

Asceticism and Islamic Politics

<"xml encoding="UTF-8?">

Here, in order to substantiate these remarks, we will first mention instances of what have been introduced as asceticism and ascetic. Then, we will deal with the correct and original conception of this term. They said to D?d at*-T?39;?ho was one of the disheveled Sufis and notable ascetics, "Comb the end part of [your] beard." He said, "Have I remained disengaged that I should do it?"

Of course, the occupation of D?d was not of the social occupations. Rather, it was a sort of ecstasy. A part of K??e Sa'?t [The Alchemy of Happiness] is allocated to asceticism and its etiquette such as indigence and seclusion. It is mentioned therein that there was someone who said to D?d at*-T&?39;?"Give me a piece of advice."

He said, "Keep aloof from the world of all-embracing subsistence and the people until the time of death, just as they run away from the lion." Likewise, al-Ghazz? narrates, "Sa'd ibn al-Waqq?and Sa'?ibn az-Zayd who were among the great Companions lived near Medina. It was a place which they called 'Aq? they did not use to attend the Friday, and they did nothing else until they died there."

Similarly, the ascetics would think of marriage as one of the signs of non-asceticism and the cause for attachment to the world. So, most of them refrained from it and preferred a bachelor's life to it. According to these ascetics, seclusion and indigence was superior to social life and wealth. The dispute of Sa'd?ith a claimant on the issue of riches and mendicancy is an exquisite attempt to express the logic of those who view indigence as superior to fortune, which is very interesting.

This anti-social and narrow-minded approach of the ascetics has taken an extensive form in our literature and has been subjected to severe criticism. According to these men of letters ascetics are clad in wool, hollow persons, intolerable, insensible, idle, self-indulgent, pretentious, and worthless who, wearing sackcloth and wool, seek to gain a reputation for themselves. In reality, they have portrayed asceticism as a snare of guile. For instance, H?z says: The wool-clad hot-tempered has not heard of love; Talk to him of its (love's) intoxication that he would abandon soberness.

Likewise, according to H?z these people wear patched and mended clothes as a symbol of asceticism, and keep their sleeves short as a sign of simplicity and abstinence from luxury. But all of these are tricks to deceive the people: There are tricks under the patched-clothes; See

how deceitful the short-sleeve wearers are.

Sa'd?Iso narrates a wholesome story concerning this which is very interesting: An ascetic was the guest of a king. He was invited for a dinner. He ate less than what he wanted to take, and since the time for prayer had come, he prayed more than what he used to do. As he returned to his place, he again asked for the spreadsheet of food so as to eat. He had a son. He said, 'O father, have you not eaten at the invitation of the sultan?' He said: [According to him] I have eaten nothing that would be useful. [The king said: 'Perform also the compensatory prayer as I have performed nothing that would be useful.']

Mawl? who was one of the great mystics and ascetics of his time also mentions, bitterly and disparagingly, the ascetics and their narrow-mindedness. In the course of the story of an ascetic who had intrusively broken the jug of wine of an emir and had then run away, Mawl? narrates the story thus in the words of the ascetic's neighbors who had come to intercede on his behalf:]

What should he know about enjoining (others) to do right?

He is curiously seeking notoriety and fame, In order that by means of this hypocrisy he may make a position for himself And somehow make himself conspicuous; For in truth he has no talent save this alone, That he plays the hypocrite to all and sundry.

At any rate, much has been said about asceticism and ascetic in our mystic and critical literature which we shall pass over. The only important point is that from this perspective, ascetics have not been quite popular. Nowadays, asceticism in this sense is also not acceptable. It is enough for us to imagine that one day all the people of the society decide to become ascetics. That is, family units would disintegrate, social life would be deranged; economic activity would stagnate; everyone would be heading toward the mountains and jungles, lurking in the corner of prosperity, and in pursuit of managing his own affairs. Undoubtedly, asceticism in this sense is not only unethical at the individual level but also a defect, and in the political arena, it is baseness and a source of societal backwardness. Then, what is meant by asceticism and simple living which has been much mentioned in the speeches of the Infallible Ones ('a) and which Imam Khomeini also used to repeat so often while addressing the government officials?

Positive Asceticism

Here, in order to present a correct picture of the ideal Islamic asceticism, we will state its features and facets in the course of some questions and answers: By citing reference in the Holy Qur'an, Imam 'Ali' a), who was among the pioneering figures of asceticism during his time, describes asceticism in this manner: The whole of asceticism is confined between two

expressions of the Qur'an. Allah, the Glorified, says: That ye grieve not for the sake of that which hath escaped you, nor yet exult because of that which hath been given.

Whoever does not grieve over what he misses and does not revel over what comes to him, acquires asceticism from both its sides. As such, asceticism has no relation whatsoever to indigence and mendicancy. Asceticism is a psychological state and a sort of inner freedom. In this respect, the ascetic is one who remains so even if he is affluent and if he loses all his possessions, he will not look back on his past and fret about it. He is such a master of himself that if he were given the whole world, he would still not lose nor forget himself. In fact, asceticism is a sort of mastery and control over oneself and regulation of one's emotions. In this sense, not only can an indigent man not be an ascetic; but, in order for one to know whether he is an ascetic or not, he should have wealth.

The indigent man has nothing to lose. We can only speak about asceticism when one has wealth and then lose it but is still able to preserve and maintain his spiritual mastery. Imam 'Ali' a) who so describes asceticism, though he led an ascetic life, was a productive person, and even during the time of his caliphate and amidst all his engagements and worries, he never gave up his economic activities.

Throughout his life, he worked just like other laborers did, but not for himself, rather for pious purposes. On the very day that the people swore their allegiance to him, he took his spade and pick-axe in hand and went to finish a job he was doing. He was digging a well, digging it with his own hands. And to whom were congratulations to be extended when water sprung forth? He said that congratulations were to be given to those who would inherit this and asked that he be brought a pen and paper so that there and then he could dedicate the well to pious purposes.

Therefore, asceticism has no direct bearing on indigence. Asceticism implies freedom from want, not dependency and parasitism. A beggar who desires riches is not an ascetic. But a wealthy man who has no attachment to his wealth is an ascetic. As such, asceticism means to use amenities as needed and not beyond that. Asceticism connotes enjoyment of the blessings to attain goals, and not making blessings the goals. In this sense, asceticism is the opposite of lavishness. But, "Lavishness is something that the people are in quest for, even though they may have the least need for it."

Is asceticism abstention from the blessings?

Well, some have thought that asceticism means abstention from the blessings and legitimate enjoyments and imagined that the ascetic is he who refrains from eating, drinking and wearing clothes except what is needed for survival. The story of Sufyath-Thawr the ascetic who found

fault with Imam as-Sadiq ('a) for wearing a beautiful garment, is expressive of this wrong view on asceticism. With this same thinking, 'Asim ibn Ziy'al-H?th?bandoned his wife and child, retreated to a corner, closed his eyes to all the divine favours, and considered all these acts as values. But Imam 'Ali' a) rescued him from his wrong conception, viewing it as the result of Satanic inculcations and said to him: "Do you believe that if you use those things which Allah has made lawful for you, He will dislike you?"

In refuting this inadmissible notion, the Holy Qur'an states: "Say: Who hath forbidden the adornment of Allah which He hath brought forth for His bondmen, and the good things of His providing? Say: Such will be only for those who believed during the life of the world." Similarly, the Qur'an emphatically urges the believers to be pure and smart and thus commands them: "Look to your adornment at every place of worship, and eat and drink, but be not prodigal." Basically, from this perspective refraining from eating and drinking cannot be considered a value. The believers are well-groomed, and they eat and drink commensurate to their vital needs. What has been forbidden to them is extravagance, and in today's jargon, 'wasting the favours of God,' and not 'depriving oneself of the favours.' A cursory glance at the lives of the Infallible Ones ('a) illustrates this approach.

The Most Noble Messenger (s) was so fond of applying perfume that he would skip his supper so as to procure his needed perfume. If perfume was not at his disposal, he would soak the perfumed scarf of his wife and rub his face with it so as to be perfumed. Likewise, before going out he would always look at himself in the mirror or water, and groom himself to such an extent as to always be an embodiment of adornment and dressing well. He would apply so much perfume that his beard had turned white as a result.

Well, this has been the tradition and way of the true ascetics. Now, let us compare it with that of D?d at*-T&?39;ho used to assert that he had not enough time to comb or trim his disheveled beard, or with that of the other (person) who was pleased with the lousiness of his clothes, or that of another, that is, M?k ibn D?r who claimed to have not eaten meat for twenty years, about which he was proud, saying: "I do not know the meaning of the statement that if a man does not eat meat for forty days, his intelligence is diminished.

I have not eaten meat for twenty years and my intelligence increases every day." Apparently, it refers to a had? attributed to the Most Noble Messenger (s) which states: "Whoever would not eat meat for forty days, the call to prayer [az?/i>] should be recited again near his ear."

Another story is narrated about this M?k which, if assumed to be true, not only does not confirm any value for him, but is also incompatible with the indisputable principles of religion.

The story is as follows: For forty years he [M?k] lived in Basrah and never ate fresh dates. When the season of ripe dates came around he would say, 'People of Basrah, behold, my belly has not shrunk from not eating them, and you who eat them daily-your bellies have not become any larger.

' After forty years he was assailed by a mood of restlessness. However hard he tried, he could not withstand the craving for fresh dates. Finally after some days, during which the desire daily increased while he constantly denied his appetite, he could resist no more the importunity of his carnal soul.

'I will not eat fresh dates,' he protested. 'Either kill me, or die!'

That night a heavenly voice spoke.

'You must eat some dates. Free your carnal soul from bondage.'

At this response his carnal soul, finding the opportunity, began to shout.

'If you want dates,' M?k said, 'fast for a week without breakfasting once, and pray all night.

Then I will give you some.'

This contented his carnal soul. For a whole week he prayed all night and fasted all day. Then he went to the market and bought some dates, and betook himself to the mosque to eat them.

A boy shouted from the rooftop.

'Father! A Jew has bought dates and is going to the mosque to eat them.'

'What business has a Jew in the mosque?' the man exclaimed. And he ran to see who the Jew might be. Beholding M?k, he fell at his feet. 'What were those words the boy uttered?' M?k demanded.

'Excuse him, master,' the boy's father pleaded. 'He is only a child, and does not understand. In our quarter many Jews live. We are constantly fasting, and our children see the Jews eating by day. So they suppose that everyone who eats anything by day is a Jew. What he said he said in ignorance. Forgive him!'

When M?k heard this, a fire consumed his soul. He realized that the child was inspired to speak as he had.

'Lord God,' he cried, 'I had not eaten any dates, and Thou didst call me a Jew by the tongue of an innocent child. If I eat the dates, Thou wilt proclaim me an unbeliever. By Thy glory, if I ever eat any dates!'

Obviously, it was the hidden voice which had been making fun of him. Besides, day and night fasting for seven whole days, even though it is possible, is certainly forbidden [har?/i>] and can be considered an 'uninterrupted fasting' [r??-ye wis?/i>], which Islam has sternly prohibited. Anyway, we have plenty of similar stories. But no matter what we call them, we cannot regard

them as asceticism that is one of the teachings of the Infallibles ('a). The Messenger of God (s) as well as other Infallibles ('a) would eat meat, dates, and other permissible foodstuffs. They did not prohibit for themselves anything which God had permitted for them. In the heat of the Battle of Jamal, Imam 'Ali' (a) asked for water but they brought him honey syrup. He drank it and said that the honey is that of T'if.

This tranquility and control which such a war failed to disturb the Imam's ('a) mind, surprised others, and 'Abdullah ibn Ja'far, paternal nephew of the Imam ('a), asked him ('a), "In such a situation, how could you identify the place of origin of the honey just by taste?" He ('a) replied, "My son, I swear to God, none of the world's affairs has ever satisfied your uncle."

Even if the Imam ('a) used to refrain from eating food or wearing (expensive) clothes, it had definitely a social philosophy and his action was not inappropriate. In fact, it was considered a lesson and education for the governors. After the Imam was informed that his governor in Basrah, Uthman ibn al-Hunayf, had accepted the invitation of one of the affluent men of the city to a banquet, he ('a) in the course of a letter, admonished him, dissuaded him from repeating such actions,

and reminded him that he ('a) who is the caliph of the Muslims has worn two garments and sufficed himself with two loaves of bread, and he urged the state officials to follow this practice. He ('a) emphasized that this abstinence and asceticism did not arise from indigence and mendicancy and [then, he ('a) said:]

If I wished I could have taken the way leading toward [worldly pleasures like] pure honey, wheat germ and silk clothes but it cannot be that my passions lead me and greed take me to choosing good meals while in the Hijaz or in Yamah there may be people who have no hope of getting bread or who do not have a full meal.

This abstinence shows the height of his humanity. The Imam led an austere life because he felt that possibly others were not be able to dress and drink as they liked. This was very different from what Malik ibn Dhar did—a kind of self-torment.

In another instance, the Imam ('a) expounds the philosophy behind this self-mortification. As he ('a) had prohibited 'Abdullah ibn Zayd from seclusion and self-mortification, the latter asked, "Why are you so austere in your own case?" He ('a) replied, "Woe be to you, I am not like you. Certainly, Allah, the Sublime, has made it obligatory on true leaders to live like the poor people, so that they are not tormented by their poverty." And he ('a) deemed it endurable.

Thus, as he ('a) himself saw that one of his companions had built a huge house, he ('a) told him that he did not need a house of such a vast size unless it was for entertaining visitors and establishing relations with kinsmen; and would be used as a means of social interaction and

helping others.

Therefore, asceticism does not mean poverty and indigence, or depriving oneself of the [divinely-endowed] favours, but a sort of independence and detachment from worldly possessions, absence of attachment, and in the words of H?z, freedom from any 'color' of attachment: I am slave of he under the sky (the world) Who is free from any color of attachment.

Is asceticism a hindrance to economic activity?

Some have believed that asceticism means solitude and seclusion, and have concluded that it is discordant with any kind of economic activity, and consequently, social progress. It is because they think that asceticism summons man to eat and drink less, be indifferent to the world and to minimize desires, while the prerequisite of any type of economic activity and social development is long-term planning and active presence in the society. So, they conclude that if all the people are supposed to be ascetic then there will be no sign of the bustle of economic activities, and expansion and progress of the society.

Of course, undoubtedly, some have taken asceticism to mean seclusion, monasticism and solitude. The point must not be overlooked that sometimes, in the different phases of the life of man, seclusion is needed and by remaining alone, man can closet and assess, himself. As such, in our religious tradition i'tik? [seclusion in the mosque for prayer and other devotional acts] has a special status.

The Messenger of God (s) would sometimes go to the cave of Hir[1 1/2]span>, and sometimes seclude himself in the mosque and meditate; but it was only for a short period. In reality, seclusion is a medication and a kind of short-term relaxation; not a strategy for one's life. In the words of Will Durant, "Seclusion is a medication and a sort of therapy through abstinence; but it cannot be food. As what Goethe had said, once and for ever, "Human habits and disposition grow only amidst the waves and confusion of this world."

So, asceticism should not be equated with mere seclusion. Consequently, apart from not being an impediment to economic activity, asceticism, with the magnanimity that it creates in man and warns him of excessive elation over his possessions can be a promoter of economic activity.

This is especially true if the economic activity is a value and a kind of religious worship and devotion [ib?h]. With the notion that economic activity is discordant with devotion and reliance on God [tawakkul], some companions of the Infallibles ('a) abandoned all endeavor and stayed in their houses. But the Holy Infallibles ('a) dissuaded them from this act and said that the supplications of such persons will not be granted and that everybody should exert efforts to

find his sustenance.

One of these persons asked Imam as-Sadiq ('a) to pray for him and ask God to give him sustenance without the need for him to exert any effort. He ('a) said, "I will not pray for you as God has commanded you to strive in pursuit of sustenance." Similarly, the Messenger of God

(s) said, "Worship has seventy parts, among which the most superior is the search for permissible [halal] sustenance." Economic activity from the viewpoint of Imam as-Sadiq ('a) is so blessed that he commanded Hisham that even "If you saw a war break out and the opposing forces take up positions, you should not stop your economic activities."

We have also dwelt on the story of Imam as-Sadiq ('a) busy working in extreme heat and being subjected to his companions' objection. And we have also heard his reply.

On the other hand, poverty, according to Islam, is not a value; it is, rather, a matter of disgrace.

Thus, in the supplications of the Infallibles ('a) refuge has been sought in God from it. Imam 'Ali ('a) calls destitution as the greatest death. He ('a) says to his son, Muhammad ibn Hanafiyyah: "O' my son, I fear lest destitution overtakes you. So, you should seek Allah's protection from it, because destitution is deficiency of religious belief, perplexity of intelligence, and it is conducive to hatred of obstinate people."

Therefore, the very person who views asceticism as a value and invites people to it, brands destitution as loathsome and the source of defilement of religion and the intellect. As such, a connection between asceticism and destitution cannot be established except that of duality and alienation. Well, the question is: Will the emergence of asceticism at the general level not obstruct economic activities? The answer is 'no'. Even nowadays there are countries where asceticism is embedded in the depth of their culture, but, at the same time, are enjoying the peak of economic prosperity and boom. We are referring to Japan. In the culture of Japan, what can be approximately regarded as the equivalent of asceticism of our religion is wabi. Wabi means "not being bound to the things of this world such as wealth, power and fame and, notwithstanding all this, deeply experiencing the most precious things that are above time, place and status."

These are the words expressed by one of the most notable Japanese culturologists and masters of Zen, who is himself a devotee of this way of life. "Wabi spells out the totality of Japanese culture."

It is present in all aspects of the individual and social life of the Japanese and has left its marks on the architecture, industry and other facets of today's life in Japan. Even the wealthy Japanese, who devote their entire life to production and make investment again and again, lead mostly ascetic lives, based on the wabi doctrine. They work and produce wealth as they regard

it as holy and blessed. At the same time, they lead ascetic and disciplined lives. They refrain from profligacy in their lives as they believe in the doctrine of wabi. It is better for us to see what the chairman of the board of directors of the huge Daewoo Organization has to say about this matter. Kim Wu Chung, who is a South Korean and one of the most hard-working economic figures, reproaches the profligacy of some of his countrymen and summons them to learn from the Japanese: Albeit the standard of living of the Japanese is far higher than ours, their life is far more moderate. Even the high-ranking directors of giant Japanese corporations live in 100-130 meter houses with very simple furniture. The chairman of the board of directors of the eminent Toshiba Company has an annual salary of approximately 100 million yen, but he lives in an 83-meter house. His monthly expenses do not also exceed 15,000 yen, but in [South] Korea some managers of small companies have 330-meter houses with luxurious imported equipment and furniture.

These words have been uttered by someone who himself has spent almost his entire life in travel, signing contracts and production of wealth. He says that he experiences joy in increasing the wealth of his country and is not so much in pursuit of personal enjoyment from his wealth and prosperity. After emphasizing the intensification of economic activity, he recommends, "Let us be hard-working and faithful." According to this economic icon, [t]he Japanese are unrivalled in saving and frugality. It is this very saving and frugality that has transformed Japan into one of the richest nations on earth today. Sometimes, things must be learned from others and we have no alternative but to be ashamed of the frugality and modest life of the Japanese.

Then, he urges the people of [South] Korea: Therefore, the more your possession is, the more you should be frugal in your living, for, through frugality and diligence you are responsible in leading your society toward what is desirable and wholesome. You should bear in mind that one of the greatest hindrances in the progress of every society is immoderation and over-consumption.

Therefore, asceticism is a value, and apart from not being incompatible with other values such as work and activity, it is even a requisite for them. Now, we understand the utility and importance of asceticism. At this juncture, it is a good idea to indicate the three fundamental elements of Islamic asceticism, which the late Martyr Mut'ahhar^{as} pointed out. According to him, the essential elements of asceticism are as follows: (1) Natural and physical enjoyments are not the sole factors of obtaining happiness; (2) Individual destiny is not separate from that of society;

(3) While the soul is in union with the body, it is loftier than the latter. With the same notion of asceticism and positive outlook on it, the Imam urges the government officials to behave ascetically in their lives, take simple living as their motto and, in this path, take Imam 'Ali' a) as their leader and model.

What is the political utility of asceticism?

From the political perspective, asceticism and simple living are not merely moral virtues; rather they are political necessities. One can enter the political arena and employ ethical politics provided he does not have attachment and devotion to materialism, position and power. To the extent that one becomes dependent, the possibility of his 'movement' and progress will decrease by the same degree.

Try to consider a mountaineer who wants to climb a summit which can be conquered (climbed) within one night. If this mountaineer is really well-experienced, he will only bring with him the things that he will need for one day and one night and will bring only a maximum of four meals.

Now, the more this person increases the weight of his knapsack, the harder his climb will be, and traversing the route, he will become more tired. Inexperienced and neophyte mountaineers have had this bitter experience time and again of bringing along with them equipment that was more than needed and weighed heavily on their shoulders, making them wish that they had set out with a lighter load.

The same is true in the political arena. Those who have many financial, emotional, social, and economic attachments have less chance of keeping their boat on an even keel along this tumultuous river. This aside, the more one has attachment to and affection for something, the more is his chance of being deceived and of forgetting his objective. In fact, bullets do not kill the statesmen; rather, it is the sugar-coated bullets that destroy them.

A glance at history bears witness to the claim that so many statesmen were seduced by the sight of gold or the illusion of power and splendor, and betrayed their ideals and country. In contrast, history shows that the only statesmen who succeeded were those who had taken simple living as their motto and weapon. From among our religious narratives, Imam 'Ali' a) can be mentioned the story of this great man being frequently told and retold.

From among the contemporaries, Gandhi is worth mentioning. A man with a few meters of hand-woven canvas named khadi covering his body, a manual spinning machine and a milking goat, succeeded in obtaining the independence of India and overawed British colonialism with his spiritual power. In the contemporary history of Iran, the late Sayyid Hasan Mudarris can be mentioned. He was a person with respect to whom persons such as Rida stood helpless. The latter

asked the former, "Sayyid, what do you want from me?" He answered, "I want you to be no more [in the position of power]." It was only due to his unflinching faith, simple living, and ascetic life that Mudarris succeeded in not being swayed by power and splendor and in not forgetting his goals. The Imam describes the spiritual strength of Mudarris and reminisces about him with great admiration:

You have noticed and seen the history of the late Mudarris who was a very slim Sayyid [having], I say, a canvas garment (which is one of the abusive words coined by the poet for him-'clad in canvas trousers'). A person like this stood against the brutality (which was such) that whoever is aware of those times knows that the time of Rid'h? was not the same as that of Muhammad Rid'h? At the time when there reigned tyranny, with which our history is perhaps less acquainted, he stood up to such a person (the tyrant). In the Majlis (Parliament). (Rid'h? once asked him, 'What do you want from me?' He replied, 'I wish you to be no more [in the position of power]; I wish you no more [in power]'. This person. used to come to Sepahs'r Madrasah [theology school]. to give lectures.

One day I attended his class; it appeared that he had nothing else to do; a mere theologian engaged in teaching. He had such a strength of character. Even in the days when he used to attend the Majlis sessions, he was held in high esteem by everybody. It seemed as if the Parliament was waiting for Mudarris to come. Although they were not well disposed toward him, it was as if the Parliament felt that something was missing whenever Mudarris was not there. But once he came, it was as though something new had happened. What was the reason for this?

It was owing to the fact that he was a person who paid no heed to position, possessions and the like. He paid no heed to anything; no position was able to attract him. Why was it so? It was because he was upright; he was not attached to carnal desires. And neither was he afraid of anyone. It was because he was free from carnal desires. He was honest; he was not dependent [on anything and anybody].

Therefore, political courage, mental freedom, intelligence, and power of practical innovation emerge only when the politician is free and upright [v?steh] and not dependent [v?steh]-this exactly is asceticism. From this perspective, asceticism does not mean not eating, drinking and wearing (beautiful) clothes. Basically, this individual level is problematic. At the highest level, asceticism is that very freedom and independence that emerges only when the person disengages himself from his diverse attachments. The Most Noble Messenger (s), who was able to cleanse the entire Arabian Peninsula from the pollution of polytheism, succeeded due to the very fact that,

apart from divine assistance, he (s) was free from various attachments; he was upright and free of want; notwithstanding all his authority and in spite of the fact that he was the vicegerent of God [khalīfah], everybody accepted him; when he was sitting in the mosque, they were not able to recognize him; one who entered (the mosque) did not recognize him for there was no such thing as sitting in 'superior' or 'inferior' places in the mosque. Simple living from the Imam's viewpoint is discussed as one of the pillars of governmental politics. After indicating the simple lifestyle of Imam 'Ali (a) and regarding it as the model, he says: That which we want is this. In Iran we want it to be so that when the head of state of some country, for example, the President or Prime Minister, is among the people, there should be no such privilege for him that the people have to step aside with 'ahs' and 'ohs'. In the opinion of the Messenger of God (s) who was the most authoritative individual in the Muslim society, "His (material) condition in life was lower than the common people who were then living in Medina."

From the Imam's viewpoint, not only does simple living ensure the independence of political authorities, but also secures their political future. If one day the officials abandon their simple lifestyle, they will be forsaken by the people. While addressing the clergymen, he would say: Praise be to God that, today, there is nothing wrong in dealing with political issues; however, you should bear in mind that all are watching you; Therefore, you must preserve your image as scholars. Live modestly, exactly like the 'ulamā [religious scholars] of the past. If one day your living standards exceed those of the common people, then, sooner or later, you will be rejected and ostracized.

He staunchly opposed lavishness and would enumerate, one by one, its negative effects. Some of the consequences of lavishness are, according to him, ostracism by the people, dependency and attachment, drifting away from spiritualities, fallen reputations and, finally, spiritual debasement. Even the responsible leaders of society should not engage in lavish formalities on the excuse of their own security. "Even those who want to protect themselves should realize that sometimes a Peykan (automobile) could be safer for them than any other vehicle." Some erroneously think that lavishness is a symbol of power, and the more lavish we are in life, the more powerful we are. This notion on the alleged relationship between lavishness and authority has led to the issue of lavishness, or what is called 'power symbols', being brought into administrative circles and international relations. One, who thinks of luxury from this angle, and as a political or administrative necessity, endeavors to possess all symbols of power such as costly tables and chairs, showy cars, and palatial mansions. These they use to show their personal or national power.

Those who are after such excuses are, actually, deceiving and covering up their concealed desires. One thing certain is that, in the long run, all those who have been engaged in the power play (of politics) and have employed its symbols have gradually been affected and tainted by these symbols. Thus, these are facilities and symbols that are not without their (unsavory) consequences. In fact, they take firm control of the mentality and psyche of man. In essence, once the politician gets used to simple living he will not be dejected and dispirited by any failure, and will not experience a sense of emptiness or loss. "We should live in such a way that we will not rue the things that were taken from us."

In the Imam's code of ethics, asceticism and simple living has such a lofty status that it is the axis and cornerstone of every kind of movement for independence and dignity. Anyone who likes to tread safely the tortuous, dreadful and horrendous path of politics should be an ascetic and accustomed to simple living.

He should know that the desert tree which receives a lesser amount of water is more resilient.

It seems as if, the Imam has obtained this viewpoint by reflecting on the utterance of our master 'Ali' a) who says, "Remember that the tree of the forest is the best for timber, while green twigs have soft barks, and the wild bushes are quick to kindle but slow in dying off."

It is with this perception that Imam Khomeini regards simple living as the key to success and the secret of felicity and honor in both the worlds, saying: If you want to stand fearless and intrepid against falsehood; to defend the truth; and the superpowers, their advanced weapons, the devils, and their conspiracies not to affect you mentally; and not drive you away from the scene, get yourself accustomed to simple living and refrain from having fondness for riches and position. Most of the great men who have rendered remarkable services to their nations have lived modestly and have been uninterested in the vanities of the world.

Those who were and are captives of mean carnal and bestial desires are willing to endure hardship and humiliation to preserve or obtain them (all that they long for). In front of satanic forces and powers they are humble and meek while in relation to the weak masses of people they are despotic and cruel. But the upright ones are contrary to them owing to the fact that, for them, human and Islamic values cannot be preserved through an aristocratic and consumerist lifestyle.

Therefore, from the Imam's perspective, asceticism and simple living are deemed part of the triple pillars of ethical politics. The one who can tread this path is like Ya'qub Layth as-Saffi who would suffice with mere bread and onion, and reckon ascetic life as his motto so as to be counted as a formidable threat to the 'Abbasid caliphate