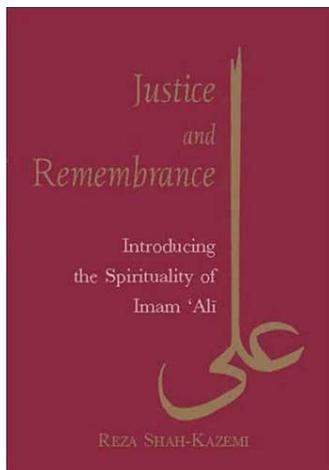




# READING GUIDE



## *Justice and Remembrance*

*Introducing the Spirituality of Imam 'Ali*

**Dr Reza Shah-Kazemi**

I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2006

A Reading Guide prepared by Amira Chilvers for the Department of Community Relations

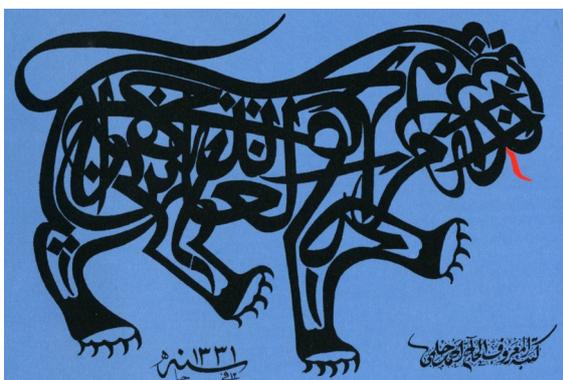
In introducing the spirituality of Imam 'Ali, Dr Shah-Kazemi's book places emphasis on the universal, perennial aspects of the Islamic message – the role of the intellect and contemplation, justice and virtue, and the remembrance of God (*Dhikru'Llah*). This book comes as a timely corrective to those who think that Islam's message is one of parochialism and intolerance. For those Muslims and non-Muslims who are spiritually inclined, it is a reminder of the richness of the Muslim heritage and of its relevance to contemporary challenges.



## Guiding Questions:

1. What are the main features of Imam ‘Ali’s spiritual interpretation of Islam?
2. How are Imam ‘Ali’s teachings relevant to our lives today?
3. What is the importance and value of prayer and remembrance

Dr Shah-Kazemi’s stated aim is to introduce the reader to the “quintessential spirituality of [Islam]” (p. 11) as found in the life and writings of Imam ‘Ali. According to Shi‘i and most Sufi traditions, Imam ‘Ali is, after the Prophet, the founder of this spiritual tradition, as well as the progenitor for many of the other Islamic sciences. Dr Shah-Kazemi argues a convincing case for Imam ‘Ali’s central role, particularly through his use of Sunni collections of *hadith*. Particularly of note are the following *ahadith* (singular: *hadith*): “I am the city of knowledge and ‘Ali is its gate”, and the *hadith* which states that Imam ‘Ali “will fight for the *ta’wil* of the Qur’an as I [the Prophet] have fought for its *tanzil*.” The first of these reinforces Imam ‘Ali’s foundational role in the Islamic sciences, as the “gate” to prophetic knowledge.



The word-picture in the form of a lion by an Ottoman calligrapher consists of an address to Imam ‘Ali who is also known by the epithet *Haydar* or Lion.  
Photo credit: *The Ismailis: An Illustrated History*.

The second illustrates the place of Imam ‘Ali at the centre of the search for spiritual interpretations of the Qur’an. It is this which particularly interests Dr Shah-Kazemi – as he points out, the entire life and thought of Imam ‘Ali can be read as a commentary on the Qur’an. Dr Shah-Kazemi shows how a sensitive examination of the thought of Imam ‘Ali can provide highly significant insights into contemporary issues facing Muslims, but also more universal, perennial themes.

Dr Shah-Kazemi explicitly states that his aim is to reflect upon the Imam’s sayings from within. At the same time, though, he also wishes to bring out the universal spiritual and ethical content of these sayings (pp. 6-7). He is able to make connections with other faiths and suggests that Islam shares with other faiths a common spiritual core. It also enables him to put the work of Imam ‘Ali into context and to show how it builds on the message of the Qur’an.

### Structure of the book

The book is divided into three chapters of approximately equal length. There is a short prologue which discusses the sources of Imam ‘Ali’s legacy, particularly the collection of the Imam’s sayings and sermons known as the *Nahj al-balagha*. Chapter 1 provides a brief biographical sketch of Imam ‘Ali before



focusing on the Imam's conception of the intellect through commentary on the "Discourse to Kumayl." Chapter 2 is a detailed textual commentary on the Imam's letter to Malik al-Ashtar, who was appointed by Imam 'Ali as governor of Egypt, focusing on the nature of justice and its relationship to spiritual awareness. Chapter 3, the culmination of the book, consists of a discussion of *dhikr* and its transformative power.

However, ideas and themes from one chapter are developed or re-stated in others. Dr Shah-Kazemi is clearly appreciative of the inter-relatedness between his main themes. Some quotations are repeated in more than one chapter, or even twice within one chapter, with different aspects of their meaning amplified as necessary. For example, the idea of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) as a "polish for the heart" is introduced in Chapter 1, and then returned to in chapter 3. By this point, the reader has already been taken through a comprehensive discussion of the meaning of the "heart" as that which sees God through "the verities of faith," in chapter 1, and so the connections between the heart, the intellect and *dhikr* emerge with clarity and purpose.

### Chapter 1: The Spirit of the Intellect

The chapter begins by outlining the centrality of Imam 'Ali to Muslim spirituality, as shown by the sayings attributed to him and the way in which later authorities have claimed that he plays a foundational role in the development of many Islamic sciences. As Dr Shah-Kazemi states, Imam 'Ali's spiritual teachings are a "unifying force ... upon the immense importance and profundity of which all Muslims, whatever their school of thought, are in agreement" (p.14). In his biographical sketch of Imam 'Ali, Dr Shah-Kazemi focuses on the closeness of the relationship between Imam 'Ali and Prophet Muhammad. He points out that Prophet Muhammad described Imam 'Ali as "[like] my

own soul (*ka-nafsi*)" (p.12) and the first section of this chapter offers a sketch of Imam 'Ali as a "faithful follower and transmitter of the prophetic norm" (p.13). Imam 'Ali's role as a supporter of Prophet Muhammad, a hero in battle, and a scribe of the unfolding revelation of the Qur'an are outlined here through stories from the life of the Prophet. So too is the importance of the *ahl al-bayt*. The biographical sketch concludes with a list of *ahadith* about Imam 'Ali, including the *hadith* of *Ghadir Khumm*.

The majority of chapter 1 then elaborates Imam 'Ali's conception of the intellect, through a detailed analysis of a passage from Imam 'Ali's sermon to Kumayl, one of his disciples. Dr Shah-Kazemi emphasises both the harmony between intellect and revelation, and the distinction (though not conflict) between intellect and reason. In Dr Shah-Kazemi's interpretation of Imam 'Ali's teachings, intellect is consistent with reason but goes beyond the limits of reason to unearth hidden depths, marvels and mysteries. With this in mind, Dr Shah-Kazemi analyses the following four sentences of the discourse to Kumayl:

*Through them [those who are the "proofs" of God on earth], knowledge penetrates the reality of insight. They rejoice in their intimacy with the spirit of certainty. They make easy what the extravagant find harsh; they befriend that by which the ignorant are estranged. With their bodies they keep company with the world, while their spirits are tied to the transcendent realm.*

These four sentences are reflected upon sentence by sentence in the rest of the chapter. The first sentence sets a frame for reflection upon the link between immorality and ignorance, and the importance of 'struggling against one's own soul'. In Imam 'Ali's teachings, as in Plato's, virtue and knowledge cannot be separated. Dr Shah-Kazemi's



## Ghadir Khumm

According to Muslim history, this is the location where Prophet Muhammad, while returning to Medina from his farewell pilgrimage to Mecca in 632 CE, stopped to deliver a sermon during which he uttered the famous words declaring Imam ‘Ali as the *mawla* (lit. patron, lord, master) of the believers. These words are preserved in *hadith* collections as: ‘He whose *mawla* I am, ‘Ali is his *mawla*’. This event, which falls on 18<sup>th</sup> of Dhu’l Hijja in the Muslim lunar calendar, is commemorated by all Shi‘a Muslims and some Sunni Muslims as Eid (‘Id) al-Ghadir.

## Hadith

Literally meaning ‘report’ or ‘narrative,’ used for the traditions of Prophet Muhammad and, in Shi‘i Islam, also for those of the Imams.

## Malik al-Ashtar

Appointed governor of Egypt appointed by Imam ‘Ali in 658 CE (38 AH).

reflections on struggling against the soul are among the most arresting and insightful in the book. Here, he puts forward a radical understanding of the concept of *tawhid*. *Tawhid* is a “verbal noun” and although it is often translated as “oneness” it literally means something more like “affirming one” or “realising one.” Thus, he interprets *tawhid* as spiritual integration – “being one in order to reflect perfectly the One” (p. 42). Thus the link between *tawhid*, knowledge and virtue is made clear, as it is the intellect which “‘binds together’ into an organic unity the disparate elements of the soul” so that *tawhid* can be realised.

The second sentence gives scope for some profound reflections on joy, beauty, certainty and virtue. The third gives rise to a consideration of the intellectual’s attitude to the world, and to death, in the thought of Imam ‘Ali, while the final sentence leads to reflections on the hereafter and salvation.



“The *khamisa* (lit. Five) is variously interpreted amongst Muslims. Amongst the Shi‘a it refers to the five ‘people of the mantle’ (*ahl al-kisa*). The *hadith al-kisa* (Tradition of the Mantle) narrates an event when the Prophet gathered Fatima, Imam ‘Ali, Hasan and Husayn under a black cloak and recited Q33:33. This engraved copper talisman, dated 1154/1741-42, has texts of Qur’anic verses and invocations. The five lines across the palm of the hand begin, ‘there is no chivalric knight but ‘Ali, no sword but Dhu’l-Faqar’.”

Photo credit: *The Ismailis: An Illustrated History*.

## Chapter 2: A Sacred Conception of Justice

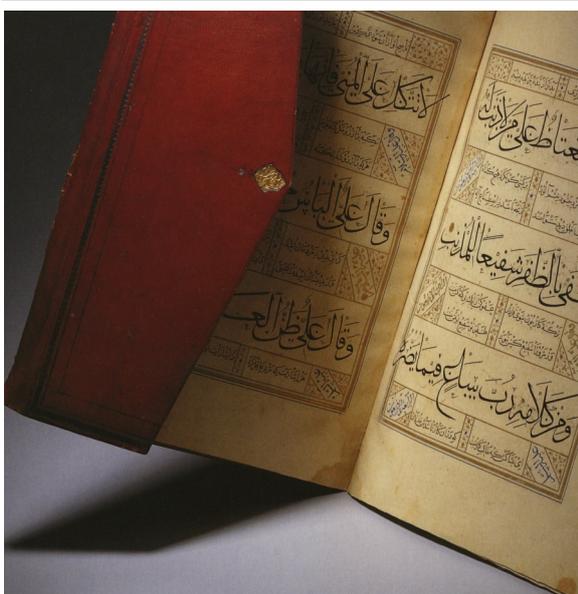
The second chapter concentrates on Imam ‘Ali’s famous letter to Malik al-Ashtar, a close companion whom he appointed as governor of Egypt. The letter not only confirms Malik’s appointment but gives extensive advice on the ethics of leadership. Dr Shah-Kazemi’s analysis of this letter reveals the deep harmony in Imam ‘Ali’s thought between justice, knowledge and spiritual orientation. Dr Shah-Kazemi also traces parallels between the thought of Imam ‘Ali and that of Plato in the *Republic*.

Dr Shah-Kazemi begins the chapter by analysing the saying of Imam ‘Ali that ‘justice puts everything in its right place’ (p.77). One is just to the extent that one gives everything, and every person, its due.



## *Ahl al-Bayt*

Literally ‘the people of the house’, meaning the Prophet Muhammad and members of his household including especially his cousin and son-in-law Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, his daughter Fatima, and his grandsons Hasan and Husayn as well as their progeny.



This manuscript of the *Mi'a Kalima*, comprises one hundred sayings attributed to Imam ‘Ali, dated 916/1510.

Photo credit: *The Ismailis: An Illustrated History*.

justice makes an explicit link between inner harmony and outer ethical action, because both of these are encompassed in the notion of putting everything in its right place. Most importantly, this conception of justice is intimately connected with a conception of the sacred – the first imperative of justice is to set right the individual’s relationship with God. In the Imam’s letter to Malik al-Ashtar, this is summed up in the command, “be just with God and be just with people.” The individual’s relationship with God is therefore at the heart of Imam ‘Ali’s teachings on justice. This relationship also “sustains the just man in his pursuit of justice” (p.113), despite difficulties and challenges that might lead to

“disappointment and despair” (p.113) for one who is lacking this relationship to God.

This, according to Dr Shah-Kazemi, can be seen in the life of the Imam himself: an unwavering commitment to justice despite the very difficult political circumstances in which he found himself.

Within this sacred conception of justice, the Imam gives specific advice on how to govern different sections of society, from the appointment of scribes and soldiers, to the way in which Malik should deal with merchants. Yet, all of this is “sealed with a spiritual message” (p.108). The Imam pays special attention to the poor who are “most in need of justice” (p.108). Once again, Dr Shah-Kazemi argues that the Imam’s emphasis on the spiritual element is what “makes practicable an ideal that otherwise would be a heavy burden,” because showing such charity to those most in need is not always a politically beneficial strategy and, according to Dr Shah-Kazemi, “those whose aspiration does not go beyond this world will be more likely to fall prey to the easy option of neglecting the destitute” (p.109). The final section of this chapter makes the transition to the next chapter by focusing on the importance of worship and the remembrance of God. In his letter to Malik al-Ashtar he stresses the importance of setting time for “what is between you and God”, meaning acts of worship and devotion. This is, in fact, more than just the obligatory prayers or the performance of formal prayers. This allows one to enhance their relationship with the divine. Here, Dr Shah-Kazemi quotes the saying of Imam Ali, “Know that your every act is dependent upon your prayer.” It is important to recognise that *dhikr* embraces all modes of worship, meditation and reflection. It is both the awareness of the ultimate reality, and a means of attaining this awareness. *Dhikr* is ultimately the connection we make with God in order to constantly be linked to the Absolute.



According to Imam ‘Ali, there is a direct relationship between *dhikr* and the cultivation of justice. Justice can only be brought to fruition in a soul—and a society—that is penetrated by the remembrance of God. It is only through prayer and remembrance, performed with the whole self, that the individual is purified so that he, or she, can act with perfect justice.

While Dr Shah-Kazemi focuses on particular sections of the letter in this chapter, he has also translated the letter in full in Appendix B.

### Plato and the *Republic*

Plato (428 – 348 BC) was a Greek philosopher. He was a student of Socrates and a teacher of Aristotle. His writings explore a range of subjects including political philosophy, cosmology, theology and aesthetics, to name a few. Plato’s *Republic* was written around 380 BC. It is in the form of a dialogue between Socrates and three interlocutors and examines the notion of a perfect community and the ideal individual within it.



The calligraphic roundel contains the name of Imam ‘Ali and the phrase “May God be pleased with him”. It was produced in Ottoman Turkey in the 19th century. Photo courtesy of *The Ismailis: An Illustrated History*.

### Chapter 3: Realisation through Remembrance

The third chapter addresses the meaning of *dhikru’Llah* – the remembrance of God – a fundamental principle in Islamic spirituality. This chapter contains many spiritual insights and is, for this reason, a chapter that needs to be read many times over. The chapter begins by outlining Imam ‘Ali’s role in the development of *tasawwuf*, as he stands at the head of all, of the chains of spiritual affiliation by which Sufis trace their *murshid*’s spiritual descent from the Prophet. A corpus of Imam ‘Ali’s teachings elucidates the principles and practice of *dhikru’Llah* which is of central importance in the Qur’an and Prophetic *sunnah*. This is why *dhikr* is central in Sufi practice and doctrine. Imam ‘Ali’s commentary on verses of the Qur’an referring to this practice allows one to better appreciate why Sufis refer to Imam ‘Ali as the first spiritual ‘Pole’ (*qutb*) after the Prophet himself. According to Dr Shah-Kazemi, Imam ‘Ali also therefore plays a unifying role in that his *walaya*, or sanctity, is essential in both Sunni Sufism and Shi‘i *‘irfan*. What follows is an extended analysis of Imam ‘Ali’s various pronouncements on *dhikr*, supported by extensive quotations from a range of Sufi masters, most notably Ibn al-‘Arabi. As Dr Shah-Kazemi states “*Dhikru’Llah* should thus be seen, in the first instance and above all else, as a principle of awareness, an in-depth assimilation of the divine presence; but it must also be seen as an action, a practice or a series of practices, and thus as a spiritual discipline” (p. 137). *Dhikru’Llah* is therefore seen as the highest form of religious practice leading to the deeper levels of spiritual realisation.



The legacy of Imam 'Ali. "This detail miniature painting is from a manuscript of the *Khavar-nama*, a poem narrating the deeds of Imam 'Ali, made in Punjab in the 11th/17th century."  
Photo credit: *The Ismailis: An Illustrated History*.

Beginning from his statement that "dhikr is a polish for the hearts (jila'an li'l-qulub)," Imam 'Ali discusses in a sermon included in

the *Nahj al-balagha* where he quotes words from verse 37 of Sura 24 of the Qur'an, entitled *al-Nur* ("The Light").

### **Ayat al-Nur**

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is a niche wherein is a lamp; the lamp is enclosed in a glass; the glass is as it were a shining star. [The lamp] is lit [by the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West. The oil well-nigh shineth forth, though fire touch it not. Light upon light! God guideth to His light whom He will; and God striketh similitudes for mankind; and God knoweth all things (24:35).

### **'Irfan**

Literally knowledge. It is from the same root as *ma'rifa* or 'spiritual wisdom'. Shi'i spirituality, mysticism and metaphysics are referred to primarily by this term.

### **Walaya**

Friendship or assistance. In Sufism the term is used for qualities that can be translated roughly as 'sainthood'; in Shi'i Islam, it is used both in this sense, and in the sense of devotion to, or love for, the saintly or prophetic possessor of walaya.



The author makes a link stating that once the heart is illuminated, all other faculties share in this illumination and, therefore, once again, there is ‘light upon light’. Dr Shah-Kazemi then reflects on the implications of this for human action. The heart purified and polished by *dhikr* not only sees God everywhere, as Dr Shah-Kazemi points out, but also reflects the qualities of God, no longer ‘through a glass darkly’, but more as if the heart were a mirror or a window for the light of God. As with other concepts, the meaning of the word *dhikr* itself is discussed at some length, yielding interesting insights. The spiritual fruits of remembrance and the practice of *dhikr* are explored with obvious commitment to the ideals underpinning the practice of *dhikr*. For the reader familiar with Sufi practices, this chapter reads as an inspiring clarion call to place the remembrance of God at the centre of one’s life.

One of Dr Shah-Kazemi’s key points in this chapter is the idea of *dhikr* as a re-collecting, as a remembrance of our pre-existing knowledge of the divine which is alluded to in the *mithaq*, or covenant between human beings and God, in which God asks all the souls, “Am I not your Lord?” and the souls answer in the affirmative (Q7:172). Human nature, according to both the Qur’an and Imam ‘Ali, is susceptible to *ghafla*, or forgetfulness, of this reality and *dhikr* is seen as an antidote to this.

The last section of the chapter is the most overtly mystical and the most complex. In this section, Dr Shah-Kazemi focuses on the concept of self-realisation, one of the most paradoxical aspects of which is forgetting oneself in one’s remembrance, to paraphrase a saying of Imam ‘Ali. Through this realisation, one comes to know that there is nothing in reality other than God.

This is closely related to the process of *tawahhud*, self-integration, the knitting together of all the spiritual “threads” of one’s soul. Within this notion is the idea that the outward verbal invocation must be in harmony with heart-felt intention. “There must be no contradiction between that which is articulated by the tongue and that which motivates the heart” (p. 163). When the soul is completely pure and at one with the highest ideals as proclaimed by the tongue and intellect, it can then become transparent to the spiritual qualities which are embedded within its own substance or primordial nature. In the absence of this, the simple act of *dhikr* with no intention or engagement, where it is only a technical act, is ‘heedless’ and lacking efficacy. As Imam ‘Ali says, “Do not remember God absent-mindedly (*sahiyān*), nor forget Him in distraction; rather, remember Him with perfect remembrance (*dhikran kamilan*), a remembrance in which your heart and tongue are in harmony, and what you conceal conforms with what you reveal. But you will not remember Him according to the true reality of the remembrance (*haqiqat al-dhikr*) until you forget your own soul in your remembrance” (p. 162).

This realisation through remembrance recognises not only the value in ‘forgetting’ everything in existence except God, but seeing that there is nothing in reality except God. In polishing one’s heart, the individual can thus ‘see’ and ‘hear’ after being blind and deaf. The heart can see the Face of God wherever it looks and is one with the universal One at all resonating frequencies.

Overall, this book makes a unique contribution to Shi‘i and Islamic studies. It opens up the richness of Imam ‘Ali’s thought and can inspire us all to explore it further.



The richness of Dr Shah-Kazemi's own use of language, its almost poetic quality, enables what could otherwise be a dry academic tome to be a source of intellectual enrichment and spiritual inspiration. It is a book to remind us of the place of spirituality in human life at a time when we most need reminding.

## Passages of Interest

### The Inner Struggle

“Struggling against the soul through knowledge—such is the mark of the intellect.”

“The strongest people are those who are strongest against their own souls.”

“Truly, one who fights his own soul, in obedience to God and does not sin against Him, has the rank of the righteous martyr in God's eyes.”

“The ultimate battle is that of a man against his own soul.”

“He who knows his soul fights it.”

“No *jihad* is more excellent than the *jihad* of the soul.” (p. 40)

“These sayings underline the fact that, for the true intellectual, the soul in its entirety has to be ‘conquered’ and enlisted on the side of the intellect. It is not a question of destroying the lower soul but of ridding it of the destructive influence of its caprice, its egotistic whims, subjectivism and individualism...” (p. 40)

“The soul's fundamental energy is not to be destroyed but converted and redirected, away from the transient objects of individualistic desire, away from the impulses of ‘*al-shaytan*’, towards the one, true object that is expressed by *al-Rahman*.” (p. 41).

## Questions

1. According to Imam ‘Ali, what is the importance of the inner struggle?
2. What roles do the intellect and knowledge play in the inner struggle?

These passages outline Dr Shah-Kazemi's analysis of the inner struggle and the role played by knowledge and intellect in the spiritual path. Imam ‘Ali outlines an opposition between desire (*hawa*) and intellect (*aql*). *Jihad* is then conceptualised within this framework as an internal rather than an external struggle. Rather than a fight against an external force, one fights against the ego and the caprice of desire. This fight requires time, energy and effort, which is why it is described as a *jihad*. However, it also requires divine grace, for one cannot subdue one's own desires unaided by such grace.

Dr Shah-Kazemi also draws a link between this *jihad* and the idea of the intellect. In a sense, desire and ego stem from not fully understanding the nature of reality, particularly of *tawhid*. It is in this sense that he refers to the ego as a “false god” (p.41). The intellect, conceived here in its widest sense, is the faculty that enables us to understand the nature of reality. However, we should not see this as a purely conceptual understanding, but as a genuine integration of the mind and the spirit. The more this integration takes place, the more our actions will flow from an ethical framework rooted in love and compassion for others.

## Compassion, Justice and Mercy

“Returning to the theme of mercy, the following passage is remarkable in placing the necessity of compassion in a universal context, and is one of the most important expressions by the Imam on the unity of the human race and the equality of all human beings.



It stands forth as a corrective to all forms of prejudice, particularism and sectarianism that would apply justice or compassion only to members of one's own 'group' however defined:

Infuse your heart with mercy for the subjects, love for them and kindness towards them. Be not like a ravenous beast of prey above them, seeking to devour them. For they are of two types: either your brother in religion or your like in creation. Mistakes slip from them, defects emerge from them, deliberately or accidentally. So bestow upon them your forgiveness and your pardon, just as you would have God bestow upon you His forgiveness and pardon; for you are above them, and the one who has authority over you is above you, and God is above him who appointed you ... and through them He tests you." (p. 101)

"One might cite here also an incident which demonstrates well the Imam's compassionate implementation of justice, and which also serves as an expression of the principle referred to earlier: all people are 'your like in creation'. The Imam came across an old, blind beggar and inquired about him. He was told that the beggar was a Christian. He told those around him, 'You have employed him to the point where he is old and infirm, and now you refuse to help him. Give him maintenance from the public funds (*bayt al-mal*).' In addition, this sentence expresses succinctly the Islamic principle of social welfare (*maslaha*), based on redistributive justice, and a policy of strict non-discrimination between Muslim and others." (p. 102)

### Questions

1. What does Imam 'Ali mean when he instructs Malik al-Ashtar to infuse his heart with mercy?
2. How can this be applied to our daily lives?
3. What can we learn from Imam 'Ali's approach to justice from the story about the blind beggar?

As stated above, when the human personality is fully integrated with a genuine perception of the nature of reality, and particularly the nature of *tawhid*, compassion and mercy flow from that personality in a natural way. Here, these broad themes of compassion and mercy are emphasised as part of both our relationship with the Divine and cornerstones of the relationship that we should have with our fellow human beings, who are either our brothers and sisters in religion or our like in creation. Just as we hope for compassion and mercy from God, so we should extend it to others. Just as we make mistakes and wish to be forgiven, so too do others; and if we wish to be forgiven then we should also aim to extend that forgiveness. In this sense, our duty as human beings is to attempt to reflect, as through a mirror, the divine qualities.

These qualities should be extended to all others, as illustrated in the example given here. This example is not so much a question of mercy but of strict justice in the case of the Christian beggar who did not receive due recompense for his efforts.

Imam 'Ali insists here that justice is universal, and that all people deserve respect and consideration, regardless of religion.

The extract from the letter to Malik also illustrates Imam Ali's caution against arrogance. Here he cautions Malik al-Ashtar that even though he is in a position of authority,



God is above all forms of human authority. This is an important caution for those who hold authority. All men, whether a slave or a commander, are ultimately at the mercy of God. It is with this remembrance that one should conduct one's life and treat others with dignity and respect. Those who find themselves in positions of authority should remember their own inferiority vis-a-vis the Absolute.

### **Dhikr and Allah's creation**

"Truly, God has made the remembrance (*al-dhikr*) a polish for the hearts, by which they hear after being deaf, and see after being blind and yield after being resistant... There have always been slaves of God...with whom He held intimate discourse through their thoughts and spoke with them through the essence of their intellects. They diffused illumination through the awakened light in their hearing and their seeing and their hearts, calling unto the remembrance of the days of God... Indeed, there is a special group (*ahl*) who belong to the *dhikr*; they have adopted it in place of the world, such that 'neither trade nor merchandise' distracts them from it. they spend the days of their life in it... It is as though they had left this world for the Hereafter, and they are there, witnessing what is beyond this world..." (p. 142)

"The latent light of the heart is disclosed by the remembrance of God; the light within shines with the light from on high: 'light upon light'. Once the heart is illumined, all of the other faculties share in the luminosity generated by the invocation, so, again, there is further 'light upon light'." (pp. 142-143)

"Here, it is a question of clarifying the organ of consciousness, the spiritual 'heart', both allowing it to function as a mirror reflecting truths from above, and also revealing its own hidden depths..." (p. 143).

### Questions

1. What does the Imam mean when he says that *dhikr* is "a polish for the hearts"?
2. What impact can practising *dhikr* have on our ethical decisions and actions?

*Dhikr* is not a simple word to translate into English and can take on a number of lexical meanings, including invocation, repetition, incantation, recitation, telling, glorification and exhortation, etc. It is said that there are two types of *dhikr* – firstly, a *dhikr* which allows for forgetfulness and secondly, a *dhikr* which does not allow for forgetfulness but expresses a continuous remembrance.

*Dhikru'Llah* is therefore an awareness of being in the presence of God. As the Qur'an states, "Truly, prayer keepeth [one] away from lewdness and iniquity, and the remembrance of God is greater" (Q29:45).

These passages are an extended reflection on the Verse of Light (*ayat al-nur*) and a discourse on the importance of life. Again, Dr Shah-Kazemi explores the relationship between clear perceptions of reality, in this case the remembrance of God, and ethical action. The remembrance of God is central to this clear perception, as suggested by the metaphor of a polish for the hearts. *Dhikr* can take time, energy and effort, but by dint of repeated polishing the human heart can become a mirror that reflects the divine light. The heart can be polished through *dhikru'Llah*, the invocation of God. This sentiment resonates with a saying of Prophet Muhammad: 'For everything there is a polish (*siqala*), and the polish of the hearts is the *dhikru'Llah*.'

This polishing of the heart allows us to see the Face of God everywhere and in everything. It enables us to be constantly engaged with the Absolute.



Through this connectivity, we can also learn to understand God's creation and appreciate his bounty and blessings.

During the commencement ceremony of the American University in Cairo in 2006, His Highness the Aga Khan said:

“In his teachings, Hazrat Ali emphasised that “No honour is like knowledge.” And then he added that “No belief is like modesty and patience, no attainment is like humility, no power is like forbearance, and no support is more reliable than consultation.” Notice that the virtues endorsed by Hazrat Ali are qualities which subordinate the self and emphasise others - modesty, patience, humility, forbearance and consultation. What he thus is telling us, is that we find knowledge best by admitting first what it is we do not know, and by opening our minds to what others can teach us.”

Beginning to understand the limitlessness of Allah's creation brings us closer to the greater One. A heart purified can thus begin to 'see' Allah and his creation everywhere; seeing not only with the eyes but also with the heart.

### Further Reading List

Shah-Kazemi, Reza. *Spiritual Quest — Reflections on Qur'anic Prayer According to the Teachings of Imam 'Ali*. I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2011.

Shah-Kazemi, Reza. *The Spirit of Tolerance in Islam*. I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2012.