

24/05/1997

Cleanliness is the key to purity of heart, mind and soul

Datuk Dr Syed Othman Alhabshi

MOST, if not all people, prefer clean to dirty things. We do not go to the same dirty place twice. Even animals are often found cleaning themselves.

The media have repeatedly highlighted illegal garbage dumping. A recent observation by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that our attitudes towards cleanliness are no different from those in poor countries, despite significant improvements in our incomes, should not be taken lightly. In fact we should congratulate the Umno supreme council for raising the subject at one of their meetings.

When I was in primary school, I remember being required to come on Saturdays to clean the school compound. The headmaster used to supervise us with a big cane. He would blow his whistle after every 10 minutes or so, and we would rush to show him the rubbish that we had collected in the given time.

If we did not bring enough rubbish, we would receive a stroke of the cane on each hand. There was no running away because he would stand in the middle of the compound where he could see most, if not all of us.

I do not think I ever enjoyed the session, because I was so small and could not hold much rubbish in my hands. I would often look for big leaves or old newspapers, so that it would seem as if I had collected quite a lot. But I believe it was the training that was important.

Cleanliness is an important virtue. A person who values cleanliness cannot stand to see anything that is not clean, whether in the home or elsewhere. Such a person will take the trouble to see to it that everything is clean and tidy.

We need to continuously work hard to remain clean, simply because things get dirty all the time. This requires us to be meticulous and thorough.

Thus we see how the virtue of cleanliness contributes in developing a positive attitude towards work. Work becomes a joy and we do not feel satisfied until we have given our best. The result is often quality work.

Cleanliness is not confined to physical matters. In fact, it is our spirit or soul that actually determines to what extent we should strive to be clean. The more we strive the more satisfying it is. A clean soul would also require a clean stomach, in the sense that we should choose only good and clean food to satisfy our hunger.

When we talk of clean food, this also entails the proper means of obtaining such food. It should be what is rightfully ours and not wrongfully taken from someone else.

In Islam, for instance what is not due to us is obviously forbidden. Consuming something that comes from a forbidden source is obviously forbidden. The Prophet has said that the part of the body that grows out of forbidden food will find itself in hell fire.

We have to ensure that our income is rightfully ours, so that we feel comfortable using it to feed our families. Money generated from forbidden sources will darken our souls. If we continue to consume food bought with such money, we will no longer feel uncomfortable about earning or receiving any money from forbidden sources. Our soul is no longer clean.

I remember that Sayyidina Abu Bakr As-Siddiq, the first Caliph of Islam, drank some milk brought home by his servant. He was not sure where the milk had come from and queried his servant about its origins. Not being satisfied with the answer, he put his fingers down his throat and vomited. He did that to ensure he did not consume anything that was not only

forbidden but also doubtful.

Apart from the stomach, we should also take pains to ensure the heart is clean. Not the physical heart but the spiritual heart that partakes in determining what is good and pure and what is bad and impure.

A clean heart is essential in developing a good character. We often refer to a good person as kind, nice pleasant, caring, sincere, honest and other positive attributes only after knowing him for some time. Such attributes or values surely emanate from a clean heart. Unless he is a sham, we would never expect him to cheat or lie to us. In fact, he would normally be helpful and selfless, easy to work and get along with. We would enjoy his company and feel very much at ease with him. This is the kind of person who commands respect and trust.

Finally, there is the cleanliness of the mind. It is the mind that produces a sound and healthy intellect. A clean mind will reason and rationalise things to produce amicable results.

People with clean minds will not scheme, nor do things only to their advantage. Those who do can be vindictive, cruel and even uncompromising. People have to be very careful with them because they are unpredictable. They are also suspicious of others because they tend to assume that others behave like them too.

To sum up, cleanliness in the physical sense is indeed the manifestation of what is in the heart and mind. Physical cleanliness will act on the soul in the sense that it produces a degree of spiritual satisfaction. When the soul is satisfied, it will react and demand more cleanliness. This action and reaction between the body and the soul will go on producing a higher degree of satisfaction in the soul and an improved state of bodily cleanliness. At the same time, cleanliness of the soul is very much affected by the cleanliness of the stomach. Clean food is essential to produce a pure soul.

Cleanliness is thus an essential ingredient in producing quality human beings who will generate quality work. No wonder the Prophet has been reported to have said, "cleanliness is part of faith". One who is unclean either in the sense of the body or the spirit has very weak faith. This is a very important teaching of the Prophet who demands that Muslims should practise cleanliness in every aspect of life. They have to cleanse themselves by making ablutions to prepare for daily prayers, to wear clean clothing and to ensure that the place of prayer is clean too.

It is unfortunate that we do not extend this practice beyond religious rituals.

Deputy Director-General,
Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia

(END)