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ON THE CONCEPT OF PARADISE AND HELL

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ON THE CONCEPT OF PARADISE AND HELL

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Friends often ask me what do you think about paradise and hell? Are these spaces located somewhere out there wherein people would enter according to their deeds good or bad? Or are these mere symbols as those who believe in *batini* (concealed meaning) of Qur'an? Are these places wherein people would eternally abide in physical sense? In fact it is like people used to ask the Prophet (PBUH) about the Day of Judgment

It is important to note that Qur'an, like other scriptures, is more symbolic than descriptive though not altogether symbolic. No scripture could be mere descriptive in order to remain eternal. Symbolism both makes it multi-layered in meaning as well as eternal in application. The scriptures should make sense equally for ordinary people as well as those who have attained great heights in knowledge. Scripture, if it is means only for highly knowledgeable would leave ordinary people uninspired and if it is flat in description and without layers of meaning would not enthuse highly knowledgeable.

Thus what the Qur'an says about paradise and hell (*jannat wa jahannam*) should be *inspiring for both lay persons as well as knowledgeable*. And indeed it does provided we take description of paradise and hell both in literal as well as symbolic sense, its literal as well as concealed sense. There is one more aspect which one must be aware of and sufis have often emphasized that aspect. Sufis believe that one must not do anything for greed or fear i.e. for reward or punishment.

This is symbolized in the famous story of **Rabi'ah Basri**, the noted lady sufi saint. One day she was carrying burning flame in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When people asked her why are you doing this, she replied I want to set fire to paradise with this burning flame and put our fire of hell with this bucket of water so that people stop worshiping Allah for greed of paradise or fear of hell. A true worshiper would do that for neither but for its own merit. More of this little later.

Qur'an is wonderfully balanced book in terms of its symbolism and flat descriptive language. An ordinary reader benefits from it as much as one who has achieved great heights of knowledge. The rationalists found it as much useful as blind followers but there was great difference between the two in terms of its understanding. The m'utazila (rationalists of Islam), the Isma'ilis (those who believed in hidden meanings along with literal) and the sufis understood the Qur'an very differently from other literalists (*zahiris*).

For *zahiris* (literalists) paradise and hell have been described in vivid details in physical sense, like a place where there will be eternal gardens with canals of milk and honey flowing therein etc. and hell with burning fire causing great physical pain and nothing can rescue them from there. Both would be eternal. The whole description is quite tempting about paradise and that of hell inspires great fear. Description of hell is so fearsome that one can start trembling.

However, those who are knowledgeable treat this more symbolically and dive in for deeper meanings. The Qur'an calls paradise place of peace and security and it says :We will root out whatever of rancor is in their breasts – they shall be as brethren on raised couches, face to face, Toil shall but afflict them therein, nor shall they be ejected there from." (15:45-48)

Firstly paradise is a state in which a believer would be feeling perfectly at peace and secure. There will be no fear or feeling of doubt, restlessness and fear. Only a person who is perfect in his/her faith can have such stage of mind. A doubter, an sceptic, without perfection of faith cannot feel so secure and peaceful at heart. The sufis talk of *insan-e-kamil* i.e. a perfect being. Their whole effort is to achieve this state of *insan-e-kamil* and such person is perfectly at peace with himself.

Also, there are stages of perfection and one has always to try to achieve higher and higher stage of perfection. It is not correct to say that paradise is a place of rest and enjoyment. Far from it. It is a place of constant efforts to raise oneself in higher degrees of perfection. Thus Qur'an says, "But those who keep their duty to their Lord shall have high places, above them higher places, built (for them)" (39:20). Thus paradise is not at all place of eternal rest and enjoyment but that of spiritual efforts for further stages of perfection.

It is abiding in the sense that these are ceaseless efforts and once you achieve one stage of perfection there is no looking back and one goes on and there is great enjoyment in making these efforts. More such efforts and more one feels at peace with oneself.

Similarly hell is, for those who are people of deep knowledge, a state of mind in which one is far from perfection in ones faith but in a constant state of doubt or even hypocrisy and thus remains in a state of torment and it is fire of doubt or hypocrisy which keeps on tormenting him/her and as those who rise in a state of perfection in case of paradise, one keeps on falling lower and lower in case of hell. Greater the depth of fall, greater the torment. However, Qur'an provides for what it calls *taubat al-nusuh* (sincere repentance which can redeem one of this torture.

One always has a choice either to rise higher and higher in a state of perfection or fall low and low in a state of lowest of low.