

Imaam Abu Hanifa (RA): His Life and works

An excerpt from the English Translation of Allamah Shibli Naumani's "Sirat-e-Nu'man"

The writers of the Tadhkirahs (biographical memoirs) in which Imam Abu Hanifah figures, have allowed their admiration for him to make them portray his character and personal habits with so much palpable exaggeration that after reading their accounts, one finds it hard to visualize what he was really like. Here are few of the incredible things they mention: For forty years he said his morning prayers with the wudu (ritual ablution) that he had performed for his 'isha prayer (the night prayer). For thirty years on end he fasted from day to day. He completed seven thousand readings of the Qur'an at the place where he died. There having been found in the canal at Kufah a piece of meat about which it could not be ascertained whether or not it was part of a lawfully slaughtered animal, he abstained from eating fish for a long time for fear that the fish, which was long-lived, may have eaten of that piece of meat. For similar reasons he gave up eating goat's meat. His personal expenditure was equivalent to ten annas a month only. There are many other fantastic stories of the same kind current about him. The surprising thing is that our historians regard impossible things of this kind as real evidence of the Imam's spiritual attainments although these have not been historically established and, in any case, are no proof of spiritual or moral excellence.

I must admit that the facts I have accepted about the Imam's personality and way of life are also derived from these very biographical memoirs; but then every incident or fact mentioned in a book has to be considered on its own merits. In regard to ordinary incidents the ordinary kind of evidence is sufficient; but so far as extraordinary things of the kind that I am speaking of are concerned, they need some authority absolutely beyond doubt; in fact, they need to conform to something more than the conditions to be fulfilled by a Hadith before it can be accepted as sahih (authentic), marfu' (connected with a saying or an act of the Prophet) and muttasil (uninterruptedly continuous) -- and must also stand examination in accordance with the principles of scrutiny (dirayat). When one thinks of the Imam's sagacity and keen intellect, of which we have first-hand proof, one cannot believe his doing things which even a rabid anchorite would not do.

An accurate, though sketchy, portrait of the Imam's personality is to be found in the description that Qadi Abu Yusuf gave of him to Harun al-Rashid at the latter's request. "As far as I know," said the Qadi, "Abu Hanifah was extremely pious, avoided forbidden things, remained silent and absorbed in his thoughts most of the time, and answered a question only if he knew the answer. He was very generous

and self-respecting, never asked a favour of anybody, shunned the company of the worldly-minded and held worldly power and position in contempt. He avoided slander and only talked well of people. He was a man of profound learning and was as generous with his knowledge as with his money." On hearing this account, Harun al-Rashid observed, "You have described a great and good man." To superficial observers, the qualities described by Qadi Abu Yusuf may not appear to be of much significance, but connoisseurs of the spiritual character know that, easy as this way of life may look, it is very difficult to follow and as praiseworthy as it is difficult.

Along with beauty of character God had endowed the Imam with good looks. He had a medium height, handsome features and a well-proportioned figure. His way of speaking was pleasing and his voice loud and clear. When he spoke on a problem he did so with such eloquence and clarity that, no matter how complicated it was, it became simplified.

He was a man of good taste and liked to dress well. Sometimes he even put on ermine jubbahs Abu Muti' Balkhi, one of his pupils, mentions that on one occasion he found him dressed in a shirt and mantle which could not have cost less than four hundred dirhams. One day he borrowed the mantle of Nasr b. Muhammad, who called on him when he was getting ready to go out. On coming back, he complained that he had felt ashamed of the mantle because it was dirty. Nasr had bought it for five dinars and was proud of it. He was, therefore, surprised at the Imam's complaint, but he understood the reason for it when, a few days later, he found the Imam wearing a mantle which could not have cost less than thirty dinars.

The Caliph Mansur had invented a special straw cap covered with black cloth for his courtiers to wear. The cap was so very tall that it provoked the poet Abu Dalamah into saying humorously, "We were expecting some enhancement from the Caliph. So he has enhanced the length of caps."

Although the Imam kept away from the Caliph's court as much as he could, yet he did not mind occasionally wearing the new courtiers' cap. In fact, it raised eyebrows in learned circles that he sometimes had seven or eight of the caps in his wardrobe, although for the beau monde this was nothing to marvel at.

In some other matters too, the Imam's style of living was quite different from that of the common run of 'ulama'. Most of the contemporary 'ulama' were stipendiaries of the Caliph or of rich courtiers, and did not consider this as a thing to be apologetic about. Somebody having taunted Qadi Ibn 'Abd al-Barr with being a stipendiary of wealthy people, he replied by citing the example of a number of Companions, Tabi'in and Tab' Tabi'in who had lived on the generosity

of the rich. However, I do not consider this as perhaps some modern-minded people do, to be tantamount to idleness or parasitism. Teaching was not yet a salaried profession. The 'ulama' used to teach honorarily either at their own homes or in mosques -- a system which has not yet been surpassed in extensiveness and usefulness. What these honorary teachers received from their rich patrons by way of regular stipends or occasional gifts could well be regarded as a salary. All the same, it cannot be denied that it was this practice which in course of time grew into the system of professional and hereditary religious preceptors (Pirs), parasites living by exploiting people's credulity, which has rendered a large part of the Muslim population idle.

There is no doubt that Abu Hanifah was strongly opposed to the practice, and he was right in the light of its subsequent development. One great advantage that accrued to him from his being attached to nobody was that he could express his true opinions without fear or favour. However independent-minded and frank a man may be, he cannot help being influenced by those from whom he accepts favours. Abu Hanifah never accepted a favour from anybody throughout his life, and so he retained his independence. He sometimes used to mention this fact too.

Ibn Hubairah, governor of Kufah and a man of renown, once said to Abu Hanifah, "I would consider it a favour if you could come and see me occasionally." "What is the point in my visiting you?" replied the Imam. "If you treated me kindly, I might fall into your trap. If, on the other hand, you received me rudely, I would consider it a disgrace. I do not need anything from your treasury, and whatever I have nobody can snatch away from me." A similar conversation is said to have taken place between him and 'Isa b. Musa.

A dispute having arisen between the Caliph Mansur and his wife Harrah over an accusation made by the latter that the former was not a just ruler, Abu Hanifah was called in to arbitrate between them. The queen sat behind a veil in order to hear the Imam's verdict with her own ears. Mansur began by asking how many wives a Muslim was permitted to have at a time according to the Shari'ah. The Imam replied, "Four." "Do you hear?" shouted Mansur to the queen. "Yes, I've heard it," replied the queen. At that point the Imam addressed himself to the Caliph and added, "But this permission is for a man who is capable of doing justice. No other man can have more than one wife. God Himself says: 'If you doubt your ability to do justice (between your wives), have only one wife.'" Mansur remained silent. A little while after the Imam returned home, a servant came to him with a gift of fifty thousand dinars. "The queen," he said, "sends you her respectful salutations and says that she is grateful to you for your truthful verdict." The Imam returned the money with a message for the queen that he had expressed the opinion he had expressed not in the expectation of a reward but because it was his duty as an arbitrator to express it.

The Imam's business was on a large scale. He traded in goods worth millions, had his agents in a number of cities and had dealings with many big merchants. With such a vast establishment under him he personally took care to see that no illicitly gained money came into his coffers, even though this subjected him to occasional losses. Once he sent some lengths of silk to Hafs b. 'Abd al-Rahman for sale with instructions to point out to prospective customers certain defects in some of the lengths. Hafs forgot the instruction and sold off the defective lengths without telling the customers anything about their defects. When the Imam learned of this, he was very sorry and gave away in charity the entire price of the lengths, which amounted to thirty thousand dirhams.

One day a woman came to him with a length of silk which she wanted him to sell for her and quoted a hundred rupees for it. On the Imam expressing surprise at that figure, she raised it to two hundred rupees. But the Imam told her that it was worth not less than five hundred rupees. "Are you making fun of me?" said the woman. The Imam took out five hundred rupees, gave them to her and kept the cloth. This kind of scrupulous honesty, far from harming his business, made it flourish.

His object in carrying on business and making money was to be able to help others. We had fixed stipends for all his needy friends and acquaintances and had reserved a part of his profits for distribution among scholars and muhaddithin annually. Whenever he bought anything for his family, he would buy the same thing for the scholars and muhaddithin of his acquaintance. If anybody came to call on him, he would tactfully find out about his economic condition and, if he was in want, help him. He used to provide those of his pupils who were poor with money for their household expenses, so that they could attend to their studies undistracted by domestic worries. Many people who were too poor to meet the expenses of their education were educated with his help and attained to high positions. One of these was Qadi Abu Yusuf, of whom more later.

One day a man who looked poor came to see Abu Hanifah. When his visitors were taking leave of him, the Imam asked the man to stay on. After the others had gone, he pointed to his prayer mat and asked the man to lift it. On doing so the man found a purse containing a thousand dirhams under the mat. Understanding that the Imam was offering the money to him, the man explained that he was well-to-do and did not need it. "Then you should not dress in such a way," said the Imam, "That people mistake you for a poor man."

On one occasion while on his way to see a sick acquaintance, the Imam saw at a distance a man who owed him ten thousand dirhams. The man tried to avoid him, but he accosted the man and, stopping him, asked why he had tried to avoid him. The man replied that he was ashamed to face him because he had not been able to

repay his loan. Impressed with the man's confession of shame, the Imam said, "Well if you are unable to repay the loan, you need not do so."

On one of his pilgrimages he was accompanied part of the way by 'Abd-Allah Sahmi. At one of the halting stations a bedouin caught hold of 'Abd-Allah and, bringing him to the Imam, complained that 'Abd-Allah was not repaying a loan he had given him. 'Abd-Allah denied the claim. So the Imam asked the bedouin the amount of loan involved. The bedouin informed him that it was forty dirhams. "Things have come to such a pass," exclaimed the Imam, "that people fight over a paltry sum like forty dirhams." Saying this, he paid forty dirhams to the bedouin out of his own pocket.

Ibrahim b.'Utbah owed somebody four thousand dirhams and being unable to repay the money stopped meeting people out of shame. A friend of his started collecting subscriptions to help him discharge the loan and approached the Imam also. The Imam asked the amount of the loan. When he was told that it was four thousand dirhams, he said, "Why bother so many people for such a small amount?" Saying this, he gave Ibrahim's friend the entire money.

There are many other stories in the history books about the Imam's generosity, which for want of space I refrain from relating.

Despite his wealth and high position in society, the Imam was extremely gentle and polite. One day, while he was sitting in the Hanif mosque, surrounded by his pupils and admirers, a stranger posed a question, which he answered. The man remarked that Hasan Basri had given a ruling contrary to his. "Then Hasan Basri made a mistake," replied the Imam. One of those present, who was a disciple of Hasan Basri, was so enraged at this remark that he shouted, "You son of a whore, you dare to say that Hasan Basri can be wrong?" This caused an uproar in the assembly, and some people wanted to catch hold of the man and punish him. The Imam, however, intervened and prevented them from doing so. This struck the whole assembly dumb. However, when order had been restored, the Imam turned to the man who had abused him and very calmly said, "Yes, Hasan did make a mistake. The correct Tradition on the subject is the one narrated by 'Abd-Allah b. Mas'ud."

Yazid b. Kumait relates that one day, when he was present, a man began to speak rudely to the Imam. The Imam went on answering his questions gently and calmly; but the man became more and more impolite, so much so that he called the Imam a Zindiq. On hearing that word, the Imam said, "May God forgive you! He knows that you have used a wrong word about me." The Imam often used to say that he had never cursed anybody, never taken revenge from anybody, never done harm to a Muslim or a dhimmi, never deceived anybody and never broken a promise.

For some time relations were strained between Abu Hanifah and Sufyan Thauri. One day a man reported to Abu Hanifah that Sufyan was speaking ill of him. "May God forgive both of us," said the Imam; "Sufyan is so great a scholar that if he had died even when Ibrahim Nakha'i was alive, the Muslims would have mourned him."

One day, while he was taking a class, a man who bore him some grudge started saying improper things about him. He paid no attention to the man and carried on with his teaching. He even told his pupils to pay no heed to him. When, after the class was over, he went out, the man followed him and continued abusing him. When both of them reached the Imam's house, the latter stopped and, turning to the man, said: "Brother, we are now at the doorstep of my house. If you have anything more to say, say it because I shall presently go in and you may not get another opportunity."

One another occasion, while the Imam was lecturing, a young man who was not a regular pupil of his, put a question to him and on hearing the answer said, 'Abu Hanifah, your answer is wrong. "One of the Imam's pupils, Abu'l-Khattab Jurjani, angered by this, shouted to the audience: "All of you are shameless people. Here is a mere youngster speaking rudely to the Imam, and nobody seems to be bothered."

The Imam, turning to Abu'l-Khattab, said,

"I am here to give people an opportunity of pointing out my mistakes freely, and I must listen to them patiently."

There was a merry cobbler living in the Imam's neighbourhood. After his day's work he used to come home with meat and wine and entertain his friends at night. They would all eat kababs, which he himself roasted, and drink his wine with him. Happily drunk, he would now and again sing a couplet which said: "People have let me go to waste me, who would have been useful to them in battle and siege." The Imam, who used to spend the latter part of the night in prayer, would hear his singing, but never objected to it out of neighbourly consideration and his habitual kindness. One night the prefect of police, who happened to pass that way, arrested the cobbler and locked him up. On the following morning the Imam mentioned to his friends that he had not heard his neighbour's singing during the previous night. They informed him of what had happened. The Imam at once ordered his mount, put on his *darbar* dress and proceeded to the governor's house. The governor then was 'Isa b. Musa, a cousin of the Caliph Mansur and distinguished among the Abbasids for sagacity and bravery.

On being informed that Imam Abu Hanifah was coming to see him, he sent a number of his courtiers to receive him, with orders that he should be escorted on horseback right up to the courtyard of the governor's house. As soon as the Imam's horse approached, he stood up and, after the Imam had dismounted, took him to a seat with all respect. Then he said, "Why have you taken the trouble of coming here? You could have sent for me." The Imam said, "What brings me here is that a cobbler who is my neighbour has been arrested by the prefect of police and I want him released." 'Isa immediately sent orders for the cobbler's release. The cobbler was brought to the governor's house and set free, and he accompanied the Imam on his way home. "Well, my friend," said the Imam to him, "have I allowed you to go to waste?" This was with reference to the couplet the cobbler used to sing. The cobbler replied, "No, sir, you have proved a good neighbour." From that day he changed his way of life. Giving up his drunken merrymaking, he joined the Imam's classes and in due course attained to such scholarship that he came to be known as a faqih.

The Imam lost his father before he had come of age, but his mother lived for a long time, and the Imam looked after her with great affection and regard. She was of a superstitious nature and, like most women, had much faith in religious preachers and storytellers, especially in 'Amr b. Dharr, a well-known preacher of Kufah. Whenever she had a religious question to be answered, she would tell the Imam to go to 'Amr and get the answer from him, the Imam would faithfully carry out her behest, much to the embarrassment of 'Amr, who would exclaim, "How dare I open my mouth before you?" The Imam would reply, "Such is my mother's command." It sometimes happened that 'Amr did not know the answer to a question. He would then request the Imam to tell him the answer so that he could repeat it in front of him -- in which case, it would become his answer. Now and again the old lady would insist on questioning 'Amr personally and would go to him mounted on a mule, with Abu Hanifah walking by her side. On arriving at 'Amr's house she would put her question to him personally and hear the answer with her own ears; only then would she be satisfied. Once she posed a problem to the Imam and asked him for the answer, but when he gave it, she turned it down, saying, "No, you are no authority.

I shall accept your answer only if Zurqah confirms it." (Zurqah was a preacher.) The Imam took her to Zurqah and explained the problem to him. "Why don't you answer it yourself?" said Zurqah. "You know far more than I do." The Imam then told him what answer he had given. Zurqah said that the answer was correct. That satisfied the old lady and she returned home. When Ibn Hubairah having sent for Imam Abu Hanifah, asked him to accept the post of MirMunshi and on the latter's refusal ordered him to be whipped daily until he relented, the Imam's mother was still living. Hearing of what was happening, she was greatly grieved Whenever the

Imam recalled this episode in later life, he would say: "It was not so my pain as the thought of the grief it was causing my mother that I found hard to hear.

The Imam was very tender-hearted and was greatly disturbed by other people's pain and sorrow. One day, while he was teaching in a mosque, somebody came with the news that a certain man had fallen from the roof of his house. He cried out aloud, left the class, ran barefoot to the man's house and attended to him. Until the man had fully recovered, the Imam visited him every morning. But, distressed as he was by other people's sufferings, he bore his own with an equanimity which astonished people. Through all the persecution to which he was subjected by the Caliph and his officers he never wavered for a moment. Patience and steadfastness were inborn in him.

One day, while he was lecturing in the Jami' mosque, surrounded by students and devotees, a snake fell into his lap from the ceiling. Everybody except him ran out of the mosque. As for him, he kept sitting calmly as if nothing had happened. A similar story is told of Imam Malik and forms one of the famous incidents of his life.

Abu Hanifah was a man of few words and never took part in idle talk. In his classroom he would sit quietly, letting his pupils freely debate among themselves, and would speak only when the discussion had become long and drawn-out without any conclusion being reached. He would then give his decision, which would satisfy all present.

He always avoided speaking ill of people behind their backs and would often thank God for saving his tongue from being contaminated with this evil. One day a man said to him: "Sir, people go about saying so many bad things about you, but one has never heard an ill word from your lips." The Imam observed: "This is God's grace. He grants it to whomever He likes." On somebody telling Sufyan Thauri that he had never heard Abu Hanifah slander anybody, Sufyan said: "Abu Hanifah is not such a fool as to ruin all his good deeds."

He thought it wrong to swear and always abstained from it. In order to enforce this upon himself he had taken a vow that every time he committed the error he would pay a voluntary penalty of one dirham. Once he did commit it inadvertently. Thereupon he raised the penalty to one dinar.

His piety and devotion knew no bounds. Praying was a delight to him and he used to engage in it with great gusto and sincerity, and he was famous for this. Dhahabi writes: "Accounts of his piety and devotion have reached a degree of tawatur (i.e. an unbroken chain of uncontradicted narrations)." While saying his prayers or reading the Qur'an, he would be so overcome with feeling that he would start

weeping and go on doing so for hours. Ibrahim Basri relates that one morning while he was saying his prayers together with the Imam, the latter recited the ayat: "I do not think that God is forgetful of the conduct of the iniquitous" and in reciting it wept so much that his whole body shook with sobs. Za'idah relates that having an important question to consult the Imam about he joined the 'isha' prayers with him and waited for him to finish his nafls. But the Imam, when in reciting from the Qur'an he reached the ayat: "Waqana 'adhab al-samum" (Save us from the torture of Hell's hot wind), went on repeating it until the morning. On another occasion he spent the whole night repeating the ayat: "Judgment Day is the sinners' promised hour and it is a difficult and unpleasant hour," and weeping while he repeated it.

Yazid b. Kumait, a contemporary of the Imam and famous for his piety, relates that he joined the Imam in an 'isha' prayer during which the Imam leading the prayers recited the ayat 'idhazulzilal .". After the other people had departed, he found the Imam still sitting and heaving deep sighs. Yazid did not want to disturb the Imam, so he also went away, leaving the Imam sitting. When he went to the mosque on the following morning, he found the Imam sitting, looking very sad, holding his beard in his hands and saying tearfully, 'O Thou Who wilt reward even the smallest virtue and punish even the smallest sin, save Thy slave Nu'man from Hell-fire."

One day while walking in the street, the Imam inadvertently stepped on a small boy's foot. The boy cried, 'You don't seem to fear God.'" On hearing these words the Imam fainted. Mus'ir b. Kudam, who was with him, stopped him from falling and attended to him. As soon as he came to, Mus'ir said, "Why were you so perturbed by a small boy's casual remark?" The Imam replied: "Who knows this was not an admonition from the Unknown!"

One day when the Imam arrived at his shop, his servant put out some lengths of cloth and by way of a good augury said, "May God grant us Paradise!" The Imam started weeping and wept so much that his whole mantle became wet. Then he told the servant to close shop and went out, covering his face with his handkerchief. When he came to the shop on the following day, he said to the servant, "Who are we to wish for Paradise? It will be enough if God spares us His wrath." Umar Faruq used to say similarly, "If on Judgment Day I am neither punished nor rewarded, I shall be quite happy."

One day, when he was explaining a point, one of the men present said, "You should always have the fear of God in your heart when you give a fatwa." The Imam was so deeply affected by this remark that he went pale. Turning to the man, he said, "May God reward you for your good deeds, brother! If I were not sure that God will punish me for deliberately withholding the benefit of my knowledge

from others, I would never give a fatwa." Faced with a question to which he did not know the answer, he used to get disturbed and ask himself whether he had committed some sin, of which this was the punishment. He would then perform his ablution, say his prayers and beg God's forgiveness. Somebody having reported this to Fudail b. 'Iyad, a famous Sufi, he wept and said "Abu Hanifah did not have many sins to repent for. That was why he thought thus. But those who are drowned in sin have innumerable calamities sent down upon them and yet do not realise that these are warnings from God."

The Imam's daily routine was as follows. After the morning prayer he would take his class in the mosque and then reply to references for fatwas, which came from near and far. That was followed by a session for Fiqh compilation, in which his leading disciples took part. Decisions reached unanimously were recorded. After saying his zuhr prayer, the Imam would go home and, if it was summer, have a siesta. The 'asr prayer was followed by another session of teaching, after which the Imam would go round the city meeting friends, visiting the sick, condoling the bereaved and helping the poor. After the maghrib prayer there was a third teaching session, which continued till the 'isha' prayer. Having said his 'isha' prayer, the Imam would start his private devotions, often continuing them throughout the night. During winter, he often slept in the mosque until the 'isha' prayer, after which he would spend the whole night in performing the tahajjud prayer, reciting chosen passages from the Qur'an and repeating devotional formulas. Sometimes he performed these in his shop.