderation are a twenty-fifth part of prophethood. [p. 1051, from Abu Dawud.]

And finally, foreshadowing the future institutional development of the role of the spiritual guide and advisor across the Muslim world, there are these two very similar versions recorded by Tirmidhi and Abu Dawud (from the same source). [p. 966]:

The (spiritual/dream) vision of a person of faith is a forty-sixth part of prophethood. It flutters over a person as long as he does not talk about it. But when he talks about it, it settles. [in Tirmidhi: “...as long as it is not interpreted. But when it is interpreted, it settles.”] So talk only to a friend or someone with sound judgment. [Or in Tirmidhi: “...Tell it only to someone who loves him or who has sound judgment.”].

II. GREETINGS (AND FAREWELLS): “*PEACE BE WITH YOU...*”

Deliberation, discernment and sound judgment are certainly required in approaching the section on the *adab* of the occasions, priorities, and general rules relating to proper social forms of greeting (and as the same hadith often make clear, of “leave-taking” as well). This section includes many apparently conflicting reports and sayings that often seem deeply rooted in traditional, pre-Islamic practices and their implied connection to hierarchical status and identity roles, whether taken from the early community’s tribal surroundings, or from radically different status questions arising from the early Arab conquests and the resulting interaction with different religious and social groups.

³ I.e., almost exactly *twice* as “great” as the hadith treating of inspired vision as a part of prophethood.

However, the first hadith on this subject highlighted by both Bukhari and Muslim are more straightforward, and particularly emphasize the extraordinary spiritual importance of this new greeting of “*Peace (salām, as a particular divine quality) be upon you!*”:

... when a man asked God’s messenger which aspect of islam was best, he replied: “That you should provide food [to those in need], and greet both those you know and those you do not know.” [p. 967.]

“You will not enter paradise until you have (true) faith, and you will not have faith until you love one another. Let me guide you to something by doing which you will love one another: Salute all and everyone among you!” [p. 970, reported by Abu Hurayra, in Muslim.]

Many hadith in this section reflect attempts by those around the Prophet either to exclude certain groups or individuals from these blessings, or to focus the whole process on “who should go first”—apparently on the (previously traditional?) assumption that actually initiating the greeting is the duty of the person or group of supposed lower status. The Prophet’s repeated response to such assumptions is both simple and far-reaching:

“Those who are nearest to God are those who are the first to give a salutation. [p. 972, from Tirmidhi, Abu Dawud, and Ibn Hanbal.]

And from another collection (Bayhaqi): Ibn Mas‘ud reported the Prophet as saying: “The person who is the first to give a salutation is free from pride.” [p. 976.]

III. SHOWING TENDERNESS AND KINDNESS:

This is a topic and concern that in fact runs all through the different parts of the larger section on *adab*, reflecting the very practical emphasis here on expressing lovingkindness (*rahma*) in recommended forms such as kissing, embracing, and shaking hands—a vivid picture altogether different, in so many cases, from the images that later generations have formed of the early community of the Prophet! Two of these reports—recorded by both Muslim and Bukhari—are particularly striking, because they dramatically highlight the extreme contrast between the sternly self-protective and “macho” ideal of proper male behavior in at least some *jahiliyya* contexts, and the Prophet’s own pointedly instructive example:

Abu Hurayra said that God’s messenger kissed (his young grandson) al-Hasan b. Ali, and that al-Aqra‘ b. Habis who was with him said: “I have ten children, and I have never kissed even one of them!” God’s messenger looked at him and said: “He who does not show tenderness will not be shown tenderness.”

Aisha said that a bedouin came to God’s messenger and asked: “Do you (pl.) kiss children? For we do not kiss them.” The Prophet replied, “I cannot help

you if God has withdrawn love (*rahma*) from your heart.”

IV. “CONTROLLING THE TONGUE”—AVOIDING HOSTILE, CRITICAL SPEECH

This long section (pp. 1004-1016), and the closely related following section on “Avoiding Boasting and ... [pride of all sorts]” (pp. 1020-1024), is not so much a listing of a wide variety of things that should not be said or expressed—although that might be the first impression of the disparate subjects raised here. Eventually, it becomes clear that the very *process* of keeping silent, avoiding, and holding back from hateful, envious, jealous, prideful, blasphemous, and many other forms of hostile and critical speech has the deeper spiritual benefit of revealing and drawing our corrective attention to our own spiritual faults and weak points that must eventually be faced. The dramatic impact of these pointed hadith, as something much deeper than a mere list of vices and virtues, is heightened by the fact that they are often about (and sometimes even reported by) close Companions of the Prophet who were themselves the object of his corrective reproaches, as in this hadith transmitted by Aisha:

Aisha reported that she once said to the Prophet: “It is enough for you in Safiya [here the object of Aisha’s jealousy] that she is such-and-such” [presumably a crudely critical expression], meaning that she was short. And the Prophet replied: “You have said a word which would change (the color of) the sea if it were mixed in it!” [p. 1011, recorded by Tirmidhi, Abu Dawud and Ibn Hanbal.]

Here it is probably best to start with a positive expression (recorded by both Bukhari and Muslim) of the actual goods and virtues that are so readily destroyed by the types of unfortunate words and expressions that are otherwise highlighted in these sections:

Umm Kulthum reported God’s messenger as saying: “the great liar is not the one who puts things right between people (the Qur’anic *muslih*), who says what is good, and who supports what is good!” [pp. 1006-7.]

Many of the opening hadith in this section are pointedly directed toward those tempting attitudes and practices of “*takfir*”—i.e., of accusing other Muslims of being either lax “hypocrites” or even openly hostile and dangerous enemies of God and the early Community—which were to break out openly in the decades of ongoing endemic civil wars and tribal strife (the *fitan*) that almost immediately followed the death of the Prophet. The dangers decried here, that emerged so widely in that terrible period, of course have their very familiar echoes in widespread contemporary events:

Reviling another muslim is disobedience to God, and fighting against him is total rejection of God (*kufir*). [p. 1005, from ‘Abdullāh b. Mas’ūd, in both Bukhari and Muslim.]

If anyone calls his brother a rejecter-of-God (*kāfir*), one of them [by implication, the accuser] *will* be guilty of rejecting God. [p. 1005, reported by Ibn ‘Umar, in

both Bukhari and Muslim.]

No one accuses another of disobeying or rejecting God without that coming back upon him, if the other person is not as he said. [p. 1005, reported by Abu Dharr.]

Just as with many other hadith that refer in apocalyptic terms to the bloody events and struggles of the *fitan* and early centuries of Islam, other hadith here reflect in contrast an apparently “quietistic”—and subsequently very influential—complex of spiritual ideals that have their own Qur’anic roots as well:

‘Abdullah b. ‘Amr reported that God’s messenger said: “He who keeps silence will be safe.” [p. 1009, from Tirmidhi, Darimi, Ibn Hanbal, and Bayhaqi.]

Ali ibn al-Husayn reported God’s messenger as saying: “Part of a man’s good observance of Islam is that he leaves alone what does not concern him.” [p. 1009, from Malik, Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Maja (instead quoting Abu Hurayra), Tirmidhi, and Bayhaqi.]

‘Uqba ibn ‘Amir said that he met God’s messenger and asked him in what salvation consisted. He replied: “Control your tongue, keep to your house, and weep over your sin.” [p. 1009, from Tirmidhi and Ibn Hanbal.]

Included in these special virtues, echoing the unforgettable Qur’anic condemnations of gossip, slander, and “badmouthing” others [NB: even when what is said might be true] is the distinctively Islamic spiritual virtue of being (like God), *sattār*—i.e., of remaining silent about reprehensible actions and states which may eventually lead to a person’s repentance or other spiritual remedies:

“Whoever sees something which should be kept hidden and conceals it will be like one who has brought back to life a (newborn) girl buried alive!” [p. 1037, reported by Uqba ibn ‘Amir, from Tirmidhi and Ibn ‘Hanbal.]

And Ibn Mas‘ūd reported God’s messenger as saying: “None of my companions must tell me anything (bad) about anyone, for I like to come out to you with no ill feelings!” [p. 1011, from Abu Dawud.]

Some of the most striking reports on this topic are stories related back to Abū Dharr, one of the very first followers of Muhammad and a figure later acknowledged an exemplar of piety and ethico-political courage:

I went to Abu Dharr and found him alone in the mosque, sitting with a black cloak supporting him around the knees. I asked him why he was thus solitary, and he replied that he had heard God’s messenger say: “Solitude is better than an evil companion; a good companion is better than solitude; pointing out what

is good is better than silence; but silence is better than supporting what is bad.” [p. 1012.]

And Anas said that God’s Messenger said: “Shall I not guide you, Abu Dharr, to two qualities that are very light to carry, but very heavy on the Scale (of God’s Judgment)?” When he responded “Certainly!”, the Messenger said: “Long silence and good character. By Him in Whose hand my soul is, human beings can do nothing to compare with those two.” [p. 1013.]

V. “MIRRORING” AND MODELING: THE HIDDEN SOLIDARITY OF PROPHETIC TEACHING

Taken together, these last two hadith stories involving Abu Dharr are a beautiful illustration of the ways that the “*sīra*”—understood initially perhaps just as the stories and teachings of the Prophet—quickly expands and deepens synergistically as those *stories become lives*, and as those lives themselves become the further examples and stories that continue to realize and then memorably exemplify, for others in new generations and new situations and challenges, the original Prophetic teachings. Here are a few well-known hadith that together highlight these ever-expanding, existentially exponential effects of the *sīra* and hadith over time, as they are “translated” and communicated in each generation by the unsung example of the “Friends of God” (*awliyā*):

“The best servants of God are those who when they are seen cause that person (seeing them) to remember God.” [p. 1014, Ibn Hanbal, Bayhaqi.]

Abū Hurayra reported that God’s messenger said: “Each of you is the mirror of his brother. So if he sees any fault in him, he should wipe it away from him.” [p. 1037, from Tirmidhi and (with small differences) Abu Dawud.]

Asmā’ daughter of Yazid said that she heard God’s Messenger say: “Shall I not tell you who are the best among you?” And when they replied, “Certainly, o Messenger of God,” he said: “The best of you are those who when they are seen are a means of remembering God.” [p. 1043, Ibn Maja.]

Another dimension of this naturally ongoing process of actualizing, applying, sharing and more deeply communicating the *sīra* is the mysterious “contagiousness” of those Friends/*awliya*’ (who according to many hadith, are often modest, outwardly unremarked characters) who actually heed and follow these models—perhaps most effectively when there is no ostensible or self-conscious effort of teaching involved at all. For much of the deeper effectiveness of the Prophetic teaching, when it is translated into genuine individual realization, is the way those hidden exemplars (the *awliya*’ of every age and group) directly reveal the reality and pertinence of these teachings precisely by *making us more aware*—often poignantly so—of our shared moral and spiritual responsibilities and ideals, of the immense mystery of what actually connects and ties us together, beneath our outwardly different situations, attitudes and perspectives. Here are a few of

the most memorable hadith—most found in both Bukhari and Muslim—that highlight this deeper, unifying *sīra* whose depths are only rarely appearing from time to time:

“You see the people of faith in their mutual pity, love and affection like they are one body. When one member has a complaint, the rest of the body is united with it in wakefulness and fever.” [p. 1032.]

“The believers are like a single person: if his body is affected, he is all affected; if his head is affected, he is all affected.” [p. 1032; only in Muslim.]

“The people of faith are to one another like a single building whose parts support each other.” Then he interlaced his fingers. [p. 1032.]

And in this famous hadith reported by Anas, that global spiritual insight is translated directly into more visibly ethical language:

“By Him in Whose hand my soul is, a person does not have (true) faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” [p. 1033.]

Or in another saying reported in even more universal terms—since “creatures” (*khalq*) here can refer to far more than just earthly human beings—by Anas and Ibn Mas‘ūd:

“All creatures are God’s children, and those dearest to God are the ones who treat His children kindly.” [p. 1039.]

Although *rahma* (and its related forms) are often translated in English as “mercy,” there are a number of other Qur’anic, Arabic roots that more specifically share some of the conditionalities and specific circumstances usually associated with that English term. In fact, as Muslim commentators constantly remind us, that untranslatable key term actually refers to the cosmic Mystery and active Source (and Process and Destination as well) of God’s absolute, unconditional creative Love, *ar-Rahmān*. Here is an approximation of that hadith—though it cannot capture the simplicity and unforgettable succinctness of the actual Arabic—which also directly evokes the unforgettable Qur’anic description of “*the servants of the All-Merciful*” at 25:63 (*al-Furqan*):

Those who show mercy/love (*ar-rāhimūn*), the Source-of-lovingmercy (*Rahmān*) will have love/compassion (*rahma*) for them. If you show lovingmercy to those who are on earth, those who are [or “He Who is”] in heaven will have love/compassion for you.