



Al-Risala 1988

July

The Message of Pilgrimage

When a man leaves his home and country to go on such a pilgrimage, he brims over with all the emotions aroused by the thought that he is embarking on a course which will lead him directly to God. He is, in effect, sloughing off his own world, leaving it behind him, and reaching out for the world of the Almighty. He is on his way to the House of God, a place where the great deeds of God's messengers and his followers have been preserved for all eternity; where we find the hallowed impressions of the lives of those who lived and died for the cause of God.

Prior to 1982, my knowledge of Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) had been limited to what I could gain from books, and so, when at last in that year I had the privilege of performing this religious duty, I felt myself singularly blessed. Although the rites of Hajj are spread over only a few days, as symbolic guidelines they stand a man in good stead for the rest of his life. The message of Hajj as I now comprehend it from the study and performance of it, is that man should make the Almighty the very pivot of his existence, hastening at His call to do His every bidding.

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The Haji or pilgrim is then filled with the realization that he is bound for that very destination which God has specially chosen for His Last Revelation. Once launched on this course, the pilgrim is imbued with the awareness of God and His truths, as well as the feeling that it is imperative that he become God-oriented. If, up till then, he had been self-centred in his thinking, he now turns his thoughts to God, and his entire behaviour is moulded and transformed by these new thought processes.

Once the pilgrim's train of thought has become God-oriented, he begins to ponder over major issues: God's act of creating, particularly His creation of himself, His affording him diverse opportunities of bettering himself in this world, His very benevolence which makes it possible for him to set forth on this journey to the House of God. The pilgrim gives his mind to the day when he will meet death and be summoned forthwith to the court of God. This trend of thought turns the ostensibly physical journey of the pilgrim into an intense, spiritual venture.

When the time nears for his entrance into the Haram (sacred territory), every pilgrim divests himself of his clothing in order to don a new kind of 'uniform' – an unstitched, plain, white garment which serves to heighten his consciousness of entering a new world. The very act of shedding his normal clothes (and with them all signs of status and ethnicity) signifies that he is separating himself from the way of life peculiar to his environment, and is now ready to become suffused with such emotions as are desired by God. In this way, thousands of men, in casting off their own hues, take on the hue of the Almighty. After clothing himself in *ihram* (godly raiment), the pilgrim finds his tongue of itself beginning to utter godly words – '*labbaik Allahumma labbaik!* – "Here I am, Oh God, here I am!"

Labbaik (here I am) does not mean just that the pilgrim has come to stay in Mecca. It means that in leaving his normal abode, he has cast aside his whole way of life. It means, "I am ready to obey You." While on their pilgrimage, pilgrims simply give utterance to the word *labbaik*, but when they return to their own countries, they must put it into practice in their everyday lives.

On reaching Mecca, the pilgrim must perform *tawaf* (circumambulation). To do this, he enters the House of God (*baitullah*), the great mosque in which in a spacious central courtyard stands the Ka'bah, which was erected by the Prophet Abraham in ancient times. Then he goes round the Ka'bah seven times to demonstrate his willingness to make God the pivot of his whole existence.

After the *tawaf*, there comes the ritual of *sa'i*, which entails brisk walking from the hill of Safa to the hill of Marwah and back again. This procedure is repeated seven times in symbolic enactment of a promise, or covenant, to expand all of one's energies in the path of God. The form which this ritual takes, can be traced back to the Prophet Abraham's wife, Hajira, running from one hill to another in a frantic search for water for her young baby when they first arrived there.

The most important period of worship during Hajj is the day-long sojourn on the plain of Arafat. It is indeed, an awesome spectacle, with people from all over the world, clad in identical, simple, white garments, chanting, "Lord, I am present, Lord, I am present!" This serves to impress upon the mind of the pilgrim how great a gathering there will be in the presence of God on the Last Day of Reckoning. Once he becomes aware of its true significance, all his problems fall into their true perspective, and his life cannot but take a turn for the better.

Another practice during Hajj is the casting of stones at Jamaratul 'Aqabah'. This is a symbolic act through which the pilgrim renews his determination to drive Satan away from him. In this way, he makes it plain that his relationship with Satan is one of enmity and combat. The next step for the pilgrim is to turn this piece of symbolism into reality, so that he may be purged of all evils, for all the evils besetting man are there at the instigation of Satan.

After this, the pilgrim sacrifices an animal to God, an act symbolizing the sacrifice of the self. (this is referred to in the Quran as *sha'airullah* – signs of God). In making such a sacrifice, the pilgrim indicates his willingness to forsake everything for God. His faith is such that if it comes to giving his life – the last thing that he would normally be ready to part with – he will not hesitate to do so in the service of God.

5 July 1988

Thinking of God in Moments of Crisis:

'Ali, the son of Abu Talib, relates how Fatima, his wife, and also daughter of the Prophet had to do all the housework herself. Her hands used to become blistered from working a millstone, her clothes became dirty from sweeping the floor, and having to bring water from outside in a large leather bag had left a mark on her neck. On one occasion when the Prophet had had an influx of servants, 'Ali suggested to Fatima that she go and request her father to give her one of them to help her in her work. She duly went to see him, but there were many people gathered at his house, and she returned home, without having been able to meet him. The next day the Prophet came to the house of Ali and Fatima and asked what it was she had wanted to discuss with him, but Fatima remained silent. Then Ali told the Prophet the whole story. The Prophet did not, however, accede to their request for a servant. "Fear God," he said, "and fulfill your duty to the Lord. Continue to do your housework and, when you go to bed at night, glorify God 33 times, praise Him the same number of times and exalt him 34 times. That makes 100 times altogether. That will do more good than a servant will."

A Burning Brand

“You bring your litigations before me – mortal human being that I am – and it may so happen that one of you puts his case better than the other, so that I decide the case in his favour, merely on the strength of what I have heard. But if I make a decision which means giving him that which is in truth his brother’s due, then what I have awarded him is a burning brand from the Fire.”¹

The lesson to be learnt from this saying of the Prophet is that no matter who is allotted some piece of property on the basis of a judicial decision, the property still in actuality belongs to its rightful owner. Even if God’s Prophet unwittingly makes a decision in favour of someone who is not really in the right, then that individual does not become the rightful owner of the property allotted to him. Indeed, it will turn into a burning brand which will sear his soul in the next world.

In modern times, it happens all too frequently that people wrongfully appropriate others’ property, and under our present corrupt system of justice, there is ample opportunity for them to set the seal of judicial authority upon their illicit designs. A bit of bribery here and a piece of fraudulent evidence there, and they are able to have their way. In every town and village, individuals are to be found who, by means of improper proceedings, have been able to wrest control of some land or building which rightfully belongs to another.

The above-quoted saying of the Prophet contains a stern warning against such behaviour. Clearly, if a decision made in all good faith by the Prophet cannot turn wrong into right, then no amount of bogus registration papers and counterfeit official documents can entitle anyone to lay hands on something which does not belong to him.

Sad to say, that is the way things go in this world. But the man who lays hands on another’s property, and rejoices over his ‘legal’ success, would do well to remember that in the world after death, this self-same property will be his undoing, for he will be trapped inside it and made to burn for his sins.

1. This saying of the Prophet was related by one of the Prophet’s wives, Umm Salamah, and has been recorded by both Imam Bukhari and Muslim.

The Identity Crisis

In modern times Muslims have been faced with such situations as have forced them to think of all the things they have lost and, as a result, they have become a prey to a deprivation complex. It is important to understand what exactly it is that they have lost, since the normal human reaction in the face of loss is to begin the struggle for repossession.

The tragedy of this situation is that Muslims have had it impressed upon them over and over again by their own poets, orators and writers that what they have lost is the prerogative to rule, and all the power that comes with it. They have had it instilled in them that if they have become weak and insignificant in modern times, there can be no other reason than the loss of their former glory.

The natural result of such a diagnosis is that Muslims, not only in India, but all over the world, have rushed headlong into the struggle to regain their former power. Most of the efforts towards a Muslim revival in recent times can be placed in this category, but their total failure shows that the basis on which these movements were launched has in its essence, been ill-conceived. This has been the result of confusing temporal power with spiritual power, and aiming at the former as the principal objective instead of the latter.

The truth is that what modern Muslims have lost is their relationship with God. Living faith in God; the true worship of God; the soul-stirrings which arise from having to account for all one's deeds before God; the desire to live and die for God's cause; – these are the real things which Muslims have lost in the world of today. And these deficiencies are so widespread that they affect everyone from the highest to the lowest. All other kinds of deficiencies – we can understand this if we really give the matter some thought – can be traced back to these religious lacunae. Only when Muslims begin to adopt a decidedly positive approach to their own religion will they be able to extract themselves honourably from their present state of mental disarray. The illusion which needs to be dispelled at all costs is that achievements in other fields – which lie outwit the province of Islam – can in any way remedy their condition.

God Is Great

The most important fact that we must grasp about this world is that it was fashioned by One Maker – than whom there is no greater being. The words, “Allahu akbar” (God is Great) which Muslims say over and over again in their daily prayers, bear witness to God’s greatness – the most momentous reality of the entire universe.

The mere act of acknowledging this greatest of all realities is in itself no small matter, for, if we are earnest in our recognition of the greatness of God, *we in turn make ourselves eligible for greatness* in this world. What then, of the peoples of the Western world, who have subscribed to the greatness of the Universe, conceiving of nothing greater? This is mental submission which has apparently enabled them to excel over all other nations of the world. If the acknowledgement of a purely material scheme of existence can raise them to such height just imagine how exalted should be the stature of a people who discover the true greatness of God – the one and only God who created a Universe of such staggering proportions.

Yet, on all sides, we see the Muslims defeated and subjugate. Why is it that the blessings which should flow from our saying, “God is great,” have not descended upon us, while the nations of the western world have reaped the full rewards of saying, “Great is the World.” The only explanation we can offer is that when we utter the word, “God is Great” we are paying lip-service to the ideal which they express, and sometimes we do not even understand the full import of what we say. We are happy to broadcast the words, “*Allahu akbar*” far and wide, but their meaning has yet to penetrate the innermost recesses of our own hearts and minds.

Not long ago, an Arabic magazine published an article on a recently built mosque in London. It was embellished with a photograph of the mosque and bore the legend, “*Allahu akbar*” in the skies of London.” Much was made of the fact that the call to prayer resounded five times a day from this mosque, and that the words, “*Allahu akbar*” meant winging their way across the London skies. Because the loudspeaker has made it possible for the refrain “*Allahu akbar*” to travel a great distance in the outside world, Muslims have hailed its invention with great enthusiasm. Yet, we have still to discover how to make these words travel inwards to the depth of our own souls. The atmosphere may so vibrate with the sound of the Muslim call to prayer, that the words, “*Allahu akbar*” reach the ears of every single mortal being, but God’s Angels are still awaiting the day when our hearts will sincerely begin to beat to the awesome rhythm of these words. It is only when our hearts begin to throb with a profound sense of God’s greatness that the blessings of our saying, “God is Great” will descend upon us.

A Defense

“Few great men have been so maligned as Muhammad. Christian scholars of medieval Europe painted him as an impostor, a lecher, and a man of blood. A corruption of his name, ‘Mahound, even came to signify the devil. This picture of Muhammad and his religion still retains some influence. The English author Thomas Carlyle in 1840 was the first notable European to insist publicly that Muhammad must have been sincere, because it was ridiculous to suppose an impostor would have been the founder of a great religion.”
(Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol 12, p. 609)

The argument used by Thomas Carlyle to sweep away western misconceptions about the Prophet was simply that if a tree is known by his fruit, so is a man known by his character. Whoever reads the sayings of the Prophet of Islam, whoever learns of what his daily life was like, whoever comes to understand what type of movement was born under his influence, can never believe that his life’s mission and achievements were those of an impostor.

A man who makes it his mission to bring about a healthy revolution among the people, speaking from the heart, and using words which contain the finest elements of humanity, can never be a deceiver.

A man who is a fraud may succeed in fraudulence, but he will never succeed in launching a divine movement.

When Things Lose Their Novelty

The next time the sunlight enters a darkened room, a bird sings by the wayside, the moon casts its silvery spell or a rose gives its fragrance to the air, we should remember that these are things which go far and beyond human creativity and that, ultimately we owe everything to God.

“When opened, it was like a small tent, and when shut, it was all curiously jointed and would fold up to the length of a man’s hand.” This curious description applies – in case you hadn’t already guessed – to the umbrella as we know it today. No one nowadays finds it necessary to describe an umbrella nor to express any astonishment over it, because it is now such a commonplace object, but when it was first manufactured in London in 1749, it seemed such a strange, new, wonderful contrivance that it caused a great deal of excitement. An invention which aroused even greater awe was the hand pump which was installed for the first time in an Indian village at the beginning of the present century. When it caused water to gush forth from the ground, a village woman exclaimed, “Now it is only death which can defeat man.” Today we feel that there is nothing so extraordinary about a hand-pump, and even pumps which operate on electricity and diesel oil have come to be regarded as run-of-the-mill items of agricultural equipment.

The moment that something becomes familiar – be it a discovery or an invention – we tend to take it for granted. We no longer have any sense of wonder about its appearance, functioning and creation. This is even more true of the vast array of God’s creation. Yet everything which exists in this world, be it a leaf, a snowflake, or a ray of sunshine, is a veritable miracle of creation. From his earliest childhood, man has been aware of these things; yet they have become objects of such familiarity, that he almost ceases to notice them. Imagine how different his attitude to them would be if he were to see them for the first time; he would be like someone who had been cured of total blindness examining his surroundings with a tremendous joy and a great sense of wonderment.

This is how we ought to look at God’s creation all around us. We should not lose our sense of awe and gratitude simply because familiarity has taken the edge off our awareness.

The next time the sunlight enters a darkened room a bird sings by the wayside, the moon casts its silvery spell or a rose gives its fragrance to the air, we should remember that these are things which go far and beyond human creativity and that, ultimately we owe everything to God.

11 July 1988

The Purpose of Creation

If this world in which we live may be considered to have a purpose, this will induce in man the feeling that he should-strive to lead his life in accord with that purpose. Such a life would be deemed responsible. It is, in fact, our sense of responsibility which is the true incentive to all human virtues.

If, on the contrary, the present world is supposed to be purposeless, the sense of there being a higher destiny simply fades away, and we lose the feeling that we must live our lives in accordance with it. In consequence, the notion of limitless freedom is born. It quickly becomes the accepted norm – which is surely the root cause of all evils.

What has to be determined is which of the resulting mentalities is more in accordance with human nature, as well as with the whole system of the universe. This should not be difficult to decide, considering that human nature, at its best, desires that good deeds should have good results, and bad deeds the opposite. If the universe were not taken to be purposeful, human nature would have to be content with one moral non-sequitur after another.

It must be conceded that the creation of the universe has been according to a purpose. Holding the universe to be purposeless is like saying that the world is there for man to live in but that it can never afford him the satisfaction of his most profound desires.

The truth is that the world does not admit of purposelessness, for that which gives man his sense of purpose (the vaster system of the universe being established in an extremely meaningful way) is the key to good and right living in this world.

Falsity Unmasked

“Perhaps no science has been a more powerful source of forgiveness than the psychoanalysis of Freud. The sinner becomes a patient. And if he seems to do wrong, it is not really he who does it but an unconscious whose machinations are unknown to him.”

Sigmund Freud, still one of the most prominent figures in the field of psycho-analysis, has exerted what is now believed to be an undue influence on the modern mind. After making a study of his more emotionally disturbed patients, he drafted a map of man's mental structure, in which he gave the unconscious a position of great importance. Freud held that it was actually the unconscious mind which was the determining factor in all human actions. According to this theory, man's will and intention were exonerated of the blame for all manner of crimes. It simply meant that if a man's actions were not governed by his conscious mind and will, he could no longer be regarded as an intentional wrongdoer. A commentator writes:

“Perhaps no science has been a more powerful source of forgiveness than the psychoanalysis of Freud. The sinner becomes a patient. And if he seems to do wrong, it is not really he who does it but an unconscious whose machinations are unknown to him.” If this theory were to be believed, the difference between one man and another is not that of right and wrong, but of right and mental illness what once was accepted as ‘discipline’ is now classified as ‘unhealthy repression.’”

In today's contest of moral laxity and a steadily rising crime rate, it is important, not just for psychoanalysts, their patients and enforcers of the law, but for everyone, to be made aware of the findings of the latest research into human nature, for these have proved Freudian theory to be wrong.

The acceptance of the falsity of this theory now puts human beings back into the category of creatures with minds and wills of their own, and a keen sense of responsibility for their actions. Culpability may once again be clearly defined in terms of intentional wrongdoing and man, once more, becomes accountable for his actions to his Maker and to the society in which he lives.

13 July 1988

The Positive Side of Accepting Defeat

“Defeated in World War II (1945), Japan emerged from the ruins of war as one of the major economic powers in the world.”

Japan, defeated by America in World War II, was occupied by American military forces in April 1945. General Douglas Mac Arther was appointed Supreme Commander in Japan, where he lived until 1951. A new constitution, drawn up with his approval, and ratified by the Japanese Assembly on November 3, 1946, reduced the status of the Emperor of Japan to that of a mere symbolic head of state. Under article 9, the Japanese nation was also made to pledge that “land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.” (10/87).

This constitution apparently sounded the death-knell of Japan as nation, but Japanese leaders showed great foresight in accepting it. They saw that although it closed all doors to Japan from the military and political point of view, the door to industrial and scientific advance still stood wide open. Withdrawing from the field of military and political confrontation, the Japanese nation began to exploit the remaining opportunities in the fields of science and industry. Just 40 years later, historians, were compelled to write these words about Japan:

“Defeated in World War II (1945), Japan emerged from the ruins of war as one of the major economic powers in the world” (V/519).

The acceptance of the present opens up hitherto unsuspected paths to the future. Those who reject the realities of the present will themselves debarred from access to the potentialities of the future.

Change with the Times

“They became the masters of change rather than the victims,”

In a travelogue published in the Urdu version of *Al-Risala* (March, 1988), mention has already been made of Shogo Katakura, a Japanese engineer whom I met in the Maldives. To one of my questions on the success of the Japanese, he replied that Japan’s geographical conditions caused his people to be constantly in quest of new ideas. He explained that in Japan, the seasons are quite distinct from each other, and that earthquakes and tempests cause repeated changes in the pattern of living. The Japanese are, therefore, frequently compelled to think of how they are going to face up to the new situations produced by constantly changing conditions.

This state of affairs has made the proclivity to go in search of new ideas a constant of the Japanese temperament. It is this temperament which worked for the Japanese after the destruction caused by the Second World War. Considering anew their whole situation in the light of changed circumstances, they devised fresh plans which would ensure their success as a nation. “They became the masters of change rather than the victims,” as one American commentator put it.

The path along which the journey of life is made is never a smooth one. Life is full of trials and tribulations, and individuals and nations alike are confronted by them. This is a state of affairs which has been brought into existence by the Creator Himself, and there is absolutely no way that it can be avoided.

In such a situation, there is only one way to human success: man must continue his journey despite all difficulties. He must summon up the courage to reach his destination regardless of the thorns and stones which obstruct his steps.

When circumstances change, refrain from railing against them. That is a form of activity which achieves nothing. Try rather to find a solution which will fit the change in the circumstances, for it is only such endeavour which will enable you to find the path to success.

Sacrificing the Self

On August 31, 1987, the national press headlined the arrest in Delhi of Harjinder Singh Jinda and Satnam Singh Bawa. Jinda was one of the most dreaded terrorists of the Punjab, with the rank of General in the Khalistan Commando Force, and scores of murders to his 'credit' including those of General Vaidya; Lalit Makin, M.P.; Arjun Das, New Delhi Councillor; and several police officers. He had also had a hand in the looting of the Punjab National Bank, Ludhiana, of 50 million rupees. At the time of his arrest, the many items recovered from him included lethal weapons, gold and 5 lakhs of rupees in cash.

The following are some of the details published in a leading national daily:

The police found in Jinda's pocket some powder which they suspect is cyanide. Jagdish Singh had swallowed cyanide when he was taken to the police post at Paharganj. If Jinda had died, it would have robbed the police of a chance to interrogate him and obtain vital information.

(Indian Express, September 1, 1987)

The 'no-holds-barred' method of police interrogation is guaranteed to elicit information from criminal suspects, no matter how hardened they may be, so that if a terrorist is arrested alive, whatever he is compelled to tell the police can lead to the wiping out of his whole organization. Faced with such a situation, many terrorists immediately commit suicide. In this way, they save themselves unbearable mental and physical torture, and their silence saves the organization.

Whether an organization is constructive or destructive in its objectives, loyalty to it demands the supreme sacrifice of self-annihilation from its members. In this world, it frequently happens that there is a clash of interests between the individual and the organization. In all such situations, the individual is expected to "kill" himself in order to perpetuate the life of the organization. Physical killing is the easier way out. A great sacrifice is the killing of the mind, the killing of sensitivity. This is psychological suicide. Both actions are a form of *jihad*, the former being of minor significance as compared to the latter.

It happens frequently in congregational life that the individual suffers from the feeling that he is being neglected and that he is not being given his due. At times, such incidents take place as are hurtful to his ego, and his mind becomes darkened by negative thoughts. On all such occasions, he must act with the same rigorous self-discipline as the terrorists, who literally kills himself to save his organization, that is to say, he must commit psychological suicide. He must kill all feelings of sensitivity,— feeding, as it were, potassium cyanide to the negative side of his thinking. Any organization which is made up of such self-sacrificing individuals can always be more certain of success than an organization in which the 'selves' of the members are constantly pulling in opposite directions.

Even during the lifetime of the Prophet, congregational life could be established only through the sacrifices made by individuals. It is well known that the Prophet's companions never spared themselves when it came to making the sacrifice of psychological 'suicide.' It could only be on the basis of such a mentality that a powerful congregational structure could emerge that would change the fate of the whole world, leading man into a new and historic era. The willing annihilation of the self gives life to the entire congregation. There is no other path for the individual to tread, if he wishes his congregation to play a meaningful role in the world of today.

16 July 1988

Obedience to the Prophet, come what may:

When Mughirah ibn Shuaba told the Prophet that he intended to marry the daughter of a certain person, the Prophet told him to go and see her first. He did as he was bade by the prophet, informing the girl's parents of his intentions and of the Prophet's injunction. The girl's parents were nevertheless reluctant to let their daughter appear before a stranger. The girl, however, who was in the next room, overheard the conversation and said, "If the prophet has given this order, then come and see me. If he has not, I implore you in God's name not to do so."

Open Your Eyes and Ears to the Truth

God has given us many signs in nature so that we may “grow in understanding ... for from some rocks rivers take their course: some break asunder and the water gushes from them. Yet after that your hearts became hard as rock or even harder.”

Bewailing man's insensitivity to the divine wonders that surround him, the Quran observes: “Many are the marvels of the heavens and the earth; yet they pass them by and pay no heed to them” (12:105). We may attempt to convey great truths in human language, but how much better they are expressed in the divine language of the universe. But when people are deaf to the word of God, how can we expect them to give ear to the human voice and be influenced thereby? Those who fail to read the writings of God in nature all around them can scarcely be expected to benefit from the writings of man.

Where can we find better teachers than the vastness and grandeur of the universe? They teach us that man is a humble creature and that the only posture which it is proper for man to adopt is that of extreme humility. In spite of this, man continues to display his arrogance. The Quran tells us not to walk proudly on the earth. “You cannot cleave the earth, nor can you rival the mountains in stature” (17:37).

God has given us many signs in nature so that we may “grow in understanding ... for from some rocks rivers take their course: some break asunder and the water gushes from them (2:74). This same verse sadly comments, “Yet after that your hearts became hard as rock or even harder.”

People go on building their lives and their societies to resemble shallow-rooted, delicate tendrilled creepers which may be swept away at any moment by even the most minor vagaries of nature, yet that very same nature provides us with the analogy of the lofty tree with its deep, spreading roots – a veritable symbol of unity, strength and wholesomeness. Why cannot human beings read the signs that are meant for them? Why do they build on such shallow foundations when society's roots need to go down so deep. The *Quran* makes it clear that we are meant to see a divine meaning in the tree when it asks: “Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree? Its root is firm and its branches are in the sky; it yields its fruit every season by God's leave. God gives parables to men so that they may take heed” (14:24).

Had people ears that actually heard, and eyes that actually saw they would find the universe announcing divine truths at every moment. But when people are deaf to divine announcements and blind to divine signs, is it to be expected that the human voice will benefit them to any degree whatsoever? When such a stage of insensitivity has been reached, it will only be the last trumpet of Doomsday which will finally bring them to their senses.

18 July 1988

Bowing before the commandments of God

There was a family of the Thaqeef tribe of Taif, named Banu Amr ibn Umair, and another from the Banu Makhzoom, named Banu Mughirah who, during the Period of Ignorance (that is, before Islam) used to conduct usurious transactions amongst themselves. After the conquest of Mecca, both families accepted Islam, but, at that time, the Banu Mughirah still owed a certain amount of money to the Banu Amr ibn Umair, who demanded repayment of the debt. The Banu Mughirah conferred amongst themselves and decided that they would pay no interest (on any loans made to them) from the earnings they made after their acceptance of Islam. This naturally caused much dissension. Attab ibn Usayd as a representative of the Prophet in the area, informed the latter of the situation. In reply, the Prophet recited this verse of the Quran: "Believers, have fear of God and waive what is due to you from usury, if your faith be true; or war shall be declared against you by God and His Apostle" (2: 278-279). The attitude of the Banu Amr ibn Umair immediately changed when they heard this verse and they said, "We turn to God and waive the interest still due."

(Tafseer Ibn Kathir)

From Past to Present: a Decline

“Whereas during the Middle Ages the trend was almost entirely from East to West (when Islam acted as the teacher of the west), in modern times the direction of influence has been reversed.”

The profound influence which Islam exerted on the culture and knowledge of the western world in mediaeval times has been well documented by historians, but seems to be falling into oblivion in the context of today's world. *The Cambridge History of Islam*, written by Professor P.M. Holt and other distinguished orientalisists, lays great stress on this aspect of Islamic history, but at the same time points out contemporary regressive trends. At the end of a chapter entitled, 'Literary impact of Islam on the western world,' the writer says: "Whereas during the Middle Ages the trend was almost entirely from East to West (when Islam acted as the teacher of the west), in modern times the direction of influence has been reversed" (Vol. 2B, pp. 888-89).

Teachers of the world in the past, Muslims have now become the pupils of the present. This reversal of roles tells us why Muslims, who were respected in the past, have now lost their position of honour among the peoples of the present.

One of the greatest contributing factors to this sorry state of affairs is the disproportionate amount of time which is spent by Muslims in lamenting over their lot in life. Protesting against what they see to be the 'deprivation' of their circumstances has almost become a way of life for large sections of the Muslim populace. Their vociferousness would almost lead one to believe that some divine law had been altered in order deliberately to disfavour them. They behave as if the ancient law which approved of receiving only when one was ready to give should now be distorted to mean that those who make protests and demands should be the ones to receive.

Considering that God has not changed the laws which apply to this world, the present preoccupations of the Muslims are likely to achieve little beyond hastening them on their downward path to doom and destruction.

Weathering the Storm

People fall, largely, into two mutually exclusive categories: those reared in the hard school of life, and those born into the lap of luxury. Early environment has a decisive impact upon their as yet unformed personalities and it is the way people acquit themselves in their contrasting situations of ease and privation that ultimately determines how their personalities will develop.

To be brought up in the midst of ease and comfort in times of peace and plenty may appear to be the greatest of good fortunes. Yet it is the man who has had to suffer hardships throughout his life who will have the stronger, better-rounded personality. Too much comfort and convenience turns people into weaklings. It is the person who has had to put up a struggle for everything he has who will emerge with the greatest strength of character. There is a great deal of wisdom in the saying that "it is not ease but effort, not facility but difficulty, that makes men."

On the stormy seas of life, there are countless individuals who are confronted by difficulties. Some emerge unscathed, but more often, a large number lose heart, become a prey to despair and ultimately give up even trying. It is only those who stand firm in the face of adversity, resisting all the various obstacles which hinder their progress, who are finally able to advance towards a new and successful life.

But there is one danger to the latter group, once they have attained their objectives, and there is a possible degeneration into materialism as a result of their experiences in a world which is nothing if not materialistic. They must guard against being morally swept off their feet by the status in society which material wealth brings with it. Learning from hardships is no learning at all if all it does is turn people towards materialism. Material possessions do one no good whatsoever if they have been gained at the cost of higher human principles.

Hardship in this world can only truly benefit us if, in the process of the ensuing struggle, we learn the lessons of morality. We can only learn from our experiences provided we do not allow ourselves to be destroyed by them. We must always remember that it is quite possible to taste the bitterness of life's potion without falling a victims to its poison. The difficulties of life should give us experiences which will enable us to become fuller and richer personalities; they should never cause us to descend into negativism.

The Challenge of Adversity

Edmund Burke, (1729-1797) the Irish writer, statesman and philosopher, once observed that “he that wrestles with us, strengthens our nerves, and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper.” Shaikh Saadi, the famous Persian poet, has expressed very much the same thought in the form of a parable in his book entitled *Gulistan*: “Don’t you see, when a cat becomes frustrated, it claws out the eyes of the lion.”

Each of these writers has seen something positive in adversity, and implies that neither passivity nor lamentation is fitting response to it. Each, by his words, encourages the sufferer to adopt a positive attitude and to launch himself on a positive course of action when confronted by difficulty or danger.

Adopting a positive attitude means looking upon adversity not as a form of irreversible oppression, but as a challenge to one’s mental and physical skills. If one sees nothing in adversity but tyrannical misfortune, one will tend to do little but register protests. A whole negative mentality will then be built up. But if one regards it as a challenge, one will try to face up to it and overcome it, very often drawing upon hitherto unsuspected potential. The mind will be stirred to action and one will draw upon reserves of moral courage which would otherwise have lain dormant. It is in seeking to counteract the nefarious plans of an enemy that one’s intelligence is quickened and one’s stores of wisdom are brought forth to meet the urgency of the situation.

Protests lead one nowhere. They can only lead to further protests, thus draining away whatever one has left in terms of strength and enthusiasm. The futility of such action must immediately be recognised, so that precious time and energy may not heedlessly be squandered. After all, acceptance of a challenge gives a man new-found courage, so that even the weakest can overcome the strongest. In exactly the same way as Saadi’s cat could cause the mighty lion to retreat.

Fighting Despair

“My hands are useless as I can find no work, and living is shameful without work.”

A few years ago, a group of passengers who were waiting at the Modi railway station were horrified to see a young man (later identified as Ramesh Dhobi *from* Maharashtra) kneel down and stretch his arms across the railway line in the path of a fast-approaching train. It was too late for anyone to come to his assistance, and the inevitable happened – his arms were severed from his body. The passengers were fortunately able to rush him to the hospital so that his life at least should be saved. When the doctors had attended to him and he was finally in a fit condition to speak, they asked him what had caused him to do such a gruesome thing to himself. It seems that he had been so haunted by the spectre of continuing unemployment, that he had come to the railway station in a fit of severe depression. The repeated disappointments of never being able to find work had ultimately made him feel that his life was worthless. *The Times of India* of the 14th August, 1981, records him as saying, “My hands are useless as I can find no work, and living is shameful without work.”

I had no sooner finished reading this newspaper report than I walked a friend who also seemed to be in a state of mental distress. But, as it turned out, his was the opposite problem. Now that he was no longer able to farm his lands himself, he needed a responsible person to take charge of his fields and their irrigation. His fields were fertile and numerous, and he had a good water supply from a canal, but there had to be someone who would effectively take over all the work from him. But up till then, no one had come forward to take on this responsibility. My friend lamented the fact that he would lose the one lakh of rupee a year that the produce of his farm brought him, if his fields had perforce to lie fallow. What he had come to tell me, in effect, was that he had decided to sell his lands.

It is one of the great ironies of life that there are hundreds and thousands of unemployed, and yet many jobs just seem to go abegging. There is, in fact, no dearth of work in this world. The unemployed must simply cultivate two all-important qualities – diligence and perseverance – and they will find that the jobs come to seek them. One thing they must never do is give in to despair. If they do, they merely reduce themselves to the same crippled state – mentally, if not physically – as poor Ramesh Dhobi from Maharashtra.

The Most Valuable Asset

There is no more valuable asset in this world than a conscientious human being of the type who has his opinions without becoming obdurate, and who can listen to criticism of himself dispassionately, and with the same objectivity with which he weighs up praise:

In his *Tarikh as-Saghir*, Imam Bukhari relates how Umar ibn Khattab once asked some companions what their greatest wish was. One of them said that he would like to have a house full of dirhams. "Then I would spend them for the cause of God." Umar asked them to think of another wish, whereupon another of their member said, "I wish that I could have this house full of gold, so that I could spend it in God's path." Umar asked them for yet another wish, and one of them ventured to say, "I should like to have this house full of diamonds. Which I could spend for the cause of God." Umar again asked them to suggest some other wish, but beyond the first three wishes, they were unable to think of anything further. Umar then said to them: "My greatest wish, on the contrary, would be to have this house full of men like Abu Ubaydah ibn Jarrah, Muadh ibn Jabal and Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman. Men such as these I would put to the service of God."

There is no more valuable asset in this world than a conscientious human being of the type who has his opinions without becoming obdurate, and who can listen to criticism of himself dispassionately, and with the same objectivity with which he weighs up praise. Such a balanced person does not waver from his principles. He recognizes the importance of being able to disagree, without however allowing his difference of opinion to bring about disunity. It was men of such character that Umar had in mind when he mentioned the above three names.

People of Two Kinds

In order to give a healthy response to any statement, one has to be able to see it in the correct light. To do this, sincerity of approach is essential. No matter whether we are listening to the word of God or to some statement made by an ordinary mortal, we must, if we are to do it justice, give it the serious thoughts which it deserves.

In this world, man is constantly being put to the test, so that God may know which of his creatures are made of the right metal. In any given situation, they are free to make right or wrong responses, but they must remember that within the divine scheme of things, they will then be categorized accordingly. The contrast between the two classes of people which emerge – differentiated by their right or wrong responses – is well illustrated by two examples which have come down to us from the earliest period of Islamic history.

The first example shows how the Jews responded to the revelation of the following verse of the Quran “Who will grant unto God a goodly loan; it will be returned to him many times over. ...” (57:11) Although there are many instances in the Quran of the Muslim being exhorted to spend for the cause of God, the Jews saw fit to come to the Prophet and say, “Mohammad, has your Lord become poor that he is asking His servants to grant Him a loan?” The scornful way in which this question was asked clearly showed that they had taken the verse out of its context and willfully misinterpreted it. Their reason for doing so was that they were unable to face up to the responsibilities which the Messenger’s teaching sought to lay upon them; in order to evade this issue, they endeavoured to find fault with his teaching, thereby demonstrating that it was not worth following.

There were others, however, who offered a positive response to this verse of the Quran in that they set about living up to the responsibilities laid down for them in the holy scriptures. They regarded it, indeed, as a challenge which they were obliged to meet in their day-to-day living. In this they were in splendid contrast to the first-mentioned group.

Abd Allah ibn Masud relates that when this verse was revealed, Abu Dahdah of the Ansars (Medinan converts) enquired of the Prophet: “Does God require a loan from us?” When the Prophet replied in the affirmative, Abu Dahdah asked him to give him his hand. The Prophet then extended his hand to him and Abu Dahdah pledged to give his orchard, which had six hundred date palms as a loan to his Lord.

He then went there, and called out to his wife and children to leave the orchard, as he had pledged it as a loan to his Lord. His wife merely said, “You have made a good deal, Abu Dahdah” then she left the orchard taking her children and her belongings with her.

It was the same verse of the Quran which was repeated both to the Jews and to Abu Dahdah, yet how different were their reactions. The former was perverse, while the latter was healthy.

In order to give a healthy response to any statement, one has to be able to see it in the correct light. To do this, sincerity of approach is essential. No matter whether we are listening to the word of God or to some statement made by an ordinary mortal, we must, if we are to do it justice, give it the serious thoughts which it deserves.

25 July 1988

The heart and the tongue: of all things the best and the worst:

Luqman the Wise, an Abyssynian slave, was once asked by his master to slaughter a goat and bring him two pieces of its best meat. Luqman did as he was bid, then cooked the goat and brought his master its tongue and heart. A few days later, his master asked him to slaughter another goat and, this time, bring him two pieces of its worst meat. Luqman did as he was bid, but presented his master with the same two parts of the animal – its tongue and its heart. His master then inquired as to why it was that he had brought him the same parts on both occasions. “If both these parts are sound,” replied Luqman, “then there is nothing to compare with them. But if they are both defective, there is nothing worse.”

From Small Beginnings

They were content to start in a small way, and then progress from that point to much higher things. History teaches us what great things can be achieved from small beginnings, provided we pursue our ends with intelligence and persistence, but how many of us are prepared to learn this lesson?

The story of foreign ascendancy over India at the beginning of the 17th century is not one of major onslaughts and massive invasion but of a piecemeal, almost fragmentary approach which nevertheless built up gradually from small, insignificant beginnings into the mighty inverted pyramid of overseas imperialism. For example, after Jehangir had issued an edict permitting the English to establish a factory at Surat, "the English Company sent an accredited ambassador of the King of England, James I, to the Mughal court with a view to concluding a commercial treaty with the Emperor. The person chosen was Sir Thomas Roe, who was 'of pregnant understanding, well spoken, learned, industrious, and of a comely personage.' Roe remained constantly at Jehangir's court from 1615 to 1618." (*An Advanced History of India*, p. 629). Jehangir used to invite him frequently to his court to have discussions with him, one of Roe's many talents being his ability to speak Turkish, so that he could converse directly with the Emperor. He also curried favour with him by catering for his special tastes. For example, he discovered that Jehangir was very interested in painting, so he presented him with a painting which the Emperor greatly appreciated. When their relationship was at its most cordial, Roe decided that the time was ripe to place his request for the commercial treaty before him, "and though certain factors prevented him from concluding any definite commercial treaty with the Mughal Emperor, he succeeded in securing several privileges for the Company, particularly the permission to erect factories in certain places within the Empire Before Roe left India in February 1619, the English had established factories at Surat, Agra, Ahmedabad and Broach. All these were placed under the control of the President and Council of the Surat factory, who had also the power to control the Company's trade with the Red Sea ports and Persia" (p. 629).

Gaining permission to open a commercial company in a city of India was apparently a move of very minor importance, considering that the whole, vast country still remained in the hands of the Mughal emperor. All the objects of glory and splendour, all the manifestations of power and might were in the hands of others. But the mere establishment of that factory at Surat was the thin edge of the wedge, as far as the English were concerned, which would finally lead them to the possession of all else. They were content to start in a small way, and then progress from that point to much higher things. History teaches us what great things can be achieved from small beginnings, provided we pursue our ends with intelligence and persistence, but how many of us are prepared to learn this lesson?

27 July 1988

True faith brings visions of unseen realities:

Malik ibn Anas tells of how Muadh ibn Jabal came before the Prophet and was asked by him, "How is your morning?" "Full of faith in God," replied Muadh. "Every statement applies to something in particular, just as every statement has an inner meaning. To what does your present statement apply?" asked the Prophet. Muadh then told the Prophet that he had never woken up in the morning thinking that he would live till the evening, and never gone to rest in the evening thinking that he would live till morning; nor did he even take one step without the thought crossing his mind that he might not be able to take another. "It is as though I see all those communities, down on their knees, being called to account for their actions. Along with them are their prophets, and their idols, too, – those to which they used to appeal, as well as to God. It is as if I see, with my very own eyes, how the people in Hell are being punished and the people in Paradise are being rewarded." "You have attained true realization," the Prophet told him. "Now let there be no falling away from it."

(Hilyat al-Auliya)

In Quest of a Dream

*Man wants a world free
of defects and limitations in
which he can fulfill his
most cherished dreams.
But the present world is not
one in which such desires
can ever be satisfied.*

Dr. C.V. Raman (1888-1970), one of India's most famous scientists, passed his M.A. at the age of 18, and in 1930 received the Noble prize in science. The result of one piece of scientific research (1928), subsequently called the Raman Effect, earned him international fame, and the institute of science in Bangalore was named after him. Throughout his life his scientific studies remained his major preoccupation, and so engrossed did he remain in them that he could ill-abide visitors coming to disturb him. Once when he was handed someone's visiting card, he exclaimed, "These visitors do not even understand the common courtesy of leaving one alone." When the telephone rang, he would just say, "Yes," or "No," and replace the receiver. He received vast quantities of mail, but after barely glancing at his letters, he would throw them in the dustbin. Of politicians, he once remarked, "To be successful in India nowadays, all you require is a Gandhi cap on your head and nothing underneath it!"

Dr. Raman's self-confidence so increased that he even denied religion. Once, talking to a news reporter, he said, "There is neither a heaven nor a hell, nor is there any existence of man after death." In the last years of his life, he fell a prey to severe depression, and little before his death in 1970, he said, "My life has been an utter failure." (*Times of India*, 21 January, 1979)

After achieving international stature as a scientist, why did Dr. Raman succumb to the feeling that he was a total failure? Perhaps the best explanation is that he could not find the world of his dreams. His greatest desire was to establish True Science in the country, but he learned by experience that those Indian scientists with whom he wanted to interact were so bent on aping the west that they had rendered themselves incapable of original thinking. As the Director of the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, he wanted renowned German scientists who had been driven out by the Nazi regime, to be invited to India by the government, in the hopes of furthering the cause of science, but his request was turned down on the grounds of political inexpediency. Then he decided to invest all his savings in the establishment of an independent scientific institute, but again his intentions were frustrated, for he lost

all his money when the private bank in which he deposited his savings went bankrupt. How sad that a man who had entered the arena of life with such high hopes and ambitions, and who had known the joys of personal success, should finally depart from it in a state of extreme depression.

This was the story of a “successful man”. Now let us take the story of a “successful woman”.

Our world is not perfect, Why?

The answer eludes man unless

he has knowledge of the Hereafter.

16-year-old Nandini was standing before a mirror in her home in Vijaynagar. She could see that her slender neck was beginning to bulge with a tumour. “Why couldn’t life have been without these blemishes?” she asked herself. She and her sisters Padma and Jayshree had become famous as professional dancers – the ‘Vijaynagar sisters’ – veterans with 150 dance performances to their credit in various cities of the country, and now, after returning from a colourful trip to Kashmir, they were due to give yet another performance in Vijaynagar. Nandini had come back from her trip having formed the private resolution that she must work even harder at perfecting her dancing so that she could become one of the top dancers of the country. But now with her neck in this ugly condition, she decided that she could not participate in the concert the following day.

As bad luck would have it, the tumour went on increasing in size, and the family, in a great state of anxiety, rushed her to hospital only to learn that their Nandini was suffering from an incurable disease – cancer. Only nine days after she had been admitted to hospital, the end came. As her body lay there motionless on the bed, her relatives were left to gaze upon her and wonder over the departure of that smiling soul.

This all happened in 1969. Subsequently, Nandini’s two sisters opened a school of dance in the name of their deceased sister. They called it Nandini Dance School. Since life had to go on, they began to accept other engagements, and made professional tours of London and European cities such as Geneva, Frankfurt, Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, etc. They achieved such great success in their profession that one of the newspapers commented. “The gods of India can smile when the bells on the Vijaynagar sisters tinkle.”

Both the sisters, now queens of Indian dancing, got married in February, 1973. Only two days after the wedding, the mirror revealed to Jayshree that a tumour was beginning to protrude near her chin. She was given prompt medical treatment, was operated upon, and the family thought that she had been cured. But the persistence of pain at that point made her feel extremely worried. Her doctor tried to reassure her by saying, “Don’t be foolish, Jayshree. How can a person so young and healthy as you be suffering from cancer?” But, inevitably, there had to be further investigations, and when a piece of the tumor was sent to the Tata Memorial hospital in Bombay for examination, their report confirmed that Jayshree, like Nandini before her, was suffering from cancer. The disease spread throughout her body

and, in spite of the best of treatment, the pain went on increasing. Her condition steadily worsened until, on March 18, 1974, Jayshree's soul bade farewell to a body made horrible by cancer.

The glittering home of the Vijaynagar sisters now wears a sad look. The parents, after losing two young daughters, now find life meaningless. The feeling of gloom is all-pervasive. It means little to them that the Nritya (Dance) School was re-named the Jayshree Arts International in November, 1975. And as for Padma, in spite of all her obvious success, she feels that she is already treading the same path as her departed sisters. She too is asking the same question that her sisters asked: "Why could not life have been more perfect?" The life of anguish that she leads is summed up by S. Ganguly in *Eve's Weekly* (2.6.1978): "A psychological amputation is not less real than a physical one."

This is not a stray example. Our society is full of such instances. We see many happy, smiling faces around us, but if we delve into the lives of many of the people who put up such a cheerful front, we shall come upon a great deal of sadness, dejection and despair.

Sometimes people feel cast down because life falls so far short of their expectations. Just as the parents of the Vijaynagar sisters expected that their daughters would go from success to success and would live for many years to savour the joys of that success, so are there many others in this world whose expectations are nipped in the bud, and they are left wondering what meaning there is in life.

But even those whose expectations are fulfilled sometimes do not succeed in leading any more positive an existence than those who are left in a state of deprivation or bereavement. Take the man who thinks that the greatest thing would be to have the bare necessities of life. He makes great efforts to acquire these things, but once they are in his possession, they no longer satisfy him. Now he wants comforts and luxuries. Again he strives to have these things, but since his desires know no limits, he takes no pleasure in their possession once he has them. His thoughts now turn to the acquisition of honour and glory. He dearly wishes to raise himself in status above all others. But the higher he rises, the more he realizes that there will always be others above him, and to him they become objects of jealousy and hatred. His life is no better than a series of gropings in the dark after one material objective or the other, and even this is brought to an end by death, which takes him away to the world of the hereafter – a world which for him will be even darker and more bitter – without his ever having attained his goal of happiness. Too late, he will discover that the successes of this world are as meaningless as the failures. Too late, he will discover that all his aims and ambitions were just so much wishful thinking.

The majority of the people in this world suffer from feelings of failure and frustration throughout their lives. Even those who have managed to avail of the best opportunities that life has to offer, and who have felt that they had the world's pleasures within their grasp, have often ultimately suffered from the acute depression resulting from accidents, illness, or the failure of their plans, and have seen their lives draw meaninglessly to a close. There are the happy few who go throughout life without experiencing adversity or even unpleasant incidents, but they too must eventually die. No one can escape death. How many are

the individuals who go on life's journey towards success, only to have death come and raze the whole edifice of their hopes and ambitions to the ground.

Is man fated to bring his precious talents to the world only to end as the worst kind of failure? If we dispense with the idea of there being a Hereafter, life takes on the hues of darkness and tragedy, our limitations loom large and the world assumes the shape of a place in which we can never even realise our dreams. It has to be accepted that it is only the concept of the Hereafter which renders human life meaningful. If we make the Hereafter our destination, we can direct our steps towards it with courage and conviction, for one who believes in the Hereafter sees a boundless future of hope stretch out before him. Life without the Hereafter appears meaningless. But the moment we accept that another life awaits us beyond the grave, life takes on a whole new complexion; every thought, word and deed becomes so significant that human language can hardly express the wonder of it all.

People who concern themselves only with the worldly luxuries of here and now consider the greatest earthly paradise to be Hollywood, America's film land capital, often ironically referred to as 'Tinsel town.' The less fortunate in this world envy from afar the denizens of this supposed heaven on earth. But little do they realize that the citizens of Hollywood, far from living in a superlative and permanent state of bliss, are often a prey to discontent, boredom and depression. A recent survey of Hollywood has, in fact, revealed that many of its inhabitants lead quite pitiable lives. Imagine a man who owns a whole fleet of cars becoming irritable and depressed because it takes him so long to chose which one he will use on any given day. Sheer boredom drives people to such extremes that they exchange houses with each other, and even their wives, so that they may have the variety which is traditionally thought to be the 'spice of life.' In actual fact, what these people need to look for is peace of mind, but they are so bedazzled by the material things of life that they never come to the point of understanding this. They continue, quite mindlessly, to seek satisfaction in mere things. In the last analysis, it is only God who can provide the eternal answer to man's desires. It is only in remembering God that man's heart can be set at rest.

Remembrance of God means filling our hearts with the only Being who is real and eternal. One who finds God finds everything. Even if, on the path towards his Maker, the seeker has to undergo all kinds of suffering, he remains content, because he knows that he is on the right path to the right destination.