



# Al-Risala 1999

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2-6 March-April 1999

## Prophet of Islam—My Role Model

Yusuf Islam, formerly pop artiste Cat Stevens released his first recording at the Sound & Vision department of the famous London department Store Harrods, where he addressed a press conference.

After four painstaking years in the studio perfecting *The life of the Last Prophet*, the scene was set to launch the new CD and cassette.

Once a pop-musician for a generation, Yusuf Islam, the man who departed the music industry at the height of his success, launched straight in the deep end as he addressed the assembled press.

*“The Life of the Last Prophet is the most important recording I have ever made,”* he said. *“I, like many who have been brought up in the West, knew only the negative side of the Islamic world and civilization. Nothing of its true history or the basis of its beliefs was ever taught to me. Therefore, I consider myself really fortunate to have been given a chance to study Islam from its purest source, back in 1976, when I was given a copy of the Qur’an by my brother David.*

*“I was stunned to find out that basic information about the Prophet Muhammad is not known by the general public, so I was inspired to produce this biography, from which I hope that people will get to know, understand and benefit from the Prophet as much as I have. Since I became a Muslim, I have been studying the life of this great man, taken as a model for every believer. The more I read and understood how great He was, the more I was frustrated by the ignorance and misinformation that surrounds him.*

*“For a long time, I was taken as a role model by quite a large number of my generation. However, I was really searching, along with everyone else. Upon discovering Islam, I read the story of the life of the last Prophet Muhammad. Suddenly, I had found my role model.”*

*“A lot is being written and said about Islam and Muslims but most of it is exaggerated, out of context or distorted. As long as there is some outlandish or sensational heading, the media, it seems, will relay it. The case of Salman Rushdie is one example of how issues have been unfairly portrayed. This issue has been represented as one of freedom of speech versus censorship and death threats, whereas in truth it is one of decency versus obscenity.*

*“No doubt some journalists here would like to bypass my album altogether and concentrate solely on that highly contentious subject. So, for the record, let me state the following:*

*The Satanic Verses was Salman Rushdie’s view of the Prophet of Islam. The Life of the Last Prophet is mine. Rushdie’s book, by his own confession is based on fiction. My work is based on facts. Therefore,*

people are free; they now have a choice, so let them listen and see which side of the story they're more inclined to believe."

*The Life of the Last Prophet* is a 66 minute CD and cassette, accompanied by a 40-page booklet which contains the full text of the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, with extensive notes and reference. The album is punctuated by some evocatively sung verse from the Qur'an, recited by a renowned Egyptian Quari." A bonus cassette of CD includes three more Islamic songs, one of which is beautiful rendition of the *adhan* (call to prayer). The whole venture is fully authenticated and approved by an international group of *ulama* (scholars).

Yusuf Islam was insistent that the arcading is as much for non-Muslims as for believers, to fill gap in accessible material on Islam for the audience.

"It's so strange that this religion was most entirely veiled from the West," he said. "We had Orientalists giving us glimpses of what you might call 'Islam', or what some called 'Mohammedanism' – which is actually a misnomer and complete distortion – but that was all we had for so long. Today, the great difference is that we have not only non-Muslims writing about Islam, we have Muslims. I am a Muslims trying to convey the message of Islam in English, the tongue with which I was born. I think that this is important, and I will be conveying this to people like me who didn't know anything about Islam."

One of the journalists present at Harrods asked Yusuf Islam why *The Life of the Last Prophet* is almost exclusively the Produce of the human voice, with hardly any musical instrumentation. The singer replied: "One of the things that we had to be careful of in this recording was to follow the basic guidelines of Islam regarding sound and the use of musical instruments. There is allowance for some kind of percussive drums but the main focus of Muslim traditional music has always been the voice: the voice is the carrier of the message of the word. So the highest form of expression or song in Islam is the recitation of the Qur'an. Then comes the *adhan*, the call to prayer, which has always been a symbol of the music of Islam. And then you have the songs which emanate naturally from weddings, from festivals – and in fact one of the song which is included on this album, which I would say is one of the most important songs in the Muslim world, is that song sung when the Prophet (peace be upon Him) came from Makkah to Madinah. All the children came out in a rush to greet him, and spontaneously sang this song, called *Tal'al-Badru 'alayna*, which means 'The white moon has arisen over us.' That was a very important element of this recording, to show how much joy there is in Islam, in music, but within limits."

Yusuf Islam is actually the third name by which this man has been known. He was born Steven Demetre Georgiou in 1948, of a Swedish mother and Greek father.

"I had quite an amazing youth and background, born in the heart of the West End in London," he said.

"Although I had quite a strict Christian upbringing, the Catholic school I attended was in Drury Lane, the heart of theatre land. So it was not surprising that I saw that the entertainment world was perhaps an easy option. I was street-wise and eventually made it at the grand old age of 18."

During 10 years in the recording industry Cat Stevens achieved approximately 25 million sales of long playing records worldwide, with memorable hits such as *Wild World*, *Morning Has Broken* and *Moon Shadow*.

But throughout this glittering career, says Yusuf Islam, Cat Steven was searching for peace and the ultimate spiritual truth. He embraced Islam in 1977, becoming Yusuf Islam, and is now an active member of the Muslim community in Britain. Gradually the music business lost its lure and he has become involved in community work in two spheres – education for Muslim children (he has five of his own) and humanitarian relief.

“One of the first things that I found was that there is very little in common between the life of a pop star and the life of a Muslim, even though music as such is not forbidden,” he said. “Music is part of the life. We know that birds sing and the sea roars and the wind howls. This is all music. But when I studied more deeply, I found that there was indeed a conflict with many of the things which go hand-in hand with the music business, such as showing off.”

Of course, Yusuf Islam is not the only Westerner to ‘discover’ Islam. The 19th-Century French romantic poet Lamartine, in a lengthy tribute to the Prophet, wrote: “If greatness of purpose, smallness of means and astounding results are the three criteria of human genius, who could claim to compare any great man in modern history with Muhammad?”

British writer George Bernard Shaw said, “I believe that, if a man like Him were to assume the dictatorship of the modern world, He would succeed in solving the problems in a way that would bring the much-needed peace and happiness. Europe is beginning to be enamored of the creed of Muhammad. In the next century, it may go further in recognizing the utility of that creed in solving its problems.”

Possibly the most telling tribute of all was that of the great pacifist Indian leader Gandhi, who wrote of the Prophet of al-Islam: “I become more than ever convinced that it was not the sword that won a place for Islam in those days. It was the rigid simplicity, the utter self-effacement of the Prophet, the scrupulous regard for pledges. His intense devotion to his friends and followers and his intrepidity, his fearlessness, his absolute trust in God and in his own mission. These and not the sword carried everything before them and surmounted every obstacle.”

*by Juliet Highet*

## ON HEARING THE HEREAFTER MENTIONED, HE WAIVED HIS CLAIM

Umm Salamah tells of how two of the Ansar brought a dispute before the Prophet about a long-standing issue of inheritance for which neither party could produce a witness. "You bring me your disputes," the Prophet said to them, "and, when no proper evidence is brought forward, I judge them according to my own way of thinking. I might, on the basis of partial evidence, make a settlement in favour of one of the parties, but in so doing, it may be that I take away from the other what is his rightful due. In that case, the one in whose favour I pass judgement should not accept what has been apportioned to him, for that would be like his accepting a firebrand which, on the Day of Resurrection, would stick on his neck." At these words, both the Ansar broke down and wept. "Prophet of God!" they both cried out, "he can have my rightful share!" "The Prophet then told them that in view of their changed attitude they should go and, seeking to do what was just and right, should divide the inheritance into two parts. Then they should draw lots as to who should have which part. In this way, each would have the other's approval of the share he received.

*(Kanz al-Ummal)*

## Without Prejudice

During the lifetime of the Prophet of Islam many of his fellow men opposed Islam and engaged in plotting against Islam and Muslims. The Qur'an has mentioned this at several places. But the counter strategy advocated by the Qur'an was not to unearth their plots and launch movements to defeat them, or even finally to wage war against them. On the contrary, the Prophet and his companions were enjoined to place their trust in God alone.

That is to say, ignoring the plots and antagonism, trusting only in God and rising above circumstances, they were to continue all activities which were of a positive nature.

This was an extremely important injunction. By giving this guidance, God set them on a course of positive thinking, which left no room for negative thought. In short, this Quranic teaching encouraged the early Muslims to live in a self-sufficient way, free of baneful influence of their opponents.

If you have this obsession that others are plotting against you, and that everyone has turned your enemy, you will start suspecting everyone, to the extent that even if a member of your own community underscores the importance of tolerance and avoidance, you will take it in a negative light and dub him an agent of the enemy. In this way, you will weaken yourselves by turning your own people away from you.

One harmful aspect of such negative obsession is that one loses all objectivity in thinking. One's entire outlook becomes partisan and prejudiced. One is unable to see reality as it is. One becomes like the man who can see only the thorns in a garden of roses or the colour-blind person to whom a garden blossoming with flowers will appear in melancholy shades of grey.

## Religion of Humanity

Abu Dharr Ghefari was a well known companion of the Prophet. He died in Rabza in 32 A.H. in Madinah. A long hadith narrated by him is recorded in Tafsir ibn Kathir, a part of the hadith is as follows.

“When I entered the mosque, I saw that the Prophet was seated alone. I sat beside him. Then I asked, ‘O Messenger of God, who is most superior of the believers?’ The Prophet said: ‘One whose moral behaviour is best.’ Then I asked, ‘O Messenger of God, who is the best Muslim?’ The Prophet said, ‘From whose tongue and hands people are safe.’ Then I asked, ‘O Messenger of God, which is the best emigration?’ The Prophet said, ‘One whose emigration leads him to shun all evils.’ (1/586)

This tradition of the Prophet tells us which types of human beings are held up as models by Islam i.e. such individuals as prove to be of the best moral character in their dealings with others. It is those in whom the sense of responsibility is so awakened that their tongues do not hurt anyone, and their hands do not harm anyone. It is those who have abandoned all such habits and ways in which there is any trace of evil.

In truth, a good Muslim is one who is a good human being. Islam in actual fact is a religion of man-making. The goal of Islam is man’s intellectual purification and practical reform. When Islam enters the heart of a person, he will become a good human being on his own.

A person whose life is devoid of goodness can make no claim to being a true Muslim.

8 March-April 1999

## HAVE TRUST IN GOD RIGHT UP TILL THE END

When the Prophet left Makkah on his emigration to Madinah, he spent the first three days in the Cave of Thur. The Quraysh, who were searching for him, eventually arrived at this cave. Abu Bakr, who was in hiding with the Prophet, said, "Prophet of God, look how close the enemy has come. If they were just to look at their feet, they would see us beneath them." "Abu Bakr," the Prophet replied, "What do you think of those two who have God as a third?"

*(Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah)*



## Duty to Parents

The Qur'an has this to say regarding parents:

At several places the Qur'an exhorts us to be on our best behaviour with parents, to pay their dues, and, even when scolded by them, to refrain from angry retorts; we should never be found lacking in loving them or in serving them. That is to say: we should at all times conduct ourselves with the utmost propriety, regardless of how our parents treat us.

According to a hadith a man approached the Prophet and asked, "O Prophet, who is more deserving of my good behaviour?" The Prophet said, "Your mother." The man then asked, "Who after that?" The Prophet again said, "Your mother". The man again repeated the question and the Prophet again said "Your mother". When the man asked the Prophet the fourth time, then he said "Your father" (Sahih Muslim 16/102).

There are many traditions which tell us that after God it is to parents that one has obligations more than to anyone else. One reason for this is that in this world individuals receive the maximum benefits from parents. As such it is incumbent upon a person when he grows up to serve his parents to the best of his ability. He should come to their assistance in their old age as they came to his assistance in his childhood.

Another reason is that serving parents enables a person to become a servant of humanity at large, to look at all human beings with love; to honour them and to pay them their dues.

## Comprehensive Principle

The simplest principle of the religion of humanity is to treat others just as one would like to be treated by them. The Prophet once observed: 'No one can be a believer until and unless he begins to like for his brother what he likes for himself (*Fathul Bari*, 1/ 73).

With minor differences these words of the Prophet have been recorded in all the books of hadith. For instance, according to the tradition narrated by Muslim (the compiler of the second most authentic book of hadith) the wording is as follows: By the Being in Whose Hand is my soul, no one can be a believer as long as he does not like for his neighbour (or brother) what he likes for himself.

All individuals, be they literate or illiterate, able-bodied or handicapped, whether of one class or another, are certain at all events of their own likes and dislikes. Now what is required is that they simply follow the principle that whatever behaviour they want from others, they should themselves accord to others. Conversely, whatever behaviour towards themselves they abhor in others should likewise be eschewed by them.

This is such a comprehensive principle that it is useful in relations between men and women, individuals and nations, in the homeland as well as in foreign lands. If people were to adhere to this principle, their family life as well as their social life would improve. National life as well as international life would run more smoothly. It is like a master key to human ethics, one single key which suffices to open all locked doors.

One who does not differentiate between his own people and others is a man of principle. His is a contradiction-free personality. And this trait, when properly developed, will turn him into a perfect person.

## The Teaching of Patience

A western commentator, William Patron, has observed: One of the fruits of Islam has been that stubborn durable patience which comes out of the submission to the absolute will of Allah.

This observation is indeed very apt. Islam attaches great importance to patience. Most of the verses of the Qur'an have a bearing, directly or indirectly, upon this virtue. In truth, patience is an attribute without which the very thought of Islam is unimaginable.

The present world is designed in such a way that here one has repeatedly to face unpleasant experiences, inside as well as outside the home. Now if people were to fall to wrangling on all such occasions, they would fail to advance along the path of human progress. That is why Islam has placed great emphasis on patience, so that by avoiding all unpleasantness, man may continue his onward journey towards the higher goal – God-realisation.

The Qur'an repeatedly stresses the need for patience. In chapter 31, we are enjoined to remain patient in these words, "Endure with fortitude whatever befalls you." (17) In chapter 8, we are told to "have patience. Allah is with those that are patient." (46) Chapter 103 says, "Perdition shall be the lot of man except for those who believe and do good works and exhort one another to justice and to fortitude.

Similarly, the traditions have laid great emphasis on the importance of patience. The Prophet once said, 'Listen and obey and be patient.' On another occasion he observed: 'God has commanded man to be patient and forgiving.' A companion of the Prophet said: 'The Prophet and his companions always remained patient in the face of persecution at the hands of enemies. It is true that patience provides the basic quality for Islamic activism. In this world no one can adhere to the path of Islamic virtue without remaining patient.

## Spiritual Progress

The actual target of Islam is spiritual progress. For this, man's spirituality has to be awakened, and the divine feelings latent within him aroused. In the Qur'an this, Islam's actual goal, is called purification and cleansing (9: 102).

In actual fact, every person is born with an upright nature. In this respect, everyone by his or her very birth is pure and clean. But during his stay in this world he becomes externally sullied. What is meant by purification is for man to rid himself of this outer shell of moral grime and revert to the upright nature he was born with.

This action of purification and cleansing has to be performed by the individual himself. A little child may be clean and pure on his own, but this state of purity is not due to some effort on his part, for he has been in this state from the very moment of his very creation. It is a different matter when he grows up. Then he must make himself clean and pure spiritually, by his own striving. It amounts to arriving consciously at the optimal stage of spiritual development by one's own will and efforts. It is this self-attained spiritual progress which is desirable in Islam. In the Qur'an it is called coming before one's Lord with a "pure heart" (26:89).

According to a hadith, the Prophet observed while praying "May God fill my heart with light." Similarly, the Prophet once uttered these words, while praying for someone, "O God, forgive his sins and purify his heart." In *Muatta* of Imam Malik a saying of Luqman is recorded in these words: God revives the heart with the light of wisdom, just as he revives the dead earth with rains. (p.707)

This is called spiritual progress. And it is this spiritual progress which is the actual goal of Islam. Those who fail to make spiritual progress will certainly never become truly Islamic in character.

## Superior Ethics

The morality that was taught to the Prophet by God and whole heartedly adopted by the Prophet in his life is alluded to in the Qur'an in these words: 'Surely you have a sublime character' (68:4).

This means that the Prophet of Islam was of such a high moral character, that his behaviour was a model of perfection for his followers. Having a high moral character means having the capacity to rise above the negativity of peoples' attitudes and behaviour. The way of the morally upright man is not that of treating badly those who treat him badly and treating well those who treat him well. The perfect man treats everyone well irrespective of their treatment of and attitude towards him.

The Prophet of Islam kept unfailingly to this high standard of morality. In this way by becoming a model of this character in practice he demonstrated how a life of morality should be lived in the real sense. Evidence of such a character is a proof in itself that the person concerned is a man of principle. The personality of such an individual is not a product of circumstance but rather of his own high principles. Such a character is truthful person who proves himself by adhering to the path of nature.

The traditions lay great emphasis on good behaviour. According to one hadith, the Prophet said, "I have been sent to perfect good moral character." Similarly, he observed that the most perfect faith is of one whose moral character is best. The Prophet further observed that on the Day of Judgement good moral character will be the supreme factor in tipping the scales of divine justice in our favour.

A believer is a person who lives at the divine level. So whatever the circumstances, he continues to remain a man of high moral character. His thinking never descends to a lower plane; no situation can prove too much for the sublimity of his character.

## Well – Wishing

Once suspicion fell upon certain people in Medina. On this occasion the following command was revealed in the Qur'an: 'When you heard it, why did the faithful, men and women, not think well of their own people, and say: "This is an evident falsehood?"' (24:12)

This shows that Islam desires an atmosphere in which the members of society think well of each other. If people hear of anything directed against someone, they should neither spread it to others, nor should they themselves give credence to it. They should always cherish good thoughts about others in their hearts.

In another verse of the Qur'an, we are addressed in these words: "Believers, avoid immoderate suspicion, for in some cases, suspicion is a crime." (49: 12)

The evils of dissension and discord are invariably produced in a society which is vitiated by suspicion. If suspicion is nipped in the bud, mutual relationships will not deteriorate. And a pleasant atmosphere will continue to prevail.

According to a hadith, the Prophet of Islam observed: "You should save yourselves from suspicion, because suspicion is the worst of falsehoods" (*Sahih*, Muslim).

There are many traditions from which we learn the dictates of Islam on this subject as well as what conformance with them entails. That is, people should keep their hearts free of misgivings about others. If anything negative is said about others, they should not believe it just on the basis of hearsay. Either they should take no notice of it or, if it is necessary to form an opinion, they should first of all investigate the whole matter thoroughly and only then draw their conclusion.

The ideal person according to Islam is one who holds positive views about others; who has only good thoughts and feelings about them.

## Modesty

Modesty, the greatest adornment of humanity, is fundamental to the building of a good and just society, for all other human qualities stem there from. That is why modesty has had so much emphasis laid upon it in all Islamic teachings. In chapter 31 of the Qur'an we are addressed by God in these words: "Do not turn away from men with scorn, or walk proudly on the earth. Allah does not love the arrogant and the vainglorious. Rather let your gait be modest and your voice low: the harshest of voices is the braying of the ass" (31:18-19). The man who is deficient in the virtue of modesty may appear to be a human being, but in reality he falls very far short of being so.

Vanity ill becomes human beings, for the beauty of man lies not in haughtiness but in modesty. What best befits mankind is humility. Man's perfection does not lie in the loud voice of arrogance but in humble gentleness of speech. The modest man is true to his nature: the arrogant man deviates from it. But it takes a sense of realism to appreciate this, and the man devoid of modesty is likewise devoid of realism.

A lack of modesty frequently leads to high-handedness, an attitude which betrays a frivolous disregard of the social obligation to respect the rights and feelings of others. That is why Islam spares no effort in inculcating a serious attitude to social dues. When one becomes a Muslim, one perforce acquires the seriousness of the modest person. According to a hadith, the Prophet once observed that God had sent the revelation that "you (people) should adopt the attitude of modesty. No one should deal high-handedly with others, and no one should be so presumptuous as to display superiority over others" (*Sunan, Abu Dawud*).

According to Islam, greatness belongs to God alone, and all human beings are equally servants of God. When this concept – the acceptance of God as the greatest of all beings – is firmly implanted in people's hearts, modesty becomes the natural condition.

16 March-April 1999

## EXTENDING UNSTINTED SUPPORT

Abu Bakr called together the Companions and told them of his intention to send an expedition to Syria. “God will surely grant the Muslims His succour,” he told them, “and exalt His word.” In the consultations that followed, some of the Companions opposed certain of Abu Bakr’s ideas. Even so, after brief discussions, all of them – without a single voice of dissent – urged Abu Bakr to do as he thought fit. ‘We shall neither oppose nor blame you,’ they assured him.

*(Ibn ‘Asakir)*



## The Four Pillars

After belief in God and the Prophet, four practices enjoy the status of pillars of Islam—fasting, prayers, *zakat* (alms-giving) and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). In essence, these are the four parts which make up the whole that is called Islam.

Fasting means not just abstaining from food and drink, but also rising above the material world so that man may bring himself closer to God. Prayer, in spirit, is remembrance of God. *Zakat*, in reality, is a form of sacrifice meant to underline those ethical values which are known in Islam as *Huququl Ibad*, that is, fulfillment of one's responsibilities towards others. *Hajj*, a reenactment of the missionary life of the greatest preacher of truth, the Prophet Abraham, also necessarily entails sacrifice in the cause of God. Understanding and acceptance of these four pillars, as symbols of the fundamental parts of Islam, prepare one to adopt Islam fully in one's life.

Each of these four acts of worship is imbued with a particular spirit, yet is so designed that its performance as well as fulfilling its basic purpose, may achieve other important ends. The pillars of Islam may, in this respect, be likened to human limbs, each having a separate function, but inseparably attached to the body.

1. One significant aspect of these acts of worship is that, even if their basic ends are not being served devotees are bound in some measure to benefit from them. For example, even if prayer and fasting do not bring one close to God (96: 19), they may at least serve to keep worshippers away from indecency and evil (29:45). Fasting, in the words of the Prophet, will teach them to refrain from falsehood, promise-breaking and loud talk; it provides them with a shield against the onslaughts of the devil.

2. Each acts of worship has been so designed that, as well as fulfilling its own specific purpose, it is closely and meaningfully linked with other acts of worship. For example, the real aim of *hajj* is to prepare the pilgrim for a missionary life – that of calling people to God. But the form it takes in the process is that of visits to the holy places and the performance of the rites of *hajj*, as a result of which the pilgrim receives a special share in the love of God and a heightened awareness of the life hereafter. He returns purified after this act of worship, and is able to lead a fuller and better religious life.

3. Every act of worship is aimed, essentially, at bringing man into communion with God, in one way or another. But the different forms of worship have been so designed that they meet other requirements of life as well, or, at least, strengthen man's will to achieve other worthy goals. For example, prayer in congregation and the worldwide gathering for *hajj* serve as platform for Muslim unity; similarly, fasting is beneficial for physical health and *zakat* makes for a well-organised economic system.

## Fasting

The Arabic term for fasting is 'sawm'. In essence, it is the same as "tabattul Ilal-Allah" that is detaching oneself from the world and devoting one's life entirely to God (Quran, 73:8). Fasting, along with most of the other rites of worship, was prescribed on a regular basis after the Prophet's emigration to Medina (2 A.H) but it had been practised even before Islam in one form or the other. According to Aishah, The Prophet's wife, the Quraysh used to fast on the day of Ashura, in their days of Ignorance (before Islam) and the Prophet would also fast on that day (*Sahih Muslim*). So one might say that fasting marks the entrance to an Islamic life, if the Prophet's stay in the cave of Hira before his receiving Prophethood is taken into account.

When God decided to give His scriptures to Moses, He asked him to go the Mount Tur where, remaining apart from his people, he was to spend forty days in fasting and abstinence. Moses did so for forty days continuously. Only then did God speak to him. This is mentioned in verse 143 of chapter 7 of the Qur'an.

Before commencing his prophetic mission, the prophet Jesus had fasted for forty days in the desert. Only then was the word of God revealed to him. This is recorded in the Bible as the sermon on the Mount. Likewise, the Final Prophet used to go to the cave of Hira before receiving his Prophethood. There he would fast in seclusion, engrossed in a world of worship and contemplation. Only after a long life of this inner purification, did the time come for him to be visited by an angel, so that he might receive the word of God.

Fasting is known as "Sawm" in the Islamic shariah. The word 'Sawm' means to abstain. Literally it means to abstain from walking around, speaking, eating and drinking. *Alkhail as saim*, is a horse that has been detained at a stable and denied fodder. That is why the Prophet called the month of Ramadhan a month of patience. Harith ibn Malik describing one of his fasts to the Prophet, said. "I withdrew from the world and was thirsty all day". The outer sign of fasting is abstention from food from morning till evening. But, in its real essence, it is to withdraw from all worldly attachments, and reduce all mundane necessities to a minimum. While fasting, one devotes much less time to conversation, social activity and sexual intercourse.

This reaches a climax during Itikaf, a total retreat conducted during the last ten days of Ramadhan. In Itikaf one is totally cut off from these pursuits. One retires from the human world and enters the world of God. The contact which the believer thus establishes with God should remain with him throughout his life. This is what the Prophet termed "zuhd" (detachment from the world) and has been made obligatory in the form of fasting during the month of Ramdhan. This renunciation or Itikaf, during the last days of the month of fasting is considered an extremely desirable form of worship. In Itikaf, one distances completely from the world and turns to God. Itikaf is thus a full form of what is required during the whole of the month, but God has not enjoined to observe Itikaf for the whole month as a concession made to devotees.

## The Benefits of Fasting:

What are the benefits sought in fasting? Its aim is to weaken the material aspect of man and strengthen the spirituality in him so that he may enter the higher realms of faith.

Two things make up a man: his body and his soul. While the material part of man, the body, is indispensable for the performance of mundane tasks, it is his soul which will take him to the higher realities. The mind – as psychologists prefer to call it – must, therefore, be preserved in a state of purity. That means that just as the body requires physical nourishment, the soul must be nourished spiritually.

When one lifts oneself up from the material world and becomes attached to the spiritual world, one is astonished to apprehend a new door of truth opening before one. All those realities that were formerly invisible beneath a veil of matter now become plain for one to see. One reaches the loftiest station – the final stage in the ascent of man.

As explained in the tradition when a person has elevated himself from the world, God endows him with wisdom, which emanates from his lips. He is shown the ills of the world, and their remedies. He is brought safely to the abode of peace. (*Mishkat*)

There comes a point on this path when one passes so far beyond the veil of matter that one can see realities exactly as they are. Then one “worships God, as if one were seeing Him.” (Bukhari)

Prophethood is the final stage of this path. But a common man can also elevate his soul to this degree. The difference is that a Prophet is one chosen by God. There is no obscurity in his vision of the divine world; it appears before him in absolute, certain form; it actually becomes a part of his consciousness. The Prophet thus is in a position to say: “I know that I know”, while a common man can never reach this stage because he is not ‘chosen’. Unlike the prophets, his contact with the divine world is neither absolute nor conscious.

Of the verses of the Quran prescribing the fast of Ramadhan, there is one which does not apparently seem to deal with fasting, but it is in this verse that the significance of fasting has been explained.

And when My servants question you concerning Me, tell them that I am near. I answer the prayer of the suppliant when he calls upon Me. (Qur’an 2: 186)

The Prophets, because of their being chosen, are in direct contact with God through angels. For others, the Qur’an takes the place of the angel Gabriel. By fasting and abstinence, the Prophets cleansed and purified their souls or minds of all material stain, thus detaching themselves inwardly from the world. It was then that God’s angel descended to them and directly communicated to them the word of God. Others who hope to attain God through the Qur’an must also engage in fasting and abstinence in order to appreciate what they read. Although the Quran is with us today, preserved in written form as it was revealed, it enters one’s heart only when one is spiritually prepared to receive it by living a life of fasting and devotion.

The fact that Ramadhan fasting was prescribed in the month when Quranic revelations began is an indication that the purpose of fasting is to prepare the individual mentally and physically for whatever the Qur'an enjoins.

Just as the Prophet had to fast in the solitude of the cave of Hira in order to receive the Qur'an, so shall other believers have to do the same. Otherwise they will be, in the words of the Quran, like donkeys, laden with books". (62: 15). The book of God will not have entered their hearts.

The Qur'an is the law of the universe; it is the voice of nature. One who is submerged in the depth of its meanings begins to hear its message in every heartbeat. Every particle in the universe starts conveying its message to him. He eventually comes to see the Qur'an and, nature as reflections of one another: "Nay here are Signs self-evident in the hearts of those endowed with knowledge; and none but the unjust rejected our Signs." (Quran 29:49)

## Fasting – the Path to Spiritual Well-Being

While decreeing the fast of Ramadhan, the Quran says:

God desires your well-being, not your discomfort. (Quran 2: 185).

Man's prior and most important need is food and drink. Abstinence from these things cannot but inconvenience him. Fasting, by its very nature, is sure to result in physical discomfort. The fact that God has said in the Quran that He desires your well-being, not your discomfort, shows indirectly that there is bound to be some physical inconvenience involved in fasting. Why, then, has it been called a path to comfort and well-being?

"Yusr", the word used in this verse, is the Arabic for ease, or well-being. It is used when an individual becomes so well prepared for a task that he finds it easy. The meaning of this verse is that fasting might appear to cause discomfort, but God has nothing to gain from causing human beings unnecessary trouble. Man may have been created such a way by God that he must necessarily satisfy his material needs, but if he is discover the Quran on a truly intellectual level, it is also essential, at least for a few fixed days to retire from the material world in order to develop the spiritual part in himself, so that he may see far and beyond all material veils; only then he will be able to receive the word of God. This is the relevance of fasting to the Quran, because of which the month in which the Quran was revealed has been decreed a month of fasting.

## The Reality of Fasting:

Some think that the most important thing about fasting is the breaking of it, so the whole day is spent in arranging for a variety of dishes and drinks. Others consider it to mean staying hungry all day, and reciting the whole of the Quran each day without stopping to ponder over its meanings. But such acts

only serve to turn a purely Islamic worship into a form of Christian monasticism. As for what is mistakenly called “dhikr bil Jahr” (Loud remembrance of God) – repetitive recitation and shaking of the body – this contradicts the very purpose of fasting, which is spiritual seclusion. The true aim of fasting is withdrawal from everything except essential subsistence and vital responsibilities. During this period, one should reduce conversation, social life, movement, merrymaking and all kinds of worldly activity to a minimum. For a certain time, one should lead a life of quiet devotion, reading the Qur’an and pondering over its meaning. Abstinance from food symbolizes not only the eschewing of those forbidden things, which a believer should give up for his entire life, but also the renunciation even of lawful things for the devotion to the fast. In seeking nearness to God, the believer must cut himself off from all worldliness.

Although fasting, in its specific and definite form, is prescribed just once a year, the fasting engaged in for this one month should be a continuous, permanent state, if it is to be done in the correct spirit. Fasting is cutting oneself off from the world and turning to God; not in a physical sense, but in one’s heart and mind to be continually directed towards God, whatever one’s bodily activity. Spiritually, one’s whole life should be a form of retreat at all time. Through not understanding this reality, people have fled to mountains and jungles in order to perfect their faith. But the perfection of faith is for one to fulfill one’s obligations in the turmoil of the world, while remaining in a state of inward “retreat” and remembrance of God. Abdullah ibn Masud, one of the Prophet’s closest companions, addressed his contemporaries – those who grew up after the Prophet’s death – in these words:

You fast more than the Companions of the Prophet; you pray more than them, and strive more than them; but still they were better than you.

People asked him why. “They were not so interested in this world as they were in the next”, was Ibn Masud’s reply (Hilyatul Awliya, V.I, P.136)

## The Construction of the Mind

One of the important point made in the UNESCO constitution is as follows:

“Since war began in the minds of men it is in the mind that the defence of peace must be constructed.”

This is an indisputable fact. Whether the quarrel is between two people on the street, or between groups or nations, the origin of all such incidents lies in the mind. It is in the mind that feelings of hatred, revenge and anger are produced, and when these spill over into provocation, the result is some measure of conflict, ranging from petty squabbling to full-scale war.

Largely speaking, negative thoughts arise in reaction to untoward behaviour on the part of others. Someone insults us and we become angry. An unpleasant situation is created – unnecessarily, we think – by someone, and we are provoked by this. Someone damages our prestige and we therefore seek revenge. All these vengeful impulses take shape first of all in our minds and when they are externalized, they wreak havoc. If peace could be established at the level of the mind, before there is any physical escalation of strife, the world would be a much better place to live in.

The only effective way to prevent quarrels, whether at the individual or at the national or international level, is to train people's minds: patience should be emphasized as the greatest of all virtues.

Such a mentality can be developed only if negative thinking is replaced by positive thinking. This should be directed at resistance to provocation and the avoidance of all unpleasantness and consequent entanglements. It must provide the basis for cool and unemotional decision-making, and, above all, for return of love for hatred.

Such a reform of the mind would lead to the most positive reconstruction of human affairs ever witnessed in human history.

## The Coming Times

A space of time is fixed for every nation; when their hour is come, not for one moment shall they hold it back, nor can they go before it.

Children of Adam, when apostles of your own come to proclaim to you My revelations, those that take warning and mend their ways will have nothing to fear or to regret; but those that deny and scorn Our revelations shall be the people of the Fire, and there they shall remain forever.

Who is more wicked than the man who invents a falsehood about Allah Or denies His revelations? Such men shall have their destined share, and when Our messengers (angels) come to carry off their souls, they shall say to them: 'Where now are your idols, those whom you invoked besides Allah?' 'They have forsaken us,' they will answer, and will admit that they were unbelievers. (7:34-37)

The verdict of hell or heaven for man is given on the basis of his reaction to the truth. When truth comes to a person supported by arguments, his mind testifies to God's truth having been laid clearly before him. Now he is left with no plea, no excuse that he had not been shown the right path. But, if even after being told the truth, he refutes it, it is certain that his response is the result of arrogance. A superiority complex has come in the way of according the truth pride of place while he accepts a lower position himself. Nothing awaits such a person in the next world except hell.

When a man refutes the truth, he does so on the basis of some feeling of confidence or the other. Sometimes this confidence is based on wealth and power, sometimes on honour and popularity. The material things provided to him for the purposes of trial come to be considered by him as dependable supports, and he feels sure that he will come to no harm as he stands on firm ground. But this is his greatest misconception. On the day of judgement, when these ephemeral supports have left him, it will become plain that he had rejected the truth all along due to haughtiness, using the many words at his disposal to justify his refusal of truth on false grounds of principle.

## Reformed Behaviour

Do not corrupt the earth after it has been purged of evil. Pray to Him with fear and hope. His mercy is within reach of the righteous. (7:56)

World reform means the re-establishment of order by God on this earth. Man has to lead his life in accordance with this God-established system. It is not lawful for him to adopt any path other than this.

Human activity was initially designed by God to create no excessive clamour. So now man should refrain from using modern contrivances which will create noise pollution. Here God has arranged for breathing in fresh air, so man must not indulge in activities which may pollute the atmosphere. The vegetables and animals flourish in their separate spheres, so man should remain in his own sphere, instead of encroaching on those of other creatures. Since everything is functioning in a planned way, man should, moreover, refrain from adopting any such emotional, hasty course as will lead to social disruption.

All the things of this world are functioning in complete coordination with one another, so man must also lead his life in harmony with others, wishing them well and seeking what is profitable for his brethren. The benefits of such a world are manifold.

There are only two possible kinds of behaviour for men on this earth created by God – reformed behaviour and corrupt behaviour. Reformed behaviour is the conscious following of the perfect order already established by God in the universe. As opposed to this, corrupt behaviour is deviation from that order and the adoption of a self-made system. But the latter course ill befits God's creatures, for the earth has already been reformed by God. This has not been left for man to do. Man has only to follow the path of nature and build his society on the same pattern. This reformed earth of God is not only the best place for human habitation, but it is also the best model for human conduct.



## God's Voice

When your Lord brought forth descendants from the loins of Adam's children, and made them testify against themselves, (He said): 'Am I not your Lord?' They replied: 'We bear witness that you are.' (This He did) lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: 'We had no knowledge of that or: 'Our forefathers set up partners with Allah; but will You destroy us, their descendants, on account of what the followers of falsehood did?'

Thus We make plain Our revelations so that they may return to the right path. (7:172-174)

This explains how the Lord and Creator instilled conscience into human nature in such an indelible way that it became the prime indicator of man's humanity. Whenever a moral issue comes before an individual, it is his conscience which gives him a clear indication of what is right and what is wrong. (In our times, the experiences of the USSR in one respect and of Turkey in another are proofs that even a totally adverse, anti-religious atmosphere has failed to change conscience-based human values.)

Unlike the animals who, in the absence of conscience, are destined to follow their instincts, man has the power to obey or to disregard the inner voice of his conscience. He is completely free to choose his course of action, to indulge in whatever activities he pleases. It is on this point that man is being tested – his correctness of choice. On this hinges the verdict of heaven for one, hell for another. One who pays heed to the voice of God – whether we call it conscience or the silent language of nature – has passed this test. The doors of heaven will be opened to him after death.

The voice of nature is God's directive to everyone. Neither can one have the pretext of being ignorant of the truth, nor can one put forward the plea that whatever one does is in continuance of the practices of one's forefathers. Since consciousness of God is inborn and an inseparable part of human nature, no one – whatever the circumstances – has any excuse for straying from the right path.

## The Blessings of God

It was Allah who made the heavens and the earth, and sends down water from the sky with which He brings forth fruits for your sustenance. He drives the ships which, by His leave, sail the ocean in your service. He has created rivers for your benefit, and the sun and the moon, which steadfastly pursue their courses. And He has subdued for you the night and the day. He grants you all that you ask of Him. If you reckoned up Allah's favours, you could not count them. Truly, man is wicked and thankless (14:32-34).

To an astonishing degree, the present world bears witness to the presence of God. His will is immanent in the abundant provision to man of earthly resources and in His gift to man of the capacity to harness those resources to the purposes of his daily living. God has given man power over the earth and water, over the rivers, seas and mountains. He has caused him to profit by the changes of the seasons, the alternation of night and day. Nature responds to man's every need, providing in advance things of which we had no prior conception.

All these manifestations of God's beneficence are so incredibly wonderful that they should leave man trembling in awe of God and cause him to enter into lifelong servitude of his Creator. Yet this does not happen. What is the reason? Why is it that the concept of the Creator of the Universe does not make every hair on a man's body stand on end? The reason is that he has been observing the universe from his earliest childhood. Because it appears perpetual and unchanging, it strikes him as being a normal, familiar sight. He finds nothing unique or extraordinary in the universe, not even the motion of the stars and planets in the vast, outer reaches of space.

Moreover, when man finds or receives anything in this world, it comes to him shrouded in the veil of cause and effect. He therefore regards God's bounty as stemming from his own efforts and capacities. That is why expressions of thankfulness do not come gushing from his lips for the Giver-God. This on the part of man is the gravest kind of neglect. It is injustice coupled with ingratitude.

### God's Command

Allah enjoins justice, kindness and charity to one's kindred, and forbids indecency, wickedness and oppression. He admonishes you so that you may take heed.

Keep faith with Allah when you make a covenant with Him. Do not break your oaths after you have sworn them: for (by swearing in His name), you make Allah your surety. Allah has knowledge of all your actions. (16:90-91)

To God, man's first duty is to see that justice is done. For example, whenever there is an outstanding debt, it should be paid, fully and in time, irrespective of the person concerned – whether weak or strong, friend or foe. In the payment of dues, the sole consideration should be the fulfillment of the obligation.

Man's next duty is to be kind to his fellow men. This means that in the granting of rights and the payment of dues, an attitude of broad-mindedness should be adopted. Humanitarianism (*muruwah*) should go hand in hand with justice. In human dealings, generosity and compassion, going beyond the call of legality, should be brought into play. Man should have the courage to be willing to receive less than the share due to him and to give others more than their share.

His third duty is to respect the rights of relatives. That is to say that a man should be as sensitive to his relatives needs as he is to his own. No man of resources should think that his wealth is to be spent only on himself and his immediate family. To his list of responsibilities he should add the paying of dues to relatives.

Three vices prohibited in this verse are indecency, wickedness and oppression. Indecency means flouting the dictates of one's conscience in order to indulge in known moral evils. Wickedness (*munkar*), the very opposite of virtue (*marooif*), consists of those practices disapproved of in every society as failing to measure up to moral standards. Oppression – the tyrannising and coercion of others, is a serious deviation from the path ordained by God.

31 March-April 1999

## AVOIDING ANGER

Abu Hurayrah tells of how a man came before the Prophet and asked him for some advice. "Do not be angry," said the Prophet. He asked for further advice, a second and a third time, and each time the Prophet repeated the words, "Do not be angry."

(Al-Bukhari, Sahih)