

Enliven your heart with admonition, and kill it with abstemiousness.¹⁷ Fortify it with certainty, and enlighten it with wisdom.¹⁸ Tame it with the remembrance of death, and force it to concede [the] mortality [of all creation]. Show it the calamities of the temporal world,¹⁹ and warn it of the assault of time and the radical undulation of night and day.²⁰ Present to it the histories of those who have passed, and remind it what befell your predecessors.²¹ Walk among their houses and ruins, and examine what they did,²² from where they departed,²³ and where they have disembarked,²⁴ for you shall find that they departed [the company of] loved ones and

¹⁷ The human being comprises three aspects: body, intellect, and emotion. Out of these three aspects, the intellect and emotion are attributed to the “heart” or *qalb*. For instance, the Qur’ān says, “There is in this admonition for one who has a heart or who listens attentively” (50:37), indicating that the heart refers to the faculty of intellect. In another place, he says, “In the remembrance of God do hearts find solace” (13:28), thereby indicating that the heart is the center of emotional stability or tumult. The present tradition uses the “heart” in this latter sense: to refer to man’s emotional center. The heart is the place from which man’s attraction, enmity, love, hate, desire, and repulsion issue. The heart is sometimes attracted to things godly and lofty, and other times to things mundane and lowly. Thus, when Imām ‘Alī says, “Enliven your heart” he wants us to stimulate it toward God and things godly. And when he says, “kill it,” he wants us to destroy its attraction to the mundane.

Listening to, or reading, admonition is the way to strengthen our attraction to God. We generally refer to this process as inspiration. We feel inspired by certain books, speeches, or experiences, to reform ourselves by acting in a way pleasing to God. Likewise, the way to destroy our attraction to the mundane is to reduce our contact with it by buying less, eating less, and looking less. Reducing our contact with the glitter of the world breaks the positive feedback loop between desire and contact. It also allows us more time and a freer conscience to contemplate our current circumstance: where we stand and where we want to go.

¹⁸ Just as the last sentence referred to the heart as the center of man’s emotional faculty, so this sentence refers to it as the center of his faculty of intellect where knowledge and beliefs lie. Inasmuch as the heart is a faculty, it can be strengthened by correct usage and weakened by misuse or by not being used at all. The way to strengthen it is to fill it with firmly rooted conviction (*yaqīn*) in those tenets of faith that lead to eternal happiness. Such conviction can be attained by studying and contemplating these beliefs; by tackling every doubt until we are satisfied with the answer; by discussing them with scholars who themselves are rock-solid in their faith. It can also be attained through acts of devotion: through prayer and supplication. If we strive to attain such certainty, our hearts will stay the course and not easily be misled by fallacy and doubt.

However, it is not enough to have a heart that stays the course if the course itself is wrong. While strength of heart is a virtue, hardness of heart is a vice. God tells the Israelites, “Despite all of this, your hearts became hardened, so they were like stone—rather harder (than stone), for there are some stones from which rivers gush forth. And there are some that split (letting) water issue from them. And there are some that fall out of fear of God” (Qur’ān 2:74). For this reason, the heart needs light to guide it to the course, and this light is wisdom (*hikmah*). Wisdom denotes any knowledge that leads one to righteous action. God says, “O you who have faith, fear God and have faith in his apostle, and he shall grant you a double share of his mercy and give you a light to walk by...” (Qur’ān 57:28).

¹⁹ It is notable that Imām ‘Alī commands us to “show” our heart the tragedies of life, as if it is insufficient to simply “tell it” or “inform it.” While reading and hearing about natural and unnatural disasters impacts us, nothing is like seeing them first hand. For this reason, the Qur’ān says “Say: ‘Travel on the earth and observe how the fate was of those who were before you’” (30:42).

²⁰ This phrase is an expression of the speed with which time passes us by.

²¹ According to the context of this paragraph, Imām ‘Alī is not referring to the historical outcome of those civilizations that rejected the calls of the prophets and drowned in moral decadence. Rather, he refers here to the realities of health and sickness, life and death, and a glorious rise to the apex of civilization followed by a catastrophic decline to the brink of extinction. He speaks of the natural disasters that, in an instant, brought seemingly invincible civilizations to their knees. In this sense, even the dominion of the Prophet Solomon—may God’s peace be upon him—and its eventual decline serve as an example of the transience of this abode.

²² i.e. what wealth they amassed, what power they wielded, what marvelous feats they accomplished.

²³ i.e. what palatial mansions, heavenly gardens, and treasuries of wealth that left behind.

²⁴ They have disembarked in their graves where they lie naked, alone with none of the pomp and circumstance they once held.

disembarked in the abodes of estrangement, and it seems you shall shortly become like one of them. So build your [eternal] abode, and do not sell [your place in] the hereafter for [a place in] the temporal world.