

The Intoxication of Death and the Truth

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(Summary: This article deals with the concept of the intoxication (stupor) of death and how it renders the truth universally undeniable as well as acceptable. It does so for the first time to nonbelievers, whereas to believers death only emphasizes the obvious. To the latter, additionally, it both perfects and validates their faith. Thus, in the Qur'anic terminology, death is likewise called al-yaqin, which means "certitude" and "conviction". The article describes the impact death should have on people: their thought and behaviour. It explains the relationship between the intoxication of life and the intoxication of death, and also the relationship between the truth of life and the truth of death. Death is the gateway between this world and the Hereafter.)

The Qur'an says: "And the intoxication (stupor or agony) of death will bring the truth; that is what you were trying to avoid" (Qaf, 19).

The intoxication of death is a moment – or a series of moments - when a person is transported from this world to the Hereafter.

It is a time when he becomes unconscious and unresponsive to this world, and conscious as well as sharp-eyed regarding the Hereafter.

It is a time when the laws and standards of this world stop functioning and the laws and standards of the Hereafter take over.

Death itself is the gateway between the two realms. In order to genuinely live, a person must die first. Death is the fountain of life.

Moreover, that is a time when all masks will fall off and nothing but the absolute truth will come forth and shine. As if death carries a "no entry" sign for all the contraries of the truth.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali beautifully said that once a person reaches this stage and passes through the death gateway, he will realize "how the things which he neglected or looked upon as remote are the intimate realities, and the things which seemed to loom large in his eyes in this world were shadows that have fled."

The truth in the above verse could mean several things. However, it generally implies the truth concerning the existential reality as a whole with reference to Almighty God, life, death, Hereafter and self.

In short, it implies full insights into everything people are supposed to know, have faith in and act upon, primarily on the basis of the revealed wisdom and guidance.

The following four points can be garnered from the verse.

First

Man is created but to find, embrace, actualize and live the truth (to serve and worship his Creator). His whole life he is to spend on those pursuits. Everything else is to be subjected, partly or completely, to them, functioning as their means and channels.

Man's innate title is "the servant of God". All other titles are artificial and ancillary.

Man is to walk – yet run - towards the absolute truth, moving ever closer to it. Death represents a convergence of man's walking (running) to the truth and the truth's coming to him.

There is no happier union than that, neither in life nor after it.

Allah describes the mood of the union as follows: "O reassured (serene) soul, return to your Lord, well-pleased and pleasing (to Him); and enter among My (righteous) servants; and enter My Paradise" (al-Fajr, 27-30).

Thus, woe to him who gets to know the truth for the first time when it is brought to him in death. That is to say, lost souls and "strangers" are doomed.

It is often rightly said as a motivational factor: "Come to the truth before it comes to you; know your God before He makes you know Him; know the angel of death before he visits you."

Be in the know. Be enlightened and guided. Live your life appropriately and responsibly.

Similarly, it is said: "Come to the mosque before you are brought to it (for the funerary prayer); pray before it is prayed to you; purify yourself before you are purified (for burial)."

Be fervent and an asset to life; do not be inert and a liability. Remember and prepare yourself for the destroyer of pleasures and (false) hopes, i.e., death.

There is no hope in the Hereafter for the truth's outcasts and pariahs.

Second

The stupor and agony of death is called *sakrah*, which also means "intoxication". From the same root is the word *sakran*, which means "intoxicated with alcoholic liquor" or "drunk".

Intoxication further means the impairment of physical and mental faculties by whatever agents.

This means that for a person to be intoxicated by death – that is, to be rendered impaired physically and mentally – he must be sober and sensible beforehand. He must live his life in the same way, and must die as such.

Before he is impaired and incapacitated by death, a person should be sufficiently able and strong in life to take on its challenges. He then should be able to face death.

It is a natural process that after every condition comes its direct opposite, after every day comes the night, and after life comes death. Such is part of the ways Allah runs the universe.

Trying to upset those patterns is unnatural, and therefore, leads to unnatural and painful consequences.

For a person to live his life intoxicated – be it by conventional intoxicants, or by greed, power, sin and pleasure-seeking – is an aberrant course of action. He thus gets himself up for the worst.

In that case, the intoxication of death overcomes, instead of the soberness and consciousness of life, the intoxication of evil. A person moves from one level of intoxication (incapacitation and paralysis) to another.

His punishment gets multiplied and compounded, just as his anomalous condition has become.

Third

It is truly unfortunate that many people spend their lives snubbing the truth, only to face it – and accept it – in death.

Sadly, when things really matter, such people are heedless and fail. They wake up only when everything is over and when realizations, together with regrets, count for nothing.

They are guilty, among other things, of misusing and abusing their God-given senses and capacities, for they did not see, nor hear, nor understand when they were expected to.

In the same vein, it is unfortunate that people, in lieu of living meaningful and productive lives, waste them, defying their intrinsic disposition, the order of nature, and the guidance of their Creator.

They spend their lives dreaming the un-dreamable and chasing the un-chasable. They are so engrossed in doing so that they forget that they, at the same time, are chased by destiny and, ultimately, death.

While they can never grab hold of their wild aspirations and vain desires, it is just a matter of time before they are seized and brought to account.

It is indeed a heart-rending experience to be shown on deathbed that life was no more than an act of chasing shadows, and when told that everything that follows afterwards is everything a person was trying to ignore, or avoid.

Regrettably, people must do in death (accept the truth) what they did not do in life. Just as their lives were full of contradictions and paradoxes, their departures therefrom, at a first glance, are in like manner.

As a proverb goes to the effect that you die as you live.

Fourth

All this pertains not only to dying persons, but also to those around them who stay behind. The latter should be wise enough and learn from what happens to their brethren, before the same befalls them.

They should look at the deaths of family members, friends, colleagues, neighbours, etc., and see themselves and their own future therein. They are what the dead were yesterday, and the dead are what they will be tomorrow.

That is the case because of a life principle according to which the wise men learn from the mistakes and experiences of others, whereas the fools do from their own.

Finally, all the above points are exemplified by the intoxication and agony of Pharaoh's death, which has been recounted as a lesson to posterity.

The Qur'an says: "And We took the Children of Israel across the sea, and Pharaoh and his soldiers pursued them in tyranny and enmity until, when drowning overtook him, he said: 'I believe that there is no deity except that in whom the Children of Israel believe, and I am of the Muslims.' Now? And you had disobeyed (Allah) before and were of the corrupters? So today We will save you in body that you may be to those who succeed you a sign. And indeed, many among the people, of Our signs, are heedless" (Yunus, 90-92).