



**SELF-CULTIVATION AND STRUGGLE:
SACRED INSIGHTS FROM THE ANCESTORS**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

In a world in which we are compelled to wage relentless struggle against social forces of oppression, evil and injustice, it is good, indeed necessary, to pause and meditate on the internal struggle needed not only to strengthen ourselves for the external struggle, but also so that we may prefigure and be worthy of the good world we struggle so hard to bring into being. Indeed, moral and intellectual self-cultivation and self-mastery are seen in Maatian ethics as at the center of being human and doing good in the world. And the *Husia* teaches that “one who can masterly cultivate and discipline the heart and mind has the equivalence of all the teachings.”

Also, in the *Odu Ifa*, there is a wealth of ways to focus and engage in such essential reflection. One such focus of reflection is found in Odu 2:1 which says: “Constantly shifting is a boat on water. / And so are human beings. / This was the teaching of Ifa for Ona Ishokan / Who was a child of the King of Oyo. / One who is brave / Should not assume the voice of the timid. / And one who is timid / Should not talk like one who is brave / The king does not allow us to make war on a / town of women / So that we may have our way with them. / Let us conduct ourselves with gentleness. / So that we may leave life peacefully. / And so that our children can stretch forth / their hands fully. / On us in burial.”

This is a teaching on the virtues of genuineness, gentleness and truthful self-presentation. It begins by recognizing that human beings are in a constant process of change, i.e., “constantly shifting” from one place, position, level of development, etc., to another. The implicit challenge here, then, becomes one of always being one’s real self in

the midst of the demands of change. Thus, the verse says we should not pretend courage when we are timid nor assume the voice of a coward when we are brave.

The moral implications of the teaching are that a person should neither hide one’s courage nor pretend a courage one does not have. The courageous are compelled to step forward and the timid are counseled to be modest in their claims. This teaching is important in stressing the need for those who are capable to always show moral courage as well as courage of heart and mind in difficult situations when it would be easy to step back, remain silent or “assume the voice of the timid.” The counsel here is to not disguise oneself and by extension to stand up and step forward in the service of good (ire). On the other hand, the verse counsels the timid to not pretend courage with the implication that this serves no good end. In fact, it could bring harm to the timid or those who depend on the timid unaware of their limitations. The implication here is that the timid should not pretend courage but strengthen themselves through self-development and practice which leads to the acquisition of courage.

Likewise, the text suggests that the example of the coward posing as a courageous person is found in men who would “make war on” or attack women in various ways to have access to and control of them. The teaching is that in a group situation, a real ruler or leader would not permit it and that the moral path to access and exchange is thru gentleness. “Let us behave gently then” to achieve our ends and to be honored and loved thereby.

The last part of this Odu, then, is a teaching on gentleness of behavior. It advises us to be gentle in all we do. And although

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there are numerous other reasons given in the Odu for being gentle, this verse gives two main ones. The first reason this verse gives for our need to be gentle is so “that we might leave life peacefully,” that is to say, so that we may die *at peace* and *in peace*. To die or pass *at peace* is to pass into the next world without undue worry about what will be left behind or what will be met ahead. And to die or pass *in peace* is to lie down to make the transition to the next world in the midst of harmony, love, calmness, contentment and untroubledness. In a word, it is to leave life in a moral community we ourselves have helped create.

The second reason the text gives us for behaving gently in life is so that our children who experience this loving kindness will reciprocate and respond to our passing in a loving and respectful manner. The teaching tells us that we must live our lives in a manner which causes love and respect from our children which in turn causes them “to stretch forth their hands fully upon us,” that is to say, to embrace us fully in death as they did in life. In sum, then, to leave life peacefully is to act in life with such gentle kindness that we leave a legacy of goodness in this world which is the basis for respectful memory in this world and eternal life in the next.

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