



Perils of Speech: Praising Others ¹

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The second principle: Foibles of the tongue [*sharr al-kalām*] [and in it] The fifth danger: Praising others.

This is a common trait observed in people when they are in the presence of aristocrats (*muḥtashimīn*) and noblemen of worldly stature. It is also the habit of speechmakers and the preachers that they praise the rich and wealthy who frequent their gatherings. There are six pitfalls in praise. Four for the adulator and two for the one who is being praised.

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The four hazards for the adulator are:

- that he may praise exceedingly and thereby say untrue things; he thus becomes a liar.
- that he may show admiration and say things though he doesn't really believe in them; he is then a hypocrite and a fawner.
- that he may say things which he doesn't really know about the person. Things like 'he is a very just man' or 'he is a very pious and God fearing person' even though he doesn't know such things for sure. A man praised another in front of RasūlAllāh ﷺ. So he said: 'Woe unto you! You have slashed his neck'. If at all anyone would praise his brother, he should say: 'In my opinion, he is such and such and Allāh knows best.'
- that he may make the one he praises gleeful. If it is the praise of a vile man or a tyrant, he has committed a sin by making him happy. RasūlAllāh ﷺ said: 'Allāh Ta'ālā is angry when a transgressor (*fāsiq*) is praised.' Al-Ḥasan has said: 'Whosoever prayed for the long life of a transgressor is as if he wishes that Allāh ta'ālā should be disobeyed'. A transgressor and a tyrant should be denigrated so that he realizes that transgression and oppression as odious and abhorrent attributes.

¹ Excerpted from *Kitāb al-Arba`in fī Usūluddīn*

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As for the one who is praised, the hazards are:

- that such praise could make him haughty and conceited which are both destructive traits. It is therefore, that RasūlAllāh ﷺ said: ‘You have slashed your friend’s neck.’
- secondly, he might be gratified to hear such praise and become complacent and self-satisfied, and further become lax and negligent. RasūlAllāh ﷺ said: ‘If a man went to another with a sharp knife, [to hurt him] it would be better than praising him in his face.’

However, if praise is free from these dangers for both who praises and the praised, there is no harm in it. Rather, it may even be desirable at times. RasūlAllāh ﷺ said: ‘If the faith (*īmān*) of Abū Bakr was measured against the faith of the universe, it would outweigh them all.’ And he also said ﷺ: ‘If I were not the last Prophet, O `Umar, you would have been sent as a Prophet.’ He has praised many of his companions in a similar fashion, since he knew that this would make them happy but not conceited.

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It is necessary for the one being praised to ponder whether his end has been vouchsafed; he should think about how *riyā`a* or show creeps up discreetly in one’s actions; one must remember the vile and ugly things that are deep in oneself, hidden from others; not the least of which are instigations of *nafs* and wild thoughts. One should think that if my admirer knows all this he would have not praised me. It is necessary to show one’s displeasure when praised and also dislike praise from his heart.

This is what is pointed out in the ḥadith when RasūlAllāh ﷺ said: ‘Throw dust in the face of those who praise.’² A pious man said when he was praised: ‘O Allāh, this slave of yours wants to come closer to me by earning your displeasure; and bear witness that I am displeased with him’

Sayyiduna ‘Alī ؑ said when he was praised: ‘O Allāh, forgive me that which they do not know; do not hold me accountable for what they say and make me a better man than what they imagine me to be.’³



² *uḥṭhu`turāba fī wujūh al- maddāḥīn*

³ *allāhumma ighfir lī mā lā ya`lamūn; wa lā tu-ākhidhnī bimā yaqūlūn; waj`alnī khayran min mā yazunnūn*