

Hazrat Ali, a Model of Futuwwa

A prime exemplar of futuwwa or chivalry in the Sufi tradition is Ali ibn Abu Talib. Ali was the son of Abu Talib who was the uncle of Prophet Muhammad. Therefore Ali was a cousin of the Prophet. He came into the custody of Muhammad early in life and was brought up by him like a son. He was the first to embrace Islam when Muhammad asked for the support of his family and clan. He was a witness to the revelation of the Holy Quran. He became the primary protector of the new religion when it was being persecuted. Besides the well-known story that illustrates his courage and faith, in which he slept in the bed of Muhammad to defeat the assassins who wanted to murder the Prophet in his sleep, he faced many famed warriors on the battlefield in one-on-one combat and defeated them all. He was instrumental in turning around crucial battles and rallying the outnumbered Muslim forces to achieve unlikely victories. His bravery and chivalry on the battlefield won even the praise of his enemies. Though he was a renowned warrior, he always preferred to avoid war if a way out could be found through negotiation.

Before the Prophet died, he left many indications that Hazrat Ali was to be his successor. Nevertheless, following Muhammad's death there was a scuffle for power. Ali had no taste for political maneuvering and withdrew from contention to pursue other projects. Three Caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman, succeeded the Prophet. Uthman was assassinated and left behind an administration that was riddled with corruption. The community turned in desperation to Ali who reluctantly accepted the role of the fourth Caliph. During six tumultuous years in that role, he reorganized the army and government. He instituted a fair system of taxation and for the first time, each Muslim was given the same allotment from the revenues, regardless of status. Slaves received the same as their masters. This leveling of status resulted in resentment and rebellion among the privileged. When a colleague pointed out to Ali that his system was alienating those who had power to help him and helping the poor who had no power, Ali replied, as for the entitled who rebel, good riddance. He said he was not seeking advantage from any party but doing what he felt was right in the eyes of God.

Ali left behind a large number of sermons and a selection of letters which have been published in English under the title *Nahjul Balagha*. My impression from reading many sermons and a few letters is that Ali saw the worldly life as filled with temptations to overcome. He saw this life as an opportunity to prepare for the next life when one's fate will be sealed and change will be much more difficult. If this life is devoted to pleasures, comforts, and self-seeking, one will be ill-prepared for the next life. On the other hand, if one seeks to do good in this life, helping others and behaving in an upright manner, one will be rewarded in the next life.

At a time of crisis during his rule, Ali thought he might not survive and wrote a long letter of guidance to his son. I have made selections from that letter which contains much chivalric teaching. I also changed the language to make it gender inclusive which sometimes makes for awkward phrasing. Here are a few samples from a longer list of selections. To see all of the selections, click on this link.

Take care to provide well for your future abode. Do not barter away eternal blessing for pleasures of this mortal and fleeting world.

Fight, whenever required, to defend the cause of Allah. When you think of defending the cause of Allah do not be afraid that people will laugh at you, censure your action or slander you. Fearlessly and boldly help truth and justice. Bear patiently the sufferings and face bravely the obstacles which come in your way when you follow truth and when you try to uphold it. Adhere to the cause of truth and justice wherever you find it.

Develop the habit of patience against sufferings, calamities and adversities. This virtue of patience is one of the highest values of morality and nobility of character and it is the best habit which one can develop. Trust in Allah and let your mind seek God's protection in every calamity and suffering because you will thus entrust yourself and your affairs to the Best Trustee and to the Mightiest Guardian.

The greatest achievement of your character is that the hostility of another against you does not overcome the consideration and friendship you feel towards that one, and his or her ill-treatment of you does not overbalance your kind treatment to him or her.