

The Human Being Is an Incurable Disease: He Is Never Satisfied

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Al-Shāfi‘ī, may Allah be pleased with him, said:

“The human being is a disease for which there is no cure.

Choose a good habit for him and he will be distracted!”¹

If you are generous, you would be accused of using magic,²

but if you are not generous, they would call you mean!

Likewise, if you associate with them, they would say you are envious,

but if you disassociate from them, they would say you are depressed!

And if you disregard their wealth, they would respect you,

and say you are rich. But if you request their help, they will not offer it to you!

I have opted for good conduct in my affairs, and I urge people

to cultivate good conduct without charm or superstitious beliefs!

Printing and arrangement of verses by Ahmad al-‘Tijjānī Tukur

¹ The poet attributed these two Arabic verses to al-Shāfi‘ī. It is unclear in this context whether he is referring to a local scholar or the popular Imam Al-Shāfi‘ī (767-820 CE), founder of Shāfi‘ī Islamic school of jurisprudence.

² If a person is wealthy and generous, they could be accused of using magic to be wealthy.

with his co-author, Abū Bakr Mas'ūdu. May Allah protect them from
evil and harm. Amen, in the name of all creatures.

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In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

May peace and blessings of Allah be upon the noble Prophet!

Oh you people, listen to me! Here is a question:

Who can clarify for me the character of humans?

One day, I was talking with Sir Hawk and he said:

“For goodness sake, what is wrong with you humans?”

All of us birds keep asking the question!

We cannot understand the character of you humans.”

I then answered him saying: “Why are you

asking me this foolish question about humans?”

He quickly replied: “Well, we are very clever!

Because of this we understand the character of humans!”

Then I said to Mr. Hawk: “Oh, so just what is it that you understand about us?”

Me, too, I'd like to understand humans!"

So then he said to me: "Some humans are speckled and red;

oh, and there are others who are even green and yellow!"

Not to mention those of nowadays! Let me tell you,

they are a disease for which there is no cure!

I swear, even intelligence is not to be found

in their character. I'm telling you, you humans!

If you offer them gifts, they say you are showing off,

but if you hold back, they say you are stingy!

If you surpass them, they say you are a know-it-all,

and that you are just greedy and exploiting people!

Again, if you avoid begging, for even a kobo,³

leaving everyone with their property, you see,

they will immediately say that surely you have money,

and because of that, you are disrespectful!

³ Kobo is the smallest unit of currency, representing 1/100th of a Naira. It is analogous to a penny.

If you go to them asking for a single shilling,

well, they are good at ridiculing you !

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Today so and so came to me, asking that I give him one shilling!

Am I crazy? I refused to give him. You see [how humans behave]!”

Hawk said to me: “This is just a bit of what I have observed.

As for you, what have you understood about humans?”

“Well,” I told him: “I don’t disagree at all, not a bit.

This character—all of it—applies to us humans!

Besides, if you are knowledgeable,

even if you are quiet about it, they will hate you!

Likewise, if you are a leader, they tell you: “Hey teacher,

Your warnings are none of our concern!”

As far as what we have discussed, I see you have understood!

Nobody can satisfy the humans!

If you are short, they say that you are small!

If someone who is moderately tall, they say he is too tall!

If you mind your own business, they investigate you;

they assume that you are rude to them, these humans!

If you bow in respect while greeting a chief,

they will say that you're doing it all for money!

Yet, if you step back and mind your own business,

they will swear by Allah that you've got a swollen head!

Who can escape them in this world?

I swear by Allah, one will suffer from humans!

So here is an example for us:

Luqmanu⁴ pointed out something about them—the humans.

He was the one who rode a donkey while his son was on foot.

They said about him that he had no pity! Did you hear that, people?

When he got down and his son climbed up [on the donkey],

then it was said that he was too close with his son, you see!

So both of them mounted [the donkey] together, and instantly it was said

⁴ *Luqmanu* in Hausa or *Luqman* in Arabic is one of the wise men whose names appear in the Quran. See Q 31:12- 13.

that they had no pity at all [for the donkey]!

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What can you say about humans in this world?

Whatever you do, pay no attention!"

The discussion that we had, me and Sir Hawk,

helped me understand how to deal with people!

The most important thing I realized, dear friends,

of all creatures, I swear by Allah, there are none like humans!

Their character is harmful and poisonous!

This is even truer now that we must live with humans.

Wise folks are not shielded [from humans], let alone ignorant folks,

or rich folks. No one is shielded from humans.

Even a ruler, I swear by Allah, humans do not leave him alone!

Even those who have nothing in the eyes of people are not shielded!

Mr. Hawk said to me: "I will leave you here

I am in a hurry now! You now know humans!"

I thanked Mr. Hawk and he disappeared.

I was surprised how well Mr. Hawk seemed to understand humans.

People, I swear by Allah, my observations about humans cannot be denied,

even though I only briefly described their character.

Complaining is one of the key elements of human character.

They do not see their own faults. They see only those of other people!

If you are someone who is shy,

who does not talk much with people,

then they will say that you are arrogant!

Someone who greets everybody, they say he is greedy!

As for people, you'd have to say that they are just like the ostrich,

which is distinctly different from other birds!

It is not as tall as the camel.

Okay, you have heard the confusion about people!

You will never please them no matter who you are.

Their ways have confused great thinkers!

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When you stand to perform your ritual prayers (salat), they say "you are showing off,

and that all your efforts are to boast before people.”

If you are not studying and learning, they will say:

“oh he is ignorant. He is not learned!”

If you are making efforts to seek knowledge,

they find fault with you, saying you want to impress the people.

When you dress well, they will wonder about you.

and you know the kind of things they would say!

Or they find your weak point so that they can talk about it.

I swear by Allah, one must be patient when living with humans.

They call a cheerful person crazy,

and a dissatisfied person, undisciplined!

An unfashionable person, they call him stingy,

hiding his money from people!

When you seclude yourself and stay home,

they will find fault, saying you are disloyal!

“He doesn’t attend naming ceremonies and burials!”

Yet, if he attends, you will hear people [gossiping]!

They would continue saying how so and so is too greedy,

and whether he wishes people die?

Oh my friends, I swear by Allah, we cannot be protected [from humans!]

Getting away from humans is very difficult!

If you want to do your work, just go ahead and do it!

For God's sake, please stop paying attention to peoples' opinions.

Just be sincere no matter what,

even though [truth] is a real problem for humans!

Here is a little something I mention based on my knowledge

about what you should do in this world of humans:

If you are going to do your work, just go ahead and do it.

If you don't do it for fear of being blamed by people,

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you will only be left idling and loitering!

You will hurt yourself by fearing people.

I have laid out [these things] for you based on my experience.

Please, keep reflecting and thinking about humans.

Take good care of this poem and keep it with you.

I am sure that even if you might change some humans [for the better],
remember that everything I said is true. Humans can only worsen matters;

there are more things about their character than can be said in a poem.

If one were to compile a whole book [on the subject],

a hundred volumes would be too little to deal with the subject of humans.

Even the Hausa people have a proverb on this:

“You can’t satisfy the world and people!”

So, my people, we can only be patient [with humans].

Let us be kind to ourselves, oh people!

This world, as you can see, is not a mere piece of cloth.

Say, you are honorable and do the right thing for people,
then they will say: “Look at him! How disrespectful he is!

He has gone too far in his efforts to help people.”

Oh people, let us be patient and live peacefully,

and let us stop quarreling continuously with people.

Let us not give up on the affairs of this world,

or those of the hereafter out of fear of people’s hatred.

And let us not agree to be courageous for the sake of being praised!

Let us only be helpful to people.

Whatever you do for humans, you can be sure that

Allah will reward you, even if it is merely watching.

So long as what one watches does not constitute a sin

if indeed you are living peacefully with people?

Again, do not just follow what they want;

if what they want is not good, you should take note!

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I thank Allah, here is where I will stop. Oh, please listen to me!

Please, strive to understand people.

Also, bear in mind the discussion I had with

Mr. Hawk, because he fully understands humans.

Also rely on what you can see with your own eyes,

and have common sense and use your mind.

Also, do not bother with everything people say.

Whatever is before you, deal with it!

Please, I implore you: do not be annoyed with me!

The truth is very difficult for people.

It is their character, I swear by Allah, we have shown it.

If you ponder over [this poem], you will better understand humans.

We hope you will treat this poem we composed as a photograph,

so that if you read it, you will clearly see the characters of humans.

Ahmad Tukur is the author of the poem.

He is also a human being who lives with humans!

Here ends my discussion. I praise the Exalted,

our Messenger, Ahmadu [the Prophet], the Leader of human being,

the one with a model character, an elder brother to Aliyyu and Jafaru.⁵

On the Day of Judgement, he is the one who will intercede for all humans.

Include us [among those you will intercede for] so that we will be forgiven

for the sins we committed while living with humans.

We love you, the father of Faṭīma,⁶

so do Muslims, jinns (spirits) and humans.

With peace, here ends the poem,

with its portrayal of myself and humans!

The writing [the poem] was completed with Allah's help.

Without Him, I would not have been able to write

a single verse.

⁵ Here, the poet refers to two cousins of Prophet Muhammad: Aliyyu or 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and his brother Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib. In Hausa society and Africa at large, cousins are considered brothers.

⁶ She was the youngest daughter of Prophet Muhammad and was married to 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.