

Letter from Hazrat Ali to his son (edited for gender neutrality)

My first and foremost advice to you, my son, is to fear Allah. Be God's obedient servant. Keep God's thought always fresh in your mind. Be attached to and carefully guard the principles (Islam) which connect you with God. Can any other connection be stronger, more durable and more lasting than this to command greater respect and consideration or to replace it?

Accept good exhortations and refresh your mind with them. Adopt piety and kill your inordinate desires with its help. Build your character with the help of true faith in religion and Allah. Subjugate your nature with the vision of death, make it see the mortality of life and of all that it holds dear, force it to realize the actuality of misfortunes and adversities, the changes of circumstances and times and compel it to study the lives of past people.

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

Do not talk about things which you do not know. Do not speculate about and pass verdicts on subjects about which you are not in a position to form an opinion and are not called upon to do so. Give up the way where there is a possibility of your going astray.

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.

Do not seek help or protection from anybody but Allah. Reserve your prayers, your requests, your solicitations, your supplications, and your entreaties to God and God alone because to grant, to give, to confer and to bestow, as well as to withhold, to deprive, to refuse, and to debar, lies only in God's Power. Ask as much of God's Blessings and seek as much of God's Guidance as you can.

Whatever you like for yourself, like for others, and whatever you dislike to happen to you, spare others from such happenings. Do not oppress and tyrannize anybody because you surely do not like to be oppressed and tyrannized. Be kind and sympathetic to others as you certainly desire others to treat you kindly and sympathetically. If you find objectionable and loathsome habits in others, abstain from developing those traits of character in yourself.

If you are satisfied or feel happy in receiving a certain kind of behavior from others, you may behave with others in exactly the same way. Do not speak about them in the same way that you do not like others to speak about you. Do not speak on a subject about which you know little or nothing, and if you at all want to speak on anything or about anyone of whom you are fully aware, then avoid scandal, libel and aspersion as you do not like yourself to be scandalized and scorned in the same manner.

But remember not to overload yourself (do not entrust yourself with so many obligations and duties that you cannot honorably fulfill them or with such luxurious life as to be wicked and vicious).

Because if this load is more than what you can conveniently bear then your journey will be very painful and tiresome to you. If you find around you such poor, needy and destitute people who are willing to carry your load for you as far as the Day of Judgement then consider this to be a boon, engage them and pass your burden on to them. (Distribute your wealth amongst the poor, destitute and the needy, help others to the best of your ability and be kind and sympathetic to human beings).

Have as many weight-carriers as you can (help as many as you can) so that you may not miss them when you very badly need them (when your sins of commission and omission will be balanced against your good deeds you must have enough

good deeds to turn the scale in your favor). Remember that all you give out in charities and good deeds are like loans which will be paid back to you.

If you go back upon your promises, if you break your vows, or start doing things that you have repented of, God will not immediately punish you nor does God refuse God's Blessings in haste and if you repent once again God neither taunts you nor betrays you though you may fully deserve both, but God accepts your penitence and pardons you. God never grudges God's Forgiveness nor refuses God's Mercy, on the contrary God has decreed repentance as a virtue and pious deed.

The Merciful Lord has ordered that every evil deed of yours will be counted as one and a good deed and pious action will be rewarded tenfold. God has left the door of repentance open. God hears you whenever you call God. God accepts your prayer whenever you pray to God. Invoke God to grant you your heart's desire, lay before God the secrets of your heart, tell God about all the calamities that have befallen you and misfortunes which face you, and beseech God's help to overcome them. You may invoke God's Help and Support in difficulties and distresses.

Be it known to you, my son, that you are created for the next world and not for this. You are born to die and not to live forever. Your stay in this world is transient. You live in a place which is subject to decay and destruction. It is a place where you will have to be busy getting ready for the next world. It is a road (to the next world) on which you are standing.

Death is following you. You cannot run away from it. However hard you may try to avoid it, it is going to catch you sooner or later.

Therefore take care that it may not catch you unawares or when you are not prepared for it, and no chance is left to you to repent the vices and sins committed and to undo the harm done by you. If death catches you unawares, then you are eternally damned. Therefore, my dear son, always keep three things in mind: death, your deeds and the life in the Hereafter. In this way you will always be ready to face death and it will not catch you unawares.

Remember that the little which is given to you by Allah is going to be more useful and serviceable to you and is more honorable and respectable than what is granted

by others in abundance. And what can another give you but part of that which Allah has granted him or her?

The losses that you suffer on account of your silence can be easily compensated but the losses which arise out of excessive and loose talk are difficult to requite. Do you not see that the best way of guarding water in a water-bay is to close its mouth.

To guard what you already possess is better than to beg from others.

The bitterness of disappointment and poverty is in reality sweeter than the disgrace of begging.

Returns of hard but respectable labor of a craft or profession, though small in quantity, are better than the wealth which you amass through sin and wickedness.

Nobody can guard your secrets better than you.

Often a person tries his or her best to acquire a thing which is most harmful to him or her.

One who talks too much makes most mistakes.

One who often reflects, develops foresight.

By keeping company with good people, you will develop your character and by avoiding the society of wicked persons, you will abstain from wickedness.

Livelihood acquired by foul means is the worst form of livelihood.

To oppress a weak and helpless person is the worst form of ferocity.

If your kindness or indulgence is going to bring forth cruel results, then severity of strictness is the real kindness.

Often medicating results in disease; sometimes diseases prove to be health preservers.

Often you obtain warnings and advice from people who are not fit to warn and advise you and often you come across advisers who are not sincere.

Do not rely on vain hopes because vain hopes are assets of fools and idiots.

Wisdom is the name of the trait of remembering experiences and making use of them. The best experience is the one which gives the best warning and advice.

Take advantage of opportunities before they turn their backs on you.

Everyone who tries cannot succeed.

Everyone who departs this life will not return.

The worst form of follies is to waste opportunities of this life as well as to lose salvation.

For every action there is a reaction.

Shortly you will get what has been destined for you.

There is an element of risk and speculation in every trade as well as danger of loss.

Often small returns prove as beneficial as big profits.

Treat those with consideration and kindness over whom you have power and authority.

Do not run the risk of endangering yourself through irrational, unreasonable and extravagant hopes. Take care so as not to be fooled by flattery.

Do good to your brother/sister when he/she is bent upon doing harm to you. When she ignores or declines to recognize the kinship, befriend her, go to her help and try to maintain relations. If he is miserly with you and refuses to help you, be generous with him and support him financially. If she is cruel with you, be kind and considerate with her. If he harms you accept his excuses. Behave with her as if she is a master and you are a slave, and she is a benefactor and you are a beneficiary. But be careful that you do not thus behave with undeserving and mean persons.

Do not develop friendship with the enemy of your friend otherwise your friend will turn into an enemy. Advise your friend sincerely and to the best of your ability even though he or she may not like it.

Keep a complete control over your temper and anger because I never found anything more beneficial at the end and producing more good results than such a control.

Be mild, pleasant and lenient with the one who is harsh, gross, and strict with you; gradually that one will turn to your behavior.

Grant favor and be considerate to your enemy because you will thus gain either one of the two kinds of victories: (one rising above your enemy, the other of reducing the intensity of his or her hostility).

If you want to cease relations with your friend, then do not break off totally, let your heart retain some consideration for that one so that you will still have some regard for that one if he or she comes back to you.

Do not disappoint a person who holds a good opinion of you and do not make that one change his or her opinion.

Under the impression that you, as a friend, can behave as you like, do not violate the rights of your friend because, when your friend is deprived of his or her rights and privileges, that one will no more remain your friend.

Do not ill-treat members of your family and do not behave with them as if you are the most cruel person alive.

Do not run after the one who tries to avoid you.

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.

Do not get worried and depressed over the oppressions because whoever oppresses you is in reality doing him- or herself harm and is trying to find ways for your good.

Never ill-treat a person who has done good to you.

Know it well, son, that there are two kinds of livelihood: one which you are searching for and the other which follows you (which has been destined for you). It will reach you even if you do not try to obtain it.

To be submissive, humble, crawling and begging when one is needy, powerless and poor and to be arrogant, oppressing and cruel when in power and opulence are two very ugly traits of the human character.

Nothing in this world is really useful to you unless it has some utility and value for you for the next world. If you at all want to lament over things which you have lost in this world then worry about the loss of things which had immortal values for you.

The past and almost all that was in your possession during the past is not with you now. You may thus rationally come to the conclusion that the present and all that is in your possession now will also leave you.

Do not be like persons on whom advice has no effect; they require punishment to improve them. A sensible person acquires education and culture through advice, while brutes and beasts always improve through punishment.

Overcome your sorrows, your worries and your misfortunes with patience and faith in the Merciful Lord and your hard work; one who gives up a straight path, honest and rational ways of thinking and working, will harm him- or herself.

A friend is like a relation and a true friend is one who speaks well of you even behind your back.

Inordinate desires are related with misfortunes.

Often close relations behave more distantly than strangers and often strangers help you more than your nearest relatives.

Poor is the one who has no friends.

Whoever forsakes truth finds that the path of life has become narrow and troublesome.

Contentment and honesty are the lasting assets to retain ones prestige and position.

The strongest relation is the one which is between a person and Allah.

One who does not care for you is your enemy.

If there is a danger of death or destruction in securing an object then safety lies in avoiding it.

Weaknesses and shortcomings are not the things to talk about.

Opportunities do not repeat themselves.

Sometimes very wise and learned persons fail to achieve the object they were aiming at and foolish and uneducated people attain their purposes.

Postpone evil deeds as long as possible because you can commit them whenever you so desire (then why hurry in committing them).

To cut connections with ignorant people is itself like forming connections with wise persons. Whoever trusts this world is betrayed by it and whoever gives it importance is disgraced by it. Every arrow of yours will not hit the bull's eye. When status changes your conditions also change.

Before ascertaining the conditions of a route, find out what kinds of persons will accompany you on the journey.

Instead of enquiring about the condition of the home in which you are going to stay, first of all try to find out what kind of people your neighbors are.

Treat the members of your family with love and respect because they act as wings with which you fly and as hands which support you and fight for you. They are people towards whom you turn when you are in trouble and in need.