

Death

by Sharafuddin Maneri

Makhdum al-Mulk Sharafuddin b. Yahya Maneri, r.a. (d.1381) had met Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya, r.a. (d. 1325) but did not become a disciple of a Sufi master until he met the little known Najibuddin Firdausi, r.a. (of the Firdausi Order in India.). Later he became a great shaikh himself. What follows is a letter concerning death that he wrote to a disciple who was unable to attend his presence.

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!

Dear Brother Shamsuddin,

Men are of three kinds: The first are covetous and greedy; the second have begun to turn to God; and the third have attained the heights of mystical knowledge. Pleasure-loving people simply do not think about death and, even if they do, it is in order to pine for this world and to become further engrossed in its good things. The remembrance of death makes such a person move further away from God. A person who has begun to turn toward God thinks about death as a means of producing fear and dread in his heart, and thus be enabled to turn completely toward Him. It often happens that he has a great aversion to death out of fear that it might come before he has turned fully toward God and prepared the provisions necessary for it. Such a person would be excused for such an aversion, and would not come under this threat: "Anyone who has despised the vision of God Almighty does not rest in His favour." This is because he does not abhor death and the divine visage, but rather is afraid of losing that very sight on account of some fault of his. It is like a person who delays seeing his beloved, and remains engrossed in making preparations to meet her at the time and place that will be most to his liking. He does not bother to make a count of the labour involved in such a preparation. The sign of his friendship is that he is always making some effort on her behalf, and is not preoccupied with anybody else.

The advanced Sufi is forever recalling death, for it is the time appointed for seeing the countenance of the Friend, and no lover can ever forget the time fixed for meeting his beloved. He would love to be swallowed up by death so that, being freed from this dwelling place of sinners, he might rise to the abode near his Friend, just as Huzaifa relates: "O God, You know that I prefer poverty

to riches, sickness to health, and death to life. Make death easy for me, that I might arrive at my reward You!" Now it will be understood why the novice is excused for shunning death and for desiring it, while, on the other hand, the advanced Sufi is also excused for loving death and yearning after it! It is said, however, that there is an even higher stage than both of these, when a person makes use of nothing at all, but does his work purely for the sake of God. For himself, he chooses neither death nor life. This is the stage of resignation and acceptance, and it is the final point of those who have reached the summit.

A person has attained this stage when the remembrance of death makes blessings appear irksome, and changes the pleasure one derives from them into vexation, and when what normally renders insipid things pleasurable and desirable for man becomes something leading to salvation. Here is a hint about this: "Think more about the destroyer of delights [i.e., death], that your inclination toward them might be severed. Thus will you be enabled to turn toward God Almighty." It is related in a Tradition: "If animals knew as much about death as you do, then you would not be able to eat the meat of any fattened animal."

A'isha said: "O Apostle of God, who will appear together with the martyrs on the Day of Resurrection?" The holy Prophet, p.b.u.h. replied: "**Anyone who thinks about death twenty times each day and night.**" He also said: "**Death is a present for the faithful, because the world is their prison, and they are always grief-stricken in it. Death is the release from all that, and release from prison is certainly a much-prized gift!**" Again, he said: "**Death is an atonement for every Muslim.**" Anyone who is a real

Muslim, unlike you and me, is in quest of it. A genuine believer is the person from whose hand and tongue Muslims receive peace and security. The behaviour of the believers should edify others. They should not be stained by sins, except for trifling ones. Death makes them pure.

Khwaja Hasan Basri said: "Death has dishonoured this world. It has not allowed any sensible man to rejoice!" A wise man wrote the following to one of his brothers: "Be afraid of death in this abode before you go to the other dwelling place, for you will long for death therein, but will not find it." When Ibn Sirin was remembered death, all his limbs became transfixed. Umar Abdul Aziz [a caliph] used to gather all the jurisconsults together each evening and recall death, the Day of Judgment, and the last things, and also weep as though his bier were in front of them all. And Khwaja Rabih Tamimi said: "The pleasures of this world cut me off from two things: One is the remembrance of death, the second is standing in the presence of God." Kaab Ahbar said: "Everyone who realizes what death is finds that the trials and difficulties of this life become easy for him to bear!" It is related that Mutarrif said: "I saw in a dream that someone in the mosque of Basra was saying that the description of death tears to pieces the hearts of the timid." It is related that whenever Jesus a.s. was reminded of death, blood used to ooze out of his body. O brother, it behooves you not to lag behind those who day and night used to recall death at least twenty times. As far as possible, remain steadfast in this practice and be ready for death to come, whenever that may be. Qaqa Hakim said: "I have waited thirty years for death to come, for I have no love for anything here." It is also related that Imam Suri said: "I saw an old man in the mosque of Kufa who said: I have waited for death for thirty years in this mosque, not knowing when it would come. When it comes, I won't have to wait for anything else. I don't want any delay. I have no claims on anybody else, nor does anyone have any claim upon me.'" One beloved of Allah ta'ala wrote in a letter: "This world is a dream. After it, comes the awakening. Midway between them lies death. We are all perplexed with dreams."

O brother, even if there were no sorrow, grief, fear, or torment, still death and its pangs would be quite sufficient, for the whole of life is made miserable because of that moment. All pleasure is spoilt therein, while every blunder and foolish action will be changed completely at the awakening. Meanwhile, it is said that death is more painful than the blow of a sword or a cut

from a saw, or removing the nails from one's fingers. Hence it is that the holy Prophet, p.b.u.h. said, "O God, make the pangs of death bearable for me!" In a similar way, Jesus a.s. said to his followers: "O my apostles, beseech God Almighty to make death easy for me, for I am so much afraid of it that my fear itself is plunging me to my death!"

It is also related that a group of the sons of Israel was passing by a cemetery. They prayed to Allah ta'ala that He might revive one of the dead so that they might question him. Lo, one dead man rose up from his grave and, between his eyes, was the mark of his repeated prostrations. He said, "O men, what do you want of me? It is fifty years now since I tasted death, but its bitterness has not yet departed from my heart!" Imam Auza'i has related this: "I was told that a dead man is afflicted by death till the moment he is raised from the grave." One man used to make great inquiries of sick people who were at the point of death, saying: "How do you find death?" When he himself fell ill, and was hastening toward death, some people asked him, "How do you find death?" He replied: "It is as though the sky were covering the earth, and as though my soul were being drawn through the eye of a needle." It is also related that the Prophet Muhammad, p.b.u.h. said: "**If even a single hair of a dead person were to be placed upon the inhabitants of the heavens and earth, then by the divine command all would certainly perish, because in each hair is contained the effect of death, and this effect simply cannot fall upon anything without causing it to perish.**" It is also related that he said: "**If only a drop of the fear of death were to be placed upon the mountains of the earth they would certainly melt away.**" It is also said that when the soul of the prophet Moses reached the Divine Presence, Allah asked: "Moses, how did you find death?" He asked this question, even though He is fully aware of what it is like. Moses replied: "I found my soul was like a sparrow, and in such a state as though it had been fried in a pan but did not receive the relief of death, nor was it released so that it might fly away." Now understand that at the time of death the lover appears to pass away, that is, he is completely peaceful and at rest. Some appropriate words of witness will assuredly be found on his lips at that moment. In his heart there will be a good idea about Allah ta'ala.

There is a tradition that the Prophet, p.b.u.h. said: "**A dying man's attention should be fixed on three things: He should be blushing with shame; tears**

should be flowing from his eyes; and his lips should be parched. This would all be due to God's mercy, which had been showered upon him. And when he makes a noise, it would be a choking sound; his colour would turn red, and his lips became the colour of dust. All this constitutes torments sent by God, which have now overwhelmed him. It would, however, be a good sign if his tongue still moved in witness to God." It is also related that the Prophet, p.b.u.h. said: **'Everyone who is dying, and knows that there is no other god but God, will go to heaven.'** It is also narrated how the Prophet Muhammad, p.b.u.h. went to a young man who was dying. He inquired: **"What is your idea about God?"** The youth replied, "I hope in God, but am afraid of my sins." He said: **"At such a time, both these two sentiments cannot be present in a man's heart, namely, that God Almighty would not grant him that for which he hopes, but would change his fear into assurance."**

O brother, the end of one and all is by this way alone, whether you are a beggar or a king, for here it is all the same with respect to the possessions of kings and the poverty of beggars, as has been said:

If your possessions were to stretch
from earth to the moon,
Finally, they would all lead to this
door!
When your jaw suddenly turns rigid,
Then all the World's wealth is no
more than a chin!
If you are a Faridun or an Afrasiyab,
In this Ocean you are but a drop!

All the creatures of this world are
submerged in an ocean of blood:
Who knows what their condition is
like beneath the dust?

If you say that in any particular state of these two, that is, fear or hope, should overcome the other, realize that when a slave is strong and completely correct in his belief and practice, fear is what should predominate. On the other hand, when he is sick and weak, especially when he is gripped by the pangs of death, that is when hope should predominate. Scholars have said that the reason is because Allah ta'ala has said: *'I am close to those whose hearts are broken out of fear of Me!'*

At the time of death, and while undergoing its pangs,

hope is better because at that moment a person's heart is broken, due to the sins committed while he was vigorous and healthy. If you were to say, "No, one should have only a good opinion about God, according to the traditions," then understand that one of the good opinions we should have is to shun any sin whatsoever against Allah ta'ala, as well as fear the punishments of the world to come, while striving to serve Him. Realize also that all works return to this one source, namely, it is a point that breaks backs, turns faces pale, rends hearts, and turns eyes into blood. Yet that very fear is the cause of mystical knowledge. In other words, this is the limit and extremity of those who fear God. A venerable Sufi has said: "There are three types of sorrow: that of worship – has it been accepted or not? that of sin – has it been forgiven or not? and that of the vision of God – will it be denied or not?" The especially favoured ones have said: "There is really only one sorrow – that of being denied the vision of God! Every other sorrow, apart from that, is easy to bear, because it is not destined to last." Hence it is that the prayer of all the wise in this: "O Lord, do whatever You wish, but don't cut us off from this!" The secret has been couched in the following verse:

The hearts of all are stirred
In expectation of seeing Your face!
Our bodies, out of fear of separation,
Cry out in the midst of pleasure and
comfort!
Without Your beauty, flowers of
desire
Turn to thorns in my hope-ekindled
eyes!

Peace!