

Contemplation: The Works of Early Muslim Scholars

In the previous chapter the latest achievements of psychology in the field of human thinking and cognitive activities have been summarized and simplified to show the significance of contemplation, as a form of worship, in directing the behavior of Muslims and enhancing their faith. Indeed, once it is realized that internal thinking, emotions, perceptions, imagination and ideas all influence the formation of an individual's behavior – his tendencies, beliefs, conscious and unconscious activities, good and bad habits – it is possible to see why the Qur'an and the Sunnah are so concerned with meditation and the contemplation of the creation of the heavens and the earth, as they fill the heart and mind with the majesty of the Creator and the nobility of His attributes. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah stated in his notable work, *Miftāḥ Dār al-Sa'ādah* (The Key to the House of Bliss): “Deep thought (contemplation)...is the beginning of and the key to all good...it is the best function of the heart and the most useful to it.”¹

It took Western psychology more than seven decades to return to the ‘common sense’ recognition of the influence of thinking and cognitive processes in shaping human beliefs, attitudes and external behavior. These achievements were not unknown to the early scholars of Islam. Indeed, the cognitive principles and practices which have only recently impressed modern Western psychology were already known, centuries ago, by scholars such as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (also known as Ibn al-Qayyim), al-Balkhī, al-Ghazālī, Miskawayh, and many others. In his masterpiece, *Maṣāliḥ al-Abdān wa al-Anfus* (The Sustenance of the Body and the Soul), Abū Zayd al-Balkhī showed the influence of contemplation and inner thought on health – a discovery that was only developed more than ten centuries after his death. He even suggested that just as a healthy person keeps some drugs and first-aid medicines at

hand for unexpected physical emergencies, he should also contemplate and keep healthy thoughts and feelings in his mind for unexpected emotional outbursts.²

Other early Muslim scholars mentioned the importance of notions, reflections and ideas that cross the mind and can grow to become drives and incentives that are carried out in real life, and, when repeated, become habits. They also referred to the unceasing internal cognitive activity of human beings – an activity, they assert, that is never interrupted, whether in a person’s waking or sleeping hours. These scholars gave genuine advice to those who wanted to perform good deeds, urging them to watch their notions and internal ideas, to remember God constantly, and to meditate on and contemplate the creation of the heavens and the earth. They also said that a person should try to change harmful notions and internal ideas before they become desires and drives, because changing a drive or motive is easier than stopping a consequent action, and removing an action is easier than trying to uproot it after it has become a habit. They stated further, in the words of modern behavior therapists, that treating a habit should be done by training the individual to do its opposite. All this was recorded by Ibn al-Qayyim in *Al-Fawā'id* (The Spiritual Benefits), and in such detail that it sounded as if he were familiar with the latest achievements of modern cognitive psychology.

In this work, Ibn al-Qayyim explicitly says that anything a person does begins as an inner thought, a concealed speech or an internal dialogue, for which he uses the Arabic word, *khawāṭir*. The word *khawāṭir* is the plural of *khaṭīrah*, meaning a fast, inner, concealed reflection, notion or subvocal thought, which may come fleetingly. Modern cognitive psychologists can compare this with the idea of ‘automatic thoughts’ which the cognitive therapist Aaron Beck claims to have discovered in the 1970s! In his classic book, *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders*, he devotes six pages to a section titled ‘The discovery of automatic thoughts’ to describe how he arrived at this ‘discovery’.³

After describing this cognitive conception, Ibn al-Qayyim details the exact process by which fleeting thoughts, particularly negative ones, develop into human actions and observable behavior. He warns

that a lustful, sinful, or emotionally harmful *khaṭīrah*, if accepted and not checked by the person concerned, can develop into a strong emotion or lust (*shahwah*). If this emotion is entertained or given credence, it may generate so much cognitive strength that it develops into a drive or an impulse for action. And if this impulsive drive or emotional motivation is not neutralized by its opposite emotion or resisting drive, it will be acted out in reality as external behavior. Furthermore, if this behavior is not resisted, it will be repeated so often that it becomes a habit. In this respect, Ibn al-Qayyim believed that emotional, physical and cognitive habits followed the same pattern – a belief which is strikingly similar to the modern approach of cognitive psychologists. He also details a different route in his *Al-Fawā'id*, whereby fleeting reflections become real actions and established attitudes:

You should know that the beginning of any voluntary act is *khawāṭir* and *wasāwis* [*wasāwis* is the plural of *waswasah* which means concealed whisper. It is used in the Qur'an to describe the inner temptation of Satan: *yūwaswisu fī sudūri al-nās*]. These *khawāṭir* and *wasāwis* lead to conscious thinking. Next, thinking will be transferred to or stored in the memory and the memory will transform it into a volition and a motive which will be acted out in real life as an action. Repeating the action leads to a strong habit. So eliminating an emotional or lustful habit is easier at an early stage before it gains strength.⁴

Thus, he advises the Muslim to lead a happy and righteous life by fighting the negative *khawāṭir* and *wasāwis* of inner fleeting thoughts before they become an emotion or an impulse. Indeed, it is easier to check inner fleeting thoughts than to fight an impulse, as it is easier to resist an impulse with an opposing motive than to change the behavior after it is actually performed, and easier to refrain from an action performed only once or a few times than waiting until it has become a habit.

In addition, Ibn al-Qayyim gives a good description of inner cognitive activity, and warns his readers that God has not given humankind the ability to totally eradicate fleeting thoughts and reflections, for they are as irresistible as breathing. However, a wise person, who has strong

faith in God, can accept the good *khawāṭir* and avoid the bad and potentially harmful ones. God, he states, has created the human mind in a way very similar to a rotating millstone which never stops, day or night, but grinds continually, and always needs something to grind. Some people, who feed their minds with good thoughts and spiritual contemplation, are like those who put corn and wheat in their mills: they produce good flour. However, the millstones of most people grind dirt and stones. When the time for making bread comes (in the hereafter), each group will know what their mills have been grinding!

Ibn al-Qayyim then states that actions and deeds can only be sound when their internal and contemplative notions originate from a warm spiritual relationship with God. He writes:

These [cognitive] stages are sound when notions and ideas are sound, and they are depraved with the depravity of those notions and ideas. They are sound in so far that they look up towards their Lord and God, aspiring to Him and striving for His pleasure. The Almighty is the source of all soundness and guidance. His grace is the source of righteousness, and His protection of His servant is the fount of safety. When the servant of the Almighty turns away and evades the Lord, he strays onto the way of perdition.⁵

This discourse reads like a summary of modern behavioral cognitive therapy in a modern textbook of psychology, with the addition of the spiritual faith dimension which is lacking in modern secular psychology. Much of this literature by early Muslim scholars is based on knowledge acquired from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, which is moulded into useful psychological principles.

As previously explained, modern behavioral and cognitive therapy has established the fact that the most successful treatment of psychological and emotional disorders is to encourage patients to evoke thoughts and feelings of tranquillity and gradually help them change their undesirable habits, as is done in reciprocal inhibition – a method of therapy which Ibn al-Qayyim had also mentioned on several occasions many centuries ago. As a matter of fact, this successful behavioral and cognitive therapy, which depends on in-depth

thought and imagination on the part of the patients, also depends on their ability to contemplate. This is particularly apparent in one of the most successful modern treatments, known as systematic desensitization, in which patients are instructed to relax and imagine themselves in a place of beautiful scenery like a beach or an area of greenery with flowing streams. While in this pleasing tranquil meditation, they are instructed to imagine the situations that had caused their emotional troubles. This is repeated until the tranquil feelings psychologically ‘overpower’ the evoked anxiety. In fact, it may be more conveniently termed ‘contemplation therapy’ instead of systematic desensitization.

Al-Ghazālī contributed much to the theoretical aspects of contemplation therapies, but he also turned to their practical aspects by giving several realistic examples. In *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, he says that the Muslim who wants to adhere to good behavior has first to change his ideas about himself and imagine himself in the desired condition. Then he must gradually assume those good manners until they become part of him. Al-Ghazālī affirms that interaction between the psychocognitive aspect and practical behavior is inevitable. Once the individual behaves in a certain manner, even if he feigns what he does, the effect of that behavior will reflect on his thinking and emotions; and when his thinking and feelings change, his observable behavior and countenance will also change. He describes this process as follows:

Good manners can be acquired by practice: by feigning or assuming the actions issuing from those manners at first until they eventually become part of one’s nature. This is one of the wonders of the relation between the heart and the organs – I mean the soul and the body. Every quality that appears in the heart will have its influence flowing to the organs so they act only in accordance with that quality. Similarly, the effect of every action that issues from the organs may reach the heart. And this continues in a circular system.⁶

He also mentions the therapeutic value of combining the treatment that uses opposing stimulation with a gradual approach based on internal cognition. He writes, as if he were summarizing the latest

achievements of modern cognitive behavioral therapy, using a few clear words and precise, tangible examples to compare the soma with the psyche:

Since the malady that changes the health of the body and causes illness can only be treated with its opposite, like treating heat with cold, and cold with heat, so vice, which is a malady of the heart, is treated with its opposite. The malady of ignorance is treated with learning, that of avarice with generosity, pride with humility, greed with abstinence, and all by assuming the contrary...

A curious aspect of this exercise is noticeable when the disciple is not willing to give up a serious offence or reprehensible wrongdoing by directly assuming its opposite. Then his shaykh [master] should lead him from that greatly undesirable habit to another one, less undesirable. This is like someone who washes the bloodstain off his shirt with urine, then washes the urine off with water, when water cannot wash off blood.⁷

He then quotes an example of a man who used to complain of a hot temper and outbursts of anger: he began to train himself gradually to be more patient, and to change his reactions and emotions by inner thought and contemplation combined with actual practice in life situations. He went as far as: "...paying a man to insult him in front of people, and he would try to be patient and control his anger by spiritually sedating himself with remembrance and contemplation, until patience was part of his nature and he became proverbial in that respect."⁸

This example shows that contemplation and concomitant remembrance of God are the backbone for the positive changes Muslims can accomplish in themselves, and that without these changes, the modification of habits and behavior would not be feasible. That is why al-Ghazālī insists in *Al-Ḥikmah fī Makhlūqāt Allāh* (The Wisdom Behind God's Creation) that contemplation is the key to every good deed, because it qualifies all cognitive actions of the believer with the remembrance of the Almighty and the recognition of His favors and grace. He says:

The way to a cognizance of God is to glorify Him in His creation, to contemplate His wonderful works, to understand the wisdom in His various inventions...It is the means to strengthen certainty and happiness, and in this course is seen the difference in the levels of the pious...The Almighty created the minds and perfected them with revelation, ordering men with such minds to think of His creatures, to contemplate and learn a lesson from what wonders He has entrusted in His creation.⁹

Clearly, such contemplation covers the intellectual, emotional, temperamental and perceptive aspects of believers – that is, all their psychological, cognitive, and spiritual actions. It is difficult to imagine those who remember God but do not contemplate His creation, or those who contemplate God’s creation but do not remember Him. This reminds us of the famous statement by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī: “Men of knowledge have been resorting to thought with the remembrance of God (dhikr), and to the remembrance of God with thought, imploring the hearts to speak, until the hearts responded with wisdom.”¹⁰

When people contemplate, it becomes a sacred and wholesome part of their nature: their hearts become submissive and they respond to every agitation in their environment with gentle emotions which control their intellectual activity. It was once said to a worshipper, “You contemplate for long hours.” He replied: “Contemplation is the core of the mind.” Sufyan al-Thawrī often quoted these lines of poetry:

When a man is used to contemplation,
He will learn a lesson from everything.¹¹

Since the origin of every action is a cognitive, emotional, or intellectual mental activity, those who are given to long periods of contemplation will perform their acts of worship and obedience quite easily. Referring to this fact, al-Ghazālī writes in *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* about the value of knowledge and inner thought in contemplation in the clearest and most eloquent way:

When knowledge enters the heart, the state of the heart changes. When this changes, the functions of the organs change. Functions follow the state of the heart, and this follows knowledge. And knowledge follows thought. Thought, then, is the beginning and the key to all good. This will show you the virtue of contemplation, and that it supersedes remembrance, since the thought includes remembrance and more.¹²

While internal cognitive activity is the key to every good and proper action, it is also the source of all disobedience, whether implied or overt. A meditative heart, which contemplates the grace of God and is mindful of the hereafter, can easily detect the evil notions that pass through the mind as a result of the great sensitivity that the mind has acquired from long contemplation and continued remembrance. As soon as an evil notion passes through the mind, good sense detects it, confines it, and defuses its effect, just as a sound immune system in the body detects the intrusion of germs and antigens, which it then besieges and destroys with specialized cells and antibodies. The psyche or soul of those who are constantly contemplating the grace of God is like a protected fortress: whenever evil notions try to enter, the acute perception acquired through contemplation and remembrance quickly attacks and destroys them. The Qur'an states: "Those who fear God, when an evil thought from Satan assaults them, bring God to mind, and lo! They see clearly" (7:201).

Contemplation, then, makes use of all the cognitive activities employed by a human being in the thinking processes. However, it differs from secular in-depth thinking in that its visions and concepts go beyond this world of the here and now to encounter the infinite dimensions of the hereafter; its object goes from the creation to the Creator. While everyday thinking may be limited to the solving of worldly problems, and may be free from sentiments, passions and emotions, contemplation, by virtue of its crossing the worldly barriers and the limitations of matter into the everlasting freedom of the spirit, is capable of motivating all the internal and external psychospiritual reservoirs of the believers. Those believers who are absorbed in deep Islamic contemplation perceive the things they are contemplating in terms of their previous experiences, as well as through the symbols and expressions

they acquired from their use of language, and their imagination of what they used to be and what they could become in the future. They then vitalize the whole combination of different thoughts and visions with a fearful love of the Almighty. Thus, although Islamic contemplation may be regarded as a mixture of thought, cognition, imagination, sentiments, emotions and, above all, spirituality, the result is a completely new experience different from the elements of which it is composed.

This process can be related to the analogy of photosynthesis described above. As photosynthesis in plants cannot be accomplished without the elements of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen, Islamic contemplation cannot be achieved without psychological ‘ingredients’ such as thought, imagination and feelings. Sunlight shines on green leaves with an energy that completely transforms the clear gas, carbon dioxide and transparent water into a new substance, glucose, that has no resemblance to either hydrogen, oxygen or black carbon. Similarly, radiating spirituality illuminates the soul and metamorphoses the internal cognitive processes into a new exalted state.

This concept brings to mind al-Ghazālī’s affirmation that Islamic contemplation “presents two data to the heart in order to motivate a third one.” He says:

He who inclines to the transient world and prefers the present life, and would like to know whether the hereafter is to be preferred to the transient world, has to know, firstly, that the permanent is preferable; and secondly, that the hereafter is permanent. Out of these two data he will obtain a third one, which is that the hereafter is preferable. To realize that the hereafter is preferable to the transient is only possible by means of the former two data.¹³

Al-Ghazālī believes that the growth of data can only be achieved by this coupling process because, according to him, the knowledge of data is a product of former knowledge. He affirms that if the contemplative believer is able to organize his knowledge in a certain manner, it will increase indefinitely, and nothing will stop it except the obstacles of life or death. In this way, al-Ghazālī shows the difference between material thinking and contemplation: man will be deprived of the knowledge

that comes from contemplation if he does not have the basic data to help him in the process of contemplation. Indeed, an ignorant Bedouin may not be able to usefully contemplate the subject of the electrons and protons that form the atom; and similarly, those who deny God cannot contemplate the Divine Being, even if they are specialists in physics. Al-Ghazālī says:

Most people cannot increase their knowledge for they do not have the capital, which is the basic data for investment in knowledge. This is like someone who has no commodity and therefore cannot make a profit. Or, he may have the commodity, but has no experience in business. He may even have the data, which are the capital of knowledge, but he does not know how to use the data to bring about the coupling that leads to the production of the profit.¹⁴

Islamic contemplation passes through three interconnected stages, leading to the fourth and final stage which I call the stage of ‘spiritual cognition’ (*shuhūd*). The first stage is when knowledge of the contemplated object comes through direct sensory perception – via sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste – or indirectly, as in the case of imagination. Such information can be purely mental and often has no relation to emotional or sentimental aspects.

The second stage of contemplation starts when a person takes a closer look at these data, inspecting their aesthetic aspects and particular qualities. It is a shift from mere perception to a state of wonder at the beauty, excellence, vastness of structure, and miraculous appearance of the perceived object. It is a stage of fine appreciation, delicate feelings and powerful passion.

The third stage is when the meditator crosses the boundary between the created object of contemplation and its Creator. He or she is then carried away by feelings of submission to and appreciation of the One Who brought the appreciated object of contemplation, as well as everything else in this universe, into being because of the meditator’s realization that there is nothing in existence save God and what He has originated.

When this refined meditation is repeated and reinforced with continual remembrance of the Almighty, it leads the worshipper to the

fourth stage: spiritual cognition. Here, the spiritual feelings associated with deep contemplation become part of the worshipper's nature, and make him or her more loving toward and fearful of God and His sublime Attributes. These feelings, continually experienced, are beyond verbal description.

Observing creation is only a primitive stage that can be enjoyed by believers and unbelievers alike. Similarly, the second stage, that of appreciating the beauty of form and structure, can touch the hearts of both believers and unbelievers. However, the third stage, which relates this aesthetic appreciation of the universe to the Almighty Creator, can only be achieved by believers. As for the believers who reach the fourth stage, they are in such deep veneration and remembrance of God that they can no longer look at God's creation in a detached manner; they see nothing but precision, mercy, beauty and wisdom in the structure of the world, and become ever more awestricken and appreciative of the glory of the Lord. This modern perception of Islamic contemplation can be related to the words of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, quoted above: "Men of knowledge have been resorting to thought with the remembrance of God, and to the remembrance of God with thought, imploring the hearts to speak until the hearts responded with wisdom."¹⁵

From the perspective of learning and habit-formation, it can be said that believers who regularly contemplate will reach the fourth stage, because meditation, strengthened with constant remembrance, becomes a deep-rooted spiritual habit. This kind of level of thinking could only occur otherwise as a result of impressive experiences or rare events that totally disturb their environment, such as an earthquake or the death of a powerful revered person. For contemplative believers, the period of contemplation will gradually expand until they spend a greater part of the day and night in this elevated kind of meditation. Familiar objects, which they used to pass by without noticing, become a source of deep thought and a pretext for greater veneration of and meditation on the grace of God – thus everything in their environment becomes a motivation for thought and a drive for remembrance.

The stage of insightful cognition which the meditative believers then reach is a subject of lengthy discussion by many scholars. For example, Ibn al-Qayyim describes in *Madārij al-Sālikīn* (The Path of Seekers),

the Muslim who reaches the stage of spiritual cognition:

The gate to witnessing the greatness of God and the scene of sovereignty are opened before him...He sees that all the cosmic changes and the affairs of existence are in the hands of the Almighty alone. Then he observes the signs of the Holder of good and evil, creation and livelihood, resurrection and death...Then, if his eye notices any part of the creation, it will lead him to his Creator and to the contemplation of His Attributes of perfection and majesty.¹⁶

Ibn Taymiyyah terms this stage of contemplation the ‘true cognition’, when the contemplative believer witnesses

all creation performing the orders of God, directed by His will, responsive and submissive to Him...What the contemplative believers thus witness will enhance and enlarge what their hearts hold of religious loyalty...not forgetting to differentiate the Eternal from the expirable, the Creator from His creation, and His oneness and independence from His creation.¹⁷

In fact, the believers who reach the second stage and appreciate the beauty of creation, its magnitude and precision, will be inevitably drawn closer toward the Maker and Regulator, and will begin to feel their own insignificance and helplessness in comparison with all His signs in the heavens and on the earth. This vast universe is indeed nothing but a place of worship to which only believers can have access, when their souls are refined, their hearts are submissive, and they are able to listen to and witness the truth.

The believers’ bewilderment at the precision, beauty and magnitude of creation, and their realization of their comparative physical and psychological meagerness, are feelings that the Creator implanted in human beings so that they could look to the heavens and the earth for guidance toward their Lord, and so that they would worship Him with awe and deep veneration. Failing this recognition, they go astray into unbelief and paganism, and use their inborn nature in an adverse manner. Indeed, this bewilderment has led the followers of pagan

religions throughout history to exaggerate the size, beauty and design of their temples, embellishing them with statues, paintings and inspiring music. We can mention, for instance, the Pantheon in Athens; or the Temple of Jupiter at Baalbek in Lebanon, which took two centuries to build, and for which huge stones had to be brought from Aswan in Egypt; or the Temple of Amon which the ancient Egyptians built at Karnak which covers an area of 5,800 square yards and contains huge columns, each 78 feet high. These temples, built by the followers of pagan religions, were the most enormous ever raised by human beings, with a great deal of effort and expenditure. The reason behind this was that the magicians and clergy wanted to overwhelm the people into their submission and control.

One can then consider and admire the simplicity of the Ka‘ba which though situated in the greatest of Islamic mosques, was merely a small room in the midst of a large arid valley. It is also reported that the Prophet described his mosque in Madinah as “pieces of wood and rushes, a bower like that of my brother Moses [Mūsā],” which has been interpreted as meaning that time and money should not be spent on making a building lavish. Indeed, his mosque was built of sun-dried bricks and clay, and the roof, made of palm branches and rushes, came only a few inches above the heads of the tallest of the Companions. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī describes its utter simplicity as follows:

The mosque was completed within the bounds of simplicity. The floor was sand and pebbles, the roof of palm branches, the pillars of palm trunks. When it rains, the floor becomes muddy. Stray dogs may be seen going in and out...This modest and simple building fostered the human angels, the tamers of giants, and the kings of the hereafter. In this mosque, the Most Gracious permitted the Prophet to guide with the Qur’an the select who believed in his message, educating them with the divine principles from daybreak to nightfall.¹⁸

It seems that the weaker the relationship between the Muslims and their Creator, the greater their interest in building and decorating mosques at the expense of purifying and refining their souls. In this connection, Muḥammad al-Ghazālī continues:

But when some people failed to build souls on sublime morals, they found the substitute in building lofty mosques to house pigmy worshippers. But the great forefathers left aside the exaggerated decoration of mosques to pay more attention to the reformation and refinement of their souls.¹⁹

In this chapter, I have presented an outline of the four stages through which believers pass in their journey from perception to cognition: sensory perception, appreciation, then awe-inspiring contemplation and cognition. However, people's contemplation does not have to be limited to the contemplation of beautiful or exquisitely constructed objects in this universe, which contains both the beautiful and the ugly, the great and the insignificant, the good and the evil. Perception can also involve painful, frightening or disturbing experiences, even if appreciation will be emotionally to the contrary. Contemplation can concentrate on the lessons learned from unpleasant experiences, and teach the contemplator how to avoid them, fear them or hate them. In this respect, the Qur'an mentions the story of Qārūn who, like many an evil tyrant, was destroyed by the Almighty so that believers can contemplate his destiny and learn a lesson from it:

Qārūn was doubtless, of the people of Moses; but he acted insolently towards them. Such were the treasures We had bestowed on him, that their very keys would have been a burden to a body of strong men. "Behold, his people said to him, exult not, for God loves not those who exult [in riches]. But seek, with the [wealth] which God had bestowed on you, the home of the hereafter, and do not forget your portion in this world; and do good, as God has been good to you; and do not seek [occasions for] mischief in the land, for God does not love those who do mischief." He said: "This has been given to me because of a certain knowledge which I have." Did he not know that God had destroyed before him [whole] generations which were superior to him in strength and greater in amount [of riches] they had collected? But the wicked are not called [immediately] to account for their sins. So he went forth among his people in the [pride of his worldly] glitter. Those whose aim is the life of this world said: "If only we had the like of what Qārūn has got,

for he is truly a lord of mighty fortune!” But those who had been granted [true] knowledge said: “Alas for you! The reward of God [in the hereafter] is best for those who believe and work righteousness; but this none shall attain save those who steadfastly persevere [in good].” Then We caused the earth to swallow him up and his house, and he had not [the least little] party to help him against God, nor could he defend himself. And those who had envied his position the day before, began to say on the morrow: “It is indeed God who enlarges or restricts the provision of those of His servants He pleases! Had it not been that God was gracious to us, He could have caused the earth to swallow us up! Those who reject God will assuredly never prosper.” (28:76–82)

Similar catastrophes happen all the time without our pondering on God’s plan, and merely attributing the events to circumstance or fate. Many dictators have been brought down by those they employed to protect them, and several contemporary scholars later turned to alcohol or drugs, which affected their livers and brains and caused them to hallucinate.²⁰

In fact, witnessing terrifying scenes or undergoing personal hardships lead one to contemplate and learn lessons probably in a more effective manner than when one is prompted by a placid appreciation of the beauty, size and precision of a building.

In this connection, I would like to relate a personal experience concerning the lessons that can be learned from a painful or gruesome observation. A young man who used to live in a mosque near our house died on a Thursday, when the mosque was closed for some repair work. His death, therefore, was not discovered until Saturday morning. When I came with a group of people to lift the body and take it to be prepared for burial, we found the spot infested with worms and dampness. The effect of all I had read about death and all my previous contemplation about the insignificance of life was nothing in comparison with the feeling I experienced in those awesome moments.

After the discussion about contemplation from the perspective of thinking and meditation, I shall, in the next chapter, consider the different levels of contemplation achieved through these diverse means.