

CHAPTER THREE

Islamic Contemplation and Modern Meditation Procedures

As stated in Chapter One, studying Islamic contemplation from a psychological perspective entails firstly examining meditation procedures and their confirmed ability to help contemplators by positively altering their states of consciousness. However, as previously stressed, in Islamic contemplation these useful altered states are not an end in themselves because the main aim of meditation as an Islamic form of worship is cognitive, intellectual and spiritual: to elevate the Muslims' cognizance of their Creator. These cognitive aspects, which were mentioned in Chapter Two, will now be discussed in detail; Chapter Four will then examine the value of Islamic contemplation as a useful meditative procedure.

The practice of transcendental meditation and similar procedures has become extremely popular in Europe and America in recent years – a phenomenon unprecedented in the history of these nations. This came about after it was established that this kind of meditation, which has ancient oriental and Indian roots, had very positive effects in the treatment of maladies connected with emotional, cognitive and physical disorders. This chapter will discuss the proven benefits of meditation and how they are related to contemplation as an Islamic form of worship.

If one examines the teachings, legislation and prescribed forms of worship of Islam, one notices that all divine enjoinders imply a benefit to the Muslim in the hereafter as well as in this world. Modern advances in medicine and psychophysiological sciences have effectively verified this claim. The value and wisdom of the Islamic prohibitions of alcohol, drugs, fornication and sodomy are too obvious to dwell upon in the modern era of addictions and the AIDS pandemic.¹ In fact, alcohol and drugs are the main dangers facing modern civilization,

in both the East and the West: American scientists assert that alcoholism has become their ‘number one problem’ and is the third cause of death after heart attacks and cancer. They also confess that their nation is spending billions of dollars every year on fighting alcoholism and treating addicts, in addition to the thousands of accidents caused by drunk or drugged drivers, and the fact that the nation is deprived of the contribution of millions of potential workers because they are unable to work. In this respect, I. S. Bengelsdorf, as quoted by R. C. Carson, affirms that the use and abuse of alcohol:

...has killed more people, sent more victims to hospitals, generated more police arrests, broken more marriages and homes, and cost industry more money than has the abuse of heroine, amphetamines, barbiturates, and marijuana combined.²

Modern medical research has also shown that all the other Islamic prescriptions, rules and desirable behavior have their undisputed value in protecting the physical and psychological health of believers. For example, bodily cleanliness, which believers acquire as a result of ablution (*wuḍūʾ*) before the five daily prayers, the ceremonial bathing, (*ghusl*) before Friday prayers and after marital intercourse, and other Sunnah practices, have their obvious sanitary aspects. Similar invaluable benefits are seen in every practice performed by Muslims whether in their worship or general exercise of Islamic teachings: for example, the physical exercise in performing the five daily prayers, the health values of fasting and the avoidance of overeating that leads to obesity – which are mentioned in several sayings of the Prophet, and in the following Qur’anic verse: “Eat and drink, but waste not by excess” (7:31).

This inevitably leads us to ask about the value of contemplation and meditation, as forms of worship, to the physical and psychological health of believers. Even without going into the particular case of Islamic contemplation, hundreds of books and research papers published in the late twentieth century stress the value of meditation combined with the faith factor in treating psychological, psychophysiological and organic disorders such as stress, anxiety, insomnia,

hypertension, migraine and high cholesterol levels. Modern psychosomatic studies affirm that thinking and other cognitive activities – which are the backbone of contemplation – have a remarkable role in a person’s tendency to various maladies, and that suitable contemplation and meditation can bring about a change in their pathological thinking and restore health. Herbert Benson calls this ‘cognitive restructuring’.³ It confirms the old Arabic saying: “Do not pretend sickness, for you may become sick in reality, and die as a result.”

The effect of mood and psychological experiences on the organic and physical aspects of a human being is a noticeable everyday occurrence. When people are excited or anxious, their hearts beat faster and they show the other physiological changes and facial expressions associated with excitement or fear. Similarly, when they are overwhelmed with shyness, they blush – that is, if they have the fair complexion that betrays this emotion. Nevertheless, these everyday minor physical changes may not convince many people, including organically minded medical practitioners, about the fundamental role played by thinking and cognitive factors in the formation of human physiology.⁴

A more dramatically convincing proof comes from medical specialists who study the complex physiological phenomena which occur in the body as a result of acute emotional and cognitive stress. One such phenomenon is false pregnancy or pseudocyesis, which occurs when a sterile woman intensely desires to be pregnant and her mind ‘orders’ her body to react physiologically as though she had conceived: her monthly period stops, her abdomen swells, and her breasts become larger with pigmented tender nipples which begin to secrete milk. According to Benson, some women may even have the sensation of a kicking fetus during the fourth or fifth month of this deceptive phenomenon!⁵ However, when the women discover that their pregnancy is false, all these physiological changes disappear astonishingly quickly. False pregnancy is one of the oldest known psychosomatic conditions, and was first described by Hippocrates, the ancient father of medicine, yet it is still of relatively frequent occurrence in our modern era. Paul Fried and his colleagues at Jefferson Medical College and Hospital in Philadelphia affirm that

the symptoms of women with pseudopregnancy were so impressive that a number of doctors were convinced about their authenticity.⁶

Other significant phenomena are seen in the improvement in the physical health of many patients who are given pills and capsules that, unknown to them, contain no active substance. These capsules may only contain some sugar, but the physician assures the patients that they are of guaranteed benefit. Similarly, the physician may inject a patient with a saline solution, claiming that the injection contains a very potent cure for his physical condition. Research has shown that patients treated in this way, which is known as the 'placebo effect', improve to a degree that is almost equal to those who receive real medication.

A very interesting and revealing study in this connection is reported by S. Wolf, and shows how the patient's belief can even reverse the effect of drugs. His sample was composed of women who suffered from nausea and vomiting during the early months of their pregnancy. He gave them a drug in the form of a syrup which actually caused vomiting but told them that it would cure their condition. Predictably, their nausea and vomiting disappeared and their stomach contractions returned to normal.⁷

Scientists have recently become more interested in this subject, especially after it was proved that a person's cognitive and emotional activities have a direct effect on the immune system. Modern research has conclusively shown that chronic psychological stress, which is collateral with anxiety, depression, severe loneliness, and loss of self-confidence, has a serious effect on human immunity against all diseases. Indeed, chronic stress impels the adrenal glands to increase the output of hormones which, in turn, weaken natural immunity. These hormones, which create a state of emergency of fight or flight in the body, can also elevate blood pressure and strain the heart, and can even cause strokes due to the bursting of blood vessels.

Similar research has led to the emergence of a new discipline, psychoneuro-immunology, which brings together two different fields of specialization for the first time, namely, the field of social sciences and psychology, and that of the chemistry of human immunology.⁸ Intensive research has been conducted to improve people's physical health

by changing their ideas, feelings and emotions. Some scholars have called this 'the third revolution' in modern Western medicine – the first being the development of surgery and, the second, the discovery of penicillin and other antibiotics. The reason behind this, as previously mentioned, is that what formulates people's thinking and cognitive activity is not the events and stimuli to which they are directly exposed in their environment, but their evaluation and conceptualization of those events and experiences. Epictetus, the Roman philosopher of the first century AC, is reported to have said: "It is not the things around man that are the cause of his disturbance, but his ideas about these things."⁹ Thus, it is not only valid to state, as the Arabic saying goes, that "the healthy mind is in the healthy body," but also that "the healthy body is in the healthy mind."

How do meditation and the concurrent relaxation help in the treatment of physical and psychological disorders? The directions which the physician or therapist gives to the patient sound rather too simple and naïve, yet generally their benefit is quickly achieved. These simple meditative instructions were known and followed by Hindus and Buddhists thousands of years ago. Many experimental studies conducted in clinics and medical laboratories, using the latest methods in measuring psychophysiological changes, have proved that concentrative meditation such as transcendental meditation is really a medical revolution in which patients use their mental, cognitive and spiritual powers in curing their ailments and enriching their psychological life.

I shall mention some of these simple instructions from one of the most popular books in this field. Its author, Benson, has become a prominent specialist in meditation and relaxation techniques that have been adapted from yoga and other Eastern practices.¹⁰ Benson asks his patients to sit comfortably and relaxed in a quiet place, to close their eyes, and breathe deeply and quietly, concentrating on the process of breathing. Then they are asked to choose a word or a short sentence from their beliefs or religious faith and to repeat it, contemplating its meaning systematically every time they exhale. If the patients prefer to choose a meaning or a visual form instead of a word or a phrase, then they can do so, following the same repetitive procedure.

When the Americans became interested in transcendental meditation, they adopted it verbatim from the ancient Hindu traditions, and would repeat a meaningless word, or a Hindu or ancient oriental mantra unknown to them. However, it was later realized that the repetition of meaningful expressions which are of religious significance to the meditators, or recall some of their beliefs, have a greater effect by deepening their meditation and intensifying their cure.

Research on transcendental meditation shows that concentration on and constant repetition of words or mental images from their beliefs have a great value for the meditators. It leads them to a deeper understanding and new conceptualization of the subject of their contemplation, and will also raise them to a higher level of abstract and spiritual meanings which they could not have realized otherwise, owing to the monotony of everyday life and the insipid familiarity of their environment. Hence the term 'transcendental meditation'.

An important direction that meditators have to follow is to ignore all the ideas and notions that constantly and compulsively force themselves into their consciousness, disrupting their concentration on the object of meditation. They must resume concentration, and take a passive and relaxed attitude towards these 'intruders' until, in time, they are able to master this exercise. Indeed, with repeated sessions, their contemplation and meditation will deepen, their bodies will be more relaxed and the negative intruding thoughts will greatly decrease. Eventually, they will find that they no longer suffer from the stress, anxiety, and even the physical symptoms about which they used to complain. Several researchers, including Benson, have found that those who perform this contemplation twice a day, for 15 to 20 minutes each session, will notice a marked improvement in their psychological and physical symptoms, and become more optimistic, more productive, and more capable of creative thinking.¹¹

This improvement can be proved by certain physiological measurements like the decrease in blood pressure and cholesterol level, and it allows physicians to reduce or even stop the medication taken by their patients – even the chronically ill who used the drugs for years before practising transcendental meditation. In this connection, Benson mentions that the cholesterol level in the blood of patients who practised

relaxation and meditation connected with the faith factor was reduced by 35 per cent in comparison with patients who had not undergone treatment by meditation.¹² Similar research shows that the patient's pulse rate is reduced by a significant three beats per minute, and that the consumption of oxygen and blood glucose is equally lessened. On the other hand, the alpha waves on the electroencephalogram, which are affected by tranquillity and relaxation, are found to increase.

Another important measurement of psychophysiological change is the variation in the resistance of the skin to a weak electric current, and is known as the measurement of the psychogalvanic skin response. Such resistance to an electric current, which is too small to be felt by the person under test, decreases with the increase of perspiration and humidity in the palm of the human hand, and vice versa. Thus, when a person is anxious, and the sweat glands in the palm secrete more sweat, the moist hand becomes a better conductor for the mild electric current; whereas when the person is relaxed, the dry palm offers a greater resistance to the current. The results can be recorded easily by attaching special electrodes to a person's palm and feeding the resulting electric current to a specialized instrument or computer. In his book, *How to Meditate*, L. Le Shan says that transcendental meditation brings about a condition directly opposed to that of anxiety and anger, and that it increases the resistance of the skin by more than 400 per cent.¹³

The convincing evidence from these psychophysical measurements is further supported by the dramatic reports given by the meditators themselves: headaches, chronic digestive disorders, chest pains and other psychophysiological symptoms are reported to disappear; insomnia, stress and anxiety simply evaporate. Even if the physical symptoms do not disappear completely, they weaken considerably so that the patient becomes generally less concerned about them.

Among the important psychological changes affirmed by meditators, whether sick or healthy, is the immense feeling of tranquillity that envelops them. They also report a strong sense of self-knowledge and a close affinity with the created order, a warm feeling towards others, a great optimism, and a growing ability for productive effort and creative thinking. Many meditators also compare this feeling to that of someone coming home after many years abroad.

Le Shan affirms that these ambiguous feelings that are situated beyond the physical world are not fanciful or self-inspired – a fact strongly confirmed by the similarity of the reports of ascetics, worshippers and mystics from all parts of the world throughout history. To secure further evidence for his claim, Le Shan appeals to physics. He writes:

If we have learned one thing from modern physics, it is that there may be two viewpoints about something which are mutually contradictory and yet both viewpoints are equally ‘correct’. In physics this is called the principle of complementarity. It states that for the fullest understanding of some phenomena we must approach them from two different viewpoints. Each viewpoint by itself tells only half the truth.¹⁴

In support of this quotation, we must remember that Einstein’s relativity theory and quantum physics shattered the clockwork image of the universe as propounded by Newton. In fact, new physics clearly demonstrated that what appears to be one thing may turn out to be its opposite. At the subatomic level, what may be experimentally demonstrated to be particles or entities that are restricted to a very tiny volume are also shown to behave like waves that stretch out over a wide area of space, and there is ample evidence for both contradictory concepts – a fact which confused many physicists when it was first discovered. Einstein’s relativity theory also overturned our concept of mass and time. The former is now viewed as concentrated energy that can detonate as the mushroom of an atomic explosion, and the latter has simply become a fourth dimension. If all this can happen on the material level of knowledge, then one should not be surprised that, as Le Shan affirms, there exists a higher knowledge of the universe and life which human beings can achieve through meditation.

Thus far I have discussed the negative and positive influences of passions, emotions, beliefs and other cognitive activities that involve the process of contemplation on human psychophysical health. I have summarized several studies that show how people can afflict themselves with psychophysiological maladies or weaken their immunity system to microbial diseases, or how they can cure themselves and raise

themselves to a higher level of existence. I have also emphasized the role of contemplation in the West and mentioned some of the simple steps that can be adapted for the practice of meditation as a therapy.

It is not difficult for a Muslim to see the resemblance of this kind of therapeutic meditation with the contemplation of the heavens and the earth and the praise and remembrance of God. Indeed, both practices share a concentration on the object of meditation, and an attempt to eliminate or lessen external and internal interference – that is, whatever may distract the mind – whether external noises or internal intruding notions. They also share a revision and a repetition of meditative meanings with a regular tempo, until the meditator or praising contemplator discovers a new meaning, achieves a novel realization, or experiences an unprecedented vision. They both use deep contemplation to liberate the static sensory perception from the prison of the daily routine of material life and the confines of familiarity, to move freely towards further horizons and a wider scope of knowledge.

The directions given by therapists in the books and educational tapes on meditation and relaxation combined with the use of the faith factor, which have become popular in Europe and America, are similar to those used by a Muslim worshipper, sitting down after performing the ritual prayer (*salah*), absorbed in contemplating the grace of God, His grandeur and the precision of His creation, incessantly repeating words of praise and glorification of the Almighty. While referring to this obvious similarity, it is interesting to note that Benson not only advises people of all religious faiths to use his meditative techniques, but also suggests the very words or phrases they could repeat when fully relaxed in their meditation. For instance, he writes:

Moslems might want to repeat words like the following:

- The word for God, *Allah*
- Some of the words said to be uttered to Mohammed by Allah at the Prophet's initial call: "Thy Lord is wondrous kind..."
- The words of the first Moslem who called the 'faithful' to prayer. Though his master tortured him by depriving him of water in the desert, he kept repeating *ahadum*, or 'One [God]' until his master relented.¹⁵

In his last suggestion, Benson was referring to Bilāl, the beloved Companion of the Prophet, although he misread the Arabic word *aḥadun* as *aḥadum*. Of course, Muslims who follow the teachings of the Prophet, by regularly relaxing and contemplating after their five daily prayers, know what focus words to use as they were specified by the Prophet himself. These words and short phrases include “Glory be to God” (*subḥān Allāh*), “Praise be to God” (*alḥamdu li Allāh*) and “God is greater” (*Allāhu akbar*).

It is of interest to note that Benson strongly maintained that after patients become proficient in meditation with the faith factor, they no longer need to lie down or sit in a relaxed position; they can relax and meditate, repeating their focus words of faith, even when walking, jogging or swimming. This reminds one of Islamic contemplation, as in the Qur’an the Almighty praises the believers who remember Him while they are standing, sitting, or lying down on their sides (3:191).

When one considers the obvious similarity between meditation rooted in ancient oriental religions and that of Islamic contemplation, one could accept the theory advanced by Abūl Aʿlā Mawdūdī that Buddhism and Hinduism may have been revealed faiths, but that, like many other ancient religions, they gradually lost their purity and allegiance to the One God. Thus as the centuries unfolded, nothing remained in these religions but deviant beliefs and rituals of worship.¹⁶ For instance, they retained some rites such as meditation, although it has abandoned its true and original aim of worshipping God and contemplating His creation. The secular and pragmatic Western world then copied these incomplete practices when their medical and psychotherapeutic benefits had been verified, without adopting the true religious objective behind them or even their deviant oriental roots.

As has been previously mentioned, all Islamic rites and forms of worship, and all enjoinders and prohibitions made by the Shariʿah, have benefits for humankind in this world and in the hereafter. These benefits are known to some and unknown to others. For instance, it is clear that concentration and serious meditation on a spiritual or moral subject would be beneficial to any person. Such benefit would be further multiplied if the contemplation was coupled with the repetition of words and meanings related to the meditator’s beliefs. Meditation is

also helped if the meditators sink into a state of tranquil relaxation, whereby they cast aside daily occupations and notions, trying to tune in with what is beyond matter, and penetrate beyond the world of the senses. They would also benefit from concentrating their finer senses on the natural sounds and movements in their environment: the twittering of birds, the rustling of trees in the breeze, or even internal regular physical movements like their own breathing or heartbeats – a process called ‘mindfulness meditation’. This ability to benefit from meditation is an attribute that God has rooted in human nature so as to enable the individual to worship, glorify and know Him. If people use this gift in the proper spiritual manner, they will achieve its psycho-physiological merits as well as the expected divine reward. If not, they will nevertheless gain its basic benefits.

These benefits, enjoyed by non-Muslims who practice meditation, are similar to those which they would enjoy if they observed various forms of cleanliness, such as brushing their teeth several times a day, washing regularly (as in *wuḍū’* and *ghusl*), and trimming their fingernails; or if they perform light physical exercise as in the Islamic daily prayers, or if they avoid alcohol, drugs, fornication, sodomy and overeating. Practising Muslims do all these useful activities as religious obligatory duties or as followers of the Sunnah of their Prophet. They enjoy their benefit in this world and God’s pleasure in the hereafter, whereas non-Muslims simply enjoy the merits of these hygienic and beneficial practices in this world. Sometimes these beneficial practices attract people who, irrespective of race and environment, have a natural, inborn tendency toward such a lifestyle, in the same way as they are drawn to flowing streams, greenery, and physical beauty. Contemplative believers therefore enjoy all these health benefits – physical and psychological – as well as experiencing a much deeper and more advanced contemplation because of their sound faith, profound insight and clarity of religious vision.

Furthermore, practising Muslims often find contemplation a relatively effortless undertaking as they have been accustomed to doing it in their five daily prayers since early childhood. Though the language of the Qur’an is an inimitable Arabic symphony, its short chapters can be understood by children, and they can ponder over the verses that

glorify and praise God when they recite them in their prayers. They 'contemplate' within the bounds of their limited experience and incomplete maturity. It is illuminating in this connection to mention that Benson found that these early meditative and spiritual experiences and rituals have very useful health benefits to them as they grow up, even if they stop practising them as adults. He writes:

Remembered wellness makes the religious ritual a very powerful mechanism. There is something very influential about invoking a ritual that you may first have practiced in childhood, about regenerating the neural pathways that were formed in your youthful experience of faith. In my medical practice, that has proven true, even, I might add, among many adults who have rejected the religion they practiced in their youth.¹⁷

Benson then goes on to explain the psychoneural mechanisms behind this interesting phenomenon:

Even if you experience the ritual from an entirely different perspective of maturity and life history, the words you read, the songs you sing, and the prayers you invoke will soothe you in the same way they did in what was perhaps a simpler time in your life. Even if you don't consciously appreciate that there is any real drama or emotion attached to the ritual, the brain retains a memory of the constellation of activities associated with the ritual, both the emotional content that allows the brain to weigh its importance and the nerve cell firings, interactions, and chemical releases that were first activated.¹⁸

Accordingly, a contemplating, practising Muslim can achieve a high level of meditation with minimum time and energy. Just listening to the poetic words of the Qur'an chanted by a beautiful voice can bring about all the fine meditative responses in a few minutes. After a series of sophisticated experiments conducted at Akbar Clinics in Florida in the United States, Dr. Ahmed Elkadi concluded that when Muslims listen to the recitation of Qur'anic verses, whether they are Arabic speakers or not, they experience all the physiological changes indicative of the release from stress and anxiety, as well as warm feelings of tranquillity and

an increase of immunity against disease, and the other changes described earlier about transcendental meditation. In these experiments, Elkadi used the most advanced electronic equipment to measure blood pressure, heartbeat, muscle tension and skin resistance to electric current, and found that the recitation of the Qur'an clearly had a calming effect in 97 per cent of cases. The subjects naturally also experienced a heightened spiritual reaction which he could not measure since there is no 'spiritometer' for measuring this sacred dimension.¹⁹

These results were supported by doctoral experimental research carried out under my supervision in the University of Khartoum by Dr. Muhammad Khair al-Irgisoosi. He selected a variable that lends itself to accurate physical measurement, namely, the increase or decrease in blood pressure, which was measured by millimeters of mercury. Physicians from the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Khartoum helped by supplying us with patients suffering from essential hypertension, which is high blood pressure caused by a stressful lifestyle or other unknown reasons. The study compared treatment by muscular relaxation combined with verbal supportive therapy to treatment with muscular relaxation combined with Islamic spiritual therapy containing selected verses from the Qur'an and sayings of the Prophet that deal with curing disease. Patients were divided into three groups: an experimental group, a carefully matched control group, and a group that received muscular relaxation training without supportive therapy or readings from the Qur'an.

The results were unequivocal. Though all the patients improved, the rate of improvement in subjects who received relaxation therapy combined with Islamic spiritual therapy was significantly better than the other two groups. This statistically significant improvement was sustained for months after therapy and, in the case of some patients, their doctors told them to stop taking their medication because their blood pressure had returned to its normal level.²⁰

Thus it can be stated that the real value of Islamic meditation lies in its connection with the worship, remembrance and glorification of God and pleading for His help. Hence, the similarity between contemplation, as an Islamic form of worship, and other forms of Eastern and Western meditation is in fact only superficial, because

the bedrock of Islamic contemplation is the belief in the Oneness of God. It is a rational deep faith that proclaims that the Almighty is the only One Who sustains this universe, from its infinitesimal electron to its most colossal galaxy. This belief is not only the cornerstone of all forms of Islamic meditation, but it is also the very foundation of Islam.

Islamic contemplation is based on the progression from meditating on the creation to its Creator. It is a smooth rational movement, since the Islamic faith is uncorrupted by any association of creatures or objects with the Almighty or any polytheistic deviations.

Atheists may contemplate the immense beauty of the universe with the vague understanding that it is ‘Mother Nature’ or the ‘big bang’ that brought it into existence, or they may avoid the issue of how this world came to be what it is altogether. They contemplate with emotional passions, completely disregarding the rational issue of how the universe was created. Likewise, pagans or polytheists who believe that it is many gods, fighting among themselves, who created everything, will find it very difficult to meditate with their rational minds and hearts since these may contradict each other. For this reason, Westerners who wish to have a ‘mystical’ experience are advised to avoid ‘reason-based forms of worship’.²¹ Indeed, as Benson says in his comments on Karen Armstrong’s book, *A History of God*, this is because the mystical experience is not rational, but “intuitive and non-verbal.” Armstrong calls it “silent contemplation”. She writes:

The mystical experience...is a subjective experience that involves an interior journey, not a perception of an objective fact outside the self; it is undertaken through the image making part of the mind – often called imagination – rather than through the more cerebral, logical faculty. Finally, it is something that the mystic creates in himself or herself deliberately.²²

Le Shan gives the same advice to meditators as Benson and Armstrong. He also cautions the student of meditation: “Try not to be verbal or intellectual about the process. It is a sensing, a putting out ‘radar’, rather than a process of the intellect.”²³

As for practising Muslims, their contemplation is a spiritual practice in which all their cognitive and spiritual faculties are activated in pursuit of the true cognizance of the Almighty. It is not an irrational or emotional endeavor to cure a disorder, nor a painful exercise in which the body is tortured by standing for several days on one leg or sleeping on beds of sharp nails. Islamic contemplation is a form of worship that binds the heart with the mind, the rational with the emotional, and the sensible with the passionate, so that sober contemplators may be in a better spiritual state in which their prayers, God willing, will be more acceptable. Irrational and highly emotional responses are frowned upon in Islamic contemplation, and altered states of consciousness are not, as previously mentioned, an end in themselves. Likewise, the occasional paranormal experiences that may occur as a result of very deep meditation, and which are so valued by Eastern and Western mystics to the extent that they are prepared to discard reasoning or tolerate severe bodily pain to secure them, are neither sought nor are they objects of excitement in true Islamic contemplation. Furthermore, since many worshippers of Satan can produce paranormal performances, genuine Muslim worshippers and meditators view such phenomena with suspicion. That is why al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, in the statement already quoted, considers the conscious remembrance and contemplation of God as two sides of the same coin. Thus one could describe Islamic contemplation, in comparison with atheistic or polytheistic meditation, as two apparently identical seashells – but whereas one contains a rare pearl, the other contains nothing but the remains of an ordinary shellfish.

This, of course, does not mean that the sense of happiness, the psychological calm, the clarity of mind, and the intimacy felt by non-Muslim meditators toward all the beings in this universe are not genuine feelings. Indeed, as stated earlier, it is a therapeutic exercise that can relieve sufferers from their physical and psychological disorders. However, this glimmer of light and peace which non-Muslim meditators experience is a reward for their striving to detach themselves from the materialistic threads of their daily problems. They have a glimpse of the transcendent spiritual horizon, perhaps for the first time in their lives, and realize that it is a great improvement in comparison to their materialistic struggle with life.

This feeling, which has such a great impact on non-Muslim meditators, is, however, hardly comparable to what believers feel, because they know that every atom in this universe glorifies and praises the Almighty. The Qur'an states: "There is not a thing but celebrates His praise; but you [humans] do not understand how they declare His glory" (17:44). Though contemplating believers cannot decipher the glorification of God by the universe, they feel the harmony between their glorification and that of all other creatures. This feeling becomes deeper with the continuation of contemplation until it reaches spiritual sublimity and a sense of joy and spiritual pleasure that is incomparable to any worldly bliss.

Describing this state of bliss, in which the cares and ailments of this world are eliminated, as darkness is eliminated by light, Ibn al-Qayyim says in *Madārij al-Sālikīn*:

The contemplative believer who remembers God will begin to enjoy solitude and places of seclusion where voices and movements are hushed...There he will find strength of heart and will, and he will no longer be worried or depressed...Then he will begin to taste the sweetness of worship, of which he cannot have enough. In it, he will find abundance of pleasure and comfort – more than what he used to find in diversion and play, or in the satisfaction of worldly desires...When he experiences this state, many of the worldly concerns will disappear, as he is in a completely different world from the rest of humanity.²⁴

Similarly, Ibn Taymiyyah quotes in his *Majmū' al-Fatāwā* (The Complete Collection of Fatwas) some of the sincere contemplators given to remembrance of God. One of them said: "I used to be in a state where I would say, 'If people in paradise are in a state like this one, then they are indeed in real bliss.'" Another one said: "At times, the heart experiences moments when it dances with glee." A third one said: "The truly vigilant worshippers find much more pleasure in their worship than those given to diversion in their play."²⁵

What a difference there is between the practising Muslim contemplators and those atheists and pagans who suffer under numerous

layers of darkness, who can reach but a glimpse of these wonders through meditation in their quest of what is beyond perception! It is as though the Qur'an was referring to them when it says: "Whenever the lightning gives them light, they walk therein, and whenever darkness falls around them, they stand still" (2:20).

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